



Pornography Use, Problematic Pornography Use, and Potential Impacts on Partners and Relationships

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Abstract

Purpose of Review The present review focuses on relationships between pornography use, problematic pornography use, and their possible effects on partners and relationships.

Recent Findings Pornography use has been examined in the setting of marriages and other partnered relationships. Aspects considered include pornography-use patterns, perceptions of a partner's pornography use, relationship satisfaction and happiness, relationship quality, partner's problematic pornography use, infidelity/extramarital sex, and relationship stability (breakup/divorce).

Summary Studying potential effects of pornography use in the context of dyadic relationships appears important with respect to understanding both marriage and divorce and the quality of couples' relationships. More research is needed, particularly in the context of problematic pornography use.

Keywords Pornography · Addictive behaviors · Compulsive sexual behavior disorder · Impulsive behaviors · Compulsive behaviors · Relationships · Marriage · Infidelity · Divorce

Introduction

Although definitions of pornography may vary, a core element involves sexually explicit materials intended for sexual arousal [1•]. Over the past 30 years, especially with the emergence of online content, pornography consumption has increased in both men and women, although it remains higher in men [2]. Some motives associated with the use of pornography may include sexual pleasure and curiosity,

fantasy, self-exploration, lack of sexual satisfaction, stress reduction, boredom avoidance, and emotional distraction or suppression [3•].

Pornography use may be undertaken in solitary or shared fashions (e.g., by couples in dyadic relationships), and thus may be understood within relational contexts [4]. Further, solitary use of pornography may also have impacts on relationships with sexual partners. Consequently, the study of pornography use in the context of romantic relationships is important [5]. Therefore, the present article reviews relationships between pornography use, marriage, and relationship factors (partners' perceptions, quality and satisfaction, happiness, infidelity, and divorce).

Methods

This narrative review aimed to provide a comprehensive synthesis of existing studies about pornography use/problematic pornography use (PPU) and potential impacts on partners and relationships. Google Scholar and PubMed were used to search the scientific literature that had been published in peer-reviewed international journals. Both English or Spanish reviews and original studies with human

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samples involving one or more participants were considered. Multiple searches were conducted. An example of search keywords is as follows: pornography AND (couple OR partner OR relationship).

Pornography Use and Entrance into Marriage

Multiple social changes have progressively modified perceptions of social institutions, such as family and marriage, that no longer may be the socially anticipated gateway to adulthood [6]. However, marital stability has been considered as an enhancer of social improvements, like the development of “high-quality children” [7], and attempts have been made to identify factors associated with such stability. Along this line, different studies have focused on exploring whether the proliferation of pornography may be associated with changes in entrances into marriage, especially among young people.

Theoretically, different reasons have been proposed for inverse associations between pornography use and entrance into marriage, among which two stand out [8]: (A) a higher frequency of pornography use may be associated with a lower value of fidelity and monogamy and, consequently, with a lower interest in marriage; and (B) increased cultural acceptance of premarital sex and pornography use may have reduced religious individuals’ interests in marriage, historically perceived as a context that legitimized young people’s sexual activity. Therefore, the existence of possible low-cost substitutes for marital sexual gratification, such as pornography, may influence decisions not to marry [9].

Empirically, there seems to be no consensus regarding associations between pornography use and entrance into marriages. Some studies have highlighted gender-related differences in the association between pornography use and marriage entrance, which would appear more significant for young men than young women [8]. However, other studies have described the frequency of pornography use as a significant positive predictor of young single men’s desire to marry, even after accounting for factors such as beliefs about marriage, relationship status, sexual frequency and satisfaction, and masturbation [10]. Other authors have described that pornography use does not statistically predict changes in the marital salience (i.e., overall importance of marriage) in emerging adults, but it does statistically predict significant changes in marital centrality (i.e., the significance given to one’s marital role after marriage). Therefore, it seems that individuals who use pornography may continue to hold the belief that marriage is an important institution, although they begin to perceive it as less important relative to other life priorities [11]. This may contradict the theory that pornography use is a mere

substitute for sexual gratification that marriage may entail [9].

