

Some sexual scientists have recently posited a “confluence model,” asserting that men with antiwoman and antisocial predispositions will be likely to engage in antiwoman aggression as a result of exposure to sexually violent pornography. The evidence, however, does not provide consistent support for this model (for a discussion of this model and research related to it, see Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2001).

One additional source of information about the effects of pornography involves meta-analysis or statistical summaries of the dozens of studies that have been done in this area. One meta-analysis showed that (a) laboratory experiments such as those described herein generally show negative effects of exposure to pornography; (b) naturalistic studies in which naturally occurring pornography consumption and its effects are examined generally show no negative effects; (c) sex criminals show no more frequent use or earlier age of exposure to pornography than do others; (d) but convicted sex offenders may show a higher level of arousal and behavioral responses to pornography, including masturbation, consensual sex, or criminal sex (Allen, D’Alessio, & Brezgel, 1995; Allen, D’Alessio, & Emmers-Sommer, 1999).

### Where Do We Go From Here: Pornography and Public Policy

In the view of some sexual scientists, evidence concerning the prevalence and effects of pornography is far from making a compelling case against viewing sexually explicit materials of any kind. At the same time, sexual scientists, like most others, are emphatically against the sort of antiwoman attitudes and antiwoman aggression that some fear might result from experience with pornography. In accord with this, one policy position would be that it is ethically and morally imperative to oppose antiwoman attitudes and antiwoman aggression directly and emphatically whenever they are found. This could be accomplished through education, policies and laws, social change, and other direct remedies. At the same time, the inconsistent evidence connecting pornography with harm would indicate that efforts to fight pornography as a way of combating antiwoman attitudes and antiwoman aggression would not effectively bring about the sought-after result.

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Written by **William A. Fisher, PhD**, Professor, Department of Psychology and Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada, N6A 5C2 and **Clive M. Davis, PhD**, Emeritus, Department of Psychology, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244; President of The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, 1984-1985; and President of the Foundation for the Scientific Study of Sexuality.

Series Editor: **Sandra L. Davis**; Associate Editors: **Patricia Bartholow Koch, PhD** and **Clive M. Davis, PhD**. The editors would like to thank several anonymous reviewers who have also contributed their time and talents to this series.

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WHAT SEXUAL SCIENTISTS KNOW ABOUT...

# PORNOGRAPHY



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## What Is Pornography?

The word *pornography* is derived from a Greek term meaning “writings about prostitutes.” Although there is no widely accepted modern definition of pornography, the common element in all definitions is that the material is sexually explicit. Considerable controversy exists concerning whether specific sexual depictions are acceptable or unacceptable, harmless or harmful, art or smut. People tend to label material that violates their own moral standards or makes them feel uneasy as *pornographic*, and use the term *erotic* for materials they find acceptable.

*Obscenity* is a legal term, not a scientific one, referring to material that has been judged by the courts to have violated specific statutes concerning matter of this kind. Central to many obscenity laws is whether the material violates community standards of acceptability and whether it involves minors. Thus, many books, movies, and advertisements that are acceptable to many people today would likely have been judged obscene earlier in our history because they violated then-current community standards. An additional factor that may enter into legal judgments of obscenity is whether the sexual material is believed to pose harm to individuals or society as a whole.

Sexual scientists have studied the prevalence and impact of pornography for over half a century and have documented developments in sexually explicit text, video, and Internet materials throughout this time. They have investigated whether variations in the content of sexually explicit materials are related to their impact on individuals and society. Accordingly, researchers have classified sexually explicit materials that depict sexual activity but do not contain themes of the subjugation of women or men or depictions or endorsement of violence against them as *erotica*. *Degrading pornography* has been defined as sexually explicit material that degrades, debases, and dehumanizes people, and *violent pornography* has been classified as sexually explicit material that portrays and endorses sexual violence.

## Prevalence of Pornography

Interest in the prevalence of pornography has been fueled by concern that such materials are both widespread and increasing in prevalence. Claims were made that X-rated materials were an \$8-billion dollar per year industry in the U.S., that violent pornography was prevalent and increasing, and that \$1-billion of child pornography was produced each year. Sexual scientists’ findings, however, have failed to confirm a number of these claims. Researchers found, for example, that sexual violence in *Playboy* magazine pictures and cartoons is extremely rare and has actually decreased over time (Scott & Cuvelier, 1993), and both Garcia and Milano (1991) and Palys (1986) found that sexual violence was rare in X-rated videos. Nonetheless, Barron and Kimmel (2000) reported very high levels of sexual violence in some sexually explicit magazines, videos, and Internet sex stories, but they also observed that the perpetrators of sexual violence in these media were often *women*.

