



Smith, Clarissa (2014) Teenage Kicks: Young People's Engagements with Pornography, Some Results from Pornresearch.org Questionnaire. 'Teenage Kicks: Die Auseinandersetzung junger Menschen mit Pornografie, Ergebnisse des pornresearch.org-Fragebogens'). In: Explizit! Neue Perspektiven zu Pornographie und Gesellschaft. Bertz + Fischer. ISBN 9783865056085

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Teenage Kicks: Young People's Engagements with Pornography, Some Results from Pornresearch.org Questionnaire.

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As we finished the final edit of this chapter, UK television channel C4 kicked off its autumn season with a documentary 'Porn on the Brain' (TX: 30.09.2013: 22.00) which purported to investigate how teenagers' relationship with pornography was changing in the Internet age. Any hopes of a nuanced and cool investigation were dashed as presenter Martin Daubney, one time editor of lads' magazine *Loaded*, exclaimed 'But now [pornography] is turning our kids into psychopaths!' In what followed, hyperbole and claim was laid on thick over camera-friendly scenes of family kitchens and brain scans, producing a picture of lost innocence, brain change and addiction. Establishing spurious connections, pornography was explicitly likened to heroin, claimed to be damaging kids' brains because the 'nature of the teenage brain ... makes it especially vulnerable to addiction' and one expert was wheeled in to intone 'we have a great difficulty in proving the connection between violent imagery and violent behaviour but clinically it is clear there is a connection.'

'Porn on the Brain' joins the myriad pages of newssheet dedicated to decrying young peoples' obsessions with sex and sexual representations. Headlines have shouted that 'Children Grow Up Addicted to Online Porn Sites' (Peev, 2012); 'How internet porn turned my beautiful boy into a hollow, self-hating shell' (Martin, 2012) and 'So, Minister when were the civil liberties of porn users more important than those of children?' (Philips, 2012) In such headlines, innocence and childhood are talked of as a protected period of life, under threat from outside forces: the forces of unbridled sex, perverse acts, degradation and humiliation. In such reportings' direct facsimile of the 19th century masturbation horror stories, pornography is positioned as an 'outside' force with the

potential to turn children into very different people from the ones that they already are, or have the potential to be.

Headlines are not the only spaces in which exaggerated claims and shoddy science are put forward. The UK government has lighted on Internet Pornography as an object of particular concern, commissioning three investigations into 'sexualisation' and the effects of pornography on young people in as many years. In May 2013, the UK Children's Commissioner released its Rapid Evidence Assessment on the state of research into children's experiences of pornography (Horvath et al, 2013). Following on from the Papadopoulos (2010) and Bailey reports (2011),¹ the Children's Commissioner report presents a series of deeply embedded assumptions, which are revealed, as one of us has observed,

by its insistent use of the word 'exposed'. Children are 'exposed' to pornography – a wording carried no less than 66 times in the REA. The fact that such a way of conceiving how people encounter sexual or indeed any other kinds of materials was long ago questioned passes them by completely – an ignoring nicely in line with the REA's dismissive attitude towards research which showed that, where young people do look at pornography, the motives for doing so range from 'masturbation', to 'wanting to know more about sex', to 'curiosity', and 'boredom'. Such motives for looking don't fit well with the working model of cumulative effect, corrupting influence, and slippery slope to doom, all of which is set in motion by that word 'exposed'. (Barker, forthcoming)

Almost a decade ago, Henry Jenkins suggested we know less about the audiences of pornography than 'probably any other genre of popular entertainment'. (2004: 2) Indeed, what little we do know often comes from representations in mainstream media where two stereotypes predominate, for example, in men's magazines like *Loaded* or in films like *American Pie*², the porn consumer may be represented as 'a normal bloke, having a

¹ Clarissa Smith (2010) has pointed to the weaknesses in the Papadopoulos report, and the

