



# Influence of Early Exposure to Pornographic Contents on the Emotional Health of Undergraduates in Select Tertiary Institutions in Osun State

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## Abstract

This study investigated the influence of early exposure to pornographic content on the emotional health of undergraduates of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities, Ede Osun State. It examines the level of exposure of undergraduates of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities to pornographic content, assesses the extent to which undergraduates of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities practice behaviors generated from viewing such content, and examines the influence that pornographic contents have on their emotional health. Relevant literatures were reviewed. Survey research design was used. The population of the study was 7527 students of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities. A sample size of 380 was determined through Slovin's formula (1967) using purposive sampling technique. Data was collected through the use of questionnaire and analysed using descriptive analysis. Findings revealed that Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities students' exposure to pornographic films is frequently on monthly basis. Their monthly exposure has led to an unending chain of addiction that becomes difficult to break free from. This has led to negative influence on their emotional health. It concludes that Adeleke and Redeemer's University students' exposure to pornographic films led to an unending chain of addiction that becomes difficult to break free from and have negative influence on their emotional health.

## Subject Areas

Psychology

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## Keywords

Early Exposure, Pornographic Content, Emotional Health, Undergraduates

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### 1. Introduction

Films, as a form of Mass Communication hold significant influence which has contributed to the widespread accessibility of pornographic contents. The internet revolutionised access to pornographic materials, making it readily available with just a few clicks [1]. People consume pornography so often because the contents have addictive attributes and they are also widely marketed on the internet based media which make it easily accessible to the consumers [2].

The moral implications of pornography have been a subject of debate, particularly regarding its potential harm of contributing to melancholic fatal condition, social and other negative attitudes among the viewers [3]. Also with the increasing pressure among adolescents and young adults to engage in sexual activities, some individuals may turn to pornographic films as a means of coping mechanism which can lead to an addiction and further deteriorate emotional well-being, resulting in risky sexual behaviors, sexual objectification, emotional detachment, and other negative consequences [4].

Research has revealed that early exposure to pornographic contents comes with risks which are exposure to sexual activities at age 11 or younger, various reproductive health issues such as un-expected pregnancy, illegal abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases cases [5]. The influence of pornography has been said to be more harmful than being addicted to drugs. This is because; it can physically destroy a part of human brain that is responsible for cognition and behaviour control. While psychologically, pornography may influence adolescents' view of sexual behaviour [6].

Also, research among adolescents and young adult established that exposure to pornographic content can weaken social interaction and bonding, lower life satisfaction, lower satisfaction with sexual experiences and lower self-esteem. Early exposure to pornographic contents has been found to be associated with risky sexual behaviors. More so, pornographic contents encourage sexism, male dominance and raise sexual expectations [7]. Many studies have shown that both pornography actors and viewers are prone to emotional health challenges [2].

Studies conducted by the World Health Organization [1] [4] have demonstrated that consumption of pornographic contents can have significant impacts on mental health, often leading to risky sexual behaviors. Based on these findings, the study aims to examine the potential influence of early exposure to pornographic films on the emotional health of undergraduate students in selected tertiary institutions in Osun State.

#### 1.1. Statement of Problem

Pornographic films are often viewed as unhealthy due to their association with

anti-social behaviours. Despite concerns, the industry continues to grow, and social scientists are exploring the relationship between pornography and behaviours like sexual perversion, violence, emotional detachment, sexism, male dominance and unrealistic sexual expectations, and there is also the worry that it may incite violence against women.

Early exposure to pornographic contents can affect the brain by triggering a dopamine rush, a feel-good hormone associated with reward and pleasure. Dopamine plays a crucial role in mood, alertness, motivation, and productivity. However, excessive dopamine production can lead to issues such as mania, addiction, and poor decision-making. In adolescence, when the brain is still developing, exposure to pornographic content can interfere with wise decision-making due to the flood of dopamine [6].

