

Self-Exploration and Reconstruction: Three Role Contradictions and Pornography Mentality of Chinese College Students

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Abstract: This study explores how Chinese college students navigate self-exploration and role contradictions related to pornography consumption. In a society with traditional norms and limited sex education, pornography serves as a key, though controversial, source of sexual information. Using a phenomenological approach, the study identifies three main conflicts: gender, media, and inter-role conflict. Gender differences in pornography consumption reflect societal expectations, with men showing more acceptance and women experiencing more shame. Media conflict arises from the tension between conservative traditional media and more open new media. Inter-role conflict highlights the psychological stress students face balancing liberal social attitudes with conservative family values. This research provides insights into the complexities of pornography use in China.

Keywords: Self-exploration; Role contradictions; Pornography; Chinese college students; Gender; Media conflict; Inter-role conflict; Sex education

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1. Introduction

The rapid development of information technology and changing social norms have sparked global debates on pornography. In China, pornography consumption has become increasingly prominent among college students, despite the continued influence of traditional sexual norms^[1] and strict regulation of the industry^[2]. Public discussion remains limited, and sex education is lacking^[3], yet pornography persists through innovative channels^[4].

This study investigates how Chinese college students perceive and reflect on their pornography consumption. Born in the 2000s with limited sex education, this group often turns to pornography for information and excitement, facing internal conflicts related to gender, media exposure, and social roles. As active Internet users, their views both mirror and influence contemporary sexual culture.

Through phenomenological research and semi-structured interviews, this study applies thematic and conversation analysis^[5], using gender role theory and inter-role conflict theory to explore identity formation and psychological tensions.

By focusing on a Chinese context, the research addresses gaps in existing literature and offers culturally grounded insights into the complexities of youth sexuality in the digital age.

2. Literature review

2.1. Scarcity and specificity in the Chinese context

Pornography studies mostly focus on Western contexts, with limited research in China^[1]. Chinese college students' attitudes toward pornography can be influenced by traditional culture, lack of sex education, and the country's strict regulations on the pornography industry.

In China, cultural conservatism constrains sexual discussions, leading many to avoid such topics^[1,3]. Studies have shown that higher collectivism correlates with a lower acceptance of premarital and extramarital sex in China, compared to more individualistic places like Hong Kong and Taiwan^[6]. Confucianism and Taoism contribute to negative attitudes toward sex, including pornography^[7].

Although sex education reduces risky behaviors^[8], China lacks effective sexual health communication^[1]. Puberty education exists but lacks appeal, prompting youth to turn to online sources, where pornography is prevalent^[3]. Zhang *et al.*^[9] found that the influence of pornography on Chinese youth's sexual awareness has been steadily increasing.

Despite the ban, pornography persists via mobile access to platforms like Twitter in China^[4]. The regulatory context and cultural limitations make pornography studies in China especially challenging. While media studies on sexuality have been conducted, cultural studies in China remain underexplored.

2.2. Gender differences in pornography

Research shows that male consumers of pornography outnumber female consumers^[10]. Gender differences exist both in how women are portrayed in pornography and their motivations for consumption. Women in pornography are typically objectified as sexual bodies, subjected to either active or passive manipulation^[11]. Some women also experience violence in pornography^[10]. These portrayals contribute to gender differences in attitudes toward pornography.

Studies show that women have lower rates of pleasure-seeking motivations compared to men^[12,13]. These differences suggest that gendered motivations and imagery may shape the mentality of Chinese college students toward pornography.

2.3. Twofold impacts of pornography use

Excessive pornography consumption is linked to negative mental health outcomes, such as compulsive sexual behavior disorder and depression^[14]. Higher frequency of pornography consumption has been associated with increased likelihood of engaging in condomless sex^[15].

Some studies, however, highlight the positive aspects of pornography consumption. For example, Sommet and Berent^[16] found that moderate use of pornography was beneficial for sexual self-competence and sexual satisfaction, particularly for women. In relationships, pornography consumption was found to improve sexual behaviors and enhance intimacy between couples^[17,18].

