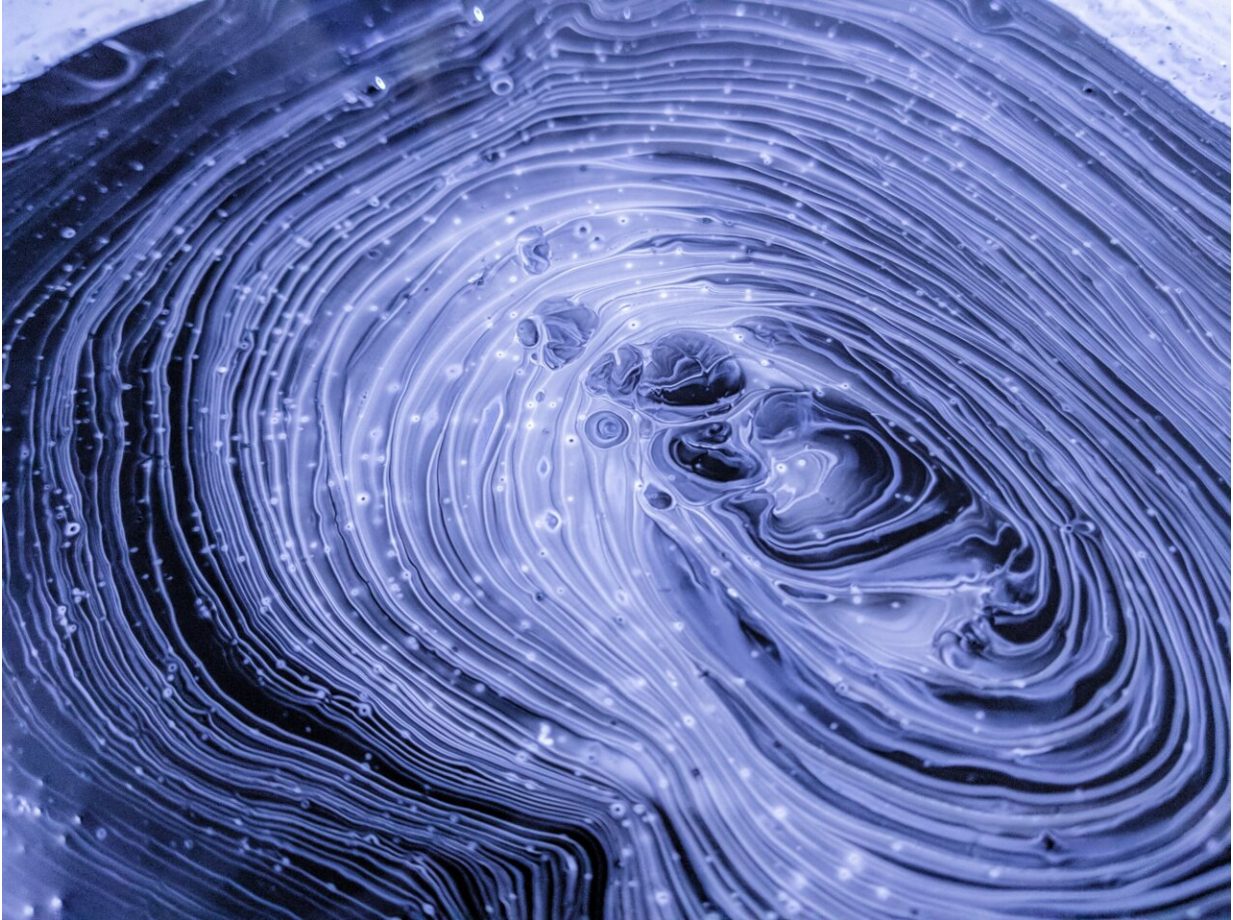


# How internet porn affects romantic life

July 7 2016, by Sam Carr, University Of Bath

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The world of internet pornography is a pervasive and wide reaching technology, growing at a breathtaking rate. It is a [\\$13 billion-a-year industry](#) in the US. Nine out of 10 boys in America are exposed to it

before the age of 18, and men are 543% more likely to be users than women. By 2017, over a quarter of a billion people will use mobile porn sites worldwide.

