The Tsunami: Adolescents, Technology, and Pornography

Ralph H. Earle, PhD        Mark E. Bell, MS

“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

This has been the proclamation this writer has heard Dr. Patrick Carnes 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 the 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 Malz 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.
highlight that these games are significantly different from traditional computer games. The T-existent we offer at Psychological Counseling Services, LTD (PCS). The T-existent is based on the PCS Adult Intensive Outpatient treatment addressing the common problems teens are facing including sexual acting-out, pornography, cyber-sex 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; we need 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. Baurlein (2009) informs us that teens are usually connected to 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 contact 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 issues is the Teen Intensive we offer at Psychological Counseling Services, LTD (PCS). The Teen Intensive is based on the PCS Adult Intensive Outpatient treatment addressing the common problems teens are facing including sexual acting-out, pornography, cyber-sex use, and mood issues impacted by busyness and isolation.

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