

## **The big question that the generation raised on porn must answer**

Porn often shows a submissive woman, stripped of all of her body hair, undergoing ritual humiliation in the name of sexuality, and twentysomethings must ask whether that has wider implications about how our peers view us socially, politically and professionally.



*Sasha Grey, whose porn work was noted for its extreme content. Photo: Getty*

What kind of porn gets you off? Is it the commonest kind, the kind that you download or stream off a website full of "amateur videos", where the woman climaxes seventeen times at the mere sight of the man's throbbing member? Is it the retro kind, where there's a vague attempt at a storyline that involves a pizza delivery, a young college girl who's forgotten her wallet, and a delivery boy with a demonstrably fake tan and a thin moustache who's willing to make a deal?

Perhaps it's the sort you buy with Real Money in a basement in SoHo, where large anoraks are a compulsory dress-code? Could it be 'mummy porn', which is less MILF and more 'naughty stuff you can read on the Tube', the category resurrected by cult erotica novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*? Or is the filth you love firmly ensconced in your head, because the porn available in the outside world seems both severely lacking in sensuous appeal and exploitative of the women who watch and perform in it?

Porn has come under the super-revealing spotlight again in the last few weeks, with a certain EU resolution causing controversy after it was put forward by Dutch MEP Kartika Liotard on International Women's Day. Liotard's mention of porn came under the broader aim to "eliminate gender stereotypes in the EU", which in her resolution involved "a ban on all forms of pornography in the media", including 'the digital field'. Predictably, there was uproar.

What constitutes "freedom" on the internet still remains to be decided. Freedoms may well have been restricted by certain ISPs choosing to block their users' access to illegal downloading site The Pirate Bay last year, in the name of protecting "artistic freedom", or copyright. Many argue that their right to engage with an online article or a public figure on social media outlets like Twitter is restricted by blocking or by comment moderation; still others argue that the writers or celebrities themselves should have the freedom to protect themselves from possible harassment.

In the online realm, which still remains fairly unregulated, people tend to feel strongly that they should be able to access anything that's going except in the most dire of circumstances, such as child abuse. In the case of porn, most attacked Liotard's resolution on this basis - the majority of Huffington Post readers voted that it was "an absurd attack on liberty and freedom of expression".

Needless to say, the vaguely worded EU resolution is not out to rip the downloaded porn from your hard drive; its use of the term "the digital realm" is more likely to be because most printed newspapers and magazines are now moving online. Considering the nature of the widespread international reaction to Liotard's proposal, its adoption is unlikely - and even if it were, in all likelihood nothing practical would change.

But the fact that it makes the connection between "gender stereotypes" and porn is interesting. It speaks of wider schisms in society and the feminist community: the "sex-positive" feminists who make porn themselves and the ones who call them "fauxminists" as a result; the school-age girls who report porn-led pressure to get Brazilians and pose naked for their peers on smartphone cameras; those who see female porn participants as empowered workers exercising a smart choice in a sexually oriented capitalist society, and those who see them as fitting into a wider framework of gender-specific disrespect and objectification.

Where is the direct connection between "gender stereotyping" and porn? As always, it's very unclear. Iceland recently tabled its own motion to ban pornography altogether, including the proposal to make it

illegal to purchase porn with Icelandic credit cards, in order to "protect children" from the "violent imagery" that has become increasingly common.

As one Icelandic minister argued, searching for porn no longer leaves you with a picture of "a naked woman in a country field"; often, even the first available video will be fifty shades darker in content. Again, emotions have run high about the possibility of censorship, or, as some opponents strongly put it, "authoritarian regimes" which involve themselves unnecessarily in their subjects' sex lives.

But Iceland is an unsurprising place for this sort of discussion to come up in government, considering that they have already banned the purchase of sex, and strip clubs. They have an excellent record in gender equality: almost half of their parliamentarians are women and they have a female prime minister - a lesbian prime minister no less. Julie Bindel pointed out that it was the first country in the world to ban strip clubs for feminist reasons, rather than religious ones. Could there be a correlation between a society that is fairer for women overall and the restriction of sex work and porn?

Perhaps not, because countries which rank higher in gender equality than Iceland, such as Germany, do not share these laws. Many have argued that while we concentrate on sex, other strategies which are proven to balance out inequality - like the provision of free and accessible childcare during working hours - are unjustly ignored. Still others balk at the idea of patronising adult women by telling them that their career choices in the sex industry were merely dictated by social brainwashing. And most of us recognise that, even if attempts were made to legislate against people accessing pornographic content online, the power of the net and human capability is such that production would just be driven underground anyway. From cave pictures to Playboy, people have always sought out filthy fodder.

Those of us who are in the generation raised on porn face these questions regularly. Now that the most-accessed forms of porn often show a submissive woman, stripped of all of her body hair, undergoing ritual humiliation in the name of sexuality, we are forced to ask whether that has wider implications about how our peers view us socially, politically and professionally.

Even while we make steps towards eliminating words like "bitch" and "whore" from acceptable conversation, they make a cyclical return to the playground as school children (most of them much savvier than their parents at negotiating online filters) watch porn. At our fingertips is an instant world of any perversion you can think of. But what's more worrying is that the norm in porn increasingly gravitates towards the violent; we'd be naive to suggest that at some level, this doesn't contribute to a wider perception of women.

In the last few years, it has seemed difficult to encourage objective discussion of pornography away from media hysterics, or the rhetoric of censorship. But it's important to discuss the visuals which many access daily: the woman screaming in the throes of another faked orgasm while a silent man looks on, or the multiple penetrations of a gagged woman in the middle of the floor; or the sky-rocketing popularity of 'choking' (applying pressure to the neck of a usually female partner) during sex scenes.

It's important because, as most people in their twenties will remind you, internet porn is here to stay. And now that it's definitely part of the status quo, it should be as open to challenge as any other social institution.

Rhiannon and Holly - New Statesman