

From Pornography to Porno to Porn: How Porn Became the Norm

Pamela Paul

Author and Journalist

“It’s all mainstream now!”

That’s what Seth Rogan’s character Zack says to his best friend and intended love, Miri, in an effort to get her to make a pornographic film with him. The film is *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*, the latest gross-out comedy/romance from Kevin Smith, and one of many recent comedies (and romances, shockingly) to make light of pornography. Indeed, in Rogan’s last romantic hit, *Knocked Up*, his character’s “job” is creating a pornographic website. The women in the film? After a quick, symbolic “yuck!”, they become willing participants.

It *is* all mainstream now. Over the past ten years, technological advances, cultural shifts, and social attitudes have transformed the pornography landscape. Today, men, women, and children are affected by the ubiquity and mainstreaming of pornography in unprecedented ways. The internet, in particular, has made pornography more anonymous, more accessible, and more affordable than ever before, bringing in new users, increasing use among existing fans, and catapulting many into sexual compulsiveness. Children are being exposed to pornography earlier than ever before, in ways that will profoundly affect their sexuality and their lives.

Not only is pornography itself more ubiquitous, the entire culture has become pornified. By that I mean that the aesthetics, values, and standards of pornography have seeped into mainstream popular culture. Young girls brazenly pose in pornographic ways on their MySpace pages, even creating porn-like videos of themselves gyrating and preening before untold numbers of strangers. Porn stars are regularly featured in the same tabloid magazines that profile actors, singers, and other celebrities, equating those who sell sex with those who create art on the basis of other talents (though, of course, one could argue the relative merits of that “art”).

Pornography is everywhere

All of this would not be possible without the hyperspeed spread of pornography over the past two decades. Today, the number of people looking at pornography is staggering. Americans rent upwards of 800 million pornographic videos and DVDs (about one in five of all rented movies is porn), and the 11,000 porn films shot each year far outpaces Hollywood's yearly slate of 400. Four billion dollars a year is spent on video pornography in the United States, more than on football, baseball, and basketball. One in four internet users look at a pornography website in any given month. Men look at pornography online more than they look at any other subject. And 66% of 18–34-year-old men visit a pornographic site every month.¹

Pornography regularly makes headlines and sells products, even within the mainstream culture. In 2004, Janet Jackson notoriously bared her breast during the Super Bowl, in primetime family television viewing hours. Shortly thereafter Paris Hilton's amateur sex video became an internet sensation. More media attention followed—Howard Stern fled to satellite radio and soon porn star Jenna Jameson and *Playboy* bunny Pamela Anderson were topping the bestseller lists with a memoir and a roman à clef, respectively. A glossy coffee table book of porn star portraits accompanied by essays from writers such as Salman Rushdie and Francine du Plessix Gray was published. Showtime ran a special in which porn stars, Jameson among them, bragged about the power women had in the pornography business. Today, celebrity couples boast about their trips to the hottest strip clubs. Characters on primetime sitcoms extol the benefits of porn. Even mainstream women's magazines advise women to enliven their marital bedtime routine by turning on late-night Skinemax.

The message is that pornography is everywhere—and only ever-so-slightly scandalous. It is good for you, and especially good for relationships. Pornography is hip, sexy, and fun.

But particularly on the internet, where much of pornography today is consumed, the type of sexuality depicted often has more to do with violence, extreme fetishes, and mutual degradation than with fun, much less with sexual or emotional connection. For those who

¹ P. Pamela, *Pornified* (Times Books, 2004, New York).

haven't double-clicked: These aren't airbrushed photos of the girl next door or images of coupling; they are vivid scenes of crying women enduring aggressive multiple penetration.

These are images created by pornographers for a single purpose: To help men masturbate and get them to pay for it. Sex, in pornography, is a commercialized product, devoid of emotion, stripped of humanity, an essentially empty experience. As one porn fan put it, after an evening of porn surfing, "You feel like, yeah, that was a release, but I don't know, maybe not the best thing. Like eating a bag of potato chips."

Bad for women and marriage

"You get into a slippery slope," cautions Massachusetts-based psychologist and sex therapist Aline Zoldbrod. "The majority of porn out there is degrading and has only gotten worse. The women are plasticized; there's no longer as much diversity or naturalism as there was two decades ago."

