

## Why Do People Watch Porn? Results from PornResearch.Org

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### FIGURING THE PORN AUDIENCE

As Henry Jenkins has argued, we know less about the audiences of pornography than “probably any other genre of popular entertainment.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, what little we do know often comes from representations in mainstream media where two stereotypes predominate. For example, in men’s magazines like *Loaded* or in films like *American Pie*,<sup>2</sup> the porn consumer may be represented as “a normal bloke, having a bit of fun,” but elsewhere he (and it is usually a he) is more likely to be presented as “deviant, slightly suspect and probably addicted.”<sup>3</sup> The latter is part of a tradition of figuring those who engage with porn in negative ways as “pimpily teenagers, furtive perverts in raincoats, and asocial compulsively masturbating misfits.”<sup>4</sup> This tradition has little to say about actual audiences of porn, instead using figures of the porn user as ways of depicting the harm and danger associated with pornography. In the past, those figures have included a “falsely innocent adolescent female” and a “truly depraved adult male.”<sup>5</sup> But the traumatized child and addicted adult male are currently the most frequently depicted figures of porn consumption. They provide the focus for much anxious press discussion of pornography, as in the well-known *Time* magazine’s reporting on “cyberporn” (1995).<sup>6</sup> This featured illustrations of a pale, transfixed child and “a naked man, his arms and legs wrapped around a keyboard and computer monitor, seeming to dissolve into the screen.” *Time* magazine’s visual connection between body and screen suggested that porn is unwholesome, overwhelming, and masturbatory,<sup>7</sup> a trope readily taken up in stories elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> Consumers as victims of pornography are graphically depicted in the Josh McDowell Ministry’s video *1 Click Away*,<sup>9</sup> where men, women, and children are shown being assailed and controlled by grasping hands and the voiceover speaks of the disintegration of the family as a result of consumption of porn leading to addiction.

The narrative of porn addiction has become a well-established way of representing porn consumption. Michael Leahy, the evangelist and author of *Porn Nation*, has claimed that porn is America’s number-one addiction.<sup>10</sup>

Writing for the *Psychologies* magazine campaign against pornography in 2010, British journalist Decca Aitkenhead describes boys sitting “in silence, staring at hardcore pornography on their phones, swapping images of astonishing sexual violence as if they were Pokémon cards.”<sup>11</sup> The Australian parenting author, Steve Biddulph, claims that porn makes girls “compliant but disengaged,” and that it is responsible for “one of the most depressed, anxious and lonely generations of young people ever to inhabit the earth.”<sup>12</sup> This depiction of porn as a narcotic is often supplemented by claims that link it to child abuse and coercive sex work. For Australian campaigner Melinda Tankard Reist, porn and sexualized media act “as a de facto pimp for the prostitution and pornography industries,”<sup>13</sup> while U.S. antiporn feminist Rebecca Whisnant describes men as victims of “grooming” by pornographers—“abused” and “consumed”<sup>14</sup> and the “target for ruthless commercial exploitation.”<sup>15</sup> The downward spiral of addiction experienced by young men is depicted by antiporn sociologist Gail Dines as follows:

They neglect their school work, spend huge amounts of money they don't have, become isolated from others, and often suffer depression. They know something is wrong, feel out of control, and don't know how to stop. Some (. . .) have become so desensitized that they have started using harder porn and end up masturbating to images that had previously disgusted them. Many of these men are deeply ashamed and frightened, as they don't know where all this will end.<sup>16</sup>

Dines develops these themes at greater length in her book *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*.<sup>17</sup>

The representation of compulsive and disturbing porn viewing is also evident in the reporting of crimes. Support for legislation against so-called extreme pornography in the UK, *Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2009*, drew heavily on the claim that viewing violent porn had fueled the murder of British schoolteacher Jane Longhurst in 2003. It further features claims that there is a general descent into cruelty in contemporary Western societies. In their book *The Porning of America* Carmine Sarracino and Kevin Scott link the torture carried out by guards at Abu Ghraib to an interest in pornography. The guards, they claim, were “intensely involved, on a daily basis, in porn” and “were fluent” in “the visual language of violent and degrading pornography.”<sup>18</sup> Evidence that the soldiers had images of commercial porn, documented their own sexual activities, and engaged in torture is refigured as an “easy-to-imagine evening of entertainment”—“a little porn, a little abuse, a little more porn, a little torture, and then some more porn.”<sup>19</sup> Although the authors do not at any point claim that the soldiers watched violent porn themselves, they argue that, “Given the presence of porn in their lives, it seems likely that the guards perpetrating the abuse at Abu Ghraib deliberately

imitated the violent porn that now thrives on the Internet.”<sup>20</sup> For these authors pornography’s effects on those who view it can be understood by noting associations and presuming particularly destructive outcomes to behaviors. While there is no robust research basis for such claims, they circulate widely nonetheless, currently forming the basis of government action against pornography here in the UK.<sup>21</sup>

