



Sexual Media as Competition in the Heterosexual Relationship Market

Mark Regnerus¹

Received: 4 January 2019 / Accepted: 9 January 2019 / Published online: 22 January 2019
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2019

In their Target Article, Leonhardt, Spencer, Butler, and Theobald (2018) do not just offer readers a review of research. Rather, they organize what has been said in such a way as to make better sense of the scope and effects of a surging practice—the consumption of sexual media.

The punchline, repeated multiple times, is that sexual media may be congruent with short-term sexual “quality,” however, measured, but poses a problem for long-term relationship success. My observations from years spent assessing and writing about sexual relationship development among American young adults are illuminated by what Leonhardt et al. (2018) have done here; what they asserted resonates. Pornography usage rates are climbing with access and content provision, as even rough population estimates have revealed (Regnerus, Gordon, & Price, 2016). We are getting better at measuring this, but further improvement is imperative.

Toward that end, Leonhardt et al. (2018) discussed the quandary of measuring “sexual quality,” a latent variable whose observable measures seem closer to sexual satisfaction. The construct, they noted, “often enlists vague, global definitions assessing the subjective appraisal of one’s sexual relationship...along with few conceptual definitions, few theoretical models, and inconsistency in the indicators used...” This is true, and problematic, but characteristic of emerging scientific domains (Ioannidis, 2005).

Leonhardt et al. (2018) were wise to distinguish between short-term and long-term sexual quality and to discern distinctive goals for each—the gratification of sexual drive for the former and romantic/sexual attraction and attachment for the latter. Bedding someone for a night draws upon different skills, motivations, and interests than making a comprehensive (rather than just sexual) life together with someone over

the course of decades. I observed this in my own interviews from the Relationships in America project, a mixed methods effort concluding in 2014 (Regnerus, 2017). One particularly self-aware young man, a 25-year-old portfolio manager from Milwaukee, identified the different sexual aims associated with relational sex and short-term sex and could even finger how pornography helped him weaken the emotional connection he felt in sex. In fact, he appreciated that, since he had not (until recently) been in the mood for a serious relationship:

(Porn) may have taken the emotion out of (sex) a little bit, which was great when I was single...The first time I had sex it was, like, in a relationship and you’re like, “Oh my God, this is amazing and I only wanna do this with you forever.” And then obviously you don’t (chuckles) and then, uh, yeah, then it just changes, and (porn) makes it more of like a, just like an activity... You think it’s so special and whatever, but it’s really just sex, so it takes, I guess it takes the special away from it which, which I like....then you can just be in the moment and not have to worry about all the other factors that are associated with it.

Among interviewees in that project, 83% of men ($N=50$) who perceived effects from viewing pornography held that their consumption of pornography influenced them in one or more ways—all of them about short-term goals: sexual scripts, expectations, how they had sex, their relationships with partners, and their general interest in sex. So far so good, in terms of congruence with Leonhardt et al.’s (2018) Target Article’s typology and assertions.

Leonhardt et al. (2018), however, seem largely uninterested in wrestling with sex differences not simply in sexual media use, but in how such differences matter for what happens next in relationships between men and women. This absence is notable, since sexual media has, for much of its digital lifespan, constituted what some have called an androcentric experience (Janssen, Carpenter, & Graham, 2003). Since its consumers are more apt to be men, content has been tailored accordingly. “Female-friendly” pornography is often labeled as such, denoting not only its distinctive

This Commentary refers to the article available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1209-4>.

✉ Mark Regnerus
regnerus@prc.utexas.edu

¹ Department of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin, 305 E. 23rd St., A1700, Austin, TX 78712, USA

content—mimicking real relationships and avoiding paraphilia—but also its atypical status.

Taking sex differences seriously means coming to grips with how sexual media affects the wider market in relationships. Simply put, pornography adds competition to a relationship (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Malcolm & Naufal, 2016; Perry & Davis, 2017). A therapist may want a couple to focus on what they can learn about the interaction they are witnessing in sexual media. But what the couple is staring at are competitors for their own attention, affection, and sexual behavior (i.e., masturbation). This is the perpetual challenge for would-be prescribers and consumers of sexual media, and no amount of “moral congruence” can fully mitigate this reality (Fisher, Montgomery-Graham, & Kohut, 2018). Creative efforts to make one’s own sexual media—designed by, and for, the couple who created it—only reflects rather than solves this dilemma. When Academy Award-winning actress Jennifer Lawrence found herself the victim of hackers who illegally downloaded nude photos she had taken of herself (and sent to her boyfriend who was living elsewhere), she explained why she snapped the photos in the first place with this remarkable concession about competition: “Either your boyfriend is going to look at porn or he’s going to look at you” (Vanity Fair, 2014).

If more men than women find sexual media compelling, which remains the case, then it is giving men more (sexual) options while putting many women in the position of having to collaborate with their own competition. Feminist writer Wolf (2003) captured this ambivalence about pornography well when she lamented what had been lost in a digital era: “...mine is the last female generation to experience that sense of sexual confidence and security in what we had to offer.” This quote, now over 15 years old, has not become obsolete. What has grown weary, instead, is women’s hope for men’s monogamous attention. Unfortunately, contemporary pressure to minimize measurable differences between men and woman, together with a desire to seem sex-positive, encourages scholars, clinicians, and therapists to overlook what many women may actually prefer here. Well-meaning therapists committed to helping both partners have failed to see how prescribing sexual media use advantages men over women. It is not that “congruency of sexual media use” cannot be genuine within a couple. It can. But such congruency does not merit being the default assumption or expectation.