² Dir. Paul Weitz, 1999

bit of fun', but elsewhere he (and it is usually a he) is more likely to be presented as 'deviant, slightly suspect and probably addicted'. (McKee et al, 2008: 25) The latter is part of a tradition of figuring those who engage with porn in negative ways; as 'pimply teenagers, furtive perverts in raincoats, and asocial compulsively masturbating misfits'. (Kipnis, 1996: 161) This tradition has little to say about actual audiences of porn, instead using figures of the porn user as ways of depicting the harm and danger associated with pornography. In the past those figures have included a 'falsely innocent adolescent female' and a 'truly depraved adult male', (Kendrick, 1996: 261-2) but the traumatized child and addicted adult male are currently the most frequently depicted figures of porn consumption. They provide the focus for much 'concerned' press discussion of pornography, as in the oft-cited *Time* magazine's reporting on 'cyberporn' (1995). This featured illustrations of a pale, transfixed child and 'a naked man, his arms and legs wrapped around a keyboard and computer monitor, seeming to dissolve into the screen', the connection between body and screen was presented as unwholesome, overwhelming and masturbatory. (Patterson, 2001: 104-5) Consumers as 'victims' of pornography are also graphically depicted in the Josh McDowell Ministry's video *1 Click Away*,³ where men, women and children are shown being assailed and controlled by grasping hands and the voiceover speaks of the disintegration of the family as a result of consumption of porn. It has been claimed that porn is America's number one addiction, that men now routinely access images of extreme sexual violence, and that pornography is responsible for depression, anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem and relationship breakdown.

As the three UK reports referenced above attest, young people are particularly at the centre of attempts at sexual regulation around a range of media forms and particularly controversies over internet pornography; this has had significant purchase on the political sphere in the UK during the past two years. Alongside those government reports into 'Sexualisation', there are current campaigns, spearheaded by the *Daily Mail*

³ Available at <http://www.just1clickaway.org/> (last accessed 25 October 2013).

and moral lobby groups, to force ISPs to block porn at the network level.⁴ The *Daily Mail* has been at the centre of similar controversies for decades over the 'video nasties', music, video games or reality television. The past two years have seen numerous stories about young people being 'addicted' to online porn sites: stories which recycle the arguments of Gail Dines (2010) and others, that by allowing easy access to internet pornography we are engaging in some sort of social experiment with no idea of the likely results.

Writing for *Psychologies* magazine as part of its campaign against pornography in 2010, British journalist Decca Aitkenhead describes boys sitting 'in silence, staring at hardcore pornography on their phones, swapping images of astonishing sexual violence as if they were Pokémon cards'. (2010) The Australian parenting author, Steve Biddulph, claims that porn makes girls 'compliant but disengaged', and that it is responsible for 'one of the most depressed, anxious and lonely generations of young people ever to inhabit the earth'. (2009: 164) This depiction of porn as a narcotic is often supplemented by claims that link it to child abuse and coercive sex work; for Australian campaigner, Melinda Tankard Reist, porn and 'sexualized' media act 'as a de facto pimp for the prostitution and pornography industries' (2009: 20) while US anti-porn feminist Rebecca Whisnant describes men as victims of 'grooming' by pornographers - 'abused' and 'consumed' (2010: 115) and the 'target for ruthless commercial exploitation'. (2010: 132) Gail Dines describes young men experiencing the downward spiral of addiction as unstoppable - they

neglect their school work, spend huge amounts of money they don't have, become isolated from others, and often suffer depression. They know something is wrong, feel out of control, and don't know how to stop. Some (...) have become

⁴ As is the way with much academic work, this chapter has been some time in the writing and various processes of reaching actual publication and, during that gestation period, policy has moved apace. In November 2013, the UK government announced that its representations to Internet Service Providers had resulted in agreement that the big four ISPs (Sky, BT, Talk Talk and Virgin) would introduce 'family friendly' internet filters. The government said by the end of next year, 20 million homes - 95% of all homes in Britain with an existing internet connection - will be required to choose whether to switch on a whole home family friendly internet filter.

so desensitised that they have started using harder porn and end up masturbating to images that had previously disgusted them. Many of these men are deeply ashamed and frightened, as they don't know where all this will end. (2011)

These are themes she develops at greater length in her book *Pornland; How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* and which were extensively referenced in the *Porn on the Brain* documentary.

Any opposition to this picture is framed as the interests of a few, strange, sad, unpleasant individuals against the needs of the innocent child and the wider well-being of society – 'A guinea pig generation of children is growing up addicted to hardcore internet pornography' (Peev, 2012). We are, apparently, in a 'state of emergency' (SaferMedia commentary at ISPA, 2011), where the key voices are those of parents and carers (Bailey, 2011). Much of the concern seems to be driven by adult and parental horror at the discovery that a child is watching pornography. The stories in the press which emphasise discovery place the blame for a whole range of symptoms – lack of sleep, nightmares, bad temper, failing grades etc – at the feet of pornography, a single incident of discovery being turned into a story of addiction, these narratives also seek to re-establish the necessity for the child to be rescued from their addiction (Martin, 2012). Children get to speak in these news stories and government reports in particular ways – their views on what *other* children are doing have been solicited for a number of recent policy reviews but there seems to be little interest in hearing *how* young people might frame the issues themselves, and about themselves.