## THE PORNRESEARCH.ORG PROJECT: MOTIVES AND METHODS<sup>22</sup>

Our project took a different starting point from assumptions that porn is *de facto* bad. Concerned with the everyday uses of pornography and how the people who engage with pornography feel it fits into their lives, our project was not based on suppositions about pornography’s harmfulness.<sup>23</sup> We wanted to gather a collection of responses from people who use and engage with pornography—the people whose voices and stories are almost entirely absent from the debates about whether or not pornography should exist. We wanted to do this in a way that those people—who are likely to be intensely aware of the way they are talked about, categorized, and belittled—would trust us sufficiently to tell us their stories, their responses, their pleasures, and their preferences. We also needed to do this in a way that would allow us to discern patterns, distinct groupings, connections, and separations. For this, we needed to generate sufficient responses to allow us to do some secure quantitative analyses. But what mattered most to us was hearing the accounts that people would give us, in their own words, of the nature of their involvements and engagements with online pornography. We know that such accounts are not transparent truths. They are the ways that people are willing and able to tell us about themselves. That, however, is their distinctive value. Through the words that men and women, straight and homosexual, cis and trans\*,<sup>24</sup> young and old, choose and use, we can hear their reasons and interests in sex, their sense of sexual self, what pornography means to them, and the ways in which it may matter to them. Before our questionnaire was launched, the entire research process was checked and approved by the research ethics committee of University of Sunderland.<sup>25</sup> Just as important to us was that we present our motives for doing the research so that people could trust that we did not have some concealed moral agenda—indeed, that our major motive for the project was to test a number of the widely circulating assumptions about the “harm” and “dangers” of pornography. Because pornography is such a highly charged arena, and our research required that respondents trust us to deal fairly with their most intimate thoughts, we had to work hard to show our credentials as people who had been willing in the past to conduct research and speak out on difficult and unpopular topics. We were not surprised, therefore, when we learned that a number of people with the requisite

Web skills checked our guarantee that people completing the questionnaire could not be tracked electronically. Information on our credentials circulated on Web sites and fora discussing issues around sex, sexuality, pornography, and the Internet more generally. Almost 5,500 people responded to our call for participants and, upon completing the questionnaire, 800 of them wrote to say they would be willing to carry on a conversation with us. From those conversations emerged a substantial body of further materials from almost 300 people, which we will, in due course, analyze in their own rights.

Our questionnaire used a carefully tailored combination of quantitative and qualitative questions. The quantitative questions were of three kinds: self-allocation multiple-choice questions (for example, asking people to say how important pornography was to them); personal and demographic information; and questions about possible orientations (reasons for looking at porn; the kinds of sources they used; and meanings of sex in their lives). With these quantitative questions came a series of qualitative ones. Some related directly to a multiple-choice question (for example, having asked people how important they felt pornography was to them, we simply asked them to tell us why they had answered as they had); other questions were prompted by our desire to get people to tell us about their experiences in distinctive ways (for example, we were interested in the idea of a *personal career* with pornography, so we asked people to try to tell us a “history of their engagement with pornography in ten sentences”).

We also wanted respondents to tell us things that might be difficult because they were self-revelatory. So, we asked people to tell us the kinds of sexual stories that most attract them and about a pornographic moment or scenario that they found especially arousing. Finally, we added an open-ended wild-card question asking people if there was anything about them as individuals that would help us understand the answers they had given. Answers to this latter question ranged from “No” or “Nothing” to lengthy stories. These stories were important as a counter-balance to our search for patterns and tendencies. People may share many characteristics, but this is an area of very individual qualities as well—and we wanted to be able to illustrate patterns we discovered with portraits of complex individuals.

We make no claim for the representativeness of the responses we collected. This is not a sample—you can only have a sample where there is a known population from which a representative subset might be taken. We had no way of knowing what kinds and ranges of people choose to engage with Internet pornography. Indeed, one of the points of the research was to try to find out the range of people who do so. Accordingly, the questionnaire was publicized opportunistically in as wide and open a way as possible, and at the locations and via the avenues that such people would be likely to be encountering in the course of their online pornography engagements.<sup>26</sup>

Completion rates of online questionnaires can be as low as 0.5 percent of those receiving a specific and personalized invitation,<sup>27</sup> and people are more likely to complete them where they feel they have some kind of personal stake in what is being asked. We cannot know how many people saw information about our research but we do know that 20,000 clicked on the questionnaire, which means our completion rate was just over 25 percent of that figure. What is so striking about our pornography research, however, is the contrast in levels of indicated Importance and Frequency of Use. Just over 50 percent reported the two highest levels of Frequency, while—very strikingly—under 25 percent reported the two highest levels of Importance. This leads us to think that we managed to attract a good range of people; and that while for many, personally, the felt Importance of porn in their lives may be quite low, they considered it significant enough to record their views on the topic, and trusted us to deal fairly with their responses.

After deriving and considering the crude overall separate totals for all headings in the questionnaire, we went through the following stages: produced cross-tabulations for every pair of quantitative questions (Gender by Relation to Age, Sexual Orientation, Frequency, Importance, etc.); produced cluster analyses of the interrelations and overlaps between the different choices within the three orientation questions (Orientations to Pornography, Kinds of Sources, and Meanings of Sex); generated word counts for all qualitative answers and for comparative groups within those answers, to discover which questions and topics had generated the most interest, and who had the most or least to say about their engagements; and random-sampled fifty responses to each of the qualitative questions, in order to gain a sense of the range of kinds of answers, and to get a preliminary sense of the accounts and explanations, and associated ways of talking about pornography, that people had given us.

