

Chapter 2—Pornography: The “Elephant on the Screen”

“...pornography is a prominent feature of the current emerging adulthood culture.”¹

Jason S. Carroll

Pornography has become a fact of life for many adolescents, as sociologist Jason S. Carroll notes in the passage above, but the jury is still out on its potential ramifications.

Sociologist Marshall Smith coined the phrase “the elephant on the screen,” used in the title of this chapter. In 2008 he wrote that sexually explicit material (SEM) could influence adolescents’ sexual beliefs and behaviours, but “a consensus has not emerged as to the effects.”² Other researchers argue that the impact of porn on pre-teens and teens is decidedly negative.

So, which is it: harmful or benign? This question is of great concern to many parents worried about the potentially corrupting influence of pornography on teenage boys. I will shed some light on the subject here, looking at how we got to the point of free, 24-7 access to X-rated films, what boys are seeing when they watch online pornography, and the possible impact.

How Did We Get Here?

With videos entitled “12 inches of black meat in Monica,” and “Wonder Woman getting her pussy pounded by Captain America,”³ it is tempting to believe that today’s porn is some kind of aberration; a sign of the depravity that characterizes certain elements of our media (among which I include most of reality TV). While it’s true that much of today’s pornography has taken a violent and misogynistic turn, some acts considered extreme these days actually have a long history.

Erotic imagery dates as far back as the Paleolithic period, where small sculptures of women with greatly exaggerated breasts and hips were created, likely to celebrate female fertility.⁴ Ancient Greek and Roman art highlighted the phallus, sometimes to arouse, but also to worship “the powers of creativity that the sexual organ represents.”⁵ (That the Greeks were more fluid in their

¹ Carroll, Jason S. “Generation XXX: Pornography Acceptance and Use Among Emerging Adults.” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23, no. 1 (2008), p. 23.

² Smith, Marshall. “Youth Viewing Sexually Explicit Material Online: Addressing the Elephant on the Screen” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*. 10, no.1 (2013): p. 65.

³ Both titles were shown on www xnxx.com when I accessed the site on February 6, 2014. The Wonder Woman film was animated and designed to look like an episode of *Justice League*.

⁴ Dopp, Hans-Jurgen et al. *1000 Erotic Works of Genius*. New York: Parkstone Press, 2008, p. 11.

⁵ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Phallicism” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/455022/phallicism> Accessed August 1, 2013.

sexuality and known for their unequal treatment of women⁶ may also have contributed to this phallus worship.)

Since ancient times, artists have produced great volumes of erotic paintings, sketches, and sculptures. Pieces created for the sole purpose of sexual arousal were typically a private indulgence. It was only after the arrival of the printing press that wide distribution of erotic art became possible.

One of the earliest collections of erotic art was *I Modi*, published in 1524. Its explicit depictions of sexual positions earned it the enmity of the Vatican. Eventually all copies were destroyed⁷ but the genie was out of the bottle. Artists from that point forward flouted the laws of the Church and continued to produce extremely explicit images. Group sex, large orgies, and a wide variety of sexual positions were common in the erotic art of the 17th and 18th centuries.⁸

Advancements in the printing process led to the emergence of written erotica which first appeared in English in the 1660s.⁹ Like the visual artists who preceded them, the creators of this early erotica did not hold back. *The Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, also known as *Fanny Hill*, was written in 1749 and is perhaps one of the best known erotic novels from the period. In rather florid language, it describes sexual encounters between two women, masturbation, voyeurism, various sexual positions, and the considerable physical endowments of the men Fanny meets. The following passage, in which Fanny surreptitiously watches a couple engage in the act, is one of the tamest in the book:

“Her sturdy stallion had now unbuttoned, and produced naked, stiff and erect, that wonderful machine, which I had never seen before, and which, for the interest my own seat of pleasure began to take furiously in it, I stared at with all the eyes I had...”¹⁰

It was steamy stuff, despite the fancy language.

A half-century later, the notorious Marquis de Sade would publish his erotic novel *Juliette*. Its text and illustrations depicted practices like spanking and bondage that would later become known as sadomasochism (S&M). Along with the author’s libertine philosophy, the book also included liberal use of the words “fuck” and “cunt,” explicit descriptions of the positions of each player in the various orgies that take place, anal and oral sex, and multiple penetration of women by men, dildos, or strap-ons¹¹—all hallmarks of today’s pornography.