Finally, in other studies, religious commitment has not been shown to be a moderating factor in relationships between pornography use and marriage entry. Pornography use, in the case of young men (whether religious or not), is associated with a lower probability of marriage [8]. Despite these findings, the literature on the association between pornography use and perceptions of marriage is scarce, so the conclusions drawn are not yet solid (Table 1).

Pornography Use and Relationships

The conceptualization of a stable and healthy marriage may include multiple factors, such as the following [12]: (a) mutual belief in the institution of marriage; (b) shared values; (c) spirituality; (d) trust; (e) flexibility when confronted with changes; (f) mutual support; (g) emotional, sexual, and physical fidelity; (h) sense of permanence of the relationship; (i) mutual respect; (j) good communication; (k) cooperation; (l) feeling appreciated; (m) mutual enjoyment of shared time; (n) superiority of positive feelings and interactions over negative ones; and (o) sexual relations that strengthen the bond. Numerous studies have considered the association between some of these factors and pornography use.

Couples’ Pornography-Use Patterns

Pornography-use patterns may influence relationship quality. Multiple gender-related differences have been identified and, consequently, between husbands and wives, in terms of pornography use, its potential etiologies, and various individual and relational outcomes [4, 13]. It has been suggested that greater differences in dyadic pornography-use patterns are associated, at least partially, with lower couple well-being [14, 15]. These different patterns may be associated with differences in the values and sexual ethics of the partners with respect to their sexual intimacy. However, when acceptance of pornography use, especially by female partners, is high, this association between differences in use patterns and negative outcomes is reduced [14].

In addition, pornography use may be limited to one or both partners in the relationship, and it may occur on an individual or shared level. This gives rise, therefore, to multiple and complex realities, identifying mainly five non-exclusive options [16]: (a) non-use, (b) individual use, (c) partnered use, (d) separate use, and (e) shared use. In both men and women, religiosity appears to be a particularly strong factor associated with the non-use of pornography [17–19]. More men than women report individual use of pornography, while there appears to be no gender-related

Table 1 Main studies about pornography use and entrance into marriage (arranged in order of their appearance in the manuscript)

First author, year, and reference	Country	Design	Sample	Marriage assessment	Pornography assessment	Main results
Willoughby et al. [6]	Midwest (America)	Cross-sectional	571 unmarried young adults from a large public university in the Midwest	Marital centrality: assessed with a four-item assessment, adapted from a measure developed by Kerpelman and Schvaneveldt (1999), asking young adults to split a pie chart into three sections (marriage, parenthood, and career) based on how much identity importance they expected to place on each role in the future. For the current study, the authors added “personal leisure and hobbies.”	Pornography use (1 = Never; to 5 = Every day or almost every day)	Higher values on marital centrality were significantly associated with less pornography use
Perry et al. (2019) [8]	America	Longitudinal	1691 Americans from their teenage years into early adulthood	“What is your current marital status?” All participants who reported being married, married but separated, divorced, or widowed were included in the “married” outcome (= 1), while all others were included in the reference group (= 0)	“About how many, if any, X-rated, pornographic movies, videos, or cable programs have you watched in the last year?”	-Men: A non-linear link between pornography use and marriage entry was reported. Men with higher frequency pornography viewing were not significantly different from those non-viewing in their probability of marriage entry. Higher levels of pornography use in emerging adulthood were associated with a lower likelihood of marriage by the final survey wave -Women: No link between pornography use and marriage entry was observed Links were not moderated by religiosity for either gender

Table 1 (continued)

