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# Putting porn in the picture

The impact of pornography on young people's relationships makes it a key violence prevention issue. A new suite of resources assists young people, parents, schools and community organisations to understand and address pornography's influence.

## inbrief

- › Analysis of best-selling porn shows high rates of physical aggression, overwhelmingly directed at females
- › Pornography is increasingly playing a role in how young people learn about, think about and experience sexuality
- › Sexual and family violence services are well placed to address pornography's influence as part of wider prevention efforts
- › New resources equip schools, parents and young people to engage in conversations about pornography

**Warning: note to readers. This article contains explicit language and content describing acts depicted in pornography**

I'm in the beautiful city of Budapest. It's been a long day of interviews—with the director of a sex industry association, a gynaecologist and the head of the human trafficking unit at Hungarian Police—and I'm now listening as porn performer Anthony Hardwood describes how porn has changed over his 14 years in the business.

*When I started it was very lovey-dovey. [But now] the whole industry has changed ... it's more tough and more rough, you can sell it, you know, and the customers love it, they buy the movies, they just love it.*

*... [The directors] want to see energy and they want to see screaming and yelling and very hard fucking and sweating and just like, you know, you have to destroy the girl.*

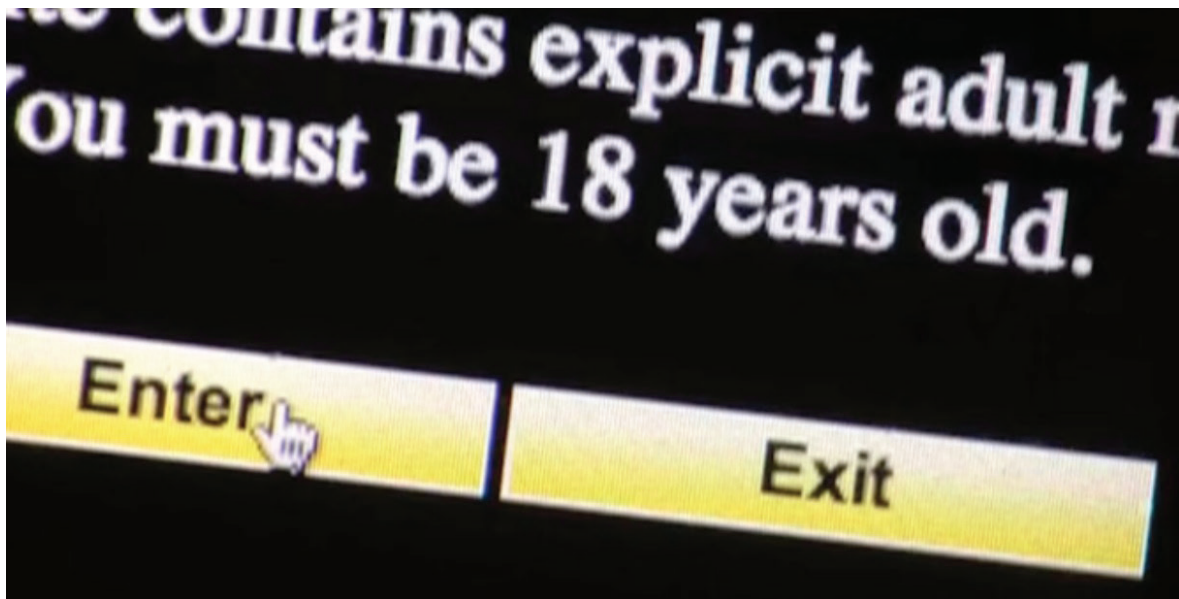
My interview with Hardwood is part of my research for a documentary film *Love and Sex in an Age of Pornography*, which was broadcast in 2013 on SBS and in other countries around the world. The film juxtaposes our interviews of representatives from the pornography

industry with the voices of Australian young people, who describe how their experiences of sex and relationships have been influenced by porn. The film is part of *Reality & Risk: Pornography, young people and sexuality*, a community education project I developed through Brophy Family and Youth Services with my colleague David Corlett, to get people talking about porn and its influence.

### Realities of life on set

Hardwood—who sports the muscular physique of someone who spends a great deal of time at the gym—has come straight from the porn set. Over the next couple of hours, my interview with Hardwood moves across a range of personal and professional territory: how he got into the industry and why, what a regular day looks like, what performers are paid, the rates of sexually transmissible infections, how his family feel about his work, its impact on his private life, and his future hopes. But most striking are his candid descriptions of what takes place on set.

