

## Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in the Digital Age: The Influence of Pornography Use and Emotional Suppression in Young Adults

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### Abstract

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**Purpose:** The present study aimed to find the relationship between Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults. Co-relational cross-sectional research was used in this research study.

**Methods:** A sample of N=300 participants was selected through purposive sampling technique. Data was collected through a Demographic Sheet, Pornography Consumption Inventory (Reid et al., 2011), Emotion Regulation Scale (Durrani& Mahmood, 2016) and Compulsive Sexual Behavior

Inventory (Miner et al., 2017). Results were analyzed through Correlational analysis and Hierarchical regression.

**Results:** Results suggested that Pornography Use and Emotional Suppression were significantly positively correlated with sexual compulsive behaviors in young adults.

Emotional Suppression was found to be significant positive predictor of Sexual Compulsive Behaviors.

**Conclusion:** This research can help in future studies to develop appropriate intervention plan and techniques to cater pornographic consumption and related sexual behaviors taking into consideration the role of emotional regulation.

## INTRODUCTION

A developmental stage that is typically spanning from late adolescence to mid-twenties is called Young Adulthood. Individuals in this stage are called Young Adults. This stage comprises of independence, formation of identity and developing meaningful relationships (Arnett, 2014). Young adulthood is a phase where individuals face many transitional changes. The changes that are associated with the transitions from adolescence to adulthood bring instability to individuals as he needs to adjust major areas of life, acquire new skills which can be social, academic or personal. This transition phase requires individuals to be independent of their family, sometimes there is transition from established group of friends. A successful transfer to young adulthood will help individual to form a basis for further future stages of development and foundations (Lenz, 2001).

Arnett (2014) developed a theory emerging adulthood that characterizes young adults from age range 18–25 as navigating a unique developmental phase that is comprised of exploration of self-identity, instability, self-determination, and a sense of being in adolescence and full adulthood. This phase is often influenced by transitions in education, career, and relationships that allow young adults to explore more possibilities for their future. While this stage fosters personal growth and independence, it can also result in consequences such as heightened anxiety due to uncertainty, delays in

achieving traditional adult milestones that are set by society and culture (e.g., stable employment or marriage), and economic vulnerability.

Madigan et al. (2018) conducted a research study to identify the presence of unwanted online explicit content exposure in youth. The findings of the research study suggested that, on average, 20.3% of individuals had been exposed to unwanted online sexual content. The results indicated that a significant portion of internet users, particularly young individuals, encounter risk of being exposed to adult content.

Research by Coyne et al., (2013) was conducted to review the impact of digital media use in emerging adulthood. The results of the research study showed that seeing specific kinds of content on media can have both positive and negative outcomes in young adulthood, that includes, aggression, prosocial behavior, body image concerns, sexual behavior, friendship quality, and academic performance. The results also showed that young adults use the media to fulfill specific needs like autonomy, identity, and intimacy needs which means that exposure to adult content is used to fulfill intimacy needs of young adults.

Pornography use refers to the viewing or consumption of content that stimulates sexual thoughts or feeling and include explicit depictions or descriptions of sexual acts involving the genitals (Tan et al., 2022). Wood (2011) conducted a research study to identify role of internet in the escalation of sexually compulsive behaviors. The results of the study identified a progression where individuals move from casual internet use to online pornographic content that leads them sexual compulsive behaviors. The findings suggested that this escalation is associated to the internet's ability to present immediate, Anonymous access to a vast array of explicit content, which can challenge

personal defenses and affect ego and superego functioning leading pornography consumption with a consequence of sexually compulsive behaviors.

Bibi et al. (2022) conducted a research study for understanding of key factors contributing to problematic pornography use among men and women in Pakistan. The findings indicated that pornography consumption in this population is influenced by underlying psychological factors including depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. These negative emotions contribute to pornography use through to key pathways. First, they trigger craving for pornography which impairs and individual's inhibitory control, making it harder to resist urges. Second, these emotions also lead to maladaptive sexual coping mechanisms, where individuals use pornography as a way to manage distress.