[8] and [9] worked on early exposure to pornographic films, however, little attention was drawn to the emotional health of the consumers of these pornographic contents, hence, this study aims to investigate influence of early exposure to pornographic contents on the emotional health of undergraduates in Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities in Osun State.

## 1.2. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the influence of early exposure to pornographic contents on the emotional health of undergraduates in select tertiary institutions in Osun state. The specific objectives are to:

- 1) Investigate the level of exposure of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities students to pornographic contents;
- 2) Assess the extent at which Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities students practice behaviours generated from viewing pornographic contents and
- 3) Examine the influence pornographic contents have on the emotional health of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities students.

## 2. Literature Review

According to [10], Pornographic films are the portrayal of people having sex on camera; this portrayal however, can mislead viewers about sex in the non-fictional world. Majority of explicit contents fall under the category of fictional works, as they involve actors performing scripted scenes while being recorded by themselves, or a full production team. Fundamentally, explicit films aim to present sexually graphic contents to incite and fulfill the audience's sexual interest and desires. These films depict sexual fantasies, incorporating sexually arousing elements such as nudity and sexual actions. They serve as an avenue for individuals to explore their sexual curiosities, stimulating fantasies in their minds. This content can take the form of written or visual materials and can be accessed through diverse media channels, such as books, movies, magazines, and several other online platforms.

Early exposure simply translates to something occurring or having an encounter with something before the expected or usual time. This could both pass

as a good and a bad thing. For example, a research carried out by [11] on the Benefits Of Exposure To Reading Prior To Kindergarten showed that although, kids are ideally expected to start their reading proper in kindergarten, those who entered kindergarten with an earlier exposure to reading, at least thirty minutes daily and at least five days a week, were more likely to meet the grade-level goals throughout the year than those students with little to no exposure as the students showing the most significant gains throughout the school year were those with an early exposure to reading.

According to [12], emotional health is described as a condition of good psychological functioning and an extension of mental health. Emotional health or well-being centers largely on being in harmony with our feelings, embracing vulnerability, and expressing our true selves. It primarily involves the management of our emotions, our understanding of them, and the development of effective strategies to deal with them. It represents the pinnacle of our mental state, encompassing the interplay of thoughts, emotions, and actions in both our internal and external realms. [13] asserts that emotional health is concerned with how we feel and think. It is about our sense of health, being able to cope with life dealings and how our emotions as well as those of others are acknowledged. It signifies our capacity to handle a wide spectrum of emotions, whether positive or negative, while also being conscious of these emotions and their impact [14]. It simply is considered an extension of mental health, making it by default, a state of positive psychological functioning.

To fuse all three concepts together, a study carried out by [14] in relation to the degree of pornographic exposure showed that the majority of students, the respondents, were exposed to pornography for the first time at the age of 12 - 15 years old (83.5%) with photography (23.6%) as the most materials seen and the social media as the media most frequently used (35.3%). Most of the students were exposed to pornography at home for the first time (43.1%) while being alone (49.2%), with “accidental” as the most mentioned reason (64.7%). The study found a significant relationship between the historical first-time pornographic exposure covering age, material, and the reasons for seeing pornography and risky sexual behavior.

Pornographic exposure at young ages did not only introduce children to sexual behavior but also enhanced the behaviour, which occurred due to the pleasure experienced when viewing as a sexual behaviour. Continuous pornographic exposure could form an addictive effect that ends with acting out phase which consists of practicing what is seen in such pornographic content. The finding therefore, means that the earlier a student is exposed to pornography, the higher the possibility the student would display a risky sexual behaviour.

[15], in their study, exposure to sexually explicit media in early adolescence relate to risky sexual behaviour in emerging adulthood. The study, based in Taiwan recruited participants from 7th grade with a mean age of 13.3 found that about 50% of the participants had been exposed to sexual media content by their 8th grade, from an average of one modality. Affirming that sexually explicit me-

dia exposure predicted early sexual debut, unsafe sex, and multiple sexual partners, they concluded that exposure to sexually explicit media in early adolescence had a substantive relationship with risky sexual behaviour in the emerging adulthood. Knowledge of this causal-like effect provides a basis for building better preventive programs in early adolescence.

