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## The Relationship Between Social Media Use, Internet Use, and Frequency of Pornography Habits

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## The Relationship Between Social Media Use Internet Use and Frequency of Pornography Habits

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this correlational study is to determine whether or not there is a relationship between the amount of time spent on the internet or social media sites and the frequency of pornography habits and if gender has an effect on the frequency of pornography habits. Participants were a convenience sample of 105 adults aged 18-24 from two universities in the Southeastern United States. Each participant completed a survey to determine time spent on internet sites, time spent on social media, and the frequency of pornography habits. An analysis of our results showed that there is not a significant relationship between internet use and frequency of pornography habits. Our results indicated no significant relationship between social media use and the frequency of pornography habits. Our results did suggest, however, that gender does have a significant effect on the frequency of pornography habits.

### Keywords

Social Media and Internet, Gender, and Pornography

## INTRODUCTION

Today, internet websites and social media applications are more accessible to adolescents and young adults than at any other point in history due to technological advances in the modern world. The variety of content available to access online is nearly limitless, creating opportunities for online users to access websites and applications containing sexually explicit material, such as pornography. In a month, pornographic material is accessed by 91.5% of men and 60.2% of women (Solano et al., 2020). Pornography, as defined by Merriam-Webster, is "material (such as books or photographs) that depicts erotic behavior and is intended to cause sexual excitement" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Pornography users are found among both men and women, but there are differences in how each gender perceives and accepts pornography. The use of pornography releases a chemical in the brain called dopamine, which has also been recognized in response to frequent social media use. Internet sites, social media, and pornography can each generate harmful effects on users' minds, their relationships, and their body image.

### WOMEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD PORNOGRAPHIC MATERIAL

Men and women consume pornographic materials with the intent of satisfying physical pleasure (Emmers-Sommer, 2018). Unlike men, however, women tend to use pornography to satisfy relational needs. They tend to engage in pornography with hopes that it will lead to a more fulfilling sexual life with

their partners. Albright (2008) suggested that women are more likely than men to communicate about sex online, while men are more likely than women to use the internet solely to seek out pornography. Furthermore, women are more perceptive than men of the negative impacts sex-seeking behaviors can generate, such as self-objectification and a decline in morality (Chadwick et al., 2018).

## **MEN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD PORNOGRAPHIC MATERIAL**

According to the National Library of Medicine, "91.5% of men and 60.2% of women herein reported having consumed pornography in the past month" (Solano et al., p. 92). Men typically have more frequent interactions with pornography than women (Emmers-Sommer, 2018). Men tend to seek pornography for sexual pleasure with the intent of self-gratification rather than relational gratification (Albright, 2008). Pornographic habits in men raise their sexually objectifying habits and beliefs toward women (Emmers-Sommer, 2018). In addition, Mikorski (2000) found that men who use pornography are more likely than those who do not perform violent or unwanted sexual advances toward women. Therefore, there is a higher prevalence of pornography use and online sex-seeking behaviors among men, even when it results in harmful effects, such as sexual objectification of women.

## **EFFECTS OF PORNOGRAPHIC HABITS**

Pornography affects the user's behavior and relationships. Adam (2019) suggests that pornography can be just as harmful as infidelity in a relationship. Men are more critical of their partner's body when they engage with pornography, leading their partners to suffer from poor self-esteem and low body positivity (Albright, 2008.) Any media that sexually objectifies can lead to body comparisons (Maheux et al., 2021). Since the rise of pornography, women have felt more inclined to change their bodies to look like the women in pornographic materials (Albright, 2008). The higher the pornography use, the more self-image declines. Pornography affects the body image of both the user and their partner (Maheux et al., 2021).

Pornography has a negative effect on morality (Bolu-Steve et al., 2022). Many users of pornography came across their initial viewing of pornography unintentionally and may have even felt repulsed or uncomfortable by the material. Exposure over time, however, leads to desensitization and, in many cases, addiction. Moral beliefs that pornography users once held are gradually dismantled, not only toward pornography but toward other areas of life, as well (Bolu-Steve et al., 2022). Pornography has the potential to extinguish self-regulation and the ability to make decisions that coincide with long-term best interests and are congruent with deep moral beliefs (Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2016).