Wang and Li (2023) conducted a research study to find out the deficits in emotional processing in individuals with problematic pornography consumption. The study highlighted that male with problematic pornography use displayed altered emotional processing compared to healthy control. The findings suggested that habitual pornography use impairs the ability to effectively process and respond to information causing emotional arousal, potentially further leading to emotional suppression.

Testa et al. (2024) conducted a study to examine the relationship between emotional dysregulation and coping strategies in the context of problematic pornography use. The study was based on the narrative review of previous literature related to emotional dysregulation in relation to problematic pornography use. The results of the study reported that intense pornography use was linked with motives of avoidance of emotions for pornography consumptions, difficulties in emotional regulation and dysfunctional coping of stress.

The conscious inhibition of behavior that is emotionally expressive while emotionally aroused is called Emotional Suppression (Seah & Friedman, 2024).

Gross proposed a Process model of emotion regulation theory. According to this theory Emotional Suppression is identified as response focused strategy which is used to prevent the outward expressions of emotions after they have generated. Suppression might temporarily reduce visible emotional reactions but it does not address the underlying emotional experience that often leads to physiological responses. Frequent reliance on suppression can have negative consequences, including emotional dysregulation, reduced emotional awareness, and difficulty processing emotions effectively. Over time, these effects may influence psychological issues such as anxiety, depression, and strained interpersonal relationships, as suppression impairs emotional authenticity and social connection (Keha et al., 2024)

Compulsive sexual behavior is a condition characterized by an ongoing inability to regulate strong, recurring sexual urges or impulses, leading to repeated sexual behaviors that cause considerable distress or disruption in personal, family, social, educational and professional aspects of life (Marchetti, 2023). Incidence of sexual compulsive behavior is impacted by framework of risk and protective factors. Difficult childhood events involving physical, sexual and emotional abuses are linked with compulsive sexual behavior in adulthood increasing the vulnerability (Sahithya & Kashyap, 2022). Furthermore, negative sexual self-concept is a risk factor for compulsive sexual behaviors as individual engages more in these behaviors. Factors like social rejection make individuals vulnerable towards sexual compulsive behaviors. Excessive use of pornography can lead individual towards sexual compulsive behaviors (Mollaei et al., 2023).

Moreover, several protective factors act as barrier against development of sexual compulsive behaviors. Participation in productive activities and health literacy or awareness regarding sexual health protects individuals from indulging in compulsive sexual behaviors. Emotional regulation and awareness of negative emotions can act as a protective factor from leading individuals towards sexual compulsivity (Mollaei et al., 2023).

Leppink et al. (2016) conducted a research study to find the prevalence of problematic sexual behavior which is a term used interchangeably with compulsive sexual behavior in young adults. The results of the research study showed that out of 492 participants with age range of 18-29, 11% reported current presence of compulsive sexual behaviors.

Leon Festinger proposed Social Comparison Theory which explains that individuals evaluate themselves by comparing their traits, behaviors and experiences with those of others. In relation to Pornography Use, individuals may compare their own bodies, sexual performance or relationships to idealized portrayal in pornographic content. This can lead to unrealistic expectations, dissatisfaction with oneself or one's partner and feelings of inadequacy. With frequent comparisons over time, it may contribute to compulsive pornography use as a means of escape or validation that result in negative consequences such as dissatisfaction in relationships, distorted perceptions of intimacy and emotional distress (Goldsmith et al., 2017).

A research study was conducted in 2020 to investigate the link of sexual compulsive behaviors with suppression of negative emotions. The results showed that Compulsive sexual behaviors were associated with emotional dysregulation, which underpinned difficulties in managing sexual impulses and behaviors. Difficulties in

emotion regulation may mediate the effects of risk factors such as childhood sexual abuse and insecure attachment, contributing to Compulsive Sexual Behavior symptom severity. (Lew-Starowicz et al., 2020)

### Aim

This study aimed to explore the relationship between Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults.

