The Tsunami: Adolescents, Technology, and Pornography

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"The Internet is transforming the experience of growing up in America. It is also transforming the job of being a parent in America. The Internet brings the world – the good, the bad and the ugly – to the American family's doorstep. It brings the ruins of ancient Athens to that doorstep, but it also brings the red light district of Bangkok." -Third Way Culture Project, 2005

"There is a Tsunami coming. We are a hundred years from understanding what we are dealing with regarding the influence and impact of cybersex on mankind."

This has been the proclamation this writer has heard Dr. Patrick Carries iterate to audiences in recent years. This assertion highlights a major contemporary concern regarding a "Tsunami" of young people adversely affected by the fusion of sexuality and limitless technology. The pornography industry, with all of its technological avenues for indulging, generates over $13 billion a year in revenue in the United States alone (Ropelato, 2009). Many modern technological advances possess hazards for unhealthy sexual experimentation, as well as practical uses. As such, there seems to be a growing awareness of the impact that unsupervised and unlimited access to the Internet and other modern technological advances are having on the overall health and sexuality of teens. Clinicians are already witnessing the initial waves of this Tsunami as numerous individuals, young and old, are caught in its path and seeking professional help.

Today, print pornography is a distant option for teens as the Internet is a more powerful, available, and alluring alternative. It is influencing the way they think, feel, and behave in the real world and online (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). Many teens appear to compulsively use die Internet for various purposes including sexual ones (van den Eijnden et al., 2008). Participation in and exposure to sex and sexual imagery can hinder teens' emotional and neurological development and encourage them to seek immediate gratification in risky behaviors and situations. It is well documented that youth who use pornography engage more often in oral and anal sex, have more sexual partners, and experience an increase in oral and genital STDs. Teens do not tend to look beyond the moment and struggle to generalize information and experiences from one situation to the next. Making matters worse for teens is their sporadic capacity to make appropriate decisions about online behavior wherein they tend to believe that they have mastered a skill when in truth they are merely practicing it (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008). Technology also possesses the capacity to numb out and desensitize youth from their natural progression as they idle away valuable moments for social, relational, spiritual, physical, '(mental and neurological development.

Trends in Teen Use of Pornography & Technology Teen pornography and technology use is affecting their values, socializing, sexuality and courtship patterns. The common belief is that pornography is a male problem with Carroll et al. (2008) indicating that among emerging adult men, 87 percent accept and use pornography of some type versus 31 percent of emerging adult women. Nonetheless, the contemporary reality is that young females are moving in a similar direction as young males, even if the reported ratios of pornography use are disproportionate. For emerging adult males though, the more that they accept and use pornography, the more likely they are to be accepting of premarital and casual sexual behavior and non-marital cohabitation, with nearly 5 times more lifetime sexual partners and higher levels of drinking and binge drinking than nonusers, with the majority of non-using emerging adult males reporting they have not had sexual intercourse (Carroll, 2008). Similar data is reflected in emerging adult females who used and accepted pornography. Even so, there still exists a larger portion of females looking for a smaller portion of males. This sets the stage, potentially, for a new massive trend in modern and future coupling, marriage and divorce patterns. The trajectory of which is not fully clear. Sex therapist Wendy Maltz says 'Teen Sexuality' has been hijacked by pornography. As Paul (2009) describes, all of us are living in a pornified culture. With this increased exposure to pornography, many teens are being groomed to believe that being explicitly

sexually active is normal. In fact, it is now common for oral sex to be seen as the new goodnight kiss and for girls to send sexts (sexual photos/messages of self via cell phone) to boys as special gifts.

Additionally, therapists are seeing an increase in anxiety among teens about their body image. This now includes beliefs among teens that there is something wrong with their genitals; that they don't perform, respond, sound, or sustain like porn stars do. It can be described as sexual performance anxiety. Dr. Jill Manning, author of *What's the Big Deal about Pornography: A Guide for the Internet Generation,* speaks about the mainstreaming of pornography as turning it into a spectator sport. Modern youth appear to believe that porn stars are exhibiting normal sexual experiences. Unfortunately, the young brain lacks the skill to generalize and fully grasp the notion that pornography is a form of entertainment and fantasy that is rarely achieved in reality. Nevertheless, many teens are turning to pornography to fulfill sexual curiosity. The pornography, however, contributes to more anxiety because they can't say they look or perform like that. This creates more of the shame base that is core to addictive processes.

