

## Young men using pornography

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Most everyday users of pornography are heterosexual men. Looking at, and masturbating to, pornography is the routine practice of large numbers of men. And most of the commercial pornographic industry caters to heterosexual men. These men – and their consumption of pornography – are the subject of a growing body of research. This chapter offers an overview of what we can learn about heterosexual boys' and young men's use of pornography, focusing particularly on quantitative studies of the extent, nature and meaning of pornography consumption.

Pornography plays an increasingly significant role in boys' and young men's peer cultures and sociosexual relations. Consumption of pornography is exacerbating some males' tolerance for sexual violence, intensifying their investments in narratives of female nymphomania and male sexual prowess, and shifting their sexual practices and relations. Among boys and young men, effective efforts to limit or shape the use of pornography will address the powerful appeal of such materials and the cultural contexts in which pornography consumption is given meaning.

### Patterns of pornography use

Males are more likely than females to use pornography, including among younger age groups. Different studies define 'pornography' in varying ways or allow research participants to do so: some do not distinguish between different kinds of pornographic media (videos, internet sites and so on) and some do not distinguish between accidental and deliberate exposure. Nevertheless, it is clear that large numbers of boys and young men in particular are growing up in the presence of sexually explicit media.

In general, men are significantly more likely than women to view pornography frequently, to be sexually aroused by it and to have favourable attitudes towards it (Johansson and Hammarén 2007: 60–4; Lo and Wei 2002: 16; Sabina *et al.* 2008: 69; Wallmyr and Welin 2006; Walsh 1999: 779). Of course, women too consume pornography (Juffer 1998; Walsh 1999), although image-centred pornographies have not developed mass appeal among women.

One of the few nationally representative surveys of pornography consumption comes from Australia. A national survey of 20,000 individuals aged sixteen to fifty-nine years found that about one-quarter looked at X-rated videos or internet sex sites in the last year. More than twice as many males (37 per cent) as females (16 per cent) watched an X-rated film in the last year. Males are almost seven times as likely as females to have visited an internet sex site on purpose in the last year: 16.5 per cent of men did so and only 2.4 per cent of women (Richters *et al.* 2003: 185–6). US data are similar. One study found that 23 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women have visited adult web sites, and getting access to adult sites is most popular among men aged eighteen to twenty-nine (Lenhart *et al.* 2001: 33). Among undergraduate internet users at a Texas university, 57 per cent of men and 35 per cent of women had used the internet to search for sex-related information (Goodson *et al.* 2001: 106). However, some males are more likely than others to use pornography. The national Australian survey found that pornography consumption is more common among young men, with close to half of males aged between sixteen and twenty-nine using pornography.

A wide range of studies in Western countries document both that significant proportions of boys and young men consume pornography and that they do so in greater numbers and with much greater frequency than their female peers. For example, a Swedish study found that 30 per cent of adolescent boys and only 3 per cent of adolescent girls watched pornography at least once a week (Forsberg 2001: 161). In an Australian study among sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds, 73 per cent of boys had watched an X-rated video, with one in twenty watching them on a weekly basis, while more than a fifth watch an X-rated video at least once a month. Only 11 per cent of girls had watched an X-rated video, all of them less often than once every two to three months (Flood 2007). Similar findings come from other countries such as Taiwan (Lo *et al.* 1999; Lo and Wei 2005). Some studies do find that girls and young women are not far behind boys and young men in the extent to which they have *ever* seen pornography, although gendered patterns in their frequency of consumption are likely to persist (Bonino *et al.* 2006: 273; Fleming *et al.* 2006: 145; Johansson and Hammarén 2007: 60; Sabina *et al.* 2008: 691–2; Wallmyr and Welin 2006: 291).

Gendered patterns of sex-related internet use also can be found among queer and same-sex-attracted individuals. An Australian survey of same-sex-attracted young people aged fourteen to twenty-one found that over 80 per cent of young men had downloaded sexual materials from sex sites, compared with under 50 per cent of young women. And close to 40 per cent of males had used sexual materials to get aroused before sex, compared with just over 10 per cent of females (Hillier *et al.* 2001: 13–14).

There are further gender contrasts in patterns and contexts of pornography use. Boys and men are more likely than girls and women to use pornography for sexual excitement and masturbation, to initiate its use (rather than be introduced to it by an intimate partner), to view it alone and in same-sex groups, and to view more types of images (Cameron *et al.* 2005; Flood 2007: 51, 56; Flood and

Hamilton 2003: 13–14; Nosko *et al.* 2007: 2). Such patterns have been documented also in older studies among young people in Canada (Check 1995: 89–90) and the US (Bryant and Brown 1989: 46). On the other hand, in a study at a Texas university, while males were more likely to report accessing explicit materials out of sexual curiosity and to become sexually aroused, there were no differences in the frequency of masturbation (Goodson *et al.* 2001: 108–13).

