

Research Paper

## Greater Frequency of Pornography Consumption is Associated with Decreased Self-Esteem and Increased Body Image Issues in Indian Cisgender Men

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The hypermasculine body ideals presented in pornography are often considered templates for individual body image and may affect the self-esteem of men. Gay men experience greater body image issues, higher dissatisfaction with their bodies, and more interest in body modification than straight men. However, there is an evident lack of relevant data in the Indian context, particularly for the gay population. **Objective:** The goal of this study was to assess the impact of frequency of pornography consumption on self-esteem (SE), social physique anxiety (SPA), and drive for muscularity (DM) in gay and straight Indian men. **Methods:** Indian college students (all cisgender men; n = 105) aged 18-25 years and self-identifying as gay (n = 55) or straight (n = 50) participated in this study. Using standardized measures for SE, SPA, DM, and qualitative measures for sexuality and time spent watching pornography, we explored the following parameters: the relationship between SE, SPA, and DM and time spent watching pornography; the differences in SE, SPA, and DM between gay and straight men; and the difference in time spent watching pornography between gay and straight men. An independent sample t-test, a Mann-Whitney U test, and a correlational matrix were used for analysis. **Results:** We found that gay men spent more time watching pornography than straight men. Though gay men had higher SPA than straight men, SE and DM were not significantly different between the two. Further, there was a strong positive correlation between time spent watching pornography and SPA, a significant negative correlation between the DM and SE, a strong negative correlation between SE and SPA, and a strong positive correlation between SPA and the DM. **Conclusion:** The frequency of pornography consumption has a direct impact on body image and self-esteem issues in both gay and straight men. Gay men consume more pornography than straight men and are thus at a higher risk of developing these issues.

**Keywords:** *Self-esteem, social physique anxiety, drive for muscularity, pornography, gay men, straight men, homosexual, heterosexual*

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Given the vast reach of the term, defining pornography comes with quite a few controversies. According to Peter and Valkenburg (2016), pornography is defined as exposure to any explicit material used to cause sexual arousal. Studies show that gay men are more likely than straight men to view pornography regularly (Downing et al., 2016). The difference between these two groups concerning pornography and how it affects certain domains of their individuality is an intriguing area.

For a long time now, most models for studying pornography and its effects function on the premise of women's subjugation (Bishop, 2015). An example of these frameworks could be the "Anti-Pornography Feminist" framework conceptualized by Linz and Malamuth (1993). Pornography, with its idealized body types and showcasing the perfect way to go about it, plays a massive role in the perception of individuals' bodies and sex altogether. The objectification and hyper-focusing on women's beauty ideals have been widespread, beauty pageants and fashion magazines like Playboy stand testimony. The effects of media images like this on women's perception of themselves and the gradual trend towards a preference for more thin-figured women have been studied and documented for a long time (Lin & Kulik, 2002; Davis & Oswalt, 1992).

The Adonis Complex, addressed by Pope et al. (2000), talks about how men are coming to be preoccupied with their body image with time. The issues of media portrayal and their effect on men have not been looked into extensively. For example, the study of eating disorders was initially exclusively focused on women (Pope et al., 2000). It is now accepted that men are as prone, if not more, to be obsessed with their bodies. Pope et al. suggest that the self-ideal discrepancy concerning their bodies and the bodies portrayed is worse for men than for women. With years of exposure to objectifying media, women have been sensitized to learn to ignore or confront these portrayals. At the same time, it is not socially acceptable for men to openly speak about these issues. In another study by Siever (1994), it was found that gay men and straight women were more likely to be dissatisfied with their body images due to the overemphasis on physical attractiveness to please men. With this dissatisfaction and desire for a muscular body also comes the anxiety of the chances of being unappealing to their partners.

Along with this, in the world of gay pornography, not very much unlike straight pornography, a very rampant theme is the hypermasculinity attributed to the dominant of the performers (Morrison, 2004) and the attractiveness of these models. Body ideals presented in media like these are often considered sources for individual body image, which may also affect self-esteem (McArdle & Hill, 2009).

In the gay community, however, pornography was initially a powerful means of validating one's sexual identity and a source of education regarding gay sex (Corneau et al., 2020). In a time with nearly no mainstream social representation of homosexuality, pornography was the only evidence of the existence of identity as such. However, as technology and social models have been advancing with time, pornography's role as a validation source has likely decreased (Morrison, 2004). Although very applicable to the Western world at the time, Morrison's findings are not very relevant to the Indian context given the lack of representation of the gay community at that time and even today.