## SOME BASIC INDICATORS

The questionnaire was open from the end of February to the end of June 2011 and was advertised by means of social media—Facebook and Twitter (pretty much replicating traditional snowball techniques). We also sent information to various bloggers such as Violet Blue and Em & Lo (two popular bloggers who write about sex, sexuality, and sexual media). We also used whatever media opportunities came our way to publicize the research, and were able to use radio interviews in particular to get the word out about the Web site. We received 5,490 completed responses; of those, 3,743 identified as male (68.4 percent) and 1,726 as female (31.6 percent). Sexual orientation broke down as follows:

TABLE 14.1

Heterosexual	3,842	(70.1%)
Gay	186	(3.4%)
Lesbian	56	(1.0%)
Unsure	189	(3.4%)

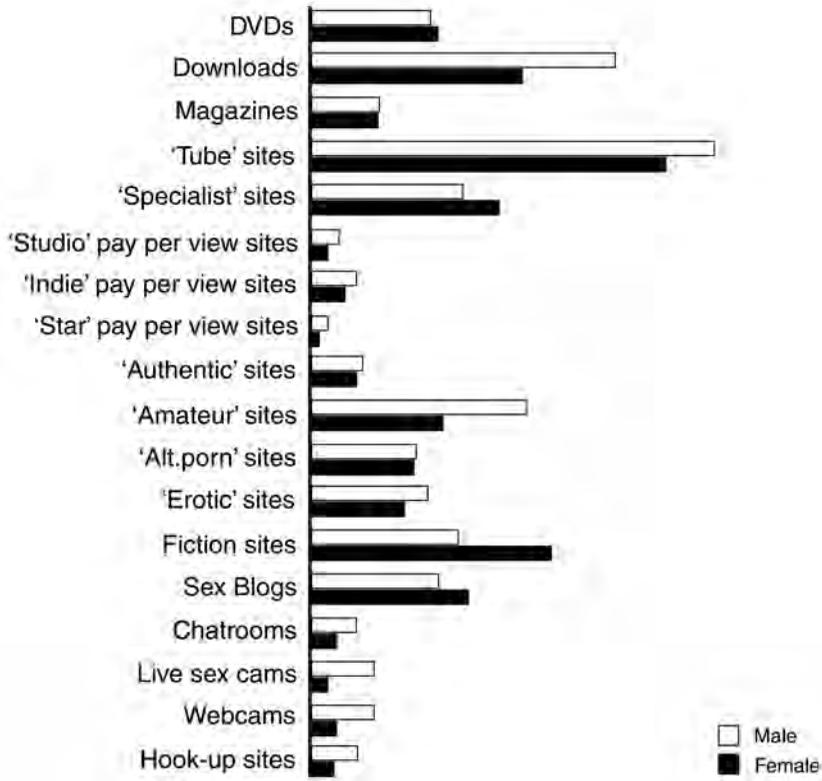


FIGURE 14.1 Kinds of Pornography Viewed.

These figures probably don't contain many surprises, aligning as they do with popular understandings of pornography as predominantly a heterosexual male pastime. Ratings for Importance are higher among men, and women give a lower Frequency for consuming pornography—again as might be expected. More interesting is the fact that cross-tabulating age with gender reveals that younger women (18 to 25) engage with pornography much more than older women, indicating a possible generational shift. When it comes to what men and women are looking at, the following chart demonstrates that by far the runaway choice for men *and* women are the tube sites, supporting the popular claim, voiced by porn companies themselves, that people want free porn and plenty of choice. That said, there are some interesting variations.

Results indicate that for men, downloads are very important, as are amateur sites (at twice women’s interest in these), followed by specialist sites (catering to specific sexual interests). For women, tube sites rank highest, followed by fiction sites (almost double the rate that men choose these), downloads (at half men’s rate), and sex blogs. Again, these results may seem to bear out the old stereotypes that women are most interested in words rather than pictures of sex; but if we look at these in relation to our results regarding orientations toward pornography, we find some more developed patterns. Our results suggest that there are some broad, general differences between men’s and women’s orientations to porn. For example, men seem more inclined to use porn simply to *express* their arousal, but women are more likely to use pornography as a *means to arousal*. Women also seem to engage with porn as a means to reconnect with their bodies, and to use with partners. Men seem more likely to turn to pornography when feeling bored or having nothing better to do. Note, however, that very few of our respondents chose “I just get attracted by pop-ups,”—those images that interrupt intentional browsing to lead viewers to other sites. This seemingly insignificant result is, in fact, very important. This finding indicates that despite the attempts to frame porn as something that seeks viewers out (as so graphically illustrated in the Josh McDowell video), consumers actively pursue the sexually explicit materials they choose to engage with. Moreover, far from being indiscriminate and simply opportunist, porn consumers have rich histories and tastes, which connect in complex ways with our respondents’ understandings of sex and sexuality in their everyday lives.

