Misleading Research on Pornography in the Popular Media

The media has a responsibility to provide the public with accurate and balanced reporting on health issues. Because most people simply do not have the time to sift through academic articles and studies to get to the truth of health controversies, journalists can easily influence public opinion by amplifying or excluding studies that support a certain point of view. Journalists can also create the illusion of controversy by providing an incomplete picture of the state of research on a given topic. The public can be led to believe that there are two equally valid perspectives on a given issue, when in fact, the weight of evidence points firmly in one direction. Furthermore, journalists are not always well informed about the minutiae of scientific research and can therefore be manipulated by lobbyists, “skeptics”, or other unscrupulous actors who have a vested interest in promoting an alternative perspective. An informative example of incomplete reporting on a health issue comes from a *National Post* article by Tom Blackwell (2016) titled, “Porn study defies conventional wisdom, suggests it has few negative effects on couples”. While this article does a decent job of summarizing different opinions concerning pornography’s effects on sexual and relationship satisfaction, it skews towards the contrarian perspective promoted by the authors of the above-mentioned study, and doesn’t adequately inform the reader how much this perspective differs from the current state of social science research. Furthermore, the author does not look critically into the content of the paper itself, and therefore misleads the audience about the quality of the study and the conclusions that can be drawn from it.

The media has a penchant for attention-grabbing headlines of the, “*x* may actually be good for you!” type. A counterintuitive study leads to a more compelling headline than one that simply reaffirms the obvious, especially if it assuages the reader’s concerns about a substance or habit that they might prefer not to evaluate. This bias is evident in the title and subheading of Tom Blackwell’s (2016) article, “Porn study defies conventional wisdom, suggests it has few negative effects on couples: The results, though preliminary and qualitative, challenge a view of porn partly rooted in ‘radical feminist’ ideas, say the Canadian study's authors.” Immediately, the language that introduces this article creates the impression of bold, innovative researchers challenging a stuffy “radical feminist” consensus on pornography. Next, Blackwell vaguely mentions that some researchers (without giving examples) consider pornography to be toxic to couples and a healthy sexuality. He then quotes the U.S. Republican party’s declaration that internet pornography is creating a public health crisis “destroying the lives of millions.” Between the unpopular examples of radical feminists and Republicans, the reader is given the impression that research on pornography is primarily ideological, driven by either conservative prudishness or feminist bias. By framing the discussion in this way, Blackwell primes us to accept the findings of a Western University study led by Taylor Kohut on the perceived effects of pornography on couple relationships (Kohut et al., 2017).

Blackwell (2016) introduces the Canadian study by repeating its central claim: “A sample of men and women is telling researchers that pornography generally has no negative effects on their relationships, and some potential benefits.” That this sample of men and women is only *telling* researchers how they feel about the effects of pornography offers an early warning sign of the study’s methodological shortcomings; it relies entirely on the researchers’ interpretations of responses to open-ended questions. Blackwell then offers a routine disclaimer that the results of the study are “preliminary and qualitative.” This distinction is important; quantitative data involves information about numbers and can be measured, whereas qualitative data involves language, and can be interpreted but not measured.Blackwell doesn’t elaborate on this difference however, as he goes on to tout Kohut’s research as authoritative: “Kohut is part of the Smart Lab research project at Western, which aims to examine scientificallythe impact of online pornography, and says talk of its alleged harms “dramatically” outstrips the evidence.” What exactly does it mean to examine the effects of pornography scientifically? That might involve not making vast generalizations about other research, as the Western researchers do in the introduction of their study when they declare that, “Much of the empirical research concerning pornography’s impact on couple relationships can be legitimately characterized as a confirmatory search for the presumed harms of exposure” (Kohut et al., 2017, p. 585). To be clear, the problem is not with qualitative research as such, but the fact that Kohut is denigrating the work of other researchers while presenting his own study to the popular media as if it negates the body of evidence on relationships and pornography (for what purpose, we can only guess). So, what kind of evidence did Kohut and his team produce that demonstrates that talk of porn’s harms is “dramatically” overstated?

