

Pornography's Impact on Male Adolescents

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Some male adolescents in American society may be harmed by exposure to pornography. Unfortunately, little social scientific research directly addresses this issue, partly because of the severe ethical and political constraints on researchers who might attempt to conduct experiments. (For example, an ethics committee is unlikely to approve an experiment in which the researcher exposed adolescents to pornography.) Therefore, the discussion below is organized around several interrelated questions and propositions that provide tentative conclusions based largely on inferences from related theory and research. This chapter, however, does not consider other potential effects of pornography exposure, including those considered beneficial by some,⁶³ but focuses exclusively on the hypothesis of possible harmful effects. The effects of pornography on female adolescents¹⁶ are also not discussed in this chapter.

HOW IS PORNOGRAPHY DEFINED?

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart intoned that although pornography may be difficult to define, he "knew it when he saw it." This famous statement highlights the difficulties of definition. Linz and Malamuth³⁶ note that the various definitions typically imply beliefs about what pornography does or does not do. For example, a definition based on an appeal to a prurient (morbid, unhealthy, shameful) interest in sex, as used in many decisions of American courts, reveals a belief that media materials designed primarily to arouse the viewer sexually or to produce lust undermine certain Judeo-Christian values and institutions. In contrast, a definition that includes the concept of "violence and degradation of women"⁵⁵ reveals a belief that such media can hurt women's rights.

As used here, pornography refers, with no pejorative connotation necessarily intended, to **sexually explicit media designed primarily to arouse the audience sexually**. Although prime-time television contains considerable sexual content,⁵⁶ the above definition is useful in distinguishing such media from those where the primary focus is sexual explicitness.

The materials used or discussed by researchers in the relevant literature can be divided into five categories, although not all would necessarily be considered pornographic by the definition above.¹⁹ These stimuli have been presented to research subjects in the form of written stories, audio depictions, magazine pictures, slide presentations, or films. Four of these categories are relevant to the current focus. **Violent pornography**, which usually depicts sexual coercion in a sexually explicit context, has been defined operationally as a man's use of force against a woman in order to obtain sexual gratification (e.g., scenes of rape and other forms of violent sexual assault). A common feature of these depictions is the portrayal of what researchers have termed "positive victim outcomes"; that is, rape is depicted as pleasurable and sexually arousing to the female victim. The second category is **nonexplicit sexual aggression against women**, which includes depictions of male sexual aggression against women that are conceptually similar to violent pornography. Although rape may be depicted, it often would be the type permissible under television broadcast standards (e.g., the sex is far less explicit than in violent pornography). However, the idea that women derive positive benefit from sexual abuse may be the same. Some researchers have hypothesized that exposure to such materials often leads to the same effects as exposure to violent pornography. As discussed below, however, the very fact that a rape or similar portrayal is presented within a context that seems to be intended to arouse sexually (and therefore presumably please) the audience may make the portrayal more harmful than when the same depiction is not sexually explicit. This argument is reminiscent of the famous assertion that "the medium is the message."⁵³

Two types of nonviolent materials have also been studied. The first is **nonviolent, low-degradation pornography**, which operationally consists of depictions of consenting, mutually pleasurable sexual acts between adults or pictures of nude women. Such portrayals are now often called erotica by some researchers. Considerable controversy surrounds the validity of the second category, which can be labeled **nonviolent, high-degradation pornography**. Researchers who use portrayals of this type usually label them demeaning, degrading, or dehumanizing to women because they depict women in subordinate positions, as being abused in some manner, or as oversexed or highly promiscuous. The validity of such a category is discussed later.

HOW SHOULD HARM BE DEFINED?

