

# Psychology of Men & Masculinities

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Online First Publication, July 18, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/men0000232>

### CITATION

Sniewski, L., & Farvid, P. (2019, July 18). Hidden in Shame: Heterosexual Men's Experiences of Self-Perceived Problematic Pornography Use. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/men0000232>

# Hidden in Shame: Heterosexual Men's Experiences of Self-Perceived Problematic Pornography Use

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The rapid rise in the availability of pornography has given the world instant access to a vast and diverse supply of pornographic material. Although it is possible for both genders to experience a problematic relationship with pornography, the large majority of online pornography consumers who identify as addicted to pornography are heterosexual men. This article aims to examine the experiences of adult heterosexual men with problematic pornography use in New Zealand. A total of 15 heterosexual men were recruited via advertising, social media outreach, and word of mouth to take part in interviews about their self-perceived problematic pornography consumption habits. A data-driven inductive thematic analysis was conducted to explore the different ways men talked about their problematic pornography use. The primary reason men kept their viewing hidden from the world was because of the accompanying experiences of guilt and shame that would inevitably follow most—if not all—viewing sessions or attempts at opening up about their use. Pornography began eroding their sense of autonomy when men experienced a loss of control over their use, which underpinned the core aspect of their problematic use. Over time, the men perceived that pornography had resulted in having unrealistic expectations when it came to sex and sexuality, the way they viewed women, and led to diminished sexual function. Further work is needed in using strategies that could offer alternatives to problematic pornographic use or interventions that help the individual learn how to productively respond to the affective triggers of discomfort that trigger use.

## **Public Significance Statement**

By interviewing men before the intervention takes place, this research will contribute toward filling a significant research gap related to the factors and contexts that contribute to self-perceived problematic pornography use, its origins, the reasons men come forward to open up about their pornography use, and an exploration of past attempts at seeking help and/or quitting. The study will also provide valuable insights into how men talk about their problematic pornography use, which provides an important resource for professionals working with men who present with self-perceived problematic pornography use.

**Keywords:** self-perceived problematic pornography use, Internet pornography, porn addiction, male sexuality, behavioral addiction

The social and cultural context within the Anglo-West has repeatedly been identified as sexualized and pornified (Attwood, 2006), but in complex and contradictory ways (Gill, 2012). One aspect of this trend has been the rapid rise in the availability of free and unregulated online pornography, which has given the world instant access to a vast and diverse supply of pornographic content. PornHub—the most popular free pornography website—has over 58 million visits per day, with New Zealanders—on a per capita

basis—representing the fifth most regular visitors worldwide (“Kiwi Porn Habits Revealed,” 2016). People first access pornography for a variety of reasons, but early curiosity and experimentation can escalate into problematic and/or compulsive patterns of use (Hilton, 2013; Meerkerk, Van Den Eijnden, & Garretsen, 2006). Although it is possible for both genders to experience a problematic relationship with pornography, the large majority of online pornography consumers—and those who identify as addicted to pornography—are heterosexual men (Weinstein, Zolek, Babkin, Cohen, & Lejoyeux, 2015). Currently, very little research has used qualitative methods to gather rich and in-depth personal data that focuses on men's problematic pornography use. Within this article, we aim to address this issue by examining the experiences of adult heterosexual men with problematic pornography use in New Zealand.

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The data and ideas in this article have not been presented, shared, or published elsewhere.

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## **Self-Perceived Problematic Pornography Use**

Pornography use has increasingly emerged as an area of focus in academic literature. Problematic pornography consumption—of-

ten labeled as “porn or pornography addiction”—refers to any consumption of pornography that causes negative interpersonal, vocational, or personal consequences for the user (Grubbs, Volk, Exline, & Pargament, 2015). Research suggests that excessive pornography consumption may have similar effects to substance dependencies, including interference with working memory performance (Laier, Schulte, & Brand, 2013), neuroplastic changes to the brain that reinforce use (Hilton, 2013; Love, Laier, Brand, Hatch, & Hajela, 2015), as well as a significant negative association between use and gray matter volume in the brain (Kühn & Gallinat, 2014). Indeed, functional magnetic imaging data scans show that brains of pornography addicts may be comparable with drug addicts in terms of brain activity (Voon et al., 2014).

Due to the current lack of published scientific literature supporting the formal classification of pornography addiction (Ley, Prause, & Finn, 2014), current literature related to pornography categorizes problematic pornography use as a subset of other sexually related disorders (i.e., hypersexual disorder, sexual addiction, sexual compulsivity) due to the similarities between the criteria of these related classifications (Sniewski, Farvid, & Carter, 2018). Despite the underlying similarities, however, literature indicates that problematic pornography use may be distinct and different from other sexual disorders (Duffy, Dawson, & das Nair, 2016). For example, one of the ways that problematic pornography use is different from other sexually related disorders in other classifications is that sexual activity involving human contact may be experienced as more anxiety-inducing than the convenience of privately and anonymously consuming pornography (Short, Wetterneck, Bistricky, Shutter, & Chase, 2016). Self-perceived problematic pornography use (SPPPU), thus, refers to an individual who self-identifies as having an addiction to pornography, or a problematic or fraught relationship where they feel unable to regulate their use. This definition relies on the user’s experiences and subjective self-perception when determining the degree to which the pursuit, and subsequent consumption, of pornography intrudes on everyday life (Grubbs et al., 2015).

Men can experience their pornography use as problematic for a variety of reasons. These include personal or ethical reasons, social and relational reasons, the frequency of use, amount of time spend engaging with pornographic material, consuming pornography in inappropriate contexts, consuming pornography with content that causes distress, or consuming such material at the expense of other responsibilities (Twohig & Crosby, 2010). Although problematic pornography use has been quantified in literature as spending at least 11 hr per week viewing pornography (Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000), consuming daily (Harper & Hodgins, 2016), or surpassing a threshold of seven orgasms per week (Kafka, 2010), frequency of consumption, in and of itself, is not vital to SPPPU (Sniewski et al., 2018). Instead, core issues that predict men’s self-definition of problematic pornography use are the negative symptoms that men experience (Gola, Lewczuk, & Skorko, 2016). Research also indicates that central to SPPPU is the concept of experiential avoidance (Wetterneck, Burgess, Short, Smith, & Cervantes, 2012). Accordingly, when men who identify with SPPPU watch pornography, it is often as an effort to cope with unwanted thoughts or feelings, even though the viewing itself may subsequently lead to additional negative affect or other problematic consequences (Wetterneck et al., 2012).

