Excessive Pornography Use: Empirically-Enhanced Treatment Interventions

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Abstract: Online pornography is now freely available and readily accessible to individuals regardless of their age. Although pornography use often forms part of a sexual offender’s behavioural pattern, exposure to sexually explicit material among general community members is commonly reported. In a proportion of the latter, habitual and excessive use of pornography results in serious negative consequences affecting interpersonal and social relationships, self-esteem, and the sexual objectification of women. The aetiology of pornography and cybersexual addiction is not fully understood, nor the reasons determining preference for certain types or forms of pornography. Empirically-enhanced treatments applied to sex offending and paraphilias have been extended to pornography addiction, predominantly cognitive behavioural interventions and motivational interviewing. However, their long-term effectiveness for this condition is yet to be determined. Functional analysis of the intra-psychic and external antecedent factors and motivations for pornography use, sexual scripts, and situational variables that trigger urges forms the foundation for effective cognitive behavioural interventions.

Keywords: pornography, paraphilia, pornography addiction, evidence-based treatments, sexual addiction

There is no consensual definition of pornography, nor are its parameters clearly defined. Multiple forms of sexually explicit material are readily available ranging from written media (novels, magazines), pictorial representations (drawings/artwork) and photographic depictions, through to audiovisual film and video recordings. These include the spectrum of erotic soft-pornography displayed in advertising (billboards and commercials), cinematic and TV programs, pop-song videos and nudity in art, through to explicit displays of genitalia, intercourse, hard-core fetishisms and extreme/graphic acts of sadism and masochism, and illegal content (child pornography and bestiality) (Doring, 2009). Previously accessible through adult stores or mail-order purchase, the Internet now offers virtually free and unrestricted opportunities to all users to view material. Sexting, that is, sending sexually explicit suggestions or pictures via mobile devices can also be construed as pornographic material.

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In considering whether material represents art or pornography, the viewer’s motivation and the type of material accessed should be taken into account (Short et al., 2012). Accordingly, it is the act of producing or viewing sexually explicit material specifically to generate arousal and/or gratify fantasies that delineates the use of pornography and arguably distinguishes it from art. Pornography objectifies sex while art is deemed to display nudity in celebration of the aesthetic beauty of the human form. Clearly, moral and value judgements operate in evaluating content as art or obscenity.

**How Extensive is Pornography Use?**

It is difficult to calculate the population prevalence of pornographic use within communities. As Doring (2009) notes, surveys tend to indicate that the majority (95% of males and 75% of females) of individuals have at least some lifetime exposure to pornographic material. Using revenue as an indicator of consumption, it is estimated that in the USA purchases of pornographic videos generates just under USD $4 billion with sales of all material reaping around USD$14 billion (Covenant Eyes, 2013). In Australia, the figure is in the vicinity of AUD $2 billion. As reviewed by Covenant Eyes (2013), in 2005 Internet pornography accounted for 69% of the pay-per-view market exceeding the market share of news, sports, and video games. The advent of free Internet access to pornography has subsequently reduced revenue by 50% from 2007 to 2011 making revenue a less accurate indicator of consumption. Free sites, representing about 70% of online pornography websites, are designed to attract users to enter pay-to-view sites (Covenant Eyes, 2013).

Technological innovations have contributed to the ready and easy access to pornography. The Internet with its 24/7 availability, anonymity, affordability (the Triple A-engine (Cooper, 1998)) and unrestricted access from home via computers or mobile devices, has opened the market to virtually everyone. Unsolicited embedded hyperlinks and cookies can result in individuals being inadvertently re-directed to pornography sites. Anyone of any age can now readily and indiscriminately access mild to hard-core pornography. Compounding the issue is the concept of cybersex where the Internet offers an outlet for individuals with hypersexual drives to engage in chat rooms and online relationships (Griffiths, 2012) satisfying a range of needs beyond pornography viewing.

Of major concern is the indifference of online providers of free pornography in preventing access to underage viewers. Disconcertingly, approximately 25% of American adolescents have unintentionally been exposed to pornography while online (Doring, 2009). Online exposure to pornography may precipitate a preoccupation and/or addiction to pornography, particularly in young adolescents progressing through puberty and their social maturational phases. Such unintended exposure may elicit sexual arousal in individuals, create or enhance sexual fantasies and scripts.
(Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, & Irizarry, 2010) and subsequently motive him/her to return to the site. Repeated usage may then lead to the emergence of ‘addiction’, through the process of operant conditioning and sexual scripting that is, excessive use gratifying sexual urges despite increasing negative consequences; interference with work or study, relationships and monetary expenditure.

In adults, unsolicited exposure to pornography can trigger sexual interests in aberrant sexual proclivities (e.g., bondage, sado-masochism or paedophilia).

Who Consumes Pornographic Material?

Not surprisingly, more males than females access pornographic material. Covenant Eyes (2013) have analysed a range of data on the characteristics of users in the USA. The data suggests that the rates of usage among males across the ages of 18 to 50 years tend to be relatively stable at around 70% to 80% reporting monthly views. In contrast, the comparable rates for females are 76% between 18 to 30 years reducing to 16% by age 50 years. Approximately 55% of married males compared to 25% of married females reportedly access pornography. Similar figures are reported in other jurisdictions (Doring, 2009).

