

## INQUIRY INTO IMPACTS OF HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY ON MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

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*NEW SOUTH WALES PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY*

*INTO THE*

*IMPACTS OF HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY  
ON MENTAL, EMOTIONAL, AND PHYSICAL HEALTH.*

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## Introduction

The availability, access, presence and use of pornography has increased in prevalence in the lives of adults, adolescents and sadly now even children. This is largely attributed to its online accessibility. Pornography use is associated with many negative impacts and outcomes on society - emotionally, psychologically, mentally, physically and spiritually. Effects extend culturally and exert negatively upon present and future relationships.

These impacts include depression, anxiety, earlier age of first sexual experience, sexual promiscuity, increased risk of teen pregnancy, violent behaviour, child sex abuse, sexual trafficking, a skewed view of male and female relationships, and for adults increased tendency to divorce which has further effects of harm on children. The spiritual effects of pornography are also deleterious, reducing perceptions of the worth of the human person, and the sense of the sacred which should attend our regard for every man woman and child.

Pornography may be defined as ‘the depiction or erotic behaviour (sexual display in pictures or writing) that is intended to cause sexual excitement.’<sup>1</sup> While the definition of pornography is reasonably agreed upon, its impact is less comprehended. This behaviour has been shown to be potentially highly addictive, with addictive pattern damage to the individual, and a tendency to escalation. Its growth into society is tied to lucrative rewards for the pornography industry with an estimated \$100 billion revenue globally in 2023<sup>2</sup>

The ubiquity and mainstreaming of pornography, with now virtually unlimited access, are linked to a cultural shift in society’s attitude to and acceptance of pornography, with a concurrent shift and upscaling of pornographic content. Within this developing sociological phenomenon and its inter-relational issues, it is to be remembered that the problem has growing significance for Australia, with its third highest per capita use of the Internet in the world.

## Pornography Usage in Australia

Research published by Melbourne University shows that pornography use has proliferated in Australia in recent years:

*‘Pornography consumption has proliferated around the world with the rise of Internet access and increasing social acceptance. Today in Australia, 99 per cent of men aged under 30 report accessing pornography in the last year.*

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<sup>1</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary online. [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pornography](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pornography)

<sup>2</sup> BedBible.com Porn Industry Revenue – Numbers & Stats. May 2024.  
<https://bedbible.com/porn-industry-revenue-statistics/>

Many are habitual consumers, with 39 per cent reporting that they watch pornography daily. A further 46 per cent report accessing pornography weekly. That means 85 per cent of men accessing porn are accessing it at least once a week<sup>3</sup>.

This is in part because it has become more available, anonymously accessible and cheaper, with only 2% of pornography users paying for access in an ABC survey in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Pornography is a major global business industry. The site 'PornHub' stated it received 33.5 billion visits in 2018. In 2019 Webroot, a cyber security firm, stated that 35% of all digital downloads related to pornography.<sup>5</sup>

Australia ranks eighth worldwide for overall pornography consumption, with some of the longest average viewing times in the world.<sup>6</sup> A research survey by the ABC "Shack" programme published 2019 revealed :

- 93% of men and 58% of women surveyed access porn.
- 65% of young men access porn a 'few times', or more, per week.
- 20% of young women worry they watch too much porn and
- 54% of young men worry they watch too much porn.

## Association between Pornography and Violence

Research has shown that the majority of Australian pornography users have applied something seen on pornography sites to their own relationships<sup>7</sup>.

Many argue that there is a pressing need to address such issues now, given the increasing mainstreaming of pornography: 'Our findings contribute toward a better understanding of the context and dynamics of Intimate Partner Sexual Violence (IPSV) for women, and suggest that pornography ought to be a greater focus in prevention efforts.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tyler M, Tarzia L. We need to Talk About Pornography. University of Melbourne. 3<sup>rd</sup> Many 2021.

