Men & Pornography

Brett & Kate McKay

(Boobs...Butts...Bellies...and Back)

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Men and Porn: An Introduction (Part 1)

In a 2010 interview with *Playboy Magazine*, musician John Mayer described his relationship with porn thusly: "It's a new synaptic pathway. You wake up in the morning, open a thumbnail page, and it leads to a Pandora's box of visuals. There have probably been days when I saw 300 vaginas before I got out of bed." Most men in the West can identify, if not with the specific number Mayer offered, then with his general sentiment and daily routine. Viewing porn, once considered a shameful pursuit to be carried on in society's shadows, has become more than mainstream; today it is considered a nearly universal part of every man's life. Watch any modern television show (particularly sitcoms), and it is nearly assumed that the main male characters watch porn, and in many cases, it is practically celebrated (see Barney in *How I Met Your Mother*). In modern novels about American life, the same is true; and even in men's magazines you will find a variety of quips about the normalness of porn. It is become embedded into our pop culture and therefore our entertainment and our conversations.

Many men have an occasional touch of wariness about the effect their porn habit is having on their brains – even Mayer posits that it is affecting his generation's relationships later in the *Playboy* interview. But in general, viewing porn is something a lot of guys engage in without much thought, seeing it as something innocuous – a normal part of life and fodder for endless jokes on internet forums.

But is porn harmless? Should it in fact be part of a man's life, or are there potential downsides to this habit? In a 4-part series this week, I will be thoroughly diving into these important questions.

What Is Normal and What Is WEIRD?

While porn is usually considered by the masses to be thoroughly healthy and decidedly normal, it is worth noting that what is "normal" in Western society does not necessarily hold true across cultures. In a study published in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* (a journal published by Cambridge University), researchers found that psychologists and sociologists routinely base their conclusions on studies done with one kind of test subject: the WEIRD (those in Western, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic societies); in fact, 96% of the subjects whose behavior has been reported in top psychological journals were drawn from only 12% of the world's population. Researchers have taken the WEIRD to be representative of populations around the globe, but this simply is not the case. Citizens of the West are in fact more likely to be outliers when compared to the behaviors and attitudes of other cultures.

A fascinating example of this is the practice of masturbation. Like porn, masturbation is often seen as a male universal. And yet there are societies in which it is a foreign practice. Case in point: when researchers attempted to ask two Central African tribes – the Aka and the Ngandu — about their masturbation practices, the anthropologists found it difficult to explain, not because these two peoples were shy or embarrassed about the subject, but because they did not have a term for it. The researchers reported that

the Aka "found it unusual and said it may happen far away in Congo, but they did not know it...We asked men, in particular, about masturbating before they were married or during the post-partum sex taboo and all indicated this did not occur." The study notes that the absence of masturbation turned up among other tribes as well:

> "We asked Robert Bailey . . . about his experiences of trying to collect semen for fertility studies from Lese men in the Ituri forest of the Democratic Republic of Congo. He indicated it was very difficult to explain to men how to self-stimulate to obtain semen samples. He said that despite explicit and lengthy instructions three of four semen specimens came to him mixed with vaginal secretions."

While masturbation and porn often go, together, hand-in-hand, the subject of this series will be porn. I simply bring up the topic to demonstrate an important fact: that which we in industrialized, Western countries consider to be normal, male universals, are not always such. The claim that "everybody does it" is unfortunately often used to shut down discussions of the possible downside of certain practices before they can ever be fully examined.

Not Your Grandpappy's Porn

Of course, it is true that pornography has existed for thousands of years in some form or another around the world. Neolithic cavemen likely drew naked women on the insides of caves; the ancient Greeks and Romans created art depicting graphic sex scenes; the ancient Hindus gave us the Kama Sutra; supposedly prudish Victorians still managed to create titillating erotic artwork; your grandpa lined his barracks with sexy pin-ups and had access to "stag films"; and your dad likely had a stash of *Playboy* magazines in his closet.

But the level of access and the sheer amount of porn has changed dramatically since the dawn of the digital age (in fact, it is estimated that 30% of all the data transferred on the internet is porn). In *Your Brain on Porn*, Gary Wilson argues that today's high-speed internet pornography is vastly different from the static variety of yesteryear. And, our hunter-gatherer brain simply is not evolved for it. That mismatch — between our current porn-infused environment and what our brains are evolved for — is creating problems for many men.

The ancient, universal code of manhood rested on 3 P's: Protect, Provide, and Procreate. While the "edifice" of manhood was designed to be held up by this triad of support, in our modern age men are not often called upon to be protectors, and sometimes do not get much satisfaction from their work as providers. Consequently, the pillar of Procreation has come to bear a disproportionate amount of weight in a man's life and has thus become twisted and contorted from the strain. The standard of procreation centered not just on having kids, but a man's sexuality, and modern men's lives are often filled to the brim with sex – or at least watching other people have sex. Men have become spectators of their own sexuality, and porn has filled their daily existence with more and more abstraction, instead of action – taking them further and further from the core of masculinity.

Thus, it is not surprising that while our culture often celebrates porn as a relatively harmless, ubiquitous pastime, fissures of discontent and concern have opened at the same time. Forums around the web are filled with thousands of men reporting a myriad of issues that have arisen from their porn use. Some have confessed that their habit has become so all-consuming that it has gotten in the way of school, work, and even relationships. Some have said that their sexual performance with their wives or girlfriends has suffered due in part to their relentless diet of porn. Some are simply tired of the way having porn on the brain has turned everything they hear — from a phrase in a pastor's sermon, to the innocent things their kids say — into a sexual innuendo. At the same time, professional urologists and therapists are beginning to report that they are seeing more and more young male patients who are heavy porn users suffer from sexual problems, like erectile dysfunction, that generally only show up later in life.

In recent years, many men have become part of the "Paleo" movement – rejiggering their diets, exercise routines, and lifestyles to align more closely with how their primitive ancestors once lived. They have discovered that sitting all day, eating processed food, and performing endless cardio was sapping their health, strength, virility, and spirit, and that creating more natural habits leveled up their lives to a new degree of vim and vigor. Is it not time that men also compared their porn consumption to that of their manly forbearers, and considered whether pulling the plug on it might aid in the journey of becoming better men?

A Note on Porn Research

I have read all the information about porn use that I could find. However, despite the long wait, research into the effects of internet porn use is admittedly still in its infancy, and there just is not that much out there. There are a few reasons for this. First, it is just plain hard to research the effects of porn use. Double-blind studies are impossible because if you ask a research participant to remove porn from their life, both the researcher and participant know exactly what the variable being tested is. What is more, researchers have had trouble finding men who have not looked at internet porn to compare what their brains or lives are like compared to men who do look at porn. There is also an ethical component to the dearth of porn research. For example, a great way to study the effects of porn on the minds of teenagers would be to find a young man who has not looked at porn and then expose him to it. But for obvious reasons, this would not be considered ethical.

Another reason there isn't all that much research on porn is that for most of modern history, porn use was never seen as something that needed to be researched because it wasn't really seen as a problem, at least from a clinical point of view.

Finally, porn is simply a controversial issue, which makes unbiased research and analysis on it difficult. On the one hand you have moral crusaders who are gung-ho to conclusively prove that porn is absolutely terrible and should be eliminated. And on the other hand, you have "sex positive" therapists, sexologists, and yes, porn producers who think porn use is part of a sexually healthy lifestyle and consequently downplay evidence of porn's detriments while emphasizing its benefits.

All this is to say that sussing out solid, unbiased porn-related research is difficult. However, that is beginning to change. As more and more men on internet forums self-report having problems with internet porn, and as the number of doctors and therapists report seeing patients who are having trouble with porn, researchers are starting to give porn use, particularly the online variety, a serious look.

Until more research is done on the effect of viewing internet porn on the body and mind, we are left with using correlational and anecdotal evidence about its effects. While not as strong as causal studies, and deserving of greater scrutiny, it would be foolhardy to dismiss this evidence that we do have altogether. Much of the research and analysis about porn use is being done by men who have experienced problems with it firsthand. They've come together on forums around the web (like Your Brain on Porn) to take part in a giant n=1 experiment by seeing what happens when they eliminate porn from their lives and reporting the results. It is admittedly not the most scientifically rigorous form of experimentation, but their shared experiences have proven useful to other men and have spurred actual scientists to put internet porn under the microscope even more.

A Note on My Own Biases

I would be remiss if I did not at the outset disclose my own biases as to the subject of porn. To put all my cards on the table, I personally think porn is wrong and immoral. I am a religious guy, so sexual chastity, on a variety of levels, is a standard I subscribe to. Other than discovering some nudie mags in the woods as a boy, and occasionally inadvertently stumbling on pornography on the web (it's hard not to when your job is on the internet), I'm not a porn user and never have been.

In some people's eyes, this likely renders me incapable of putting out objective material about porn. While that is true, no one is objective, even professional scientists. And I personally think I am pretty adept at examining a subject apart from my own beliefs, approaching it as a neutral observer would, and trying to see if there are any compelling, non-religious reasons to adopt certain behaviors. To that end, my research has been all over the spectrum, and I intentionally read both pro-, and anti-porn materials with an open mind. In fact, at one point in my research, I came to think that while porn was not for me because of my personal beliefs, it really was not a big deal for other men and did not have significantly deleterious effects. But then, after reading more materials on the subject, I ultimately came to feel that the argument against using porn was in fact the strongest, regardless of a person's religious beliefs.

Finally, despite my faith, I am not a fan of the firebrand anti-porn scare messages put out there by many of the religious ilk. I cannot help but roll my eyes when people call porn a "pandemic" or "plague." From my observations, I just don't think that sort of rhetoric is all that helpful and in fact can actually backfire — making the allure of porn even more enticing and the specter of quitting even more difficult for men who are using it (I'll explain why later in the series).

Bottom line: I intend to present information on the possible negative effects of porn use in the most even-handed, non-polemical way possible, and allow readers to draw their own conclusions.