Sexual media only pays dividends in the short-term market, Leonhardt et al. (2018) argued. Competition, however, undermines commitment (or “brand loyalty”) to both short-term and long-term relationships alike. Even in short-term relationships, the benefits to women may be overestimated, since women’s relationship security—commonly developed over time and with the emergence of familiarity, intimacy, and communication—tends to be a prelude to their sexual satisfaction (Armstrong, England, & Fogarty, 2012; Byers,

2005; Mah & Binik, 2001; Sprecher, 2002). In other words, short-term relationships tend to benefit men (sexually) more than women (Bogle, 2008). Meanwhile, Leonhardt et al. observe, pornography is corrosive to the kind of sustainable relationships that adults have long relied on for far more extensive purposes—economic support, mental health, companionship, children—than purely erotic ones. Sexual media fosters “heightened levels of arousal,” stimulating the sex drive—most commonly when the user is alone. As Leonhardt et al. describe it, when arousal is conditioned to sexual media rather than a relationship with a real person, users “may function effectively autoerotically, but not relationally.” Androcentric sexual media is instructing women how to have sex “like a man”; at the same time, men are unlearning the social skills necessary to engage and build mutual relationships with women (Malcolm & Naufal, 2016).

An additional challenge to the notion of pornography being “helpful” to a relationship is that it is by definition—as Leonhardt et al. (2018) note—objectifying. This can be done with consent, of course, but consent does not alter the objectification. Persons in sexual interaction—on screen or in print—become instruments to facilitate some end, whether that is to aid a lone user in masturbation or a couple’s efforts to inject some sizzle into a lapsed sex life. In each case, however, dehumanization occurs. Persons are reduced to breasts, butts, or penises. Relationships are reduced to acts. Sexual objectification—the treatment of persons as objects—is unavoidable in a nonmonogamous system, which sexual media encourages. Leonhardt et al. nevertheless write as if this dehumanization is somehow avoidable if only users are instructed about the surreality of pornography early enough. I do not understand this logic. Many, if not most, users turn to pornography to escape reality—or at least augment or alter it—and they know it. Leonhardt et al., meanwhile, assume users value reality over unreality. I see few reasons to suppose this.

In conclusion, sexual media is here to stay. That said, its use is to sustainable relationships what opioids are to health. In the case of opioids, users want them because they are powerful at generating short-term effects, but sustained use often turns compulsive and is destructive to health. A similar process seems true of sexual media. Leonhardt et al. (2018) helpfully charted how sexual media might be of service in narrow circumstances, but continued use not only leads away from flourishing long-term relationships, but can foster mistrust, disunity, and attitudes and practices about monogamy that undermine the health of important social relationships. What they and many scholars overlook is how this is due in part to the sexual competition that pornography represents. I do not see how the two types of markets can be readily distinguished in such a way as to prevent the values of short-term relationships—interest in which is hardly distributed randomly between men and women—from jeopardizing the

health of long-term relationships upon which many adults (and their children and communities, in turn) depend. At best, the empirical question is not whether sexual media is a teacher. The question is whether any potential positive lessons discerned from it could ever be enough to outweigh the problems it promotes.

Acknowledgements Dr. Regnerus receives monetary payment for providing writing, editing, evaluation, and networking services to the Witherspoon Institute. The business interests of Witherspoon Institute relate to the topic of this study.

References

- Armstrong, E. A., England, P., & Fogarty, A. C. K. (2012). Accounting for women's orgasm and sexual enjoyment in college hookups and relationships. *American Sociological Review*, *77*, 435–462.
- Baumeister, R., & Vohs, K. (2004). Sexual economics: Sex as female resource for social exchange in heterosexual interactions. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, *8*, 339–363.
- Bogle, K. (2008). *Hooking up: Sex, dating, and relationships on campus*. New York: New York University Press.
- Byers, E. S. (2005). Relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction: A longitudinal study of individuals in long-term relationships. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *42*, 113–118.
- Fisher, W. A., Montgomery-Graham, S., & Kohut, T. (2018). Pornography problems due to moral incongruence [Commentary]. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1248-x>.
- Ioannidis, J. P. A. (2005). Why most published research findings are false. *PLoS Medicine*, *2*(8), e124. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.0020124>.
- Janssen, E., Carpenter, D., & Graham, C. A. (2003). Selecting films for sex research: Gender differences in erotic film preference. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, *32*, 243–251.
- Leonhardt, N. D., Spencer, T. J., Butler, M. H., & Theobald, A. C. (2018). An organizational framework for sexual media's influence on short-term versus long-term sexual quality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1209-4>.
- Mah, K., & Binik, Y. M. (2001). The nature of human orgasm: A critical review of major trends. *Clinical Psychology Review*, *21*, 823–856.
- Malcolm, M., & Naufal, G. (2016). Are pornography and marriage substitutes for young men? *Eastern Economic Journal*, *42*, 317–334.
- Perry, S. L., & Davis, J. T. (2017). Are pornography users more likely to experience a romantic breakup? Evidence from longitudinal data. *Sexuality and Culture*, *21*, 1157–1176.
- Regnerus, M. (2017). *Cheap sex: The transformation of men, marriage, and monogamy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Regnerus, M., Gordon, D., & Price, J. (2016). Documenting pornography use in America: A comparative analysis of methodological approaches. *Journal of Sex Research*, *53*, 873–881.
- Sprecher, S. (2002). Sexual satisfaction in premarital relationships: Associations with satisfaction, love, commitment, and stability. *Journal of Sex Research*, *39*, 190–196.
- Vanity Fair. (2014). *Jennifer Lawrence Calls Photo Hacking a 'Sex Crime.'* Retrieved from: <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/10/jennifer-lawrence-cover>. Accessed 2 Dec 2018.
- Wolf, N. (2003). The porn myth. *New York Magazine*. Retrieved from: http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/trends/n_9437. Accessed 2 Dec 2018.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.