

Signing On, Getting Off:
How Heterosexual Internet Pornography Is Damaging
Sexual Development and Identity Formation

by

Natalie S. Tran
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Introduction

I knew about Internet pornography before I saw it, and it affected me before I thought about it. During the last few years I began realizing that Internet pornography and its place within this technological age has had a complex and profound influence on many people of my generation. This work is an exploration of the ways in which Internet pornography usage has informed the development and constructions of heterosexuality, gender, sexual norms, personal interactions, and power systems between young women and men today. My initial intent was to write about a social force that was explicit, abundant, threatening, and oppressive – to write about heterosexual pornography’s presence on the Internet in the last two decades and its impact on the lives of innumerable young people. I wanted to argue against its easy acceptance in much of society with a voice and an interest that was also explicit, abundant, threatening, and most of all personal. There is something “in your face” about most pornography online, and I wanted to speak back to it in a similar fashion. However, I came to realize that assuming that sort of position so early on limited how much I could actually see and interpret; concentrating on only what was “in your face” kept me from identifying what comes after instances of experience, which might have put attention on what Internet pornography *is* but not on what Internet pornography *does*. Similar to the negative impact of mass Internet pornography usage on the youth today, I allowed little space for important and individual voices,

narratives, and arguments to be understood. More specifically, I came into my research and writing thinking “this is about sex,” only to find out the effects I assumed were occurring were much broader.

The anxieties and concerns actual young people have spoken with me about in the last months have pointed to a larger and more complicated relationship that is currently being formed with heterosexual Internet pornography. I assumed there would be a clear binary, which would situate people who like heterosexual Internet pornography on one side and those who do not like it on the other. This was an important misconception of mine, for now I see that I began my research within the same intricate space that young people navigate everyday - sexual identity, sexual relations, and the ambivalent feelings we might have toward both are not issues that exist separate from our daily thoughts and actions. They affect so many different aspects of life and identity that a simple binary system could never embody the actual negotiations that are continually occurring within the lives of young people.

Traditionally, activists divide within the pornography debate based on a relatively standard assumption of pornography as a production that is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable. Pornography is different today from what it used to be just a few decades ago, mainly because its usage has been massively propelled by technological advancements. The way it looks and where it is found factor in to how we can talk about it and especially how we live with it. The questions that must be addressed now do not hinge solely on notions of good and bad, but on the considerations of who is using it, how frequently, for what reasons, and to what effect. Addressing these questions in regard to young people today, many of whom

literally grew up with the Internet, opens a very new avenue of examination in the larger pornography debate.

The excitement of working within an area of such relevance to contemporary society has driven my interest from the start. I have been gratified by the way this topic is received when people I talk with acknowledge a similar interest and concern with heterosexual Internet pornography usage. Many people initially explain that they have never really thought about porn's place in their lives. However, once the young people I spoke to began discussing Internet pornography, it became clear that they have complicated and ambivalent opinions regarding it. It happened this way for me as well. I can recall being twelve years old and seeing an image of two people having sex on a computer in the library of my school. I can also recall the frequent adolescent sexual discussions, many of which I took part in, that occurred throughout my teenage years. There were dozens of instances where friends would show each other the porn they found online. There are hundreds of images that come to mind when I hear the word *pornography*. But, as far as the word having something personal to do with me: this I did not realize until recently. It is this realization that I hope many people of my generation will be able to recall in the years to come, because the opinions and attitudes that can come out of it make a personal and social difference.

Often when I explain this thesis to a person, regardless of their use and/or support of Internet pornography, she or he agrees that its existence has had an impact on this generation of young adults, and that they have rarely critically discussed or considered it. This can be disheartening at times, especially when I consider how little activism and political involvement I have seen among the youth recently, and how

political apathy is often thought of as a norm among young people. But it also speaks to a belief that young people *do* care, and if real interaction and critical thought is promoted in daily life we could create a better society.

Pamela Paul writes,

The pornification of American culture is not only reshaping entertainment, advertising, fashion, and popular culture, but is fundamentally changing the lives of more Americans, in more ways, than ever before. We are living in a pornified culture and we have no idea what this means for ourselves, our relationships, and our society. (Paul 2005, 11)

I aim to take Paul's claim further. Her focus is on the transformations caused by pornography usage in American culture. What I concentrate on is less the transformation, but more the development of this new culture. The people I focus on are adolescents and young adults, and the pornography they experience most regularly is Internet accessed and present in countless ways in both public and private spheres. We are developing individually and socially in a climate already marked by the transformations Paul is concerned with. I agree with Paul that people have no clear idea of what it means to live within a "pornified culture" today, but I also think that if we do not direct a new critical attention to the development of the youth within this culture, we will lose the ability to find that meaning.

I believe that growing up within what Paul refers to as a "pornified culture" has had an effect on how many young people in the United States have sex. What I initially overlooked, and what I think is going unnoticed by many people everyday, is that *porn is not just about sex*. Whatever aspect of the debate we consider, people's arguments about pornography have never been that simple. The

depictions and images may be “sex” or “sexual in nature,” but the discussions have been about life and about people. They address issues of equality and humanity, of individuality and freedom, of agency and choice. In this thesis I specifically address heterosexual Internet pornography and its use among young people, because I believe applying critical thought to this realm will make apparent to society the current problems within the constructions of gender, sexual relations, and sexual development.

In Chapter One, I address some of the major arguments that have been made throughout the pornography debates, particularly since the 1980s. I engage with other pornography activists in an attempt to flesh out the larger arguments against pornography in the United States, specifically those that rely on notions of harm and damage, and address issues of status violation, subordination, possible violence, and authority. By discussing positions within the pornography debate that are based on harm, damage, and civil rights, I hope to guide the discussion away from traditional “moral” opinions and the limits they put on critical political discourse.¹ I argue that current use of heterosexual Internet pornography does harm young people in their development of social, sexual, and individual identities, the consequences of which are immense. I also address censorship of pornography in the United States, and the protections and limitations of the First Amendment right to freedom of speech. Lastly I discuss sexual education and the ways in which Internet pornography is gaining a significant hold in this realm of society among young people, especially because of its mass accessibility and presence.

¹ I mean the discussion to focus more thoroughly on issues of equality, power, and harm rather than opinions regarding religion, moral righteousness, political traditionalism, and conservatism.

Chapter Two is an exploration of the personal opinions and experiences of the young people I have spoken with over the course of my research. There were seventeen main participants ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-four.² All of these people identified as heterosexual, and acknowledged heterosexual Internet pornography as a presence in their lives, although not all were current users. The far majority of those who used or currently use Internet pornography, particularly on a regular basis, were males. Most participants also explained that they had seen or known about pornography on the Internet for years, often referring to early adolescence as the time of their first exposure to online pornographic material. The majority of these young people are current university students of middle class status. The experiences and opinions used were taken from a relatively equal amount of young women and young men; their gender, age, and geographic origin within the United States are listed in an appendix at the end of the thesis. All the names were changed, and I chose to leave names out all together in some places to further protect anonymity among those who participated in these personal discussions of pornography and sexuality. All participants also consented to have their personal narratives and opinions discussed in this thesis.³ Through an exploration of their attitudes and views, Chapter Two identifies three ways that access to and use of heterosexual Internet pornography impacts young people – through the experience of community making and the construction of masculinity, by informing gender identity

² Not all of these participants appear with names in the chapter. When I cite my own personal anecdotes they refer to people I have spoken or interacted with outside of the research for this thesis, so their personal information regarding age, gender, and sexual orientation is not included.

³ A copy of the consent form required by the Wesleyan Human Subject Committee and Internal Review Board is located at the end of the thesis.

and attitudes about sex, and by the construction of heterosexual expectations and relations.

In Chapter Three, I connect my own argument regarding heterosexual Internet pornography usage among young people in the United States to the actual narratives and experiences introduced in Chapter Two. I also reassess the argument that pornography causes harm to people, and explore the differing views regarding the censorship of pornography. Lastly, I advocate more available and comprehensive sex and sexuality education for young people in the United States as an important solution for some of the problems caused by Internet pornography today. This improvement of education, I believe, is the first step in a genuine attempt at working toward a new and healthier sexual culture among young people, and one where Internet pornography will no longer maintain its current authority.

My main intention in this thesis is to highlight the significant influence heterosexual Internet pornography has on young people by exploring what young adults today think and feel about their experiences with pornography and sexual relations. Those that I spoke with have a lot to say, and their opinions and concerns beg for a much more thorough and comprehensive examination of Internet pornography as a social force. As I mentioned, pornography is not just about sex. I also argue that sex is not just about sex. This is especially true for young people who are continually developing their own individual and social identities in the United States today, a process that involves intricate dealings with gender, expectation, sexuality, knowledge, communication, and personal interactions. Many young adults can look back at their adolescent years as incredibly formative and relevant to the

beliefs, ideals, and lifestyles they currently maintain. They can also recognize the misconceptions and negotiations that often occur in youth, as well as the effects they may have had. Most importantly, young adults today can explain what it was like for them to grow up in this new technological age, the benefits and detriments of which are perceivable in the workings of their own lives.

Recently, a young woman told me that she was glad I was writing this thesis, that she believed it was a subject that needs urgent and significant attention. She said that what was most important was that Internet pornography is a topic not many people think they know or care about, but that most actually do in a very personal way. This statement speaks to the fact that despite the things that can be said of the problems within youth culture today, young people are invested in and concerned for the future they are building. It is this concern we have to lose if people remain quietly accepting of heterosexual Internet pornography usage and all that it is capable of saying and doing. It is a concern we have for ourselves and for one another, and I believe the more we talk about it the more we will have to gain.

Chapter One

Click. The window pops up. There is a video clip in a small box on the screen. Underneath is written “Come On In.” The clip is maybe four seconds long and on a loop; the sound quality is poor, but the image is clear. A young woman with legs spread open fondles herself and moans, tilts her head back and whispers something. It’s almost inaudible and you cannot see her mouth to make out the words. Then the clip starts over and you listen harder. Then the clip starts over and you listen harder still. Then the clip starts over...and you have it.

Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.

It plays again and again, the rhythm of the repeated sounds looping over itself until a creeping discomfort drives the urge to click out. Click. The window goes away. Sometimes the discomfort does not.

Pornography. The debate can divide in a thousand ways, a hundred thousand ways, a hundred million ways – as many ways as people are willing to see it, feel it, know it, talk about it.

Pornography. It is right there, and as Supreme Court Justice Stewart famously put it, “I know it when I see it.”⁴

But, how do we see it?

How do we feel it?

⁴ Justice Stewart made this statement in 1964 during the Supreme Court case *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. He later recanted this opinion as legally indefensible in 1973 during the Supreme Court case *Miller v. California*.

How do we know it?

How do we talk about it?

How do we deal with it?

Pornography is an explicit production, the medium of sex and bodies making the ultimate message. The dialectic of pornography is complicated. Its presence is ever changing within society, taking form under the influence of the patterns of social standards and technologies. In the tide of the debate opinions are difficult to maintain; the boundary between pornography: the thing, and pornography: the thing in action and discourse is imprecise, especially because of the massive use of heterosexual Internet pornography among younger and younger people. In its current place in society, pornography is tumultuous and elusive as a point of concern, yet ever present for use, readily available for consumption – on its own terms.

We *know* it when we see it. But then what?

Click. The window pops up.

Pay attention.

There is something here.

Internet Pornography: A New Focus

Some would say that pornography has been around forever, or at least for enough time and across enough countries to view it as nothing new in the American

21st Century.⁵ Its format might have changed but the idea is definitive and the definition is simple. A general dictionary definition identifies pornography as “The explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects or activity in literature, painting, films, etc., in a manner intended to stimulate erotic rather than aesthetic feelings.”⁶

Understood in this way, pornography can be seen as just another social or cultural production, like action films or video games. Defined, “pornography” seems an easy concept to understand, and if the definition is simple then the discussions about it can be simplified to a point: If you don’t like it, leave it alone. Problem solved. Freedom protected. Major liberal American ideals remain unquestioned. America is about freedom, and America is about choice. The freedom to choose to use pornography is a clear example of liberty in action, granted by the United States to the individual. It all seems so evident in this way...so why complicate it?

The fact is pornography, evident or not, is not what it used to be. Whether considered unacceptable, desirable, or anywhere on the spectrum between, pornography was once contained. It was a product to be purchased. It was something that one *could* choose to have in their life, and something that one could choose to avoid. The difference is that heterosexual pornography in its current magnitude has complicated the dialectic, riding fiercely in the tides of the technology that is now a normal part of American life, and it is especially influential among its increasing youth market. It is not just pornography we are dealing with now; it is Internet pornography, and it is developing into a machinery all its own. This machinery

⁵ The term “American” throughout this thesis refers only to the United States. I use it to reflect cultural and social norms that are often equated with standard “American” ideals, especially in popular cultural terms.

⁶ This is one standard definition take from the Oxford English Dictionary.

disseminates products and saturates society with explicit heteronormative information, often rendering choice obsolete in the face of mass accessibility and social presence. This is particularly true for current generations of young people, considering that many of us are growing up with heterosexual Internet pornography as a social norm, and very few people are recognizing its critical influence.

The definition of pornography that this thesis is concerned with is not limited to “the explicit description or exhibition of sexual subjects and activities.” The focus is not pornography as a type of image, but rather as a type of mechanism, which allows for a definition that embodies the way in which pornography works in the United States today. Especially now that it works primarily through the Internet, both the content itself and the way it is used become necessary factors in what we consider pornography to be.

How we see pornography, how we feel it, know it, and talk about it has been altered by its exponential accessibility and the presence it has maintained and continues to maintain among young people in the United States. If it can no longer be avoided, then it is imperative that we at least attempt to understand where its workings and influences exist within our social structures. Discussions can no longer be limited to arguments about whether pornography deserves restriction, whether it should be regulated, whether it should be protected as freedom of expression. We must now also confront how pornography works – what we do with it and what it does to us. The speed at which technology is propelling society into a blur of consumerism only makes these discussions more urgent.

Immorality and impermissibility are notions that often come up in discussions of pornography, but they are not the focus here. These notions, whether valid or not, have to do with the management of pornography, the handling of a problem.

However, the problem itself has not been adequately identified, and it will not be until the way it is discussed takes into account not only what pornography is, but how it is used currently. Heterosexual, mainstream Internet pornography in this culture is not a fixed thing, but a persistent and influential mechanism. Its use has been informing the cultural and sexual norms and expectations of young people increasingly over the last two decades, and the society we live in today reflects its impact. Heterosexual Internet porn cannot be taken out of its place among us and discussed as if it could be isolated or detached, because its use is not isolated or detached from society.

Technology has changed the way we communicate and exchange information; the Internet has changed the way in which pornography is used, and these changes have afforded Internet porn a very distinct authority among young people currently. Many live with Internet porn without examining the effects of its mass presence, and this is where new discussions begin. I believe we must look at it where it lives. We must look at how it lives. We must realize that this has everything to do with how we live.

The United States of America is a nation of ideals, and at the forefront of those is freedom. We are a body of millions and millions of people with freedom in our head and in our history, or at least the ideal of freedom. Citizens strive for it and try continually to protect it as something given. The individual has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The individual has the right to choose to do whatever she or he wants as long as it does not encroach upon another's freedom. Of

course this is where there is trouble, the place in which what *I* do comes into conflict with what *you* do. This is the place of possible harm, which is central in critical examinations of contemporary Internet pornography usage, especially in terms of harm to contemporary constructions of sexuality and sexual relations.

Most general definitions of harm revolve around the concept of damage. To harm someone is to damage them in some way – physically, mentally, morally, and on a larger scale materially or socially. To harm is to cause someone distress or injury, and it can be done in innumerable ways. Proving a harm generally necessitates the identification of a source of harm and a harmed party. Sometimes this is a simple identification to make; other times the systematic character of particular harms makes the identification of the source and the harmed party nearly impossible. The debate around pornography often examines the validity of the notion that pornography harms those who come in contact with it in their lives. But if there is no physical injury, no visual or tangible proof of harm, the ways in which harm is identified become complicated. The harms themselves, as many have argued, become obscured and obscurable.

Catherine MacKinnon, a predominant figure in the anti-pornography debate, argues, “The feminist critique of pornography is politics, specifically politics from women’s point of view meaning the standpoint of women to men. Morality here means good and evil; politics means power and powerlessness” (MacKinnon 2000, 170). The relation of harm to politics then, ties the harm doer to power and the harm receiver to powerlessness. This sort of relationship between domination and subordination materializes in different ways, but the significance of the power

dynamic offers us a more useful means of discussing the problem of pornography than traditional moralist positions. These positions are often associated with notions of Right Wing Conservatism and religious doctrine, both of which have been historically linked to anti-pornography sentiments. However, the focus here is on the effects of pornography and the things it does, rather than on varying opinions scholars, activists, and politicians have had regarding pornography's moral worth and/or notions of good, proper, and acceptable conduct, which differ immensely among groups and individuals. This is not to say that discussions of morality and political conservatism are not significant to the larger pornography debate, but if a new understanding of heterosexual Internet pornography in society is to emerge, the discussion about it must remain specific – we are not talking about whether pornography use is distasteful or inappropriate based on social standards; we are talking about current heterosexual Internet pornography use among young people as damaging on multiple levels.

The specific argument of this thesis is that heterosexual, mainstream Internet pornography use harms young people today – its effects on gender relations and sexual development take power away from the individual and promote the survival of an intricate and deeply embedded sexual inequality in society. Unlike MacKinnon, I do not equate men with the role of dominator and women with the role of subordinated victim. I argue that heterosexual Internet porn harms both young women and men with the constructions and expectations it imposes on developing sexual

cultures.⁷ The power dynamics that form because of this might resemble a paradigm of domination and subordination, but that is only one manifestation of the effects current mass usage of heterosexual Internet pornography can have among young people.⁸

It might be fair to say that I am “anti-pornography,” but it would be more accurate to say that I oppose the way in which heterosexual Internet porn is located and normalized within youth culture. I am deeply concerned with its current ability to function as a seemingly harmless and even beneficial source of information for adolescents and young adults, and believe there is great danger in the acceptance of Internet pornography’s definitions and norms pertaining to heterosexual sex and gender constructions.

There are many meanings to the “anti-pornography” position, each loaded with its own social relevance and stigma. Some working definitions in this thesis must be outlined for the purpose of clarity and communication. The initial opposing positions are often divided into the categories pro-pornography and anti-pornography, which specify which side of the debate a pornography activist is located. However, these terms do not imply any other specific meanings, especially as they are understood in this discussion. As the debate has made its way into public and political realms the positions of pro-censorship and anti-censorship have become legally

⁷ When I use the terms “developing sexual cultures” in this thesis, I am not referring to specific groups of individuals or particular sexual cultures in society. I mean the term to address the sexual culture that forms among any group of young people. This includes aspects of sexual relations and dynamics, and the notions of sexuality and gender that develop during adolescence and early adulthood.

⁸ I will discuss other particular effects related to sexual relations and gender development in the following two chapters.

relevant. Similarly, the terms pro-sex and anti-sex are increasingly popular, especially in discussions of pornography that utilize notions of sexual liberation.

Since pornography in the United States became a prominent issue of discussion both socially and politically during the 1970's and 1980's, "anti-pornography" has come to be linked with the position of "pro-censorship." One who is pro-censorship regarding pornography believes that for particular reasons pornography is not protected under the First Amendment and should be censored and/or regulated by United States law. "Anti-censorship" thus describes one who does not believe pornography should be censored or regulated, however, the term does not necessarily imply that one supports pornography. "Anti-sex" is another term linked to anti-pornography positions, equating the opposition to pornography with the opposition to freedom of sexual expression and desire. The term "pro-sex" has been commonly adopted by those who believe pornography is beneficial to society and the freedom of sexual expression. However, it is important to note that many pro-sex advocates are not necessarily in support of heterosexual, mainstream Internet pornography in particular, but rather in support of the individual's freedom to engage in whatever sexual practices and use whatever sexual tools she or he desires.⁹

The definition of these terms and labels are important for when they are used incorrectly, as they commonly are within the pornography debate, positions are often misunderstood and miscommunicated. I have realized the effects of this miscommunication personally throughout my studies of pornography. It was not until

⁹ In my research I found that there is also a position of anti-anti-pornography, but I have chosen not to include it here, as it engages with issues that would take from the focus of this thesis and revolve more around the general pornography debate rather than the specific examination of heterosexual Internet pornography usage among young people.

recently that it occurred to me that my own position often seems unclear because it combines terms that are not commonly associated. I oppose pornography in its current state within society, but I do not support censorship and have always identified as a pro-sex feminist. It is the way these terms are rethought, negotiated, and combined that I believe there is a message of great optimism in feminism and sexual liberation, as well as a freedom of sexuality that hinges on the individual rather than the emerging cultural and technological norms.