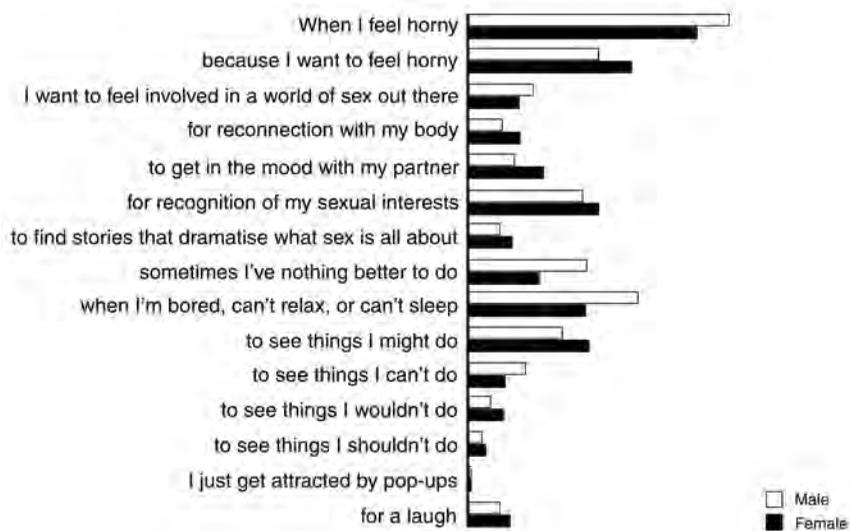


FIGURE 14.2 Reasons for Viewing Pornography.

In what follows, we explore the patterns of motivations for engaging with pornography that emerge from our research.

## ENGAGING WITH PORN

Why do people engage with online pornography? The answer to that may seem too obvious to be worth asking. Yet we think it worth asking, because although sexual arousal and pleasure are aspects of people's interests in pornography, it is not the whole story; nor is the question as simple and obvious as it might seem. But also, from previous research that we have done, we know that the reasons driving a person to seek out pornography will play a role in shaping their preferences and choices, and hence their responses.<sup>28</sup> To begin to understand, then, how audience responses to pornography work, we need to take a closer look at the complexities within people's stated interests.

Using our standardized procedure, we sampled our overall body of responses, focusing on answers to our first qualitative question, which asked respondents to explain in their own words their choice from the options for the Importance of pornography. In the fifty sampled responses we can see evidence for a number of different reasons people view pornography, each of which leads, broadly, to a different orientation to porn, and, from that, connects with how much and with what commitment they engage; what sources they choose; what materials (visuals, scenarios, narratives) they find interesting and arousing; and what they feel pornography adds to their lives. Of course, these orientations do not necessarily come separately, and as we look at individuals in detail we will see how these different elements may interweave. Nonetheless there is a value in first separating out these orientations to consider their separate logics.

We illustrate these briefly, using examples both from our sample of fifty, and from others in the larger sample found using keywords suggested by the fifty. First, it is significant to note that for some people the most important reason to watch pornography is that there is no real reason—they just do it. This shows in answers such as the following. "It's not a habit but something to enjoy occasionally." "Well, I don't need to view pornography for gratification—my own imagination is far better. It's great for when you are just horny and lazy, however!" "It's less that porn is important and more that it is nice to have. Were I to lose it tomorrow the funeral would be short, but it would be missed." People responding like this are marking the boundaries of their engagement. It is like Cadbury's Cream Eggs, or any other treat—no more than that. "It's not important because nothing I do relies on porn—I can function in every aspect without it." "For the same reason romantic comedy movies are not important in my life: Both are low-quality entertainment that I have no great interest in watching." "It's not important, just diversionary,"

said another respondent. In these responses, as we found throughout the database, there is underlying acknowledgment of the ways in which pornography and its consumption are much talked about, and that the figure of the “porn-user” is an object of considerable public concern, to be worried about, a personage who has to be managed—to protect them from themselves, and to protect others from their supposedly malign influence(s)—so that these boundary-marking answers identify the respondent as different from the stereotypical “porn-user.”

But beyond these answers—almost always from low Importance respondents—there is a considerable range of reasons, as indicated by the following examples:

### 1. Boredom/Idleness

“Entertainment for when I’m bored.”

“I use it regularly, sometimes to distraction. I use it out of boredom, I’m in a ‘living apart, together’ type of relationship—but mainly ‘apart’ and find porn a palliative.”

“I only occasionally look at porn, usually when I’m really bored. I hardly ever think about it.”

It seems as if this is a particular kind of boredom, in which one’s body asserts itself and demands some attention in and of itself. One person puts it nicely in drawing an analogy with food. According to them: “An analogy would be something like hamburgers—I enjoy hamburgers a lot, when I decide to eat them, but that’s pretty much the extent of their involvement in my life.” The issue then is what might be meant by “boredom” and “idleness” where this leads to looking for porn experiences.

### 2. Release

“Sometimes just as a stress reliever / unable to concentrate on work.”

“I view porn multiple times a day. I feel that viewing porn reduces my stress levels, makes me feel better when depressed, and makes me feel better about myself. It also seems to allow me to re-set and re-focus quickly on important high-concentration tasks such as software development. I just feel happier and like my day is just a little bit brighter.”

“I really enjoy watching it. I use it as a coping method to cut stress.”