The industry has developed its own shorthand vocabulary for many of the sexual practices it employs, some of which appear to be experiments in physical and emotional endurance: DP (double penetration, simultaneous



anal and vaginal sex), double anal (two penises in one anus), ATM ('arse-to-mouth', where anal sex is followed immediately by oral sex), deep throating (fellatio with the penis pushed into the throat, also known as 'throat fucking'), facials (ejaculation on the face, sometimes by many men at once) and fish hooks, 'you know, where you stretch the girl's mouth'. Hardwood refers to these acts with the familiarity of an industry native. He talks about women enduring the pain involved in this line of work and how it's difficult for the male performer if his female colleague is crying.

Hardwood's candour is remarkable. He makes no attempt to hide the cold, hard reality that porn is a massive, global business that profits from the eroticisation of gendered aggression.

Hardwood has spent much of his career in Los Angeles, the global centre of the porn industry. When I visit LA a few months later, his descriptions of the market's appetite for aggressive content are corroborated in our interviews with other performers, and with directors, producers and agents. Veteran performer Nina Hartley described how 'there has been an increase in what I would call the aggression that we see on camera'. And, according to influential director John Stagliano, 'Rough sex and strong sex works because it's incredible to look at. As human beings we want to see stuff like that.'

Their commentary is also supported by academic research. A recent content analysis of best-selling porn found

that 88 per cent of scenes contained physical aggression, and 48 per cent of scenes contained verbal aggression.<sup>1</sup> The aggression was overwhelmingly directed at female performers (94 per cent of cases).

The industry's descriptions—and the statistics that quantify the prevalence of aggression—are disconcerting. Why is there so much demand for this kind of content? What does it say about the state of gender relations? Has feminism got us nowhere?

### Gendered hostility

To be sure, these are controversial questions. Pornography is one of those subjects that can divide people: lovers, family, colleagues, traditional political allies from within the left and the right—and feminists.

Some people seem less offended by the misogyny these stories convey than by the challenge they pose to a narrative of pornography's contribution to a progressive society.

For some people, pornography represents freedom—an unashamed embrace of anything and everything sexual, and a rebuttal of conservative forces that have sought to define what is acceptable to a narrow, limited view of human sexuality that breeds sexual neuroses and legitimises the silencing and oppression of sexual minorities. Sometimes an investment in this porn-as-liberator view appears to lead to a denial of its gendered hostility, with advocates claiming—despite so



### Aggression and degradation in porn

The acts observed in the recent content analysis by Bridges et al of best-selling porn included:

- gagging in 54 per cent of scenes
- choking in 27 per cent of scenes
- spanking in 75 per cent of scenes
- verbal aggression in 48 per cent of scenes
- 'ATM' in 41 per cent of scenes.

*Porn's pervasiveness is unprecedented. It can be more difficult to avoid porn than to see it*

much evidence to the contrary—that aggression as described by Hardwood is rare.

Then there are those who reject a socio-cultural analysis of porn's influence, preferring to view porn as a private matter of individual choice: 'Each to their own. Whatever floats your boat, it's none of my business.' If exposure to porn and, importantly, exposure to the influence of porn, were simply a matter of individual free choice, this position would be more feasible. But, with the advent of the internet, that is simply not the case—if, indeed, it ever was.

Porn's pervasiveness is unprecedented. It can be more difficult to avoid porn than to see it—thanks, in part, to the industry's aggressive marketing strategies. An astonishing 30 per cent of all internet traffic is porn-related<sup>2</sup>, and global porn revenue is more than that of Apple, Google, Amazon and Microsoft combined.<sup>3</sup>

Nor is porn's presence benign. Its influence on sexual imaginations, expectations and experiences is now a significant challenge to many individuals' capacity to develop relationships and sexuality that are mutual, respectful and fully consenting. This is particularly so for young people.

## Conversations with young people

The journey that led me to Budapest and LA began in secondary school classrooms in south-west Victoria. Through my work delivering a sexual violence prevention program with hundreds of young people each year, I noticed that pornography was increasingly playing a role in how young people learn about, think about and experience sexuality. The young people I worked with were keen to have the conversations—about porn, and about the issues it raises around gender, sex, respect, aggression, consent, arousal

and pleasure. But the adults in their lives were often unaware of the issues, or felt ill-equipped, unable or unwilling to have those conversations.

Twenty-year-old Sara was interviewed for our documentary film. She first saw pornography at school. She described feeling embarrassed and horrified by its 'ugly' portrayals of sex, which didn't align with what she'd hoped sex would be. Unfortunately, as Sara's experiences attest, porn's influence is not confined to those who choose to view it.

