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Rapid Communication

The Nature and Dynamics of Internet Pornography Exposure for Youth

Chiara Sabina, Ph.D.,¹ Janis Wolak, J.D.,² and David Finkelhor, Ph.D.²

Abstract

We examined exposure to Internet pornography before the age of 18, as reported by college students ($n = 563$), via an online survey. Ninety-three percent of boys and 62% of girls were exposed to online pornography during adolescence. Exposure prior to age 13 was relatively uncommon. Boys were more likely to be exposed at an earlier age, to see more images, to see more extreme images (e.g., rape, child pornography), and to view pornography more often, while girls reported more involuntary exposure. If participants in this study are typical of young people, exposure to pornography on the Internet can be described as a normative experience, and more study of its impact is clearly warranted.

Introduction

SUBSTANTIAL NUMBERS OF youth Internet users are exposed to online pornography.^{1,2} Despite extensive worry about the potential impact, there is still little research on this topic. The current study used an online survey to question a convenience sample of college students about experiences with online pornography before age 18. Due to known differences between boys and girls with regard to pornography, we compared genders.

Method

We asked professors at a New England public university to recruit undergraduates to participate in an online survey regarding exposure to online pornography. As an incentive, participants could enter a raffle for one of ten \$100 checks. We gathered 594 responses; 12% of 4,992 students in the classes of 48 professors who voluntarily participated. The final sample totaled 563, of which 34% ($n = 192$) was male, the median age was 19, 93.4% identified as white, and 72% as freshmen or sophomores.

We asked participants about (a) demographics; (b) age of first exposure to online pornography, if any; (c) consumption of 10 particular types of images; (d) reasons for viewing; and (e) whether they had seen online pornography be-

fore age 18 that had a strong effect on their attitudes or emotions. Responses were anonymous, and raffle entry occurred on another Web site. Data collection took place during Spring semester 2006.

Results

Overall, 72.8% of participants (93.2% of boys, 62.1% of girls, $p < 0.001$) had seen online pornography before age 18. (See Table 1.) Most exposure began when youth were ages 14 to 17, and boys were significantly more likely to view online pornography more often and to view more types of images. Considerable numbers of boys and girls had seen images of paraphilic or criminal sexual activity, including child pornography and sexual violence, at least once before the age of 18. Girls were significantly more likely than boys (42.3% of girls; 6.8% of boys, $p < 0.001$) to report never looking for pornography on purpose, indicating they were involuntarily exposed.

A small minority of participants, 12.0% of boys ($n = 20$) and 18.7% of girls ($n = 37$), said they had viewed online pornography before the age of 18 that had a strong effect on their attitudes or emotions (not shown in table). Asked about these strong reactions, boys were significantly more likely to report feeling sexual excitement (80% of boys, 27% of girls), while girls reported significantly more embarrassment (73%

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TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF EXPOSURE TO INTERNET PORNOGRAPHY BEFORE AGE 18

	Boys n = 192	Girls n = 371
Exposure to Internet pornography		
Yes, before 18**	93.2%	62.1%
Yes, after 18***	4.2	20.6
Never***	2.6	17.3
Exposure to Internet pornography before age 18	n = 179	n = 226
Age at first exposure		
8	0.6%	0.0%
9	0.6	0.0
10	0.6	0.5
11	1.7	1.0
12	10.9	7.7
13	16.0	15.3
14*	21.1	12.4
15	22.9	22.5
16**	20.0	33.0
17	5.7	7.7
Mean at first exposure**	14.3	14.8
Number of times spent viewing for more than 30 minutes		
Never***	30.6%	76.8%
Once	6.9	9.1
Up to 10 times***	27.8	11.4
More than 10 times***	34.8	2.7
Mean number of times spent viewing for more than 30 minutes ^{a***}	9.8	1.0
Reasons for viewing Internet pornography		
Wanted the sexual excitement***	69.3%	16.8%
Curious about different things people do sexually***	53.1	26.1
Wanted information about sex***	39.7	19.5
With friends who wanted to do it**	34.1	20.8
Never looked for pornography on purpose ^{b***}	6.8	42.3
Types of images seen at least once		
Naked people but no sexual activity***	98.3%	88.9%
Mixed-sex intercourse***	93.8	73.5
Naked people showing genitals**	91.1	81.0
Sexual activity among more than 2 people***	83.2	57.1
Same-sex intercourse**	69.3	55.3
Sexual activity involving bondage***	38.6	22.6
Sexual activity between people and animals***	31.8	17.7
Sexual activity involving urine or feces	21.8	16.4
Rape or sexual violence*	17.9	10.2
Sexual pictures of children	15.1	8.9
Mean number of times seen images ^c		
Naked people but no sexual activity***	18.0	6.4
Naked people showing genitals***	16.5	5.3
Mixed-sex intercourse***	16.7	4.5
Sexual activity among more than 2 people***	12.5	3.2
Same-sex intercourse**	11.1	3.3
Sexual activity involving bondage***	3.2	0.9
Sexual activity between people and animals**	1.6	0.6
Sexual activity involving urine or feces**	1.5	0.5
Rape or sexual violence**	1.1	0.3
Sexual pictures of children*	0.9	0.3
TOTAL***	82.8	24.1

