

The Benefits of Pornography

In 1997, when I started my training in public health, Big Tobacco (as the tobacco industry was called) was a leading foe. Students, faculty, and practitioners were united behind the idea that tobacco and smoking behavior were responsible for needless deaths, illnesses, suffering, and the worsening of numerous health inequities. What's more, tobacco companies like R.J. Reynolds and Philip Morris were being sued (and later found liable) for fraudulently hiding the health risks associated with smoking and for marketing cigarettes to children. There were no two ways about it: tobacco and smoking were reviled. In fact, while I was a graduate student, my school instituted a policy that no faculty or student could accept grant funding from a tobacco company because any collaboration with the tobacco industry was viewed as in direct conflict with the goals of public health. This rule bothered me a bit at the time because Altria group, the parent company of Philip Morris and other tobacco companies, had recently announced that they were willing to fund domestic violence research—which was the topic of my dissertation and was underfunded by government sources. But it also bothered me because as a domestic violence shelter worker, I had seen firsthand the benefits of cigarette smoking. Yes, you read that right. I'm a career public health advocate and I believe that there are circumstances in which cigarette smoking has benefits.

When women came to live in the domestic violence shelter, they were on the run from severely abusive and dangerous partners, and they lived with the fear (as did staff) that at any moment one of the abusive partners might show up with a gun and in a murderous rage. For women who smoked, cigarettes had the benefit of temporary stress reduction. Taking periodic smoke breaks together out on the porch of the shelter also strengthened social bonds between house residents, and sometimes with the staff who joined them, and gave some structure to stretches of time that otherwise felt overwhelming and agonizing. One could argue that healthy alternatives, such as stretch classes or meditation breaks, could have replaced the cigarette smoking. Smoking was increasing the shelter residents' risk of cancer, hypertension, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and was polluting the environment. At the same time, it was also a quick, easy-to-obtain, and relatively inexpensive mood

booster to many women in acute crisis who had no other opportunity to experience even a moment of pleasure, or calm, or relief from anxiety. In fact, there is evidence that, in low doses, nicotine can have an antidepressant effect.¹ So as a graduate student in public health, I had one of my first chances to experience what it is like to embrace two opposing beliefs at the same time. Smoking is unequivocally bad for human health. There are also times and places when smoking, despite the harm it causes, should be tolerated. I will never take a one-sided view of cigarette smoking—or pornography.

When I began to study the impact of pornography on adolescents, I quickly developed a multidimensional perspective. I could see that a one-sided view on pornography was overly simplistic and inconsistent with both existing literature and my own research findings, and that nuance was needed. I understand that in some academic disciplines scholars are trained to pick one particular side of an issue and to argue vociferously in defense of that viewpoint, even when faced with competing evidence. That is not what we are trained to do in public health. Public health is a scientific field that is concerned with uncovering truth so that people may live healthier, and ideally happier, lives. For example, in the 1980s, the best available data suggested that the saturated fats in butter were harmful to health, so public health advocates promoted margarine as a butter substitute. A decade later, new research revealed that trans fats in margarine were harmful, so nutritional epidemiologists reversed course and provided the public with the updated information about margarine—that it was not a good alternative to butter after all. In public health, we are not embarrassed about “flip flopping” when we have the results of new studies, and we should never be cagey and defensive about the weaknesses in our research studies or limitations of our findings, because what’s most important is that we strive to get ever closer to the truth of whatever we are investigating. Generally, public health scientists are OK with saying: “I don’t know,” “Our conclusions were wrong,” and “It’s complicated.” It comes with the territory of what we do.