Men with SPPPU feel their pornography use is out of control and have experienced multiple failed attempts at either cutting back or quitting (Kraus, Martino, & Potenza, 2016). Although rare, when men with SPPPU do seek help for their use, they perceive treatment options as inadequate or ineffective (Ross, Månsson, & Daneback, 2012). Additionally, men with SPPPU face a difficult situation because therapists typically lack the training necessary to manage such pornography use (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). This is despite clients continuing to frequently disclose their problematic pornography use in sessions (Ayres & Haddock, 2009), as well as the clinical belief that problematic pornography consumption is worthy of treatment and intervention (Pyle & Bridges, 2012). Without an adequate understanding of men’s experiences and accounts of problematic pornography use, the possibility for ineffective or unethical treatment increases, as therapy and treatment approaches are likely to be influenced by personal biases and beliefs (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). This article seeks to address a significant research gap related to the factors and contexts that contribute to SPPPU, its origins, the reasons men volunteered to talk about such issues, and an exploration of past attempts at quitting pornography. The data and results presented here help to identify the contexts in which pornography viewing can be problematic, but can also assist clinicians and therapists working with this specific population.

## Method

### Epistemology and Methodology

This work is situated within a critical realist epistemological framework, which allows for an in-depth examination of psychosocial phenomena (Fletcher, 2017). Here we examine how adult heterosexual men with SPPPU talk about their experiences of pornography use from an exploratory qualitative perspective. A critical realist approach means that instead of directly reporting what the participants said, the researchers engaged in interpretive work, identifying the underlying ideologies, psychological mechanisms, and/or surrounding sociocultural structures that shaped the narratives (Houston, 2001). Additionally, exploratory qualitative methodology allowed researchers to develop a better understanding of specific issues and to probe participants for rich, personal, and experiential data (Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005).

### Participants

Fifteen heterosexual men were recruited via advertising, social media outreach, and word of mouth to take part in interviews about their self-perceived problematic pornography consumption habits. The research advertisement sought to attract men who met the basic inclusion requirements (i.e., New Zealand-based, aged 21 or over, and identifying as a heterosexual man) and who identified with SPPPU. The implications of this recruitment strategy was that a specific group of volunteers came forward that identified with SPPPU and were ready and willing to talk about this to a researcher (Farvid, 2010). The advertisement was placed on noticeboards across Auckland-based universities. Digital copies were sent to New Zealand-based sex therapists and clinicians. Digital

copies were also shared on social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

The participants were aged between 22 and 51 ( $M = 32.5$ ), nine identified as Pākehā (Non-Māori New Zealanders of European descent), three as Asian (Chinese, Southeast Asian, and Indian, respectively), one as Pasifika, one as Māori, and one as Middle-Eastern. Six of the participants were employed professionals ( $N = 6$ ), five were undergraduate tertiary students ( $N = 5$ ), followed by two postgraduate tertiary students ( $N = 2$ ), and two participants who did not specify ( $N = 2$ ). Ethical approval was gained from the host university prior to commencing data collection.

### Data Collection

The heterosexual men were interviewed about the various aspects of their pornography use in Auckland, New Zealand, between May and August of 2018, either in-person or via Skype video call. All interviews were conducted by the first author (a heterosexual man with previous experiences of SPPTU, who was of a similar age to the average participant). To support academic rigor, the first author worked in conjunction with the second author to review interview data, codes, and themes, and to ensure neutrality. The data were collected using semistructured interviews, which ranged from 30 to 75 min (with most about 60 min). Interview questions asked about the participants' first exposure to pornography, sexual education during childhood, openness with family members and friends about discussing pornography use, frequency, duration, and patterns of use, triggers for use, feelings and emotions after use, reasons for problematic self-perception, and past attempts at reducing or quitting pornography. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were provided for the participants and all identifying information was changed or removed for the purposes of publication.

### Data Analysis

Situated within critical realism, a data-driven or inductive thematic analysis was conducted across the full data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). A data-driven approach means that the themes derived were strongly linked to what the participants said within the interviews, and the researchers did not impose their own thematic categories within which to fit the data. Such an approach is suited to exploratory qualitative research and useful for an in-depth exploration of the data, as there was little research and knowledge about the topic. The analysis derived themes from both the semantic level (surface reading of the data) and the latent level (underlying ideas or ideologies that inform the semantic content) when analyzing and interpreting the data. For example, although some of the subthemes and codes were identified from the explicit surface content, the analysis examines the underlying ideals, conceptualizations, and assumptions that informed the semantic content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The iterative process of thematic analysis followed the standard six phases of data analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012). The first author, in full consultation with the second author, conducted the coding and analysis processes. When reporting the data, basic punctuation is used and the insertion of [ . . . ] denotes the removal of unrelated data.

## Results and Discussion

Four main themes emerged after data was analyzed. The themes identified across the data were: Secrecy and Silence, Losing Control, Eschewing Discomfort, and Pornography as a Sexual Influencer.

### Secrecy and Silence

All of the men discussed the secretive nature of their pornography use. Men reported keeping their use hidden from close friends, family members, and partners. Indeed, for all but three of the men, these interviews represented the first instances of speaking to anyone about their use. The men provided various reasons for keeping their consumption hidden:

Albert: Sex was taboo in the 80s and 90s. Even in the media it was talked about as a bad thing to do. Yeah, it was something no one talked about [ . . . ] you just keep it private. (37, Pākehā, Student)

Zachary: Porn was a source of guilt, really. I was a Christian kid, so the bible really taught that porn was bad. You know, if the eye can offend you, pluck it out. (43, Pākehā, Therapist)

Frank: In my [Chinese] culture we do not talk about it. No, never. (27, Asian, Student)

David: As I started getting into more and more extreme things it became this supertaboo thing I could never talk about. Particularly when it came to anal sex, I'd be aroused at the thought of anal sex, but incredibly embarrassed at anyone finding out that's what I was into. Just very, very private. (29, Pākehā, Professional)

The secretive nature of the men's pornography use covered many dimensions. Albert and Zachary described the social and religious contexts that contributed to keeping their use private. Frank, a university student from China who reveled in the personal freedoms he enjoyed as a student living in dorms at a New Zealand-based University, laughed when asked about whether he spoke to his parents about his pornography use. He declared that pornography was not something anyone from China would openly discuss.