These responses indicate the use of masturbation as a wind-down, and accessing pornography as a way to intensify this process. This idea is further exemplified by the statement: “As a college student and a virgin currently not

in a relationship, I find porn as a good way to escape many of the stresses of college life.” The implication here is that the body carries the load of other kinds of stress, and attending to it in itself relieves some of this.

### 3. Simple Intensification of Bodily Pleasures

“While I find I can create my own fantasies outside of pornography, it does take the effort out of forming an erection, and the visual stimulation causes me to have more powerful orgasms.”

“I’m a very visual person and it increases my orgasm time by a lot (even compared to partner sex). Sometimes I just want to masturbate for the afterglow, so a quick orgasm is desirable.”

“Pornography can provide erotic stimulus or can intensify erotic feelings.”

Pornography’s role in the intensification of bodily pleasures might again seem obvious but, again, we don’t think it is. In the answers here, we see understanding of sexual arousal as a thing in its own right, worthy of its own modes of attainment. Feeling aroused is more than a response; it is a mode of being that can be enhanced, even at its most mundane: “I masturbate regularly, and watching pornographic videos helps make it more exciting.” “Life is full and complex. Most things take a small place, even eating and going to the loo. These are important, as you would likely find too, but nonetheless small aspects.”

### 4. As a Leisure Choice in Its Own Right

“It’s a leisure activity, not really ‘important,’ per se.”

“I write porn for fun and to share, so it’s an important leisure activity; I don’t consume it as much as I produce it though.”

“My most important leisure-time activity is coming up with new ideas for hentai. Also, I use it every day except Sundays.”

“Like many leisure activities it is fun, but not all-consuming.” This quote, like the previous ones, agrees with separating sex off as something with its own imperatives. But for people who enjoy sex in this fashion, it is something one can get better at, and pornography can be an important facilitator.

“Fantasy is at a premium—if you have a partner with whom you can role-play some passionate and exciting scene, you’ll have really hot sex. So porn, in a sense, challenges us to introduce narrative into sex, not just sensation or power dynamics.” Like a sport, or like a hobby, sex can be pursued. One can choose how far one goes, but it is recognized that it could become an

expertise, almost a profession where pornography can take a significant role. And it is striking that a number of those indicating this reason talk about themselves producing as well as consuming pornography.<sup>29</sup> This is an aspect of our responses that we will pursue in future investigations of the database; for now, we simply note its presence.

#### 5. Inadequate Sexual Opportunities, for Various Reasons, Including Age

“Porn is necessary to supplement a lacking sexual life.”

“Because my ‘real life’ sex-life is—after 20 years of marriage—somewhat lacking, particularly in comparison to my fantasies.”

“I am 70 years old with a missing human sensitivity in my life . . . erotic material (I do not particularly like the term porn) is important to fulfil a human need.”

This is a very frequently given reason among respondents explaining why they choose to use porn. The condition here is usually of someone who used to have an active sex life, but for whatever reason, often due to age or a long-term relationship, has experienced a decline or absence of sex. Pornography provides a surrogate means of recovering some version of sexual experience. For some, it is almost like an antiageing cream. According to one respondent, “I am beyond the age of being able to play in the dating/mating game. But I think it possible that the neuronal and hormonal activities that accompany desire and arousal might contribute to a healthy life.” For another, “Sex was an important part of my life but age, IBS [irritable bowel syndrome], and weight gain-driven low self-esteem means that has fallen away. Porn fills that gap.”

#### 6. Within an Ongoing Relationship

“Either I or my partner and I use certain homemade porn for arousal purposes.”

“My partner and I are in a long-distance relationship. We send links of porn to each other as a way of keeping things fresh and hot.”

“I like trying new things with my sex partners and I learn many new things from porn.”

“Both my wife and I regularly enjoy pornography.” It is, of course, impossible, with an answer like this, to say to what extent a person is fairly reporting his or her partner’s interests and willingness. But there are a good number of responses—from both men and women—suggesting that selective porn viewing can play a role in accentuating sexual life for some couples, both heterosexual and homosexual. Responses such as these, and the ones above,

indicate that pornography can serve as a means of enabling relationships, that it contributes to the idea of sex as a particular form of sharing between individuals that can be enhanced and expanded through an external resource. While there are certainly many respondents who use pornography on their own, the thousands who talk of it as a shared activity go considerable ways to counteract the dominant discourse of pornography consumption as a “sad” or “lonely” activity.

### 7. Exploring One’s Sexual Self/Identity

“[Porn] was really important in my sexual development; it assisted in shaping my identity and has almost always been present, but I go up and down in my use.”

“I enjoy porn quite a bit, both by myself and with my partner, but other things in my life—i.e., school, social issues—are more important. I selected ‘Quite Important,’ however, because porn has helped me come into my identity over time, and I think porn issues can be some of the important social issues I think about.”

“It helps me to express the sexual part of my identity. Since menopause I’ve found that my sexual responsiveness has decreased, although my desire has not. Using porn helps me.”

