



pop culture

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The Great Porn Experiment

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To the extent that present day conditions are different from ancestral conditions, the ancestral genetic advice will be wrong.

—Richard Dawkins

The collision of widespread internet porn use with man’s ancient mammalian brain constitutes one of the fastest-moving, most global experiments ever unconsciously conducted. Consider the following:

In 2009, the Canadian sociologist Simon Louis Lajeunesse had to revise his proposed study to examine the effects of today’s porn videos. He couldn’t find any “porn virgins” to serve as a control group among the male students at a major university.

Of nearly 100 porn users who competed to give up porn for two weeks, *seventy percent* could not. Contest volunteers reported uncomfortable withdrawal symptoms, not unlike substance abusers.

In 2010, a US Government report revealed that Securities and Exchange Commission officials were viewing porn for hours a day while on the job.

Up to sixty percent of college-age males find aspects of their porn viewing problematic according to a 2009 survey.¹

With porn, as with drugs and alcohol, “too much” varies from user to user. Nonetheless, adopting an evolutionary perspective, we can safely say that the human brain is especially vulnerable to the extraordinary stimulation of today’s porn—with unanticipated and escalating consequences. As the psychiatrist Norman Doidge observes, “pornographers promise healthy pleasure and relief from

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sexual tension, but what they often deliver is addiction, tolerance, and an eventual decrease in pleasure.”² Since free porn videos became widely available at high speed some five years ago, heavy porn users increasingly report that they can no longer become aroused by real mates. Some also suffer from an early onset of erectile dysfunction.

Humanity’s Great Porn Experiment acquires unsuspecting, eager subjects whenever new computers go online. Unfortunately, our society is currently dithering in debates about free speech, unacceptable content, sexual repression, and harm to third parties. Meanwhile, one of porn’s most sinister risks is overlooked: its power to hijack the brain. To understand it better, we have to think about how evolution has shaped our appetites.

Mating and eating are the two primary drives for which our brain evolved its appetitive *go-get-it* circuitry. These drives seem innocuous because they’re second nature. If you were having intrusive thoughts about alcohol, you’d suspect you had a problem, but you would probably think nothing of intrusive thoughts about sex. Enthusiasm for sexual stimuli is a genetic program, not unlike a yen for mother’s milk. It’s nearly universal. In contrast, many people find drugs, nicotine, and alcohol aversive. This difference might well explain why porn users often report being hooked on porn without having previous compulsions.³ Our brains evolved to push us toward sex and food, not toward addictive drugs, and, “never before, in the history of pornography, has so much been so cheaply available to so many.”⁴

We all know how potent today’s extraordinarily enticing junk food is: 64 percent of Americans are overweight, and half of those obese. Why would highly stimulating porn be *less* compelling or risky? Sex is why we’re here—at least from the perspective of our genes. Desire can override our intellect and urge us to make babies, even at great personal risk. In fact, mammalian brains may generally be wired to binge on especially alluring food and sex—to get as much as possible while the getting is good. Highly valued stimuli *feel* like they will satisfy more, but they can trigger lingering dissatisfaction, which drives us beyond our normal limits—and, sometimes, beyond common sense. Our brain reduces our sensitivity to pleasure, and as a result *it does*

not register fulfillment. This is why many of us can’t easily say, “no.” Neither sex nor food is inherently maladaptive. What might well be maladaptive is the combination of our intrinsic wiring and today’s super-enticements.

