

## INTERNET PORNOGRAPHY: A NEW FORM OF VULNERABILITY FOR THE YOUTH

Gagan Jain<sup>1</sup> & Mukta Singhvi<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

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### ABSTRACT

*The recent expansion of Internet-enabled technology has significantly changed how youth encounter and consume pornography. With the growth of the Internet, access to pornography has also increased manifold. The issue is more pertinent to the Indian society which is fast moving towards digitization with its ever-expanding internet base and a vast population of the youth. Youth is amongst the most vulnerable when it comes to the impact of negative consequences of exposure to pornography. Their still-developing sexual identity and the dynamic interplay of biological and social changes make them more prone to sexual experimentation. They are more likely to uncritically interpret pornography and perceive it as a realistic depiction of sexual activity. The purpose of this paper is, thus, to infer the vulnerability of the Indian youth towards the ill effects of internet pornography on the basis of recent (i.e., 2005 to present) literature. It deals with issues regarding the impact of Internet pornography on young people, sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The influence of cyber pornography on self-concept, body image, social development has also been discussed. Finally, recommendations for future research regarding the psychologically healthy understanding of the sex issues have been discussed.*

**KEYWORDS:** Internet, Pornography, Youth, Sexual Attitudes, Sexual Beliefs, Sexual Behavior

### INTRODUCTION

India has the world's largest population of young people aged between 10-24 years, a total of 356 million. It consists of 28% of the country's population (The Hindu, 2014). In addition, more than 1 in 10 children in India are teenagers or are currently experiencing puberty and more than a quarter of all children will make a transition into adolescence and puberty within the next decade (The Hindu, 2014). This age group, which is highest in any country in the world, poses both opportunity and danger. If the energy of this vast youth is channelized in the right direction, the country can become an economic superpower. But wherever there are high peaks, there are dangers too, of falling into the deep and dark gorges. This age group of adolescents and young adults has some very distinguished features associated with them. For example, the age between 10-24 is also a phase of physical, psychological and social transition. During this transition, adolescents experience significant changes in lifestyle, behavior, growth, and development marked by vital biological and physical changes. With these changes, adolescents may also exhibit a considerable amount of struggle for autonomy, engagement in risky health behaviors. Thus a need for education on sexuality and healthy lifestyles arises. Young people can be exposed to a wide range of attitudes and beliefs in relation to sex and sexuality. And this makes them prone to the ill effects of wrong

sources of knowledge like pornography etc. The level of an adolescent's understanding of human sexuality determines their ability to make informed decisions (Esere, 2008).

The issue of availability and viewing of pornography and its impact on the various psychological and behavioral aspect of a person can't be neglected. This is also true in the Indian context. According to the data released by one of the leading global porn website, Porn Hub, India ranked third all over the globe in porn consumption and is ahead of Canada and Australia in porn viewership. Internet availability through smartphones or computers plays an important role in increasing porn viewership.

According to the latest report 'The Future of the Internet in India' by Nasscom (The Economic Times, 2016), the number of web users in India will see a twofold rise at 730 million by 2020 against 350 million at the end of 2015. Although internet penetration in India is just 18% of its population it is expected to reach 550 million in 2018, if the dream of 'Digital India' envisioned by the government of India comes true. This increasingly omnipresent access to the Internet can be positive; for example, it has been found that people of all ages are turning to this medium for information on sexual education and sexual health (Barak & Fisher, 2001), social connection (Cooper et al 1999), work, shopping, entertainment, news, and academics. On the other hand, unmonitored access for youth raises genuine concerns in the light of potential risks (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011).

Given these circumstances, one may assume that the youth's access to pornography via the Internet is unmatched by any other medium (Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2007); The volume and range of sexually explicit content available on the Internet are remarkable. The evolving nature of technologically mediated pornographic content (e.g., real-time and interactive) provides novelty and variety at unprecedented speeds (Coopersmith, 2006). Additionally, the risk of cyberbullying, sexual victimization, or harassment from others is real and pervasive (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011). The availability of pornography, especially through the Internet, has influenced youth culture and adolescent development in unprecedented and diverse ways (Owens et al, 2012).

