

Impact of Pornography on Sexual Health of Adolescent Girls

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Abstract

Viewing sexually explicit content or pornography has become increasingly commonplace. Many of the adolescent girls do not anticipate or expect that viewing pornography will negatively influence their sexual lives. The fact remains that usage of porn contents often significantly impacts the users as well as their family, workplace, and community (besides “negatively impacting sexual health of those who view pornography”). According to research findings, adolescent girls (including boys), in the present day situation, have access to pornography more frequently than ever before. However, it is pertinent to note that they may be more vulnerable to the (negative) effects of pornographic contents. The author of this work argues that early exposure to pornography use among adolescent girls can result in (a) “delinquent behaviour”, (b) “high-risk sexual behaviour”, and (c) “substance use” (including addiction to ‘alcohol’ and ‘smoking’). This review paper aims at researching into implications of pornography on sexual health of adolescent girls. It is based on secondary data. The paper briefly concludes that early sexual debut, unsafe sex, and multiple sexual partners are some of the harmful consequences of exposure to pornography among girls during adolescence.

Keywords: *Pornography; Sexual Health; Reproductive Health; Adolescent Girls; Teenagers; Sexual Arousal; HIV and AIDS; STDs; Unplanned Pregnancy*

Introduction

Pornography is intended to cause sexual excitement. In most common language, it is defined as sexual material (such as a picture, video, or text) that is primarily intended for sexual arousal. However, it has been found that with the emergence of internet and mobile technologies, adolescent girls (including teenagers of the opposite sex) have unregulated and unrestricted access to pornographic materials. But it has been found that this trend is not conducive as viewing pornography by teenage girls has potential to negatively impact their sexual and reproductive health at later stages of their life [1]. Pornography use among female adolescents and emerging adults, for instance, has been linked with outcomes such as “multiple sexual partners”. The author of this work makes a research statement that watching pornography within the institution of marriage (including consensual sexual contact) on the advice of qualified sexologists may be a healthy phenomenon. It is pertinent to note that sexologists, sometimes, encourage engaging sexual partners to see porn materials to treat sexual dysfunctions, such as premature ejaculation and inability to reach orgasm. The author of this work argues that beyond

this consideration, viewing pornography results in impairing the personal and social life. Most importantly, it can become pathological if watched excessively; it impairs the sex life of individual adolescent girls. In today's world, it is uphill task to restrict (prevent) adolescent girls from viewing porn and erotica materials (accessible on internet resources) due to information and technology (IT) regulations in many parts of the globe. The author does not wish to elaborate on this aspect, as it is beyond scope and objectives of this paper.

Some sex therapists recommend commercial pornography to patients with sexual dysfunctions. It is pertinent to note that older adults, women after menopause, and others confronted with "chronic diseases" and "family violence" (during their childhood days) experience decreased libido (or sexual desire). They are, sometimes, encouraged to view sex contents in very responsible manner in order to enhance libido, but only under guidance and expert supervision of sexologists. For some, it might sound surprising that trained sexologists, psychologists, and behaviour counsellors prescribe porn. The fact remains is that "sex therapy and pornography have a long and intertwined history" [2]. The author does not wish to further elaborate on this aspect, as it is beyond scope and objectives of this paper. However, pornography use is not suggested for adolescent girls (and boys) on the ground that they, often, lack maturity in matters pertaining to sexual behaviour. After access to porn sites, they are, often, likely to engage in unsafe (sexual) practices in order to get sexual pleasure. Prime objective of this paper is to present narrative on implications of pornography on sexual health of adolescent girls. Secondary data have been used and method of data analysis is descriptive; it involves desk-based research.

Objectives and Methodology

This paper aims to outline description on implications of pornography on sexual health of adolescent girls. It discusses the framework within which pornography use impacts overall sexual health aspects among teenagers. Also, description on way forward has been presented. The author has used two terms interchangeable in this paper: 'adolescent' and 'teenager'. Both groups fall in the age category when they are not fully matured to understand the relevant aspects pertaining to their own sexuality, including repercussions pornography use may have on their sex life (behaviour). Secondary data (largely 'qualitative' in nature) have been used. Data have been collected from sources such as books, book chapters, journal articles, etc. A scoping review was undertaken in view of objective(s). Method of data analysis is 'descriptive', involving "desk-based research approach". The author makes a point that plagiarism to some extent may be detected in some parts of this work, but it was unavoidable, since changing the style of presentation of the text (including rewording) beyond a certain limit result in loss of intended meaning(s).

