PORNOGRAPHY AND HUMAN FUTURES

PSHE Association

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Foreword

This first issue of Fully Human cuts a different path through the discussion of online porn.

People often think online porn is about sex. So we talk as if we're talking about sex. Squeamishly or stridently. As moralist or libertarian. Denouncing porn as sexual perversion or celebrating porn as sexual freedom. The two sides line up in opposition while pornography itself grows and changes beyond recognition online. Because mainstream online porn isn't about sex. It's about money, and what happens when technology is aimed at the most intimate parts of us in the pursuit of profit.

If porn was just about sex, we'd have the debate about whether there is anything inherently harmful or unethical about creating and viewing films and photos of humans involved in sexual activities. But mainstream online porn is not just films and images, and this is not the debate we need have.

Instead, when there is now a rich and growing research literature[†] revealing mainstream online porn's wide-ranging harmful effects on humans, including on relational and sexual satisfaction, attitudes towards women and girls, the prevalence of harassment and other unethical behaviour, we need to ask — why?

During the pandemic, Pornhub had a bigger audience than the BBC[‡] yet the increasing media and government scrutiny of tech corporate practices and their influence on humans is not being applied to the online porn industry. This is despite the porn industry's engagement in many of the practices being questioned elsewhere (and more besides) and the fact that a significant proportion of teenagers view pornography regularly.

UK government made a commitment to age verification of online pornography in 2015 which five years on is still not in place. There is a lack of clarity about its future and whether other forms of regulation will be applied to the industry. The 145 page draft Online Safety Bill (2021) going through parliament at the time of writing does not mention pornography once (excluding reference to the distinct issue of children involved in its production, a form of child sexual abuse)[*]. So while pornography remains ubiquitous in online life, it is near invisible in policy. These facts combine to create significant, poorly understood and unchecked influence on individuals and society, including on children and young people.

In Fully Human Issue #1, our exploration of this influence concludes that at its heart, mainstream online porn is not videos or imagery, or even a product. It is an invitation – or endless invitations — for individuals to go on a journey in which their sexuality, self and values are shaped towards others' profit, and away from their own and others' potential for rich, connective life. This understanding has profound implications for young people's education and for wider societal action aimed at supporting human thriving, and preventing injustice and harm.

Jonathan Baggaley

A recent representative survey of children and parents commissioned by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC, 2020) found that 41% of 16 – 17 year olds had seen it in the last two weeks, alongside 32% of 14 – 15 year olds, and 18% of 11 – 13 year olds. This study found high levels of viewing in girls as well as in boys.

Executive Summary

Pornography and Human Futures brings together research on porn with wide-ranging literatures on core elements of human flourishing to answer some critical questions:

- What is pornography in this age of ever-present technology?
- How does it work and what does it do?
- What does it mean for our hopes for young people?
- How does it affect our potential for what we might call a 'fully human' existence?

The insights, findings and arguments this study lays out have profound implications for how we approach pornography, both individually and collectively. They also inform our thinking about other pressing societal concerns and focus our attention on our deepest aspirations for young people and how we might journey towards them.

Five key findings:

An unethical business model.

The online porn industry seeks to shift users' sexual interests (and other core parts of who they are) towards those that increase its profit. People are shaped away from their best interests towards those of the porn industry. A variety of strategies and tactics are used in this process, including bombarding, surveilling and targetting viewers, and pushing sex that is impersonal, hostile, and transgressive of normal social boundaries of respect and care.

Manipulation and compromised autonomy.

By exploiting psychological vulnerabilities, being extensive in its scope, and disinterested in users' rationality, values or wellbeing, **online porn is both an archetypal and thoroughly modern manipulator**. Most fundamentally at stake is people's autonomy, including its relational dimensions. People's ability to author themselves and their lives in line with their core interests and values is critically compromised, yet research finds this is a key component of human flourishing, central to vitality and fulfilment.

Nudged towards selfish values and away from compassionate ones.

Research finds that **when faced with selfish values being promoted or normalised, people tend to move their own attitudes and behaviours towards those values, and away from those that are more prosocial and altruistic**. In keeping with this, studies find that pornography increases unethical behaviour, even that unrelated to sex, such as lying in the workplace. One way it does this is by increasing viewers' tendency to objectify others – when people are objectified, they are seen as having less of a mind, and being less competent, less sensitive to pain and/or less deserving of moral treatment.

Sex becomes acting, losing flow and connection.

Porn use reduces sexual satisfaction over time, and one way it seems to do so is by teaching sex as a performance of (usually gendered) roles. People become focussed on 'successfully' playing their part, and in this process sex becomes untethered from interpersonal attunement, flow and intimacy – and thus the potential for sex and these relational elements to mutually heighten one another is lost.

Love and vulnerability move out of reach.

Research also finds that **porn use can cause relationship problems: causing them to break-down or diminish in quality**. Reasons for this likely include how pornography invites viewers to disregard and demote both love and vulnerability. These two elements of intimate relationships have at their heart fragile paradoxes which can be broken by porn's emphasis on 'number one', performance, role and appearance.

This analysis finds porn is a prime example of what can happen when we treat one another as less than human. In tandem, this should inform our thinking about what it means to do the opposite. We can apply this analysis to all parts of society, asking the core questions of our policies, practices, processes: do they respect and support people's humanity, or do they disregard or, at worst, violate aspects of it? Our intrinsic values, autonomy and capacities for connection and self-embrace are core human goods and should be considered in all big decisions that affect us.

Q: Do you like having your picture taken?

A: I don't like having my picture taken.

Q: Do you believe that it is possible that, at some point in the future, one will be able to achieve sexual satisfaction, "complete" sexual satisfaction, for instance by taking a pill?

A: I doubt that it's impossible.

Q: You don't like the idea.

A: No, I think under those conditions we would know less than we do now.

Q: Know less about each other.

A: Of course.

From 'The Explanation'
Donald Barthelme: Forty Stories

1. Introduction

What is pornography in this age of ever-present technology? How does it work and what does it do? What does it mean for our hopes for young people? How does it affect our potential for what we might call a fully human existence? These are the fundamental questions about porn that Fully Human Issue #1 seeks to explore.

There now exists a robust body of research evidencing various effects of pornography on both young people and adults, and this is critical to our ability to find answers to these questions. Alone however this research is insufficient – here we look beyond individual 'impacts' of porn to explore what lies beneath, joining up these studies with research on the core qualities of human flourishing, as well as the essential aspects of the porn complex and experience – always asking what one means for the other.

One backdrop to this report is the long-standing heated debate about pornography, with people divided broadly along liberal, conservative and feminist lines, and the arguments centred on whether pornography should be censored given (contested) harms to women and the family, or whether in fact that constitutes an infringement of individual rights and freedoms. The analysis here and the position we come to does not neatly sit within any of these camps, nor indeed this debate as a whole. First our focus is on today's mainstream online porn, and its which, when taken as a whole, differs in some fundamental ways from earlier pornography.

Second, the different views in this debate arise from people giving more or less weight to different values (for example, some emphasising individual freedoms versus others prioritising equality), yet we see each of these as core to a fully human existence and seek to foreground them all – perhaps at their most fundamental these core 'goods' being autonomy, connection and justice. Third, our focus here is largely on surfacing the fundamentals at play, rather than presenting the case for specific ways forward – this exploration being a necessary basis for those subsequent discussions.

The themes of visibility and invisibility run throughout. What do viewers see and what don't they? What do those behind the algorithms see, and what do they hide? What are the elemental qualities of being human that are both profoundly 'known' but all too infrequently articulated, and in what ways might they be quietly chipped away at by today's online porn? **By bringing all of this to the surface, we can more clearly think about what porn means for our children and young people, and for all of us, and what we can do in the effort to chart a fully human course forwards.**

Note that, whilst important, this analysis does not focus on the impact on individuals in videos on porn sites. Recent activism and media coverage has highlighted how porn sites have been hosting and profiting from videos of abuse: girls and women (in the main) suffering the severe trauma of images of their abuse being seen by thousands and having no means to prevent it.

2. The nature, dynamics and business model of online porn

Our exploration of today's mainstream and free online porn begins with what is seen and how it is seen, before moving on to what is hidden, porn's meta-messages, propaganda and practices of viewer surveillance and manipulation.

Pornhub and the practices of its owner, the Canadian company MindGeek, are a particular focus given that Pornhub is the most popular porn site in the UK and MindGeek are one of the biggest players in the industry (also owning sites such as YouPorn, RedTube and GayTube and various porn production and fee-based online porn companies).

In addition, Pornhub's 'Insights' blog provides useful data, and MindGeek's practices do not appear to be 'outliers' in the industry (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). It is important to note that we are not making the claim that MindGeek's practices are more problematic than those of its competitors.

The porn tube site experience

Visit PornHub and you are bombarded with images and videos. As Margaret MacDonald[2] observes 'the overall effect of this homepage layout is not an impression of any individual video or scene, but rather the endless variety and availability of them, flowing inexhaustibly down the screen'.

'The effect is to draw the viewer's eye clock-wise...The result is a cyclical viewing pattern that compels viewers to browse the entire space... well known to designers of other consumer spaces, such as supermarkets... The aim is to softly persuade viewers into continuing to search for an 'imagined perfect image'... however, nothing compares to an imagined perfect image, leaving every image inadequate... viewers forego the pleasures of the known for the pleasures of the unknown.'

Patrick Keilty (2018): *Desire by design: pornography as technology industry.*

The exception here are those videos serving as adverts for paid sites and services, which take up more space on the screen and play without prompting in fast-forward. To give a flavour of this barrage of videos and images, this was the content immediately seen on visits to PornHub on a random day[3]:

- Video adverts (attention is immediately drawn to them because of their size, placement and movement) including close-up footage of a girl's anus being penetrated by a man's penis whilst she bends over on a car, and a middle-aged man coming up behind a girl opening a fridge in her underwear (seemingly looking for food) and then without warning immediately penetrating her from behind, her expression shows shock at this
- Numerous thumbnail images of films available to view upon clicking, below which are their keyworded titles such as 'fucked hard from black man'; 'redhead allowed to fuck her ass for iphone'; 'daughter knows her step-dad wants her' (accompanied by picture of a girl in pigtails); 'finally my mom let me fuck (first time with my thai mom)'; and 'too cute amateur girl for anal sex casting'. Of the eleven first listed films, three involved 'step sisters' and three involved 'step moms'. Alongside more general nudity, the viewer is overwhelmed with close-up imagery of female genitals and anuses, and their penetration with penises.

The menu bar at the top of the page lists options such as 'fuck now', 'live sex' and 'categories' ('categories' include 'teen', 'gangbangs' and 'bdsm'[4]). Videos are arranged approximately four or five per row and some rows are labelled, one set being 'recommended for you'[5].

The term **girl** here is used to describe a female who looks young, teens or early twenties, often placed in the site's 'teen' category.

BDSM refers to Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism. BDSM pornography mostly comprises violent or dominating sex, with men usually in the dominant position. Themes of humiliation and degradation are common. Not readily visible within BDSM porn are the themes of consent, safety and trust that many who practice BDSM in real life see as central.[4]

Gathering, storing, processing and analyzing billions of data points a day is a colossal challenge that MindGeek Engineering embraces... MindGeek data scientists have developed sophisticated machine learning algorithms to mine the data and extract the meaning from the noise.

MindGeek website (2020)[1]

This is where a person is treated as a means to an end (such as someone else's sexual pleasure). Their feelings, thoughts and ability to choose and act are seen as unimportant or absent.

In contrast to the now almost unavoidable, prominent cookie notices and invitations to adjust settings displayed on most mainstream websites, PornHub has a very small notice likely missed by most at the bottom of its page with no options for cookie customization. Its privacy policy displays in extremely small font that is hard to read.

