

# The Influence of Pornography Exposure Towards Female University Students

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of pornography exposure towards female university students in Malaysia's setting. Data is collected from 875 female university students from three public universities in Malaysia. Quantitative research methodology is used in this study, utilising closed-ended questionnaires as the instrument. Raw data is analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings of this study show that there is a moderate positive relationship between pornography exposure and sexual activities among female university students. As hypothesised, there is also a positive relationship between pornography exposure and sexual desires among female university students. Furthermore, the association between pornography exposure and permissive sexual attitude among female university students is moderately positive. These results replicate the outcomes of past research studies even though respondents in this study are all female. The findings of this study enhance the understanding of pornography exposure and its influence towards female university students. It could be used as reference for the future development of strategies and intervention programs to reduce and mitigate its negative consequences.

Keywords: sexual permissiveness, pornography, sexual activities, sexual desire, university students

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## INTRODUCTION

With the availability of social media especially the internet, pornography has become widely and easily accessible over the years. This has led to easier exposure to pornographic content on the web, either via mobile phones or desktop computers. Even internet users who do not voluntarily search for pornography materials could not escape encountering it (Cooper, 1998; Kanuga & Rosenfeld, 2004; Tyden & Rogala, 2004). In a country that upholds traditional values such as Malaysia, sex and pornography are considered taboo (Koya, 2018). Surprisingly, despite Malaysia's ban on Pornhub, the site has released statistics in 2017 that reveals 84% of Malaysian women watch porn on their mobile devices (Pornhub, as cited in "Pornhub Reveals Malaysian Women", 2017). This dataset ranks Malaysian women in the top 10 (7th place) of its international list of women accessing Pornhub through their mobile devices in 2017 (Pornhub, as cited in "Pornhub Reveals Malaysian Women", 2017). Most women from this report come from the 18-34 age group, making it the largest age group on the list (Pornhub, as cited in "Pornhub Reveals Malaysian Women", 2017). Fisher and Byrne (1978) state that the most common reason for watching pornography in women is 'curiosity'. This could be the reason relevant to Malaysian women as well, due to the lack of access to comprehensive sexual health information/ knowledge in schools' syllabus and from parents (Wong, 2012). Because of curiosity, the potential or possibility for female viewers to get hooked onto pornography is quite high. Pornography-seeking attitude has repeatedly been related to having oral sex (Brown & L'Engle, 2009) or anal sex (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009), sexual intercourse (Brown & L'Engle, 2009) and various sexual partners in a lifetime (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Wingood *et al.*, 2001). According to Hald and Malamuth (2008), women are more susceptible in using pornography with their regular romantic partners compared to men. According to Traeen, Spittnogle & Beverfjord (2004), a considerable number of women think that it is acceptable to use pornographic materials in sexual encounters with partners. Hence, it is more common for women to watch pornography on the internet and imitate them with partners. Risky sexual behaviours have also been correlated to pornography use, such as opposing the use of condoms (Wingood *et al.*, 2001), as is usually the case in typical pornography scenes where sexual acts are performed without safety precautions. This could

lead to unwanted pregnancy and baby dumping. Students and high sensation-seekers are more likely to come from this group of women exposed to pornography (Luder *et al.*, 2011).

Despite the rising number of women becoming more accustomed to pornography over the years, there is not much study which focuses on female psyche and behaviours. Most studies focus on gender differences in pornography consumption basically concentrating more on male samples, exploring specifically the effects of its addiction on their sexual behaviours and levels of aggression (Hald, Malamuth, & Yuen, 2010; Malamuth, Addison & Koss, 2000; Vega & Malamuth, 2007). These research, however, are conducted years ago in developed Western countries such as those in the Scandinavian region (Kvalem, Træen, Lewin & Štulhofer, 2014) and Australia (Ashton, McDonald & Kirkman, 2019) when internet and online pornography are more easily obtainable/accessible compared to Malaysia at the time. In Malaysian society, pre-marital sex is largely unacceptable (Muhammad, Shamsuddin, Mohd Amin, Omar & Thurasamy, 2017), as it increases the risks of contracting sexually transmitted disease (Daluga, 2002) and conceiving a child from an out of wedlock pregnancy (Wingood *et al.*, 2001). It is uncertain how common it is for unmarried Malaysian women to perform sexual acts with their partners. However, infiltration of Western cultures via the media play a part in shaping permissive attitudes towards sex and pornography in modern societies. Sexually permissive attitudes are associated with more “acceptable” views of sexual behaviours (Randall & Byers, 2003) and those who are sexually active are more likely to have permissive sexual attitudes (Petersen & Hyde, 2010).

