

Generation P?

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Youth, Gender and Pornography

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Editors: Susanne V. Knudsen, Lotta Löfgren Mårtenson and Sven-Axel Månsson

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Susanne V. Knudsen, Lotta Löfgren-Mårtenson and Sven-Axel Månsson
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Introduction

*By Sven-Axel Månsson, Lotta Löfgren-Mårtenson
and Susanne V. Knudsen*

Pornography is a familiar phenomenon to most young people in the Nordic countries. The vast majority have seen porn and many use it actively. An internet-based questionnaire administered to Danish, Norwegian and Finno-Swedish youth in the autumn 2005 shows that 92 % of the respondents had seen porn at least once (see Kjørholt's & Sørensen's chapter). These results coincide with other recent research findings in the Nordic countries (Hammarén & Johansson 2002, Svedin & Priebe 2004, Häggström-Nordin et al. 2005a, 2005b, Hald 2006). The majority of the respondents of the Nordic questionnaire say that they had viewed pornography by the age of 12–14. Also, they report experiences with a wide variety of pornography, although it is the conventional hardcore genres that stand out as the most common. Compared to earlier studies on the use of pornography, for example from the mid 1990's, these results imply an increase in young people's experiences and use of pornography (Månsson 2000).

Hard core pornography has been freely available in the Nordic countries for a long time. In 1967, Denmark became the first nation in the world to legalise unlimited production of pornography. The other Nordic countries have followed suit and removed the general provision on pornography from the penal code. However, since pornography became freely available, it has changed considerably in its content and dissemination. There are many ways to describe this change. One is to say that the boundaries have been stretched. Many of the images that appear in mainstream media today – images depicting nakedness or explicit sexual activity and situations – would have been defined as pornography some twenty to thirty years ago. Conversely, much of what was then regarded as 'indecent' would most likely not be considered as such by the majority of people today. The portrayals of sex and nakedness in films and books that

earned the Nordic countries – especially Sweden and Denmark – the reputation of being particularly ‘sinful’ in the 1950’s and 1960’s would hardly raise eyebrows today, certainly not in the Nordic countries itself and probably not in most other countries in the world.

Another change concerns exposure and distribution. It seems reasonable to suggest that the increasing familiarity with pornography among young people today relates to the increased visibility and accessibility of pornography in the virtual as well as in the ‘real’ world. Internet use in the Nordic countries is among the highest in the world. Thus with such a high level of ‘connectivity’ the situation in these countries may be seen as a preview of future developments in other countries (Cooper et al. 2003). Even though it is a general aspect of popular culture, the so-called mainstreaming of pornography in society has special significance for young people (see Sørensen’s chapter). TV programmes, advertising, and the music industry exploit and play with pornographic codes and scenarios. The sex industry launches and promotes its products via youth channels and websites. In other words, relationships have been forged between pornography and youth culture, which is somewhat of a new development.

Definitions of pornography

In the Nordic countries, as well as in many other countries, there is concern and public debate about this development and about the implications and consequences of young people’s increasing experiences and use of pornography. However, very seldom is it made clear in this debate what is meant by pornography. At least in part, the meaning of pornography seems to lie in the eyes of the beholder. It also varies from time to time depending on the prevailing sexual morality. To capture the fluidity and breadth of the phenomenon, the American pornography researcher Milton Diamond has coined a rather broad definition of pornography as “any sexually explicit material primarily developed and produced to arouse sexual interest or provide erotic pleasure” (Diamond 1997, 4). A broad and encompassing definition is particularly adequate if, like Diamond, one wants to study the production and consumption of pornography in different cultural contexts. Within this broad definition one sometimes talks about soft- as opposed to hardcore pornography in order to distinguish between low and high levels of explicitness or intrusiveness. Furthermore, expressions such as ‘erotica’

or 'erotic pictures' are used to characterize representations that emphasize the more sensual elements of human sexual actions and encounters.