Common themes

I won't shoot any kind of incest scenes. I realize that's cutting my work in half but I just don't feel okay doing those scenes anymore... I don't want some kid seeing me on film coaxing my 'step-brother' into fucking me and that kid thinking it's okay to do that to his little sister or cousin. I shudder to think about it.

Gia Paige, pornography actor[6]

Society has made some progress to become less tolerant of prejudice, violence, coercion and the abuse of power. Within porn, however, these and related injustices are not only given free rein, but are normalised, sexualised and glorified. Common themes in mainstream porn include sexism and racism; violence, hostility and denigration; emotional manipulation and deception; unrealistic or lack of sexual consent; objectification; 'teen' and incest.

In an analysis of the content of 400 of the most popular free online pornography films, Marleen Klaassen and Jochen Peter found that 41% of professional videos depicted violence towards women.[7]

The two most common forms of violence were spanking and gagging (inserting a penis very far into the mouth). Women's responses to this violence were for the most part neutral or positive. Men dominating women were also common, as were women being instrumentalised (i.e. used as a sexual object whose own sexual pleasure is not important). A concerning minority of films depicted non-consensual, deceptive or manipulative sex. In an analysis of communication in porn, Malachi Willis and colleagues[8] found that films typically conveyed harmful myths about consent, such as women are indirect and men are direct; some behaviours such as sexual touching do not need explicit consent; and people can consent to sexual activity by doing nothing.

In an Australian study in 2018 exploring what adolescents and young adults actually see when they view porn (complementing the analyses of porn content), Angela Davis and colleagues[9] found that 70% frequently saw men portrayed as dominant (compared to 17% frequently seeing women as dominant); 36% frequently saw women being called names or slurs (compared to 7% frequently seeing men treated this way); 35% frequently saw 'consensual' violence towards women (compared to 9% frequently seeing this towards men); and 11% frequently saw non-consensual violence towards women (compared to 1% frequently seeing this towards men).

This figure dropped to 37% when films labelled 'amateur' were also included. A separate content analysis by Fiona Vera-Gray and colleagues (2021) of the video titles found on the landing pages of the UK's three most popular porn sites found that 12 per cent described sexual violence (this study used an arguably conservative measure of violence, for example excluding titles referencing bestiality as well as BDSM despite porn sites appearing to requisition the latter term as a shorthand for violence). Note that parallel analyses of violent content on porn sites aimed at gay men have not been conducted.

As Wikipedia (accessed September 2020) summarises, 'the relationship involves the traditional parental hierarchy of father-son dynamics, the daddy providing emotional support and guidance along with sexual encouragement and nurturing to the inexperienced and vulnerable partner.'

The 'teen' genre is one of the most common[10] and often involves adult men across the age range having sex with females who look younger than 18 and/or are signified as younger through props such as school uniform and pigtails. One of the most popular themes of gay male porn is 'Daddy' in which an older man is having sex with a younger male. Incest porn, also termed 'fauxcest', makes up a large proportion of commonly seen porn aimed at a heterosexual audience and includes both sex between step- and biological family members[11]. Fiona Vera-Gray and colleagues[12] found this to be the most frequent form of sexual violence described to viewers on popular porn site landing pages.

Beyond sexism, a further engrained prejudice in pornography is racism[13]. Demeaning stereotypes of women, girls and men of different ethnicities are promoted and sexualised. One content analysis found that videos with Asian and Latina women were more likely to depict aggression than those involving white and black women[14]. Another, in 2021, found black men more often portrayed as perpetrators of aggression than white men, and black women more often targets of aggression than white women[15]. Across the board, whiteness is not labelled and therefore presented as the default, with people of other ethnicities categorised and rendered a fetish[16].

Viewing porn

It seems that most children and young people who have seen pornography first do so accidentally, for example as a result of friends showing them videos on their phones, and frequent pop-ups on sites popular with children and young people (such as those that stream videos)[17].

In a recent BBFC survey, 11–13 year olds who had seen porn reported that 62% of this viewing had been 'more unintentional'. This dropped to 53% of 14–15 year olds and 46% of 16–17 year olds.

Some children hear a term such as 'sex' or 'porn' and search for it online not knowing what they will find. It is important to focus on the reality that these figures point to – for many children their first exploration of sex and sexuality is met with immediate and confronting close-up footage of forceful penetration, in which important boundaries are seen to be broken and people treated without care or respect. Often this is the depiction (at best) of rape.

For older young people and adults viewing porn tends to be more intentional. Statistics indicate that 'users' tend to view porn for about 10 minutes and visit approximately 10 pages in one session[18]. This is reflective of what is typically a fragmented and 'jumpy' interaction – people describe time on porn sites spent watching films in parallel, dipping in and out of them, fast-forwarding and rewinding, constantly trying to find the 'best' scenes to enhance their arousal, fuelled by the sense that there is infinite material out there[19].

'Intention' is complex, dimensional and, as we shall explore, can be undermined and manipulated by the online porn industry.

Why not think of sex as something you can get better at yourself? Then you'd not only be connecting with another person, but you'd be alive, growing, changing. Not stuck in a loop with an algorithm. If a device calculates a perfect sexual experience for you, then what's really happened is that you've been perfectly trained in a Skinner box.

Don't be a lab rat.

Jaron Lanier, 2019

Jaron Lanier in 'Dawn of the New Everything' discussing the 'sexual singularity', the idea that VR sex will get better than real sex because 'algorithms will get to know you and automatically design the ultimate partners for you'

There are also other, perhaps more profound ways in which porn is experienced very differently from other film 'entertainment'. Porn seems to encourage viewers to blur fact and fiction. Following his research with young male users of porn, Ferenc Marczali reflected that 'there seems to a peculiar ambiguity between the conscious and the not-so-conscious interpretation of my respondents: while all of them expressed directly or indirectly that they are aware of the fictional nature of pornography, simultaneously they were talking about pornography as if it were the documentation of non-fictional and non-performed sex'[20]. This perception may entwine with the immersion and identification that viewers also describe, wherein they can experience themselves as almost having the sex they are viewing[21].

Often it is objectively unclear what is 'real' and what is staged within pornography. For example, 'casting couch porn' shows women being penetrated by porn directors as part of selection into the industry – this may either be a real event or staged. 'Amateur' porn may be professional porn made to look amateur, or genuine uploaded 'home videos'. The latter are in large supply on mainstream tube sites, given that uploading is made as easy as possible for users: they can do so anonymously and without needing to prove the consent of those on camera. It is therefore unsurprising that much of this footage is in fact of real rape and abuse, or consenting sex shared without consent, itself an act of violence[22].

Even professional porn depicting a fictional story has an ambiguous quality. It is, to a greater or lesser extent, a film of a reality which cannot be undone. As Adrian Nathan West writes in his Aesthetics of Degradation, 'we are accustomed to dismissing the savagery of pornography by saying, it is only a movie, they are just actors. But no one pretends to cover a woman's face in semen, or choke her, or piss in her mouth... She did not pretend to gasp or burst into sobs when she awoke.'[23] The action is irreversible. Josette Feral suggests that actions being 'reversible' is central to something remaining theatre (performance or fiction)[24]. At the most basic level, the sex filmed is real not pretended, but going further, porn may often include coercion or manipulation that women (in particular) did not know of in advance or consent to. Porn production can also follow from dynamics that render any consent invalid – in other words the consent does not remove the violation. Porn of this nature is therefore footage of real sexual assault, involving real pain, shame, humiliation, embarrassment, shock, dissociation, or disgust, sometimes expressed, sometimes not. Adrian Nathan West quotes porn director Khan Tusion sharing how he tries to to capture women's real distress, 'I let lots of things go and will ask a small and poignant question at an awkward time so that they are defenseless and you get an honest response' (rather than one that is acted).

In response to recent media coverage and campaigning about this, PornHub has removed 10 million videos, banned downloads, and only accepts uploads from people with verified identities. These changes whilst welcome do not adequately prevent this abuse, and other platforms continue to allow anonymous uploads and downloads – a spokesperson at Xvideos described the investigative journalist whose work was pivotal in forcing the changes on Pornhub as 'Santa Claus' because of the gift these represented to its competitors.

A simple example of this is porn involving an underage young person. There are also various more complex situations in which people consent to filmed sex they find distressing, because for example, it feels familiar, confirming feelings of worthlessness, or it is one option within a false choice (for example, porn or homelessness, the option of neither not being present).

In Jon Ronson's investigative podcast, The Last Days of August, looking at the events leading up to porn actor August Ames' suicide in 2017, her husband recounts the violation she experienced during filming of a porn scene. When Ronson interviewed those involved in shooting the scene, none of them could see that she had suffered during it, seemingly because it was all seen as just 'acting'

Face it – this is the type of porn you enjoy. You may not like yourself for it, but so what. Now get ready to JACK OFF!

Why do these girls allow themselves to be treated like this? Why do the people who own porn companies finance filth like this? Any why can't I stop myself jacking off to it? Why? Why? Why?

Text accompanying porn films cited in Rebecca Whisnant's 'From Jekyll to Hyde, the grooming of male pornography consumers'.

The contradictory yet simultaneous rendering of porn as both fact and fiction are central to its success. The feeling that what is on screen is authentic drives immersion, arousal and, at times, entwining feelings of dominance, humiliation and control. In parallel, its presentation as fiction is a salve for viewers' ethical qualms and protects it from wider societal scrutiny. **One moment, a woman or girl's real emotion is evoked and displayed for the viewer's desire, the next it is hidden behind a façade for the same purpose.**

There are various other methods by which porn consumers are invited to ignore any discomfort they have with what they are watching. In their analysis of online porn film titles, Fiona Vera-Gray and colleagues[25] found that 'depictions of practices that meet criminal standards of sexual violence, including rape, incest and so-called 'revenge porn', are labelled in ways that not only minimise or remove their criminality but often mock or belittle the possibility of harm'. Text alongside violent footage may tell viewers that the woman is in fact 'loving it', that any objection is squeamishness, they should just focus on their arousal and anyway, their watching is inevitable: they have no agency not to[26]. More simply, celebratory user commentary, ratings and viewing figures accompanying each video serve to normalise and legitimise viewing giving the sense that 'everyone else is watching this, so it must be OK'.

Despite these efforts to normalise and legitimise viewing, and at times viewers' own cognitive distortions, many seem left with difficult feelings such as sadness, shame, confusion, shock, self-dislike, emptiness, and a sense of dirtiness.

These emotions may contribute to an unsettling ongoing ambivalent relationship with porn and feelings of reduced agency. On the other hand, others seem unfazed and emotionally detached. Each of these states arguably testify to how pornography may compromise human integrity and flourishing[28].

Surveillance and manipulation

Have audiences grown exponentially more fond of incest porn in the last decade?

Margaret MacDonald (2019)

Various dominant beliefs about porn work to limit concern and keep scrutiny at bay. One of the most powerful and deceptive is that porn is a simple reflection of human sexuality. This runs something along the lines of: much of porn might be unsavoury but that's not porn's 'fault', porn is simply serving people their sexuality back to them at it's most raw and real. A related view is that porn usefully enables people to discover their sexuality – by following their arousal to porn, they will discover their authentic sexual selves. Indeed this is often the reason young people give for viewing it[29]. Yet porn is fundamentally a commercial enterprise. Online porn platforms are in the main no different from other tech platforms offering seemingly free services and products with the view to 'activate commercial intent' and 'prioritise commerce-driven experiences'[30]. They are not seeking to feed your core sexual needs, anymore than fast food companies are simply seeking to feed your core nutritional needs.