[16] in their work titled socio-environmental predictors of sexual-risk behaviour among in-school adolescents in Ikenne Local Government Area of Ogun State, Nigeria, aimed to investigate the predictors of sexual risk behaviour among in-school adolescents in Ikenne Local Government Area, of Ogun State, Nigeria. The study employed a cross-sectional design and used a multi-stage sampling technique to select 716 participants for the study. The result showed that the mean age of the participants was  $15.2 \pm 1.4$  years. Their findings concluded that sexual-risk behaviours can be predicted by peer influence, media influence and parents' socio-economic status, recommending that peer education should be encouraged to train and help adolescents learn how they can influence one another positively.

[17] in the dangers of exposing children to pornography aimed to illuminate how pornography affects the mental health of children exposed to it, employed the use of interview as the method in research. Their findings showed that 35% and 45% of pornographic scenes on two popular pornography sites exhibited violence and 97% of the time, women were the target of that violence and the more this content was viewed, the more likely the male audience were to want power over women with another pressing issue being the absence of comprehensive sex education. This sometimes is the reason some children continuously view pornographic contents as they may think that it is the only way to really learn about sex as more than half of children get their first 'sex education' from adult movies on the internet.

They concluded by explaining that when communication between parents and children about sexual health was on the rise, the use of pornography was not related to the participation of adolescents in dangerous sexual relationships, they therefore recommended that sex education be introduced early in childhood in order to curb the need for self-education through dangerous vices.

The study of [17] on the Descriptive Analysis of the Types, Targets, and Relative Frequency of Aggression in Mainstream Pornography based on 4009 heterosexual scenes from two major free pornographic tube sites (Pornhub and Xvideos) found out that 45% of Pornhub scenes had at least one act of physical violence, while 35% of scenes from pornographic videos comprise of violence. The commonest physical violence included slapping, spanking, hair pulling, choking and gagging. Females were the target of the violence in 97% of the scenes, and their responses to aggression were either neutral or positive and rarely negative. Men were the ones carrying out violence against women in 76% of scenes. The study further suggests that violence is popular against women in online pornography, while effects to this violence are hardly talked about.

[18] in experimental effects of degrading versus erotic pornography exposure

in men on reactions toward women suggests that heterosexual men's use of pornography may be associated with negative attitudes and behavior toward women. Their findings did not completely support the following perspectives on the impact of pornography use; "All pornography use is harmful, Conservative-moralistic/radical feminist perspective, All pornography use is harmless/libertarian perspective". But rather, it suggests subtle distinctions regarding the type of pornography such as; "Sometimes degrading pornography use is harmful (liberal feminist perspective), Sometimes erotica use is harmful (aversive racism/modern prejudice perspective), and at times their type of harm varies depending on the criteria considered".

Generally, hostile sexist attitudes toward women increased with exposure to degrading pornography, as such, attempts to address the potentially harmful effects of pornography use on women should examine multiple types of pornography and multiple types of outcomes.

## **2.1. Theoretical Framework**

The cultivation analysis and uses and gratification theories formed the theoretical underpin of the study.

### **2.1.1. The Cultivation Analysis Theory**

The Cultivation Analysis theory, proposed by George Gerbner in 1969, suggests that repeated exposure to media, particularly television, shapes individuals' perception of social reality. This theory focuses on the idea that frequent viewers' beliefs about the real world align with the dominant messages portrayed in fictional media content. It posits that media exposure over time influences people's beliefs about the real world. The theory's main tenets include the unique, affordable, accessible, and pervasive nature of television as a mode of communication. It asserts that television forms the cultural mainstream and has the power to shape how society views life [19].

