

The role of pornography in media and in sex education



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A number of feminist and religious leaders have criticised pornography as being morally obnoxious. However, a closer analysis of the subject reveals that a majority of the population evaluate pornography as an important element in sexual stimulation.

The idea that sexual activity could lead to improved health was born around a hundred years ago. Among the medical profession the satisfaction of natural sexual instincts was viewed as a positive contribution to health. The desire to have intercourse with one's husband or wife was regarded as a natural and healthy instinct. On the other hand, when sex drive was artificially awoken it was argued that this would result in negative consequences for an individual. The individual would eventually suffer from an overemphasized sexual desire, and this would in turn disturb his/her peace both in mind and body (Kontula, 1990). Pornography was claimed to be precisely that kind of artificial and dangerous sexual stimulation.

Since the early 1900s a constant discussion has ensued as to whether pornography is actually promoting or endangering sexual health and sexual well-being. Does pornography tempt and lead an individual to commit shameful or even illegal acts that would never had taken place if he/she had not exposed himself/herself to its effects? Are human beings as organisms responding to external stimuli rather than selecting experiences based on an inner logic?

Defining pornography is a problematic venture, due to its individualistic nature. Originally the term referred to literature expounding the dangers of prostitution. Today, it's more about possibilities (fantasies, imagines) rather than realities of sex (Sigel, 2002). Pornography includes speech, writings, pictures, images, or films depicting erotic behaviour with the intent of sexual arousing the reader or viewer (Francoeur et al., 1991). However, there have been controversial arguments and debates as to whether the intent is always to provide an arousal to the reader or viewer.

The concept of pornography is relative to the context and history of when and where something can or could be seen or heard. For example, a classical painting may be considered art when it is displayed in a gallery. However, the same picture might be considered pornography when a copy circulates as a postcard among the lower classes. A simple image of a white woman may be intolerable when it is available to black men in South Africa. It might be better to consider pornography as one of the various modes of sexual expression, interacting unevenly with others. After all, for quite a few people it is also the only avenue of sexual expression.

Attitudes and affective reactions to pornography

Feminists have actively criticised pornography. Liberal feminists are more concerned about the harms of censorship than the harms of pornography, and thus typically oppose censorship. Radical or anti-pornography feminists favour censorship or other forms of control, since they weigh the imputed harms of pornography, especially in the form of violence toward women, more heavily. More abstractly, this may be seen as a difference between the values of individual freedom and responsibility for others.

Stands that people take on pornography are in many cases very personal. How different pornographic materials have been judged, the attitudes regarding their legal control through



censorship, are entirely dependent on the positive and negative affective personal reactions caused by the material. Belief systems about the harms or benefits of such materials have in many cases been developed and applied as justifications of these affective responses. These affective reactions arise not just out of personal sexual sensations, but also from the individual's socialization regarding sexuality (Fisher, 1995).

Of course, the issue of pornography has also a cognitive component. It has been argued that belief in the harmful effects of pornography is but one of many conservative values which make up cultural fundamentalism. These traditionally conservative values are the product of socialization processes, which have strong cognitive components (Wood & Hughes, 1984).

Kutchinsky (1999) found that persons who were unfamiliar with erotic materials were likely to experience strong and conflicting emotional reactions when first exposed to sexual stimuli. This was due to the social taboo of public nudity.

In Kutchinsky's (1999) studies exposure to erotic stimuli produced sexual arousal in substantial proportions both among males and females. Arousal was dependent on both the characteristics of the stimulus and the characteristics of the viewer or user. When viewing erotic stimuli, more women reported the physiological sensations that were associated with sexual arousal rather than admitting they were sexually aroused. If a woman's mind processes the stimuli that is accessed, and assuming the stimulus continues, and also assuming that she remains focused and that she enjoys the experience of arousal, she then becomes aware of her sexual neediness.

In the latest Finnish sex surveys the proportion of women who agreed with the statement «In my opinion, watching pornography can sexually be very arousing» increased considerably during the 1990s (surveys in 1992 and 1999). In 1999 the proportion of women who agreed with this stance was over 60 %. At the same time, over 80 % of men considered pornography as sexually very arousing. Results implied that pornography was becoming more and more popular especially among the female population (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003).

Media and pornography as sex educators

Pornography has had a silent but important role in the distribution of sexual knowledge and also in sex education. A lack of knowledge has hampered the formation of relationships, reduced the quality of sexual experiences and resulted in undesirable consequences. Adequate skills for interaction between an individual and his or her partner in sexual communication are necessary for satisfying experiences. Pornography has promoted these skills.

Although the schooling system, other public authorities, and various organisations work to improve knowledge about sex and attitudes and skills of the population, a large part of sex education and sexual health promotion occurs through the media (including pornography). The media disseminates current sexological information, news from that field, and it provides a public forum for the discussion of sexual topics through its information and images. It defines the limits of socially acceptable sexual activity. The media is one of the most important factors that determine peoples' views on the meanings of sexuality (Kontula, 2000).