### Effects and significance

What is the significance of this pervasive pornography consumption among boys and young men? While there is considerable controversy regarding any claims that media have ‘effects’, I wish to argue that pornography consumption has a series of identifiable effects among boys and young men. There is debate regarding the methods used to demonstrate that pornography has effects, so I begin with this, before offering some caveats for my own claims.

Research into pornography’s effects can be divided into various types, according to two dimensions: the study design, and the type of effect being studied. In terms of study design, some studies are experimental, often in laboratory conditions, and involve testing the impact of exposure to pornography on participants’ attitudes or behaviour. Other studies are correlational and involve the investigation of possible relationships between ‘naturalistic’ pornography use (in everyday life) and attitudes or behaviour. Longitudinal studies examine the use of sexual media and its correlates over time. In terms of the type of effect being studied, much research focuses on attitudes, while some focus also or only on behaviours (Malamuth *et al.* 2000: 41–2).

Laboratory-based experimental studies on pornography have been criticized as excessively artificial and formal (Boyle 2000: 188; McNair 1996: 65–7). Pornography is often defined by the particular effect it produces in the spectator, that is, sexual arousal and masturbation to orgasm. Yet masturbation is usually absent in experimental studies. The experimental context is very different from the natural setting of pornography consumption, for instance where a young man masturbates to internet pornography in his bedroom or a group watch an X-rated video in the living room. Masturbation and orgasm, as powerful physical and emotional experiences, are central to the pornographic experience and influence the interpretation and effect of the material. It is therefore possible that experimental studies in fact *underestimate* the effect of pornography (Jensen 1998b: 105). Experimental studies have also been criticized for focusing on measures of physiological arousal rather than affective or emotional responses such as pleasure or shame, and neglecting long-term effects, given that their definitions of ‘massive’ exposure may be as small as five hours’ worth (Jensen 1998b: 104) and their time scales may be only weeks long (Thornburgh and Lin 2002: 156).

Correlational studies do not allow determinations of causality: associations between exposure to sexual media and particular attitudes or practices may go either way, be reciprocal, or shaped by other factors such as sexual interest

(Hald 2006; Janghorbani *et al.* 2003). And few studies are longitudinal, tracing the use of sexual media and the formation of sexual and gender identities over time.

Nevertheless, existing empirical research is robust enough for us to be able to claim that pornography consumption does have discernible effects. It suggests too that at least three types of factor mediate the impact of exposure of pornography: the characteristics of the viewer, their own engagement with the material, and the character and context of exposure.

First, the likely effects of viewing sexual content among young people are moderated by such variables as age, gender, maturation, sexual experience and parental involvement. Age and maturation influence children’s levels of understanding of, comfort with and interest in content such as sexual humour and innuendo. In a study of eleven- to fifteen-year-old girls, girls who were more physically mature and had been in an intimate relationship with a boy were both more interested in and more critical of portrayals of sex in the media (Huston *et al.* 1998: 15–16). Research on the relationship between pornography and sexual aggression finds that important moderating variables include the individual’s cultural background (emphasis on gender equality or inequality), their home background (sexually permissive or restricted), their personality characteristics and their current emotional state (Malamuth *et al.* 2000: 55).

Second, pornography’s effects are shaped by the user’s sexual, emotional and cognitive responses to the material (Fisher and Barak 2001: 317–20; Jensen 1998b: 157–9; Malamuth and Impett 2001). There is evidence that the effects are greater for people who are more active and involved viewers, who watch the media in question with specific purposes in mind and who attribute greater realism to the portrayals (Ward 2002: 3). At the same time, little is known about children’s and young people’s active engagement with pornography, although children and young people are known to be active and agentic consumers of media, using critical skills and perspectives in interpreting sexual content (Buckingham and Bragg 2003).

Third, the character and circumstances of exposure are important: the type of material involved, the duration and intensity of viewing, and the context (voluntary or involuntary, solitary or collective) (Thornburgh and Lin 2002). For example, when a young man watches an adult video or views a pornographic web site alone and masturbates, the powerful physical and emotional experiences of arousal, masturbation and orgasm may lend greater intensity to the sexual images (Jensen 1998b: 104–5). Mixed effects may occur when boys watch an X-rated video or look at internet pornography in a group. On the one hand, the intensity of the experience may be lessened, as there are distractions, taboos apply to open displays of sexual arousal and group interaction may be characterized by sexual banter, playfulness and sarcasm rather than sexual absorption. On the other hand, watching pornography in groups may enhance collective acceptance of the value systems embedded in pornography and normalization of the particular sexual practices shown.

