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Excessive Consumption of Digital Pornography and the Mental Health of Contemporary Man: Approaches Between Psychoanalysis and Neuroscience

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Summary

Unrestricted access to digital pornography, intensified by streaming culture and hyperconnectivity, has raised questions about its effects on the mental, sexual, and relational health of adult men. This article aims to discuss, in light of psychoanalysis and contemporary neuroscience, the impacts of excessive pornography consumption on male subjectivity, with an emphasis on repercussions such as compulsivity, psychological distress, sexual dysfunctions, and relational impairments. This is an integrative literature review, conducted in the PubMed, SciELO, PsycINFO, PePSIC, and Google Scholar databases, encompassing publications between 2014 and 2025, in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. The theoretical framework articulates classic contributions from Freud on sexuality and drive, as well as Winnicott's notion of the inner world and the use of objects, with recent studies on Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder (CSBD) and problematic pornography use.

The results indicate that repeated pornography consumption is associated with alterations in reward circuits, tolerance to sexual stimuli, difficulties in impulse control, anxiety-depressive symptoms, and sexual dysfunctions, especially in young men. In parallel, feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation are observed, frequently mediated by moral and religious beliefs, which complicates the clinical picture. It is concluded that the phenomenon should be understood from a biopsychosocial and subjective perspective, requiring dialogue between psychoanalysis, psychiatry, neuroscience, and public policies on sexual education and mental health, with interventions that address both the management of compulsivity and the underlying relational and existential suffering.

Keywords: Digital pornography. Mental health. Masculinity. Psychoanalysis. Neuroscience.

Abstract

The unrestricted access to online pornography, intensified by streaming culture and hyperconnectivity, has raised concerns about its impact on men's mental, sexual, and relational health. This article aims to discuss, from a psychoanalytic and neuroscientific perspective, the effects of excessive pornography consumption on male subjectivity, focusing on compulsive patterns, psychological distress, sexual dysfunctions, and relational impairment. An integrative literature review was conducted using PubMed, SciELO, PsycINFO, PePSIC, and Google Scholar databases, including publications from 2014 to 2025 in Portuguese, English, and Spanish. The theoretical framework articulates Freud's contributions on sexuality and drive, as well as Winnicott's concepts of inner world and object use, with contemporary findings on Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder



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(CSBD) and problematic pornography use. The results indicate that repeated pornography use is associated with changes in reward circuitry, tolerance to sexual stimuli, impaired impulse control, anxiety and depressive symptoms, and sexual dysfunctions, especially in young men. Feelings of guilt, shame, and loneliness, often shaped by moral and religious beliefs, further complicate the clinical picture. It is concluded that pornography-related problems must be understood within a biopsychosocial and subjective framework, requiring dialogue between psychoanalysis, psychiatry, neuroscience, and public policies in sexual education and mental health, with interventions addressing both compulsive behavior and underlying relational and existential suffering.

Keywords: Online pornography. Mental health. Masculinity. Psychoanalysis. Neuroscience.

Summary

Unrestricted access to online pornography, intensified by *streaming* culture and digital hyperconnectivity, has raised growing concerns about its impact on men's mental, sexual and relational health. This article aims to analyze, from a psychoanalytic and neuroscientific perspective, the effects of excessive pornography consumption on male subjectivity, with emphasis on compulsive patterns, psychological malaise, sexual dysfunctions and sexual deterioration. An integrative literature review was carried out in the PubMed, SciELO, PsycINFO, PePSIC and Google Scholar databases, considering publications between 2014 and 2025 in Portuguese, English and Spanish. The theoretical framework articulates Freudian contributions on sexuality and drive, as well as Winnicottian concepts of the internal world and use of the object, with contemporary ideas referring to Compulsive Sexual Conduct Disorder (TCSO) and the problematic use of pornography. The results indicate that repeated exposure to pornographic content is associated with changes in the circuits of reward, increased tolerance to sexual stimuli, difficulties in impulse control, anxious and depressive symptoms and sexual dysfunctions, especially in young men. Feelings of guilt, shame and loneliness — often modulated by moral and religious beliefs—

further complement the clinical framework. It is concluded that problems related to pornography must be understood within a biopsychosocial and subjective framework, which requires an interdisciplinary dialogue between psychoanalysis, psychiatry, neuroscience and public policies on sexual education and mental health. Therapeutic interventions must simultaneously address the compulsive dimensions of behavior and the underlying relational and existential sufferings.

Keywords: Online pornography. Mental health. Masculinity. Psychoanalysis. Neuroscience.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, pornography has ceased to be material with restricted circulation and has become... to make a product available on any internet-connected device, in real time and in large volume. Streaming platforms, social networks, and specialized websites offer content of free or low-cost access, which reshapes how men relate to...