I provide this context because I wonder if some readers will be surprised that this book includes a chapter about research that has identified benefits of pornography for human health. Here is why I feel that it is important to include this chapter: Perhaps preceding chapters have persuaded the reader that when it comes to some outcomes (e.g., body acceptance, relationship stability), the research on the influence of pornography is mixed, in that some studies find evidence of an association between pornography and the negative outcome of interest, while others do not. But I would also like to impress upon the reader that when it comes to research about pornography, the evidence is also “mixed” in the sense that there are studies that find that pornography use

is associated with positive outcomes of interest as well as with negative ones. I do not argue that the harms of some pornography are canceled out by the fact that there are some people who derive benefits from some of it. These are not equal and opposite propositions! By way of example, that some people feel pleasure or tension reduction from cigarette smoking is not considered a compelling reason to dispense with tobacco-use age limits, warning labels, taxes, indoor use prohibitions, and so on. On balance, there may be more reasons for public health professionals to regulate and minimize the role of pornography in people's lives than there are to defend or to celebrate it. But a holistic review of what pornography does, and does not, do to people's health is important—and full consideration of the spectrum of positive and negative impacts that pornography may have on public health is what is often missing from activists' discourse about pornography as a public health issue.

Therefore, in this chapter I review the evidence that pornography can have a positive influence on an individual's sexual wellness, mental health, relationships, body acceptance, self-esteem, and sexual knowledge, that it can increase safer sex behavior, and that it can foster self-acceptance in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other sexual minority individuals. I do not include a discussion of the benefits of radical and boundary-pushing art to society, or the ways in which materials that are deemed pornographic, sexually explicit, erotic, or obscene may have a helpful role to play in advancing an antiracist and antihomophobic agenda, although these are arguments that can be made and are relevant to public health.

Sexual Wellness

Pornography can cause people to become sexually aroused, increase their sexual excitement, and enable them to have orgasms and experience sexual pleasure. This hardly seems like a controversial statement because sexual arousal and pleasure are, after all, the purpose of pornography. What is controversial about the idea that pornography can cause sexual arousal, though, is the belief that sexual arousal is sometimes bad, that sexual excitement in response to certain materials is wrong, and that orgasms and pleasure are dangerous if they occur in reaction to pornographic material instead of with a human partner.

According to the World Health Organization, sexual health not only is the absence of disease, but also requires “the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences.”² The American Sexual Health Association asserts that is healthy to masturbate, and that sex promotes better sleep, less stress,

and more happiness, and that “our bodies thrive on the chemicals released during orgasm, so a healthy sex life is indeed part of a healthy body.”³ At the 2019 World Congress of Sexual Health, it was declared that “sexual pleasure is a fundamental part of sexual rights as a matter of human rights,” and governments were urged to promote sexual pleasure because of its importance to global public health.⁴ If orgasms are healthful and sexual pleasure is a human right, perhaps the starting assumption of public health advocates should be that sexually explicit material that enables people to experience orgasms and sexual pleasure is beneficial to human health.

There is research to support the contention that pornography can improve sexual well-being. It has been used successfully to treat sexual dysfunction in married women,⁵ and more frequent pornography use predicts lower arousal and orgasmic difficulty, greater pleasure, and more masturbation in partnered, adult women.⁶ Neurologically, both men and women appear to react similarly to pornography.⁷ More frequent pornography use has been found to be associated, cross-sectionally, with the frequency of masturbation, coitus, oral sex, and anal sex in heterosexual men and women,⁸ and, in at least in some instances, it encourages some men and women to try new sexual positions and sexual acts, reduces their feelings of sexual guilt, and inspires more direct communication about sexual pleasure with a partner.^{8,9} Men have reported moderate positive effects of pornography, including increased sexual functioning, sexual pleasure, relationship enhancement, improved sleep, and other psychosexual health benefits.^{10,11} Given the possibility of these direct benefits on sexual well-being, it is not surprising that some therapists recommend the use of pornography to some patients or use sexually explicit material in the therapeutic context.¹²

A study of 151 women in Australia who were social media users found that pornography use was generally accepted and normalized within young people's relationships, and that many had positive things to say about pornography. For example, one 27-year-old in the sample said: “[Pornography] can be a great way to engage with my partner, even if just to laugh and wonder how they did what happened in the film. Sometimes it can assist with getting ‘in the mood.’”¹³ A similar study, which drew upon in-depth interviews with 35 young men from a university in the northeastern United States, also found that pornography had educational benefits for men in the sample. The authors found that pornography use was “an ordinary and unproblematic component of their lives,” and that research participants “used pornography to explore their sexual desires [and] emerging sexual identities, and for developing new sexual techniques.” One man in the sample reported that his girlfriend had been able to communicate with him about her sexual desires through

pornography. He said: “[She’s] shown me stuff she likes, and that been fun exploring, too.”¹⁴ The idea that pornography may normalize more agentic roles for women, which improves their comfort with sex and arousal and reduces shame and guilt about sexuality, has been proposed by other research teams as well.^{15,16}