Some of pornography's impacts are innocuous or even desirable, but others are problematic if not deeply troubling. Below, I move from effects more likely to be perceived as the former to effects more likely to be seen as the latter. Among boys and young men, pornography provides information about sex and sexualities, tends to liberalize sexual attitudes and shifts young men's sexual practices and repertoires. Its use, particularly when secret, can harm female partners' sense of intimacy and trust and can take compulsive and obsessive forms. Pornography encourages sexualized and sexually objectifying understandings of girls and women. Finally, pornography consumption can intensify boys' and young men's tolerance for, and participation in, sexual violence.

### **Pornography as sex education**

#### *Sexual knowledge and attitudes*

Pornography is a significant source of young men's information about sex and sexualities (Measor 2004). Pornography's teachings take place in the context of both limited formal sexuality education and young men's reliance on peers for sexual information (Gelder 2002). A series of reviews document that regular and frequent exposure to sexual content, at least in mainstream media, produces greater sexual knowledge among children and young people (APA 2007; Strasburger and Wilson 2002; Thornburgh and Lin 2002; Ward 2003). Children and young people exposed to sexual media content have greater sexual knowledge (about such topics as pregnancy, menstruation, homosexuality and prostitution) than the control groups (Huston *et al.* 1998).

There is evidence too that pornography in particular is a significant source for many boys' and young men's formative sexual knowledge (Allen 2001). For example, some men report that pornography helped them to learn about female and male bodies and sexual techniques (MacDonald 1990). Some male users describe early encounters with pornography as 'educational', in that it provided information about biology and sexual practices, demystified and destigmatized sex, and taught them about sexual positions, practices and techniques, thus increasing their sexual competence (McKee 2007b). It is worth asking, however, exactly what males learn about bodies and sex from pornography, given that in much heterosexual mass-marketed pornography

sex is divorced from intimacy, loving affection, and human connection; all women are constantly available for sex and have insatiable sexual appetites; and all women are sexually satisfied by whatever the man in the film do.

(Jensen and Dines 1998: 72)

Consumption of pornography and other sexual media also shapes the liberalization of boys' and young men's sexual attitudes. The reviews of exposure to

sexual content in mainstream media also document that this produces more liberal sexual attitudes among children and young people. In experimental studies, for example, children and young people exposed to sexual media content are more accepting of pre-, extra- and non-marital sexual relations (Huston *et al.* 1998). Correlational studies find associations between greater exposure to sexual content on television and the belief that one's peers are sexually active and a more favourable attitude towards recreational sex (Strasburger and Wilson 2002).

Similar if not greater effects are likely for pornography, given its explicit and decontextualized depictions of diverse sexual relations. For example, fifteen- to eighteen-year-olds in a Swedish study who had ever watched a pornographic film were more likely than others to be less ashamed about masturbation and to see prostitution, pornography and sex without love as 'okay' (Johansson and Hammarén 2007). Pornography use also shapes the acceptance of pornography itself: young men (and to some extent women) exposed to large amounts of explicit sexual content often become more supportive of and less offended by such material (Thornburgh and Lin 2002).

Another dimension of pornography's role in male sex education concerns male bodies and bodily processes. Some men argue that pornography has played a therapeutic role in helping them develop healthier sexualities (Kimmel 1990: 21). Pornography has allowed men to feel less shame about ejaculation and semen and to accept themselves as sexual beings (MacDonald 1990). These effects are one aspect of the allegedly 'sex-positive' contribution afforded by pornography. For some feminist and queer commentators, pornography has challenged sexual repression, heterosexist and erotophobic sexual norms and thus benefited women (Duggan *et al.* 1988: 82). However, others argue that while pornography oppresses women, it also limits men. Pornography has helped to homogenize men's sexual tastes, narrow the range of male sexual satisfaction, channel all men's intimate needs into genital sexual activity and promote myths of perpetual male sexual readiness and penis size (Brod 1990).

The limited evidence available regarding men's pornography use and their sexual self-esteem and body image is contradictory. A Canadian study among students on college campuses found that men with higher rates of exposure to internet pornography had lower levels of genital and sexual esteem (Morrison *et al.* 2006). On the other hand, a study among heterosexual university students did not find this relationship, although it did document an association between pornography use and higher sexual anxiety (Morrison *et al.* 2004). In fact, one study among male undergraduates finds that frequent readers of soft-core pornographic magazines report more positive body esteem than other men (Schooler and Ward 2006: 37). However, it may be that frequent reading of pornography here acts as a proxy for a specific type of masculinity which itself is related to certain body image attitudes.

Pornography has further influences on sexual attitudes which I address below, as they concern attitudes towards particular sexual practices.