Definition of key terms used

- **Pornography:** It implies books, magazines, and films that are designed to cause sexual excitement by showing or describing sexual acts. Pornography refers to representations designed to arouse and give sexual pleasure to those who read, see, hear, or handle them. Although sexual stimulation would seem to be a splendid goal, it is not always so regarded in a society that is still characterized as puritanical (having standards of moral behaviour that forbid many pleasures).
- **Adolescent:** The term 'adolescent' refers to a young person who is no longer a child and not yet an adult, between the ages of about 13 and 17 years. In some societies and countries, however, the classified age group is 10 - 19 years. This variation takes place due to several prevailing socio-economic, demographic cultural norms and practices.
- **Teenagers:** It implies someone who is 13 to 19 years old. Like adolescents, the age group of teenagers also varies owing to several factors.
- **Sexual health:** It is defined as "a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality". It is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity.

Discussion

Formative years during adolescence

Before presenting discussion on impact of pornography on sexual health among adolescent girls, it is appropriate to look into conditions that determine overall development during adolescence period. Understanding of this, according the considered research view of the author, is crucial because adolescent girls (including boys) are not matured enough to take appropriate decisions in matters pertaining to sexuality.

Adolescence is the phase of life between childhood and adulthood. It is a unique stage of development. Also, it is an important time for laying the foundations of good health, including sexual and reproductive health. Adolescent girls experience rapid physical, cognitive and psychosocial growth during these years. This affects how they feel, think, make decisions, and interact with the people (including peers) around them [3].

In the present day situation, adolescent period, despite being thought of as a healthy stage of life, is marked by death, illness, and injury and other health complications. This happens because during this phase, adolescent girls establish some patterns of sexual behaviour that can put their health at risk now and in the future. Some of such behaviours, for instance, are related to diet, physical activity, and substance use [4]. Such health situations are preventable. Most importantly, sexual activity is another dimension of adolescence period among girls. It is pertinent to note that in order to grow and develop responsible sexual behaviour, adolescent girls need right information from reliable sources. The type of information that they need most include: (a) “age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education”; (b) “opportunities to develop life skills”; (c) “health services that are acceptable, equitable, appropriate and effective”; and (d) “safe and supportive environments”.

Also, they need opportunities to meaningfully participate in the design and delivery of interventions in order to improve and maintain their sexual health. Expanding such opportunities is prerequisite for responding to specific sexual needs (and rights) of adolescent girls [3]. It is, thus, obvious that sexual health (behaviour) of adolescent girls is shaped by several factors, including prevailing situations they are placed in. However, with the advent of Internet, adolescent girls get easy and instant access to porn sites (or “Internet pornography”).

Use of internet, in the present day situation, is a big part of teens’ lives. Over and above, devices like smartphones, laptops, and tablets make the internet and social media easily accessible to teenage girls. In terms of answer to the question why teens get attracted to Internet sites and social media platforms, it can be stated that teenage girls’ developmental needs match well with what social media has to offer (e.g. developing friendships, figuring out their identities, and establishing social status by being “in the know”). But Internet and social media outlets also expose them to pornography, globally. Access to what is shown on porn sites has, often, undesirable consequences on the sexual health of adolescent girls [5]. This is discussed, in details, in subsequent section of this paper.

Addiction to internet and social media

In addition to access to pornography, another area of concern is addiction. Analysis of research data indicate that Internet technology negatively impacts adolescent girls if they spend too much time on screens. This practice leads to, over the years, to what is termed as ‘addiction’; they skimp on eating, sleeping, doing their homework, or spending time with friends and families. Too much use of Internet, social media and mobile devices can be a risk factor for irresponsible sexual behaviour (including anxiety and depression) among several of the teenage girls. It is common seeing adolescent girls (and boys) engaged with mobile screen during their leisure time (as depicted in figure 1). It is important to understand that adolescence is a period in which biological, social, and psychological changes happen. Especially in the era of post-mobile innovation (accompanied by Internet usage), identity discovery, self-expression, friendships, and peer acceptance are of great importance for adolescent girls. They are especially eager to explore peer relationships. Social media platform offers adolescents the opportunity to interact with their peers, anywhere and anytime [6].



