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EMOTIONAL INDOCTRINATION DISGUISED AS EMPOWERMENT:THE IMPACT OF DIGITAL SMUT ON YOUTH

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Abstract
This study examines how digital erotic literature and hypersexual content on platforms like Wattpad, TikTok, and OnlyFans influence adolescents and young adults aged 15–22. It argues that smut works as emotional indoctrination disguised as empowerment, reshaping how youth perceive love, intimacy, and identity. Through a literature review and a survey of 103 participants, we find that exposure normalises unhealthy relationships, causes desensitisation, and encourages addiction-like behaviour. In the survey 75.7% of people said they engaged with online smut regularly, most encountering it passively. Over half of the responses reported emotional numbness afterwards, and many described real-life intimacy as underwhelming in comparison. Meanwhile, 73% acknowledged that smut shaped their perception of love. This shows recurring themes including the romanticisation of pain, and how intensity outweighs intimacy. We conclude by discussing the role of algorithms, historical parallels, and ethical concerns. The findings highlight the urgency for media literacy and safeguards that address explicitness and the emotional logic in youth-oriented smut.

Keywords: Digital Smut, Emotional Indoctrination, Youth Psychology, Hypersexual Content, Desensitisation, Addiction, Algorithmic Amplification, Empowerment Narrative, Romanticisation of Pain, Media Literacy.

Introduction
In todays world, erotic content isnt limited to traditional pornography anymore. It has evolved into more subtle and accessible forms including fanfiction, and self-published erotica on platforms like Wattpad, TikTok, and Onlyfans.
These formats frame graphic romantic and sexual narratives as normal, liberating experiences. This paper examines their psychological, cultural, and emotional impact on youth aged 15–22, defining “smut” as digital erotic literature and hypersexual media created or promoted for young audiences. Unlike mainstream porn, smut is often narrative-driven but still fetish based, merging storytelling with sexual intensity. Wattpad’s teen fiction, for example, often centers on dominant “alpha male” archetypes, while TikTok POV’s condense intense sexualised scenarios into seconds. OnlyFans though marketed for adults enters youth spaces through discussion and widespread availability.
The central argument is that smut functions as emotional indoctrination under the banner of empowerment. On the surface, it validates feelings, especially those of loneliness, confusion, or curiosity about love and promotes sexual exploration, often in sex-positive or feminist terms. Beneath that, repeated exposure embeds damaging beliefs: that abuse signals romance, that love must be extreme to be real, and that self-worth relies on desirability.
This study integrates a survey of 103 young people with a wide literature base spanning psychology, cultural studies, and ethics. The survey captures not just usage patterns, but also how smut shapes emotional baselines and expectations of intimacy. The literature review examines gender-specific effects, algorithmic amplification, desensitisation, parallels with historical erotica, and moral perspectives. By using quantitative data with first-person accounts, this research builds a clearer picture of smut’s influence on how youth unlearn what healthy relationships look like.

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Literature Review

Youth, Media, and Sexual Content

Adolescents today grow up surrounded by media that often sexualises youth and relationships. Our survey shows that by age 13, many have already encountered pornography. But beyond explicit videos, narrative erotica has become mainstream. Wattpad, a self-publishing site, popularised teen romance globally. Its "Teen Fiction" category, often filled with romantic thrillers containing explicit scenes, remains among the most popular. An article by Federico Pianzola found that Wattpad stories evoke strong emotional engagement, with readers commenting throughout the entire series, showing deep care. Within these communities, identity is often tied to the stories, with readers sharing personal thoughts in the margins. This makes Wattpad erotica not a side hobby, but a major space for social and emotional engagement.

TikTok plays a similar role. While known for dance and comedy, it also hosts countless short "POV" erotica videos created for teens. Algorithms can escalate exposure to extreme content within minutes. Research shows TikTok's algorithm identifies user vulnerabilities and feeds addictive content, including sexualised material. An NGO study found harmful content can appear within under a minute for users as young as 13, and that profiles marked by insecurity receive more misogynistic and sexualised videos. This shows how algorithms can normalise and accelerate exposure to explicit and harmful narratives.

