

# **A Whole Lot of Porn Going On**

- As of July 2003, there were 260 million pages of pornography online, an increase of 1800% since 1998. Porn amounts to about 7% of the 3.3 billion Web pages indexed by Google
- Internet users who access adult websites spend an average of 73 min. per month there, but that doesn't include time spent on amateur porn sites
- Americans rent upwards of 800 million pornographic videos and DVDs a year, compared with 3.6 billion nonpornographic videos. Nearly 1 in 5 rentals is a porn flick
- Hollywood produces 400 feature films a year. The porn industry churns out 11,000
- One in four American adults surveyed in 2002 admitted to seeing an X-rated movie in the past year

In the Internet age, pornography is almost everywhere you look. But what is it doing to real-life relationships?

## **The Porn Factor**

In a Friends episode titled "The One with Free Porn," Chandler and Joey discover to their delight a free pornography TV channel, which they leave on and watch endlessly for fear it will go away. Later, a startled Chandler reports to Joey, "I was just at the bank, and there was this really hot teller, and she didn't ask me to go do it in the vault." Joey describes a similar cold shoulder from the pizza-delivery woman. "You know what?" Chandler concludes. "We have to turn off the porn." Chandler may be on to something. Call it the porn factor. Whereas pornography was once furtively glimpsed at dimly lighted newsstands or seedy adult theaters, today it is everywhere. It pours in over the Internet, sometimes uninvited, sometimes via eagerly forwarded links (Paris Hilton, anyone?). It titillates 24/7 on steamy adult cable channels and on-demand services (the pay-per-view reality show *Can You Be a Porn Star?* made its debut this month). It has infiltrated mainstream cable with HBO's forthcoming documentary series *Pornucopia: Going Down in the Valley*. And in ways that have only begun to be measured, it is coloring relationships, both long- and short-term, reshaping expectations about sex and body image and, most worrisome of all, threatening to alter how young people learn about sex.

In recent years, a number of psychologists and sociologists have joined the chorus of religious and political opponents in warning about the impact of pervasive pornography. They argue that porn is transforming sexuality and relationships for the worse. Experts say men who frequently view porn may develop unrealistic expectations of women's appearance and behavior, have difficulty forming and sustaining relationships and feeling sexually satisfied. Fueled by a combination of access, anonymity and affordability, online porn has catapulted overall pornography consumption, bringing in new viewers, encouraging more use from existing fans and escalating consumers from soft-core to harder-core material. Cyberporn is even giving rise to a new form of sexual compulsiveness. According to Alvin Cooper, who conducts seminars on cybersex addiction, 15% of online-porn habitués develop sexual behavior that disrupts their lives. "The Internet is the crack cocaine of sexual addiction," says Jennifer Schneider, co-author of *Cybersex Exposed: Simple Fantasy or Obsession?*

Yet most users say sex online is nothing more than good (if not quite clean) fun. According to a 2001 online survey of 7,037 adults, two-thirds of those who visit web-sites with sexual content say their Internet activities haven't affected their level of sexual activity with their partners, though three-quarters report masturbating while online. The vast majority of respondents—85% to 90%—according to Cooper, who heads the San Jose Marital and Sexuality Center, which conducted the study, are what he calls "recreational users," people who view pornography as a curiosity or diversion.

The question is, Can even recreational use be unhealthy? A 2003 online study by Texas Christian University found that the more pornography men watch, the more likely they are to describe women in sexualized terms and categorize women in traditional gender roles. Mark Schwarz, director of the Masters and Johnson clinic in St. Louis, Mo., says porn not only causes men to objectify women—seeing them as an assemblage of breasts, legs and buttocks—but also leads to a dependency on visual imagery for arousal. "Men become like computers, unable to be stimulated by the human beings beside them," he says. "The image of a lonely, isolated man masturbating to his computer is the Willy Loman metaphor of our decade."

Other psychologists are more tolerant. Most men use pornography in secret, and as long as it doesn't affect their relationships, some say that's O.K. "If a client is enjoying a healthy use of pornography without his wife's knowledge, I would counsel him not to tell her," says psychiatrist Scott Haltzman, who studies men and relationships. Yet many therapists say such behavior creates a breach of trust. Spouses often view porn as a betrayal or even as adultery. The typical reaction when a woman discovers her husband's habit is shock and "How dare he?" According to therapist Lonnie Barbach, based in Mill Valley, Calif., many such women "feel like they're not good enough. Otherwise, why would their mates be seeking this?"

Sometimes pornography tears couples apart. At the 2003 meeting of the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers, two-thirds of the 350 divorce lawyers who attended said the Internet played a significant role in divorces in the past year, with excessive interest in online porn contributing to more than half of such cases.

"This is clearly related to the Internet," says Richard Barry, president of the association.

"Pornography had an almost nonexistent role in divorce just seven or eight years ago:"

Still, couples therapists sometimes suggest pornography as a way to refresh relationships or spark desire. Increasingly, women are game. Sociologist Michael Kimmel has found that each year more of his female college students approve of porn, which may reflect women's increased sexual empowerment. Nonetheless, he says, "their attitude is surprising to those of us who think it an impoverished view of liberation to construct your sex life the way men do." The key, therapists say, is for mutual consumption to be seductive to both partners and for material to be "erotic" rather than "pornographic." Most describe the difference this way: porn is objectifying and derogatory while erotica depicts mutually satisfying sex between equal partners. Others say it's a matter of taste.

Trouble is, often the taste is not shared. Jessica (not her real name), 28, a product manager in New York City, tolerates her boyfriend's pornography habit, but his admiration for bodies like that of porn queen Jenna Jameson has made her insecure, so she plans to get breast implants. "My boyfriend told me lots of his friends' girlfriends have done it," she says; "He said to me, 'Imagine what an awesome body you'll have!' I can't blame him for his preferences." But Jessica isn't sure that surgery will improve their sex life. "He tends to be selfish sexually," she says. "I think pornography has a lot to do with it. For him, porn is easy."

Jessica's experience is pretty typical, says Aline Zoldbrod, a sex therapist in Lexington, Mass. She says men's use of porn for undemanding relief often distracts them from the task of trying to please their real-life partners.

Porn doesn't just give men bad ideas; it can give kids the wrong idea at a formative age. Whereas children used to supplement sex education by tearing through *National Geographic* in search of naked aborigines and leafing through the occasional *Penthouse* they stumbled across in the garage, today many are confronted by pornographic images on a daily basis. In a 2001 poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 70% of 15- to 17-year-olds said they had accidentally come across pornography online. Older teens may be aware of the effects of such images: 59% of 15-to-24-year-olds told the pollsters they believe seeing porn on the Internet encourages young people to have sex before they are ready; 49% said it promotes bad attitudes toward women and encourages viewers to think unprotected sex is O.K. "Pornography is affecting people at an increasingly young age," says sociologist Diana Russell, who has written several books on the subject. and unfortunately for many kids growing up today, pornography is the only sex education they'll get.

Because children learn sexual cues early, boys may train themselves to respond only to images shaped by porn stars, while girls may learn that submission and Brazilian bikini waxes are the keys to pleasing men. Recent studies show a correlation between increased aggressiveness in boys and exposure to pornography, and a link between childhood use of porn and sexually abusive behavior in adulthood. "It's not easy to shock me," says Judith Coche, a therapist in Philadelphia who has been in practice for 25 years. "But one 11-year-old girl's parents discovered their daughter creating her own pornographic web site because it's 'cool' among her friends." As such incidents multiply, more Americans-parents especially may come to Chandler's conclusion: We have to turn off the porn.

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