Diverse harms may result from the exposure of adolescents to certain types of pornographic media. The definition of harm need not be limited to the possibility that such exposure may directly incite to violence but may include changes in other spheres, such as attitudes that affect individuals and/or the cultural climate.^{6,37,38,40,54}

Even if considerable scientific evidence showed various types of harm, the question of which remedies should be used may not be a scientific one. Policies about the use of legal or other alternatives involve moral/political decisions that result from weighing and prioritizing the perceived benefits and harms that may occur by restricting or not restricting consumers' access to materials that they desire.³⁶ This chapter focuses on the potential harm of attitudinal changes that may result from exposure to media materials. Research concerning the relationship between such

attitudinal changes and antisocial behavior, suggesting the conditions under which such attitudes do or do not affect behaviors, has been reviewed elsewhere.⁴⁰ The present discussion considers certain changes in attitude as harmful in and of themselves, regardless of whether they actually result in increased antisocial behavior, and also suggests that the processes presumed to underlie the effects found with sexually violent media are likely to occur with some other pornographic media as well.

The basis for much of this research has been social cognitive learning theory.² This is not simply a "monkey see, monkey do" theory but instead specifies various mechanisms by which people may be influenced by the environment to which they are exposed and the conditions under which certain influences are more likely to occur. Particularly relevant is the theory's focus on attitudinal mediators of behaviors.

HOW MUCH EXPOSURE IS THERE AMONG YOUTH?

Bryant and Brown review most of the available social scientific literature regarding levels of exposure to pornography among youths and adults.⁸ They note the considerable limitations to research due to the sensitivity of consumers about the topic and the problems of different definitions used by respondents and investigators. Nevertheless, they were able to reach the following conclusions with considerable confidence:

Exposure to pornography typically occurs at least by high school years, and usually is facilitated by peers. Only small proportions of people report no voluntary exposure at all. The image of the pornography consumer as a loner who lacks socialization skills appears, as a general rule, to be inaccurate (pp 52-53).

They also note that males are considerably heavier consumers of what is typically considered pornographic than females.

The actual data may be illustrated by a study conducted by Bryant.^{7,8} The research was based on 600 telephone interviews designed to obtain normative information on amounts of exposure to various types of R- and X-rated media. The interviews were conducted in midwestern cities with random-digit dialing. Subjects were classified into three age groups: 13-15 years old, 16-18 years old, and 19-39 years old. Interviews were successfully completed with 100 males and 100 females in each group; about 40% of the people contacted responded to the questions. The findings indicated that by age 15 years, 92% of the males and 84% of the females had "looked at or read *Playboy* or *Playgirl*" and that by age 18 years, the proportion rose to 100% of the males and 97% of the females. The average age of first exposure was reported to be 11 years for males and 13 for females. High levels of exposure to films were also reported. For example, nearly 70% of 13-15 year olds, even though under age, reported exposure to an average of 6.3 sexually oriented R-rated films before the age of 13. In regard to X-rated media, among all respondents the average age of first exposure to a magazine that depicted couples or groups in explicitly sexual acts was 13.5 years; an average of 5 such magazines had been viewed. In regard to X-rated films, 92% of 13-15 year olds said they had already seen such a film, with an average reported age at first exposure of 14 years, 8 months.

A survey in Great Britain of a representative sample of children and adolescents assessed the frequency of exposure to video films that are legally classified as obscene (many would not receive such a classification in the United States). Because these films are banned in Great Britain, they were not viewed in theaters but in private homes on videos. According to the investigators,⁵³ "It is a matter of grave concern

that in the formative years, 45% of children . . . have seen one or more video films which would legally be classified as obscene in this country on account of the morbid, sadistic and repugnant nature of the violence they portray. The first knowledge of sexual life acquired by these children may come from viewing films in which sexual conduct is inextricably entwined with violence, hatred, coercion and the humiliation of women in particular" (p 3).

IS THERE CONSENSUS AMONG SOCIAL SCIENTISTS ABOUT EFFECTS?

Linz and Malamuth discuss how three theories—the conservative, liberal, and feminist—have guided definitions, thinking, and research on the subject of pornography.³⁶ They note that each theory is broadly based on values and assumptions that cannot be empirically tested. They also suggest that the theories function as "cognitive schemas" or implicit theories that have strongly affected the evaluation of research evidence.

