

An emerging landscape

Pornography, adolescents and indigenous ways of being in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Global trends are becoming evident regarding the proliferation of pornography use among adolescents worldwide, along with the resulting attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. This literature review examines a body of research related to adolescence and pornography that reveals a spectrum of use ranging from normative to problematic sexual compulsivity/addiction. Between the two ends of the spectrum emerge a vast array of psychosocial impacts and co-morbidities. Through identifying gaps in the literature and comparability with other addiction treatments, the review then examines systems of connectedness that already exist within an Aotearoa New Zealand context. As a way forward, relational connectedness is recommended as a theoretical framework to support constructive work with adolescents and addictions.

Keywords: pornography, adolescents, addiction, social isolation, connection

My interest in the effects of pornography on rangatahi (adolescents) has spanned decades. Initially it became apparent in my own adolescence, when I observed its detrimental effects on my friends and their relationships; it then became a more professional concern during my career as a teacher. Currently, two decades on, it is very present on my radar professionally as a beginning counsellor (and personally as a mother of two children), on watching the pernicious effects of the problematic use of pornography on intimate relationships and families.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the media have played a key role in highlighting the emerging culture of acceptability in relation to pornography. The high-profile “Roast Busters” scandal (*New Zealand Herald*, 2014) as an example, and many others like it

since (*New Zealand Herald*, 2015), have involved the intoxication of underage females filmed performing sexual acts and then posted online. These incidents have come to the fore in the public domain and then repeatedly phased into the background.

In my current role as a counselling student on placement at an intermediate school, my ongoing concerns regarding adolescents and their relationship to pornography have led me to look more closely into the research available to us as practitioners, in navigating what has become an increasingly complex terrain. This literature review is therefore my examination and critique of a body of research, both internationally and within Aotearoa, addressing adolescence and pornography use. The review highlights societal and generational shifts occurring in relation to pornography: trends in its availability; the continuum of normative-to-problematic pornography use among adolescents; and its subsequent effects.

Gaps in the literature highlight the small amount of research currently available that indicates how best to work with adolescents who struggle with pornography use. However, what is emerging is a suggestion displayed in international trends, that current practices regarding the importance of “relational connectedness” in the broader field of drug and alcohol addictions could be transferable to working with the effects of pornography use (Lofgren-Martenson & Masson, 2010, as cited in Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012; Renascent Foundation, 2016; TED Conferences, 2015; Weiss, 2015). Contemporary resources in Aotearoa about the importance of whanaungatanga (Huriwai, Robertson, Armstrong, Kingi, & Huata, 2001) and relational connectedness (Te Pūmanawa Hauora, 1996) are recommended as offering a theoretical framework to support working with addictions. For the purposes of this review, “adolescence” spans the ages of 10 to 22 years, in line with the age span across the literature.

Terminology

“I can’t define pornography,” said a US Supreme Court judge, “but I know what it is when I see it” (Itzin, 1995, p. 20). Widely, pornography can be divided into three categories: sexually explicit and violent; sexually explicit and non-violent—though “subordinating and dehumanizing” (Itzin, 1995, p. 20); and the sexually explicit, non-violent, and non-subordinating type that is based on mutuality, often termed “erotica.” Consistently, research shows that harmful effects are associated with the first two categories (Itzin, 1995).

For the purposes of this literature review, therefore, the general term “pornography” is used to describe these first two types. Essentially it encapsulates

what Malamuth (2001, as cited in Flood, 2009) described as “sexually explicit media that are primarily intended to sexually arouse the audience” (p. 385). While there are various forms of media that depict such images, the main source researched in this literature review is sexually explicit internet material.

