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Consequences of Virtual Addiction to Watching Sexual Content on the Reduction of the Quality of Marital Relationships: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

Abstract

The rapid spread of digital technologies and the neglect of media literacy have exposed families to serious challenges, including pornography consumption, which gradually undermines emotional intimacy and damages marital relationships. In this study, the consequences of porn addiction on the reduction of marital relationships quality were examined. Research data were obtained through searching the scientific databases. After eliminating irregular articles, a complete review of the remaining 30 articles was conducted. The findings showed that virtual addiction to social networks and websites has had a negative impact on the status of individual and marital relationships. This addiction, directly and indirectly, has led to a tendency to high-risk sexual behaviors, anti-social behaviors, inappropriate sex patterns, and consequences such as marital betrayal. The results of a systematic review of the background led to the identification of 107 indicators, organized into three main categories and seven subcategories. The findings of this study showed that this addiction destroys trust in marital relationships and increases the likelihood of infidelity, leading society to destructive behavioral patterns. A systematic review of the traumatic indicators reveals that this crisis has dimensions beyond individual imagination and has led strategic threats to the quality of social relationships and the foundation of the family. The need to create a platform for public education centered on promoting self-control, self-regulation, and media literacy, as well as cultural and social policies aimed at limiting access and implementing preventive educational programs. Solutions were presented for this issue.

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Introduction

The quality of marital relationships plays a pivotal role in the mental health of couples and family stability; it has a direct impact on the health of society (Samadi & Ahmadi, 2021). The health and dynamism of society depend on the health of the family (Afrooz, 2015), and any threat to the family will have consequences for society (Hao, 2022). With the advancement of technology and the expansion of cyberspace, especially the accessibility of sexual content, the privacy of families has changed, and the cohesion of marital relationships has decreased (Adlipour & Pourjabar, 2017). In Iranian society, the importance of the quality of marital relationships and its effective causes and related factors, such as role conflict, division of household duties, and employment, has been studied since the 1980s (Rajabi et al., 2018). In the cultural context of Iranian society, which emphasizes family-centered values and chastity-based relationships, this phenomenon can have specific and more severe consequences. However, systematic research has not addressed the identification and comprehensive classification of all its dimensions. This research gap reveals the need for a study that can comprehensively explore the consequences of this type of addiction on the reduction of the quality of marital relationships. Thus, in the present study, by studying selected documents, an attempt is made to answer the following fundamental question: What are the consequences of virtual addiction to watching sexual content on the reduction of the quality of marital relationships?

Methods

The objective of this study was to systematically review the research background using a documentary and systematic review to identify and extract subcategories and categories related to the consequences of virtual addiction to watching sexual content on reducing the quality of marital relationships, to provide a basis for creating a tool to measure this variable in the family and marital relationships. The statistical population of the study included all research published in national and international scientific sources on the consequences of virtual addiction and addiction to watching porn on the quality of marital relationships. A search was conducted in the SID IRANDOC, IRANMEDEX, Scopus, PubMed, Google Scholar, and CIVILIKA databases. After several stages of screening and applying exclusion criteria, the PRISMA method was used to examine the validity of the articles (Baniasadi et al., 2023). Finally, 30 documents that were in line with the current research were analyzed; while identifying key concepts, the researchers categorized them in the form of subdimensions and main dimensions.

Findings

To identify and classify the consequences of cyberspace addiction on the reduction of marital relationship quality, the PRISM protocol was used as a systematic review method. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 30 relevant articles which examined the consequences of pornography addiction in marital relationships were selected. The findings were reported in a table including 107 codes, seven subcategories, and three themes.

Pornography is associated with the weakening of human dignity and individual values. To systematically assess individual consequences, three key dimensions, including psycho-behavioral dimensions, interpersonal relationships, and social-individual consequences, were identified and analyzed. Consistent with this finding, research has shown that pornography leads to feelings of loneliness through unstable relationships and individualism, isolation, and reduced social relationships. It also has negative effects on happiness, physical and mental health, and quality of marital life; it creates jealousy and tension in couples (Wright et al., 2017). This finding is consistent with the study of Henderson et al. (2020) which showed that pornography addiction was associated with reduced social participation.

Pornography has serious effects on families, given the important role of women in the family and the cultural sensitivity to feminine values. To examine the family consequences, two subcategories of marital conflict and attitude change were identified and categorized. These consequences included online cheating relationships, divorce, family tension, and decreased intimacy, which weaken the foundation of the family. One of the serious consequences of this situation is the increase in online cheating

relationships due to easy access, which leads to marital infidelity and damage to couples' trust. In line with this finding, research has shown that pornography leads to changes in people's attitudes towards marital commitment and an increase in the likelihood of infidelity (Perry, 2020). This finding, in line with the study of Wright and Tokunaga (2014), supports the relationship between pornography and the formation of negative attitudes towards spouses.

The most common sexual consequences for women, which are reported by about 1/3 of the articles, are decreased libido, and those for men include erectile dysfunction (especially in old age) and premature ejaculation (Ghaedi, 2016). A review of studies shows the sexual consequences of pornography in couples. To identify this criterion, two codes of sexual problems and sexual role modeling were identified. According to self-regulation theory, the findings of the present study show that extreme arousal in pornography depletes the individual's self-control resources and makes him vulnerable to addictive impulses. In line with this finding, studies by Doran and Price (2014) and Wright et al. (2017) address the relationship between pornography consumption and increased sexual problems and unrealistic comparisons with their spouses.

Discussion

By systematically reviewing 30 relevant studies, the findings of the present study show that addiction to watching sexual content in cyberspace has multidimensional destructive effects on reducing the quality of marital relationships, which can be categorized into three themes (i.e., individual, family, and sexual). The findings in the individual dimension show that addiction to sexual content can be explained by the mechanisms of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982). This finding is consistent with the study by Pawlikowska et al. (2022), which shows that pornography consumption is associated with increased levels of depression and anxiety. The findings in the family dimension show that addiction to consuming sexual content has destructive effects on family structure. The findings of the present study are consistent with the results of Besharat et al. (2025), which show that weakening secure attachment in an individual leads to family conflicts and a decrease in the quality of relationships. In the sexual dimension, the present study shows that addiction to sexual content consumption leads to the emergence of several problems. This finding is in line with the research of Doran and Price (2014), which refers to the increase in sexual violence and the formation of unrealistic expectations. According to the research findings and the explanations provided, it can be concluded that the destructive phenomenon of addiction to sexual content consumption affects the quality of marital relationships through various psychological mechanisms. Moreover, to understand the unreality of pornographic content and the harms of consuming this content, couples and young people applying for marriage should be given media training using edutainment and other effective methods. Furthermore, the sensitivity of the research topic, which leads to the participants' bias in reporting their views, is essential. In the future, researchers should conduct in-depth and field research on specific cultural works of Iranian society and present more comprehensive findings.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors of this study have no conflict of interest in conducting this research. All research costs were covered by the researchers, and no financial support was received from other institutions.

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