In light of these implicit theories, the lack of a broad-based consensus among researchers about the effects of pornography is not surprising. Some conclude that the data clearly show strong and consistent effects in a wide variety of areas, whereas others believe that the findings are not convincing.^{20,23,24,55}

As noted above, the tools available to researchers are often quite limited by ethical and practical constraints. For example, the ideal study investigating the effects of sexually violent media on children might include having some youngsters randomly assigned to view, over several years, a media diet that included many portrayals of sexual violence. Because for obvious ethical reasons such ideal research cannot occur, the studies available typically involve considerable compromises.

Certain tentative conclusions can be currently justified. It is important, however, to reiterate that they are not shared by all researchers:

1. Exposure to certain media presentations may affect people's attitudes and perceptions, even if the audience is well aware that the media depictions are fiction.

To many, this proposition seems so obvious that it does not require scientific support. The vast advertising industry clearly rests on the assumption that fictionalized media messages affect consumers' attitudes and behavior. This view is shared by many researchers, and various types of scientific evidence may be presented in its support. For example, studies show that when people are asked to imagine that a certain event occurs, they believe that such an event is more likely to occur in reality.¹¹ In addition, most social scientists accept the validity of a large body of literature that implicates media violence as a contributor to actual aggression in some of the audience. Although a few skeptics still exist, the disagreement primarily concerns whether exposure to media violence affects violent behavior outside the laboratory.²⁵ Virtually no authority disagrees that such exposure affects responses such as attitudes and laboratory aggression.³⁰ Meta-analyses of research, which systematically examine conclusions across large numbers of studies, conclude that media effects occur both for prosocial and antisocial attitudes and behavior, although differences in magnitude may exist.²⁹

2. Exposure to fictionalized portrayals of sexually violent messages in the media may, like some other media content, affect people's attitudes.

The research described below analyzed media stimuli by the messages or meanings that they convey. Meaning is, of course, a function of both the message and the receiver's interpretations. The message given the most attention involved the consequences of sexual aggression. A series of experiments found that rape depictions that show the victim as ultimately deriving physical pleasure from her

experience fostered attitudes more condoning of aggression against women.^{43,45,48,49} Rape depictions that portrayed the victim as abhorring the experience, on the other hand, were less likely to have such effects.⁴⁰

The current controversy over a possible relationship between pornography and crime has led to a search for direct links between media exposure and deviant behavior. People have sought an immediate causal connection between media action and audience imitation. For example, a civil suit brought against National Broadcasting Company alleged that a rape portrayal in a television movie, "Born Innocent," resulted in rape by some juvenile viewers (*Olivia v. NBC*, 1978).

Beyond the dramatic popular notion that violent pornography spurs a minority of sexual deviants to criminal acts lies the far grayer and more complex, but potentially far more pervasive area of indirect effects. Evidence suggests that a wide range of media affects the general population in a variety of different ways. In particular, heavy exposure to sexual violence could affect thought patterns (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, schemas) that are concurrently being shaped by family, peers, other media messages, and a host of other influences. If other risk factors exist in the person and in the environment, such thought patterns may contribute to acts such as stranger and date rape.⁵¹ In the absence of other factors that contribute to aggression or in the presence of forces that inhibit (e.g., fear of punishment) or are incompatible (e.g., empathy) with violence, there is still some likelihood that thought patterns will be expressed in other ways, such as a not-acted-upon desire to be sexually aggressive, a sanctioning of sexual aggression in others, or sexist, discriminatory, and/or harassing behavior. Even when not translated into violent behavior, such effects have wide social implications.

