

Smut Check

HOW PORN REWIRES YOUR BRAIN, HIJACKS YOUR LIBIDO, AND THREATENS YOUR SEX LIFE
(AND JUST MIGHT IMPROVE IT, TOO)

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA SCOTT

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I WAS 15 YEARS OLD WHEN I DISCOVERED
MY FATHER'S PORN HABIT. IT WAS AFTER MIDNIGHT,
A SCHOOL NIGHT; THE BLUE-GREEN GLOW
OF HIS COMPUTER MONITOR SPILLED FROM THE
CRACK BENEATH HIS DOOR.

I let myself in, assuming he was working, and instead found him feverishly masturbating to the images on the screen. It's a moment as ingrained in my mind as I imagine the porn is in his: He was perched, naked, in his green swivel chair, which he had covered with one of my mom's best bath towels. He looked angry.

Shortly afterward, my mom filed for divorce, and I branded pornography as my father's—or perhaps all men's—evil vice. I couldn't understand his desire for the naked pretzel women, contorting into yogalike poses on his computer screen. Or why his porn habit—which, my mother later told me, spanned my parents' entire 20-year marriage—seemed to be worth more to him than his family.

I've seen my father only a handful of times since he left. And I've watched hard-core porn just once, in a dorm room. But years later, a scene from the film I watched with friends—a woman bent over, her pointy breasts swinging like pendulums—surfaced in my dreams. It reignited the fear I first felt after the encounter with my father: Does porn somehow invade the deepest recesses of men's minds? Of women's? And if so, does every man carry a mental cache of unerasable erotic images?

As an adult, this anxiety has carried over into my relationships; even a Victoria's Secret catalog seems threatening, like a gateway drug to cruder desires. I know intellectually that porn addiction is actually quite rare. That most men can look at it and still lust after living, breathing, imperfect women. Yet I still have a nagging fear that the naked images will displace me.

For years, I lumped all men who looked at porn into one perverse Pandora's box—*younger, equally warped versions of my father.* But then I became a sex researcher and writer. (Psychologists could have a field day with that career path, I'm sure.) I've spent hundreds of hours sifting through studies in an effort to find out what motivates men, what penetrates their brains. And the more I've learned, the more my earlier view seemed oversimplified.

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Part of my job is to equip men with the knowledge they need to improve their sex lives. Yet my understanding of pornography—a part of most men's sexual repertoires, I know—was shaped entirely by my personal, traumatic experience. Then I realized how remiss, even irresponsible, this was.

So I turned to science for answers. And as I dropped references to this story among my guy friends, they were fascinated—and worried. Turns out, I'm not the only one who wonders what life in the age of porn is doing to us.

From what I know now, based on my interviews with nearly a dozen experts and from studying a stack of studies about 8 inches high,

I'll never look at pornography the same way again. And I can make an educated guess: You won't want to, either.

Many psychologists believe that men have evolved to pursue lusty, busty women who are willing to engage in casual sex. According to Paul Wright, Ph.D., an assistant professor at Indiana University who researches the social aspects of sex, that may be because a woman's appearance can give more clues to her reproductive potential than a man's can. However, Emory University research suggests that men and women are similarly interested in visual sexual stimuli, but what they find sexually interesting definitely divides along gender lines. "Men prefer novelty, while women are more interested in stable dynamics," says study author Heather Rupp, Ph.D., now a research fellow at the Kinsey Institute.

Pornography solves a primal problem for men: It offers easy access to commitment-free sex with multiple partners. Throughout human evolution, a man's reproductive success increased if he inseminated as many women as possible—ideally those who were young and beautiful, since both qualities signaled fertility and health. Women's success, on the other hand, would have been enhanced by selecting men with both resources and an interest in parenting, says Wright. "Men still have instinctual preferences today because those preferences served a reproductive purpose for their ancestors," he says. "Men's modern environment has changed dramatically, but their evolved sexual preferences have not."

For privacy reasons, certain identifying characteristics of people in this story—including the author's name—have been changed.





