

Pornography: The South African Scenario

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ABSTRACT

This literature review aims to assess pornography consumption in South Africa and to place the country in a global context. Research has examined pornography consumption among teenagers and younger children, adults, individuals who engage in sexting, and people in the workplace. The prevalence of pornography, not only in South Africa but worldwide, has been rising for several decades, and its effects are becoming more prominent every day due to the accessibility, affordability, and lack of accountability associated with pornography use. It has thereby become more widely available to people of all ages, especially children and adolescents. Reports, existing studies, journal articles, policy documents, and books relating to pornography in South Africa were examined, and an overall picture of pornography use in South Africa was compiled. There is a significant lack of recent pornography statistics in South Africa and globally. The Internet and smartphones are the main methods used to view pornography. Information was obtained through statistics provided by Pornhub, as well as research conducted by researchers who interviewed people. The purpose of the review was to identify major themes, trends, and research findings concerning the social, psychological, cultural, legal, and moral impacts of pornography within the South African context. The rise in pornography consumption has far-reaching effects and can be harmful, sometimes even lasting, for young people and teenagers. The South African government must enact legislation to curb this tendency effectively.

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Introduction

Before the invention of the Internet, individuals eighteen years and older could go into a store and buy pornographic magazines or rent pornographic videos. Today, it is different. Pornography globally

has become more available to people of all ages, even to children and adolescents. (Nufer, 2017). Individuals simply must type the word porn into a search engine like Google. Millions of websites are available to show sexually explicit material. Furthermore, no strict age curtailments have been



implemented worldwide. (Nufer, 2017). Although age verification has been used to control access to certain websites, it has not been very successful and is often side-stepped by children. (Blake, 2019). From 1977 to 1991, pornographic videos could be shipped to people's homes in the United States of America. Simultaneously, cable television came about, presenting soft-core porn late at night (Weiss, 2020).

Computer-aided telecommunications can transmit images, written and audio texts, as well as video files, worldwide in milliseconds. Many websites have become showcases for violence against women and children. National laws, both local and international, have become obsolete because the Internet is largely unregulated. Pimps now have access to the global market and can operate unchecked. Information, along with women and children, is freely sold. Pornographic images and videos depicting the sexual abuse of children are circulated without restriction. Pimps and sex buyers contribute to the Internet industry, which is financially dependent on the prostitution industry for its survival. (Hughes, 1999).

Discussion

First, it is necessary to understand what pornography is before the full consequences of pornography consumption can be grasped.

Definition of child pornography?

The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 32 of 2007 (South Africa, 2015) describes child pornography as created to stimulate erotic feelings of any person under the age of 18 years with an explicit sexual nature, to:

- (a) engage in an act that constitutes a sexual offence;
- (b) engage in an act of sexual penetration;
- (c) engage in an act of sexual violation;
- (d) engage in an act of masturbation;

- (e) display the genital organs of such a person in a state of arousal or stimulation;
- (f) unduly display the genital organs or anus of such a person;
- (g) display any form of stimulation of a sexual nature of such person's breasts;
- (h) engage in sexually suggestive or lewd acts;
- (i) engage in or as the subject of sadistic or masochistic acts of a sexual nature;
- (j) engage in any conduct or activity characteristically associated with sexual intercourse;
- (k) show or describe such a person-

- (i) participating in, assisting or facilitating another person to participate in; or

- (ii) being in the presence of another person who commits or in any other manner be involved in any act contemplated in paragraphs (a) to

(j); or

- (iii) showing or describing the body, or parts of the body, of such person in a manner or in circumstances which, within the context, violate or offend the sexual integrity or dignity of that person or any category of persons under 18 or is capable of being used to violate or offend the sexual integrity or dignity of that person, any person or group or categories of persons.

The South African scenario concerning child pornography

All forms of child pornography are illegal in South Africa. This includes possessing, creating, or importing any image or description of a person, real or simulated.

Mthabela (2019, pp. 2 and 3) explains as follows:



“According to the Films and Publications Act, 1996 and Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 2007, any person who unlawfully and intentionally exposes or displays or causes the exposure or display of any image, publication, depiction, description or sequence of child pornography or pornography; or any image, publication, depiction, description or sequence containing a visual presentation, description or representation of a sexual nature of a child, which may be disturbing or harmful to, or age-inappropriate for children, with or without the consent of a child is guilty of the offence of exposing or displaying or causing the exposure or display of child pornography or pornography to a child.

