



Pornography Consumers of Color and Problematic Pornography Use: Clinical Implications

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Abstract

Purpose of review The purpose of this article is to utilize a problematic pornography use (PPU) framework to review the nascent research on Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) consumers of pornography.

Recent findings Adolescent and adult BIPOC research participants, and Black Americans in particular, viewed pornography more or in greater frequency when compared to their White counterparts. BIPOC adolescent consumers often preferred pornography that featured performers of colors, which frequently contains problematic racial stereotypes and aggression. Findings suggest that pornography can influence sexual scripts of BIPOC consumers and increase the probability that they will develop PPU, which can take the form of relationship aggression, sexual risk behaviors, and permissive attitudes toward sex.

Summary Pornography may shape the sexual scripts and sexual interactions of BIPOC pornography viewers and set the stage for PPU. Service providers should consider providing pornography literacy programs for adolescents and assess PPU in the context of relationship distress and intimate partner violence.

Keywords Pornography · Problematic pornography use (PPU) · African Americans

Introduction

There is a need for more scholarship on compulsive sexual behavior disorder and problematic pornography use (PPU) among ethnically diverse populations [1]. The purpose of this article is to utilize a PPU framework to review the nascent research on Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) consumers of pornography. This topic warrants investigation for several reasons. Researchers have generally found that adolescent and adult BIPOC participants, and Black Americans in particular, viewed pornography more or in greater frequency when compared to their White counterparts [2–4, 5••]. BIPOC adolescent consumers often preferred pornography that featured performers of colors [6–8], which frequently contained problematic racial stereotypes and aggression [9, 10••].

Wright [11] introduced the script acquisition, script activation, and script application (₃AM) model to explain

the process of media sexual socialization. This model proposes that viewers learn new sexual scripts from pornography (acquisition), learned scripts become primed through repeated exposure (activation), and viewers reenact the scripts that they learned in pornography (application). For example, more than one-half of adolescent respondents of color had reenacted a sexual act that they first saw in pornography [7].

For some viewers, pornography consumption has been associated with less marital happiness, multiple sexual partners, and less satisfaction with one's financial situation [3]. Problematic pornography use (PPU; excessive, compulsive, and uncontrollable pornography use) is one framework to understand the relationship and interpersonal problems that are associated with pornography use [12]. The addiction model has emerged as the most common theoretical framework to conceptualize PPU. Core components of addiction include (a) interpersonal conflict, (b) sex life conflict, and (c) negative attitude conflict [12]. The purpose of this article is to review the research on adult and adolescent BIPOC pornography viewership, racial content of pornography, and PPU in the form of relationship aggression, sexual risk behaviors, and permissive attitudes among BIPOC consumers.

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BIPOC Pornography Viewership

Adult Pornography Viewers

Based on the General Social Survey (GSS), Black Americans consumed pornography in various formats. In 1973, 28% watched pornography on film; in 1994, 37% watched pornography in a theater or on a videocassette tape; and in 2002, 9% watched Internet pornography [13]. Data from the 2000–2014 GSS revealed that 33% of Blacks watched an explicit sexual movie in the year prior to the survey [3]. Based on data from the 1973–2016 GSS, Blacks increased their pornography viewership from 28% in 1973 to 46% in 2016, which is approximately an 18% increase in viewership over the past four decades [5••]. Future researchers should take an intersectional approach to determine how other demographic factors influence BIPOC pornography viewership, such as age, gender, educational level, or religious service attendance [5••].

Adolescent Pornography Viewers

Researchers have documented exposure to sexually explicit media (SEM) in the form of X-rated movies, magazines, and Internet websites among Black middle-school students (average age 13.6 years old) [2] and in semi-structured interviews with 15–19-year-old, Black adolescent males who identified as same-sex attracted (SSA) (66% self-identified as gay or homosexual) [6]. Several researchers conducted interviews and surveys with Black and Hispanic pornography viewers who were recruited from medical settings [7, 8, 14–16]. It should be noted that exposure to SEM was more frequent among Black adolescents compared to Whites and teens who were older, from lower socioeconomic statuses, who had less educated parents, and who were higher sensation seekers, as measured by items such as “I like new and exciting experiences, even if I have to break the rules” [2].