Harm and Rights

Pornography harms real people.¹⁰

This is the start of many arguments against pornography: the bottom floor of an increasingly complicated structure. The socially permeating forces of Internet pornography challenge this initial statement, as locating and identifying its harms can be an incredibly difficult endeavor. The ubiquitous quality and social influence heterosexual pornography has achieved through Internet access often obscures its harms in society, especially when these harms occur on systematic levels such as contemporary gender construction and the development of sexual norms. The task of locating harms caused by heterosexual Internet pornography is problematized not because the harms do not exist, as many might argue, but because they are ingrained in a culture they help to build and reinforce continually. This concept is not new to

¹⁰ When I say “pornography” I am referring to heterosexual pornography accessed primarily through the Internet, as this paper does not address feminist or homosexual pornography. Some of the writers I cite do not make this specification and speak of pornography in a more general way, but the elements of their ideologies remain significant to my argument.

the pornography debate, but I argue that widespread Internet use in the United States has allowed heterosexual pornography to achieve a greater level of success in this way than ever before.

“[M]any liberals have argued that only when a harm can be identified as affecting a particular victim or victims is the state justified in interfering,” Lori Gruen writes on the issue of censorship when discussing pornography. “Harm to society, or shared human values, or public life, in the form of words or images that offend because they are indecent, crude, banal, or even repugnant, is not strong enough reason to interfere with individual liberty” (Gruen 2002, 159). This is an important point, but considering the scale in which Internet pornography operates, considering that it both operates within society while manufacturing new ideals of society, I believe heterosexual Internet pornography’s harms go beyond notions of the indecent, crude, banal, or repugnant. I argue that we are talking about a larger story, that Internet pornography opens vast avenues of harm that transcend the necessity of identifying “specifiable individuals” (159), as it affects people in the United States on systematic as well as personal levels. This is not to say that specific individuals are not specifically harmed by heterosexual pornography, as this is certainly true in some cases. The point I highlight is that currently, especially among young people in the United States, most individuals are harmed by heterosexual Internet pornography in that they live in a society where its norms, ideals, and messages are predominant and hugely influential.¹¹

¹¹ The issue of censorship will be addressed later, but I will note that I am not in support of it is a solution to the problems caused by pornography in the U.S. However, I do not believe interference can be deemed unjustified because of the notion that pornography’s harms are not specific enough.

Harms are often divided into two categories, direct and indirect, and it is often easier and more apparent to identify a direct harm than an indirect harm. Let us assume a direct harm is what you can see; it is the actual condition of damage done to someone. If one person stabs another, the direct harm is the stab wound, and the stabber directly harmed the stabbed. Indirect harm is an occurrence that is responsible for bringing on some damage. If one person leaves a knife sticking up in a room and shuts off the lights, and another person walks in and falls onto the knife, then the first person has indirectly harmed the second person. I believe the damage caused by pornography involves both types of harms.

The immensity and differences among the harmed party complicates the task of identifying the source and type of harm. When an individual is assaulted and violated in the making of a pornographic production the harm to that person is direct. However, when a person states that pornography caused him or her to commit a violent crime, has that person been directly or indirectly harmed by pornography? The victim of the crime is directly harmed by that person, but are they also indirectly harmed by pornography's influence? When a person states that their freedom and equality have been compromised by pornography's messages, the harm seems indirect, but is the harm any less real? People are being harmed directly and indirectly as a result of heterosexual Internet pornography, and it is being noticed less and less.¹² What I fear is that pornography is the knife blade waiting in a dark room, sometimes someone is holding it, sometimes it stands on its own, and no one can turn on the lights.

¹² Particular harms and negative influences of heterosexual Internet pornography will be addressed in the next chapter. I only ask these questions here to provoke a line of critical thought pertaining to the spectrum of harm that can be caused by current pornography use among particular groups of people.

But let us not rely on my fear to continue the discussion, and instead ask why this scenario is possible. If pornography harms real people, who are the people and how is the damage being done? These questions speak to a key element of the harm factor in the pornography debate, and are enticingly addressed in Rae Langton's essay "Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts." Langton engages with conceptions of harm in relation to authority, and in the context of pornography management in legal terms. She cites MacKinnon to introduce the argument that pornography does not simply depict subordination, but itself is a form of subordination. Whether considered direct or indirect, many harms associated with pornography use come back to a broad notion of subordination, an occurrence where one party is assigned a position of lower rank or importance than another party, and as Langton specifies, this assignment is done "unfairly" (Langton 1995, 208). Subordination in this way manifests inequality, and the experience of inequality, specifically in social and political terms, is a form of harm to both groups and individuals. Still, as she explains, it is not this simple.

Plenty of people are harmed by cigarettes, but they are not thereby subordinated. A link between harm and subordination is made, though, when we shift our perspective on the asymmetric pattern of sexual violence and view it afresh, not simply as harm or crime, but as an aspect of women's subordinate status. To view it otherwise would be to obscure its systematically discriminatory nature, and to obscure the fact that the perpetrators are nearly always members of one class of citizens, the victims nearly always members of another. (213)

In consideration of this discussion's primary focus on heterosexual, mainstream, Internet pornography, I find Langton's ideas persuasive. However, if it is *how* pornography harms real people that we are concerned with, we must go further into understanding the systems of power in play.

This raises the issue of authority, which I argue is afforded to heterosexual, mainstream pornography through its massive presence within much of youth culture in the United States. Langton states on both linguistic and political levels, authoritative speech acts require “that the speaker occupy a position of authority in a relevant domain” (Langton 1995, 209). Using the example of racism in apartheid, she argues that particular damaging and discriminatory effects would not have been possible had the speakers (lawmakers and other figures) in South Africa not had “appropriate authority” (208). “This means that in order to answer the question ‘Does pornography subordinate?’ One must first answer another: ‘Do its speakers have authority?’” (214). My answer is yes. The product pornographers produce and disseminate through the Internet sends its messages frequently and easily. It has secured its hold over the last two decades on the sex culture that develop among young people who have experienced Internet pornography throughout their social and sexual development in the United States. As Langton describes of this argument, “The authors of pornographic speech are not mere bystanders to the game; they are speakers whose verdict counts” (214).

From here the implication is not that pornographers tell young men to rape and abuse women, and that these men do; but what has become increasingly apparent is that young people develop less a notion of what they want sexually and more a picture of what is supposedly wanted from them. The roles of sex are drawn out by Internet pornography just as gender roles are provided to young girls and boys throughout their entire developmental lives. There are numerous paradigms of the idealized masculine/feminine binary. The influence of heterosexual pornography

among young people relies on similar dynamics of unequal power and worth, which is perpetuated by much of its material online. A more functional and authoritatively legitimated system of flawed sexual notions is then promoted within a culture already constructed of such gender and sexual inequality.

What is important is whether it is authoritative in the domain that counts – the domain of speech about sex – and whether it is authoritative for the hearers that count: people, men, boys, who in addition to wanting “entertainment” want to discover the right way to do things, want to know which moves in the sexual game are legitimate. What is important is whether it is authoritative for those hearers who – one way or another – do seem to learn that violence is sexy and coercion legitimate: the fifty percent of boys who “think it is okay for a man to rape a woman if he is sexually aroused by her,” the fifteen percent of male college undergraduates who say they have raped a woman on a date, the eighty-six percent who say that they enjoy the conquest part of sex, the thirty percent who rank faces of women displaying pain and fear to be more sexually attractive than faces showing pleasure. In this domain, and for these hearers, it may be that pornography has all the authority of a monopoly. (Langton 1995, 215)

The link between subordination and harm is one that is key to understanding the problems of heterosexual mainstream Internet pornography in the United States. However, while Langton discusses how pornography works as a form of legitimate authority in sexual cultures, there is more to be said about how harm created by pornography can operate. MacKinnon expounds on the systematic harm of pornography in an essay entitled, “Pornography, Civil Rights, and Speech.”

Once power constructs social reality, as I will show pornography constructs the social reality of gender, the force behind sexism, the subordination in gender inequality, is made invisible; dissent from it becomes inaudible as well as rare. What a woman is, is defined in pornographic terms; this is what pornography *does*. If the law then looks neutrally on the reality of gender so produced, the harm that has been done will *not be perceptible as harm*. It becomes just the

way things are. Refusing to look at what has been done substantively institutionalizes inequality in law and makes it look just like principle.

In the philosophical terms of classical liberalism, an equality-freedom dilemma is produced: freedom to make or consume pornography weighs against the equality of the sexes. Some people's freedom hurts other people's equality. There is something to this, but my formulation comes out a little differently. If one asks whose freedom pornography represents, a tension emerges that is not a dilemma among abstractions so much as it is a conflict between groups. Substantive interests are at stake on *both* sides of abstract issues, and women are allowed to matter in neither. If women's freedom is as incompatible with pornography's construction of our freedom as our equality is incompatible with pornography's construction of our equality, we get neither freedom nor equality under the liberal calculus. Equality for women is incompatible with a definition of men's freedom that is at our expense. What can freedom mean, so long as we remain unequal? Why should men's freedom to use us in this way be purchased with our second-class civil status? (MacKinnon 1997, 183-84)

Since the 1980's MacKinnon has marked a stance against pornography that is theoretical and legal, academic and applied. While the United States legal system has traditionally dealt with pornography through concerns of obscenity, moral decency, and community standards, the debate changed in the 1980's due to feminist recognition of pornography as an issue independent of conservative or moralist opinions. MacKinnon and fellow activist Andrea Dworkin worked against pornography from a civil rights approach that focused not on morality, but on the violation of women's rights. This violation in MacKinnon's view is a specific source of harm, one of subordination, which pornography produces.

According to MacKinnon, not only does pornography contain a discriminatory and possibly violent message, but also it perpetuates this message through society and its structures so much so that harms are concealed in the fabric that is considered culture and reality. She argues that pornography makes inequality, and inequality

leads to harms that are psychological, physical, legal, and social. The interconnectedness of these harms is as complicated as it is indistinguishable. While I agree with much of what MacKinnon argues here, I believe that Internet porn use among young people has changed the situation in significant ways, necessitating a broader scope. As I will discuss in the following chapters, current use of pornography by young people does not simply result in female oppression and male empowerment. The culture and reality that develop in a climate driven by heterosexual Internet pornography's influence, I argue, are altered in such a way that often the only party that is truly empowered is the pornography industry. Still, arguments regarding equality and civil rights lend great perspective to the significant work that has emerged from the pornography debate, and has helped to establish the issue as a genuine political and social concern.

Political beliefs that focus on one's freedom to use pornography often come into conflict with notions of women's equality, which creates a space where freedom and equality are incompatible. This all points to a very large and very real problem in civil rights in the United States, MacKinnon has continually argued. "Doing something legal about a situation that is not really like anything else is hard enough in a legal system that prides itself methodologically on reasoning by analogy," she explains, "Add to this the specific exclusion or absence of women and women's concerns from the definition and design of this legal system since its founding, combined with its determined adherence to precedent, and you have a problem of systematic dimension" (MacKinnon 1997, 184).

The anxiety afforded by the history of legal systems and power structures in the United States gestures toward a larger concern that despite institutional effort, inequalities have simply been distorted and taken up in new forms. If society is ingrained with inequalities and damaging power dynamics, which I believe a relatively credible notion, then the concept of institutionalized regulations and protections becomes quite problematized. I believe pornography is dangerous in this way because it is an unrestricted machinery of inequality working within a system of unrestricted inequalities. The effects are devastating, and as MacKinnon argues, they are easily overlooked or hidden. Often physical and sexual abuse is quieted as a social epidemic, and equality itself is changed.

“Until women listened to women, this world of sexual abuse was *not spoken of*. It was the unspeakable. What I am saying is, if you *are* the tree falling in the epistemological forest, your demise doesn’t make a sound if no one is listening.” MacKinnon argues on the subject of sexual abuse in society, “Women did not ‘report’ these events, and overwhelmingly do not today, because no one is listening, because no one believes us” (186). MacKinnon is one of many feminist voices that have described this phenomenon of oppression and repression that comes packaged with “womanhood.” Many feminists also argue that pornography decides and/or informs what this “womanhood” looks like, thus reinforcing the oppression of female identity, both socially and sexually.

Further, MacKinnon argues that many women do not believe their own experiences, that they can look at the frequency of sexual abuse and violence against women and still see “freedom” and “equality.” She explains that in the face of it all,

“the view that basically the sexes are equal in this society remains unchallenged and unchanged. The day I got this was the day I understood its real message, its real coherence: *this is equality for us*” (MacKinnon 1997, 186). It is in this perception that I agree with MacKinnon, but I care to go even further. I believe the rapid changes in technology, society, and politics in the past decades have allowed for the standards of equality to shift in a way that causes women and men to experience subordination under oppressive institutions, heterosexual structures and norms being among them. This is not to say that women and men experience the same subordination, because the United States remains a patriarchy, and men remain “the dominant sex.” However, there is a need for new critical considerations that go beyond the inequality experienced by women. The actual constructions of sexuality and gender need to be taken apart and the roles promoted in society for individuals must be critically reassessed.

The subject is not simply one of equality and inequality, MacKinnon explains. It is of power and powerlessness. It is not just the problem, but the inability to fight the problem because of the inability to see it. And it is not just the inability to see the problem, but the inability to recognize that your right to see it has been silently withheld. While I agree with these claims, I continue to stress the importance in recognizing heterosexual Internet pornography as its own entity within the larger pornography and feminist debates. Because Internet porn works differently than other types of pornography, the problems it causes need their own particular assessments.

Both MacKinnon and Dworkin create a working position against pornography by highlighting the link between pornography and inequality, and then between

inequality, subordination, and violence. Their position insists that these occurrences are all connected in that they are manifestations of the violation of status equality. The effects of this connection can be found within pornography's images, contained in the message consumed by users, and throughout the system of inequality in society.

The harmony and coherence of hateful values, perceived by men as normal and neutral values when applied to women, distinguish pornography as message, thing, and experience. The strains of male power are embodied in pornography's form and content, in economic control of and distribution of wealth within the industry, in the picture or story as thing, in the photographer or writer as aggressor, in the critic or intellectual who through naming assigns value, in the actual use of the models, in the application of the material in what is called real life (which women are commanded to regard as distinct from fantasy). (A. Dworkin 1995, 48)

Here, Dworkin describes pornography as a power play between the sexes, both through sexual relations and the process of depicting them. The man assumes power through degradation of the woman. Powerlessness is experienced through violation and exploitation. This becomes sexy. This is sex, as pornography chooses to sell it, and, because the machinery of pornography is increasingly ingrained in society, everyone is buying.¹³

This is a dense point of contention, both within the debate in general, and among anti-pornography activists. Many people disagree with the insistence that pornography is based on violence and violation. MacKinnon and Dworkin have received substantial criticism founded on the counter-argument that pornography and

¹³ The term "buying" has often played off a double meaning – both the "buying" into some system and the actual purchasing of a product. I find the term interesting here because currently few young people purchase pornography online (as material can be readily found free of cost), complicating the whole notion of what buying into something even means in this technological age.

violence are *not* inherently linked, that one cannot prove pornography leads to any sort of violent behavior. Gruen elaborates on this issue explaining,

It is very difficult to establish the causal role that consumption of pornography plays in violence against women. Perhaps pornography leads men to act out their violent fantasies on real women, perhaps pornography creates those fantasies, perhaps pornography desensitizes men to violence against women, perhaps pornography acts as a release for violence that would otherwise be perpetuated on women, or perhaps pornography is causally inert...some social scientific studies suggest that there is a causal link between exposure to pornography and violence against women; other studies suggest the opposite and still others are inconclusive. (Gruen 2002, 160)

Unfortunately, if acts of violence (especially sexual violence) caused by pornography use cannot be proven, it becomes easy for many to hold the conclusion that pornography is harmless. This, however, places too much importance on the need for a *causal* link, and often limits the concept of harm by equating it with violence. As I have argued, heterosexual Internet pornography usage causes both direct and indirect harms. The things it does may be, but are not limited to causal occurrences.

In an essay entitled, “On the Question of Pornography and Sexual Violence: Moving Beyond Cause and Effect,” Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer explain, “Arguments that pornography ‘causes’ violent acts are indeed, inadequate. But the conclusion that therefore we should not be concerned about pornography at all is equally unjustified.” They argue that a critique of pornography can still be successful without “proving a specifically *causal* link with violence,” and that concerns regarding the complex connections between the two should examine the issue of forms of representation in culture (Cameron and Frazer 2000, 240).

Because sexual crimes and abuses are often tied to notions of moral decline and corruption in society, the connection between pornography and sexual violence is often brought up in moral terms, as if it is essentially a moral issue.¹⁴ While it was once a subject of the private sphere, decades of feminist effort have brought sexual violence into public concern. Morally linked or not, it is political issue. Discussing politics through terms of morality, however, runs the likelihood that one be associated with a conservative viewpoint, a position that holds tradition in high value. This association of anti-pornography feminists with traditional, moral righteousness can be highly problematic and distorts perceptions of the true argument. Cameron and Frazer note, “Whereas conservatives criticize almost all expressions of sexuality as immoral and recommend a return to traditional religious and family values, feminist analysis criticizes instead the oppressive and misogynistic forms such expression typically take in male-dominated culture” (241).

Gruen also addresses the various schools of anti-pornography activism explaining,

Politically, in the US, there have been two major constituencies that have raised concerns about the production, distribution, and consumption of pornographic material: religious conservatives and feminists...Feminists are divided on the topic. Some feminists see pornography as one of the primary sources of violence against women and thus argue that the abolition of pornography should be a central task of feminist political action. Other feminists are concerned about some forms of pornographic representations of women and children, but do not believe that ridding society of pornography...will eliminate sexist attitudes and practices. Still other feminists believe that the censorship of pornography will be used to further stifle women’s

¹⁴ My use of “moral” here refers to opinions and beliefs that culminate under personal and social standards of acceptable behavior. I use the term to stress the commonly perceived difference between issues considered “moral” - related to differing personal standards, and “political” - related to public and governmental concern.

sexual expression and aid in blocking acceptance of non-heterosexual or non-monogamous sexual desires. (154)

These divisions among feminists highlight the difficulties in dealing with pornography's presence in society, for the grand effort always seems to be toward some notion of liberty and equality, despite conflicting opinions. Gruen writes, "From an ethical point of view, the existence of pornography adds important dimensions to discussions of the nature of harm and the success of various normative strategies for weighing conflicting values such as liberty, autonomy, and equality." While I agree with this, the Internet has made pornography into a different type of social force. Even one decade ago, the discussion and concerns were unlike what they are today, and the notion of "dealing" with pornography's presence in society was different as well. My argument against heterosexual Internet pornography usage recognizes the conflict between values of liberty, autonomy, and equality, but also questions the way in which the United States values and interprets those concepts within such a pornographically penetrated culture. Pornography's presence in the lives of young people have given it an authority over the way we are developing as a society, and its impact goes beyond sex, influencing the most basic ways we live with one another.

Many feminist activists and scholars who have also insisted that pornography is detrimental in society because of its authority among those who live with it, namely MacKinnon and Langton, did so in reference to older forms of pornography.¹⁵ My position is aligned with many aspects of their arguments. However, I write with a

¹⁵ As MacKinnon and Langton are both still actively involved in feminism and the pornography debate, they may address Internet pornography and current usage in their contemporary work. However, considering the dates of publication of the articles I have used, as well as their general use of the term "pornography," I have to assume they are referring to all pornography, and not specifically pornography found on the Internet (especially by children, adolescents, and young adults).

personal notion of pornography in mind, and being a member of the generation I discuss, that is Internet porn. But Internet porn use among the youth is relatively new, as is the culture developing out of it. While I find MacKinnon and Langton's claim that pornography has authority in people's lives imperative to my own argument, I cannot argue that the same authority existed before the Internet introduced the means for mass production, access, and use of pornography.

Because so many young people are now growing up with pornography as a normal part of life – because all they have to do is click around on the Internet or talk to their friends or walk through the halls of their schools and *there it is* – attempts to regulate it often seem futile. Still, there are people who work to promote a critical view of Internet pornography's place in young people's lives; we work with an urgency caused by the knowledge that this generation is still fresh, and the norm of Internet pornography is still nascent. The coming of the next generation leads me to be quite skeptical about what the concepts of liberty, autonomy, and equality will mean as consumerism and technology further penetrate all realms of society, affecting both the formation of national ideals, as well as concepts of personal and sexual identity.