<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/we-need-to-talk-about-pornography#:~:text=Pornography%20consumption%20has%20proliferated%20around,that%20they%20watch%20pornography%20daily>.

<sup>4</sup> ABC The Shack August 26<sup>th</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/heres-what-you-told-us-about-what-porn-you-watch/11442772>

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Hansen. Digital Enslavement Amidst the Search for Intimacy 2024, p17.

<sup>6</sup> The Cabin Sydney Outpatient Addiction Treatment Centre.

<https://www.thecabinsydney.com.au/blog/sex-addiction/australias-growing-concerns-over-the-effects-of-porn-addiction/>

<sup>7</sup> McKee A, Lumby C, Albury K. The Porn Report 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Tarzia, L., & Tyler, M. (2021). Recognizing Connections Between Intimate Partner Sexual Violence and Pornography. *Violence Against Women*, 27(14), 2687-2708. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801220971352>

Relationships in which intimate partner sexual violence has occurred damage the victim, who is usually a woman, due to the ongoing anxiety and fear, coercion, and control that characterises relationships in which IPSV is present.<sup>9</sup>

In a 2010 study of pornographic depictions, 88.2% contained physical aggression<sup>10</sup>:

*‘Nearly half (48.7%) contained verbal aggression, mostly name-calling. The perpetrators were mostly male and the targets were mostly female. The targets were depicted responding either neutrally or positively.’*

Concerningly, in a 2016 study<sup>11</sup> of 3,000 respondents, only 54% of pornography users think sexual acts that are ‘forced or painful’ are always wrong, and only 44% of pornography users think showing someone demeaningly is always wrong. This acceptance of harm and degradation accompanies an overall acceptance of pornography usage, with ‘90% of adolescents and 96% of young adults ‘encouraging, accepting’, or non-committal, when discussing pornography with others. Pornography consumption is featuring and fostering attitudes condoning sexual coercion. It increases callousness and decreases sympathy and compassion for the demeaned and acceptance of the objectification of another person (usually a woman). For some years it has been known that studies on the effects of pornography on 18- to 25-year-olds have shown a relationship between sexual aggression towards women and pornography consumption<sup>12</sup>.

Eight years ago, in the 2016 Federal Government Senate Inquiry into Harm being Done to Australian Children through Access to Pornography on the Internet, Professor Freda Briggs from the University of South Australia argued that pornography is used by child sex offenders in the process of seducing their young targets. She further stated:

*‘there is additional evidence that some children become addicted to downloading pornography and rape younger children..clearly we are paying too high a price for adults’ right to view whatever they wish regardless of the consequences for young people and society’.*

Nothing has since been done which tackles this pervasive problem.

It’s a discussion that is rarely held, and an issue too readily passed over.

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<sup>9</sup> Logan T. K., Walker R., Cole J. (2015). Silenced suffering: The need for a better understanding of partner sexual violence. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 16(2), 111–135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838013517560>

<sup>10</sup> Ana Bridges, Robert Wosnitzer, Chyng Sun, and Rachael Liberman, “Aggression and sexual behaviour in best-selling pornography videos: A content analysis update,” *Violence Against Women* 16 (Oct. 2010): 1065-1085.

<sup>11</sup> J. McDowell, *The Porn Phenomenon: The Impact of Pornography in the Digital Age* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Flood M, Hamilton C. *Youth and Pornography in Australia. Evidence on the Extent of Exposure and Likely Effects.* The Australia Institute Canberra.

## Pornography and Children

### Increasing immersion and exposure of children to pornography

The increase in pornographic material available to children has been noted since the advent of the Internet<sup>13</sup>. Children may have both intentional and accidental exposure to pornography. It may be only a click away from their current search interest. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century this occurs in an already highly sexualised societal and cultural context. Additionally, evidence shows that a significant number of children and young teens are growing up in an environment of increasingly sexually explicit media, both in Australia<sup>14</sup> and elsewhere. This may be creating a normalising interpretation of aberrant and objectifying pornographic depictions.