Frequency of Viewership

The frequency of pornography consumption among BIPOC children and adolescents varies widely across studies. Among middle-school children, 61.3% of Black boys and 37% of Black girls reported that they had viewed sexually explicit material [2]. Braun-Courville and Rojas [14] found that 69.9% of Black and Hispanic adolescents reported infrequent exposure (never, once, or twice) to sexually explicit websites (SEWs) in the 3 months prior to the survey and 30.1% reported more regular viewing (3–10 times or more than 10 times). Regarding gender differences, females were 85% of the Brown and L’Engel [2] sample; however, more

males (85.7%) than females (50.1%) had visited SEWs. More recently, Rothman and Adhia [7] found that Black and Hispanic adolescents watched pornography approximately twice per week and 51% watched weekly or more often.

Also, Black gay adolescent males were frequent pornography consumers and 85% ($n=29$) of respondents who had used SEM at the first interview were regular viewers. When interviewed 4 months later, 59% of SEM users had watch pornography 21 or more times. Most often, they watched to learn new sexual positions. In contrast, participants who denied using SEM around their first same-sex experience ($n=8$, 17%) did not report any SEM use at the follow-up interview [6].

Context of Pornography Viewing

Black and Hispanic adolescents watched pornography in a variety of settings: 51% watched SEM while alone, 20% watched with friends and family members, and 61% had watched pornography with a dating or sexual partner and reenacted the sexual behavior. Also, 6% of respondents watched with a sibling or another person who was 18 years old younger, 10% watched with peers in a public high school, and 11% had been in a pornographic video (professional or amateur) [7]. In addition to being potentially harmful to the minor, inducing underage family members or coercing school mates to watch SEM could create legal or other problems for the perpetrator [8] and may be indicative of PPU.

Gay Black adolescents first viewed pornography between the ages of 6 and 17. Exposure prior to age 10 occurred when respondents discovered a family member’s SEM. A variety of individuals, including peers and relatives (fathers, brothers, and cousin), introduced pornography to pique the respondent’s interest in heterosexual activities and to discourage their same-sex desires. Most respondents (83%) watched SEM prior to or around 13.9 years old, when they had their first same-sex sexual experience. Also, their partners used SEM immediately prior to sexual activity and reenacted what they had watched while having sex. One participant explained: “that was the first time I ever watched porn and he (partner) said, ‘Why don’t we do this?’ and we did” [6] (p. 603). Pornography that featured gay Black men often contained racial stereotypes and aggression [17, 18], which can contribute to PPU when adolescents mimic this behavior [6].

Format of Pornography Viewing

BIPOC youths watched pornography on a variety of devices. In an earlier study, 29.7% of Black adolescent girls viewed X-rated movies in a theater or on VHS tape [16]. More recently, 55% of Black and Hispanic adolescents viewed sexually explicit websites [14] and 79% of SSA Black youths

watched Internet pornography [6]. The most preferred website was Pornhub (63%), followed by YouPorn (18%), and Pornsite (11%), in which Black and Hispanic youths watched online at home, at school on desktop computers, and on their smartphones [7]. The easy accessibility of free porn on the Internet, even to children under the age of 18, can contribute to PPU.

Preferred Pornographic Genre

Contemporary pornography is available in a wide variety of genres and depicts a vast array of sexual activities [19, 20]. When surveyed, 39% of Black and Hispanic adolescents expressed a preference for “Ebony” or Latino pornography [7] and gay Black adolescent males preferred to watch sexual actors who were Black or biracial [6]. In semi-structured interviews with Black and Hispanic youths, five participants—two males and three females—reported that they or their partners always watched pornography that featured performers of their same race or ethnicity [8].