Psychological Effects and Perception of Erotics

Studies on adolescent reactions to sexually explicit media show mixed outcomes.

Michaela Šaradín Lebedíkovás study found most youth reported neutral feelings, with some noting increased sexual confidence or education. This aligns with sex-positive claims that erotica can teach consent and pleasure. Lindgren's research supports this, showing young women often learn new things from erotic content. Similarly, Lippmann's study found OnlyFans users reported sexual growth and knowledge gains.

However, critics point to risks. Traditional critiques argue that pornography and smut degrade relationships, create unrealistic expectations, and promote objectification. Konnikova describes how compulsive users develop a "numbed response to pleasure," finding real partners less satisfying. The Catholic Catechism calls pornography a "fantasy world" that distorts reality. Addiction models suggest repeated exposure builds tolerance, pushing users toward more extreme content. Kleczek found that male problematic use linked more to pleasure-seeking, while female problematic use correlated with loneliness and victimisation. Our survey reflected this pattern, with 36% of respondents reporting they needed "intensity" to feel love, showing how smut can shift emotional reward systems.

The 'Empowerment' Narrative and Gender

Online erotic material is marketed as empowering, especially for women. Works like Fifty Shades of Grey go hand in hand with sexpositive messaging, encouraging women to own their sexuality.

Some research supports benefits, showing erotica can improve sexual agency and confidence. But other studies highlight the illusion of empowerment. Anciones-Anguita and Checa Romero found that teens, including girls as young as 12, often see platforms like OnlyFans as career paths, citing control and income while overlooking risks. The same study warns that normalising sexual commodification reduces self-worth to appearance and desirability.

Feminist critics including Lindgren observe that popular novels and BookTok stories often romanticise abusive dynamics or male dominance and female submission.

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Our survey respondents referenced titles like After, where an abusive male lead is portrayed as redeemable. This reflects "empowered femininity," where women appear active in sexual narratives but still operate within male-centered fantasies.

Algorithmic and Cultural Context

Algorithms heavily shape youth exposure to sexualised content. Our survey showed 64% first encountered smut passively, meaning algorithms pushed it to them. Studies confirm that even light engagement with romance or attractiveness-related content can quickly lead to more explicit material. TikTok and Instagram have been documented promoting OnlyFans and similar platforms to teens, blurring age boundaries. Historically, this is not new. The Victorian era saw erotic exposés like W. T. Stead's Maiden Tribute scandalise the public while drawing fascination. Today's difference is scale: digital erotica is constant, personalised, and interactive. The cultural concern remains the same, youth absorbing dangerous scripts about sex and power

Desensitisation and Addiction Models

A common thread in research and our findings is desensitisation. Over half of our participants reported feeling emotionally numb after consuming smut, with many saying real-life intimacy felt flat by comparison. This mirrors concerns in both religious and secular critiques that extreme sexual content dulls emotional sensitivity. Addiction models show that tolerance builds over time, leading users to seek more intense or extreme material. This pattern, supported by studies on pornography addiction, parallels what our respondents described: needing obsessive, drama-filled romance to feel excitement.

Methodology

To study the issue at hand, a survey was conducted among youth aged 15-22, with 103 participants. The participants were all recruited through school and college networks through social media. The survey included quantitative and qualitative questions.

The quantitative portion measures patterns of smut consumption; platforms used, whether exposure was active or passive, and self reported emotional effects. Using a likert scale participants rated whether smut made them feel understood, whether they found real life romance exciting and whether they felt desensitised.

The qualitative portion asked participants to describe how smut affected their views on love, intimacy, and self worth, allowing deeper insight into their personal experiences and emotions they had internalised.

This provided a showcase of prevalence and insight into recurring themes. Percentages in the results refer to the total sample of 103 participants, who were 62% female and 38% male, with an age range of 15-22.

All data has been kept confidential and participants anonymity has been protected throughout.

Results

The survey shows that engagement with smut is both widespread and often unplanned. 75.7% of participants reported regularly reading or watching sexually explicit fanfiction or romantic erotica, including Wattpad stories, BookTok videos, and TikTok POV clips. 64% said their first exposure was passive, meaning the content "found them" through algorithmic recommendations rather than a deliberate search.