⁶ Holland, Jack. *Misogyny: The World’s Oldest Prejudice*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 2006, p. 12-35.

⁷ Eroti Cart. “I Modi” *The History of Erotic Art*. <http://www.eroti-cart.com/i-modi-c-93> Accessed January 13, 2014.

⁸ Néret, Gilles. *Erotica Universalis*. Koln: Taschen, 1994. Electronic Edition.

⁹ Toulalan, Sarah. *Imagining Sex: Pornography and Bodies in Seventeenth-Century England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Cleland, John. *Memoirs of Fanny Hill: A New and Genuine Edition from the Original Text*. Paris: Isidore Liseux. Reprinted by Amazon Digital Services. (The Kindle edition includes no page numbers.)

¹¹ Sade, Marquis de. *Juliette*. Translated by Austryn Wainhouse. New York: Grove House, 1968.

Those themes carried into early 20th century pornographic photographs and films.¹² Still shots from the period include S&M¹³ and a great variety of sexual positions. Save for their grainy quality, early pornographic films depict scenes similar to some of the tamer porn seen today—nuns in an abbey getting it on with an abbot and a priest, female students being disciplined at school as a pretext for a sexual encounter that includes plenty of consensual spanking, and lots of group and oral sex.¹⁴ (The short films I saw were part of a compilation entitled *The Good Old Naughty Days* which also includes scenes of bestiality.)

Clearly, explicit depictions of sex—even practices that are still considered unorthodox today—have been with us for a long time.

So why the hand-wringing over pornography in the 21st century? The answer is probably obvious, but I will state it for the record: concerns today centre on the easy accessibility, ubiquity, and gender bias in current hard-core representations of sex; representations that, because of technology, reach even the youngest among us, unfiltered and unfettered.

Whereas the porn of yesteryear was restricted to brothels, in the case of the films in *The Good Old Naughty Days*, or retailers of adults-only products, today it is available with the click of a mouse. With the Internet, boys can circumvent all of the limits that restricted previous generations from viewing XXX videos, and watch what they want, when they want, and wherever they want, thanks to mobile devices.

As for what they are watching, the answer varies depending on the person. Sexually explicit media may be easily accessible, but not all boys are indulging. Still, a significant number are and for very good reason: as they mature both physically and emotionally, they become curious about what sex is and how it is done. To satisfy this normal, natural interest in sexuality, some will seek out explicit videos, often for their own enjoyment but also to save themselves the embarrassment of having to ask someone else about sex.

This interest in sex is healthy but what boys find online may not be. The concern is not so much with boys seeing sex performed but with the ways in which sex is presented. Media depictions of explicit sex tend to follow traditional sexual scripts, showing the man as the dominant player in pursuit of attractive and acquiescent, even submissive, women. Some porn takes it even further, treating women with aggression or violence and even portraying sex as an act of anger.

¹² Jenkins, John Philip. "Obscenity" *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/424001/obscenity> Accessed July 29, 2013.

¹³*The Erotica Bibliophile*. http://www.ericabibliophile.com/illustrations_index.php. Accessed January 13, 2014.

¹⁴ My Porno Project. "The Good Old Naughty Days (by all means)" *mypornoproject.com*. May 24, 2012. <http://mypornoproject.com/2012/05/24/the-good-old-naughty-days-by-all-means/> Accessed January 14, 2014. The link has since been taken down but the film can be seen at http://www.xvideos.com/video7522081/the_good_old_naughty_days as of July, 2015.

Who Is Watching Porn and What Are They Seeing?

Pornography has been defined as “explicit representation of sexual acts with visible genitalia,” with the intention to arouse. Pornography is considered distinct from soft-core content which does not generally include visible sex organs.¹⁵ Historian Sarah Toulalan notes that in the modern context, pornography is very much a part of visual culture, seen in “images of naked bodies and sexual activity as presented in magazines, films, and videos and, most particularly now, on the Internet.”¹⁶

While it is true that the Internet—“present and prioritized in the lives of many youth”¹⁷—has made pornography widely available to teens, its usage is not universal in this age group.