With increasing syllabus work from the Internet in primary school curricula, requiring access both in the classroom and in the home, more children may be inadvertently exposed to pornography. They may also encounter pornography through a parent or older sibling or other adult's material. A survey of teens and pornography exposure (2022)<sup>15</sup> found that

- 15% of children were exposed to pornography before age 11 years;
- 54% of children were exposed to pornography before age 13;

### Predominantly male usage patterns in teens

Even fifteen years ago in 2009 it was known that 85% of adolescent males and 50% of adolescent females had already been exposed to pornography via sexually explicit websites.<sup>16</sup> Since pornography tends to be more sexist, demeaning and hostile towards women, and since males are prone to using pornography, young men are being influenced towards harmful objectification of women at best, and formed towards violent, self-gratifying behaviour towards women at worst.

A 2012 Sydney University study (Sitharthan and Sitharthan) found that men who became frequent pornography users were first exposed to pornography between ages 11 and 13 years-old.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Covenant Eyes. Pornography statistics <https://www.covenanteyes.com/pornstats/>

<sup>14</sup> Flood M. Exposure to pornography among youth in Australia. *Journal of Sociology* 43:45-60. doi:10.1177/1440783307073934

<sup>15</sup> Covenant Eyes. Pornography Statistics. <https://covenanteyes.com/pornstats/> Last accesses October 6<sup>th</sup> 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Braun-Courville D and Rojas M. Exposure to Sexually Explicit Websites and Adolescent Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 45(2009) pp156-162

<sup>17</sup> Szittner K. Study exposes secret world of porn addiction. Sydney.edu May 10 2012. <http://sydney.edu.au/news/84.html?newsstoryid=9176>

## Direct Effects on Children

Children seeing pornography may be shocked, disturbed, embarrassed, afraid and fearful. 53% of young people in Australia aged 11 to 17 had experienced something they found ‘offensive or disgusting’ on the Internet<sup>18</sup>, and described the effect as making them ‘sick’, ‘repulsed’, ‘shocked’, ‘upset’. The effect of these early emotional responses to sexual relations on their future relationships and bonding are unknown. It is a poor introduction to the fulfilling commitment and love to be found within normal relationships and to the full potential of monogamy.

Data about child pornography exposure is concerning at many levels, including the evidence that children under 12 years of age who have viewed pornography are statistically more likely to sexually assault their peers.<sup>19</sup>

The Australian Child at Risk Assessment Unit in Canberra has observed an increased number of sexually aggressive and sexually abusive children under age 10 years, from referrals to their service. Prior to the introduction of the Internet, in the early 1990’s they received three referrals per year for sexually aggressive behaviour. By 2003 the number of referrals had increased to 70 children per year and included children who had forced other children to participate in sexual acts. To investigate this phenomenon the National Child Protection Clearinghouse and Canberra Hospital reviewed these cases retrospectively. They reported a correlation between sexually abusive children and their access to the Internet. Social Worker Cassandra Tinning stated:

*‘We noticed a number of really interesting issues. Of course, this primary issue is around the use of the Internet. Almost all of the children who accessed our services in the last three years in relation to sexually harmful behaviours, almost all those children had accessed the Internet and specifically had accessed the Internet for pornographic material.’<sup>20</sup>*

## Indirect Effects on Children

Exposure to pornography at a young age may increase children’s vulnerability to sexual abuse, undermining their recognition of, and ability to remove themselves from, sexual abuse and sexually exploitative circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Aisbett K. The Internet at Home: A Report on Internet Use in the Home. Australian Broadcasting Authority Sydney.