Although concerns regarding pornography viewing—in general—and particular stigmatized acts such as anal intercourse may be shifting with the normalization of pornography (Marston & Lewis, 2014), David reported feeling ashamed of the pornographic content he enjoyed. Given the currently "pornified" sociocultural context (McNair, 2014), where pornography is seen as mainstreamed, these accounts were surprising. They indicated a level of unease and shame with pornography consumption, which positioned pornography as anything but normalized (albeit such claims were sometimes qualified by referring to religion or Chinese culture). David for example, described anal sex as "extreme" when it comes to pornography consumption. Interestingly, anal sex might now be considered as "standard" or normal, especially when considering trends in pornography that involve more extreme acts (i.e., double or triple penetration, group sex, BDSM). Thus, it is possible that either these cohort of men were seemingly quite conservative or that the normalcy of pornography—or at least the normalcy of some sexual acts such as anal sex—has been overestimated.

In the instances when the men's friend, partner, or family member discovered their pornography use, the subsequent experience of embarrassment often served to reinforce the secretive nature of viewing. For example, when Michael's older brother returned a laptop he had borrowed, he looked Michael straight in the eyes and told him sternly to delete his browsing history. There was no other exchange of words, which left Michael feeling unsettled and humiliated. In an effort to avoid situations like those that Michael had, men went out of their way to ensure that their viewing remained private:

Paul: I would watch porn at Internet cafes, just choosing a computer that was not in view of other people. (39, Pākehā, Professional)

Wallace: Sometimes I'll spray perfume to get rid of the smell. I think I smell after I use porn and I want to get rid of it. (29, Pākehā, Teacher)

To keep his viewing hidden from his family, Paul (ironically) resorted to consuming pornography in public spaces. Despite being in a public place, Paul would rub his erect penis against his pants in a specific way that would still allow him to reach orgasm. Paul described his Internet café experiences as "getting his fix." Indeed, reflecting on these contexts and situations was one of the factors that made him feel his pornography use had become problematic. Wallace, on the other hand, was worried that people would discover his pornography use by smelling it on him as he thought the smell of his semen would be obvious to those around him. Interestingly, he admitted that he did not actually think other people would be able to detect or notice the smell. Thus, it seems that the smell of semen was a symbolic form of stigma for Wallace, with perfume representing a way of hiding the associated shame. Lastly, Peter described his long periods of secret viewing in the bathroom:

Peter: Each viewing session would be about 2 or 3 hr, but my son is pretty good, so I'd sometimes leave him to potter around for some time while I viewed. I would be in the toilet [. . .] If my wife knew I was doing that, she wouldn't be very happy. (40, Pākehā, Did not specify)

In an effort to keep his viewing hidden from his family, Peter neglected his parenting duties while attending to his viewing needs. Peter's account also highlights the related subtheme of participants viewing pornography in inappropriate contexts. Another participant, Daniel, reported feeling tempted to view pornography at work. He would wait until the office was empty before consuming pornography there. Although other researchers have identified inappropriate viewing contexts as a characteristic of problematic pornography use (Twohig & Crosby, 2010), Daniel was the only interviewee to identify the contextual nature of his viewing as problematic. Context, it seems, was a secondary factor to identifying with SPPPU and merely a consequence of the efforts made to keep pornography use hidden.

Research suggests that that for many men who report problems with their pornography use, these problems take place particularly in their intimate and sexual relations/relationships (Daneback, Ross, & Månsson, 2006). For the men in the study in relationships (or discussed past relationships when pornography became problematic), pornography use was perceived as problematic in one of two specific ways. First, some of the men experienced feelings of guilt and shame for preferring pornography to having sex or being

intimate with their partner. As an example of the first scenario, toward the end of his relationship, Phillip would choose to watch pornography instead of having sex:

Phillip: I would definitely go downstairs on a number of nights to sleep on the couch and just watch some porn. (29, Asian, Student)

Literature supports the notion that Phillip's secretive pornography viewing likely contributed to his deteriorating relationship (Whitty, 2003), even though Phillip did not directly state that pornography was the reason for his diminished need for intimacy with his partner. Indeed, Phillip reported the deterioration of the relationship as prior to his late night pornography excursions downstairs.

Paul's situation with his wife was quite different from Phillip's. Paul was a recovered alcoholic of nearly 16 years. He volunteered for the study because he felt that pornography was a subsequent addiction he was dealing with. Paul was so embarrassed about his pornography viewing that he had not ever openly talk about it with any friends, family members, or his partner. In an effort to maintain his self-image as a man that does not watch pornography, sometimes he would instead watch women dancing in bikinis on YouTube music videos and reach orgasm by allowing the shower to spray onto his penis in a specific way. By doing this, Paul could feel better about himself because he had not technically watched pornography or directly masturbated. Interestingly, Paul described his relationship with his wife as loving and positive. Nonetheless, despite his wife's attitude toward his pornography viewing being generally playful and accepting, he watched pornography in private in the bathroom during his showers:

Paul: I would say [I would be] looking forward to an instance once a day and having to be sly about it around my wife. So I live with my wife, and it would have to be not too many available options to watch it at home. (39, Pākehā, Professional)

Phillip's and Paul's narratives illustrate that the state of the relationship—whether positive or negative—does not necessarily affect whether these men with SPPPU kept their pornography use hidden from a partner. What the men seemed to fear most was the potential consequences (i.e., feelings of shame, guilt, or embarrassment) of their secret consumption being seen by their partner. This fear prevented men from opening up about their use to their partners and might signal an important step for men seeking to intervene with their SPPPU. Indeed, some research suggests that the efficacy demonstrated by conjoint therapy for men with SPPPU was the result of the couple learning how to communicate about the male partner's pornography use (Sniewski et al., 2018). Such improvements to intracouple communication diminished feelings of shame and guilt experienced by the male partner (Sniewski et al., 2018).