^aResponse choices were none, 1, 2–5 times, 6–10 times, 11–20 times, and more than 20 times. Each category was then recoded to its midpoint for number of times participant viewed pornography for 30 minutes or more (i.e., 0, 1, 3.5, 8, 15.5, and 25.5).

^bTo be coded as never looking for pornography on purpose, participants must have endorsed this item and indicated no other reason for looking at Internet pornography.

^cResponse choices were never, 1–5 times, 6–10 times, 11–20 times, 21–30 times, and more than 30 times. Each category was then recoded to its midpoint for number of images seen (i.e., 0, 3, 8, 15.5, 25.5, and 35.5).

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

of girls, 25% of boys) and disgust (51% of girls, 20% of boys). Over two-thirds of both boys and girls with strong effect experiences described feeling shock or surprise (65% of boys, 78% of girls). Half of boys and about one-third of girls (32%) felt guilt or shame. About equal numbers of boys and girls said that as a result of the encounter they were less eager to seek sexual activity (20% of boys, 22% of girls with strong effect experiences), had unwanted thoughts about the experience (25% of girls, 24% of boys), or felt unattractive or inadequate (15% of boys, 19% of girls).

Discussion

The young people in our sample had a considerable amount of exposure to Internet pornography during their teenage years. Nonetheless, we found considerable diversity in the extent of and reactions to exposure to online pornography. While many youth sought pornography, some were exposed involuntarily. Some wanted sexual stimulation, while others wanted information. Some accessed pornography frequently, others rarely. Most say online pornography did not have a strong effect on them, but some were strongly affected. Among those, some had mostly positive feelings, while others experienced guilt, embarrassment, and disgust.

The degree of exposure to paraphilic and deviant sexual activity before age 18 is of particular concern. In the case of child pornography, the viewing itself was probably a criminal act.³ Some boys had repeated exposure to pictures of sexual violence, raising concerns about established connections between pornography and sexual aggression among young men with aggressive tendencies.⁴

On the question of the effects of pornography on adolescents, few youth reported strong effects. Boys reported more sexual excitement and girls more embarrassment and disgust. However, responses were diverse. Some girls felt sexual excitement, and some boys were embarrassed or disgusted. Girls and boys both reported shock, surprise, guilt, shame, and unwanted thoughts about the experience. There was diversity both between and within genders, suggesting that relying on gender stereotypes about reactions to online pornography can obscure the full picture of how youth respond.

While this study provides noteworthy findings, generalizations cannot be made from this convenience sample, which includes retrospective reports from students at one public university with a largely homogenous student body.

For a topic of considerable public policy interest, the impact of Internet pornography exposure on young people has been subjected to little social scientific research. However, it is important for young people, as well as for public-policy decision makers, that we have basic facts about this issue. This study illustrates one model of how such facts can be obtained. We hope that success of these efforts will encourage others to seek empirical evidence to guide policy on the controversial issues that this topic engenders.

Disclosure Statement

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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