Young people ought to be at the centre of discussions about pornography and its meanings and place in teenagers' lives but *how* they are placed in such, and the kinds of questions they are invited to respond to, must be properly considered. Audience researchers have long acknowledged the ways in which observers (even if they belong to the target demographic in terms of age or gender) will ascribe particular problems,

harms etc to *others* rather than to themselves. They speak *about* others while thinking of themselves in entirely different terms: where others are unable to resist 'media messages', they themselves are unaffected. The debates about sexualisation have proved no different. When asked to reflect upon their own *personal* experiences, young people give answers about their own personal uses that are more nuanced and less excitable than those which embellish stories in the press. The rest of this chapter will turn to accounts of those kinds in order to explore how pornography might be significant in teenagers' lives.

The pornresearch.org project: Motives and Methods

This chapter draws on material gathered during a research project carried out online at <http://pornresearch.org/>, launched during 2011 and aimed at examining people's everyday engagements with pornography. We wanted to gather a body of responses from people who use and engage with online pornography – people who are almost entirely absent from the debates around it, to examine in their own words the nature of their involvements with online pornography. We wanted to do this in a way that those people, who are likely to be intensely aware of the way they are talked about, categorised, and belittled, would trust us sufficiently to tell us their stories, their responses, their pleasures, their preferences and how those might be disappointed or refused. We needed to do this in a way that would allow us to discern patterns, distinct groupings, connections and separations. For this, we needed to generate sufficient responses to allow us to do some secure quantitative analyses – but what mattered most to us was hearing the accounts that people would give us. We know that such accounts are not transparent truths. They are the ways that people are willing and able to tell us about themselves. But that is their distinctive value. Through the words that men and women, straight and homosexual, young and old choose and use, we can hear their reasons and interests in sex, their sense of sexual self, what pornography means to them, and the ways in which it may matter to them. The picture that emerges from this research is seriously at odds with the representations of pornography audiences

that we are familiar with from the popular press, television and policy reviews. Here we outline some findings of the project, focusing particularly on what our research suggests about the ways that young people engage with porn to learn about sex and about themselves and to think through, figure out or express sexual orientations and identities. We consider some of the ways in which porn consumption is related to age, and the place of pornography in its audiences' lives, imaginations and relationships. We discuss the implications of this kind of research for the study of pornography and more generally for research on sex, sexuality and the media, and consider the lessons that can be learnt for policy and public debates about pornography.

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

We also wanted to ask them to tell us things that might be difficult because self-revelatory. So, we asked people to tell us the kinds of sexual stories that most attract them, and about a pornographic moment or scenario that they had found especially arousing. Finally, we added a 'wild-card' question asking people if there was anything about them as individuals which would help us understand the answers they had given. Answers to this ranged from 'No' or 'Nothing' to lengthy stories. This was important as a counter-balance to our search for patterns and tendencies. People may share many

characteristics but this is an area of very individual qualities as well – and we wanted to be able to illustrate patterns we discovered with portraits of complex individuals.

We didn't actively seek under-18s for this project, in fact, because of ethical issues under 18s could not be directly targeted by the research, although we did include a category of under-18 in our demographic questions. Ninety-seven young people did answer the questionnaire - we could have excluded their answers but why, when they gave time and evidently thought the questionnaire was worth their energy to complete, would we choose to ignore their responses? More than this, their answers are rich and ready for analysis, these respondents have the anonymity given to everyone else, and they offer us perceptions which are not available elsewhere. Given that there is so much anxiety about young people and their use of pornography, these responses, albeit unsolicited, offer important insights into young peoples understandings of pornography, their interests in sexuality and their place in the debates and outcry.

Some stats: Not for quotation or reproduction without permission of authors

The survey ran from February – July 2011, hosted at <http://www.pornresearch.org>, we received 5,490 responses, of which 3,743 were male [68.4%] and 1726 female [31.6%] (21 respondents left this field blank). Results for sexual orientation and age are given in the tables below.

Orientation	Number	Percentage
Heterosexual	3842	70.0
Gay	186	3.4
Lesbian	56	1.0
Bisexual	905	16.5
Queer	303	5.5
Unsure	189	3.4
Total	5481	99.8
No answer	9	.2
Total	5490	100.0

Age	Number	Percentage
under 18	97	1.8
18-25	1937	35.3
26-35	1823	33.2
36-45	944	17.2
46-55	418	7.6
56-65	227	4.1
over 65	31	.6
Total	5477	99.8
No answer	13	.2
Total	5490	100.0

Clearly our questionnaire was popular, not only did more than 5,000 complete it but we also received hundreds of emails thanking us for the opportunity to take part and for presenting the opportunity to reflect on pornography and their consumption of it in ways they might not have thought about before. For some respondents, among them the under-18s, the questions were difficult: "Not sure what to put here. I thought this would be an easy survey :-[" - and for others, completing the questionnaire offered an opportunity to joke about pornography's status as damaging: "Tell daddy I don't want to make the movies anymore. I want to go live with mommy." This is something we return to later as it indicates a particularly reflexive mode of engaging with our questionnaire.