Zoldbrod believes many young men today are terrible lovers because they learn about sexuality from pornography. "In real life, sexually-speaking, women are crock pots and men are microwaves. But in pornography, all a man does is touch a woman and she's howling in delight. Today, pornography is so widely used by young men, they learn these falsehoods. There's good evidence that the more porn men watch, the less satisfied they are with their partner's looks and sexual performance."

Advice columnists across North America receive letter after letter in which women complain about their partner's pornography. Men who watch a lot of porn seem to focus more intensely on the visual, even when in bed with a woman, asking her to emulate the look and moves of porn stars. Women have distorted body images and feel the need to remodel their appearances—no matter how they personally feel about pornography.

Though pressured to accept pornography as a sign of being sexy and hip, many women admit that in practice their boyfriend's use of porn hurts. A 24-year-old from Baltimore complained to me about how her boyfriend got lap dances at a strip club every month. "If he were to do that with a woman in front of me on the living room couch, that would be considered cheating. Why is it somehow OK just because he's at a strip club?" Another woman

told me, “All of my girlfriends and I expect to find histories of pornographic websites on our computers after our boyfriends use it. They don't bother erasing the history if you don't give them a lot of hell.” The implications troubled her. “I fear we are losing something very important—a healthy sexual worldview. I think, however, that we are using old ideas of pornography to understand its function in a much more complex modern world.”

Women view men’s relationship with pornography as a sign of betrayal, even cheating. A 38-year-old mother of two from Kentucky said finding her husband’s secret stash of porn “pretty much wiped out the trust in our relationship.” Once she knew about his years-long subterfuge, she recalled, “I would find myself worrying all the time. If I were going to take a trip for my job, I’d wonder about what he might look at while I was gone.”

Pornography thus creates deception and distrust in relationships. Most women have no idea how often their boyfriends and husbands look at pornography because the men do not tell them. Usually, the deception is deliberate, though many men deny to themselves how often they look at it, and most simply don’t think about quantifying the amount they view. While men consider trust crucial for a healthy relationship, they seem willing to flout that trust when it comes to pornography—deceiving their significant others into thinking they’re either not looking at it at all or are looking at it less frequently. Fitting pornography into one’s life isn’t always easy.

More women are installing programs such as NetNanny on their computers to limit their home computer internet access to PG websites. According to one filtering company, WiseChoice.net, more than half the company’s 3,000 customers are adults who use the software not to block their kids’ access but to keep themselves and other adults from looking.² In a 2004 *Elle*/MSBNC.com poll, one in four women said that they were concerned that their partner had an “out-of-control habit” with online pornography.

Matrimonial lawyers attest to a growing docket of cases in which pornography had been a major source of tension, if not the cause of the divorce. “Pornography wrecks marriages,” says Marcia Maddox, a Virginia-based attorney.

² L. Harris, “Stop Him Before He Clicks Again!” Salon.com, April 15, 2004.

Bad for men

Yet lest pornography get written off as a “women’s problem,” consider the extensive negative effects of pornography on the primary users, men. According to a large-scale 1994 report summarizing eighty-one peer-reviewed research studies, most studies (70%) of *non-aggressive* pornography find that exposure to pornography has clear negative effects—and that is not the only kind most users view.³

Countless men have described to me how, while using pornography, they have lost the ability to relate to or be close to women. They have trouble being turned on by “real” women, and their sex lives with their girlfriends or wives collapse. These are men who seem like regular guys, but who spend hours each week with porn—usually online. And many of them admit they have trouble cutting down their use. They also find themselves seeking out harder and harder pornography.

In interviews for *Pornified*, a book I wrote about pornography’s effects, men—even those who were avid porn fans—confessed that their pornography habits had damaged their sex lives. Men who use pornography say they are losing the ability to relate to, be close to, and achieve orgasm with real women.

A single twenty-something graphic designer told me he would find himself in bars, berating himself over the way he scanned potential dates. “I’d be saying, ‘No, her breasts are too small, she’s not worth it, then wonder, ‘Who have I become? Why am I judging women like this?’” After months of rampant use, he had to “restrict” himself in order to regain perspective.

A 28-year-old man explained, “I used to view porn online, but I began to find it more difficult to stay aroused when having sex with a real woman. ... During a dry spell, I discovered i-porn, and the easiness of it made it easy to glut—to the point where now, even though the dry spell is over, real sex has now lost some of its magic.”