### Objectives

Following were the objectives of the research study,

- To find the relationship between Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults.
- To analyze the Predictors of Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults.

### Rationale

A research study reported 72% of Pakistani youngsters consuming pornographic material and leading to risky sexual behaviors in them (Ali et al., 2024). It is critical yet under researched area in socio-cultural context of Pakistan despite cultural and legal restrictions.

Similarly, suppressing emotions can lead to increased psychological distress and maladaptive coping behaviors such as compulsive sexual activities (Reid et al., 2011). Within Pakistani and many other Eastern cultures and nations, it is generally considered taboo to express ideas or disclosing about sexuality and societal norms surrounding sexuality are largely shaped by conservative values, where open discussions about sexual behaviors and emotional well-being remain taboo (Ehsan et al., 2019). This cultural backdrop creates a unique environment where individuals may experience conflicting pressures between traditional expectations and exposure to globalized

media, including pornography, which is easily accessible despite being socially stigmatized (Hald & Mulya, 2013).

There is existing western literature for these variables but in Pakistan these dynamics are still under studied where the cultural, religious, and familial constructs significantly influence behavioral patterns. This gap underscores the need to explore how these factors interplay in shaping the emotional and sexual behaviors of young adults in Pakistan.

### Research Question

What is the relationship between Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults?

### Research Design

Co relational Cross sectional study design was used in this research study.

### Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample (N=300) of university students with age range 18 to 25 was selected through purposive sampling strategy. In the research study, the collection of data was done from different universities of public and private educational sectors from Lahore.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were followed for the participants for this research study,

- Participants with age range from 18 to 25 were included in this research study.
- Any participants with physical disability were excluded from this research study.
- Married individuals were excluded from this research.

## Measures

Collection of data was done from the sample through measures that contained a demographic sheet and three self-reported measures that are as below:

### *Demographic Questionnaire*

A demographic questionnaire about basic information of participants was used. It consisted of Age of participants, gender (Men or Women), Family System (Nuclear or Joint), Institute (Public or Private), Education Year, Fathers and Mother's Occupation and Education.

### *Pornography Consumption Inventory (PCI: Reid et al., 2011)*

Pornography Consumption Inventory developed in 2011 was used to measure Pornography Use in Young Adults. The scale comprises of 15 items and is subdivided into 4 factors Sexual Curiosity, Emotional Avoidance, Excitement Seeking and Sexual Pleasure. It is a 5-point rating scale with 1 (never like me) to 5 (often like me). The Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for this scale is .83 that shows high internal reliability.

### *Emotion Regulation Scale (ERS: Durrani & Mahmood, 2016)*

Emotion Regulation scale developed by Sara Mehmood Durrani and Zahid Mahmood in 2016 was used to measure Emotional Suppression in Young Adults. The scale comprises of 50 items which are subdivided into two factors from which the only the factor of Emotional Dysregulation was used for this research. The Cronbach alpha value of this scale is .93.

### *Compulsive Sexual Behavior Inventory (CSBI: Miner et al., 2017)*

Compulsive Sexual Behavior Inventory was used to measure Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults. The scale consists of 3 factors that are control, abuse and violence. The subscale of control factor was used in this research study. It consists of 13

items and has a 5-point rating scale which has a range from 0 (never) to 5 (Very Frequently). Test- retest reliability for this scale is .93.

### Procedure

Initially, approval for the title of the study was taken from Institution and then permission was taken from different private and public universities for collecting data. The aims and objectives of the research study were elaborated for permission. Data was collected in the form of group administration in which proper introduction of the present study was given to the participants and a written consent was taken. Data was collected after providing instructions and the rights of the participants regarding their participation and confidentiality. After data collection, statistical analyses were performed on data and then results were summarized in the research report.

### Ethical Considerations

Appropriate Ethical guidelines were taken into consideration while conducting the research study like, confidentiality of participants was maintained and any potential harm was avoided. Informed consent was taken from participants and their right of withdrawal was explained to them. Permission from respective authors of the measurement scales was taken and data was kept original without any fabrication.