The term pornography is defined as any material that "is predominantly sexually explicit and intended primarily for the purpose of sexual arousal" (McManus, 1986). Thus cyberporn is the pornography accessible through the internet. With the advent of smartphones, which has brought the world into the pocket of the user, finding pornography on the Internet has become effortless, and this can be validated by the sheer number of people who visit porn websites every year. In August 2015, India's telecom ministry ordered internet service providers to block access to 857 websites hosting pornographic content. But a week later it scaled down its directive because of the public outrage and widespread criticism of this order (BBC, 2016). Sex and sexuality are sensitive and yet a subject of pivotal importance, which has a strong influence on one's life. So it should be dealt with utmost care. Talk or discussion on Sex or sex-related issues are still a taboo in Indian society, yet we cannot ignore its importance in day to day human behaviour.

This paper examines the available literature of the past ten years regarding if any, the impact of watching pornography on sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors on the viewer. Along with it the importance of this knowledge in the Indian context has also been discussed.

## **OBJECTIVE**

· The goal of this article is to examine the recent literature (i.e., 2005 to present) related to the impact of internet pornography on various developmental and psychological aspects such as sexual attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, self concept and social development of the youth and the significance of these findings in the present socio-demographic environment of India.

· It also aims to highlight the current body of research in an objective, clear, and coherent way, making it accessible to educators, counselors, policy makers, parents, and other vested stakeholders so that they can analyze the hidden yet a widely prevalent phenomenon.

· There is a wealth of research on the influence of online pornography in the Western countries. However, there is a dearth of literature in India, in part, due to the legal, ethical and cultural considerations involved. The purpose of this article is not to make moral judgments regarding the consumption of pornography, rather highlight the direct and indirect influences pornography has on the developmental processes of the youth. Due to the sheer presence of a large number of youth in India and their rapidly changing lifestyles, this review is warranted and long overdue. Thus the significance of the findings of western society centered research and the recommendations for future research, specifically in the Indian context, based on this review has also been provided.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **IMPACT ON ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS**

According to the recent research positive correlation exist between pornography exposure and the formation of a variety of sexual beliefs. Peter and Valkenburg (2008) argue that pornography can offer numerous sexual attitudes to viewers and that these beliefs may differ from those instilled in adolescence by their families and schools. This dissonance, or conflict in sexual beliefs, is attributed to increased sexual uncertainty, which is not a healthy sign at all.

Tsitsikaet al (2009) conducted a cross-sectional study among Greek adolescents in an effort to explore potential implications for the use of pornography. Their findings suggested that adolescents who are exposed to pornography may develop “unrealistic attitudes about sex and misleading attitudes towards relationships.” Indian society is collectivistic in nature, where the family in particular and the society as a whole in genera play a very important role in shaping the attitudes of a person towards various issues such as sex, interpersonal relationship etc. In such a scenario the discrepancy between societal and porn-induced attitudes and beliefs towards sex might endanger the very fabric of society.

In another study, Peter and Valkenburg (2010) found that as young people are frequently exposed to pornography, their perceptions of social realism i.e. the perceived similarity of the content of porn with the real world sex, and the utility of sexually explicit material i.e. considering it as a useful source of information, increases. In such situation, whatever sexual acts and positions are depicted in porn movies, the viewer tries to emulate them in their real life sex, without considering the validity of it. Sex occupies not just physical but also an emotional aspect of in any romantic relationship. This study also suggests the direct relation between the young people perceptions of social realism and utility of sexually explicit material

are, their instrumental attitudes toward sex. Instrumental attitudes refer to “the notion of sex as primarily physical and casual rather than tender and relational”.

In another study by Svedin et al(2012) on Swedish male high school students supported the findings that frequent male viewers of pornography had more acceptable and positive attitudes towards pornography than those who viewed pornography less frequently or not at all. They also believed that using such material could create a more stimulating sex life for example: in arousal, trying different positions etc for their consumers. Frequent pornography consumption is also linked with more permissive sexual attitude (Lo & Wei, 2005; Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009). Here sexually permissive attitude refers to the more liberal attitude towards polygamy, casual sex, one night stand, extramarital affair etc.

A similar study by Peter and Valkenburg (2008) also indicated a relationship between adolescent exposure to pornography and more open attitudes related to engaging in casual sex. All these findings are western society-centric. Does the nature of society i.e. individualistic or collectivistic play a role of mediating variable is yet to be explored.

Does pornography also contribute to nurturing sexist attitudes among its viewers? In India this question is above all, the most important where crime against women are at an all-time high.

