



THE

PROORN

ULTIMATUM

Could internet porn be ruining your sex life? Does a high volume of virtual vixens have the capacity to rewire your brain? Our writer sifted through the digital dirt to discover the true impact of online porn →

By Jesse Fink



Susanne Montag appeared on the covers of two issues of German *Playboy* in 1985 and – in all her golden-tanned, busty, Teutonic magnificence – was the first completely naked woman I ever saw inside the pages of a magazine. Our encounter that year, she in print, me with my school shorts around my ankles, was our first and last.

Although we were never to meet in person, Susanne has imprinted herself in my psyche for all time, producing my first orgasm. There have been many more of those since, of course, but you never forget your first. Unlike Foxy, Lela, Ginger, Autumn, Nadia, Jada and the thousands of other instantly forgettable women who make up the bewildering zoetrope of body parts found in even the most cursory search of internet porn.

I'm 42 now, and grew up when porn was far more innocent – and much harder to obtain. When I was in year 7 at my high school in Sydney's inner west, a kid called Dennis sold porn and Wizz Fizz out of his locker. He did a roaring trade in both items because it was all so illicit.

Men in their twenties and thirties, however, have never known anything other than porn that is instantly accessible and, for the most part, free. A 2012 online study by the University of Sydney into porn viewing found 43 per cent of respondents' first exposure to porn was between the ages of 11 and 13, with 47 per cent spending between half an hour and three hours a day watching porn.

They have grown up with things that I could barely have conceived back when I was a kid. As a result their expectations are different. But that's to be expected: it's evolution.

In 2015, though, there are so many options on what to whack off to that it's difficult to know where to begin. All those sites, all those pop-up windows leading you to dingy sets you didn't want to go to in the first place. We're being bombarded with porn.

It's also true that the more you surrender to the lure of porn, the more dislocated from reality you become. A couple of years back, Joseph Gordon-Levitt wrote, directed and starred in

Don Jon, playing a young man who preferred jerking off to pornography to sleeping with real women. In the movie, startlingly, he had Scarlett Johansson as a girlfriend and still preferred porn. This is not some dystopian scenario or doomsday vision of society's sexual future. It's very real and it's happening now. According to the University of Sydney study, one in five men prefer watching porn to experiencing real physical relations. I should know. I've lived some of the script of *Don Jon* myself.

For a decade I was emotionally and sexually satisfied in my first marriage. But the relationship ended unexpectedly due to an affair – hers. As a coping mechanism for my grief, I commenced a casual sex/online dating bender that lasted many years. When I wasn't having sex with women, I regularly used porn and soon had settled on a roster of go-to favourites: Puma Swede, Rocki Roads, Holly Halston. They had the kind of bodies and rapacious sexual appetites to meet my aesthetic needs, even if the nature of our exchanges were virtual and unsatisfyingly artificial.

My use of porn was never a problem to the point where it began interfering with my work or my responsibilities. But at times, I recall a distinct feeling of not wanting to go out at night or to meet friends. And that was a problem.

Porn is compulsive, private, accessible and widely free – why did I need to leave the comfort of my own home to pick up a woman when I could masturbate to a tight-bodied, plastic-surgery-enhanced porn star and likely have a more fulfilling orgasm than I would with some less-than-physically-perfect but eager woman I'd met at a local bar?

In real life I found myself attracted to partners who could approximate what I was seeing in porn. I was drawn to narrow-waisted, big-breasted women. If a girl wasn't sexually adventurous, I'd stop seeing her. Not all the positions I'd learned from PornHub or RedTube were welcomed in the bedroom. When I logged on to my computer, I'd frequently type in "gangbang" or "DP", even though group sex is not something I'd ever want to do or be involved in.

That's what porn does. As much as it can be a healthy way of broadening sexual horizons and generating sexual ideas, it can also diminish what makes sex truly great – and that's feelings.

There are very few emotions on show in porn and most erotica that purports to be "intimate porn" or "art porn" is manufactured for the camera.