What is the Aetiology, Diagnosis and Impact of Pornographic Addiction?

The aetiology of pornography addiction is not well known, let alone the selection of preferences. Operant conditioning plays a major role in conjunction with intra- and extra-personal psychological variables remaining important as in other behavioural addictions. Exposure to pornography elicits arousal and provides a temporary relief from boredom, isolation, stress, or affective symptoms. Repeated usage establishes a toxically motivated behavioural habit that can become compulsive and difficult to break. Young (2008) describes five stages: discovery, experimentation, escalation, compulsion, and hopelessness (addiction).

Although a comprehensive overview of the aetiological models of pornography is beyond the scope of this paper, there are emerging evidence and arguments for the implication of meso-limbic-frontal brain regions associated with reward pathways. These pathways involve dopaminergic and serotonergic neurotransmitter dysregulation potentially similar to that found in other addictive behaviours. These neurobiological processes may be relevant to treatment approaches based on concepts of neuroplasticity, that is, forming new neuronal connections (O'Brien, 2009).

The psychological impact of pornography and its causal relationship to sex offending is not fully understood but is complex and multiple in its potential negative effects. Weinberg et al. (2010) point to the influence of pornography in shaping what Gagnon and Simon (1973) described as ‘sexual
scripts’. Sexual scripts represent an individual’s set of organized cognitive schemas, attitudes and beliefs related to the type and appropriate portrayal of sexual behaviours. The range of aberrant or unrealistic spectrum of sexual behaviours often depicted in pornography provides the foundation for distorted scripts.

Although pornography addiction is not recognised as a distinct category in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), *pictohilia* can be construed as falling within the general domain of ‘paraphilias, not otherwise specified’. The DSM-5 distinguishes paraphilias that are non-normative sexual interests or behaviours, from pathological sexual interests causing distress, impairment or harm to others. Pornography addiction is differentiated from pornography use by the presence of repetitive viewing of pornography resulting in clinically significant distress and/or impairment in functioning across a range of domains. Core elements include unsuccessful efforts to cease or reduce consumption, tolerance (habitation) manifested by increased consumption of more stimulating material, and withdrawal symptoms (cravings and urges). As a consequence, addicted individuals spend inordinate time and money satisfying their urges to the detriment of work and study, social and intimate relationships, and quality of life. However, there are few well-validated and accepted psychometric instruments assessing pornography addiction or its problematic use: the *Problematic Pornography Use Scale* being one (Koret et al., 2014). In addition, research on pornography and addiction is somewhat limited and the direction of causality between intra- and extra-psycho factors difficult to establish. For example, do certain personality traits represent a premorbid vulnerability factor or the subsequent impact of an addictive process?

Pornographic use can act as a catalyst in triggering masturbatory fantasies that subsequently are acted on behaviourally. In individuals with pre-existing paraphilic tendencies, repeated exposure may lead to a breakdown in inhibitions and ultimately lead the individual to enact scenes or fantasies elicited by pornographic content. For example, viewing child pornography may induce a paedophile to gratify urges in actuality, or exposure to aggressive sexual acts may translate into similar acts perpetrated in the context of intimate relationships. Of concern is the tendency for habituation to generate boredom leading to the search for progressively more ‘exciting’ material increasing the overall risk of a breakdown in inhibitory controls. However, it is important to highlight that other concomitant and/or premorbid psychosocial factors must be taken into account in understanding the factors that erode inhibitory control; anti-social personality traits, substance use, and affective disorders. Thus, viewing R-rated material where violent sexual acts are shown (e.g, rape scenes) may
increase the probability of aggressive sexual behaviours being exhibited by aggressive individuals (Doring, 2009).

Alternatively, sexual offenders can be variably attracted to consume pornography to further gratify existing sexual urges and proclivities. Rapists tend to report lower levels of pornography use compared to child molesters (Hudson & Ward, 1997). In the case of the latter, paedophiles frequently access child pornography to actively fuel their fantasies.

Consumption of pornography influences attitudes and beliefs toward sex, women and interpersonal relationships (Doring, 2009; McKee, 2007; Weinberg et al., 2010). Pornography leads viewers to objectify and debase females, instil unrealistic and inappropriate expectations surrounding sexual behaviours and performance, foster abusive behaviours towards partners, and impair intimacy resulting in dissatisfaction within relationships (Doring, 2009; McKee, 2007). In addition, some but not all viewers may experience a sense of personal inadequacy in their own sexual abilities and physical attributes as they contrast their performance to those of porn stars: prolonged sexual acts, large penis, and ecstatic responses of female partners. In addition, repeated exposure may lead to habituation to ‘normal’ sexual acts resulting in a propensity to gravitate to more and more extreme, ‘hard-core’ material. The end result is a personal sense of inadequacy, lowered self-esteem, and impaired interpersonal functioning, although the direction of causality is often difficult to disentangle (McBride, Reece, & Sanders, 2007).

