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Porn, Power, and the Brain: Pornography scripts shaping Gen Z's neurodevelopment, objectification perceptions and political beliefs

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ABSTRACT

By age 12, most Gen Z teens encounter pornography, often before any real-life sexual experience, yet its social and psychological impacts remain largely overlooked. This research examines how mainstream porn functions as a surrogate sex educator, scripting hierarchies of dominance and submission that distort intimacy and gender roles. Drawing on social cognitive theory, I collected qualitative data via a Google Form survey with Q&A and interview-style text responses, engaging 159 participants aged 18–25 across diverse gender identities. Findings reveal early porn exposure shapes expectations, internalises aggressive sexual scripts, blurs the line between performance and desire, and amplifies objectification, inhumanisation, and affective detachment. Beyond the bedroom, these distortions intersect with socio-political dynamics: early porn exposure, male loneliness, and legitimised misogynist discourse create an emotional and ideological vacuum, driving some young men toward simplistic, authoritarian models of leadership. This research underscores the urgent need for transformational leadership, critical sex re-education, and media literacy, framing pornography as a potent social force shaping intimacy, gender norms, and political attitudes.

Keywords: Pornography; Social Cognitive Theory; Masculinity; Inhumanisation; Fascism

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the chances of a young person watching porn on purpose or by accident are very high. In a recent report by Common Sense Media, three-quarters of teenagers admitted to viewing pornography by the age of 17. The average age of first exposure is 12. Of those surveyed,

nearly 60 percent say they first stumbled upon pornography by accident.¹

Bell Hooks, looking at porn through a structural lens, defined porn as power suppression: "Pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling."² She highlights the

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¹ Common Sense Media, "Teens and Pornography: Findings from a New Common Sense Survey," January 2023, <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/2023-teens-and-pornography-report.pdf>

² bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 41.

disconnect between body and mind depicted in mainstream porn. Porn commodifies, stripping sex of its complexity so that may be re-entrenched in barbaric patriarchal, racist, and sexist structures. In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*, Hooks describes pornography as a means by which men “numb themselves” and perpetuate power-based relationships, distancing themselves from authentic feeling and connection.³ The hyperbolisation of power imbalances creates an environment that suppresses, or at the very least destabilises, the forms of vulnerabilities that are integral to genuine intimacy.

Pornography found its boom during the first sexual revolution in 1960's-1970's where further attention was brought to female pleasure. Relaxed taboos and the spread of contraception led Western mainstream culture and pornography to increasingly depict female orgasm and sexual agency as part of the narrative.⁴ The film “Deep Throat” launched in 1972, marking the beginning of the “Golden age of porn” and mainstreaming Pornography as a film industry.⁵ During that wave of lifting sexual taboos that was perceived as a liberation from sex stigma for youth, the star of the film, Linda Lovelace, revealed that she had been coerced and abused during filming, making her a feminist icon for anti-pornography activism in the late 1980s. This did nothing to disrupt the machinery driving pornography's ascent. Her story reframed the porn industry as evidence of male domination disguised as sexual liberation.⁶ But her advocacy did not restrain the phenomenon, which ultimately led to the industry's second boom: “The internet explosion” of the late 1990s.⁷

This article centres on the power play produced by pornography in shaping Gen Z's perceptions of intimacy and gender roles, as these effects are inseparable from the cognitive distortions formed

through early exposure to porn during critical periods of neurological development. Despite their significance for the social and political construction of gender roles among Gen Z, these distortions remain largely overlooked in academic research. Pornography is defined here as sexually explicit material, including images, texts, videos, or other media, produced and consumed primarily with the intention of sexually arousing the viewer or consumer. This article specifically focuses on the impact of video content on Gen Z.⁸ Research consistently shows that videos provoke stronger emotional and neural responses than static images because they provide dynamic, multisensory, and realistic cues that the brain processes as more behaviourally relevant. The combination of motion, sound, narrative structure, and character identification increases immersion, reduces counter-arguing, enhances perceived realism, and therefore produces higher arousal, deeper emotional absorption, and stronger internalisation of the norms or behaviours depicted.⁹ Because of the power dynamics embedded in gender expression, it is paramount to understand that this article addresses submission in feminine-identifying people and domination in masculine-identifying people. When the concept over-vulgarises the complexities of gender expression, mainstream pornography portrays caricatural, heteronormative behaviours and primitive interpretations of femininity and masculinity, submission, and domination, which need to be addressed.

Gen Z (loosely defined as children born between 1997 and 2012) is the first generation in history to have widespread, easy access to pornography before becoming sexually active.¹⁰ Because high-speed home internet became common in the 2000s, free streaming porn sites emerged around 2007, and most teens now get private smartphone internet access by age 13.¹¹ This

³ bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 65–66.

⁴ Del LaGrace Volcano and Josephine Ho, “Feminist Perspectives on Sex Markets,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified February 17, 2004, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-sex-markets/>

⁵ “Deep Throat (1972) - Release info,” IMDb, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0068468/releaseinfo/>

⁶ Emily Witt, “Deep Throat Speaks: The Autobiographies of Linda Lovelace,” *Hazlitt*, August 15, 2013, <https://hazlitt.net/feature/deep-throat-speaks-autobiographies-linda-lovelace>.

⁷ Alex Bracetti, “10 Ways Adult Entertainment Changed the Tech Industry,” *Complex*, February 9, 2012, <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/a/alex-bracetti/10-ways-adult-entertainment-changed-the-tech-industry>

⁸ ZipDo Education Reports, “Porn Use Statistics: Key Insights 2025,” last modified May 29, 2025, <https://zipdo.co/porn-use-statistics/>

⁹ Mel Slater and Sylvia Wilbur, “A Framework for Immersive Virtual Environments (FIVE): Speculations on the Role of Presence in Virtual Environments,” *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 6, no. 6 (1997): 603–616; Andrew K. Przybylski et al., “How Violent Video Games Might Alter Emotional Processing,” *Current Biology* 25, no. 2 (2015): 1–5.

¹⁰ Wright, Paul J. 2022. “Increase in the Prevalence of Online Pornography Use.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, no. 22: 14967. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8888374/>.

¹¹ Pew Research Center, *Teens, Social Media and Technology 2023* (December 11, 2023),

means that for the first time in the history of humanity the bulk of pre-teens and adolescent teens see explicit content before any real-life sexual experience. Owing to the ease and immediacy of access to online pornography, the high prevalence of consumption among Gen Z pre-teens appears to reflect both anxiety about sexual underperformance during initial experiences and a curiosity about the unfamiliar, with pornography functioning as an accessible and readily available pseudo-instructional guide.

Drawing on social cognitive theory,¹² this article examines how using porn as a primary sex guide contributes to the distortion of perceptions of gender roles and intimacy norms, thus shaping how young people approach sex for the first time. This global phenomenon catalysed a collective shift in intimacy expectations, as evidenced by primary research undertaken by myself: participants consistently reported viewing porn prior to being intimate for the first time, which shaped their normative behaviours and expectations.¹³ Direct quotations from them further illustrate the internalisation of these scripts.

Through a leadership lens, this work applies congruence theory to examine how pornography functions as a symbolic 'leader' in shaping sexual behaviour. Pornography's influence is rooted in a reward-based dynamic, where individuals seek the perceived safety and guidance of scripted scenarios to navigate the emotional vulnerability of first-time intimacy.¹⁴ The "leader", however, depicts highly violent media: 88% of popular pornographic scenes feature physical aggression, normalising it for youth. The violence includes slapping, hitting, gagging, choking, spanking, insulting, threatening, demeaning language such as name-calling and coercive speech toward female performers which are frequently

portrayed in pornographic scenes.¹⁵ These acts are often depicted as part of consensual sexual behaviour supporting the philosophy that it is the norm. Desensitisation to violence, a form of habituation, illustrates how repeated exposure to violent stimuli can reduce emotional responses and shape perceptions of social norms, influencing socialisation over time. When behaviour that degrades another person is not merely normalised but celebrated as sexually arousing, what meaningful boundary remains between the treatment of a human being and that of an object?