The Under-18s

Orientation	Female	Male	Total
Heterosexual	13	42	55
Gay	0	6	6
Lesbian	0	0	0
Bisexual	15	9	24

Queer	1	3	4
Unsure	4	3	7
No answer			1
Total	33	63	97

Young People's Responses:

So what did young people say? We start first with a mischievous rejoinder to us and to the standard ideas of young people as simply bodies without controls:

I have a bomb strapped to my chest, if I don't cum every 45 minutes half of Cleveland goes up in flames.

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We could look at a response like that and say there is very little that can be learned from it. But that would be to dismiss its important implications about the ways in which the debates about porn don't simply skim off the backs of those who are supposedly 'the problem' or 'at risk' – this answer demonstrates an awareness of being talked about, of being a figure that has to be managed, a personage who has to be protected; so here we see an under-18 actually speaking back to those arguments. One young man completed the entire questionnaire in satirical mode and in the following responses you can see his rejoinders to the ways in which porn is characterised as a dark force ready to attack the unsuspecting. In answering our questions about where he most recently accessed pornography this young man told us 'By the dumpster behind my elementary school. A man with 8 fingers gave me a beta tape of dogs humping rubber gloves filled with Vaseline.' He obviously has a sense of humour and he's playing a game with us. He subverts the questionnaire but is using the kinds of languages and scenarios of the pornographic imagination – the man with eight fingers; the fears that teens might be

infecting other young people with their interests and that they'll be tempting younger children – in ways which clearly speak to us as a particular imagined group of researchers but also marks a refusal of the categorising discourses of 'young people at risk from porn'. Indeed, this young man takes those categories and fears and plays with them; he writes that 'Sex is essential to opening portals to dark dimensions', suggesting that he doesn't want to be frightened off by well-meaning adults. His answers play with the conventions of porn and popular culture: in his answer to our question about a favourite scenario he told us, 'He was a 4 foot ex-navy seal with a bad attitude and a heart of gold. She was a daddy's girl with a skin condition and a devil-may-care smile. They fight crime.' And in his description of his history with pornography he plays with outrage 'Most recently I cut my dick on a doorknob trying to unlock it with my foreskin.' in order to amplify affect in, and effect on, us as researchers seeking 'proper' answers. Indeed, his remarks go as far as parody - 'Sufficiently violent pornography usually distracts the child I'm raping long enough for me to finish. Without it I would have to go back to burning them – with menthol cigarettes.' - which reflects and amplifies the levels of hyperbole at work in many discussions of young people and their sexual interests.

So, the format of our questionnaire allowed teens to respond ironically and to refuse their objectification as 'subjects of concern' – something very few researches pay attention to but which we feel is an important reminder that such discourses of concern can be experienced as an unwarranted imposition which may prevent young people even taking any notice of the current debates or feeling they have any part to play in how these are conducted. Even if a proportion of our respondents gave these 'defiant' and 'rejecting' answers, they do so at some length, indicating a real desire to have their say on the topic. In this, these challenging answers correspond with the majority of the responses we received from the under-18s - far from being unthinking, uncritical and unreflexive 'victims' of pornography, these young people gave lengthy responses, demonstrating their own awareness of themselves as engaging in sexually explicit materials, how those materials might fit with their experiences in this stage of their lives

and their understanding of themselves as often excluded from discussion on the basis of their supposed lack of experience:

