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Pornography and Committed Relationships: How Pre-existing Factors within a Dyad Change the Effect of Pornography on Heterosexual and Homosexual Couples

By Rachel Gingrich

Introduction

Pornography and its effects have been the topic of debate for decades now. Much of the pornography debate centers on whether or not male pornography consumption is detrimental to men's perception of, communication with, and treatment of women. As Charlotte Witt claims, "feminist debates over pornography originate in fundamental philosophical disagreement" (165). Many feminists and feminist groups critique pornography for its degradation of and violence towards women. Andrea Dworkin, a feminist against pornography, states that "the fact that pornography is widely believed to be 'sexual representation' or 'depictions of sex' emphasizes only that the valuation of women as low whores is widespread and that the sexuality of women is perceived as low and whorish in itself" (201). However, some couple therapists support pornography and prescribe its use to aid couples struggling with intimacy. It is primarily used as a way to bring the couple together through the intimacy created when viewing pornography together as well as to help the couple regain their sexual stimulation.

Amanda Maddox, Galena Rhoads, and Howard Markman define pornography as "media used or intended to increase sexual arousal" (441). There is debate, however, over what exactly constitutes pornography and where the line between pornography and erotica is drawn. For this reason, some researchers choose to use the more inclusive term 'sexually-explicit material' or SEM. The scientific study of pornography is a fairly new field, only taken seriously within the last 20 to 30 years. The current state of research on the study of pornography examines predominantly single white heterosexual men ages 18-30 viewing pornography on their own. It looks mostly at how pornography consumption affects men's perception and treatment of women. This paper, however, examines heterosexual and homosexual males in committed relationships in order to find out how the viewing of hardcore non-violent pornography changes their feelings of intimacy, their sexual satisfaction, and their sexual freedom with their partner in order to understand how and why the viewing of pornography affects both heterosexual and homosexual relationships differently. This paper takes as its focus the consumption of pornography by the male partner. While women also view pornography, it is much less frequent than men and generally viewed along with their significant other. For the sake of this paper, exclusively male consumption of pornography is examined for its effect on his relationship with his female partner if it is a heterosexual relationship, or his male partner if it is a homosexual relationship.

How Pornography is Used

Pornography is used by homosexual males both as a vehicle to learn more about sex and their own sexuality, as well as for sexual stimulation. Heterosexual males use pornography primarily for sexual stimulation. Pornography is utilized by heterosexual males to stimulate arousal and aid in masturbation. Robert Athanasiou and Phillip Shaver state that heterosexual males "will often use pornography as a substitute for heterosexual contact... and may use it as a stimulus for masturbation" (308). Heterosexual males utilize pornography as a means to an end with the intent being sexual stimulation to which they can climax without an actual

physical partner. Steve Garlick agrees with Athanasiou and Shaver and asserts that “contemporary pornography is, in a significant sense, about masturbation” (307). Male masturbation is about control. Since a willing partner is not necessary for masturbation, the male has full control over the situation. He can control the type of sex act he views and when he climaxes. The feeling of masculinity is produced through the control gained in masturbation. Garlick expands on this idea and claims that “masturbation is central to the way in which masculinity is produced via pornography” (307).