"I MADE PEACE WITH PORN"

I grew up in a Southern Baptist town, where women preached the "Porn is evil" gospel. Then I moved to New York City, fell in love, and stumbled across my husband's stash of amateur porn. My insecurity flared: Was he comparing me with these women? Ultimately, though, it drove me to make peace with porn. To learn what actually arouses me.

I discovered Erika Lust—gorgeous, cinematically lush porn—and vintage plot-driven flicks, like *Debbie Does Dallas*, which my husband and I watch together in a fun, cheesy way. Occasionally, if I want to luxuriate in my masturbation, I'll watch porn alone—sometimes I even crave it, but only in the way you want to hear a song that's stuck in your head. I never stray beyond the glossy, vanilla stuff I know I like, because porn is just entertainment. It doesn't shape the way my husband and I have sex. Our sex is about us and the moment. —RACHEL WHITE, 27, SEX BLOGGER



"MY HUSBAND IS ADDICTED TO PORN"

I'm a confident woman. Even so, it shakes me when my husband turns to porn instead of to me. At one time, even undressing in front of him was anxiety inducing—the thought of him looking at me the same way he has looked at thousands of other women was unbearable. He can tell me, "It's totally separate from you. It has nothing to do with how I feel about you." But it's not separate. It very much affects the woman.

Every man has his triggers. For my husband, it's stress, boredom, and feelings of inadequacy. I have compassion for him—I've seen the images he looks at and they're arousing, even to me. What bothers me even more than the porn is the secrecy and lies. He'll say he's giving it up, but I always find out he's gone back to it. He knows what this could do to our relationship and to our family—he doesn't want to be a child-support dad. Yet he can't stop looking at it. —MAC, 30, COLLEGE ADMINISTRATOR

A man's physical response to porn—faster heart rate, increased bloodflow, erection—is preceded by a deeper neurological process, which scientists have attempted to capture through brain scans. The results have varied widely. "There are so many moving parts in this equation," says William Struthers, Ph.D., a biopsychologist and the author of *Wired for Intimacy*. "How old is the man? Is he involved in a sexual relationship? Is he regularly masturbating? People think sex is always the same. It's not. You look at food very differently when you're hungry compared with when you've just finished a meal."

Even so, a few broad themes have consistently emerged. First is the cognitive component—visual processing, attention, and reward. "Pornographic images seem to activate a man's visual system in a manner that goes beyond just looking at trees or even people," says Struthers. "It's almost like a high-definition signal compared with a standard signal." Once this signal—Tori Black in the nude, say—hits the male antenna, the mesolimbic (reward) system kicks in, producing a rush of feel-good dopamine.

This can reinforce the behavior much in the same way that drugs like cocaine would—which is perhaps the most widely exploited argument against porn. "Guys freak out when they think porn might be 'rewiring' their brains," says Struthers. "The reality is, our brains are regularly being 'rewired'—we wouldn't learn anything otherwise." Perhaps more troublesome is what occurs after that pleasurable surge: the activation of brain regions tied to motivation, which drives men to seek sexual release.

At this point, "several brain regions, called the higher cortical component, have to decide, 'What's the best way to deal with this?'" says Struthers. "The problem is, these cortical systems can shut off—that is, they may receive less blood as the visual and arousal systems become more active. Essentially the decision-making system is turning itself over to the experience; it's almost like the men are hypnotized. This is the classic male stereotype: When men think with what's below, they don't make good decisions." Or, the decisions are made *for* them.

Scientists have linked the motivating power of porn to the "mirror neuron system," a part of the brain that compels us to simulate action we see other humans perform. In a 2008 study in the journal *NeuroImage*, for example, men who watched erotic videos experienced mirror neuron activation and reported a desire to replicate the sex acts they saw. The stronger their mirror neuron response, the harder their erections tended to be. (This parroting effect may be more pronounced in response to videos, which have more action cues than photographs do.)

"When you're viewing something sexual, the mirror neuron system enables you to vicariously experience it," says Struthers. However, simply watching isn't sufficient to elicit an orgasm. This is why the need to masturbate or to seek an actual sex partner becomes so overpowering that men can't resist it.