I know pornography is not *everywhere* in the literal sense, but it is necessary to consider the possibility that the Internet has allowed pornography to exist *anywhere*. Its effects and damages often hide in plain sight: it is found on computer screens in homes and schools, but it also exists vividly in the minds and interactions of young people across the country. I think it an absolute necessity that the *there it is* moment be immediately followed by personal questions of, *What is it saying? How*

do I feel about it? What do I want to do? If anything, these questions are part of a standard assertion of self, and an effort toward individual development and decision-making; these questions are a right people should never give up nor be ignorant of. They are where any position against, or even for, pornography begins, and they should not be where they end.

Back to the starting point: Pornography harms real people.

It does this directly and indirectly. Its presence among youth harms both women and men. It harms equality. It harms reality. It harms gender relations and sexual development. Pornography produces powerlessness as quickly as it works to take away one's power to recognize it.

This is what pornography does, and with the mass accessibility afforded by the Internet, heterosexual, mainstream porn is doing immeasurably more than ever before.

Regulation, Censorship, and Freedom

In 1980, MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and other activists drafted an anti-pornography ordinance for the city of Indianapolis, Indiana. The enactment of this ordinance not only caused an eruption of publicity for the pornography debate in the United States, but it brought to the forefront of the debate the issue of censorship and state legislation regarding pornographic material. The Indianapolis Ordinance defined pornography as “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or words,” and specified material that presented women “as enjoying pain or

humiliation or rape, or as degraded or tortured, or as filthy, bruised or bleeding, or in postures of servility or submission or display” (*American Booksellers Assn., v. Hudnut* 1985). This definition made no exception for literary or artistic works, and understandably drew much criticism for it. Also, rather than restricting sale or distribution of pornographic material, or regulating zoning laws for businesses, the ordinance prohibited any “production, sale, exhibition, or distribution” of pornographic material. The federal district court and the Circuit Court for the Seventh Circuit held that the ordinance was unconstitutional in that it was in violation of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The case, however, remains a significant historical and political marker in the pornography debate. The ways in which the case stresses the conflicts that arise with the political issue of freedom of speech complicate the assumed simplicity of the First Amendment and the protection of liberty in general.

In the Seventh Circuit Court, Judge Easterbrook stated that even if the negative consequences of pornography could be assumed censorship would still not be permissible:

Under the First Amendment the government must leave to the people the evaluation of ideas. Bald or subtle, an idea is as powerful as the audience allows it to be...[The assumed result] simply demonstrates the power of pornography as speech. All of these unhappy effects depend on mental intermediation. (*American Booksellers Assn., Inc. v. Hudnut* 1985)

Ronald Dworkin underlines the political importance of this holding explaining,

We must, as individuals and nations, choose, among possible combinations of ideals, a coherent, even though inevitably and regrettably limited, set of these to define our own individual or national way of life. Freedom of speech, conceived and protected as a

fundamental negative liberty, is the core of the choice modern democracies have made, a choice we must now honor in finding our own ways to combat the shaming inequalities women still suffer. (R. Dworkin 1997, 229)

These statements are based in a belief that pornography cannot be constitutionally censored, and that such censorship violates the First Amendment right to freedom of speech. Pornography may be bad and ugly and distasteful and even hateful and advocating of inequality and degradation for women, but it is allowed to be out there. Many people believe it is our choice as individuals and as a nation to either embrace it or leave it alone, and I agree this initially seems sensible.

The line of thinking that follows looks something like this: allowing pornography to exist freely does not mean every person has to have it in their lives, has to use it and desire it. People are not so fragile that some bad and ugly words are going to break them; they do not need protection from their own freedom to choose particular lifestyles; the actions and reactions of living and acting freely remain those of liberty. In the United States the individual is protected, the process of individuality promoted, and the freedom of will is valued. Whether or not philosophy proves these efforts to be futile or misdirected, it is what most people in this country currently believe in.

I think about this a lot – as a young person, as a feminist, and as an American – and it troubles me. On a very basic level, I believe in both the individual and the individual's freedom to choose how she or he will live. I believe in choice. I believe in individual desire and intellect. I believe in equality. I believe that these are part of a flawed construction, that they are problematic, and they might never be purely

achieved. But they are ideals nonetheless, and like most other people in the United States, I am not ready to let them go.

This is the same place from which many people come to their opinions on pornography and how it can and should be handled in society. Attempts at legislating pornography bring a threat to both sides. Support for pornography, or at least its right to exist, often derives from a fear that censorship and regulation will only result in a loss of freedom; “regulation” means excessive government involvement in a realm where people should be free to decide. Opposition to pornography is often based in fears of the consequences of its consumption. Many worry that freedom to use pornography will perpetuate inequality and take freedom away from subordinated and/or harmed parties; they worry this is already happening. The situation then is impossibly complex – whose freedom matters more? What happens when one person’s freedom comes up against another’s equality (MacKinnon 1997, 184)? Left alone, these questions will surely be answered by those with the authority and those with the voice.

The topic of voice brings us back to freedom of speech.¹⁶ On the surface of the debate it seems the First Amendment protects pornography as freedom of speech. Most U.S. citizens can hear this and nod along. The right is a cultural norm; it is something the majority of us has come to rely on. Of course, there are times in which this is complicated, and the Supreme Court has never held First Amendment protections as absolute. There are exceptions. And for the most part, the pornography debate has hinged legally on this point of exception, namely, obscenity. Some say

¹⁶ While “speech” is the only term specifically stated in the Amendment, we will suppose for this paper that “speech” also embodies speech acts and communicative expression.

pornography is obscene and obscene speech should be prohibited. Some say pornography is not obscene and should be protected. Others believe, and this includes Supreme Court Justices, that even obscenity should be protected under the First Amendment.

But there is an angle to the anti-pornography argument that confronts the conflict between censorship and First Amendment rights by questioning the validity of pornography as speech. How is pornography protected if it is not speech, or not simply speech? This question may not propel the anti-pornography movement into success, as the process of defining what constitutes “speech” is as difficult as defining “obscenity” or “pornography.” It does, however, add a new level of criticism and complication when using the First Amendment as the institutional protector of pornography.

“On the assumption that words have only a referential relation to reality, pornography is defended as only words,” MacKinnon explains, “even when it is pictures women had to be directly used to make, even when the means of writing are women’s bodies, even when a woman is destroyed in order to say it or show it or because it was said or shown” (MacKinnon 2000, 98). Her statements here are big and sensational, opening up a wide space for criticism. Many that disagree with MacKinnon argue that these sorts of claims implicate people too generally, and that they do not apply to everyone. A defense to such criticism is that they do apply to someone, and that if silence is dangerous, sensationalism is nothing in the face of mental and/or physical intrusion (101). These lines she writes allow for great intellectual skepticism – MacKinnon makes a point by pointing to experience, that of

women harmed and damaged by pornography, and experience is often thought of as faulty, especially in intellectual discussions. As there is a common instinct toward the notion that experience is not enough to make something true, relying on it to prove something as harmful can be an ambitious endeavor, and often an unsuccessful one. A person reads these lines and thinks, “This is not me. I have never been, nor will I ever be this woman; I don’t see bodies being destroyed in pornography, and I don’t see this extreme harm either.” This same person has taken MacKinnon’s words – “only words” – and reflected them upon herself, considered briefly, is that woman me? Could I be her? – What if the answer was yes? Would these lines still then be only words? Would pornography have nothing to do with real life harms?

Pornography...has been legally framed as a vehicle for the expression of ideas...The *idea* of who wants what, where, and when sexually can be expressed without violating anyone and without getting anyone raped. There are many ways to say what pornography says, in the sense of its content. But nothing else does what pornography does. The question becomes, do the pornographers – saying they are only saying what it says – have a speech right to do what only it does?
(MacKinnon 2000, 100)

The issue pornography raises here is how far does the First Amendment extend its protections? Where does speech become something else? Does it protect, as MacKinnon puts it, “unconscious mental intrusion and physical manipulation, even by pictures and words, particularly when the results are further acted out through aggression and discrimination” (101)? Apply First Amendment protections to the vast quantity of material found on the Internet and the whole story expands and becomes even more convoluted.

The truth is, I cannot answer these questions. But my intuition tells me that they should not be answered for me. Perhaps this is where the concern over censorship and prohibition of pornography is rooted – in the fear that such restrictions will, in effect, answer these questions for everyone. Censorship and prohibition seem to naturally come into conflict with a liberal democratic view, a view that breeds a wariness toward any system that decides the way people can live.

What many anti-pornography, pro-censorship theorists support is the notion that pornography is not just words or speech or images. Pornography *does something different*. Whether it is the way pornography has enveloped society as a cultural norm, or the precise dangers of the messages it deploys, there is something about pornography that removes it from a simple definition of personal expression, that puts it on the table as something to be dealt with critically.

I believe this is true.

There is something different about most current pornography and the things it does.¹⁷ You must look no further than to an issue of *Cosmopolitan* or *Marie Claire* to see the pornography machinery at some of its best work. The authority pornography currently maintains makes its messages unavoidable, for they are not contained in the pornographic images on the computer screen, but evident even in popular “women’s” magazines. These are sexy and empowering magazines for the autonomous young woman today.¹⁸ Or at least that is the pitch. Shiny movie stars and luscious models

¹⁷ I make this claim in reference to heterosexual Internet pornography rather than all pornography in general, but do not wish to completely isolate it from bigger issues.

¹⁸ This is just one common description of these magazines. I do not mean to make an assumption of the age and gender of all readers, but rather to highlight the image these magazines might portray to young people.

and people with money and influence pour from the pages. They transmit the message – this is where we are, this is what you want.

Then there is the section where “real” readers write in with “real” problems they have with relationships and sex. This part is often popular among readers because it offers a supposed picture of what real people worry about. It discusses problems others confront both publicly and privately today, and offers advice and assistance anonymously. In some sense it serves as a public forum for information exchange and support, however, a closer look can often reveal a different agenda. Countless times, there is woman on these pages asking about her partner’s pornography use. She wants to know why he uses it and why he uses it so much. She wants to know if this means there is something wrong with her, if he is not satisfied. She wants to know if this means there is something wrong with her, because she is not comfortable with it. She always says something along the lines of “I don’t understand. I am willing to try new things. I want him to be happy. I am not a prude.”

Then the “specialist” responds, usually a doctor, sex expert, or relationship therapist. The specialist has all the answers, and the answer to this particular woman is always some variation of the same: “Don’t worry. It’s normal to be insecure when you find your partner uses pornography. He probably keeps it from you because he doesn’t know how you will react. Some men just use pornography as a sort of outlet for the tensions of everyday life.” The advice is the most telling of how pornography’s authority works today: “Why don’t you try looking at it with him? Be open to the sexual ideas it promotes.” By aligning itself with concepts of sexual liberation, pornography navigates its way into innumerable aspects of daily life, and

does so seamlessly. I find great irony in the fact that some current workings of “sexual liberation” promote submission to sexual norms, and advocate participating in activities one finds uncomfortable, rather than advising one to consider their own feelings and desires. I do not find magazines and other media sources at fault, so much as I view them as convenient and efficient vessels of information, the validity of which can vary immensely.

One specific *Cosmopolitan* article titled, “7 Bad-Girl Bedroom Moves You *MUST* Master,” advises,

If the mere thought of renting a porno feels smutty, then it's definitely time to pick one up. From the spine-tingling moment you venture into the adult section of the video store to the second you surprise your guy with a skin flick and wait breathlessly for his randy response, taking the plunge into porn will add fiery fervor to your real-life bump and grinds...If you're less than bold about shopping for a sex flick, drive to a store in another neighborhood, shop online or go to a place that stocks X-rated movies on the shelves, rather than behind the counter where you have to request them. (Rush 2007)

The predominance of this sort of sex advertising for heterosexual women is crippling in multiple ways. Not only does it speak to a formulation of sexual and power dynamics that stresses male pleasure over female comfort, but it also utilizes a voice of casual, even fun, authority – women *must* do this, the article exclaims – making it all okay. I mean, after all, it is written in *Cosmo* and that is a magazine that looks out for women. The person who feels alienated by these messages can sense the immediate pulse of an incentive system that works to oppress the genders. This occurrence only points to the ways in which pornography, in this technological age, has pervaded endless avenues of communication and culture. Everyone is free to read this sort of article and think, “Bullshit!” But where do we go from there, if our voice

only works to back a losing team? How does opposition form among young people whose very generation learned much of the standards of heterosexual sex and identity from pornography's presence on the Internet? The answers to these questions will be found when we all start talking again, and reexamine the institutions that have set themselves up as "normal" socially and within our individual lives.

These articles do not address the possibility that something is wrong. They do not say that we have a right to repulsion when it comes to heterosexual pornography in our lives. Sex sells, and the media knows it, just as these magazines know it. If pornography has a monopoly on the definition of heterosexual sex, which it has come to acquire culturally through its mass Internet presence, then there is very little interest among popular media sources to oppose pornography. In a way, this is simply good marketing, but the brilliance and danger of the pornography machinery is that it has learned if it sells itself to its consumers enough, consumers will bring it into normality.¹⁹ Many do not see that this is already occurring, and worse, many do not realize that they are part of it.

I do not support censorship, and that includes the censorship of individuals created by heterosexual, mainstream Internet pornography. That woman in the magazine, like countless women in society, is censored by the cultural adoption of heterosexual pornography's sex and all that comes with it.²⁰ All a person needs is a computer and the Internet and they can plug in to the new sex reality, and once they plug in, especially if they are young, this "reality" becomes the only reality. At first it

¹⁹ I am specifically referring to young consumers, who are increasingly active participants in the consumer market.

²⁰ By this I mean issues regarding gender, sexual development and interactions, expectations, and other topics that will be discussed in the following chapter.

seems the Internet only makes pornography easy and easily accessible; then a day comes and it is increasingly difficult if not impossible to avoid in everyday life, severely limiting the concepts of choice and decision-making. Society is an open market for pornography's relentless advertisement, and while I do not assume that young people and consumers today are mindless vessels, I do not deny the immense influence cultural standards have over the individual. Everyday, young women and men are quieted and compelled to buy and sell pornography's message, over and over again, until it feels natural for everyone.

New Access and New Problems for Young People

When I say that I do not support censorship, that I am not pro-censorship, I mean that I do not think it is the best solution for the problem of pornography in the United States today. I do, however, support prohibition of access to pornography, namely for minors. Fifty years ago it was different. Pornography was contained in magazines sold in plastic bags kept under the counter of newsstands and corner stores. This is not to say that fifty years ago sexual politics were in a better place, but it is important to consider the position in society that pornography held. Twenty-five years ago it was different as well. The pornography debate breathed a new feminist zeal, and the civil rights approach that feminists put forth ensured pornography not be considered a solely moral issue. Pornography was contained in film and magazine, but required purchase nonetheless, which required customers to be of a particular age. There were already signs then of the direction pornography would move in. Mass

marketing and accessibility have been an increasingly exciting focus of the industry, and the possibility that pornographic material no longer be limited to a finite amount of individual products has driven a whole new type of production and market for pornography on the Internet.

As computer technology has been developing exponentially, the Internet has held a new and exciting promise of connecting people like never before. It has been thrilling and novel, and like any new technological advancement, people want to take part. The 1980's consumerism and the 1990's charge toward the new millennium helped to establish computers as a cultural norm among the middle and upper classes in homes and schools across the country. Computers are more convenient than a typewriter and faster than the postal service. The Internet has become a new and influential source of information for all sorts of research and inquiry. Games, chat rooms, and instant messaging between people are all part of a new American culture.

The generations born into this technological age have a different relationship to pornography than previous generations. They look around and pornography finds them eventually. Many of them learn sex through a machine, and they learn it as if it was always supposed to be this way. The heterosexual pornographic message of sex works its way through society, disseminating among developing youth cultures, and this means influencing young people in a widespread fashion. This thesis primarily focuses on the current generation on 18-24 year olds, a section of youth whose sexual culture and norms were among the first to form around computer and Internet technology. Less than a decade ago we were children on the verge of adolescence, and today sexual and gender relations in the United States show many of the

consequences of Internet porn's presence. I do not mean to oversimplify childhood sexual development into something that can be casually summed up, but the fact that developing young people learn from sources outside themselves is imperative to understanding pornography's influence.

Every day of life, a child learns something about what it means to be sexual, how he or she is defined by others, how one should act, what is expected of one...all gender systems take their justification from physiological distinctions between female and male, and from birth on a person learns the social rules that influence and determine sexual behavior for that gender within the society. (Martinson 1994, 101)

When Floyd Martinson writes this in *The Sexual Life of Children*, he is touching on a notion that is relatively plausible, especially in American society. People are thought to be developing creatures. We do not come into the world shaped and learned. We are born, and then to some extent we are socialized, learning from what and who are around us, learning from experience and being taught. Gender categories, and sexual expectations are formidably significant to who we think we are and who we think we should become.

“Every person a child meets throughout the day, every agency, the media, as well as institutions that have a direct stake in doing so – family, school, state, church – contribute to shaping the child's identity,” Martinson claims, “What children have traditionally learned in U.S. society is that they are not to engage in any activity that is sexual in nature” (101). This can be taken as truth in a general sense. Of course some parents and families are an exception, but for the most part school dress and behavior codes, statutory rape laws, and sexual abuse laws, all support the notion that children are not supposed to be having or advertising sex in any overt manner.

The average parent does not explain to their ten-year-old child exactly what having sex physically entails, and how men and women should treat each other within sexual relations; such an explanation might not even be possible, and is subjective nonetheless. The problem is that children are curious and they seek answers, even if they do not understand them, and even if they cannot discern the information they find. Sometime between childhood and adolescence, most young people “know” or “find out” about sex. They experiment with it and talk about it. They adopt into their body of knowledge an idea of what sex is “really” like, and that is usually not something learned in health education class, but what is seen in movies and advertisements and videogames. And now on the Internet. For the most part, they “know” that they want to know more and more. Something happens in those years and into early adulthood, and how it happens shapes the definitions of sex and sexuality, both for the individual and the culture she or he live within.²¹

I look around at the people of my generation and I know there are codes to be known regarding sex in our lives. The details differ among the class, race, and geographic location in the United States. Perhaps children that have been isolated from media influence and the Internet or who live below the line of wealth to have access to these sources are an exception, but they are not who this thesis is addressing. They are affected indirectly by heterosexual Internet pornography’s prevalence, but as much as they are part of society in the United States, they will eventually know much of what this pornography wants them to know.

Sexual norms among youth develop rapidly. During adolescence boys reach the age of sexual curiosity and in their search for information often find mass Internet

²¹ There will be a more specific discussion of sexual education in the following chapter.

pornography. Heterosexual, mainstream, Internet porn is one of the most accessible and convenient sex teachers nowadays – it is private and anonymous and racy; the excitement feels good and the thought of getting away with something, especially a sexual something, has always held a particular allure. The more pornography is out there, the more boys turn to it for information, for something to do and satisfy and talk about. The excessiveness of it is heady and grandly attractive. The effects, however, are now surfacing. They are not as pleasing as the product would have led us to believe.

Adolescent girls, in general, are urged away from the habit of using pornography, but there seems an unspoken expectation that they accept it among their male counterparts. They learn it as part of the cultural gender binary: it is something the other gender does and they often acknowledge it as a norm, like football or wrestling. Girls could technically take part as well, but that would attract attention and judgment, and the social incentive to not use pornography is prominent.

In the United States, boys grow up within a prominent patriarchal system. They learn what it means to be a man everyday from innumerable sources. They learn that if there is a role that men should fill then there is a role that women should fill. They see it in their schools, their homes, and the institutions that make up their culture and lives. Girls learn it as well. Heterosexual, mainstream, Internet pornography fits perfectly into this gendered power structure as an effective and self-perpetuating machinery. The current problem is that pornography is working exceedingly well, perhaps better than any other source of “truth” on the subject of sex and sexuality. It fits right in, and now its influences have a monopoly on the business

of knowledge making – that knowledge, more so than the pornographic images and films themselves, is the product that pornography sells. It is a case of sex selling “sex,” and the results are harmful.