Second, for some of the other men, viewing pornography—in and of itself—created problems within the relationship. In line with the literature, for these men, discussing pornography use with their partners caused relational distress, deterioration of trust, and lowered self-esteem for the female partner (Bechara et al., 2003). For example, Zachary was a self-proclaimed devout Christian leading up to his first marriage. The personal shame he felt when he watched pornography was directly related to his strong religious beliefs. He hid his pornography use from his wife as long as he

could and did not disclose his pornography use until after they got married. Zachary's partner, however, was very distressed, not just to hear about the pornography use, but also that Zachary had waited until they were married to inform her. Attempts at open communication about Zachary's pornography consumption did not work for the couple:

Zachary: She didn't like [my viewing] but we came to the decision that I would tell her when I would use. But that didn't work because I didn't want to share that with her, and it was unbearably shameful. I couldn't share with her and I felt awful about it. During the first year of our marriage, I viewed like 3 or 4 times, but I would beat myself up so much when I craved using it and it was not healthy. It created a really toxic feeling and cycle. For both me and my partner. (43, Pākehā, Therapist)

Experiences of shame and guilt resulting from his hidden use compounded Zachary's continued pornography use. These shame-fueled cycles of pornography use described by Zachary were experiences shared by the other men in the study as well. Although it is possible for shame and guilt to prompt declines or shifts in behavioral change in general (Allen, Murphy, & Bates, 2017), the experiences of these men more closely aligned with literature that suggests that shame and guilt are positively correlated to ongoing and reinforced hypersexual behavior such as pornography use (Gilliland, South, Carpenter, & Hardy, 2011).

Regardless of the outlet, when men broke the silence about their pornography use and were met with a lack of acceptance, this scenario serve to reinforce hidden use. Some men talked about seeking professional help to address their problematic pornography use. Such attempts at help-seeking had not been productive for the men, and at times even exacerbated feelings of shame. Michael, a university student who used pornography primarily as a coping mechanism for study-related stress, was having issues with erectile dysfunction during sexual encounters with women and sought help from his General Practitioner Doctor (GP):

Michael: When I went to the doctor at 19 [. . .], he prescribed Viagra and said [my issue] was just performance anxiety. Sometimes it worked, and sometimes it didn't. It was personal research and reading that showed me the issue was porn [. . .] If I go to the doctor as a young kid and he prescribes me the blue pill, then I feel like no one is really talking about it. He should be asking about my porn use, not giving me Viagra. (23, Middle-Eastern, Student)

As a result of his experience, Michael never went back to that GP and started doing his own research online. He eventually found an article discussing a man approximately his age describing a similar type of sexual dysfunction, which caused him to consider pornography as a potential contributor. After making a concerted effort to lower his pornography use, his erectile dysfunction issues began to improve. He reported that even though his total frequency of masturbation did not reduce, he only watched pornography for about half of those instances. By halving the amount of times he combined masturbation with pornography, Michael said he was able to significantly improve his erectile function during sexual encounters with women.

Phillip, like Michael, sought help for another sexual issue related to his pornography use. In his case, the problem was a noticeably reduced sex drive. When he approached his GP about his issue and its links to his pornography use, the GP reportedly

had nothing to offer and instead referred him to a male fertility specialist:

Phillip: I went to a GP and he referred me to specialist who I didn't believe was particularly helpful. They didn't really offer me a solution and weren't really taking me seriously. I ended up paying him for six weeks of testosterone shots, and it was \$100 a shot, and it really didn't do anything. That was their way to treat my sexual dysfunction. I just do not feel the dialogue or situation was adequate. (29, Asian, Student)

Interviewer: [To clarify a previous point you mentioned, is this the experience] that prevented you from seeking help thereafter?

Phillip: Yup.

The GPs and specialists sought by the participants seemed to offer only biomedical solutions, an approach that has been criticized within literature (Tiefer, 1996). Hence, the service and treatment these men were able to receive from their GPs was not only deemed inadequate, but also alienated them from further accessing professional help. Although biomedical responses seem to be the most popular answer for doctors (Potts, Grace, Gavey, & Vares, 2004), a more holistic and client-centered approach is needed, as the issues highlighted by men are likely psychological and possibly created by pornography use.

Another participant reported seeing a counselor to discuss his pornography use. Daniel felt he was watching a lot of pornography and perceived himself to be addicted. When he finally did meet with a counselor, Daniel felt that he was dismissive, judgmental, and moralistic when it came to his pornography use. The counselor told him he should not be watching pornography and that it was bad for his mental health:

Daniel: I felt it was dismissive. It's really difficult for me talking about this topic, but it's important to do to work through it. But it was so raw after that. Like wow, I had this problem for so long, and I finally step out to talk about it, and I get shit on. Like, fuck this! It was very hurtful. It felt like he was coming after me from a moral perspective. (27, Pasifika, Student)

Interviewer: Was it this experience that prevented you from seeking help thereafter?

Daniel: Absolutely.

Experiences like those described above are not isolated. Previous research indicates that many therapists and counselors report not having the adequate tools or knowledge to help men with SPPPU (Ayres & Haddock, 2009). In the current study, negative experiences with clinical professionals resulted in additional feelings of shame, continued and reinforced use, and lower likelihood of future help-seeking.

The hidden nature of pornography use typically stemmed from feelings that discussions around sex were taboo from a young age. Men talked about the curiosity, wonder, and excitement associated with their first exposure to pornographic content, but they had no one to talk to about their experience. In many ways, pornography is widely consumed by boys, and this is typically considered a normative part of "manhood" (Antevska & Gavey, 2015), but without the proper guidance, advice, or explanation from their parents—and/or sufficient sex education—boys simply do not know how to navigate through this sexually charged material. For

most of the men, sex and pornography were simply taboo subjects that were never adequately broached by parents or sex education. Hence, pornography became a surrogate sex educator (Ševčíková & Daneback, 2014):

David: My parent's sex education involved sitting in front of a TV and watching a documentary on sex with us, with no conversation or dialogue or questions afterward. Just not talking about it at all. (29, Pākehā, Professional)

George talked about the open communication he experienced with his parents as a child and teenager. But when the topics of sex and pornography were brought up in the household, George said that his parents were able to talk to him only briefly about sex, and never about pornography specifically. Because of the very open relationship George had with his parents, this created the feeling that pornography was a private matter and a subject to be avoided, at the very least with his parents:

George: No. Porn no, never. Sex, very briefly as a teenager. But not really. I never felt comfortable talking to my parents about that. And I do not remember my parents ever talking to me about it. Sex was a bit of a taboo topic. It was a nontopic. I was afraid to broach the subject because I was uncomfortable talking about it. A bit scared. And I do not think they ever felt they could broach it with me. They certainly never actively tried. (51, Pākehā, Mentor)

Ironically, in a sex-saturated society where sex is "everywhere," the muted sex education in social, cultural, and familial contexts of participants all contributed to the men feeling that they had no one to share their experiences with. The social structures that influenced these men the most—and the ones they placed most value on—ignored, stigmatized, or condemned pornography. Society may have become more hypersexual, but the environments these men were raised in seemed to be very sexually conservative. Thus, even though we are in a more "pro sex" and sexualized sociocultural context, there is a lack of direct, frank, and informative sexual education or open communication, thus creating a contradiction for these men. As a result, the participants kept their porn use hidden from adolescence and into adulthood.