I further analyse how pornography's dehumanising representations of womanhood, explained through inhumanisation theory¹⁶ and objectification sociology,¹⁷ intersect with fascist ideologies. I argue that the developmental exposure of Gen Z to these dehumanising processes, combined with the rise of normalised misandrist discourse and the loneliness epidemic among men, forms a triad. Dehumanisation processes and rise in popularity of fascist thinking do not only co-exist, but they are also co-dependent. Change in intimacy norms amongst same gender and different gender groups has dragged Gen Z into a transitional period, one in which men's mental health is increasingly advocated for after years in which misandrist discourse had been promoted and normalised, and yet, simultaneously, there is a perceived theft of male agency, fuelled by social media surveillance and the profound incongruencies within contemporary narratives of what it means to be a real man. These moments of transition and uncertainty have historically demanded adaptable leadership, but when the seat of guidance remains empty and the challenge proves so intricate, the victor tends to be the one whose message is easiest to grasp, the one who carries the simplest, most digestible agenda. This matrix helps explain the contemporary appeal of authoritarian

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/12/11/teens-social-media-and-technology-2023/>

¹² Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977); and Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986)

¹³ Lucia Taquet, "The Influence of Mainstream Pornography on Youths' Perceptions of Gender Roles: A Study Focusing on People Between the Age of 18 to 24, Having Already Consumed Pornography" (unpublished undergraduate dissertation, City, University of London, 2024).

¹⁴ Kleio Akrivou, "Self-Ideal Congruence and Its Positive Relationship to Self-Complexity," Henley Business School Discussion Paper Series, 2008, https://assets.henley.ac.uk/legacyUploads/from-active-edition/jhd_dp_2013-014.pdf?mtime=20170512104116

¹⁵ Ana J. Bridges et al., "Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis

Update," *Violence Against Women* 16, no. 10 (October 2010): 1065-1085, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801210382866>.

¹⁶ Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan, "Dehumanization and Inhumanization," *Annual Review of Psychology* 65 (2014): 399-423, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115045>

¹⁷ Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1997): 173-206, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>; Nicki Fritz and Bryant Paul, "From Orgasms to Spanking: A Content Analysis of the Agentic and Objectifying Sexual Scripts in Feminist, For Women, and Mainstream Pornography," *Sex Roles* 77, no. 9-10 (2017): 639-652, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0759-6>

control and the alienation of outgroups, for our young men.

2. FROM SCREEN TO BED: HOW PORNOGRAPHIC SCRIPTS SHAPE GEN Z'S UNDERSTANDING OF INTIMACY AND GENDER

"Porn has existed for decades; it isn't a Gen Z issue"

When discussing the research and emphasizing that pornography is a Gen Z issue, people from diverse generations would often question: pornography has existed for decades, magazines and videotapes have long contained highly graphic content; so why would Gen Z be particularly in the crossfire of its harmful effects? I reiterate that pornography has never been so easily accessible to individuals of all ages. Above this, the impact of regularly consuming video content during critical developmental stages is particularly pronounced, as it exerts a stronger influence on the formation and reinforcement of normative behaviours and gendered expectations than static images, which are easier for individuals to cognitively distance from their own identities.¹⁸

Psychological research consistently shows that moving images, such as video clips or violent scenes in film have a deeper impact on emotional processing and identification compared to static pictures. Videos offer dynamic, multisensory engagement: the viewer is drawn into unfolding narratives, audio cues, and facial expressions, which evoke stronger feelings and foster identification with either victims or perpetrators presented on screen. This heightened realism amplifies arousal and can lower emotional defences, making violent acts seem more vivid and memorable.¹⁹

Crucially, video stimuli facilitate a form of observational learning that is less likely with single-frame images. When adolescents watch violent content in video games or movies, they don't just observe static bodies or

aggressive gestures; they witness the context, motivation, and seeming rewards of aggression. Psychologists note that this immersive engagement primes and activates aggressive cognitions and scripts, leading youth to mimic behaviours, rehearse emotional responses, and accept violence as a normal part of life.²⁰ Additionally, the process of identification is more profound in moving images. Adolescents may see themselves in characters, resonating emotionally with their conflicts, victories, or retaliatory acts. This is compounded when the video includes elements of similarity such as age, gender, or background, making the violent model even more influential.²¹

The result is stronger internalization of aggressive norms and a greater risk that the viewer will enact or endorse violence in real-world situations. In contrast, static images may lack narrative depth and emotional cues, limiting both empathy and identification. While both forms can desensitize viewers over time, research finds the repetitive, story-driven nature of videos exerts a more potent influence on the normalization of violence and on emotional desensitization in youth.²²

2.1 From Alarm to Apathy: The Quiet Drift of Habituation

Desensitisation to violence represents a form of habituation, a well-established type of non-associative learning in which repeated exposure to a stimulus leads to a diminished emotional or physiological response, independent of the reward system. The process begins with repeated exposure to violent stimuli, which gradually reduces the intensity of the emotional reaction, resulting in emotional desensitisation. For instance, initial exposure to violent depictions in mainstream pornography may provoke strong negative emotional responses, such as fear, disgust, or distress. However, with repeated exposure, these reactions are dampened or transformed into other, less intense

¹⁸ Jessica S. Hutton and Jessica T. Piotrowski, "Digital Media and Developing Brains: Concerns and Opportunities," *Current Addiction Reports* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-024-00545-3>

¹⁹ Giulia F. Galli et al., "Comparison of Slides and Video Clips as Different Methods for Inducing Emotions: An Electroencephalographic Alpha Modulation Study," *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 16 (June 9, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2022.901422>.

²⁰ L. Rowell Huesmann, "The Impact of Electronic Media Violence: Scientific Theory and Research Evidence," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 41, no. 6, suppl. 1 (December 2007): S6–S13, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2704015/>.

²¹ Jonathan Cohen, "Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters," *Mass Communication and Society* 4, no. 3 (2001): 245–64, https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0403_01.

²² Nicole K. Bushman and Craig A. Anderson, "Media Violence and the American Public: Scientific Facts Versus Media Misinformation," *American Psychologist* 56, no. 6-7 (September 2001): 477–489, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.56.6-7.477>; Andrew J. Baumgartner, "Emotionally Anesthetized: Media Violence Induces Neural Changes Associated with Emotional Processing," *Frontiers in Psychology*, March 2015, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4590536/>.

emotional states, resulting in reduced emotional distress.²³

This is analogous to a bird that hears wind rustling leaves repeatedly: it may initially be alert, but over time it stops reacting, a process of habituation that conserves energy and directs attention toward truly survival-critical stimuli, such as predators. Similarly, a person repeatedly exposed to violent content may no longer perceive violence as threatening or predatory, reflecting a form of emotional blunting. Furthermore, habituation can generalise to similar stimuli and across contexts, a process known as stimulus generalisation, which can influence an individual's perception of social norms and, over time, impact socialisation processes and behaviour.²⁴ Habituation naturally intended for human beings to integrate normative behaviours in favour of social "savoir vivre" was perverted by continual exposure to mainstream pornography insidiously reshaping social norms, widening the neo-blatant deepening hole in normative congruence between men and women.