Could You Quit?

If porn becomes a problem, there are ways to cut back.

1 TAKE A PORN INVENTORY

For 2 weeks, use porn as usual—but jot down your reasons for doing so. Bored? Fighting with your wife? Just horny? "You can't change something unless you know when it happens and why," says psychologist Ana Bridges, Ph.D., director of the relationships lab at the University of Arkansas.

2 FIND DISTRACTIONS

Create a list of activities to turn to in lieu of porn—movies, exercise, sexy texts to your girlfriend. Or, yes, masturbation. Without porn. "You need to decouple masturbation from porn," says Bridges. Don't worry if porn scenes pop up in your mind: Once you stop feeding that fantasy, your own desires will eventually take over.

3 RECRUIT HELP

Tell someone—a buddy, your brother—about your mission. No, really. Everyone needs to be held accountable, says Jill Manning, Ph.D., a marital therapist who specializes in pornography dependence. "Part of this process is reengaging in real-life relationships." Ask your confidant to check in with you.

4 WEAN YOURSELF

A gradual break is generally best. "If you masturbate to porn five times a week, reduce it to three times, and use an alternative strategy twice a week. The reduce it to two times, and so on," says Bridges. Don't sweat a relapse. "It's part of change," says Bridges. "Revisit your original reasons for quitting porn."

5 REAP THE BENEFITS

During sex, make a conscious effort to stay in the moment, focusing on her body, your body, and your mutual pleasure. "Without fail," says Manning, "the partners of men who quit porn tell me, 'He was more present. I felt like we were really relating and connecting. Sex was much more satisfying.'" What's not to like? —E.L.

Man's neurological response to porn is especially strong because the content suits men's sexual interests much more than it suits women's, according to Rupp. The erotic depictions imitate the casual sex men crave, but without the threat of disease or unwanted pregnancy. This makes it incredibly titillating—and it's made even more so by the cornucopia of content available on the Internet.

The *Playboy* centerfold era is over. In an Indiana University study, men said they were most aroused by hard-core, lesbian, female-only, amateur, and "barely legal" pornography. (Men view these genres about twice as often as women do.) "With hard-core pornography, you're able to become aroused more quickly and intensely," says Ana Bridges, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of Arkansas. "When there is more action, more intensity of emotion—it doesn't necessarily have to be a positive emotion; it can just be intensity—then arousal increases."

Marital therapist Jill Manning, Ph.D., author of *What's the Big Deal about Pornography?*, adds, "Internet pornography is especially stimulating to the brain because you have the feeling of being engaged directly."

Recent research suggests that this flood of visual stimulation may amplify men's evolved drive for casual sex. In a recent study, for example, Wright found that men who use porn are more likely to have multiple partners and extra-marital sex. "Is it just that people who like casual sex gravitate to pornography? I didn't find that to be the case in a follow-up study," says Wright. "Viewing pornography was associated with increases in casual sex, but the reverse wasn't true—casual sex didn't predict pornography use."

Wright's findings are in line with what psychologists call "sexual script theory," the widely studied notion that what we watch becomes our definition and even our expectation of normal sex. Think of it as an internal rehearsal: "People look at other people as behavioral models, gaining an idea of how a specific sexual encounter is supposed to go—that is what I need to do to experience that kind of pleasure," says Eliza-

beth Morgan, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Boise State University. "We don't typically watch other people in the bedroom, so it's often through sexually explicit media that these scripts are presented to us."

The natural reaction, says Bridges, is to assume immunity—that the depictions in porn may influence other people's desires but not your own. "People consistently say, 'It's not going to affect me,' about a number of things, including political persuasion and advertising," says Bridges. "But we're being impacted all the time by what we consume with our eyes and ears and brains. There's no question."

Or as Struthers puts it, "Denial is the first line of defense. Because so many men have viewed so much porn, the fear about how it has affected them is too overwhelming. So they deny the issue." But it doesn't go away.