## Losing Control

All participants reported that their pornography use was outside of their conscious control. All had difficulties curbing, reducing, or ceasing their pornography use when they attempted to reduce or abstain from viewing. David shook his head and smirked as he reflected on his difficulty in abstaining from pornography:

David: It's this funny thing because my brain will start with something like "you should look at porn," and then my brain will think that "oh, I shouldn't do that," but then I'll go and look at it anyway. (29, Pākehā, Professional)

David describes an intrapsychic conflict, where he is psychologically pulled in different directions when it comes to his pornography use. For David, and many of the other participants, the temptation to consume pornography consistently won out in this internal "tug of war."

One participant talked about the strong visceral experiences he felt when he became aroused. His temptation and craving to use

pornography were so overwhelming that he could not focus on anything else until the urge had been satisfied:

Michael: When I'm aroused, I have to masturbate. I literally have no control over it. It controls my decisions. When I'm aroused, I'm not rational. When I get aroused, I start browsing. And it's a trap I fall into pretty much every time. When I'm aroused I do not give a shit! (23, Middle-Eastern, Student)

The men described almost an internal splitting that occurred for them. This was between a "rational self" that does not want to watch pornography, and the "aroused self" that has no control over pornography use. This "arousal imperative" created a linear narrative and sexual script when it came to the men's SPPPU. Once the men were aroused, they reported needing masturbatory orgasmic release almost at any cost.

Furthermore, the participants' behavioral patterning in relation to pornography represents a violation of their autonomy and self-control (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Autonomy, or control over one's desires and actions, is considered a fundamental psychological need in the contemporary context (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007). Indeed, literature has shown that the greater the perception of self-control and self-functioning experienced by an individual, the greater the likelihood of perceived happiness (Ramezani & Gholtdash, 2015). The participants discussed their perceived lack of control—and thus hindered autonomy—in three different ways.

First, men discussed their lack of willpower and subsequent feelings of psychological "weakness" in relation to their viewing. Albert and Frank reported that their lack of control was a consequence of feeling psychologically weak. David, Paul, and Brent valued their ability to have a sense of mastery over other life domains (e.g., work, goals, social relations), yet when it came to pornography, they felt powerless to control their consumption. This was highly distressing for these men. For example,

Wallace: It feels really weird saying it out loud, but I'd want to stop being controlled when it came to sexual urges. Having to masturbate in certain situations, or like going to the bathroom to have a shower. I'd prefer it not to have that control over me. I just start to feel aroused and I think "I guess I have to do it now." (29, Pākehā, Teacher)

Though not directly communicated by the men, this perceived lack of agency with regards to their pornography use likely represents a fundamental violation of traditional masculine identity. The notions of control and self-mastery are often attributable as masculine traits within the west (Canham, 2009). Hence, men's lack of control over their pornography use was distressing, as it not only indicated a lack of personal autonomy, but also violated some of the fundamentals of contemporary manhood. Here, an interesting contradiction is evident. Although watching pornography is considered a masculinized activity—and a means by which some men can "do" masculinity correctly (Antevska & Gavey, 2015)—compulsive pornography use was experienced in negative terms, as disempowerment and a violation of their masculine identity.

Participants also experienced an undermining of their autonomy and identified a lack of agency when their viewing became an automatic habit. Here, their pornography use had evolved into a compulsion that needed to run its course once the thought of pornography entered their mind or when they became aroused. For these men, the pleasure and sexual stimulation once associated

with watching pornographic content had faded, and was replaced with a habituated response pattern. For example,

David: I used to enjoy porn a lot more, where now I feel it's just become just a thing I do, somewhat of a routine that I do not particularly enjoy as much, but I know I need to do it in order to complete the routine. Something I need to follow. I know the outcome, but it doesn't give me the same buzz it used to. There's more of a dissatisfaction and disgust that seeps through the entire experience because it seems I cannot escape the process. But since there's finality to it, a specific end, then I just ride through the porn routine until the end and then continue on with my day. (29, Pākehā, Professional)

David's experience highlights the troubling nature of this habituated pornographic consumption pattern. Not being able to escape the process is linked to a strong affective reaction (i.e., dissatisfaction or disgust), and is positioned as particularly distressing for David. When men cannot escape a process and feel a loss in their sense of control, their well-being can suffer (Canham, 2009). Frank, like David, had lost much of the pleasure and stimulation initially associated with pornography use, and described a scenario of pleasureless compulsion:

Frank: It's this compulsive thing. I feel compelled to do it. It feels like I'm not even thinking about it [. . .] It's habitual. I do not know how to describe it [. . .] Sometimes when I'm trying really hard to orgasm it feels empty. I feel nothing physically. And then when I finish I wonder why I even did that in the first place [. . .] because it's not even pleasurable. (27, Asian, Student)

Frank's situation seems to encapsulate the problematic nature and experience for men with SPPPU. As opposed to pornography being a choice motivated by sexual stimulation—as it once was—it had evolved into a compulsive and automatic habit, devoid of pleasure. The subsequent experiences of guilt, shame, and disempowerment were the consequence of the men not being able to stop or control their use despite the desire to do so.