Section 18(1)(c)(ii) of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 2007 (“Criminal Law”) provides that a person who supplies exposes or displays child or adult pornography to a third person or a publication or film to encourage, enable, instruct, or persuade a third person to perform a sexual act with a child is guilty of the offence of promoting the sexual grooming of a child.

Section 19 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 2007 provides that a person who unlawfully and intentionally exposes or displays or causes the exposure or display of:

- (a) any image, publication, depiction, description or sequence of child pornography or pornography;
- (b) any image, publication, depiction, description or sequence containing a visual presentation, description or representation of a sexual nature of a child, which may be disturbing or harmful to, or age-inappropriate for children, as contemplated in the Films and Publications Act, 1996, or in terms of any other legislation; or
- (c) any image, publication, depiction, description or sequence containing a

visual presentation, description or representation of pornography or an act of an explicit sexual nature of a person 18 years or older, which may be disturbing or harmful to, or age-inappropriate, for children, as contemplated in the Films and Publications Act, 1996, or in terms of any other law, to a child, with or without the consent of B (the child), is guilty of the offence of exposing or displaying or causing the exposure or display of child pornography or pornography to a child”.

Definition of adult pornography

Researchers across disciplines do not agree on a single definition of pornography. However, more than half of the researchers agree that pornography is sexually explicit content intended to arouse sexual feelings. However, different meanings are attached to words such as explicit and arousal, which further complicate the definition. Different cultures view pornography in different ways according to what they consider pornography to be in their culture. European, American, and Oceanian countries (Australia, New Zealand, Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia) seem to have extensive literature on pornography, more liberal viewpoints, beliefs, and attitudes towards pornography. They have also developed facilities supplying specialised treatment for pornography addiction. Asian and African countries are more conservative in their beliefs and attitudes towards pornography. However, all countries believe that pornography viewing leads to aggressive sexual behaviour and mental health problems. (Ahorsu et al., 2023). The concept of what pornography is also changes over time and from country to country (McKee et al., 2020).

Pornography can be defined as "material [e.g., pictures, films, videos or text] deemed sexual, given the context, that has the primary intention of sexually arousing the consumer and is produced and distributed with the consent of all persons involved" (Ashton et al., 2019, p. 163).



The Act mentions the word "pornography," but it does not offer a stand-alone definition of the term apart from the context of sexual exploitation or child pornography.

Merriam-Webster defines pornography as the depiction of erotic behaviour in pictures, writings, books or photographs, intended to cause sexual excitement. Also, the sensational depiction of acts arouses a quick, intense emotional reaction (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

The South African scenario concerning adult pornography

Judge Kollapen, Chairperson of the South African Law Reform Commission, explains that possessing and viewing adult pornography, excluding child pornography, is legal in South Africa. However, the production and distribution of pornographic materials are subject to specific regulations. Such material may not involve minors. There are restrictions to protect minors and other vulnerable people. The distribution of child pornography is illegal, and minors (under 18 years of age) may not enter premises licensed as adult premises. Adult premises are places where material is classified as X18. The Electronic Communications and Transactions Act of 2002 require Internet Service Providers to respond to and implement take-down notices regarding illegal internet content such as child pornography, defamatory material, and copyright violations. The South African Constitutional Court has ended an era of tight censorship by decriminalising pornography, stating that a long-standing ban on pornography was incompatible with the right to free expression guaranteed by the new constitution (Kollapen, 2021)

Definition of revenge pornography

Revenge porn is the distribution of sexually explicit images or videos of individuals without their consent, with the punitive intention to create public humiliation or character assassination out of revenge against the victim (Citron & Franks, 2014).

The South African scenario concerning revenge porn

South Africa officially follows the examples of Israel, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Japan by criminalising the distribution of sexually explicit images or videos without someone's consent. People found guilty of breaking the revenge porn laws could face a two-year jail sentence and R150 000,00 if the victim cannot be identified. However, if the victim can be identified, the perpetrator could face a four-year prison sentence and pay up to R300 000,00. Recently, South Africa has become stricter about what is acceptable and legal to post online. (Law for All, 2025).

