

# Impact of Pornography on Self-Esteem and Body Image: A Review Article

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**Abstract:** Pornography production and consumption have drastically expanded in recent decades as a result of widespread usage of the internet and easy access to new technologies. More than 120 million people regularly visit porn websites. Increased access to pornography has been accompanied by rising concerns that it impacts health and well-being. This review seeks to deepen the understanding of how pornography consumption may influence body image and self-esteem. To achieve this objective, a comprehensive review of the literature was conducted, examining a broad spectrum of scholarly articles from databases such as Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and ShodhGanga. The focus was specifically on the effects of pornography on aspects of body image and self-esteem. The findings of this review reveal a consistent pattern: pornography consumption often negatively impacts self-esteem and body image, contributing to decreased psychological well-being. This review highlights the complex relationship between pornography use, self-esteem, and body image, emphasizing the need for further research to address its psychological implications more comprehensively.

**Keywords:** Pornography, Porn Consumption, Self-Esteem, Body Image.

## INTRODUCTION

Sexually explicit content is now far more prevalent in both mass media and social media (Doornwaard et al., 2014). Moreover, the usage of pornography has expanded rapidly around the world with the development of the Internet (Wright, 2012; Willoughby, 2018). There are several reasons for concern about the impact of Internet pornography on adolescents, one of them is pornography use negatively affects the self-esteem of individuals and as well as one's body image (Cerbara et al., 2023; Leickly et al., 2017). Internet pornography can cause a variety of threats to growth and wellbeing, particularly as children are widely seen as the most susceptible viewers of sexually explicit content (Owens et al., 2012). Moreover, consuming pornography had an impact on couples' perceptions of their own bodies and their own self esteem (Tylka & Kroon Van Diest 2015). Therefore, concerns exist regarding the potential use of pornography to become harmful (Brand et al., 2019).

## PORNOGRAPHY

Hald and Malamuth's (2008) description of pornography has been authorized as a working definition: "Pornography is any form of content

intended to arouse or enhance arousal in the recipient and, at the same time, containing explicit exposure to and/or descriptions of the genitalia, as well as clear and explicit sexual acts like sexual activity, bondage, sadomasochism, sexual assault, urine sex, animal sex, etc." According to JW Slade (2000), the term "pornography" (or "porn") is typically used to describe representations designed to arouse and provide sexual pleasure to people who read, see, hear, or handle them.

As a result of increasing Internet usage and easy access to new technologies, both the production and consumption of pornography have drastically expanded in recent decades (Ballester et al., 2021). More than 120 million people regularly visit websites like Pornhub (Uzieblo & Prescott, 2020). Pornography turned out to have a far greater adverse impact both psychologically and socially on individuals, the adverse effects were not only for adults but would also have more impact on children. Rape, harassment, and other sexual crimes that are triggered by sexual activities are some negative effects of pornography that are widely reported as criminal news by the mass media (Hafiar et al., 2019). Use of pornography can harm marriages by devaluing the worth of monogamy, decreasing satisfaction with a partner's sexual performance, affection, or physical beauty, and decreasing the desire for sex with that partner (Albright, 2008).

Self-esteem is defined as "your overall evaluation of your worth as a person, high or low, based on all the positive and negative self-perceptions that make up your self-concept" (Sigelman, 1999). According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem is one's positive or negative attitude toward oneself and one's evaluation of one's own thoughts and feelings overall in relation to oneself. Self-esteem is a critical factor in personal well-being because an individual's self-esteem has a major role in their psychological health, social adjustment, and quality of life (Boyd et al., 2014).

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines body image as "the mental picture one forms of one's body as a whole, including its physical characteristics and one's attitudes toward these characteristics". Body image may be construed as a multidimensional self-attitude towards one's body, especially its looks (Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990). When it comes to gender and body image, women would be expected to be less satisfied with their appearance than men since men are believed to place more value on attractiveness when choosing a partner than women (Barrett et al., 2002) and women reported that they hide their bodies more often than men do, and compare their appearances more (Davison & McCabe, 2005).

## **PORNOGRAPHY AND SELF-ESTEEM**

Research demonstrates a link between pornography use and self-esteem, with higher levels of problematic pornography consumption often associated with lower self-esteem. Stewart and Szymanski (2012) found a correlation between pornography use and diminished self-worth, while Nelson et al. (2010) reported that young men who abstain from pornography generally exhibit higher self-esteem, more positive identity development, and lower depression levels than their peers who use it. In a study on men who have sex with men (MSM), Leickly et al. (2017) observed that men who compared their physical features to those seen in sexually explicit online media often reported feeling less self-esteem. Similarly, van Tuijl et al. (2021) reported lower average self-esteem among men with frequent pornography use compared to those from the general population.