The literature

A review of the published literature, the majority of which is centred around the theme of the psychosocial impacts and effects of pornography use on adolescents (Doornwaard, van den Eijnden, Baams, Vanwesenbeeck, & Ter Bogt, 2016; Flood, 2009; Itzin, 1995; Owens et al., 2012; Rosenberg, Carnes, & O’Connor, 2014; Stulhofer, Jelovica, & Ruzic, 2008; Ybarra, Mitchell, Hamburger, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2011) reveals an expansive, international phenomenon demonstrating global trends in the proliferation of pornography availability and accessibility, irrespective of region or culture (Owens et al., 2012). The literature indicates that the ever-increasing omnipresence of internet pornography is affecting youth culture and development in incommensurable ways (Doornwaard et al., 2016; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2010; McNair, 2002; Paul, 2005; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007, as cited in Owens et al., 2012).

Numerous studies have addressed the issue of internet accessibility and the highly sexualised environment that the internet has become (Doornwaard et al., 2016; Owens et al., 2012; Stulhofer et al., 2008). Cooper (1998, as cited in Doornwaard et al., 2016) commented on the attractive nature of sexually explicit internet material due to its affordability, anonymity, and accessibility, all appealing benefits for youth.

In a review of international literature utilising a mixed methods approach, Owens et al. (2012) demonstrated the global trends that are evident regarding the proliferation of pornography use among adolescents worldwide. Subsequently, shifts in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours are emerging among young people as a result.

Research carried out by Flood (2009) into the effects of exposure to pornography among children and young people picked up the theme of the emerging effects on young people. Of particular influence, Flood (2009) posited that unhealthy notions of sex and relationships were found to be sustained by pornography use. Flood’s review also noted that boys and young men who frequently used pornography progressed to more violent materials, developed attitudes supportive of sexual coercion, and increased their likelihood of perpetrating sexual assault, thus demonstrating the rapid progression from one end of the spectrum to the other.

In their article entitled “Lower psychological well-being and excessive sexual interest predict symptoms of compulsive use of sexually explicit internet material among adolescent boys,” Doornwaard and colleagues (2016) outlined their study, also from a positivist paradigm using quantitative methods to statistically analyse how psychological wellbeing, sexual interest/behaviour and impulsivity were associated with symptoms of compulsive pornography use. Though this study was gendered, in a similar way to Flood (2009), this research suggested that pornography use itself is highly gendered, with males demonstrating the greatest consumption.

Sexual compulsivity was a strong theme across the studies reviewed. While accessing such material may aid age-normative explorations of sexuality for adolescents (the “normative” end of the spectrum), research suggests that the scope of access is expanding rapidly and can leave young people susceptible to developing compulsive tendencies (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2004, as cited in Doornwaard et al., 2016)—the “problematic” end of the spectrum. Miner et al. (2006, as cited in Stulhofer et al., 2008) and Parsons et al. (2007, as cited in Stulhofer et al., 2008) defined sexual compulsivity as a clinical phenomenon represented by sexual urges, fantasies, and behaviours that are recurrent in nature and intensity to the degree that they impinge upon an individual’s “normal” daily functioning. Sexual compulsivity encapsulates other terms such as “sexual addiction” and “compulsive sexual behaviour.” Symptoms can include: obsessive sexual thoughts; excessive use of pornography and online sexual engagement via chat rooms and social media sites; compulsive masturbation; and intercourse with multiple and often anonymous partners. People with sexual compulsivity claim to be unable to control these excessive and disruptive behaviours (Stulhofer et al., 2008). Rosenberg et al. (2014), however, have cautioned professionals to be clear about criteria for sexual compulsivity, as many people who present as “promiscuous, or who take part in novel expressions of sexuality are not sexually addicted” (p. 77).

Three key studies revealed co-morbidity related to users of pornography whose use developed into sexual compulsivity (Doornwaard et al., 2016; Rosenberg et al., 2014; Stulhofer et al., 2008). All three studies were located within a positivist paradigm using quantitative methods to statistically analyse and test their hypotheses through various self-report surveys using rating scales. Collectively, all three studies cited additional research that showed co-morbidity with sexual compulsivity which included: depression, anxiety, loneliness, insecure attachments, low self-worth, substance abuse, eating disorders, and social isolation.

