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You Are What You Repeat

As one addict recalls, “When I was 14/15 I encountered [transsexual] porn while surfing the internet. I still remember the graphic nature of the advert... All the straight and lesbian porn I had watched for several years seemed ordinary. My heart started racing. My head was thumping, and the fear of getting caught... watching what some could consider not exactly 100% straight porn...made it all the more memorable. I remember crying after I finished. I didn’t know what came over me. I was so terrified I wanted to curl up into a ball in my bedroom. But I didn’t stop watching it. I was still attracted to girls, but with the [transsexual] porn, I could orgasm quicker” (“Why Shouldn’t Johnny Watch Porn If He Likes?”). There are tens of thousands of others like him. Innumerable anecdotes like this one, documenting users experience with pornography addiction and the struggles of recovery, have sprouted up and stood their ground since the onset of the internet and tube sites (sites based off Youtube’s streaming video format). Superficially, this shouldn’t be surprising. Adult entertainment has gained increasing momentum and acceptance in the past decade and a half, both on and off broadcast media, and it shows no signs of stopping or slowing. What led to this grand acceptance of sexual proclivity, the kind of acceptance that leaves fourteen-year-olds crying because they don’t have the tools to control their own brains in their own homes?

One may not be sure, but a brief history of sexual taboo and lack thereof may give heed to a discovery.

Because, in moderation, sexual freedom has been shown to be a natural part of our society. This is an idea that can be examined as far back as the Ancient Roman Empire. Many prominent writers of that time period “took sex for granted,” speaking “frankly about it” in their writings (Skinner). This permitted only a dash of societal stigma on sex, allowing for open discussion. To add background and to differentiate between our current sex culture and theirs, it’s important to note that for Romans, “sex was a duty,” a way for men to show-off their manhood and a way for women to oblige them with childbirth (Mason). Marriage itself was not appropriated for pleasure, it was instituted simply for the continuation of the family line. Sexual relations showed no personal bond, no connection between two people, and men weren’t concerned with the consequences of sharing numerous sexual partners as long as their actions didn’t enter their reputation into trouble. The Romans loved fornication, and sexual moderation was found to be a key stabilizer of their society. This stabilization was easier to maintain because they didn’t have “pornography” in the sense we do today. There wasn’t the technology for it. Even up to the 1930s, technology adapted to assist with the distribution of sexual paraphernalia had been lacking. Brothels and prostitutes were still mainstream because they were all that was there. Sex addiction, both in the Roman Empire and in 1930s America, was, relatively, the only widespread sexual issue. With the barriers that were present in accessing sexual novelties, even sex addiction hadn’t bloomed into its full capacity.



(Historic American Building Survey, Brothel, 1933)

These barriers were naturally instituted due to how society evolved, with the disapproval of extramarital relations, the shaming of prostitution, and the taboo of discussing sex all firmly established. In the Roman Empire, these barriers weren't present. Prostitutes were considered "fair game" along with "brothels... and dancing girls," and these forms of entertainment remained, in their base form, the status quo for centuries (Mason). The Roman mantra of sexual freedom was altered heavily, but for those with the desire, the "fair game" concept was still there. Come the early 1900s (at this point a complete turnaround from Rome's sexual culture had begun to solidify), those who had that desire could visit Gentleman's Clubs and Brothels like the one pictured above. These locations were the most popular (and near sole) attractions up until the advent of more prominent "Red Light Districts" in the 1920s and 30s. Once the

1930s hit, it was common for prostitutes to “work in hotels, apartments, and roominghouses” and again, with advancements in technology, “to communicate with customers by telephone” (Humphrey). Prostitutes “adapted to the automobile” revolution by organizing meetings with possible clients through taxi-drivers and by riding around in search of willing customers (Humphrey). The Roaring 20s had brought forth a new age of sexual freedom, and technology had now allowed prostitutes to find new mediums to advertise in, but family values and conservatism still dominated the general attitude towards sexuality. Thus, the stigma of shame that purchasing prostitutes and attending brothels constituted remained in place. “Pornography,” as we see it today, was still conceptually non-existent and America was, in comparison to modern times, still caught in that moderation phase; no form of eroticism had really brimmed to extreme proportions. We hadn’t yet gone overboard in our lustful pursuits. This moderation, however, entered a torrent of disintegration in the 1950s as the barriers to access for erotic entertainment collapsed.