*I think when boys start having sex they imagine porn and like everything that goes on in porn because that's the dream really. Like boys, you know, have their way with girls, whatever they want ... They don't really ask, they just sort of do and hope that you will go along with it. Like anal, that's a big thing, like, you know, when you're going at it they just sort of try and slip it in the other hole and you're like 'hang on a minute, like that's not what I want'.*

And Sara was not alone. Young women repeatedly described to us being pressured to do what their partner had seen in porn, regardless of whether or not they liked it or wanted to, even if they found it painful or humiliating.

Young women talked about struggling with how to respond, wanting to be generous and accommodating partners, but generally not wanting to do the acts that their partners initiate from porn.

*Girls, like, they love it in the porn so maybe boys think that girls like that. And, you know, when you love someone you're always willing to just, you know, make them happy. If they want to give me a pearl necklace [ejaculate on the neck] and I'm in love then I'll do it for them and I'll pretend that I like it.*

These stories were confirmed in our interviews with young men, who regularly described aspiring to engage in—or, indeed, initiating—the sex they've seen in porn.

Some of our most interesting interviews were with young gay men who, to my surprise, described the regular portrayal of gendered aggression in gay male pornography.

*There's the typical top and bottom in gay porn ... there's a passive and a dominant role.*

*The dominating type are normally the big muscular blokes who have a deep voice and are very straight acting, whereas the submissive people are normally the femme-type guys who are the slim ones.*

*That top guy can be almost an arsehole and just be very rough and very aggressive. I don't know. The bottom guy just seems like a piece of meat in a way, like, the top guy's there to do what he wants, to get his rocks off, and then the bottom guy is sort of just left to hang out and take it.*

What these young men shared was supported by my subsequent reading, research and interviews: it seems that gay male pornography manages to communicate the same types of messages about gender inequality, gendered violence and degradation that are so common in heterosexual porn—even in the absence of any female performers.<sup>4</sup>

Gay porn is a genre commonly viewed as a source of liberation for a community whose sexuality has been silenced and pathologised. Yet, while my interviewees described gay porn providing a reassurance that they are not alone in their attraction to other men, they also articulated repulsion at its painful, degrading and aggressive portrayals, and concerns that it reinforces limiting stereotypes that impact on their lived experiences.

Pornography's influence on young people is a phenomenon that is increasingly recognised internationally. In 2013, the United Kingdom's Children's Commissioner released the report "Basically ... porn is everywhere": A rapid

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evidence assessment of the effects of pornography access and exposure on children and young people. The report was commissioned when these issues emerged as a key theme in an inquiry into child sexual exploitation. As the authors explain in their foreword:

*We had frequent accounts of both girls' and boys' expectations of sex being drawn from pornography they had seen ... We also found compelling evidence that too many boys believe that they have an absolute entitlement to sex at any time, in any place, in any way and with whomever they wish. Equally worryingly, we heard that too often girls feel they have no alternative but to submit to boys' demands, regardless of their own wishes.<sup>5</sup>*

These themes are echoed in a very recent study that found a normalisation of coercive heterosexual anal sex among young people, where both young women and young men expected men 'to persuade or coerce reluctant partners'.<sup>6</sup> Participants in the research frequently cited pornography as the explanation for engaging in anal sex, an act that both male and female participants expected to be painful for women. While some women enjoy anal sex, most do not,<sup>7</sup> and it appears that this is widely understood—yet, apparently, this is not a sufficient deterrent for many men wishing to do it.

Pornography openly promotes a script that not only privileges male sexual pleasure, it suggests that male pleasure is derived through dominance and through sex acts—and ways of performing them—that are at women's expense. It conveys that there is something sexy about hurting women, or successfully pushing women to comply with sex they don't want or like, and may find painful or degrading. Porn normalises female sexual subservience and male entitlement, but it does more than that. It eroticises male aggression towards women.