Only after the mid-1960s did the media take an active role in the distribution of sexual knowledge and in sex education. This created very lively sexual-political debate. Some magazines published their first theme issues about sexual matters. Men's (porn) magazines even wrote articles about the Kinsey report and the pioneering sexological studies of Masters and Johnson. Gradually, information leaflets and guidebooks became available for all who were interested. This break-through in the media

concerning sexuality was later called the sexual revolution. It was, above all, a break-through where sexological knowledge became the common property of the whole nation. The distribution of porn expanded and became part of everyday life (Kontula & Kosonen, 1994).



Public discourse about sex in the media has a true relevance for the sex life of private individuals because most people will not otherwise acquire practical and applicable information and guidance on the topic. Sexuality in films, videos and literature (also guidebooks) are for most people the only concrete models of sexual behaviour available (Abramson & Mechanic, 1983; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003). In most cases, it is not possible for children to observe the sexual actions of adults or to formulate fantasies or models about how to enjoy their own sex life. Erotic literature, sex magazines and sex videos are therefore the main source of information about different sexual patterns and various forms of sexuality. For example, in school sex education classes, these sexual patterns are not presented and discussed.

During the 1980s sex education presented in medical columns of Finnish magazines spread to even the most conservative magazines. Journalists began writing about sex without applying it to marriage at all. Simultaneously, women's magazines began to discuss women's rights to sexual self-determination and their right to sexual activity in a much more direct manner. The discussion included however, as is the case today, warnings about the threat of sexual harassment and violence (Kontula & Kosonen, 1996).

Since the 1950s pornography and men's magazines or sex magazines have educated their readers about sexual issues. Sex magazines struggling with diminishing sales figures (since the 1980s), have tried to inform their readers about how to have better sex. It has often been women who have responded to the questions of male readers in their columns about how to get a new kick and zest for sex which has turned stale and passive. Different fact-based articles have also been published about various aspects of sex. Sex magazines have provided a wide range of material for the development of lovemaking skills.

Regarding lovemaking skills of the whole population, sex magazines have fulfilled an important function of public educators in sexual matters. For decades they have disseminated theoretical and practical information on how to improve interactions between partners and make their sex lives more versatile. All this has taken place in a kind of underground spirit, because these magazines were produced and sold under the threat of confiscation and suppression.

In 1976, Stauffer and Frost suggested that public sex discussion increases liberal attitudes toward sex. This hypothesis about the effects of the media on behaviour is consistent with the results obtained in the follow-up of the Finnish sex survey (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 1995). According to this survey attitudes of the general population became clearly more liberal from the beginning of the 1970s to the 1990s. As a result of this change, sexual intercourse between young unmarried people was generally accepted, casual sexual relations were considered more satisfying, and sexual intercourse was accepted more often without love.

These changes in attitudes were especially significant in age cohorts that were young, or in young adults in the beginning of the 1970s or later. Open public discussion about sexuality, which began at that time, had changed attitudes toward sex in these age groups towards a more liberal direction. People who were young before the 1970s were significantly more conservative. In their childhood years public discussion about sexuality was far more restricted, moralising and closely tied to marriage (Kontula & Kosonen, 1994).

Sex therapy and family therapy can give people practical knowledge and guidance for the development of sexual skills. Also, friends can guide each other in these skills. However, in most cases

the development of sexual lovemaking skills of individuals and couples, their lessons learned from previous experiences, remain dependent on the contribution of media and commercial sex industry. This industry describes how people can touch and satisfy each other in enjoyable ways. These kinds of stimuli encourage individuals to realise their own dreams and listen to the wishes and feelings of their partner in more sensitive ways.



Impacts of pornography on sexual behaviour and criminality

It is evident that public presentations of sexual patterns and love-making fantasies as well as practical sexual guidance have had a liberating effect on the sexual patterns of a great number of men and women. According to the results of the Finnish sex survey, the sexual habits of respondents under the age of 35 were significantly more versatile and more satisfying in the beginning of the 1990s than in older age groups (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 1995). Since a large proportion of sex magazines, films and videos was directed towards young adults and adolescents (with whom this was very common), it is presumable that these sources of information encouraged these populations to a more diversified realization of personal sexual scripts.

The tones of this public presentation of sexual issues have ranged from women's general sexual equality to their right to reject unpleasant approaches. New issues for discussion have been introduced on developing women's erotic skills and seeing men as erotic objects. Despite the varying focus of the discussion, it has surely helped women to become aware of their own sexuality and their sex-related needs. As one of the most important results of the FINSEX survey (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 1993), women's sexual activity and satisfaction has increased from the 1970s to the 1990s. Men's and women's expectations concerning sexual matters were better met than previously. This change was no doubt promoted by the lively discussions about sexual issues in the media.

