



HOW CONSUMING PORN CAN LEAD TO VIOLENCE

It's no secret that much of porn is violent, but many people don't understand the extent to which porn's underlying messages influence behavior. Porn is full of people, particularly women, being disrespected, coerced, and physically and verbally abused, and that's shaping how society thinks and acts.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Most mainstream porn contains violent sexual behavior against women.
- Consuming violent porn can change attitudes and leads individuals to think violent sex is normal and acceptable.
- Studies show that after consuming porn, even non-violent, consumers are more likely to use verbal coercion, drugs, and alcohol to coerce individuals into sex.

A few years ago, a team of researchers looked at 50 of the most popular porn films—the ones purchased and rented most often. [1] Of the 304 scenes the movies contained, 88% contained physical violence and 49% contained verbal aggression. On average, only one scene in 10 didn't contain any aggression, and the typical scene averaged 12 physical or verbal attacks. One particularly disturbing scene managed to fit in 128!

The amount of violence shown in porn is astonishing but equally disturbing is the reaction of the victims. In the study, 95% of the victims (almost all of them women) either were neutral to the abuse or appeared to respond with pleasure. [2]

In other words, in porn, people are getting beaten up and they're smiling about it.

Of course, not all porn features physical violence, but even non-violent porn has been shown to have effects on consumers. The vast majority of porn—violent or not—portrays men as powerful and in charge; while women are submissive and obedient. [3] Watching scene after scene of dehumanizing submission makes it start to seem normal. [4] It sets the stage for lopsided power dynamics in couple relationships and the gradual acceptance of verbal and physical aggression against women. [5] Research has confirmed that those who consume porn (even if it's nonviolent) are more likely to support statements that promote abuse and sexual aggression toward women and girls. [6]

But porn doesn't just change attitudes; it can also shape actions. Study after study has shown that consumers of violent and nonviolent porn are more likely to use verbal coercion, drugs, and alcohol to coerce individuals into sex. [7] And multiple studies have found

that exposure to both violent and nonviolent porn increases aggressive behavior, including both having violent fantasies and actually committing violent assaults. [8]

In 2016, a team of leading researchers compiled all the research they could find on the subject. [9] After examining twenty-two studies they concluded that the research left, "little doubt that, on the average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive [favorable] to sexual aggression and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression."

If you're wondering how sitting in a chair consuming porn can actually change what a person thinks and does, the answer goes back to how porn affects the brain (See *How Porn Changes The Brain*). Our brains have what scientists call "mirror neurons"—brain cells that fire not only when we do things ourselves, but also when we watch other people do things. [10] This is why movies can make us cry or feel angry or scared. Essentially, mirror neurons let us share the emotion of other people's experiences as we watch. So when a person is looking at porn, he or she naturally starts to respond to the emotions of the actors seen on the screen. As the consumer becomes aroused, his or her brain gets to work wiring together those feelings of arousal to what is seen happening on the screen, almost as if he or she was actually having the experience. [11] So if a person feels aroused watching a man or woman get kicked around and called names, that individual's brain learns to associate that kind of violence with sexual arousal. [12]

To make matters worse, when porn shows victims of violence who seem to accept or

enjoy being hurt, the viewer is fed the message that people like to be treated that way, giving porn consumers a sense that it's okay to act aggressively themselves. [13]

Consumers might tell themselves that they aren't personally affected by porn, that they won't be fooled into believing its underlying messages, but studies suggest otherwise. There is clear evidence that porn makes many consumers more likely to support violence against women, to believe that women secretly enjoy being raped, [14] and to actually be sexually aggressive in real life. [15] The aggression may take many forms including verbally harassing or pressuring someone for sex, emotionally manipulating them, threatening to end the relationship unless they grant favors, deceiving them or lying to them about sex, or even physically assaulting them. [16]

And remember that porn use frequently escalates over time, so even if consumers don't start out watching violent porn, that may change. (See *Why Consuming Porn Is An Escalating Behavior*.) The longer they consume, the more likely they'll find themselves seeking out increasingly shocking, hardcore content. [17]

Not surprisingly, the more violent the porn they consume, the more likely they will be to support violence and act out violently. [18] In fact, one study found that those with higher exposure to violent porn were six times more likely to have raped someone than those who had low past exposure. [19]

Of course, not every porn consumer is going to turn into a rapist. But that doesn't change the fact that pornography is hitting us with a tidal wave of dehumanizing violence. It makes no sense for our society to accept the messages of porn, while at the same time calling for full gender equality and an end of sexual assault. A large portion of the porn consumed by millions of people every day is reinforcing the message that humiliation and violence are normal parts of what sex is supposed to be. [20] It's wiring the minds and expectations of the upcoming generation, making it harder for many young people to prepare for loving, nurturing relationships [21] and leaving both women and men feeling like they can't express the pain it's causing them. [22] (See *Why Porn Leaves Consumers Lonely*.)

Saying no to porn is helping to build a less violent world; one that's more loving, connected, humane, sexy, and safe.

Citations

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