First author, year, and reference	Country	Design	Sample	Marriage assessment	Pornography assessment	Main results
Malcom et al. (2016) [9]	The USA	Repeated cross-sectional (3 waves)	1512 observations of men between the ages of 18 and 35 (from the 2000, 2002, and 2004 waves)	The marriage variable was set equal to 0 for anyone who was not married at the time of the survey, whether because he had never been married or because he was divorced. Authors did not distinguish between divorcees and single men	Use of internet to view pornography	Usage of internet in general had a negative impact on marriage formation, and pornography use had an especially strong impact
Perry (2020a, b, c [10]	America	Cross-sectional	Survey 1: 2988 American participants ages 18 to 39 Survey 2: 15,738 adults between the ages of 18 and 60 years	Desire for marriage: "Would you prefer to be married?" (yes = 1, no = 0)	Survey 1: "During the past year, how often did you view pornographic materials (such as internet sites, magazines, or movies)?" (from 1 = never to 6 = every day or almost every day) Survey 2: "When did you last intentionally look at pornography?" (1 = today to 10 = I've never intentionally looked at pornography)	Pornography use was strongly and linearly linked with a greater likelihood of wanting to be married. This relationship was apparent at both the bivariate level and after taking into account sexual satisfaction, relationship status, beliefs about marriage, and multiple other potential confounds Rather than making marriage less desirable, pornography use predicted a comparatively higher desire for marriage

Table 1 (continued)

First author, year, and reference	Country	Design	Sample	Marriage assessment	Pornography assessment	Main results
Leonhardt et al. (2018) [11]	Midwest (America)	Cross-sectional and longitudinal	568 emerging adults (longitudinal $n = 142$)	<p>Marital salience (6 items): “Getting married is more important to me than having a successful career,” “Getting married is more important than my educational pursuits and achievements,” “Getting married is among my top priorities during this time in my life,” “All in all, there are more advantages to being single than to being married (reverse coded),” “Getting married is a very important goal for me,” and “I would like to be married now.” (1 = very strongly disagree; to 6 = very strongly agree)</p> <p>Marital centrality was measured using an adapted item developed by Kerpelman and Schvaneveldt (1999), asking participants to assign a percentage to the aspects of marriage, parenting, career, and personal leisure/hobbies, equaling a total of 100%</p> <p>Ideal age of marriage: “What is the ideal age of marriage?”</p> <p>Marital context beliefs related to sexuality were assessed based on beliefs about sexual readiness and marriage</p>	<p>“During the past month, on how many days did you view pornography (online or offline, such as movies, websites, magazines, and/or strip clubs).” (0 = none; to 5 = every day or almost every day)</p>	<p>Cross-sectional findings: pornography use was linked with a higher importance placed on sexual readiness before getting married</p> <p>Longitudinal findings: pornography use predicted lower marital centrality</p>

Country locations are those listed in the manuscripts

differences in joint pornography use [18]. Also, although it seems that the length of the relationship is not an influential factor in shared pornography use, cohabitation appears to contribute importantly to this type of pornography use [18].

Differences in several constructs associated with couples' relationships have been identified when pornography-use patterns are considered. In one study, non-using pornography couples, compared to partners who consumed pornography individually, showed greater relationship satisfaction. However, couples who engaged in shared pornography use showed no differences with non-using or solitary-using individuals [16]. Similarly, in another study, participants who engaged in shared use of pornography did not have higher relationship satisfaction compared to those who never or rarely used pornography together [20]. However, women who always used pornography in a shared manner with their partners reported lower levels of distress than those who never, rarely, or sometimes used pornography in a shared manner [20]. In this vein, Maddox et al. [18] highlighted that non-using individuals reported higher dedication, lower negative communication, and lower infidelity rates, compared to those who used pornography individually and/or with a partner. In addition, non-using individuals, compared to those with individual use, showed higher sexual satisfaction and better relationship adjustment. Those individuals who only used pornography jointly showed higher dedication in comparison to those who used it individually or both individually and together. Huntington et al. [21•] reported gender-related differences in individual pornography use. While for men it was associated with poorer relationship quality, for women it was associated with better relationship quality. In addition, relationship intimacy was higher for those who used pornography together.

At a qualitative level and in the specific case of women's perception of pornography use with a partner, seemingly contradictory results have been found [22]. While some studies have observed that women consider pornography sharing as an option to communicate sexual issues, enjoy and take new ideas to sexual activities [23–25], others highlight that for some women, this shared pornography use may generate pressure to perform certain sexual behaviors that they do not necessarily want to do [26].