Research Assessing Attitudinal Effects. To evaluate the hypothesis that exposure to sexually violent media may affect some viewers' attitudes, the cumulative evidence must be considered. As in virtually all areas of media effects, the impact on exposed subjects may vary considerably according to their cultural and individual background. Nevertheless, the data appear to justify certain conclusions.^{14,18,40}

In three experiments, male subjects were exposed to depictions of mutually consenting sex; rape in which the female victim eventually became aroused; or rape abhorred by the victim. Afterwards the subjects were shown a depiction of rape and asked about their perceptions of the act and the victim. In two of the studies, subjects exposed to the positive portrayal of rape perceived the second rape as less negative than subjects first exposed to the other depictions.^{43,49} One of the studies also found that the portrayal depicting victim arousal led men to perceive rape as a more normative act.⁴³ Subjects in the third experiment were asked how women in general would react to being victimized by sexual violence.⁴⁸ Those exposed to a "positive" rape portrayal believed that a higher percentage of women would derive pleasure from sexual assault. This effect was particularly apparent in men with higher inclinations to act aggressively against women.

A fourth experiment conducted outside the laboratory yielded similar results.⁴⁵ This study was specifically designed to use the advantages of the experimental method (i.e., random assignment of subjects to conditions) in a relatively naturalistic setting that would enable better generalization than the laboratory environment. Male and female undergraduates were randomly assigned to one of two exposure conditions. Participants in the experimental condition were given free tickets to view feature-length films on two different evenings that included portrayals of women as victims of aggression in sexual and nonsexual scenes. These films suggested that the aggression was justified or had positive consequences. On the same evenings, subjects in the control condition were given tickets to films that contained no sexual violence.

The films shown in both exposure conditions had been aired with some editing on national television. Subjects viewed the films with moviegoers who purchased tickets and were not part of the research. Classmates of the recruited subjects who did not see the films were also studied as an untreated control group. Several days after the films were viewed, a "Sexual Attitude Survey" was administered to the entire class. (Subjects were not aware of the relationship between this survey—purportedly administered by a polling agency—and the earlier films viewed by some students as part of an ostensibly unrelated study.)

Subject responses were assessed by scales developed by Burt.⁹ They included acceptance of interpersonal violence (AIV) against women (e.g., acceptance of sexual aggression and wife battering); rape myth acceptance (RMA) (e.g., the belief that women secretly desire to be raped), and adversarial sexual beliefs (ASB) (e.g., the notion that women are sly and manipulating when out to attract a man). These measures were embedded within many irrelevant items intended to disguise the purpose of the survey.

Exposure to the films portraying positive effects significantly increased the scores of male but not female subjects on the AIV scale. A similar pattern was observed on the RMA scale, although the effect only approached acceptable levels of statistical significance. The ASB scores were not affected. Taken together, the data demonstrated effects of sexually violent movies on men's acceptance of violence against women; the effects were sustained for at least a few days. Moreover, the results were obtained in a nonlaboratory setting seemingly devoid of demand characteristics (i.e., subtle conveyance of their hypotheses by researchers to subjects).

The validity of the conclusions based on these studies is supported by the consensus reached by a group of leading social scientists assembled by the Office of the Surgeon General of the United States.³⁴ The researchers included Professor Albert Bandura, a highly renowned social learning theorist. According to one of the consensus statements, reached primarily on the basis of the studies described above, "pornography that portrays sexual aggression as pleasurable for the victim increases the acceptance of the use of coercion in sexual relations" (p 19).

Not all research has found similar effects.¹² For example, in one study Malamuth et al. found no changes in attitudes after exposure to media sexual violence that did not depict victim arousal.⁵⁰ A number of methodologic differences between this study and the others may help to explain the different findings. For example, in the experiments showing significant effects, the media stimuli were specifically selected because they clearly depicted violence against women as having positive consequences.