Responses were mixed. 68% said smut has made them feel seen during periods of loneliness, confusion about love, or uncertainty about identity. They see the content as a source of liberation, a way to express the emotions that they struggle to work through. At the same time,

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53.6% admitted that prolonged exposure has left them feeling emotionally numb, and 47% said they no longer feel excited by real intimacy, instead craving the thrill of smut, as slow romance or simple affection feels underwhelming compared to the drama they are used to.
36% said they felt unsatisfied by passive expressions of love, such as texting, compliments, or patience. The mentality of "if it doesn't break you, it doesn't count" was common, showing how love must be obsessive to feel real.
When asked if smut shaped their perception of love, 73% said yes. Many admitted they knew the content was unrealistic and unhealthy, but they felt attached to it.
Overall, the results show that smut can offer temporary validation, but it alters emotional perception by creating dependency on drama, and reinforcing the idea that love must be like fictional extremes.

Discussion

Smut as Emotional Indoctrination

The results confirm that smut functions less as casual entertainment and more as a form of emotional conditioning. Many respondents reported feeling deeply "seen" by fictional narratives during periods of loneliness or emotional instability.
At first the content feels safe and trustworthy as the validation lessens mental barriers, leading to the reader being more emotionally invested. Meanwhile, the narrative reinforces the belief that love must be extreme. Jealousy is passion, and that emotoinal pain is depth.
This mimics the way indoctrination is found in other contexts. Propaganda does not work by bombarding the audience with raw ideology alone; it begins by connecting to the audience's existing feelings and insecurities. Smut works similarly. It begins with characters and situations the audience can relate to, common tropes include outsiders, the misunderstood, the lonely, and then attaches these identities to emotionally charged storylines that glorify obsession or domination. Over time, the emotional payoffs create an attachment to the very scripts the individual might rationally reject.
Smut is seen as a source of empowerment. Young people engage with smut as a personal choice, a safe way to explore their desires privately, and on their own terms. But the data shows that this choice is influenced by what platforms show and the cultural norms that surround them. At first it feels like freedom but overtime it can shrink their emotional range, making them dependent on emotional highs just to feel something.

Gender-Specific Impacts

Gender patterns are prevalent in smut consumption. They are seen in how different genres and platforms cater to male and female audiences. Research shows that male-targetted explicit media is more visual, while female-targeted smut is more emotion and narrative driven.
Our sample, which was 62% female, reflects the dominance of platforms like Wattpad and TikTok POVs in shaping female consumption patterns.
Female respondents frequently described emotional connection as a key factor in their enjoyment of smut. They reported being drawn to "alpha male" archetypes, intense jealousy, or high-conflict relationships, patterns also found in the most-read Wattpad titles and trending BookTok hashtags.
Some claim these narratives helped them explore their boundaries and identify what their needs were in a relationship, others admitted that these stories made them desire toxicity. Finding comfort in a narrative while knowing it is harmful shows how emotional indoctrination occurs, even when it isn't apparent beneath the surface.

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Male respondants were less likely to be invested in long form erotice, prefering short form explicit content. Though the short form content didn't offer emotional attachment, they were still influenced by the ideal bodies and sexual expectations shown in smut.
Several noted that their peers felt pressure to meet unrealistic physical standards or adopt aggressive sexual personas, mirroring the objectification dynamic in reverse.

Algorithmic Amplification

Perhaps the most revealing insight from the survey is how often first exposure to smut was passive, 64% of respondents said the content "found them."
This shows the pivotal role of recommendation algorithms not just in providing content but in expanding exposure to sexualised material. Once a user interacts with suggestive content, the algorithm begins to show increasingly explicit versions.
This is dangerous as the progression towards more explicit content is hidden within a normal browsing experience.
Platforms rarely label such material as adult, meaning teens can receive a steady stream of explicit or suggestive videos without hitting an age barrier. The fact that this process is personalised makes it even more persuasive. An algorithm can feed a lonely 16-year-old girl a chain of romanticised abuse clips while serving a 17-year-old boy content that frames women primarily as sexual commodities, both without either of them seeking it out.
This is a form of emotional targeting. The algorithm identifies not just interests, but vulnerabilities including sadness, insecurity, curiosity, and exploits them to increase engagement. In doing so, it accelerates the emotional conditioning process, making it easier for smut's core messages to become part of the user's mental framework before they even recognise it happening.