*Sexual practices and relations*

Given its influence on sexual knowledge and attitudes, it is not surprising that pornography also may shift boys' and young men's sexual expectations, practices and repertoires. While these are shaped by a wide variety of interpersonal and contextual influences, there is some evidence that males' consumption of pornography is informing increased interest in, demand for and participation in particular sexual practices such as anal intercourse and extra-vaginal ejaculation, both of which are pornographic staples.

While one should not expect that the depiction of sexual practices in pornography will match their prevalence in the population, it is worth noting just how wide the gap can be. For example, Australian studies suggest that anal intercourse – a feature of *most* pornographic features according to Jensen and Dines (1998: 80) – is a relatively uncommon practice. Among all Australians aged sixteen to fifty-nine, in their most recent heterosexual sexual encounter only under 1 per cent practised anal intercourse. Over their lifetimes, about one in five (21 per cent of males and 15 per cent of females) had ever had heterosexual anal intercourse, including 4 per cent of people aged sixteen to nineteen (de Visser *et al.* 2003: 151–2).

Evidence that pornography is shaping young men's sexual practices comes from three sources. First, some young male pornography users themselves report this, either for themselves or for others. For example, in a study among 300 young men aged sixteen to twenty-four visiting a genito-urinary clinic in Stockholm, Sweden, 53 per cent agreed that pornography had had an impact on their sexual behaviour (Tyden and Rogala 2004). Close to half described this as only 'Yes, a little,' and 4 per cent said, 'Yes, much.' However, more men believed that pornography influenced *others'* sexual behaviour. This 'third-person effect' – the belief that others are more affected by media messages than oneself – is a common finding in studies of media effects (Hald and Malamuth 2008; Lo and Wei 2002). Asked how they might be influenced by porn, the young men responded that they had been inspired or influenced to try particular acts or positions.

The second source of evidence concerns associations between pornography consumption and sexual behaviour. Various studies find correlations between young people's actual sexual behaviour and the consumption of sexual media content (Huston *et al.* 1998; Strasburger and Wilson 2002; Ward 2003). These findings hold for pornography in particular from the few studies examining naturalistic pornographic consumption among minors. In a Swedish study of 1,300 high-school students, Johansson and Hammarén (2007) report that young pornography users are more likely than non-users also to have had sexual intercourse, masturbated, had same-sex sex and a one-night stand. A survey of 522 African American females aged fourteen to eighteen found correlations between viewing X-rated movies and having multiple sex partners, having sex more frequently and testing positive for chlamydia (Wingood *et al.* 2001). One of the

most well documented associations concerns young men's pornography use and their practice of heterosexual anal intercourse. Five studies among Swedish young people find that young men who are regular consumers of pornography are more likely to have had anal intercourse with a girl and to have tried to perform acts they have seen in pornography, and that girls who have seen pornography also are more likely to have had anal intercourse (Tyden *et al.* 2001; Rogala and Tyden 2003; Tyden and Rogala 2004; Haggstrom-Nordin *et al.* 2005; Johansson and Hammarén 2007).

A third source of evidence comes from experimental studies. When adults engage in prolonged consumption of pornography showing particular sexual practices, their estimation of the prevalence of such practices in the population increases (Thornburgh and Lin 2002: 153; Zillmann 1989: 135).

It is likely therefore that consumption of pornography among boys and young men is shaping their actual sexual practices, including their involvement in anal intercourse. Young men may be learning from pornography that anal intercourse is normal, desirable and enjoyable for women (even though most young women in the Swedish studies above who had had anal intercourse did not enjoy it and did not want to do it again). Given heterosexual pornography's obsessive pre-occupations with extra-vaginal ejaculation, double and triple penetration, multiple-partner sex and other 'esoteric' sexual practices, these too may be increasing in erotic salience among boys and young men.

However, the relationship between pornography use and sexual behaviour also is likely to be complex. For some young men, both their use of pornography and their involvement in anal sex may represent a broader, sexually adventurous or experimental orientation. Pornography by itself is unlikely to influence an individual's entire sexual expression, and its consumption may be part of 'a larger sexual space and sexual experimentation' (Johansson and Hammarén 2007: 66).

An additional form of influence on young people's sexual relations concerns pornography's representation of same-sex sexualities. Research among same-sex-attracted young people in Australia finds that internet pornography has played a role as 'one way to address the invisibility of same sex desire, sexual performance and behaviour in Real Life' (Hillier *et al.* 2001: 20). In the context of a silence about homosexuality in their everyday lives, young men and women use pornography to learn what to do when having sex, to improve their knowledge about sexual behaviour or as a substitute for sexual relationships.

