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Effects of Sorority Members' Pornography Use on Bystander Intervention in a Sexual Assault Situation and Rape Myth Acceptance

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Brosi et al.: Effects of Sorority Members' Pornography Use on Bystander Interven
**EFFECTS OF SORORITY MEMBERS' PORNOGRAPHY USE
ON BYSTANDER INTERVENTION
IN A SEXUAL ASSAULT SITUATION AND RAPE MYTH ACCEPTANCE**

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College women's exposure to pornography is growing nationwide. A limited amount of research exists documenting the negative effects of pornography on women's attitudes and behavior related to sexual assault. The present study surveyed sorority members at a Midwestern public university on their pornography use, rape myth acceptance, bystander efficacy, and bystander willingness to help in potential sexual assault situations. Results showed that women who view pornography are significantly less likely to intervene as a bystander and are more likely to believe rape myths. Implications for women's personal safety and for the advisability of consuming pornography are discussed.

Traditionally considered a strictly male phenomenon, the once pronounced gender gap found in pornography consumption has quickly diminished. Increased ownership of personal computers and continually expanding Internet content have provided a greater accessibility to pornographic materials and a greater degree of anonymity, allowing women users to avoid negative labels sometimes associated with female pornography consumers (Fisher & Barak, 2001; Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2001; Morahan-Martin, 2000). Forty-nine percent of college women describe pornography viewing as an acceptable expression of sexuality and 31% now use pornography (Carroll et al., 2008; Yoder, Virdin, & Amin, 2005). College-aged women are becoming more likely to view pornography (Boies, 2002), reflecting efforts by the pornography industry to develop materials specifically targeting female audiences (Dines, 2010).

Most of the studies about women's pornography use that have been conducted thus far have studied college women. Specifically, women in social sororities have often been studied in related research about violence and sexual behavior, such as sexual assault particularly due to their high risk of victimization. In a series of nationwide anonymous surveys involving over 20,000 women, sorority women were found to be 50%

more likely to experience rape than other college women (Mohler-Kuo, Dowdall, Koss & Weschler, 2004). In addition, women who live in sorority houses are 200 to 300% more likely than other women in college to experience rape (Mohler-Kuo et al.). These two lines of research, rape and pornography viewing among women, have not been well integrated in the scholarly literature. Research relating pornography viewing and rape is particularly sparse with sorority women, who are most likely to experience rape (Mohler-Kuo et al.). The present study explores whether sorority members' pornography use has an impact on whether they will intervene to help prevent the rape of another woman.

For the sake of this study, the definition of pornography was "media used or intended to be used to increase sexual arousal" (Carroll et al., 2008, p. 8). It can include media termed sexually explicit, erotica, and that which is defined as online sexual activity. Research on pornography also includes the effects of stripping, prostitution, and other live performances.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Trends in Pornographic Behaviors

The kind of behavior in today's pornography is commonly described by researchers as far

more shocking and extreme than that of 10 or 20 years ago (Dines, 2010; Eberstadt & Layden, 2010; Jensen, 2007a; Jensen, 2007b; Malarek, 2009). Researchers assessing the most popularly purchased and rented pornography videos today found 88% of the scenes in them included physical aggression toward women such as spanking, open-hand slapping, hair pulling, choking, and bondage. Among the most recent trends, in 41% of the most popular mainstream pornography movies today are scenes in which a man engages a woman in anal sex followed immediately by oral sex for the purpose of her degradation (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010; Malarek, 2009).

With the growth in the pornography industry, the demand for “fresh merchandise” has outstripped the supply, leading pornographers to turn to sex trafficking to have enough women and girls for their online and video materials (MacKinnon, 2007; Malarek, 2009). Furthermore, as the pornography industry grows and seeks to satisfy its increasingly large customer base, it has continuously innovated its products and materials in a direction of more extreme, violent, “edgy,” material, often featuring underage actors and scenes depicting a wide variety of dehumanizing behaviors not heretofore seen (Dines, 2010; Eberstadt & Layden, 2010; Jensen, 2007a; Jensen, 2007b; Manning, 2006).

Pornography Use and Women's Psychological Well-Being

The impact of pornography use on women remains largely unknown (Manning, 2006). Most past research, which has suggested a variety of detrimental effects on psychological well-being and socialization variables, is concentrated on the effect of pornography on male consumers or women as partners of consumers (Manning, 2006). Research has shown a positive correlation between women's acceptance of pornography and their psychological well-being (Carroll et al., 2008). Still, more research is needed on women as direct consumers of por-

nography, particularly regarding the effects on women's intra- and interpersonal development.