You'll come across clips that, the person, you know being, seemingly umm... tied up and whipped and raped, by twenty or thirty people and you watch the entire thing and then there will be an interview at the end, with them, umm quite normally, talking and laughing about the segment they've shot, umm, so it takes what is quite a degrading scene and normalizes it, at the end, by making it quite clear, that it was something that they'd gone into consensually and enjoyed

22-year-old male student[27]

Sexual scripts **are mental stories, blueprints or guidelines of how sexual encounters happen and what they involve, or what is sexy.**

Human sexuality contains a multitude of potentials but the pornography industry can only make big money from certain patterns of sexual arousal, particular 'sexual scripts'. Sexual arousal and desire can be based on and enhance feelings of love, personal connection and intimacy. But it can also spring from feelings of hostility, power, and denigration, and this sexuality is far easier to monetise. Sexual feelings that arise between two people based purely on their interpersonal attraction and chemistry are in the dynamic between people, they are unknowable and unreachable to pornographers. There is no easy 'market' here.

In contrast, **the porn business can readily showcase, encourage interest in, and thus make money from, opposing sexual scripts, notably those of impersonal sex, boundary breaking, objectification, violence, misogyny, dominance, and 'the corruption of innocence'. These scripts have multiple roots** – many seem to reflect centuries of misogynistic thinking (which we seem to often forget we live in close temporal proximity to), as well as more specific historical sexist conceptions of females, sex and sexuality. One example of these is the Victorian categorisation of females as 'innocent' virgins, asexual wives and mothers, or 'whores'[31], and the ensuing interest in those moving from one category to another. Jennifer Johnson argues, alongside others, that in late capitalism there exists a 'male paradox of power' in which 'institutional male power coexists with a personal sense of powerlessness among men', and that pornography attempts to save the union of patriarchy and capitalism by offering micropower to those men feeling threatened or helpless[32].

The key point here is that pornography profits from indulging and developing certain, often highly problematic, sexual interests at the expense of those that are 'personal' – those where we find connection, depth, spirituality, chemistry, fulfilment and love. **In its quest for profit, the porn industry seeks to nudge, shape and co-author people's sexualities, undermining their autonomy and much more besides. Children and young people are most at risk of this co-authorship (or what we might call 'land grab') given that they have not had the protected space to establish contrasting sexual scripts.** But how exactly does online porn do this? What is its business model?

Online porn platforms typically operate a freemium model and depend on economies of scale. Their wide, sticky net of free online porn captures millions upon millions of viewers, a small fraction of whom will follow adverts to paid sexual 'services'[33]. These include pay-to-view porn sites, often themselves owned and produced by the same companies, as well as live web camming and 'escort' services. Formerly in charge of optimisation at MindGeek, Brandon Retty describes a 'washing machine effect' in which the company's free and paid sites push viewers between them[34]. More recently, money is also made from viewers subscribing to tube sites' 'premium' services, which similarly offer more content, as well as virtual reality porn and longer videos.

Longer time spent on a site means more exposure to its adverts. So alongside high viewing figures, online porn platforms seek high engagement: lots of people spending as much time as possible on them. In line with other tech companies, providers like MindGeek use different techniques to do this, for example, undertaking constant, iterative A/B testing. Viewers are presented with different versions of the same video, if more view B than A, B is rolled out, and then two slightly different versions of B are compared, and so on[34]. These processes of 'optimisation' are further combined with users' data to provide individualised content. User behaviour is extensively tracked across all their sites in the search for higher revenues[35]. Individuals' data, gathered without informed consent, is fed into machine learning algorithms which assess, categorise and serve up the content that is deemed most likely to nudge specific people to spend – this includes both free content that keeps them on the site (such as images, keywords, videos) and the content of adverts. To put it more simply, a person using PornHub (and many similar sites) is surveilled and targeted with content calculated as most likely to get them in particular to spend. People's data used in this project include their age, gender, location, device, and the minutiae of their behaviour on the site in question and others. The wide net is made as sticky as possible.

Companies using people's data to target them with bespoke invitations to spend (specific adverts and the like), is an increasingly familiar story. The critical point here is that pornography targets us most intimately and aims to use people's data to shape their feelings, attitudes, intentions and behaviour, their very selves, towards those commercial ends.

Drawing together various elements of online porn discussed so far, Figure 1 shows a simplified model of what this looks like in practice. Viewers start in the 'green zone' and when they enter the 'red zone' they are spending money (for example by subscribing to a paid porn site). Few people ever enter the red zone, but more will get there if they are constantly being nudged from the green zone into the blue zone, then from the blue into the purple. Note that the green zone is in itself highly problematic as it is already set up to prime people to start on these journeys.

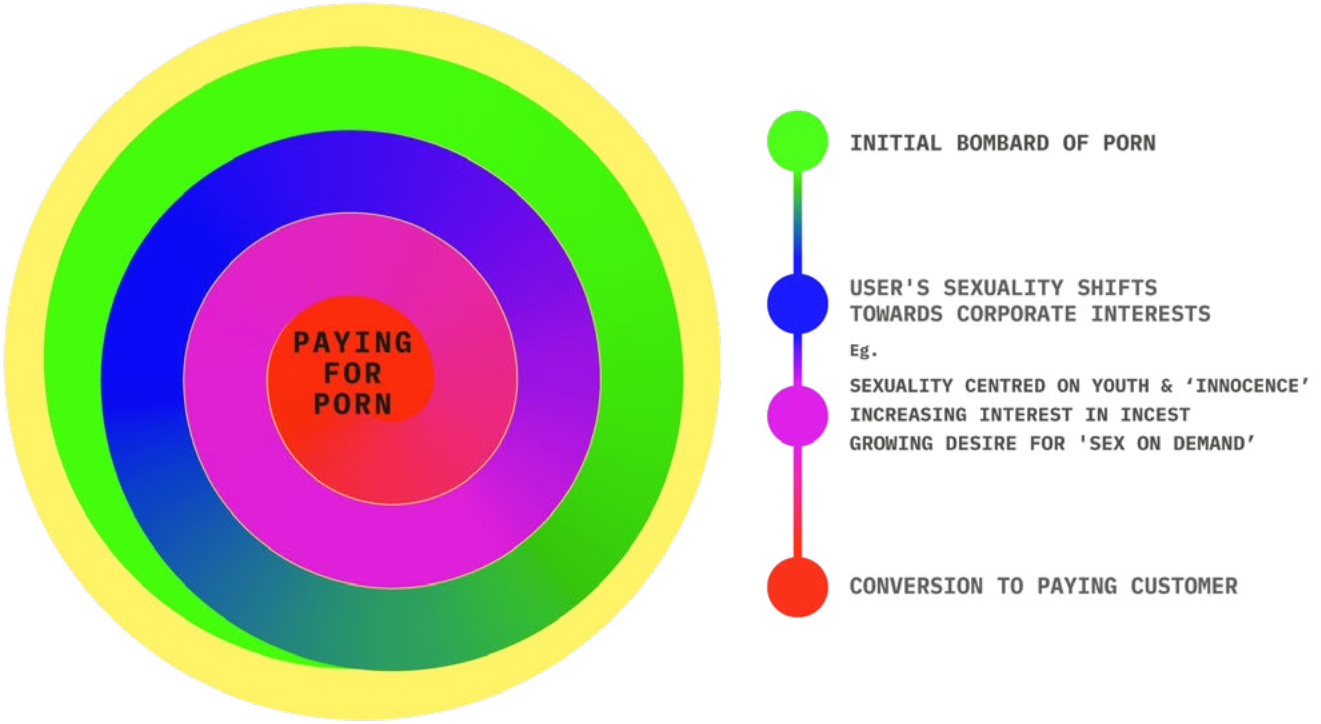


Figure 1 - the spiral

Information gathered on a person is used to determine which route is the company's best bet for nudging them towards the red (these might also be dubbed 'yes ladders'). Route one could be arousal centring more on violence and degradation, route two, an increasing desire for sex with someone now, route three: a growing fascination with incest, and route four: a narrowing focus on 'innocence' and youth. In reality there are multiple overlapping and interacting pathways that are not mutually exclusive. **The fundamental point is that the porn a person sees is chosen by an algorithm in order to craft their personal sexuality, and associated emotions and beliefs, towards another's' profit. Surveillance is a primary tool in the quest for maximum manipulation.**

Of late, increasing media, academic and regulatory attention is being given to the myriad ways tech companies are harvesting people's data to hold their attention and more broadly, use their psychology against them[36]. The implications of this 'corrosive business model' for our ability to live rich, connective, and deeply human lives are starting to be widely discussed and felt – and within this there is a rightful growing focus on children and young people[37]. Whilst pornography, as ever, seems out of range of these discussions, to those who do look, it would seem **one of the most sinister examples of this form of capitalism. This is in part because it is kept out of range – as society turns a blind eye, the industry is left free to target people's vulnerabilites, manipulating their sexuality towards abusive, unhealthy and bigoted interests. And in the face of these state-of-the-art technologies[38], children and young people are afforded no extra safety or protection.**

In Jon Ronson's podcast The Butterfly Effect (2017), the former head of affiliate marketing for Ashley Madison recounted how the company got 80% of its revenue via ads on MindGeek porn tube sites; he describes a 'yes ladder' effect whereby porn made men more open (saying 'yes') to what might be termed 'no strings attached' sex, in turn leading them to Ashley Madison which offered opportunities for infidelity.

Meta-messages

Next we turn to look more directly at central parts of our personhood, things which when they flourish, we flourish. In order to think clearly about pornography's relationship to these vital aspects of being human, it is useful to hold in mind the implicit messages that free mainstream online porn communicates to its viewers. These messages, which might be better described as invitations to think similarly, are whispered, shouted, or preached through various combinations of videos, forum comments, layout features, keywords, site blogs, ancillary sites, and beyond. Each viewer will receive their own medley of invitations, in which some are dialled up and others down, depending on what is most likely to fulfil the corporate financial interest.

Overall, free mainstream online porn invites its viewers to think that:

- In sex the primary concern should be your own arousal – following this at the expense of your values and empathy is sexual freedom
- Sexual arousal is all there is to our sexuality
- Sex is about the use of another's body for one's own pleasure
- Values and norms about how other people should be respected do not apply to sex
- Sexually exciting encounters typically involve dominance, power imbalances, and the transgression of boundaries, for example around childhood, honesty, respect, consent and family relationships – so in fact what is sexy is often criminal and abusive
- Equal and intimate relationships are not where the heights of sexual pleasure lie
- Open communication in sex is abnormal, unnecessary, unsexy
- Everyone watches porn and there are many watching worse content than you
- Masculinity is about dominance, and in sex men should generally lead or be in control
- Big penises are best, as are generally big breasts (alongside various other body specifications)
- A lot of women and girls like sex in which they are hurt, humiliated, dominated or persuaded into it

3. Our core values and ethics

Figure 2

Research indicates that whilst there are many things we might view as important (for example, wealth, status, personal pleasure, unity with nature, friendship, and social justice), these all tend to fit into universal, structured sets.

Whilst Schwartz's **self-transcendent values** differ in some ways from the intrinsic values of Self-Determination Theory, they overlap sufficiently to be considered interchangeable for our purposes, and Common Cause Foundation term this broad cluster 'compassionate' values. Each of these labels emphasises different qualities to these values: they are intrinsic, they are self-transcendent and they are compassionate. The same approach is adopted here for extrinsic, self-enhancement or selfish values.

What we value, i.e. place importance on, is core to who we are as individuals and as a collective (whether that be a community, society or the human race). Our values shape our attitudes, our behaviour, our identity, and the meaning and purpose we give our lives. Values and their related overlapping constructs (such as goals and morals) have been the subject of a range of psychological theories and research literatures[39], each with a different focus and often their own vocabulary, but together complementing one another and informing a deep understanding of what it is to be human, and to live more authentically. Key insights across these literatures are explored, leading to analysis of what they mean for our understanding of porn and its impact on individuals, societies and our world.

Human values are both diverse and predictable. The same varied set of core set of values are found across numerous cultures studied (naturally with some cultures giving certain values more weight than others) and these values relate to one another in consistent ways[40].