Definition of sexting

The term sexting stands for a combination of sex and texting and refers to the act of sending sexual text messages, often nude, semi-nude, or suggestive photos. Sometimes, the messages also include sexual or explicit videos. Sexting can be done via cell phones, other messaging services or direct messaging on social media sites (Morgan, 2023).

The South African scenario concerning sexting

South African law does not have a specific law that criminalises sexting between consenting adults, but it can lead to several legal issues when done by children.

If the videos or pictures involve a person under 18, even if sent between minors, they could be classified as child pornography and lead to criminal charges for all people involved in creating, possessing, or distributing them. Sending or sharing sexually explicit images or videos without the consent of the person depicted can be considered a crime, depending on the nature of the content. If the sexting leads to the unwanted sharing of images or videos, or if the images are used to harass or bully someone, it could result in charges for cyberbullying or harassment. If someone is threatened or blackmailed with the release of sexting images or videos unless they comply with certain demands, they could be charged with sextortion, which is a serious crime.



Privacy Laws can be violated if videos are shared without consent. This can lead to civil lawsuits or legal action (Lehman, 2021).

Review report and research method

This review report focused on an overview of the bigger picture of the South African population. The review report adopted a qualitative research approach to analyse reports, journal articles, previous studies, policy documents, and books related to pornography in South Africa. To understand the key themes, pornography viewing patterns and research findings regarding the social, psychological, cultural, legal, and moral effects of pornography within the South African context were identified.

Background information about pornography

A description of the pornography phenomenon in other countries will help to better understand the pornography phenomenon in South Africa.

Research done by Ballester-Arnal et al. (2023) concluded that pornography is something common and is currently part of the sexuality of pre-adolescents, adolescents, adults, and the elderly.

Pornography is a topic that affects everyone, whether they realise it or not. An estimated 91.5% of men and 60.2% of women consume it. What is more, as many as 93.2% of boys and 62.1% of girls first see porn before they turn 18, with estimates of first exposure at an average age of 13 or younger (Robey, 2022).

A study done in America on a group of 2,075 people based on various porn use rates in their lifetimes revealed that 11% of men and 3% of women reported that they were addicted to pornography. Approximately 69% of American men and 40% of American women view online porn each year. Pornhub alone reported more than 2 billion visits in a single month in 2023. 69% of men and 40% of women view porn online, while 20% more men are more likely to download porn (Miller & Hoffman, 2025).

Research done by Bóthe et al. (2024), among 82 243 participants from countries worldwide (57.0% women, 39.6% men and 3.4% gender diverse people), found that the problematic pornography use risk is estimated to be 3.2–16.6% of the population of 42 countries and varies among different groups (e.g. genders) and based on the measure used.

Pornography consumption among adolescents has continuously increased over time. The starting age for children's exposure to pornography is getting younger (Alexandraki et al., 2018).

Thomas (2023) reported that most teens, both girls and boys, view pornography regularly in the USA, even during school hours. This report is based on the findings of a representative national survey of 1,300 teenagers aged 13 to 17 years old. More findings include:

- 75% of boys and 70% of girls watched online pornography, and the average age at which they started was 12 years or younger.
- Four out of ten teenagers said they had watched nudity and sexual acts during the school day on school-owned devices.
- 80 per cent said they had seen what appeared to be rape, choking, or someone in pain.
- Most adolescents (approximately 60–75% of boys and 40–52% of girls) have seen pornography, with over half reporting their first viewing of pornography before age 14, whether intentionally or not. Some report that they have seen online pornography at the age of 10 or younger. Some (44 %) have seen it intentionally, while others (58%) have seen it accidentally. (Michael & Supreet, 2023; Peter & Valkenberg, 2016).

Pornography legislation in South Africa

South Africa currently experiences an interesting void in terms of regulating the online distribution of



live pornography. Although there is a ban on the direct commercial distribution of X18 content online in South Africa, this does not include a ban on live streaming such content. In other words, it is currently illegal to distribute X18 films or recordings online, but there is no regulation of the online live broadcast of X18 content in South Africa. Only X18 material may be distributed or exhibited by the holders of licences to conduct the business of adult premises, in accordance with the conditions set out in section 24(2) of the Act, and only to persons aged 18 or over. Material rated as X18 is for adults only and may be distributed and/or exhibited only in and from licensed adult premises (Films and Publications Act, No. 65, Sec. 31(3)(b)).

