

Utah: Pornography Capital of America?

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INTRODCUTION

In March of 2009, pornography use in Utah was thrust into the spotlight by a Harvard Business School study, which found Utahns to be the highest per capita purchasers of online adult entertainment in the United States (Edelman 2009). Some journalists quickly crowned Utah the “Online Porn Capital of America” (Tynan 2009:1). Without regard to the efficacy of the study’s controversial conclusions, the dubious proclamation resurrects two questions that seem important in the present conversation: *Does the use of pornography really do anybody any harm? Furthermore, is it possible that there is something about Utah’s culture that creates an affinity for pornography use?* I argue that the answers to these questions are unequivocally yes.

IS PORNOGRAPHY USE HARMFUL?

It is likely that most of us have heard the arguments from both sides for years regarding pornography use. It’s a freedom of speech issue; it’s not doing anybody any harm. Hey, if you don’t like it, just turn it off, or sign off. Pornography use should be banned because it denigrates women, drives people to criminal behavior, or will destroy their lives and marriages. There are strong opinions about such a volatile issue. The evidence-based research of the 70’s through the late 90’s suggests that there is actually little correlation between the use of pornography and harmful effects. Namely, recent evidence has found that increased use of sexually explicit materials (SEM) does not lead to increased sex crimes or objectification of women.

PORNOGRAPHY AND SEX CRIMES

One of the nation’s leading pornography researchers, Dr. Milton Diamond, Director of the University of Hawaii’s Pacific Center for Sex and Society released a comprehensive empirical review addressing the most common arguments used by opponents of SEM. In this review and in a variety of other studies,

Diamond reveals that as rape rates and aggravated assault rates increased, pornography consumption decreased. He references Donnerstein and Linz’s 1986 study which concludes “that no evidence exists for any ‘harm’-related effects from sexually explicit material” (1986:618). Diamond also identified that in countries where SEM had been decriminalized and legalized, that with the exception of the United States, there were “decreases in both non-violent sex crimes as well as non-sexual violent crimes” (2009:306). Diamond identifies similar studies done in Britain (Longford 1972) and in Canada (McKay and Dolff 1985) where no evidence could be shown linking pornography to deviant behavior or crime trend statistics. Diamond concluded that “every country so far examined has shown parallel findings: as pornography became available sex crimes decreased rather than increased” (2009:307).

Diamond noted that while there is a universal “intolerance for any materials in which children or minors are involved . . . [and that] nothing has demonstrated any cause and effect relationship between viewing child pornography and the actual commission of child abuse” (2009:307).

PORNOGRAPHY AND FEMALE OBJECTIFICATION

A long standing argument against pornography use is that it dehumanizes and denigrates women. Diamond states that “this criticism is often the most heard from those who oppose pornography” (2009:307). He emphatically states that “no researcher or critic has found . . . that pornography—by any definition—has had a cause and effect relationship between exposure to SEM and ill feelings or actions against women. No correlation has even been found between exposure to pornography and calloused attitudes toward women” (2009:307).

Diamond’s position seems to suggest that we are simply making too much of pornography use:

Criminalizing or legalizing pornography should depend on whether it can be shown to be *seriously harmful* or not; not whether it is found to be beneficial, although it has been seen to have positive effects in every country studied. And

while it might have been accused of negatively affecting *some* individuals or families, it has in no community or population been found to be *generally* harmful (2009:311). Italics added

HARMFUL PORNOGRAPHY ADDICTION

While there is evidence that demonstrates pornography poses no threat in regard to sex crimes including rape, child abuse, and the objectification of women, the standard Diamond uses to ascertain “general harmlessness” is incomplete. The true harm or serious harm of pornography lies in the addictive patterns that capture the lives of pornography addicts and their families.

From my experience this fall, as an intern for *Candeo* (see www.candeo.com), a company which provides online support for those suffering from the effects of addiction to pornography, as well as their spouses and significant others, I have listened to the suffering and anguish expressed in recovery forums by virtually all of the participants and their families. One person from the Middle East expressed living in “daily fear of his life if he were to be found out.” He said that “to be discovered would mean suffering the gravest of consequences: in the next life, [he] would have hot-molten lava poured into his eyes.” Another client was so overwhelmed with guilt and shame that he was ready to emasculate himself, or even take his life, to put himself out of his own emotional misery.