One set of universal values, variously termed Self-Transcendent, Intrinsic or Compassionate, includes things like honesty, mature love, and a world of beauty. These values cluster around care for each other and the world. Whilst these values are found to complement self-direction and personal growth, they are in opposition to the set of values variously labelled Self-Enhancement, Extrinsic or Selfish which include things like wealth, achievement, power and image. These latter values are concerned with individuals 'getting ahead' and are found to sit comfortably with hedonism.

It is not that people cannot hold 'opposing' values in parallel – most people do, rather it's that these clusters of values weigh against one another. **The more weight a person places on intrinsic or compassionate values, the less likely they are to see extrinsic or selfish values as important.** Numerous experimental studies find that when people attend to their intrinsic values, they care less about extrinsic things, and vice versa[41]. In other words, if a large slice of their 'values pie' is caring for others, other slices focussed on themselves will be small – or as Tom Crompton at the Common Cause Foundation has suggested, as we blow up compassionate balloons inside ourselves, there is less space for selfish ones and they shrink in response (or vice versa) [Fig. 2]. And fundamentally, most people do hold their compassionate values as more important than those focussed on self-interest. A large UK survey by the Common Cause Foundation found this to be true of 74% of adults, and a recent survey of UK 7–18 year olds by Global Action Plan found this to be true of 86% of young people[42].

As might be expected, what we value is influenced by messages from institutions, organisations and corporations about what is important, as well as what we think the people around us care about[43]. Of concern, both adults and children tend to under-estimate how much others prioritise compassionate values, and over-estimate how much they care about things like status, money and appearance[44] – in short, people tend to

assume the world is driven by selfishness even though it isn't. This misperception grows as children grow into adults[45] and is likely driven in part by corporate profit-driven messaging, implicitly conveying that others' are more status driven and self-interested than they really are. This mistaken assumption can in turn influence people's own behaviour – for example, in the Global Action Plan study, children shared that they might hide how much they cared about people and nature due to fears of being judged, bullied and less liked, and because they wanted to fit in and not feel alone. This might then result in actions or inaction that suggests to us that we are more self-interested than we really are. More generally, when we act in line with our values they strengthen, like muscles, whilst those in opposition weaken.

Intrinsic values are in large part those that we might describe as ethical or moral; they enable us to live in harmony with one another and the world. An interesting theory[46] built on a wealth of anthropological, zoological and psychological findings argues that in hunter-gatherer groups humans evolved to be 'assertively egalitarian'. They held close to and acted in line with principles which stressed the importance of connection, trust, co-operation and fairness. In contrast, the social structures of our earlier non-human primate ancestors were based around hierarchy, dominance and submission. This has left us with two implicit opposing 'mental sets', each activated by different social cues, one based around equality and co-operation, the other around status and dominance. From this vantage point, our intrinsic values might be described as our most 'human'. Whatever their origin, we find that these **intrinsic values are of fundamental importance, beyond even the social harmony they support. They are linked to greater wellbeing and vitality, both collectively and individually**[47]. And individuals who hold intrinsic values tend to experience greater autonomy, they are more readily able to embrace intimacy and they hold a clearer, resolved identity[48]. Conversely, research indicates that oppositional values such as materialism lower both individual and societal wellbeing[49].

Sanctity

When thinking about how pornography may pull us away from things we think are important, it's worth considering that the values humans tend to intuitively feel are 'moral' go beyond those that concern being fair to others or harming them. Through cross-cultural research on morality, psychologist Jonathan Haidt has suggested we have several 'moral taste buds' including one centred on sanctity, and its opposition, degradation[50]. It's existence is perhaps most memorably illustrated with his chicken experiment: People are presented with a scenario in which a man buys a chicken from a supermarket and then goes home and has sex with it, before cooking and eating it. Most people of different cultures and demographics judge this to be wrong. This feeling of wrong-doing emanates from what anthropologist Richard Shweder and colleagues termed 'the ethic of divinity', the sense that our souls, our bodies and the universe hold a 'sacredness' – they are inherently special and are to be respected[51]. Honouring 'the sacred' is connected to feelings of elevation, whereas dishonour and degradation provoke repugnance – this feeling may at times be a valuable warning to us 'not to transgress what is unspeakably profound'. So much of porn appears to delight in this transgression.

> *Repugnance... revolts against the excesses of human wilfulness, warning us not to transgress what is unspeakably profound. Indeed, in this age in which everything is held to be permissible so long as it is freely done, in which our given human nature no longer commands respect, in which our bodies are regarded as mere instruments of our autonomous rational wills, repunance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.*
>
> Leon Kass (1997)[52]

> *One thing my internet fiddles had pretty much always done was make me feel horrible afterwards. Yes, it was weird, but every time I masturbated to porn I'd always feel a little bit ashamed, a little bit sad, a little bit 'urgh, I don't really like myself now' after. I remember discussing this with a bloke who used porn a lot.*
>
> *'How do you feel afterwards?'*
>
> *'Oh, yeah, really terrible and worthless,' he'd replied.*
>
> *My behaviour post-internet wank supported this...I didn't tweet, 'Just had a wank to porn! #wanking'. I deleted my computer's history, I washed my hands and I lied to my mother about what I'd been doing if she called.*
>
> Lucy-Ann Holmes (2019) *Don't hold my head down*

Pornography and values

How does all of this inform our understanding of porn and its impact? To summarise, research suggests a common conception of what is good and finds that compassionate and self-transcendent values are better for individuals, societies and the world. In tandem, humans have a profound awareness of sanctity, which can contribute to respect for people and the planet. In direct opposition to all of this, we have seen how mainstream pornography unapologetically promotes self-interest and indulges in people being controlled, manipulated, degraded, humiliated and hurt.

We can expect pornography to work like any other promoter of selfish values – in short, increasing the degree to which people hold selfish values, act in line with them, and think that others do too – and of course, doing the opposite for compassionate values. Consistent with this analysis, research finds that adolescent pornography use correlates with hedonism and self-enhancement values, and is negatively related to self-transcendence values – this is likely to represent a bi-directional relationship in which values predict pornography use and are influenced by pornography[53]. Going further, studies using a range of methods are consistent in indicating that viewing pornography can increase unethical behaviour[54]. One study, for example, found that it increased the proclivity to lie in order to shirk commitments[55].

Moral disengagement

Porn doesn't just encourage unethical behaviour by promoting selfish values, it also directly supports 'moral disengagement mechanisms', a set of cognitive processes that work to unhook people from their morality. These strategies support, legitimise or justify moral transgressions, serving to hide the wrongdoing both from self and others. Perhaps the most extensively studied of these strategies is dehumanization, also termed objectification. In this process, certain groups of people are seen as lacking either uniquely human and/or human nature attributes. The former are those qualities seen to distinguish us from animals (such as rationality, intelligence, morality and agency), the latter are those felt to be deep within us, universal and distinguishing us from inanimate objects (such as warmth and emotionality)[56]. So **when people are objectified, they are perceived as having less of a mind, and being less competent, less sensitive to pain, and/or less deserving of moral treatment[57]. In turn, various actions that hurt and harm them can be viewed as acceptable, or indeed logical.** For example, if people are not viewed as having agency, as being independent decision makers, they can be excluded from involvement in decisions that affect them; if people are viewed as less capable of pain and hurt, they can be the target of aggression, and so on.

A particular focus in media on women's appearance or sexual features and functions is inherently objectfiying, so it unsurprising that research indicates that pornography usage increases viewers' tendency to objectify women[58]. Given the link between objectification and attitudes supportive of sexual violence and harassment[59], this is likely to explain at least in part, pornography's role in spurring this behaviour. Interestingly, the study cited above that found porn to increase lying, found it did so via its impact on objectification – it is easier to lie to others when they are simply viewed as a means to an end. Note the spill-over effects implied here – when people objectify those they see on screen, they are more likely to objectify those around them.

Other moral disengagement mechanisms that we can predict porn to encourage include: euphemistic labelling (for example, aggression, degradation and humiliation labelled as 'hardcore' or 'bdsm'); palliative comparison (for example, the implicit message that there are many out there watching 'worse'); misconstruing and minimising the consequences of actions (for example, painful actions usually depicted as not causing pain); and victim blaming (for example, regular derogatory labelling of women and girls as sluts, whores, and bitches[60]).

In summary, through a set of powerful, interlocking processes, mainstream **online porn works to pull people away in their thoughts and actions from their intrinsic values and moral core. Yet these are central parts of being human. When we act in line with them, we are more content, integrated and vitalised, and we contribute to the good of others and the world in which we live.**

[BDSM Revisited]

As discussed, porn routinely and inaccurately uses the term BDSM to describe films of violent and hostile sex which are void of the safety and consent framework that those who practice BDSM stress as being integral to it.

4. Sexual relating

Human flourishing

Schools of thought drawn upon here include evolutioary psychology; transpersonal psychology; philosophies of relationship and sexuality; and theories about body image, the self, self-concept and self-esteem (such as those that conceptualise self-objectification, and also those drawn upon in therapy).

Evolution selects for individuals and groups whose children have children, not simply for individuals who have children. If we simply see evolution selecting for the ability to produce one's own children, this can lead to unfounded views about the primal nature of individualism.

Like our values, our sexuality and our relationships with others and ourselves are core parts of being human and can richly feed our flourishing and fulfilment. In this and in the subsequent two sections, we consider the potential of each to deepen the human experience, reflecting on themes of acceptance, attunement, vulnerbility, and play. This exploration in turn provides a vantage point from which we ask different questions about the experience and impact of porn.

An outdated but still prevalent view is that evolution has given us sexual feelings simply for us to have our own children. This view can reinforce beliefs which diminish people and their sexuality (such as the view that men are 'hard-wired' to seek as many sexual partners as possible) and is in fact at odds with modern evolutionary theory and research. This instead sees sexual feelings being selected by evolution to support various other functions beyond direct conception, such as bonding between parents, bonding between 'alloparents' (for example women who co-parent) and bonding within groups, which all come under the label of 'affiliation'[63]. This broad view of evolution expanding the role of sexual feelings complements our everyday experience of **human sexuality having a multitude of potentials, including its ability to deepen and energise human relationships, evoke and enable vulnerability, interplay with spirituality, and act as a central energising force.**

Sexual chemistry

Sexual chemistry between two people, described as 'a mysterious, physical, emotional and sexual state'[64], is a delightful, synergistic human experience which both energises and affirms, whether it be an immediate experience upon meeting or something that evolves over time. Responding to the request to describe romantic chemistry, participants in a study by Kelly Campbell and colleagues brought to life this beautiful dimension of human experience with comments such as 'romantic chemistry feels like floating. It makes me feel confident, powerful... it feels like I have everything I need and want'; 'absorbing, riveting, inescapable... as if the world suddenly became background to this one person'; 'you are able to be yourself, you want to be real with that person'. Chemistry involves an interactive process in which people both appreciate one another and enjoy the other's appreciation. There is a feeling of being drawn to the other and a desire for mutual openness[65].

Two ends of a spectrum

Sexual experiences themselves can be broadly divided into those comprising a form of intimacy and connection, and those that are focussed on roles, performance, acts and scripts[66] – though these are perhaps more accurately seen as two ends of a spectrum. Those at the intimate end often follow from chemistry, and involve flow and attunement. Sexual desire heightens and is heightened by mutual vulnerability and cherishing of one another. Research studies find that both early to mid-adolescent boys and girls primarily desire sexual experiences for intimacy

All young people have the right to author a sexuality that is authentic and rooted in respect, intimacy and connection

Gail Dines[61]

Users looking for a more realistic porn-viewing experience could tune-in and unzip, getting everything they needed without all the real-world troubles. Who needs an IRL (in real life) partner when you have POV (point of view) Pornhub videos on your side?