## **EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND INTERNET USE**

Social media is accessed very regularly by a majority of adolescents (Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2016). There are many effects of social media use. A recent rise in self-objectification among adolescent females can partly be attributed to high social media and internet use. Self-objectification is the belief that a person is an object rather than a human (Maheux et al., 2021). Likewise, body comparisons, common among frequent social media users, can contribute to declining body confidence (Maheux et al., 2021).

Addictive behaviors are frequent among adolescents and young adults who regularly access internet websites and social media applications. These users become reliant upon the validation and attention received through social media posting (Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2016). The need to meet these social interaction desires often propels adolescents to become avid media consumers. Social media interaction leads to a disconnect from society. Frequent internet access causes users to be entirely dependent on the interactions they gain from social media (Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2016).

## **DOPAMINE CHEMICALS IN THE BRAIN**

The act of accessing social media applications and receiving validation from posted content creates significant amounts of dopamine in the brain (Bolu-Steve et al., 2022). Experiencing gratification in one form, such as receiving likes on a social media post, can transfer to wanting gratification in other forms (Bolu-Steve et al., 2022). The brain is altered once it begins creating more dopamine. Over time, the brain needs more dopamine in order for the same physiological response to occur. The dopamine release becomes a craving for the user, and the user may seek harmful ways to achieve more dopamine releases by more frequently accessing more of the element provided in the initial dopamine release or reward system (Bolu-Steve et al., 2022).

The reward system phenomenon is especially relevant among adolescents. Adolescents do not understand that what they consume has the potential to alter their brain chemistry. An alteration of brain chemistry leads to addiction, often for years following initial use (Bolu-Steve et al., 2022). The more an adolescent activates the brain's reward system with explicit materials, the more objectifying behaviors and aggressive sexual activity will occur (Bolu-Steve et al., 2022). The reward of dopamine also has the potential to override morality depending on what is important to the individual. In addition, overuse of pornography leads to neurophysiological changes, changes in behavior, and relationship problems (Alves et al., 2020).

## PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of the non-experimental study is to explore the relationship between internet use, social media use, and frequency of pornography habits. This study also aims to explore if gender affects the frequency of pornography habits.

## HYPOTHESIS

It is hypothesized that there is a relationship between social media use and the frequency of pornography habits. It is also hypothesized that there is a relationship between internet use and the frequency of pornography habits. Finally, it is hypothesized that gender will affect the frequency of pornography habits.

## METHOD

### PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were a convenience sample of one hundred and five 18-24 year olds from two colleges in the Southeastern United States. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample used for this study.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of Sample*

	Female <i>n</i> =74 (70)		Male <i>n</i> =31 (29)		Total <i>n</i> =105 (100)
	White <i>n</i> (%)	Other <i>n</i> (%)	White <i>n</i> (%)	Other <i>n</i> (%)	Total <i>n</i> (%)
Freshman	11(79)	2(14)	1(7)	0(0)	14 (100)
Sophomore	15(71)	2(10)	3(14)	1(5)	21 (100)
Junior	7(44)	0(0)	8(50)	1(6)	16 (100)
Senior	8(53)	1(7)	6(40)	0(0)	15 (100)
Masters	16(80)	1(5)	2(10)	1(5)	20 (100)
Other	11(58)	0(0)	8(42)	0(0)	19 (100)

### INSTRUMENTATION

The primary instruments used in this study were the Pornography, Social Media, and Internet Use Survey, which was comprised of the Compulsive Internet Use Scale (Downing et al., 2014) and the Pornography Use Scale (Szymanski & Stewart-Richardson, 2014). In addition, the survey included demographic items about each participant (age, gender, race, and school classification) and demographic items pertaining to social media use.