³ J.S.Lyons, R.L Anderson, and D. Larsen , “A Systematic Review of the Effects of Aggressive and Nonaggressive Pornography,” in Zillman, Bryant & Huston (ed.) *Media, Children & The Family: Social Scientific, Psychodynamic, and Clinical Perspectives*, (Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, NJ), p. 305.

When they are having sex with real women, such men need to conjure images they've viewed in pornography in order to maintain their level of excitement. Other times, they want to focus on their partner, but find their minds filled with pornographic images instead—like getting a bad song trapped in their heads.

Men also told me that they found themselves wasting countless hours looking at pornography on their televisions and DVD players, and especially online. They looked at things they would have once considered appalling—bestiality, group sex, hardcore S&M, genital torture, child pornography.

They found the way they looked at women in real life warping to fit the pornography fantasies they consumed onscreen. Their daily interactions with women became pornified. Their relationships soured. They had trouble relating to women as individual human beings. They worried about the way they saw their daughters and girls their daughters' age. It wasn't only their sex lives that suffered—pornography's effects rippled out, touching all aspects of their existence. Their work days became interrupted, their hobbies were tossed aside, their family lives were disrupted. Some men even lost their jobs, their wives, and their children. The sacrifice is enormous.

Nor is it only the most violent hardcore pornography that damages how the male users view women, including their wives and their girlfriends. Because pornography involves looking at women but not interacting with them, it elevates the physical while ignoring or trivializing all other aspects of the woman. A woman is literally reduced to her body parts and sexual behavior. Gary Brooks, a psychologist who studies pornography at Texas A&M University, explains that “soft-core pornography has a very negative effect on men as well. The problem with soft-core pornography is that it's voyeurism—it teaches men to view women as objects rather than to be in relationships with women as human beings.”

But pornography doesn't just change how men view women— it changes their lives, including their relation to pornography. The first step is usually an increase in frequency and quantity of viewing: more times logging online or clicking the remote control, prolonged visits to certain websites, a tendency to fall into a routine. In a 2004 *Elle*/MSBNC.com poll, nearly one

in four men admitted that they were afraid they were “overstimulating” themselves with online sex.

In fact, routine is an essential ingredient in the financial success of high-tech porn. Wendy Seltzer, an advocate for online civil liberties, argues that pornographers should not even be concerned over piracy of their free material. “People always want this stuff. Seeing some of it just whets their appetite for more. Once they get through what’s available for free, they’ll move into the paid services.”⁴ And once they’ve indulged in more quantity, they want more quality—meaning more action, more intensity, more extreme situations. The user’s impetus to find harder core fare helps the entire industry.

Particularly on the internet, men find themselves veering off into forms of pornography they *never* thought they could find appealing. Those who start off with soft-core develop a taste for harder core pornography.

Men who view a lot of pornography talk about their disgust the first time they chanced upon an unpleasant image or unsolicited child porn. But with experience, it doesn’t bother the user as much— the shock wears thin quickly, especially given the frequent assault of such images he encounters on the internet. He learns to ignore or navigate around unwanted imagery, and the third time he sees an unpleasant image, it’s merely an annoyance and a delay. At the same time that such upsetting imagery becomes more tolerable, the imagery that had aroused him becomes less interesting, leading the user to ratchet up the extremity of the kind of pornography he seeks, seeking more shocking material than he started out with.

The women’s market

Having won over such a significant chunk of the male market, the pornography industry is eager to tap into the other potential 50% of the market: women. A number of companies are increasing production of pornography made by and for women, and the industry is keen to promote what it likes to view as women’s burgeoning predilection for pornography. Playgirl TV announced its launch in 2004 with programming to include an “erotic soap opera” from a

⁴ J. Schwartz, “The Pornography Industry vs. Digital Pirates,” *The New York Times*, February 8, 2004, Section 3, p. 1

woman's point of view, a 1940s style romantic comedy with "a sexual twist," and roundtable discussions of "newsworthy women's topics."

In recent years, women's magazines have regularly featured a discussion of pornography from a new perspective: how women can introduce it into their own lives. While many women continue to have mixed or negative feelings toward pornography, they are told to be realistic, to be "open-minded." Porn, they are told, is sexy, and if you want to be a sexually attractive and forward-thinking woman, you've got to catch on.