When the subject of sexuality has occupied a significant and permanent position in the media, it leads to a gradual but significant eroticisation of peoples' symbolic world. This has been found, for instance, in sexual autobiographies (Haavio-Mannila, Kontula, & Rotkirch, 2002; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila 1997), where sex often signifies a continually present erotic tension in younger women. The most important aspect in this change is that people have been allowed permission (i.e. giving permission in the PLISSIT sex therapy scheme¹) to realise their own sexual needs and wishes in a more satisfying way than earlier. Sexual tolerance and liberalism has promoted sexual health (Kontula, 2000).

Pornography is an explicit material about sexual actions or sexual traits. Individuals with high sexual interest or desire are those who are most interested in pornography. For example, in France and Finland porn readers reported a more frequent and more varied sexual activity than men overall. They had a broader and more diversified repertoire of sexual patterns, a greater number of partners, and they masturbated more frequently. They also reported more frequent sexual fantasies and they reached orgasm more frequently than other men. However, a greater number of them reported that they were dissatisfied with their current sex life (Giami & Colomby, 1995; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003). This was probably due to their high sexual interest that was difficult to fulfil.

¹ Id="fag-kontula-48"> The term PLISSIT comes from the initials of Permission, Limited Information, Special Suggestions and Intensive Therapy (Annon, 1976).



In the United States contradictory arguments on pornography have been presented even in Presidential Commission reports (Pornography, 1970). After sponsoring various surveys and research studies, a 1970 commission concluded: «In sum, empirical research designed to clarify the question has found no evidence to date that exposure to explicit sexual materials plays a significant role in the causation of delinquent or criminal behaviour among youth and adults. The Commission cannot conclude that exposure to erotic materials is a factor in the causation of sex crime or sex delinquency.» In fact, the commission concluded that pornography contributes to sex education and this can be beneficial.

In Denmark, Sweden and West Germany, Kutchinsky (1999) analysed the relationship between crime statistics and availability of pornography from 1964 to 1984. These countries legalized or decriminalized pornography in 1969, 1970 and 1973, respectively. He showed that as the amount of pornography increasingly became more available, the rate of rapes in these countries either decreased or remained more or less at the same level. In all three countries the rates of nonsexual violent crimes and non-violent sex crimes (e.g., peeping, flashing) have essentially decreased.

Diamond (1999) has studied similar correlations in Japan, the United States, and Shanghai. It was clear from the data reviewed, and the new data and analysis presented, that a massive increase in available pornography in Japan, the United States, China and also elsewhere, was correlated with a dramatic decrease in sexual crimes especially among youngsters as perpetrators or victims. There was no evidence that pornography was intended or likely to produce «imminent lawless action». –

«Porno and sex as merchandises for sexual pleasure»

Pornography is one component of sexual stimulation that provides pleasure and excitement. The higher sexual motivation/desire a person has, the more actively he/she is usually using pornographic products. On the other hand, people who don't have strong sexual interests consume less pornography. Pornography is often a stimulant for masturbation but a third of porn consumers have not used it for this purpose (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 2003).

It is most probable that pornography turns some people «on» while it turns other people «off». In fact, as Diamond (1999) puts it: «Pornography is often the poor man's Viagra.» There is little doubt, however, that it provides many with positive returns and pleasurable and legal outlets for sexual urges. It can also provide excitement for sexual communication with a steady partner.

Many individuals, in polls and surveys around the USA and Japan, have indicated that pornography has been useful in their love-making and relaxation. Others, even senior citizens, have indicated it has also been instructive and pleasurable (Diamond, 1999). From this perspective, it is surprising that popular films and videos rarely focus on sexual behaviour where characters are married. The focus is more often on «unmarried sex». Passionate kissing accounted for 63 % of sexual activity among husbands and wives in 1998 in USA (Dempsey & Reichert, 2000).

Against a backdrop of a pornography of mainstream media and the emergence of a more sexualized culture, women are increasingly targeted as sexual consumers. The success of TV shows like *Sex and the City* suggests that late 20th century discourse which fronted female pleasure has crystallized in a new form of sexual address to women. Previously, this kind of show would have been considered pornography. Sex for women is sold as a set of fashion and design items, rather than as a set of media representations. The marketing of products for younger women is dependent on the understanding that sex is «cool», and on the recognition of women's sexual pleasure. Sexual pleasure

is re-contextualized in relation to the pleasures of fashion, design, pampering and self-help (Attwood, 2005).



The future of this market lies in the Internet. In addition to products, the Internet has also become another medium for marketing romance and sex. In a world fraught with sexual problems, pitfalls, and prejudices, the Internet offers many opportunities to positively influence sexuality and sexual connections between people. One trend is the proliferation of virtual communities around common sexual interests. Professionals are recognizing that these virtual communities impact peoples' lives significantly and are increasing their efforts to study and understand them (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002).

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