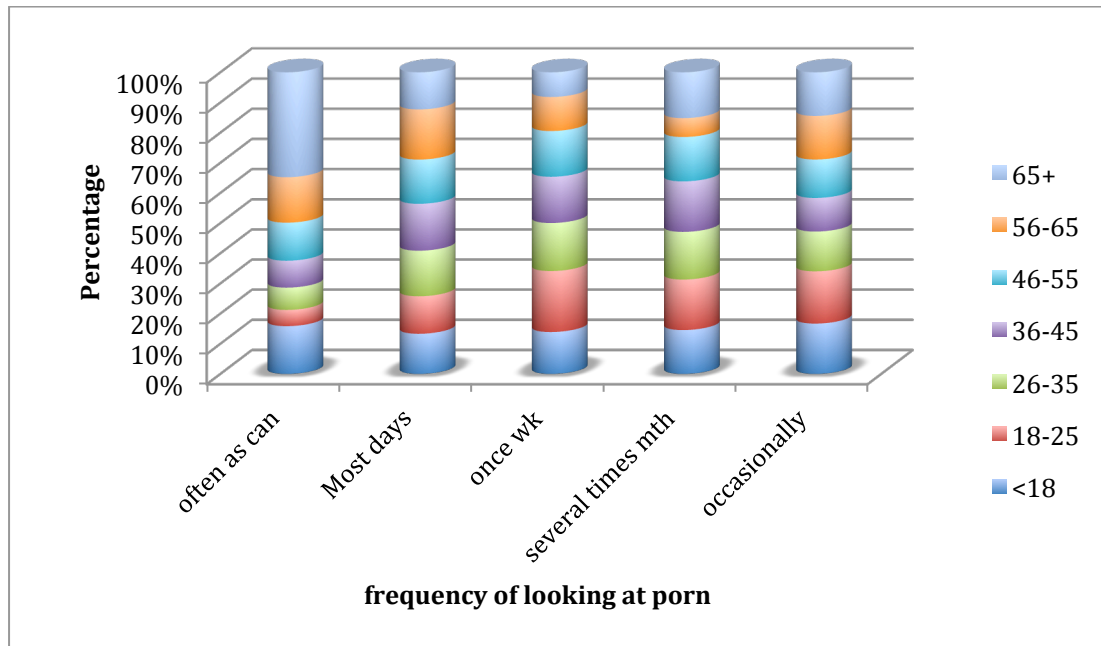
I have not, in fact, ever had sex, and am beginning to suspect that I am not the target demographic for this survey. Nevertheless, I will forge onwards (by the way, I would also like to note that I am in the 13-18 age bracket, if that disqualifies my survey). Given this admission, I might seem underqualified to be giving opinions on sex...

Yet, of course, not having *had* sex doesn't mean that the individual is not *sexual*. Let's see how being sexual is explored by young people and how they accord porn a place in their life-stage *qua* teens.

Associations between frequency of viewing porn and age

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Our first question asked respondents 'how important would they say porn is in their lives?' All 5,490 respondents answered this question, and across the age categorisations the most frequent response being 'only a little' for importance (35.7%), followed by 'quite' important (33.4%). The least frequent response was for 'extremely' important (5.2%). A significant association was uncovered between frequency of looking at porn and age. One of the clearest findings seems to be that those in the oldest age category (the 65+ age group) stated that they view porn 'as often as they can' (22.6%) significantly more than all other age groups. This was followed by 10.3% of the under 18s stating that they look at porn 'as often as they can'. Another clear finding is that the most frequently cited response category across all ages was for viewing porn 'most days'. The 18-25 age group cited looking at porn 'maybe once a week' (24%) more than any other age group. The age groups 26-35, 36-45 and 46-55 all presented with a similar pattern of results with porn being looked at 'most days' as the most prevalent response category, followed by 'once a week' and then 'occasionally'.



Several significant associations were uncovered between age and the main reasons for looking at porn. Younger age groups (under 18s and 18-25 year olds) cited the following main reasons for viewing porn: 'When I feel horny', 'Sometimes I've nothing better to do', 'When I'm bored, can't relax, can't sleep', and 'for a laugh', more than older age groups. In contrast, older age groups cited 'I want to feel involved in a world of sex out there', 'for reconnection with my body', 'for recognition of my sexual interests', 'to find stories that dramatise what sex is all about', and 'to see things I *can't* do' as their main reasons for viewing porn more than younger age groups. The middle age groups (26-35, 36-45, 46-55 year olds) cited 'to get into the mood with my partner', as a main reason for viewing porn more than they young and older age groups. The under 18s cited 'sometimes I've nothing better to do' as a main reason for viewing porn the most compared to all other age groups (47.4%). This compares to only 9.7% of over 65s citing this as a main reason.

An incremental significant association with age was found for the reason 'for recognition of my sexual interests', with the lowest percentage for stating this as a main reason in

the 18-25 year old age group (28.6%), and the highest percentage was for the over-65 age group (51.6%). The percentage stating this as a main reason increases as age increases (apart from under-18s). Age was significantly related to the reason for looking at porn 'I want to feel involved in a world of sex out there' - the older age groups cited this a main reason for viewing porn more than the younger age groups: only 13.2% of 18-25 year olds, and 13.4% of under 18s cited this a reason for viewing porn, compared to 29% of over 65s, and 28.2% of 56-65 year olds.

