

The impact of poor body image

Click Off Consultation Response: June 2020

Click Off aim to raise awareness about the harms of pornography, to share our learning with legislators and build a movement against pornography in the UK. We draw from the research and experience of feminists. Click Off are non-partisan and our opposition to pornography is not faith-based.

Who is particularly at risk of poor body image? (groups protected by the Equality Act) What contributes to poor body image?

Pornography is having a devastating impact on body image; it is girls and young women who are bearing the brunt. With 120 million daily visits to PornHubⁱ across the world pornography acts as driver for other forms of media, changing the digital landscape and seeping into all aspects of culture. Since the lockdown restrictions were introduced more time has been spent online, increasing the likelihood of exposure to pornography.

Of those who use pornography, 14 per cent of women and 31 per cent of men admit to struggling with addiction, this is unprecedented and risingⁱⁱ. Furthermore, has been estimated that around ten percent of 12-13 year olds in the UK fear they are addicted pornographyⁱⁱⁱ, and research suggests that the formative sexual experiences of most young adults will have been impacted by exposure to online pornography^{iv}. This is not only changing how people have sex, it is also changing how people think about their bodies.

The American Psychological Association (APA) have conducted useful research in this area^v, concluding that 'the proliferation of sexualised images of girls and young women in advertising, merchandising and media is harmful to girls' self-image and healthy development. The APA task force on the Sexualisation of Girls cite problems caused by sexualised and objectified imagery as including: 'shame and anxiety with one's body, eating disorders and an unhealthy self-image.'

Given that the vast majority of men, and indeed many women and children of both sexes, routinely consume pornography this must be considered when appraising people's internal sense of their own worth and body image.

It is clear that pornography does not simply mirror inequality, it actively creates it. Indeed, it has a significant impact on views of sexual violence; researchers Bryden and Grier^{vi} found that watching pornography leads to increased acceptance of rape myths and the 'belief that the crime is not truly unlawful.'

Online pornography has impeded the progress women had been making towards equality setting us back generations. This can be seen both in the record low convictions for crimes of rape and sexual assault (as identified by HM Crown Prosecution Inspectorate^{vii}), and also the soaring rates of mental illness and suicide amongst young women. According to the most recent figures from the Office for National Statistics^{viii} 'Despite having a low number of deaths overall, rates among the under 25s have generally increased in recent years, particularly 10 to 24-year-old females where the rate has increased significantly since 2012.'

This is the group commonly referred to as the i-generation, those who have come of age online into a world saturated by pornography. That the increase amongst women is noted as 'statistically significant' hints at wider cultural problems that today's young women are forced to navigate – arguably the availability of online pornography and the impact it has on body image, self-esteem and mental health is one such problem.

It is pointless to attempt to look at issues of poor body image, mental health and self-esteem without setting it in the context of freely accessible, hardcore online pornography.

What is the impact for those with multiple protected characteristics including race, disability, sex and sexuality?

In pornography young women are routinely referred to in the most misogynist and debasing terms; those who are Black or from ethnic minorities are called by racist slurs. Disabled women are fetishized on the basis of their disability. The language used would be unacceptable in any other context.

'Lesbian,' 'gay' and 'bisexual' have effectively become pornographic search terms rather than sexual orientations. A young person turning to the internet to make sense of their feelings is far more likely to find pornographic images of women being abused than an explanation of what it is to be in a same sex relationship. The 'lesbian' categories on Pornhub alone yield 499,073 videos.^{ix}

There has been a 4,400 per cent increase^x in girls being referred for 'gender transitioning' treatment in the past decade. It is well documented that these girls are statistically more likely to be same sex attracted and/or autistic^{xi}.

Girls who see the augmented bodies of women in pornography are likely to feel both scared by the violence enacted on women, and also to feel alienated from the hyper-feminised appearance of performers. Indeed, trauma itself is known to force a mind/body split^{xii}.

It is clear that whilst everyone is affected by pornography, those with additional protected characteristics fare worst.

What are the long-term effects of poor body image on people?

What is the relationship between poor body image and mental health conditions including eating disorders?

The increase in mental health problems is not a just personal problem, it is a social one requiring joined-up action.

Not only is pornography known to lead to greater acceptance of rape myths, it also is used in the grooming of girls and young women^{xiii}. In turn sexual abuse can lead to eating disorders, body dysmorphia and mental health issues.

The impact of undergoing serious and risky operations to change one's appearance should also be considered as a long-term health effect; with otherwise healthy bodies irreversibly changed in order to conform to sexist stereotypes of beauty. 92 per cent of cosmetic procedures are performed on women^{xiv}; it is clear that it is women and girls who are bearing the physical and psychological brunt of a pornified society.

What is the impact of media consumption on people's body image, does it impact their mental health?

Pornography is a significant part of the media consumed and it bleeds across into all aspects of popular culture, from fashion to film. When media consumption is discussed the 120 million global daily users of Pornhub are seldom considered (*ibid*).

The relationship between pornography and its mainstream media cousin is complex, for example, Bauer media profits from the publication of pornography through sub companies (Pabel Moewig and Inter Publish) and from mainstream 'women's magazines' like Cosmopolitan^{xv}.

There is a compelling and growing body evidence that suggests exposure to women's magazines negatively affects women's self-esteem and body image.

What is the effect of the following on people's body image when using social media?