### Statistical Analysis

Descriptive and Inferential Statistical Analysis was performed on the data using SPSS. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to organize and summarize the data collected. Correlation analysis was used to find relationship between Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults. Furthermore, Regression analysis was used to find the significant predictors of Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults.

Results

Table 1

*Mean and Standard Deviation of Demographic Variables (N=300)*

Variables	M	SD
Age	20.3	1.59

Note. M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation

Descriptive analysis in Table 2 shows mean and standard deviation for age of participants. Results show that the mean age of participants was 20.3 whereas the standard deviation was 1.59.

Table 2

*Pearson Correlation between Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults (N=300)*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1.PCI	30.91	14.23	1	.92***	.93***	.88***	.91***	-.01	.36***
2.PCI-F1	7.71	4.03	-	1	.79***	.74***	.80***	.01	.33***
3.PCI-F2	10.81	4.85	-	-	1	.77***	.79***	-.001	.34***
4.PCI-F3	6.30	3.38	-	-	-	1	.75***	-.01	.30***
5.PCI-F4	6.09	3.32	-	-	-	-	1	-.05	.34***
6.EDS	33.83	16.15	-	-	-	-	-	1	.14*
7.CSBI	25.92	11.60	-	-	-	-	-	-	1

Note. M= Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, PCI=Pornography Use, PCI-F1=Sexual Curiosity, PCI-F2=Emotional Avoidance, PCI-F3=Excitement Seeking, PCI-F4=Sexual Pleasure, EDS=Emotional Suppression, CSBI= Sexual Compulsive Behaviors, p\* < 0.05, p\*\* < 0.01, p\*\*\* < 0.001

Pearson correlation analysis was run to find out the relationship between Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults. Results show that all the factors of Pornography Use that are F1=Sexual Curiosity, F2=Emotional Avoidance, F3=Excitement Seeking, F4=Sexual Pleasure and Emotional Suppression have significant weak positive correlation with Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults.

**Table 3**

*Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Predictors of Sexual Compulsive Behavior in Young Adults (N=300)*

Variables	B	SEB	$\beta$	95% of CI		R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
				LL	UL		
Step 1						.11	.11***
Age	-1.08	.41	-.15**	-1.88	-.29		
Institute	-5.25	1.30	-.23***	-7.80	-2.70		
Gender	-3.16	1.40	-.14*	-5.90	-.42		
Area of living	2.10	1.57	.08	-1.00	5.19		
Family system	1.48	1.44	.06	-1.37	4.32		
Current living	.01	1.44	.00	-2.83	2.85		
Step 2						.19	.16***
PCI-F1	.26	.29	.09	-.31	.83		
PCI-F2	.30	.25	.12	-.19	.78		
PCI-F3	-.07	.31	-.02	-.70	.54		
PCI-F4	.43	.36	.12	-.27	1.13		
Step 3						.21	.02**
EDS	.11	.04	.15**	.03	.18		

Note. CI = confidence interval, LL = lower limit, UL = upper limit, R<sup>2</sup> = Coefficient of Determination,  $\Delta R^2$  = Change in R<sup>2</sup>, PCI-F1=Sexual Curiosity, PCI-F2=Emotional Avoidance, PCI-F3=Excitement Seeking, PCI-F4=Sexual Pleasure, EDS=Emotional Suppression

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

The hierarchical regression analysis showed that demographic factors explained 11% of the variance in the outcome, with age, institute, and gender emerging as significant predictors, while other demographic variables were non-significant. In the second step, the factors of Pornography Use collectively increased the explained variance by 16%, indicating their overall contribution, though none of the individual dimensions reached statistical significance. In the final step, the inclusion of Emotional Suppression significantly improved the model by adding 2% additional variance, establishing it as a meaningful positive predictor. Altogether, the full model explained 21% of the variance, suggesting that demographic characteristics, Pornography Use and Emotional Suppression jointly influence the outcome. Among all predictors, institute, age, gender, and Emotional Suppression were the most influential.