Lastly, men reported that their viewing made them feel like a less motivated, engaged, and energized version of themselves. For example, after watching pornography, Michael would feel completely drained of energy. Any motivation to study or engage in a productive activity waned after watching pornography and masturbating. He described his ability to reengage with life as lack of “crispness,” a self-reported quality Michael described as “being present, clear, focused, and attentive”:

Michael: After I masturbate, I feel depleted. No motivation. I do not feel crisp. I do not want to do anything, just feeling low and depleted. People are talking to you but you cannot really answer. And the more I masturbate, the less crisp I feel. I do not think masturbation makes me the best version of myself. (23, Middle-Eastern, Student)

The lack of crispness, as Michael describes it, sounds comparable with the feelings of emptiness reported by Frank. Michael, however, discussed how his pornography use impacted other domains in his life. He reported that watching pornography was expending energy that would have otherwise been expended on sleep, studying, or engaging in social situations with friends. Similarly, Paul, experienced a lack of energy after viewing, but felt his postpornography fatigue prevented him from progressing in his career and having children with his wife. He lamented that while his peers

progressed in their careers jumps, had children, and increased their income, he was stuck:

Paul: I could earn something and be at a better place in life, I'm just sort of stuck in a place of doing nothing, thinking, worrying. I think I do not have a family because potentially because of my masturbating. (39, Pākehā, Professional)

Paul—and indeed many of the men in the study—seemed to identify pornography as the primary roadblock preventing them from becoming better and more productive versions of themselves.

### Eschewing Discomfort

Many of the participants talked of using pornography as a way of blunting, escaping, and avoiding uncomfortable or stressful feelings. Pornography represented a temporary escape from experiences perceived as unpleasant or overwhelming. George, for example, talked about how pornography became his primary coping strategy for any and all of the affective discomfort he faced in his life:

George: Fear. Loneliness. Overwhelm. I use porn to relieve those states. In the short-term, it works. In the short term it is a relief and a release [. . .] And then sometime after release, maybe minutes, maybe hours, it just kind of feels empty and is not a sustainable thing. It's a temporary fix. (51, Pākehā, Mentor)

Similarly, pornography viewing has previously been linked to experiential avoidance, playing a crucial role in the viewing habits of men with SPPPU (Levin, Lillis, & Hayes, 2012). Experiential avoidance can be defined as seeking to reduce the form, frequency, or situational sensitivity of private experiences even when doing so causes additional harm (Levin et al., 2012). Levin, Lee, and Twohig found that viewing pornography to avoid unwanted emotions accounted for both frequent viewing and its negative consequences (Levin, Lee, & Twohig, 2019). Participants seemed particularly reactive to four specific affective states: procrastination, boredom, loneliness, and stress.

Pornography came to the forefront of the participants' mind, or was possibly triggered, during situations that lacked mental or physical stimulation. When there was nothing else to do or when certain tasks were being avoided, pornography was the time-consuming activity of choice. Albert and Wallace describe watching pornography to pass time and alleviate the experience of boredom:

Albert: Most of the time it's boredom. If I'm just sitting at home with nothing to do, then I'll just watch. (37, Pākehā, Student)

Wallace: I guess for me it comes down to boredom [. . .] It's something to do with my free time. (29, Pākehā, Teacher)

Albert and Wallace described their experience of boredom as an uncomfortable state of agitation in their mind and body. In the absence of applying more positive coping strategies, pornography was the go-to “quick fix.” An additional consideration in regards to these men's statements around free time leading to habitual pornography use, would be the existence of preexisting vulnerabilities that have been linked to problematic pornography use. Such preexisting vulnerabilities include underlying depression or anxiety disorders (Wood, 2011), deficient self-regulation (Sirrianni

& Vishwanath, 2016), high levels of neuroticism (Egan & Parmar, 2013), or high levels of narcissism (Kasper, Short, & Milam, 2015). In this sense, pornography use may be a subset or manifestation of other mental health concerns.

In addition to boredom, participants' pornography use was also triggered by experiences of loneliness, isolation, or rejection. Such accounts are consistent with literature suggesting a significant positive relationship between Internet pornography use and loneliness (Yoder, Virden, & Amin, 2005). The men were able to reflect upon the role that loneliness played in their use.

Jason grew up in a conservative home environment in a small town of New Zealand. At the time of this study, Jason self-reported as a virgin and said he had never experienced intimate or sexual contact of any kind with a woman. Any time he approached women, he reported feeling intense visceral discomfort. His immediate assumption was that the woman could feel his anxious energy, which would only serve to intensify his feelings of angst. On the occasions when he did summon the courage to approach a woman, any subsequent rejection became a significant trigger for his pornography use:

Jason: I think a lot of times I use porn after I get rejected. Like a day after the rejection sinks in. I think most of the time my porn use is driven by my feelings of rejection. (23, Asian, Student)

Jason's rejections triggered feelings of low mood as well. For Jason, pornography use served as an attempt to soothe his experiences of both rejection and depressive feelings. Upon reflecting more deeply on his pornography use and feelings of depression, he realized that when he used pornography to mediate such feelings, his low mood only worsened. Though he still used pornography, Jason made it a point to attempt to abstain when he was feeling particularly low because he knew it would only make his depressed mood worse.

Timothy, like Jason, self-reported as a virgin. For Timothy, his continued failed attempts at relationships, as well as sexual encounters in general, triggered intense feelings of loneliness. For Timothy, pornography soothed the immense loneliness he felt on a daily basis. He lived alone and reported as having no friends:

Timothy: I definitely think it's like a self-soothing thing for me [ . . . ] and it's also escapism. Escaping from being a single man, the not having anybody and feelings of loneliness. (35, Pākehā, Professional)

Without substantive social connections, pornography was the only escape available for Timothy. Despite only offering temporary relief and leading to further affective discomfort, the short escape provided by pornography was deemed useful.

Pornography represented the primary and/or only coping strategy for the stresses of daily life for most of the men. David was able to reflect upon his viewing, and how increases in his daily stress would inevitably spark increases in his pornography use:

David: Like a coping mechanism. Usually an increase in my daily life stress will spark an increase in my porn use. (29, Pākehā, Professional)

Like David, Michael knew that his levels of pornography viewing were directly related to his stress levels, which for him came in the form of university exams and assignments. Michael's experience of stress often reached a point when he felt he had no choice but

to use pornography. He talked about lying awake at 3 o'clock in the morning unable to sleep because of the stress and anxiety of an upcoming exam. Pornography was the only way he could get at least a little sleep on those nights:

Michael: It's a coping mechanism and I just want to get rid of the anxiety. Just get it out of my body. I do not care about the consequences, I'll deal with them later. (23, Middle-Eastern, Student)

Regardless of the context, the emotional undercurrent of the men's triggering experiences was that of discomfort. When these affective states become overwhelming and there seemed like no other way of getting rid of them or coping, pornography provided a sure-fire solution, regardless of how temporary.