The Films and Publications Board of South Africa does not currently recognise online live streaming as a form of “distribution” or “film, game or publication” falling within the control of the Act. The prohibition on regulating online live streaming of X18 content has not yet been enacted into law. This delay in the Amendment Act means that the regulation of online live streaming of X18 content is seemingly falling between the cracks in South Africa. Due to this vacuum, quite a few newly emerging live-streaming X18 producers in SA want to take advantage of this opportunity to fill the gap (Reisenberger, 2020).

Availability of Pornography in South Africa

According to Pornhub’s consumer data for 2016, 2017, and 2018, South Africa repeatedly appeared among the top 20 pornography-consuming countries in the world. However, this information remains site-specific (Koba, 2022).

Pornography consumption in South Africa increases significantly during weekends. At the end of 2019 (the last year for which stats are available), Pornhub reports that South Africa slipped from the 20th to the 24th position in the world for porn consumption. Porn consumption decreases dramatically among people over forty years of age (Chambers, 2022).

A large anonymous survey of 676 completed survey responses and 25 interviewed respondents among porn viewers revealed that 621 of the respondents watch porn at home, mostly over weekends (Koba, 2022).

During the past three decades, there has been an unprecedented increase in the number of young people who not only visit pornography websites but also seek out pornographic videos and magazines in South Africa. Like the rest of the world, most porn consumers are adolescent boys. The Film and Publication Board reports that 64% of minors aged 13 to 17 in South Africa access pornography websites illegally because access to porn sites is not monitored effectively. Age verification is difficult (Semakalang, 2023).

Although holders of licenses may only distribute sexually explicit films and publications to operate the business of adult premises and only to adults within the premises that form part of a building, it is common knowledge that this type of material and DVD’s are freely available in communities and public places and, therefore, also to children. It is, thus, easy for children to view material containing vaginal and anal sexual intercourse, mutual masturbation, fellatio, oral sex, and ejaculations onto the body or face of, usually, females, and often involving multiple participants. There are no boundaries to what is available to children. They are even exposed to fisting, coprophilia (sexual arousal and pleasure from faeces), bestiality, incest, rape, explicit sexual conduct, which is demeaning or degrading of human beings, depictions of women as nothing more than objects for the sexual gratification of men and the explicit infliction of extreme sexual violence. Child abuse material, including materials depicting the torture, maiming and the penetrative rape of children as young as 6 months, is also included in this (Chetty & Basson, 2006).

During 2006 (more recent statistics are hard to find), the Film and Publication Board classified over 27 000 DVDs and videos containing sexually explicit content for distribution in South Africa (Chetty & Basson, 2006).



According to the Disrupting Harm Survey, 58% of internet-using children who participated go online at least once a day. Children's internet use increased with age, consistent with patterns in other countries worldwide (ECPAT, INTERPOL, and UNICEF, 2022).

This data aligns well with data from 9–17-year-olds in three provinces of South Africa, collected in 2016 (Phyfer et al., 2016). Free and uncontrolled internet viewing poses many risks, such as accessing inappropriate content like pornography and graphic violence. Children can also be tricked into providing personal information to unknown sources. (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2025).

As much as 60% of children in South Africa have seen pornography by age 10, and at least 20% of children have been subjected to sexual abuse and exploitation online, as well as harmful content, including rape and incest (Vorster, 2025).

In South Africa, more than half of the 9 to 17-year-olds have seen sexual images on a phone or online device in the past year. As much as 8% took naked photos or videos of themselves, while two-thirds of them shared these photos. Experts report up to 15 cases of sextortion a day involving children, while the earliest exposure to pornography happens at preschool (Vorster, 2023).

New advanced technology has empowered tech enthusiasts to develop software that can interchange faces, superimposing the likenesses of any individual onto others in videos. This enables artificial intelligence (AI) to produce highly realistic videos and photos, often indistinguishable from authentic footage. The term 'deepfakes' has emerged for these creations and is also exploited for creating unauthorised use of personal images from social media to develop pornographic content since 2017 (Gatora, 2024). 9 out of 10 times, deepfake technology is used 9 out of 10 times to make nonconsensual pornographic material. Of these, 4% were aimed at individuals in politics, while the remaining 96% were related to pornography (Van der Nagel, 2020). Deepfakes

tend to mislead viewers, and South Africa's population is at significant risk of failing to identify deepfakes (Gatora, 2024).