Pleasure, the body, and sexual fantasy.

International studies have been pointing to a high prevalence of pornography consumption among young men and adults, as well as an increase in reports of sexual difficulties and psychological distress. associated with the problematic use of this type of material. Recent reviews suggest that the use Excessive sexual activity can be related to sexual dysfunctions, such as erectile difficulties and decreased satisfaction. sexual, although there is still controversy about causality and the presence of mediating factors, such as Anxiety, depression, and the quality of affective relationships.



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At the same time, the International Classification of Diseases – ICD-11 – began to include Compulsive Sexual Behavior Disorder (CSBD), which includes problematic use of Pornography is one of the most frequent forms of clinical presentation. This inclusion highlights the recognition, in the medical and mental health fields, that a portion of individuals experience loss of control over sexual behavior, with significant impairments in different areas of life.

Beyond the biomedical perspective, the phenomenon raises central questions for the Psychoanalysis and the human sciences: the place of fantasy in psychic life, modes of satisfaction. Instinctual impulses in contemporary culture, the rearrangements of masculinity, and new forms of social bonding mediated by technology. Freud, when discussing sexuality in *Three Essays on the Theory of sexuality* already indicated the complexity of forms of pleasure and the presence of perverse components. Polymorphs in human sexual life (FREUD, 1905/2017). Winnicott, in turn, when working on the Concepts of potential space and the use of objects contribute to thinking about how certain resources... External factors can function as support for the internal world or, in pathological situations, as... impoverished substitutes for the experience of lived relationship (WINNICOTT, 1971/2019).

In this context, the present article aims to analyze the excessive consumption of Digital pornography by adult men: a dialogue between psychoanalysis and neuroscience. emphasizing:

- a) recent findings on the neurobiology of problematic pornography use;
- b) the impacts on sexual and mental health;
- c) possible psychoanalytic interpretations of this phenomenon in clinical practice with men.

Instead of a field survey with a questionnaire, a review was chosen.

An integrative approach to recent literature, seeking to bring together empirical evidence, theoretical productions, and... Psychoanalytic contributions that help to qualify the clinical and social debate on the subject.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Sexuality, drive, and pornography in the light of Freud

In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud (1905/2017) describes sexuality.

The human condition is marked by polymorphism and a range of possible drives. The distinction between sexual object and sexual target, the emphasis on childhood sexuality and the idea that the so-called "Perversions" are virtually present in all subjects and constitute important bases for... To consider the non-naturalized nature of sexuality.

Digital pornography, with its logic of an infinite catalog of bodies and scenes, seems to engage in dialogue... with this polymorphic dimension, offering a multitude of erotic objects in just a few clicks.



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and combinations of sexual practices. From a Freudian point of view, consumption can be understood repetitive pornography as a form of technology-mediated autoerotic gratification, in which The subject regulates their arousal based on images that function as representations of fantasies. unconscious.

However, when the pursuit of this type of satisfaction becomes massive, repeated, and lacking... Once symbolized, space opens up for compulsive forms of functioning, in which the subject begins to... being "used" by excitement, instead of being able to use it creatively. The repetition of scenes, scripts and Pornographic categories can reinforce fixed circuits, impoverishing the capacity for fantasy and to become subjectively involved in the sexual experience with another who is not reduced to an object of use.

2.2 Winnicott: solitude, use of objects and virtual environment

Winnicott (1971/2019), in developing the notions of transitional object and potential space, describes an intermediate field between internal and external reality, where play, creativity and Culture is inscribed. This space, supported by a sufficiently good environment, allows the The individual experiences illusion and disillusionment gradually, favoring the integration of the self.

When the environment fails significantly, the individual may resort to substitutes that... They offer a sense of control or immediate relief, but do not encourage encountering... another living being. In many clinical reports, intensive pornography use seems to occupy that place: It functions as a pseudo-environment where the subject "controls" the scene, the time, and the intensity of the... excitement, without exposing oneself to otherness, frustration, and the negotiation inherent in real relationships.

From a Winnicottian perspective, compulsive pornography use can be considered as an attempt to manage anxieties of annihilation, feelings of emptiness, or experiences of helplessness. making use of an "object" that responds predictably, but does not provide recognition. It does not allow for experiences of mutuality.

2.3 Neuroscience of problematic pornography use

In recent literature, problematic pornography use is often described as a specific form of addictive behavior or as a manifestation of the Disorder of Compulsive Sexual Behavior (CSBD). Neuroimaging studies have indicated alterations in structure and functioning of the reward system in individuals who report high consumption. of pornography.

Kühn and Gallinat (2014), in a study using magnetic resonance imaging, observed that longer time Exposure to pornography was associated with lower gray matter volume in striatal regions. and changes in frontostriatal connectivity, suggesting an impact on areas linked to pleasure, Motivation and inhibitory control.