SEM (sexually explicit material) is essential to the growth and development of a homosexual male’s sexual identity. SEM provides information about homosexual sex and sex acts that may otherwise be impossible for some men to learn. Due to the lack of information on homosexuality in mainstream society, SEM is an important method by which MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) can learn about themselves sexually without fear of judgment or rejection. Gert Hald, Derek Smolenski, and B. R. Rosser assert that “as much as 97% of MSM report positive effects of SEM consumption on their sexual knowledge, enjoyment of, and interest in sex, attitudes toward sex, and understanding of their sexual orientation” (763). SEM is used by homosexual males as an exploratory tool by which they can expand their sexual repertoire and stimulate themselves sexually. Sharon Rostosky, Ellen Riggle, Michael Dudley, and Margaret Comer Wright report similar findings to Hald et al. and state that “the effect most commonly reported ... was an increase [in] ... ‘knowledge of sex acts,’ ‘interest in trying new sexual acts or positions,’ and ‘enjoyment of masturbation’” (218). Hald et al. agree and elaborate on this idea. They assert that “SEM consumption among MSM may play a positive role in an MSM’s sexuality by enhancing his sex life, being a major source of sexual information, providing a recreational sexual outlet, and providing validation, understanding, and confirmation of sexual attraction to men” (764). Todd Morrison adds to Hald et al.’s findings and claims that homosexual male pornography is viewed under a “lens of utilitarianism,” necessary for sexual discovery and identity confirmation (181). While pornography may play a positive role in an MSM’s sexuality and sexual identity, it may not positively affect his identity as a whole. SEM is also utilized by homosexual men as a guide for what is attractive or desirable in other men. John Mercer claims that “one of the functions that gay pornography performs has been to articulate ideals of sexual desire” (313). Using pornography as the standard for what is desirable in a partner and oneself can be detrimental and create unrealistic standards for potential partners and oneself to live up to. Self-esteem is important in the formation of a homosexual identity and unrealistic standards created by pornography can be damaging to an individual’s self-esteem and therefore inhibit the identity formation process. Vivienne Cass claims that for homosexual men, the need to enhance self-esteem is a “motivating force in identity formation” (147). While Hald et al. find generally positive effects from the use of SEM among MSM, they also find that it causes a decrease in men’s acceptance of their own body. This is most likely due to the unattainable body images displayed in homosexual pornography. Todd Morrison discusses the problems with how homosexual pornography displays the male form, criticizing the “hyper-masculinity that is rampant in gay male pornography” (169). Morrison claims that “the ideal gay physique embodies a ‘butch’ aesthetic in which one is ‘tanned,’ ‘muscular,’ and ‘hairless,’ and possesses ‘tattoos,’ ‘short hair,’ ‘a v-shaped build,’ ‘broad shoulders,’ and ‘six-pack abs’” (172). This is an impossible standard for all men to live up to, and while SEM may be beneficial for an MSM’s sexual development and discovery, it does not necessarily positively affect his homosexual identity as a whole.

How Pornography is Viewed

The effect pornography has on a couple is greatly dependent upon the way in which the

male views the pornography—alone in secret, alone with the partner’s knowledge, or viewed together as a couple. When pornography is viewed by the male alone in secret, it is generally detrimental to the couple’s relationship. When pornography is viewed by the male alone with the partner’s knowledge, it has neutral or no effect, though the body of research on this phenomenon is sparse. When pornography is viewed by the male together with his partner, there are neutral to positive effects on the couple’s relationship.

Pornography is most frequently consumed by heterosexual men alone in order to aid in masturbation. Amanda M. Maddox, Galena Rhoades and Howard J. Markman state that “Viewing SEM on one’s own (without a romantic partner) appears to be most common among 18 to 25 year olds who are sexually active, have low levels of sexual anxiety, and report higher numbers of sexual partners” (441). However, Maddox et al. go on to claim that “no studies have demonstrated a positive effect of viewing SEM alone for relationship functioning in general or for men’s views of their partners” (442). Male pornography consumption without the presence of a partner has been linked to poorer relationship quality as well as lower levels of sexual satisfaction for both the using and non-using partner. Franklin Poulsen, Dean Busby, and Adam Galovan add to Maddox et al.’s line of argument and take it one step further. Poulsen et al. claim that “higher male pornography use was indirectly associated with lower male and female relationship satisfaction” (79-80). One possible reason for the negative effects of solitary male pornography use is the secrecy of it. The consuming male partner uses pornography in secret either because he knows his partner will not approve or because he is ashamed of his use of pornography. When the non-using partner discovers the pornography use, the using partner is generally met with anger, betrayal, or both. Dawn Szymanski and Destin Stewart-Richardson speak to this phenomenon by stating that “when wives discover their husband’s heavy pornography use, themes of betrayal, isolation, uncertainty, confusion, and loss of trust in the relationship emerge resulting in significant damage to the relationship” (67). In this case, it is the secrecy of the pornography use that causes the damage to the relationship as opposed to the actual viewing of sexually explicit material. Szymanski and Stewart-Richardson continue, claiming that “women who had discovered their male partner’s pornography use reported that their male partners seemed more withdrawn and secretive and that the quality of their sexual relationships had deteriorated” (67). Spencer Olmstead, Sesen Negash, Kay Pasley, Frank Fincham agree with Szymanski and Stewart-Richardson and assert that “spouses of chronic pornography users reported feelings of betrayal, decreased intimacy and sexual activity, and feeling less understood by their partners” (626). The secrecy of the pornography use can cause a rift between partners and because of that, the relationship suffers. With feelings of betrayal comes a lack of intimacy between partners. It is this lack of intimacy which results in poorer sexual quality between partners.