The pattern of findings indicates that the younger age groups cited 'when I feel horny' as a main reason for looking at porn, more than the older age groups. For instance, 83.5% of the under-18s cited this as a main reason for looking at porn compared to 42.3% of 56-65 years olds, and 45.2% of over-65s. Frequently, in answer to our question why is porn important to you, a typical response from young people could be summed up in, 'It's for wanking! Doh!' With that there is an interrogation to us: 'Why are you even asking this question? There is only one thing it is for.' This mirrors the construction of pornography as a media form which has little or no significance beyond its sexual function and even that function is not particularly important. Pretty obviously sexual arousal and pleasure *are* components within people's interests in pornography, but it is not the whole story – or indeed as simple and unified as that 'obvious' statement might seem to suggest. From previous researches that we have done, we know that the reasons guiding a person's seeking out pornography will play a role in shaping their preferences and choices, and thence their responses. (Barker, 2007; 2001; Smith, 2007)

To begin to understand, then, how audience responses to pornography work, we need to unpack the complexities within people's stated interests. So, for us, there is something really interesting about that kind of 'obvious' response. Yes, it highlights the ways in which for a lot of people, porn enables masturbation and masturbation is simply something that one *does*. But if we think about that in more depth - it has a physical importance but only in as much as it is like cleaning ones teeth: it's a part of everyday life, a means of keeping oneself 'healthy' but without any particular or acknowledged emotional significance.

'It's a getaway, as crazy as that sounds, from everyday life. Like all entertainment, really.'

'I find it as a great way to relax after a very hard day.'

'I feel like I could probably live without it, I just don't really want to.'

'I don't take it seriously but it's pretty nice.'

'I don't rely on porn, but I watch it frequently. I don't consider it important.'

'It matters.'

However, we also found within the larger sample that in fact there are a number of ways in which the physical significance of masturbation is felt – one's body asserts itself and demands some attention in and of itself; masturbation is a form of wind-down, and accessing pornography is a means to intensify this process – the body carries kinds of stress which need relief; sexual arousal as a thing in its own right, worthy of its own modes of attainment. Pornography is often simply a reliever of boredom and from our data it seems as if this is a particular *kind* of boredom, in which one's body asserts itself and demands some attention in and of itself. One young person puts it nicely in drawing an analogy with food: 'An analogy would be something like hamburgers - I enjoy hamburgers a lot, when I decide to eat them, but that's pretty much the extent of their involvement in my life.' The issue then is what might be meant by 'boredom' and 'idleness' where this leads to looking for porn experiences.

What is particularly interesting for us in examining some of the qualitative data which sits alongside these choices is that those at the older and younger age ranges have similarities in patterns of use around frequency but accord pornography different levels

of importance which seem to relate to age and state of the body. For older respondents, the condition for looking at porn to connect with a world of sex out there and for recognition of my sexual desires is usually of someone who *used to have* an active sex life, but for whatever reason has experienced that as going into decline or ending. Pornography provides a surrogate means of recovering some of the experience of that. It is almost like, to be brutal, an anti-ageing cream. 'Sex was an important part of my life but age, IBS and weight gain-driven low self-esteem means that has fallen away. Porn fills that gap.' For younger respondents, those orientations appear to be more about discovering potentialities and possibilities when there seems to be no other outlets – a frequent response from young people was that viewing porn was because 'I don't have a relationship':

'The process: Horny - No girl = porn ;)'

'I'm a virgin, so I'd have no outlet for sexual desires without porn.'

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'Young, no boyfriend, hormones. I need to vent somehow and it also helps with sleeping and getting rid of frustration of any kind.'

'It's too soon for a sexual relationship.'

'With my hormones I'd be indiscriminate.'

'I'm just curious and still exploring myself.'

So, there are particular continuities and similarities across young people's answers but these responses also relate to that ticking bomb comment offered earlier: the idea of being in a particular place physically, right now, which is driven by the surges of hormones, the swell of wanting to explore and discover oneself. For some, this can be experienced as a problem, because it is something that one can't have much volition

over sometimes. 'I don't have a relationship'; 'I'm not ready for a relationship'; 'I can't find a relationship' all point to the ways in which the functionality of the body is bound up with having a relationship – *not* being ready for a relationship (or unable to have one) could have consequences which need to be assuaged by masturbation. Of course, masturbation is here figured as an inadequate substitute for coupled sexual activity: a construction we find writ large in most of the porn addiction literature where masturbation can also 'damage' proper sex. There were also quite a number of responses which speak of the young person wanting to be sure s/he is not behaving 'stupidly' or 'recklessly' so porn provides an outlet for wanking everyday, in order to prevent 'indiscriminate' behaviours which might put the individual at risk, emotionally, as well as physically. Thus one of the most interesting elements in these responses is that, contrary to the arguments that porn encourages indiscriminate and risky behaviours, the young people who responded to our questionnaire are apparently using pornography as a part of their reflections upon their readiness for sex, what might they like to engage in, with whom, how, and what might be the ethical considerations for themselves and prospective partners.

