

## Adolescence and Pornography on the Net

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### Abstract

In this article, we will address the question of adolescents' access to pornography on the Internet. We'll cover several facets of such encounters: the 'accidental' encounter, when adolescents are confronted with inopportune images, advertising or spam with pornographic content; the 'spectator' encounter, when adolescents actively search for videos or pictures related to sex; and finally the 'actor' encounter, when adolescents perform, alone or with others, pornographic acts on the Net. We'll use examples to consider the stakes of these early virtual encounters with adult sexuality in relation to adolescent development and the expression of their own developing sexuality.

**Key words:** *pornography, adolescents, Internet, sexuality*

**I**ronically, in France, an adolescent can legally have intercourse at 15 years of age, but cannot see a pornographic movie before the age of majority. Typically, the difference between erotica and pornography is perceived quantitatively—in pornography, close-ups of sexual organs proliferate in a staged production, while in erotica the genitalia are masked. In reality, for Bonnet (2003), 'the problem of pornography is not linked to the amount of flesh shown, but rather how it is presented.' X-rated images not only show skin, they actually make it invisible in the way they present it.' Sex is shown like a performance, a limitless succession of acts. It's no longer about people but about flesh and bodies. Eye contact, which plays a fundamental role in relationships, no longer exists, rather the focus is completely on the sexual organs of the other person. These findings lead us to explore the question of adolescents' access to Internet pornography.

Out of 3.5 million Internet searches carried out under parental control software (Norton), Symantec (2009) lists the most commonly searched key words, immediately following social networks, 'sex' and 'porn' are at the top. 'Boobs' is in 26<sup>th</sup> place, 'pussy' in 72<sup>nd</sup>, 'girls' in 81<sup>st</sup>, 'naked girls' in 86<sup>th</sup>, 'naked' in 88<sup>th</sup>, 'nude' and 'playboy' in 89<sup>th</sup>, and 'xxx' in 93<sup>rd</sup>. According to UNESCO (2006), out of the 1000 sites most visited by adolescents, 10% are pornographic sites

directed at adults only. Finally, a self-declarative study led by Haza and Grolleau (Association de Recherche Clinique sur l'Adolescence (ARCAD), 2010, involving 2000 high-school students of the Charente Maritime region) revealed that it is mainly boys that surf pornographic sites on the Internet. In grade 6, 60% have never seen images of nude men or women. In grade nine, only 28%! Twice as many girls as boys have never seen these images and six times more boys have seen them frequently. Moreover, those who frequently view pornography are mainly in eighth grade (5% in sixth grade, 8% in ninth grade and 12% in eighth grade), which can correspond to the start of puberty and a discovery of the body and sexuality facilitated by the Internet. Youth list the pornographic sites they know (without having necessarily visited them): "youporn, pornweb, sites lesbiens, mrsex, mypornnation, porntube, redlist, prostitution sites, scatophilia, sensualsex, sexforever, sadomaso, xxxporn, xxl...". When these images are seen by young adolescents, they are said to be particularly shocking (pornography (Kâma-Sûtra), zoophile, hard, striptease, SM, rape, fellatio, fistfucking, etc.).

Few studies question the impact of the Internet on adolescents' sexual behavior. It would appear that only a few experience a traumatic impact on their sexuality. It all depends on whether the sexual material is actively sought out by the

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user or if the user is suddenly confronted with it—those who are more fragile are most likely to be traumatized or confused. However, the adolescent's young age and the variety of pornographic scenes encountered (double penetration and threesomes), raises questions. Crude pornographic scenes become what excite the imagination. Sexual organs are shown devoid of their purpose of pleasuring another and at the expense of a relationship with another person. Before even knowing what they're looking for, before even having developed the desire for another person, adolescents act out the pornographic scenarios they've seen, as though they are obliged to 'try out sodomy and double penetration' or 'sodomy with a bottle the first time' (words of female high school students).

In this article, 'accidental' encounters refer to adolescents being confronted with inopportune pornographic images, advertisements or spam. To illustrate, let us consider the case of an eight year old boy: carrying out his research on nut-bearing trees for his natural science class, what a surprise he must have had when he was confronted with sex organs while looking for 'nuts.' This type of encounter can upset the child or adolescent when he is not expecting it. This sort of content, however, is easily and frequently found by all in advertising (not just for lingerie, but for food, shower gel, kitchen appliances, etc.). There is currently a reliance on pornographic images in videos, on the Internet, and in advertisements. Bonnet (2003) states, 'there's something indecent about the way everyone is forced to parade themselves.' Images using sexual positions are frequent (for example the Magnum chocolate bar conjures up images of fellatio; 'the housewife Maive loves to be laid'). So, viewing pornographic pictures, (for Bonnet, actions without words, silent rituals), always presents a real confrontation, particularly for adolescent students. Finally, pornographic content appears in spam and other pop-up ads that suggest you 'enlarge your penis' or 'improve your sexual performance', when they are not directly circulating pornographic videos on masturbation or bestiality. The adolescent (or child) is inevitably unprepared for these shocking encounters and this can result in questions, worries, anxiety and nightmares.