Television tends to promote general assumptions about life rather than specific attitudes and often supports the status quo by normalizing established values and practices. While television's specific effects may be small, its cumulative impact on cultural consciousness is significant. The emergence of novel technologies, such as Netflix and online TV, further reinforces and amplifies television's influence. The Cultivation Theory, based on Gerbner's cultivation hypothesis, suggests that the more individuals are exposed to mass media, particularly television, the more likely they are to perceive the real world as similar to what they observe. In this study, the theory is utilized as a framework to investigate whether continuous exposure to pornographic contents alters the worldview and perception of reality among individuals who engage in such viewership.

### **2.1.2. Uses and Gratification Theory**

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, developed by Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz in 1974, explores why individuals choose to consume different types of media.

This theory posits that people use media to satisfy specific wants and needs, viewing media users as active agents who have control over their media consumption [20]. Initially, research focused on the gratifications sought by media users, but in later years, attention shifted to the outcomes of media use and the social and psychological needs that media fulfill.

The key tenets of the theory are as follows: media use is goal-directed, driven by the expectation that it will fulfill specific needs and desires; the impact of media on behavior is influenced by social and psychological factors, as individuals' personality and social context shape their media choices and interpretation of media messages; and media competes with other forms of communication for individuals' attention. The theory emphasizes the power of the individual over the power of the media, with individual differences mediating the relationship between media and their effects. Consequently, media effects are driven not only by the content itself but also by the characteristics and preferences of the media user. In the context of the study at hand, this theory can help us understand why individuals continue to view pornographic content, the needs they seek to satisfy, and the gratification they derive from the continuous viewing.

### 3. Methodology

The survey research method was employed for this study. The population of the study comprised all undergraduate students of Adeleke University, Ede (3527); Redeemer's University, Ede (4000). The sample size was 380 respondents purposively selected using purposive sampling technique through Slovin's formula (1967) from Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities. Data was collected through online survey. The research instrument was discussed with experts in the field of communication who made corrections to ensure its validity and thirty eight (38) copies of questionnaire representing 10% of the sample size were administered on students. The Cronbach's alpha test was used to measure the reliability of a research's questionnaire. The results show high reliability of the instrument, with Cronbach's Alpha values for each variable ranging from 0.76 to 0.95.

The online structured questionnaire was administered virtually on students in Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities respectively through their class WhatsApp group platforms. Descriptive analysis using simple tables, frequencies and percentage was used for data analysis. In terms of ethical consideration respondents were informed of purpose of data collection, use of data, what is required of them and were informed that there is no conflict of interest as this study focus on contributing to existing knowledge with no fund received from any organization to facilitate the study and were assured of their confidentialities.

### 4. Data Presentation and Analysis

#### Level of exposure of Adeleke and Redeemers universities students towards pornographic content

Data presented **Table 1** shows that majority of the respondents 63% (SA =

18.3%; A = 45.4%) had an early exposure to pornographic contents and this caused them to continuously view pornographic contents, broadly dispensed over a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis, but majorly 43% of the respondents on monthly basis routinely exposed themselves to pornographic contents. This means that Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities students had early exposure to pornographic contents and continuous routine exposure to pornographic contents.

**Table 1.** Frequency distribution of respondents on the level of exposure of Adeleke and Redeemers universities students towards pornographic content.

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total
	Freq (%)	Freq (%)	Freq (%)	Freq (%)	(%)
I had an early exposure to pornographic films	64 (18.3)	159 (45.4)	92 (26.3)	35 (10)	350 (100)
I view pornographic films daily.	8 (2.3)	21 (6)	141 (40.3)	180 (51.4)	350 (100)
I view pornographic films weekly.	12 (3.4)	57 (16.3)	139 (39.7)	142 (40.6)	350 (100)
I view pornographic films monthly.	30 (8.6)	120 (34.3)	95 (27.1)	105 (30)	350 (100)
I view pornographic films yearly	27 (7.7)	106 (30.3)	104 (29.7)	113 (32.3)	350 (100)

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

**Table 2.** Frequency distribution of respondents on the extent at which the behaviours acquired from viewing pornography is practiced.