***Pornography as betrayal***

Pornography arguably can be a healthy part of sexual intimacy in couple relationships. For this to take place, the use of pornography should be freely chosen, mutual and open, and the sexually explicit materials themselves should be ethical (although there is considerable debate over the ethical status of depictions of sex). In such circumstances, couples may watch pornography together, or make it themselves.

However, it is likely that for most heterosexual men who use pornography and are in relationships, these conditions are not met. Instead, their pornography use is hidden from their partners. There are no data regarding the extent to which women are aware of or indeed share their male partners' pornography use. I suspect that there is a widespread denial and dishonesty in heterosexual relationships in which women do not know of their partners' use of pornography. Among those women who *do* know of their partners' pornography use, some experience significant distress at this.<sup>1</sup>

Studies among women who are aware of their male partners' use of pornography find that most have largely neutral attitudes to this use. They 'don't mind' and see it as 'normal'. However, a substantial proportion have much more negative attitudes, experiencing their partners' pornography use as damaging both for their relationships and themselves. In a US study, one-quarter of women saw their partner's pornography use as a kind of affair, one-third felt that it had had negative effects on their sexual lives and relationships, and over one-third agreed that they felt less attractive and desirable and more like a sexual object (Bridges *et al.* 2003). Other studies find that partners of adult pornography users report decreased sexual intimacy, lowered esteem and demands that they participate in activities they find objectionable (Manning 2006).

Some heterosexual men use pornography in their sexual relations in ways which women find coercive or abusive. A representative survey of 4,446 college women in the US found that 6 per cent of the young women had been exposed to pornographic pictures or materials by someone when they did not wish to see them (Fisher *et al.* 2000: 31). Some women are coerced by sexual partners and others into looking at pornography, and pressured or forced into unwanted sexual acts inspired by the man's use of pornography (Jensen 1998b: 108–19). There is no doubt that some women freely choose to consume pornography, and some consider pornography a positive force in their lives. At the same time, other women experience distress and harm in relation to their male partner's use of pornography.

### **Pornography as addiction**

An emerging scholarship on sexual, internet and cybersex 'addiction' suggests that some pornography consumers come to use pornography in ways which are obsessive, compulsive and have damaging consequences for themselves or others (Cooper *et al.* 2004; Young 2008). Seen through the prism of traditional understandings of drug use, the term 'addiction' implies that pornography consumption necessarily is compulsive, escalates over time and has harmful personal effects, and these can be mitigated only by abstinence. The internet is seen to play a particularly potent role here, with one text referring to its role as 'the crack cocaine of sexual addiction' (Schneider and Weiss 2001).

The analogy between pornography use and drug use is dangerous if we assume a model of 'one taste and you're hooked'. On the other hand, other models of

illicit and licit drug use provide more useful ways of conceptualizing pornography consumption. For example, there may be 'recreational' users, occasional users, and habitual users: some individuals will use pornography for years with little negative effect, while others will find it highly destructive.

Some men's (and women's) use of pornography clearly is habitual, compulsive and has negative effects on other areas of their lives, resulting for example in social, occupational or financial difficulties. Such patterns of use may be less well framed as 'addictions' and more accurately described as impulse control disorders, akin to eating disorders or pathological gambling (Heron and Shapira 2003). While there is no research on 'pornography addiction' among minors, some argue that similar patterns may emerge among younger users (Sussman 2007).

At the same time, we must be wary of problematic norms of behaviour which can guide the medicalization and pathologization of certain forms of pornography use, for example in which any adolescent sexual behaviour and any powerful interest in sex are defined as problematic. In addition, notions of pornography use as 'addictive' or 'compulsive' may divert attention from questions regarding users' agency and responsibility.

### **Pornography as sexist education**

Pornography's influence on boys' and young men's attitudes includes the encouragement of sexist and stereotypical understandings of gender and sexuality. Evidence for this comes in the first place from research on mainstream media. Both correlational and experimental studies find that adolescents' and young adults' exposure to mainstream media which sexualize girls and women is associated with greater acceptance of stereotyped and sexist notions about gender and sexual roles, including notions of women as sexual objects (Ward 2002; Ward *et al.* 2005). Adolescents and young adults who have frequent, regular exposure to media genres high in sexualized content (such as music videos) are more accepting of attitudes that sexualize and sexually objectify women (APA 2007: 31–32). For example, in a study among undergraduates aged 18–22, Ward (2002) documented both experimental and correlational connections between TV viewing and students' sexual attitudes and assumptions. Students' support for sexual stereotypes typical in television content (dating is a recreational sport, women are sexual objects whose value is based on their physical appearance and men are sex-driven creatures who have trouble being faithful) was associated with more frequent and more involved viewing.