Today, the pornography industry and our pornified culture have convinced women that wearing a thong is a form of emancipation, learning to pole dance means embracing your sexuality, and taking your boyfriend for a lap dance is what every sexy and supportive girlfriend should do. In an *Elle* magazine poll, more than half of the respondents described themselves as "pro-stripping" (56%), and said that they weren't bothered if their partner went to strip clubs (52%).

Sociologist Michael Kimmel, who studies pornography and teaches sexuality classes at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, says, "Twenty years ago, my female students would say, 'Ugh, that's disgusting,' when I brought up pornography in class. The men would guiltily say, 'Yeah, I've used it.' Today, men are much more open about saying they use pornography all the time, and they don't feel any guilt. The women now resemble the old male attitude: They'll sheepishly admit to using it themselves." Women's attitudes have merged even more closely with men's.

The internet measurement firm comScore tracked close to 32 million women visiting at least one adult website in January 2004. Seven million of them were ages 35 to 44, while only 800,000 were over the age of 65.⁵ Nielsen NetRatings has found the figures to be somewhat lower, with 10 million women visiting adult content websites in December 2003.⁶ In a 2004 *Elle/MSNBC.com* poll, 41% of women said they have intentionally viewed or downloaded erotic films or photos, and 13% watched or sexually interacted with someone on a live webcam.

⁵ K. Olbermann "Countdown," MSNBC, February 23, 3004.

⁶ M. Navarro, "Women Tailor Sex Industry to their Eyes," *The New York Times*, February 20, 2004, p. A1

Yet as much as women are touted as the new pornography consumer, they still lag far behind men. The spitfire headlines do little to reflect the reality of most women's experiences. Statistics belie the assertions of the pro-porn movement and the go-go girl mentality espoused by female pornography purveyors.

While some polls show that up to half of all women go online for sexual reasons, the percentage of women who say they do is likely exaggerated by the inclusion in the definition of "adult" internet content of erotica, dating, and informational sites, areas to which women are disproportionately drawn compared with men. Others feel like admitting they don't look at pornography at all is akin to affixing a "frigid" sticker to their chastity belts; better not to come off as uptight. Many women tracked through filtering sites visit the sites by accident or out of curiosity, or are tracking down their male partner's usage.

Some attribute the rise in female consumption to an increased supply in pornography for women. That may be part of the reason, but there's more at play than a simple increase in supply—something has to explain the increased demand. Broader societal shifts in men's and women's roles in relationships and a corresponding swing in women's expectations and attitudes towards their sexuality are driving women to pornography too.

Not a harmless "guy thing"

Many women try to treat porn as merely a harmless "guy thing," but they are profoundly disturbed when they are forced to come to terms with the way porn changes their lives—and the lives of their boyfriends or husbands—today. They find themselves constantly trying to measure up to the bodies and sexual performance of the women their men watch online and onscreen. They fear that they've lost the ability to turn their men on anymore—and quite often, they have.

One 24-year-old woman from Baltimore confided, "I find that porn's prevalence is a serious hindrance to my comfort level in relationships. Whether it's porn DVDs and magazines lying around the house, countless porn files downloaded on their computers, or even trips to strip clubs, almost every guy I have dated (as well as my male friends) is very open about his interest in porn. As a result, my body image suffers tremendously. ... I wonder if I am insecure

or if the images I see guys ogle every day has done this to me.” She later confessed that she felt unable to air her concerns to anyone. “A guy doesn’t think you’re cool if you complain about it,” she explained. “Ever since the internet made it so easy to access, there’s no longer any stigma to porn.”

A 38-year-old woman from a Chicago suburb described her husband’s addiction to pornography: “He would come home from work, slide food around his plate during dinner, play for maybe half an hour with the kids, and then go into his home office, shut the door and surf internet porn for hours. I knew—and he knew that I knew. I put a filter on his browser that would email me every time a pornographic image was captured. ... I continually confronted him on this. There were times I would be so angry I would cry and cry and tell him how much it hurt. ... It got to the point where he stopped even making excuses. It was more or less: ‘I know you know and I don’t really care. What are you going to do about it?’”