2.2 Neurodevelopmental Vulnerability: How Pornography Shapes the Adolescent Brain

Adolescence is a critical time when the brain is still developing and is highly sensitive to experiences. When teenagers watch pornography, it affects their brain because their brains release a chemical called dopamine, which creates feelings of pleasure and rewards the brain for repeated behaviour. Dopamine isn't bad by itself, it is important for motivation and mood; but pornography causes the brain to focus on it excessively, making the teen want to watch repeatedly. This leads to forming strong memories linked to sex, but these memories may be unrealistic and emotionally intense, unlike a grown adult's experience.²⁵

Because the adolescent brain's control center (prefrontal cortex) is still immature, they have less ability to regulate impulses and emotional reactions. Meanwhile,

the emotional center (amygdala) is more active, so the emotional impact of porn scenes is stronger and more deeply encoded in memory.²⁶ Watching violent or aggressive pornography repeatedly changes brain wiring by strengthening connections related to sexual arousal and aggressive behaviour, while weakening pathways that help with healthy emotional and social responses. This can lead to problems like difficulty trusting others, regulating emotions, and forming healthy relationships. It also makes teenagers more likely to accept harmful ideas like objectifying partners or justifying sexual violence because those ideas are repeatedly reinforced by what they see in porn.

Additionally, the brain's reward system becomes desensitized over time, meaning teens need more extreme content to get the same dopamine "high."²⁷ This cycle is like addiction, where the brain craves the stimulus and struggles to control the behavior. This rewiring also impairs attention, memory, and decision-making abilities, which can affect school and social functioning.²⁸ In simple terms, high porn exposure during adolescence teaches the brain faulty lessons about sex, relationships, and emotions, rewiring it to prioritize sexual images and dopamine-driven cravings while weakening the ability to form genuine, healthy emotional connections. This can have long-lasting effects on mental health and social development well into adulthood.

2.3 Bandura and Beyond: Cognitive Mechanisms Underpinning the Acquisition and Normalisation of Pornographic Behaviour

Bandura's social cognitive theory explains how individuals can learn behaviours through observing and internalising scripts presented in pornography, particularly by evaluating perceived consequences and

²³ Mel Slater and Sylvia Wilbur, "A Framework for Immersive Virtual Environments (FIVE): Speculations on the Role of Presence in Virtual Environments," *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 6, no. 6 (1997): 603–616; Andrew K. Przybylski et al., "How Violent Video Games Might Alter Emotional Processing," *Current Biology* 25, no. 2 (2015): 1–5

²⁴ Slater and Wilbur, "Framework for Immersive Virtual Environments," 610.

²⁵ Simone Kühn and Jürgen Gallinat, "Brain Structure and Functional Connectivity Associated With Pornography Consumption: The Brain on Porn," *JAMA Psychiatry* 71, no. 7 (July 2014): 827–

834, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2014.93>

²⁶ Casper Schmidt, Laurel S. Morris, Timo L. Kvamme, Paula Hall, Thaddeus Birchard, and Valerie Voon, "Compulsive Sexual Behavior: Prefrontal and Limbic Volume and Interactions," *Human Brain Mapping* 38, no. 3 (2016): 1182–1190, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hbm.23447>

²⁷ Kühn and Gallinat, "Brain Structure and Functional Connectivity," 830.

²⁸ Aishwariya Jha and Debanjan Banerjee, "Neurobiology of Sex and Pornography Addictions: A Primer," *Journal of Psychosexual Health* 4, no. 4 (2022): 227–236, <https://doi.org/10.1177/26318318221116042>

rewards.²⁹ When pornographic behaviour is employed as the primary or sole framework for understanding intimacy, the anticipated reward often centres on delivering pleasurable performance for one's partner. However, this reliance may lead to the enactment of aggressive or violent behaviours, driven by mainstream porn's systemic portrayal of women as submissive and men as dominant.³⁰ Furthermore, Wright's 3AM model comprising Acquisition, Activation, and Application explains how exposure to unfamiliar sexual media can lead to the acquisition of new or dormant sexual scripts, which may later be activated and applied in real-life contexts.³¹

Fritz and Paul (2017) argue that these newly acquired scripts can gradually become normalised, shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviours in intimacy.³² Supporting the normalisation process theory, Gerbner's (1973) cultivation theory explores how consistent media exposure influences people's perceptions of reality.³³ Shrum (2017) asserts that the more time individuals spend engaging with media, the more their worldviews are shaped by it.³⁴

When analysing the impact of early exposure to mainstream pornography on young people's livelihoods, sexual behaviours, and perceptions of gender roles, it is essential to engage with theories of indoctrination, cultivation, and normalisation considering the evidence that an entire generation is grappling with such effects. The collective behavioural consequences promote the normalisation of certain sexual scripts and gender dynamics, highlighting its deeply societal dimension.

3. THE DORMANT SCRIPTS EMERGING FROM SLUMBER

In 2024, I conducted research examining the influence of pornography on young people's perceptions of gender roles. I recruited my participants on social media platforms (Instagram and WhatsApp). 159 participants responded through these channels, more than I initially expected. Many people privately contacted me to express that they had noticed an impact of pornography on their intimacy and, collectively, on Gen Z's perceptions of gender roles. They were eager for me to share my findings. I believe this explains the high engagement with the research: it illuminated dynamics that participants had sensed in their personal lives but had not previously identified, named, or understood as socially patterned, which heightened their motivation to participate. Because the nature of the research was deemed high-risk, I chose anonymous participation through a Google Form as my method of data collection. The first question outlined the aims of the research, explained how the data would be stored, reinforced that all answers would remain anonymous and used solely for academic purposes, and asked participants for consent before proceeding to the polls and questions.

The study involved 159 participants aged between 18 and 25. The research was conducted remotely from London and primarily reached students from City, University of London. Because City is an exceptionally multicultural institution,³⁵ and because the survey link was shared through university group chats with over 100 members as well as through my personal social media platforms, the participant pool was highly diverse. Several responses were submitted in French, indicating that some participants were likely from my

²⁹ Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1977); and Albert Bandura, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1986).

³⁰ UK Government Equalities Office, *The Relationship Between Pornography Use and Harmful Sexual Attitudes and Behaviours: Literature Review* (2020), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-relationship-between-pornography-use-and-harmful-sexual-behaviours/the-relationship-between-pornography-use-and-harmful-sexual-attitudes-and-behaviours-literature-review>

³¹ Karol Lewczuk, Adrian Wójcik, and Mateusz Gola, "Increase in the Prevalence of Online Pornography Use: Objective Data Analysis from the Period Between 2004 and 2016 in Poland," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 51, no. 2 (February 2022): 1157–1171, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-021-02090-w>

³² Nicki Fritz and Bryant Paul, "From Orgasms to Spanking: A Content Analysis of the Agentic and Objectifying Sexual

Scripts in Feminist, For Women, and Mainstream Pornography," *Sex Roles* 77, no. 9–10 (2017): 639–652, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0759-6>

³³ George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, "Growing up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective," in *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 17–41; Lloyd J. Shrum, "Cultivation Theory: Effects and Underlying Processes," in *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*, ed. Patrick Rössler, Claudia A. Hoffner, and Liselotte van Zoonen (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017)

³⁴ Shrum, L.J., 2017. 'Cultivation theory: Effects and underlying processes'. In P. Rössler, C.A. Hoffner & L. van Zoonen (eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Media Effects*. Wiley-Blackwell

³⁵ "City St George's, University of London (formerly St George's)," University Compare, last modified March 11, 2025, <https://universitycompare.com/universities/city-st-georges-university-of-london-formerly-st-georges/reviews>

home country, Belgium, or from France. Of these, 71% identified as women, 24% as men, 3% as non-binary, and 3% preferred not to disclose their gender. This article adopts a gender-inclusive approach that goes beyond binary categorizations of male and female, recognizing the diverse spectrum of gender identities and expressions. By intentionally including participants with varied gender identities; including nonbinary, transgender, and gender-nonconforming individuals, this work seeks to critically examine how experiences of submission, domination, and intimate scripts function across and within a broad range of gender expressions. This perspective acknowledges that gender is a fluid and socially constructed process rather than a fixed binary, thus enriching the analysis of how pornography shapes intimate norms and power dynamics. The inclusion of diverse gender identities not only strengthens the validity of the findings but also reflects the lived realities of contemporary youth navigating intimate and gendered experiences.