### Pornography as a Sexual Influencer

The participants talked about how pornography influenced the various aspects of their sexuality and sexual experiences. Michael discussed how pornography had influenced his sexual behaviors, specifically about the acts he would attempt to recreate with women that he had watched in pornography. He openly discussed the sexual acts he regularly engaged in, and questioned how natural these acts were:

Michael: I sometimes cum on a girl's face, which serves no biological purpose, but I got it from porn. Why not the elbow? Why not the knee? There's a level of disrespect to it. Even though the girl consents, it's still disrespectful. (23, Middle-Eastern, Student)

This desire to orgasm in this specific way was produced as a result of watching pornography, as, to Michael, it was pornography that made the face a sexy and acceptable place to ejaculate. Michael relays an interesting conundrum when it comes to pornography-inspired sexual acts, consent, and sexual congruency. For Michael, ejaculating on a woman's face during sex feels disrespectful, yet it's a practice he engages in. His feelings that it is not quite right for him, as a sex act, are not alleviated by a sexual partner's consent. Here, Michael is able to relay a very complex relationship with pornography, and its impact on his sex life.

Additionally, Michael's situation also aligns with cognitive scripts theory, which posits that the media can play a significant role in providing a heuristic model that outlines acceptable (or unacceptable) behavior, as well as what the outcomes of a particular course of action should be (Wright, 2011). In these instances, pornography provides a heuristic sexual script from which men that consume pornography can model their sexual behavior (Sun, Bridges, Johnson, & Ezzell, 2016). Mainstream pornography has amalgamated around a substantively homogenous script, which can create significant detrimental consequences for the sexual experiences of men who watch pornography, including requesting particular pornography sex acts of a partner, deliberately conjuring images of pornographic content to maintain arousal, having concerns over sexual performance and body image, and a diminished sense of pleasure and enjoyment derived from sexually intimate behavior with a partner (Sun et al., 2016). The data provided by the participants seem to align with literature, with pornography impacting sexual expectations, sexual preferences, and sexual objectification of women.

Pornography creates narrow and unrealistic expectations of sex (Antevska & Gavey, 2015). After years of watching pornography,

some of the men began to get uninterested in everyday sex because it did not measure up to the expectations set by pornography:

Frank: I feel like real sex isn't as good because the expectations are too high. The stuff I would expect her to do in bed. Porn is an unrealistic portrayal of a regular sex life. When I got used to unrealistic images, you expect your real sex life to match the intensity and pleasure of porn. But that doesn't happen, and when it doesn't happen, I get a little disappointed. (27, Asian, Student)

George: I think the expectations I have about how whizz, bang, wonderful things should be during sex are not the same in real life [ . . . ] And it's harder for me when what I get used is something that's not real, and staged. Porn sets up unrealistic expectations for sex. (51, Pākehā, Mentor)

Frank and George highlight an aspect of pornography that is referred to as "Pornotopia," a fantasy world where an endless supply of "lustful, gorgeous, and always orgasmic women" are readily available for male viewing (Salmon, 2012). For these men, pornography created a sexual fantasy world that could not be met in "reality." The awareness of such an impact of pornography, however, did not affect consumption. Instead, some men began looking for women that more closely matched their pornographic preferences or who allow the men to recreate what they see in pornography. When these expectations were not met, some of the men were disappointed and became less sexually aroused:

Albert: Because I've seen so many images and videos of women I find attractive, I find it difficult to be with women that do not match the quality of the women I watch in videos or see in images. My partners do not match up to the behaviors that I watch in the videos [ . . . ] When you watch porn very often, I've noticed that women are always dressed very sexy, in sexy high heels and lingerie, and when I do not get that in bed I get less aroused. (37, Pākehā, Student)

Albert started noticing how his pornography viewing began influencing what he found attractive in women. He disclosed later in the interview that he subsequently started expecting—and requesting—these preferences from his partners. When women did not match the unrealistic aesthetic he had watched in pornographic content, his sexual desire for his partner would diminish. For Albert and other participants, regular women simply did not match up to the women created by "Pornotopia." Pornography influenced these men's sexual preferences, which often led to disappointment with real sex, preference for pornography over sex with real women, or looking for women that more closely resembled—both physically and in terms of sexual behaviors—the pornography ideal.

Participants also discussed how their sexual preferences evolved as a result of their pornography use. This could involve an "escalation" in pornographic preferences:

David: At first it was one person getting progressively naked, then it progressed to couples having sex, and from quite early on, I started narrowing down to heterosexual anal sex. This all happened within a couple years of starting my porn viewing [ . . . ] From there, my viewing got more and more extreme. I found that the more believable expressions were those of pain and discomfort, and the videos I viewed started to get more and more violent. Such as, videos that are made to look like rape. What I was going for was the homemade stuff, amateur style. It looked believable, like a rape was actually happening. (29, Pākehā, Professional)

Literature has suggested that compulsive and/or problematic pornography users often experience a phenomenon where their pornography use escalates and takes the form of greater time spent viewing or seeking out new genres that induce shock, surprise, or even violation of expectations (Wéry & Billieux, 2016). Consistent with literature, David attributed his niche pornographic preferences to pornography. Indeed, the escalation from nudity to realistic looking rape was the primary reason David perceived his use to be problematic. Like David, Daniel also noticed that what he found sexually arousing had evolved after years of watching pornography. Daniel discussed his extensive exposure to pornographic scenes, specifically of penises penetrating vaginas, and subsequently becoming sexually stimulated by the sight of a penis:

Daniel: When you watch enough porn, you begin getting aroused by the sights of penises as well, since they're on the screen so much. Then a penis becomes a conditioned and automatic source of stimulation and arousal. For me it's fascinating just how localized my attraction is to the penis, and nothing else of a man. So like I said, I derive nothing from men, other than the penis. If you copy and paste it onto a woman, then that's excellent. (27, Pasifika, Student)

Over time, as their pornographic preferences evolved, both men sought to explore their preferences in real life. David reenacted some of his pornographic preferences with his partner, specifically anal sex. David reported feeling very relieved when his partner was accepting of sexual desires, which is certainly not always the case in such instances. David did not, however, disclose his preference for rape pornography with his partner. Daniel, like David, also reenacted his pornographic preferences and experimented by engaging in sexual acts with a transgender woman. According to literature pertaining to pornographic content and real-life sexual experiences, however, the cases of both David and Daniel do not necessarily represent the norm. Although there is a link between less conventional practices, a significant proportion of individuals have no interest in reenacting the pornography acts—especially the unconventional acts—they enjoy viewing (Martyniuk, Okolski, & Dekker, 2019).