What is interesting here is the sense of personal philosophizing that frequently accompanies answers of this kind. This is not just about sexual arousal and pleasure, it is simultaneously thinking about the meanings and significance of being aroused or feeling pleasure—the felt importance of experiencing one’s own body as “sexy” in itself, for oneself and for others. The significance of pornography can, of course, decline once one has acquired a level of experience, as here: “For a time, it was quite important. It helped to clarify what excited me. Now, after many hours of ‘research,’ I know, so it’s only of mild interest now. Still, erotic stories do hold my interest these days too.” A version of this response—where people look at porn to find out if it constitutes something they want to become; for instance, young men who think they might be gay, and who experiment with gay porn to see if it arouses them—we might have expected to see more frequently, but it does not predominate in the opening round of fifty responses we focus on here. There are indications of it in the wider database, particularly among those respondents who identified as queer, as we discuss elsewhere.<sup>30</sup> For now, we note that this idea of acquiring understanding is part of people’s ways of talking about fantasies—pornography enables kinds of experiments with the self, as here: “It explores my sexual fantasies.” The wording of this short (complete) answer is interesting. Porn is an “it,” something external which is allowed to work on this person, if we take this wording seriously.

## 8. As Part of a Wider Recognition of the Force of Sex

“I’m an artist/researcher. I’m fascinated with how people perform for the webcam and amateur content. I wonder why people make videos of themselves having sex to post on the Internet. I study porn but I also like to watch it. I’m aware of a whole range of fetishes that have found communities on the Internet and I’m fascinated by how people interact through it.”

“Sex positivity and sexual expression are very important to me. Porn has been an important part of discovering and also defining my sexuality as a queer. Seeing other queers fuck is empowering. I write smut, am a published author and find pornographic writings and literature to be very stimulating. I also use visual porn, pictures and movies, currently on a daily basis while masturbating. So, overall, porn is very important to me!;)”

“I do use pornography, but I also study and analyze pornography for scholarly pursuits and am in the field of porn studies, so pornography is important for my academic, intellectual, and professional life.”

The idea of “studying” and learning from porn is one that frequently surfaces in our responses and clearly has several meanings both as a means of studying oneself (testing out likes and dislikes; understanding one’s sexual orientation) and as a form of engaging with pornography as cultural medium in order to understand its appeal to other people, and the importance of pornography to sexual life.

“I have studied it a lot. I also like watching it to feel sexually stimulated.” “Sex is always around us and porn is a pretty immediate means of access.” Like the previous reason, this category involves a body of wider thoughts about the meanings and purposes of sexual desire in humans—and perhaps here a sense of the simple variousness of desires, choices, acts. For some of our respondents, then, porn is not simply about feeling “aroused” but is also an important means of understanding the rich varieties of sexual attraction, interests, and practices as they exist for others. There is also, in some cases, a sense that if unattended to, lack of sex will have deleterious consequences for a person. Other aspects of his/her life will suffer in consequence.

## 9. As an Aesthetic/Erotic Experience

“I love beauty. I love to see beautiful women. Nature at its best, in the eyes of a man.”

“The porn I view is almost entirely viewed as art by me. I rarely masturbate, but I like sexy images.”

“Excitement, appreciation of human body and sexuality as an art form, fulfilment of fantasies, exploration of sexuality, comparison of desired characteristics in a mate.”

This quite common response works against treating porn as something special. It is a form of taking pleasure, as with food, poetry, music, or nature. This type of response emphasizes the ordinariness of sex and the feelings that accompany it. “Porn is not only titillating, it can also be very relaxing. To me, looking at a beautiful nude model is like looking at a classic painting or a beautiful sunset. Nothing is more beautiful than the various sizes and shapes of nude human females.” “Porn, for me, is a high-grade entertainment on a level with music, fine food, etc. Part of why life is sweet.” Again, we see here that pornography is more than just simply a spur to physiological response, but it offers aesthetic and emotional resources that can enrich the everyday.

#### 10. Voyeurism

“I’m a very visual person, and I also enjoy the aspect of voyeuristic visualization that porn offers . . . It helps the fantasy.”

“I feel that porn is a necessary outlet for any sexual urges I get when none of my partners are available, and also as an occasional outlet for exclusively voyeuristic urges.”

“I enjoy watching other people enjoying themselves sexually. I also get off on the auditory part of porn, especially when I’m jerking off.”

“Looking at nude women and people having sex makes me feel good. Currently I’m single, so it’s nice to have an engaging sexual outlet. Also I’m curious about how other people express their sexuality. How kind of them to share with me!”

Interestingly, this is a set of responses that does seem to have an opposite, with a number of people saying that they find this aspect of pornography difficult. The negative possibilities of being considered a “voyeur” means that looking at other peoples’ bodies can be experienced as embarrassing (therefore watching professionals can ease their awkwardness). Or, they may prefer stories because of the distance this allows. But there are a good number of people for whom, simply, the sight—and sound—of bodies sexually engaged is an attraction in itself.

#### 11. The Attraction of the Kinky, the Naughty, and the Dirty

“I am a single parent of young children—I’m not dating. So I masturbate to porn for my sexual release. Also, I enjoy certain kinks that

I have not been able to enjoy with a partner in many years. Porn gives me access to that.”

“As a lover of pegging, watching videos of the act helps set the mood for my partner and [me]. The videos also helped show her it was neither abnormal nor all that kinky so much as easy, clean and fun. Very well done porn also helps us keep up with items that aren’t exactly in the local stores like sex swings.”

