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Emerging lessons from pornography in the pandemic

By David S. Prescott, Kieran McCartan, & Kasia Uzieblo

The first author was reminiscing about experiences at Grateful Dead concerts way back in days gone by. While much of their concert experiences are now legendary, there were two elements in particular that completely changed the way people think about music and its performance. The first were the [spinners](#), who sought out far-flung parts of the arena to dance, seemingly in their own world. Even more thought-provoking were the [deafheads](#), deaf people attending concerts simply for the experience, sometimes holding balloons through which they could feel the vibrations of the music. It all may seem ridiculous from the outside looking in (why attend a concert if you can't see or hear the act?), but the band later created entire sections for them, providing additional speakers for the spinners. And by doing so, the band redefined its actions in response to what they were learning about their followers.

Although it may seem a strange analogy, clearly the pornography industry is also evolving in response to trends in the pandemic era. A recent in-depth examination by [The Economist](#) is fascinating: During the past month, pornography usage at Pornhub (the world's largest site, that offers user data as part of its marketing) has remained 22% higher than average, while significant spikes were noted in various countries with the pandemic's onslaught in March. Spending on porn-related sites has nearly doubled. Traffic on "premium" portions of otherwise free sites is higher than ever. Is this really just about having more time to access porn during shelter-in-place orders or a full lockdown? Additionally, Pornhub's "giving back" (or increasing traffic, depending on your perspective) gave [free access](#) to its premium accounts to some of the most impacted countries during lockdown (including, but not limited to, Italy, Spain, and France). Therefore, not only were people more willing to access pornography during the pandemic they were also more able to do so. All of this raises further questions of



Kieran McCartan, PhD
Chief Blogger



David Prescott, LICSW
Associate Blogger

SAJRT Bloggers' Profile

We are longtime members of ATSA dedicated to furthering the causes of evidenced-based practice, understanding, and prevention in the field of sexual abuse.

The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers is an international, multi-disciplinary organization dedicated to preventing sexual abuse. Through research, education, and shared learning ATSA promotes evidence based practice, public policy, and community strategies that lead to the effective assessment, treatment, and management of individuals who have sexually abused or are risk to abuse.

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where exploitation begins and ends in these circumstances.

At the same time, there are increasing trends where porn performers are engaging in more direct marketing, eschewing directors, and others viewed as middlemen. This involves filming themselves with smartphones and the like and uploading the results to adult social media sites. While economically this makes sense (why lose money to a middleman if you can do without them), it also has the effect of bringing the audience closer to the performer. It is also possible that it creates a kind of authenticity to the experience (something we have blogged about [previously](#)). In the current business model, viewers willing to spend extra can get personalized performances for example, with the performer speaking to them by name, etc.). These trends have led to increased divergence in the market with more [amateur material](#) being produced, [innovations](#) in the production of material, but also an increase in [revenge porn](#) and [recorded sexual abuse](#); therefore, as with other industries, a [reshaping](#) of the pornography industry. At a time when so many people are rightly concerned about abuse, it seems strange that the abuses of revenge porn and related issues of consent have not become more prominent in public dialog.

As we have stated many times throughout the history of this blog, there are many aspects to the debates about pornography by people who have abused and by society beyond. Recalling the well-known therapeutic axiom that one must always “meet the client where they’re at” in treatment, however, it seems that these changes to how sexually explicit media is delivered is worthwhile to understand. Clearly, the emerging structure of sexually explicit adult social media sites demonstrate that there is more to porn than sex acts, just as there can be more to a concert than the music and the partying.

Furthermore, the sheer volume of sexually explicit media being consumed and the money spent (especially when there is already so much free porn) highlights that the desires of people consuming it are more complex than many might have believed in the past. In the end, the theme of viewers wanting to experience some form of connection to the performers, no matter how illusory it may be, is hard to miss. In the case of men who sexually abuse others, it can be easy to miss just how important this theme of connection and relatedness to others can be, especially when their histories of violating connections can be so florid.

We must ask ourselves, as we emerge from lockdown towards whatever the new normal will be, what does all of this mean for the production, use, and consumption of pornography? Will this period be looked back on as a blip, a holding pattern, or a time of redefinition? Thinking about the impact on sex, sexuality, relationships, and paraphilia. Have people discovered, or confirmed, suspicious about their sex and asexuality preferences? How will this impact themselves and others moving forward? We need to try and rationalize the current surge in pornography use as we move towards the new normal, therefore some key questions might be;

- What pornography was I looking at during lockdown?
- How much pornography did I consume at this time? Was it more than before?
- How did my interpersonal and intimate relationships change over lockdown?
- Did the pornography that I looked at change?
- Am I more interested in the new pornography that I am viewing?

- How do I feel about lockdown ending and “normal” relationships resuming?

In the end, we are left with massive societal questions. The same article also discusses how STRASS, the French union for sex workers estimates that out of roughly 35,000 sex workers in France, 1.3 have moved to online activities, and of that only 10 % are making ends meet. While there have been historical assumptions about victimization histories, trafficking, and other coercion into these activities by men, the current situation shows how exploitation of one sort or another appears present at nearly every level of sexually explicit media production. It is impossible to predict where this is all going, but the current trends can teach us something about the people we see in treatment, including both those who have abused and those who have been abused.