Sexually violent films that do not portray positive consequences may nonetheless affect viewers in undesirable ways. For example, Linz studied the effects of repeated exposure to X- and R-rated feature-length films that portray sexual violence with primarily negative consequences to victims.³⁴ He found desensitizing effects on viewers. In one experiment, male college students who viewed 5 such films had fewer negative emotional reactions to the films that they viewed. Also reported was a tendency for the subjects' desensitization to affect their judgments of a rape victim in a simulated trial presented after exposure to the films. In a second experiment, Linz again found that males exposed to several R-rated, sexually violent films became less sympathetic to a rape victim in a simulated trial and were less able to empathize with rape victims in general.³⁴

Importance of Effects. Clearly, no influence on human thinking or behavior works in a vacuum; media influences interact with a variety of other individual and cultural factors—sometimes counteracting them, sometimes reinforcing them, and at

other times having little effect. The nature of the effects found by the research described above must be kept in perspective, because they have not been the wide-sweeping changes that some seem to assume. In fact, wide-sweeping changes are unprecedented in media research. Given the type and duration of exposures and the fact that the subjects are adults with relatively established attitudes, the most that can be expected is that, if effects exist, they would be detected only with careful and precise assessment specifically geared to the manipulations used. The fact that theoretic and empirical support exists for such effects, despite limits of the research, strongly points to the viability of the hypotheses proposed.

Some critics of the research on sexually violent media and other pornography seem to assume that the suggested effects are based on simplistic models of influence. For example, Fisher and Barak²³ write that "although we are quite prepared to assume that media models may have effects, we wish to distance ourselves from a position that suggests that human beings are easily influenced creatures who are essentially no better or worse than the last movie or series of movies they have seen" (p 291). The nature of the potential effects that are emphasized here and elsewhere is by no means simple, direct imitation.⁴⁰ On the basis of available research, it is not feasible to gauge the relative importance of media influence generally and of pornography specifically in comparison with other factors. In the author's opinion, pornography in and of itself is unlikely to exert a powerful effect on most people, but the consensus statement of the Surgeon General's Workshop³⁴ concluded, "Pornography does have effects; it is just not yet known how widespread or powerful they really are" (p 19). The effects of pornography may be important for some individuals but not for others, and they may be relatively powerful only as they interact with other factors.

Individual Differences and Synergistic Effects. In fact, one of the problems in the literature has been the use of oversimplistic models, including the lack of sufficient consideration of the role of individual and cultural differences as moderators of media influences. Researchers have largely attempted to consider the role of media stimuli in isolation from other variables, often not giving sufficient consideration to the role of the media in complex interactions with other influences.

Fisher and Barak²⁴ seem to recognize this problem: "for an individual who has not been adequately socialized, but not for persons in general, pornography or any other media message may indeed produce antisocial effects" (p 73). Yet in their evaluation of the research on pornography, they do not seem to give sufficient consideration to such differences. For example, they describe the study by Goldstein²⁶ as showing that "the sex deviates had less exposure to what we would define as erotica (e.g., heterosexual acts) as well as less exposure to what we would define as violent pornography (e.g., sadistic and masochistic material)" (p 300). A careful reading of a more detailed version of this same study, however, indicates that although rapists reported less exposure to pornography in adolescence than the control groups, various aspects of the data suggest that the type of pornography to which rapists were exposed and the degree to which they were affected by it may have differed.²⁷ For example, rapists reported an earlier age of peak experience with pornography. In addition, they were far more likely to have encountered pornographic photographs displaying explicit sexual acts (rather than nudes) at an early age and to have had a greater desire to imitate the activity portrayed in pornography (although they said they were less likely to have actually done so). Rapists were more likely to relate daily masturbation to thoughts of pornography, to have developed a stronger interest in pornography early in life, to have become repeatedly aroused by a particular theme, and to have more feelings of frustration and guilt related to their exposure to pornography than control subjects.