Reading the stories of spouses whose mates are heavy users of pornography also reveals a trail of painful consequences. The broken hearts felt; the feelings of disappointment, betrayal and broken commitments experienced are profound. It would be a daunting task to suggest that the use of pornography does no harm, to a group so deeply affected by it. How does one balance the evidence that the use of SEM is relatively harmless, with the experiences of pornography addicts and their families? The anguish of pornography addicts cannot be ignored. The psychological and emotional damage to spouses is very real. These victims need no evidence-based study to prove the harmful effects of pornography. Where are these consequences of pornography use accounted for in such academic conclusions? It is anecdotally clear that there are serious ramifications posed by the addictive nature pornography use can and does take upon those within its grasp.

In 1987, the Partnership for a Drug Free America launched a massive campaign to draw attention to the

effect of drug use and drug addiction to the physiological dimension. Many of us can still remember the slogan from their television public service announcements: “This is your brain on drugs.” The evidence surrounding addiction was now becoming much more scientific. New technologies such as CT Scans and MRIs proved that increased drug use, over a period of time, causes brain damage, and a variety of other biological, psychological, mental and emotional effects. Soon, some scientists began postulating that if excessive amounts of the brain’s natural *feel good* chemicals (neurotransmitters such as dopamine, norepinephrine, serotonin, etc.) are released through the excessive viewing of pornography and orgasm, over and over again, is it possible that similar neurological damage would occur similar to that of drug addicts?

It is not contested that viewing pornography and orgasm trigger the release of what are termed endogenous chemicals. Renowned Pharmacologist Candace Pert has worked for many years with top scientists in both neuroscience and neuropsychology. She discovered that when we are emotionally aroused [sexually stimulated] that the brain releases a psychopharmacological flood of “epinephrine, testosterone, endorphins (endogenous morphine), oxytocin, dopamine, serotonin, and phenylethylamine” (1991:177). It doesn’t require sticking a needle in your arm or ingesting pills to become addicted to drugs. The release of the body’s own natural drugs, alone, can create a harmful addiction. Forensic Psychologist, M. Douglas Reed states: “Addiction [can] exist within the body’s own chemistry.” (1990:15). In many cases, pornography use doesn’t just *resemble* the use of illicit drugs, it *is* the use and misuse of the body’s own naturally created drugs.

New information is beginning to appear that is even more telling of the possible harmful effects of pornography use on the brain. PET Scans (a nuclear medicine three-dimensional imaging technique) of both pornography-addicted adults and non-addicted adults who view pornography show brain reactions for both groups similar to cocaine addicts comparing the images of people taking cocaine (Satinover 2004:2).

In testimony submitted to the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, on November 18, 2004, regarding pornography use and addiction renowned physicist, psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst Dr. Jeffrey Satinover wrote:

. . . it was once possible . . . to maintain that pornographic expression had to be considered on the same abstract and elevated plane as any other

form of expression, and that to do otherwise would gravely harm the foundation of our freedoms. It is no longer possible to do so without turning a blind eye to the plain evidence of neurophysiology and epidemiology . . . With [the] advent of the computer, the delivery system for this addictive stimulus has become nearly resistance-free. . . we have devised a form of heroin 100 times more powerful than before, usable in the privacy of one's own home and injected directly to the brain through the eyes (2004:2).

Understanding the correlative nature of pornography use and its negative effect on the brain is still in its infancy, but the evidence is mounting.

IS UTAH UNIQUELY PREDISPOSED TO PORNOGRAPHY USE?

According to Diamond (2009), there is no general or serious harm posed by pornography or even its abuse, because it impacts only a relatively minor addictive population . Despite Diamond's findings, we see that the consequences of pornography addiction are real and seriously harmful to the addict and their families. Furthermore, it has been suggested that a disproportionate number of Utah residents are viewers and potential abusers of pornography. Does Utah foster a cultural environment predisposed for pornography use?

