

[Tech Support](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/tech-support)

Relationships in the digital age

by Peg Streep

What Porn Does to Intimacy

*3 studies find that explicit material can do more harm than most people think.*

*Published on July 16, 2014 by* [*Peg Streep*](http://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/peg-streep) *in* [*Tech Support*](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/tech-support)

The rapid proliferation of [pornography](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/pornography) is one of the digital age’s legacies; some 40 million people in the United States visit porn websites regularly, many of them emerging or young adults. Popular media have capitalized on cautionary tales about porn [addiction](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/addiction) and stories of boyfriends objectifying their girlfriends and wanting them to behave like porn stars. But studies confirm that the preponderance of young men—and slightly less than half of women—thinks that watching sexually explicit material is okay.

That’s what Spencer B. Olmstead and his colleagues found when they asked college students about the use of pornography in future [romantic relationships](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/relationships): 70.8 percent of men and 45.5 percent of women thought they would watch. In contrast, only 22.3 percent of men and 26.3 percent of women thought pornography had no role in a romantic partnership.

Men and women tend to disagree on two issues: How porn is watched (alone, in groups, with a sexual partner); and how often it is watched. As Michael Kimmel reported in his 2008 book *Guyland*, young men often watch porn with their peers and for different reasons than older men. Kimmel writes that “guys tend to like the extreme stuff, the double penetrations and humiliating scenes. They watch it together with guys and they make fun of the women in the scene.” In contrast, older men with more experience either watch by themselves or with a partner, and with what Kimmel calls “wistfulness” about their younger selves; they tend to prefer material “where the women look like they are filled with desire and experience pleasure.”

The Olmstead study found that women’s concerns had more to do with whether consumption of porn was limited than whom it was watched with. Men tend to think that watching porn has only positive consequences.

As reported by Nathaniel Lambert and others in a review of studies, women whose partners watched porn regularly thought less of those partners and saw porn as more of a threat to the stability of their relationship. On the other hand, other studies have shown that young men and women alike think that sexually explicit material can help them explore their [sexuality](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sex) and adds “spice” to what they do in bed.

Is watching pornography really as benign as people think? The following three studies reveal that it has a greater effect on relationships than those we usually discuss.

What Porn Does to Intimacy

**1. Porn-free relationships are stronger, with a lower rate of** [**infidelity**](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/infidelity)**.**

That’s what Amanda Maddox and her colleagues found in a study of men and women, ages 18 to 34, who were in romantic relationships. The researchers measured the levels of negative communication, relationship adjustment, dedication or interpersonal commitment, sexual satisfaction, and infidelity. In their study, 76.8 percent of men and 34.6 percent of women looked at sexually explicit material alone; 44.8 percent reported viewing it with partners. They found that people who didn’t view *any* porn had *lower* levels of negative communication, were more committed to the relationship, and had higher sexual satisfaction and relationship adjustment. Their rate of infidelity was *at least half* of those who had watched sexual material alone *and* with their partners. But people who *only* watched porn with their partners were more dedicated to the relationship and more sexually satisfied than those who watched alone.

**2. Watching porn diminishes relationship commitment.**

What these researchers discovered is that watching porn reminds you of all the potential sexual partners out there, which in turn lowers your dedication to the person you’re *actually* involved with. It also leads you to swap out the person who’s actually [lying](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/deception) in bed with you for some fantasy person you’ve never met (and probably never will).

Does that sound healthy?

Nathaniel Lambert, Sesen Negash and others conducted five separate experiments to find out. In the first, they asked participants, age 17 to 26, who were in relationships (as long as three years and as brief as two months) about their porn consumption and measured levels of commitment. They found that porn consumption lowered commitment in both men and women, but with a stronger effect on men.

In their second study, they had independent observers watch videos of couples performing an interactive task—one partner was blind-folded and had to draw something while the other gave instructions. Among the observers, lower commitment was observed among porn users.

The third study only tested participants who had consumed porn. They had half the group give up porn for three weeks. The other half was asked to give up their favorite food, but were allowed to watch porn. The result? Those who had abstained from sexually explicit material showed increased commitment to the relationship at the end of the three weeks.

The last two studies focused on the effect of greater attentiveness to alternatives on potential infidelity and infidelity itself. And yes, people who watched porn were more likely to engage in [flirting](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/flirting) (and more) outside their relationships in one experiment; and more likely to cheat and hook-up in the other.

What Porn Does to Intimacy

**3. The fantasy alternative leads to real-world cheating.**

In another study, Andrea Mariea Gwinn, Nathaniel Lambert, and others further explored the [nature](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/environmental-psychology) of the other alternatives imaginatively offered up by pornography. They suggested two possibilities: First, that seeing physically attractive and sexually available partners on screen may heighten a person’s perceptions of his own possible partners. And second, that porn may make the idea of multiple sexual partners more appealing—another wound to a committed relationship.

And that’s exactly what they found.

In one study, the researchers found that people who thought about porn they’d watched reported having better alternatives to their current relationship than those who didn’t. A second study showed that, over time, exposure to porn was a robust predictor of infidelity.

More strikingly, the [team](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork) found that both thinking about possible partners and acting on the impulse to find those alternatives operated separately from dissatisfaction with one's current relationship and partner. In other words, even though one's own pasture may be plenty green enough, just the thought of a greener one can be enough to send one roving.

You might want to keep that in mind if you’ve been watching the hard stuff or if you've become inured to seeing your partner just flip open his laptop "just for fun.”

Pornography is not as benign as you think, especially when it comes to romantic relationships.

***Copyright© Peg Streep 2014***

***VISIT ME ON***[***FACEBOOK***](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/social-networking)***:***[***www.Facebook.com/PegStreepAuthor***](http://www.facebook.com/PegStreepAuthor)

Olmstead,Spenser B., Sesen N Negash, Kay Pasley, and Frank D. Fincham, “Emerging Adults’ Expectations for Pornography Use in the Context of Future Committed Relationships: A Qualitative Study,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (2013), 42, 625-635.

Kimmel, Michael. *Guyland*: *The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.

Maddox, Amanda, Galena K, Rhoades, and Howard J.Markman,” Viewing Sexually-Explicit Materials Alone and Together: Associations with Relationship Quality,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* (April 2011), 40, no. 2, 441-448.

Lambert, Nathaniel M. and Sesen Negash, Tyler F.Stillman, Spencer B. Olmstead, and Frank M. Fincham, “A Love That Doesn’t Last: Pornography Consumption and Weakened Commitment to One’s Romantic Partner,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* (2012), vol.31, no.4, 410-438.

Gwinn, Andrea Mariea, Nathaniel M. Lambert, Frank D. Fincham, and Jon K,Maner, “Pornography, Relationship Alternatives, and Intimate Extradyadic Behavior,” *Social Psychological and* [*Personality*](http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/personality) *Science*, (2013), vol.4, no. 6, 699-704.