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total
	Freq (%)	Freq (%)	Freq (%)	Freq (%)	(%)
Watching pornography stirs up sexual desires in me.	72 (20.6)	138 (39.4)	99 (28.3)	41 (11.7)	350 (100)
These sexual desires cause me to want to recreate what I have watched.	76 (21.7)	117 (33.4)	106 (30.3)	51 (14.6)	350 (100)
My exposure to pornography has caused me to develop abnormal sexual kinks e.g., sexual aggression, multiple sexual partners, non-consensual intercourse etc.	32 (9.1)	45 (12.9)	154 (44)	119 (34)	350 (100)
My continuous exposure to pornographic films has led to an addiction	120 (34.3)	85 (24.3)	35 (10)	110 (31.4)	350 (100)
I am trying hard to stop viewing pornography, but I am finding it difficult.	113 (32.3)	76 (21.7)	55 (15.7)	106 (30.3)	350 (100)

Source: Field Survey, 2023.



***Extent at which students practiced behaviours acquired from viewing pornographic films***

**Table 2** presents the frequency distribution of respondents on the extent at which the behaviours acquired from viewing pornographic contents is practiced. Majority (60%) of the respondents affirmed that viewing pornographic contents stirs up sexual desires in them, 55% said it causes them to want to recreate what they watched and 58% reported being addicted to pornographic film and find it difficult to stop viewing it. However, 77% of the respondents said it has not caused them to develop abnormal sexual kinks. This implies that students in the study area sometimes practice what they are exposed to in pornographic films.

***Influence of pornographic films on the emotional health of youths***

**Table 3**, reveals that early exposure to pornographic contents by the respondents influence their emotional health with majority 70% (SA = 30%; A = 40%) of the respondents affirming that watching it makes them feel shameful and causes them to sexually objectify opposite sex, 74% (42.9%; 31.4%), said it inhibits them from having genuine relationship with the opposite sex, 64% (35.7%; 26.9%) said it contributed to their low self-esteem, while 54% (23.4%; 29.7%) affirmed that it has negative effect on their emotional health. This implies that early exposure to pornographic contents have negative influence on emotional health of students in the study area.

**Table 3.** Frequency distribution of respondents on the influence of pornographic contents on the emotional health of youths.

Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total
	Freq (%)	Freq (%)	Freq (%)	Freq (%)	(%)
Watching pornography brings a feeling of shame.	105 (30)	140 (40)	70 (20)	35 (10)	350 (100)
Pornography viewing causes me to sexually objectify the opposite sex.	170 (48.6)	75 (21.4)	30 (8.6)	75 (21.7)	350 (100)
Since my exposure and possible addiction to pornography, building a genuine emotional relationship with the opposite sex has been difficult.	150 (42.9)	110 (31.4)	30 (8.6)	60 (17.1)	350 (100)
My early exposure to pornography contributed to my low self-esteem.	125 (35.7)	94 (26.9)	104 (29.7)	27 (7.7)	350 (100)
Viewing pornography is immoral	139 (39.7)	162 (46.3)	39 (11.1)	10 (2.9)	350 (100)
Pornographic films affects my emotional health negatively	82 (23.4)	104 (29.7)	115 (32.9)	49 (14)	350 (100)

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

Findings of this study reveal that students of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities 63% (SA = 18.3%; A = 45.4%) had an early exposure to pornographic contents and this caused them to continuously view pornographic contents. This agrees with the uses and gratification tenet of media use being goal oriented or motivated by a reason, asserting that the initial and one-time exposure to pornography often lead to continuous viewing. This aligns with a previous study conducted by [16] that opined that heavy exposure to pornography stemmed from the first encounter. It also supports [5] study that said initial encounters with pornography are often accidental but later becomes purposeful with continued exposure. This implies that students of the study area's level of exposure to pornographic contents are high probably because of their exposure to the internet. This aligns with [21] study that says, internet is a famous channel for pornography because of its privacy and anonymity attributes at both the receiving and sending points. Their early exposure to pornographic contents encourages their continuous viewing of it. Despite the missionary nature of the two universities, the students still find means of continuous exposure to pornographic contents.