Pornography exposure and its relationship with sexual permissiveness is a relatively new research area that needs to be explored further. Over the years, there are increasing number of sex-related studies conducted in the Malaysian context involving both male and female samples (Muhammad *et al.*, 2017; Tan, Yaacob & Tan, 2018; Wong, 2012). And the increasing number of Malaysian women’s openness to conversation on sexual topics facilitate studies related to pornography exposure and sex. The present study seeks to better understand how pornography exposure affects female university students’ sexual activity, sexual desire, and attitude towards premarital sex in the Malaysian context

## **MATERIALS & METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study uses a correlational method to analyse the relationships between the three dependent variables (level of sexual activity, sexual desire and sexual attitude) and the independent variable (pornographic exposure). The data collected represented the effects of pornography consumption on respondents over a time frame of three months. This research framework seeks to understand how the independent variables influence the dependent variables, i.e., investigating the effects of pornographic exposure to the levels of sexual activity, sexual desire and sexual attitude of female university students. A close-ended questionnaire is drawn up and distributed to the samples for data collection.

### **Sample**

Female students from three public universities in Malaysia aged between 18 and 27 are sampled. Convenient sampling, in which questionnaires are distributed to respondents who are conveniently and readily accessible, are employed. In this survey, 875 female university students participated.

### **Instrument**

A close-ended questionnaire is used in this study. Compared to sample interviewing, this method is a faster, cheaper, and more flexible way of data collection. It allows wide coverage of respondents in the shortest time possible. Both Bahasa Malaysia and English are used in the questionnaire to reach out to students who do not have good mastery of the English language. Pornography is here characterized as 'materials depicting sexual activity, organs and/ or experiences for the purpose of sexual excitement' (Kalman, 2008). Meanwhile, the questionnaire consists of 35 items. Instruments from previous studies are adapted, modified and constructed for the present study. The questionnaire is set in both printed and digital forms ('Google Form'/WhatsApp application) to reduce the cost of paper use and printing and in compliance with the physical distance restrictions due to the Covid-19 pandemic and Movement Control Order (MCO).

## RESULTS

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	n	%
<b>Age:</b>		
18 to 24 years old	837	95.7
24 years old and above	38	4.3
<b>Ethnicity:</b>		
Malay	367	41.9
Chinese	81	9.3
Indian	39	4.5
Others	388	44.3
<b>Year of Study:</b>		
Year 1	242	27.7
Year 2	168	19.2
Year 3	409	46.7
Year 4	56	6.4
<b>Residency:</b>		
Urban	479	54.7
Suburban	276	31.5
Rural	120	13.8
<b>Current romantic relationship status:</b>		
Single, never been in a committed relationship	290	33.1
Single, previously in a relationship	256	29.3
In a relationship	329	37.6
<b>Pornography Exposure:</b>		
Yes	823	94.1
No	52	5.9
<b>Prior Sexual Experience:</b>		
Yes	522	59.7
No	353	40.3

Table 1 shows the summary of the respondents' demographic profile. In this study, a total of 875 female respondents took part. According to Table 1, most respondents (95.7%) came from the 18 – 24 age group, while 38 respondents (4.3%) come from the “24 years and above” age group. Almost half of the respondents (44.3%) identified their ethnicity as "Others," followed by the Malay ethnicity, which has a total of 367 respondents (41.9%), Chinese 81 respondents (9.3%), while the remaining are Indian (4.5%). Students from Year 3 study took up the biggest share of respondents (46.7%) followed by Year 1 (27.7%), Year 2 (19.2%), and Year 4 (6.4%). Meanwhile, 479 respondents (54.7%) live in urban areas, 276 (31.5%) in suburban settings while 120 (13.8%) in rural areas. It is found that 290 respondents (33.1%) have never been in a committed relationship previously while 256 respondents (29.3%) are single but have had romantic relationships in the past. About 94% of the respondents are exposed to pornography and 5.9% have never been previously exposed. Interestingly, 522 respondents (59.7%) report engaging in masturbation, kissing, fingering, oral sex, and penetration in the past while 353 respondents (40.3%) say that they have never had sex before. Table 2 describes the reliability scores (Cronbach-Alpha values) and the sources in which the different parts of the questionnaire are adapted.

