Chapter 69

Online Pornography Seeking Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

Given the prevalence of online pornography and the ease with which this content can be accessed using Internet search engines, it is important to understand different ways to measure online pornography seeking behaviors. Research that has used self-report data to analyze online pornography searches and behavior is discussed, and the limitations of this methodology are outlined. An alternative approach, which samples a portion of Google Web searches in order to determine how many searches for specific keywords have been conducted in a given time period, is then presented as a useful method for assessing this behavior. Using this method, the changes in pornographic keyword searches across the last eight years are discussed along with how pornographic searches change across a given week. Finally, research is presented in order to demonstrate how this methodology can be used to examine various psychological and social theories.

INTRODUCTION

Pornography is available via a variety of media, including books, magazines, film, and video. Currently, one of the most prevalent means of distributing pornography is the internet. In 2006, the revenues from online pornography were nearly $5 billion (Ropelato, 2006). By simply typing a few keywords into a search engine (e.g., Google), it is extremely easy to search for pornography on the internet. It is so easy that it has been speculated that every second, 372 individuals are typing pornographic keywords into a search engine. Altogether, it is estimated that up to 25% of all internet search engine requests are for pornography (Ropelato, 2006).

Approximately 13% of the US population regularly views internet pornography and the majority of these individuals (75%) are men (Ropelato, 2006). Theorists and researchers suggest that this interest in pornography can be attributed to men's evolved interest in sexual variety and multiple partners (c.f., Mosher, 1988; Malamuth, 1996). As noted by Symons (1979), men tend to fantasize about a place where, "sex is sheer lust and physical gratification, devoid of more tender feelings and encumbering relationships, in which women are always aroused, or at least easily arousable, and ultimately are always willing" (p. 171). In other words, men may have evolved a desire to have sex with multiple women who are uninterested in commitment. Online pornography provides men with a multitude of physically attractive "virtual" partners, which help provide physical gratification without commitment (Malamuth, 1996).

Given the expansion in internet pornography as a business and the vast number of individuals who engage in internet pornography use, it is important for researchers to understand different ways to assess this behavior. Past research examining traditional media pornography consumption (e.g., pornographic magazines, movies, etc.) has relied almost exclusively on self-report assessments. Unfortunately, assessing changes in pornography consumption across time using these self-reports has proven difficult. Data presented by the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, which combined survey data from 1970 and 1985 on pornography consumption, found that in 1970 20% of individuals indicated they read a pornographic magazine whereas in 1985 this number increased to 67% (U.S. Department of Justice, 1986). However, in 1970 15% reported seeing a pornographic movie whereas in 1985 this dropped to 7%. Although such results are interesting, the exact meaning of them is somewhat unclear. First, not only did these studies utilize samples which were drawing from different populations, but these studies also worded the questions about pornography consumption differently (Brown & Bryant, 1989; Smith, 1987). For example, in 1970 participants were asked about the purchase of sexually explicit magazines in the "past year" whereas in 1985 they were asked if a purchase for such material had "ever" occurred. It would be much more informative if researchers were able to examine changes in pornography consumption across time using a standard methodology.

Even when online pornography consumption is examined, researchers still frequently relay on self-reports. In these studies, researchers simply ask participants how much they utilize online pornography (e.g., "In the past three months, how many times have you visited computer porn internet sites?"; c.f., Twohig, Crosby, & Cox, 2009; Grubbs, et al., 2010). Results from such research suggest a wide range of negative outcomes for individuals who frequently view online pornography, including depression, isolation and damaged relationships (c.f., Schneider, 2000; Twohig, Crosby, & Cox, 2009).

Although research using self-report assessments of online pornography use and searching behaviors has provided important insight into the psychology of online pornography, it is methodologically limited. Self-reports are susceptible to self-enhancement and self-deception errors (John & Robins, 1993). When relations are found between self-report measures of pornography and other self-report variables (e.g., depression) it is difficult to untangle whether this effect is due to a sustentative relationship or some variety of method variance (Funder, 1999). Most importantly, self-report data is limited because, in the end, researchers are not interested in predicting merely what a person says he or she does; researchers are interested in understanding what people actually do.

Instead of asking individuals about their online pornography behaviors, researchers have also examined the keyword searches individuals use to find pornography. Keywords are the words individuals enter into various search engines in order to find something online. For example, a

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