

The Porn Effect Some Say Porn Influence Damaging Girls' Sense of Self

By MARTHA IRVINE

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CHICAGO -- Porn used to be relegated to a video hidden in the bottom drawer, or a magazine under the mattress. Today, it's part of everyday life.

Hugh Hefner's girlfriends have become TV's "girls next door." Porn stars have MySpace pages and do voiceovers for video games. And while "porn on demand" is standard for hotel TVs and upgraded cable packages, it's even easier to find it with a few clicks on the computer.

In April, more than a third of the U.S. Internet audience visited sites that fit into the online "adult" category, according to comScore Media Metrix.

So the message is clear: In today's world, sex doesn't just sell. The pervasiveness of porn has made sexiness -- from subtle to raunchy -- a much-sought-after attribute online, at school and even at work.

Many agree that the trend has had a particularly strong influence on young women -- in some cases, taking shape as an unapologetic embracing of sexuality and exhibitionism.

"I am one of those girls," says Holly Eglinton, a 31-year-old Canadian who recently won a talent search competition to appear as an unclothed newscaster on the Internet's "Naked News." She auditioned after meeting a producer for the show on a social networking site where she's posted provocative photos of herself -- an increasingly common practice.

For Eglinton, taking off her clothes for an Internet audience was freeing, fun and a little rebellious.

"It's something that sort of suits my personality," she says. "I'm kind of an extrovert and a bit of a camera hog, a poser."

It's a prevalent sentiment in our look-at-me culture. But many wonder if it really is empowering,

especially for younger women and girls who try to emulate what's already on the Web.

Too often, educators and health professionals say, the results are cases of "Girls Gone Wild" -- gone wild.

Michael Simon, a therapist and high school counselor in the San Francisco Bay area, has seen an increasing number of girls and young women in his private practice after episodes in which they undressed or masturbated in front of a Web cam for people they met online.

"Instead of pornography or performative sexuality being one choice among many ways of being sexual, it's essentially become the standard of sexiness," says Simon. "It's also the standard by which a man or woman is a prude, depending on how much they embrace that kind of sexuality."

Yvonne K. Fulbright, a sexologist and author who co-hosts the "Sex Files" program on Sirius satellite radio, also has seen the shift in attitude.

She's posted messages on Craigslist looking for people who want to comment on various topics for the show -- and, instead, often receives responses from young women who send descriptions of their breast and waist sizes.

"They're under the impression that they can be the next big thing," Fulbright says.

"Unfortunately, for a lot of females that means taking off your clothes and being sexual.

"It's a really warped sense of what it means to be sexy."

Indeed, there was a time when dancing for the masses in barely there outfits was the realm of music video stars and strippers. Then the Internet and reality TV came along, providing new platforms for young women to flaunt it for a shot at fame.

In one hit prime-time series, for instance, eager young contestants perform soft-core porn dance routines in hopes of becoming the next member of The Pussycat Dolls singing group.

The fascination with being "hot" also has made its way into the workplace, where confidence is

often conveyed in the way one looks and dresses.

"I would say that, in the world of Washington, D.C., power brokers, it's important to be sexy, but in a more sophisticated, muted way," says Charles Small, a 25-year-old young professional who works in the nation's capital. That's in contrast, he says, to cities such as Los Angeles and Miami, "where overt sexiness is more the status quo."

Some employers -- taken aback by the trend -- have responded by setting tougher dress codes. Many school administrators have done the same.

"As a high school teacher, I see 14-year-old girls dressing in a way that makes me shake my head. Where do they get that?" asks Dennis Brown, an educator and parent in Huntley, Ill., outside Chicago.

Recently, he says his own 5-year-old daughter proclaimed, "Daddy, I look fat."

"And I thought, 'Oh my gosh, here we go,'" he says. "Now I have to start deconstructing that mind-set."

It's a big topic of discussion among researchers. A 2007 report from the American Psychological Association compiled the findings of myriad studies, showing that the sexualization of young women and girls, in particular, can hurt them in many ways. Problems can include anything from low-self esteem and eating disorders to depression and anxiety.

Simon, the California therapist, has seen those symptoms in several of his young female patients.

While boys tend to seek out porn for their own sexual pleasure, he sees a sexual disconnect with girls who exhibit provocative behavior they're not ready for -- from undressing online to performing oral sex on boys.

"It doesn't have anything to do with their sexual pleasure," says Simon. "It has to do with pleasing somebody else -- the grasping for attention."

"As a parent, it makes me want to cry."

And while they tell him they feel empowered, too often, he says they end up getting pegged as "sluts."

Julie Albright, a sociologist at the University of Southern California, has noted that dynamic in her research. She's working on a book about "players," men who juggle more than one sex partner and earn a title of esteem for behavior that much of society still frowns upon for women.

"If you 'act like a man,' in that sense, you're trying to grab hold of that same kind of power, that same kind of lifestyle -- and claim male privilege," Albright says.

"The problem is, you're still female and it's still a man's world."

Anna Stanley, a 25-year-old in Madison, Wis., knows all about that double standard. She also wonders if she and her peers place too much importance on the power of sexiness.

"It seems like it stems out of the 'Girl Power' thing of the '90s gone awry -- men objectify us, so let's objectify ourselves and get something out of it. It's not really progress," she says. "But it's something I have mixed feelings about -- because sometimes I do it, too.

"Sometimes you do dress up to get noticed and attention, and you do feel more confident when you do that."

She wishes there was more focus on helping women develop a healthy sense of their own sexuality.

Missy Suicide -- founder of the "Suicide Girls" pinup Web site -- couldn't agree more.

"I think that women shouldn't be afraid of their sexuality. It's a part of who we are. You shouldn't be embarrassed and ashamed of your body and yourself," says the 29-year-old entrepreneur, who lives in Los Angeles. But, she says, it shouldn't be the sole focus.

She and the women on her site are known for challenging the stereotypes of beauty, with their tattoos and piercings and varying body types.

"I get messages from girls all the time saying they never felt beautiful before because they never saw girls like themselves in magazines or on TV. Then they saw a girl like them on 'Suicide Girls,'" she says of the site, an online community that attracts a worldwide audience of both admirers and women who want to become nude pinups.

Victoria Sinclair, the lead anchor on "Naked News," also sees herself as a role model. She left a job in the corporate world to join the show as lead anchor in 1999 -- and never looked back.

"Sometimes, there are moments when I think, 'Oh my goodness what am I doing?'" says Sinclair, who recently turned 40. "But I'm really OK with it."

She says it works for her because she has control over what she does on the show and has been allowed to age gracefully, without plastic surgery.

Still, many skeptics remain.

"To be sure, it can make you feel powerful to know that you are arousing strong feelings in other people, that you have their attention and admiration," says Eileen Zurbriggen, a psychologist at the University of California, Santa Cruz, who helped compile the APA report.

"This is the same sense of power experienced by charismatic rock stars and politicians. But politicians also wield other kinds of power. They can make actual changes to the legal, economic, and geopolitical landscapes -- changes that have far-ranging impacts.

"Women," she says, "might be better off developing other sources of power."

On the Net:

APA report: www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization.html

Fulbright's site: www.yvonnekfulbright.com