**Table 2.** Description of Questionnaire

Variables	No. of items	Cronbach's Alpha	Sources/ notes
Demographic	7	-	Age, ethnicity, year of study, residency, current romantic relationship status, history of pornography exposure and prior sexual experience
Pornography Exposure	5	.729	Patterns of pornography exposure (Dwulit & Rzymiski, 2019)
Sexual Activity	12	.920	Sexual Behaviour and Sources of Influence Scale (Dutt & Manjula, 2017)
Sexual Desire	6	.905	Sexual Desire Inventory-2 (Spector, Carey & Steinberg, 1996)
Permissive Sexual Attitude	5	.939	Sexual attitude toward nonmarital sexual activities (Wijaya Mulya & Hald, 2014)

**Table 3** Pearson Correlation Results

	Porn. Expo.	Sexual Activity	Sexual Desire	Perm. Sex. Attitude
Porn. Expo.	1	-.358**	.531**	.348**

\*\*  $p < 0.01$

***Relationship Between the Level of Exposure to Pornography and Sexual Activity Among Female University Students***

Pearson Correlation test is used to examine the relationship between exposure to pornography and levels of sexual activity among female public university students. Based on the analysis, the  $p$ -value is lower than the significance level ( $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests the existence of a correlation between exposure to pornography and sexual activity among Malaysian female university students ( $r(874) = 0.358, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, as the null hypothesis is rejected, we conclude there exists a moderate relationship between pornography and sexual activity among Malaysian female university students.

***Relationship Between the Level of Exposure to Pornography and Sexual Desires Among Female University Students***

Pearson Correlation test is used to examine the relationship between exposure to pornography and sexual desires among female public university students. The finding suggests that exposure to pornography and sexual desire among Malaysian female university students are significantly correlated ( $r(874) = 0.531, p < 0.001$ ). As the null hypothesis is rejected, we conclude that there exists a relatively strong positive relationship between pornography exposure and sexual desires among Malaysian female university students.

***Relationship Between the Level of Exposure to Pornography and Permissive Sexual Attitude Among Female University Students***

Pearson Correlation test is used to investigate the relationship between exposure to pornography and sexual attitude of female university students. The finding suggests that exposure to pornography and permissive sexual attitudes are significantly correlated ( $r(864) = 0.348, p < 0.001$ ). As the null hypothesis is rejected, it can be concluded that

there exists is a moderately positive relationship between pornography exposure and permissive sexual attitude among female university students.

## DISCUSSIONS

This study seeks to better understand how exposure to pornography affects female university students in Malaysia. There are not many studies conducted in Malaysia in the past examining the effects of pornographic exposure on students, particularly female students in public universities. This study hence purports to bridge the gap. Based on the gathered data, it is surprising to find that the majority (94%) of female students sampled have had past exposures to pornography. This could be due to unintentional exposure out of mere curiosity, or it could be attributed to wilful sourcing of pornography materials, given the wide availability of pornography materials in the media (Lo & Wei, 2005). Though the present work does not indicate the respondents' age of first exposure to pornography, it is interesting to note that Brown and L'Engle (2009) report that early exposure to pornography may result in more permissive sexual norms and changes in sexual behaviours. Albright (2008), on the other hand, reports that female viewers with romantic partners are experiencing increasing pressure to perform sexual acts as seen in pornography. According to Chen, Leung, Chen and Yang (2013), one of the reasons their respondents are drawn to pornography viewing is because internet pornography content can stimulate sexual curiosity and unleash suppressed sexual sensations. This appears to relate to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory (1961) where the innate sexual impulses of a person demand satisfaction to attain pleasure. The respondents, comprising mainly of young unmarried Malaysian women, report having the experiences of desires for sexual pleasures in this study. These sexual feelings are largely hidden, however, because it goes against the conservative society norms and practices. The *ego* will negotiate with the *id* to be discreet and conscientious in using pornography materials to elicit sexual pleasures. If the *ego* is inferior, however, then the *id* will prevail and has its way. Freud's psychoanalytic theory (1961) via his ideas of libidinal pleasures clarify the compulsive aspect of the difficulties in avoiding the use of pornography. This theory supports the notion that sex is addictive, that is once exposed to the pleasures of sex, it would be difficult for individuals to stop desiring them in premarital context. Given that most respondents are currently in some kind of romantic relationships (66.9%), most respondents are also reported to have had previous sexual experiences (54.7%), including masturbation, kissing, fingering, oral sex, and penetration. In his theory of psychosocial development, Erik Erikson (1982) states that psychological development of the "intimacy versus isolation" stage takes place during young adulthood aged between 18 to 40. During this stage, they begin opening up and intimacy with others develops. Successful completion of this stage can result in happy relationships and helps develop a sense of commitment, safety, and care within the relationship. Following this, it is understandable that respondents would engage in intimate behaviours with their romantic partners. Hald (2006) reports that women with regular romantic partners are more likely to use pornography items with their partners. Hence, it is expected that a majority of the respondents who are currently in romantic relationships watch pornography and imitate these sexual acts with partners.