SELFISH GENES, INFIDELTIY, AND PAIR BONDING

Once we adopt an evolutionary perspective, the appeal of internet porn is no mystery. The chance to fertilize a novel partner is a genetic bonanza that natural selection does much to encourage. Producing offspring with different mates means that genes flow through diverse immune systems, offering wider resistance and improved odds of genetic immortality. Wandering genitals are so valuable to reproductive success that there are in fact *no* truly monogamous mammal species. Ninety-seven percent of them conduct their love lives according to a simple formula: “Mate to satiety, and lose interest for some time . . . unless a novel mate shuffles into view, in which case, *zing!*” This “Coolidge effect” is part of the common knowledge among evolutionists. They are perhaps less commonly aware that the effect has been observed in females, too.⁵

In 3 percent of mammal species, humans included, the program favoring a variety of sexual partners coexists with a powerful urge to form pair bonds—at least for a time. This class of mammals is *socially* monogamous, but DNA tests show that all pair bonders still exchange genes on the side. Humans form pair bonds because it furthered the survival of human offspring. While the offspring of other primates can at least cling to their mother at birth, a human baby can’t even hold up her head. She has such a large skull that she has to be born, in effect, prematurely. She requires years, and a lot of provender, to develop into a competent adult. In contrast, most mammals need only the mother’s mammary glands for a time to make it to adulthood. For humans, having our parents fall in love—at least for long enough to fall in love *with us*—isn’t a luxury.

The interplay between these two evolutionary programs—the appeal of a bonded mate versus the intoxication of novel genes—creates an uneasy tension. Whatever collateral domestic damage this tension might have produced, it has evidently served our genes well. We are, after all, a

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1 remarkably prolific species. Now, however, porn might be
 2 rapidly tipping this delicate balance in a new direction. Ear-
 3 lier this year, for example, musician John Mayer confessed
 4 that he now prefers hours of porn to relationships with real
 5 women.⁶ While preparing this article, I exchanged electronic
 6 messages with a number of people who offered testimony
 7 about the experience of porn use. As one such interviewee
 8 explained, “Porn was easy excitement. I didn’t interact with
 9 others because it took too much work, I had to think too
 10 hard, and interaction was ‘boring.’ I was numb and my senses
 11 were dulled. And I feared they would continue to be that
 12 way even after I quit.” Months after quitting porn, he added,
 13 “I’m dating a woman again, and I’m more attracted to her
 14 real body than I ever was to porn girls. I never imagined
 15 this would happen, and it is so exciting. The colors are
 16 back in my life!”

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 18 **PORN, CRACK, AND KRISPY KREMES**

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 20 No doubt the evolutionary programming that primes us to
 21 exploit opportunities to have sex with novel partners, or
 22 binge on sweet or high-fat foods, once worked well enough.
 23 After all, calories could be converted to a bit of extra fat
 24 for easy storage and transport, and willing strangers were
 25 probably not all that plentiful. In short, sparse environments
 26 and scanty populations limited our opportunities for over-
 27 indulgence. Today, however, we’re inundated with synthetic,
 28 super-potent temptation. Junk food is carefully crafted to
 29 goose our primal hankering for fat and sugar. In a single
 30 session, porn users can attempt to fertilize more (virtual)
 31 novel mates than most of their ancestors laid eyes on in a
 32 lifetime. Such supranormal stimulation sets the brain abuzz
 33 with a loud, now erroneous, message: “This activity is *really*
 34 *valuable* because it’s causing a mammoth release of exciting
 35 neurochemicals. Focus your future attention on everything
 36 connected with it. Do it as often as possible!” To ensure we
 37 keep doing it, our brains temporarily numb our pleasure
 38 response. Normal tastes and normal feelings of satisfaction
 39 don’t return for weeks after we stop.⁷ Meanwhile, we’re
 40 looking around eagerly for something to “hit the spot.”

41 The source of these commands is our primitive reward
 42 circuitry, most of which lies just behind the nose in the
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limbic system. Our reward circuitry gives rise to our gut
 feelings, our drives, our urges to gobble sweets, drink when
 thirsty, and have sex. It plays critical roles in our moods,
 judgments, and choices between competing priorities. It’s a
 vital part of our emotional attachment mechanism. It bonds
 us to our offspring, and it causes us to fall in—and out—of
 love. Finally, it is the epicenter of every addiction.