For many wives and girlfriends, it becomes immediately clear that the kind of pornography their men are into is all about the men—about their needs, about what they want—not about their women or their relationships or their families. It’s not surprising a woman ends up feeling second rate. Not only does pornography dictate how women are supposed to look; it skews expectations of how they should act. Men absorb those ideals, but women internalize them as well. According to the nationally representative *Pornified*/Harris poll, commissioned for my 2004 book, most women (six out of ten) believe pornography affects how men expect them to look and behave. In fact, only about one out of seven women believe pornography *doesn’t* raise men’s expectations of women.

Men tell women their consumption of pornography is natural and normal, and if a woman doesn’t like it, she is controlling, insecure, uptight, petty, or a combination thereof. The woman demands. She is unreasonable. He has to give up something he’s cherished since boyhood. She’s not supportive. She blows everything out of proportion. If it weren’t for this attitude of hers, the relationship would be fine. For a woman to judge pornography as anything but positive is read as a condemnation of her man, or at the very least, of his sexual life. Discomfort with pornography also becomes a woman’s discomfort with her own sexuality.

Still, the *Pornified*/Harris poll found that only one-fifth of Americans believe pornography improves the sex life of those who look at it. Indeed, one-third of respondents to this book's nationwide poll believe looking at pornography *won't* harm a couple's relationship. And not surprisingly, half of Americans say pornography demeans women. Women are far more likely to believe this—58% compared with 37% of men. They are much less likely—20% compared with 34%—to believe that pornography *isn't* demeaning.

Of course, with increased viewing, the effects of pornography become less obvious. While 60% of adults age 59 and older believe pornography is demeaning toward women, only 35% of Gen Xers—the most tolerant and often heaviest users—agree.

Not a solo activity

In other words, despite appearances, pornography isn't precisely a solo activity. As interviews with men and women attest, it plays into how people approach and function in relationships. Whether a couple watches together, or one or both partners uses it alone, pornography plays a significant role not only in sex but in a couple's sense of trust, security, and fidelity. As Mark Schwartz, clinical director of the Masters and Johnson Clinic in St. Louis, Missouri, says, "Pornography is having a dramatic effect on relationships at many different levels and in many different ways—and nobody outside the sexual behavior field and the psychiatric community is talking about it."

Not knowing who to turn to when their boyfriends turn away from them and toward pornography, many women write in to magazine advice columnists for help or ask for support in online forums. Female-oriented internet communities (chat rooms, bulletin boards, online forums, etc.) teem with discussions on the subject. Every week, advice columnists across the country address the issue; presumably many similar letters go unanswered in print.

Just one example: A woman writes to a local newspaper, "We've been together five years, lived together half that time. We have a loving, happy relationship. Recently, I discovered via the computer that he's fascinated by hardcore pornography, lots of it. When confronted, he said I have no right to be upset, though he's aware it offends me; he insisted I let it go. He's still spending hours looking at this and I'm disgusted. ... I've tried to discuss how degrading and

controlling this seems to me, but he's not willing to give it up. I know many people think it's harmless, but it's making me question whether I'm willing to continue a relationship with someone who can disregard my feelings so easily."⁷

The *Pornified*/Harris poll found that overall, 34% of women see men using pornography as cheating in absolutely all cases. Yet only 17% of men equated pornography with cheating. Indeed, most men who use pornography tend to see pornography as *not* cheating: A man has his needs, and he's fulfilling them in a way that prevents him from cheating on his wife with a real woman. According to the *Pornified*/Harris poll, 41% of men say pornography should never be considered cheating. Only 18% of women felt the same way.

Once she's discovered his pornography, what next? Psychotherapist Marlene Spielman says when a woman finds out about a partner's pornography habit, the result is usually a back and forth of very strong emotions. The woman typically feels hurt, angry, and betrayed. Confronted husbands often begin with denial before confessing the truth, followed by a big fight, blaming, and accusations. He may accuse her of driving him to it; she might point to his avoidance of problems in the relationship.

In the 2004 *Elle*/MSNBC.com poll, one in four divorced respondents said Internet pornography and chat had contributed to their split. At the 2003 meeting of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, a gathering of the nation's divorce lawyers, attendees documented a startling trend. Nearly two-thirds of the attorneys present had witnessed a sudden rise in divorces related to the internet; 58% of those were the result of a spouse looking at excessive amounts of pornography online. According to the association's president, Richard Barry, "Eight years ago, pornography played almost no role in divorces in this country. Today, there are a significant number of cases where it plays a definite part in marriages breaking up."