<sup>19</sup> Manning J. The Impact of Internet Pornography on Marriage and the Family: a Review of the Research. *Sexual addiction and Impulsivity*. 2006, 13:131-165.  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247501841\\_The\\_Impact\\_of\\_Internet\\_Pornography\\_on\\_Marriage\\_and\\_the\\_Family\\_A\\_Review\\_of\\_the\\_Research](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247501841_The_Impact_of_Internet_Pornography_on_Marriage_and_the_Family_A_Review_of_the_Research)

<sup>20</sup> Limb J. Alarming rise in children’s sexually-abuse behaviour. *The World Today*. Nov 26<sup>th</sup> 2003. (Original link <http://www.abc.net.au/world-today/content/2003/s997751.htm> no longer available). Referred to in Manning et al. in ref 19 in this submission.

<sup>21</sup> Russell D, Purcell N. Exposure to pornography as a cause of child sexual victimization. *Handbook of Children Culture and Violence*. Dowd N, Singer D, Wilson R. Sage: Thousand Oaks. CA;59-84.



It is well known that sexual predators have exposed young children to pornography as a means of grooming them for the many heinous forms of sexual exploitation.

## Mental and Emotional Impacts of Pornography Use

As researchers Dr. Gomathi Sitharthan (Sydney University School of Health Sciences) and Professor Raj Sitharthan (Department of Psychiatry of the University of Sydney) further observed from their research<sup>11</sup>:

*'The survey.. shed light on extreme cases. For example, about 20 percent of participants said that they preferred the excitement of watching porn to being sexually intimate with their partner. About 14 percent had formed a relationship with other online users, 30 percent acknowledged that their work performance suffered due to excessive viewing, and about 18 percent were preoccupied with fantasising when they were not online.'*

Professor Raj Sitharthan reported that in the preceding five years he had seen an increase in people presenting with problems associated with excessive pornography viewing in his clinical practice. Usage had developed into an addiction, impacting work, home and general functionality.

Repeated exposure to 'standard, non-violent' pornography is itself associated with<sup>22 23</sup> significant effects on the individual:

- Addiction to pornography;
- Escalation to more deviant types of pornography;
- Trivialization of rape;
- Devaluation of monogamy
- Decreased satisfaction with partner's appearance, affection;
- Less valuation of marriage;
- Decreased desire to have children;
- Viewing extramarital relations as normal.
- Behavioural aggression,<sup>24</sup> which correlates with the strength of the depicted sexual violence.

## Relational Effects of Pornography Use

Married women have been found to view Internet pornography as a threat to the relationship, and to find it distressing. This distress was proportional to the amount of pornography viewed by their

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<sup>22</sup> Zillman D and Bryant J. Effects of prolonged consumption of pornography on family values. *Journal of Family Issues*. 9(4), 518-544. 1984,

<sup>23</sup> Drake RE. Potential health hazards of pornography consumption as viewed by psychiatric nurses. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*. 8(2),101-106.

<sup>24</sup> Allen M, D'Alessio D, and Brezgel K. A meta-analysis summarizing the effects of pornography II: Aggression after exposure. *Human Communication Research*. 22(2), 258-283.

partner. These women (married) were more distressed by partner usage of pornography than any other group of women studied.<sup>25</sup>

62% of marital lawyers report that Internet pornography usage plays a role in divorce<sup>26</sup> cases.

Cybersex addiction was a major contributing factor to separation and divorce for affected couples. Most cybersex users report the loss of interest in relational sex.<sup>27</sup>

It has been found that an emotional distance is created by a partner's use of online pornography. This distance can be just as damaging to the relationship as adulterous infidelity.<sup>24</sup> The online use of pornography is viewed as an act of betrayal of the relationship. It is described as:

*'a wall that cuts one's partner off, draws sexual energy away from the marriage, and heightens distance between partners'<sup>28</sup>.*

Conversely, those who report being happily married are 61% less likely to use Internet pornography'<sup>29</sup>.