Rape-Supportive Attitudes, Acceptance of Rape Myths and Victim Blame

One of the most common ways to measure people's attitudes toward sexual violence is to assess their agreement with what are called rape myths. According to Lonsway and Fitzgerald (1994), “Rape myths are attitudes and generally false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women” (p. 133). Examples of rape myths include the beliefs that women deserve to be raped or that no woman can be raped against her will. Why individuals accept these myths and what factors affect the socialization of these beliefs is a critical factor in the sexual violence field.

Research has shown that when women are exposed to pornography before the age of 18, they are more likely to have attitudes supporting sexual violence as adults (Corne, Briere, & Esses, 1992). In addition, women who view violent pornography, with its coupling of intercourse and aggression, have been found to have distorted views about rape including increased victim blame and decreased assignment of responsibility to male sexual assault perpetrators (Corne, Briere, & Esses, 1992; Cowan & Campbell, 1995; Davis et al., 2006; Norris et al., 2004). Exposure to pornography has been associated with women's beliefs that they should accept sexual victimization (Norris et al., 2004). Thus, the ties between women viewing pornography and experiencing sexual assault are potentially dangerous.

Notably, research has shown when women in popular mainstream pornographic movies experience physical aggression by a male, 95% of the time they respond with either a response of pleasure or no response at all. Today's mainstream pornography reinforces the notion that violence against women in sexual situations is acceptable and the belief that women enjoy the violence

(Bridges et al., 2010). Further, the content of pornography today seems to be reinforcing the script that women do not resist when hit during a sexual encounter (Bridges et al.). If women internalize these messages that women enjoy violence, it raises a barrier for potential intervention to help a friend or sister in need.

Sexual Assault Bystander Intervention

Bystander behavior has been the topic of much research in the area of sexual assault prevention during the last decade (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2004; Foubert, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Brasfield, & Hill, 2010; Katz, 2006). Researchers who study bystander intervention have explored the factors that lead people to intervene to help others who are in distress, rather than stand by and ignore and/or otherwise not act (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan). Several factors have been shown to increase the likelihood people will intervene as bystanders. These include being aware of a situation in which someone is being victimized, making a prior commitment to help, having a sense of partial responsibility for helping, believing that the victim has not caused the situation to occur, having a sense of self-efficacy in possessing the skills to do something, and having seen others modeling such pro-social behavior (Latane & Darley, 1968; Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan).

These varied, but interconnected strands of inquiry lead to the formation of a central research question: What impact would exposure to hardcore pornography, sadomasochistic pornography, and rape pornography have on sorority women's rape myth acceptance, bystander willingness to help, and bystander efficacy? Based on prior research showing the connections between women's use of pornography and their attitudes toward rape-related variables (Corne, Briere & Esses, 1992; Davis, et al., 2006; Norris et al., 2004), the researchers formulated the following hypothesis: Women who used each type of pornography

would report higher rape myth acceptance, a lower efficacy to intervene as a bystander in a potential rape situation, and a lower willingness to intervene as a bystander in a potential rape situation.

METHODOLOGY

Instrumentation

Perceived ability to intervene as a bystander was measured by the bystander efficacy scale developed by Banyard, Plante, and Moynihan (2005). This instrument asked participants to indicate whether they believe they could do each of 18 bystanding behaviors and if so, to indicate their level of confidence in performing this bystander behavior. Participants rated items on a scale of 1 to 100 percent, indicating their percent confidence they personally believed they knew how to intervene in the given scenario described. Criterion validity of this scale was established through a significant correlation between bystander efficacy and actual bystander behavior ($r = .30$). Construct validity was established with a significant correlation between bystander efficacy and rape myth acceptance ($r = .24$) (Banyard, 2008). This scale yielded an alpha reliability of .91 in the present study.

The Willingness to Help Scale was developed by Banyard et al. (2005) and measures participants' degree of likelihood of engaging in 12 bystanding behaviors on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) not at all willing to intervene to (7) very willing to intervene. Items came from research literature and from discussions with advocates and professionals working in the field of sexual violence. Criterion validity of this scale was established through a significant correlation between bystander willingness to help and actual bystander behavior ($r = .37$). Construct validity was established with a significant correlation between bystander efficacy and rape myth acceptance ($r = .32$; Banyard, 2008). The alpha reliability for these 12-items was .85 in the present study.