Porn also made me less tolerant of imperfection and less patient in the art of seduction. My expectations of the physical attributes of women were raised by porn. I became much more judgmental. I briefly dated a TV star who was beautiful, bright and intelligent, but her body wasn't porn-worthy enough to sustain my interest. So, stupidly, I dumped her. Instead, I found a friend-with-benefits who had a high libido, a porn-star physique and, unfortunately, not much to say. The relationship was purely sexual. Online, as well as in real life, I was demanding instant gratification. Porn was having a direct impact on the way I thought and the way I valued women.

It's a dangerous mindset that infects many men who log on to get off, and can lead to problems managing sexual desires or urges.

Gary*, an accountant in his fifties from the Hills District of north-west Sydney, has a love-hate relationship with porn. Recently diagnosed with depression, he separated from his wife of 30 years and quickly managed to find a new girlfriend despite his personal troubles. But a twice-a-day online porn habit has cast a long, dark shadow over his relationships. Gary believes porn is changing the way men and women interact.

"Porn put too much pressure on my relationships," he admits. "There's too much expectation on our wives or partners to perform like porn stars in the bedroom."

His experience is mirrored across generational lines. Lachlan*, a 24-year-old fitness instructor from Melbourne's Frankston, started watching porn at 14. "I've often struggled with the emptiness and depression that accompanies my experiences with it," he says.

It's both the pressure of meeting unrealistic standards and the spiritual barrenness evident in Gary's and Lachlan's experience of porn (and to some degree in my own) that has led to a boiling moral panic over porn use, spawning groups like "NoFap"® (registered trademark, no less), a global movement of men (and increasing numbers of women) abstaining from masturbation and pornography and sharing their sometimes difficult progress with one another online. The group's slogan is "Get a Grip on Life". Critics might say, "Get a grip on reality!" but at the time

CONTROL THE CLICK

Dr David Ley's 5 tips for using porn responsibly

- 1 View porn as entertainment, not as education.
- 2 Porn should be one aspect of your sex life. If it becomes all of it, then it may be too much.
- 3 Let porn inspire your sex fantasies, but don't let it direct them.
- 4 Porn can be a great stress reliever, but it can't be your only one.
- 5 Be mindful of when, how, what and where you use porn. If your porn use is on autopilot, you're in trouble.

APIX SYNDICATION

of writing there were over 140,000 dedicated "Fapstronauts".

Then there are sites such as *FightTheNewDrug.org* and *YourBrainOnPorn.com*, the latter gravely warning visitors, "Evolution has not prepared your brain for today's internet porn". There may be some truth in that. I haven't been able to erase from my mind some of the things I've seen in 10 years of casually watching online porn, especially some stuff coming out of Eastern Europe.

So how exactly, then, does porn affect our brains, sex drive and performance, as well as our expectations of real women? Is the hysteria justified? Or like the panic over masturbation a century ago, is the feverish debate about internet porn a tad, ahem, overblown?

Right now, across the world, there are millions of men out there furiously spanking the monkey in one big dopamine mushroom cloud. What we want is instantly available, whenever we want it, with no requirement for picking up the bill at dinner or the awkward post-coital chat in bed with or without a cigarette.

"Internet pornography represents a major change in modern sexuality," says Dr David Ley, a clinical psychologist, regular contributor to *Psychology Today* and author of *The Myth of Sex Addiction*. "For perhaps the first time in history, people have access to a greater range of sexual stimulation than ever before, and can now select and seek out material that is stimulating to them – not just what society tells them they should find appealing or attractive."

In other words, tailor-made orgasms for every kink

and fetish under the sun. Is it any surprise, then, that there has been a huge increase in the amount of men – around 70 per cent according to another University of Sydney study – using porn? Perhaps the larger question is whether the vast panoply of porn-viewing options is contributing to a continental shift in our brain chemistry and an epidemic of erectile dysfunction (ED), as some anti-porn crusaders would have us believe.

On the weight of current evidence, the answer is no. A man's physical response to porn – faster heart rate, increased bloodflow, erection – is preceded by a deeper neurological process. But while scientists have attempted to capture this process through brain scans, results have varied widely.