While most studies focus on negative impacts, recent research explores psychological motivations such as emotional avoidance, sexual curiosity, and pleasure-seeking^[12,13]. This study explores how Chinese college students perceive and analyze their pornography consumption and its psychological motivations.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Gender role theory

Gender role theory examines how social structures shape gendered behavior and attitudes, critiqued through social

expectations. Mead ^[19] introduced this theory, analyzing gender differences from a social perspective rather than a biological one. Social expectations, stereotypes, and traditional culture influence men's and women's attitudes toward pornography, shaping their perceptions and behaviors. This theory explains how societal norms and gender roles lead to differing attitudes toward pornography among men and women.

3.2. Inter-role conflict theory

Inter-role conflict theory addresses conflicts that arise when an individual occupies multiple roles that require different responses. Studies show that individuals with multiple roles experience conflict and resolve it by shifting between or withdrawing from roles ^[20]. For Chinese college students, roles like media consumer, pornography viewer, and family member contribute to inter-role conflict, especially when faced with cultural shock. This theory helps us understand how students' attitudes toward pornography reflect the tension between these conflicting roles.

Extending the mentality analysis under the gender role and inter-role theories, we developed the research questions below:

RQ1: How do social expectations and role allocation cause the difference in male and female mentality toward pornography?

RQ2: How does a person embody the cultural shock and integration brought about by pornography in different social roles?

Our goal is to explore how Chinese college students' attitudes toward pornography reflect role contradictions and shift the focus from Western sexual media studies to cultural studies in China.

4. Methodology

This study used a phenomenological approach to examine how Chinese college students experience self-exploration and role conflict related to pornography, focusing on lived experiences and subjective meanings ^[21]. Empirical data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observations. Interviews enabled in-depth discussion with consistent guiding questions, while observations added contextual depth. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with consent.

Twenty students aged 18–22 were purposively selected for diversity in gender, sexual orientation, and educational background, including 17 from joint programs. Recruited via university networks and social media, participants provided informed consent under strict confidentiality. Interviews were held in private settings, either online or in person, and lasted around 60 minutes. Data were analyzed using thematic and conversation analysis ^[5], with open and axial coding to identify themes and relationships. Reflexivity was maintained to reduce bias. Life histories and field notes offered further insight into how pornography relates to identity, social norms, and psychological experiences.

5. Findings

5.1. Theme 1: Gender conflict

The study reveals significant gender differences in attitudes toward pornography. Men generally exhibit higher levels of acceptance and lower levels of shame when discussing and viewing pornography. This is linked to societal beliefs that encourage male sexual exploration. Men tend to view pornography as a normal social activity. For example, Haunter stated,

"I watch pornographic movies with my friends regularly. It's a normal social activity for us. We discuss the plot or actors afterward, and it helps strengthen our friendships by sharing opinions and interests."

In contrast, women show more ambivalence and shame due to societal expectations of chastity. Many female

participants expressed internal conflict about consuming pornography because it conflicted with their self-image and social expectations. As Susan said, she felt guilty when viewing pornographic films because she was worried that such behavior would affect her reputation in her family and society if others knew about it.

"I rarely watch porn, but feel guilty. I'm 18, from a traditional family, and afraid of being judged, so I watch in secret and delete everything."

This gender disparity is deeply influenced by traditional Chinese cultural values, where men are expected to be sexually active, and women are expected to remain pure and submissive. This cultural framework reinforces different attitudes and behaviors toward pornography.

5.2. Theme 2: Media conflict

Our study reveals that college students hold paradoxical attitudes toward pornography due to the shift from traditional to new media. The rise of new media has increased the speed and scope of information dissemination, exposing students to more pornography. However, differences in content presentation and values between traditional and new media lead to conflicting attitudes.

