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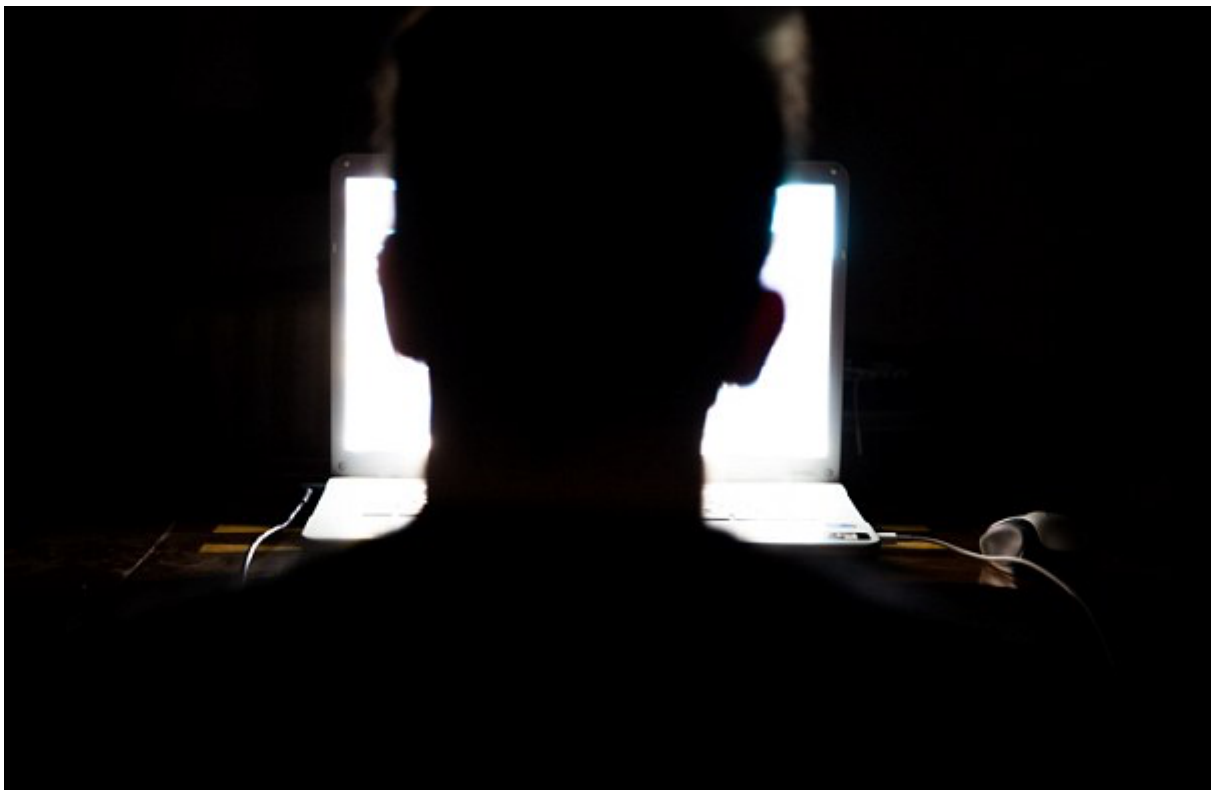
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Does Watching Porn Lead To Prostitution ?



Adam Popescu Jun 8, 2017 · 9 min read

(An unpublished story from my days reporting on the darker side of entertainment for Playboy <http://www.playboy.com/articles/seven-adult-film-stars-on-leaving-porn> Several magazines and newspapers said this was ‘too dark’ to print—you decide)



The stereoscopic glow is hypnotic. The bodies writhing on-screen — inches away — the viewer tumescently pumping until relief and release. But is there ever true relief for an addict, or is it a continuous loop chasing a dragon that will never be caught?

From screens to strip clubs and escort sites, streets and sets, the world’s oldest profession will be around as long as we are. Sex on film has never been more accepted. Some call porn unbridled feminism, others label it misogynist subjugation. But while we judge from afar, *sex workers* remain largely unheard. And the link between that work, and what many of us consider harmless digital voyeurism, may have dangerous consequences.

mentality on apps like Tinder. Some claim a darker connection: it's causing men to create the fantasies they see online, behavior forcing women into prostitution.



In speaking to half a dozen current and former escorts, strippers and performers, I met women who wanted intensely to relate their stories. Women still in the industry were vehement in defending their chosen profession. But the women who've left — women who could have slunk away, kept their shame private, and never resurfaced — many of their stories sounded tragically similar.