Although Goldstein et al. did not specifically inquire about pornography involving coercive sex themes, depictions involving sexual violence (e.g., motorcycle films depicting "gang bangs") frequently became part of rapists' daydreams and fantasies.^{27,28} In addition, the authors report that 55% of the rapists (as compared with 9% of the controls) used scenes from pornography in their fantasies and daydreams.²⁷ Of interest, programs for treating rapists place considerable emphasis on changing their sexually violent fantasies.¹

How can we account for the data suggesting that rapists had less exposure to pornography in childhood but may have been more affected by such exposure? Goldstein's study as well as other research suggests that rapists were more likely to come from home environments where education about sexuality was highly restricted and sex in general was treated as a taboo subject.²⁷ (The relatively minimal exposure to erotica may have been a byproduct of this attitude). With such a background, exposure to pornography might be expected to exert a relatively more powerful influence on rapists' responses because it would be more of a primary source of information and stimulation.⁴²

Such a conclusion is consistent with other research. In one study,⁴¹ university students indicated how much information about sexuality they obtained in their childhood from various sources, such as peers, parents, church, educational media, educational courses, sexually explicit media, and doctors. Sexually explicit media was ranked second only to peers as the most important source of information. Subjects who reported obtaining more information from explicit media also held attitudes more supportive of violence against women. Such a correlation was not found with the other sources of information about sexuality. Information from sources such as educational courses actually correlated with lower levels of attitudes supportive of violence against women. In fact, the link of sexually explicit media to antisocial attitudes tended to be stronger when compared with other sources of sexual information than when measured alone. Similarly, Tjaden asked college students to indicate all sources from which they may have received information about various sexual topics as they were growing up.⁶⁰ Sources included school, church, parents, peers, mass media, and nonpornographic books and magazines as well as pornographic magazines and films. In general, pornography was relatively unimportant for females. For males it was also unimportant for some topics, such as venereal diseases, pregnancy, and childbirth. However, for other topics—masturbation, arousal and orgasm, and oral and anal intercourse—men reported pornographic materials as an important primary or secondary source of information.

Focusing only on quantity of exposure, therefore, may be an oversimplified approach. People raised with little education about sexuality or in families in which sex is treated as taboo may be more susceptible to the influences of certain types of explicit media than people reared with considerable education about sex.⁴² The latter can more accurately assess the myths about women and sexuality portrayed in certain types of pornography. People without much sex education may be more apt to use explicit media as a primary source of information.

Similarly, the impact of a particular variable may have synergistic effects when interacting with other factors.³⁹ Using a national representative sample of post-high school students,⁵² a recent study examined whether subjects who consumed relatively high levels of pornography were more likely to be sexually aggressive.⁵¹ Their findings showed that for the population as a whole, information about pornography usage did not add a great deal of predictive value. Significant predictive value, however, was found for those men who had earlier been identified as at highest risk for committing sexual aggression. Although these data do not allow inferences

about cause and effect, they illustrate the importance of not relying on simple models of the potential impact of pornography or any other factor; instead, the potential interactive effects of various factors must be probed carefully, particularly for some subjects.

That exposure to some types of pornography may especially affect men at greater risk for committing sexual aggression is consistent with earlier experimental research. Because subjects were randomly assigned to conditions, cause and effect could be inferred.^{13,48} These studies indicated that men scoring relatively high in pretest measures of risk characteristics (e.g., self-reported attraction to sexual aggression) showed the most pronounced effects of exposure to sexually violent and highly degrading pornography.

3. The effects of the messages may differ depending on the presence or absence of sexually arousing stimuli.

This assertion relates to the question of whether sexually explicit media should be treated differently than nonexplicit media, an issue of much debate among legal scholars and policymakers, but it does not suggest that sexual explicitness per se is the critical factor affecting the potential harm of exposure to certain media stimuli. On the contrary, a PG-rated film showing rape in a positive light could be more socially detrimental than an X-rated film without sexual violence.⁴⁰ The degree of sexual explicitness may be less relevant than the message conveyed by the depiction of sexual aggression. However, the fact that a rape is portrayed within a sexually explicit context may alter the message conveyed. For example, a depiction of the rape of Bosnian women in a context clearly intended to be sexually arousing would convey a different message than the depiction of the same acts in a documentary intentionally designed to avoid gratuitous sex. The use of sexual explicitness in media often conveys to the consumer that the acts portrayed may be used for entertainment and are therefore not particularly objectionable.