Men may be the predominant consumers of Internet pornography, however, women, men, and gender and sexual relations all suffer as a result of its widespread availability and usage. Young and sexually developing males consuming mainstream Internet pornography are regularly taught an idea and an ideal of sexual relations, while young and sexually developing females tend to easily receive a complementary message of their place in the schema.²² The presence of Internet pornography has opened a new sort of power system of sexual relations. At the forefront of this system is the message that women are accessible. They are supposed to be accessible. They will be valued more if they accept this standard, appreciate it, become it. Consistently, men receive the message that women are to be valued for their accessibility. A man’s freedom to access the female body is not just sexy and hot and desirable, but is a right he can come to expect. With every click of the mouse comes a new scene of women being exposed and displayed and fucked – and they love it. Even if this is not what the men are looking for, the message is looking for them. However, these are not the only messages being offered. A closer examination of Internet pornography’s influence shows that its messages extend far past examples of what sex looks like and how it should be. It also impacts the way young people develop sexually, especially in regards to standards of gender, expectation, and identity formation, which I will explore in the following chapters.

²² I do not mean to be overly broad with the use of the terms “boys” and “girls,” “men” and “women.” I use the terms generally to point to trends in current sexual and gender relations among young people, especially those who have experienced Internet pornography and its influences in their lives.

As a phenomenon, Internet pornography fades into the folds of cultural norms a little more every day. Noticed with decreasing scrutiny, it is a regular presence among young people, developing into just another part of human relations and relationships. The messages it tells are no longer recognized as having an origin. Both young men and women are giving in everyday to the repeated notion - this is all *natural*. As a result, both genders are allotted a certain role to play, and mainstream Internet pornography dictates just what those roles are without ever having to be held responsible for the harrowing ramifications.

At this time in the United States there is something askew with sex and the way it works within our lives. Many people of this generation sense it; if we really focus we feel the slight anxiety underneath all the shiny ideals that bombard us daily. Those of us who were lucky enough to be of a certain class and opportunity know the language of consumerism, technology, and desire; we speak advertisement. There is a basic urge to protect a way of life that is all many of us have ever known. We grew up on the Internet – connected, fulfilled, accepting of everything it so generously offers us.

We know so much now.

This is not untrue. The Internet does offer immense information quickly and conveniently. But the same way that people use the Internet, the Internet uses people. I look around at this generation; we talk and write and communicate. The truth is, a lot of people feel something is wrong, but do not know how to deal with it. A young woman I spoke with explains, “I don’t know why we have sex the way we do. It’s

like we are all just acting sometimes, and when we go home we don't even have an idea of if we are happy or not." I believe, living without that idea, regardless of how much else we know, makes a travesty of our very identities.

Well into the new millennium, there is a familiar notion that this current generation of people benefits from extensive efforts of activism and political struggle. It is a common belief that things are not perfect, but they are generally better than they have ever been before in the United States. *We know so much now*. Many learn about past struggles in school – the Free Speech Movement, the Civil Rights movement, waves of feminism, sexual liberation, homosexual rights, and on – these are narratives of history, and the present benefits. As a feminist in the United States it is hard to avoid the fact that sexual politics has come long way in the past century. Women and men are generally free to have and talk about sex; it is no longer the most taboo of subjects; it is no longer trapped in the private realm. But because sex is such a part of this ever developing culture, there is great pressure to drop the criticism and be happy – to feel lucky that things are the way they are. Sex is a relatively open arena, so live and let live. This is the message, and it seems one of liberty.

It is not, though. A lot of the members of this culture feel it vaguely at times and then sharply in the fleeting moments it becomes obvious – there is something awry with this new sexuality. There is still something to not feel good about, and it is oppressive, but to say something might seem repressive. So many young people do not say anything, and they go out there smiling and excited, not quite knowing why a nightclub or a party or a classroom or a bedroom might feel a little like a battlefield.

The unrest comes and goes, but the reassuring hum of the computer and the availability of what we are looking for is something we can count on.

Click. Image.

Click. Image

Click. Image.

We want it as if we have always wanted it, as if it has always been there.

Chapter Two

- Hottie dressed in black is asking to be fucked.*
- Lucky guy fucks two girls and cums on their tits.*
- Big titty brunette sucking cock then drilled deep hard.*
- Pink pussy will shock you as it gets stuffed full of toys.*
- Worship my dick while I cum in your face.*
- Mary energetically sucks off five guys and then enjoys a facial cum shower.*
- Pigtailed teen girl spreading her tight pussy.*
- Hot gagging facial blowjob fuck and cumshot.²³*

It takes less than three seconds to type “porn” into the search engine. You click the first site on the list. You wait another two seconds. You count at least twenty pornographic thumbnail pictures. Where do you go next? You click “text version.” What is text version? Oh. This is text version. Each film and image captured in one line. Who writes this? You ask yourself. It really could be anyone, you decide. These lines do not even have to be sentences. What they say is precisely what you can imagine. What they say about the development of a current sexual culture is perhaps much more.

While explaining the topic of this research project to people, I realized quickly that outside of feminist academia, most people have never considered pornography in a critical or political way. Among my peers the most common question I encountered was, “Do you get to just watch a bunch of Internet porn for your research?” It was not

²³ This text was taken from a mainstream online pornography website available at <http://yobt.com/maintext.html>.

as silly a question as it seemed at the time, as the information that can be gathered while watching heterosexual, mainstream Internet pornography is graphically immense. However, my focus is on this type of pornography's effects on the people that grew up with it, namely young people today. Rather than analyze actual films and images I am using this chapter to draw out a narrative of real people's experiences and thoughts on the role Internet pornography has played in their lives. My focus group consists of people between the ages of 18 and 24 who identify as heterosexual and have either used or experienced Internet pornography in their daily lives.²⁴ In the political and social realm of the pornography debate, issues of speech and voice are never far from the center. Despite many people's lack of involvement in pornography activism, the voices in this chapter tell an important story within the current youth culture in the United States and its sexual dynamics.

A boy named Patrick told me what sex was in fifth grade by a water fountain during lunch break. I remember calling him a liar. I remember saying that it was impossible. A penis can't go in a vagina, I told him. It wouldn't fit in there, I said. Yes it can, he told me. *I've seen it*. I called him a liar again and spent a year pondering the peculiar possibility. In sixth grade we had a "health meeting" and the girls and boys were separated into different classrooms. I found out Patrick had not

²⁴ This thesis is not an ethnographic study, and I would like to acknowledge again that the pool from which I chose people to interview was limited to mostly university students of somewhat middle class status. I point this out not to undermine the significance of their experiences, but to clarify my intention. I do not believe my claims on sexual culture among young people are universal in anyway, nor do I pretend that my conversations with these individuals were "scientific." However, I believe these voices deserve to be heard, as my pressing concern regarding heterosexual, mainstream, Internet pornography in current youth culture is the way in which it is used in mass quantity with very little critical thought or discussion.

been lying, but I would not *see it* for another few years, and it would look quite different than I had expected.

In eighth grade a boy named Chad told my friend Megan to give him a blowjob at a local playground. She did not know what that meant and he explained it to her. She told me it was gross and that he pulled her hair the whole time. I told her she had to tell her parents immediately, that she had to tell the principle of our school. I thought he should get into trouble. No, she told me. *I wanted to – he liked it.* Where did he learn what *it* was, I asked her. I don't know, she said, all the boys just know about it. She became the most popular girl for a few months, but then a lot of girls started doing what the boys *just* knew about. And then we all just sort of knew about it, until eventually it was a normal part of our social life and sexual knowledge, regardless of whether or not one took part.

This was just my experience; I do not know how it worked for other people, the way in which sex became more than just a word. However, I do know many people of this current generation experienced some part of the same cultural working in terms of learning sex, and that through this learning a collective sexual culture forms.²⁵ Sexual “knowledge” at this age tends to grow in an exponential fashion, especially among adolescents in social and school settings. The norms of every different group vary, but as within any social assemblage, they do exist. The way in which sex is informed by the standards of what is “normal” has undeniable influence on the sexual culture that develops, and this is where mass usage of Internet pornography becomes incredibly influential. The United States speaks a language of

²⁵ As I explained in Chapter One, by “sexual culture” I am not referring to the sexual culture of a particular group of individuals, but rather mean the term to describe a system among many young people today of sexual relations, norms, and constructions.

sex in every form of its media, and it is a language that the public necessarily understands. Growing up in a “booming technological age” has had a distinct impact on the present culture, including the development of gender and sexuality that occurs among individuals within it. The way we are able to see and understand ourselves and one another in these terms is wrapped up in the project of identifying what those impacts are and how they exist.

“I absolutely love porn, I just do, I love it!” A young man named Matt tells me one night before I even begin asking him questions. “I’ll talk about it all you want. I love porn, watch it all the time. I think it is great.” He is anxious to start talking and as soon as I tell him I am ready to start he holds his hand up to me, “I really want you to understand, like, I love porn. I do think it’s great, but, like, I know it’s bad. I would never say it is a *good* thing in my life, like I want everyone to use it.” When I ask why he wants me to understand this he says,

Just because. I mean, I don’t want to seem like a sicko or some pervert, it’s just, there are a lot of things guys do that they aren’t necessarily proud of, but they’re not going to stop doing them, so they might as well make clear that it isn’t who they are. Just because I love porn doesn’t mean it’s my whole life. Sometimes I even feel pretty weird about it and try to stop watching it for a while. But I still like it. I still come back to it. I don’t know. I guess it’s complicated.

Thus begins a real and personal discussion of heterosexual, mainstream Internet pornography today. Points of fact and indubitable truths are not being posited here, and this is not an attempt at proving any sort of causal relationship between the use of pornography and some particular negative outcome. What are here are the experiences and possibilities of living with Internet pornography. While youth culture is not homogenous nor easily defined, what young people have to say does great work

to provide an insight into an otherwise private and complicated realm. The way we think about Internet pornography, and the way we talk about it has everything to do with how it works in our lives. What I found more than anything during these discussions was an eagerness among people to share experiences and opinions, and pleasure in having been asked for them.²⁶

Numerous important topics and concerns were addressed in the course of these conversations. I have chosen three dominant themes in order to emphasize the relevance of these individual experiences to the way in which heterosexual, Internet pornography affects young people today. These three categories do not contain a comprehensive list of opinions, concerns, and anxieties that exist in regard to heterosexual Internet pornography. However, they reflect significant ways that current use and access to Internet pornography among many young people has influenced the construction of both sexual and social identities. The sections categorize discussions based on the ways that pornography informs community making and the construction of masculinity, gender identity and attitudes about sex, and the construction of heterosexual expectations and relations. As one young woman I spoke with put it, talking about Internet pornography today “is not just about sex...it’s about everything that comes with it.”

²⁶ Obviously the limited amount of people I have spoken with do not represent youth culture as an entire entity. Their experiences are meant only to offer a picture of the problems caused by Internet porn, and how young people live with it today. I believe much further research in this realm is necessary.

Community Making and the Construction of Masculinity

David Loftus writes in *Watching Sex: How Men Really Respond to Pornography* that boys develop strong ties to pornography for numerous reasons. He points to “the pleasure of having their curiosity satisfied, the tang of novelty, the thrill of the forbidden and taboo, the tingle of doing something clandestine, the sensation of being ‘grown-up,’ and the chance to bond with other boys” (Loftus 2002, 17). These ties are a point of great interest to my argument, as I believe Internet pornography in the last two decades has become increasingly integrated into the experience of “growing up.” Curiosity, pleasure seeking, partaking in actions that are clandestine and taboo, and a desire for acceptance have often been linked to the development of young adults, but viewed specifically in regards to the use of Internet pornography, there is a particular significance to be drawn out. Many of the young men and women I spoke with about early experiences with Internet pornography referred to this sort of unspoken community making, one in which boys and girls seem to be systematically separated.

“I would say that it’s really unusual for girls to watch porn, and maybe they want to but they think they shouldn’t. But I do think it is a norm among boys, at least the boys I know. And the girls they are friends with all know it too, but we don’t talk about it or anything,” a young woman named Piper explains. Here is how she describes some of her experiences:

NT: When did you first see pornography?

P: Freshman year in college on the Internet.

NT: Had you heard about it before then?

P: Yeah, of course.

NT: When?

P: In high school, ninth grade...I was a late developer. It was pretty taboo in general where I went to school, but it was around, like no one would say that they didn't know what it was, and I guess it was assumed that boys were generally using it privately.

NT: Do you remember your reaction?

P: I don't know. It was weird at first, I guess, but then it got more acceptable as it seemed that most boys I know use it all the time.

NT: Were these boys close friends, a boyfriend, both?

P: These were my best friends and my boyfriend, and they watched porn, and it seemed normal. Like, they thought it was so normal that I would have thought it was abnormal to think it was weird. I mean, I still don't think it's weird or anything. But I'd never use it. It's just not really a "girl" thing to do.

When I ask Piper to elaborate on what she means about the use of pornography as "not really a 'girl' thing to do," she laughs and explains, "See, it is still a little embarrassing." Her initial response on the subject is not surprising to me, as I can hardly remember a single serious conversation I had through my entire adolescence about pornography or masturbation. Piper continues,

I guess, and I don't mean to get political about this, but porn is just more acceptable for boys, and expected. I mean, going online to look at porn when you're a teenager is obviously about masturbating or curiosity, and I don't think masturbating or sexual curiosity is that acceptable for girls, like, among a lot of people...I don't even think a lot of thirteen and fourteen year old girls really get how to masturbate, and if they do they certainly don't talk about it. I mean, if you're a teenage boy and your parents catch you jacking off to porn they'd be like, "whoa" or maybe "gross" or want to talk to you about sex or whatever, but they wouldn't be surprised or freaked out. But if you're a teenage girl, I think parents would be like "Oh my God, what's wrong with my daughter?"

Piper's sentiments were shared by many I have spoken with on the subject of Internet pornography use among adolescent girls. The standard of what is acceptable appears to play quite a significant role in the way in which adolescent girls and boys are gendered and socially separated, especially when the issues of pornography,

masturbation, and sexual desire are introduced. Lynne Segal argues that notions of gender and sexuality are currently “conceptually interdependent,” explaining, “They are held together by the cultural imperatives and practices of heterosexism definitively linking the ‘masculine’ to sexual activity and dominance, the ‘feminine’ to sexual passivity and subordination” (Segal 1994, 268). She goes on to address the unstable and problematic nature of this occurrence, which I argue is emphasized by the disparate usage of Internet pornography between adolescent girls and boys. Young women are generally not socially encouraged to use Internet pornography, while among young men, initial use of Internet pornography helps to form a community norm and practice in which they can take part, and share experiences and knowledge.

For Milo, Internet pornography began as somewhat of a social device. “I didn’t quite figure out the movie thing for a while, because, I wasn’t like, Internet savvy or socialized yet,” he explains. Milo recalls being given a *Hustler* magazine by an uncle long before he ever saw Internet pornography, but also explains that he never really considered *Hustler* to be porn. “The first time I looked at Internet porn was actually with a friend, and it was like, ‘Whoa man, check out her tits!’ or something. But you’re really, like, checking out the URL so you could come back later. I was actually a late comer to porn in my group of friends.” When asked if it was normal that he and his friends watch pornography together Milo responded that it was not, explaining that he only “did that in the beginning...it was casual, like a joke. When you first start, you and your friends show each other so you all can sort of see that it is okay, and then eventually you go off and use it on your own.” Some young

men described an anxiety that came with their first encounters with pornography that was eased when looking at it with other boys. Despite this social usage, none of the young men that I spoke with said that they ever used Internet pornography to masturbate in the company of friends.

Interestingly, the majority of young men I interviewed agreed that after their initial encounters with Internet pornography they rarely used it without the intention of masturbating. Some explained on occasion that they might browse pornography websites to find things they wanted to come back to, or look up films they might have been told about. “But those are usually really crude or funny things, not things you want to get off on,” a young man named Dane explains. “I definitely let my buddies know if I find something really fucked up or crazy, but I would never tell them about things that I like to get off to. That would definitely be weird.”

While Milo explains that he and his friends never discussed actually masturbating to pornography he says, it remained an assumed activity in their lives. He also points out that as years passed it became less and less discussed or even noticed, “I mean, after a while it was just old news, like Internet pornography wasn’t even interesting, it was just there.” Another young man echoed Milo, saying, “For sure, when I was first using porn online I would talk about it with friends at school – things we saw, what we thought was hot, but it’s not like I would go up to my friends now and be like, ‘Hey, so I was watching some really hot porn on my computer earlier.’”

Karin Martin explains in *Puberty, Sexuality, and the Self* that men form bonds over discussions of sex, especially at puberty, often joking or boasting to one another.

She writes, “Although at a deeper level they may be a way of expressing uncertainty and a fear of inadequacy, these jokes and boasts encourage feelings of adult masculinity in boys because they are a way of associating or bonding with adult men, and becoming adult men themselves” (Martin 1996, 50). I believe this bonding can become problematic when many young men experience it over the information they receive from Internet pornography, not necessarily because pornography itself has only a negative impact, but because the quantity and accessibility of pornography through the Internet gives the material immense authority. If Internet pornography’s messages and images of sex are taken as truth, then the community formed by its adolescent users (most often boys) is distorted and situated around a “norm” that owes no fidelity to any legitimate standard of sexual relations. Milo explains of his experiences,

I’ve always thought there was a contradiction of pornography...all my friends and myself, at 14, 15, 16, were watching Internet pornography and were greatly informed by it in terms of how we envisioned our sexual futures, in detail...And it definitely shaped my perspective and my friends’ perspectives on what we thought *how sex was supposed to be*, and how we thought we should act, in the act. Not so much very degrading, but the whole concept of having sex was a lot more “I’m going to fuck that bitch,” and it was greatly informed by pornography, like the abusive side of it. And we actually didn’t have any *real* experience, like, that would back it up in any way.

The discrepancy Milo points to, between young men’s early concepts of sexual relations and actual experience, is of special interest, as numerous people mention it in their discussions. While I cannot legitimate this conclusion, there is a likelihood that more young men than young women initially develop an explicit idea of what heterosexual sex is “supposed to be” because of their use of Internet

pornography.²⁷ This type of knowledge furthers the influence of norms formed within communities of adolescent boys, and according to Martin, allows them access to a realm of “adult masculinity” (Martin 1996, 50).

“I saw naked women on the Internet long before I ever saw an actual naked woman,” a young man named Jacob explains. “I had started using Internet porn when I was like eleven or twelve. My older brother had a computer and I remember looking up the sites that he used, and I’d try to be really secretive about it at first.” Jacob recalls that he was one of the first of his friends to see pornography on the Internet, and as more boys in his school started hearing about it and using it, Internet pornography became a popular topic in daily conversation. “We’d say things that I could never get away with now – like calling the girls ‘bitches’ and talking about ‘fucking them’ and how hot their ‘tits and ass’ were.” When I ask how things have changed in his language he responds, “Oh, man, if I said some of those things to my girlfriend now she’d probably break up with me. I mean, we said a lot of bad things. We were stupid little teenage boys, and the girls then didn’t know any better. Everyone wanted to fit in at that age.” Jacob also recalls, “when my brother found out I had been using his computer for porn, like when he was at practice or whatever, I was so scared that he’d tell on me or be mad. But he was so cool about it, like we had something in common, like I was growing up. And I always wanted to be like him.”

I found a general acknowledgement among young men I spoke with that using Internet pornography began as a sort of social imperative: a norm that many heterosexual young men took part in and that was often discussed in social settings

²⁷ I use “explicit” here in reference to the vividness of images, sounds, scenarios, and physical functions that occur during sex in online pornography, especially that which is more overt than what is seen in other forms of media such as television, films, and magazines.

such as school, sports practice, or when they were “hanging out.” In a society that values heterosexual masculinity, like in the United States, these norms can act as social markers and represent particular rites of passage. “You get the nudge and the wink, or the pat on the shoulder, or just that knowing smile from your dad or your brother or your uncle, and suddenly porn has allowed you access to the men’s club you’ve always wanted,” a young man named Stan explains of his experience.

I only had sisters and I was the second youngest so I got put in a lot of dresses and went to dance performances and shit like that. It was when my dad found the porn sites I had been looking at that I finally got free of all that girl stuff...I was so scared when my dad came in to talk to me, but it turned out to be, like, this great moment in my life. I was thirteen or fourteen, and having my dad acknowledge me as man was so important. Needless to say, I didn’t get in trouble, but we both knew none of it should be mentioned to my mom...it was like I wasn’t just one of girls in his eyes anymore.