Perception of a Partner's Pornography Use

The perception of partners' pornography use has been explored mostly in women [27]. Ashton et al. [28], in their systematic review of qualitative studies, highlighted that women exhibit complex and perhaps even opposing perceptions of their partners' pornography use. The four most common options are as follows: (a) acceptance of their partner's pornography use, considering it, for example, "their right," "their space," their "natural sexual need," or a way

to enhance their sexual relationships [24, 29–31]; (b) non-acceptance of their partner's pornography use and/or preference for hidden use [30]; (c) conflict between feelings of inadequacy stemming from partner pornography use and the belief that they cannot prohibit their partners from this use [29, 32]; and (d) the perception that their role as a partner/wife involves accepting partner pornography use even though they do not agree with it [24, 29].

In addition, women's perception of attachment disturbances due to their partner's use of pornography has been highlighted. Common experiences described qualitatively include the following [33]: (a) a partner's pornography use precipitates a psychologically and emotionally disruptive experience in female partners; (b) a change in global perception occurs, as well as diminished trust of the partner; and (c) a negative impact on attachment security is experienced by linking partner pornography use with an altered ability to fulfill marital expectations.

Quantitatively, Adamson et al. [34] categorized women into three groups according to their attitudes toward their partners' pornography use (positive, neutral, or negative). Women with neutral or positive attitudes experienced no change in their levels of partner intimacy, whereas pornography use negatively affected the partner intimacy of those with negative attitudes.

Pornography Use, Relationship Satisfaction, and Happiness

Pornography use appears to have no clear association with relationship satisfaction. Some studies have observed that pornography use has no impact on relationship satisfaction [35], while other studies have highlighted certain associations between these factors. For example, some studies have suggested that male pornography use seems to have a significant indirect association with relationship satisfaction in both genders [17]. Female pornography use seems to have a significant indirect association with relationship satisfaction for males, through female sexual quality [17]. Moreover, men have shown lower levels of interpersonal satisfaction (more specifically, sexual and relational satisfaction) in regard to pornography use. However, pornography use was not associated with lower intrapersonal satisfaction (including general self-satisfaction and body satisfaction) [36•]. Regarding women, no clear association between pornography use and satisfaction, both interpersonal and intrapersonal, has been observed [36•].

In studying pornography use and relationship satisfaction, possible associated factors, such as honesty regarding pornography use [20], depression [37], anxiety [37], moral disapproval [37, 38], moral incongruence [39], anxious attachment [40], pornography acceptance [40], and attributions about partners' pornography use [41] have also been

studied. On the one hand, some have proposed that there is a relationship between honesty, higher levels of satisfaction, and lower levels of distress [20]. In fact, honesty may be a predictor of relationship dissatisfaction [20]. Therefore, the use of pornography in an open manner could potentially enhance couple satisfaction and intimacy [12]. On the other hand, the joint effect of anxiety, depression, and moral disapproval on the association between pornography use and relationship satisfaction has been studied. Moral disapproval appears to mediate an indirect effect, through depression, of pornography use on lower relationship satisfaction [37]. Moreover, findings suggest that high pornography use levels together with high moral disapproval of pornography positively predict an increase in anxiety levels, which predict a growth in relationship dissatisfaction when the influence of insecure romantic partner attachment is taken into account [37]. In addition, in individuals who morally disapprove of pornography use, pornography use appears to be associated with lower marital quality [39], and greater sexual shame, which is related to lower sexual satisfaction and, consequently, lower relationship satisfaction [38]. Finally, the type of attributions that women make about their partners' pornography use also appears related to relationship satisfaction. More specifically, a lower frequency of negative attributions (e.g., "partner is sexually bored" or "something is missing in the sexual relationship") and a higher frequency of neutral and positive attributions (e.g., "facilitates sexual arousal" or "strong and trusting relationship") appear associated with higher relationship satisfaction [41].

In the association between pornography use and relational happiness, the role of masturbation has been specifically explored. It has been reported that masturbation is significantly and negatively associated with relational happiness [42]. However, pornography seems not to be significantly associated with relational happiness [42]. At the moment, it is not possible to consider causal associations between these factors, given that studies have been cross-sectional.