PornHub Insights 2019[62]

and emotional connection[67], but boys, perhaps increasingly as they enter late adolescence and early adulthood, feel the pressure to negotiate these desires with conflicting norms of masculinity[68].

Martin Buber's work has shaped modern humanistic psychology and person-centred therapy, as well as civil rights activism

In an influential philosophical work, Martin Buber marks a distinction between 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' relationships, with those that are I-Thou involving reciprocity, self-transcendence and presence[69]. In these relationships, two people come together in what Buber terms 'the between' – this is beyond either individual and involves mutual attunement and dialogue. Mark Levand and Nicolle Zapien draw on Buber's thinking to describe experiences of sexual intimacy which are both profound and ethical[70]. In these experiences people are focussed on one another in the moment in 'reflective embodied engagement', and there is an openness to seeing the other person and being seen oneself, all of this involving an element that is pre-conscious. This, they compellingly argue, is the heart of sexual consent, and so consent requires the willingness of both people to enter into an 'I-Thou' relationship with the other. 'while likely peppered with moments of I-It relationality and distraction from the present moment... one is always able to renew the willingness and openness to the I-Thou and to consent anew through choice'.

This thinking on human relationships and sexual intimacy resonates deeply with James Carse's philosophy of life as finite and infinite play. ***'There are at least two kinds of game', he writes, 'a finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play'***[71]. The same activity in life (for example, education, work, parenting, relationships, sexual relating) can be played in either fashion. Finite play involves rules, prediction, scripts, 'theatre' (i.e. performance for an audience), and, of course, winners, losers and endings. In contrast infinite play involves openness – to discovery of self and others, to change, to surprise, to touch – touch being a reciprocal experience in which people, with choice and spontaneity, connect to each other's centre and change as a result. In infinite sexuality therefore 'it is not their bodies but their persons [that people] make accessible to others' and there is the paradox 'that by regarding sexuality as an expression of the person and not the body, it becomes fully embodied play'. Rather than sexual experiences involving seductive and sexual acts being learnt, developed and 'improved' upon, in infinite sexuality, people are instead learning 'how to be more concretely and originally themselves, to be the genius of their own actions, to be whole.' A further paradox (with parallels in other spheres of human relating) is that in sexual experiences like this, in which goals of personal satisfaction are not the focus, people nevertheless find themselves more satisfied[72].

Drawing this all together, there is a rich sphere of human existence and experience in which people sexually connect to one another with openness, flow and embodiment, and in which they mutually see, value and touch one another's person. In a fascinating study by Sharon Lamb and colleagues, young heterosexual men were interviewed about what goes through their mind during sex. Two types of sexual experience were recounted, one in which notions of gender, performance and control were emphasised, the other centred on equality and continuity between partners. In accounts of this second form of sex, feelings of specialness, presence and connection were palpable (although were hard to articulate) as was the letting go of pre-concieved roles and expectations:

> *[In infinite sexuality] satisfaction is never an achievement, but an act in a continuing relationship, and therefore joyous. Its lack of satisfaction is never a failure, but only a matter to be taken on into further play.*
>
> James Carse (1986)

Finite sexuality is a form of theater in which the distance between persons is regularly reduced to zero but in which neither touches the other... [In its] complex plotting... it is by no means uncommon for the partners to have played a double game in which each is winner and loser, and each is an emblem for the other's seductive power.

James Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (1986)

It was more of two people coming together to be as close to one person as two people can be um, and kind of um, I guess I kind of let go of my masculinity in a way

Other than us having different genitalia there shouldn't really be any difference whether there is male or female, that like in that moment it's us no matter what like the outside impact is... it's what we both want together

It was something completely different... all my thoughts were directed to how great this was, this, this new experience, it's just totally mind-blowing

In the other form of sex they described, participants focussed on achievement and being the best (closely according with Carse's notion of finite sexuality). This sex was seen as a place in which masculinity needed to be performed and proved, whether to themselves, the women they were with, or the internalised watching eye of other males. Echoing messages from pornography, success was seen as involving women's vocalisations of pleasure – these needing to be achieved without overt communication and there was no recognition that they might in fact themselves be performative. It was a 'job' which could be done well or poorly, resulting in either 'feelings of proudness' or 'feelings of incompetence'.

The insights of this study dovetail with those of others to demonstrate how certain notions of masculinity undermine the human potential for fulfilling connection (both in sexual and non-sexual relationships), as well as self-acceptance, embodiment and intrinsically motivated living[73]. Whilst they differ in content, messages about how to be a woman (or girl) can lead to similar losses[74]. A complex nexus of gender norms, objectification, shame and judgment work together work to constrict and disconnect us from ourselves and one another[75]. Boys and men are invited by mainstream porn and other actors (including some media and peer groups) to adopt a version of masculinity in which they should objectify girls and women, be dominant and in control, and suppress and disavow their emotions[76]. To not do so is to risk rejection, contempt and shame, in particular from other males[77]. Girls and women are taught that their appearance needs to fit a certain narrow standard and that, especially in sex, they need to please men (whether through submission or a performance of dominance)[78]. Departing from these norms again risks shame and judgement.

In line with Carse's conceptualisation of finite sexuality, sex can reduce to each person acting out a performance of masculinity or femininity. Indeed, beyond gender, pornography always presents sex as performance: the sex is acted and/or filmed for the watching eye. Theatre and voyeurism become inextricably tied up with sexuality.

Objectification

All of this returns us to the issue of objectification – where people are treated as less than human and the primary focus is on their appearance or 'function'. People on screens, strangers in the street, peers, dating partners, spouses, even ourselves (by ourselves) can be objectified. Thinking specifically about partner objectification, this by its very nature, precludes the infinite play

The more I tried to perfect my own body at the gym, the more wrapped up I got in this shame. I was increasingly desperate to fix and repair myself, to avail myself of all the products and treatments I could to plug the holes of my many male deficiencies. But the thing about masculinity is it's pegged to a fictive status quo; it is something you either police endlessly, or give up on altogether.

David Adjmi, *I had the best body I'd ever had – so why did I feel so much shame?* **The Guardian, 20th October, 2020**

He is not really with me, not really making love to me when we have intercourse. He seems to be thinking about something or someone else – likely those porn women.

When I know that my husband has masturbated to cyberporn, I don't want him to touch me. I feel like I am leftovers.

He cared more about doing things the way he thought 'looked' right rather than doing things the way he thought would feel good, like, feel good for me.

Many of the things he most liked and requested when we made love were recreations of downloaded images.

Female partners of male porn users interviewed in a range of research studies[79]

You'll sort-of try out a girl and get a perfect image of what you've watched on the internet... you'd want her to be exactly like the girls on the internet... if she's not, she's not the right one, you'll move on to the next one...Its ruined any sense of love...I find that now it's so hard for me to actually feel the connection for a girl.

Male teenager speaking about the impact of porn in the film *InRealLife* (Kidron, 2013)

of connection and touch, and places the sexual experience in the same category as porn – in which novelty is often needed to maintain interest.

Research finds that when people objectify their partners they tend to be less satisfied in their relationships[80], and some studies suggest that their partners or ex-partners feel the same[81]. Studies find that porn increases this tendency, as well as increasing the likelihood of self-objectification[82]. Porn viewing encourages people to focus on both themselves and their partner as their body, versus in their body.

The process of self-objectification has been the focus of much research[83]. It involves several interlocking elements: internalising appearance ideals (I think it's important to look the way porn, wider media or society promotes as attractive); valuing appearance over competence (how my body looks is more important than other things about it); and surveilling one's body (I need to habitually monitor my appearance to check if I'm measuring up). As might be anticipated, research finds that this approach is associated with body dissatisfaction, negative feelings about one's body, lowered self-esteem, and increased self-consciousness during sexual activity[84]. In one study for example, frequency of porn use was associated with men internalising an ideal of lean muscularity and monitoring their bodies, and this self-objectification was associated with body dissatisfaction and less body appreciation[85]. Further studies suggest that men's porn use can also increase their female partner's self-objectification, in turn leading to reduced self-esteem and negative feelings[86].

Some people when self-objectifying will perceive their bodies to measure up well and so may not experience the visceral body dissatisfaction or shame. This, however, does not protect them from the habitual surveillance and 'body-work' to avoid shame, nor does it make space for full embodiment and self-contentment. **Whether you think you are a valuable or cheaper object, the disembodiment and maintenance work involved in being an object persist.** Wider questions about self-objectification also remain to be explored – for example, if when we objectify others, we see them as less sensitive to pain and deserving of moral treatment, do we feel the same way about ourselves when we self-objectify? Do we treat ourselves with less respect and expect less from others?

Taking stock

We humans have the potential for sexual experiences that involve the entwining of pleasure, delight, and emotional and bodily attunement to self and other. There is diversity here, for example this sex could be between two people who have recently met and experienced great sexual chemistry, or between two people in a long-term relationship and therefore involving deeper levels of vulnerability and intimacy. **What is always there is the mutual, interacting delight and pleasure in being with the other person in their body. As we've explored, pornography works against this way of sexual relating, and therefore undermines one of the most profound forms of human relating. It does this in large part by rendering sex as performance-and-watching, and people as bodies and gendered roles.** In this operation, certain performances, bodies and roles are deemed attractive and sexy, others not so. All of this is not only relevant to sexual relating with one another but also to how we relate to one other and ourselves more widely.

5. Self embrace

If things like self-objectification and restrictive gender norms lead to relationships with ourselves that are underwhelming or unfulfilling, what would a more fully human approach look like? **What approaches towards ourselves allow us to flourish and thrive, within ourselves and in relationships?**

Body appreciation and acceptance

Based on in-depth interviews with women exploring positive body image, Nicole Wood-Barcalow and colleagues define this concept (or rather way of being) in a rich, expansive fashion:

> ***An overarching love and respect for the body that allows individuals to (a) appreciate the unique beauty of their body and the functions that it performs for them; (b) accept and even admire their body, including those aspects that are inconsistent with idealized images; (c) feel beautiful, comfortable, confident, and happy with their body, which is often reflected as an outer radiance, or a "glow;" (d) emphasize their body's assets rather than dwell on their imperfections; (e) have a mindful connection with their body's needs; and (f) interpret incoming information in a body-protective manner whereby most positive information is internalized and most negative information is rejected or reframed.***

Here people appreciate their body's competence and skills over its appearance, whilst also seeing its beauty, which is not tethered to a narrow ideal. Body acceptance and appreciation may intertwine with wider self-acceptance and radiate as a 'glow'. The body forms a 'functional yet modest part' of identity. Women for example commented:

> ***Appreciate the things you were given in life rather than wishing that you had the stuff that you don't; that's when life is good and what it's supposed to be***

> ***I'm treating my body with love. My body treats me back with love. It just is like this bond.***

> ***If people are saying positive things about your body, but that's still the main focus of their conversations and what's on their minds, that's bad also.***[87]

With this mentality, there is no need for body self-consciousness. Instead of the body's appearance being regularly monitored to check how it is complying to standards, its feelings and needs can be listened and attuned to. This is reflective of the love felt towards one's body, just as the appreciation of all that it does is reflective of the love felt from it. Paradoxically, whilst self and body are in relationship, intuitive bodily awareness also means that a person is deeply in their body – they are embodied. Research finds that **this body appreciation and acceptance is associated with multiple elements of psychological and physical wellbeing (such as happiness, life satisfaction and intuitive eating) as well as increased sexual satisfaction**[88].