When asked about their reasons for viewing pornography, 71% reported using it to seek information about sex. Notably, 78% indicated that they had watched pornography prior to their first sexual experience, suggesting that for many, initial exposure to sex occurred via screens and online pornographic platforms. Additionally, 71% indicated they consciously imitated a porn performer's behaviour because they thought that is what their partner would like. An additional 15% reported that, although not yet sexually active, they had consumed pornographic content. Taken together, 98% had viewed pornography before becoming sexually active. Only 4% reported having sex before watching pornography (2% preferred not to answer).³⁶ These findings add to a body of evidence highlighting the significant role pornography may play in shaping early sexual knowledge and perceptions of gender dynamics.

I asked the participants: "Do you believe that pornography has influenced your sexual preferences or desires?"³⁷ Responses revealed recurring themes of confusion, discomfort, internalised pressure, and the normalisation of certain sexual behaviours. Selected quotations illustrate the emotional and cognitive impact described by respondents:

"For a long while pornography led to feel like I desired rough, degrading sex when in reality I did not actually enjoy it."

"I don't think I could explain it but I have felt it."

"I never watched porn but I can still feel the effect it has on us sexually. I mean, I am never alone performing a sexual act."

"I have, but I can't explain it. There's also a feeling of disgust."

"It would make me doubt my wants (do I really want it, for example) after seeing rougher clips."

"I did, and because I got turned on by the violence."

"Maybe the behaviour of the partner, to what extent he/she is involved or 'acting.'"

"Not porn, but accidentally reading really graphic fan fiction-type content at a young age gave me completely distorted ideas of sex that definitely caused some trauma and still affect my sex life."

"Since women are often portrayed to be submissive, it feels uncomfortable not to be."

"Often feel pressured to act a certain way: You always see comments using 'vanilla' as an insult. It makes you overthink your personal preferences."

"I think of doing things that would never have crossed my mind naturally."

"Aggression during sex is common in porn and I believe this has affected how I respond when a partner acts this way towards me."

"I expect men to act like they are portrayed in porn, and it grosses me out."

"The face that you must have when you are having sex."

"I feel like as a woman I have been indoctrinated to like submissive sex (on my part)."³⁸

These insights highlight the internalisation of pornographic scripts and how affective responses, ranging from arousal to distress, can shape sexual

³⁶ Lucia Taquet, "The Influence of Mainstream Pornography on Youths' Perceptions of Gender Roles: A Study Focusing on People Between the Age of 18 to 24, Having Already

Consumed Pornography" (unpublished undergraduate dissertation, City, University of London, 2024).

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ Taquet, 2024

identity and expectations, even among those who do not actively engage with pornographic media.

If a clear distinction is not made between scripted porn scenarios and real-life intimacy, these internalised scripts can extend beyond the bedroom, influencing broader perceptions of gender roles. This is particularly significant given that Gen Z and younger generations represent the first generation in human history to widely consume pornography before becoming sexually active. As such, their experiences of sex may be fundamentally different from those of previous generations, whose understandings of intimacy developed through more organic, interpersonal experiences rather than through media consumption.

3.1 Congruence Leadership Theory and the Pornographic Blueprint of Intimacy

Through the lens of congruence theory, the pornography industry can be understood as a normative and symbolic leader in guiding youth towards an “idealised” form of sexual performance. Congruence theory as elaborated within constructivist models of adult ego development, posits that individuals strive to align their real self with their self-ideal, in other words: who they aspire to be. A process shaped by internalised social expectations and leading archetypes.³⁹

Constructivist theorists such as Cook-Greuter⁴⁰ and Kegan⁴¹ argue that individuals progress through increasingly complex stages of meaning-making, beginning with social conformity and progressing toward self-authored, authentic worldviews. In the absence of first-hand experience, individuals rely on cultural scripts. In the context of the porn doctrine, the embodiment of specific scripts is violative and traumagenic, as evidenced by participants' statements: In response to the question, “Do you believe that pornography contributes to unrealistic body standards or expectations?” one participant remarked: “Porn is worrying. I had guys choke me at the club thinking I would enjoy it when I had not given consent, and they

did not seem worried by that. Choking is very frequent in porn, so might be correlated.”⁴² Porn’s gendered behaviours function as a heuristic model in the context of early adulthood. A key stage in psychosocial development where individuals are particularly susceptible to external models that appear to offer meaning, validation, or a roadmap to perceived success.

My findings suggest that for many young people, the porn industry acts as such a leader. To the question: Have you already gone on porn websites to get information about sex? 71% of participants stated they had and despite acknowledging pornography’s unrealistic nature, another 71% reported consciously imitating behaviours seen in porn because they believed it would please their partner, most of whom had watched porn before having sex for the first time.⁴³ This reveals a perceived link between mimicking pornographic performance and achieving a higher standard of sexual competence than expected for a “beginner.” In this context, pornographic scripts serve as influential scenarios that guide users toward an “ideal self” in intimate encounters, reinforcing the industry’s normative authority over sexual expectations. As noted almost half a century ago by Pierre Bourdieu: “People can only operate within the limits of what they know.”⁴⁴

The pornography industry does not simply reflect prevailing sexual norms; it actively constructs and disseminates them. As a dominant source of early sexual education, it assumes an informal but powerful leadership role, offering scripted templates that define what is desirable, expected, and “normal” in sexual interactions. These scripts, disseminated globally and algorithmically reinforced, become authoritative guides for intimate behaviour, especially among impressionable youth navigating formative stages of identity development. By positioning itself as the default educator in the absence of further explicit educational alternatives, the porn industry assumes symbolic leadership over sexual culture, directing not

³⁹ Kleio Akrivou, “Self-Ideal Congruence and Its Positive Relationship to Self-Complexity,” Henley Business School Discussion Paper Series, 2008, https://assets.henley.ac.uk/legacyUploads/from-active-edition/jhd_dp_2013-014.pdf?mtime=20170512104116

⁴⁰ Susanne R. Cook-Greuter, *Postautonomous Ego Development: A Study of Its Nature and Measurement* (doctoral dissertation, Harvard Graduate School of Education, 1999)

⁴¹ Kegan, Robert. *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982

⁴² Lucia Taquet, “The Influence of Mainstream Pornography on Youths’ Perceptions of Gender Roles: A Study Focusing on People Between the Age of 18 to 24, Having Already Consumed Pornography” (unpublished undergraduate dissertation, City, University of London, 2024).

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977)

only how sex is performed, but how it is imagined, desired, and valued. Consequently, it operates as a cultural architect, embedding its own logic of pleasure, gender, and power into the personal landscapes of its consumers.