Other processes may also affect the impact of a message conveyed in a sexually explicit context. In research on attitude change, considerable evidence shows that people's states of arousal and mood have a substantial effect on their degree of susceptibility to media messages. For example, the evidence suggests peripheral routes to persuasion³¹; that is, people in elated moods or high states of arousal engage in relatively little systematic analyses of rational content and may be influenced by the message despite the weak arguments in its favor.⁵⁷ Similarly, research into the effects of arousal and valence on memory demonstrates that arousal in particular has powerful long-term effects. Pleasantness of the experience may also influence degree of susceptibility to influence.⁵ Similarly, research on subliminal conditioning of attitudes demonstrates that attitudes can develop without rational deduction and without an individual's awareness of the process.³² Moreover, men's individual differences in the sexually arousing properties of pornographic media may increase the likelihood that some consumers will choose to expose themselves repeatedly to similar themes and messages.^{44,46} In summary, research suggests that exposure to messages in the context of pornography, where relatively high states of arousal and positive affect may occur, could have considerably stronger effects than exposure to the same messages in a neutral state of arousal or affect.

4. Research on sexually violent media may be applicable to other media that do not contain sexual violence.

Can "degrading or dehumanizing" be reliably and validly defined in relation to sexually explicit materials? The concept of degrading pornography has played an important role in Canada's recent Supreme Court decision, which substantially changed the definition of obscenity and the materials that can be banned.¹⁰

In sociologic and psychological literature the concept of degradation involves a demotion in social rank or status, which conveys a loss of standing or privileges.^{3,21,33} "Dehumanization" conveys the same idea. Some studies have focused on the validity of such concepts. For example, Senn and Radtke differentiate between three categories of sexually explicit materials:

1. **Erotica** is defined as "images that have as their focus the depiction of mutually pleasurable sexual expression between people who have enough power to be there by positive choice" (p 37).⁵⁹ Such images have "no sexist or violent connotations and portray equal power dynamics between individuals as well as between the model(s) and the camera/photographer" (p 144).⁵⁸

2. **Nonviolent pornography** is defined as "images that have no explicitly violent content but may imply acts of submission or violence by the positioning of the models or the use of props. They may also imply unequal power relationships by differential dress, costuming, positioning, or by setting up the viewer as voyeur (the model is engaged in some solitary activity and seems totally unaware or very surprised to find someone looking at her)" (p 144).⁵⁸ This category is similar to that labeled as degrading or dehumanizing by other researchers.

3. **Violent pornography** is defined as "images that portray explicit violence of varying degrees perpetrated against one individual by another."⁵⁸

The investigators found that their subjects, Canadian undergraduate women, could reliably differentiate among these categories. The five female raters agreed on about 75% of the stimuli used (taken from *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* magazines and from two books), but disagreed considerably on 25%. Furthermore, the subjects evaluated the violent and nonviolent pornography negatively but the erotica positively. Finally, the women were affected differently by exposure to the different materials. After two 30-minute sessions of exposure, women exposed to violent and nonviolent pornography had increased mood disturbance, but such negative effects on mood did not occur for women exposed to erotica or for controls.

Delineating what is degrading or dehumanizing may be feasible. However, considerable "gray" areas where differentiation is not reliable will probably remain. A number of themes have been included in defining degrading or dehumanizing materials,¹⁷ such as: (1) **demeaning actions**, which include calling the person an animal or a bitch, using abusive language, or ejaculating in a person's face; (2) **dominance**, in which one of the participants is shown to be in a far less powerful and more subservient position than the other (e.g., a fully clothed man with a partly clothed woman in a maid's outfit), and (3) **objectification**, in which the participants, most frequently the women, are portrayed merely as objects to be used for sexual pleasure. Other, less useful themes include **indiscriminate availability**, which portrays the woman as willing to have instant sex with anyone, and **penis worship**, which emphasizes centrality of the penis and/or its ejaculate.