Participants' attitudes toward sexual assault were measured using the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (IRMA; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). Participants answer a series of 45 questions on a scale of 1-7 where 1 represents disagreement and 7 represents agreement. Payne et al. (1999) developed this scale through six studies including a factor analysis for construct definition and item pool selection, a complete-link cluster analysis to determine the structure and dimensions of the scale, item pool selection based on fit to a hierarchical model, and a construct validity study correlating the IRMA to seven similar measures ($r = .50-.74, p < .001$). They also conducted a study where groups known to differ in rape myth acceptance scored differently as predicted on the IRMA ($p < .001$) and a validity study correlating IRMA scores with a content analysis of open ended scenarios written by participants that were analyzed for rape myth content ($r = .32, p < .05$). The alpha reliability in the present sample for this variable was .90.

Several other variables were measured in the present study including participant's race, age, and class year. In addition, participants were asked to report their use of pornography. Specifically, the following questions were asked: "Have you seen media consisting of graphic sex acts (including penetration) being shown or described in videos, movies, magazines, books, or online during the last 12 months: Yes/No (hardcore pornography); Have you seen media consisting of sadomasochistic portrayals of bondage, whipping and spanking but without an explicit lack of consent in video, movies, magazines, books or online during the last 12 months: Yes/ No (sadomasochistic pornography); Have you seen media consisting of sexually explicit rape depictions in which force is used with explicit lack of consent in videos, movies, magazines, books, or online during the last 12 months: Yes/ No (rape pornography)" (Carroll et al., 2008).

Participants and Procedures

Participants in the present study were female members of five sororities at a large public university in the Midwest. Of 902 total members, 307 volunteered to participate, constituting a 34% return rate. Participants were 89% Caucasian, 4% Native American, 3% Hispanic, with the remaining participants being African American, Asian, or mixed race. The mean age of participants was 19.7 ($SD = 1.02$) with 9% at age 18, 39% age 19, 27% age 20, 22% age 21, 3% age 22, and .3% age 23. There were no participants over the age of 23. Participants included 41% first-year students, 28% sophomores, 26% juniors, and 6% seniors.

Research protocols were submitted to and approved by the institutional review board for human subjects. The experimenters also recruited assistance from the Panhellenic Council, the leaders from all of the sororities on campus, to request the volunteer participation from each chapter. Chapters were offered monetary incentives for reaching high levels of survey completion among their members.

Graduate students visited each chapter house up to three times to distribute and collect surveys for this study. Surveys were administered and collected in regularly scheduled group meetings and in additionally scheduled meeting times when members could be present to complete the measures. All individuals participated voluntarily and received no direct compensation for completing the measures in this study. After receiving a briefing about the nature of the study and an informed consent document, surveys were distributed at chapter meetings. Participants completed surveys anonymously and returned their survey in a common return envelope with no identifying information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women were asked whether they had viewed three different kinds of pornography during the past 12 months: hardcore pornography, sado-

masochistic pornography, and rape pornography. Among sorority women who completed surveys in this study, 46% had viewed hardcore pornography, 27% had viewed rape pornography, and 21% had viewed sadomasochistic pornography. Survey results were analyzed using SPSS version 17. This section presents results organized by dependent variable alongside with discussion and considerations to enable more direct interpretation.

Rape Myth Acceptance

A 2 by 2 by 2 MANOVA was computed with exposure during the last 12 months to hardcore pornography, rape pornography, and sadomasochistic pornography as dichotomous independent variables and rape myth acceptance as a dependent variable. Consistent with a unidirectional hypothesis, main effects for sadomasochistic pornography emerged $F(1, 265) = 2.67, p = .05$ such that women who viewed this type of pornography reported a higher level of rape myth acceptance ($M = 2.29; SD = .76$) than women who did not view sadomasochistic pornography ($M = 2.06; SD = .75$). The effect size for this difference was between low and medium (Cohen's $d = .30$). Likewise there was a main effect for viewing hardcore pornography. Consistent with a unidirectional hypothesis, if women viewed hardcore pornography within the last year, they reported greater rape myth acceptance ($M = 2.25; SD = .65$) than women who did not ($M = 2.05; SD = 1.18$), $F(1, 265) = 3.23, p < .05$. The effect size for this difference was low (Cohen's $d = .21$).