4. THE PORNOGRAPHIC LEADER: HOW DEHUMANISATION FUELS FASCIST MASCULINITY

The differences between humans, animals, and objects are a longstanding and praised subject within philosophical discourse and continue to be a matter of ongoing debate and interpretation. However, to explain the processes of dehumanisation or, more precisely, infrahumanisation theory, it is necessary to categorise distinctions between objects and animals in contrast to human beings. Specifically, there are capacities that they lack and that humans possess, such as:

1. Self-awareness;
2. Cultural modulation;
3. Theory of mind: The ability to empathise with others' emotions;
4. Social and moral reasoning.⁴⁵

Focusing on the fourth attribute, mainstream porn exercises systemic physical and verbal violence in its depictions of women. Even if certain parts of the world have experienced progress, women's sexuality tends to be taboo and demonised, perceived as more shameful and dirtier than men's.⁴⁶ This creates a disconnect of social and moral reasoning abilities towards women because of patriarchal systemic and cultural modulation. The perception of disconnect initiates the infrahumanisation process: a generalised acceptance of violence and dehumanising attitudes as normative, embedding patriarchal cultural modulation into the

social psyche. The outgroup modulation in the mind is and will be extensively engrained if porn imagery is routinely consumed during early adolescence (10-13 years old). This creates a disconnect from the outgroup, resulting in a diminished capacity to empathise with women, which corresponds with the violence portrayed against women as a social group in mainstream pornography.

In mainstream pornography, women are systematically positioned as the outgroup. Psychological essentialism supports the view that the pervasive violence and degradation depicted in pornographic content, combined with the cultural taboos surrounding female sexuality, contribute to a collective failure to recognise women's full humanity. This aligns precisely with the infrahumanisation process: women are less attributed with complex emotions such as hope, love, or moral reasoning, which are reserved for the ingroup.⁴⁷

4.1 Objectification: From human being to object

Linking objectification with infrahumanisation, Fredrickson and Roberts define sexual objectification as reducing a woman's body to a set of parts or instruments representing her as a whole.⁴⁸ Fritz and Paul distinguish between indirect objectification, such as portraying women's bodies solely for male pleasure, and direct objectification, which includes acts of sexual aggression.⁴⁹ A 1999 study by Purcell revealed that 90% of analysed pornographic scenes involved aggression, with women being the target in 94% of cases. Exposure to such content has been linked to both women accepting objectification and men adopting objectifying views of women.⁵⁰

Sociologist Samantha Newport argues that pornography reflects and reinforces patriarchal norms wherein men are expected to be dominant and sexually assertive, while women are seen as passive.⁵¹

⁴⁵ Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan, "Dehumanization and Infrahumanization," *Annual Review of Psychology* 65 (2014): 399-423, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115045>

⁴⁶ Amy C. Moors, Ali Ziegler, and Tiffani D. Conley, "Backlash from the Bedroom," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2012): 392-407, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684312467169>

⁴⁷ Stephanie Demoulin et al., "Emotional Prejudice Can Lead to Infra-Humanisation," *European Review of Social Psychology* 15, no. 1 (2004): 259-296, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463280440000044>

⁴⁸ Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, "Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks," *Psychology of*

Women Quarterly 21, no. 2 (1997): 173-206, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>

⁴⁹ Nicki Fritz and Bryant Paul, "From Orgasms to Spanking: A Content Analysis of the Agentic and Objectifying Sexual Scripts in Feminist, For Women, and Mainstream Pornography," *Sex Roles* 77, no. 9-10 (2017): 639-652, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0759-6>

⁵⁰ Purcell (1999) referred to in Elizabeth Monk-Turner and H. C. Purcell, "Sexual Violence in Pornography: How Prevalent Is It?" *Gender Issues* 17, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 58-67, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-999-0015-7>.

⁵¹ Samantha Newport, "The Problem With Porn: Heteronormativity & Gender-Roles," *The Room Psychology*, June 30, 2021.

Supporting this claim, 47% of the 159 participants aged 18–25 in my research described the portrayal of women in porn as submissive.⁵² These gendered expectations influence how male consumers engage with partners, often prioritising control over mutual understanding. Newport also highlights how the growing variety of porn genres has normalised unconventional sexual preferences and contributed to porn addiction. This negatively impacts gender representations, sexual identities, and the psychological and physiological health of users, altering real-life sexual expectations and behaviours. When asked, “Have you noticed a difference of perception or/and approach to porn between men and other genders? If so, could you briefly explain your answer,” some participants shared:

“Women are often reduced to just their body parts and pornography has created an unrealistic standard of how women's bodies should look.”

“Women are often viewed as « objects » and porn often concentrates on men's pleasure.”

“Cis men seem to be perceived a lot as the main dominant in porn, majority of porn with either men with trans individuals or women, the men are majority always the dom.”

“I feel like porn tends to empower men in their misogynistic behavior. It also makes teen boys have a very wrong approach to women and relationships.”

“Men tend to be the dominant one, whilst the women must be submissive by the positions, things they say, and the way they moan. Very much like gay porn the feminine guys are treated in the same way, same insults, and expected to have the same level of

submission because of their feminine appearance.”⁵³

These quotes highlight that the Gen Z participants in my research have identified these dynamics on screen and sometimes their transfer to real-life situations.

4.2 Infrahumanisation, objectification, and the rise of fascist views among Gen Z men

The foregoing discussion demonstrates how mainstream pornography, through infrahumanisation⁵⁴ and objectification,⁵⁵ systematically devalues women and destabilises organic relations between genders, embedding patriarchal norms into the social psyche. Viewed through the lens of authoritarian leadership, these psychological and cultural processes contribute to the rise of fascist attitudes among Gen Z men, reflected in recent voting trends and sociopolitical behaviours.

Infrahumanisation theory posits that consistently portraying women as lacking fundamental human traits such as empathy and self-awareness reinforces their status as outsiders or less than fully human.⁵⁶ Pornography normalizes violence and aggression against women during adolescence, a formative stage for moral and social development.⁵⁷ This is further reinforced through sexual objectification, where women are reduced to tools for male pleasure or become targets of aggression, deepening dehumanising attitudes.⁵⁸ These gendered dynamics echo fascist models of gender ideology: rigid gender roles, normalisation of violence, and the rejection of gender equality. Fascist attitudes toward womanhood historically confined women to subordinate roles as mothers and homemakers, stripping them of agency and public power. This patriarchal vision was enforced in Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy through policy, propaganda, and cultural norms, with women portrayed as virtuous, passive, and existing for the service of men and the state.⁵⁹

⁵² Lucia Taquet, “The Influence of Mainstream Pornography on Youths' Perceptions of Gender Roles: A Study Focusing on People Between the Age of 18 to 24, Having Already Consumed Pornography” (unpublished undergraduate dissertation, City, University of London, 2024).