Emotional Desensitisation and Addiction

One of the clearest patterns is emotional desensitisation. Over half of the responses in our study report a sense of emotional numbness after prolonged exposure to smut, especially when it contains extreme, dramatic, or hyper idealised intimacy. Many participants felt physical or emotional real-life intimacy felt underwhelming in comparison. This points toward an underlying neurological mechanism, similar to a tolerance effect seen in substance addiction.
When a person interacts with high intensity emotional or sexual content on repeat, their brain tunes itself to see those dopamine spikes as a need. The baseline for what is pleasurable and stimulating rises, in a similar manner as to how a person who regularly consumes coffee finds weaker blends tasteless, the person becomes reliant on dopamine spikes triggered by extreme intimacy, they find normal human connection such as hand holding or casual conversation disappointing as it doesn't provide the same release and sensations.
This change shows itself in subtle ways. Slow-burn romance may no longer feel rewarding. Moments of respect or communication may seem as lacking a spark. Many people have admitted to ending stable relationships because they did not have that intensity they craved. Some believe the absence of constant chaos or grand gestures meant the relationship was less real.
This creates a feedback loop. The connections that feel authentic are those that replicate the emotional stakes of fictional ones. Volatility, extreme passion, and even abuse are asked for, but these are traits associated with unhealthy and abusive relationships. They look for drama as proof of love, individuals are trapped in constant emotional instability.
Addiction comparisons make it clear why this cycle of emotional instability is resistant to change. The brain associates this content with an emotional high. This isn't purely sexual; it often includes a craving for validation and emotional extremes. Once this pattern becomes a

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regular, the brain looks for this stimulation when bored, lonely, stressed, or even when dissatisfied. Over time, this becomes a part of a person's subconscious, and the individual won't consciously recognise why they are drawn towards such content.

Our survey results reinforce this model. Approximately 36% of respondents admitted to actively seeking obsessive, high-drama relationships because "anything else feels boring." This is not a simple matter of preference, like enjoying one genre of film over another it reflects a neurological adaptation to a consistent, artificially high level of stimulus. In the same way that constant exposure to loud music can dull one's hearing, constant exposure to high-intensity emotional content can dull the capacity to appreciate lower-intensity but healthier forms of intimacy.

The result is a lesser emotional range, as people become unable to find satisfaction in stability, and peace. Without intervention through self-awareness, reduction in consumption, or resetting their expectations, this pattern gets worse over time.

Historical and Cultural Parallels

Humans have always been involved in erotic or romantic stories, and throughout history they have dictated how people think about love, sex, and relationships. But the form changes. The Victorian era had the penny press and serialized novels, cheap, sensational stories people pretended to frown upon but devoured in private.

They acted as an escape from rigid moral codes, a place where people found comfort reading about passions they could never admit to. Later in the 20th Century pulp romance novels became common, paperbacks with dramatic covers and plotlines. Then came the 1970s, when erotic magazines and romance novels were present in mainstream bookshelves, being marketed as the sexual revolution.

Every era has had its version of "forbidden but irresistible."

The difference now is in the speed, the reach, and the way it follows you. Back then, you had to go out of your way to find it, whether to the bookstore, a borrowed copy, or a subscription. There was a time between wanting it and getting it. Now, it's in your pocket. You don't even have to search for it. It finds you. Algorithm-fed feeds deliver it, each click rewarded with something a little more tuned to you than the last. There's no space between the want and getting it.

And the old debates about whether these stories give people unrealistic expectations? Still here, only now they're happening in an environment where fiction isn't just consumed, it's lived in. Platforms like Wattpad, AO3, or even certain corners of TikTok don't just give you a story; they pull you into a community. You're not reading alone. You're in a comment section with hundreds of others, trading jokes about tropes, sharing edits, writing spin-offs, turning a niche fantasy into a kind of shared belief system.