Experiences like Stan’s speak to an increasing suspicion that because of the way Internet pornography can be accessed so easily and privately, attitudes toward its use has changed. A number of writers and researchers on pornography describe society’s response to pornography use as a negative one, especially among adolescents. Loftus writes,

By the time they were out of high school, most men had gotten the message that pornography was frowned upon by much of society. Some learned it from their friends, by observing the way their peers handled (or hid) the material. Some received clear messages from their parents, who either condemned pornography or warned their sons not to let the neighbors know about their interest. (Loftus 2002, 21-22)

This narrative is common. For decades pornography usage has been a mostly private and hidden practice. Perhaps the message that pornography is thought of negatively by much of society is valid. However, I argue that this public opinion is just no longer

relevant for many people. The users of pornography Loftus (and a significant amount of writers on pornography) refers to are of an older generation. However it used to be, it is not that way anymore.²⁸ With the accessibility of pornography online, the notion of “hiding” one’s usage is now only a matter of erasing the Internet browser “history.” Current use among young men is now so prevalent that I believe many people simply feel opposition to Internet pornography use is pointless. Among young people today, opposition can even be seen as abnormal, unnecessarily combative, or even just silly. It is difficult to say – and even more difficult to believe – that we live in a society inhospitable to Internet pornography usage when all one has to do is click and hundreds of websites line up to be accessed.²⁹ Jacob explains,

What “society” thinks has nothing to do with me looking at porn. It’s no one’s business and anyway, they’ll never know...I can’t think of a single time my buddies or I were concerned about anything like that – obviously you don’t want to get in trouble with your parents or whatever, but that’s just what growing up is about.

On a similar topic of “growing up,” a young man named Josh told me his age was nineteen before correcting himself a few minutes later. “Oh, I mean, I am twenty now. I don’t even remember,” he laughs, “age doesn’t even matter anymore. It’s like when you’re a kid you’re dying to get older so you can be an adult, but once you move out or turn eighteen, it doesn’t really make a difference.” At first this information seems trivial, but Josh’s responses during the conversation speak significantly to a link that exists between common notions of “manhood” and

²⁸ This is a lofty argument to make, but I believe it a valid one – it is impossible to deny that technology has changed the face of daily life in the U.S., and done so extraordinarily quickly. Technology has also changed pornography’s format and usage, making it necessary to adjust previous arguments to new social workings.

²⁹ This statement supposes that one have access to a computer, which depends on class and wealth status. I use it only to point to common experiences of those who do have access, and not to assume a generalized view of wealth and opportunity among the United States’ population.

sexuality, especially in the form of sexual knowledge and competency. “I just wanted to know what it was all about. I mean, sex has always been a hot topic, hasn’t it? And that’s really true when you’re a teenage boy hanging out with other boys.” Andrew Tolson explains in *The Limits of Masculinity*,

Boys find out about sex from school-friends and friends provide an audience for accounts of sexual exploits...Groups of boys develop conventions of sexual behavior, partly dictated by teenage fashion...The personal show of sexual competence is supported by an obsession with group norms – what everyone else is (supposedly) doing. (Tolson 1977, 37-38)

Tolson’s argument introduces an interesting dynamic that pornography use among young men can promote. Concepts of competition, competence, and acceptance all play significantly into processes of community making, especially if common notions of masculinity are a factor. A young man named Chris admits that using Internet pornography often made him uncomfortable and confused. Chris no longer uses Internet pornography, and states that it is easier now that he is older “because guys don’t talk about it as much – it’s just assumed everyone is doing it, so I can get away with not doing it and no one will know or think I am strange.” When I ask what he means by “strange,” Chris replies, “Gay. Or sexually undeveloped. I mean, either one is a huge blow to the young man trying desperately to achieve the big idea of masculinity and manhood...I know there’s all this feminism out there, but it’s hard for guys too.” In this situation, heterosexual pornography use acts as a marker of masculinity and sexual orientation, which connect one’s use to their ability to fit into a masculine community.

Josh offers a different example of Tolson's argument, describing his introduction to pornography as an experience driven by curiosity among his male peers. "It started in junior high, and we were all like 'check this out!' to each other when we found porn online." Eventually he began using Internet pornography on his own, although he explains, "I never use it *not* to masturbate. At first I did maybe because my friends and I liked to show each other and talk about it, and I wanted to see what it was that people did in sex, but after a while it just became a practical part of my life." Later in the conversation Josh says that he thinks talking about porn with friends is more commonly situated in early teenage years, "because once you're, like...*an adult*... talking about that stuff would seem like you're trying to prove something, and by adulthood you're supposed to have already proven yourself as sexually knowledgeable or experienced." When I ask if he thinks that is true for women as well he responds quickly, "No way. You guys get to talk about sex all the time with each other, probably because you're nicer or more considerate about it...girls are lucky in that way, like, they don't always have to be sex pro's. It's even better if they aren't." I clarify that I meant women talking about pornography not sex, and he replies laughing, "Oh...I doubt girls talk about porn that much, unless they're complaining. I don't think very many girls look at porn or masturbate, or at least, they don't tell me about it when I ask them." I smile at this response and Josh asks why.

I hesitate before replying, "There is just so much men and women don't know about each other."

"No shit, man," Josh says. "No shit."

Gender Identity and Attitudes About Sex

This section, like the previous one, explores different opinions and experiences of gender identity development in regard to the mass presence of Internet pornography in the lives of many young people. This topic connects the constructions of gender and attitudes about sex not just to the graphic content of heterosexual Internet pornography, but also to the ideals forwarded by the ways it is used.³⁰ Gender is only one of the categories that help to define one's identity in society, and gender itself is influenced greatly by innumerable internal and external forces. I choose to focus on aspects of gender here that have to do with the way one views her or himself as fulfilling particular "gender expectations" and how that affects their attitudes about sex.

Big boobs and a nice ass. That's what I see when I look at porn online...I don't have big boobs or a nice ass. I am too pale, and I am skinny, but not in a nice way. My stomach muscles are too defined because I play a lot of sports and I have almost no shape, like no hips, no waist. My best friend always says how lucky I am to be skinny, but I see the way boys look at her boobs...It's the worst when I look at the porn my boyfriend looks at and not one girl resembles me at all. He says he thinks I am beautiful – I wish that was enough...but those women are who he masturbates to. It's just hard not to let that hurt my feelings.

This is how a young woman named Jenna describes some of her experiences with Internet pornography. She says her boyfriend had always been open about his usage with her, "even back when we were just friends," and that it never bothered her much until she realized he still uses it numerous a week. "He's said he's looked at it on my computer while he was sleeping over...if I am asleep...I laughed it off, but it

³⁰ This will be discussed in more depth in the last section.

was weird for me. When I told a friend she said it was completely normal, so I didn't bring it up again." When I ask how experiences with Internet pornography have impacted her feelings as "a woman" she explains,

It's good and bad, I guess. Sometimes its nice to see men and women enjoying sex, and it can be pretty sexy, but there are also really degrading things you can't overlook. I had a friend who broke up with a guy because he pulled out once when she was giving him head and came all over her chest, and it was just horrible for her, like completely violating, and he didn't see the big deal. I haven't experienced anything that bad, but like, in high school boys would say things that were completely out of line, and there were a couple of instances where a boy had sex with a girl while she was unconscious or drunk. I mean things like that get dealt with, but its hard not to look at those people and think everything is just going to shit if a fifteen year old boy gets the idea that it's okay, or worse, *the girl thinks it's okay*. I can't say for sure that porn teaches people to do bad things, but you know it isn't the kids' parents... There are just some things that make being a girl really scary or painful or just really hard. I feel fairly good in sex now, and lucky...but as a woman, yeah, I guess I wish I could be more confident, like I had the body that men wanted, and that I was, you know, enough.

When I spoke with people who had been in or are currently in relationships, the occurrence of seeing what kind of pornography their partner looked at was rather common.³¹ No one I spoke with had ever used pornography with a partner, and one young man explains, "I don't think it is very common at all with people our age, either because you'd have to feel really secure with yourself and sex to do that or because it's something you'd take on when you're older, like, old enough to have been with the same person for a while." He continued on the subject saying, "a lot of it comes down to confidence for both men and women, and whether or not they feel like they are what they are supposed to be. As much as I like porn, I can see why

³¹ Most of these people were students and were frequently given access to one another's computers. Outside of this, I do not know how common it is that young people in relationships discuss the material one or both might use. Also, by "what kind" I am referring to different genres of heterosexual Internet pornography, not other forms (magazines, DVD's, etc.).

having it around when your having sex with someone would just confuse a lot of things when it came to confidence and ego.”

Luke explains of his past relationships, “I have had two girlfriends who have been *completely* uncomfortable with their small breast, even during sex, which seems so silly to me. I don’t even like big breasts, but I guess girls sometimes have an issue with that.” When I ask if he cares about breast size when he is looking at pornography online he says, “sometimes. I mean, sometimes you’re just in the mood for something, but in real sex I usually just like what’s there, which sucks when the other person thinks you’re disappointed or something.” On the other hand, Claire recalls, “Once I had a boyfriend who told me I acted like a porn star, and that upset me, like, just because I am confident and love sex I am equated with some fantasy woman...It’s like do guys think real girls don’t love sex too?” I ask her to elaborate on the issue and she explains, “I don’t have a problem with women in porn, but they’re actors. I want credit as a real woman, and not as a slut or a role player, but just as a person who can do what they want, and yeah, likes to keep the lights on or make noise or just really enjoy myself.” I then ask her if she thinks age is significant to peoples’ attitudes toward sex, to which she replies,

Hell yeah. It’s funny because young people are the ones usually associated with sleeping around and being really promiscuous, which is probably true, but they are also the ones most uncomfortable in their bodies. Women want to be one thing and men want to be another, and everyone wants to be wanted...but I think that sort of ‘fitting in’ to your gender stuff takes years and a lot of thinking and re-thinking. I agree that having porn all at your fingertips from the second you start wanting to know about sex can cause a lot of problems for people...it gives all these ideas...and how can you know what to do with them – which are bullshit to you - until individuals start deciding what they want and who they want to be?

This statement is interesting as it reflects a certain dynamic between Internet porn and the development of sexual identity. Perhaps Internet pornography can provide useful information about sex to young people, but I argue that a person first needs to have an understanding of their own sexual identity in order to know how to place pornography's presence in their life, and of their own volition. It is here that sexual liberation, sexual identity, and sexual knowledge are connected. If heterosexual Internet pornography in its authoritative presence offers the common "useful understanding" of sex, then sexual identity itself becomes vulnerable to whatever messages the makers of Internet pornography offer, and concepts of liberation can be sacrificed. This is not just about particular sex acts, but about the gender roles and performances that follow, and the impact those have on the identities that individuals form.

Many feminist writings on female sexuality and sexual liberation, which are significant topics to the larger pornography debate, stress the importance of creating one's own sexual identity. The familiar social narrative that women do not masturbate or use pornography is undeniably problematic and works against many efforts for sexual liberation and equality. The comments made by Josh in the previous section referred to this narrative, as did many of the comments made by people I spoke with – *most girls don't masturbate and if they do they don't talk about it*. On the flip side of this is the narrative that *most boys do masturbate and it is fairly normal*. Regardless of how true either of these statements are, they work everyday to reinforce an oppressive gender and sexual divide between young women and men created by pornography's presence and role in daily life. Carly Milne addresses this problem in

the introduction of *Naked Ambition: Women Who Are Changing Pornography*, when she tells of her own experience with a friend who referred to her as “weird” for using pornography. She then, in support of feminist pornography, writes, “For well over a decade now, women sex writers and pornographers have brought strong women to pornography and pornography to strong women” (Milne 2005, xiii). I do not disagree with this statement because I do not object to all pornography, nor do many of the people who have a problem with it; and a lot of people, users and non-users alike, have a problem with it. I argue here that heterosexual, mainstream, Internet pornography in its workings and usage among groups of young people does anything but allow for sexual liberation. Any social force that systematically separates the genders early on and perpetuates ideals in a fashion that is difficult to criticize is one that I believe we should question continually. Not only must we look at the content and messages of the pornography itself, but also the way in which it influences contemporary constructions of gender, as well as the effects it has on sexual and gender relations. When Milne writes of strong women she does so with an optimism I share, but I fear that current generations will not turn out as many of these strong women or strong men, if heterosexual Internet pornography is allowed to maintain its current authority in the realm of youthful sexual and social development.³²

This authority suffers when individuals question it, especially in terms of actual users’ personal opinions and preferences. However, the people I spoke with, while eager to share, often expressed an unease and ambivalence when discussing the actual pornographic material they look at rather than their general opinions of

³² I use the term “strong” in the same way I interpret Milne’s definition, meaning sexually autonomous and conscious of personal preferences and desires.

pornography's common usage. Not all heterosexual pornography on the Internet depict exploitive or abusive sexual behaviors, however people I have spoken with point out particular genres that can easily be taken as degrading and/or misrepresentative of particular sexual activities. Several people discussed the discrepancy between the frequency of anal sex found online and how common (or uncommon) they have found it to be among their peers. Other types of sex acts include gang-bangs, group sex, rape scenarios, under age or "barely legal" sex, sex with animals, and many more. I make no judgments as to whether these types of acts are "appropriate" or "desirable," but I will say that they can be bothersome to both users and non-users. Some young women I spoke with acknowledged a discomfort at knowing their partners or friends are aroused by particularly violent or extremely graphic "hardcore" material; some young men expressed a slight anxiety over things they have discovered. "Sometimes I just laugh it off as crazy, but sometimes I am aroused by things I would never want to do in real life. Those are times when I wish I knew what was going on my head, but who do you talk to?" Matt wonders.

Milo speaks of what he considers degradation in the pornography he uses, explaining that he had not realized the power dynamics in play when he was younger.

I mean, at that age it is a more sudden reality. At that age it seemed that, like, *that's what sex was*. I mean, the way that men and women acted, like, there was an economy of power, and the male was definitely dominant - especially in such pornographic traditions such as the gangbang, or multiple partners, or the exploitation of interracial sex. The way we all thought about it as adolescents was greatly shaped by that, but as we all became sexually active adults, I actually became ashamed that pornography had shaped my perspective that much... I would say it's a common narrative among young men in my generation, although I would say probably, a good portion of males my age don't realize that they have been informed that way by pornography. I don't want to sound like I am enlightened. It just seems

like it's such a dominant trend in the pornography market that it must be playing to some cultural interest, you know, like, it's selling - so people are interested in seeing it. Maybe it's playing to taboos or something, but for whatever reason males my age, and especially younger are interested in seeing it, or, I mean, they *are* seeing it.

Many investigations and popular writings on heterosexual Internet pornography describe a common and particular trajectory for men's usage. It often begins with a curiosity and then moves much further. On the introduction of the Internet to the heterosexual pornography market, Pamela Paul writes of one man's experience:

First he was happy looking at magazines, which he kept around for a long time. So when he started with Internet porn, he also started with still photos, usually of naked women. But soon he discovered moving images, and once he saw what was available, his interest was piqued. "I found that I wanted to see actual sex acts, hardcore stuff, and especially group sex," he says. It was always available, with so much more to be uncovered. The Internet offered endless exploration, voyeurism, and discovery. (Paul 2004, 61)

This trajectory is generally echoed by many of the young men I have discussed heterosexual Internet pornography with. The magnitude of its influence can be emphasized when one considers that the track of Internet pornography usage for young people, especially heterosexual young men, often coincides with sexual development itself, frequently beginning at nearly the same time. "I guess as I got older the material I used got more hardcore, or explicit, obviously," Milo recalls. When I ask what he meant by saying "obviously" he replies, "I mean, like, you start off slow because everything is new and kind of thrilling, but with everything out there how can you not be curious and want more?" Matt had a similar response on this topic explaining,

I guess in some way you keep wanting the excitement of how it was in the beginning. I definitely didn't jump straight into the hardcore stuff, but using it everyday, especially when I was younger, I got bored. The normal stuff didn't get me off as fast or sometimes it just wasn't enough. And, you know, sometimes I just wanted to see what was out there...I mean there is crazy shit out there.

Both of these young men answered with a simple "no" when asked if their preferences in real sex reflected or changed with the explicitness of material they saw online.³³ Milo says, "I think there is a certain disassociation boys do with sex, because they're not comfortable, either with some of the stuff they look at or just with girls in general." Not all of the users I spoke with expressed a fondness for "hardcore" or extremely explicit Internet pornography, although almost all of them readily admit to seeing it frequently online. "Some porn things are just too much for me. I would look at them when I was in high school, but now that I have sex I realize they really weren't what I liked," says one young man.

On the subject of preference Dane explains, "There are definitely things I watch online that I wouldn't be interested in doing in real life...like anal or orgies or gang bangs...I sometimes like to watch them, but in real life, I'm not that kind of person." When I ask him what he means by "that kind of person" he continues, "I've never thought about it...it's like, some things just get me off...but that's as far as I go. I don't really think about it later - my attitude about real sex has to stay separate from thoughts when I look at porn. I don't want to be like the people I watch."

³³ Some people acknowledged that they occasionally used sexual positions that they had seen online, but did not speak of them in terms of "hardcore" material.

Construction of Heterosexual Knowledge, Expectations, and Relations

There is sex. And lovemaking. And boning. And fucking. And getting laid. And doing it. And blowjobs and threesomes and girl-on-girl and anal and oral and orgies and on. The majority of people who have sex today went into it initially with some idea of what it was supposed to be like and what it might include.³⁴ This idea comes from the heterosexual narratives offered in society through all forms of mainstream media, and also from school, peers, cultural factors, and familial influence. But the far majority of these sources do not offer the same explicit picture that is on the opening page of most Internet porn sites. The way most people have sex with each other is understandably based on what they think is expected, driven by a desire to do it “correctly,” whatever that may be. Figuring out what sex is about takes years.³⁵ Seeing people have sex takes a second, depending on the speed of the Internet connection. The negotiations that happen between the two are where the conversations in this section focus, and the experiences here speak to the problems that can develop when adolescents learn “sex” from mainstream, Internet pornography.

In *Puberty, Sexuality, and the Self*, Martin asks, “Why do adolescents have sex? What kind of internal and external forces influence their decisions to have sex? Is the experience of teenage sex different for boys and girls?” (Martin 1996, 59). These questions, she claims, have been left unanswered by much current research, and while I am unsure of what results such research would have, I believe her

³⁴ This also entails what certain acts might be called or defined as.

³⁵ By this I mean the way in which sex works for each individual person - the development of desires, preferences, discomforts, and other factors that pertain to sexual relations.

concerns refer to a system of relations that people must approach with an open mind. Martin cites Catherine Chilman, explaining that in general, most studies done on the topic of teenage sex ask only “Who does what sexually, with whom, how, and when?” There is not enough research, on the other hand, when it comes to how teenagers actually feel about sex, “What sexuality means to adolescents, how it relates to other aspects of teenage life, and what strategies teens use to manage or incorporate it into their lives” (59). I would go even further and ask what effect these things have on the sexual identity one has as an adult. While the people I have spoken with are generally older than the teenagers often referred to in discussions of sexual education, I believe their information and opinions are still relevant. Learning sex and sexuality, as most people would agree, is an ongoing process, and the negotiations and management of it continue well into early adulthood.

“It took almost a year of sleeping with my girlfriend before I realized that I didn’t have to go on for hours, or get it up numerous times in a night. Sex was much better after that, I think for both of us,” one young man tells me of his experience. “It took that long for her to tell me that it actually hurts her after a while...it sucked to realize that’s how it was for her.” Piper reflects this experience saying,

Oh God! Having sex for *hours* is just ridiculous, like when you know the guy is really trying not to come. Sometimes I want to tell him he doesn’t have to hold off, especially because, like, after ten or fifteen minutes I am usually either satisfied or tired. But you don’t want to hurt their feelings...I just wonder – who ever told a guy that a girl wants you to have sex with her for an hour straight? Maybe once in a while, or maybe some girls like that, but it should depend on the people.

Both these experiences are tied to a much larger system of heterosexual knowledge that is affected deeply by the early and excessive use and presence of Internet pornography. There are the common “standards” many of us grow up being aware, if not believing – men are not supposed to ejaculate too soon in sex, women who sleep with too many men are “sluts,” men who sleep with a lot of women or “players,” women make a lot of noise when they feel pleasure in bed, women “get wet” when they are turned on, men are supposed to be able to “get it up” when they want to, men are supposed to keep their erection during sex, women who cannot climax are frigid, sex without a condom feels better, women like to be touched the way they are in porn, men like to be touched the way they are in porn. Obviously there are many more of these typical sexual notions, and of course not everyone buys into them, but they still exist and influence people and their feelings about sex everyday.

“I am sure my first boyfriend used techniques on me that he saw when he went online. I mean, I don’t blame him, but the way he went about it didn’t have much to do with me, or what I liked,” a young woman named Sarah recalls.

I completely understand why boys do that, because, like, I know how scary it must be, especially because the boy is supposed to know what to do the first time. But it’s so bad in the beginning usually... He was nice, but too aggressive, I remember...He grabbed my boobs too hard and would just stick his fingers inside me as if that was supposed to feel good. It wasn’t until we were comfortable with each other and actually told each other what we liked and didn’t like that sex got enjoyable.