Figure 1: Addiction to internet and mobile technology is common among some adolescents (source: <https://extension.umn.edu/tough-topics-kids/teens-online-and-social-media-use>).

In the context of addiction behaviour, the author of this review paper makes a point that Internet and social media do not affect all teenage girls the same way. However, irrational use of Internet is linked with healthy and unhealthy effects on sexual health (including mental health). These effects vary considerably from one teenage girl to another. Social media effects on sexual health depend on factors such as:

1. What a teen sees and does online;
2. The amount of time spent online;
3. Psychological factors (e.g. maturity level);
4. Any pre-existing mental health conditions; and
5. Personal life circumstances (including cultural, social and economic factors) [7].

Impact of pornography on sexual health

As outlined in previous sections of this paper, pornography refers to books, magazines, films, etc., that describe or show sexual acts in order to cause sexual excitement. In terms of measurement of age when teenage girls get sexually aroused, the author of this work argues that the foundations for sexuality are incorporated into an individual's sense of self. This narrative envisages sexual desire that includes (a) intimacy, (b) feeling desired, (c) wanting to feel desired, (c) pleasing one's partner, and (d) eroticism [8].

The term 'eroticism' implies the arousal of or the attempt to arouse sexual feeling by means of suggestion, symbolism, and acts. A state of sexual arousal essentially envisages stimulation of erogenous zones. Any part of the body can be an erogenous zone. An erogenous zone is any area that can produce sexual arousal when stimulated. Some common extra genital female erogenous zones include: (a) the breasts, and specifically the nipples; (b) mouth and lips; (c) nape of the neck; (d) buttocks; (e) inner thighs; (f) lower abdomen (pubic area); (g) inner wrist; (h) scalp; (i) the area behind the knees; (j) the perineum (the space between the anus and vagina); (k) the area around and in the anus; and (l) the upper and lower back. Stimulation of these areas through self-touch (masturbation), a partner's touch, sex toys, or other means often leads to sexual arousal. Sexual arousal involves increased blood flow and nerve sensitivity [9].

In true sense, discussion on use of pornography use is controversial. It is, however, of utmost importance to (a) understand how young girls use pornography, and (b) determine whether pornography use has adverse effects on their sexual health and well-being [10]. In the context of understanding the exact context and situations(s) in which pornography impacts sexual health (and behaviour)

among adolescent girls, it is imperative to look into (a) the mechanism of erogenous zones, and (b) the process and stages of sexual arousal. Sexual arousal is very sensitive issue that involves physiological body changes, including personal preferences of teenagers. The discussion follows.

Erogenous zones are parts of the body that trigger sexual arousal when stimulated. These include both 'genital' and 'non-genital' areas. In situations wherein adolescent girls view sexual acts on porn sites, they get sexually aroused; it is natural. When they are sexually aroused due to porn viewing, it leads to increased blood flow to the clitoris and the rest of the vulva, as well as vaginal transudation (resulting in "the seeping of moisture through the vaginal walls, which serves as lubrication"). In scientific and medical terms, sexual arousal among adolescent girls involves four stages, namely:

1. **Excitement:** The sexual excitement stage (also sometimes termed as "the arousal stage") involves a range of physiological changes in the body of adolescent girls. It is pertinent to note that most of these functions prepare the body for vaginal intercourse. Vagina, for instance, becomes wet because the glands produce lubricating fluids. Further, clitoris and vulva swell up as blood vessels dilate. Furthermore, nipples become more sensitive to touch.
2. **Plateau:** The plateau stage is the period before orgasm. In this stage, the changes adolescent girls feel in the excitement phase intensify. Their breathing may quicken, and they may start moaning (or vocalizing involuntarily). Again, vagina might tighten and produce more lubrication.
3. **Orgasm:** The orgasm stage is often considered the end goal of sex, but it is not always so for all adolescent girls. It is (totally) possible to have pleasurable sex without reaching orgasm. Orgasms can include muscular convulsions, especially in the lower back and pelvic area. At this stage, vagina might tighten and it might become more lubricated. It is associated with a sense of euphoria and pleasure.
4. **Resolution:** After orgasm, adolescent girls' muscles relax and their blood pressure drops. Clitoris might feel particularly sensitive or even painful to touch. They might experience a refractory period, during which they won't be able to orgasm again. Some teenage girls experience multiple orgasms. But it is not necessary for some adolescent girls to have a pleasurable sexual experience with multiple orgasms [10].