I find pornography keeps my mind off of sexual fantasies about girls I actually know, something I like because those fantasies make me feel like I'm committing rape with my imagination. I am glad pornography allows me an outlet for my sexual imagination, without victimizing people I know.

This young man's concerns about committing rape with his imagination are surely a part of the ways in which the public accounts of the effects of porn are carried over into an individual's understandings of themselves.

If we turn now to some more detailed and 'serious' (compared to our teasing respondent) accounts and how much these young people say and their detail we can see how taking part in the questionnaire actually enables thinking about themselves, and reflecting on their answers.

I first came to porn when I was young, mostly out of curiosity and being a little bemused at why some people found it arousing. Later I began to use it for sexual satisfaction; over time, I browsed a wide variety of porn and found the kinds that I enjoyed the most.

I first came to porn at a very young age. I started off when I was maybe ten or twelve, just on soft-core internet porn. I explored that for a while, but as I got older (maybe around 14 or so) my interests turned to more fetish material.

I really got into transgender related material and transformational material I.E men turning into women and vice versa. I was interested and aroused by the material not entirely because I want to be a woman, but more because I find the transfer of power and change stimulating. So I look more at transformational and domination material.

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Most recently I have been trying to limit myself to erotica type material on these subjects. I have decided to stay to the written word rather than visual because I want to reclaim some bodily mystery and make the human form more exciting.

As we outlined earlier, key to many of the scare stories about young people and pornography are the ways in which they figure 'porn users' as at risk, as indiscriminate, having no developed tastes, failing to acquire sets of knowledges and understandings about porn. But what we've found in our respondents' answers is actually a process of becoming aware of what that individual likes, why and how.

After a while, I began (and still do) focus almost exclusively on still-image porn drawn in the Japanese fashion (hentai). I tend to search for porn of fictional characters from my favourite Japanese cartoons. I feel odd about this, mostly because I hold the belief that I am an outlier and that most people search for

video porn of actual people. Nevertheless, I continue to use porn in this fashion today.

[...]

Since I have no romantic partner, I use pornography solely in masturbation. Obviously, porn makes masturbating easier. However, it also adds a romantic element to it. I suppose many people would view my infatuation with fictional drawn characters as quite odd; nevertheless, that's how I am, and masturbating to images of said characters stirs up romantic feelings as well. If I had no opportunity to look at porn, I suppose masturbation would become more about basic pleasure than emotion. Actually, this contradicts what I said before about porn not being that important; I guess it's more important than I thought at first.

There are, in the above, indications of the processes of thinking about pornography and about its importance to this particular teen as he completes the questionnaire. It is, we would suggest, important to recognise the ways in which young people take part in these kinds of research. What is it that *they* get out of it as well as what we, the researchers, get out of it? There is a tendency to see research as something that we're doing *to* them but actually there are ways in which they may be doing stuff *to and for themselves* in taking part.

Fantasy

The issue of 'fantasy' is of the highest importance in thinking about pornography and those who use and enjoy it. It is visibly present and at work in critiques of porn, usually in the form of rhetorically expressed fears that some 'addicted' porn users might try to live out in their real lives some idea that they found within pornography. Indeed, this is one of the most oft-repeated worries about young people and their engagements with pornography, especially young men – that because young people have little or no actual experience of sex, they have no tools with which to resist the blandishments and outlandishnesses of Internet pornography. Gail Dines claims:

Nowadays the average age for first viewing porn is just eleven years. This means that, unlike before, porn is actually being encoded into a boy's sexual identity so that an authentic sexuality – one that develops organically out of life experiences, one's peer group, personality traits, family and community affiliations – is replaced by a generic porn sexuality limited in creativity and lacking any sense of love, respect, or connection to another human being. (2010: xi)

What is so striking here is that pornography is *such* a force on young men that it wipes out any of those alternative possible influences such as peers, family or community that Dines suggest might give rise to 'authentic' or 'organic' sexuality. For this to be true, individuals' previous histories as children must be erased by the powers of pornographic imaginings and their ensuing adulthood can offer no further possibilities for learning or development. All the other social spaces in which teens engage with ideas about sexuality – to name but a few, home, school, sex and relationship education, friendship groups, television, novels, teen-comedies, film, music video, teenage magazines, and of course online resources for homework, shopping, entertainment and advice – the spaces where public conversations occur and which interact with whatever models of self and behaviour parents generate in their children are, apparently, meaningless in the face of porn, the hijacker of sexuality.