The statistics on teen use of pornography vary greatly, depending on the country of origin and the methodology used to determine the numbers:

- Security software vendor GFI commissioned Knowledge Networks to prepare a parent-teen Internet safety report in 2011. The US-based study showed that 31% of surveyed boys admitted to visiting adult websites and 13% said they do so “often” or “sometimes.”¹⁸
- A 2008 YouGov study reported by Britain’s Channel 4 indicated that 42% of sexually active teens use porn regularly: more than a quarter of surveyed boys reported using porn at least once a week and 5% reported using it every day.¹⁹
- A 2008 study by social psychologist Chiara Sabina and colleagues asked college students about their use of porn during their adolescent years. Most had accessed porn for the first time between the ages of 14 and 17, with some seeing it for the first time at age 12 (10.9%) or 13 (16%). Overall, 93.2% of males had seen porn before the age of 18 compared to 62.1% of females.²⁰

¹⁵ Weber, Mathias et al. “Peers, Parents and Pornography: Exploring Adolescents’ Exposure to Sexually Explicit Material and Its Developmental Correlates” *Sexuality & Culture* 16, no. 4 (2012), p. 409-10.

¹⁶ Toulalan, Sarah.

¹⁷ Owens, Eric et al. “The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research” *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity* 19, no 1-2, (2012), p. 100.

¹⁸ GFI Software. *2011 Parent-Teen Internet Safety Report*. June 2011.

http://www.gfi.com/documents/GFI%20_2011_parent_teen_internet_safety_report_june.pdf Accessed April 27, 2013.

¹⁹ Sexperience/Channel 4. *Teen Sex Survey*. <http://sexperienceuk.channel4.com/teen-sex-survey>. Accessed April 27, 2013.

²⁰ Sabina, Chiara et al. “The Nature and Dynamics of Internet Pornography Exposure for Youth.” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 11, no. 6 (2008), p. 692.

- In 2009, journalism professor Jane D. Brown and behavioural scientist Kelly L’Engle reported that 53% of males had reported using sexually explicit media at least once in the previous year, compared to 28% of females.²¹
- Telecommunications professor Paul J. Wright and colleagues found in a 2012 study that 17% of the websites visited by teens are X-rated and at least 6% contain sexual violence.²²
- In 2009, a study from security software company Symantec showed that among children’s top ten Internet search terms, “sex” ranked fourth, closely followed by “porn” in sixth place.²³

From these numbers, it seems that sexually curious boys are seeking out pornography, but many are not regular users. Indeed, some of the highest percentages, like those indicated by Brown and L’Engle and Sabina, do not refer to regular use but rather to sporadic use of as little as one time during a given period. Still, porn use could be a problem for some boys: many are seeing pornography at very young ages and even the 5% in Britain who use it every day constitute a rather large number in that population.²⁴ And it is boys who stand to be most directly influenced by porn. As sociologist Michael Flood notes and other studies also show, males are more likely “to use pornography, to do so repeatedly, to use it 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.”²⁵

Statistics on the gender differences in porn use vary, but a 2012 study by communications scholar Mathias Weber and colleagues indicates that, among teenage respondents to his survey, only 3% of females watched porn on a daily basis, compared to 47% of males. Overall, only 2% of boys in his survey had never seen porn compared to 19% of girls. Other studies show similar ratios, with porn viewing an overwhelmingly male pastime.

The Sabina study looked into the reasons teens use porn. Among boys, the majority wanted sexual excitement (69.3%), but 53.1% said they used it out of curiosity about “different things people do sexually,” and 39.7% said they wanted information about sex.

²¹ Brown, Jane D. and Kelly L’Engle. “X-Rated: Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors Associated with U.S. Early Adolescents’ Exposure to Sexually Explicit Media.” *Communication Research* 36, no. 1, (2009), p. 139.

²² Wright, Paul J. et al. “Research on Sex in the Media: What Do We Know About Effects on Children and Adolescents” in *Handbook of Children and the Media*. 2nd ed. Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer, eds, Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012. p. 292.

²³ BBC News Online. “Kids’ top searches include ‘porn’”. August 12, 2009. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8197143.stm> Accessed April 27, 2013.