If the non-consuming partner is aware of the male’s pornography use, however, the negative effects can be mediated. Maddox et al. disagree with Szymanski and Stewart-Richardson’s and Olmstead et al.’s line of argument. Maddox et al. claim that “women tended to agree with some positive statements about their partners’ pornography use, such as ‘My partner’s use of pornography leads to variety in our sexual relationship’ and ‘My partner’s use of pornography does not affect the intimacy in our relationship’” (442). When both partners are in favor of pornography consumption, it can serve to enhance the relationship, expanding the couple’s sexual repertoire and aiding the male consumer’s fantasies. Poulsen et al. account for these conflicting phenomena with their idea that “it is not known whether the female partner was aware of her male partner’s pornography use, or vice versa. To an extent, this limits what can be interpreted about why male pornography use has a negative association with sexual quality” (81). The negative effects of male pornography consumption on both sexual quality

and relationship quality can be attributed to whether or not the non-consuming partner in the relationship is aware of the pornography use or not. If the non-consuming partner is aware and accepting of the male's pornography consumption, it yields not only neutral effects, but occasionally positive effects as well.

When pornography is viewed by the male with his partner, it yields positive effects on the couple's relationship and sexual satisfaction. Maddox et al. examine the positive effects of viewing SEM with a partner and claim that it "could be considered a shared activity or interest between partners, and there is evidence that having more shared interests and activities is associated with higher relationship satisfaction" (443). It is not necessarily the pornography consumption itself that causes positive effects within the relationship but instead the act of sharing an intimate experience with one's partner. Being able to share in something so intimate benefits the couple's relationship satisfaction as a whole, regardless of the actual content of the pornography. Maddox et al. continue and argue that "those who only viewed SEM together reported more dedication than those who viewed SEM alone or both alone and together, and viewing SEM only together was associated with higher sexual satisfaction than viewing SEM only alone" (446). Male pornography consumption alone or with a partner has very different effects on a relationship; alone it has been proven to have neutral to negative effects, while together it has been proven to have neutral to positive effects. These differences in effect have little to do with the content of the pornography but rather what viewing patterns reveal about the relationship. Olmstead et al. agree with Maddox et al. and observe that "Some [women] held the expectation that viewing pornography alone, particularly if one's partner was unaware, was unacceptable, but viewing it together as a couple was acceptable" (628). Whether or not the partner is aware of their counterpart's pornography use is the most important factor in determining how the pornography consumption affects the relationship. Women tend to use pornography with their partners, and female pornography use is indirectly related to better sexual quality for the female and higher relationship satisfaction for the male. Men tend to use pornography alone, and male pornography use is indirectly related to both lower sexual quality for the male and female as well as lower relationship satisfaction for male and female. However, Poulsen, et al. find viewing patterns (whether pornography is viewed together or alone) do not contribute to the effect of pornography on the relationship. Therefore, it stands to reason that it is not the viewing pattern itself but instead the shared knowledge of and consent to viewing pornography between the couple that explains why pornography consumption as a couple generally yields positive effects while solitary male pornography use generally yields negative effects.

How the Dyad Functions

How a male communicates with his partner as well as the models of relationships the couple has available to them is a predictor for how pornography use will affect the couple. If the male exhibits a high level of disclosure and communicates positively with his partner, the effects of the male's pornography consumption on the couple are generally neutral to positive. If the male exhibits low levels of disclosure and negative communication with his partner, the pornography consumption generally produces negative effects on the relationship. The type of connection or style of love the couple exhibits is a predictor for how pornography consumption will affect the couple. Diane Felmlee and Susan Sprecher cite different theories of love and love styles, such as Phillip Shaver, Hillary Morgan and Shelley Wu's "love surge" theory, Karen Dion and Kenneth Dion's theory of the societal embeddedness of love, and Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver's adult attachment theory. Felmlee and Sprecher claim "close relationships among adults are influenced by enduring styles of attachment developed in childhood" (369).