That's the real shift. In the past, reading a romance novel might make you quietly wish for some grand gesture or passionate fight. Today, you can log in and find entire groups of people reinforcing that wish, validating it daily, and giving it new language.

Ethical and Religious Perspectives

Religious traditions see smut as more than a personal fufilment. Smut is seen as a threat to morality that reshapes the individual and the community. In Islam, the Quran(An-Nur 24:30-31) instructs believers to lower their gaze and guard their chastity. It says to avoid temptation and a realisation that repeated exposure to sexual content changes what the mind desires and normalises.

Christianity has a similar outlook. In Matthew 5:28, Jesus warns that anyone who look at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Lust is an action with

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moral weight, it has the ability to distort how we perceive others. Both religions recognise that sexual fantasies erode self control, reduce respect for others, and shift intimacy to personal fulfillment.

Feminist ethics have a similar conclusion. Thinkers like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon argue that erotica reinforces patriarchal structures, even when it is written for women by women, it romanticices male dominance and frames submission as desirable. Our survey reflected this dynamic: female respondents often described high-drama or toxic relationships as exciting, even while acknowledging they would reject such behaviour in real life. This shows how easily fictional tropes can bypass rational boundaries when they are emotionally rewarding.

Progressive scholars who support sexual exploration also warn that consent in fiction is not the same as consent in life. Fiction can normalise tropes such as persistence after rejection or jealousy as proof of love that erode healthy boundaries in reality. Several respondents echoed this concern, noting that while they recognised these storylines were unrealistic, they still caught themselves hoping for similar dynamics in their own relationships.

The ethical question then becomes not simply "Is this content right or wrong?" but "What kind of person does regular exposure to this content encourage me to become?" In both religious and secular moral frameworks, the risk lies in how quickly desire can become shaped by stories that disguise control, manipulation, or emotional harm as romance.

A Feedback Loop of Expectation and Validation

When all of this is put together the emotional validation, the gendered storylines, the way algorithms feed content, and the gradual loss of sensitivity, it becomes a cycle that feeds itself. Smut tends to show up when someone is feeling low or uncertain, offering exactly the rush or comfort they need in that moment. That builds a sense of trust. The more content they consume, the more the platform learns about you, and what to show next. Slowly, their idea of love and intimacy shifts toward the fictional highs. Making real relationships feel dull.

What makes this loop so powerful is that it feels personal. The user does not experience smut as a mass-market product, they experience it as their private escape, their secret source of comfort or excitement. This intimacy between consumer and content is what makes the indoctrination so effective.

Conclusion

This study shows how smut isnt just another form of entertainment. It changes how young people see love, intimacy, and themselves. Platforms like Wattpad, TikTok and OnlyFans make explicit content available for the youth. Most of the exposure is not chosen. It appears through recommendations, often growing in intensity once curiosity is detected. The impact, however, lasts far longer than the moment of scrolling.

The survey highlighted three main patterns. First, most participants had come across smut, many without searching for it. Second, a large number felt emotionally numb and less satisfied in real relationships. Third, the picture of love offered by smut; obsessive, dramatic, and extreme; slowly becomes the standard by which real life is measured. Other studies support this, showing differences in how men and women consume it, how it takes advantage of vulnerability, and how it feeds on unmet emotional needs.

Religious and ethical views use different words, yet their warning is the same. Continuous exposure changes expectations, values, and behaviour. Whether it is described as moral decline or as the spread of harmful norms, the conclusion does not change: what people consume shapes them.

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This does not cancel out the possible positives. Smut can sometimes inform. It can provide a safe outlet. It can help people put feelings into words. Still, when looking at the larger pattern in both our findings and past research, the risks are greater. Without awareness, reflection, and healthier options, smut becomes a school for distorted ideas of intimacy.

Real strength will not come from copying the emotional logic of stories written to keep attention. It will come from giving young people the ability to see how these stories work, how algorithms use their weaknesses, and how to tell the difference between a passing rush and lasting connection. Only then will their choices be conscious, and only then will intimacy grow instead of being lost.

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