Among media with sexual content, pornography may be particularly effective in encouraging adherence to sexually objectifying understandings of and behaviours towards girls and women. Pornography shows a much higher degree of sexual explicitness (by definition) than other sexual media. More than this however, much contemporary pornography offers a decontextualized portrayal of sexual behaviour, a relentless focus on female bodies, and sexist and callous

depictions of women (Flood and Hamilton 2003). As various experimental studies among adult men find, exposure to narrow ideals of female sexual attractiveness in pornography constrains men's appreciation of and intimacy with female partners:

exposure to pornography ... leads men to rate their female partners as less attractive ... to indicate less satisfaction with their intimate partners' attractiveness, sexual performance, and level of affection ... and to express greater desire for sex without emotional involvement. (APA 2007: 29)

A correlational study among over 600 US undergraduates found that men who regularly viewed pornography were more likely than others to see women (but not men) in sexualized ways, to endorse gender-stereotypical statements about themselves and others and to perceive men as more masculine and women as more feminine (Frable *et al.* 1997).

Men's consumption of sexualized media also influences how they actually treat and respond to real women in subsequent interactions. At least three studies find that when men are exposed to sexualized content they are then more likely to treat women in sexualized ways (APA 2007: 32). In these experiments, effects were strongest among stereotypically masculine men, suggesting an interaction between media exposure and pre-existing orientations.

While pornography appears to be influential in shaping men's sexualized and sexually objectifying understandings of women, its significance for sexist attitudes *per se* appears to be complex. A series of studies have found that relationships between pornography consumption and attitudes towards women are either weak or non-existent (Garos *et al.* 2004: 71–2). Attempting to explain this, Garos *et al.* examined more complex measures of sexist attitudes. In two studies among US university students, they report, there was no relationship between pornography use and more hostile, overt measures of sexism, although pornography use was related to more benevolent, 'modern' forms of sexism. The authors suggest several possible explanations for this. One is that the forms of pornography examined were 'mainstream' rather than those depicting women experiencing pain or suffering, limiting a relationship with hostile attitudes towards women. Another is that both pornography use and favourable attitudes towards women are shaped by a third factor, a general liberal orientation (Garos *et al.* 2004: 89–90). This may also explain the finding in an Australian study of self-selected pornography users of no relationship between the extent of pornography use and attitudes towards women (McKee 2007a).

### **Pornography as rape training**

The final area of pornography's impact I consider is the most troubling, its relationship to sexual violence against women. The application to existing empirical

studies of summary techniques or 'meta-analysis' finds consistent evidence that exposure to or consumption of pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women. This association is strongest for violent pornography and still reliable for nonviolent pornography, particularly by frequent users (Malamuth *et al.* 2000: 53).

In experimental studies, adults show significant strengthening of attitudes supportive of sexual aggression following exposure to pornography, such as acceptance of rape myths, sexual callousness and adversarial sexual beliefs. Across sixteen experiments with 2,248 participants, the association between pornography and rape-supportive attitudes is evident as a result of exposure to both nonviolent pornography (showing consenting sexual activity) and violent pornography, while the latter results in significantly greater increases in violence-supportive attitudes (Allen, Emmers *et al.* 1995: 19). Exposure to sexually violent material desensitizes male viewers to sexual violence, diminishing their emotional response to the stimulus, eroding their empathy for victims of violence and informing more callous attitudes towards female rape victims. According to a meta-analysis of thirty-three experimental studies involving 2,040 participants, adults also show an increase in behavioural aggression following exposure to pornography. Exposure to non-violent or violent depictions of sexual activity increases aggression, and the effect is stronger in the case of exposure to violent pornography (Allen, D'Alesio *et al.* 1995: 271).

What about correlations between pornography use in everyday life and attitudes supporting sexual aggression? An early meta-analysis did not find these (Allen, Emmers *et al.* 1995: 18), although analysis of the differences between non-violent and violent pornography was not possible (Malamuth *et al.* 2000: 47, 53). However, a more recent meta-analysis, correcting for problems in the 1995 effort and including more recent studies, did find an association between men's everyday pornography consumption and their attitudes supporting violence against women (Hald *et al.* 2009). Across nine studies with 2,309 participants, violence-supportive attitudes correlated more strongly with the use of sexually violent pornography than with the use of non-violent pornography, although the latter relationship was also found to be significant.

There are correlations too between everyday pornography use and actual sexually aggressive behaviour. Studies among men in the general population find significant associations between the use of at least certain forms of pornography or habitual pornography use and levels of sexual aggression (Malamuth *et al.* 2000: 50). In addition, men who use 'hard-core', violent or rape pornography and men who are high-frequency users of pornography are also significantly more likely than others to report that they would rape or sexually harass a woman if they knew they could get away with it (Malamuth *et al.* 2000: 51–2).