²⁴ It was hard to gauge the exact number of sexually active teens among the overall male adolescent population, but estimates from various studies show that one-third of adolescent males are sexually active. Population statistics for 2007 indicate that there are 3.5 million males aged 10-19 in the UK meaning just over one million (one-third) are sexually active. If 5% of those boys are daily porn users, that could mean upwards of 50,000 boys watching porn on a regular basis, a not insignificant number.

²⁵ Flood, Michael. “The Harms of Pornography Exposure Among Children and Young People.” *Child Abuse Review* 18, no. 6 (2009), p. 386.

These results are echoed in Weber's study which suggested that teens use pornography not only for arousal, but also to discover sexual behaviour and explore their own sexual preferences. As Weber and colleagues note, pornographic films are the only place sexually curious teens can see sex, so it stands to reason that they will seek them out.²⁶

A 2009 study from Sweden drew conclusions similar to Weber's. This survey of Swedish youth aged 14 -20 found that male adolescents use porn for arousal and sexual information (positions, new techniques), and that teens in general use porn as a form of social intercourse. They watch together to gauge peer reactions to what is seen on screen, thereby discovering the "normative guidelines" of their peer group.²⁷

In short, teens use pornography for information about sex, not just titillation, a fact noted by pediatricians Debra Braun-Courville and Mary Rojas who believe that mass media in general play an important role in the sexual socialization of youth, but the Internet may be at the forefront. Indeed, for boys, the Internet is the most popular choice for viewing sexually explicit media, favoured by 40%, followed by X-rated DVDs at 36% and pornographic magazines at 29%.²⁸

Braun-Courville and Rojas also cite research showing why the Internet has become so important: it is affordable, accessible, and anonymous.²⁹ Teens can access it anywhere for free without having to reveal who they are or what they have been watching. Mobile devices have increased this sense of freedom, making teen online activity "portable" and also "largely unmonitored."³⁰

Most parents are aware that porn is easily accessible but may not be as familiar with the actual content. As social psychologist Gail Dines says in her book *Pornland*, most women and some men have an idea of pornography that is twenty years out of date.³¹

Before researching this book, I would have fallen into that category myself. While I am no expert, I have done a brief survey of pornography through the ages and can make something of a comparison to current porn. As I said earlier, the actual sex acts have not changed much but the tone has. In the older videos and images I saw, women were often portrayed as enjoying sex and participating equally in what was happening. In a lot of today's porn—or at least much of what I saw on free porn sites and the sites associated with porn magazines—women are routinely

²⁶ Weber et al, p. 411, 416.

²⁷ Löfgren-Mårtenson, Lotta and Sven-Axel Månsson. "Lust, Love, and Life: A Qualitative Study of Swedish Adolescents' Perceptions and Experiences with Pornography" *Journal of Sex Research*. 47, no. 6 (2010): p. 1-12.

²⁸ Brown, Jane D. and Kelly L'Engle. "X-Rated: Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors Associated with U.S. Early Adolescents' Exposure to Sexually Explicit Media." *Communication Research* 36, no. 1, (2009), p. 139.

²⁹ Braun-Courville, D.K. and Mary Rojas. "Exposure to Sexually Explicit Web Sites and Adolescent Sexual Attitudes and Behaviours." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 45, no.2 (2009), 161.

³⁰ Owens, Eric W. et al, p. 100.

³¹ Dines, Gail. *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2010, p. 13-14.

objectified and sex is depicted with a high degree of hostility; something men do *to* women, not *with* them. For their part, the women seem to acquiesce to whatever the men want, making sex about fulfilling men's needs, not women's. (For the record, porn targeted to women, sometimes called erotica, offers a much more balanced depiction, with the women enjoying themselves as much as the men.)

Examples of fairly typical X-rated content can be found on the websites of pornographic magazines, although online access to North America's big three X-rated publications varies. *Playboy*, which announced in October, 2015 that it would end "full nudity" in its print magazine,³² still offers plenty of skin on its *Playboy Plus* website. Most of the content appears to be behind a paywall but clickable links at the bottom of the main page grant access to galleries like "Playmates," "Amateurs," and "Coeds." The latter category promises "fun coed girls" that will "get down & naughty," along with "fresh teen faces" who "bare it all,"³³ while the "Special Edition" area of the site offers "hot girl on girl action."³⁴ Each category includes several pages of images, but most are pretty tame compared to the *Penthouse* and *Hustler* sites. At *penthouse.com* visitors will get an eyeful of still images taken from their videos of couples engaging in the act. Over at *Hustler*, the raunchiest of the three magazines, a lot of explicit content is available via nude galleries and video previews. To access this content, a site visitor simply has to click "yes" when asked if he or she is 18 or older. The video previews are usually under two minutes in length but make the most of that short time by including a tightly edited montage of all kinds of sex acts, especially women performing oral sex on a man or another woman, "money shots" of men reaching orgasm in a woman's mouth, and lots of close-ups of hard-driving intercourse that looks painful for the women involved. And this is not even the worst.