In terms of sexual activity, SSA adolescent Black males watched pornography that depicted different sexual orientations: 42% ($n=16$) only watched gay pornography; 34% ($n=13$) only watched heterosexual pornography; 13.2% ($n=5$) began viewing heterosexual pornography and transitioned to gay pornography; and 11% ($n=4$) viewed both gay and heterosexual pornography [6]. In contrast, Black and Hispanic male and female adolescents typically watched SEM that featured heterosexual intercourse or women having sex with women. In addition, Black and Hispanic adolescents most often preferred the following genres: lesbian/bisexual (44%), “big butts/big tits” (43%), “blow jobs” (21%), threesomes (16%), and teen sex (13%) [7]. Participants also viewed SEM that depicted bestiality, group sex, and bukkake (i.e., multiple men ejaculating onto one woman’s face), and physical or sexual aggression, including incest, rape, choking, and public humiliation [8].

Reasons for Pornography Viewership

BIPOC adolescent watched pornography for a variety of reasons, including as a form of entertainment, to alleviate boredom and loneliness, as a masturbatory aid, and to stimulate sexual arousal [6, 8]. Sex education was the primary reason that BIPOC teenagers and young adults viewed pornography. As one 18-year-old female respondent reported: “Without porn, I wouldn’t know the positions, I wouldn’t know half the things I know now” [8] (p. 736). In semi-structured interviews, almost every Black and Hispanic participant, both males and females ($n=21$), reported using pornography to learn about sex, including sexual positions, activities that were enjoyed by opposite sex partners, and ways to perform various sex acts (e.g., oral sex, anal sex)

[8]. Based on surveys, 54% of Black and Hispanic respondents watched SEM to learn how to do something sexual and 30% reported that pornography was their primary source of information about sex [7]. Similarly, gay Black males used SEM to learn about the appearance and function of sexual organs, the mechanics of same-gender sexual activity, and as confirmation of their same-sex attraction [6].

To conclude, BIPOC adolescents reported a range of reactions to pornography, including distaste and surprise when viewing extreme forms of pornography, such as rape scenes. However, respondents generally reacted with indifference or acceptance. Furthermore, 56% of teens had reenacted behaviors that they had seen in pornography, such as anal sex—often with negative consequences [8]. Black gay youths also described modeling behaviors that they viewed in SEM, such as condom non-use and swallowing ejaculate. These findings suggest that pornography may shape the sexual scripts and sexual interactions of adolescent viewers [6, 8].

Racial Content of Pornography

According to Pornhub [21], the largest pornographic website on the Internet, ethnic-themed pornography is a popular genre. The term “Black” increased by +19 to make the top searches list worldwide and “Ebony,” “Asian,” and “Latina” were the fourth, fifth, and sixth, respectively, most searched terms of 2021. Despite its popularity, adult industry executives have issued a statement on problematic racial imagery in ethnic-themed pornography: “We call for an end to...racist marketing practices and films that rely on stereotypes and ignorance...As an industry, we can no longer deny that these films amplify racism and discrimination” [22].

Problematic Racial Images in Pornography

Black performers have been featured in pornographic scenes that included stereotyped speech patterns, racial insults, and ethnic background music; racialized performers’ names, such as Chocolate or Ebony; and references to the exceptionally large genitals of Black male performers [9, 17]. When compared to White performers in interracial pornography, Black actors were portrayed in lower status positions, as measured by clear age differences and occupational status (e.g., pimp/prostitute, master/slave). In addition, Black women were shown performing fellatio on their knees more frequently than White women, which the researchers defined as a form of submission [9]. Finally, when compared to White couples, Black men and women demonstrated less intimacy in pornography, defined as kissing, using the other person’s name, caressing, having intercourse face-to-face, and talking during sex [9, 10••].