Bystander Intervention

A 2 by 2 by 2 MANOVA was computed with viewing during the last 12 months to hardcore pornography, rape pornography, and sadomasochistic pornography as independent variables and bystander efficacy and bystander willingness to help as dependent variables. Consistent with our unidirectional hypothesis, there was multivariate significance with women's viewing sado-

masochistic pornography on bystander variables $F(2, 254) = 2.71, p < .05$. Univariate effects emerged for bystander efficacy such that women who viewed sadomasochistic pornography ($M = 75.3, SD = 18.41$) perceived that they were less able to intervene in a sexual assault situation than women who chose not to use sadomasochistic pornography ($M = 81.0; SD = 18.17$), $F(1, 255) = 4.34, p < .05$. The effect size for this difference was between low and medium (Cohen's $d = .31$). Women who used sadomasochistic pornography ($M = 4.01; SD = .73$) were also less willing to intervene in a potential sexual assault situation $F(1, 255) = 4.29, p < .05$, than women who reported they did not use sadomasochistic pornography ($M = 4.23; SD = .72$). The effect size for this difference was between low and medium (Cohen's $d = .30$).

Nearly half of the women in this study reported viewing hardcore pornography, attesting to the pervasiveness of its use. Results demonstrated several harmful effects of women's viewing pornography, confirming prior research (Carroll, 2008; Davis et al., 2006; Norris et al., 2004).

Hardcore Pornography

The 46% of women who viewed hardcore pornography during the last 12 months indicated a greater belief in rape myths than women who did not view hardcore pornography. Thus, women who have looked at pornography within the past 12 months were significantly more likely to believe false or stereotyped beliefs about rape, rape victims, or rapists. It appears that when females viewed hardcore pornography, their conceptualization of rape was subject to becoming skewed. Research has shown that what is portrayed in hardcore pornography, particularly that which has been produced during the last 15 years, depicts activity more consistent with nonconsensual than consensual acts (Dines, 2010). In short, "porn plays out 'fantasy' sex that looks more like sexual assault than making love" (Dines, 2010, p. xxvii). Thus, this con-

firm other studies indicating that women who have watched media that blurs the line between consensual and nonconsensual acts would report a less accurate understanding of rape, rape victims, and rapists than those women who abstain from pornography.

Sadomasochistic Pornography

When women reported viewing sadomasochistic pornography during the past 12 months, a consistent pattern of effects resulted. Compared to the 79% of women who had not viewed sadomasochistic pornography, the 21% of women who used it reported significantly greater beliefs in rape myths, less bystander willingness, and lower efficacy to intervene in a rape related situation. Just as in the case of women who viewed hardcore pornography, women who used sadomasochistic pornography had experienced significant effects on rape myth acceptance. Thus, those women who viewed sadomasochistic pornography had significantly more false beliefs about rape than women who did not view this kind of pornography. Although there is overlap between these two groups, with 21% of women viewing sadomasochistic pornography and 46% viewing hardcore pornography, many women looked at hardcore pornography but did not view sadomasochistic pornography. This smaller group, about one in five, who view sadomasochistic pornography constituted a subset of pornography viewers who deserve close scrutiny.

Values on the dependent variable of rape myth acceptance revealed that many females who viewed sadomasochistic porn had distorted perceptions about rape, the nature of rape survivors, and the characteristics of rapists. That these distorted beliefs coincide with viewing sadomasochistic pornography suggests, at a minimum, that such viewing is risky for women who would otherwise want or should have accurate knowledge about rape, survivors, and perpetrators.

In the present study, participants who viewed

sadomasochistic pornography also reported a lower level of willingness to intervene as a bystander in a sexual assault situation than non-users. Thus, it seems exposure to sadomasochistic pornography is associated with a lack of women's willingness to intervene to help prevent the rape of another woman. This result is particularly compelling for those interested in reducing the rate of sexual assault on college campuses. Several studies have shown that convincing college students to intervene in potential rape situations is an especially effective prevention practice (Banyard, Plante & Moynihan, 2007; Foubert, Newberry, & Tatum, 2007). Given that viewing sadomasochistic pornography was associated with a lower level of willingness to intervene to help prevent the rape of another woman, it seems advisable to explore effective educational efforts to discourage sadomasochistic pornography use in concert with efforts to promote the bystander model of rape prevention.

Participants who reported viewing sadomasochistic pornography also reported a lower level of bystander efficacy than their peers. With that, it appears there is something about women's viewing sadomasochistic pornography directly related to their belief that they know what to do to intervene in a sexual assault situation more so than their peers who do not use sadomasochistic pornography. Similar to the effect that viewing sadomasochistic pornography may have on one's willingness to intervene, this could be because they have viewed behavior that combines both sex and aggression in a manner the manufacturer intends to be sexually stimulating. Women's confidence in their ability to identify a rape situation as opposed to one that needs no intervention may also be affected. This, unfortunately, then alters their understanding of how to intervene in situations that could turn into rape—perhaps simply because of the blurred boundary resulting from the inclusion of violence in sexual acts.