⁵³ Taquet, 2024

⁵⁴ Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan, “Dehumanization and Infrahumanization,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 65 (2014): 399–423, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115045>

⁵⁵ Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks,” *Psychology of*

Women Quarterly 21, no. 2 (1997): 173–206, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1997.tb00108.x>

⁵⁶ Haslam & Loughnan, 2014

⁵⁸ Nicki Fritz and Bryant Paul, “From Orgasms to Spanking: A Content Analysis of the Agentic and Objectifying Sexual Scripts in Feminist, For Women, and Mainstream Pornography,” *Sex Roles* 77, no. 9–10 (2017): 639–652, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0759-6>; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Natalie Purcell, *Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary: The Politics of Sex, Gender, and Aggression in Hardcore Pornography* (New York: Routledge, 2012), ISBN 9780415523127

⁵⁹ Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

Mainstream pornography mirrors these dynamics. In both fascist ideology and pornography, women are frequently reduced to objects or instruments, lacking complexity, autonomy, and subjectivity. Far-right ideologies have historically maintained a fascination with pornography depicting power imbalances, sadism, and derealisation of women, turning them into “ghosts” to be controlled or consumed. This is evident in the persistence of genres such as “nazipolization” and sadistic porn, reflecting patriarchal and dehumanising codes.⁶⁰

Although pornography operates under the guise of sexual liberation, feminist critiques argue it reinforces, rather than subverts, traditional gender hierarchies.⁴⁴ Women are consistently portrayed as submissive, degraded, and passive, echoing the same control mechanisms inherent in fascist ideology. Both systems reduce women’s roles to service and sacrifice, whether for male pleasure or state objectives. Despite differing historical contexts state ideology versus commercial entertainment, the underlying message remains the same: women’s value lies in their service to others, not in their autonomy. This enduring cultural script continues to shape perceptions of femininity, reinforcing patriarchal structures of power and control. What begins as erotic spectacle mutates into a cultural script; one that echoes fascist gender archetypes and resonates with a generation left vulnerable as a result of negligent governance. Porn, misandry, and masculine leadership collide at a volatile crossroads, shaping Gen Z’s evident drift toward authoritarian belonging.

4.3 Surveillance, Masculinity, “Shoulder to shoulder” rather than “eye to eye”

Sociologically and psychologically, the ways men and women interact reflect deeper cultural logics: men’s tendency to seek side-by-side connection (e.g., watching sports, gaming) rather than face-to-face communication mirrors norms around emotional restraint and indirect intimacy. Research on male friendship patterns highlights how vulnerability among men is often mediated through shared activities, leading to “shoulder-to-shoulder” rather than “face-to-face”

emotional engagement.⁶¹ As mental health discourse becomes less stigmatized, men across Gen Z and increasingly Gen Alpha (children born from 2010 onwards) are approaching friendship and emotional openness at different paces, creating friction and incongruencies in expectations around intimacy and masculinity.

Stanley argues that fascism weaponizes precisely these underlying anxieties of identity, belonging, and vulnerability by creating clear boundaries of “us vs. them” within social and political spheres. For disenfranchised youth, especially men searching for meaning and agency, fascist communities often serve less as ideological collectives and more as safe havens of belonging, promising restored status, solidarity, and “masculine” self-efficacy.⁶² The attraction lies in the affective power: beliefs that are tightly aligned, and the reassurance that comes with membership in a group that does not judge vulnerability as weakness but instead valorises shared struggle and a narrative of lost power.

The era of mass surveillance, both technological and social, exacerbates this dynamic. Gen Z is the first cohort to grow up entirely under digital scrutiny: every action is subject to visibility, recording, and potentially viral dissemination. The constant, almost ambient surveillance generates perpetual self-consciousness, amplifying social anxiety and fear of rejection or ridicule. In this context, algorithmic feedback loops reinforce extreme identification, political polarization, and the clustering of like-minded individuals into isolated digital communities.⁶³

COVID-19, digital capitalism, neo-liberal instability, and shifting feminist discourses further intensified generational divides. For many Gen Z men, masculinity appears polarized: some see “woke” identity politics as undermining their value, while others flock to hyper-masculine influencers or “manosphere” spaces where dominant, sometimes regressive models of manhood are promoted.⁶⁴ The result is a collective identity crisis, driving many to either overcompensate masculinity

⁶⁰ PJ Patella-Rey, “Beyond Privacy: Bodily Integrity as an Alternative Framework for Understanding Non-Consensual Pornography,” *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 5 (2018): 786–

91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428653>

⁶¹ *ibid*

⁶² Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York: Random House, 2018), chap. 3.

⁶³ Scott M. Reid, “What Everyone Gets Wrong About Our Generation According to 21 College Kids,” *GQ*, September 22,

2025, <https://www.gq.com/story/what-everyone-gets-wrong-about-our-generation-according-to-21-college-kids>

⁶⁴ Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books, 2017); YouGov, “Young Men, Masculinity and Misogyny,” October 13, 2025, <https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/52863-young-men-masculinity-and-misogyny>, citing research by Schmitz and Holt (2023).

through performative toughness and emotional suppression or to experience shame and insecurity about their gender. When Gen Z men are already challenged with masculine identity, fascism presents a simple straight to the point model to bow down to.

Pornography intersects here as both possible cause and symptom. Fascist politics utilise sexual anxiety and the “mythic past” where men were protectors and women passive as rhetorical weapons. Pornographic scripts that valorize violence, domination, and emotional detachment reinforce dehumanisation and the infrahumanisation processes. This creates cognitive and emotional disconnects for men, who internalize scripts that are at odds with real-life, healthy intimacy, leading to frustration and rage. This internalized despair for “lost agency” and “rejected masculinity” primes young men to seek authoritarian models as pathways to regain control and social standing.⁶⁵

Surveillance and “cancel culture” intensify fears of social judgment or exposure. The “fear of being cringeworthy” and the reluctance to express vulnerability arise precisely out of the pressure to conform and the risk of public shaming, now amplified by digital platforms and viral sharing.⁶⁶ Stanley’s pillars of fascist politics; the politics of hierarchy, nostalgia for a mythic past, and normalization of exclusion work in tandem with surveillance society to channel youth anxieties into support for authoritarian movements and emotionally distant role models.⁶⁷

6.2 Emotional Fallout from Masculine Leadership, Porn-Driven Sexual Scripts, and the Normalisation of Misandry

Fascist ideology is marked by authoritarian leadership, where power is concentrated in a single leader or ruling elite, and dissent is suppressed. The fascist authoritarian model of liberal democracy includes authoritarianism, perceiving “others” as threatening, welcoming

conspiracy-oriented propaganda, and distrust of established governance.⁶⁸

Stanley explains that the us vs. them structure engineered in fascist politics is not merely about political struggle; it leverages deep emotional vulnerabilities, particularly sexual anxiety rooted in patriarchal frameworks. In fascist ideology, the demagogue often becomes the symbolic father of the nation, embodying the ideal patriarch whose control is threatened by perceived sexual deviance and assault crimes.⁶⁹ These threats are particularly potent when traditional male roles as providers and protectors are destabilised by what we are witnessing today: a growing awakening to male mental health emerging amid a new regime of digital hyper-surveillance.

Patriarchal masculinity creates rigid expectations: men are to be sole family providers, controlling both the public and private spheres. Economic anxieties, digital hyper surveillance and gender equity movements that threaten traditional male status exacerbate this insecurity. In such conditions, demagogic fascist politics distorts anxieties into existential threats, weaponizing fears that familial structures and male dominance are under siege of the irreverent ‘other’.⁷⁰ This would include feminists, LGBTQ+ communities, immigrants, progressive youth, and other groups framed as destabilising traditional masculinity. The poisonous cocktail of frustration and rage that builds in this context underlies much of the appeal of fascist movements, especially among young men.

A recent survey found that Gen Z men are drawn to authoritarian systems that reflect traditional masculine power, with 45% believing men are now discriminated against due to women’s equality efforts, and many trusting hyper-masculine influencers who promote dominant leadership.⁷¹ This trend is reflected globally: in the US, 45% of Gen Z men approved of Trump’s 2024 presidency compared to 24% of Gen Z women, revealing a clear gender divide in youth support for authoritarian politics.⁷² In Germany, the far-right AfD emerged as the most popular party among voters under 25 years old.⁷³

⁶⁵ Reid, “What Everyone Gets Wrong About Our Generation.”