It is difficult to control pornography use and distribution as current legislation quickly becomes outdated due to the rapid development of technology (Hlomani & Ncube, 2023). South Africa is struggling to combat deepfakes (Gatora, 2024).

Pornography statistics in South Africa

Recent porn statistics are very hard to find. Nevertheless, based on previous statistics, the porn pandemic in South Africa needs urgent attention.

Africa is listed as one of the most porn-consuming countries in the world (28th in the world). In South Africa, there is a fast-growing pornography business (Tottoc, 2023).

Staggering statistics reported by Berg (2024) stated that porn viewing in South Africa went up 16 000% from 1969 to 2024, 79% of young male adults watch porn every month, and 71% of young female adults watch porn every month. The biggest group of porn consumers are between the ages of 12-17, male and female.

Adult pornography

The adult porn business in South Africa is at present the biggest in Africa, and young adults try to make money, primarily online, through pornographic films (Tottoc, 2023). According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), this flourishing porn business inspires young men and women to be part of this occupation (Mthembu, 2013).

Globally, statistics reveal that a staggering 4.2 million websites are dedicated to pornography, constituting about 12% of all websites on the internet. This overwhelming presence normalises adult content and sets a dangerous precedent for the easy accessibility of illegal materials. Reports indicate grim figures. There are around 116 000 daily requests for child pornography, and an estimated 100,000 websites are engaged in



providing “illegal” child pornography (Gopal, 2025).

Counsellors in Johannesburg, on average, have seen a yearly increase of 10% in clients showing signs of porn addiction (Semakalang, 2023).

Child Pornography

Child pornography is increasing at an alarming rate in South Africa, according to Deputy Home Affairs Minister Malusi Gigaba (Gigaba, 2009). Research reveals shocking statistics about pornography consumption among children. Child pornography is becoming disturbingly common in South Africa (Umar, 2022).

The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) reported that more than 95% of children in South Africa have regular Internet access. However, their risky online behaviour can expose them to online violence, exploitation and abuse. The survey also found that 70% of children use the Internet without parental consent. Twenty-five percent confirmed they have added people they have never met in person to their friends or contacts list. 18 per cent have sent a photo or video of themselves to someone they have never met in person. Sixty-seven per cent of child participants who had encountered sexual images were exposed to them via an online device. Children who have been sexually exploited online prefer not to share their experiences or trauma about the incident, which in turn can have a devastating long-term impact on their mental health and emotional well-being (UNICEF 2022).

Global Happenings (2022) reports that during the first quarter of 2022, the number of paedophile arrests rose by 50% compared to the same period in 2021. During 2021, the number of children under 13 involved in child pornography and solicitation increased by 38%. In the same year, 5,613 cases were treated by the National Centre for the Fight Against Online Child Pornography, increasing from 3 243 in 2020. The number of people suspected of child pornography and solicitation is also growing. In 2021, there were 1,282, an 8% increase from

2020. Moreover, 100,000 websites offer illegal child pornography (Sound Vision, 2022)

A survey conducted by UNICEF among 2,643 children and 1,393 parents, spanning 176 towns and cities across South Africa, revealed alarming statistics (Basson, 2022).

According to a disturbing study by the Youth Research Unit of Unisa’s Bureau for Market Research, more than half (55%) of young South African children regularly watch online. This research, done by Basson, also revealed that 35% of the children watch child pornography and 30% watch violent pornography, while nearly 65% watch pornography between a man and a woman. Furthermore, they do not care that child pornography is illegal. (Komisa, n.d.).

Another study (comprising more than 1 500 high school children) done by the Youth Research Unit of Unisa’s Bureau for Market Research revealed that more than 30% of school kids have been lured into online sex chats against their will. The rest of the survey revealed much more. 97.7% of those who participated in the study had access to the internet, while 95.7% were registered on various social networking sites (Jacobs, 2015).