Findings in this study are also in line with Janghorbani and Lam (2003) which demonstrates that those exposed to pornography are more likely to engage in sexual activities. According to Weiberg, Williams, Kleiner and Irizarry (2010) the time spent watching pornography is positively associated with the willingness to engage in various sexual activities. The finding of present study is consistent with past studies, e.g., Atwood *et al.* (2012), Bleakley, Hennessy and Fshbein (2011), as well as L'Engle, Brown and Kenneavy (2006), in which it is found that rampant use of sexually explicit media content is associated with increased sexual desires and intentions to engage in sexually related behaviours. This study also further supports the research work by Basson *et al.* (2003) in which sexual desire is found to become more frequent after being exposed to items with sexual content, e.g., pornography. Regan and Berscheid (1995) investigate the potential gender differences in beliefs about the causes of sexual desire and report that women see sexual desires, more than men, as being caused by external factors such as the element of relationships and social atmospheres. Consequently, women are more likely to have greater sexual desires when they have partners (romantic partners) for sexual intimacies. Leiblum and Sach (2003) suggest utilising pornography as one of the many ways to arouse women with low sexual desires to engage in masturbation. Women currently in romantic relationships or women having had previous romantic relationships made up the majority of the respondents in this study, this mirrors well the "intimacy vs isolation" stage of Erickson's psychosocial development theory. This consideration together with findings of those past research that emphasizes the influence of existing romantic partners could justify the relatively strong correlation found between exposure to pornography and sexual desires in this study.

The finding confirms that there is a moderate positive relationship between the respondents' exposure to pornography and their sexual attitudes. This finding is in line with Lou *et al.* (2012) in which many young adults, regardless of gender, learned about internet sex and watch pornography, and find themselves more prone to permissive sexual attitudes and higher levels of sexual behaviours. Set in three Asian cities, the findings in Lou *et al.* (2012) show that media exposure is significantly correlated with sex-related awareness, attitudes and behaviours of young adults. The disparity between Lou *et al.* (2012) and this study is in the strength of correlation which could be attributed to the differences in culture and religious beliefs. Lou *et al.* (2012) respondents are situated in cities with Confucion-based culture that are open to outside influences, whereas in the present study, the setting is in a highly traditional and conservative Muslim majority society. In another study from the US, L'Engle *et al.* (2006) find that media exposure is significantly correlated with permissive attitudes of the respondents towards premarital sexual intimacy. Meanwhile, Zhang, Li, Shah, Baldwin and Stanton (2007) argue that media could serve as some kind of sexual tool for young adults seeking sexual knowledge. However, they never warn its viewers about the negative repercussion of their sexual content. This may be one of the reasons why young adults, such as university students with high exposure to pornography, would become more sexually permissive and this tend to encourage experimentations and imitations (L'Engle *et al.*, 2006). Lo, So and Zhang (2010) discover that more collectivist individuals are less likely to accept premarital and extramarital intercourse and participate in sexually permissive behaviours. Malaysia is considered to be a country with a collectivist culture so samples from Malaysia is likely to be less sexually permissive. However, the difference in the findings of Lo *et al.* (2010) with the findings of this study may be explained by the lack of collectivist individuals identified among the respondents. This explanation could be used to justify the moderate correlational strength between pornography exposure and sexual attitude among respondents.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings show that pornography exposure does have an influence on Malaysian female student sexual activities, sexual desires and permissive sexual attitudes. The “intimacy and isolation” stage of the psychosocial development theory explains the involvement of most of the respondents in romantic relationships while the *id*, *ego* and *superego* elements of the psychodynamic theory justify the role of these romantic relationships in permissive sexual behaviours. The moderately positive correlation between pornography exposure and sexual activity reflects the conservative nature of Malaysians mixed with the liberal exposures to the influential Western medias. The strong positive association between pornography exposure and sexual desire is justified by the presence of romantic partners among the majority of the respondents. The moderately positive correlation between pornography exposure and permissive sexual attitudes could be explained by the presence of collectivistic respondents who are less likely to accept premarital sexual behaviours and individualistic respondents who are more likely to accept premarital sexual behaviours. The findings of this study indirectly provide meaningful evidences on the existence of young women who are willing to open up about taboo topics on the influence of pornography exposures in a conservative society. This study could open up the possibilities for future similar studies on the same topic. With the evidences of the high rates of pornography exposure and premarital sexual activities among respondents, the authorities concerned could come up with some kind of development programs or intervention strategies to reduce the negative consequences of these concerns.

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