The Compulsive Internet Use Scale (Downing et al., 2014) has high reliability due to its internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.92). The scale also has high convergent validity with boredom, sexual frustration, and time spent viewing internet sexually explicit media (Downing et al., 2014).

The Pornographic Use Scale (Szymanski & Stewart-Richardson, 2014) has a Cronbach's alpha score of .88 for the frequency of use subscale, while the problematic use subscale has an alpha of 0.91. Construct and discriminant validity are also high for this scale (Szymanski & Stewart-Richardson, 2014).

### PROCEDURE

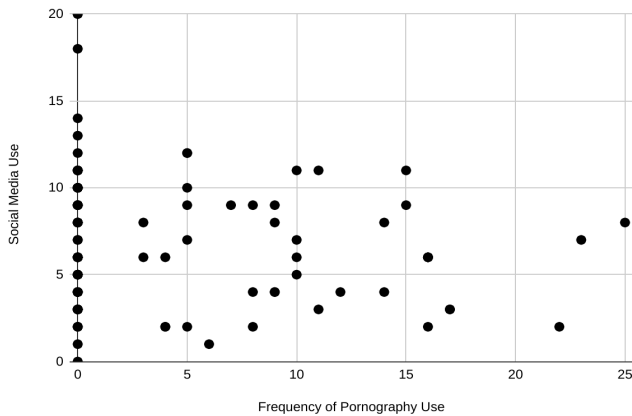
Once IRB approval was obtained for this nonexperimental study, the Pornography, Social Media, and Internet Use Survey was distributed by email to male and female undergraduate and graduate level students among two southeastern universities ranging from ages 18 to 24. These recipients were given a choice on whether to participate; therefore, the participants who completed the survey provided informed consent by choosing to participate. Once participants completed the survey, the data were scored by the researchers. Pearson Correlation tests were used to determine the relationship between time spent on social media, the frequency of pornography habits, and the relationship between time spent on internet sites and the frequency of pornography habits. An independent samples t-test was used to explore differences in the frequency of pornography habits between males and females. Each hypothesis was examined at an alpha level of 0.05.

### RESULTS

Our data analysis revealed one statistically significant result and two that were not statistically significant. To test the first hypothesis, a Pearson Correlation test was conducted comparing the frequency of pornography habits and social media use (Figure 1). This analysis revealed no statistically significant relationship between the variables  $r(103) = -.15$ ,  $p > .05$ ; therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

**Figure 1**

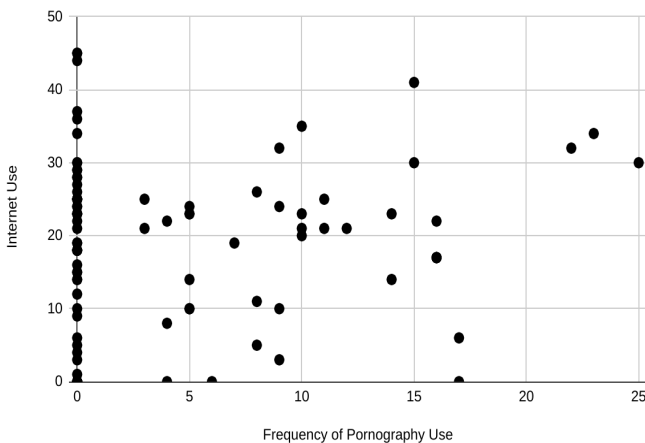
*Social Media Use and Frequency of Pornography Habits*



A Pearson Correlation test was also conducted to compare the frequency of pornography habits and internet use among participants (Figure 2). No statistically significant relationship was found  $r(103) = .08, p > 0.05$ ; therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected.