Wider self-acceptance

How we approach our bodies closely relates to how we approach our wider selves. We can not only appreciate and embrace our bodies, but all that we are, in self-acceptance. This is recognised as an intrinsic and profound human good in various philosophies and therapeutic approaches[89]. The founder of one such therapy, Albert Ellis, defines this state as when people 'fully accept themselves as valuable and enjoyable human beings whether or not they are self-efficacious and whether or not others approve of or love them'[90]. There is a sense of inherent self-worth and being enough as you are. People feel love and compassion towards themselves, a sense of self-embrace. Self-acceptance's opposite is inadequacy – a sense of only being worthwhile 'if...'. The person is only 'OK' if certain conditions are met, for example having a certain body, having others' approval, being popular, rich etc. Clearly these positions are on a spectrum and many people move around between the two – influences in life promoting one or other approach at any given point. Adolescence and early adulthood, with their developmental tasks of identity formation and self-clarification[91], would seem particularly sensitive periods for these influences, providing fertile ground for one or other orientation to take greater root[92].

Here we are interested in an individual's personal capacity for and experience of sexual feelings, the sexual strands of their experience and identity. This is distinguished from sexual relating between two people, although of course the two are closely entwined – a person's sexuality guiding that sexual relating.

As is clear from these discussions, various 'ideals' and norms of mainstream pornography push people away from body- and self-acceptance and towards constructing a self whose worth is tied up with specific ways of looking and behaving (via objectification, and various gender norms and sexual scripts). None of these ways centre attunement towards oneself or others.

A holistic and integrated sexuality

This takes us to the final element of what we are describing here as self-embrace: a holistic and integrated sexuality. Pornography conveys to its viewers that their sexuality is their immediate arousal to the images and videos it promotes. Viewers are implicitly invited to follow their level of arousal to find their sexuality, this approach lying behind the frequently disjointed, fragmentary viewing experience. A commonly cited 'positive' of pornography is its supposed utility in helping people 'explore' and 'discover' their sexuality. **Yet sexuality is far richer and more multi-faceted than simple arousal (not to mention one that is pushed and prodded towards another's profit). To ignore these other elements and prioritise arousal in a vacuum leads to all sorts of problems and confusions, and on a fundamental level, reduces what it is to be human**.

Sexuality includes sexual attraction, desire, energy, arousal and pleasure – these can layer upon and deepen one another, but they are not collapsible[93]. Sexuality also involves how we think and feel about each of these elements within ourselves. The following examples attempt to unpack this multi-dimensional nature of sexuality, showing how the different elements can relate or otherwise not.

A young person is attracted to a friend of a friend he has recently met. They experience great sexual chemistry and as their relationship develops, he experiences increasing sexual desire for him/her. During a sexual experience together, he experiences high levels of sexual arousal. An undercurrent of arousal was present in his attraction and desire, but these feelings were not reducible to that – sexual attraction motivating a desire to be with that person, the sexual desire being about wanting to have a sexual experience together. In this relationship, attraction, desire and arousal align and they are feelings that the person desires, accepts and enjoys.

A person in a satisfying monogamous relationship is attracted towards a person they've recently met through work. There is the awareness that if they were single, she/he would explore this attraction, allowing it to deepen and to lead to sexual desire. As this would conflict with their relationship however, she/he chooses not to go on that internal and interpersonal journey.

A person finds their levels of sexual arousal heighten to pornography focussed on women's bodies, however in life they only experience attraction to men, sometimes developing into desire.

An individual experiences a sexual energy within them that links to their creativity, and their self-embrace. They experience it as something that gives them energy, confidence and 'glow' and it is not focussed on a particular 'object' of attraction, desire or arousal.

Clearly human sexuality is rich and complex. In large part this is because we are human, with all that that brings including the potential for spirituality, relational depth, morality, agency, and second-order thinking and feeling. The argument put forward here is that **our sexuality contributes most powerfully to personal and relational flourishing when it is holistic and integrated. Here a person recognises the different elements of their sexuality, and aspires to align them with one another and with other intrinsic parts of who they are. Arousal is not split off and reified as it is in pornography** – indeed a person may choose not to incorporate arousal that is manipulated for another's ends (as it is in pornography) into their sexuality if it doesn't align with their deep desires and needs. In contrast, the sexual energy that people might find springing from within them when they adopt a holistic stance, an attitude of openness, can be acknowledged, delighted in, and may emanate in various parts of life. This is reminiscent of further comments from young women discussing body appreciation in the study by Nicole Wood-Baraclow and her colleagues:

It's almost like that sparkle in somebody's eye. You can definitely tell when somebody feels great

You have personal glow... your body's just glowing, like a spotlight... everyone sees that you're happy

The thread running throughout is that humans do well, individually and collectively, when they appreciate and embrace themselves, including their bodies and their sexuality. This acceptance supports embodiment (i.e. being in one's body and self, versus adopting the perspective of an onlooker), as well as satisfying relationships with others and agentic living – both explored next.

6. Relationships

Fulfilling relationships

Relationships are central to human wellbeing, flourishing and meaning across the lifecourse[94], and everything we have explored so far is relevant to them. Here we consider relationships directly, asking **what are their ingredients that satisfy, vitalise, and contribute to mutual thriving and growth?** And what does this mean for our understanding of pornography's impact? Whilst the focus here is on romantic relationships, much of what is discussed is also relevant to friendships and, albeit to a lesser degree, other close relationships.

Research indicates that various relational qualities and approaches towards one another contribute to, or indeed constitute, satisfying romantic relationships. These include intimacy, trust, kindness, autonomy, open communication, empathy, and security[95]. Similar qualities appear to comprise satisfying friendships[96]. Clearly relationships are complex and multidimensional, and the elements on this list all interrelate with one another and others besides. Notwithstanding this complexity, **let's briefly explore five particularly fundamental elements: authenticity & autonomy; emotional reliance & vulnerability; care & valuing; trust; and warmth.**

Authenticity and autonomy

When people are authentic and autonomous in relationship with one another, they are each fully endorsing their involvement in the relationship, they seek the relationship for itself (versus as a means to an end), and they experience and enjoy both themselves and the other being themselves (versus playing a part or needing to hide core parts of themselves). Each person holds the knowledge: I want to be in this relationship, and so do they; I can be myself and so can they; I accept them for who they are, and they accept me. We might think of this as a triad of self-determination (personal autonomy), authenticity and support of the other person's autonomy – the latter referring to valuing and respecting the other's perspective, feelings, goals and the like, and supporting them to act freely. Numerous studies have explored these ways of being in relationships and find them closely linked to relational satisfaction and security, as well as 'personal positives' such as vitality, life satisfaction, and self-esteem[97].

Emotional reliance and vulnerability

When those we are in relationship with support our autonomy and our competence (i.e. believing in and encouraging our abilities), we are more likely to rely on them for emotional support – turning to them for help with difficult feelings such as frustration, sadness or confusion, or appreciating positives with them like happiness, pride or gratitude. This emotional reliance is also associated with vitality, life satisfaction, self-esteem as well as fewer feelings of anxiety or depression[98]. When we share our emotions like this we feel we are being true to ourselves. It is often a form of vulnerability, defined here as revealing to another parts of ourselves that we feel some fear or self-consciousness about. **At its heart, vulnerability is exposure to the possibility of being attacked or harmed; the paradox being that when we choose to place ourselves in this position with someone we trust and that trust is vindicated by their acceptance and validation, there can be a richness of human intimacy, love and experience that is otherwise inaccessible.** Following extensive research and theorising, Professor Brene Brown names vulnerabilty 'the birthplace of connection and the path to the feeling of worthiness'[99]. In contrast, research finds that when people conceal parts of themselves from their partner, they feel less connection and more conflict with their partner, and both parties feel less satisfied with the relationship and committed to it[100].

This comes with the important caveat that love for another can and arguably should be held alongside, further in interaction with, love for oneself, explored in the section above and further below.

Care and valuing

Ryan and Deci note that 'the very concept of love implies a kind of caring that is both unselfish and yet fully self-endorsed'[101]. When people love they are caring about someone intrinsically – they hold these caring feelings and actions as their own, and they are primarily focussed on the other person's needs and wellbeing. And here lies a further paradox – that when we willingly care about others, **when we love and give to them, we so often satisfy our own core needs that would be impossible to meet through a direct focus on self. And if we try to 'love' simply for self-fulfilment, this stops being 'love' and benefits to both parties diminish. When we give we receive, but it is impossible to give to receive: the gift has gone.**

Various studies speak to the importance of this volitional care (that we term love)[102]. An over-arching meta-analysis of 100 studies conducted by Bonnie Le and colleagues found that the motivation to care for others was associated with greater relationship wellbeing both for oneself and for one's relationship partners (whether friend, romantic partner, parent or child)[103]. But this motivation was only linked to personal wellbeing for oneself and partner when it was held with a sense of agency, and interestingly, also care for oneself (chiming with our discussion of self-embrace above). In relationships where people intrinsically care for each other like this, there is a sense in which the relationship and the other person become parts of oneself[104].

Trust

Interwoven with everything explored so far is trust – at its heart this being the sense that the other person is who they say they are, and that they have your best interests at heart. This is a basis for security, commitment and investment in the relationship. Unsurprisingly research finds this relational quality is also closely linked to relationship satisfaction[105]. It is of course important that this trust is deserved and well-placed. And if it is found not to be, feelings of betrayal can be exceptionally hard to bear.

Warmth

A final quality worthy of mention is warmth: those feelings and behaviours of affection that convey the sense of being loved, valued and in connection. This would seem a primary (and primal) means of conveying the authenticity of our feelings, our intrinsic care for another[106]. Without it people's actions risk being perceived as instrumental and less agentic or human. On a related note, diverse studies and psychological theories have delineated our need for a sense of closeness and connection in relationships beyond their ability to fulfil other needs, (such as to be respected, or have our thoughts and feelings valued)[107].

If we summed this all up in simple terms, one of the richest realms of human experience involves relationships in which people love with their 'true selves' and are loved for being their true self. It is important to note that such relationships are on a continuum of depth and vulnerability, and that even

relationships that are casual, of short duration, or that sit within roles (for example, work colleagues) can still involve this mutual intrinsic valuing and enjoyment of one another.

Pornography and relationships

When Pornhub asserts that its users can get everything they need 'without all the real world troubles' and rhetorically asks 'who needs an IRL (in real life) partner when you have POV (point of view) Pornhub videos on your side?', it perfectly captures the industry's ignorance, disregard, and undermining of human relationships – in particular those that are romantic and sexual.

Here we join up a few of the dots. Mainstream online porn encourages its viewers to see others in terms of appearance and function – more like objects — by presenting people in this way on screen. This works against people looking for and valuing each other's inner selves. Porn tells people that a certain set of looks and performances are desirable, but when people buy into this notion and focus on their achievement, they are demoting both their own and their partner's inner selves. In this way connection is compromised, and the potential for vulnerability is lost. **Vulnerability may be experienced as unsafe, given the threat of being valued according to porn's scripts – a person reveals themselves only to find themselves not being seen: for their partner they are just a player in a finite game.** Anticipatory shame and feelings of insignificance guard people against such situations, and instead sex and the wider relationship may be approached with self-sufficiency and undue attention to appearances and roles.

Mainstream online porn tells its viewers to focus on 'number one' and that others are toys, but the richest relationships are those where people intrinsically value and care about 'you, me, we', not primarily 'me'. Furthermore if someone watches mainstream online porn, they are on some level buying into its values, which can undermine their partner's trust.

Paul Wright and Robert Tokunaga recently conducted a meta-analysis of 15 research studies and found that women's perceptions of their male partner's pornography use was associated with significantly less satisfaction with the relationship, their sex life, and their body[108]. In qualitative studies, many women gave voice to this damage, describing feelings of betrayal, reduced respect for their partner, and feeling less valued and inadequate. Others will not explicitly know that their partner consumes porn but may still experience it's impact on reduced intimacy, respect and love without knowing why. At the extreme end, pornography can exacerbate and be used as a tool in abusive relationships, for example, by modelling and normalising humiliating language and acts which are then used in the abuse[109].