A study by Hald et al (2013), on Danish youth in the age group of 18-30 found that increased past pornography consumption among men was initially found to be associated with a more negative attitude towards women including more hatred, discrimination, and stereotypes. Among women, none of such things found to be true. However, personality (agreeableness) does play a role in influencing the relationship between pornography and sexist attitudes, so that it was only among participants low in agreeableness that pornography was found to increase sexist attitudes. (Gert and Malamuth, 2013). There needs to be more research required on the role of personality as a mediating variable. In 2009 Brown and L'Engle's study indicated that male dominance and female submission are gender roles that are reinforced through pornography.

High exposure to pornography increased the likelihood that adolescents, of both the genders, would view women as sex objects. (Peter and Valkenburg, 2007) i.e. “ideas about women that reduce them to their sexual appeal in terms of their outer appearance and their body parts.”

In another study focused on porn consumption and sexual preoccupation Peter and Valkenburg (2008) found that “the more frequently adolescents viewed porn, the more often they thought about sex, the stronger their interest in sex became, and the more frequently they became distracted because of their thoughts about sex.”

Magdalena Mattebo (2014) investigated the sexual experiences and pornography consumption of more than 800 sixteen years old upper-secondary school students. This study showed that there were no differences in the proportion of girls and boys who thought that their sexual behavior is influenced by pornography to a great extent. Boys and girls who watched pornography had a more favorable attitude towards pornography than those who did not. Based on traditional stereotyped gender roles, it was not surprising that the adolescents in the study had a more favorable attitude towards boys having multiple sex partners as compared to the attitude towards girls having multiple sex partners.

## SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

The influence of porn viewing is not just limited to formulating sexual attitudes but is also reflected in sexual behavior. There is a consensus in the literature suggesting that young people can learn sexual behaviors from observing the behaviors depicted in porn movies, (Alexy et al, 2009). This study also found that the youths believed that pornography might serve as a source of knowledge but, at the same time, distort their images of sexuality. A 2005 study, conducted by Lo and Wei, indicated that exposure to pornography increased the likelihood that the youth will accept and engage in sexually permissive behaviors. Haggstrom-Nordin et al. (2005) also asserted that adolescents who were more frequently exposed to pornography had their first sexual experience at an earlier age prior to the adolescents who were not frequently exposed, maybe because of increased sexual stimulation provided by pornography.

Kraus and Russell (2008) expanded the field of study by incorporating exposure to cyber pornography and the age of first sexual experience, as well as the number of sexual companions. Participants who started watching porn sooner reported significantly younger ages of first sexual experiences than those who delayed or restricted porn usage; however, there was no significant difference when they compared the number of sexual partners. The authors argue that “the Internet, where pornography is made available very easily, may be acting as quickening agent for earlier reported ages for first oral sex and first sexual intercourse”.

The early exposure to pornography increases the likelihood that both male and female adolescents will engage in oral sex and sexual intercourse earlier than their non-exposed peers. These findings were verified in multiple studies by Brown and L'Engle's (2009) Haggstrom-Nordin et al. (2005) and Kraus and Russell (2008). Sun (2014) research revealed the way in which pornography came to dominate heterosexual men's sexual encounters with women. Men who watched more pornography found it difficult to keep aroused during sex and many times preferred pornography over real-life sexual encounters. They often also had to imagine porn in their mind to remain aroused while indulging in real life sex. In other words, pornography is not a mere fantasy for men; instead, it shapes how they engage in intimate behaviors. Schrimshaw (2016) in his study found that greater consumption of pornography can be linked with un-protective anal sex. Viewing a greater proportion of pornography containing anal sex without the use of condoms was associated with engaging in more anal encounters without the use of the same. Here it is noteworthy that unprotected sexual encounters are one of the biggest reasons behind prevailing sexual transmitted diseases (STD's). In 2016, 2.1 million people living in India were found to be HIV positive.

In another study, researchers examined whether exposure to pornography affected three aspects of sexual behavior that had not yet been well characterized: protective measures, extramarital affairs, and paying for sex. It has been found that pornography consumption did not affect condom use but that people who watched more pornography tended to have multiple sexual partners, indulge in infidelity frequently, and were more likely to pay for sex. They commented that watching pornography allows viewers to learn new forms of sexual behavior (e.g. seeking sex outside of the relationship) and may change viewer's attitudes towards sex (e.g. that sex is also a medium for pleasure and amusement not just for procreation). However, they also strongly highlighted the limitations of the study: the typical cause and effect problem, the survey could not discern whether pornography triggered these behaviors or watching pornography typically accompanies these higher-risk sexual behaviors.