This is often not overtly expressed. According to Hardwood, when female performers allow their pain to reflect in their expression:

*The director immediately starts to say, "No, no, we don't want to see that kind of face reaction. We want to see you enjoy it, enjoy it."*

The screenshot shows a website navigation menu with the following items: HOME, YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS, SCHOOLS, COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS, ABOUT US, SUPPORT US, and RESOURCES. Below the menu is a yellow banner with the text: WHAT'S THE ISSUE?, WHAT'S GOOD SEX?, SO, WHAT NOW?, and GETTING SUPPORT. The main content area features a photograph of a young boy in a blue hat looking at a smartphone. Below the photo are two icons: a girl and a boy. The girl icon is accompanied by the text 'More than 60% of girls have seen online porn'. The boy icon is accompanied by the text 'More than 90% of boys have seen online porn'. To the right of these icons is a dark grey box with the heading 'What's the issue?' and the following text: 'It seems that porn's everywhere. It's really easy to access – even when you're not looking for it! And it's accepted that lots of people use it, particularly guys, but also some girls. But, while it might seem cool or exciting or turn you on sexually, porn is not reality, and it can impact in a range of ways that aren't all good – like what you expect sex to be like, what turns you on, and how you think about men and women...'

Screenshot from *It's Time We Talked* website

Research suggests that this kind of obscuring is normal, with 95 per cent of incidents of aggression in best-selling pornography met with either a neutral or a positive, pleased response by the target of the aggression.<sup>8</sup> Porn's message to viewers is that women like it when men hit, choke or gag them; and they enjoy whatever men do to them, particularly aggressive, thrusting, penetrative sex.

## Pornography is a violence prevention issue

For those involved in preventing family violence and sexual assault, pornography is a critical issue to address.

Many young men's—and young women's—expectations of gender and sex are being shaped by pornography depicting female sexual subservience to sex that many women don't enjoy. This is a recipe for coercion and sexual assault—and for the perpetuation of gender inequality and violence against women, more broadly. Clearly, porn is not alone in conveying that women are inferior and/or for men's sexual consumption. Those messages are supported and reinforced in a vast array of other contexts: from advertising, music videos and films, to lap-dancing venues, high-level political discourse, and sometimes even academia.<sup>9</sup> But pornography communicates these messages *par excellence*. Porn makes an emphatic and substantial contribution to an insidious kind of 'cultural wallpaper' that normalises and, indeed, eroticises, violence against women. And, due to the normalisation of its consumption, the fraught nature of porn debates, and the fact that its use is frequently in private contexts, pornography's influence often

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occurs without the presence of any real critique.

That makes porn a violence prevention issue we can't afford to ignore.

But how do we begin to tackle such a powerful influence? Who should do it? And where?

As is the case with violence prevention more broadly, a sound understanding of gender, power and violence is a critical foundation. For this reason, sexual and family violence services are well placed to address pornography's influence as part of wider prevention efforts, and to support others to do so.

Young people—who are at an important and formative stage in their development, and are a relatively accessible audience—are a priority population for violence prevention.<sup>10</sup> The most effective way we can support young people on this, or any other violence prevention or wellbeing-related issue, is a multi-faceted approach in which the key messages are reinforced across different parts of young people's lives.<sup>11</sup> Some of the key sites for intervention are homes, through parent engagement, and schools.

A growing number of parents, schools and workers are identifying that, in the 21st century, supporting young people to critique pornography's influence is an important part of equipping them to navigate relationships that are respectful, mutually pleasurable and fully consenting.

Many parents, schools and community organisations do not feel well-equipped for the task. These are politically sensitive, confronting issues that many prefer to ignore. But, with the appropriate support and resources, people's confidence to address pornography is growing. Schools are increasingly open to including the issue of pornography in their policies, parent education and curriculum. Indeed,

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more and more schools and education departments are requesting support to do just that.

Organisations with expertise in gender, power and violence can play an important role in advocating for the need to address pornography, and building awareness and confidence for schools, parents, community organisations and policy makers on these issues.

In order to do so, violence prevention organisations need a clear understanding of pornography's prevalence, nature and influence, informed by their existing gender and power framework, and access to high-quality resources.

## **New resources to address porn's influence**

Since the *Reality & Risk* project began in 2009, awareness of pornography's influence has grown. We've delivered training and workshops to over 1,000 teachers and workers from a wide range of contexts, presented to parents, spoken with hundreds of young people and met with many school leaders. We've also advocated to political, bureaucratic and community leaders about how significant pornography is as a violence prevention issue.

*Reality & Risk* has also focused on creating tools to assist in this work. We have contributed to government sexuality and respectful relationships education resources, and pre-service teacher training resources. To complement these, we recently released *In The Picture: Supporting young people in an era of explicit sexual imagery*, a resource that supports secondary schools to develop a whole-school approach to the issues. To our knowledge, *In The Picture* is the first resource of its kind.