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But what is it about viewing sadomasochistic pornography that is associated with women's perceptions of intimate relationships? Women who view sadomasochistic pornography are exposed to a view of sexual contact where violence, power, and sexual contact are conflated. One explanation may be that when women internalized the messages present in sadomasochistic pornography, they accepted an altered reality of sexual relationships. However, these depictions of men and women in exaggerated power positions (e.g., a dominatrix) may serve to cloud their understanding of mutual, reciprocal relationships.

The challenge to understanding the link between women's viewing sadomasochistic pornography and efficacy in intervening may lie more specifically in determining the degree of consensual sexual contact between sexual partners. An individual's ability to determine whether a sexual assault situation necessitates intervention may be altered by exposure to sadomasochistic pornography. Perhaps women experience difficulty conceptualizing the difference between sexual assault and consent, leading them to question whether a situation is problematic. It appears that sadomasochistic pornography blurs women's understanding of consent, leading to altered beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists; decreased understanding about how to intervene; and lowered willingness to intervene in potential rape situations.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present study showed that sorority members who used pornography, particularly sadomasochistic pornography, reported higher rape myth acceptance, lower willingness to intervene in a sexual assault situation, and lower efficacy to intervene in a sexual assault situation. In addition to replicating the study with a nonmember comparison group, a potential next step in this research line would be to assess the relationships between use of a wide ar-

ray of types of pornography and frequency of use along with the bystander variables measured in this study. The present study was limited to assessing sorority women's use of pornography during the last 12 months and did not assess the conditions under which pornography was consumed. It could be that women were viewing pornography voluntarily, vicariously, as an aid for masturbation, against their wishes, with a significant other, or even as part of an event with their sorority where they may or may not have had a choice to take part. Exploring the relationship between the aforementioned variables and the circumstances under which pornography was consumed would add tremendous depth to the understanding of women's pornography use.

It would also be interesting to qualitatively explore sorority women's use patterns, motivations to consume, and attitudes concerning various types of pornography to illuminate and expand upon the present study's findings. For example, individual interviews with women who have consumed pornography could yield information rich data that could shed light on the dynamics of how sadomasochistic pornography impacts women's perceptions of consent and how this phenomenon relates to bystander intervention.

In terms of implications for practice, as sexual assault continues to affect both fraternities and sororities alike, special care should be taken to address the related issue of pornography use. Specifically, this study showed that pornography use is more prevalent among sorority women than may have been thought. Openly addressing the implications of accepting this medium as it pertains to the objectification of women, the concurrent lower likelihood of bystander intervention, and the negative impact on attitudes toward rape is cause for serious concern. As this research has highlighted, the intersection between viewing pornography and adhering to rape myths and intervening in sexual assault situations should be highlighted as an

area that leaders on campuses and in inter/national offices should address as a direct link to sexual violence.

LIMITATIONS

This study is primarily limited by the fact that only sorority women were surveyed on only one campus in the Midwest. The measure of pornography consumption used in this study was limited to the women's exposure to one genre of pornography (violent) during the past 12 months, without assessing the frequency of that use or the circumstances in which the women consumed it. Future research should take into consideration the differences between those who choose to pursue and view pornography on their own from those who are tangentially exposed or tolerate viewing pornography with others (e.g., boyfriends, etc.) in addition to the specific content viewed, the frequency of viewing, and the medium through which it was viewed (online, movie, magazine, etc.). Comparison studies between nonmember college women, women who belong to other groups such as athletic organizations, and men are warranted.

This study is further limited by the response rate. Of the 11 of sororities on campus, five chose to participate with 34% completing and returning the surveys. Thus, the sample may

be biased with information collected by individuals specifically interested in this topic. Further, it may be that the sensitivity of the issue being investigated was perceived as casting a negative light on the sorority community as a whole, which could have led some to want to avoid sharing their experiences. This study is further limited by the nature of using self-report measures and the fact that a scale of social desirability was not included. Given the nature of the study, it could have been valuable to measure the degree to which participants were answering truthfully and to selectively remove responses from participants who appeared to be answering in a deceptive or dismissive manner.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, pornography appears to pose a danger to both men and women, particularly as an influence on potential sexual assault behaviors and victimization. Research has shown that men who view pornography are at increased risk for committing sexual assault (Carr & VanDeusen, 2004). However, as indicated in this study, when women view pornography, particularly films with sadomasochistic themes, they are less likely to look out for the safety and security of others and are more likely to stand by and do nothing while a sister is being assaulted.

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