There is another danger in teen use of pornography. In a review of the top selling pornography videos, Wosnkzer & Bridges (2007) discovered that the majority had violent themes with verbal or physical aggression. However, only a small fraction of the females in those videos demonstrated a negative reaction with the majority demonstrating a positive or neutral reaction to the violence. Consequently, this relays to teens that violence in a sexual relationship is normal. Naturally, this signifies new concerns about increased risk potential. New trends in marital rape and domestic violence appear imminent as teen couple together and court each other under these contemporary expectations. Concurrently, teens seem to be losing the ability to empathize with others due to being groomed in so much objectification in our pornified culture where sex and violence are blended together in their sexual templates. Additionally, van den Eijnden et al. (2008) report that online communication may more easily evoke verbal hostility than face-to-face communication due to physical distance and perceived anonymity with socially vulnerable teenagers being particularly targeted. This speaks to the current epidemic of text and cyber-bullying from kids targeting other kids. Herein we see this lack of empathy becoming pervasive as peers are reduced to text and images on a screen rather than someone real.

Another current online trend is massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). Knutson and Oswald (2009) highlight that these games are significantly different from traditional computer games. As a type of social networking, the virtual world of these games moves in real time and the game continues even when players log off as characters in them are controlled by real people around the world. Most MMORPGs promote formations of "guilds" that group together to carry out quests with strong social pressure to be present when other members are playing. Players are prevented from actually winning because MMORPGs also provide endless objectives requiring significant investments of time and a reluctance to walk away. These characteristics make MMORPGs more demanding, socially stimulating, and addictive, while filling social needs unmet in the real world.

Teens also appear to be lacking social skill development due to excessive exposure to technology. With so much impersonal and static social interaction in today's culture, many modern youth are not learning the social cues critical to interpersonal and relational communication. They are not developing the skills to know how to decode over time the subtleties of socializing and face-to-face interactions, like how to know when someone likes them. Courtship is being replaced with text. A smiley face or LOL at the end of a text or email is different than seeing people's actual smiles or hearing their actual laughs. Hence we are witnessing the beginnings of a socially backwards generation. The parental barrier is being circumvented via the teen creating an entire world of their own in their home. In their bedroom the teen may have access to their laptop and/or desktop equipped with a webcam and all the critical features for social networking. Bauerlein (2009) informs us that teens are usually connected to multiple social networking sites and spending an average of 9 hours a week interacting on them. The teen also has their cell phone with its capacity to "stay connected" to all their "friends" via an average of 2272 texts per month in addition to the other quantities of time spent talking on their cell phone. All of this physical isolation and distraction due to technologically based social networking is coming at a cost.

What do we do about it? An example of what is being done to address these teen issues is the Teen

Intensive we offer at Psychological Counseling Services, LTD, (PCS). The Teen Intensive is based on the PCS Adult Intensive Model used successfully for over a decade. It serves as an adjunct to MFTs nationwide treating teens with the challenges outlined in this article. It is short-term (one to four weeks) outpatient treatment addressing the common problems teens are facing including sexual acting-out, pornography, cyber-world use, and mood issues impacted by busyness and isolation.

For MFTs it is nonnegotiable. Delmonico and Griffin (2008) inform that MFTs must become educators and prevention strategy specialists in their own communities for instructing teens and families about technology issues and cybersex problems. They also encourage parents to learn online terminology and establish accounts for the most popular venues used by teens to better understand them. As a culture, though, Americans don't do that good a job of talking to their kids about sex. With the average age of first pornography exposure being eleven years old, parents must be challenged to start early with their children. It is well known that by the time kids reach their teens they already possess some deeply entrenched beliefs and habits regarding their sexuality. Sussman and Ames (2001) argue that since the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior, teens' dangerous sexual behavior is likely to continue into adulthood.

Though many parents feel intimidated by technology, each need to be active in educating and monitoring their children around sexuality and technology. Adopting an authoritative parenting style, where limits are set with input from the teenager has been connected with more conscientious teen sexual experience, less sexual activity, and would likely help ensure teen safety on the Internet (Rosen et al., 2008). Parents are also advised to create modeling opportunities for their children to watch them engage in critical decision-making and specific behavior skills while online (Delmonico & Griffin, 2008). If parents provide accurate information to their children and monitor them they may help set values for responsible sexual decision-making (Sussman, 2007). Finally, it is important to note that teens are generally the best source for keeping therapists and parents updated about the Internet and technology so keeping an open dialog with teens is to any parent's advantage, even if it is awkward or embarrassing, *m*

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