Are there any positive effects of pornography use? As McKee (2007) notes, very few studies have evaluated the positive effects of pornography use. This is perhaps because of the ubiquitous moral and socio-cultural perception that pornography is exploitative and degrading. In his survey of 1,023 Australian pornography viewers, McKee reported that just over half considered such usage to be positive compared to having no effect in a third of the sample, and less than a tenth, a negative effect. Positive effects are reportedly related to broadening open-mindedness about sex, tolerance towards the sexual exploits of others, and increasing communication with and attentiveness over a partner’s wants (McKee, 2007; Weinberg et al., 2010). The use of pornography in these instances results in the normalisation and empowerment of sexual behaviours and thus a greater propensity for experimentation and sexual satisfaction within the confines of a relationship, without an associated risk of engaging in sex with other partners (Kvalem, Træen, Lewin, & Štulhofer, 2014; Weinberg et al., 2010).
Empirically-Enhanced Treatment Interventions

There is an absence of long-term randomised control outcome studies evaluating the comparative effectiveness of interventions for pornography addiction. A search on the Cochrane database (http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/cochranelibrary/search) using the keyword ‘pornography’ returned 15 articles from 907,144 records. None of these fifteen articles contained any data on treatment outcomes.

The bulk of the treatment literature deals with sex offending and paraphilias where pornographic use represents a risk factor rather than the primary addiction. Accordingly, little is known about the long-term effectiveness of pornography addiction treatments. The effective management of excessive pornography use is founded in careful and detailed assessment of motivations, preference of and interest in specific types of pornography, concurrent paraphilic disorders and hypersexuality disorders, personality traits, and situational variables. It is important to ascertain if pornography use is the primary addiction or the expression of paraphilic interests, and the extent to which comorbid personality disorders (anti-social) pose challenges to effective outcomes.

Given the ubiquitous nature of pornography in contemporary society through online access, parental oversight of children and adolescents’ Internet activity represents an early preventative intervention. Although not fool-proof, the use of pornography filter blocking software such as Net Nanny (https://www.netnanny.com/features/porn-blocking/) or a host of others (e.g., https://www.raymond.cc/blog/block-pornographic-pictures-by-pixelating-images/) may reduce the potential for unwanted exposure.

Open and transparent communication and discussions within families about the topic of pornography may assist in protecting sexual scripts from distorting and provide a more solid foundation for realistic attitudes and cognitive schemas surrounding intimacy, respect and appropriate sexual interactions.

Treatment requires a multi-modal approach although a cognitive-behavioural approach, within the architecture of relapse prevention and self-monitoring/self-regulation skills, forms the mainstay of treatment. Pharmacological regimes are perhaps less effective in pornography addiction compared to other paraphilic disorders. Although avoidance is the ideal objective, the extent to which sexually arousing stimuli are readily available in the community makes it difficult to avoid at least ‘soft-core’ pornography. Behaviourally, stimulus control techniques are necessary to reduce exposure to high-risk situations. This involves identifying the situational variables that provoke urges, both exposure to physical cues and emotional stresses and mood states. The first step is to map out the
patterns of use according to time and location of pornography use. The next step is to block online access through filtering software, and/or reduce options for isolated online activity by moving computers to more visible locations in the house. Other actions include cancelling online accounts and credit cards used for payment, and subscriptions to off-line suppliers.

Stress management, emotional regulation and coping skills can minimize the motivation to use pornography as an emotional escape in response to external stresses and dysfunctional moods.

In the absence of randomized control trials, guiding principles for treatment of pornography addiction may be gleaned from approaches adopted in other behavioural and substance related addiction. However, empirical data is required to establish which techniques are effective. Cognitive-behavioural and motivational interviewing interventions can be adopted to identify and modify distorted cognitions and beliefs, and evaluate the pros and cons of pornography use. These interventions are commonly applied to a host of non-substance behavioural addictions. Initially, a functional analysis of the antecedents, motivations and cognitions leading to the use of pornography is required. Insight and awareness of emotional, situational and cognitive variables that trigger urges to consume pornography coupled with the recognition of the negative impact on others and need to assume responsibility and accountability, will reduce the likelihood of relapse. Couple and marital therapy is required to repair conflicts and dissatisfaction between partners taking into account the direction of causality; marital dissatisfaction leading to pornography use, or pornography use causing marital conflicts.

There is some emerging evidence regarding the applicability of mindfulness and acceptance and commitment therapy for behavioural addictions (Agoston, 2013) including pornography (Twohig & Crosby, 2010), and internal family systems therapy (Sweezy, 2013). However these need to be replicated and extended before a conclusive statement can be made.

**Summary**

Excessive pornography use mimics many of the features of a behavioural addiction. Although psychological interventions targeting pornography addiction have not been evaluated, cognitive-behavioural therapy and motivational interviewing applied to sex offending and paraphilias can be effectively translated to online pornography use and cybersexual behaviours.
References