Although BIPOC adults who regularly viewed SEM perceived that racism was prevalent in pornography, respondents believed that these images were stereotypical type-casting and denied preferring ethnic-themed pornography [23••]. On the other hand, adolescent BIPOC consumers preferred pornography that featured Black and Latinx performers [6–8]. Social categorization theory suggests individuals will model their behaviors based on what they perceive to be the behavioral norms of their group and subsequently adhere to negative sexual stereotypes portrayed in pornography as part of group identification. Thus, these representations may influence sexual scripts of Black and Latinx youths and increase the probability that they will engage in risky sexual behaviors [10••]. Fritz and colleagues [10••] speculated that “this reinforcement of negative stereotypes of detached and aggressive sex for Black couples, may lead to sexual and relationship dissatisfaction” (p. 115).

Aggression in Pornography

In addition to stereotypically racist images, a substantial amount of pornography contains aggressive acts [19, 20, 24]. For example, 45% of Pornhub scenes and 35% of Xvideo scenes included at least one act of physical aggression, with spanking, gagging, slapping, hair pulling, and choking being the most common forms that were depicted [25]. Based on literature reviews [20] and content analyses [9, 10••], women of color were overrepresented as targets of physical aggression.

For instance, Cowan and Campbell [9] used a sample of 54 interracial (Black/White) X-rated pornographic videocassettes obtained from adult video rental stores and found that Black women were the recipients of more total acts of aggression (e.g., hair pulling, hitting, name calling, racial insults) than White women (1.34 vs. 97 mean acts of aggression, respectively). More recently, Fritz and colleagues [10••] content analyzed 1741 pornographic scenes on Pornhub.com and Xvideos.com to investigate racial differences in physical aggression, defined “as any action appearing to cause or potentially causing physical harm to another person ranging from spanking to choking to hair pulling and to mutilation” (p. 109). When compared to White women (36%), Black women (50.8%) were more often recipients of physical aggression and Black women were more often spanked than White women (39.8% vs. 24.8%, respectively).

Contrary to other scholars who used random samples [9, 10••], Shor and associates [23••, 26••] conducted a content analysis of 172 of the most watched ethnic videos that were uploaded to Pornhub between 2000 and 2016 and found that videos that featured Black women were *less* likely to depict aggression, coded as 12 acts of “physical aggression: visible,” such as biting, choking, and gagging, and “physical aggression: nonconsensual,” defined as verbal or physical

cues for lack of consent. Instead, when compared to Black women, more Latinas (51.9%) were targets of physical aggression. Also, Asian women were frequently depicted in videos that featured physical aggression (75%), nonconsensual aggression (35.7%) [23••, 26••], and overrepresented as victims on free Internet pornographic rape websites [27].

BIPOC men were disproportionately depicted as aggressors in pornographic titles and videos (e.g., “Teeny Booper Kidnapped by Huge Black Cock”) [23••, 26••]. When compared to White men (35.3%), more Black men (47.3%) were depicted as aggressive toward women. Compared to scenes that featured White couples (34.8%), Black couples (54.1%) more frequently included acts of aggression toward the woman, such as spanking women and pulling women’s hair [10••]. Also, visible physical aggression was more common in videos that featured Black men compared to White men (53.3% vs. 33%, respectively). However, physical aggression was most common in videos that featured Latino men (50%) and Asian men (68.8%). Among videos that depicted nonconsensual aggression, 43.8% featured Asian men, which may reflect themes that are popular in the Japanese adult entertainment industry, such as *reipu* (rape), *kankin* (imprisonment), and *chikan* (molester on a train) [23••, 26••].

To conclude, BIPOC adults who were regular pornography viewers did not seek out or enjoy aggressive content [23••]. However, despite some respondent’s discomfort with aggressive pornography, many Black and Hispanic adolescent viewers found violent pornography to be unremarkable [8]. Fritz and colleagues [10••] concluded that “...the sexual script of higher levels of aggression in pornography against Black women creates a societal context that devalues Black female bodies” (p. 114).