Another key theme of the research reviewed—oriented towards the more problematic end of the spectrum—was the link between pornography use and sexual aggression. Owens et al. (2012) noted that based on a variety of mostly longitudinal studies, pornography depicting violence can be linked with increasing degrees of sexually aggressive behaviour. Ybarra et al. (2011) also conducted a 36-month longitudinal study to determine the links between exposure to pornography and sexually aggressive behaviour. Exposure to non-violent pornography did not yield statistically significant results (5%); however, exposure to violent material predicted a six-fold increase in the odds of self-reported sexually aggressive behaviour. Not only was this behaviour evident across these studies, in a review synthesised by Flood (2009) there was also an association between pornography and rape-supportive attitudes, irrespective of whether the pornography was violent or non-violent. Violent pornography, however, was associated with significantly greater increases in violence-supportive attitudes. Flood (2009) suggested that it erodes users' empathy for victims of violence. Itzin (1995) concurred that male pornography users become less sympathetic to rape victims, and more sympathetic to perpetrators, while self-report reveals increases in sexual interest towards children. Flood (2009) cited earlier experimental studies (Allen et al., 1995; Malamuth et al., 2000) in which adults showed “significant strengthening of attitudes supportive of sexual aggression following exposure to pornography” (p. 392).

When synthesised, the literature suggests a lack of agreement among researchers and clinicians alike when it comes to the notion of whether compulsivity of pornography use constitutes “addiction.” Rosenberg et al. (2014) noted that many attempts have been made to formulate a diagnosis for sex addiction for the purposes of clinical work and research. However, similarities can be seen with other addiction screening tools identifying themes such as tolerance; withdrawal; increase in frequency and intensity of use; a greater investment of time given to preparation; engagement, and recovery. Other researchers agree that there are core criteria related to the compulsive use of pornography that are comparable across other addictive disorders (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008; Grubbs, 2015; Ross, 2012; Twohig, 2009, as cited in Doornwaard et al., 2016). However, despite this agreement in the field, “sex addiction” and other variants of the disorder were not accepted for the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.) nor included in the Appendix (Flood, 2009).

Literature also implies that whether users of pornography are considered “addicted” may not be the predominant argument. Doornwaard et al. (2016) have suggested

that even when pornographic use is not considered compulsive, it still contributes to, and influences, sexual attitudes, emotional wellbeing, and behaviour. Similarly, a concern echoes through the literature that the terrain regarding the range of use between non-compulsivity and compulsivity is still relatively unknown, and changing rapidly due to the accessibility and acceptability of pornography, predominantly affecting millennials and Gen-Z. Research is struggling to keep pace with the perpetual repositioning of this landscape.

A further point of contention to emerge in the literature and among researchers is the difference between normative and problematic pornography use. It is largely unclear in the literature what constitutes “normal” viewing. Much of the literature states that sexual curiosity is age-normative and that adolescents use pornography for education, but it is unclear at what point the curiosity ends and the problematic use begins. Frequency of use, for example, is not sufficient to determine whether the behaviour is adaptive or problematic, because individual experiences are subjective, and are likely to vary with age and supplementary factors (Doornwaard et al., 2016).

Additionally, while there is some exploration of the neuroscience and the effects of pornography use on adolescent brain development (Owens et al., 2012; Rosenberg et al., 2014), there appears to be no conclusive evidence of how pornography harms the developing brain.

With respect to the effects of pornography use, it is important to note that most of the research at present is located within a positivist paradigm. According to Grant and Giddings (2002), the premise of positivist theory is that “social reality is relatively stable and based on pre-existing patterns or order” (p. 14). However, the literature reviewed here reveals that the emerging phenomenon of internet pornography use, which as has been shown is growing rapidly, could almost negate these very assumptions, perhaps indicating the need for alternatives.