## SELF-CONCEPT AND BODY IMAGE

There is limited data in recent times regarding the influence of Internet pornography on young people's self-concept and body image. In a qualitative study conducted by Haggström-Nordin et al. (2006) it was found that consumption of pornography led young people to accept traditional gender roles, specifically those of the male being dominant and the female being submissive. It may be because in more than 90% of the porn movies male actors are depicted in a more dominant position. Participants discussed the double standards reinforced in pornographic material; that is, women with multiple partners are considered promiscuous, while men with multiple partners are revered (Haggström-Nordin et al., 2006).

In another study, the authors described what they called a "pornographic script" a kind of mental schema that was strengthened by viewing pornographic material (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010). This script created unrealistic and concerning expectations for both the males and females who participated in this study. Men expressed uncertainties about their capacity to perform sexually; women about their body image. For example, the males in the study discussed their concerns about their sexual execution, for e.g. the duration of sexual intercourse, as the men in the pornography they viewed. In contrast, the females in the study felt that the women they saw in porn represented the ideal bodytype.

Two other themes emerged that are of interest here. First, increased self-confidence decreased the pornography consumption (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Masson, 2010). Second, if participants developed positive relationships with others, specifically friends and family they are able to "handle pornography more satisfactorily". This finding is quite relevant to the Indian culture where a family is the backbone of the society.

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Time is fast changing, and with the advent of smartphones and social media, one to one interaction in society is shrinking fast. Virtual social relations and status have become more preferable than a real one. One Israeli study has shown that young people who have a strong and the high number of social interaction and bonding were not as likely to consume pornography as were their less social peers (Mesch, 2009).

Additionally, he found that greater quantities of pornography consumption were significantly correlated with lower degrees of social integration, specifically related to religion, school, society, and family. The research also found a measurably noteworthy connection between pornography consumption and conduct issues in school, with higher degrees of consumption related to higher levels of aggressiveness. But it is not clear that aggression results from high porn consumption or lack of qualitative social interactions.

A study by Tsitsika et al. (2009) found that Internet pornography is positively co-related with social maladjustment. In particular, adolescents who demonstrated incessant use of pornography were twice as likely to have conduct issues as those who did not consume pornography at all. It may be because of the fantasy world of pornography cut oneself off from the reality, thus making him/her difficult to adjust with the surroundings. Likewise, frequent consumers were altogether more likely to indicate abnormal conduct issues as well as borderline addictive Internet use.

There is also a statistically strong positive relationship between exposure to pornography and delinquent behavior during the previous year (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). It was also found in this study that children who consume pornography on Internet are more likely to exhibit clinical symptoms of depression and a lesser degree of bonding with caregivers than those who consume pornography through other means, probably because of wider and intense porn availability. The relatively easy availability of porn on the internet is one of the main reason behind increasing porn addiction.

Alexy et al. (2009) studied pornography consumption patterns of juvenile sexual offenders and related it to various forms of aggressive behavior. Those who were consumers of pornography were more likely to display forms of aggressive behaviors such as theft, truancy, manipulating others, arson, and forced sexual intercourse. This finding is very significant in the Indian context where the issue of juvenile crime has been widespread in the past couple of years.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Most of the literature available on the issues related to sexuality or the effects of pornography originated in western countries. There is a clear dearth of scientific research in India because of the social and moral limitations attached to it. But whatever be the considerations, we cannot deny the need of the hour to scientifically investigate a topic which is somehow a part of our youth population.

Although there is a great amount of research on this subject there are some clear gaps, which need to be abridged. First and foremost, most of the research related to pornography has been conducted in the western society, the findings of which might not be valid in the country like India, where the very structure and values of society are quite different from the west. For this purpose, there is a need to turn our attention towards the process of conducting this research.

First of all the stigma attached to the word 'sex' in the society should be replaced with a healthy discussion on it. Objective research on this topic can go a long way in this direction. Part of this process involves collecting data on the risks and benefits of this research in order to establish a scientifically informed approach that can be used to educate Departmental Review Committee members as they review studies that may fall outside their areas of expertise (Caskey & Rosenthal, 2005; Mustanski, 2011).