Although it is clear that there is a far greater quantity of sexually explicit material available today—including the wide diversity and easy availability of Internet-based materials—it does not appear that the proportion of sexually violent materials has increased over time. One reason for this may be that most individuals do not have an appetite for sexually violent materials. Bogaert (1993) asked male university students to choose whether they wanted to see sexually explicit material, and if so, which type of material they wished to see. Most (51%) chose not to see *any* sexually explicit materials—they just wanted to receive their credit for participation in research and leave. Their second most frequent choice (15%) was to see nonviolent sexual depictions. Few chose to see sexually violent videos (4%) or child pornography (3%). It should be noted that none of the men were actually exposed to any sexually explicit material in this investigation. They only indicated their choice of what they would like to see.

## Effects of Pornography

Sexual scientists’ findings concerning the effects of exposure to nonviolent erotica are rather consistent. In general, men and women show small, short-term

increases in the sexual behaviors they already are accustomed to engaging in, but generally, they do not add anything new to their sexual repertoire. Research also suggests that both men and women are sexually aroused by erotic material, although women also often report more negative *emotional* reactions to such material than men, and women appear to be considerably less likely to access sexually explicit materials (Fisher, 1983).

Findings concerning the effects of exposure to violent pornography on attitudes towards women have been more mixed. A number of researchers have found that experimental exposure to sexually violent materials resulted in increased acceptance of rape myths (beliefs that ascribe responsibility for sexual assault to women who are the victims of assault) and increases in men’s self-reported likelihood of raping a woman. Yet, some of these same authors have also found that experimental exposure to sexually violent films had *no* effects on rape myth acceptance and *no* effects on self-reported likelihood of rape (see Fisher & Grenier, 1994). Others have examined the attitudes towards women expressed by consumers of sexually explicit materials in X-rated movie theatres, bookstores, and Internet sites and have found no association between consumption of sexually explicit media and negative attitudes towards women (e.g., McKee, 2007).

Findings concerning effects of exposure to violent pornography on aggression against women have also been mixed. In the classic laboratory approach to studying effects of violent pornography, men—usually college undergraduates—are exposed to edited clips of violent pornography or to neutral images. Then they are instructed to send electrical shock to a female confederate of the experimenter who has angered them. In such research, all men send electrical shock to the female confederate, as required by the experimental procedures and instructions, regardless of whether they have seen violent pornography or neutral images. However, men who have seen violent pornography generally send higher levels of electrical shock to a female confederate than men who have seen neutral images. This approach has been criticized, however, because (a) university men may not be representative of potential male sexual aggressors; (b) the men in these studies have not

chosen to see pornography; they’ve been presented with the opportunity to do so for class credit; (c) the violent pornography seen by men in experiments involves edited clips that may not represent the kind of violent pornography that is generally available; (d) the men are *instructed* to aggress against the female confederate and have no nonaggressive response open to them; and (e) finally, sending electrical shock in a laboratory setting is not at all the same as sexual violence. In fact, Fisher and Grenier (1994) found that if men were given the choice *not* to send electrical shock, very few sent any shock at all.

There are naturalistic studies in which efforts have been made to correlate exposure to sexually explicit stimuli with antiwoman aggression. In early studies, the incidence of sexual assault in Denmark and West Germany was compared before and after the legalization of pornography. Increases in sex crimes were *not* found (Kutchinsky, 1991). In a more recent study, sexual scientists observed a rather steady *decline* in rates of reported sexual assault in the U.S. from 1995—when Internet pornography availability began to increase quite dramatically—to 2005 (Whitty & Fisher, in press). Thus, after a full decade of the easiest availability of every type of erotic, degrading, and violent pornographic material *no* increase in rates of reported sexual assault was found (see Figure 1). A related body of literature has, with a few exceptions, generally found that convicted sex offenders report *less* exposure to sexually explicit materials compared to individuals who are not sex offenders (see, for example, Becker & Stein, 1991; see Marshall, 1988, for a conflicting finding).

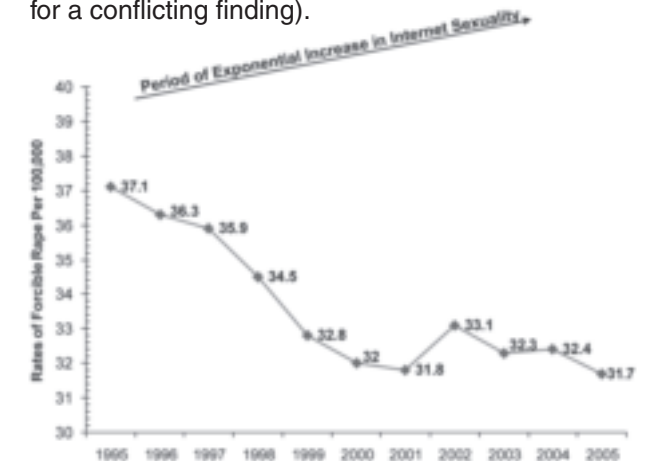


Figure 1. Rates of reported sexual assault in the U.S. in the decade following rapid increases in easy availability of Internet pornography. Reprinted from Fisher & Barak (2001) with permission from The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality.