



## Pornography 101: Why College Kids Need Porn Literacy Training

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I am a professor. As I return to the classroom this fall, my thoughts turn to porn. More specifically, to the fact that in apartments, dorms -- and from the back of some WiFi-ed classrooms -- college students are cruising the Internet with the left-handed mouse.

This should come as no surprise. We live in a world filled with sexual imagery: There's Miley Cyrus' advanced-beginner pole dance at the Kids' Choice Awards last year; a breathless homoerotic shower scene in the HBO vampire series, "True Blood," and commercial advertising (like this from Axe) that takes double entendre to a new level. Pornography itself is a ubiquitous and easily accessed part of our media landscape. And with many schools lacking comprehensive sex education, many young adults are now getting information about sex from sites like youporn and redtube.

The use of Internet porn hardly represents the first time people learned about sex from pictures. *Playboy* launched its first issue in 1953 and *Penthouse* has been around since 1969. *The Joy of Sex* became a best-selling book when it first hit the shelves in 1972, in no small measure for its how-to illustrations. But access to high-speed, live-action visuals ups the ante. With laptops overtaking sales of desktop computers and the proliferation of smart phones, sexual gratification and research is available to many of my students anywhere, anytime.

"Sex" is the number-one search term used around the globe. Every second, people spend \$3,000 on Internet porn. There are an estimate 370 million Internet porn sites, and industry revenues surpass earnings by Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple, and Netflix combined.

But along with its popularity, there is also cause for deep concern about the effects of mainstream pornography on our culture. Whether we like porn or not -- and based on the figures, many people like it -- we would be smart to figure out strategies for dealing constructively with the impact of this media genre instead of trying to silence it, shut it down or uncritically supporting it.

Pornography both shapes and reflects assumptions about straight masculinity, female sexuality, expectations of beauty, and how women are treated -- particularly women of color. Porn has the potential to affect the sexual pleasure and safety of all.

Like all forms of pop culture entertainment, mainstream porn often reenacts bias about gender, race and power. In this sense, porn is no different than Disney films or "Jersey Shore," "CSI: Miami" and the sports section of your local paper. But because porn is explicitly focused on sex instead of simply infused with sex-power innuendo, porn can blur the line of consent by making non-consensual domination seem sexy.

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting that vanilla is the only flavor of the day. Unlike some, such as *Pornland* author Gail Dines (who worries that men watching gonzo porn is increasing pressure on women to accept heterosexual anal penetration, or bondage and domination), I trust adults to make their own best decisions about their sexual choices. Whether spanking, teasing, topping, or switching -- or even nuzzling, fondling, spooning, or kissing -- it's not clear that porn is an evil culprit. Certainly there's nothing wrong with human proclivity for both cuddle and kink. But what matters in every moment is consent.

Better information about the politics of media creates in young people -- and all of us -- stronger abilities to distinguish between fantasy and reality, yes and no, coercion and consent -- lines that can be fuzzy in porn. The more we understand how to "decode" porn media, the better situated we are to know the difference. The more willing we are to teach age-appropriate media literacy to children and young adults, the better able they are to navigate the sexually mediated world we live in.

The answer is not to eradicate porn: "Just say no" just doesn't work. This slogan did not erase drug addiction, it is ineffective in terms of sexual abstinence and it does not work for pornography, either. The American Academy of Pediatrics explains that abstinence-only education is a waste of time especially "when the media have become such an important source of information" about sexual activity. Since pornography is one aspect of media, it holds that promoting porn abstinence is also an unwise strategy.

Yet groups such as Stop Porn Culture would like to obliterate porn. With *Reefer Madness*-style hysteria, these total-ban arguments lack nuance and stomp on free will. The anti-porn pledge available for signing at the Stop Porn Culture Web site echoes virginity-until-marriage vows promoted by the Christian Right. Neither pledge works and both create a dangerous conundrum. "Just say no" does not provide skills for knowing how to make choices when we "just say yes" one time and discover that it feels good. This is the case whether inhaling that first hit of weed or taking a first look at an XXX-rated click-through.

Rather than fostering silence and further taboo, it is crucial to provide critical media literacy, increased access to sexual information, and greater conversation about gender, race, consent, and power. This promotes sexual pleasure and productive solutions to sexual harm. When I speak at universities across the country, students enthusiastically contribute their questions and concerns. They *want* to talk about the impact of porn on our most intimate lives, our most casual hook-ups, and our most long-term desires.

For instance, a PowerPoint I show during these discussions, culled from decades of porn stills, suggests that we live in a world of increasingly vanishing pubic hair. While a full

Brazilian is neither good nor bad, teaching how porn fashion can become bedroom style goes far toward expanding beauty expectations for ourselves and for our partners. Open conversation about the personal politics of porn happens best when the room is judgment-free. Based on what young adults share about their pleasures and their fears, I know there is a real need for porn education and for providing new language to articulate our preferences and our non-negotiables.

Public conversation about drugs helps promote better solutions to addiction. The HIV and the AIDS epidemic transformed "condom" from a word uttered in private hushed tones to a common vocabulary term on billboards and public service announcements. Effective solutions to social problems require brave conversations that are our cultural realities.

Digital technology is increasingly shaping our analog relationships. Pop culture infuses our everyday lives. We must put media literacy at the top of our cultural to-do list because this provides the critical skills that enable adults (young, or otherwise) to identify sexism, misogyny and racism in all forms of pop culture, including porn. As a generation of porn-watchers comes of age, it is to society's benefit that they are taught a kind of "porn literacy" that encourages an understanding of what constitutes mutually consensual sex in real life.

The ubiquity of porn requires a willingness to start talking out loud about the sex-tech nexus. Talking won't solve all our problems overnight. But shifting our cultural conversation matters -- particularly when these are difficult dialogues.

Americans understand that censorship violates our most fundamental principles of free speech. Instead, what is necessary is greater conversation to confront crucial issues of equality, safety and consent while promoting agency, autonomy and free will.

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