However, simply to define pornography as more or less intrusive or sensuous depictions of bodies, genitals and sexual activity does not catch the essence of it. Certainly, these definitions or distinctions tell us what we see, but the social meaning of pornography stretches beyond them. Secretiveness, prohibition and social transgression are all integral parts of the meaning of pornography; they are what constitute the attractiveness and desirability of the phenomenon. Or to cite the often quoted American pornography researcher Brian McNair:

Pornography is seductive because it represents the secrets of private sexual desire in all their taboo-breaking, transgressive exoticism. It is, by definition, a violation of public morality and taste – an affront to community standards in the sphere of sexual representation, whatever they may be (McNair 2002, 42).

This way of defining pornography, as a transgression of public morality, raises some interesting questions. One of them is McNair's own: What would happen if restraints on the unacceptable, specifically pornography, ceased to exist in a meaningful way, i.e., if everyone had access to everything everywhere. Impossible? No, not at all. In fact, due to new information and communication technology, particularly the Internet, we seem to have arrived at that point already.

A process of normalisation

The implications of the almost unbounded accessibility of pornography on the Internet have been discussed by among others the Swedish researchers Sven-Axel Månsson and Peder Söderlind (Månsson & Söderlind 2004). They argue that these changes should be perceived as part of a process of normalization. Simply put, as greater numbers of people consume pornography, it becomes more normal to do so. Among today's young people this process is particularly evident. How can something that is so easily accessible be so emotionally and morally charged, so dangerous, so wrong? As will be seen in the succeeding chapters of this anthology, many of the young people who have been interviewed by the different authors recognize that there has been a change in the general attitudes to pornography. Nowadays, looking at porn is no longer regarded as something

shameful, but rather is considered to be acceptable and fairly normal. However, this is not the same thing as saying that one likes what one sees, or that one is not critical of what goes on in the media and in popular culture. To the contrary, as will be made clear in several chapters in this book, this also implies some interesting gender differences.

Clearly, the public debate about pornography does not revolve only around the degree of exposure and accessibility. It also concerns content, i.e. what is being shown in pornography and how it relates to love and sexuality, gender, bodily ideals and images, and to sexual desire and power. In short, what are the human, social and gender-political meanings and implications of pornography? These are questions and issues that the public and academic debate has dealt with for a long time, to be precise since the early 1980's, and they are still reflected in the concerns that permeate the public discourse of today (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson 2006a). To what extent do these debates and discussions affect young people's attitudes to pornography today? This brings us to some of the main questions of this anthology: How do young people navigate through the pornographic landscape that surrounds them? Does this omnipresence of pornography breed curiosity or resistance? How is one affected by talk, opinions and attitudes concerning pornography in public space? And how are the pornographic references and representations, mediated by popular culture, perceived in relation to the sometimes more restrictive and critical view of pornography supplied by parents, teachers, public debaters, and critical friends?

The study of youth, gender and pornography in the Nordic countries

It was questions like these that motivated the Nordic Ministers of Equal Opportunities and the Nordic Council of Ministers to perform a major study on youth, gender and pornography in the Nordic countries during 2004-2006. However, the rationale behind the study was also driven by a very clear and distinct political concern that the increasingly one-dimensional representation of masculinity and femininity associated with the mainstreaming of pornography and the sexualisation of public space, would limit the possibilities of young people's gender identification. This development, it was felt, presents a serious threat to the realization of the ideals of gender equality in the Nordic countries (Sørensen & Knudsen 2006).

The study was hosted by NIKK, Nordic Institute for Women's Studies and Gender Research and officially aimed at revealing possible connections between teenager's exposure to pornography and their attitudes towards gender and power by:

- gaining insights into the extent of 'pornofication', its media basis and the situations in which it appears, with special focus on Nordic teenager's experiences with and attitudes towards pornography;
- analyzing young people's views of the images and ideals of gender and gender relations depicted in pornography, and their feelings towards these images and ideals;
- studying how the increased exposure to pornography relates to the teenagers' own perceptions of gender, and their ideas, experiences and views with regard to sexuality.