In view of the discussion presented above, it is obvious that adolescent girls, who view sex sites, are likely to be sexually aroused. The level and extent of arousal will vary. In such situations, those girls, who are matured enough and know self-control measures, will not get involved with sexual acts with others. It is known fact that pornography contains sexual acts that actually happens between boys and girls, men and women. Above all, porn and erotica sites also depict sexual act between and among adolescent girls (sometimes involving sexual act among more than two girls; termed as 'lesbian': a homosexual woman or girl). Sex act between two adolescent girls can (sometimes) involve vaginal penetration, with fingers, dildos, vibrators or other types of toys. However, vaginal penetration between them is not always mandatory during sex since one of them does not have a penis. As such, the adolescent girls wanting to experience sexual pleasure through vaginal intercourse (including foreplay), owing to exposure to porn and erotic materials, are at increased risk of getting engaged in sexual intercourse with partner of opposite sex (boys). This has several risk factors, such as unplanned pregnancy, and unsafe sex [which, in turn, may result in human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV and AIDS) and sexually transmitted disease (STDs)]. Also, there is need to consider two aspects in this context:

1. **First is marital status.** If the adolescent girls, with exposure to porn contents, are married, they are less likely to be engaged in sex (including vaginal, anal and oral sex) with multiple sex partners. However, considering the age group of adolescent girls (13 - 17 years or 10 - 19 years, as outlined in previous section of this paper), they are not likely to be the part of "institution of marriage". As such, they are at increased risk of "unsafe sex practices". At this juncture, it is pertinent to note that legally prescribed marriage age for girls is 18 years in most countries. However, in some countries, the age is under 18. In other countries, it is 19, 20 or 21 years. Under this demographic scenario, it can be pre-assumed that vast majority of adolescent girls are unmarried.

2. Second consideration, according to research view of author of this paper, is “locally prevailing social and cultural norms (practices)”. In societies where making sexual contacts with multiple partners is the “accepted norm”, adolescent girls may get sexual pleasure. There is not much scientifically published research data that indicates acceptance of sexual acts among adolescent girls with others (of opposite sex). However, sexual contact is made between adolescent girls and boys, although it remains ‘undisclosed’ or ‘uncovered’.

The question needing answer is: what adolescent girls with access to pornography or sex-driven social media can do to get sexual pleasure during their lives? Its answer is: ‘masturbation’. It is an act wherein a person sexually stimulates their own genitals for sexual arousal or other sexual pleasure. It has no negative effects on sexual health of adolescent girls, unless they get addicted. It has been found that sexual behaviour is usually limited to masturbation at this age. Masturbation can be good for health. However, some of the adolescent girls may start to experiment with sexual arousal through other activities such as (a) flirting, (b) hugging, and (c) playfully hitting or tickling other youth they are romantically interested in. They may also start kissing or “making out” with other teens of opposite or same sex. All these have various long-term deleterious effects on sexual maturation (behaviour).

Steps toward change

In terms of way forward, the author of this paper argues that the negative impacts of pornography on sexual health of adolescent girls can be challenging to overcome. However, healing is possible. It is very essential that they want to make the steps toward recovery. Family members, parents, and people around may encourage steps toward change. But it is adolescent girls who can ultimately make the transformation. Importantly, without internal motivation, change will likely be superficial or short-lived. Some strategic interventions may include: (a) “becoming aware and understand how pornography impacts sex life”, (b) “re-evaluating and identifying values to provide motivation for change”, (c) “facing the fears of what life would be like without pornography”; and (d) “taking responsibility for self-recovery” [11].

Few words of caution for adolescent girls

Adolescent girls, who view porn contents on Internet resources and social media platforms, must realize that ‘consent’ and ‘communication’ are crucial to sexual pleasure. Sexual acts with a partner are often portrayed in porn movies and video as something that happens “perfectly without either person really talking”. As depicted on many porn sites, people begin kissing passionately. It looks like both partners know exactly what to do to make each other feel good. This is not how it works in real life. In actuality and real life situation, sexual encounters (including kissing and foreplay activities) work the best when engaging sexual partners communicate their likes and dislikes. Also, they must fully realize and understand that there is no shame in experiencing sexual desire and pleasure, but within accepted family, social, cultural and ethical norms and practices. These are normal and healthy feelings. Sexual desires are a part of human body; it is answer to the question “why people have sexual intercourse”. It is up to adolescent girls to make sure that they express their sexual desires and pursue (sexual) pleasure in ways that are respectful [11].