This study hence looks into the frequency of pornography consumption and its effects on self-esteem, social physique anxiety, and drive for muscularity in gay and straight men.

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The lack of literature on gay pornography and its usage and effects (if any) in the Indian context is astounding. While scientific inquiry on the impact of gay male pornography has begun only recently (Bishop, 2015), the wave is yet to hit the Indian culture.

In gay pornography, a rampant theme is a hypermasculinity attributed to the dominant of the performers (Morrison, 2004) associated with the submissive partners' degradation. Yet, also with the devaluation and sexualization of men who are seen as the "others" (men of color, men without the "perfect body," men with feminine characteristics), they are also dehumanized by using terms usually used against women like "cunt", "bitch" and "whore". (Kendall & Funk, 2004).

In a study conducted by Duggan and McCreary (2014) on 96 men, both homosexual and straight, it was found that gay men were more concerned with their body image than straight men were. This was accompanied by poorer eating attitudes and more concerns with being thin. Gay men were more likely to go on diets to lose weight than straight men. Overall it was seen that gay men were more prone to be dissatisfied with their bodies than straight men. In a similar study conducted amongst Norwegian gay and bisexual men by Kvaem, Traen, and Lantaffi (2015), it was found that men who considered themselves to be thin and athletic also thought themselves handsome while men who thought themselves to be beefy or average did not hold the same belief. Out of both these groups, men with athletic/muscular body types were considered the most attractive, and this group also reported higher self-esteem. In an online study by Peplau et al. (2009) consisting of 776 adult men, gay men were more prone to have a low evaluation of their appearance and higher preoccupation with being overweight than straight men. A study conducted by Morrison et al. (2004) showed that gay men had more bad body image. Another survey by Frederick and Essay Ali (2016) looked into the same topic, looking into sexual orientation and body mass index across five national U.S studies, again found that gay men reported higher dissatisfaction with their body than straight men, more interest in body modification than straight men and more social comparisons than straight men,

According to another study by Fales et al. (2016), it was found that men were more likely than women to care about appearance when seeking long-term partners. This could imply that gay men have a greater social need to pay attention to their appearance than straight men.

While studies like these have been conducted, their lack in the Indian context is evident, more so in the gay population. Hence, this study aims to fill the gap in studying the effects of pornography on gay men and its impact on straight men.

### ***Research Questions***

- Is there a relationship between the frequency of pornography usage and self-esteem, anxiety, and a drive towards muscularity in college-going Indian students?
- Are there any differences in self-esteem, social physique anxiety, and drive for muscularity between gay and straight men?

### ***Hypotheses***

H1: There will be no significant difference in time spent watching pornography between gay and straight men

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H2: There will be no significant relationship between time spent watching pornography and self-esteem.

H3: There will be no significant relationship between time spent watching pornography and social physique anxiety.

H4: There will be no significant relationship between the drive for muscularity and time spent watching pornography.

H5: There will be no difference in self-esteem between straight and gay men

H6: There will be no difference in social physique anxiety between straight and gay men

H7: There will be no difference in the drive for muscularity between straight and gay men.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

#### *Tools Used*

Information on pornography consumption habits was gathered in an initial screening questionnaire along with demographic data.

For assessing self-esteem, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965) was used. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is a 10 item scale used in the Indian context and has proven to be reliable and valid.

For social physique anxiety, Social Physique Anxiety Scale (SPAS) (R. Leary, 2013) was used. The social physique anxiety scale (SPAS) is a 12 item self-report scale to measure social anxiety related to the physique. SPAS was developed by M. R. Leary (2013). It demonstrated both high internal and test-retest reliability. The scale has been used in the Indian context and has proven to be reliable and valid.

For assessing desire towards muscularity, the Drive for Muscularity Scale (DMS; McCreary & Sasse, 2007) was used. Drive for Muscularity Scale is a 15 item self-report scale that both men and women can use. The reliability estimates are ranging from .85 to .91, while the validity scores were high too.

#### *Sample*

- The expected number of participants for this study is 200 college-going males, falling under the age group of 18-25; 100 gay and 100 straight.
- The primary sampling method in this study is the snowball sampling method. After identifying a few individuals fit for the study using convenience sampling, the snowball method will be used.

#### *Inclusion criteria*

Indian college-going students who self-identify as exclusively gay or straight and consume pornographic media.