The attachment style the male exhibits predicts dispositional aspects of his personality which influence how he may utilize pornography. Male attachment styles will be discussed more in-depth in the next section of this paper. Susan Hendrick examines the ways in which love styles affect heterosexual and homosexual couples and claims that “love styles show similarity for gay men and heterosexual men” and that “lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples were similar in relationship satisfaction as well as in love and liking for one’s partner” (653). Establishing that heterosexual and homosexual relationships exhibit similar love styles and patterns is pivotal to the examination of how male pornography consumption affects the two types of couples differently or similarly. It is impossible to compare the effects of a variable if you do not have a control. Because heterosexual and homosexual relationships exhibit similar patterns of love styles, it is possible to compare the effects of a variable on the two types of relationships. The fact that heterosexual and homosexual couples are similar in relationship satisfaction means that any deviation in the effects of male pornography consumption on relationship satisfaction did not originate at the core of how the relationship operated. Having this similar baseline between the two types of couples makes it easier and fairer to compare the effects of male pornography consumption on the couple. John Gottman et al. also find similarities between heterosexual and homosexual couples. Gottman et al. assert that the “breakup rate for homosexual couples... is quite comparable [to the] breakup rate for first marriages among heterosexual couples” (26). Whatever the factors, it is clear that there is a definite similarity in the functioning of heterosexual and homosexual relationships.

How the male communicates with his partner is a predictor for how his pornography use will affect the relationship. Hendrick examines the importance of disclosure within a relationship, calling it “mutually transformative,” and claiming that while “intimate disclosure may deepen a relationship, as a relationship becomes deeper and more intimate, risks of full disclosure may go up and disclosure may then decline” (654). It is because of this phenomenon that so many men view pornography in secret without their partner’s knowledge. As a relationship advances, full disclosure becomes more difficult due to the risks attached to it. Men chose not to disclose their pornography consumption with their partner due to the risk that it may upset their partner and affect the relationship negatively. However, when most partners discover the male’s pornography use, it is the fact that it was done in secret that is most upsetting, not the act of pornography consumption itself. Felmlee and Sprecher add to Hendrick’s discussion and focus on the social network around an individual as a component of an intimate relationship. Felmlee and Sprecher argue that the social network is important to the relationship functioning because “the social network is an arena in which the effects of meso- and macro-level factors on dyads often are realized” (368). Felmlee and Sprecher give a specific example of this idea in that “a community may influence a dyad and ... provide information regarding who is an appropriate partner” (368). Due to the influence of the social network surrounding an individual, values and ideals of the group can be thrust upon the individual as his or her own. The social network serves as a medium to transmit societal values to the individual. Because of this, if the social network surrounding an individual disapproves of pornography use, the individual may begin to view the use of pornography as unacceptable.

Hendrick examines some differences between heterosexual and homosexual couples, and asserts that “gender differences in communication may be accentuated for gay and lesbian couples ... insofar as a lesbian couple might at times over process a relational issue, whereas a gay male couple might tend to avoid emotion-based disclosures” (656). While heterosexual and homosexual couples exhibit similar love styles, the way in which the couple communicates with one another is different. This is most likely due to the models of relationships available to heterosexual couples in comparison to homosexual couples. Rostosky et al. focus on the issues

homosexual couples face in identifying viable models for their their relationships. Rostosky et al. assert that “heterosexual models may not be applicable or may be rejected outright as unequal and sexist by same-sex couple members” (220) and that “adopting traditional heterosexual scripts that are based on gendered power relations and roles may preclude the active discussion and negotiation that same-sex couples find necessary and integral to the definition and development of their committed relationship” (216). Homosexual couples generally communicate more frequently and more openly than heterosexual couples due to more fluid relational scripts. Homosexual couples utilize more flexible relational scripts because they have fewer and less strict relationship models available to them. However, Rostosky et al. maintain that “the necessity of creating gender and relational scripts is a central task for many same-sex couples” nonetheless (220). Homosexual couples more frequently engage in the act of discussing and negotiating roles and scripts within their dyad than heterosexual couples. This act and its ongoing continuation increase the couple’s intimacy as well as their commitment to one another. Because same-sex couples let their roles and scripts arise from discussion rather than prescribed relationship models, there is more room in the relationship to accommodate non-traditional aspects such as the use of pornography. Heterosexual couples, however, rely more heavily on prescribed societal roles and scripts. Due to this stagnancy and lack of dialogue on the subject, heterosexual couples are generally less willing to deviate from perceived norms and therefore less likely to accommodate the use of pornography.

Is the Pornography Really to Blame?