Lastly, men reported the impacts pornography had had on their sexual function, something that has only recently been examined within the literature. For example, Park and colleagues (2016) found that Internet pornography viewing might be associated with erectile dysfunction, decreased sexual satisfaction, and diminished sexual libido. Participants in our study reported similar sexual dysfunctions, which they attributed to pornography use. Daniel reflected on his past relationships in which he was not able to get and keep an erection. He associated his erectile dysfunction with his girlfriends' bodies not comparing to what he had become attracted to when watching pornography:

Daniel: My previous two girlfriends, I stopped finding them arousing in a way that wouldn't have happened to someone who was not watching porn. I had seen so many naked female bodies, that I knew the particular things that I liked and you just start forming a very clear ideal about what you want in a woman, and real women aren't like that. And my girlfriends didn't have perfect bodies and I think that's fine, but I think that got in the way of finding them arousing. And that caused problems in the relationships. There are times I couldn't sexually perform because I was not aroused. (27, Pasifika, Student)

The experiences of these men speak to the level of sexual objectification that can occur for some men as a result of watching pornography. Sex and arousal become things that are stimulated by—or connected to—certain looks, bodies, clothes, or acts rather than a person's personality or the intimate connection between two people. Problematic pornography consumption seems to be creating a model of sex that is disconnected, highly visual, and largely based on objectification. Sex becomes a purely mechanical act triggered by visual stimuli, as opposed to a mutual exploration or expression of intimacy.

### Summary and Conclusions

In this article, we have explored the different ways men speak about their problematic pornography use. We covered both the origins of their use—primarily in the form of the contextual issues that shaped their initial viewing habits—as well as the individual subtleties and nuances that trigger present use. Although a private activity, pornography use was shrouded in secrecy and silence, ironically positioning its use as “taboo” in an ostensibly sexualized and pornified sociocultural context. The two primary reasons for men's private, hidden, and secretive use were that, first, sex and pornography were largely taboo in these men's lives and, second, that opening up about pornography use was hard and often met with rejection or judgment.

Overall, men opening up about something they are struggling with positions them as vulnerable, and this can inherently carry some stigma. We need to make it more socially acceptable for men to seek help for anything, including SPPPU. Indeed, when some of these men did find a safe person or context to talk about their use, they experienced comforting relief. When, however, these attempts at vulnerability were met with judgment, shame, or misunderstanding, they withdrew further into shame and secrecy. In the absence of parental guidance and adequate sex education, all of the participants, whether consciously or unconsciously, used pornography not only as a form of sexual education, but also as a model and script for how sex should unfold and what to expect—both physically and in terms of sexual behavior—of their sexual partners.

The main reason men kept their viewing hidden from the world was because of the accompanying experiences of guilt and shame that would inevitably follow most—if not all—viewing sessions. Men reported simply being too ashamed to open up about their use to anyone, which further reinforced the hidden nature of their use. The participants described how the cycle was a patterned behavioral loop. After using pornography, the men reported immediate feelings of a guilt, which would then trigger use in an effort to find temporary solace from such feelings.

As the participants developed and matured into adults, pornography began eroding their sense of autonomy, an important psychological need that contributes to healthy functioning and wellness for individuals. The men experienced a loss of control over their use, which underpinned the core aspect of their SPPPU. The men valued qualities of self-control, willpower, and discipline, and yet pornography completely undermined these traits and their efforts to be optimal versions of themselves. Such an undermining represented a form of disempowerment and even emasculation. Over time, their continued and repetitive use began adversely impacting various aspects of and experiences of sex. The men perceived that pornography had resulted in having unrealistic

expectations when it came to sex and sexuality, the way they viewed women (solely as objects of sex), and lead to diminished sexual function.

For the men interviewed here, pornography evolved from a conscious choice motivated by pleasure-seeking and sexual stimulation to a habitual act, triggered by stress and other experiences of affective discomfort. Affective states commonly avoided by participants were boredom, loneliness, and stress, which would trigger use of pornography in the absence of other coping strategies. For most of the men pornography was the only coping strategy for these uncomfortable experiences, as free time or time spent alone with self was often experienced as too uncomfortable to bear. Lastly, it is important to mention that the men's accounts of masturbation as draining did not specifically differentiate between masturbation per se and masturbation with pornography. Although beyond the scope of this research, it may be useful for future research to explore this area due to the long-standing cultural discourses of ejaculation as depleting for men, as well as the anecdotal evidence supporting the benefits of semen retention.

The outcomes of this research warrant further investigations aimed at understating how we can better equip men with psychological knowledge and capacity. Further work is needed in using interventions and psychosocial strategies that could offer alternatives to problematic pornographic use, such as productive and meaningful projects, tasks, activities, hobbies, and/or relationships. Alternatively, mindfulness-based practices like meditation could be used to help the individual learn how to and practice observing, being with, and nonjudgmentally accepting their internal experience so that the uncomfortable experience does not subconsciously trigger use. Finally, this article highlights the important role of professionals who work with men and supports literature suggesting therapists and clinicians may be unprepared when men disclose their pornography use in sessions. This article can serve as an important resource for professionals working with men who present with SPPPU.

In this article, we have started to scratch the surface when it comes to men's SPPPU. Much like in the men's accounts, SPPPU itself is a hidden issue that requires greater engagement by researchers, policymakers, clinicians, and medical doctors. Overall, the importance of comprehensive sex education and media literacy education that counters some of the problematic outcomes of hidden SPPPU use cannot be stressed enough. It is time to openly address this issue, before it creates more difficulty and harm.

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Received December 6, 2018

Revision received June 17, 2019

Accepted June 24, 2019 ■