With such an enormous audience, it is not possible to make generalisations about whether [internet pornography](#) is good or bad. Clearly, it's a matter of perspective. [Reviews](#) have linked pornography consumption with positive effects such as increased sexual knowledge and more liberal sexual attitudes. But how does it shape our intimate relationships?

British Prime Minister [David Cameron has expressed concern](#) that internet pornography could be warping ideas about sex and relationships, and [scientific evidence](#) in this area tends to support his view. Links between pornography consumption and intimate relationship problems (although data typically refer to heterosexual, monogamous relationships) are well established.

Pornography consumption has been associated with increased marital distress, risk of separation, decreased romantic intimacy and sexual satisfaction, a higher chance of infidelity, and compulsive or addictive sexual behaviour. However, this does not automatically imply that internet pornography causes relational difficulties. Pornography consumption may equally be caused *by* them.

But if consumption does dampen romantic intimacy then it will be important to understand how. Harvard Psychology Professor [Deirdre Barrett](#) has suggested that internet pornography is a version of what scientists call a "[supernormal stimulus](#)". That is, an artificial exaggeration of the environmental factors from which we have naturally evolved to become sexually aroused.

Instinctive behaviour across a range of species can be hijacked when

researchers create supernormal versions of normal stimuli. For example, while a female bird's natural instinct is to nurture her small, speckled eggs, she will abandon them when presented with the option of larger, more heavily patterned artificial exaggerations of her eggs. Over time, she will lose interest completely in the normal eggs, as though her instinct towards them has been overridden by the supernormal ones.

In a similar (but more complex) way, internet pornography offers users a supernormal sexual experience. On one level, they become aroused by watching supernormal bodies having supernormal sex. On another level, they become accustomed to selecting these supernormal, virtual experiences from seemingly infinite options and have the possibility to refine, replay, pause, and rewind these virtual sexual experiences at will.

A major concern for [sex and relationship therapists and researchers](#) is that real people's responses to real sex can indeed be dampened by overexposure to virtual sex. In his [TED Talk](#), The Great Porn Experiment, Gary Wilson discusses arguments and evidence in support of porn induced erectile dysfunction. He highlights issues such as a numbed pleasure response and addictive craving for "hits" of pornographic material in heavy users.

## Supernormal sex lives

The ways in which family life can be affected by these issues can be very powerful, too. [A paper by sex therapist, Paula Hall](#), outlines the following typical case:

*Tim was a 36-year-old man, married with two children aged one and three. He initially presented with erectile dysfunction but detailed assessment revealed that he had no problems with erections to pornography which he was now accessing most evenings for three or four*

*hours at a time.*

*He was very aware that his pornography use was getting in the way of him having sex with his wife and realised he'd got himself into a Catch 22. Watching increasingly hard-core porn was making him feel numb when having sex with his wife, but because sex with his wife was now so difficult, he was watching even more porn. In fact, the only times he could get an erection with his wife now was if he fantasised about porn which left him feeling guilty and distant from her.*

Dampened responses to normal sex can result in intense feelings of guilt for users when sex with their partner isn't as arousing as supernormal sex. There can also be attempts by users to make normal [sex](#) supernormal, either through fantasy or by manipulating reality.

[Studies](#) have also documented a deep rooted breakdown in trust and attachment, connected to the fact that partners frequently experience pornography consumption as a deceptive form of betrayal and infidelity. In the above study, one wife described her husband's use of [pornography](#) as indiscriminate, virtual philandering and said that she felt like "he's had a million affairs."

Ultimately, as cultural anthropologist, [Mizuko Ito](#), has suggested: "We have created these technologies but it's not obvious how they evolve in and shape our culture." Paradoxically, as connecting as technology may be, it is vital that we also understand and debate its role in creating and exacerbating disconnection.

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