Matrimonial lawyers across the country attest to the growing docket of cases. "Pornography wrecks marriages," says Marcia Maddox, a Vienna, Virginia-based attorney. The five attorneys in her office are always working on at least one case involving pornography. In one, a wife found her husband's internet pornography while she and their daughter were

⁷ "His Porn Habit Has Become a Hardcore Problem," *The Toronto Star*, July 4, 2004, p. B04.

working on a school project. Horrified, the woman hired a computer technician, who discovered a trove of hardcore pornography on the hard drive. The couple ended up getting a divorce; the mother was awarded sole custody.

The fact is, Maddox says, “Using pornography is like adultery. It’s not *legally* adultery, which requires penetration. But there are many ways of cheating. It’s often effectively desertion—men abandoning their family to spend time with porn.” Often the judges find that even if children aren’t directly exposed to a father’s pornography, they are indirectly affected because their fathers ignore them in favor of porn. Visitation in such cases may be limited.

Mary Jo McCurley, an attorney who has practiced family law in Dallas since 1979, agrees. In the past five years, more and more cases are brought forth in which a husband’s pornography habit is a factor. “We see cases in which the husband becomes so immersed in online porn it destroys the marriage,” she explains. “Not only is it unsettling for the wife that he’s using other women to get off, but it takes away from the time they could spend together as a couple.”

In divorce cases these days, enormous amounts of time and money are spent recovering pornography off computers. “You can hire experts who specialize in digging through hard drives,” McCurley says. “There are people who have made a profession out of it. It’s become quite common in Texas divorce.”

Bad for teenagers

The statistics are frightening, but even more appalling are the effects of pornography on the next generation. According to a 2001 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, seven in ten 15- to 17-year-olds admitted to “accidentally” stumbling across pornography online. Girls were more likely than boys to say they were “very upset” by the experience (35% versus 6%), although 41% of youth that age said that it wasn’t a problem.

Statistics show that about half—if not all—teenagers are exposed to pornography one way or another. A 2004 study by Columbia University found that 11.5 million teenagers (45%)

have friends who regularly view internet pornography and download it.⁸ (Incidentally, teenagers with a majority of friends who do so are three times more likely to smoke, drink, or use illegal drugs than are teens who have no such friends.)

The prevalence of teens with friends who view and download internet pornography increases with age, from nearly one-third of 12-year-olds to nearly two-thirds of 17-year-olds. Boys are significantly more likely than girls to have friends who view online pornography: 25% of 12- and 13-year-old girls, and 46% of 16- and 17-year old girls say they have friends who regularly view and download internet pornography, compared with 37% and 65% of boys the same age.⁹

Bear in mind that most of these statistics are already outdated.

Psychotherapists and family counselors across the country attest to the popularity of pornography among *pre*-adolescents. Even pre-adolescents are being treated for pornography addiction, says Judith Coché, a clinical psychologist who runs the Coché Center in Philadelphia and teaches psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania. She describes one case in which the parents of an 11-year-old girl found her creating her own pornographic website. When confronted, she said that pornography was considered “cool” among her friends. Perhaps it wasn’t a very good idea, she admitted, but all of her friends were doing it. Her parents were horrified. Coché says. “Before the internet, I never encountered this.”

“I’ve had my own therapy practice for over twenty-five years,” she says. “I feel like I’ve seen everything.” She pauses and says almost apologetically, “I’ve been walking around my practice saying, ‘We have an epidemic on our hands.’ The growth of pornography and its impact on young people is really, really dangerous. And the most dangerous part is that we don’t even realize what’s happening.”

Pornography is wildly popular with teenage boys in a way that makes yesteryear’s sneaked glimpses at *Penthouse* seem monastic. The prevalence of the internet among

⁸ C. C. Radsch, “Teenagers Sexual Activity Is Tied to Drugs and Drink,” the *New York Times*, August 30, 2004, p. A15.

