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The Problem of Pornography

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His eyes met mine as he scoffed, “It’s just videos. It’s not like it’s real or anything. It’s not that big of a deal!” It should not have surprised me then, that our relationship would end with his gaze trailing another woman, as he had spent so much of the years we dated with his eyes lingering on other women on screens, pages, and incognito tabs on his phone. At the time, I didn’t have research, statistics, or studies to present against the praise of pornography. All that I had were the gut wrenching memories of the destruction that pornography had caused in my own life. This is the kind of effect that pornography can have on the lives of people who choose to consume it.

While there are a few different ways to define pornography, a simple google search provides the most comprehensive definition for differentiating between what pornography is and is not: “printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic or emotional feelings.” The consumption and normalization of such explicit content in America is greater than ever, and the current cultural climate only perpetuates this normalization. Despite this cultural acceptance, pornography consumption is highly detrimental to relationships and to the people in them, and we must affect cultural change in order to combat the personal and societal damage that pornography consumption causes.

The pornography industry has grown steadily in recent years, but there remains a widely accepted misconception that a majority of the population do not regularly partake in the viewing and reading of pornographic material. Some sources have reported that as low as 10%

of women view poronographic material regularly. (“The Porn Gap.”) One report claimed that the highest rate of regular pornography use among women across different stages of relationship commitment was only 15% (“The Porn Gap.”). In 2018, a group of researchers, skeptical of the rates being reported, joined together to obtain a more accurate representation of the percentages of people that regularly consume pornography using studying four primary areas of measurement: various modalities of pornography, endorsement of common pornography consumption measurements, reasons for use of pornography, and the relationship between age and gender in the previous measurements, and additionally, “included a much wider age range (ages 18–73) than in typical pornography research” (Solano et al.). Using these key areas of research, this study was able to examine a much broader range of age and type of pornography use that may have been overlooked in previous studies. The result was a staggering average of 91.5% of men and 60.2% of women had consumed porn within the last month. The range of statistics gave even more context to this data: “In this study, consumption rates of men were generally consistent (91–99%) across time frames, though women’s consumption varied more widely (60–92%)” (Solano et al.). This demonstrated that the previously reported rates were not only misleading, but were wrong by a massive margin. This study challenges integral and common misconceptions that surround the use of pornography, and it exposes the epidemic proportions this issue has reached. The rates of pornography consumption show that this is not only a men’s issue, but a people’s issue.

The rate of pornography consumption, already impressive, becomes catastrophic in light of pornography’s addictive nature. A 2017 study revealed that the neural pathways that are activated in the context of alcoholism, gambling addictions, and various other substance abuse addictions are also activated when viewing arousing stimuli for erotic pleasure. By studying a group of 52 heterosexual men, 28 of which were seeking treatment for problematic pornography use (referred to as PPU in this journal), and 24 of which did not have PPU, researchers were able to study the brain’s different stimuli response to erotic material between these groups. Using an fMRI scanner, they “examined ventral striatal responses to

erotic and monetary stimuli, disentangling cue-related ‘wanting’ from reward-related ‘liking’” (Gola et al.). They then explained that, “similar to what is observed in substance and gambling addictions, the neural and behavioral mechanisms associated with the anticipatory processing of cues specifically predicting erotic rewards relate importantly to clinically relevant features of PPU” (Gola et al.). Even before pornography use has been developed into fully-fledged PPU, these neural pathways are being activated and strengthened, giving pornography use a ‘snowballing effect’ that makes a one time experience quickly devolve into an ingrained addiction. A similar study found that Naltrexone, an opiate antagonist, was an effective treatment for internet sex addiction and was explained as: “Prescribed for treating alcoholism, naltrexone blocks opiates’ capacity to augment dopamine release. This article reviews naltrexone’s mechanism of action in the reward center and describes a novel use for naltrexone in suppressing a euphorically compulsive and interpersonally devastating addiction to Internet pornography” (Bostwick and Bucci). The individual being studied had tried several other types of medication to treat his long term internet sex addiction, but ultimately none were as effective as Naltrexone (Bostwick and Bucci). The success of this treatment reinforces the idea that pornography consumption is an addiction, rather than a harmless casual activity.

Like any addiction, pornography consumption can have highly detrimental consequences. Regular pornography use can become the root of objectification, sexual deception, and sexual aggression, as one study indicated. The researchers found that “consumption of reality TV, sports programming, and pornography was each associated with greater acceptance of objectification of women, which in turn was associated with greater rape myth acceptance and more frequent acts of sexual deception” (Seabrook et al.). This study depicted a cause and effect relationship between objectifying media and sexual aggression. The consumption of sexually explicit media leads to a psychological shift in the way that women are viewed and treated, creating a culture that justifies and excuses aggressive, deceptive, and objectifying behaviors (Seabrook et al.). Pornography is objectifying by nature, and this objectification

naturally spills over into the behavior and views of those that regularly consume this message. An additional effect of this shift in perspective is a breakdown of the ways that objectified partners view themselves. A 2014 study assessed the influence of a former partner's pornography use on 4 areas of well being among women in heterosexual relationships: anxiety within romantic relationships, self-esteem, body appreciation, and negative affect. The research showed that a former partner's consumption of pornography led to an increase in "women's reports of interpersonal sexual objectification, internalization of cultural beauty standards, and eating disorder symptomatology" as well as being "indirectly associated with body surveillance and body shame through internalization of cultural beauty standards" (Tylka and Kroon Van Diest 77). This evidence displays a destructive psychological remnant of relationships that were corrupted by the use of pornography. The psychological effects of pornography corrupt the way that viewers regard their partners, increase deception and sexual aggression, and build insecurity and shame within their partners.