(Los Angeles Times, Hollywood Walk of Fame, 1953)

Hollywood had much to do with this collapse. It commandeered the ability to create sex symbols in films, taking complete advantage of this power beginning in the 1950s after the Golden Age of Hollywood had ended. This decade marked the beginning of Hollywood’s dramatization of “such things as sexuality and violence” (New World Encyclopedia). It used dominance in the industry to create films that included “darker plot lines” and “edgier stars,” namely the two biggest sex symbols of the age (pictured above): Marilyn Monroe (left) and Jane Russell (right) (History Cooperative). But even with the effect they had on America’s view of sex culture, Hollywood only proved to be a precursor—a set-up—for the final blow. Having established Marilyn Monroe as a dream girl for men everywhere, Hollywood permitted Playboy to take control. The photo above was taken in June of 1953, six months before Marilyn Monroe crossed all established sexual boundaries and appeared on the cover of Playboy’s first

issue in December of 1953. This is what was needed to evoke a sexual cataclysm: a new means of viewing adult entertainment. An erotic, straight-to-your-doorstep magazine omitted all the societal shame that had to this point been associated with prostitution and gentleman's clubs. It was private, it was new, it was exciting—and the sales showed it. This first issue “[sold] 53,991 copies,” and Playboy's sales continued to rise until “November 1972” when it reached its peak “at 7.16 million” copies of one issue sold (Chemi). But that peak was in 1972, 43 years ago, respectively. If such a monopoly could begin crumbling, what would be the final blow if it became unstable enough to be susceptible to one?

The term “pornography” has been frequently mentioned up to now but not dissected, and there's a reason for this: it was the tipping point—at least a version of it was. There have been representations of pornography since man could draw, but they never caused severe neurological issues. Static images, outside of relationships and social connections, provide few avenues for personal harm. Addiction may be possible in a few cases, but it is not at all likely. Copies of erotic video tapes, magazines, or other sources have physical limits (amount of new material, access to material, cost of material). The novelty of a pornographic film wears off after rewinding the tape for the sixth or seventh time, and novelty is one of the key factors in our subject at hand. This is because what tipped the scales, placed pornography on the addiction radar, and led to our young addict's story in the introduction, was the advent of high-speed internet connections, and, thus, high-speed porn. The popular song in the Tony Award winning musical Avenue Q says it all: “The Internet Is For Porn” (“Avenue Q Cast Recording”).

Like the videos rented at the video store, porn (a term that, used here, is meant to be synonymous with high-speed internet porn) involves multiple senses. Unlike video tapes or DVDs, porn allows for endless “sexual novelty” and “overconsumption” (Wilson). Porn, thus, provides strong evidence that it is “a supranormal stimulus,” because it relies on “novelty as aphrodisiac,” making “familiar partners quickly lose their luster” (Hilton) (“Why Shouldn’t Johnny Watch Porn If He Likes?”). As a superstimulus (synonymous with supranormal stimulus), received signals from porn are sent to the inner brain which harnesses our “powerful drives to eat and to procreate” (Hilton). We can examine another superstimulus, junk food, as an example of this in order to clarify superstimuli and the human brain’s love for porn. Junk food is candy to the brain; it’s salty, sweet, has a high caloric content, and generally caters to everything our body is looking for, evolutionarily, to survive. Addiction is very likely. As junk food seems to be a never-ending bounty to the brain, so high-speed internet porn seems to be a never-ending mating season. The novelty in sexual partners, the hours of dopamine rushes, the thrill of the chase; this is what makes porn such a powerful drug—and its base of operations lie in the inner brain, a place where “evolutionary procreative pressures eventually trump purely recreational motives” (Hilton). In other words, it’s the area of our brain saying yes to “more calories” and yes to “more ‘fertilization’ opportunities” (Wilson). Addiction is highly probable. In fact, it’s more probable than any other behavioural addiction because it’s fueled by this superstimulus phenomenon, and because many users’ brains are “virtually marinated in porn” (Luscombe). That marination can’t occur with other stimuli like junk food. As will be noticed rather hastily in use: “there are limits on food consumption,” (a full stomach being one) but “no physical

limits on internet porn consumption” (besides biological needs) (Wilson). And the effects are disastrous, in that modern pornography imposes involuntarily sexual conditioning upon its users, overrides normal satisfaction and dopamine processes in the brain, and causes porn-induced erectile dysfunction and other serious conditions.

The sexual conditioning that is propagated by “hardcore porn, multiple windows, and constant clicking” is largely unknown to the user in the beginning (“Why Shouldn’t Johnny Watch Porn If He Likes?”). And it starts young. The average age that a child today is exposed to “Internet pornography is 11 years old” (Cash). This would allow for an eighteen-year-old male to have seven years of conditioning to a computer mouse and a screen, ultimately making porn a “replacement or substitute for a healthy relationship” (Cash). This substituted relationship doesn’t just make physical arousal towards real people instead of a screen more difficult, or even impossible, it also allows for sexual tastes to morph. A young man who begins his descent with straight varieties of porn may find himself falling into, as one user described, “more and more hardcore shit, like really weird shit” (Wilson). The popular pliantry “you like what you like” is thrown on its head in the world of porn. Many viewers have no desire to harbour fantasies of “rape, homicide and submission” or watch “transgender porn, femdom porn, [and] incest,” but at the point they have reached they “just can’t get off to the normal stuff anymore” (Wilson). This desensitization is a key component of porn use—think of our young addict in the introduction. It’s the main reason this unwanted escalation and conditioning occurs, and it’s unavoidable for the human brain.

