Porn Sex vs. Real Sex: Exploring Pornography’s Impact on Sexual Behaviors, Attitudes, and Relationships

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Abstract

For over forty years, researchers, activists, and policymakers have questioned how, if at all, pornography affects its viewers. Previous research has focused on how pornography relates to many factors including sexual risks, sexual permissiveness, violence, rape myth acceptance, and sexual behaviors. Much of this research, though, has been unable to identify the direction of the relationship between viewing sexually explicit material and various sexual attitudes and behaviors, and rarely studies a sample that is representative of the U.S. adult population. Instead, much of the research on pornography has relied on college student samples or other convenience samples. My study addresses these gaps by exploring a wide range of sexual behaviors and attitudes through surveying a sample of respondents who participate in online survey research panels. By accessing online survey panels, researchers are able to specify the demographics they would like their particular sample to reflect. For this study, a sample has been selected to reflect the U.S. population on age, race, and gender. To better assess the directionality of the relationship between exposure to sexually explicit material and respondents’ sexual behaviors and attitudes, I have included several closed-ended items that may help to better identify the temporal order of these variables. Additionally, I have used open-ended questions to provide a more in-depth account of respondents’ perceptions of pornography and how it relates to their sexual behaviors and relationships. Findings suggest that not only are there correlations between viewing pornography and the sexual acts participants engage in and
find arousing, but that the material individuals are exposed to may be shaping their behaviors and attitudes. I discuss the quantitative findings in relation to respondents’ qualitative remarks within the context of sexual scripts theory.