Pornography Use and Relationship Quality

Longitudinally, some studies have suggested that higher frequency use of pornography may relate negatively to marital quality exclusively in the case of men, with no relationship observed in women [43]. These findings could reflect possible negative impacts of pornography use on men's evaluation of their own relationships, with men using pornography when in lower-quality marital relationships. Alternatively, pornography use may lead to poorer marital quality, with other relationships also possible. In order to identify a dominant trend in the association between relationship quality and pornography use, Perry [44] evaluated the use of 31 instruments to assess relationship quality in 30 nationally representative surveys, observing that pornography use in

the general population (both genders; married and unmarried individuals) is either not associated with relationship quality or has a weak association with poorer or better relationship quality.

Partner's Problematic Pornography Use

Although the evidence base regarding PPU is growing, there remains limited evidence of its effects on partners [45]. Some studies focusing on self-perceived or partner-perceived PPU seem to indicate that possible impacts of PPU on individuals and their partners are similar, characterized mainly by feelings of isolation, relationship breakdowns, and emotional and psychological distress [46–48].

Quantitatively, it has been suggested that relationship satisfaction is one of the most relevant moderating factors in the association between the frequency of pornography use and self-perceived PPU, and gender does not seem to influence this moderation effect [49]. Two possible interpretations of this association have been suggested [49]: (a) alterations in relationship satisfaction could be generating negative emotions in the individual, so pornography use may be used as a maladaptive coping strategy; or (b) pornography use could be a more unconscious strategy to express anger towards the partner (due to conflicts in the relationship), especially if the partner perceives pornography use as negative. It also appears that partners' perceptions of the impact of PPU on relationship satisfaction are influenced by four main factors: context, frequency, secrecy of pornography use, and relationship commitment [50].

Qualitatively, a common challenge has been described in the partners of individuals with PPU to understand and address the disorder. Likewise, the difficulty has been observed in integrating positive aspects of couples' relationships with negative aspects associated with PPU, as well as emotional ambivalence, fluctuating between denial of the disorder, perception of PPU as a medical excuse, and moral accusation [32].

Pornography Use and Infidelity/Extramarital Sex

Infidelity has been understood in a committed dyadic relationship as, "the act of having either a romantic or a sexual relationship with someone other than one's spouse or partner" [51]. The study of the association between infidelity and pornography use is complex and controversial. In order to study such an association, an in-depth analysis of the contents of mainstream pornography is warranted. In these contents, infidelity, and especially marital infidelity, is a common theme, supporting previous proposals suggesting that casual sex appears to be more exciting than sex between emotionally bonded partners to many [52]. It has also been proposed that pornography could be an expression of common sexual

fantasies, including infidelity [53]. This could explain, at least partially, why content analyses of pornography (often/mostly intended for male heterosexual consumers) find twice the proportion of women than men engaging in infidelity [52]. Men would therefore be fantasizing about having casual sex with emotionally unavailable women, rather than cheating on their own partners [52]. Therefore, pornography may be promoting, at least to some extent, the idea that extradyadic sex is normative and exciting [54].

Three important aspects to consider in the association between pornography use and infidelity include the following: (a) the perception of pornography use as infidelity *per se*. Although this perception does not seem to be generalized, minorities have been identified who perceive pornography use as infidelity, and certain cultural differences in this perception may exist [55]; (b) a direct association between pornography use and favorable attitudes toward infidelity [54, 56–59]. Higher intentions to commit infidelity have been found to relate to preference for two types of content: gangbang scenes and threesomes [60]; and (c) the association between pornography use and infidelity, suggesting that pornography use may predict extradyadic sexual involvement [18, 58, 61, 62].

Pornography Use and Relationship Stability (Breakup/Divorce)

The association between pornography use and couple breakups/divorces has been studied cross-sectionally, with higher probabilities of divorce observed in those individuals who use pornography [63, 64]. In fact, online sexual activity conducted by the partner has been described as a central contributing factor underlying divorce [65].