It was a decision to do something that took him away from me and from our relationship

I thought I wasn't attractive

I don't trust him... with my most intimate thoughts

My self-esteem is damaged beyond belief

I started doubting myself. I started doubting my self-worth

My first boyfriend used to watch a lot of porn... it made me feel quite insecure

I find it degrading to think that he's turned on by those women more

Women and girls talking about the impact of their male partner's porn use, interviewed in a range of research studies[110]

Of course when relationships are damaged, they are damaged for both parties. Both people are losing out on enjoying the richness of connective, emotionally supportive, valuing and trusting relationships. And research confirms porn's impact on the relational satisfaction and quality of its users, not just their partners. For example, a longitudinal study of newly wed couples by Linda Muusses and her colleagues, found that husbands' porn use was linked over time to their perception of their relationship being poorer quality[111]. Cross-sectional studies also find an association between men's porn use and reduced relational satisfaction, a relationship linked to both gender roles and objectification of their partners[112]. Confirming and extending these findings, in a recent meta-analysis of over twenty studies, Paul Wright and his colleagues found pornography consumption was associated with lower relational satisfaction across various types of research study and different populations[113].

It is apparent from research that there are gender dynamics to the effects of porn on romantic relationships: those that are heterosexual and involve the male viewing it are the most adversely affected. Various factors likely account for this, including porn's particular emphases on male sexual entitlement and prerogative, and female objectification and denigration, all set within a wider conducive cultural context.

Relationships may be compromised by porn to the point of breakdown. In a longitudinal study complementing other research, Samuel Perry and Cyrus Schleifer found that the probability of divorce roughly doubled for married men and women who began porn use between survey waves[114]. An over-arching theme here is isolation – both through relationships becoming less connective and through them dissolving. Going further, isolation arguably also results from porn leading people to be less interested in relationships in the first place. As explored, porn promotes a model of the world in which people are atomised and human connection rendered obsolete. **Many accept porn's invitation to 'meet their needs' and may feel that it has[115], often times not realising that it may in fact be placing the satisfaction of their deepest needs out of reach[116].**

As all relationships are enriched by mutual enjoyment and respect of each other's inner selves, they can all be impacted by porn. Whilst most adolescents will not be in serious romantic relationships, their relationships with their friends and peers can be detrimentally affected[117]. **Furthermore porn's education in impersonal sex, objectification, and gender roles during such a formative period of development sets up a significant risk to future relationships. Adolescence is a sensitive period in which sexual scripts, and models of self, others and relationships are readily laid down or internalised[118].**

Robert Jensen, a prominent pornography researcher, described pornography as 'what the end of the world looks like'[119]. It's nature and effects can certainly seem dystopian, operating like a silent parasite, setting in motion millions of everyday tragedies. Returning full circle to our analysis of its business model, this is partly done by its compromise of our agency – the thing that is perhaps most central to the human condition, explored next.

7. Autonomy and self-determination

György: I think that this is an addiction, just like cigarettes. Or like any other addictions...

Ákos: Yes... sex-addiction

Isi: Actually I've already tried to give it up

Ákos: Me too, me too

György: Me too

Ákos: To give up this everyday thing

Isi: I can't

György: I also said [to myself] what's good in it?... that I surely wouldn't do it for a week

Ákos: I swear I tried... [sounds incredulous] I tried... and I swear

Isi: I endured for two weeks, then relapsed

Ákos: I'm like... I must [watch porn] because that's how I get relaxed, how I discharge daily stress I swear!

György: Yes but yeah really

Young men interviewed by Ferenc Marczali[120]

At its heart, autonomy is both the feeling and the reality of driving oneself and one's life, rather than being in the passenger seat looking on, a passive recipient of thoughts, feelings, and life experiences. It is the right and condition of self government. Mental autonomy comprises both freedom of thought, as well as the sense of ownership and endorsement of one's thoughts and feelings. Autonomy extends from there into our decisions, our actions and our opportunities. We enjoy fuller autonomy when we are valued and respected by others and ourselves; when we are supported in developing core capabilities such as self-awareness, critical reflection and imagination; and when we have a range of freedoms and opportunities through which to grow, pursue life goals and achieve wellbeing[121].

In everyday use, autonomy is often understood as individualistic independence, but extensive philosophical and psychological literatures have unpacked its rich connections with our relationships, social nature and compassionate values[122]. The concept of 'relational autonomy'[123] draws attention to the ways in which people develop their autonomy and act with agency within their web of social influences and connections – in particlar highlighting how we own, value and choose our care and commitment towards others.

Autonomy is relevant to all of the other parts of being human that we've explored so far. People who place more weight on intrinsic values (such as caring for others and nature) tend to feel more autonomous[124] – they have the experience of thinking, feeling and acting on what are felt to be the deepest parts of themselves. And relationships are at their best when both people support the other's autonomy – indeed love itself cannot exist without it, given love's essential quality of being 'fully self-endorsed'[125]. In contrast, both objectification and manipulation profoundly threaten this core of our personhood, as we will further explore.

Mental autonomy is an internationally enshrined human right. Simon McCarthy Jones traces its legal history and its vulnerability to technological development in 'The autonomous mind: right to freedom of thought in the 21st Century'

Why is autonomy important?

But first, why the emphasis on autonomy? Why is it important? Autonomy's central role in human flourishing, across cultures, is the main conclusion of hundreds of studies conducted within the framework of Self-Determination Theory[126]. When we enjoy greater autonomy, we experience greater vitality and life satisfaction. At the same time, it's value cannot be reduced to its impact on wellbeing[127]: legal statutes, schools of philosophy and core tenets of our politics all recognise that it is an irreducible 'good'. **Democracies are built on the notion that the people's will is inherently worthy of respect. And we have an inherent 'will to will', to be an author in our own lives**, beyond any further benefits this might bring us. Most of us will likely concur with Thomas Scanlon when he writes:

> ***I want to choose the furniture for my own apartment, pick out the pictures for the walls, and even write my own lectures despite the fact that these things might be done better by a decorator, art expert, or talented graduate student. For better or worse, I want these things to be produced by and reflect my own taste, imagination, and powers of discrimination and analysis. I feel the same way, even more strongly, about important decisions affecting my life in larger terms: what career to follow, where to work, how to live.***[128]

What it is to be a person is impossible to conceive of without autonomy. Without this wellspring within us, fundamentals to our existence such as self, meaning, creativity, relationships, responsibility, apology and commitment, start to breakdown and lose their substance.

Virginia Woolf noted that 'a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself'[129]. We have greater freedom of thought when we have the permission, space, protection and support to contemplate, listen to all parts of ourselves, and find our deepest values. Shoshana Zuboff makes the case for this being a basic right: our right to sanctuary[130]. This space inside ourselves is our own, it is to be respected and protected and is integral to another right she asserts, the right to the future tense. This is the right to find out who we are, and what we want. The right to act on this in the future - to be the author of our own life.

Porn users' experience of loss of control

> ***Certain consumers are very heavy users...[their] behaviours are not healthy.... these consumers are particularly important because of the significant financial resources that they pour into the online erotica industry***
>
> Jack Morrison, Adult Video News Media Network[131]

Pornography's corrosion of autonomy is most obvious in the experience of individuals who feel addicted to it, and many of its users do. In a large representative sample of Australian adults, 4.4% of men and 1.2% of women reported feeling addicted to pornography[132]. Younger age is associated with increased risk of porn addiction[133]; a recent study of Polish University students found that of the 80% of students who said they had seen pornography, 15.5% felt addicted to it[134]. In the UK it seems that increasing numbers of young people are seeking help for this problem[135].

At the same time, the 'reality' of porn addiction remains contested. Some voice concern that this narrative frames porn use as a 'biological danger' and it does so to maintain 'traditional moralist fears' about porn[136]. Raising different issues, on the basis of their analysis of various media articles and the online response to them, Kris Taylor and Nicola Gavey note how the narrative of addiction works to create categories of 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' porn use and, by focussing on 'disordered individuals', it diverts attention from the pressing ethical questions about porn itself and its cultural contributors[137]. Similar concerns have been raised about other addiction narratives (for example related to gambling), and a further worry is that the addiction label can be used to obscure agency and responsibility. It is also not at all clear how exactly to define porn addiction[138].

At the heart of addiction is the feeling of having lost control[139] **When we talk about porn addiction, it's important that we do so with nuance – sidestepping and challenging unhelpful assumptions like those just noted – whilst not losing sight of these feelings of powerlessness which seem to be what so many are trying to express when they reach for the word 'addiction'.** Interestingly, one of the main findings coming out of the neuroscientific research on pornography is that 'porn addiction' on a neurological level resembles other addictions[140], as it also does psychologically[141]. The particular pattern of neural activity in self-described porn addicts compared to controls supports the Incentive Salience Theory (IST) of addiction[142], which argues that in addiction 'wanting' (anticipated reward) becomes untethered from 'liking' (the experienced value of the reward). In other words, people find themselves wanting something that in reality they find unsatisfying, being driven by desires that do not lead to the fulfilment of their goals.

Importantly people struggling with an addiction do not lose all autonomy. In a convincing philosophical exploration, Neil Levy finds that the type of autonomy lost in addiction is the ability

to extend one's agency and oneself across time – Zuboff's right to a future tense. An addict can ably initiate and execute plans to get hold of the thing she craves but 'she lacks the capacity effectively to guide her own future behaviour by her will... her preference is temporary and does not reflect her will'[143].

Within all of us there are different parts that, consciously or subconsciously, jostle and negotiate with one another. Part of human development is becoming more aware of these different parts of ourselves and clearer on how they best work together and integrate. When we find ourselves dependent on or addicted to something, it is as if one part has jumped into the driving seat, against the will of the others who are in fact better at driving us towards our deepest aspirations. But maybe this is not quite true in the case of porn addiction – instead of an addicted part jumping into a person's driving seat, it seems more that they have been groomed, lured and pulled into it by the mainstream online porn industry's tactics and surveillance-driven algorithms. In other words people are manipulated into dependency.

Other addictions such as those to gambling, alcohol and social media can also be fuelled by the practices of those who profit from them.

Manipulation and the porn industry

Manipulation, like coercion or force, is generally recognised as a threat to autonomy. It's heart and contours (what is must comprise, whether it is always wrong, the critical way it undermines autonomy) are the subject of rich debate. Some scholars argue that it always has a covert element[144]. Others say that secrecy is not always necessary, but instead insist on another feature such as its disregard of a person's rationality[145]. The general conclusion that we can draw is that each of these 'features' increases the risk of manipulation and the threat to autonomy (whether or not they are necessary or sufficient): they have each been a focus of attention because there is recognition that when they are present, the situation usually worsens. Interweaving with these discussions is increasing analysis of the extent and impact of the corporate manipulation made possible by technological surveillance, that reaps and then trades in people's data[146].

When we combine all of this scholarship with our earlier analysis of mainstream online porn and the business model behind it, we find an industry engaged in extensive manipulation – both of people's sexuality and other parts of themselves – and this profoundly corrodes people's ability to be the authors of their own lives and enjoy the freedoms and delights of being 'fully human'.

To recap and summarise, data is gathered from porn viewers without their informed consent to feed algorithms that shape their porn experience, in turn to shape them towards corporate profit. Drawing on vast amounts of people's data, these algorithms 'find' the human vulnerabilities that can be exploited to hold their attention and in other ways pull them towards spending. Whilst there has been inadequate analysis of the intricacies of porn's machine processes, the founding president of Facebook, Sean Parker, has indicated that techniques such as intermittent reinforcement were deployed on Facebook, a powerful manipulation which keeps users' engaged through inconsistently giving them the 'rewards' they seek.