And in fact, researchers may have a

tendency to focus too much on the harm done. Bryant Paul, Ph.D., a telecommunications professor at Indiana University who studies sexual messages in the media, says "there is definitely a bias in media-effects research toward studying the potential negative effects of things rather than the positive ones. Porn is almost always portrayed in a negative light."

Whatever the negative bias in the research may be, porn is inarguably designed with its primary audience in mind—it consists of visual cues that will most effectively capture men's attention. "The camera angles minimize the visual information about who the guy is. Porn tends to be shots of the penis, with the woman seen in more totality," says Bridges. It's intended to make men feel as if they're actually having sex, not just watching it.

Cue the mirror neurons.

A 2007 Emory University study shows that men tend to imagine acting on the female star, removing the male actor from the equation. Women, by contrast, imagine that they're the female actor. "The man is probably thinking, 'She's hot. I want to screw her.' But the woman is probably thinking, 'I feel sexy,'" says Rupp, who conducted the study.

Similarly, in a 2011 Princeton University study, men were asked to pair verbs with images of nearly naked women. They tended to choose first-person statements, like "I grab" or "I control." "When looking at the bikini-clad women, these men were thinking, 'I am acting on this person,' rather than, 'She is acting,'" says study author Susan Fiske, Ph.D., director of Princeton University's intergroup relations and social neurosciences lab.

Because men tend to focus on performing sex acts rather than being the recipient of them, they may be more likely to replicate in real life what they see in porn. That's not to say that every man who looks at porn fantasizes about slapping women or ejaculating on them, which are two common behaviors seen in top-selling adult videos, according to a recent University of Arkansas study. Personal preference plays a role: If you're repulsed by, say, double penetration, then pornographic images that depict it won't magically rewire your brain and compel you to reenact it. It's when you're neutral toward or mildly interested in a particular sex act that porn has more potential to shape your desires, says Wright.

Sexual experience also factors in. "If you're seeing this but have a long history of relationships and have other role models for sexuality, it's probably not going to have the same impact as if this were your first glimpse into the world of sex," says Bridges. That glimpse is becoming more revealing than ever: In a 1985 study, 92 percent of men had looked at *Playboy* by age 15; in a 2008 study, 74 percent had seen Internet porn—usually featuring genitalia, intercourse, and often group sex—by age 15.

The younger a guy is when he starts surfing porn sites, Bridges notes, the greater the

Partners who both used porn reported fewer sexual problems. If she's into it, it's a party. If not, it's a potential problem.

potential influence on his sexual expectations. Case in point: In a recent study of college students in the *Journal of Sex Research*, men who watched porn once a week expressed a greater desire for partners who talked dirty, dominated them, used sex toys, had shaved pubic areas, and participated in threesomes than men who watched it less frequently. "Basically, they were interested in partners who engaged in the same behaviors they saw women in pornography engage in," says Morgan, who conducted the study.

This isn't inherently bad. Nearly a quarter of men and women say pornography has helped them experiment more in bed, and just over 20 percent say porn has made them more comfortable voicing their desires, according to recent research in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. "If you're looking at pornography for sexual learning—to give your significant other a more pleasurable oral sex experience, for example—you may be less likely to become compulsive than someone who views it because he is depressed and lonely," says Wright.

In fact, in a study published in the journal *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, men who used Internet porn for sexual education experienced an increase in real-life sexual activity with a partner. But those who sought it to cope with stress reported an increase in relationship problems. The drive behind ordinary usage of pornography is mostly just normal sexual motivation. But someone who is struggling with addiction not only has that normal sex drive but also has another powerful motivation. He may be trying to recover from something, such as events in his life that have left him feeling degraded, and when he uses pornography he creates a fantasy in which he overcomes that degradation. "So this person has two really strong motivations going—a pretty potent sexual cocktail—and a whole lot more reason to use the porn," says Ray Bergner, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Illinois State University. "So the potential for becoming hooked is greater."

A recent University of Arkansas study found that a third of men use porn to ease boredom or stress; a fifth turn to it when they're lonely. The same study also linked sexual media use to depression in men but not women. "Women with even mild levels of depression start to lose interest in sex quickly," explains Bridges. "But for men, depression has to reach severe levels before their sexual drive goes down."