A natural result of the deterioration in the way people view their partners and themselves is a decline in relational success. Researchers investigated the link between pornography use and relationship failure for this reason. The *Journal of Sex Research* published a study that sought to find exactly how harmful pornography use could be on relationships. 8500 married American couples were interviewed 3 times in 2 year increments over the span of 8 years (Perry and Schleifer). They were asked to report on their pornographical content consumption, their religious beliefs, and the perceived happiness of their marriage. The results showed a direct relationship between pornographical content consumption and higher rates of divorce and marital dissatisfaction. They added to this conclusion that "the probability of divorce roughly doubled for married Americans who began pornography use between survey waves... and that this relationship held for both women and men" (Perry and Schleifer). Not only was there a correlation between pornography consumption and higher divorce rates, but beginning to use pornography within marriage doubled the likelihood of divorce. Pornography use, then, can be fatal to even happy and successful marriages. Samuel Perry,

one of the researchers on this longitudinal study, presented a separate journal article that focused on marital quality using data from this initial study. Perry asserted that, “pornography viewing, in its main effect, was strongly and negatively related to marital quality over time” (Perry 554). The combined data from these studies stand to show that pornography use is harmful to intimate relationships and is often correlated with lower marital satisfaction and lower marital success.

Pornography has been shown to be immensely harmful, yet research shows that it is consumed by a very large portion of the population. There are two major influencers to this growing problem that must be assessed to understand this trend. The first major influencer of this rise in pornography use is the current cultural attitude towards pornography use. In a culture that urges people to pursue what feels good to them, it is unsurprising that pornography use would be on the rise. In late 2018, Tumblr, a popular social media platform known in part for its lenient policies on nudity and explicit content, announced that it would be officially banning pornographic content from its site. The backlash to this decision across social platforms exemplifies the problematic acceptance of pornography internet users today maintain. For example, BuzzFeed, a popular media, news, and entertainment company responded to this decision by stating, “The site’s willingness to acknowledge (or at least accept) pornography as part of the equation of what someone might look for online was chief among its merits. The sex was the point” (Washington). In asserting that Tumblr’s value was in its acceptance of pornographic content, BuzzFeed expressed that the primary concern in this decision was “It eliminates a resource for people looking for relatable porn they can’t find anywhere else” (Washington). BuzzFeed’s writers are not only lauding pornography, but implying that it is a necessary part of life. A company that is making an effort to eliminate the dangers of child pornography on their site is coming under fire for the collateral ‘damage’ of that decision, rather than being praised for redesigning policies to protect children. This article is indicative of the normalizing of pornography use that has been steadily growing in recent years. While BuzzFeed’s language and advocacy of pornography is concerning, what is more concerning is their

trust that this attitude is pervasive among their audience. One look at the harmful effects of pornography should make this a deeply concerning trend.

The second major influencer on this trend is a widespread ignorance surrounding the use of pornography, which allows the myth that pornography consumption is harmless and natural to flourish. One place that this ignorance is seen very clearly is in pornography research itself. Since the beginning of discourse regarding pornography consumption, it has often been labelled as a “men’s issue.” As a result, most research has focused primarily on men as consumers, and have avoided the idea of women’s use. By treating pornography as a men’s only issue we are alienating women and denying them space to acknowledge and heal from their addiction.

While women remain underrepresented in pornography research, and while research on the issue remains divorced from the public consciousness, pornography is able to disguise itself as normal, good, and harmless.

To combat pornography consumption and its effects, it is important to assess these major influencers and their roots. With cultural discourse and general ignorance being major contributors to growing pornography consumption, the most appropriate and effective response will be education. One crucial opportunity to educate the general population is by changing the cultural conversation. If BuzzFeed and other important cultural voices took small steps toward letting go of advocacy language in regards to pornography consumption and reported on the data evidencing the negative influence of pornography, the trajectory of pornography consumption could be changed in a desperately necessary way.

There is a common view that pornography is not a women’s issue, that it isn’t used widely, or that pornography is harmless, natural, and personal, a habit that only influences the viewer. Some authors have even claimed that pornography has resulted in lower rape statistics and objectification. One wrote, “over the same period that pornography has grown much more common, the rape rate has plummeted. It was higher throughout the aughts than it is today. There is no more

extreme or pernicious act of using and abusing women as sexual objects rather than treating them as humans” (Friedersdorf). Solano’s study of porn consumption rates unravels the myth that women’s use of pornography is inconsequential. The combined research on the addictive nature of pornography consumption and internet sex addiction treatment show that pornography use is serious, dangerous, and highly addictive. Multiple studies examining the manner in which pornography positively correlates with sexual aggression, objectification, lower self esteem and partner satisfaction, and lower relational success silences the sentiments that pornography is the cause of lower rape statistics and objectification.

Pornography consumption is an epidemic issue and much of the population is beginning to suffer the consequences. The cultural conversation and overall lack of knowledge enforces the reality that pornography use is an issue shrouded in misconception and lighthearted excuse. The most appropriate response to the disastrous effects of pornography is education via the influence of our cultural conversation. By educating the public on the rising research on the harmful effects of pornography, we can pave the way for a new generation that will better understand the harmful effects of pornography, and will be empowered to make healthier decisions regarding their bodies, minds, and relationships. We are already facing the consequences of pornography use, but we are refusing as a society to acknowledge the root of the issue. We can allow this corruption of sexuality to continue, leaving a legacy of broken relationships and identities, or we can begin to address this problem head-on, identifying pornography use as the disease that it is, and beginning the process of cultural healing that we so desperately need.

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