⁶⁶ *ibid*

⁶⁷ Stanley, *How Fascism Works*

⁶⁸ Frontiers in Political Science, “The Fascist Authoritarian Model of Illiberal Democracy (FAMID): A Theoretical Framework,” *Frontiers in Political Science* 4 (2022), accessed June 12,

2025, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/political-science/articles/10.3389/fpos.2022.907681/full>

⁶⁹ Stanley, *How Fascism Works*

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ Frontiers in Political Science, “FAMID,” 2022.

⁷² Survey Center on American Life, “The State of American Friendship: Change, Challenges, and Loss,” American Survey Center, 2021, accessed June 12,

2025, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/the-state-of-american-friendship-change-challenges-and-loss/>

⁷³ Matthew Moore, “How Germany’s Far Right AfD Is Reaching Young Voters,” Deutsche Welle, September 19, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-germanys-far-right-afd-is-reaching-young-voters/video-70264592>; Simon Romero, “Javier Milei Wins Argentina’s Presidency, Riding

Argentina's Javier Milei won youth backing with his radical anti-establishment campaign,⁷⁴ while Italy's Giorgia Meloni and Hungary's Viktor Orbán have gained youth support by presenting themselves as strong, anti-elite leaders promising order and national renewal.⁷⁵

The rise of fascism among Gen Z may be somewhat explained with the help of the "loneliness epidemic" among men as being a major contributory factor, with mounting evidence that young men are experiencing unprecedented social isolation. In the UK, people aged 16 to 34 are five times more likely to feel chronically alone than those over 65, and about eight million men report a sense of desolation at least once a week. Similarly, a recent Gallup poll in the US found one in four men under 35 struggles with loneliness.⁷⁶ The Office for National Statistics reported 40% of adults aged 16 to 29 in Great Britain felt lonely "often or always" or "some of the time," a higher proportion than any other age group.

The qualitative experience of loneliness among men is often compounded by cultural norms discouraging emotional openness and vulnerability. The result is stark: 15% of men today say they have no close friendships, a fivefold increase since 1990, and two thirds of men aged 18 to 23 say they feel no one really knows them.⁷⁷ This epidemic does not exist in a vacuum. As young men increasingly turn to online spaces for connection, they are exposed to a digital environment rife with misogynistic and hateful speech. Many online communities, often called the "manosphere," capitalise on male loneliness and disaffection, offering belonging in exchange for hostile or exclusionary worldviews.⁷⁸ This model presents itself as further simplified, vulgarised, therefore easier to make sense of, as opposed to facing the complexities of this transitional period that

belongs to us. The pornographic scripts consumed by many young men reinforce this, as they depict gender hierarchies steeped in domination and violence, further distorting sexual norms and fostering alienation from authentic intimacy.

While feminist movements historically centred on egalitarian principles, the emergence of digital feminism and social media platforms in the 2010s introduced more polarising rhetoric, including visible strands of male exclusion or hostility. The #MeToo movement (2017) raised awareness about sexual harassment and abuse, yet provoked backlash and intensified public debate. In some online spaces, discourse became increasingly adversarial, with expressions of animosity toward men gaining traction. By 2018, the term "toxic feminism" circulated more widely, reflecting concerns over the tone and direction of certain feminist narratives in digital environments.⁷⁹

As noted by psychoanalyst Hannah Arendt and echoed in recent scholarship, fascist movements provide a remedy for loneliness by offering a sense of collective identity and belonging. The spectacle of mass rallies, uniforms, and shared rituals creates an emotional experience of unity, allowing individuals to feel part of something greater than themselves. For those who feel invisible or powerless, the allure of being "seen" and valued within a powerful group can be profound.⁸⁰ Fascist ideologies frequently channel personal frustrations and social grievances into hatred against scapegoated groups, minorities, foreigners, or other perceived "outsiders." This process not only gives a target for diffuse feelings of anger or inadequacy but also bonds adherents through a shared sense of struggle.⁸¹ The identification of enemies and the promise of purging them from society provides a clear,

Voter Rage," *New York Times*, November 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/19/world/america/argentina-election-milei.html>

⁷⁴ Romero, 2023

⁷⁵ Sam Jones, "EU Elections 2024: How Did Key Countries Vote and What Does It Mean?," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/jun/10/eu-elections-2024-how-did-key-countries-vote-and-what-does-it-mean>

⁷⁶ Gallup, "Daily Loneliness Afflicts One in Five in U.S.," October 14, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/651881/daily-loneliness-afflicts-one-five.aspx>; Office for National Statistics, "Loneliness - What Characteristics and Circumstances Are Associated with Feeling Lonely?," April 9, 2018, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/lonelinesswhatcharacteristicsandcircumstancesareassociatedwithfeelinglonely/2018-04-10>

⁷⁷ *ibid*

⁷⁸ Southern Poverty Law Center, "Male Supremacy," SPLC, accessed June 12, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy>

⁷⁹ The Conversation, "#MeToo Backlash: Why Men Remain Silent about Sexual Harassment," *The Conversation*, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/metoo-backlash-why-men-remain-silent-about-sexual-harassment-103838> (accessed June 12, 2025); Joan Golden, "The Myth of Misandry: Do Feminists Really Hate Men?" *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2023): 441–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843231202708>

⁸⁰ Liberal Arts, "Fascisms: Then, and Now? Arendt and The Origins of Totalitarianism," *Thinking Now and Then*, 2019, <https://liberalarts.org.uk/fascisms-then-and-now-arendt-origins-of-totalitarianism/>.

⁸¹ *ibid*

emotionally satisfying narrative for those seeking meaning and agency.

Stanley argues that authoritarian movements use narratives of betrayal to create feelings of victimhood and lost honour, especially among men. In this framing, honour is imagined as being under attack and is treated as a key source of political power. This model presents itself as further simplified, vulgarised, therefore easier to make sense of, as opposed to facing the complexities of this transitional period that belongs to us. The pornographic scripts consumed by many young men reinforce this, as they depict gender hierarchies steeped in domination and violence, further distorting sexual norms and fostering alienation from authentic intimacy.

The figure of the authoritarian leader becomes a surrogate for personal agency; followers identify with the leader's strength and decisiveness, experiencing a vicarious sense of control and importance. This identification can drown out feelings of insignificance or helplessness, replacing them with nationalistic pride and a belief in personal and collective greatness. However, as philosophers like Simone Weil have observed, the pursuit of power and prestige is ultimately a "phantom," never fully attainable, perpetuating a cycle of violence and repression in service of an ever-elusive goal.⁸²

5. CONCLUSION

The impact of widespread, early and easy access to pornography on youth remains an under-researched area, despite its far-reaching social implications. This article - drawing on social cognitive theory, primary research, a range of secondary neuroscientific, psychology and sociology data sources, as well as congruence leadership theory⁸³ - has illuminated how porn is not just a private habit but a powerful social force shaping expectations, behaviours, and even identities among Gen Z. The findings point to an urgent need for robust leadership, both expert and government bodies, to confront the normalisation of pornographic scripts as default guides for intimacy. As argued, the intersection of three forces - early porn exposure, the epidemic of

male loneliness, and the legitimisation of misandrist discourse - forms a potent triad that may help explain why authoritarian and fascist ideologies are gaining traction among today's youth, as reflected in recent voting trends. These dynamics are not isolated; they are mutually reinforcing, creating a climate where alienation and the search for belonging can be exploited by extremist movements. Tackling this challenge demands more than moral panic; it calls for evidence-based education, critical media literacy, and inclusive leadership that can offer young people healthier models for intimacy and community, breaking the cycle of objectification and division that currently shapes their world. As demonstrated throughout this article, pornography is not only an individual behavior but a powerful social force reshaping intimacy, expectations, and even political tendencies through complex and often invisible mechanisms. It is imperative that social scientists, educators, policymakers, and community leaders look beyond the simplistic narratives of moral panic, recognising that the issue is deeply embedded within broader social, neuropsychological, economic, and political fabrics.