### Discussion

The current study was carried out to find out the relationship between Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults. It was a correlational, cross sectional study having survey methodology with the sample of N=300 participants. Data was collected from different Government and Private Universities of Lahore using purposive sampling. The measures for data collection included a Demographic Sheet, Pornography Consumption Inventory that comprises of 15 items, Emotion Regulation Scale that comprises of 25 items and Compulsive Sexual Behavior Inventory that comprises of 13 items.

The primary hypothesis was analyzed which explored the relationship of Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults. Findings suggested that Pornography Use and Emotional Suppression were significantly positively correlated with Sexual Compulsive Behaviors. In reviewing the

literature, one study by Ali et al. (2024) identified the association among pornography use and compulsive sexual behaviors in Pakistani young adults. The results found increased use of pornography on daily and weekly basis and associated with sexual compulsive behaviors like sexual imitation as watched in pornographic content and masturbation after every exposure to such content.

Moreover, in another study by Samadifard et al. (2021) which explored the role of emotional regulation strategies in predicting compulsive sexual behaviors, the results identified strong associations of maladaptive strategies of emotional regulation i.e emotional suppression in predicting compulsive sexual behaviors.

Additionally, the predictors of sexual compulsive behaviors in young adults were analyzed. The findings suggested Age, Institute and Emotional Suppression as predictors of sexual compulsive behaviors in young adults. Lew-Starowicz et al. (2020) conducted a research study to investigate the link between emotional suppression and sexual compulsive behaviors. The results showed that Compulsive sexual behaviors were associated with suppression of negative emotions, which underpinned difficulties in managing sexual impulses and behaviors.

Moreover, the findings didn't suggest pornography use as significant predictor of sexual compulsive behaviors in young adults. It might be due to different culture factors in shaping coping mechanisms for issues in individual's life. In reviewing the literature, Sue et al. (2009) explains that individual's cultural background has a significant impact in shaping coping styles of dealing with different mental health issues in individuals. Collectivists societies emphasize on maintain social and group harmony that shapes their coping so might be the reason the likelihood of pornography use is restricted.

## Implications

Understanding the connection Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression, and Compulsive Sexual Behaviors can help mental health professionals in developing targeted interventions for young adults in Pakistan. By increasing awareness of these issues thorough awareness workshops, it can aid in reducing the stigma and encourage individuals to seek professional help. Pakistan's socio-cultural and religious values favor modesty and restraint in sexual matters. The study's findings can help policymakers, clinicians and educators develop culturally sensitive programs that address the psychological and behavioral effects of pornography use while respecting societal norms.

The study can help in incorporating discussions on emotional regulation and coping mechanisms in educational settings so that it can help young adults develop healthier ways to manage stress and emotions, helping in reducing the potential likelihood of pornography use and compulsive sexual behaviors. The study highlights the need for open and informed conversations about sexuality and emotional well-being within families. By encouraging supportive parent-child communication, young individuals can navigate their emotions in a healthy way.

## Limitations and Suggestions

- Due to the sensitivity of the variables of current study, it was difficult to collect data from participants as they were hesitant and reluctant to share their data on this topic despite assuring them with proper confidentiality.
- Data was only collected from few universities of Lahore. A diverse data from different cities might enable an improvement in the generalizability of the findings of this study.

- For future researches, these variables can be studied with different social domains and their relation in leading towards pornography use and compulsive sexual behaviors.

### Conclusion

To conclude, this study analyzed the connection between Pornography Use, Emotional Suppression and Sexual Compulsive Behaviors in Young Adults. According to the current research findings, pornography use and emotional suppression is highly associated with sexual compulsive behaviors in young adults. Considering Pakistan's societal framework, culturally sensitive interventions, educational awareness, and psychological support are required to address these issues. Future research should further examine the long-term psychological and social effects of pornography use in young adults while developing strategies to promote healthier emotional expression and responsible digital consumption. By integrating mental health awareness, family support, and policy-driven initiatives, society can work toward fostering emotional well-being and reducing the risks associated with compulsive sexual behaviors.

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