The study itself involved 430 participants who provided 3963 responses to 42 open-ended questions about the effects of pornography on their relationships (Kohut et al., 2017). The researchers then sorted these responses into 66 themes and claimed that most of the responses were positive. “They get some personal benefit, but it doesn’t have any serious ramifications for their relationships. Like one partner really liking golf” claims lead researcher Kohut in Blackwell’s (2016) article. This statement is belied by his own findings. To summarize just a few of the negative responses in Kohut’s research: 90 of the responses involved the perception that pornography was replacing sex; 71 responses discussed how pornography could desensitize the user and make it difficult to achieve sexual arousal with a partner; 60 responses were concerned with dependence or addiction to pornography; 42 responses discussed a loss of intimacy; and 28 responses involved the perception that pornography reinforced sexist stereotypes, among many other reported negative effects (Kohut et al., 2017; Wilson, n.d.). So, not exactly just like golf! The study was also roundly criticized by Gary Wilson, author of *Your Brain on Porn: Internet Pornography and the Emerging Science of Addiction* (2017)*,* whom Blackwell quotes in a single sentence at the end of his article. In his analysis of Kohut’s research, Wilson points out that this study did not contain a representative sample, as 95% of the female participants reported viewing pornography on their own, as opposed to only 2.6% of married women who reported viewing porn *once a month* in the General Social Survey (Wilson, n.d.). The researchers admit as much in the limitations section of their study: “Some readers may believe that our sample is particularly erotophilic because of the high rates of female pornography use that we report” (Kohut et al., 2017, p. 600). Indeed. This is particularly relevant because another study on patterns of pornography use in relationships found that “virtually all” (95%) of pornography use differences involved a male partner viewing pornography more than a female partner, and that male pornography use in the absence of female use was found to have significant associations with negative effects on a relationship (Willoughby et al., 2016). In light of these findings, selecting a sample of female users that are in the tiny minority that use pornography as much or more than men is incredibly misleading, and this fatal flaw should have merited more than a single sentence on Blackwell’s part. Finally, the study did not correlate pornography use with any quantitative variable assessing sexual or relationship satisfaction (such as the Relationship Assessment Scale). Kohut presents this weakness as a positive to Blackwell (2016), arguing that most of the established research on pornography is “top-down” and somehow designed to find evidence of harm, whereas his more “open-ended” and “neutral” research offered “…an indication of porn’s effects without the influence of researcher bias.” On the contrary, researcher bias is evident in the selective way that Kohut ignored or downplayed the negative responses in his own sample.

To his credit, Blackwell (2016) does address some criticisms of the study and its conclusions. For example, he interviews Jill Manning, a family therapist who offers an opposing viewpoint. Manning points out that the study was based on respondents talking about their relationships without feedback from their partners, which could produce overly positive results. She also observes that therapists have been witnessing an increase in relationship problems related to compulsive sexual behaviors: “We’re seeing people losing jobs, losing multiple relationships.… This is really a negative and harmful thing for a lot of families and relationships.” Manning then points to a large longitudinal study that found that porn users are likely to have marriages of poorer quality (Perry, 2017). In the interest of fairness presumably, Blackwell immediately counters with an Australianstudy that found that only 12% of porn consumers *felt* it had negative effects (Rissel et al., 2017).Here again, Blackwell demonstrates a lack of critical insight into the quality of the studies he is discussing. The first study drew on longitudinal data to access the effect of pornography use on marital quality over time, whereas the second study consisted of telephone interviews and the self-perception of participants as to whether or not they were addicted to pornography and whether pornography was harmful. Pornography viewers are not necessarily experts on the long-term effects of their viewing habits (they might lack *insight* into their behavior), so it seems that first study offers more useful data to evaluate pornography’s effects. This points to the central problem of Blackwell’s article; he doesn’t differentiate between the quality of any of the research that he discusses. This lack of discernment allows researchers like Kohut to amplify their misleading findings through the popular media, obscuring the public’s understanding of the real and harmful effects of pornography. It also allows Kohut and his colleagues to present themselves as the true authorities on this topic, whilst caricaturing all other research on pornography as the work of radical feminist ideologues.

In their study, Kohut et al. (2017) claim that assumptions of pornography’s harms “…have their roots in longstanding radical feminist assumptions that pornography privileges male sexual pleasure, denies female agency, and degrades women”. But are these feminist assumptions wrong? In fact, a review of the state of research on media and sexualization, containing 135 studies, found consistent evidence that exposure to sexually objectifying portrayals of women led to “…greater support of sexist beliefs and of adversarial sexual beliefs, and greater tolerance of sexual violence toward women” (Ward, 2016). Coincidentally, another study led by Kohut (using similarly misleading methods) produced the finding that pornography viewers held more egalitarian attitudes towards women, a finding that is contradicted by hundreds of studies including the aforementioned review of the state of research (Kohut et al., 2016; Ward, 2016). Naturally, this Kohut study was also the subject of an article by Tom Blackwell (2015) for *The National Post*. This pattern of reporting raises some troubling questions. What is the purpose of Kohut’s research, and why does Blackwell give it so much attention?

It is worth asking who stands to benefit from the type of research that Kohut and his team produced: the public, or the pornographers? Researchers like Kohut are decidedly useful for the multi-billion-dollar pornography industry because they reassure the public that a profitable habit is not harmful to relationships or mental health, despite robust evidence to the contrary (Perry, 2020; Wilson, 2017). As the immortal refrain of lobbyists and skeptics goes, “more research is needed…the consequences are *not clear*!”Blackwell is guilty of contributing to that confusion by promoting a false equivalency between the viewpoints that he summarized in his article. It is misleading to amplify the voice of skeptics when they don’t have strong evidence to back up their claims. This is an especially pressing concern during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, as lockdown conditions have contributed to increased media consumption of all kinds, including pornography (Absolute Market Insights, 2020). In a new reality where we are increasingly obligated to spend much of our time online and in isolation, the stakes for relationships, gender equality, and mental health are high. Considering the gravity of this subject, Tom Blackwell must aim for more rigor in his reporting, and Kohut should not be flattered with media attention for his misleading research.

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