My March, 2013 search for "free porn" on Google resulted in 724,000,000 hits. A similar search in December, 2015 found 207,000,000 links. Both searches led to www xnxx.com, a site that in 2013 included video clips with titles like "Jizz on her pretty face," "Hot and horny girlfriend get anal on couch," and "Naughty Wife Punished Hard." Newer titles, seen in 2015, include "Teen tries her biggest dick ever," "Brother Tricks Sister into Anal," and "Ebony slut in an amazing gang bang." Some of the videos on the site appear to offer more tepid depictions of sex but a look at the categories in the sidebar showed all manner of positions and several options for viewing aggressive sex: choices include gangbang, gagging, depththroat, and throat-fucking.³⁵ The oral fixation of the latter three themes is also present in the imagery on the *Hustler* site, where women are routinely pictured with absolutely huge penises being thrust into their mouths.

³² Benwell, Max. "Why you should be worried about Playboy dropping naked women from its pages." *Independent* October 20, 2015.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/why-you-should-be-worried-about-playboy-dropping-naked-women-from-its-pages-a6692756.html> Accessed November 24, 2015.

³³ Playboy. "Coed Girls" *Playboy Plus* <http://www.playboyplus.com/category/coed-girls/> Accessed December 8, 2015.

³⁴ Playboy. "Special Editions" *Playboy Plus* <http://www.playboyplus.com/category/special-editions/> Accessed December 8, 2015.

³⁵ Xnxx. <http://www xnxx.com/> Accessed March 25, 2013.

Hustler is certainly not the place one would expect to find gender balance or any kind of enlightened attitude toward women, but much of its content goes beyond basic male sexual dominance into cruelty and degradation. Consider a still shot from January, 2015 showing a woman with black eye makeup running down her face, either from crying or semen, as she attempts to wrap her mouth around an absurdly huge penis. Or the promo for a video called *Four-Eyed Fuck Fest*, centred on sex with women wearing glasses and stating that “when you’re ready to pop, make sure you give these spectacle-wearing sluts a big load of ball juice—right in their luscious lenses.” And on, and on, with references to sluts and whores, pussies and snatch, cum facials, *Teen Anal Pounding*, and Latinas who like “to get their holes stretched and pounded.” Sadly, violence and porn often go together and the images and language seen on the *Hustler* site, while shocking for those unaccustomed to porn, are not at all atypical. In fact, some porn goes even further.

Dines notes the role of the profit motive in the shift to more extreme acts in pornographic films—with so many players in the field, each has to find new ways to attract an audience, and what used to be considered hard-core is now mainstream. One example is “ass-to-mouth” or ATM, a sex act in which a man puts his penis in a woman’s anus and then into her mouth (another category on xnxx.com). According to research cited by psychologist John D. Foubert, ATM scenes occur in 41% of pornographic films.³⁶

In her book, Dines talks about a particular subgenre of porn called “gonzo” which is characterized by tremendous brutality and abuse of women. According to Dines, gonzo is the “overwhelmingly dominant porn genre” because it focuses on sex and not narrative, making it cheaper to produce. (Narrative has never been a major concern in standard porn, but it is, apparently, even less of a focus in gonzo.) In the gonzo genre, women are penetrated simultaneously in different orifices by multiple male partners, sometimes sustaining injuries, or gagged to the point of vomiting when performing oral sex.

As the examples above demonstrate, most porn takes to extreme the sexual script of men as dominant and women as compliant partners seeking to please a man. In the porn version of this script, women suffer immensely. They are shown as submissive and accepting of whatever men want; less people than instruments for a man, or men’s, sexual gratification.