New media, especially social media and video-sharing platforms, make pornography more accessible. College students are exposed to diverse pornographic content, which leads to more open attitudes. Key factors include the immediacy and convenience of new media, allowing access anytime and anywhere via smartphones and computers. Additionally, the variety of content, including short videos, live streams, and virtual reality, meets different interests, encouraging acceptance. Lastly, the interactive nature of new media enables discussions in online communities, reducing shame and fostering openness.

In contrast, traditional media like television and magazines present more conservative content. This approach influences some students, causing confusion when they encounter the openness of new media. Traditional media's strict censorship emphasizes privacy and moral constraints, while new media's openness creates value conflicts. Some students, influenced by conservative norms at home and school, expressed confusion when exposed to explicit content online. One interviewee remarked, "TV rarely shows sexual content, but it's everywhere online."

Despite the growing influence of new media, traditional media's impact remains significant for some students^[6,12]. These students tend to revert to the values instilled by traditional media when confronted with new media pornography, causing internal conflict. One interviewee explained that, despite frequent exposure to explicit content, he felt it should not be widely disseminated due to its contradiction with family and educational values.

In summary, our study highlights the paradoxical attitudes of college students toward pornography, shaped by the contrasting influences of traditional and new media. While new media fosters diverse attitudes, traditional media's conservative values continue to shape students, reflecting the complexities of sex education and media influence.

5.3. Theme 3: Inter-role conflict

Our study observed inter-role conflict among college students, illustrating the impact of culture shock and the integration of pornography. College students play different roles in varying environments, and the conflict between these roles is particularly evident when confronted with pornography.

In open social circles, students described watching and discussing pornography as a normal social activity. Haunter shared,

"My friends and I watch pornographic movies together all the time, and we feel like it's a way to promote friendship, and it feels natural to everyone."

However, when returning to more conservative family environments, students feel guilt and stress, as this behavior is seen as immoral. Coco, an 18-year-old student, explained,

"I'm an 18-year-old college student with no sexual experience, and my traditional family would be very disappointed if they knew I watched porn."

This conflict highlights cultural shock and the challenge of balancing modern and traditional values. Students feel open-minded in school but revert to traditional values at home, causing confusion. As some interviewees noted, at school, they felt freedom, but at home, they had to present a more conservative image, which left them disoriented.

These findings provide insights into the psychological and behavioral challenges students face during cultural conflict and integration. They offer valuable references for educational and counseling approaches to support students navigating these cultural tensions.

6. Discussion

This study identifies three core conflicts—gender, media, and inter-role—that influence college students' engagement with pornography. These reflect the powerful role of cultural norms and social expectations in shaping individual attitudes and behaviors. Gender differences highlight the persistence of traditional roles; media conflict illustrates how contrasting values in traditional and new media create confusion; inter-role conflict shows the inner tension students face while navigating liberal peer environments and conservative family expectations. These conflicts stem not only from external cultural shifts but also from internal struggles with identity and self-exploration.

The findings offer insights for research and practice. Educators and counselors should address students' psychological needs in sex education and help them cope with cultural contradictions through inclusive strategies. The study also contributes to understanding how gender, media, and cultural roles shape behavior, offering directions for future research and policy development. Moreover, the methodology can inform broader social behavior studies. By understanding the roots of these conflicts, we can better support students' mental health and promote a more inclusive society.

7. Conclusion

This study identifies three key conflicts in college students' attitudes toward pornography: gender, media, and inter-role. Gender conflict reflects persistent traditional roles in male-female perceptions; media conflict arises from tensions between conservative traditional media and liberal new media; inter-role conflict reveals struggles between modern social values and familial expectations. In China's shift from traditional to digital media, these tensions expose a paradox of coexisting values. Findings offer insights for improving sex education and counseling to better support students. However, the study is limited to one university, with mostly heterosexual, joint-program students, and many participants had limited sexual experience. Future research should include more diverse samples, consider sexual history, and adopt cross-cultural and longitudinal approaches to inform inclusive education.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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