A number of studies provide evidence that the processes described above in the context of sexually violent media may apply to other materials as well. For example, one of the consensus statements from the group assembled by the Surgeon General was that "prolonged use of pornography increases beliefs that less common sexual practices are more common."⁵⁴ This conclusion was based mainly on the research of Zillmann and associates.^{64,65,69} Zillmann and Bryant⁶⁵ showed male and female undergraduates varying amounts of pornographic films. The massive exposure group viewed 6 different 8-minute sexually explicit films during each of the 6 weekly sessions; the intermediate exposure group viewed 3 erotic and 3 nonerotic films; and the no-exposure group viewed 6 nonerotic films. The erotic films contained only consenting heterosexual activities of fellatio, cunnilingus, coition, and anal intercourse.

Three weeks after the end of the exposure, the subjects completed various questionnaires, one of which asked them to estimate the percentages of adults in the United States who engaged in various common and uncommon sexual practices. In comparison with the groups who had no exposure or no prior treatment, subjects in the intermediate and massive exposure groups estimated that significantly higher numbers of adults engaged in fellatio, cunnilingus and anal intercourse. In addition, estimates of the prevalence of group sex, sadomasochism, and bestiality were higher for the massively exposed group than for the other groups, even though none of the pornographic material to which they were exposed included these types of activities.

Additional studies by Zillmann and associates as well as others also provided relevant data.^{13,61,64,67,68} These studies indicate that as a function of exposure to certain nonviolent pornography, some men (1) become less repulsed by extreme forms of pornography; (2) were more likely to believe that various unusual sexual behaviors were more common; (3) were less condemning of such behaviors; and (4) were more likely to indicate some likelihood that they would coerce a woman sexually if they were assured of the lack of negative consequences to themselves. Other studies, however, have not found similar effects, particularly when reactions to rape are measured.³⁵ Methodologic differences may help to explain the divergent findings. Future research should focus on disentangling the conditions under which effects are or are not likely to be found.

5. **Once negative attitudes have been formed, they may not be easily reversed by educational interventions.**

Instead of attempting to limit people's exposure to certain types of pornographic media that may have negative effects, it may be preferable to use educational interventions to counteract the possible harmful effects. Indeed, early research revealed the effectiveness of educational interventions; the author and associates have actively advocated educational interventions.^{15,37,47} A note of caution, however, is necessary: recent research indicates that once developed, attitudes such as beliefs in rape myths may be difficult to change. In fact, some people who already hold such beliefs to a relatively high degree may evidence boomerang effects; that is, attempts to change negative attitudes may have the opposite effect of strengthening them.^{22,62} These particular studies, however, focused on the types of attitudes that other research had shown to be affected by media exposure; they did not investigate how the beliefs in rape myths were formed originally.

CONCLUSIONS

There seems to be scientific support for the hypothesis of harmful effects on some men of certain types of pornographic stimuli. To reach conclusions about adolescents, it is necessary to infer that the effects found with young men (i.e., at least 18 years old) are likely to be as clear or stronger for adolescents. This assumption is consistent with findings in other media research, which indicate that effects are more pronounced for those less likely to have had experience with and education about the content of media messages.⁴

The data suggest that the type of messages conveyed within the portrayals (e.g., violent, degrading) is crucial to the impact of the materials. Sexual explicitness per se does not have harmful effects, as defined in this chapter. However, when a message is presented within a sexually explicit context, it may have different effects than when presented in a nonexplicit context, because the content is perceived differently and because arousal is generated. Furthermore, research suggests that those subjects who

already have some risk of being attracted to sexual aggression or similar behavior are most likely to be influenced by exposure.

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