Conclusion

What also needs to be recognised however is that the levels of concern which characterise much of the discussion of young people and pornography are a distinct block to actually hearing what young people might have to tell us about their interests in sex, sexuality and their representations. In our own dealings with journalists and other interested parties who have consulted us about the findings of this project, we have found ourselves seeking to uncover information that would decisively challenge the anti-porn critics, to find responses that would 'prove them wrong'. In line with the

problematic framings of pornography as a topic on which one is supposed to be either 'pro' or 'anti', we have, at times during our considerations of this enormous database, fallen into the trap of hoping for some killer finding that would be the 'instant headline'. This is surely the wrong way to proceed, instead, as we propose in the accounts outlined here, we have a larger body of materials which must be allowed to speak in themselves.

Our wider findings pose important questions about the ways in which imagination and fantasy have been traditionally understood and, in the case of under-18s, suggest the necessity for more nuanced and less-overheated appraisals of the meanings of pornography in everyday life. There is no doubt that there is considerable concern about young people and their use of pornography but so much of this is framed in terms of concern that it risks totally alienating young people. Most of the accounts we read in newspapers, popular books on the subject and in some academic work, frame pornography within fears that such representations are always significant as the destroyers of morals, as hijackers of sexuality, and as deceivers offering false ideas about women, pleasure, love and sex; but at the same time pornography is constructed as a completely unimportant media form with no variations in its consumption. All of which ignores the ways in which, for the young people who completed our questionnaire, porn can function in a multiplicity of ways – as a means of bonding in friendship groups, sexual communities or intimate relationships; pornography is a source of arousal, of laughter, of disgust (which has its own divisions of affect from arousal, through excitement to repulsion); pornography is an important means of feeling the body and is/is not significant in relation to how one feels at this moment or in relation to other considerations at a particular time.

Overwhelmingly our research indicates that porn is to be understood in relation to the relationships a person is currently engaged in, has been in recently, or hopes to be in, in the future. Porn consumption is intimately tied to people's sense of their *sexual circumstances*. Filling out inadequate ones, holding sexuality open when a person is not

in a relationship, preparing and offering ideas towards future relationships. Porn is a cornucopia of possibilities, for people to look at and imagine themselves amongst: perhaps then we could conceive of engaging with pornography as a kind of erotic window-shopping and, depending upon age and circumstance, sexually explicit materials offer the opportunities to look at all the things you can/not have, and wonder at their variety and availability. There is a combined recognition of the *learnability* of techniques, of the *self in relation to* what is seen, alongside a realisation of the very wide range and impossibility of a lot of it. What 'stars' do is different. What wild fantasies one might see is not the point. The point is that at the moments where sexual arousal is desired, porn provides that in spades. There is little doubt that among the motives for looking at porn is an attraction to seeing what other people are doing or can do, sometimes balanced on a cusp between delight and disgust. It is also surely linked to the bad reputation of pornography – to seek it out and watch it is to explore a forbidden domain, and see what goes on there.

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There is a sense therefore that porn is a 'genre', in much the same sense that Action films or Chick Flicks or *Country Living* or *Grand Designs* are genres. That is, you have to evaluate the characters and actions against the requirements of the format. With porn, it begins from the fact that this has isolated sex as a thing in itself, and offers it back to you with no limits. It is therefore neither real nor unreal, but para-real. It seems to work through forms of self-imagining whose purpose is to feel one's body intensely.

Public framings of young people's engagement with porn are 'overburdened with significance'; their engagements with porn are framed as 'exposure', 'risk', 'addiction'. Young people frame their public accounts in accordance with public framings, hence they talk about *other* young people as at risk, while they themselves are not. Where they are invited to give their own private accounts, sexual arousal and pleasure form a large component within people's stated interests in pornography, but our research indicates it is not the whole story – or indeed as simple and unified as that 'obvious' statement might seem to suggest. To begin to understand, then, how audience

responses to pornography work, we need to unpack the complexities within people's stated interests. Individual accounts demonstrate a variety of experiences, revealing porn to be both mundane and important, connected to identity and relationships. Young people talk back to public framings and exhibit reflexivity in their answers, we need to pay attention to what they have to say.

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