And what of the men in porn? They are the perpetrators of some truly sickening acts of aggression against women. It may be hard to have much sympathy for them, but Dines notes that, like their female counterparts, porn men are portrayed in a negative and one-dimensional manner: “...as soulless, unfeeling, amoral life-support systems for erect penises who are entitled to use women in any way they want. These men demonstrate zero empathy, respect, or love for the women they have sex with.”³⁷ That the men themselves express no enjoyment or even response until the moment of ejaculation is another sign of their lack of emotional investment.

³⁶ Foubert, John D. “Pornography Viewing among Fraternity Men: Effects on Bystander Intervention, Rape Myth Acceptance and Behavioral Intent to Commit Sexual Assault” *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*. 18, no. 4 (2011), p. 213.

³⁷ Dines, p. 17-20.

Media and communications professor Feona Attwood notes that these men are presented as little more than machines that “shoot massive jets of come” but get little else out of their sexual encounters.³⁸ Given the horrible things done to women in some porn, the idea of men being objectified and dehumanized might sound ridiculous, but Dines and other researchers believe porn men bear signs of objectification since the focus is not on them as people but on one specific part of their bodies.

The Impact of Porn on Boys

It is easy to be outraged by pornography, but is there reason to worry about its effect on boys, many of whom use it as a sexual education tool or an arbiter of what is acceptable or normal in a sexual relationship?

Some say there is little cause for concern. Swedish research, cited earlier, indicates that porn is becoming more socially acceptable and an integral part of an adolescent’s everyday life. Although the study used a very small sample of teens, its authors concluded that the majority of participants had acquired the necessary skills “to navigate the pornographic landscape in a sensible and reflective manner,” noting that male and female participants seemed equally cognizant of the gender inequities in porn and equally aware that the sex shown in porn videos is exaggerated, distorted, or false.³⁹

Teens themselves have been asked their thoughts. Many describe pornography use as normal and even positive. Marshall Smith notes that boys see porn as a way of learning new techniques or “tricks,”⁴⁰ while Weber and colleagues described porn use as “socially desirable” in some peer groups and a tool for achieving or maintaining status within that group.⁴¹

It all sounds very shiny and happy. In reality, the long-term effects of adolescent pornography use are not yet known, despite what teens and some researchers might think.

Much of the research into the impacts of porn focuses on adults, not children and teens. Because children are accessing sexually explicit videos and being exposed to porn-inspired imagery in music videos and other media at increasingly younger ages—and at crucial periods when their sexual attitudes and scripts are being formed—research on this age group is badly needed. It is, however, very hard to conduct. The most accurate research comes from lab-controlled experiments which would require children and young teens to sit in a room and watch sexually explicit media. Clearly such experiments are unethical. Instead of laboratory studies, researchers are using surveys of teens and pre-teens to determine the extent of pornography use and its possible impacts. The results may be somewhat less accurate but are still enlightening.

³⁸ Attwood, Feona. “‘Tits and ass and porn and fighting’: Male heterosexuality in magazines for men” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no. 1 (2005), p. 91.

³⁹ Löfgren-Mårtenson, Lotta and Sven-Axel Månsson, p. 6-10.

⁴⁰ Smith, p. 71.

⁴¹ Weber et al, p. 419.

Psychologists Jochen Peter and Patti Valkenburg are among the most prolific researchers in this area, having written extensively about adolescent use of “sexually explicit Internet media” (SEIM), a term they prefer over the emotionally charged word “pornography.”⁴² Their body of research shows how SEIM affects adolescents and explains why its effects can be so strong. Where most people, including the mainstream media, think that porn’s influence on males is manifested in increased sexual aggression and objectification of women, Peter and Valkenburg show that the impact might be deeper and more insidious.

In 2008, Peter and Valkenburg found that frequent use of SEIM led to more thoughts about sex, stronger interest in it—beyond the “sexual curiosity that characterizes adolescence”—and more frequent instances of teens being distracted by their thoughts about sex. In their words, “SEIM leaves its traces in adolescents’ thinking about sex.”⁴³

Those traces can be fairly significant. As we saw earlier, adolescents tend to use SEIM as a tool for sex education. Its educational impact is not just on the act itself, but also on fundamental attitudes.