This association has also been explored longitudinally [66, 67]. It has been observed that, with the onset of pornography use in marriage, the likelihood of divorce is twice [66] or even more than twice (in the 6 years following the reported pornography use) [67, 68] than in marriages without pornography use. Likewise, both the presence and frequency of pornography use may predict divorce (the greater the frequency, the greater the likelihood of divorce) [68]. Furthermore, higher frequency and earlier use of pornography may be associated with a higher probability of breakup in the case of future relationships (in single individuals), not only in the case of individuals already in a relationship [68].

However, while some studies have found that the association between pornography use and divorce is stronger for men (double for women and 3.5 times for men) [68], others have not found gender/sex to be a moderating factor in this association [66, 67]. A strong negative association between relationship quality and pornography use has been observed for men but not for women, possibly due to the difference in consumption patterns between the two groups. While men more frequently use pornography alone with the intention of masturbation,

women use it more commonly in the context of couple and sexual encounters. Consequently, a stronger association between divorce and pornography use may be expected for men.

In this vein, in the case of women, stopping pornography use appears to be associated with a lower likelihood of divorce [66]. This could be due to several reasons, such as, in the case of women, pornography use being associated with a poorer quality of marriage or a possible extramarital affair [66].

In addition, it has been described that the positive association between divorce and pornography use is greater in younger individuals, those with lower levels of religiosity, and those who report greater initial marital happiness [66]. On the one hand, age seems to be one of the mediating factors between pornography use and divorce. This may be explained by several factors including cultural changes in attitudes in which younger people consider divorce as a more normalized event and the greater access to pornography over time. Age, at the moment, could be a protective factor against divorce, although with the emergence of online pornography, this pattern could be altered. On the other hand, religion also seems to be a protective factor against divorce, possibly due to social control mechanisms and internalized moral values. Religion, therefore, could affect the quality of marriage to a greater extent by increasing the negative consequences of pornography use, but at the same time, it could restrain marital breakdown. Finally, the finding that those individuals who report greater marital happiness at baseline have a higher likelihood of divorce may be, among other reasons, due to pornography use being discovered unexpectedly in the marriage and perceived as infidelity, or that although marital happiness was higher initially, it declined over time, promoting pornography use and, subsequently, divorce [66].

Limitations and Future Studies

The studies included in this review have limitations. First, an important limitation is the conceptualization of pornography, as multiple studies do not define the construct and/or do not explore the specific types of pornography used by participants, as well as the types of use (e.g., solo or partnered). Second, numerous studies have assessed pornography use dichotomously or with low-validity self-report instruments, with the consequent biases that these may entail [69]. Third, in the case of PPU, most studies do not clinically verify that individuals actually present with PPU, and thus are assessing their or partners' perception of PPU. Future studies could assess dyads in clinical populations with PPU. Fourth, the methods for assessing dyads have limitations, given that multiple studies assess only one member of the dyad, whereas quantitative and qualitative assessment of both would provide more specific information. Fifth, in most studies investigating pornography use and divorce, the data could not explain the

precise causes of divorce or the precise impacts that pornography use may have had on divorce, as well as those of other associated factors that might be confounding observed associations. Sixth, there is an overrepresentation of heterosexual couples, such that homosexual couples and other types of relationships remain unexplored. Seventh, many studies had small sample sizes or consisted of non-representative populations. Eighth, as suggested by other authors [70], recognizing possible effects of pornography use on couples and marriages may not clearly reveal the complexities of associations between these factors, and may lead to inaccurate, simple and biased understandings. Future studies should delve more deeply into processes, rather than effects, to determine under what conditions pornography use may influence different aspects of relationships at specific stages. Ninth, there may exist cultural biases, given that most studies focusing on pornography use in relationships have been conducted in Western cultures. Finally, given that age appears to be a factor associated with pornography use and divorce, future studies should systematically investigate how age may link to other factors associated with pornography use, such as relationship satisfaction or couples' patterns of pornography use.

Conclusions

Studying the effects of pornography use in the context of couple relationships appears important to understanding both changes in social patterns of marriage and divorce and understanding the quality of couples' relationships. More research is needed, particularly in the context of PPU.

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