It is impossible to establish a direct causal relationship between the negative effects generally correlational with male pornography usage in a relationship and the actual pornography usage. Because existing research is mostly based off of cross-sectional studies as opposed to longitudinal studies, there is no way to determine whether the male pornography usage directly causes the negative effects in the relationship or if the negative manifestations in the relationship lead to the male pornography use or if there is no direct relationship. Poulsen et al. find that “pornography users reported using more negative communication with their partner ... and having lower quality relationship history as compared to their non-using counterparts” (78). However, it is unknown if these effects are correlational or causal, and if they are causal, it is unknown if pornography is truly the cause. If a couple exhibits low levels of sexual satisfaction and poor relationship quality, the male may turn to pornography as an outlet for his sexual desires. In that case, it would be the poor relationship causing the pornography use. It is also possible that a certain type of disposition is prone to both pornography use and poor relationship quality. Felmlee and Sprecher propose that “social psychological processes are shaped by the particular type of relationship involved” and that “differing relational identities ... produce different emotional responses” (367). The relational identity that the male attributes to his partner may determine both the way he communicates with his partner as well as his inclination towards pornography consumption.

Another factor that may predict both relationship quality as well as pornography consumption is the attachment style the male exhibits. Hendrick proposes that the type of attachment style an individual has may be another possible cause of the negative functioning found in the relationships of pornography viewers. Hendrick cites secure attachment, anxious attachment and avoidant attachment. Hendrick finds that “people identifying with the different attachment styles reported differences in their conceptions of relationships, their previous relationship experiences, and their childhood relationship with their parents” (652). If a male exhibits an anxious or avoidant attachment style, it makes him more likely to have negative relationship experiences as well as makes him more likely to use pornography. The

type of attachment style is what determines both the relational effects and the pornography consumption, as opposed to the pornography consumption causing the negative relational effects. Szymanski and Stewart-Richardson add to Hendrick's findings and assert that "men who have more avoidant and/or anxious attachment styles will use more pornography because it provides a medium in which one can become emotionally disengaged from one's partner by focusing energy and emotion into activities that are not part of the individual's ongoing reality or relationship" (66). Because of the anxious and/or avoidant attachment style, the male cannot participate in a successful relationship and attempts to disengage with his partner. It is this disengagement, not the actual pornography use, which causes poorer relationship quality.

Similar to attachment styles, male gender role conflict may also predict both relationship quality and inclination towards pornography consumption. Szymanski and Stewart-Richardson claim that "men with high levels of gender role conflict may use pornography as a way to deal with their deficits in interpersonal functioning and to avoid the intimate aspects of a romantic relationship" (65). It is unlikely that a man who avoids intimacy and lacks interpersonal skills would be able to maintain a positive and healthy relationship regardless of pornography usage. Whether men with gender role conflict turn to pornography to deal with their interpersonal issues or not, the relationship they participate in could be unlikely to be fully functional due to their emotional handicap. It is not the pornography use that causes the problems in the relationship, but instead the disposition of the male that predicts both the relationship outcome and the male's inclination towards pornography usage.

Conclusion

Pornography is a controversial topic with many societal implications. Some relationship counselors utilize pornography as a way to bring feuding couples together while some feminists and feminist groups criticize pornography for encouraging the degradation of and violence towards women. Two main factors that influence how the male's pornography use affects the couple are: the environment in which it is viewed (alone or with a partner), and the male's disposition and attachment style. The way in which pornography changes men's feelings of intimacy, their feelings of sexual satisfaction, and their sexual freedom with their partners—regardless whether they are in a heterosexual or homosexual relationship—is dependent on preexisting conditions within the dyad such as: the male's level of disclosure with his partner, the male's disposition and attachment style, and the models of relationships available to the couple.

There are still many unexamined avenues in the study of pornography's effects on committed relationships. In general, there is very little existing research on homosexual pornography use and even less on how pornography use affects a homosexual couple. The study of homosexual pornography is nearly unaddressed in the current state of research. Homosexual males utilize pornography in a different way than heterosexual males and there is not a substantial body of research on how homosexual males utilize pornography. In addition there have also been very few longitudinal studies on the effects of pornography on a committed relationship. Currently, the most comprehensive studies on the effects of pornography use in a relationship are all cross-sectional. It is because almost no longitudinal studies have been conducted in this field that it is impossible to determine the true relationship between solitary male pornography use and negative manifestations within a couple. At present, it is only possible to establish correlational factors between pornography use and relationship satisfaction. In the future, researchers should move to conduct in-depth longitudinal studies on this topic. Another gap in the current body of research is that the participants used in most studies are predominantly white, middle- to upper-class, and highly educated. Due to the lack of representational samples, it is unknown where pornography causes different effects in different groups of people.

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