There appears to be a circular relationship between pornography and sexual aggression, in which men at higher risk for sexual aggression (given their attitudes and so on) are more likely to be attracted to and aroused by sexually violent media and may be more influenced by them (Malamuth *et al.* 2000: 55).

Most of the research on pornography and sexual aggression has been conducted among young male adults. While its findings cannot simply be extrapolated to younger males, there is evidence of pornography's role in sexually aggressive attitudes and behaviours among adolescent and older boys. Looking first at non-pornographic sexual media, experimental studies among young adults find that males (and females) exposed to sexualized or objectifying content are more accepting of rape myths, violence-supportive and adversarial beliefs (Kalof 1999; Lanis and Covell 1995; Milburn *et al.* 2000; Ward 2002), while correlational studies among adolescents also show such associations (Cowan and Campbell 1995; Kaestle *et al.* 2007).

What about pornographic media? In a study of Canadian teenagers with an average age of fourteen, there was a correlation between boys' frequent consumption of pornography and their agreement with the idea that it is acceptable to hold a girl down and force her to have sex (Check 1995). Among US boys and girls aged eleven to sixteen, greater exposure to R- and X-rated films was related to stronger acceptance of sexual harassment (Strouse *et al.* 1994). There are behavioural associations too. Among Italian adolescents aged fourteen to nineteen, there were associations between pornography use and sexually harassing a peer or forcing someone into sex (Bonino *et al.* 2006).

Pornography is not the only important source of sexist and violence-supportive discourses and representations in our cultures (Segal 1998: 49–51). Other media such as television and film are also effective teachers of gender-stereotyped and rape-supportive attitudes (Strasburger and Wilson 2002: 164). At the same time, pornography warrants particular attention, given its pervasiveness, accessibility, functionality and the extremes of hostility and callousness towards women it often betrays.

### Fifty ways to leave your lover

If we agree that boys' and young men's use of pornography, or particular forms of consumption and/or of particular forms of pornography, is harmful, what do we do about it? I focus here on social and educational strategies rather than legal and regulatory ones, for two reasons. First, the former have been neglected while the latter have been widely canvassed. Second, they have several advantages over technological strategies such as filtering. They encourage young people's moral and ethical development and resilience, they are more effective than technological solutions in the long term and they minimize the negative effects of exposure if and when it does occur.

The most prominent response to the problem of men's pornography use centres on abstaining from its use. Christian pastors, centres and texts exhort men to abandon pornography, seek the forgiveness of their wives and of God and renew their spiritual and marital vows. This faith-based response to pornography is the logical extension of traditional Christian hostility to masturbation, sex for sex's sake, sex outside the boundaries of married heterosexual monogamy and

infidelity. It overlaps with strategies which frame pornography use and abuse as 'addiction'.<sup>2</sup> This abstinence-centred strategy is the most well developed of existing social strategies. At the same time, its reach is limited. It appeals primarily to conservative Christian adherents and its narrow sexual proscriptions are confronted by the contrary tenets of a powerful sexual culture.

A very different call for abstinence comes from pro-feminist men. Committed to the feminist critique of pornography and the sex industry as patriarchal, brutalizing and misogynistic, they call on men to quit pornography and forge ethical sexual and gender relations. The most prominent advocate is Robert Jensen (2007a), with others including Jackson Katz and John Stoltenberg. Pro-feminist frameworks too must confront the weight of powerful, patriarchal sexual norms, although they are more in step with contemporary destabilizations of rigidly heterosexual and masculine identities, assertions of female sexual agency and increasing norms of gender equality (Flood 2009).

Given that young people turn to pornography in part for information on sex and sexuality, the provision of alternative, more age-appropriate content on sexuality is an obvious strategy. Sexuality education for children and young people, both face-to-face and through the internet and other media, is desirable in its own right and in reducing the appeal of pornography (Thornburgh and Lin 2002: 250–1). To be most effective, sexuality education will need to address the negotiation of sexual and intimate relations and include explorations of lust and desire.

However, even the most compelling sexuality education will not satisfy young people's, and particularly young men's, interest in sexually explicit materials for stimulation and masturbation. Indeed, asked what they would like in sexuality education, some young men call for the inclusion of pornographic depictions of bodies and sex (Allen 2006). Still, pornography will not help to foster young men's sexual development, as it does not prepare them for the emotional complexities and bodily diversities of lived sexual experience.