Chronaki (2014), in agreement with the need for alternatives, conducted a study entitled *Young adults’ stories with sexual content during childhood and teenage life: An alternative approach to an ever-going debate*. He used a Foucauldian and social constructionist approach to qualitative data which was followed by a wider discourse analysis of socially constructed notions of sexuality, sexual content in the media, social and sexual identities, and what might constitute a “desirable self.” What Chronaki’s research discovered was that viewing pornographic material was rarely the first time the participants learned about sex and that participants were aware of what kind of functions pornography had for people and what it might offer to adolescents in

terms of sexual education. Flood (2009), however, strongly disagrees: “While children and young people are sexual beings and deserve age-appropriate materials on sex and sexuality, pornography is a poor, and indeed dangerous, sex educator” (p. 384). Where Flood (2009) and Chronaki (2014) converge is on the improbability that pornography is an isolated contributor to sexual expression. Individual factors such as personality, age, gender, sexual experience, culture, parental involvement, and physical maturation are all contributory. Doornwaard et al. (2016) agree that compulsive users of sexually explicit material are not a homogeneous group.

Gaps in the literature

There is little doubt that technology is influencing our world at a rapid pace. Annually thousands of political leaders, business people, and philosophers congregate in Davos, Switzerland, to discuss the big issues facing various societies worldwide. In 2016 the theme was ‘How Technology Is Shaping Our World’ (Bremmer, 2016). As this review has sought to demonstrate, pornography as a predominantly technologically dispersed commodity is also shaping our world through our young people. Literature clearly confirms also that the proliferation of internet pornography use is affecting sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours worldwide, that pornography use sustains unhealthy notions of sex and relationships, and that the cyclical nature of use and harm may well be comparable to other addictions. Against such an emerging backdrop, the question facing researchers would now appear to be “What next?” in terms of how to work with young people in this growing field.

Findings from quantitative research by Doornwaard et al. (2016) revealed that users with lower levels of global self-esteem are at an increased risk of problematic use of pornography. In examining the area that sits between the two ends of the spectrum of use, it may appear that perhaps the gaps in the research are related to the potentially insidious theme of disconnection. As mentioned earlier, one of the co-morbidities related to compulsive pornography use is social isolation.

Bond (2014) has argued that for most, social isolation is detrimental to a person’s health both physically and mentally. After examining psychology experiments documenting the effects of isolation and sensory deprivation, Bond (2014) investigated the physical and mental effects of isolation. Physical risks included higher blood pressure, susceptibility to infection, higher risk of developing Alzheimer’s and dementia, and sleep deprivation. Psychological/mental effects included a distorted sense of time, high anxiety, lower mental performance, and hallucinations. When these effects of social isolation are applied in the context of pornography use, it can

be seen how consumption could quickly get out of control and how cognitive abilities could become impaired (sexual preoccupation).

Borrelli (2015) has described how loneliness causes a need for social connection in the same way that hunger causes people to crave food. These studies of the effects of social isolation are relevant because they may show links between social isolation and pornography use as a *craving*, for it may actually be the counterfeit of social connection. Studies by Doornwaard et al. (2016), Owens et al. (2012), and Rosenberg et al. (2014) have revealed that psychological wellbeing (inclusive of connectedness to others) is a predictor of compulsive use symptoms. Therefore, it may be plausible to suggest that perhaps what users are seeking is not purely sexual but relational.

This sentiment is echoed in the literature, though very faintly. A small amount of research conducted by Lofgren-Martenson and Masson (2010, as cited in Owens et al., 2012) showed a group of people who were at less risk than others of developing sexual compulsivity—a group who were connected elsewhere via positive relationships with friends and family.