Throughout the course of evolution, the limbic sys-
 tem has executed its tasks with such blinding efficiency that
 it hasn’t changed very much in over one hundred million
 years. The same neurochemicals and nerve cell receptors
 still perform roughly the same functions in all mammals.
 And indeed, the limbic system has been called the mam-
 malian brain. We tend to rely on our reward circuitry, our
 inner compass, without thinking about its commands very
 much. When we’re under stress and parts of it are bleeping
 especially loud, anxious signals, we trust it to steer us to
 relief. Of course, our brain’s more recently evolved frontal
 cortex can trump such impulses. That’s how we exercise
 willpower or discernment. Yet there are times when it takes
 so much effort to resist these subconscious commands that
 it’s normal to rationalize giving in. “Everyone else is doing
 it!” “I *need* something to take the edge off.” Alas, when users
 attempt to withdraw from heavy porn/masturbation, many
 suffer debilitating distress for weeks. It’s easy to dive back
 in—and get caught in an escalating porn loop as the ever-
 more-numbed brain seeks greater stimulation to medicate
 the pain of withdrawal. Jay Phelan is a professor of biology at
 UCLA and coauthor of *Mean Genes*.⁸ When I interviewed
 him, he made this point:

All excessive stimulations of the reward circuitry
 of the brain that are not tied to the behaviors
 for which the circuitry originally evolved are
 problematic. While this has become appreciated
 for drug addiction such as cocaine (and for
 issues relating to food), it is not yet appreci-
 ated for porn.

We need to understand who we are as a
 species and why we have self-control problems.
 Internet porn is another manifestation of “mis-
 match,” the phenomenon of our modern world





deviating from the world to which we became adapted over evolutionary time.

In short, a potent “Focus on this!” command in response to supernormal stimulation doesn’t reliably indicate that the activity or substance is actually worthy of our exaggerated attention—and our consequent inattention to other goals or people in our life.

I’m twenty-five years old and I’ve been using porn for fourteen years. There was a period of two years though where I couldn’t look at it because I was on a government facility where pornographic sites were banned. During those years I was at my peak of creativity: writing poetry, songs, and stories. I also talked to everyone, not shying away from a soul. When I got home I went back to spending the day looking at the nakedness of the Internet. Two years later, I’ve become an introvert, secluding myself away, and I’m shy and depressed most of the time. —Jason

The brain’s reward circuitry can only weigh priorities according to which give off the loudest neurochemical signals. In a brain that is temporarily numbed to pleasure, a hot video easily trumps companionship, flirting, kids, and jobs:

Unnaturally strong explosions of synthetic experience and sensation and pleasure evoke unnaturally strong degrees of habituation. . . . Soon we hardly notice anymore the fleeting whispers of pleasure caused by leaves in autumn, or by the lingering glance of the right person, or by the promise of reward that will come after a long, difficult, and worthy task.⁹

Hot videos offer false-positive results brought about by a surge of dopamine. Humans are better served by securing close, trusted companionship and lots of affectionate touch. Both trigger the release of natural antidepressant,

anti-anxiety neurochemicals, which help to keep our brains in balance, our perception clear, and our judgment sound.

I have so much more energy, I’m less moody, I have more enthusiasm and motivation for work, I don’t feel drained all the time, and I feel a deeper sense of connection with everything around me. But the biggest change it has made is in my relationship. My girlfriend and I feel much closer to each other already. —Rob

As Doidge observes, “The addictiveness of Internet pornography is not a metaphor” (*Brain*, 106). Today’s porn users are seduced into training sessions that meet all the conditions required for plastic change of the brain: rapt attention, reinforcement (sexual arousal), and creation and strengthening of new neural connections. These changes narrow future attention. Other brain changes numb users to life’s subtler pleasures, such as the charms of normal partners, soothing affection, and friendly interaction.

