

How are viewers of Pornography more likely to participate in risky sexual behaviour?

Introduced in the 1960s, conceptualized by George Gerbner (1967,1969) and Larry Gross, Cultivation Theory is a mass communication theory to examine the influence of television on viewers. Throughout the exploration of this theory, Gerbner detailed that the effects of television were limited, and it became part of a bigger sociocultural system (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980). He specified that although watching television may not cause a particular way of behaving, exposure to media over a long time period shapes consumers perception of the world and how they conduct themselves in life (Nabi & Riddle, 2008). From this the hypothesis was created that the more television consumed, the more likely the consumer is to perceive televisions depiction of reality as truth and apply it to real life. Some scholars explore this theory on other media platforms such as video gaming (e.g.Beullens, Roe, & Van den Bulck, 2012). This has become relevant with those who consume pornography (a term used to describe sexually explicit content, professionally made to sexually arouse viewers through displaying sexual organs or description (Jenkins, P.J., 2021)) as studies have shown wider exposure to SEM increases the likeliness of you engaging in risky sexual behaviour. Indicators of risky sexual behaviours include unprotected sexual intercourse and sexual choking, both of which have been linked with poor health issues. Throughout this essay, it will explore in further detail of how pornography cultivates its audience over time.

One of the first investigations within this theory focused on the effects of violent media on its audience (Settle, Q, 2018). Gerbner and Gross explained that heavy viewers of violent content on television were more likely to consider the world scarier and meaner than light viewers. Their exploration exhibited a direct correlation between the recurrence of violence and its impact on consumers perception of reality. George Gerbner (1919-2005) and his team worked together to devise a system to be followed by researchers when studying cultivation. This research paradigm included 4 stages to investigate (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, 2002). The step was to highlight the most prevalent, repeated, and standing out patterns shown throughout tv programs, including images and values. Next followed was assessing the exposure time where researchers differentiate “heavy watchers” (watching more than 4 hours of tv per day) from “light watchers”. After that investigate people’s views about the world with no mention of television; finally examine the relationship between media exposure and viewers attitudes and beliefs (Gerbner, 1973). While this approach was designed to access the effects of television it can be applied to any dominant medium. This showed, as over 500 relating studies have been published since 2010 (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010), highlighting the theory’s ability to adapt and keep up with the fast pace changing media platforms.

Notably, this theory has been immensely criticised, especially during its early stages of development. Critics argue that there is a possibility that other aspects play a role in the relationship between television and cultivation, that do not get mentioned but would have more of an impact and give a better explanation. Researchers have linked personality traits such as authoritarianism, with beliefs about the “Mean world syndrome” (Gunter & Wober, 1983; Wober & Gunter, 1982). Wober (1986) detailed that it is not television consumption

that heighten the feeling of anxiety within this theory, but that it could be a person's "underlying personality disposition that produces this feeling" (p.224). This has therefore minimised the negative connection between the effects of viewing television. Other critics highlight that the questions asked are many times negatively phrased, therefore facilitating an area of biasness (Hirsch, 1980; Hughes, 1980). Initial cultivation research only focused on the negative relationship between television and the viewers. However, it has been found in studies that there is also a positive correlation between the two. For example, kindness, creativity, and empathy were all positive consequences that Robert and Maccoby (1985) found. Therefore, the theory does not show a full in-depth representation.

With the affordability and the easy accessing nature of pornography, it has become ubiquitous in today's society. This creates increasing concerns over its effects on viewers, especially if they are not able to differentiate between media content and reality. Worldwide approximately 72 million people view pornography online (Ropelato, 2007). "At its heart, pornography narrates sex as a quest for sexual pleasure via the viewing and use of other people's bodies. Sex is impersonal, often unequal, and other people are tools for one's own gratification. Values, ethics, and other parts of one's personhood are side-lined" (Hanson, 2020; Whisnant, 2010). As pornography can be obtained effortlessly and within minutes (Doran, 2008), the industry is able to continue its circulation across society. This has become problematic because emerging adults are showing increased attention to this visual content (Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2000). Studies show sexually explicit media influences sexual risky behaviours among younger audiences (e.g. Carroll et al., 2008); after viewing pornography they are often prone to imitate the sexual acts that they have watched (Morgan, 2011). Among these acts unprotected sex and choking is central to the attention of health experts as globally unprotected sexual intercourse is ranked 2nd among the leading health risks for female and male adolescents (Mokdad, Forouzanfar, Daoud, Mokdad, El Bcheraoui, Moradi-Lakeh, 2016).