When men have secondary motives, porn becomes more than just a source of positive reinforcement (sexual pleasure, that is). For these men, often called "at-risk users," it's also a way to escape unpleasant feelings, such as loneliness or stress. "They're using porn to cope," says Bridges. "That tends to be associated with more problematic use."

Problematic isn't necessarily compulsive—it simply implies that using porn has led to some undesired outcome. In a Utah State University study, for example, more than half of male users said looking at porn led to problematic outcomes—social, spiritual, psychological, or relational. These negative effects weren't linked to viewing time—the men who watched porn frequently were just as likely to report problems as those who watched it less often.

The distinction between casual and problematic use may have less to do with frequency and more with masturbation. "The big kicker that people leave out of the equation is the ejaculatory response," says Struthers. "This is what really stores the memory. When you have an orgasm, there's a release of oxytocin, the bonding hormone, presumably to bind you to your partner. If you're viewing pornography, your partner is the screen in front of you."

As Manning explains, "When all those hormones are released, you're conditioning the brain to bond and attach to those images." This pleasurable surge, combined with "perceived enhancement" of real-world sex, can overshadow—even mask—any negative effects of porn, driving men to keep viewing it, she says.

This raises important questions: How does porn impact sex with the woman you share (or hope to share) a bed with? And when does "perceived" relationship enhancement become actual? For some couples, it could be never: The intimacy-boosting effect of porn may be confined to couples who are already synchronized in their sexual tastes, say researchers at the University of California.

In other words, if both partners aren't equally open to porn, the enhancing effect can become negative—less a hot threesome, more an unwelcome third party. One Norwegian study, for example, found that when only one partner used porn, couples often reported sexual dysfunction, including low arousal. Partners who both used porn reported fewer sexual problems. If she's into it, it's a party. If not, it's a potential problem.

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We were supposed to be having vacation sex. You know, the kind of uninhibited hotel-room romp that can turn even the tamest women into wild animals. But we couldn't even make it past foreplay. As we lay in the bed, sandy and sunburned, my then boyfriend described the precise and unusual—to me, anyway—ways he wanted to be touched. This was not an erotic conversation; his manner was calculated, his directions nonnegotiable.

My mind was racing. Had I done something wrong? Had every other guy led me astray?

Then I remembered a guy my friend dated in college. He had been insistent about ejaculating on her chest. "That's what they do in porn, so that's what he wants," she'd bluntly explained. Was my boyfriend accustomed to sex in one specific way—the way he touched himself when he masturbated?

Or, worse, the way he saw it in porn? So I just blurted it out: "Do you look at pornography?"

He paused, apparently taken aback, and then turned to face me. "Yeah, I mean, sometimes."

My expression must have alarmed him because he quickly added, "Only, like, 40 percent of the times I masturbate, though."

I hoped he couldn't tell I was crying.

My reaction embarrassed me at the time, but I've since learned it wasn't atypical among my female peers. In the 2011 *Archives of Sexual Behavior* study, 36 percent of women said they equate porn use with cheating, compared with just 7 percent of men. Over 40 percent of women admitted to worrying that their partner's porn use is a sign of sexual dissatisfaction. Only 10 percent of men said the same.

"Women are often distressed by men's porn use because they feel it's personal, that he must not think she's good enough," Bridges says. "But it's almost never personal."

It may not be personal, but it can still have a personal impact. Sexual media use is consistently linked to lower relationship satisfaction in men. The unrealistic depictions in porn may alter men's sexual expectations (it's that same

sexual-script theory, causing trouble again), so their frustration mounts, says Morgan.

I was worried about satisfying my boyfriend, yes. But the force of my reaction stemmed from the same old underlying fear: that every man who used porn would end up like my father—more aroused by his laptop and a bottle of lotion than by his wife. So I decided to talk to my mom, hoping that if I learned more about my parents' relationship, my anxiety about men and porn might dissipate.

