

Defining Pornography

by Blaire Ostler | May 16, 2017 | Featured, Pornography | 2 comments



A recent study from BYU highlighted the effects of pornography on religious persons. While there was much discussion on social media, the conversations were less than fruitful when arguments hinged on the definition of pornography.

I'm highly skeptical of absolute statements concerning traditional notions of pornography when sexual imagery is far more complicated than just **good** or **bad**. I have often said, "I am anti-porn, because I'm pro-sex." But what is porn?

According to Merriam-Webster, pornography is defined as: (1) the depiction of erotic behavior intended to cause sexual excitement (2) material such as books or photography that depicts erotic behavior and is intended to cause sexual excitement.

I suspect most people would conform to this definition of pornography or something akin to it.

If we accept this definition, one must conclude that not all pornography is bad. For example, I send my husband explicit, erotic images and videos of myself regularly with the deliberate intent to sexually arouse and excite him. Over fifteen years of marriage, he certainly has

collected quite a “pornographic collection” and has developed what some would consider a definitional “pornography addiction.” But in this context words like **pornography** and **addiction**, as traditionally defined, hardly seem helpful. Frankly, those words seem silly. But why? How is pornography different than me sending erotic images and videos to my husband?

The sexual expressions, depictions, and behaviors between my husband and I are founded upon love and intimacy. I’m not convinced this medium of sexual interaction is bad, damaging, or immoral. Quite the contrary, it is a consensual expression of sexual desire that provokes intimacy and love among the involved parties. I would contend that sexually explicit or erotic material that enhances intimacy and love in interpersonal relationships of all persons involved is **NOT** pornography. Pornography should be defined in terms of harmful sexual expressions, not arousal or excitement.

For example, to the extent that sexually explicit material enhances intimacy and love in interpersonal relationships among consenting members, it is **good** and therefore is **NOT** pornography. To the extent that sexually explicit material is a hindrance to intimacy and love in interpersonal relationships, it is **bad** and therefore **IS** pornography.

Pornography has tangible effects on human sexual desire, response, and functionality. If we look at some of the potential harm that comes from prolonged, systematic exposure to pornography, which is sadly exacerbated by damaging shame tactics and dangerously repressed sexual desires, we certainly shouldn’t ignore the risks and effects of engaging in pornography viewing, production, and distribution.

However, if pornography is defined as **depictions of erotic behavior intended to cause sexual excitement that are a hindrance to intimacy and love in interpersonal relationships**, the word pornography has become an identifier of what we wish to avoid, which is harmful, oppressive, sexual expressions to oneself and/or others. With this definition of pornography, we aren’t shaming sexual desire and arousal via imagery and media, we are instead identifying harmful sexual expressions.

Of course, the devil is in the details. This definition of pornography certainly leaves room for interpretation and would likely vary among the persons involved. What is a harmful sexual expression to me may not be a harmful sexual expression to you. While my husband may enjoy sexually explicit media of me in a perfectly healthy way, if he were to distribute those images or videos without my consent, they would then become pornography because they were distributed in a manner that would hinder love and intimacy in our relationship. In this sense pornography is a fluid state that may or may not change depending on context.

There is still much to be explored and understood about the risks and benefits of sexual expressions, especially as technology continues to connect us with others in radically unprecedented ways. Should pornography play a role in our relationships? Well, it depends on how you define pornography. It should be defined in terms of damage, harm, and oppression. So I would say no, there is no need for it in our relationships.

As for myself, discussions about pornography seem silly when definitions, assumptions, and verbal baggage obstruct meaningful discovery of what are helpful sexual expressions and harmful sexual expressions. I certainly am anti-porn, because I perceive pornography as

harmful sexual expressions that inhibit love and intimacy among involved persons. I am certainly pro-sex, because sex is a powerful, dare I even say godly, way of enhancing love and intimacy among involved, consenting persons. As technology is further developed I have no doubt it will radically change the way we perceive and engage in sexual behaviors, but we won't be able to appropriately discuss the risks and ramifications if we can't even define pornography in any meaningful way.

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Blaire Ostler

Blaire Ostler is one of the leading voices on the intersections of Mormonism, feminism, and transhumanism. She presents and writes on many forums, and speaks at conferences promoting Mormon Transhumanist ideals. Blaire holds a BFA in Design from the International Academy of Design and Technology-Seattle. She is pursuing a second bachelor's degree in philosophy with an emphasis in gender studies. She is passionate about aesthetics, religion, human sexuality, queer theory, social philosophy, and art. She and husband Drew reside in Utah with their three children.

All posts by Blaire Ostler

2 Comments



Bob Cooper on May 16, 2017 at 10:30 am

Blaire you make a number of good points and I would highly recommend this article to every member of the Church. So much of what the Church teaches about sex only makes sense when applied to children but falls apart when applied to adults.

I would go further and argue that all pornography is benign for an adult. Take viewing violent movies for example. Why is it a sin to watch someone making love and yet it isn't a sin to watch someone being murdered? Yet I haven't found a Church web site on overcoming a violent movie addiction.

Some might argue that this scripture from 3 Nephi proves that pornography is a sin.

"28 But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman, to lust after her, hath committed adultery already in his heart."