Reviews on the neurobiology of "sex and pornography addictions" highlight the participation



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of the mesolimbic dopaminergic system, especially in the pathway involving the ventral tegmental area, nucleus accumbens and prefrontal cortex, highlighting phenomena such as sensitization, tolerance and Difficulty controlling impulses in the face of sexual "cues." These mechanisms are similar to... described in other behavioral addictions (such as gambling) and in some addictions of substances.

Furthermore, reviews on CSBD indicate that problematic pornography use often... coexisting with anxiety symptoms, depression, substance use disorders, and a history of trauma, indicating that the neurobiology of compulsion is intertwined with psychosocial dimensions and biographical.

2.4 Pornography, sexual dysfunctions and psychological distress

Several observational studies investigate the relationship between pornography consumption and Sexual dysfunctions in men. An integrative review by Dwulit and Rzymiski (2019). This indicates an association between heavy pornography use and complaints of reduced sexual desire with a partner. Erectile difficulties and reduced sexual satisfaction, especially in young populations, although noteworthy the need for more robust longitudinal studies.

Park et al. (2016) describe clinical cases in which the preference for masturbation associated High-stimulation pornography is linked to difficulties in sexual response during encounters. In-person participants showed improvement after reducing or stopping pornography use. International research. A study conducted with young men by Jacobs et al. (2021) found an association between consumption Frequent pornography use, lower overall sexual satisfaction, and a higher likelihood of erectile dysfunction. even after controlling for variables such as age and substance use.

In the Brazilian context, recent studies describe a possible relationship between intensive use of Pornography and erectile dysfunction in young men: linking clinical data with reviews. international. In addition to sexual difficulties, narrative reviews and clinical studies mention increased symptoms of anxiety, depression, social isolation, shame, guilt, and conflict. marital issues in men who perceive their pornography consumption as excessive or out of control.

This constellation of elements — compulsiveness, psychological suffering, and functional impairment — has sustained the discussion about the place of problematic pornography use within the broader field. of behavioral dependencies, while also calling for psychodynamic readings capable of considering the subject's history, their modes of organizing desire, and their conditions. concrete aspects of life.

3 METHODOLOGY

An integrative literature review was chosen because it allows for the gathering of studies from different...

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research designs (theoretical, quantitative and qualitative empirical, narrative and systematic reviews).

linking them to a common thematic axis.

3.1 Search strategy

The PubMed, SciELO, PsycINFO, PePSIC, and Google Scholar databases were consulted.

using combinations of the following descriptors, in Portuguese and English: "digital pornography",

"problematic pornography use", "compulsive sexual behavior disorder", "pornography addiction",

"male sexual dysfunction", "erectile dysfunction", "psychoanalysis", "Freud", "Winnicott",

"masculinity".

The time frame included publications between January 2014 and October 2025.

prioritizing the period following the consolidation of neuroimaging studies on pornography and

inclusion of CSBD in ICD-11.

3.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The following were included:

- Original articles, reviews, clinical studies, and theoretical texts that addressed:

- a) problematic use of pornography or CSBD in men; and/or

- b) relationships between pornography, sexual health, and mental health; and/or

- c) Psychoanalytic readings of male sexuality in contemporary times;

- Texts in Portuguese, English, or Spanish, available in full.

The following were excluded:

- studies focusing exclusively on female or adolescent populations, without specific discussion about adult men;

- studies with insufficient data for analysis of pornography consumption patterns;

- Articles that have not been peer-reviewed or opinion pieces lacking theoretical or empirical support.

3.3 Analysis procedures

The selected articles were read in their entirety and organized into summary tables.

containing: author(s), year, country, design, sample (when applicable), main results and

implications for clinical practice with men. The analysis followed a thematic approach, allowing for the grouping of

findings on axes:

1. Neurobiology and reward circuits;

2. Sexual dysfunctions and relational functioning;

3. psychological suffering, guilt and shame;

4. Contributions of psychoanalysis to clinical understanding and management.

No quantitative meta-analysis was performed, given the heterogeneity of the designs and

The instruments used are prioritized, with a focus on a critical and interpretative discussion of the findings.



4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Neurobiology, compulsiveness and tolerance

The neuroimaging studies and neurobiological reviews analyzed converge in pointing out that repeated consumption of pornography intensely activates the reward system, with central participation of the mesolimbic dopaminergic pathway. In individuals with complaints of use compulsive eating disorders reveal alterations in connectivity between striatal regions and the prefrontal cortex, which may translate to greater reactivity to sexual cues and a reduced capacity to inhibit responses. impulsive.

These findings help to link problematic pornography use to other issues.