Some people I have spoken with about their actual experiences with sex and expectations of sex were more forthcoming than others, but there were a lot of shared

feelings.³⁶ One young man expressed a concern he and his friends have saying, “It is really hard to know if a girl is turned on or if she likes it. I think all guys worry they aren’t doing it well or that the girl is faking an orgasm.” He continues on the subject of oral sex explaining, “It can be so uncomfortable when you can tell a girl just really doesn’t like giving a blowjob, or she does things she thinks guys would like...online it always looks like girls love giving blowjobs, so it can be weird when it really happens.” On the other hand, Jenna recalls, “The first few times I gave a blow job the boy didn’t come, and he told me it was okay, that he didn’t mind, but it really sticks with you. I really don’t feel comfortable giving head still because I think I am bad at it.” Another woman tells a story of personal concerns young women often share but do not talk about frequently,

I don’t think I am particularly shy, especially with my friends, but there are still things one understandably feels weird about talking about. Like, I have never gotten “wet” or whatever down there, and sometimes boyfriends have thought it was because I wasn’t turned on – and I know that is something they say in porn a lot, the whole thing about “wet pussies” and female ejaculation, which I just haven’t experienced...Also, I don’t orgasm during vaginal sex, but, yeah I fake it sometimes because what else am I supposed to do? Obviously your partner expects it, and just because I don’t come like him doesn’t mean I haven’t liked the sex...I think there are just so many ideas of what it is supposed to be like, and I know my boyfriends looked at porn frequently, and if that’s what gets them off, then of course I want to make them happy...even if it means pretending I like things that maybe I don’t or “faking it” so the sex is better for them – because they’ll feel like they did a good job.

Other than basic expectations of sexual techniques, there are also expectations of what one might feel about different sexual experiences. I, myself, had a friend whose boyfriend loved the idea of a threesome with two girls. She would often find

³⁶ While all the names in these discussions have been changed, I try not to use names at all unless it seemed necessary due to the sensitivity of the topic.

porn on his computer consisting of two women and one man, which made her uncomfortable at first. Eventually she gave in to the idea of a “threesome” as what she considered a present for him. I will spare the details, but it turned out badly as her boyfriend realized he was jealous and angry to see his girlfriend being pleased by someone else. They broke up soon after the experience, and he has since told me that it was a mistake – “I didn’t realize how I actually felt. I didn’t think it would be different from how it was in porn. I didn’t think about how real feelings would play into it.” On a similar note I talked with a number of young people who spoke of casual sexual relations, meaning sex had outside of any sort of commitment to a relationship. “I recently had sex with a girl the same day I met her, which I had done before a few times...I was interested in her, but she hasn’t called me back and I realize I blew it by just sleeping with her.” A young woman echoes this story explaining, “I slept with a guy and really liked him...which sucks because it is really hard to go anywhere from sex when you don’t really know the person...you’re not supposed to develop feelings when it’s just a ‘hookup.’” Upon hearing this I could not help but mark in my notes a similar phrasing from my discussion with Josh. “I don’t think I feel anything when it comes to using porn,” he says, “You get turned on and then you get off...you don’t usually develop *feelings* about some other world online.” Stories like these emphasize the role sexual expectations and socialized norms have in particular youth cultures and sexual practices. The way they are spoken about seems to assume an acceptance that has not been adequately questioned.

In a chapter entitled, “Born into Porn: Kids in a Pornified Culture,” Paul cites a Harris/*Pornified* Poll that reports that 30 percent of Americans said that one of the

greatest impact of pornography on children is that it distorts boys' expectations and understandings of women and sex. Other questions in this category pertained to the effect pornography would have on the age at which children were likely to have sex; 25 percent of Americans polled believed it likely that children would have sex earlier than they would otherwise. "Only 2 percent of Americans actually believe that pornography helps kids better understand sexuality. And only 9 percent think it has no impact on children at all," Paul writes (188).³⁷

Sarah had come across similar numbers reading a magazine. She continued to tell me of her response:

I remember reading about some poll...it said something about how low the percentage of people who thought porn taught kids something beneficial was. And it was really low, and it is not that I thought it would be high, but it just hit me. So few people actually think any good can come out of sexually developing with porn around, and yet it is happening everywhere. Porn taught me what a blowjob was, or rather, it taught my brother and I asked him, which is funny because I am a year older than him. I remember I even made him show me online porn once, and we both were, like, totally grossed out in front of each other, but I was totally thinking, 'wow...I am going to have to know how to do this soon.' I mean I was in high school, fifteen years old. [laughs] God, I even thought I was behind then, not knowing. The people who think kids aren't learning this shit on the Internet are in denial. I come from a good family and my parents didn't let us curse or talk back or go anywhere without telling them, but yeah, we could find anything on the Internet. Probably worse things than we could have found in the real world...Anyway, I remember reading that poll and thinking, now that I am...an adult or whatever, that if so few people think it's good, then why the hell is it so predominant?

The question Sarah asks leads to the topic of sexual education for young people, which remains a hugely controversial subject in the United States. Some parents expect the schools to take care of it; some schools expect the parents to. Some

³⁷ This poll was conducted by Harris Interactive, and is referred to as the Harris/*Pornified* Poll by Pamela Paul in *Pornified*.

children receive sexual education; some children do not. Yet, it is not this simple, as the type of sexual education available is a completely different point of contention. As of 2002, 89 percent of American public schools offered a sexual education class. However, one-third of those classes taught abstinence-only education, a form of sexual instruction supported and funded by the Bush administration (Paul 2005, 189). In 2005, the Bush Administration proposed \$258 million for abstinence-only education, a large increase from 2004, and even greater from 1998, “despite teenagers’ need, and desire for, more information” (189).

The need and desire for more information is an issue that my argument in this thesis revolves around. I believe there has to be significantly more information available to young people, and not just about contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases.³⁸ Many writers and researchers today share this notion. Martinson addresses numerous studies and trends regarding sexual education in *The Sexual Life of Children*, showing not just a lack of comprehensive sexual education in schools across the United States, but also a lack of knowledge available to young people about sexual issues, sexuality, and specific sexual behaviors (Martinson 1994, 101-117). In general, most states offer information about AIDS, HIV, and other sexually transmitted diseases in public schools and publicly funded medical clinics; some states also offer information about contraceptive methods and pregnancy. There is a significant concern over the discrepancy between the ways in which daily life and media are sexualized in the United States and the low levels of actual discussions of sexuality and information for young consumers. It is here where heterosexual Internet pornography fills the gap in the young person’s quest for such knowledge.

³⁸ I will discuss more specifically the types of sexual information I advocate in the following chapter.

In a book entitled *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*, Judith Levine discusses the dangers of keeping sexual information from children and adolescents. Among these consequences is a child's inability to develop sexual agency or autonomy, as well as feelings of powerlessness due to a poorly constructed and uninformed relationship with sex. In her words, "As children move out into the world, protecting them from sex will not protect them from those dangers that have little to do with sex but may ultimately make sex dangerous" (Levine 2002, 225). While I agree that these dangers are of great significance, Levine's argument regarding pornography and online information does not address many factors and issues that actually occur when young people encounter certain material online. Levine states, "Pornography doesn't hurt the viewer, and especially for a young person trying to figure out his or her sexual orientation, it can help in exploring fantasies and confirming that other people share the same tastes" (149). These statements, however, give way to numerous over simplifications of how online pornography is used by young people.

Levine claims that many parents either will not or cannot bring themselves to explain the "nitty-gritty details of sex" (142). I agree that this might be commonly true, but if parents cannot even talk about those details, how are young people supposed to know what to do with them in mass quantity? More importantly, who are they supposed to go to for answers to further questions, confusions, or even fears that pornography brings up? I have to ask – for a twelve or thirteen year old girl, what is comforting or informative about seeing a man put his penis into a woman's mouth, vagina, or anus, and then squirting a thick fluid on her face or somewhere else on her

body?³⁹ I have no problem with whatever sex acts adults choose to engage in, but these images can only be educational to a young person if she or he knows how to place them into the context of her or his own experiences. Levine's view assumes that young people can easily understand their sexual orientations and tastes, and can do so by just going online for sexual images and information. She does explain that too little of this information "is any good," and recommends particular websites such as *The "Go Ask Alice" Book of Answers*, but these, I must point out, are not pornography websites.⁴⁰

Also, even if some people do gather information about their own sexuality and preferences through pornography online, the fact remains that the majority of young people that access it are adolescent boys, often looking for masturbation material; young women do not experience the same level of acceptability when it comes to pornography use and sexual pleasure, meaning young women often have a much vaguer idea of what their preferences and desires are before they become sexually active, and sometimes long after that.⁴¹ Young people need to find the information that is appropriate for *their* age and understanding, for *their* lifestyle and taste, and especially in a way where they have more opportunities to learn about what particular information means in their lives; the likelihood of this happening through mainstream, heterosexual, Internet porn sites is quite small.

³⁹ I do not mean this description to sound satirical or judgmental in any way, but do wish to highlight the literal image a young person might see with no adequate knowledge of sexual relations.

⁴⁰ These types of websites allow people to ask questions anonymously, which are answered in a public online forum by other readers or specialists affiliated with the website.

⁴¹ This could be true for young men as well, but I base the comment on the statistic that young men use pornography more frequently than young women.

While Levine discusses helpful websites where young people can ask questions and receive a variety of “realistic information,” her claim that “porn offers only one kind of information: rudimentary images of physical parts and the permutations of their display and contact, blessedly free of judgmental commentary” (149) is ridiculous. As I have argued in the last chapter, everything pornography says is judgmental commentary, whether it is good or bad. It is commentary about what is sexy and desirable, about how people can and should treat each other, about what sex should look like. Most heterosexual pornography online offers not one kind of information, but an entire system of information that reflect and perpetuate many sexual and gender inequalities already in existence. “*Do you like it when I come on your face, bitch? Tell me you like it!*” says something, and to a young person it certainly is not “here is some useful, non-judgmental information about the way people have sex, about your own personal sexuality, and about how to engage with sex in your own life.” A few young men did admit that it bothers them when the male actors in much online heterosexual pornography often appear faceless with extremely large erections. Josh speaks in detail about his annoyance with the fact that “most mainstream porn focuses on the woman...the man sometimes is just there for his huge dick, which is just so unrealistic. When I first started I hoped I would be that big, but [laughs] I guess it just didn’t happen.” There is also a relatively new feature to many pornography sites where users can write their opinions in a forum or open discussion board. Paul describes these spaces as “an atmosphere of posturing and competition” where men write things like, “Looks like she’s had a few too many sandwiches!!!” or, “This chick’s boobies are weird. How come her nipple aren’t

somewhat centered within her areolas?” in reference to particular images or videos (Paul 2004, 38-39). These are blatant examples of judgmental commentary. Perhaps one could argue that because these discussion board writers are *users* they have nothing to do with the intentions of the *makers* of these sites, but as I have been arguing, heterosexual Internet pornography works as a proliferating and incorporating system among users and within the larger society. The intentions of the makers cannot be isolated for the larger context in which heterosexual Internet pornography is used.

The last point of contention I have with Levin is in response to her explanation that “luckily” as information on sexuality has diminished in schools it has begun proliferating in cyberspace, “where kids are wont to read anyway” (143-144). Sure, some of this information online is helpful and does allow young people a way of discovering information that they could not easily find elsewhere, but if people are really “lucky” enough to leave it up to the Internet and media, what does that say about who actually is raising these new generations? How do young people know what is true and not, what works for them, and what is actually acceptable or desired? Has access and availability replaced actual attention and communication? I do not believe it should be so, but I do worry that they are starting to feel an awful lot like one another. For children and adolescents that means there are far fewer options when it comes to understanding one’s own sexual identity and comfort.

“If I still believed ‘sexy’ was wearing high heel platforms and a thong during sex, like I did at thirteen, I would be an entirely different person,” a woman named Mel explains. “I really had that idea for a while, and it terrified me because I thought

it was gross, and as a result thought boys and sex were terrifying until I was, like, eighteen.” Mel believes having older sisters to talk to and “pretty liberal” parents enabled her to develop a more realistic idea of sex, but also explains, “I think a lot of misconceptions sort of die out as you get older, but there still is that lingering confusion when it comes to the way boys and girls envision each other in sexual terms...I was really lucky when I think about it.”

“I don’t even know where that line gets drawn anymore, between child and adolescent. I don’t even know if it matters,” Sarah says on the topic of sexual education through childhood and adolescents. “I believe in sex-education, like, comprehensive sex-education, but when do you start? Kids are having sex so early now that waiting until someone is a teenager seems naïve. It gets complicated when ‘kids’ start having sex before they are considered ‘adolescent’ or ‘mature.’” When asked if she thinks a more comprehensive sexual education would make a difference to underage use of Internet pornography Sarah replies,

I don’t really know. I would have appreciated it. I think it would have been good for the people I knew when we were all getting into the whole ‘sex world’ or whatever you want to call it...to know more than just about contraceptives and STD’s...But, I don’t know about boys. They still want to masturbate and get off, right? Maybe it would at least have lent some perspective, or, like, some knowledge of decency rather than just these sometimes horrible images and scenarios that you find with Internet porn. Maybe the way in which Internet porn was used would be different if we also knew some other idea of sex that had more to do with us, you know, real people in our real lives.

On the same topic, Piper responds, “I definitely believe in sex-education in schools, but parents are responsible too.” When I asked her opinions on the effect of Internet pornography on sexually developing young people she replies,

I don't have a problem with people watching porn. I think it is fucked up and there is a lot wrong with kids being able to watch porn on their dad's computer, but you can't censor the Internet, and it is not up to me or anyone to decide what is too fucked up for the way people have sex. But it is definitely important that there is strong parental control. It's inappropriate for children to see that, for children up until 15 or so, to see the things pornography shows you...Parental control is so necessary, especially because kids are using the Internet so much more and they can find things, and typing something into Google can bring something up really easily. But I don't think you can force that. I think the "Click Here If You're 18" doesn't work, but you can't put the responsibility just on the porno industry.

Piper continues, restating that she firmly believes that parents need to be responsible for what happens to their children until they are eighteen but acknowledges that it is almost impossible to control the content young people come across on a daily basis. "It's really hard, I guess, when I think about it. Even if my parents watched everything I did on the Internet, there are still the kids at school, you know, friends, talking about porn and sex. Kids find what they want to find. I don't really know what the answer is." She pauses for a few seconds and continues, "What's really bad is that I think about how strict and protective my parents *were*, and I came across that stuff anyway. And all my friends always made fun of me for being so protected. I wasn't ostracized or anything, but I could have been...because I was kept...*conservative*."

There is an important concern about experiencing explicit sexual images through the Internet combined with a lack of adequate sexual knowledge in regard to the development of a young person's sexuality. "Children who are not instructed must rely on each other's experiences and bits of information they find," writes Martinson on the topic of sexual education (Martinson 1994, 103). I would argue that this is true through adolescence as well. However, I will not make claims about appropriate types

of sexual education here, as that is a topic that warrants a much more thorough discussion. I only hope to highlight the influence Internet pornography in its mass accessibility can have on developing adults, as well as to point to the large discrepancy between the information that can be provided to young people by adults in their own lives, and the explicit messages that are sent by the adults of the heterosexual, mainstream, Internet pornography industries.⁴² A great discomfort seems to exist in many parents today considering the amount of sexualized messages available through the media, and now, the availability of pornography on the Internet. “Many parents assert that they are ill equipped to give sex information to their children because they are confused as to what they ought to teach them, at what age they ought to teach them, and how they ought to teach them” (Martinson 1994, 108). I think it would be fair to say that Internet pornographers do not share these concerns, as one must be eighteen years old in order to access pornography online. That or they must have the ability to click a computer mouse.⁴³

Paul cites a 1999-2000 study conducted by David Finkelhor of children nationwide between the ages of ten and seventeen. “Only half (48 percent) of kids told their parents they had viewed pornography online; in 44 percent of the incidents, kids didn’t report unwanted exposure to anyone” (Paul 2004, 201). It is difficult to not feel concern over numbers this large, especially considering that these incidents of exposure are often a young person’s first encounter with sexual knowledge and material, and online there is no limit to how extreme or influential the pornography is.

⁴² By “adults in their own lives,” I am referring to parental figures, family members, friends, and educators.

⁴³ One of the common age restricting devices used on Internet porn sites is a button on the opening page that reads, “If you are eighteen click here,” or “You must be eighteen years old to enter this site.”

“Just because I had seen sex scenes in movies did not mean I knew what sex actually was. Movies I had seen always cut before the logistical part, so yeah, when I saw porn online I was fifteen and realized, shit, I had no idea this is what it actually looks like, and I still had no idea how it should feel,” Jenna recalls, continuing,

I mean, of course it is important that people learn what sex is, but how can anyone think Internet porn is the appropriate means, especially for young teenagers...My parents tried, I mean, they told me to wait until I was ready and talked with me about protection, but it’s not like they could explain ‘oh, this is how he is going to touch you, and this part hurts, and this is what it sounds like.’ There are certain things that parents just can’t, or don’t, get into.

The prevalence of Internet pornography in young people’s lives today often make it so any other type of sexual information must compete for influence. Paul cites an interview she conducted with a thirty-two-year-old mother of two in order to tell of particular anxieties parents feel in regard to their children’s use of pornography:

She hopes if she has a son he wouldn’t look at pornography until he is sixteen or seventeen, and only after she has a chance to discuss sex and pornography with him...”Pornography could impact what they think about the girl next door or how they relate to girls and women they know.” As for her daughters, her concerns are great but different. “I hope my girl has a healthy sexual identity and only sees pornography when it’s age-appropriate,” she says. “I hope she can experience her own sexuality in positive and real ways that are particular to her.” (Paul 2004, 188-189)

What I find especially interesting about this woman’s concerns is the way they might reflect a more general anxiety parents feel over the topic of pornography as tied to the development of their children’s sexuality. No one I spoke with ever engaged in a serious conversation about pornography with their mothers when they initially

encountered it, especially the young men, and only a few had an extensive discussion with their fathers or another male family figure.⁴⁴ I had not had a conversation about Internet pornography with my own mother, despite her knowledge that it is the topic of my thesis until I asked her about it recently. “I don’t know why I never talked about it with you guys,” she says. “I never dealt with it when I was growing up. I never even realized it was something you knew or worried about, especially when you were younger.” When I ask her what she would have said had she known she says, “I really don’t know. It’s unfortunate, but I just don’t...now talking to kids about sex has to confront porn and movies and every other source of information out there. It’s scary.”

It is a focus on Internet pornography usage among young people that allows for a more critical view of available sexual information. A great portion of the pornography debate in general revolves around the question of whether or not people are actually influenced by media messages, and to what extent. Does heterosexual Internet porn send out messages of sex? Of course it does, just as images of sports might send out messages of athleticism and competition. These messages, though, are not the only problem when it comes to heterosexual Internet pornography usage in current generations. To address an issue within the debate of media influence, I do not believe people, even young people, are simply passive receptacles that receive information and then mindlessly act. However, young people do seek out information and cultural cues on how to act within their communities, and when Internet

⁴⁴ The majority of these discussions only occurred after their fathers had “caught them” with pornography on their computers, and often took place much after the time they first began using Internet porn. Also, I do not mean to imply that because no one I interviewed had spoken with his or her mother that this is a universal experience. I only mention it as a point of interest.

pornography is thought as “normal,” its messages are given authority; its “normal” nature among the way young people live changes the options and expectations available in the way they have sex – and it is much more than simply unfortunate.⁴⁵ I believe most young people are anything but mindless in the United States today. I think most of us - regardless of geographic, class, race, or cultural boundaries - think a lot, and we worry, and we struggle, and we try like everyone else to figure our lives out. But to argue that the media does not affect what we think, and want, and what we do is simply unwise.

Still, this is not to say that every heterosexual young person in the United States feels concern or discontent over the way sex is had and perceived currently, and that they all believe it is because of the mass accessibility of Internet pornography. I would not make a claim like that. There are, however, innumerable young people who do feel oppressed and unsatisfied in the available roles and means of heterosexual relations. The presentations of heterosexual sex in media and reality have commonly been a site of criticism and discussion in society, and Internet pornography is a new avenue that deserves significant attention. One young woman believes, “We are all just scared of each other – boys and girls alike - because we don’t know what we want and we don’t know what the other person wants from us. No matter what it always seems like I’ve done something wrong because it never turns out how I hoped.” The other day a male friend of mine said, “Having sex is the really the lamest thing you can do. There is so much performance and its all so fucked up and phony and you don’t even feel good in the end.” Another young man asks,

⁴⁵ I am referring to heterosexual relations, but I do not want to refer to only young “heterosexual” people here, as I believe sexual orientation and preference is something that takes time to develop, and it happens in the company of other young people who are “heterosexual” and “homosexual” alike.