Another reason for this escalation and conditioning is sensitization. While desensitization is the escalation of explicit sexual tastes and conditioning, sensitization

is the attributing of “salience to particular stimuli” (Hilton). It’s the degrading of everyday pleasures in favour of a specific activity, in this case porn. If you were going cave-diving, think of sensitization as the flashlight and desensitization as the descent. The flashlight’s beam illuminates a specific area, making you able to focus on only that area. Everything outside that area is dimly lit or shrouded in darkness. What may have been previously exciting—seeing family, hanging out with friends, flirting, extracurricular activities—simply doesn’t fall into the flashlight’s (porn’s) cone of light. Other activities can’t compare to the experience that porn offers, an experience that signals “a powerful neurochemical incentive to grab more” (Wilson). Your brain is saying, in layman’s terms: feast while you can. But for porn, the feast is always there. The novelty-filled, dopamine-engorged, eternal mating season never ends. The shocking novelty of porn causes “aberrant responses in dopamine systems,” and can keep dopamine levels peaking for hours upon hours (Hilton). Can a family reunion with grandma or a day on the town with friends compete? Not in the slightest. In reality, it appears there is nothing that can sink porn’s never-ending pleasure cruise. This is apparent in the habits of users, from those who climax “to porn 10 times a day” to those who watch it on “school-issued laptops” during school (Luscombe). Isolation and general anti-social behaviour are directly correlated with this deadening of normal satisfaction.

Along with anti-social behaviour, numerous other effects are associated with porn use as well. We know this through tens of thousands of anecdotal reports and, in recent times, a blossoming number of studies. Even moderate porn use “involved a pattern of negative thoughts about oneself” and can instigate “depression, anxiety, and perceived stress” (Grubbs). Translation: you don’t have to be an addict to suffer certain disarming

effects. Other minor effects may include “brain fog,” “social discomfort,” “impaired motivation,” “less sexual and relationship satisfaction,” and the “inability to concentrate” (Wilson). Minor is used here because in comparison to larger issues, such as sexual tastes that no longer match one’s decided sexual orientation, self-harm, “loss of attraction to real partners,” “anorgasmia (inability to orgasm),” “delayed ejaculation (DE),” and “porn-induced ED (PIED or simply ED),” issues like decreased motivation and trouble concentrating are of relatively low importance (Wilson). Though out of all those complications of porn use, the most integral and debilitating is ED. Through continued desensitization, the brain can reach a point where arousal is only possible when “sex is like it is on a movie” (Luscombe). But sex can only be like it is on the movie when you’re watching the movie, when there’s no one else to please but yourself. Arousal and climax in this case are only possible when there is porn—sex with a real person is near impossible, if not completely so. These dysfunctions, the apparent performance anxiety associated with them, and the wiring of the brain’s sexual pursuits to porn could signal why “36 percent of young Japanese guys” along with “20 percent of young Frenchmen have no interest in real partners” (“Why Shouldn’t Johnny Watch Porn If He Likes?”). What may not be so surprising is that “ED is the number one reason men choose to give up porn” (Wilson). Four years ago, a study in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* found that “26% of adult men seeking help for ED were under 40” (Luscombe). A 2012 Swiss study found that a third of those studied were “even younger men: 18 to 25” (Luscombe). Regular ED is a condition that in the past only rose to the surface in older men—men over forty. Now the world is seeing it in eighteen-year-olds. Though, given how porn affects the brain, is this surprising? The numbers of hours of porn

watched will only increase, and will do this concurrently with the cases of PIED and DE present in young adults. In the year of 2015, at the time of documentation, people around the world watched “4,392,486,580 hours of... content” on the popular tube site Pornhub (Luscombe). And that’s only one site. Adult entertainment is not just America’s pastime—it’s the world’s pastime.

But despite all of the evidence connecting these symptoms to porn, many individuals, even medical professionals, still claim that porn is “normal... in fact, it’s healthy” (Wilson). Does something that makes an individual have “urges, crazy thoughts, sleeplessness, feelings of hopelessness, despair” and worthlessness, not to mention a lack of libido and a numbing of outside pleasures, sound healthy (Wilson)? Does an activity or substance that releases stockpiles of DeltaFosB, the chemical that is the main cue for addictions and that leads to “heightened vulnerability to compulsive behaviors and relapse (cravings and triggers),” sound like it will make a young man’s brain evolve into an untainted, effective tool (Hilton)? If it does, then cocaine, obsessive gambling, heroin, MDMA, and food addictions are all the epitome of health as well. Porn is a drug, and although our society uses it to the point of exhaustion, it still may not be as widespread as it will be in the days to come. As humans, we analyze trends, we see patterns, we take in information, and we calculate. We need to see the patterns of porn use and its disastrous effects. This movement of sexual paradigms is one paradigm shift that must be taken seriously for the success of our society, the richness of our relationships, and the assured happiness of our individual lives.

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