ADDITION AND TOLERANCE

If today’s porn tastes were purely the product of millions of years of evolution, they would be similar, and wouldn’t shift with time. Instead, as Doidge notes, “Hardcore pornography now explores the world of perversion, while softcore is now what hardcore was a few decades ago. . . . When pornographers boast that they are pushing the envelope by introducing new, harder themes, what they don’t say is that they must, because their customers are building up a tolerance to the content” (*Brain*, 102). Ironically, porn does not even ease sexual frustration, except in the very short-term, sometimes. Extreme stimulation interferes with feelings of satisfaction. As a consequence, finding “the hottest” porn video to produce the strongest climax leads to *less* satisfaction soon afterward, not more. It’s not uncommon for users to binge because they cannot scratch their itch. Yet most don’t even question what’s going on until they suffer from erectile dysfunction or find themselves watching things their limbic brains find shocking/stimulating and their rational brains find revolting—just to climax. At the same time, they

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1 are hypersensitive to anything their brains associate with
2 “relief,” and this vulnerability remains after recovery.

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4 I’ve noticed that when I do succeed in avoid-
5 ing porn for a week or two, I don’t have any
6 problems with erections. Whereas if I look at
7 porn, I can’t get it up without it. Trouble is,
8 each time I get better I believe I’m cured, and
9 go back to daily porn/masturbation. I wish I
10 could stay away from it permanently. —Damon

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12 It is not unusual for some users caught in the porn loop to
13 feel intense social anxiety, depression, despair, apathy, and so
14 forth. Until they completely reboot their brains, life seems
15 meaningless—but for the single-minded pursuit of hotter
16 stimuli. The lengthy withdrawal (often months) required to
17 restore their brains to equilibrium is sometimes so unbear-
18 able (shakes, insomnia, despair, cravings, severe headaches,
19 relapses, irritability) that many feel they have no choice but
20 to keep using. They don’t realize there is light at the end
21 of the tunnel because it is so long and dark.

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23 For years my erections got weaker and weaker,
24 despite using more and more stimulating porn.
25 Well—for those out there who may not have
26 tried stopping porn—I have *no* erection strength
27 problems anymore [after several months of hell-
28 ish withdrawal]. I think tonight’s is the strongest
29 erection I have had in years. Having all these
30 erections is like being a teen again. As bad as
31 the cravings are right now, I am happy about
32 the renewed strength of my body. —Cory

33 34 PORN’S IMPACT ON HUMAN ATTACHMENT

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36 Like it or not, humans are tribal, pair-bonding primates.
37 We’re wired to thrive on close, trusted companionship and
38 warm affection (as well as exercise, accomplishment, and so
39 forth). Companionship releases healthy levels of dopamine
40 and other “feel good” neurochemicals, such as oxytocin,
41 which help balance us. The gains from connection show
42 up in very real terms. For example, HIV patients with a
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partner live longer and develop AIDS less rapidly. Wounds
heal twice as fast with companionship as compared to isolation.
Warm touch between married couples reduces various
measures of stress. Yet the most profound gifts of close con-
nection may be psychological. Close emotional connections
are associated with lower rates of addiction and depression.¹⁰
They change the neural patterns and brain chemistry of
those who engage in them, bolstering their sense of self
and making empathy and socialization possible.

It is getting easier to resist. Porn doesn’t have
the power it once had over me, nor is it drain-
ing my self worth, nor am I a lust ball all day.
I can do other things, like socialize. I feel other
things. —Ian

Humans cannot regulate their moods on their own, at
least not for long. Prisoners in solitary confinement often
go insane. In other words, it’s *normal* to feel anxious or
depressed when isolated. As Philip J. Flores reminds us in
Addiction as an Attachment Disorder, “Attachment is not just
a good idea; it’s the law.”¹¹ It’s also some of the best health
insurance the planet offers.

The stereotypical porn addict used to be a person
who, for whatever reason, *couldn’t* form healthy relationships.
Now, well-adjusted men are succumbing to the crack-like
appeal of today’s extreme videos. Some are also isolating,
seeking medication for unaccustomed depression and anxi-
ety, and experiencing social anxiety.