## **Physical effects of Pornography on the User**

Men with problematic pornography usage have abnormal functional magnetic resonance Imaging scans (MRI's) when watching pornography.<sup>30</sup> High levels of pornography have also demonstrated reduced gray matter volume, and 'downregulation of the brain's response to erotic material'.<sup>31</sup> Pornography adversely affects the dopaminergic reward system of the brain.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bridges AJ, Bergner RM, Hesson-McInnis M. Romantic Partner's Use of Pornography: its significance for women. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy*. 29, 1-14.

<sup>26</sup> Proceedings of Meeting of American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers Chicago. 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Schneider JP. Effects of Cybersex addiction on the family. Results of a Survey. *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*, 7, 31-58

<sup>28</sup> Manning C, The Impact of Internet Pornography on Marriage and the Family: a Review of the Research. *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*. 13:131-165, 2006. Doi: 10.1080/10720160600870711 (McCarthy B, Personal Communication Research June 1<sup>st</sup> 2005).

<sup>29</sup> Stack S, Wasserman I, and Kern R. Adult Social Bonds and Use of Internet Pornography. *Social Science Quarterly*. 85(1), 75-88.

<sup>30</sup> Gola M, Wordecha M, et al. Can Pornography be addictive? A fMRI Study of Men Seeking Treatment for Problematic Pornography Use. *Neuropsychopharmacology* 42, no.10(2017):2021-2031  
<https://www.nature.com/articles/npp201778>

<sup>31</sup> Kuhn S, Gallinat J. Brain structures and Connectivity Associated with Pornography Consumption. *JAMA Psychiatry*. May 2014

<sup>32</sup> Love T, Laier C et al. Neuroscience of Internet Pornography Addiction: a Review and Update. *Behavioural Sciences*. Sept 2015,

Erectile dysfunction studies have evidenced that pornographic viewing is associated with diminished sexual stimulation<sup>33</sup> and decreased desire with natural partners.

## Spiritual Effects of Pornography

Pastoral responses draw from philosophy, psychology and moral theology. From within these deep traditions of wisdom, and many generations of observation and analysis of the human condition, individual's relationship with others and with the Divine, deeper considerations are realised. These observations span more than the Internet years.

Church teaching is congruent with the conclusions presented from pornography research findings:

*'Pornography removes real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties. It offends against chastity because it perverts the conjugal act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other. It does grave injury to the dignity of its participants (actors, vendors, the public), since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others. It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world. It is a grave offence. Civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic materials.'* Catechism of the Catholic Church 2354.

## Conclusion

The mental emotional relational and physical impacts of pornography are well known and well documented. As the pornography industry and its market grow, and expand into adolescence, the price is paid not only by themselves with impoverished relationships, addiction and even escalation into severe aberrancy and distortions, but also by their loved ones. Female objectivation accompanies male assumptions of sexual entitlement. Affection, tenderness and considerateness are the first casualty of preoccupation with pornography participation. Users become desensitized to the violence and degradation depicted.

With the increasing acceptance and use of pornography society and culture become more hypersexualized. Hence the developing phenomenon of 'sexting'. The burgeoning social shift and the addiction it facilitates can increase the demand for the sex trafficking of women and children, and other forms of exploitation.

Research over recent decades, consistently, since the advent of the Internet, has shown that pornography usage is associated with individual dysfunctionality, sexual deviancy, and behavioural aggression and sexual violence. Its mental, emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual harms have also been demonstrated.

The growing prevalence, increasing deviance and emergingly violent content of pornography are also invading the space of childhood. Its presence in their lives – to any degree - robs children of

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<sup>33</sup> Park B, Wilson G et al. Is Internet Pornography causing Sexual Dysfunction? A Review with Clinical Reports. Behavioural Science 2016, 6(3), 17; <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs6030017>

their innocence, and causes unrest and anxiety, and increased vulnerability to sexual abuse and trafficking.

Overall, pornography - the commodification of sex and sexuality as a purchasable product - has been vastly accelerated by the Internet. Its harms have increased in prevalence and severity due to the coupling of ready, anonymous, free access and its addictive tendency. Pornography has become a Public Health Crisis.

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