Correlational research supports these findings, with several studies indicating that perceived pornography addiction negatively impacts self-

esteem (Wilt et al., 2016; Kor et al., 2014). Furthermore, individuals with low self-esteem may turn to internet pornography to escape negative feelings like insecurity, shame, and loneliness, contributing to an ongoing cycle of diminished self-worth (Skinner, 2005). However, the relationship between pornography use and self-esteem is complex. For example, while Kvaalem et al. (2016) found a positive relationship between pornography consumption and sexual esteem, Morrison et al. (2007) reported a decrease in overall self-esteem with increased pornography use. In adolescent populations, Stulhofer et al. (2019) found that higher frequencies of pornography use were associated with lower baseline self-esteem among females, though no significant effects were observed in males. Kohut and Stulhofer (2018) similarly reported no significant associations between pornography use and self-esteem in adolescents overall, though a slight positive association was noted for female adolescents after controlling for impulsivity and adverse family environment. Overall, the majority of studies indicate a negative association between frequent pornography use and self-esteem, emphasizing its potential impacts on psychological well-being (Cerbara et al., 2023; Tylka & Kroon Van Diest, 2015; Brown et al., 2017; Rasmussen et al., 2015).

## **PORNOGRAPHY AND BODY IMAGE**

Research shows that increased exposure to pornographic material is associated with negative body attitudes and heightened body comparison. Whitfield et al. (2018) found a direct link between pornography consumption and negative body image, while Davis et al. (2019) noted that frequent pornography use increases unrealistic expectations for a partner's body. In particular, pornography's impact on body image appears more significant for individuals in relationships characterized by avoidant or anxious attachment styles (Tylka, 2015). Leickly et al. (2017) reported that participants often felt negative emotions when comparing their bodies to those in pornographic media, which diminished their self-worth and contributed to body dissatisfaction. Additionally, Albright (2008) observed that women were more likely to feel their bodies were subject to scrutiny by their partners, whereas men reported being more critical of their partner's appearance.

Several studies indicate that pornography use promotes self-objectification and body comparison in both genders, with adolescents, in particular, experiencing increased body-related concerns linked to the objectifying nature of pornography (Paslakis et al., 2020; Maheux et al., 2021). Gewirtz-Meydan et al. (2021) found that problematic pornography use significantly predicted body image issues, particularly among women in relationships, while Borgogna et al. (2018) similarly identified a correlation between pornography consumption and negative body image. For men, frequent pornography use was linked to dissatisfaction with muscle tone and body fat, negatively impacting overall body appreciation (Tylka, 2015). Additionally, Cranney (2015) found that pornography use was associated with dissatisfaction regarding penis size but showed no correlation with breast size dissatisfaction in women. Maas and Dewey (2018) reported higher levels of body monitoring among pornography users compared to non-users.

However, some studies have shown mixed results. Maheux et al. (2021) observed that while pornography consumption was associated with increased self-objectification and body comparison, it did not correlate with body shame. Meanwhile, three studies found no significant association between pornography consumption and body image, suggesting that the effects of pornography on body image may vary based on individual or contextual factors (Gleason & Sprankle, 2019; Laemmle-Ruff et al., 2019; Gleason, 2017). Overall, the majority of evidence supports the notion that pornography consumption is linked to body dissatisfaction and unrealistic body expectations, highlighting its potential impact on self-perception and body image.

## CONCLUSION

This review aimed to understand the impact of pornography consumption on body image and self-esteem, synthesizing findings from various studies that investigated these variables. The majority of studies indicate that pornography use is associated with decreased self-esteem and body satisfaction. Correlational studies demonstrate that frequent pornography use tends to lower self-esteem and increase body dissatisfaction. Comparative research has shown that men who frequently

consume pornography report lower average self-esteem than those in the general population. Longitudinal studies reveal a decrease in self-esteem over time in adolescent women with higher initial levels of pornography use, while other longitudinal research controlling for impulsiveness and adverse family environments suggests no association between pornography use and self-esteem among male or female participants, with a slight positive association in certain cases. Some studies also indicate that women report lower self-esteem when their male partners consume pornography. However, one study found no negative impact on self-esteem, suggesting a positive relationship instead.

Regarding body image, most studies report that pornography consumption has a detrimental effect, contributing to increased body comparison and self-objectification among both male and female participants. A cross-sectional study shows that frequent pornography users tend to engage more in body monitoring than non-users, while a qualitative study among men who have sex with men (MSM) reveals that comparing their bodies to those seen in pornographic media led to negative emotional experiences. Another correlational study found that while pornography use was linked to dissatisfaction with penis size, it had no effect on women's breast size dissatisfaction.

Contradictions in findings, such as studies where pornography had no apparent impact on body image or self-esteem, highlight the need for further research. The limited data, generally small sample sizes, and methodological variability across studies make it challenging to draw definitive conclusions on pornography's effects on self-esteem and body image. Given these inconsistencies, additional rigorous research is essential to clarify the nuanced effects of pornography consumption on psychological well-being.

## FUNDING SOURCE

Nil

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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