The 'spectator' encounter can be defined as adolescents who are actively seeking out videos or images showing sexual content. Typically, it's been fairy tales, novels or movies that have provided insight into the ways in which relationships between lovers or sexual partners play out. Adolescents are passionately interested with images and stories that teach them about how to enter into a relationship with another person, especially during puberty. It is a time of curiosity, desire, fantasies and dreams related to their bodies' new capabilities. Today, they can easily hunt for this information

on the Internet. It can be found, for example, in 'the chat room for under 18 year olds who don't want to be bugged by their parents' on the site Skyrock.com; or in cam to cam (Webcam) discussions where the first words can be 'Peek a boo, want to see my cock?'. It is in these types of 'active' encounters where we find many eighth grade students (ARCAD, 2010). Adult sexuality is difficult to represent as a carnal act as well as an act of desire. Grade eight students entering adolescence and puberty are confronted with images that show the abilities of their new genitalia now capable of reproduction. Thus, they pass directly from fantasy to seeing it actually acted out. Experiencing emotions linked to real scenes may seem less troubling than being faced with new and incomprehensible or embarrassing challenges associated with the onset of puberty. The externally generated fantasy can raise fewer feelings of guilt. The Internet can therefore be a source of reassurance in relation to sexuality and the pubescent body. Virtual relationships also mean that real physical relationships that awaken sexual urges can be avoided. In a way, 'it's about being attracted to violent images in order to find a path to express' (Marty & Houssier, 2009) the stresses of their inner world and of puberty. Adolescents replace their blossoming sexuality with images of sex; pornography becomes an exciting, hidden form of sex (Marty, 2011), hiding and flaunting human sexuality at the same time. Moreover, contrary to sex, this encounter with Internet images doesn't need to be postponed, and the need to respond to the sexual urge can be satisfied through an image. To illustrate, let's take 13 year old Steve, who, during a consultation, shows a pornographic manga video on his phone. Thanks to 'Hentai', Steve can put his burgeoning sexuality into words. Steve is a boy just entering puberty; his father committed suicide when he was six. Entering into adolescence, Steve is in search of his paternal origins, and he is trying to understand what his father did, to reassemble the memories scattered among his family, to break certain taboos surrounding this violent death and the blurry image of this 'hanging without a face.' At this point in therapy, Steve finds himself facing aggressive sexual urges that overcome him and bring to mind his idealized father. He is seized by dark thoughts, thinks of suicide himself, and is questioning issues of sexuality. 'How can it be that his sister was born just 15 days after his father's suicide if his parents were already separated?' 'Why do girls love jocks while he is skinny?' Thanks to the sex scenes depicted in videos, Steve manages to think about his parents' sexuality, to talk about how they met and of their life as a couple. In this case, we can hypothesize a reenactment of a primitive scene, the adolescent watching these pornographic images is like the child watching what is happening in the parental bedroom. Steve is capable of filtering through these images in order

to find the answers and the foundation to his family history and his origins. Let's tell the story of another passive encounter, that of 12 year old Alice, who comes to consultation after an 'event': her cousin of the same age showed her a video of her sexual encounters with two 14 year old boys. Alice, having questions about sexuality, found herself, without any filters, face-to-face with these images showing her own cousin, practically her double, in the middle of having sex with two boys in a pornographic setting. Alice found it difficult to speak about these videos to the adults in her life, torn between her feelings of loyalty to her cousin and her sense of alienation with regards to the video—her confusion manifested itself in problems at school and at home (difficulty sleeping, aggressivity, etc.). Pornographic sex scenes collide with the cousin's childish theories (sub-conscious hypotheses about where babies come from). She believes she is pregnant and almost hysterically confides in Alice: 'I'm worried about the baby I'm carrying because I vomited blood.' Since seeing the video, Alice is afraid of boys: 'What if they want to do the same thing with me?' 'They come up to me and hug me and say "my little Libra!"' Seeing these pornographic images upsets the developmental process that Alice is going through, imposing adolescent (indeed adult pornographic) fantasies on a child's sexuality. The scenes raise questions in Alice that she is too young at this time to process. One year later, Alice explains: 'There you go! I've got my period, I'm big now, I can colour my hair, I can drink a spritzer and drive a scooter now!' Sexual preoccupations do not dominate even though a premature and pornographic sexual encounter occurred. The onset of puberty for Alice has left room for personal expressions that are removed from the sexual arena.