This porn addiction, all of it, the withdrawals,
the weird emotional stuff, is losing its power.
I’m unclogging a drain. I’m pulling out one
hair, but it’s pulling everything connected with
it out as well. I wish I had known this one hair
was the culprit behind all my mental maladies
years ago! —Kyle

Frequent affection is normally very soothing and rewarding
for a pair-bonded species—with or without sex. But when
we’re not able to feel subtle pleasures due to blunted brain
sensitivity, affection seems pointless. Instead of tenderness,
we may want “space” and extreme stimuli. Mere exposure





to images of foxy females can cause a man to devalue his real-life partner. In one study, males rated a partner lower not only on attractiveness, but were also less in love with her. Another study showed that exposure to even nonviolent porn makes men and women more likely to believe that women like submission during sex, and causes them to devalue marital fidelity.¹²

My boyfriend says he's unable to perform sexually due to his porn use. I love him so much but feel absolutely devastated that he felt he had to turn to porn. I always thought we had such a great sex life. I am twenty-six years old and consider myself to be quite attractive, but I now feel like shit. I have no confidence or self-esteem left. —Mia

“With science-fiction strangeness, porn [is] competing with real-life partners, and [is] even emerging as the most important object of some clients' sexual desires,” writes sex therapist Wendy Maltz. In short, compulsive porn use can be both a substitute and an obstacle for interpersonal relationships.¹³ Until a person relinquishes all addictions, including sex addictions, he cannot tap the “only source of healthy affect regulation that is available to [him]: healthy interpersonal attachment” (*Attachment*, 11). When recovering users force their attention away from their habitual “relief,” their reward circuitry looks around for other sources of pleasure. Eventually it finds those it evolved to find: friendly interaction, real mates, time in nature, exercise, accomplishment, and so forth.

After a few days I noticed increased energy, increased attention, and higher self-esteem. After a month—although it took several tries to get there—those improvements were all through the roof. A couple of months later, I was having real sex. It is nice to get aroused by little things, like a revealing blouse or just a woman's flowing, shiny hair and fragrance. —Nick

Under normal circumstances, we humans are driven more by a need for attachment than by other sources of pleasure (*Attachment*, xi). We need this interdependence, not just

at key points of our childhood, as Freud postulated, but throughout our lives. For example, connection helps reduce cortisol, which can otherwise weaken our immune system under stress. “It's much less wear and tear on us if we have someone there to help regulate us,” explains psychologist/neuroscientist James A. Coan.¹⁴

THE GREAT PORN EXPERIMENT AND HUMAN EVOLUTION

Our cultural mind-set is that orgasm and masturbation are such tonics that porn is practically a health-aid.¹⁵ Yet porn can only produce orgasms; it can't meet our evolved needs for human connection. If today's computer literate men weren't using so much porn, it seems likely that they would have less depression and anxiety, greater willingness to approach real mates, more charisma.

I feel again. I feel emotions again. My interest in women is heightened, my confidence is up and gives me motivation again. I'm twenty-eight now, and until the last couple of years I felt I had the maturity of a fifteen-year-old. But as I heal and recover from this addiction, I've felt emotions I've never had to deal with before. It has helped me grow up. —Adrian

It's unfortunate that research can seldom furnish an accurate picture of a rapid trend. For example, experts once assured us that marriage contentment improved in later years. Finally, a team reexamined the data and realized that the improvement was an illusion.¹⁶ In fact, people *in earlier generations* were actually happier throughout their marriages. They had different expectations about marriage, and perhaps significantly, less exposure to the growing snowball of increasingly compelling synthetic sexual stimuli.

Will the link between super-stimulating internet porn, numbed brains, and side effects like “copulatory impotence” finally motivate frequent porn users to go through the discomfort of returning their brains to normal sensitivity?¹⁷ Or will future generations conclude that The Great Porn Experiment radically altered the course of human evolution?

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