Certainly, pornographic images appear to activate a man's visual system more than, say, looking at trees or even other people. "It's almost like a high-definition signal compared with a standard signal," says Dr William Struthers, a biopsychologist and author of *Wired For Intimacy*. Once this signal – say two lesbians making out on a couch – hits your antenna, the mesolimbic (reward) system kicks in, producing a rush of feel-good dopamine. Just as it does when you bite into a Mars Bar, jump from a plane or, yes, snort a line of cocaine.

"Porn looks like other rewards; like eating chocolate or watching puppies play," explains Ley, who contends men's neurological response to porn is the same as any other reward that activates a dopamine rush. "There's absolutely no evidence that shows that porn has a disparate effect on the brain compared to any other form of entertainment." Broken down like this, objections to porn use begin to look moral rather than medical. →



Ley cites a 2014 Cambridge University study, in which 19 heavy pornography users had MRI scans when viewing both sexually explicit videos and sports videos. They found that when men watched the sex videos there was increased activity in three parts of the brain – the ventral striatum, dorsal anterior cingulate and amygdala – which, according to the study’s findings, are “regions that are also particularly activated in drug addicts when shown drug stimuli”. But, crucially, the research didn’t “necessarily provide evidence that these individuals are addicted to porn – or that porn is inherently addictive”.

“People who like sex, who like sensation-seeking, stimulation and taboo, use more porn and may have different brain structures than people who do not,” argues Ley. Not because of the porn, he adds, but because of the people – because of who they are and what they enjoy.

It’s a conclusion that rings true for me, having been publicly labelled a “sex addict” when I released a memoir in 2012, *Laid Bare*, detailing some of my sexual experiences after my divorce. I was never a sex addict. I just had a lot of sex – and I enjoyed it.

It’s true, however, that it’s not only who you

are that determines your porn use, but your frame of mind. In that sense, porn may be the most unlikely of psychological salves, says Ley.

“People often blame porn for their depression or their anxiety when, in fact, many men use it to cope with their depression or anxiety from loneliness, often due to divorce or work problems,” he says.

It certainly worked for me. Porn was a way of filling time, a way of coping with the bitter loneliness I experienced after my separation and divorce.

It worked for Gary, too, who used it as a pick-me-up when there was nothing, and nobody, to turn to. “It improved my libido after it hit rock bottom during the worst days of my depression,” he says.

It’s a common story among professionals working in the field of sexual therapy and relationship counselling. Porn can provide a psychological buffer against the darkest of emotions. “It’s a creative response to low mood, much like exercising is a great way to lift your mood,” says Sydney relationships counsellor Clinton Power.

Of course, you can lean on that buffer too often. “Porn can become a compulsive behaviour just like overeating or gambling, which people use to cope with

One in five men prefer watching porn to experiencing real physical relations

negative emotions,” says Victoria Kasunic, a psychologist and media presenter.

The question is, what happens then? Well, you won’t go blind – even today’s most virulent anti-porn campaigners concede that. But will you lose your edge in the bedroom? Will you go blunt?

It’s true, eat too many Mars Bars and you’ll get fat. And even Tony Montana might concede (in hindsight, of course) that there are limits to how much cocaine you can snort before you start believing “the world is yours”. But can too much porn use really lead to ED, as so many Fapstronauts claim?

Research recently published by Dr Nicole Prause, an associate research scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, has looked into the correlation, if any, between high levels of porn use and ED. Her paper, “Viewing Sexual Stimuli Associated with Greater Sexual Responsiveness, Not Erectile

Dysfunction”, co-authored with Dr James Pfaus of Montreal’s Concordia University, is the first study of its kind to test whether the volume of erotica viewed is related to erectile malfunctioning.

The findings? “We only found evidence for the opposite,” insists Prause. “More erotica viewing was associated with a stronger experience of sexual arousal when viewing sexual films and unrelated to erectile problems with partners.” In other words, the more you watch, the harder you come.