Findings reveal that students in the study area practice the behaviours acquired from viewing pornographic contents. Majority (60%) of the respondents affirmed that viewing pornographic contents stirs up sexual desires in them, 55% said it causes them the urge to recreate what they watched and 58% reported being addicted to pornographic films and find it difficult to stop viewing it. However, 77% of the respondents said it has not caused them to develop abnormal sexual kinks. This agrees with the tenets of cultivation analysis theory which states that, repeated exposure to media overtime influences the perception of one's social reality. Their exposure to pornographic contents in reality stirs up sexual desire in them, brings about addiction and makes them take cue of urge to practice it. Furthermore, this aligns with the study of [5] that continuous exposure to pornography can lead to addictive tendencies and a desire to engage in behaviours depicted in the contents. This implies that early exposure which led to continuous exposure of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities students lead to addictive tendencies and make them to engage sexual scenes depicted in the pornography contents. Although, 77% of the respondents said it has not caused them to develop abnormal sexual kinks but they develop sexual kinks. This is in line with the study of [22], that increased exposure to pornography is associated with a higher likelihood of committing sexual aggression and supporting violence against women.

Furthermore, findings revealed that early exposure to pornographic contents by the respondents influence their emotional health with majority 70% (SA = 30%; A = 40%) of the respondents affirming that watching it makes them feel shameful and causes them to sexually objectify opposite sex, 74% (42.9%; 31.4%) said it inhibits them from having genuine relationship with the opposite sex,

64% (35.7%; 26.9%) said it contributed to their low self-esteem while 54% (23.4%; 29.7%) affirmed that it has negative effect on their emotional health. This implies that early exposure to pornographic contents has negative influence on emotional health (low self esteem, & feeling of shame) of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities students. This aligns with [12], who suggests that emotional distress, including irritability, guilt, hopelessness, and worthlessness, can be associated with addiction to pornography.

More so, their high level of exposure to pornographic contents leads to sexual objectification of opposite sex, 70% of the respondents in this study expressed this feeling. They feel that their exposure to pornography caused them to objectify people, 74% affirmed that their exposure to pornographic contents makes it difficult to have genuine relationship with opposite sex, low self esteem and overall on their emotional health. This aligns with [15] assertion that sexually explicit media is linked to risky sexual behaviours and negatively affects attitudes towards sexuality and relationships. This means that early exposure to pornographic contents has influence on students of Adeleke and Redeemer's Universities overall emotional health. As morally debated social issues, early exposure to pornographic contents does not only have negative effect on social wellbeing of students but also has on their emotional wellbeing.

## 6. Conclusions

- Based on the findings discussed above, early exposure of students in the study area to pornographic contents has influence on their overall emotional health in terms of low esteem, guilt and feeling of shame that causes inhibition of having genuine relationship with opposite sex.
- Also, it concludes that their early exposure to pornographic contents encourages their continuous viewing of it leading to their addiction to it.
- Lastly, this has led to their practice of the behaviours acquired from viewing pornographic contents because it stirs up sexual desires in them and makes them to want to recreate what they watched.

## 7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made to help reduce the rate of early exposure to pornographic contents and to also curb the viewing of pornography among youths.

1) The level of exposure to pornographic contents is high due to its easy accessibility. There should be critical censoring of all pornographic contents on the internet especially for undergraduates by government that will largely reduce its level of easy accessibility.

2) Having established that viewing pornography is in most cases; an intentional decision that is not influenced by external factors like peer pressure, individuals should take up the responsibility of avoiding materials of any kind that includes pornographic contents as this may help reduce the desire to view por-

nography.

3) The management of institutions of higher learning should embark on a sustained campaign on the dangers of exposure to pornography to help their students have better knowledge on them.

4) Avenues for counselling or rehabilitation should be made available and accessible for those who want to embark on their journey away from pornography.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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