The first challenge exposed by this research is the glaring absence of robust, adaptive, and inclusive leadership for young men; a deficit intensifying the search for belonging and validation. Congruence leadership theory argues that people seek leaders whose values and identities reflect their own evolving aspirations. For Gen Z males, the gap in public figures who model vulnerability, emotional intelligence, and healthy forms of masculinity means that toxic online influencers and simplistic, authoritarian models too often fill the void.⁸⁴

This vacuum is a cog in the wheel of the current threats to our democratic structures. Leadership scholars emphasize that transitional periods, such as adolescence in today's rapidly shifting digital and cultural landscape, require adaptable but strong leadership.⁸⁵ Leaders must not simply mimic the zeitgeist; they must

⁸² Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Craufurd (London: Routledge, 2002)

⁸³ Kleio Akrivou, "Self-Ideal Congruence and Its Positive Relationship to Self-Complexity," Henley Business School Discussion Paper Series, 2008, https://assets.henley.ac.uk/legacyUploads/from-active-edition/jhd_dp_2013-014.pdf?mtime=20170512104116

⁸⁴ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829-859; Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men:*

American Masculinity at the End of an Era (New York: Nation Books, 2017)

⁸⁵ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2009); Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Primal Leadership: Unleashing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* (Boston: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013)

guide youth through complexity by modelling resilience, authenticity, and diverse ways of relating. The lack of such figures leaves many young men not only confused about what it means to be “a man” today, but also susceptible to narratives that channel frustration, loneliness, and social defeat into regressive or fascist political identities.

Critically, research shows that when youth lack reliable mentors, educators, or community models who address intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional skill, harmful scripts often derived from media, including pornography become default guides for relationships and social negotiation.⁸⁶ Young people need mentors who can help disentangle the false equivalences embedded in pornographic scripts: that dominance equals desirability, or that violence and submission are standards for intimacy.

The second challenge is that despite accumulating evidence of porn’s impacts on youth, existing academic research remains fragmented by discipline and blind to key intersecting vulnerabilities: gender, race, sexuality, class, and neurodevelopment. While sociologists highlight how pornography perpetuates patriarchal, racist, and heteronormative gender structures,⁸⁷ neuroscience research reveals how early exposure rewires emotional and cognitive patterns, impacting attachment, self-worth, and impulse control well into adulthood.⁸⁸

What is under-examined is how these effects operate intersectionally: How do race, class, and sexuality moderate or intensify the vulnerability of different youth groups to pornographic socialization, for example? How do neurodevelopmental factors like trauma, disability, or minority stress interact with porn exposure? How does the rise of misandrist or exclusionary feminism online compound alienation among males, and vice versa? Moreover, contemporary scholarship often lags the dynamic reality: Most research is cross-sectional, focusing on either individual

outcomes or short-term social attitudes. There is a dearth of longitudinal studies charting the developmental, relational, and political repercussions of adolescent porn exposure. As this work demonstrates, the interplay between porn consumption, loneliness, misandry, and the resurgence of authoritarian politics is multifactorial and mutually reinforcing; it cannot be fully understood, or tackled without research that bridges neuroscience, sociology, psychology, public health, and digital media studies.

Because the problem is complex, leadership must be similarly sophisticated. The solution is not singular - it is systemic, requiring coordinated efforts in education, governance, mental health, technology, and community building. I suggest that leadership for complexity is needed, in order to building new models and policies relevant to the current era and the young people involved. This should include:

Evidence-Based Education and Dialogue. Young people need curricula that strip away the mystique and distortion of pornography, replacing fear and shame with critical media literacy and comprehensive sex education. These programs must go beyond risk and danger to challenge damaging scripts and foster empathy, mutual respect, and sexual agency. Leadership here is not about punishment, but about enabling youth to reflect, question, and build authentic connections.

Mentorship and Male Leadership Reform. Communities and schools should invest in mentoring programs that match boys and young men with diverse, emotionally literate male role models. Programs like Beyond Equality (UK), Manhood Academy, and Lifting Limits offer promising approaches, teaching boys and men that real strength includes vulnerability, care, and self-reflection. Policies should incentivize recruitment, retention, and training of male educators, coaches, and leaders who embody constructive masculinity and model healthy relationships.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Scott D. Wright, “Exploratory Findings on U.S. Adolescents’ Pornography Use and Sexual Satisfaction: The Mediating Role of Sexually Dominant Behaviors,” *Journal of Sex Research* 58, no. 2 (2021): 214–224, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10903642/>

⁸⁷ bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004); R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829–859

⁸⁸ Donald L. Hilton Jr. and Clark Watts, “Pornography Addiction: A Neuroscience Perspective,” *Surgical Neurology International* 2 (2011): 19, accessed December 5,

2025, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3050060/>

⁸⁹ Beyond Equality, “Schools Programs,” accessed November 23,

2025, <https://www.beyondequality.org/programs/schools-programs>; Steve Allen and Patricia Ainley, *Framing Men: The Politics of Masculinity* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2013); Suzanne

Intersectional Policy Design. Policy responses must be attuned to intersectional difference: Not all youth are affected in the same ways. Effective frameworks will engage racial, gender, and neurodiversity advocacy groups in research, design, and implementation; ensuring that interventions do not inadvertently reinforce new stereotypes or exclusions, but rather address the whole person and their unique context.

Critical Regulation of Pornographic Media. Tech platforms and governments must revisit regulatory structures around accessibility, age verification, and harmful content. The French parliamentary commission proposed strict regulations including a ban on social media for children under 15 and nighttime curfews for those aged 15–18, for example. Despite these proposals and pressuring platforms like TikTok and Vinted to reform, implementation has largely failed, with platforms continuing to allow underage and harmful content access due to technical, legal, and enforcement gaps. The French government's attempts at mandatory age verification and stronger content moderation have been blocked by industry resistance and technical limitations, leaving youth exposed to risks despite new regulations.⁹⁰ Reinforcing the principle that governments should have increased agency to cater to welfare efficiently. Beyond enforcement, leaders should advocate for greater ethical oversight of the algorithms that shape youth exposure to pornography and related media, insisting that companies hold a public responsibility for youth wellbeing.

Continued Interdisciplinary Research. It is essential to fund large-scale, interdisciplinary studies that explore the developmental, sociopolitical, and cultural dimensions of pornification. Only by understanding the full spectrum of effects; including neurobiological, relational, and civic outcomes, can policy and educational interventions be tailored appropriately.

Protecting Youth, Revitalizing Democracy. When the conversation about pornography is narrowed to morality or personal failure, we fail youth and democracy alike. Hook's insight that porn suppresses

true feeling gets to the heart of the matter: Pornography's normalization of objectification and division weakens not just intimacy but the civic capacity to empathize, collaborate, and participate in democratic life.⁹¹ The rise of authoritarian and fascist ideologies among youth is a political symptom of deeper failures to offer belonging and agency in ways that are healthy, inclusive, and critical.

Policies must frame the issue holistically, recognizing porn not simply as a private or moral dilemma but a civic and public health challenge. Breaking cycles of loneliness, objectification, and division requires not just compliance but transformation, transforming leadership, research, education, and collective purpose. Only through such comprehensive, nuanced policies can we build societies and democracies where young people grow into adults able to relate authentically, lead compassionately, and resist the allure of easy, divisive answers.

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⁹¹ bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004)

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⁹⁰ "France Parliamentary Report Proposes Social Media Restrictions for Children," *JURIST*, September 11, 2025, <https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/09/french->

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