We have also developed *It's Time We Talked* ([www.itstimewetalked.com](http://www.itstimewetalked.com)), a website with resources for young people, parents, schools and community organisations. And, to complete the suite of resources, we're producing a second documentary film, *The Porn Factor*, designed for adults, including pre-service and in-service teachers, parents, youth workers, doctors, psychologists and workers from the family and sexual violence fields, which will be available later this year. Unlike our earlier film, which was made to open up the conversation with a general broadcast

audience, *The Porn Factor's* thesis-driven approach provides an overt articulation of the issues through interviews with experts in the field.

There is still a great deal more work to do. And I look forward to working with others—in government and the community sector—to integrate pornography as a prevention issue into education, training and policy nationally.

## Say it how it is

I've been in a lot of schools, community organisations and government department offices since I sat opposite Anthony Hardwood as he oscillated between boyish giggles, awkward explanations and stomach-churning scene descriptions. When I reflect on the journey that this project has been, I think there is something we can learn from an industry that speaks so openly about how violence against women sells. Like them, we need to say it how it is, and not be afraid to do so. Actually, I think we can't afford not to. To fail to take up this challenge is to risk leaving young people's sexuality and relationships education to the likes of Anthony Hardwood and John Stagliano.

In my experience, given the opportunity—the language, permission, and a safe, supportive context—most young people, parents, teachers, youth workers and school principals are willing and able to engage in conversations about pornography that might have previously felt 'too hard'. Indeed, many people are relieved to find tools to help them have those conversations with their students, children, colleagues, school principal, other parents or other educators.

Pornography is not going to go away. It is, and will continue to be, a powerful influencing factor in many people's lives, including young people. And any honest assessment of its influence will identify multiple, significant harms.

But, by putting pornography in the violence prevention picture, we can support young people to critique its messages about men, women, power, sex, pleasure and aggression, and assist them to instead choose relationships and sexuality that privilege—and eroticise—mutuality, equality, consent, safety and respect. ■

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Bridges, A, Wosnitzer, R, Scharrer, E, Sun, C and Liberman, R 2010, 'Aggression and sexual behaviour in best-selling pornography videos: A content analysis update', *Violence Against Women*, 16 (10), pp.1065–1085

<sup>2</sup>Anthony, S 'Just how big are porn sites?', [www.extremetech.com/computing/123929-just-how-big-are-porn-sites/2](http://www.extremetech.com/computing/123929-just-how-big-are-porn-sites/2)

<sup>3</sup>Berman, N 2011 'Gonzo Barbie – Empire of illusion', <https://ninaberman.wordpress.com/page/11/>

<sup>4</sup>Kendall C N (2004) *Gay Male Pornography: An issue of sex discrimination*, UBC Press, Vancouver

<sup>5</sup>Horvath, M et al (2013) 'Basically ... porn is everywhere', [www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content\\_667](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_667)

<sup>6</sup>Marston C & Lewis R (2014) 'Anal heterosex among young people and

the implications for health promotion: A qualitative study in the UK', *BMJ Open* 4:e004996 doi:10.1136/bmjopen-2014-004996

<sup>7</sup>Häggström-Nordin, Hanson and Tyden (2005) 'Associations between pornography consumption and sexual practices among adolescents in Sweden', *International Journal of STI and AIDS*, 16, 2:102-107

<sup>8</sup>Bridges et al (2010), p.1076

<sup>9</sup>See research on gender discrimination in academia at: [www.hastac.org/blogs/superadmin/2015/01/26/gender-bias-academe-annotated-bibliography-important-recent-studies?utm\\_](http://www.hastac.org/blogs/superadmin/2015/01/26/gender-bias-academe-annotated-bibliography-important-recent-studies?utm_)

<sup>10</sup>Flood, M, Fergus, L & Heenan, M (2009), *Respectful Relationships Education: Violence prevention and respectful relationships education in Victorian Secondary Schools*, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, pp.8-10

<sup>11</sup>Flood, M, Fergus, L and Heenan, M (2009), p.27

## Putting schools *In the Picture*

Education about pornography's influence can be incorporated into respectful relationships education, a key strategy in recent primary prevention efforts. Its aims align beautifully with Australian Curriculum standards in Health and Physical Education (particularly sexuality education, the logical curriculum 'home' of 'pornography education') and Civics and Citizenship.

*In the Picture* provides guidelines and resources for each aspect of developing a whole-school response, including:

- Developing policy
- Preparing and equipping staff
- Building partnerships with parents and community
- Creating a supportive school culture
- Curriculum activities and education strategies
- Evaluating the need and impact.

For more information and to order *In the Picture* go to: [www.itstimewetalked.com](http://www.itstimewetalked.com)