Sociologist Robert K. Merton may have described Utah's cultural predisposition to the deviance of pornography in what has become known as his *goal-means gap* or *strain theory* (1938). Merton examined the relationship between cultural goals and the structural means to achieve those goals. William Perdue, former chair of Eastern Washington University's Sociology department, summed up Merton's theory: "when success *goals* were universally imposed on the members of a society, and simultaneously, the *means* to achieve them were restricted or unattainable for some members, *deviance could be expected on a broad scale*" (1986:84). In our religiously influenced culture, the community generally holds close to its heart the goals of an afterlife with God, predicated upon the following of certain means, which call for, in part, sexual purity, characterized by an abstinence from that which is termed "forbidden." Pornography, in our culture, falls under just such a characterization, and when one has violated the rules, there is the tendency to develop the strong belief that goals, once held close, are now beyond reach and unattainable.

Two LDS scientists, Sociologist Harold

Christensen and Psychologist Marvin B. Rytting, stated that "while our [cultural] socialization works well for most . . . it is strong enough to make significant deviation almost unbearable. Individuals who don't fit the mold are made to feel so guilty that they may even become alienated from the circle of [their society] (1976:9). One of Utah's only Board Certified Clinical Sexologists, Dr. Mark Malan, shared the following:

Utah has a high percentage of individuals socialized in faith-based culture that is highly socially regulative of sexual behavior. It is not limited to just LDS culture, as all faiths in our area seem to be stricter in their beliefs. Cultures like ours, that regulate sexual behavior with faith, will naturally have higher incidences of individuals who report experiencing guilt or who internalize shame when they violate tenets of their faith. Internalized shame around sexuality generally impairs healthy sexual functioning (2009).

Under such cultural conditions, Merton would have likely suggested that pornography use would be pursued with even more reckless abandon. "Why stop?" asked one interviewee, "there's no more hope for me anyway." This idea was confirmed by Dr. Randy Hyde, a well known Utah psychologist who has worked with pornography addicts for many years: "when you combine the feelings of despair, guilt and shame with the forbidden nature of pornography within a culture; and a possible predisposition for addiction, you have a recipe for disaster" (2009).

Dr Barnaby B. Barratt, Director of the Midwest Institute of Sexology, offered testimony to the Michigan House of Representatives' Committee on Constitutional Law and Ethics, in 2005, on pornography use, that was a bit more specific: "the suppression of sexual fantasy life, and of the body's capacity for self-administered pleasure, can result in the impulsive or compulsive 'outbreak' of risky or antisocial behaviors." (2005:4)

CONCLUSION

Are there people who drink alcohol who do not become alcoholics? Yes. Are there people who can view pornography who do not become addicted? Yes. But to dismiss its capacity to harm based on studies from the 70's, 80's and 90's is to ignore reality. Local Marriage and Family Therapist, Dr. Bernell Christensen, who, like Dr. Hyde, has worked with pornography addicts and their victims over many years, may have just said

it best: “while I’m aware of all the evidence based information to the contrary, let me share with you *real* evidence . . . If I could have you write anything, this would be it: when a wife comes through my door (upon her husband’s successful recovery from pornography addiction), and says, ‘For the first time in 30 years, I feel connected again to my husband’, that’s reality” (2009). Would those who suggest that pornography does little or no harm acknowledge or even recognize the 30 year theft of intimacy from a marriage, due to pornography use, as being harmful?

It is often difficult to remain objective regarding such volatile issues, especially when we know someone whose life has been impacted by such behaviors. Despite the strong opinions on such an issue, new, powerful empirical and anecdotal evidence is confirming that excessive pornography use rivals the damage heroin and cocaine do to the brain. “We have devised a drug [online pornography use] 100 times more powerful than heroin” (Satinover 2004:2).

While it is premature, if not unfair, to be dubbing Utah as “the porn capital of the U.S.” without more serious research and study, it is clear that Utah fosters unique cultural factors that may leave those with susceptibility at an even greater predisposition to using and abusing pornography.

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Author Bio

Vinny Barborcka returned to the University of Utah after many years to finish his bachelor’s degree in Sociology, with hopes of pursuing a new career in drug and alcohol counseling. He has co-authored two addiction recovery workbooks: *Crossing Boundaries*, and *New Directions*, for American Community Corrections Institute. He is the recipient of the Sociology Department’s 2010 Frost Award for “outstanding scholarship” among graduating seniors, and was one of two recipients of the University Writing Department’s prestigious “Best Student Paper” for undergraduates in 2010. Motivation for this article was a result of his 2009 internship with *Candeo* (www.candeo.com), an online behavioral health resource, with programs coming soon in the areas of sexual addiction and substance abuse behaviors.