Finally, 'actor' encounters show adolescents acting out pornography on the Internet, either alone or with others, in order to be watched or looked at (as on Facebook). For example, Dedipix, where pictures are posted to be commented on. The more suggestive the picture, the more comments will be posted, feeding adolescent narcissism. Another example of an 'actor' encounter: adolescents filming themselves in pornographic scenes alone, with others, in heterosexual or homosexual scenarios, and circulating them on the Internet (as found in 'happy slapping' or 'skin party' sites). These activities raise questions about the lasting impact of periods of adolescent experimentation and discovery, the memories of which used to exist only in one's imagination. As Tisseron states (2007), those adolescents with fragile egos who fear being humiliated or being excluded or rejected by others can act out or adopt indecent behaviours because of these fears. Finally, adolescents enjoy assembling and editing scenes and settings. With photo editing software, sex organs can be enlarged, modified, or enhanced as the editor wishes.

An example of an 'actor' encounter involves Lea, a young 16 year old girl, who went to court for circulating pornographic videos via laptop and is banned from high school. Lea tells the story of how she lived in the Ivory Coast, for seven years (repatriated six years ago), and experienced a coup d'état and three years of war with curfews and gunfire. Since her return, she no longer trusts anyone, not even her parents. She is afraid of losing control, hitting others, or saying nasty things. She keeps getting into trouble as a result of her distress. She has recurrent suicidal thoughts, thinks about 'the gun, the balcony and the medications in her parents' bedroom.' Lea says she 'falls for boy after boy' because she 'needs affection', is afraid of being alone, and always needs to be with others. Her father thinks that she is continually 'going out and getting laid' and threatens to kill her: 'I'll beat you to your grave.' She has felt completely rejected by him for the past two years. Recently Lea filmed herself during a sexual act. She completely plays down the fact that this video was circulated in the neighbouring high schools. Lea, after a suicide attempt failed to get her parents' attention, could find no other way to make adults react than through provocation using pornography. The act had more to do with self-inflicted violence than sex or pornography. The situation is clearly linked to the family's history, and to paternal rejection as well as a relationship with a withdrawn and subdued mother. In this situation, pornography has come along as a way to endanger oneself, as an expression of poor self-esteem and body image, and as a way to shock and force a dialog or a confrontation with adults. Here, the 'actor' pornography is really a symptom of deeper adolescent troubles.

So, adolescents produce and consume pornographic material. Access and distribution of it affects each one differently and finds meaning in relation to each one's personal story. When faced with pornographic images, they are taking part in an abbreviated version of the imaginary world of sex and love. Some adolescents worry about not being able to measure up, about not being able to reproduce what they see, which can cause mental blocks or bring on early experimentation. Desire and fantasy are blurred by the sometimes premature acting out of pornographic scenarios in which adolescents conform to codes of a new sexuality that sometimes includes scenes of rape and violence. The "Enquête Santé" (2010) reminds us that the average age of intercourse for the first time has not changed (16 years 3 months) but fellatio now starts at an earlier age, creating new ways of relating to various forms of sexuality.

Education at an early age about manipulation and transformation of images sensitizes young people to the need to critically evaluate the authenticity of what is presented to

them. In this way they can question these pornographic images without making them into a model of normal sexual behavior. As well, games that make use of pseudonyms and avatars allow youth to regain some modesty, reintroducing the gradual revealing of oneself that takes place in new encounters. The role of adults appears to be important in putting these 'taboo' and sometimes embarrassing images into words, and in re-injecting a relational aspect into these acts. As in daily life, youth express their need to be supported and supervised by adults in the twists and turns and the immensity of the Internet (ARCAD, 2010). Talking with them about sexuality and answering their questions gives adults the opportunity to participate in their learning about, and integration of, loving and respectful relationships above and beyond the raw act of sex. Adolescents therefore need to be with adults that will allow them to find themselves as their blossoming sexuality develops and to filter what they might see while on their own on the Internet. Parents cannot

prevent these encounters, but they can reduce them, give them perspective, indeed eliminate them by transforming them into a medium for discussion.

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