Relationships

Chapter 7 provides an in-depth review of the evidence that addresses the question of whether pornography viewing by one or both members of a couple harms relationship stability. It concludes that if pornography does influence relationship health, the influence is likely weak, and varies by gender, people’s attachment style, overall relationship health, and other factors. But there are a handful of research studies that have found that pornography use by one or both members of a couple can be beneficial for relationship quality. For example, a study of 617 married or cohabiting couples found that female pornography use was positively associated with how satisfied they felt with the physical intimacy in their relationship.¹⁷ Interestingly, the study did not find that the same was true for men in the sample. A study of 217 heterosexual couples found something similar—the more that women used pornography, the more sexually satisfied their male partners were. On the other hand, the more that men used pornography, the less sexually satisfied the men were. Part of the reason for this difference is that women in the sample reported that they primarily used pornography as part of sex with their partners, while men tended to use pornography alone for masturbation. The study also found that shared pornography use was associated with better relationship satisfaction than one person’s solitary pornography use.¹⁸

A third study, which analyzed responses from a convenience sample of 8,376 people who responded to an online survey from *Elle* magazine and MSNBC.com about “online sexual activities,” found that both men and women who engaged in online sexual activities were “more open to new things” and found it easier to talk about what they wanted sexually. The study reported negative findings as well, including that men were less aroused by sex with a human partner as a result of their online sexual activities, but the general pattern observed in the findings was that online sexual activities yielded benefits for both men and women, including increased intimacy with their partners and better communication about sex.¹⁹

In his book about ethical porn viewing for men, author David Ley made the argument that the availability of porn can also protect relationships by

offering a sexual outlet to individuals whose partners are not interested in sex (p. 81).²⁰ In other words, Ley suggested that couples faced with a mismatch in sexual drive or sexual interest could face less relationship strain if the partner with higher sexual interest views porn. Given that disparity in sexual desire is a common and often divisive issue for long-term and married couples, the possibility that sexually explicit and erotic materials could be helpful instead of harmful to the stability of these relationships is a hypothesis to investigate.

Body Acceptance

Chapter 9 provides a review of the evidence that addresses whether pornography viewing causes people to feel less accepting of their own bodies. In that chapter, I conclude that pornography likely harms some people's self-image, has no effect on most people's body acceptance, and for some people improves how they feel about their bodies. In this section, I highlight some of the findings that support the idea that, for some people, there are body acceptance-related benefits of viewing pornography. One small study that involved interviews with 11 adult women recruited through a sexual workshop center in Toronto, Canada, found that pornography helped the women to normalize their own bodies and bolstered their self-esteem and body acceptance. A woman in the sample spoke about the "Big Beautiful Women" (BBW) genre of pornography and reported that seeing it is "a reminder that BBW are sexy and fuckable. So I sort of couch that into boosting my self-esteem."

For those not easily persuaded by an 11-person qualitative study, there are also data from a cross-sectional MTurk study of 393 American young adults that found that, in women, frequency of pornography use was associated with comfort being nude.²¹ Women and men who watched more pornography and perceived the pornography as realistic also had better body images than those who didn't perceive pornography as realistic. The study authors explained that they believed that, for men, the reason more pornography viewing was associated with better body image was that those who watched more pornography had higher self-esteem and were more satisfied with their bodies. For women, those who watched more pornography felt more comfortable being nude and had higher self-esteem. The authors explained that while unrealistic pornographic imagery may be associated with negative body image, it is possible that realistic pornography images (i.e., of real people, with realistic bodies, doing real sexual things) may make the performers "good role models for body positivity."²¹