Problematic Pornography Use

The addiction model has emerged as the most common theoretical framework to conceptualize problematic pornography use (PPU). Core components of addiction include (a) interpersonal conflict, (b) sex life conflict, and (c) negative attitude conflict [12]. Consistent with these components that have been associated with addiction, pornography use in BIPOC consumers has been linked to relationship aggression, sexual risk behaviors, and permissive sexual attitudes.

Relationship Aggression

Pornography consumption has been associated with relationship aggression in the form of adolescent dating abuse (ADA) victimization, defined as verbal or physical abuse committed by a boyfriend. Compared to nonvictims in a sample of 522 Black girls between the ages of 14 and 18 years old, victims of ADA were twice as likely to have

viewed X-rated videos [15]. Both Black and Hispanic male and female respondents reported sexual dating violence victimization and perpetration that involved pornography. In semi-structured interviews, one adolescent girl felt coerced when her boyfriend pressured her to reenact pornographic scenes and a 17-year-old boy, who was inspired by an amateur pornographic video, used his smartphone to videotape himself having sex with his girlfriend without her permission [8].

In one survey, 69% of Black and Hispanic respondents had experienced at least one instance of physical and sexual dating abuse in the past year. ADA victims watched pornography approximately twice as often per week (2.4 vs. 1.1 times), twice as often per month (8.3 vs. 3.8 times), and approximately 2.6 times more frequently per year (37.1 vs. 14.0 times) when compared to nonvictims. In addition, ADA victims were more likely to view pornography with other people, rather than alone (54% vs. 38%); to have been asked to reenact a sexual act that they believed that their partner first saw in porn (50% vs. 32%); and to have watched pornography during or after marijuana use (52% vs. 23%). Furthermore, ADA victims more frequently than nonvictims watched pornography that featured threesomes (21% vs. 5%). Finally, all of the participants who had ever asked a sibling or other person younger than 18 years old to watch pornography were ADA victims ($n = 4$); all but one of the participants who had ever watched pornography at a public high school were ADA victims ($n = 6$); and all but one of the participants ($n = 7$) had appeared in a pornographic video (professional or amateur) had experienced dating abuse in the past year [7].

Finally, relationship aggression can occur in educational or academic settings, which is indicative of PPU [12]. Ten percent of Black and Hispanic respondents watched pornography in school, which created a sexualized and hostile environment and led to sexual harassment. One 17-year-old girl described how: “Some guys just open up the porn [site], and then they just start watchin’ it. And then like the boys start like slapping girls’ butts, grabbing their boobs and stuff” [8, p. 740]. Rothman and colleagues [8] concluded: “In sum, the ubiquity of pornography on the internet and proliferation of Web sites where users post their own amateur videos may be increasing the likelihood that minors create SEM, exploit sexual partners, disseminate sexually explicit images of underage peers, and pressure their dating partners to engage in sexual acts that could hurt or upset them” (p. 743).

Sexual Risk Behavior

Although SSA Black adolescent males used SEM to learn both unhealthy and safer sexual practices [6], pornography viewership has generally been associated with risky sexual

behaviors [2]. When compared to those who were not exposed, low-income Black adolescent girls who viewed X-rated movies were 1.8 times more likely to have frequent sex, 2.0 times more likely to have multiple sex partners, and 1.7 times more likely to test positive for chlamydia. In addition, respondents who had viewed pornography were 2.2 times more likely to have failed to use contraception in the 6 months prior to the survey, 1.5 times more likely to have failed to use contraception during the last intercourse, and 2.3 times more likely to have a strong desire to become pregnant [16]. Similarly, when compared to nonviewers, Black and Hispanic adolescents who viewed SEWs were 1.8 times more likely to have multiple lifetime sexual partners, 1.8 times more likely to have had more than one sexual partner in the 3 months prior to the survey, and 2 times more likely to have engaged in anal sex [14].