⁹ “National Survey of American Attitudes on Substance Abuse IX: Teen Dating Practices and Sexual Activity,” the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, p. 23.

teenagers has made pornography just another online activity; there is little barrier to entry and almost no sense of taboo. Instead, pornography seems to be a natural right and an acceptable pastime. One teenage boy in Boston explained recently to the *New York Times*, “Who needs the hassle of dating when I’ve got online porn?”¹⁰

There is a reason for this. Like all good marketers, pornographers know it’s important to reel consumers in while they’re young. Pornography is integrated into the cable tv and videogame cultures, for example. MTV recently announced the launch of a Stan Lee/Hugh Hefner collaboration, *Hef’s Superbunnies*, an “edgy, sexy animated series” from the creator of the *Spider-Man* comic book series featuring a buxom team of specially trained Playboy bunnies.¹¹

Mainstream videogames regularly feature pornographic elements. One 2004 game, “The Guy Game,” that didn’t even get an “Adults-Only” rating, features women exposing their breasts when they answer questions wrong in a trivia contest. (The game manufacturer is being sued because one woman included in the footage was only seventeen and didn’t give her consent to be filmed.)¹² “BMX XXX” adds a pornographic sheen to bike stunts and racing. Another game, “Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude” features full-on nudity as gamers live out the player lifestyle, trying to score hot babes. The manufacturers are fighting to obtain an “M” rating (the equivalent of a movie’s “R”) in order to ensure being carried at Walgreens across America.¹³

Marketers have extended the porn brand to everything from sporting equipment to clothing. Two snowboarding companies, Burton Snowboards and Sims, now offer boards—clearly marketed to teenagers, the backbone of the snowboarding market—emblazoned with images of *Playboy* bunnies and Vivid porn stars. Sims boasts that the boards with photographs of porn stars Jenna Jameson and Brianna Banks are their bestsellers.

¹⁰ B. Denizet-Lewis, “Friends, Friends with Benefits, and the Benefits of the Local Mall,” the *New York Times Magazine*, May 30, 2004, Section 6, p. 30.

¹¹ C. Littleton “Hugh Hefner, Stan Lee to Hop to ‘Superbunnies,’” Reuters/Hollywood Reporter, September 7, 2004.

¹² T. Thorsen, “Take-Two, Sony, and Microsoft Sued Over ‘The Guy Game’” Gamespot.com, 12/21/04.

¹³ C. Morris, “Video Games Get Raunchy,” CNN Money.com, May 12, 2004.

Sexually cued to a computer

The effects of such ever-present pornography on kids who are still developing sexually has yet to be fully understood, Coché explains. She has talked to parents who have witnessed their sons playing computer games when pornographic pop-ups come onto the screen.

“Pornography is so often tied into videogame culture and insinuates itself even into non-pornographic areas of the web. It’s very hard for a 12-year-old boy to avoid.”

As a result, boys are learning to sexually cue to a computer, rather than to human beings. “This is where they’re learning what turns them on. And what are they supposed to do about that? Whereas once boys would kiss a girl they had a crush on behind the school, we don’t know how boys who become trained to cue sexually to computer-generated porn stars are going to behave, especially as they get older.”

Kids also absorb pornography very differently from adults. Not only are they like sponges, they are also quite literal. Not only younger children, but even young teenagers are generally not sophisticated enough to differentiate between fantasy and reality. They learn direct lessons from pornography, with no filter, and with no concept of exaggeration, irony, or affect.

They learn what women supposedly look like, how they should act, and what they are supposed to do. They learn what women “want” and how men can give it to them. Watching pornography, boys and girls learn that women always want sex and that sex is divorced from relationships. They learn that men can have whomever they want and that women will respond the way men want them to. They learn that anal sex is the norm and instant female orgasm is to be expected. And they absorb these lessons avidly, emulating people they perceive to be role models.

“Kids today are going to run into pornography online, not erotica,” explains Aline Zoldbrod. “They’re getting a very bad model. Pornography doesn’t show how a real couple negotiates conflict or creates intimacy.” For girls especially, Zoldbrod believes, pornography is a “brutal way to be introduced to sexuality,” since much of it is “rape-like” in its use of violence.