The campaigns from the last decade against the airbrushing of adverts now seem quaint; everyone has the technology on their phones to present a perfect, augmented version of themselves. The incessant focus on appearance and hyper sexualised culture is arguably evidence of pernicious 'self-objectification.' Anecdotal but compelling evidence shared with Click Off indicates that self-objectification through the taking of selfies and sexting act as a conveyor belt into use of sites such as Only Fans and eventually the wider sex industry.

A BBC investigation of the pornographic platform Only Fans^{xvi} found that on one day over 7000 Twitter accounts were directing traffic to the site, and that around 2500 of these were thought to be from those under 17. Pornography providers are adept at using social media channels to drive users to their sites.

Effectively mobile phone technology is a portal through which young women learn to dissociate from themselves and to monetise their bodies. The need for approval as signifying popularity on social media platforms can lead to compulsive and harmful sexual behaviour.

What strategy should the Government take to encourage healthy body image for young people?

Would proposals in the Online Harms White Paper protect people from potential harm caused by social media content in regard to body image?

It is imperative that age verification is brought in as promised in the Digital Economy Act, with immediate effect.

Education programmes to teach girls not to base their self-worth on the opinion of boys is essential. Breaking down sexist stereotypes and teaching boys to recognise and respect boundaries is intrinsic to this.

An urgent review of current PHSE/ RSE providers is essential, many suggest that pornography is harmless and do not discourage children from viewing it. Often the same providers suggest that discomfort in one's body is evidence of being transgender, rather than a part of the pressures of adolescence (which are often particularly difficult for those with autistic spectrum disorders and for those who will grow up to be lesbian, gay or bisexual).

The consequences of viewing and producing pornography must be covered as part of age-appropriate sex and relationships education in schools and academies

Is there enough research and data to support the Government in creating policy surrounding body image and social media?

Research is desperately needed to investigate why so many young people feel dissatisfied in their bodies. This research must make reference to the impact of pornography.

Research is needed into the impact of pornography on wider society, and the role it has had in normalising misogyny is needed urgently.

An investigation is needed into the use of social media to encourage traffic to pornography sites with a view to legislating against the practice.

Do companies advertise their goods and services responsibly in relation to promoting positive body image?

Using images to promote 'positive body image' is absurd. Presenting a range of diverse yet 'sexy' bodies will change nothing other than allowing companies to look progressive; it is cheap and shabby public relations. The problem is presenting women, of whatever shape or colour, as objects for titillation. Regrettably, much advertising rests upon the objectification of women.

ⁱ Pornhub (2019) [2019 Year in Review](#), (accessed 25 June 2020)

ⁱⁱ Lothian-McClean, M (March 2019) 'How do your porn habits compare with young people across Britain?' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcthree/article/bb79a2ce-0de4-4965-98f0-9ebbcfcc2a60%3e> BBC News (accessed 3 November 2019)

ⁱⁱⁱ Howse P. (2015) 'Pornography addiction worry' for tenth of 12-13 year olds.' <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-32115162> (accessed 25 June 2020)

^{iv} Davison J. (2015) 'Expert testimony to inform NICE guideline development' National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

^v American Psychological Association (2007) 'Sexualisation of Girls is Linked to Common Mental Health Problems in Girls and Women with Eating Disorders, Low Self-Esteem and Depression; An APA Task Force Reports.'

^{vi} Bryden DP, Grier MM, (2011) 'The search for rapists' "real" motives,' Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology, Vol 101, Iss 1, pages 171-278

^{vii} HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (2019) *Rape Inspection 2019*

<https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmcp/inspections/rape-inspection-on-report-december-2019/> (accessed 25 June 2020)

^{viii} Office for National Statistics (2019) 'Suicides in the UK: 2018 registrations Registered deaths in the UK from suicide analysed by sex, age, area of usual residence of the deceased and suicide method.'

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicideintheunitedkingdom/2018registrations>

^{ix} Pornhub (2020)

^x Rayner G (16 September 2018) 'Minister orders inquiry into 4,000 per cent rise in children wanting to change sex' <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2018/09/16/minister-orders-inquiry-4000-per-cent-rise-children-wanting/> (Accessed 25 June 2020)

^{xi} Transgender Trend (2020) 'BBC Newsnight report on the Tavistock GIDS' <https://www.transgendertrend.com/bbc-newsnight-tavistock-gids/> (Accessed 25 June 2020)

^{xii} Haven, T (2009) "That Part of the Body Is Just Gone": Understanding and Responding to Dissociation and Physical Health, Trauma Dissociation10(2) Pages 204-18.

^{xiii} Fight the New Drug (2019) 'Traffickers And Predators: How Porn Is Used To Desensitize And Groom Victims' <https://fightthenewdrug.org/porn-is-used-to-groom-and-desensitize-victims/> (Accessed 25 June 2020)

^{xiv} BAAPS (2019) 'Cosmetic surgery stats: number of surgeries remains stable amid calls for greater regulation of quick fix solutions'

<https://baaps.org.uk/about/news/1708/cosmetic-surgery-stats-number-of-surgeries-remains-stable-amid-calls-for-greater-regulation-of-quick-fix-solutions#:~:text=Women%20underwent%2092%25%20of%20all,and%20facelifts%20which%20rose%209%25> (Accessed 25 June 2020)

^{xv} Meade A, (2019) 'Softcore pornography magazines the Picture and People to close amid sale ban and falling circulation' The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/oct/23/softcore-magazines-the-picture-and-people-to-close-amid-sale-ban-and-falling-circulation> (accessed 25 June 2020)

^{xvi} Flyne E (2020) 'Nudes4Sale' BBC3 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p087m1nh>