And it did, to some degree, as I realized that my father was an extreme case—part of the minority of men for whom porn had become like a drug he used to fill an empty place in his life. "He would stay up most of the night in his office," my mother recalls. "At the time, you had to pay for Internet according to the time you used. Our bills were huge." I distinctly remember the Christmas he installed dial-up as the "family gift." Ironic, given the effect it had.

"I think he relied on porn for so long that he had no desire for real sex," my mother says. "We didn't even have sex on the first night of our honeymoon. Later, if we did have intercourse, it was very rough and impersonal. Afterward he'd say, 'There you go. Is that what you wanted?'"

My father apparently used porn to avoid intimacy—consistent with research suggesting that compulsive users may fear closeness. He belonged to the subset of men who use porn in lieu of intimacy—a problem that extends beyond the sexual realm, says Struthers. "In our culture, we have a narrow understanding of intimacy as sexual intercourse. But it's bigger than that. It's really about people connecting with one another—you need your father to tell you you're a good son, your brother to tell you he loves you, your daughters to look up to you."

When the connection is missing or incomplete, intimacy—sexual or otherwise—becomes something to be avoided. In my father's case it rings true: His quest for his own father's approval was a consistent theme in the arguments between my mother and father, and his brother committed suicide when I was 10. In this context, at least, his aversion to closeness makes a little more sense.

The more typical response, though, is to use porn as a surrogate for real intimacy, says Struthers. The logic: If you can't find a partner to perform the act yourself, watch somebody who can. In fact, a 2011 British study found that men who view porn may crave intimacy and closeness more than nonusers do, suggesting that porn isn't just an escape from connection but could also be part of the search for it.

"People think porn is about sex. It's not; it's about intimacy," says Struthers. "The guy who can't find a girlfriend and starts looking at porn is searching for intimacy. He hasn't found it. He's found the erotic payoff of orgasm. It's a counterfeit form of intimacy."

Struthers clarifies that arousal is an essential part of sexual intimacy—but only if it's coupled with some form of interpersonal connection. "Sexual intimacy has two components: One is sensual; the other is contextual," Struthers says. For a man, intimacy begins with sex—he's attracted to a woman's body, say, so he pursues her. For women, the entry point to intimacy is contextual: "Who is this guy? What's the nature of this relationship?" As a couple's bond strengthens, their definition of intimacy becomes more parallel: The man comes to value context ("I want her because she's my girlfriend"), and the woman increasingly emphasizes eroticism. "It's when the two are enmeshed that you have a deep, sexually intimate relationship," says Struthers.



On a 7 a.m. flight to California, I was

watching soft-core porn: a French war movie with more intense sex than battle scenes. But anyone glancing over my shoulder may have thought I was prepping for vacation in the country's porn capital. I glanced around, embarrassed. Fortunately, the woman next to me—a plump mom in a tracksuit—was too engrossed in her e-reader to notice the couple jackrabbiting across my laptop screen. I turned back to my filthy French subtitles, relieved.

Four hours later, I noticed that the woman's purposeful expression still hadn't changed. I stole a glance at her Nook; the words "nipple" and "satin" leaped off the screen. She was reading *Fifty Shades Darker*—mommy porn. As I sat there, awkwardly observing her read about rock-hard nipples, I couldn't help but wonder: Why was it acceptable for a woman to read erotica in seat 23B, while my watching porn in 23C—especially if I'd had a penis—was taboo?

The distinction isn't so much anatomy (although popping a boner on a plane certainly won't help the male cause) as it is psychology. Unlike men, women use porn primarily as a way to express, explore, or reclaim their sexuality; it's a tool to mentally connect with their sexual selves or partners, says Rupp. "Porn is serving a different purpose in women than men. Women tend to use it in an adventurous way or for the relational component."

One British website found that 68 percent of people who searched for "Fifty Shades" looked for lingerie sales afterward. (Clearly they'd be showing that sexy lace off for somebody.) According to an Associated Press article, nearly 150 members of babycenter.com, an online community for moms and moms-to-be, credited their pregnancies to the saucy series.