#### *Exclusion criteria*

Men who aren't college students; men who identify as sexually curious or bisexual, or men who have an active career based on their physique (models/bodybuilders, etc.), men above post-graduate levels of education.

#### **Operational Definitions**

**Self-Esteem:** Self-esteem is an individual's subjective evaluation of their own worth, encompassing beliefs about oneself (for example, "I am unloved", "I am worthy") as well as

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emotional states, such as triumph, despair, pride, and shame. (Hewitt, J.P., 2009). It is a measure of global self-worth based on the positive and negative feelings about oneself, as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

**Social Physique Anxiety:** The degree of anxiety faced on observing one’s physique (one’s body form and structure, especially focusing on, body tone, muscular tone, and general body proportions), as measured by the Social Physique Anxiety Scale (SPAS).

**Drive for Muscularity:** The drive for muscularity is one’s perception of themselves where they believe that they aren’t muscular enough and need some bulk in their body frame, in the form of muscle mass as measured by the Drive for Muscularity Scale.

### ***Procedure***

- Identification of participants.
- Presentation of debriefing script and consent form through google forms.
- Presentation of the tools to the participants for data collection through google forms.
- Analysis of data using Jamovi

## **RESULTS**

### ***Data Analysis***

The analysis was done using Jamovi. A correlational matrix was used for hypotheses: H2, H3, and H4 to see if there exists any significant relationship between frequency of pornography consumption and self-esteem, social physique anxiety, and a desire for muscularity, between gay and straight men respectively,

For hypotheses, H1, H5, H6, and H7, based on the results of a normality test, an independent sample t-test or a Mann Whitney u-test was used to see if there was any significant difference between the frequency of pornography consumption self-esteem, social physique anxiety, and a drive for muscularity between gay and straight men respectively

***Table 1: Descriptives for Time Spent Watching Pornography, Physique Anxiety, Self-Esteem and Drive for Muscularity***

	Sexuality	Min/week	SPAS Total Score	RSES Total Score	DMS Total Score
<b>N</b>	1	53	53	53	53
	2	52	52	52	52
<b>Mean</b>	1	109	41.3	26.1	37.6
	2	84.1	35.4	28.1	36.5
<b>Standard Deviation</b>	1	77.5	7.71	5.34	13.3
	2	106	9.68	5.29	12.9
<b>Shapiro-Wilk p</b>	1	<.001	0.747	0.675	0.305
	2	<.001	0.114	0.232	0.213

The table above consists of the mean, standard deviation, and Shapiro-Wilk’s p-value for time spent watching pornography in minutes per week, social physique anxiety scores, self-esteem scores, and scores for the drive for muscularity.

The Shapiro Wilk value for time spent watching pornography is less than .001 for both gay and straight men, showing that the data for time spent watching pornography is not normally

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distributed. The scores for social physique anxiety, for gay and straight men, are 0.747, and 0.114 respectively showing that the data is normally distributed in both groups. For self-esteem we have 0.675 and 0.232 for gay and straight men respectively, again, showing the data is normally distributed. The scores for the drive for muscularity for gay and straight men are 0.305 and 0.213 respectively, showing that the data is normally distributed.

**Table 2: Mann Whitney-U for Time Spent Watching Pornography Between Gay and Straight Men.**

		<b>Statistic</b>	<b>p</b>
Min/Week	Mann-Whitney U	955	0.007

The p-value for the Mann-Whitney U test is 0.007 suggesting that the mean of time spent watching pornography differs for gay and straight men. From the mean of time spent watching pornography from *table 1*, we see gay men spend an average of 109 minutes per week consuming pornographic media, while straight men spend 84.1 minutes for the same. Hence, we conclude that gay men spend more time watching pornography than straight men do.

**Table 3: Independent Samples T-test for RSES, SPAS, and DMS Between Gay and Straight Men**

		<b>Statistic</b>	<b>p</b>
RSES Total Score	Student's t	-1.911	0.059
DMS Total Score	Student's t	0.447	0.656
SPAS Total Score	Student's t	3.456	<.001

The student's t-test p-value for RSES between gay and straight men is 0.059 which is not significant, hence there seems to be no difference in self-esteem between gay and straight men. In the case of Drive for Muscularity, the p-value is 0.656 which again is not significant, suggesting that a difference in the drive for muscularity does not exist between gay and straight men. In the case of SPAS, we see that the p-value is less than .001 suggesting the existence of a significant difference in the means for the scores for social physique anxiety between gay and straight men.