At the same time, adolescent girls should also realize that much of the information they get while seeing sexual acts on porn sites are wrong and unscientific. As outlined earlier, consent and communication are two essential ingredients of actual “sexual pleasure’ with “comfort level” (between boys and girls, and men and women) in the real life situation. They should also understand that every individual, of both sexes (boys and girls), have their own preferences in matters pertaining to (a) foreplay, and (b) sexual intercourse. Some girls may like and enjoy anal sex, whereas others may not. Same is applicable in case of ‘cunnilingus’ (involving oral sex on the vagina, vulva and clitoris), ‘fellatio’ (oral sex on the penis), and ‘anilingus’ (oral sex involving the anus). But, it is important to remember that oral sex can be a natural and enjoyable part of sexual act between partners if (a) “both partners consent to it”, and (b) “personal sexual hygiene is maintained”. Pornography depicts engaging partners performing oral sex, but information on relevant and scientific aspects are not available on porn sites, a situation that puts adolescent girls in negative frame of mind about the whole sexual act.

Also, wrong information that adolescent girls get from porn sites is about duration of actual sexual intercourse (more in case of vaginal and anal intercourse): from penetration of the vagina by the penis until ejaculation. Perceived time ranges of intercourse activity (based on research studies) are generally classified in four categories: (a) adequate: from three (3) to seven (7) minutes; (b) desirable: from seven (7) to thirteen (13) minutes; (c) too short: from one (1) to two (2) minutes; and (d) too long: from ten (10) to thirty (30) minutes. Again, the duration varies from individual to individual (due to multiple of factors). As again this scientific fact, some porn sites and movies show vagina being penetrated, non-stop, without any break, by penis for more than one hour (sometimes for more duration). As such, the adolescent girls form a perception that vaginal intercourse (including anal and oral sex) for longer duration is something that gives more (increased) sexual pleasure. But when they engage in sexual intercourse, this does not happen; they may experience orgasm (climax of sexual excitement) within 5 - 10 minutes, whereas their male sexual partner may ejaculate in the vagina after 15 minutes. These situations may bring in several conflicting thoughts in the mind of adolescent girls. The term 'orgasm' is also known as 'cumming' in some societies.

Based on the description presented above, the author of this article argues that with advent of Internet and mobile technology, most of the adolescent girls are leaving in the "era of misinformation"; this adversely affects their sex lives in many ways. Pornography contributes to "sexual health illiteracy" due to its often fantastical and unrealistic depictions of sex acts [12]. Much of what is available online on porn sites (including in print materials, like books) on the subject of sexual acts creates fear in the minds of teenage girls. They think of pornography whichever way they want to think of it.

Conclusion

Adolescent girls' exposure to online pornographic material has increased in many regions of the globe in the past years. Its impact is a complex topic. Teenagers are exposed to pornography due to a variety of factors, including low costs involved, no legislation for prohibition, peer pressure, etc. This paper concludes that exposure to pornography (including unregulated/excess exposure to pornography) at an early age by adolescent girls can have serious long-term effects on various fronts. Often, they get wrong and unscientific information from porn sites. This situation requires preventive measures. The author of this paper suggests educational intervention, e.g. sexuality education at school, college and university (higher education) levels. Importantly, it is essential to understand that the term 'sex' carry different meaning for different individuals. For instance, if some adolescent girls are asked why they have sex, one gets a lot of different answers. A few reasons adolescent girls give, for instance, include: (a) "to feel closer", (b) "to feel connected to a partner", (c) "because it is expected of me", and (d) "to feel (physically) good". All of these reasons are important to examine in the broad context of "individual preferences in sexual acts" and "cultural norms" [13]. Thus, parents and others in the family need to understand the mental framework of adolescent girls, in terms of their perception about what is expected from sexual acts. Since every individual is different, reasons for viewing pornography will depend on individual decisions of the young girls. What is needed is: "helping teenaged girls, who view pornography, making wise sexual decisions".

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