“I don’t particularly feel the need to search out porn, but will happily consume it, if it’s there. Which may be somewhat more than average since I use various BDSM/kink-related social networking sites.”

There is little doubt that among the motives for looking at porn is an attraction to seeing what other people do in their most private moments, sometimes balanced on a cusp between delight and disgust. It is also surely linked to the bad reputation of pornography—to seek it out and watch it is to explore a forbidden domain, and see what goes on there.

Combinations of responses, even shown in quite short answers, tell us a lot about a life story. Consider the following answer: “It stimulates my relationship with my partner and my creativity in everyday life. It makes me feel young and energetic.” In this we can see the interaction of two modes: the contribution to an ongoing relationship and the sense that attention to sex provokes benefits in other parts of this person’s life. But there is also a hint of awareness of another mode that has to be fended off: the possibility of waning desire that might go with ageing, though, for now, porn produces feelings of youthfulness.

Or, consider a somewhat longer answer:

While a substantial amount of porn is mainstream and staged, there’s nonetheless something voyeuristic and hot about it. The naked bodies, the sounds, just turn me on and provide my imagination with a starting point. I watch porn just about every night, and it’s pleasing to fantasize right before sleep. I suppose the other reason that I find it appealing is that it’s still ‘naughty.’ I lead such a tame life that this dirty pleasure is an outlet for me.

For this respondent, there is a very palpable sense in which pornography allows safe access to ways of being naughty, of experiencing dirty pleasures without risk. Like the sensations on a roller-coaster, pornography offers ways of experiencing thrills with limits.

## CONCLUSION

In such a short chapter as this it is impossible to explore the minutiae of each of these reasons and their significances. Even so, the sheer range and complexity of reasons that respondents provide in explaining why they use

and enjoy porn should give us pause. This brief foray through the range of reasons is, we believe, an important counter to the simplistic judgements about pornography and the people who consume it that we outlined in our introduction. Too often, debates about pornography revolve around whether or not porn is good or bad for us. With these differentiated reasons in view, perhaps we might begin to ask other questions: How might these different interests in porn then feed through into different patterns of choice, different preferred kinds, and different uses of pornography? Is it possible to draw out repeating threads linking wishes and hopes, sources and choices, and outcomes—even to the point of being able to link these, however tentatively, with kinds of people (by age, gender identification, sexual orientation, etc.)?

This is the task we have set ourselves in pursuing the analysis of our amassed data and responses. Inevitably this will take us some time to complete, as we have 5,500 individual responses and more than 1.5 million words to analyze. Our intentions are not to simply produce graphs and speedily accessed conclusions from the data. Rather, we are carefully sifting our way through the responses in order to do justice to the richness of the responses we have received. Whatever the confidence with which, in the end, we are able to explore different patterns of consumption, the picture that is emerging from this research is seriously at odds with the conventional figures of the aberrant, troubled, and addicted porn user that are dominating discussion about pornography at the present time.

## NOTES

1. Henry Jenkins, "Foreword: So You Want to Teach Pornography?" in *More Dirty Looks: Gender, Pornography and Power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson (London: BFI Publishing, 2004), 2.

2. Dir. Paul Weitz, 1999.

3. Alan McKee, Kath Albury, and Catherine Lumby, *The Porn Report* (Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008), 25.

4. Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 161.

5. Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 261–62.

6. Philip Elmer-Dewitt, "Online Erotica: On a Screen Near You," *Time*, July 3, 1995, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,983116,00.html>.

7. Zabet Patterson, "Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 104–5.

8. Such as Liz Martin, "How Internet Porn Turned My Beautiful Boy Into a Hollow Self-Hating Shell," *Daily Mail*, April 20, 2012, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2132342/How-internet-porn-turned-beautiful-boy-hollow-self-hating-shell>.

html or Leslie Bennetts, "The Growing Demand for Prostitution," *Newsweek*, July 18, 2011, <http://www.newsweek.com/growing-demand-prostitution-68493>.

9. Josh McDowell Ministries, *Just 1 Click Away*, <http://just1clickaway.org/resources.html>.

10. Michael Leahy, *Porn Nation: Conquering America's #1 Addiction* (Chicago: Northfield Publishing, 2008).

11. Decca Aitkenhead, "Are Teenagers Hooked on Porn?" *Psychologies*, June 2010, <http://www.psychologies.co.uk/family/are-teenagers-hooked-on-porn>.

12. Steve Biddulph, *Raising Boys: Why Boys are Different—and How to Help Them Become Happy and Well-Balanced Men* (London: Harper Thorsons, 2009), 164.

13. Melinda Tankard Reist, *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls* (Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex Press 2009), 20.

14. Rebecca Whisnant, "From Jekyll to Hyde: The Grooming of Male Pornography Consumers," in *Everyday Pornography*, ed. Karen Boyle (London: Routledge, 2010), 115.

15. *Ibid.*, 132.

16. Gail Dines, "How the Hardcore Porn Industry Is Ruining Young Men's Lives," *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 2012, <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/how-the-hardcore-porn-industry-is-ruining-young-mens-lives-20110517-1erac.html#ixzz23kFcaGSP>.

17. Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

18. Carmine Sarracino and Kevin Scott, *The Porning of America: The Rise of Porn Culture, What It Means, and Where We Go from Here* (Boston: Beacon Press 2008), 139–44.

19. *Ibid.*, 149.

20. *Ibid.*, 153.

21. The British government has enacted provisions against the possession of "extreme pornography" in its Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 and is currently pushing through similar legislation that will outlaw possession of "rape porn" in its Criminal Justice and Courts Bill. This legislation is driven by an amorphous "increasing public concern," and with little acknowledgement of a vast body of work on a variety of media, including pornography, and their audiences, which would significantly complicate the picture of effects. In order to justify the legislation, the government commissioned a Rapid Evidence Assessment (Catherine Itzin, Ann R. Taket, and Liz Kelly, *The Evidence of Harm to Adults Relating to Exposure to Extreme Pornographic Material: A Rapid Evidence Assessment* (REA) (London: Ministry of Justice, 2007)), which joins a range of other government-sponsored research exercises beginning from the assumption of pornography's harms. See Reg Bailey, *Letting Children Be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood*. Vol. 8078. The Stationery Office, 2011; Miranda Horvath, Llian Alys, Kristina Massey, Afroditi Pina, Mia Scally, and Joanna R. Adler, "Basically . . . Porn Is Everywhere: A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the Effects That Access and Exposure to Pornography Has on Children and Young People," (press release, 2013); Linda Papadopoulos, *Sexualisation of Young People Review* (London: Home Office Publication, 2010). Each of these reviews was designed to build consensus and failed to

assess the evidence for any discernable links between pornography and the normalization of violence against women. Instead, those links are assumed to be already proven. For more detail about the legislation on possession and its problematic evidence base, see Feona Attwood and Clarissa Smith, "Extreme Concern: Regulating 'Dangerous Pictures' in the United Kingdom," *Journal of Law and Society* 37, no. 1 (2010): 171–188.

22. The research was designed and conducted by the three authors. We received £1000 funding from the University of Sunderland to cover the costs of the Web design and hosting. We are still working our way through the responses we received and are being assisted by colleagues Dr. Lynne Hall, Reader in Computing at the University of Sunderland, and Dr. Sarah Tazzyman, Teaching Fellow in Psychology at the University of Leicester.

23. See <http://www.pornresearch.org>.

24. Trans\* is an umbrella term popularized by Sam Killerman that signifies "all of the identities within the gender identity spectrum." See Sam Killerman, "What Does the Asterisk in 'Trans\*' Stand For?" *It's Pronounced Metrosexual*, May 2012. <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/05/what-does-the-asterisk-in-trans-stand-for>.

25. Most university research involving human participants is vetted by individual institutions' Ethics Committees and Institutional Review Boards to ensure that the research adheres to proper standards of research design, methodology, and reporting. Discussions of research ethics are often dominated by natural scientists and medical researchers whose perceptions of issues such as "harm" are inevitably (and for them rightly) governed by simple measurable criteria. But for researchers within the Humanities and Social Sciences the concept of harm comes laden with problematic cultural assumptions, which it has been important for researchers to question. Ethical considerations have sometimes meant that important research cannot be conducted. For example, much of the so-called evidence about young peoples' consumption of pornography is based on anecdote and conjecture because very few universities are willing to sanction research with subjects under the age of eighteen.

26. The research was publicized via various social media sites, including Facebook. From there individuals posted our information on their own blogs and in discussion fora such as [melonfarmers.org](http://melonfarmers.org) and others focused on sexual topics and communities. It was also featured on Web sites with specifically pornographic content such as [pornrapidshare.org](http://pornrapidshare.org). The research was also discussed by traditional media, including the gay and lesbian radio station Joy 94.9 in Australia, various student radio stations, and in more mainstream publications like the UK broadsheet the *Guardian*.

27. The Head of Web Research at SPA comments that "we typically get anywhere between 0.5% and 10% but this really depends on how engaged the database is with the company concerned, the incentive offered and how short/engaging the survey is. We typically ask our clients for sample based on a 25:1 completion ratio so 4% as an average." See <http://econsultancy.com/uk/forums/best-practice/industry-stats-uk-on-line-survey-response-rates>.

28. Martin Barker et al., *Audiences and Receptions of Sexual Violence in Contemporary Cinema* (London: BBFC, 2007); Martin Barker et al., *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Reception* (London: Wallflower, 2001); Clarissa Smith, *One for the Girls! The Pleasures and Practices of Reading Women's Porn* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2007).

29. Across our respondents we have found interests in producing written, photographed, and filmed pornographies. Sometimes these were to share with a long-term, and particularly long-distance, partner; for others, writing erotic stories had become an important pastime and means of sharing with other likeminded authors at Web sites such as literotica.com and in femslash communities. For yet others, sharing photographs with partners was a key way of fostering excitement and anticipation. A significant minority of our respondents talked of uploading their own videos to amateur sites, while a very small number said they actually produced pornography professionally.

30. Clarissa Smith, Feona Attwood, and Martin Barker, "Queering Porn Audiences," in *Queer Sex Work*, eds. M. Laing, K. Pilcher and N. Smith (London: Routledge, forthcoming).