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## Pornography and Self-Promoting Social Media: It's Everyone's Problem

*By Marshall Ballantine-Jones*

I discovered something quite tragic when completing my PhD research with Sydney University's Medicine faculty. Young people were unable to stop using pornography, even after my education program persuaded them to reduce its use, reject its messages, and desire better behaviours. Pornography is highly addictive. Indeed, neurologists have observed that long-term consumers had brains resembling drug addicts. It is worse for those who are exposed at a younger age, which is about 11.5 years now.

It has been well documented for years now that pornography alters behaviours, attitudes, and well-being. In addition to addictive behaviours, sexual preoccupation, and objectifying others, users have reduced enjoyment of alternative activities, impaired memory and lower academic skills. Their sexual system is rewired, and in addition to profoundly altered desires, the brain becomes desensitised to the pleasure it offers, as it becomes hypersensitised to triggers and memories. As users lose control over their behaviours, so they lose self-control over other areas of life. These are facts.

But pornography isn't just about the user; it is not merely a private matter. It has far-reaching effects. It hurts relationships. I meet many spouses who experience deep hurt and betrayal upon discovering their partner went elsewhere for sexual fulfillment. Besides being demeaned and rejected, discovering years of lies and the abandonment of the 'forsaking all others' pledge, is crushing. Even if forgiveness is an option, there are practical challenges to confront, for example, loss of libido and altered sexual drive. Over 50% of male pornography addicts experience erectile dysfunction in real-life sex.

Pornography causes social harm. The common excuse 'but it doesn't harm anyone' is pure (or impure) rubbish. Pornography requires production and supply. Vast profits are generated globally, with some estimates suggesting 96 billion a year. Very little of that money goes to the 'performers'. They are highly exploited, under-paid, subjected to humiliating and

harmful activities. To exploit their circumstances for personal gratification is dehumanizing, unconscionable, and unloving. Many performers later regret the catalogue of content they made, yet since the internet keeps a permanent record, their past enslaves them. None of this could happen without a private consumer. At a general level, mainstream media mirrors the 'edgy' progress of pornography. Movies, tv-shows, music videos, advertising and fashion follow the trends set by pornography. Our young people are saturated with messages and influence to be sexualised. Unsurprisingly, women are the major losers in this social order, since the social tide increasingly pressures them to look and act sexually. The correlation between pornography, child-sexual abuse and domestic violence is emerging in the literature.

For the church, pornography is crippling. It is spiritual cancer. For those who use pornography, it is a perpetual compromise of our basic calling to love. It condones hypocrisy, violates self-control, and stifles prayer. It removes hearts from the spiritual battle we are called to engage in. At a corporate level, it deflates commitment, depletes ministry, increases marriage breakdowns, and hurts parenting. I wonder if this explains why so many churches struggle to get their men's ministries off first base.

Just who is viewing pornography? Studies suggest about 70% of males and 20% of females regularly view pornography (less for people who did not have the internet in their adolescence). Data describing Christian populations suggests similar frequency, including Christian leaders. There are many theories as to why people view pornography. Some have said it fills a void, compensates for deeper hurts, and acts like a soothing salve. That may be true superficially. But we are sexual beings, and internet mobile devices, coupled with ease of private access, makes it easy to get hooked.

Is this issue even relevant for Christian communities? If you have never been affected by pornography, it may feel irrelevant.

I know many Christians, including senior leaders, who simply can't accept this is important, because it doesn't affect them. I wish to persuade that person that this absolutely DOES affect them, perhaps more so than the user.

Let me explain. If 7/10 men in our ranks struggled with the temptation to use pornography – that is an enormous proportion. Even 2/10 of females is a large number (especially since around 60% of church populations are female). Trying to advance a loving, joyful, faithful, mission-minded community with that volume of 'strugglers' is like a football team playing a final with half the team suffering from the flu. It places undue pressure on the spiritually healthy to carry the slack, whilst giving huge advantage to the opposition. Then, in order to recover a healthy church, we have to detract from the main game to apply remedial therapy. Since the Bible clearly calls on Christians to 'carry each other's burdens' (Gal 6:2), it is a 'healthy' Christian's duty to support a struggling brother or sister. If some of the members of your church experience genuine addictive behaviours, then they need you. They can't help themselves.

Another challenging discovery in my PhD research was the complicating effect social media has on people. The more someone used self-promoting social media apps (like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok), the more they developed narcissistic behaviours. Narcissism, which in essence is about the degree of confidence and admiration one has about themselves, distorts self-esteem and morality. It excuses immoral behaviours, falsely amplifies self-entitlement, and relegates friendships and relationships to a 'you exist for me' economy. There is significant cross-over between frequent social-media self-promoting behaviours, and online sexualised behaviours (like pornography and sexting). And although only 2/10 females use pornography, a much higher percentage uses social media. Indeed, for younger women, nearly 100% use Instagram and Snap Chat. Dr Rose Cairns has described a recent phenomenon where there has been an explosion of self-harm poisoning amongst adolescent girls since around 2012. This, incidentally, was when the smartphone and Instagram were first getting accessed by young females.

Thus social media is an additional challenge for the church. We are called to be Christ-like (1 Cor 11:1), which at the least means having humility (Phi 2:8) and self-control (1 Peter 4:7). Obsessive behaviours about how others see me will counter godliness. So, if pornography is successfully appealing to our men's sexuality, social media seems to be unhelpfully appealing

to our females' desire for social acceptance. Either way, we're in a bind, as all too many of us know.

So, what should we be doing?

**COMMUNICATION.** It is vital we create good narratives, challenge poor narratives, and inject evidence-based education. We need to upskill about the problems and risks associated with pornography, the internet, social media, and narcissism. We need to advance education about good sexuality, healthy relationships, improving the common good. Lastly, we should advance knowledge about God's will, from the scriptures, for living as his disciples. Christ renews the mind, and his gospel teaches us to say 'no' to ungodliness. This starts with repentance and faith.

**CONTAINMENT.** We need to surround ourselves with protection from temptation and unwanted behaviours. Restrictions and the removal of triggers are strategies to protect the unexposed and contain those at risk. Password protections, parental locks, router limitations, online programs like Covenant Eyes and Family Zone, or Wi-Fi devices like Koala Safe, are tools that can help. But also, wise practices like only using internet devices in public spaces at home, and not late at night, are 'no-brainers'. Alcoholics remove immediate access when recovering, so why not something similar for online behaviours?

**COOPERATION.** People need to regularly communicate with their peers about these matters. Regardless of our age, our perception of what is normal to others is highly influential. Regular transparent engagement, with shared critical thinking, challenges these narratives, while constructing accountability around and between these friendships. Whether you need others to help you, or you can help others – everyone can help.

**CLINICAL SUPPORT.** As mentioned, pornography is addictive. If attempts to recover have failed, then get help from a therapist! They are specialists – experienced at helping people change.

Ultimately, our churches are at 'Ground Zero' because of pornography and self-promoting social media. It is critical we all recognise the facts, perceive the threats, and embrace activities that advances solutions for a healthy, vibrant, and faithful church.

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