Addictive behaviors, without reducing it to a purely biological phenomenon. From the point of view Clinically, the idea of tolerance—the need for increasingly intense or specific stimuli to reaching the same level of arousal — this frequently appears in the accounts of men who describe escalation of content consumed over time, as well as difficulty in becoming aroused by sexual contexts considered "common" or "less performative".

4.2 Sexual dysfunctions, bonding, and masculinity

Recent literature identifies an association between heavy pornography consumption and different Forms of male sexual dysfunction, especially among young adults. Although it cannot be... to assert a linear causal relationship, studies suggest that the combination of high frequency of consumption, preference for masturbation accompanied by fast-paced and low-key pornography The quality of affective relationships can contribute to:

- difficulty achieving an erection during in-person sexual intercourse;
- decreased desire for a regular partner, with greater arousal directed towards virtual material;
- Difficulty maintaining intimacy and emotional contact during sexual intercourse.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, such manifestations cannot be reduced to a "mechanical effect". from pornography, but they are articulated to the way the subject organizes their desire, their fantasies and their relationship with one's own body. Pornography, by offering a hyper-performative script of Masculinity — centered on unlimited potency, continuous erections, and absence of distress — can to reinforce unattainable ideals of virility and, paradoxically, increase anguish in the face of the reality, in which the body is traversed by flaws, affection, and the unpredictability of encountering the other.

4.3 Guilt, shame and psychological suffering



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Several clinical studies describe the presence of guilt, shame, and self-reproach among men who rate their pornography consumption as excessive or incompatible with their values moral, religious, or marital issues. In some cases, the suffering stems less from the quantity of time spent and more of the feeling of "losing control" or living a kind of secret life, dissonant in relation to public or family image.

In a psychoanalytic reading, these affects can be understood as an expression of conflicts between rigid superego demands and modes of instinctual satisfaction that escape the Idealization of the self. Pornography, as a space for poorly symbolized fantasies, can function both as an outlet for repressed content, as well as intensifying feelings of worthlessness.

when the individual realizes they are unable to limit their own behavior.

In Winnicottian terms, the absence of a sufficiently welcoming environment for the Suffering can encourage the solitary recourse to pornography as an attempt at self-comfort, but without The recognition of the other would allow one to process shame, fragility, and dependence.

4.4 Implications for psychoanalytic clinical work with men

A review of empirical and neuroscientific studies, articulated with the contributions of Freud and Winnicott allows us to raise some directions for psychoanalytic practice with men who bring the pornography topic:

1. Listening without judgment: it is essential to create a space where the patient can talk about the use of pornography without fear of being labeled an "addict" or a "deviant," acknowledging that the symptom is a way of trying to cope with anxieties and shortcomings.
2. Exploring the realm of fantasy: instead of focusing solely on the amount of time or frequency
In terms of usage, psychoanalysis is interested in the content of fantasies, the affects mobilized, and the manner in which they are used.
How pornography relates to experiences of loneliness, rejection, trauma, or idealization.
3. Connection with the body and with the bond: complaints of sexual dysfunction can be addressed not only as a physiological problem, but as an expression of conflicts surrounding delivery, of vulnerability and the possibility of "being seen" by the other person in the sexual scene.
4. Dialogue with other approaches: the inclusion of CSBD in ICD-11, as well as proposals for Cognitive, behavioral, and pharmacological interventions indicate the importance of care. interdisciplinary. Psychoanalysis can be added to these strategies, offering a space for
A deeper exploration of the subjective meanings of the symptom.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Excessive consumption of digital pornography by adult men is a phenomenon. complex, situated at the intersection of technological transformations, models of masculinity,



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Instinctual organization and concrete living conditions. The integrative review conducted shows that:

- There is consistent evidence that problematic pornography use is associated with changes in reward systems, the subjective experience of loss of control, and functional impairments in different areas of life;
- Observational studies suggest a correlation between heavy pornography consumption and dysfunctions. Sexual activity, especially in young men, although longitudinal research is still needed. that better distinguish the factors involved;
- Feelings of guilt, shame, and isolation occupy a central position in the subjective experience of these individuals. men, which requires therapeutic approaches that go beyond simply prescribing abstinence. or reducing screen time;
- Psychoanalysis offers valuable tools for understanding the place of pornography in the economy. Psychic, articulating fantasy, desire, superego, and social bond, and can engage in productive dialogue. with findings from neuroscience and contemporary psychiatry.

Recognizing problematic pornography use as a mental health issue and, in some cases...

In contexts of public health, this implies investing in critical sex education and policies to promote...

digital health and expanding access to psychological and psychotherapeutic treatments, including psychoanalytic approaches. Instead of reducing the phenomenon to a moral debate or a "disease of "brain" is about bringing the subject, their history, their connections, and their possibilities back into focus.

To build more integrated, creative ways of achieving satisfaction that are compatible with self-care and care for others.

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