“I was forced to do the videos,” says Jaimee Johnson, a former adult actress who now runs the [Sisters of the Streets](#) nonprofit in California.

From her experience, watching porn alters a viewer's expectations and behavior, which can be fatal for the people serving those fantasies. “Basically, it's a cycle of exploitation over and over.”

Far from the empowered feminist ideal, most performers are working against their free will, she continues. Porn teaches a customer what they want, and often when they pay for sex, they're looking to recreate the fantasies they saw online. And the instant gratification of the web makes it all so very simple.

“It's easy to hop on Backpage and call a pro and pay her to fulfill a fantasy,” Johnson says. “Especially if she's offering a porn star experience. A lot of times, that leads to violence because a girl becomes uncomfortable with what he wants to do. And those differences lead to violence.”

The sheer number of places to serve sex online makes it more common to engage in any and every act that makes money — web cams, stripping, escorting. In this game, she continues, “porn agents and directors are the traffickers and predators because they make you perform sexually for them for free. Everyone does it.”

A runaway at 18, “Maggie” traveled 3,000 miles to California to escape her family. Bipolar, her parents wanted her institutionalized. So Maggie fled, making it all the way to the coast. Enticed by what she felt was the glamour of a fast life and quick money, she started filming. And kept filming. She shot a staggering 135 scenes in twelve months.

“It didn’t pan out the way I thought it would,” Maggie, now in her late 20s, told me. “I remember being on-set and bleeding and people saying ‘cut, clean up the blood,’ then they kept going. ‘Stop for 30 seconds, wipe off the blood, go.’”

Like Johnson, Maggie said she saw many girls working on set “that clearly didn’t want to be there.” And when they weren’t performing the right way, watching porn would be used as an instructional aide.

Maggie got into the life for the reasons that perhaps sound most cliché and strange but often ring the truest — abuse, desperation, and the desire for stability. But after only a year, she was overshot and worn out. So she turned to the clubs, spending two and a half years serving tricks inside and on the street.

In her world, porn agents and managers were de facto pimps, just like in Johnson’s, and she didn’t differentiate sex on-screen or off either. Sex for money is just that, she says. “It doesn’t matter if the camera is rolling or not.” And the force, coercion, brutality — all the hallmarks of trafficking — were accentuated by celluloid.

“I experienced a lot of violence within porn,” she said. “It seemed like people I met through escorting had certain ideas what they wanted to do, maybe from personal stuff, maybe from porn.”

Maggie managed to leave the game eight years ago. She’s been sober seven years now, and works in real estate. “I have a house, family, child, husband.” She pauses, laughs lightly. “A lot of normal stuff.”

But the now born-again Christian gets sullen when recalling friends who weren’t so lucky. “I don’t meet any survivors. No one really gets out, they either die or stay addicted. In and out, in and out. Nobody realizes what happens when someone gets into the industry.”

“It All Felt Wrong”

Harmony Grillo travels to over 170 strip clubs a year. She walks behind the velvet rope, past plush couches and crushed velvet VIP, passing out lip gloss and jewelry to women like her — or at least the woman she *used* to be.

For two years, she danced in clubs in West L.A., showered with money nightly, enough to numb the trauma of abandonment. It was an easy fix — for a time. But the Venice native was living two lives: student by day, stripper after hours. And she was still caught up in the same pattern of abuse, both at home and at work.

“It all felt wrong,” she remembers. At that moment, in a parking lot just a stone’s throw from LAX, “I told myself I would never strip again. And I didn’t.”

Grillo ended up graduating from UCLA with an MA in social work. In 2003, buoyed by her newfound path and abstinence, she founded [Treasures](#), a 501(c)3 focused on rehabilitation for women trapped by exploitation and despair. Women the masses write off — women she believed could be healed. And she started going to strip clubs to find them.

“Because of all the things I’ve gone through, all of the darkness, losing hope, life, men, it’s easy to believe the lies that all you’re worth is what you can do sexually,” says [Crissy Moran, an ex-porn star](#) who Grillo began mentoring in 2007. “It’s easy to fall into that. That’s not the truth.”

Grillo has helped dozens like Moran, women still in the business and others looking for a way out. By all rights, her story is one of success, complete with a prince charming, marriage, family, and an angelic little girl who looks up to her mommy. She’s appeared on ABC’s Nightline, in glossy mags, even penned a memoir. She didn’t have to invoke the sex worker stigma, but like Johnson and Maggie, her calling is to help those that the masses have written off — because she’s been one of them.