Much of this pornography consumption occurs in the context of substance use, which can increase the probability of engaging in risky sexual behavior. Braun-Courville and Roja [14] found that Black and Hispanic pornography consumers were 2.6 times more likely to have used alcohol or other substances during their last sexual encounter and Rothman and Adhia [7] found that 43% of the BIPOC youths in their sample watched pornography during or after marijuana use and 17% had watched during or after alcohol use.

Due to the cross-sectional research designs, researchers were unable to establish whether exposure to SEM led BIPOC viewers to engage in risky sexual behaviors. Demographic risk factors, such as residing in a single-parent family and being monitored by someone other than one’s mother, have been found to account for sexual risk behaviors among low-income Black girls [16]. It is also equally plausible that substance use/abuse or traits, such as sensation seeking, were contributors to both pornography use and risky sexual behavior [2, 7, 14].

Permissive Attitudes

Compared with adolescents who have never been exposed to SEWs, Black and Hispanic respondents who had visited SEWs displayed higher sexual permissiveness scores as measured by items such as “casual sex is acceptable” and “I would like to have sex with many partners” [14]. Although it is difficult to translate attitudes into behaviors, the media environment may play a pivotal role in attitude formation in that permissive sexual attitudes may be developed and reinforced by observing internet pornography [14].

Clinical Implications

Educators, parents, and youth-serving professionals can develop pornography literacy programs to improve BIPOC adolescents’ understanding of knowledge, attitudes, and

behavioral intentions related to pornography. Rothman [28•] recommends talking with youths about contemporary pornography, its potential impact, strategies to set sexual boundaries when they are pressured to reenact pornographic scenes, and legal risks that are associated with inducing an underage partner to participate in pornography. It is especially important to provide pornography literacy to same-sex attracted BIPOC youth, who are often underserved by traditional sex education programs and rely on SEM to understand their sexuality [6].

When providing clinical services to BIPOC couples who are experiencing relationship problems, service professionals should consider the influence of pornography consumption.

Pornography viewership was associated with less happiness in marriage, multiple sex partners in the past year, and less satisfaction with one's financial situation [3]. This suggests that PPU may highlight ongoing relationship difficulties, such as poor communication, infidelity, and decreased sexual satisfaction [29]. Moreover, pornography that featured BIPOC men and women often depicted racial stereotypes, more acts of aggression, and fewer acts of intimacy, such as kissing [9, 10••]. When coupled with exposure to racism in pornography, Fritz and colleagues [10••] speculated that “this reinforcement of negative stereotypes of detached and aggressive sex for Black couples, may lead to sexual and relationship dissatisfaction” (p. 115).

Domestic violence perpetrators who self-reported higher levels of excessive, compulsive, and uncontrollable pornography use committed more frequent physical and sexual IPV than abusers with lower levels of SEM use [29, 30]. Families of color often experience exceptionally high rates of partner abuse [31]. The combination of consuming ethnic-themed pornography with violent themes could exacerbate IPV among BIPOC couples [10••]. Accordingly, services professionals should assess PPU in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV).

Conclusion

To conclude, Rothman [28•] made the compelling argument that caution and racial sensitivity should be used when discussing BIPOC pornography consumers: “Personally I'm not sure that social justice and thus public health is well served by discussions of race-specific pornography viewing because of the potential that race-specific estimates could be used to stigmatize, blame, or shame Black, Indigenous, and other people of color for any amount of pornography viewing” (p. 42). At the same time, other scholars have theorized that pornography, under some circumstances, can be sexually liberating and empowering for BIPOC actors and consumers [18, 32–34]. Yet, it should be acknowledged that

some consumers of color experience problematic pornography use in the form of relationship aggression, risky sexual behavior, and permissive sexual attitudes [14–16]. As the US population becomes more ethnically and racially diverse [35], service professionals must grapple with the sensitive topic of compulsive sexual behavior and problematic pornography use among BIPOC consumers [1].

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