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Porn, sexuality and the internet

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Porn and “deviant” sexuality are often at the centre of arguments to tighten content regulations online, inevitably implying a perceived harm and threat to social order and the minds of the “vulnerable” – children, young people and women.

The problem is, when it comes to law and policy, women are still stuck in the passenger seat for anything that has to do with sex, sexuality and sexual expression. It imagines the hubby coming home, all pumped up, and asking the missus to go beyond the missionary position. Just like he saw on his iPad mini. (Dirty, dirty.) You see? Man, driver. Woman, passenger.[1]

Porn is always assumed to be not in women’s interest or of interest to women, and some feminists believe porn to be an objectification and commodification of women. Pornhub’s 2018 survey on its viewership showed that 29% of the viewers are female, and the percentage of female viewership has seen a gradual increase over the years.[2]

Long before the internet, the porn industry had already realised the potential of the female consumer. According to Ross (1993), there has been “pornography from a woman’s point of view” since the mid-1980s, but the internet is giving the niche a strength it never previously knew. Not only is the content female friendly, but so is the access to it: from the privacy of one’s home, anonymously and securely – at least comparatively, since before the internet sex and porn were only commercially available in men-dominated public spaces (cinemas, video stores, bars, brothels, [bookshops]).[3]

Anonymity, security and privacy are all issues taken for granted on the internet. Although they are relative, dependent on legislation and [trust for] service providers, for instance, the perception of their effectiveness has improved the comfort zone for accessing porn. Changes in how porn is

produced, with an emphasis on amateur videos and exhibitionism (the success of cam4cam comes to mind), also brought women closer to porn[4]. When porn grows closer to the domestic sphere, the home, then it grows closer to women, since this is traditionally the sphere of life associated with the feminine. Furthermore, access to pornographic narratives can have a positive impact on an individual's life: the EROTICS-Brazil research established porn as an important medium of sexual knowledge transmission and socialisation, and porn can help a person come to terms with sexual desires, in realising or expressing them[5].

Porn that women like

> Extracted from: Bruno Dallacort Zilli, "A Star is Porn? Internet and a kind of porn women like", *Critically Absent: Women's rights in internet governance*, APC, 2012. https://www.genderit.org/node/3548

James Deen is the screen name of porn actor and director Bryan Sevilla. In his mid-20s and with a "guy-next-door" charm, his performances in heterosexual hardcore scenes have become quite popular among women who consume porn. On 25 July 2011, blogger Emily Heist Moss interviewed Deen, discussing the issues of misogyny in porn and the female attention he has been receiving. Later, on 15 November 2011, he was interviewed in depth by Amanda Hess for the Good Magazine website, which inspired another article about him. Internet communicators had already realised there is something unique about Deen and the attention he is receiving from the female audience. A search for his name on Tumblr shows an interesting aspect of this attention – that many women, some of them young teens, like to watch his scenes and state that this is their first enjoyable porn-watching experience.

Online, women declare that they would like to have sex with the actor, among other fantasies, such as wishing to cook for him. They say they get excited not (only) by his appearance, but by his performance. In the movies, Deen can be seen whispering into actresses' ears, holding them tight in amorous embraces while he penetrates them, and enjoys giving oral sex. On the other hand, he also does a lot of BDSM-themed scenes, where he dominates women and performs rough sex. In some scenes, his partners are "older" women, "cougars" in their 30s and 40s. He has also appeared in at least one scene where the actress performs oral sex on his anus ("rimming"), which is very unusual for male actors in heterosexual scenes.

The diversity Deen brings to porn is that he is neither the “disembodied” penis blindly penetrating female orifices, his physique is not an exaggerated mass of muscles, nor is he afraid to go beyond the boundaries of mainstream heterosexuality, though he doesn’t escape them. He presents a more “romantic” persona – even if his scene partners or the scenes themselves are not intentionally romantic. In this regard, it’s interesting that it is not always his physical attributes that are the focus of feminine attention, even though he is young and comely. It is the alternative his scenes represent to the “grammar” of porn, “speaking” a different language which is attractive to the women who like him.

One way of interpreting what these women are saying is that they are enjoying the subversion of the gender language used in most pornographic narratives. They enjoy the novelty of this women-friendly narrative, a form of resistance to the usual gender hierarchy which is simply rehearsed in mainstream porn. Usually, women are the main focus of objectification and sexualisation. While the male body is just a stand-in for the (presumed) male viewer, the female body is the object of desire around which the narrative is built. But as the “Deen phenomenon” shows, there is porn in which men can be objects of sexual desire for women as well. This fruition of sexuality online is a novelty that cannot be ignored.

Reflection questions

1. What can and should be done to enhance safety online, but at the same time, ensure the facilitation of women’s expression and agency over their sexuality, desire and fantasy?
2. How can we change the way policy makers see porn as harmful and dangerous for women?

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1 Extracted from: Bishakha Datta, “Porn. Panic. Ban”, Global Information Society Watch 2015: Sexual rights and the internet, APC and Hivos, 2015. https://www.giswatch.org/en/sexual-rights/porn-panic-ban

2 Pornhub 2018 Year in Review. https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2018-year-in-review

3 Extracted from: Bruno Dallacort Zilli, “A Star is Porn? Internet and a kind of porn women like”, Critically Absent: Women’s rights in internet governance, APC, 2012. https://www.genderit.org/node/3548

4 There are issues, however, of being able to recognise porn and being able to recognise sexual violence. Video posts on gang rapes or rapes are sometimes mistaken for porn and it is important that we have discussions on what are the tell-tale signs of online content that is in fact sexual violence.

5 Extracted from: Bruno Dallacort Zilli, op. cit.

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