Other findings of this research were:

Table 1: Children's Online Porn Activities (Youth Research Unit of Unisa's Bureau for Market Research).

	Description	%
1.	Children eventually performed sexual acts against their will.	13
2.	Children engaged in open sex talk	48.2
3.	Children took and/or sent naked or semi-naked pictures of themselves	59.6
4.	Pupils conducted sexual acts via webcam	18.8
5.	Children reported online grooming	31.8
6.	Children opened an unfamiliar message or website link containing pictures of naked people or people having sex	41.9



7.	Children accidentally accessed websites with sexually explicit material	43
8.	Children intentionally accessed pornographic material	29.2
9.	Children accessed pornographic sites occasionally	77.6
10.	Children accessed pornographic sites daily	9.1
11.	Children lured into online sex chats against their will	30
12.	Children asked online to perform sexual acts	22.8
13.	Children persuaded to perform sexual acts	24.4

The previous Minister of Basic Education, Angie Motshekga, said learners had access only to secured online portals such as Thutong Education, DBE Cloud, MTN Online School, Vodacom e-School, Lightbulb, Tswelopele, Woza Matric, and provincial online platforms on their department-issued devices. However, they have free Wi-Fi access at school. Motshekga added that the education department would work together with licensees to provide learners with appropriate educational content on secure online platforms (Pillay, 2022).

Not only in South Africa but also internationally, traditional libraries are being replaced by the internet. As a result, more children are exposed to the risks posed by objectionable material. To aggravate the problem, many teachers lack sufficient knowledge to ensure internet safety at schools. This leaves many learners vulnerable to internet predators and the psychological distress from exposure to harmful, disturbing and age-inappropriate material on the internet. However, most schools have strict mechanisms in place to prevent children from accessing sexually explicit material on the Internet.

The freely available access to the internet has many positive educational opportunities, but online abuse tragically also happens.

Digital technologies make the documentation and recording of child pornography alarmingly simple, which is a deeply entrenched and pervasive crime that has no borders. Digital technologies pose a threat to the safety and well-being of children around the world because they not only fuel the ongoing crisis of child pornography online but also sustain the cycle of child exploitation and abuse (Gopal, 2025).

Revenge pornography

Revenge pornography is growing in South Africa, with women being the main targets. Regardless of whether it is male or female, it is undoubtedly a violation of a victim's constitutional right to privacy (Boshoff Attorneys, Notaries and Conveyers, n.d.). Men are reported to be the primary perpetrators (O'Connor et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2020). People between the ages of 18 and 45 are more likely to engage in Non-consensual Pornography (NCP) as they use the internet the most (Powell et al., 2020).

NCP cases in South Africa, also known as revenge porn or cyber rape, are limited, but some cases of NCP involving prominent figures are spreading on social media platforms. Prominent cases include Malusi Gigaba (a prominent member of the ruling party) and, more recently, Zanele Sifuba (also a political leader), whose intimate photos were reshared on X (formerly known as Twitter) and other social media platforms by ex-partners (Dyantyi, 2024). However, the United Kingdom (UK) Revenge Porn Helpline reported approximately 9,000 NCP cases through its helpline, with around 40% reported by women (Ward, 2022). The Revenge Porn Helpline reports that women have approximately 28 times more images shared without their consent compared to men. This is part of the staggering 106% increase in the total number of reports received by the helpline in 2023 alone (Papachristou, 2023).

Sexting

It is estimated that more than one-third of our population owns smartphones, the primary tool for sexting. A 2017 survey by the Kinsey Institute revealed that 77% of South Africans sexted and



that we are the top sexting nation in the world (Law For All, n.d.).

The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention reports that approximately 51.2% of 9-17-year-old South Africans have access to sexual images using mobile devices, computers and laptops (Phyfer et al., 2016).

Pornography is usually a gateway to sexting. A study published by JAMA Paediatrics in 2018 found that 1 in 4 teens are receiving sexually explicit texts and emails, and 1 in 8 children between the ages of eleven and seventeen report either forwarding or having a sext forwarded without their consent. Sexting has become commonplace among children, with 14.8% sending and 27.4% receiving sexts, with those numbers growing as the child gets older. These statistics are likely much higher, as they found that the majority do not report their sexting activity (Exodus Road, 2020).