“What the fuck does ‘casual sex’ even mean? Is it sex where you don’t really know or like the other person? Or just casual because it never works out afterwards?” Another young man jokes in his discussion, “Coming into sex, I thought anal was a total norm! And I thought I had seen everything... Well, now I can say that it turns out not many people do anal, and I didn’t actually know anything.” On a recent Saturday night, three separate female friends confided in me that if they did not find someone to “hook up” with by the end of the night, the weekend would have been a “failure.” One young man told me he just wanted a girlfriend, but he cannot understand girls enough, while another explains, “The best part of having a girlfriend is not having to do the whole ‘sex game’ every weekend... getting to finally do things that you two like and feeling comfortable doing them.” I cannot even count the times I have heard people I know say that they absolutely could not go out until they have a few more drinks – just so they can handle the night. One person said to me recently, “They think that I want something, I think that they want something – the sex is either good or bad, but as far as what we really wanted... I don’t know. Sometimes its easier to just not deal with that.”

These stories resonate within a generation and a culture that is surprisingly ill at ease, whose participants share an ambivalence toward sex itself and the way it functions in common heterosexual relations and identity development. As I stressed in the previous chapter, access to a newly available sexual knowledge plays a complicated role in the way young people live today – there is gratitude for the liberation it can allow and for the identities that can be formed and informed by it; there is also anxiety over its particular messages and content, its effects that are

sometimes easier to not acknowledge but set standards nonetheless.⁴⁶ Still, for the most part a lot of young people just keep on going out there – hopeful and worried – trying to make sense of it all. It is hope and concern that drives me to ask: what if all young people knew, related, and expected things sexually based on real human interactions, communications, and desires?

What if it had been this way from the start?

⁴⁶ By “newly available sexual knowledge” I am referring to information provided primarily through heterosexual, mainstream, Internet pornography, but do not overlook similar information expressed less explicitly through other forms of current media.

Chapter Three

They want to be like me. They're seeing the glamour icon but don't realize . . . there are more facets to me besides spreading my legs.

-- Jenna Jameson, "The Queen of Porn"

Not Just Sex

In this chapter, I explore the different solutions to the problems caused by mass usage of heterosexual Internet pornography among young people. The options available for alleviating "the problem of pornography" seem vastly limited until one can recognize the distinct effects heterosexual Internet pornography has due to the authority and messages it maintains. Addressing these problems in proactive and critical ways opens new avenues of change and sexual liberation.

"Any serious discussion of pornography quickly leads to two queries: Is pornography somehow problematic (for example, morally, socially, or politically)? If so, precisely what sort of problems does pornography present?" Sue Dwyer writes in the introduction to *The Problem of Pornography*. These are important questions and the discussions they provoke are often connected to one thing: sex. Pornography and sex are inextricably linked. There is no conversation about pornography that does not include some notion of sexual relations and/or images. The problems presented by pornography span a range of moral, social, and political concepts, but the arguments always involve sex – its depictions, its definitions, its influences, its effects, and the power dynamics that occur within and because of it. The discussions I had with

young people regarding their experiences with heterosexual Internet pornography, however, made it quite clear that we are addressing and thinking about a lot more than sex.⁴⁷

This realization introduces a new way of approaching the problems of heterosexual Internet pornography by lending a better understanding of precisely *how* pornography currently affects people of this generation. The way many young people engage in sex today is where my apprehension regarding Internet porn usage began. I did not think simply that pornography had directly caused abusive or degrading sexual relations among young people today. I did, however, think the link between pornography use and sex was the most relevant concern regarding heterosexual Internet porn's influences. This changed as I recognized that people's real concerns, as well as my own, spanned a variety of topics that transcend and/or incorporate "the act of sex." Being able to address these other topics allows new arguments to emerge in the pornography debate, especially ones specific to the current concerns of this thesis. As I have argued, heterosexual pornography use among young people is not just about male access and female accessibility, but also about access in a much broader sense – access to knowledge about sex and sexual identity, access to ideals of gender and heterosexual relations, access to communities and bonding opportunities, access to a developing person's sense of self and place in their particular culture, access to the power one can have over their sexual experiences – and the limitations and unrealized consequences mass Internet pornography usage can have in these areas.

⁴⁷ In the more general pornography debate the focus clearly goes beyond "just sex" to issues of harm, inequality, violence, and so on. I make this statement to emphasize the personal concerns these young people deal with, rather than the political arguments about porn use, which I engage with separately.

I believe that shifting critical attention to these issues of access is one thing that must be encouraged not only to challenge the authority heterosexual Internet porn maintains as a source of sexual information, but also to promote healthy sexual identity formation in the United States. Sexual identity is only one of the things at stake in a pornographically immersed culture, but it is a concept that connects the numerous affected aspects of development and relations that have been discussed. Sexual identity is also a key concept to efforts of sexual liberation, and especially within the divide between pro-sex and anti-sex political positions. These positions have been an important part of the general pornography debate, especially since the 1980s. Pro-sex feminists have often supported pornography usage as an exercise of sexual agency and freedom, arguing that regulation of pornography in society would limit the individual's right to make personal sexual decisions. However, the notion of a dichotomy between pro-sex and anti-sex stances, especially in regard to pornography usage, was complicated during my discussions with young people. Lauren Pellegrino, a pro-sex activist as well as a student sexual educator on a college campus, explains in a discussion we had regarding Internet pornography's role among people of our generation, "The experience for the users is not only sexual – it has lots to do with concerns of gender, masculinity, masturbation, expectations, and all the other issues that come with 'growing up' in this society."

A debate about heterosexual Internet pornography usage that relies on the dichotomy between pro-sex and anti-sex positions is inadequate because the debate, like current pornography usage itself, does not revolve solely around sex. In many political discussions of pornography, there is a frequent misconception based on an

over-simplified notion that people opposed to pornography are anti-sex in some way, while people that are pro-sex support pornography.⁴⁸ This is problematic for many reasons, and in the case of Internet porn's effects on young people, drawing a parallel between being concerned or opposed to pornography and being opposed to sexual liberation would be to completely overlook the factors that Pellegrino names. It is a disservice to any understanding of how pornography works within emerging heterosexual structures, and in my opinion, it is counter-productive to struggles for sexual liberation, as it often silences individual voices whose narratives do matter. This is not to say that opposition to pornography based on oppressive ideals does not exist, but my opposition is based in many larger arenas of concern.

Considering the current generation of young adults allows opportunities for a new pornography dialectic to build, and it should be one that is not excessively divided over rigid political dichotomies that have developed within the pornography debate. These positions overlook some of the particular problems and systems of development that have resulted because of such frequent and early use of pornography that the Internet has made possible. This thesis is an examination of the things that are happening in this current technological age. The variety of heterosexual Internet pornography's influence must be confronted continually. Many, if not most, young adults today have known what pornography is for years, and they experience it through the Internet, which is different than the way any other generation before has experienced it. Most can agree that developing a sexual identity

⁴⁸ This can be seen in common stereotypes such as the "man-hating, sex-hating feminist," which within other schools of feminism often refers to a position more readily aligned, ironically, with anti-feminism. Another misconception is that those who oppose pornography are usually Right-Wing Conservatives. I point out these stereotypes here so as to stress the fact that they *are* stereotypes, and too often blur the actual lines and opinions within the pornography debate.

and culture informed by the images and messages of heterosexual Internet porn has *some* effect on how people can live, know, and treat one another. Whether these effects are considered harmful or beneficial, they are not negligible. Chris, a young man whose opinions were included in the last chapter, explains, “What is the most bothersome is the way people feel uncomfortable with certain aspects of porn in their lives, and yet they don’t feel the right to talk about it.” Chris describes his experience with Internet pornography as “kind of disturbing” and “definitely lonely.” The loneliness he identifies is not only directly related to his physical use, however, but also due to an “alienation” he believes one might feel “if they have questions or problems with a part of life...like pornography or sex, that is already so accepted.” Some young people today think about these effects and dynamics, about pornography and about sex itself, and they have opinions, while others do not. I hope this will change in the coming years, but that can only happen when people stop thinking of Internet pornography as “something that’s just there” and instead are encouraged to think about its impact and create a space to raise questions.

This space is of critical concern and something worth working toward, because within it are our options regarding the main question of this chapter: If heterosexual Internet pornography is a problem, what can we do about it? In the following section I will reassess the anti-pornography position raised in the first chapter that pornography harms real people. I will then explore the difficulties and varying opinions of the regulation and censorship of Internet pornography in the United States, and lastly I will address the need and benefits of better education for young people in the United States about sexual relations and sexuality.

Harm and Options

Numerous anti-pornography positions, including my own, insist that pornography harms people. The significance of defining what type of “pornography” this statement referred to eluded me in the initial formulation of my argument. It was not because all pornography and its effects are the same, but because pornography is an issue that people regard on a personal level. The pornography that influences a generation is the pornography particular to that generation. By this I mean that the pornography that was published or produced thirty years ago, for example, does not inform young people today – Internet pornography does, and it does so in a manner that is very distinct from how pornography worked thirty years ago. As I have said, and as numerous statistics support, the far majority of pornography used by young people currently is accessed on the Internet.⁴⁹ A small number of young people purchase pornographic films or magazines in stores, and many who do use them in addition to pornography on the Internet.⁵⁰

Despite the abundance of use and access to pornography, most young people have rarely thought about pornography in intellectual or political ways, especially outside of academic settings. In discussion very few had ever heard of the “pornography debates,” and were relatively unaware of porn’s political and legal history in the United States. I assumed initially that pornography’s existence was of social common knowledge and experience, but realize now that this assumption was

⁴⁹ The term “young people” refers to people under twenty-four, as that is the age at which I limited my research to in this thesis, as well as the age used in many of the statistics I refer to.

⁵⁰ This is true for both heterosexual and homosexual pornography, which is why I do not make the distinction. However, as throughout this thesis, I am only referring to heterosexual Internet pornography when I reference usage.

based on Internet pornography's ubiquitous existence today. "Heterosexual Internet" pornography requires clear specification because the particular way it works is what makes it influential, and its influences and harms are the true concerns here.

The writers and activists of the past have constructed a critical framework for the pornography debate, which has promoted the progress and development of innumerable arguments and concepts regarding pornography's role in society. These arguments are of utmost importance to any discussion or study of pornography's role in society. Still, it is increasingly important that there be a refocusing on Heterosexual Internet pornography as a uniquely influential social machinery. New considerations must take into account the way heterosexual porn is available today on the Internet and used in mass quantity by young adults, adolescents, and even children.⁵¹

Internet porn has become ubiquitous and authoritative in its presence among much of the youth in the United States. It is a machinery that designs the rules and norms of what sex is supposed to be and how people are supposed to behave sexually.⁵² Many people in the United States, whether aware of it or not, have a large stake – politically, socially, and personally – in heterosexual, mainstream Internet pornography, its accessibility, its quantity, and most importantly the role it has created within the personal lives of young people. In the last chapter, I presented the ways some individuals have experienced and reacted to heterosexual Internet pornography as a social norm. In these discussions one can see the personal and

⁵¹ I certainly do not mean to imply that "adults" do not use Internet pornography, and only omit them from this list because my focus is on growing up/developing within a pornographically penetrated society.

⁵² I am referring to behavior in physical sexual terms as well as in regard to attitudes, expectations, and desires.

particular ways its use can cause harm to real people, and also the various aspects of youth development porn now informs.

Many feminist activists involved in the pornography debate focus their arguments on harm to women: Does pornography use harm women? Is this harm physical, mental, social, political, or some combination? How can these harms be proven? Do these harms make it so women's equality is placed in conflict with greater notions of liberty? These questions are undoubtedly important to the pornography debate in general, but the framework of 'women as victims' in and because of pornography opens the door to countless criticisms, especially by other feminists. Andrea Dworkin is one feminist often associated with the view that it is women who suffer at the hands of pornography, and her writing on the topic has brought great attention to this type of anti-pornography position. In an essay titled, "Against the Male Flood," she refers to pornography as "the subordination of women purely achieved," and continues,

[T]he abuse done to us by any human standard is perceived as using us for what we are by nature: women are whores; women want to be raped; she provoked it; women like to be hurt; she says no but means yes because she wants to be taken against her will which is not really her will because what she wants underneath is to have anything done to her that violates or humiliates her... This view is institutionally expressed in law. So much for equal protection. (A. Dworkin, 2000 27)

While I believe Dworkin's claims certainly emphasize the extreme and violent dangers that exist for women, statements such as these are often criticized as unsubstantiated or overly sensational. My concern is that focusing the pornography debate *solely* on issues of harm to women is insufficient. Such arguments assume a

far too limited view of the possible effects pornography use can have, and the implications of insisting upon such a gender specific detriment can work against particular concepts of sexual liberation.

For example, several pro-pornography positions oppose the notion that pornography is sexism against women, because such a notion often supposes that women are beings that need constant protection, who have little control over their identities, and are even unable to exercise agency. This notion, it has been argued, also assumes that men are always in power in sexual relations, and pornography does not harm them. While I do not agree entirely with these types of pro-pornography stances, I do recognize that certain gender based assumptions can be problematic to pro-sex efforts, as they can demote the status of the individual, especially in terms of being a sexual agent, to a position where agency and autonomy are considered quite limited. Those who have struggled for sexual liberation have done incredible work in the past decades, fighting sexism and misogyny with the promotion of female and sexual empowerment. New genres of pornography, as well as sexuality's developing position in the foreground of society, reflect this shift in sexual acceptability and openness in public and social realms. But this does not mean that porn does not still pose particular problems. My argument remains that heterosexual Internet pornography usage has been and is harmful to developing young people, especially in terms of the gender roles and sexual assumptions it promotes

Its influence displaces power among individuals, problematizing sexual and power dynamics, and not necessarily empowering men and oppressing women. This is not to say that most heterosexual pornography use does not promote sexism, and

women are not placed in subordinate categories, because these things continue to be true. However, especially among young people, the results are not always this direct or clear. Users can feel its influence differently and on multiple levels. This can be seen in some of the personal narratives of the young men I spoke with. They express fear of inadequacy in gender and sexual terms, unease caused by masculine ideals and systems that are portrayed and/or perpetuated by pornography, and anxieties over sexual expectations or even over their personal use. These instances are common and they cannot be overlooked as harms. The harms inflicted upon young women are sometimes similar, but their position as the subordinate gender (especially within patriarchal systems of heterosexuality) often results in an even more oppressive or damaging situation caused by mass use of heterosexual Internet porn. In the United States, people are situated differentially based on gender in every aspect of daily life. It is necessary for us to explore all the different types of damage Internet pornography can inflict both because of and in spite of gendered power relations. I find anti-pornography arguments that insist harm caused by pornography only affects women inadequate, because when I say pornography harms real *people*, I mean *people* – women and men, the way they interact sexually, and see themselves and each other.⁵³

The emphasis on the range of people that suffer because of heterosexual Internet porn use urges the need to confront and remedy the problem on a social and political level. This brings to light the issue of censorship, which has long been associated with the pornography debate in the United States, and came up in almost every discussion of pornography I have had. The people I spoke with were all young

⁵³ When I use the term “people” here, I have no age limitations in mind, meaning children, adolescents, and adults can all be included in this category of “people”.

adults, and most of them spent their adolescence aware of if not using heterosexual Internet pornography. Their opinions differ as do their experiences, but every person agreed that children and young adolescents should not be able to access Internet porn, or at least not be able to do so regularly.⁵⁴ This, by no means implies that every young adult feels this way, however, it is important to notice that some of the very children who grew up with the experience of this access do not personally recommend or advocate it.⁵⁵

Piper touches on a number of extremely relevant aspects of the problem of heterosexual Internet pornography today in her statement, “I don’t have a problem with people watching porn. I think it is fucked up and there is a lot wrong with kids being able to watch porn on their dad’s computer, but you can’t censor the Internet.” Her opinions reflect the multi-faceted nature of pornography as a social mechanism, and thus the need for a more complex and current examination of it. This brief discussion brings to light not just personal opinions of porn, but of conflicts regarding social usage, problems with young people’s access on the Internet, and the issue of censorship. There is a difference between advocating limitation of youth access to pornography and supporting actual governmental censorship, but the space between these two requires careful navigation so as to thoroughly examine the opinions and options embodied in each position.

⁵⁴ “Young adolescent” generally refers to people thirteen years old or younger. Many of the people I spoke with acknowledged fifteen as an acceptable age, but these numbers are not statistically informed.

⁵⁵ Again, these people all had access to a computer, which is implicative of particular class and wealth status. Also, as they were born in different years during the 1980s, the type of access and the level of technology might differ slightly between experiences, as advancements in technology occurred quite rapidly through the next two decades and continue still.

I find that generally the attitudes people have regarding pornography usage in society differ depending on who they consider the users to be, especially hinging on the factor of age. For this reason I will discuss the issues of limitation and censorship in terms of differing opinions in regard to the age of users and their ability to access pornography online. While many people feel that pornography use is a private matter in the United States, not many people privately put children in front of the computer to show them Internet pornography. There is a perceived difference between adults and children in the ability to make decisions, exercise personal agency, and take part in practices that are considered appropriate or acceptable.

This divide affects the way people think and act everyday, and it exists beyond the issue of watching Internet porn – movie ratings, age requirements for purchase of certain products, legal parental consent requirements, statutory rape and child protective laws all reflect this same social treatment of children and adults as inherently and legally different. The stage of adolescence complicates the customs and boundaries that are often located between childhood and adulthood, and Internet pornography usage that spans this spectrum of age and experience is especially important. When does it become acceptable that a young person use Internet pornography, or engage in other “adult” activities for that matter? What are the consequences if it happens before it is deemed appropriate? These seem logical and common questions, but as technology and culture rapidly develop, I believe the new question is: What control does anyone have over such experiences? There is certainly some, but it is a tricky matter. The communication divide between youth and adulthood grows continually due to changes in cultural standards, especially

regarding sexuality and personal interaction. Often, it is the fear that the Internet has made pornography use uncontrollable that leads many people to believe regulation and censorship are necessary.

When the topic of censorship comes into a discussion of pornography the concerns become significantly more complicated. Censorship in the United States is a legal and political issue, generally referring to a sort of management or control of activities by the government. It is understandably troublesome considering the ideals of freedom and liberty in the United States. When Piper says, “You can’t censor the Internet,” she highlights differing views about censorship. In some sense, censoring the Internet by controlling its functions, usage, and the material it makes available is rather impossible. Of course there has been legislation regarding child pornography and other illegal activities or exchanges, but they still occur. The implication here is that even if legislation was passed permitting the censorship of pornography on the Internet, it could never be adequately enforced. This is especially relevant to issues regarding any sort of Internet activity, as the Internet is already commonly acknowledged as a dangerous space of information exchange, as well as a site both praised and criticized for its unlimited material (“You can find anything online!”).⁵⁶ One worry here is that failure of enforcement could lead to other ramifications, for example, it could divert attention and concern from the problem of Internet pornography because action has already been taken.

On the other hand, Piper’s statement speaks to a fairly common American value of freedom of speech, expression, and assembly. One can interpret statement

⁵⁶ By “dangerous space of information exchange,” I am referring to contemporary fears that span issues of identity and monetary theft to instances of child abduction and other criminal activities.

“You can’t censor the Internet,” as the expression of political opinion, the declaration that one cannot or will not stand for a particular governmental limitation on the individual’s right to choose what type of life she or he lives. Censorship of any sort is commonly considered a problematic and oppressive solution to social problems; dozens of Supreme Court cases prove this, especially those that emphasize the importance of the First Amendment and its legal interpretations.⁵⁷

One of the people I spoke to remarked, “Even if we could be sure using porn was bad, especially for kids and teenagers, it’s not like anyone could be justified in taking it off the Internet, because there still are people, adults, who have a right to do what they want to do. Censorship is not a solution,” he explains, “because it is one of those things that once you start doing it, it is damn near impossible to stop. I think a lot of people have that fear...that governmental control only leads to more governmental control.” This sentiment is not surprising; speaking as a young person involved in activism and feminism I can agree that a lot of political unrest, especially among younger generations, comes from a fear of rigid structures and institutions of authority. In the United States, there has always been a strong political critique of excessive government involvement and control in both private and public spheres. This makes the issue of censorship all the more troublesome, for even if it could be argued that censorship of Internet pornography would be beneficial to sexual liberation and individual development for young people, it still is “censorship” and thus a stigmatized concept.