Future studies would benefit from research that incorporates more sophisticated methodologies that move beyond simple co-relational analysis and cross-sectional designs. Studies focusing on mediating or moderating variables such as age, gender, personality type, childhood experiences, family values, technology etc. greatly enrich the existing body of knowledge. Porn viewing is a very subjective and private issue. The inclusion of greater specificity about the themes, content, and messages portrayed in pornography is needed and such studies may be conducted using qualitative methods that offer greater depth and rich data sources. (Owen et al, 2012).

As technology is advancing with great speed, researchers should also consider the role of various mediums like smartphones, tablet computers, internet etc. used to consume pornography and the emerging trends toward technology use, production and distribution of one's own pornography (e.g., sexting, YouTube videos, etc.).

India is a land where “Kamasutra” the book of love originated, which talks about the physically and psychologically healthy and spiritual dimensions of lovemaking. Most of the literature talks about the ill effects of consuming pornography, but the future research should also consider and pay heed on, if any, the positive side of the picture.

The issue of sex education, which is the most important in this regard, should not be neglected when we talk about the effects of pornography. Researchers should study how education about sexuality should be imparted in a healthy manner in the youth so that their development leads them to become physically, socially and psychologically healthy citizen of this country.

Also how sex education can contribute to eliminating the ill effect of pornography or from a different perspective can pornography be utilized as a medium of imparting a healthy sex education in our youth should be considered. The role of sex education as a mediating variable should be studied extensively in the research relating to pornography.

Limited evidence reveals that the risk and protective factors, which play a role in determining the sexual activity of youth in developing countries, are different from those in the west and they are more centered on the youth themselves. Small-scale studies were done in India also highlight factors related to the environment such as peers and family, apart from individual factors.

However, the review highlights the need to conduct large-scale representative studies to explore the comprehensive picture of risks and protective factors that could apply to the youth in India, a country which has a diverse socio-cultural milieu across regions.

Finally, the emotional and psychological well-being of the youth population who consume pornography should also be taken into consideration while studying sexual health and sexual risks.

## CONCLUSIONS

Thanks to the cutting edge information technologies such as the internet, the borders, and barriers between the different parts of the world are fast losing their significance. Yes it is true that the very structure and social fabric of Indian society are quite different from the western one, but we cannot ignore the influence of western culture on our society, be it our movies, our clothing, our food habits etc. With the current review of the literature, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Collectively, the studies on the subject of pornography suggest that youth who consume pornography may develop unrealistic sexual values and beliefs. Porn is a scripted fantasy which is quite different from real bedroom intimacy. Unable to discriminate between reality and fantasy leads to non-fulfillment of expectations which results in frustration. And frustrated relationships cannot sustain very long. This certainly is not at all a healthy sign for any society.

- These unrealistic sexual values and beliefs not just include the body image and sexual performance, but also various sexual acts and sexist attitudes which reduce the sanctity of being a woman.

- Among other findings, higher levels of permissive sexual attitudes such as acceptance for polygamy, casual sex, extramarital affairs, sexual preoccupation, and earlier sexual experimentation etc. have been correlated with more frequent consumption of pornography. Honesty is the foundation of every relationship. Strong relationships consist of not only physical intimacy but also emotional intimacy. In India, the institution of marriage is not just social in nature but also spiritual. In such a scenario if sexual permissive attitudes increase it endangers the very existence of the institution of marriage. In such a case



proactive approach is more relevant than being reactive.

· One of the most important findings emerged from pornography research is adolescent use of pornography that depicts violence with increased degrees of sexually aggressive behavior. In the issue of juvenile sexual offenders which became the part of mainstream discussion following the heinous Nirbhaya rape incident, the role of porn viewing should be thoroughly researched.

· The literature does indicate some relationship between young people ingestion of pornography and the concept of self. Young girls report feeling physically the second rate to the women they view in porn movies, while boys fear they may not be as virile or able to execute as the men in these media. Adolescents also report that as their self-confidence and social development increase their use of pornography decreases.

· Additionally, research suggests that adolescents who use pornography, especially that found on the Internet, have lower degrees of social integration, increases in conduct problems, higher levels of delinquent behavior, a higher rate of depressive symptoms, and diminished emotional bonding with guardians.

· These findings indicate that the effect of pornography is not just limited to the formation of sexual attitudes and behavior but also influence the psychological well-being and social bonding of its viewer. In such a scenario, the role of parents, teachers, and media becomes very important, where they can contribute to developing a healthy mindset regarding various aspects of sexuality in youth.

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