A third quantitative study also found that pornography may have a positive influence on men's acceptance of their bodies. In a sample of 1,274 university students from Norway and Sweden, Kvale et al. (2014) found that men who perceived pornography as realistic had higher satisfaction with their genital appearance and higher self-esteem than those who did not perceive pornography as realistic.²² A study of 346 US women similarly found that women who had seen Internet media (pornographic and otherwise) perceived their vulvas as normal-appearing at higher rates than those not exposed to such media (97% vs. 91%, respectively).²³

Sexual Knowledge

A known public health problem is that too many adolescents and young adults in the United States and elsewhere have inadequate knowledge of sexual anatomy and physiology. Only 71% of US high school districts have adopted a policy that specifies teaching sex education, and two thirds of states and the District of Columbia allow parents to remove their children from sex ed classes that are taught in schools.²⁴ In the United Kingdom, three quarters of students rate their school-based sex education as "less than fair,"²⁵ and a recent meta-ethnographic study that covered 25 years of sex education in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Japan, Iran, Brazil, and other nations found that young people report their sex education was generally negative and failed to discuss issues that were truly important, such as sexual pleasure and the details of male and female anatomy.^{26,27} A natural consequence of providing inadequate sex education in schools is that adolescents may seek out information about sex elsewhere. Accordingly, the idea that adolescents are learning about sex from pornography, and that that is a problem, has been alleged by various anti-pornography groups since the 1980s—and by me since 2016.^{28,29} But there is a possibility that some adolescents and young adults are learning about sex from pornography—and that in some cases it provides them with accurate information about sexual anatomy and physiology.

To test the hypothesis that pornography use may be related to sexual knowledge, Hesse and Pedersen recruited a convenience sample of 337 Canadian university students and social media users and asked them to complete an online survey about pornography and sexual knowledge.²⁶ They found that pornography use was positively correlated with increased sexual knowledge; more positive attitudes toward sex, sexual behaviors, and the opposite gender; and overall quality of life. The authors were surprised by the finding

that the frequency of pornography use predicted more accurate knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and sexual behavior. While they acknowledged that students with better sexual knowledge may have been more likely to seek out pornography, it also is possible that pornography served as a source of sexual information. Interestingly, in this sample, nonheterosexual sexual orientation was associated with greater knowledge and more positive perceptions of pornography, as well.

Because there has been only this single study of pornography and sexual knowledge, and it used a convenience sample, whether pornography can impart accurate anatomical and physiological sexual information to youth or to adults remains unclear. Because pornography is so varied, it may matter very much what kind of pornography is viewed. For example, the casual viewer of mainstream Internet pornography might easily come away with the erroneous idea that women ejaculating or “squirting” during sex is common, or that most women have orgasms quickly and easily from vaginal penetration alone. When the mechanics of sex are staged for the camera, the viewer might not acquire accurate sexual information. However, there remains a possibility that, at least in some basic way, the explicit visual imagery in most pornography provides some accurate information about sex and sexuality to people who are not getting accurate information elsewhere. Importantly, this is not an endorsement of pornography as sex education. As Chapter 8 makes clear, available evidence suggests that pornography is not a good source of information about how to have sex, and if it is viewed as instructional material by adolescents, it likely causes far more harm to their sexual scripts than anything helpful or useful. To my mind, it is an unintended and coincidental side effect that some people may pick up some accurate anatomical information from pornography, rather than a selling point in its favor.

Boredom, Loneliness, and Safer Sex Behavior

Multiple studies have found that one of the reasons that people use pornography is to alleviate boredom.^{30,31} When the COVID-19 global pandemic hit in 2020, worldwide traffic to Pornhub increased—and increased even before the website began granting free premium accounts as part of an incentive to attract new users during the pandemic.³² Pornhub said that they were motivated to offer free premium accounts out of altruism, because it would encourage people to stay indoors and distance themselves socially. While Pornhub may have had other reasons for wanting to offer time-limited free premium accounts, it is also true that during the exceedingly stressful period

of 2020, when people had to become accustomed to stay-at-home orders and quarantines, having a sexual outlet may have been helpful to some. Perhaps pornography use encouraged safer sexual behavior because people with access to it were less likely to risk COVID-19 exposure by meeting a hookup partner. Some researchers have conjectured that, in general, increased solo masturbation to pornography could reduce rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unwanted pregnancies, although designing an observational study to assess this idea would be challenging because pornography use is so common and because it would be difficult to control for the numerous potential confounders.