**Table 4: Correlation Matrix for Time Spent Watching Pornography, Self-Esteem, Drive for Muscularity and Social Physique Anxiety**

		<b>Min/Week</b>	<b>RSES Total Score</b>	<b>DMS Total Score</b>	<b>SPAS Total Score</b>
<b>Min/Week</b>	Spearman's rho	-			
	p-value	-			
<b>RSES Total Score</b>	Spearman's rho	-0.186	-		
	p-value	0.057	-		
<b>DMS Total Score</b>	Spearman's rho	0.049	-0.240*	-	
	p-value	0.623	0.014	-	
<b>SPAS Total Score</b>	Spearman's rho	0.385***	-0.533***	0.417***	-
	p-value	<.001	<.001	<.001	-

Note \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

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According to the table above, we see there is no significant relationship between time spent watching pornography and self-esteem as the p-value for Spearman's correlation is 0.057. The same can be said for the relationship between time spent watching pornography and the drive for muscularity with a p-value of .632. In the case of social physique anxiety, we see there is a strong significant positive correlation between time spent watching pornography and social physique anxiety with a p-value of less than .001, suggesting the higher the time spent watching pornography, the higher an individual's social physique anxiety is.

We also see, that there exists a significant negative correlation between the drive for muscularity and self-esteem, with a p-value of 0.014, suggesting that the lower the self-esteem, the higher their drive for muscularity is. We see a strong significant negative relationship between self-esteem and social physique anxiety, with a p-value of less than 0.001, suggesting that the higher one's social physique anxiety, the lower their self-esteem. A strong positive correlation is seen between social physique anxiety and the drive for muscularity among men, suggesting that the higher one's drive for muscularity is, the higher the social physique anxiety is.

Based on the findings, H1 is rejected as there exists a significant difference in time spent watching pornography between gay and straight men, H2 is accepted as there was no significant relationship between time spent watching pornography and self-esteem, H3 is rejected as the results indicated a significant relationship between time spent watching pornography and social physique anxiety, H4 is accepted as there was no significant relationship between the drive for muscularity and time spent watching pornography, H5 is accepted as there was no difference in self-esteem between straight and gay men, H6 is rejected as the results indicated a difference in social physique anxiety between straight and gay men, and H7 is accepted as there was no difference in the drive for muscularity between straight and gay men.

### **DISCUSSION**

This study indicates that gay men tend to consume more pornography than straight men do. This might indicate a more accepting attitude towards pornography in the gay community or a more acceptance towards admitting consumption of pornography, representing perceived acceptance. Another explanation for this could be a deviation from the status quo due to the perceived unacceptance of the "gay lifestyle". On the other side, the narrative of straight men might revolve around pornography being inherently "dirty" hence a denial to use it or a denial to admit using it.

Apart from this, the results indicate that gay men are more likely to have social physique anxiety than straight men, this is corroborated by the significant relationship between time spent watching pornography and social physique anxiety. Given the strong relationship, social physique anxiety has shown to have with self-esteem and a drive for muscularity, men with higher social physique anxiety are likely to have lower self-esteem and are more concerned with their body image. Hence, while there were no significant differences found between the two groups in terms of self-esteem and drive for muscularity, the findings for social physique anxiety suggest that gay men are more likely to have lower self-esteem and a greater drive for muscularity.

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### *Limitations*

There are several limitations to this study that need to be addressed. Since this study was conducted online, the geographic location of the participants cannot be known. Hence caution should be taken when generalizing the results to specific parts of the country. Another point to be taken under consideration is that a prerequisite to be a part of the study was access to the internet and coming across the poster and the link to the study.

Finally, a core assumption in this study was gay and straight pornography are similar in terms of their content and effect on the viewers. However, these two forms of media are distinct in terms of their content and thus might have different implications on the consumer. For example, since the focus in gay pornography is the male body, it is likely that the male body receives more attention than in straight pornography, making gay pornography put more emphasis on the attractiveness of the male body.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical clearance was sought from the institutional review board of Christ (Deemed to be) University, Bangalore. After giving them the debriefing script and asking them to contact the researcher for any further queries, informed consent was taken before including them as participants. They were informed that participation is on an entirely voluntary basis, and they hold the right to withdraw at any point of the study. Participants were to be notified if there were any harm or risks to them, a need of which did not arise. They were assured that confidentiality will be maintained at all points of the study. Data were de-identified before analysis.

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### ***Conflict of Interest***

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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