The outcomes of Prause’s research dovetails neatly with Gary’s and Lachlan’s experiences. “Yep, porn enhanced my libido, if anything,” says Gary. “I think there are different uses for it. Personally I used it as a ‘rediscovery’ aid.” Lachlan concurs: “Porn can often boost my libido because I’m a very visual person sexually. I like to see things; I like to hear things.”

So does abstaining from porn have the potential to “reboot” sexual desire? Most experts believe not, although Power is open to the idea of abstinence as a way to rebalance your sexual and emotional equilibrium. It’s a chance for a man to “pay attention to the quality of his life and relationships and make a

decision for himself if he wants to re-introduce porn into his life after such a period”, he says.

What, then, of your expectations of “real women”? Can abstaining from masturbating to porn increase your sensitivity to and appreciation of real, flesh-and-blood women?

“Studies in the past found that men and women tended to be more negative about their partner’s appearance and relationship satisfaction after viewing sexual films,” concedes Prause. More recently, she adds, people seem to be becoming more realistic about the way sexual films reflect stylised, non-real sex. “Data shows that couples who view sexual films together have increases in both negative and positive feelings about their partner and relationship.” Not exactly a cause for panic, is it?

Which is not to downplay some of the seediness and degradation found in contemporary pornography. Watching some of the free clips found on PornHub, RedTube and other sexually explicit aggregator websites can be an unsettling experience for anyone who was raised thinking good ol’ missionary is the standby position for a Saturday-night encounter. It’s a brave new world of sex out there – and sometimes a dark one.

So what’s your move if you still think your porn viewing is becoming a problem?

“It’s a matter of balance,” says Kasunic. “You need to work out whether a behaviour is creating

a negative impact on your life, relationships, beliefs about yourself. Then you need to look at how you want to tackle this.”

It also depends what your goal is. If partner problems are the central issue, Ley says, many couples’ therapy approaches are very targeted, time-limited, and shown by science to work. And if you still can’t get a hard-on or your libido is not quite where it needs to be, Ley suggests looking upon the problem as an opportunity for creativity. Hey, it could be a blessing in disguise.

“I tell men that if they’re having erectile difficulties, and there aren’t physiological reasons, then they may have been given a gift,” says Ley. “Now is the time to explore lots of other, non-erection-focused behaviours. Or, as my wife says, ‘Don’t these guys have tongues and fingers?’”

In the end, how you handle porn comes down to what you’re comfortable with. I haven’t had to book a spot of transcranial magnetic stimulation (Ley offers this as a treatment to manage sexual urges) because I long ago recalibrated my own affair with porn.

I’ve found another outlet for my time and energy – my mental and physical health, my family, and my work. Idle or anxious minds aren’t a good mix with porn. But a little bit isn’t so bad and I still enjoy it when I’m not in a relationship. Just as a piece of chocolate and glass of wine after a long day in the office isn’t so bad either.

* Some names and personal details have been changed



You can follow Dr David Ley on Twitter @DrDavidLey
Dr Nicole Prause @NicolePrause
Clinton Power @SydneyTherapist
Victoria Kasunic @victoriakasunic

10 minutes
The average duration of visits to porn sites
Source: PornHub

82 per cent
Percentage of visitors to porn sites who are male
Source: PornHub

Are you in control of your porn habit? Take our test

1 How long can you go without porn?

- A How long does James Deen go? Taking a snack break and getting back to it.
- B Until I feel aroused again and I don’t have a better offer – from a woman.
- C I’m too busy watching ABC News 24 to even think about sex right now.

2 What are Brazzers, Pure Mature and Naughty America?

- A Bookmarks in my Safari browser.
- B Porn websites.
- C Pauly Shore movies.

3 DP stands for?

- A Double? Triple!
- B Double penetration.
- C The display picture on my desktop.

4 Lastly, bukkake...

- A Time well spent with my mates.
- B A curious sexual act originating in Japan.
- C Dipping sauce for sushi.

KEY

Mostly As
Dude, perhaps lay off the porn a bit and go for a run. It’s a beautiful day outside.

Mostly Bs
You enjoy porn in moderation and have a completely normal degree of sexual awareness.

Mostly Cs
No one said you had to be a monk. Enjoy yourself.