“Porn is often used by traffickers and johns to groom women,” she says, as high as 80% of women who’ve been trafficked. “Many of these women are then filmed without their consent, content that is then uploaded to the web where the cycle continues. Often, footage and images of prostituted women and girls is used as blackmail by traffickers.”

Numbers are hard to confirm. A 2003 study [published](#) by the Journal of Trauma Practice interviewed 854 prostituted women across 9 countries, and found that 47% reported that they were upset by customers trying to make them perform what the customer had seen in porn. In the US, 41% claimed they were forced to perform acts against their will, acts their tormentors viewed in porn, and were attempting to emulate. About half were then forced to have that degradation filmed, echoing Grillo’s experience.

The [National Human Trafficking Resource Center](#) claims there were 2,678 reported cases of sex trafficking in [2015](#), and over 19,000 cases since 2007. This many not sound like an epidemic, but these are only *reported* numbers. Most incidents aren’t. Just to become a statistic means arrest, capture, conviction, stigma, a long and arduous process barely scratching the problem.

Grillo, like the others I spoke to, thinks that the key ingredient is addiction — viewer addiction. You don’t have to cruise for sex on a corner to be involved, clicking a clip is all it takes to start the process.

Hilton used an MRI scan to observe which areas of the brain lit up when a sexual image was presented. In his tests, when the brain watches porn and becomes active and interested, it would light up, “just like a christmas tree,” a phenomenon called insensitive sensitization. “A hallmark of addiction.”

A stimulated reward center, just like any other needy behavior, makes this an addiction. But it’s one that’s too shameful to discuss publicly, even though it touches all spectrums of society. Often used in the context of [drugs and alcohol](#), this addiction is a neurally based craving that changes the way we think (and it’s been [confirmed](#) elsewhere, by researchers at Germany’s Max Planck Institute).

To give a sense of how many addicts are out there, Pornhub claims [their site streams an iPhone’s worth of data a second](#). Hilton’s work has scientifically proven that porn drives a demand that’s become harder to satiate in real life, an experience women like Johnson, Maggie and Grillo have all witnessed.

“Porn is known as a gateway to prostitution,” Grillo states plainly. “More stimulus to elicit the same production of dopamine means excessive porn use can lead to the purchasing of people for sex.”

Every Shade Of Grey

We seem to prefer falling for visual avatars over actual people — there would be no market for Tinder and eHarmony, or web cams if this wasn’t true. Consumption inhibits intimacy, just ask a generation beset by [porn induced erectile dysfunction](#), men for whom lovemaking with a partner has become a physical impossibility.

So what do the screen stars say? Does their work lead to prostitution?

Harriet Sugarcookie, the nom de plume of a British cam model, wouldn’t answer directly — the addicted would be hooked on “something else if porn didn’t exist. I don’t think people could fall in love with their screens or even porn.”

Rachel Swimmer, who performs as Tasha Reign, flippantly calls it “a coin toss.”

Chanel Preston, who stripped for years before beginning her film career in 2010, told me how weary she is of the topic, even if parts ring true.

“People want to blame porn, they never want to be responsible at all,” she says. “Maybe porn isn’t the cause but where the problem manifests. I don’t agree that watching porn makes men more violent. I’m not saying that no performer or woman has ever gotten into porn and that hasn’t happened, but I would not consider it a grooming process. If porn didn’t exist, there would still be problems with sex trafficking or intimacy or addiction to sex.”

can lead to violence and forced sex, shouldn't we as a society of viewers be asking why this pattern continues — and how can we fix it?

Is porn the grooming process Grillo and the others described? I came away from my reporting with the conviction that porn is a gateway in the sense that it teaches women involved that it's all part of the deal, seduction part of the daily routine that brings so many a step closer to real pain.

Perhaps the answers lie in the stigma and legality of the act itself. From Holland to England to Germany, prostitution — even brothels — are legal. As long as the work is consented, and by choice, we're all adults.

Why are we in the land of the free so far behind? Sex work should be unionized and regulated. Stringent and straightforward consent and legal arrangements would keep the pimping leeches at bay, and the providers safer. With the continued explosion of our online lives, sex will only become more pervasive. Too many lack the right outlet for their carnality, and countless providers suffer — largely in silence — from post traumatic stress, mental health disorders and violence because they're tethered in one way or another to porn.

The answer, as Preston and Grillo say, is getting these issues into the open so we can create frank and real dialogue. The first step is removing the shame attached to sex work and sex workers, and that means legalization, whether on film or in private. Porn has never been easier to see — why does it still have to be so difficult to talk about candidly?

Maybe this is too lofty, too wishful, too naive? Then again, who would have thought marijuana would be legalized in so many places? Could sex be that far behind?

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