

Online Pornography: Prevalence and Trends

It is unknown how many adolescents use pornography, due to the influence of factors such as the unintentional/intentional use of pornography, methodological differences, technological changes, and cultural contexts [1]. Pornography prevalence rates for individuals under the age of 19 are also unknown, due to inaccurate or non-existent age collection by pornography sites, along with ethical limitations on researchers [2]. In this document, service providers will find some statistics and trends regarding problematic online pornography.

Trends

Overall, pornography is reaching an increasing number of youth, and at an increasingly younger age, which comes with consequences. A Canadian study titled “Who has seen what, when? Pornography’s contribution to the social construction of sexuality during childhood and adolescence” indicates that 470 adolescents reported that 98% had been exposed to pornography. The average age of first exposure was 12.2 years, and one-third were exposed as young as age 10 [3]. Another Canadian study called “The prevalence of unwanted online sexual exposure and solicitation among youth: a meta-analysis” found that one in five youth experience unwanted online exposure to sexually explicit material, and one in nine youth have experienced online sexual solicitation [4].

Being exposed to pornography at such a young age is problematic, given that today’s pornography often includes verbal or physical aggression towards women [5]. Children do not have the context understand what they are watching, as this exposure generally occurs before sexual activity. Research also shows the impact of viewing pornography can be different for those age nine or younger than for those age 10 and over. For example, children who had seen pornography at an earlier age have been found to report as adults that they were more involved in risky sexual behaviour, had a higher sexual arousal to violence, had more diverse sexual experiences, and used pornography more often than others [6].

Not only has pornography infiltrated mainstream society, its content has also evolved to include escalating sexual violence in response to acquired taste. What was once considered “hardcore” pornography is now accepted in mainstream media as “softcore” [5]. Historically, hardcore pornography meant pictures in magazines of men’s and women’s exposed genitals, as well as people having sexual intercourse. Now, hardcore pornography involves violent anal penetration and rough, deep oral sex, often to the point of vomiting. This type of pornography can cause viewers to feel shame, humiliation, and hate [5, 7]. Hardcore pornography also incorporates morally repugnant themes—incest and gang rape, for example—which would have been considered too obscene, violent, and socially deviant in the past.

Use and access to pornography is not a new global occurrence [6]. Pornography has evolved over time, but it was not until the technological development and inclusion of photography in the

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mid-19th century, movies in the early 20th century, and the advancement of the internet in the late 20th century that pornography was able to infiltrate almost every aspect of modern society [6]. Three factors—often referred to as the Triple A Engine [8] have been identified behind the widespread distribution of, attraction to, and engagement in online pornography: access, affordability and anonymity; these factors, along with increased social acceptance, have made internet pornography addiction a new clinical phenomenon [6, 9].

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