I've experienced the hype firsthand: For months, my Facebook news feed has been littered with female friends' rabid reviews of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. A male colleague recently vented to me that bondage had apparently become an acceptable theme for cocktail party chatter among his wife's friends.

Why? Because *Fifty Shades* has been marketed as erotica, not pornography. "When women use explicit materials, they choose erotica. When men and women look at materials together, they tend to look at erotica," says Bridges. "But when men look at materials alone, they look at pornography."

The definition of "erotica"—a term coined to separate the sensual from the smutty—is a bit hazy, especially considering the prominence of bondage and domination in *Fifty Shades*—some of the very things pornography is vilified for. The standard once widely used to distinguish

erotica—"nonviolent, nondegrading, consensual sex"—from pornography is defunct. Now, say Australian researchers, the distinction is intimacy. Pornography downplays interpersonal connection, but erotica depends on it.

"Mommy porn" appeals to women's evolved desire for relationships—they need a partner who will stick around for child rearing; but the staples of hard-core porn, such as threesomes and casual sex, conflict with the female drive to land a committed partner. This may partly explain the *Fifty Shades* phenomenon. The book features S&M, sure, but it's still driven by a committed relationship—the centerpiece of female arousal. According to Rupp, women often focus on the context, so they actually like it more when they understand the dynamic of the relationship—it improves over time.

This underscores what may be one of the primary differences in the male-female experience with sexual media, one that has more to do with motivation and less with content.

"Women tend to use it as an extra tool for connecting with their romantic partners," says Morgan. Erotica isn't women's go-to way of increasing physical arousal—that's more likely accomplished by fantasizing, says Rupp.

Women's physical arousal and mental arousal are two separate entities, explains Rupp, and they're not always in sync. In other words, women can be mentally but not physically aroused, or vice versa. "For men, the two are more closely linked," she says.

This may be because men's arousal reliably ends with orgasm, which is often not the case for women. Not surprisingly, then, men masturbate to porn more often than women do. A recent study in the *Archives of Sexual Behavior* found that men's self-pleasuring is accompanied by porn nearly half the time, as opposed to 9 percent of the time for women.

Viewing or reading erotica does influence women, but it affects a different part of the intimacy equation than pornography does for men. Men who view porn may experience a shift in their sexual expectations; women who use erotica may experience a shift in their relationship expectations. "Women who consume more erotic fiction tend to have unrealistic expectations of their partners," says Bridges. "They want to have these fantastic, passionate relationships."

Beyond that, she says, "erotica tends to be positive. It can expand a couple's sexual repertoire and increase communication about what they like and don't like." The obvious explanation is their partner's positive perception of it—men typically interpret women's sexual media use as an effort to liven up their lovemaking, says Bridges. It's not just wishful thinking. According to the University of Arkansas study, women's primary reason for using sexual media is to enhance partnered sex; in fact, this may be the critical distinction between erotica and porn. "Material which could be viewed as pornographic when used alone would acquire a different meaning

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NAKED NUMBERS

It's no surprise that men watch more pornography than women do. So here's perhaps the more critical and telling question: How do men's and women's perceptions of pornography diverge?



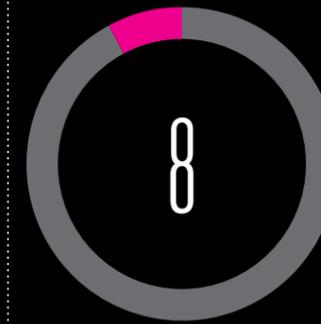
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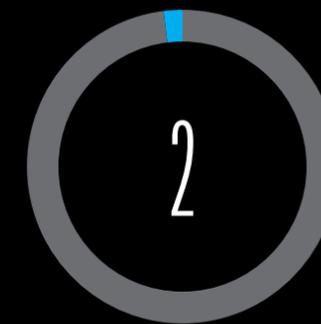
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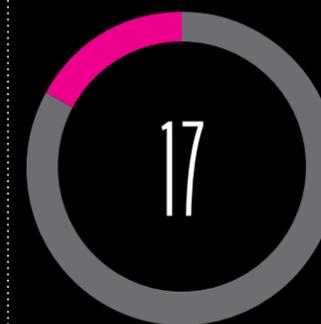
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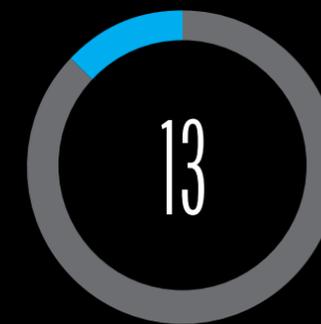
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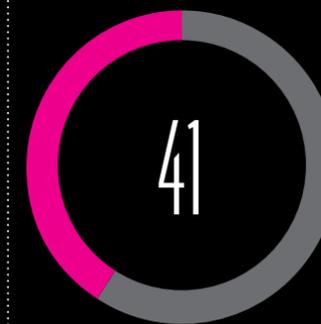
PERCENTAGE OF MEN WHO WOULD FEEL BETRAYED IF THEIR PARTNER USED PORN



PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN WHO SAY THE SAME



PERCENTAGE OF MEN WHO SAY PORN HAS MADE THEM MORE CRITICAL OF THEIR PARTNER'S BODY



PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN WHO FEAR THEIR PARTNER WILL COMPARE THEM TO PORN STARS



Why More Women Are Watching Porn

Pornography isn't just fodder for male fantasy. A 2011 University of Denver study found that nearly a third of women use porn solo. One explanation: Younger women are being taught that engaging in a typically male behavior is sexy. But there's also a more personal motivation: "Women are embracing sexuality for personal pleasure, not just having babies," says Ana Bridges, Ph.D., a University of Arkansas psychology professor. "They're discovering their likes and dislikes, even taking control in the bedroom."

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when viewed in company," say Australian researchers, who authored the paper linking intimacy and erotica.

Context, they argue, is more important than content. In the University of Arkansas study, for example, both men and women who reported using sexual media as part of love-making had higher relationship satisfaction than those who used it solo. University of Denver researchers recently found that couples who exclusively viewed pornography together were more sexually satisfied and dedicated to each other than those who viewed it separately. These results, however, "do not suggest a benefit of viewing sexually explicit media together," the scientists note—they only imply that mutual use won't detract from your relationship quality.

What will? A lack of communication. "Open communication with your partner and yourself is the most effective way to keep porn use healthy. It plays the biggest role," says Rupp.

"She has a right to her limits about her partner's use. It's okay for her to say, 'This is my limit. I'm okay with this, but not that,'" says Bridges. "But so does he. He has a right to say that's reasonable or not."

The key is "thinking that sexuality is always relational, even if you're single," says sex therapist Michael Metz, Ph.D., author of *Enduring Desire*. That means taking the focus off performance. "We live in a sexually perfectionistic culture—erectons are expected to be automatic, performance perfect," says Metz. This view, largely perpetuated by pornography, isolates one aspect of sex—the acts—and makes it the definition of great sex.

That's incredibly limiting—and unrealistic.

Have porn sex if you want. In fact, according to Metz's book, it's okay and even advisable to incorporate erotic scenarios, such as watching erotic videos together, using sex toys, or role playing, into your repertoire. But you should also "open up sex so it's not so narrow," he said. "Any mood should be right for sex. Have angst sex. Party sex. Bad-mood sex. Your erection may not always be great, but there's connection."

That, says Struthers, is the definition of intimacy. "It's looking at someone and saying, 'You are good,' and having someone look at you and saying, 'You are good.'"

Men have told me I'm beautiful or that my body is arousing, which, of course, makes me feel sexy. But being told I'm enough—physically, emotionally, and sexually—is my ultimate desire. I think that's the desire of every woman, or perhaps of every person: to satisfy and feel satisfied, to be accepted and adored. That's something only the person next to you in bed can fulfill. ■

The reporting and editing process for this story touched off a tremendous amount of debate in the offices of *Men's Health*. Perhaps you (or your girlfriend) would like to join the conversation as well. Go to MensHealth.com/porn to make your arguments, pro and con.