Pornography at work

Mike van Wyk, spokesperson from Medicare 24, stated that there is a growing concern about the increase in pornography consumption in the workplace. It is not only disruptive, but it can also impact workplace performance. It is a silent, growing crisis. People in management positions, as well as blue-collar workers, access inappropriate material during office hours, and this is a major concern. Pornography addiction in the workplace extends beyond the addiction of the individual. It affects team dynamics, employee morale and the ethical fabric of an organisation. Porn consumption in the workplace can lead to negative behaviour like objectification of co-workers and eventually manifest as a hostile work environment. Pornography consumption during working hours leads to neglect of professional responsibilities and sexual harassment, affecting the well-being of all employees. Productivity is reduced, causing feelings of guilt (Kaiser, 2024).

Research reveals that 70% of Internet pornography consumption by employees happens during work hours, between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. (Patrick, 2021).

The connection between crime and pornography

The human trafficking industry has grown to include various forms of exploitation, with some growing to become more popular than others. Pornography is one of the forms of sexual exploitation that has increased with the rise of internet pornography. It has a distinct impact on sexual exploitation due to its accessibility and deception. These factors create challenges for both consumers of pornography and individuals who are at risk of being trafficked for its production (Javier, 2023).

According to Fight the New Drug (FND), there are an estimated 21-32 million slaves around the world, of whom 22% are sex slaves. It represents approximately seven million people. Pornography increases the demand for sex trafficking, and many women in pornographic videos are sex slaves (Lewis, 2019).

Around 35% of all internet downloads are pornographic. As the internet grows exponentially, the amount of porn on the internet expands, and pornography addiction is reaching unknown heights (Hull, 2022). (See below.)

Porn increases sex trafficking. Porn consumers' porn habits fuel sexual exploitation. Women and children are frequently forced, coerced, or fraudulently induced to perform visual recordings of sexual acts. These film recordings were sold commercially (Enough is Enough, 2017). Research in nine different countries showed that 49% of rescued sex trafficking victims reported being forced to participate in recording pornographic material (YouTube, 2015). Many of these women reported that hardcore pornography production routinely forms part of the prostitution package (Raymond et al., 2017).

A survey of pornography users found that hardcore pornography fuels the sexual abuse of women and children. None of the interviewed porn viewers collects only these images. They copy what they see and behave abusively (Seigfried-Spellar & Rogers, 2013) when this is denied. The use of



pornography significantly increased battering and sexual abuse by batterers (Shope, 2004). Batterers shape their behaviour towards women through visualised hardcore pornography. (DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2016). There has been an increase in recent years in studies that analyse the association of pornography consumption with acceptance of violence against women (Burnay et al., 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many women (sex workers) were driven to platforms like OnlyFans, where traffickers exploited financial insecurities and economic precarity (Martellozzo & Bradbury, 2021; Polaris Project, 2020). During that same time Pornhub was exposed for profiting from documented rape, child sexual abuse, and human trafficking (Kolhatkar, 2022). Many more articles draw attention to the exploitation of children in the porn industry. Their abuse had been disseminated on Pornhub (Kristof, 2020).

The French Senate's 2022 investigation, "Hell Behind the Scenes", exposed the violence and abuse underpinning pornography production (Chrisafis, 2023). Many porn activities are done not out of personal volition but to meet the demands of the buyer, usually men devoid of empathy, exploiting the vulnerabilities of the victim for their own pleasure (Waltman, 2021). Survivors of the porn industry describe their experiences as profoundly psychologically harmful and stated that they live in constant fear of recognition (Martin, 2015). The body is treated as a product, a commodity, thereby separating the mind from the body and stripping the person of subjectivity and humanity (Miriam, 2005).

Pornography has been shown to impact the sexual behaviour of children and adults, causing increased sexual violence and high-risk sexual behaviour (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018).

Sexual abuse is now a prominent form of child maltreatment. Assessment of the literature review suggests that pornography is an indirect influence on child sexual maltreatment (Knudsen, 1988).

Consequences of the rising porn phenomenon in South Africa

The physical, emotional and mental harm done by porn consumption and addiction is well documented. If South Africa does not control this trend, the consequences could be devastating for the country's citizens, adults and children alike. Porn is addictive (Smith, 2025) and has the same harmful effects on the brain as drugs (legal and illegal). Not only is pornography addictive, but it also causes other harmful consequences that cause much distress and anxiety in people, communities, and children.