**Figure 2**

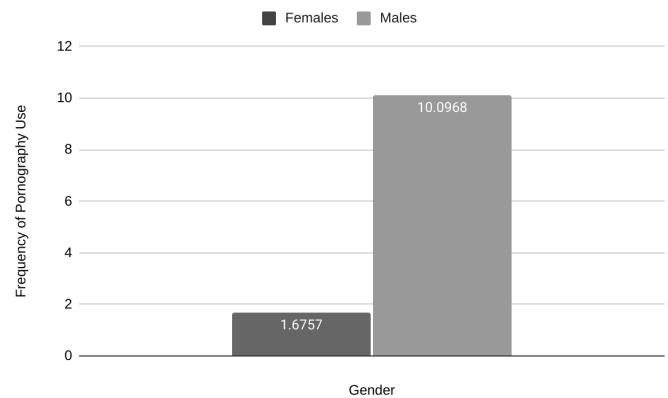
*Internet Use and Frequency of Pornography Habits*



Finally, an independent samples *t*-test was calculated to compare the frequency of pornography habits between males and females (Figure 3). This analysis showed a statistically significant difference between the groups,  $t(103) = 7.88, p < .05$ , and the null hypothesis was rejected, while the alternative hypothesis was supported.

**Figure 3**

*Frequency of Pornography Habits by Gender*



Overall, our data analysis revealed no pattern of relationship between the frequency of pornography habits and the use of either social media or the internet. However, the data analyses revealed that, on average, males reported a higher frequency of pornography habits compared to females.

## DISCUSSION

### FINDINGS

The study revealed no meaningful relationship between the frequency of pornography habits and social media use. Similarly, this study provided no evidence of a relationship between the frequency of pornography habits and internet use. Our findings appear to contrast with other findings in the literature. For example, Sirianni and Vishwanath (2016) found heavy social media use to have an addictive quality similar to that of pornography. Furthermore, the extant literature suggests strong connections between internet use, social media use, pornography habits, and the release of dopamine in the body (Bolu-Steve et al., 2022). Similarly, findings by Delmonico and Miller (2003) suggest a meaningful correlation between time spent online and pornography usage. The discrepancy between our findings and current literature may be due to our sample's relatively high proportion of female respondents. As noted by Albright (2008) and Solano et al. (2020), females are less likely than males to have a high frequency of pornography habits.

In this regard, our findings affirm the lopsidedness of the differences between males and females in pornographic habits. For example, women have been shown to be more perceptive than men of the negative impacts sex-seeking behaviors can generate (Chadwick et al., 2018). Likewise, over 91% of men have frequent interactions with pornographic content compared to just 60.2% of women (Emmers-Sommer, 2018; Solano et al., 2020).

## **LIMITATIONS**

There are several limitations to our findings in this study. The small sample size and volunteer nature of the survey responses limit the generalizability of findings. The sample was selected from a single college campus with demographic characteristics that may not adequately represent the population of college students in the country. Furthermore, the self-report responses on the survey constitute an additional limitation. Despite anonymity, the respondents may not have provided truthful answers to such a sensitive topic as pornography. Finally, information about social media use in the survey was limited to Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. Students also use other social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube. This restriction may also limit the generalizability of our results.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

An important implication of this study is the affirmation of previous research showing that men report a higher propensity for pornography habits. Our results confirm that women also access pornographic materials online, albeit at a much lower frequency than men. These findings have implications for educational programs aimed at combating addiction to pornography, body dysmorphia, or sexual objectification. There tends to be an assumption that these are struggles that only affect men, and therefore, interventions are only needed for men. Our findings imply that these challenges also affect women and that it is important to consider support systems for this subpopulation.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research on the relationship between social media use and the frequency of pornography habits could include broadening the scope of social media applications in future studies. Further research could incorporate platforms not included in the current study, such as YouTube, Twitter, and Pinterest. Further research could also extend the investigation to participants from broader demographic backgrounds.

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Anna Miller is also a second-year graduate student pursuing a master's in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. She is set to graduate in December of 2024 and will stay in Searcy to pursue a career in counseling. Upon completion of the program, she plans to work toward becoming a Licensed Professional Counselor. She is passionate about helping people and giving them a place to communicate their hardships.