There are two further strategies which, while very rare thus far, are promising ones. Given that boys and young men are likely to continue to consume pornography, an important strategy is to teach them the skills with which to read it more critically. 'Pornography education' centres on encouraging critical skills in media literacy, such that viewers are more resistant to sexist and violence-supportive themes in pornography (Strasburger and Wilson 2002: 346–63; Thornburgh and Lin 2002: 248). Support for this strategy comes from experimental studies, which find that adults shown violent pornography can be 'inoculated' against its negative effects through pre-briefing or 'cured' afterwards through debriefing (Allen *et al.* 1996). There are fledgling efforts to incorporate pornography education into school curricula in Australia and the UK (Crabbe and Corlett 2008).

One significant resource among boys and young men here is their resistance to pornography. Various studies find that significant proportions of boys and young men have critical attitudes towards pornography. In a Swedish survey of young

people aged fifteen to eighteen, 23 per cent of males (and 67 per cent of females) disagreed with the statement that 'porn is sexually exciting' and 37 per cent of males (and 69 per cent of females) agreed that pornography is degrading (Johansson and Hammarén 2007: 61–2). Two other studies document both complicity and resistance in young men's relationship to pornography (Thomson 1999: 194; Dean 2007: 48–9).

A final strategy is encouraging the use of more ethical pornography and more ethical forms of use. Ethical pornography would eroticize consent, respect and intimacy and be produced without participants' coercion or harm. While this strategy is the most marginal of all those I have canvassed, its value is in finding ways to inform and inspire men's and women's erotic lives and relations without also entrenching inequalities.

The effectiveness of these efforts in helping boys and men to quit or rework their pornography use has not been tested empirically. Still, there are some general principles which should guide any such endeavour. Among boys and young men, more effective efforts will address the powerful appeal of such materials and the cultural contexts in which pornography consumption takes place and is given meaning. They will avoid intensifying the stigma of masturbation or pathologizing sexual interests and desires. They will mobilize some young men's discomfort and guilt regarding the sexism of pornography. And they will be complemented by wider efforts to foster egalitarian sexual cultures among young people.

## Notes

1 See Dines, Whisman, Thompson and Boyle, this volume, for anecdotal accounts of women's distress at their male partner's pornography use.

2 A typical example is the web site Through the Flame, a 'pornography and sex addiction support group' on line at <<http://www.throughtheflame.org/>> (accessed 16 November 2009).

## 'Students study hard porn'

### Pornography and the popular press

Mark Jones and Gerry Carlin

While researching a contribution to another volume on contemporary pornography, we found it necessary to browse some hard-core pornographic web sites using our office computers (Jones and Carlin forthcoming). Negotiating a somewhat fraught route between the university's information technology policy, research sub-committees, ethics committee, and various harassment, civil rights and academic freedom agendas, we were reminded that the alleged ubiquity of pornography in the contemporary environment is in fact continually and vigorously resisted by multiple administrative, legal, moral and technological constraints. The supposed mainstreaming of pornography – through visual quotation, allusion, and appropriation in music, fashion, advertising and celebrity culture – has been discussed, bemoaned and landed for over a decade.<sup>1</sup> But despite the ease with which porn can now be privately accessed, and its increasing familiarity in mainstream discourses, hard-core pornography itself remains largely obscured from public display. Frequently cited, but seldom actually sighted unless deliberately sought out,<sup>2</sup> hard-core pornography remains an object for primarily private consumption.

It was transgressing this rule of solitary and private viewing that landed the authors of this chapter in trouble in January 2004, when we suddenly found that our single session on pornography on a final-year English module had become front-page news in the local Sunday tabloid newspaper. 'Students study hard porn' was the banner headline, while the report inside directed the outraged, but perhaps reasonable, question 'What the Dickens are they teaching?' at a course which in one semester degenerated from James Joyce to hard-core pornography (Wells 2004). It was not, however, the ostensible subject of our session which caused this eruption of moral outrage; after all, we had been teaching a class on pornography, in various modes and media, since the mid-1990s. Rather, it was our specific pedagogical practice, involving the communal screening of pornographic material, which so enraged the popular press. 'Students watch hard porn' would have been the more accurate, if less surprising or newsworthy, headline. Weekly 'lad' magazine *Nuts* more accurately summarized the essence of the situation, with the headline 'Students watch mucky movie – For their degree?' (Anon 2004c). It seems that what is at issue in minor moral panics such as ours is



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# Everyday pornography

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Edited by  
Karen Boyle

# Contents

First published 2010

by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge

270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

Editorial selection and material © 2010 Karen Boyle  
Individual chapters © 2010 the Contributors

Typeset in Galliard by Taylor & Francis Books

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now  
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information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from  
the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 10: 0-415-54378-9 (hbk)

ISBN 10: 0-415-54379-7 (pbk)

ISBN 10: 0-203-84755-5 (ebk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-54378-1 (hbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-54379-8 (pbk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-203-84755-8 (ebk)

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KAREN BOYLE

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