Still, many older kids at least partly recognize the negative side. When asked in the 2001 study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 59% of 15-to 24-year-olds said they thought seeing pornography online encouraged young people to have sex before they are ready, and half thought it would lead people to think unprotected sex is okay. Half thought internet pornography could lead to addiction and promote bad attitudes toward women. In a 2002 nationwide Gallup poll, 69% of teenage boys between the ages of 13 and 17 said that even if nobody ever knew about it, they would feel guilty about surfing pornography on the internet. Not surprising, an even greater number of girls—86%—felt the same way.

Interestingly, when asked about the effect of pornography for the *Pornified*/Harris poll, young people between the ages of 18 and 24 were often most likely of all generations to report negative consequences. Four in ten of them believe pornography harms relationships between men and women, compared with only three in ten 25-to-40-year-olds. The internet generation is also more likely to believe that pornography changes men's expectations of women's looks and behavior.

Adults also see the harm pornography does to young children and teenagers. When asked in the *Pornified*/Harris poll what is the greatest impact of pornography on children, 30% of Americans said the fact that it distorts boys' expectations and understanding of women and sex, 25% said that it makes kids more likely to have sex earlier than they otherwise might have, 7% cited the way it distorts girls' body images and ideas about sex, and 6% said it makes kids more likely to look at pornography as adults (men were twice as likely to believe this last as women).

Only 2% of Americans actually believe that pornography helps kids better understand sexuality. And only 9% think that it doesn't have any impact on children at all.

Pornography's effects

Pornography in all its permutations affects children's developing sexuality; the younger the age of exposure and the more hardcore the material, the more intense the effects. Boys who look at pornography excessively become men who connect arousal purely with the

physical, losing the ability to become attracted by the particular features of a given partner. Instead, they recreate images from pornography in their brain while they're with a real person.

"It's sad that boys who are initiated to sex through these images become indoctrinated in a way that can potentially stay with them for the rest of their lives," Gary Brooks says. "Boys learn that you have sex in spite of your feelings, not because of your feelings. Meanwhile, girls are taught that you don't have intimacy without relationships."

No matter what kind of pornography they look at, spending one's pre-pubescence and puberty on porn can have lifelong implications. Masters and Johnson's clinical director Mark Schwartz has seen 14- and 15-year-old boys who are addicted to pornography. "It's awful to see the effect it has on them," he says. "At such a young age, to have that kind of sexual problem."

Schwartz isn't surprised about the growing number of young addicts in the internet age. At that age, "your brain is much more susceptible," he explains. "Many of these boys are very smart and academically successful; a lot of computer geeks are the ones who get drawn in. It affects how they develop sexually. Think about a 12-year-old boy looking at *Playboy* magazine. When you're talking about internet pornography, you can multiply that effect by the relative size of the internet itself."

Research trickling in has begun to document the effects of pornography on kids, a difficult area to study given obvious ethical challenges. Certainly, there aren't any parents who would consent to have their children view pornography in order to further research on the damage done.

Still, some evidence has been gathered. A recent study of 101 sexually abusive children in Australia documented increased aggressiveness in boys who use pornography. Almost all had internet access, and 90% admitted to seeing pornography online. One-fourth said an older sibling or a friend had shown them how to access pornography online, sometimes against their will; another fourth said that using pornography was their primary reason for going online. When questioned separately, nearly all of their parents said they doubted their child would access any pornography via the internet.¹⁴

¹⁴ P. Goodenough, "Online Porn Driving Sexually Aggressive Children," CNS News, November 25, 2003.

It wasn't like this

Touring around this country to promote my book *Pornified*, I heard again and again from concerned parents. “I know my 14-year-old son is looking at extremely hard-core pornography, but what can I do about it? He tells me he needs the computer for schoolwork.” “I have a 10-year-old daughter. I don’t want to even think about what boys her age are learning about the opposite sex online.” “My daughter found pornography that my husband downloaded on the family computer.” A pediatric nurse told me there was an incident in her practice in which *toddlers* acted out moves from a pornographic movie.

A day’s worth of nationwide headlines inevitably brings up stories of children encountering pornography at the local library, child pornography arrests, and school incidents in which teachers are caught looking at pornography on school computers during school hours. It is terrible enough that adults are suffering the consequences of a pornified culture. But we must think about the kind of world we are introducing to our children. Certainly everyone—liberals and conservatives alike—can agree with the statement, “It wasn’t like this when we were kids.” And I can’t imagine anyone would have that thought without simultaneously experiencing a profound sense of fear and loss.