At the core are the concepts of perceived realism and perceived utility. In a 2010 study, Peter and Valkenburg concluded that more frequent use of SEIM among teens leads to a greater belief that these materials are socially realistic and useful for learning about sex. In turn, teens who hold those beliefs tend to develop a more instrumental attitude toward sex; that is, a notion that sex is “a primarily physical, casual game” with a person’s sexual pleasure deemed more important than relationships, connection, and affection.⁴⁴

Similar conclusions were made in another 2008 study. Although it focused on emerging adults aged 18-26 and not younger teens, this study showed that young people do not necessarily need to use porn to be accepting of it and influenced by it. Participants in the study were asked whether they thought porn was an acceptable way to express their sexuality. Men who agreed with the statement—even if they did not use porn themselves—tended to be more accepting of premarital and casual sex. This study demonstrates that even a cursory knowledge of pornography could have an impact on sexual attitudes, acting as a “value stance” or “sexual ethic.”⁴⁵

What is the problem with an instrumental attitude? Teens who take a more casual attitude to sex may put themselves at risk of sexually transmitted infections and the emotional health effects that come from promiscuous behaviour, a topic I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter.

⁴² Peter, Jochen and Patti M. Valkenburg. “Processes Underlying the Effects of Adolescents’ Use of Sexually Explicit Internet Material: The Role of Perceived Realism” *Communication Research* 37, no. 3: 2010, p. 377.

⁴³ Peter, Jochen and Patti M. Valkenburg. “Adolescents’ Exposure to Sexually Explicit Internet Material and Sexual Preoccupancy: A Three-Wave Panel Study.” *Media Psychology* 11, no. 2 : 2008, p. 226-227.

⁴⁴ Peter and Valkenburg, 2010, *Communication Research*. p. 377.

⁴⁵ Carroll Jason S., p. 6-30.

Beyond fostering an acceptance of casual sex and promiscuity, pornography may have other negative impacts on boys' emerging sexuality.

Porn can affect boys' sexual scripts by altering their sense of what is realistic or expected in sexual encounters.⁴⁶ In particular, Marshall Smith believes pornography may reinforce the stereotypes of experienced,⁴⁷ sexually adventurous males and passive, accommodating females. This exaggerated heterosexual script, which is dominant in porn, may also diminish boys' sexual self-esteem and lead to sexual anxiety, as it presents a performance ideal for males (i.e. that they can go for hours) and positions men as initiators of sex who must have more sexual knowledge and skill than their female partners.

Pornography also blurs the lines about consent, an already hazy area for teens. In pornographic films, consent is never mentioned and sexual encounters escalate to extremes without discussion—women's bodies are explored and penetrated, additional men or women join, and men ejaculate all over women with nary an "Are you okay with this?" being asked.

Sociologist Michael Flood notes as well that porn and other sexually explicit media can lead to a wider acceptance of non-mainstream sexual acts, like anal or group sex, which, as we saw earlier in this chapter, have been with us for a long time but carry risks to sexual health if precautions are not taken, and in porn, they never are.

With the conflicting body of evidence about the impact of pornography, what conclusions can we draw? The news is both reassuring and worrisome. It is good to know the majority of boys are not regular users of porn—a fact not widely noted in media reports. Yet it is troubling to read about the subtle ways porn can shape boys' sexual scripts and the number of boys who see porn as a valuable educational resource. On that count, the words of psychologist Michael Flood seem particularly relevant. He noted in a 2009 paper that pornography is a poor sex educator—most is too explicit for young people, shows sex in unrealistic ways while neglecting intimacy, is sexist, and, in some cases, eroticizes violence.⁴⁸

Yet boys clearly crave more information about sex, so what is the answer for parents? Sex education is very delicate issue, rooted in a family's morals and values. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. There are, however, some realities that all parents need to face in a media environment where sexualized imagery is becoming increasingly normalized and ubiquitous. It is not just pornography but other media that help shape boys' attitudes toward sex, including magazines and music videos that are increasingly adopting a porn aesthetic. In order to make the best decisions for their sons' sexual education and development, parents need to understand the possible influences of all sexualized media on boys' sexual health, notions of consent, experience of aggression, and body esteem.

⁴⁶ Peter and Valkenburg, 2010, 377.

⁴⁷ Smith, p. 73.

⁴⁸ Flood, p. 394-5.