⁵⁷ One famous Supreme Court Case, *Miller v. California* (1973), created a test for determining obscenity in pornographic material, which was based on community standards. The First Amendment, it was held, does not protect obscenity. However, both Justice Hugo Black and William O. Douglas argued the opposite in previous cases (in 1957, *Roth v. United States* resulted in a different test for determining obscene material), which reflect the conflicts of Constitutional interpretation.

Many have a different fear, which is that censorship of pornography could even further sexism and inequality. In Chapter One, I cited Lori Gruen's explanation that there are many feminists who "believe that censorship of pornography will be used to further stifle women's sexual expression and aid in blocking acceptance of non-heterosexual or non-monogamous sexual desires" (Gruen 2002, 154). This belief is often associated with schools of pro-sex feminism, and is especially relevant to feminist efforts that have created new genres of pornography, often referred to as "feminist porn" or "educational porn." Censorship in this situation would seem to allow for further sexual oppression. In the case of Internet porn use among young people, however, it is not that simple. Mainstream, heterosexual Internet porn is not the same as feminist or educational porn, and the things they do are different.

There are many reasons that I do support censorship as the solution for the problems caused by mass usage of Internet pornography, but the most important reason I do not advocate censorship is because I believe there are better options. I believe censorship is in many ways a statement that people cannot handle great social problems, and thus must turn to authority and government for a legal solution. This is not necessarily a failure on behalf of citizens, but considering the harms of Internet porn, I find the notion that governmental authority should deal with pornography's authority problematic. To support and advocate individuality and liberation, especially in regard to sexuality and sexual relations, I have to assume that it is our authority over our identities, our thoughts, and our actions that will result in a more equal society and diminish the everyday effects heterosexual Internet pornography currently has on this generation and the next.

“Censure not Censor,” is the title of Paul’s last chapter in *Pornified*, and this phrase embodies the direction I believe we must move toward in regards to heterosexual pornography’s presence and usage among young people today. Unlike many previous writers and activists, I do not argue for or against pornography *in general* or with a comprehensive historical scope. I have only seen it as it lives now. I have only experienced it, like most other people in this generation, in the way we live now. It is a personal concern, and one I have for everyone. The people I have spoken with about Internet pornography – whether they use it or not, whether they have a problem with it or not – all express some anxiety, often at the realization that computers and the Internet will only gain more influence over the way people live during the next decades. Phrases like, “It’s fucked up, I know,” or, “I wouldn’t say it is a *good* thing in my life, but...” are simple, and they commonly came up in the discussions of the previous chapter, but what they say is telling of an apprehension that is difficult to describe and even more difficult to specifically locate and confront. This is where a more critical view of pornography would be helpful, where people would be free to censure pornography or at least maintain some control over the influence and authority it is permitted to have in her or his life.

Heterosexual Internet pornography usage among youth usually occurs in a dangerously casual fashion. Young people use it with particular intentions, whether they are masturbatory, educational, or social; others who do not use it are moderately aware of its presence and its messages. Otherwise, its existence blends into the folds and patterns of daily life. There are twelve year olds referring to “bitch’s tits” and asking for “blow jobs,” fourteen year olds terrified of what they are supposed to

already know, and eighteen year olds worrying, “Is that really what they want? Is that really how it looks?” There are twenty-two year olds saying, “I can’t believe the things I thought, the things I did,” believing no one really knows what they actually want from one another. Many young people simply find it easier “to just not deal with that.” This is not reality. This is what Internet pornography has promoted as heterosexual culture. This is the daily life that Internet porn is a normal part of. It needs to be questioned. The impact on the development of gender and sexual dynamics caused by the last decades of mass Internet porn use among young people is only now emerging, and it is difficult to deconstruct or analyze the results. This specific research and examination, I believe, needs to begin for the people I know and have spoken with, and for any others who still hope for a greater freedom and equality in both gender and sexual construction and interaction.

Sexual Information Not Sexual Regulation

As was mentioned in the last chapter, there is a great desire and demand among young people, as well as adults, for more adequate sources of information about sex and sexuality. Without this, heterosexual Internet pornography will maintain its authority over what it defines as “sexual knowledge,” and the dominant heterosexual system, embedded with inequalities, will continue to dictate how people can and should act, rendering the notion of sexual liberation meaningless. This information and the space of inquisition, and learning that will form because of it, is a better option than censorship could ever be. It is an option that exercises freedom of

speech and expression, and does so in a way that respects and promotes individuality. Aside from education about contraceptive use, pregnancy, and sexual transmitted diseases, there is a strong need among young people for information about *sexuality* and all the aspects that it entails. More than just the physical actions of sex, which are important in their own right, an education of sexuality that opens discussions of intimacy, pleasure, respect, curiosity, and anxieties could allow for significantly more informed sexual identities to develop. Jane Mills argues, “In short, sex education is in a mess, with sex educators not necessarily even aware of the constraints of talking openly and freely about empowering women to pursue the possibilities of pleasure” (Mills 1993, 203). I would take this statement even further, for while it is often more acceptable for boys to discuss issues of sex amongst each other, I believe there is little knowledge or education among either of the genders when it comes to expectations and treatment. Many young people go into their initial sexual experiences with a desire to “do it right” without an adequate perspective on all the different factors involved, and these, as I have argued, go beyond the physical. Internet pornography rarely goes beyond the physical either, but its messages and judgments inform people everyday, nonetheless, and in the very least, its messages are out there while other forms of education are severely lacking.

The way heterosexual Internet pornography can be used and situated as a normal part of life among young people has formed a detrimental reality. Pornography and sex have not always operated as they do today, making common perceptions of what is “normal” or “natural” problematic, and often carelessly acceptable. Examinations of how sex and porn operate in their current positions

cannot and should not be swept away by more and more images for younger and younger viewers. We are in a new territory, and it is thrilling, but also ominous. Heterosexual Internet pornography takes a place in people's lives early on, demanding space and attention and offering availability and quantity. It has worked through the Internet and is working still, embedding itself among people, inside and outside of the computer, inside and outside the very social structures in which we live.

Milo's remark from last chapter, "For whatever reason males my age, and especially younger, are interested in seeing it, or, I mean, they *are* seeing it," is the root of many fears regarding a pornographically influenced society, including my own. The way in which Internet pornography is available can render interest or choice insignificant, as young people are being immersed in material during such a developmental time that desire and agency play an increasingly limited role. When a source offers information as early, easily, and explicitly as heterosexual Internet porn does, it becomes difficult for other sources to compete. This is reflected by the discussion in the previous chapter about the distress and inability many parents feel over educating their children about sex and sexuality. Further, Paul explains, "As it is, sex education in America rarely touches on the subject of pornography. Although media education is increasingly taught in many curricula, kids aren't typically taught to put pornography into context" (Paul 2002, 189). Out of context, pornography's messages can appear to be the reality of sex, which further complicates the problems it causes young people; Internet pornography not only acts as the main source of

sexual information, but young people rarely learn ways to navigate around it or use its information as part of a larger education and experience.

The people I have spoken with all shared one key opinion: regardless of particular experiences, the most normalized and accepted form of heterosexual pornography today among young people is Internet accessible. Purchasing magazines like *Hustler* and *Playboy*, buying DVD's or going to porno theaters – these are events of the past, antiquated trends. They may still happen occasionally, but far less than before, and not commonly among young people.⁵⁸ The Internet is fast and easy and private, and those who grew up with it feel comfortable with its daily presence. Technology has simply changed reality (as it always has) and it has changed pornography use as well.⁵⁹ As a result, realities that question pornography or limit its authority among people seem not to exist relevantly anymore, seem almost incongruent to any understanding of the present. I am referring to this because of the frequency of young people who easily acknowledge that Internet porn is a common experience in their lives, that claim it is normal, and that it is not really thought about or discussed. This is the climate a lot of young people encounter and describe when it comes to heterosexual Internet pornography: one of utter lack of surprise or opposition, and one of acceptance. Immense access to the right resources allow

⁵⁸ Interestingly, many people said in their discussions that they do not even consider magazines like *Playboy* and *Hustler* “real porn.”

⁵⁹ The mainstream pornography industry has grown significantly over the last decades, and I do not mean to imply that movie and magazine sales have not increased as well. However, the people I am referring to statistically use Internet pornography significantly more often.

people to *know* the Internet and media, see it every day materialized and in action, build a life in which they are integral.⁶⁰

The discussions included in the previous chapter have supported the belief that many simply feel ill equipped to question large and socially ingrained institutions, especially outside of a liberal academic setting. Internet pornography is one of these, but it represents much larger concepts and dynamics of heterosexuality, as well as the power systems it imposes. These conversations reflect the influence heterosexual Internet pornography has had, but the opinions and beliefs of the speakers also represent a discomfort that we can move away from. The majority of people in the United States do not find Internet pornography to be an adequate source of comprehensive sexual knowledge. Many believe its information, messages, and images require further guidance. Still, Internet pornography *is* a main source of sexual information for young people, and further guidance is limited. Without this guidance, communication, and critical interaction, heterosexual Internet porn is allowed to continue teaching its sex, answering real questions with false notions, and shaping entire generations of people around what it calls sex, sexy, man, and woman. Regardless of one's opinions on pornography, this is not something that anyone seems to want.

Many of the problems of pornography usage today have to do with communication. Young people have a lot to figure out, they have a lot to ask about, and they have a lot to say. They live in a society driven by technology and an ideal of progress; they live with their thoughts and their questions, and they live with one

⁶⁰ Specifically, I speak with college students in mind, but I do not want to exclude children and teenagers who engage with the television and the Internet on a daily basis (instant messaging, Facebook, MySpace, email, use of online search engines, and online porn, etc.).

another. While parents shy away from sexual discussions with their children, while fears run rampant regarding the state of the youth, while the media throws up its hands and says that it is not responsible for the effects of its messages and images, while cell phones now allow one to take the Internet with them anywhere all day long, young people still have a lot to figure out. And heterosexual Internet pornography is teaching and talking and growing. But this picture is not as desperate as it seems, for young people want more knowledge; they want to communicate; they want to talk and they want to be heard. Real discussions and interactions need to continue if we – people of all ages, classes, races, and genders – will be able to learn from one another and promote a culture of individuality, sexual liberation, and equality. To make change we need to keep going.

Conclusion

The young woman in the box is waiting all day every day, looping a message that goes far beyond its two words.

Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck me.

She speaks for heterosexual Internet pornography. She speaks of a limited realm of knowledge containing sexual information and messages. She speaks of sex that has already been designated and limited by its designers, and she tells it today to far too many people who accept it as the standard truth. Heterosexual Internet pornography's authority remains inadequately challenged because it systematically teaches people to not challenge it – it tells its “truth” so frequently and with such influence that two little words can affect the very development of new sexual identities and cultures. The young woman is not at fault; she simply provides the image and the voice, but what she seems to want has no necessary authority over what you want. This pornography only has authority because it says it has it, and its voice is loud and it is everywhere. But your voice is real, and as you look at her there is incredible possibility when you realize that she does not speak for you. And she does not speak for me.

This discussion started with pornography, and it started decades ago. It started with feminism and with politics, and here in the United States, in 2008, I think about the great feminist efforts that have brought us all to where we are today. I think about this not so much in admiration – although I do have much admiration – but in genuine

wonder. I am writing on a laptop in a document that is one of four windows on the screen. The others are two *Wikipedia* articles that I looked up out of curiosity, one on “Second Wave Feminism,” the other on “Sexual Intercourse,” and the fourth page is an online porn site called “Xtube: The best thing since the orgasm.” I opened this last site to see if the public wireless Internet allowed me access, which it did. The extent of what is possible in this age drives much of what is thought of “my generation,” and a unique marker of this generation is the access we have to information, communication, and one another. What is possible is that we are in a bad way when it comes to sexual equality and liberation; what is possible is that we have the ability to change the current situation.

For the last decade or so, a number of books, studies, and scholarly articles have been produced regarding the Internet, often examining the question of “what it means” to live in a society of Internet connection. These works are a reflection of social, political, and intellectual reaction to an impetus of social change, a reaction that occurs commonly in times of social transformation. More particular questions are being raised examining not only what it means to live in a society of Internet connection, but to grow up in one. Beyond this, concerns are emerging in regard to what kind of connection the Internet provides, and in this realm, heterosexual pornography is an important player.

Internet access works to connect millions of people everyday in the United States, creating a technological social network. Those that have grown up with this access experience the fast development of a fascinating and intricate way of life. This way of life, both in generation and in culture, is literally ours, as are the problems it

creates. As I have argued, heterosexual Internet pornography is a personal problem for young people, because it exists in such a uniquely embedded fashion. Its use might be considered an action taken by individuals, but its mass usage, much like the Internet network, connects young people in a complicated way. The action of some affects others, and more importantly, the influence of heterosexual porn occurs at such a developmental level that its messages disseminate throughout countless aspects of a young person's personal and social existence.

Current generations are connected *to* the Internet in our daily lives, and are connected *by* the Internet in the cultures that we create under its influence. The pressing concern of this thesis is the sexual cultures that form among youth in the mass presence of Internet pornography. As I have explored, there are numerous aspects to sexual development, and young people are being harmed by the unrealistic notions of sexuality that heterosexual Internet porn promotes. Sexual relations are a prominent area of focus when it comes to the effects of pornography, but among young people today sexual expectation, gender construction, masculinity, and sexual power dynamics are also key to understanding the problems current sexual cultures face.

Many feminist activists have argued that pornography is a production that not only *says* something, but that *does* something, and this is why it must be viewed as politically relevant. Whether it be considered speech or not, considered harmful or not, it is an entity in society that deserves critical attention. These beliefs oppose mindless use of pornography, and in my opinion, they have provided a crucial place to start new discussions of pornography's role in peoples' lives.

In the 1970's and the 1980's a political movement occurred, which is usually referred to as "The Feminist Sex Wars," or simply the "Porn Wars." These heated disagreements over the issues of pornography and its relation to sexuality, and sexual liberation led to important divisions within feminism at the time. What was commonly known as Second-Wave feminism split into a number of different schools of feminist opinion. One would like to think that such an event would imply that pornography and sexuality are of immense importance if they could have such a political effect among people. Yet, it is common to observe that pornography use has since faded into normality, especially among the youth, and sexuality seems mostly a vague term for much of the population currently.

As a young feminist today, I have observed that young people experience great political and sexual confusion. In regard to sexism in the United States, popular opinion says that things are better than they ever have been, the sexes are generally equal – things are basically fine. Ask a young person if she or he thinks women and men are in equal positions or experience equal power in sexual relations, however, and the answers get more complicated. The young people I spoke with about their views on Internet pornography describe a realm of development and interaction that may or may not be better than ever before, but is not fine. Their experiences with heterosexual Internet porn touch upon many political and personal issues regarding sexism, power, and identity, and yet they often remain entirely unexamined. Mainstream media may be selling sex in its public messages and images, but young people are learning every day that sexual information is more readily accessed in private, that it is easier to go online to find out what sex is about. Considering

heterosexual Internet porn a normal cultural entity makes its heterosexual message appear normal as well. It is difficult to dissent from its authority when entire generations are left without knowledge of how to put its use and influences into a political sexual context, and when its presence is allowed to seem harmless or informative.

Pamela Paul writes,

For years, the pornography industry and the pornified culture have told both men and women who oppose pornography to shut up or turn a blind eye. They have accused anti-pornography activists, or even those who have dared question their profit equation, of being anti-sex and anti-freedom. They have done so while creating a forcefully anti-sex product that limits the freedom of men, women, and children. (Paul 2005, 276)

Considering the current usage of heterosexual Internet pornography among young people, I agree with Paul, and I believe the Internet porn industry is doing more than ever before. I do not believe heterosexual Internet porn is necessarily “a forcefully anti-sex product” in its images, but it is in its effects.

The quantity, use, and influence of heterosexual porn among young adults, adolescents, and children are mitigating oppressive institutions of gender and sex in place of adequate sexual education. Its messages are increasingly successful because of their persistence and ubiquity. It is successful because young people need more information about sexuality today. Many agree that there are dangers in keeping sex education from young people, which I have discussed, but the problem goes deeper. Sex is a complex act and a complex issue, and education must address these facts head-on. Internet pornography would not be as harmful nor as influential if more young people were developing a strong sexual identity based on individual desire and

social interaction. The promotion of this identity lies in communication, education, open-mindedness, and respect. The growing social networks created by the Internet reflect a common desire among people to connect with one another. If this desire is applied to promoting more equal and healthy sexual cultures the results will be of systematic dimension, young people will develop their individual social and sexual identities based on more complete information, and American society will continue working toward the ideals of equality and freedom that it has always held.

Appendix A

Index of Interviewees*

Chris: 20 years old, male, Southern California
Claire: 23 years old, female, Southern California
Dane: 19 years old, male, Midwest
Jacob: 20 years old, male, Northern California
Jenna: 20 years old, female, Southeast
Josh: 20 years old, male, Midwest
Luke: 24 years old, male, Northeast
Matt: 21 years old, male, Northeast
Mel: 18 years old, female, Northwest
Milo: 21 years old, male, Southwest
Piper: 22 years old, female, Southwest
Sarah: 20 years old, female, Midwest
Stan: 22 years old, male, Northeast

*All names have been changed

Ages listed are at the time of interviews.

Other than California, states have been left out to protect anonymity of the interviewee.

This is only a list of interviewees who received pseudonyms in this thesis. There were four other main participants, but I chose not to identify them by name in their discussions.

Appendix B

Consent to Participate in Research

Project: Internet Pornography: A New Generation of Gender and Sexual Development

Researcher: Natalie Tran (class of 2008)

Faculty Advisor: Professor Lori Gruen

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Natalie Tran for a senior thesis under the supervision of Professor Lori Gruen in the Department of Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut.

You are being approached to participate as a member of a particular age group (18-24), in order to gather information about sexual and gender development during the rise of Internet culture in the United States, and especially surrounding the topic of access to Internet pornography. Gathering a variety of personal experiences, encounters, and opinions are the main goal of these interviews.

The goal of this project is to identify the influence that access to pornography through the Internet has had in the past decade, focusing on the age group that reflects the first generation of children to be raised with Internet and computer access. Subject's initial experiences with sexual curiosity and the use of pornography, both through the Internet and other forms, will be gathered through interviews. Differences in age, sexual orientation, and gender will also be noted so as to identify any possible trends or patterns. The ways in which people feel Internet pornography and its widespread usage may be influencing and shaping notions of sexual and power relations as well as the social perception of sex is the main focus of the interviews. The age group is loosely set between 18 and 24, as the members within it likely came into sexual maturation and experience with direct involvement with computer and Internet technology. Both men and women will be interviewed, as long as he or she has some experience with mainstream Internet pornography.

This interview will take approximately 30 minutes. During the interview you will be asked questions about your experiences with Internet pornography, how they may have changed over time, and your personal feelings about how Internet pornography has changed your view of sex and sexuality.

The interview may be audio taped and transcribed, however, subjects will remain anonymous and given pseudonyms during and after the interviews. The results of your interview will be used as part of a research thesis regarding Internet pornography.

There may be some possible discomfort as a result of the questions asked in the interview. You may choose not to answer a question or offer information that is not directly asked for. There are no direct benefits to you from your participation, but your willingness to share your knowledge and experience will contribute to a deeper understanding of the use of the Internet and technology in personal spheres, especially regarding the development of sexuality, gender identity, and gender relations. Hopefully, this research project will enable some to be more conscientious of the influences Internet pornography has on human relations, American society, and within their own lives.

To ensure protection of your privacy, you will be given a pseudonym and your name will appear neither in the research project or on the transcripts of the interview. The tape of your interview will be closed to public use, and your name will not appear in the transcript or referenced in any material obtained from the interview.

Your participation in this interview is voluntary. Even if you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the interview without penalty, or request confidentiality, at any point during the interview. You may also choose not to answer specific questions or discuss certain subjects during the interview or to ask that portions of our discussion or your responses not be recorded on tape.

If you have any questions about this research project or interview, please feel free to contact Natalie Tran at 858-442-9987, ntran@wesleyan.edu, or the faculty sponsor Lori Gruen at 860-685-2008, lgruen@wesleyan.edu.

Statement of Consent:

I agree to participate in this project / study / interview, and to the use of this project / study / interview as described above. My preference regarding the use of my name is as follows:

___ I agree to be identified by a pseudonym in any transcript or reference to the information contained in this interview, and understand that I will remain anonymous otherwise.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

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