Self-Acceptance in Sexual Minority Individuals

Just as pornography may help some people accept the appearance of their genitals as normal, it may also help people accept or discover their sexual orientation and sexuality. For example, a study of in-depth interviews with 35 young men from a US university found that porn helped some respondents come to an understanding about, and clarify, their sexual attraction.¹⁴ Similarly, in a mixed-methods study of 526 young men who have sex with men (MSM), Kubicek and co-authors (2010) found that participants reported that pornography was one of their only resources for learning about the mechanics of anal sex and that seeing gay pornography confirmed their sexual attractions—although some participants also expressed disdain for the “nasty” types of sex they saw in porn (e.g., fisting, water sports, bestiality).³³ Similarly, a focus group study involving 10 adult men who had seen gay pornography found that some participants found porn validating. One participant was quoted as saying: “I remember the first time I saw gay porn. I was about nine. I happened to [come across] a magazine in a back alley, and it was so validating. It was like, ‘Yeah, that’s it. That’s what I am. And, look, there’s other people doing it; they’re having sex; they don’t look embarrassed; they don’t look grossed out.’”³⁴ And a recent interview study involving 15- to 19-year-old Black, male, US youths found that participants described using pornography primarily for sexual development, including learning the mechanics of same-gender sex, and to negotiate their sexual identity.³⁵

On the one hand, evidence is accruing that suggests some sexual minority individuals (i.e., gay or bisexual individuals) may find pornography helpful because it depicts people with their own sexual orientation and interests engaged in pleasurable sex and normalizes that. On the one hand, given the stigma of being gay or bisexual, and the health-related sequelae of experiencing

sexual-orientation-related discrimination, persecution, and shame, material that may have a protective effect could have important, positive value. On the other hand, pornography is diverse, and not all of it depicts realistic sexual positions, sexual acts, or consent, and some of it may shape social norms in ways that ultimately cause harm (see Chapter 5). For this reason, it is hard to celebrate, unqualifiedly, the idea that porn is an important source of self-validation for gay and bisexual men. Materials that boost self-esteem may be essential from a public health perspective, but why should pornography be the only, or best, option? That gay, bisexual, and pansexual people have, in some cases, had to turn to pornography in order to see their sexuality represented positively points to a more fundamental problem with the lack of diversity in mainstream media depictions of people and relationships. From a public health perspective, perhaps pornography does something useful and helpful for some people with same-sex sexual interests and attractions—nevertheless, there may be something problematic about the fact that pornography, which is generally created to make money and not with health education as its goal, is being used to address a health-related need.

Conclusions

Experiencing sexual pleasure is healthful, and pornography offers many people the opportunity to experience sexual pleasure alone or with partners. However, just because something is pleasurable to people does not make it an automatic public health good. Imagine, for example, the argument that the cost to society of the opioid epidemic is offset because opioid users experience pleasure or tension relief from it. This argument is untenable, and similarly, from a public health perspective, the pleasure benefit of pornography only holds up if the health costs to the individual or society are small. But, if we are weighing the possible positives and negatives of pornography use from a public health perspective, we can add to the positive side of the scale that pornography offers viewers the opportunity to see a diversity of body shapes and sexual behaviors celebrated, which some people reportedly find affirming, that some viewers may come away from pornography with more accurate understanding of sexual anatomy and physiology, and that some may be able to communicate better with their partners about their sexuality and sexual interests because of their pornography use. The bottom line is: for some people, there are undoubtedly benefits of having access to pornography, viewing pornography, and using pornography in the context of their relationship or for masturbation. Nevertheless, this should not be misconstrued as

conclusive evidence that “porn is good” or that we have no reason for continuing to investigate its potential harms. The research that finds that there are selected benefits of some pornography use by some people highlights the need for public health, public policy, and other professionals to resist the tendency to oversimplify.

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