When someone visits a porn site and they see content algorithmically chosen for them, there is no explanation of why they are being shown that particular content: what knowledge about them has informed that decision and how, and what that decision is fundamentally trying to achieve. And the barrage of videos and images confronting viewers, creating a fragmentary and disorientating experience, is likely to make it far harder for people to apply clear thinking to their decisions in this zone. An obvious point that bears repeating is that these and the other features of online porn reviewed here work in the interests of the corporation, not the user. Going further, and drawing on everything that we have explored so far, they work against the person's interests. As we've explored, we flourish, both individually and collectively, when we respect our own and others' full personhood, when we love both ourselves and one another, and when we have the freedom and support to author ourselves, our lives and our relationships in alignment with our deepest values.

In short, the mainstream online porn industry — through both covert and overt means — seeks to shape people's sexuality towards its own interests, which are in opposition to the interests of its users (and in opposition to the interests of others upon whom it impacts). It would seem to exploit psychological vulnerabilities, is extensive in its scope, and is disinterested in viewers' rationality, values, or wellbeing. **As such it is both an archetypal and thoroughly modern manipulator. We suggest that fundamentally this manipulation undermines viewers' autonomy by making it harder for them to think and act with self-awareness and critical reflection, by stimulating sexual scripts that conflict with other parts of themselves, and by increasing the power of superficial, temporal preferences relative to their deeper aspirations, values and beliefs.**

In all of this people's Right to Freedom of Thought is violated, as this of course includes the right not to have one's thoughts manipulated[147]. The boundaries of their inner mental sanctuary are broken. **Viewers are treated as organisms to be herded, prodded and shaped towards corporate profit. Like those they view on screen, users are themselves objectified, their sexuality – this core and intimate part of ourselves – seen as 'fair game' in a game that they're not playing, a game that they are at best only vaguely aware of.**

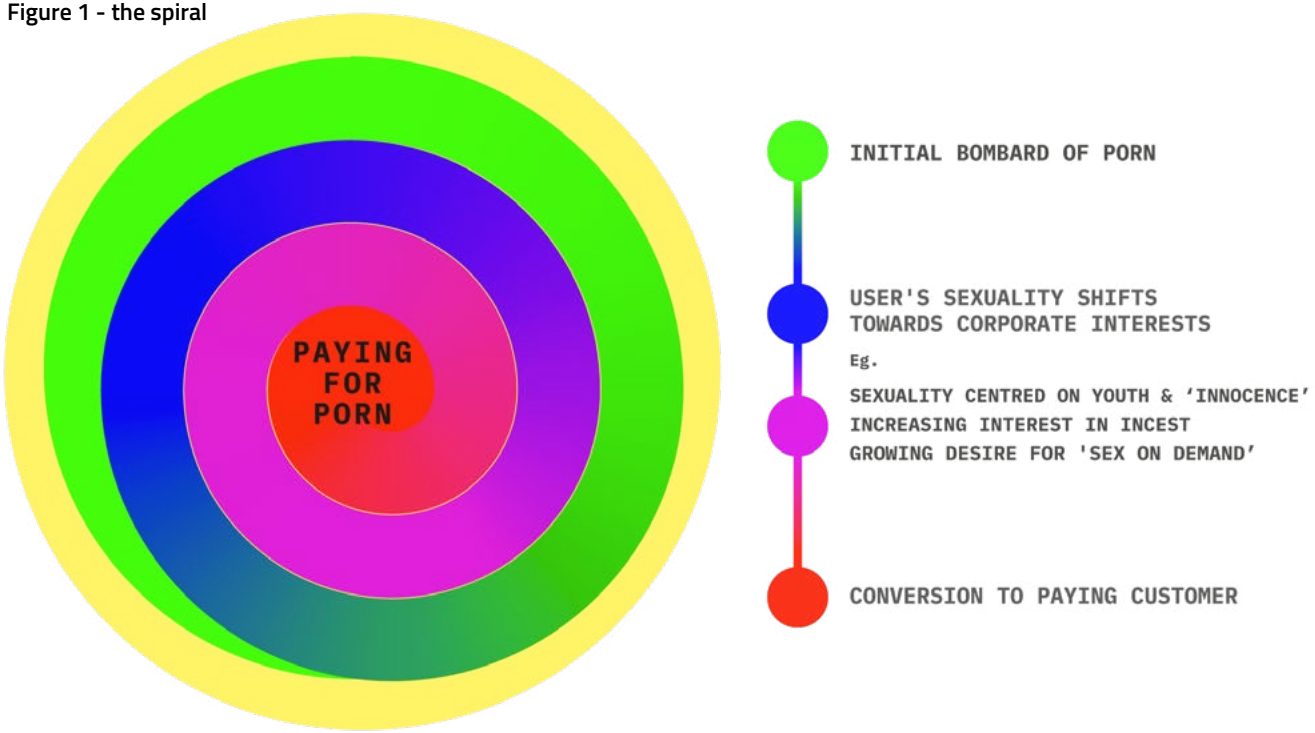
It's no wonder then that so many find themselves feeling addicted to porn, in conflict between using it and not wanting to, finding their ability to extend their agency over time, to be the person they want to be, deeply compromised. But of course not everyone feels this way. A set of studies find that porn users are more likely to see themselves as addicted when they experience moral incongruence: when they are aware of a conflict between their porn use and their moral values[148]. At the opposite end of the spectrum are those with entrenched beliefs that complement their porn use (for example, attitudes that are sexist, or support inequality or aggression). Between both poles are likely many who hold a conflicting mix of values and views, and who are unused to critical ethical reflection on the content of porn and their use of it[149]. During their porn use, conflicting parts of themselves are suppressed or ignored. Unlike the first group, these individuals feel as if they have more control over their porn use because they are less likely to have tried to stop and their decision to use feels more 'their own'.

But these users are still subject to the same strategies and manipulations. Their autonomy is still compromised even without this being a felt experience. Pornography has curtailed their freedoms, for example, to author a sexuality rooted in respect, intimacy and connection[150]. In an analysis of how AI systems can support (or detract from) human autonomy, Rafael Calvo and colleagues draw attention to six spheres of technology experience (adoption, interface, tasks, behaviour, life and society) and show how a particular platform, app or device may be autonomy-supportive in one sphere but detract from it in others. The domains of society and life are the most important, the latter being 'the extent to which a technology influences the fulfilment of psychological needs, such as autonomy, within life overall, this potentially affecting the extent to which one is thriving'[151]. Drawing on recent research on the impact of fitness wearables on motivation[152] they demonstrate the contradictory ways a particular technology can influence our autonomy: whilst a tracker can feel autonomy-supportive at the adoption, interface, task and behaviour levels (for example a person chooses to use one without being manipulated to and find it motivates them to exercise), over time these devices increase guilt and pressure, and reduce overall 'psychological need satisfaction'. **So too we assert with pornography: users can feel completely in control when viewing it, whilst all the while it is cutting away their more profound life freedoms and controls.**

In an insightful analysis of social media's manipulative power, Sylvie Delacroix argues that its hidden influence combined with its precise and comprehensive scope combine to create a particularly potent manipulative influence and threat to our autonomy. When people are gradually drawn along a path by a multitude of hidden influences, they may lose a capacity essential to autonomy: the ability to imagine oneself as a different person. For example, when someone has gone on an online journey into extremism, pushed and pulled a thousand times, **they may arrive at a place where this viewpoint feels authentically their own and of their choosing, but what is missing here is their ability to see and relate to their 'shadow self' – who they were or could have been.** In these circumstances there is not *'enough left of us that is free of manipulatory influence to anchor some after-the-fact endorsement or alienation test'*[153].

We suggest that this is exactly what is happening to many porn users. Returning to Figure 1, once people have entered the blue and purple zones of manipulated sexuality, they may forget what their 'green' sexuality looked and felt like, and they feel like they could never return to it, it is no longer 'them'. And when porn has been viewed from a young age, a person's sexuality without porn may feel inconceivable. What a 'yellow' sexuality could look and feel like, i.e. where one's sexuality would have ended up without manipulative influence, is likely even harder to fathom. **The invisible tragedy here is that people are losing what they never knew they could have, having something taken away from them before it was even given, owned, and enjoyed.**

Figure 1 - the spiral



Porn and the autonomy of women and girls

So far our discussion has focussed on how porn undermines the autonomy of its users. However, they are not the only group whose autonomy it affects. Our analysis as a whole points to varied ways in which the autonomy of women and girls is particularly harmed by porn, given how it routinely narrates them as objects (often of humiliation and denigration), as well as passive, and without desire beyond pleasuring men. So, for example, when women and girls experience porn-inspired objectification (whether from themselves or others), their self-development and self-acceptance is endangered. When they are subjected to porn-inspired sexual harassment and abuse, not only are their rights violated, their freedoms to learn, socialise and play are cut back. When they experience porn-inspired sex, they often miss out on sexual flow, immersion and fulfilment. And when their relationships sour or end as a result of porn, they lose love and connection. All of this returns us to the sense of quiet tragedy unfolding around us.

8. Conclusions

In order for young people to flourish, their intrinsic values, autonomy, and capacity for connection need to be supported and protected as they grow. This analysis suggests how the mainstream online porn industry actively violates these needs, manipulating young people to demote core parts of themselves, to treat others and themselves as less than human, and to cut their developing sexuality away from relational connection, vulnerability, and true appreciation of self and other. It does this by bamboozling them[154] (blitzing them with content and confusing fact with fiction) whilst at the same time pushing versions of sex that are generally about power, disrespect, violation, and/or selfish gratification. People are shaped towards being the type of person that makes the industry money. One of the greatest ironies in all of this is that viewers can feel in control, whilst all the while their power to achieve their deepest aspirations is being critically undermined.

So where do we go from here? First young people's exposure to online porn needs to be drastically curtailed – needless to say far from reducing their autonomy this works to safeguard it, providing the space and freedom they need to author their sexuality in line with the rest of who they are. We would never countenance a situation where young people with a simple click can get free cigarettes anytime, and actions that would be taken to stop this were thwarted by arguments about the inherent freedom to explore your 'smoking identity'. Yet the current situation with porn is more concerning, given how it powerfully targets sexual arousal, and the depth and breadth of ways it compromises human health and flourishing.

Serious discussion also needs to be had about wider regulation of the porn industry. Policy-making and legislation looking to address tech surveillance, manipulation and algorithmic decision-making have so far been focussed on social media and search engines – this must change so that online porn is always squarely in scope. This regulation should run alongside efforts to rid porn platforms of abuse and exploitation, and in addition, be part of a wider public health approach. Following on from all we've explored around autonomy, public health actions should include those that help all porn viewers to make informed decisions about their use.

On a related note, a critical role for PSHE education is developing young people's ability to author their selves and lives in line with their deepest values and aspirations. This is an active defence both against online porn as well as the actions of other societal actors that seek to shape us towards their own ends. Such education includes teaching on business models, industry practices and meta-messages, alongside foundational lessons on our values and rights (and acting in line with them); the nature of fulfilling, 'healthy' relationships and sexuality (and how these can be achieved); and autonomy, including its relational dimensions. Alongside this, there is the need for parents to be supported in understanding porn's methods, protecting their children from it, and supporting their values, capacity for relational sexuality, and agency in the face of it.

In this first issue of Fully Human, we have explored mainstream online porn both as an issue in and of itself but also because it is an arch example of what can happen when we treat each as less than human. In tandem this of course informs our thinking on what it means to do the opposite. **We should apply this analysis to all parts of society, asking the core questions of our policies, practices, processes: do they respect and support people's humanity, or do they disregard or, at worst, violate aspects of it? Our intrinsic values, capacities for connection and self-embrace, and autonomy are core human goods and should be considered in all big decisions that affect us.**

In interaction, let us as a society openly ask and grapple with fundamental questions that consider the status quo, our possible futures and the journeys between them. What do we most value and what do we want to value? What kinds of freedom do we think are most worthwhile? Where do people find meaning, and what kinds of society help them find it? **If pornography depicts what an end of the world looks like, let's instead reflect on, hope for, and work towards worlds that reflect our most ethical and fundamental aspirations.**

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Carl Sagan , *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark* «

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