Cultivation theory is often used by researchers when identifying the correlation between exposure time of pornography and people's sexual practices, identifying whether they have been cultivated. Researchers who have analysed sexually explicit content explain that condoms are used in only 3% of the scenes, illustrating penial-vaginal intercourse and 10% of scenes picturing penial-anal penetration (Grudzen et al., 2009). This has created a culture of negative attitudes towards the use of condoms (Wingood et al, 2001) and valuating the pleasure of unprotected sex more - but intern increasing potential risks of sexually transmitted infection and pregnancy. A study investigating teenage pre-marital pregnancy found 80.7% of teenage girls who were pregnant were frequently exposed to pornographic material in comparison to 34.7% who did not consume this content. Among the participants that were not pregnant only 13.9% viewed sexually explicit material (Kamal, N., Chan, F.L., Bujang, A., 2017); showing their hypothesis to be true - that frequent exposure to pornography may have an association with increase rate of teenage pregnancy.

One of the popular free porn sites, Pornhub, reached 33.5 billion views in 2018 (Biggs, 2018); on the site, almost 7 thousand results came up with videos of content makers engaging in sexual choking when searched in May 2021. Choking during sex can have notable health consequences and (e.g. Bogle, Sandler, 2018) and in a few cases result in death. However, pornography analysis finds that depictions of negative outcomes of choking are sparse (Bridges et al, 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Sun et al., 2008) and data shows that aggressive behaviour against women is common in visual sexually explicit media, but repercussions of these actions are rarely shown (Fritz et al., 2020). This repeated exposure to these kinds of sexual practices, intern start to normalize outlandish behaviour (Mulya and Hald, 2014) and blur the lines between the scripted world and reality. Within the content, it shows none of the participants asking for consent to be choked. Under Gerbner's theory, long-term exposure could normalise this behaviour, giving the consumer the view that this has no negative repercussions. Whereas in the real world there can be legal consequences if a partner has not agreed. As sexual choking has become more mainstream, male-on-female choking has become normalised and standardized as "the normal way to have sex" (Moore & Khan, 2019, para 25). In these videos it depicts these aggressions are pleasurable, cultivating its audience into attitudes and values that believe these behaviours towards their partner are harmless and wanted (Wright, Herbencik, Tokunaga, 2021), when in many cases are not. Yet because of what is shown in the media, heavy consumers are not able to differentiate from what is on screen behaviour; therefore, associate and apply the same values and attitudes in real life scenarios.

A study discovered men with more exposure to sexually aggressive porn (including choking) were more likely to engage in non-consensual sex (Wright et al, 2021). Within these studies it followed the cultivation theory steps; researchers identified a prevailing pattern within sexually explicit material, which in some studies were the absence of condoms and from this came up with hypotheses. They then gathered a sampling size of 7429 women and separated them into groups of who deliberately watched porn and those who were unwantedly expose to it. Researchers gave them a survey which would detail how long they have been exposed to this media and how often they view it. With this they could acknowledge who were "heavy" viewers. Participants were also given a depressive to sensation-seeking scale where they would indicate on the scale what best sums them up as a person. This helped researchers understand their personality and behaviours in everyday life - higher scores indicated a more sensation seeking personality. Consistent with other studies, results highlighted a significantly positive association between exposure to pornography and not wearing a condom when they last had sexual intercourse (e.g. Luder, Pittet, Berchtold, Akre, Michuad, Suris, 2011). Reinstating that explicit content has a role in influencing sexually risky behaviour.

Considering the information explored, it has explained why and how often heavy viewers of sexually explicit material take what they are viewing and apply it to their sexual experiences, without recognising the impact that it has in society. It has also detailed those recurring messages such as condom-less sex are noticed and influences the audience. A reason for this is it only highlights the rewards - that being the feeling of pleasure - and not

the punishment, such as sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy. This is important to study as it can potentially help understand factors for the current statistics in these areas and help put better measures in place for explicit visual content.