

# Perceived pornography realism as a mediator of the association between pornography use and problematic sexual behavior among male adolescents

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Landripet, Ivan

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# PERCEIVED PORNOGRAPHY REALISM AS A MEDIATOR OF THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN PORNOGRAPHY USE AND PROBLEMATIC SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AMONG MALE ADOLESCENTS



Ivan Landripet

Department of Sociology, University of Zagreb, Croatia (ilandrip@ffzg.hr)

## BACKGROUND

### ADOLESCENTS AND PORNOGRAPHY USE

Early exposure and high rates of pornography use among adolescents have been consistently reported in the literature, particularly among males.

- Emphasis on adolescents in contemporary research of the effects of pornography use stems from early age of first exposure and high prevalence rates of pornography use recorded across cultures among young males (e.g. Hald et al., 2014).

### ADOLESCENTS AND PERCEPTION OF PORNOGRAPHY REALISM

Early exposure to pornography may contribute to the development of unrealistic ideas about sexuality and problematic sexual behaviors.

- Pornography may influence young peoples' lives by creating role models that encourage, normalize, and reinforce specific sexual beliefs and sexual behaviors (e.g. Hald et al., 2014).
- Lacking real-life experiences and cognitive ability to evaluate and contextualize pornographic representations as fictional or exaggerated may contribute to development of unrealistic ideas about sexuality (e.g. Peter & Valkenburg, 2010).
- Perceiving pornography as realistic may contribute to personal acceptance of pornographic scripts and lead to their reenactment (e.g. Baams et al., 2015).

## OBJECTIVES

To explore the mediating role of perceived pornography realism in the association between pornography use and:

- early sexual debut,
- sexting,
- sexual aggressiveness.

- Personal appraisal of pornographic depictions of sex as realistic was hypothesized to mediate (fully or partially) associations between pornography use and certain problematic sexual behaviors (early sexual debut, sexual aggression, and sexting, i.e. sharing one's sexualized or sexually explicit images/videos).

## METHODS

### ANALYTICAL STRATEGY

- Three mediational models were tested using structural equation modeling.

### PARTICIPANTS

- Participants in our 2015 online survey were recruited in Croatia's capital of Zagreb high schools among the sophomore students. In total, 928 males previously exposed to pornography were included in the analyses (mean age=16.1 years; SD=0.5).
- All study procedures were approved by the Ethical Research Committee of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb.

### MEASURES

**Pornography use** was assessed by three items combined in a composite measure:

- ▶ Frequency of pornography use **two years ago** (1=never to 8=several times a day), **in the past six months** (1=never to 8=several times a day), and **in the past week** (0 to 10 or more times).
- The items were moderately to highly correlated ( $r=0.57-0.73$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.79$ ).

**Perceived pornography realism** was assessed by a validated four-item scale:

- ▶ E.g., "Sex depicted in pornography is very similar to sex in real life"; "One can learn a lot about sex by watching pornography" (1="Strongly agree" to 5="Strongly disagree").
- The items were moderately to highly correlated ( $r=0.55-0.70$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.86$ ).

**Sexting** was assessed by a validated four-item scale:

- ▶ The items were asking about the number of times in the past six months that the participant has sent a sexual message, sexy photograph of oneself, sexy video clip of oneself, or a pornographic photograph or video clip to someone (1=not once to 5=6 or more times)
- The items were moderately correlated ( $r=0.30-0.61$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach's  $\alpha=0.74$ ).

**Early sexual debut** was assessed by a single item:

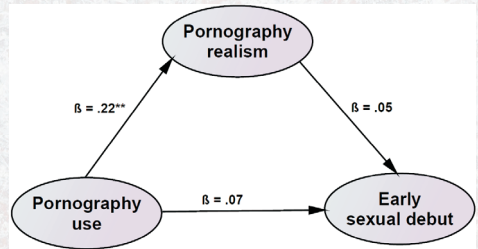
- ▶ "What was your age at your first sexual intercourse (coitus)?" Early debut was defined as the first intercourse at age 14 or less (9.3% or participants).

**Proclivity to sexually aggressive behavior** was assessed by a single item:

- ▶ "How many times have you kissed, touched, or done anything sexual with another person when that person did not want you to do so?" (1=Never; 2=Once; 3=Several times).

## RESULTS

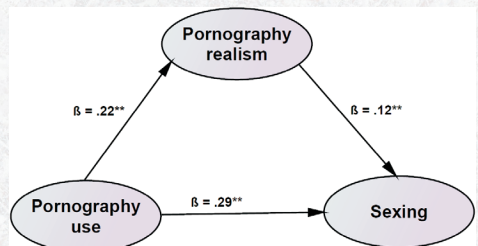
**Model 1. Perceived pornography realism as a mediator of the association between pornography use and early sexual debut ( $\leq 14$ )**



\*\* $p<0.01$ ; fit indices:  $\chi^2(df)=71(17)$ ; SRMR=0.035; CFI=0.98; RMSEA 0.06 (0.05-0.07). Direct or indirect link not statistically significant at  $p<0.05$  (CI95% 0.03-0.05).

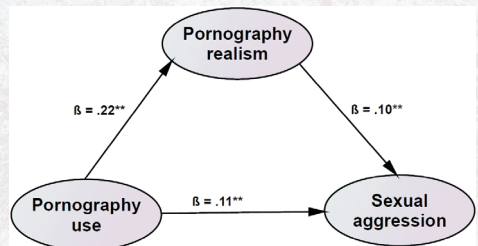
**M1: No evidence of direct or indirect links between pornography use and early debut was found.**

**Model 2. Perceived pornography realism as a mediator of the association between pornography use and sexting**



\*\* $p<0.01$ ; fit indices:  $\chi^2(df)=216(40)$ ; SRMR=0.046; CFI=0.96; RMSEA 0.07 (0.06-0.08). Total effect=0.32; direct effect=0.29 (indirect link statistically significant at  $p<0.01$  (CI95% 0.01-0.05)).

**Model 3. Perceived pornography realism as a mediator of the association between pornography use and proclivity to sexual aggression**



\*\* $p<0.01$ ; fit indices:  $\chi^2(df)=44(17)$ ; SRMR=0.03; CFI=0.99; RMSEA 0.04 (0.03-0.06). Total effect=0.13; direct effect=0.11 (indirect link statistically significant at  $p<0.01$  (CI95% 0.01-0.04)).

**M2 & M3: Pornography use was:**

- directly and positively associated with sexting and aggressive behavior,
- positively linked to perceived realism of pornography, which in turn was positively associated with sexting and aggressive behavior.

**Albeit small, indirect effects were statistically significant:**

- partial mediation of perceived realism of pornography was found in the relationships between pornography use and sexting and sexual aggression.

## CONCLUSIONS

- ▶ Perceived realism of pornography may amplify some harmful behavioral outcomes of pornography use among adolescents.
- ▶ Support of the need for media literacy education programs aimed at shaping critical reception of sexual representations in adolescents.

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