Inside the brain, Evolutionary Design causes the brain to respond to sexual stimulation with surges of dopamine. (Evolutionary Design is the natural growth and development of a system that works with the dopamine system to promote survival, reproduction, and pleasure). Dopamine, a neurotransmitter, is released by the reward centre in response to behaviours we perceive as positive, such as eating tasty food or anticipating a reward. This means that when the body wants something good, like sex or food, the brain remembers where to return to experience the same pleasure (Barr, 2019).

The brain develops a preference for events that produce those feelings and rewires itself to experience them again. This creates feedback that compels porn users to seek out ways of triggering that flood of chemicals to make them happy (Brand, et al., 2016; De Sousa, 2017).

This anticipation of reward habituates porn users to instinctively reach for their laptops or cell phones to fulfil their desires. Porn scenes are hyper-stimulating triggers. These triggers lead to unnaturally high levels of dopamine secretion, damaging the dopamine reward system and rendering it unresponsive to natural pleasure. When this happens, porn users have trouble achieving arousal with a physical partner and prefer to return to porn for sexual pleasure (Barr, 2019).



Exposure to pornography can lead to dangerous and troubling effects on children and adolescents because pornography is a dangerous and poor sex educator (Flood, 2009). These troubling effects are aggravated by deviant, shocking and even criminal sexual practices in online pornography that children are exposed to (Sabina et al., 2009)

All pornography is harmful and needs to be regulated to protect women and children. Research revealed that female pornography actors face considerable risks to their health and well-being (Grudzen et al., 2011). Revenge and adult pornography are common in South Africa, with females being the primary victims (Brook, 2020).

Recommendations

The South African Government must take the lead and prioritise the control of pornography consumption as a matter of urgency to protect the people, especially women and children, against the harmful consequences of pornography. They must get all stakeholders involved in this very important task.

- The governments must investigate the misuse of the Internet to promote and/or carry out trafficking, prostitution, and the sexual exploitation of women and children.
- As a matter of priority, the government should review, amend, and enforce existing laws, or enact new laws, to prevent the misuse of the Internet for trafficking and prostitution, and to prevent the sexual exploitation of women and children. Illegal, harmful content distributed in physical formats should also be made illegal on online platforms.
- Pornography offences should be accurately recorded in the police database and be nationally available.
- Further research and consultation should be undertaken to understand whether problematic pornography use (PPU) should be formally recognised as an addiction.
- The government should financially support organisations that fight against pornography. Platforms to raise public awareness about intimate image abuse and the harms of pornography should be developed.
- School curricula should include topics on internet safety, and educators should be trained to deal with these topics. Clearer guidance should be given to schools on the role of teachers and staff in preventing harmful sexual behaviours.
- The government and nongovernmental organisations must develop and implement educational programs on the harm of trafficking, prostitution, and sexual exploitation of women and children for the mental and physical well-being of women and children.
- The government and nongovernmental organisations must develop and implement educational programs addressing responsible Internet use.
- The government must cooperate on a global level, on a national level as well as a regional level, to combat the escalating trafficking, pornography and prostitution of women and children, the globalisation of this industry, and the misuse of the Internet to promote and commit crimes of sex trafficking, sex tourism, sexual violence, and sexual exploitation.
- Not only children but parents and the public as a whole must be educated about the harm done by pornography and ways of combating this problem. An online platform for parents and carers should be created to supply them with information on how to talk to their children about the impact of pornography on their lives.
- Banks and other payment providers must comply with regulations to try to stop children and other people from accessing illegal content online



Conclusion

This review makes it clear that pornography consumption is on the rise in South Africa. This scenario is not without consequences. Especially women and children are suffering, and porn addicts face life-changing characteristics that can be very harmful and difficult to control and to get rid of. Although the impression is created that pornography has become a social norm, it can dramatically impact the way forward for South Africa. It is of the utmost importance that the Government take the necessary steps to curb this tendency as soon as possible.

Further study is needed to obtain more reliable data, and more popular pornography sites should be involved so that data can be compared with each other, and conclusions can be more accurate.

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Author's contributions

EB conceived and wrote the article.

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