International authors agree that the opposite of addiction/compulsivity may not in fact be sobriety, but connection (Renascent Foundation, 2016; TED Conferences, 2015; Weiss, 2015). Hari (TED Conferences, 2015) has presented new evidence about addiction by citing the work of Bruce Alexander, a psychologist and professor from Vancouver. Initially, Alexander presented isolated rats with heroin-laced water and subsequently observed the process of addiction. He then created a “rat park,” a fun-filled park for rats with activities, food, and an abundance of friends, while also maintaining their access to the drug-laced water. Alexander noted that in the “rat park” a minute percentage used the drugged water, yet none used it compulsively and none overdosed. Alexander concluded that perhaps addiction is more about the “cage”—our environment and level of connectedness to others—than the drug per se.

In an interview with Johann Hari following his increasingly popular TED Talk, *Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong* (TED Conferences, 2015), Siegel (2015) questioned Hari on what addiction recovery could look like. Hari responded from a poststructuralist paradigm, noting the wider social discourses and systems in relation to addiction:

In addiction, we talk a lot about individual recovery and that is hugely valuable. But what Bruce [Alexander] talks a lot about is social recovery. If something has gone wrong with us as individuals, then something has gone wrong with us as a group and we need to think about how we recover as a group, how we restore our

ways of connecting and bonding, being together and supporting each other by being present in each other's lives. That requires much bigger social change.
(para. 30)

As has been discussed, a poignant insight gleaned from the literature review conducted by Owens et al. (2012) demonstrated that decreases in pornography consumption occurred when self-confidence and connection to others (real as opposed to cyber) increased.

Interestingly, in Aotearoa, research into relational connectedness as a form of intervention working in these areas is not new. Huriwai et al. (2001) undertook a significant piece of research entitled *Whanaungatanga: A process in the treatment of Māori with alcohol and drug-use related problems*, in which they investigated the way “a sense of belonging to an iwi (‘tribe’) could contribute to the recovery process” (p. 1034). In relation to addiction treatment, this very concept of whānau (familial ties and relationships with family and friends) is a systemic way of achieving change that places clients within the context of their extended families (Huriwai et al., 2001). As can be seen, this is opposed to more traditional treatment programmes already cited in this review that tend to work solely with individuals in isolation.

Other models of Māori health and wellbeing also have a concerted focus on connection as a way of being. Durie’s model of health, Te Whare Tapa Whā, as cited by the Ministry of Health (2015), demonstrates the holistic approach to health and wellbeing that sees balance between physical, psychological, spiritual, and family health and connection as interdependent facets. The Whakapiripiri Whānau Framework is also used as a model for understanding the relationship between whānau and health (Te Pūmanawa Hauora, 1996)—whakapiripiri itself meaning to keep close together, to attach (Moorfield, 2011).

Additionally, Rose Pere’s model of Te Wheke—the Octopus—demonstrates the interwoven dimensions of health, represented by the head and the eyes of the octopus, and each tentacle. Together these include: te whanau—family; waiora—total wellbeing for the individual and family; wairuatanga—spirituality; hinengaro—the mind; taha tinana—physical wellbeing; whanaungatanga—extended family; mauri—life force in people and objects; mana ake—unique identity of individuals and family; hā a koro ma, a kui ma—breath of life from forebears; whatumanawa—the open and healthy expression of emotion (Ministry of Health, 2015). Perhaps it is through the creation of contexts of oranga (health, welfare) and holistic wellbeing through connection that pornography will no longer determine and dominate the landscape.

Conclusion

In conclusion, connection is quite possibly the best location for change, for as Flood (2009) surmises, “the shifting cultural and collective dynamics of children’s and young people’s social, sexual and gender relations are likely to have a profound influence on the use, meaning and impact of pornography” (p. 388). I would add, “and vice versa.” Clearly pornography has a negative impact on people to varying degrees. We must accept that it is out there, widely dispersed and invested in; we cannot rid the world of it. But what research has revealed can guide our practice: we can promote healthy relationships, and environments of connection and belonging. These can serve as antidotes to the intent, the power and the effects of pornography. Better still, we need not cast our vision so far from home. We have within reach indigenous ways of being already embedded within the whenua of Aotearoa New Zealand that promote this very antidote. Perhaps we can lead the way in terms of change?

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