After a call for research plans, eleven researchers from different Nordic countries were chosen and invited to participate in the project during a period of two years (2004-2006). Methodologically, the project was divided into three independent parts consisting of (1) quantitative studies with questionnaires on the Internet, (2) qualitative studies with in-depth interviews with young people, focus groups and case studies and (3) media studies. Primarily, the aim of the quantitative studies was to find out about consumption patterns and attitudes: how often young people use pornography, why they use it and what their attitudes are toward gender representations, performances and bodily images depicted in it. Seldom are young people's own voices being heard in the debate about their views on and experiences with sex and porn in public space. The intention of the qualitative studies was to remedy this by listening to young people's talk about pornography. Finally, the purpose of the media studies was to analyze the depiction of gender, sex and pornography in the media, including public service TV, youth Internet sites and free porn Internet sites. The results of the project were published in 2006 by the Nordic Council of Ministers in three separate volumes

titled *Unge, køn og pornografi i Norden* (Youth, gender and pornography in the Nordic countries).¹

The NIKK study shows that young people consume pornography in varying degrees, boys more than girls; they are familiar with various genres and appear to be fairly reflective and critical in relation to what they see. On the other hand, it also is evident that the issue of young people's experiences of pornography and its effects on their perceptions about gender and sexuality is complex and offers no easy answers. This complexity will be further elaborated in this anthology. Furthermore, The NIKK study reveals that there are no significant differences between the Nordic countries. One likely reason is that the discourses in the Nordic countries concerning sexuality are similar, if not identical. Another important factor probably is the globalization of sexuality in the media and on the Internet which gives young people access to the same content, on the same terms, at the same time.

The content of the anthology

To a large degree, this anthology springs from the NIKK study. We, the three editors, were part of the research group, and we felt that the findings from this collective effort could be of interest to a larger, English speaking audience outside the Nordic countries, not least because of the different methodological approaches and research traditions represented in the project. Early on we decided to expand the circle of contributors by inviting researchers from outside the Nordic countries, specifically from southern Europe and the USA. It is our contention that this has enriched the presentation.

1. The researchers and their publications listed in References were Lecturer Guðbjörg Hildur Kolbeins, Iceland (Kolbeins 2006); Project Manager Anette Dina Sørensen, Denmark and Project Coordinator Vigdis Saga Kjörholt, Norway (Sørensen & Kjörholt 2006, Sørensen & Knudsen 2006, Kjörholt & Sørensen 2006a, Kjörholt & Sørensen 2006b); Ethnologist Bjørg Jacobsen and Midwife Karin Dahl, the Faroe Islands (Dahl & Jacobsen 2006); Associate Professor Willy Aagre and Assistant Professor Rønnaug Sørensen, Norway (Aagre 2006, Aagre & Sørensen 2006); Researcher Niels Ulrik Sørensen, Denmark (Sørensen 2006a, 2006b); Senior Researcher Lotta Löfgren-Mårtenson and Professor Sven-Axel Månsson, Sweden (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2006d, 2006e); Professor Jeff Hearn and Senior Researcher Marjut Jyrkinen, Finland (Hearn & Jyrkinen 2006a, 2006b), Senior Lecturer Anja Hirdman, Sweden (Hirdman 2006a, 2006b); Professor Susanne V. Knudsen, Norway (Knudsen 2006a, 2006b). Directors and coordinators of the project were Anette Dina Sørensen and Susanne V. Knudsen.

One might wonder why we chose to title this anthology *Generation P? Youth, Gender and Pornography*. The rationale behind the question mark that follows the P (as in pornography) is that the research findings that we present are to some extent both ambiguous and contradictory.² Certainly, present day popular culture, including pornography and sexualized media, is a powerful factor in shaping young people's ideals and values pertaining to the body and sexuality. In that sense the expression *Generation P* is appropriate. Never before have pornography and sexualized material been so readily available and pervasive in young people's everyday life. On the other hand, as will become clear, young people do not swallow the messages without resistance, and some are very critical of or actively opposed to them. For that reason, the label *Generation P* without a question mark would be both unfair and incorrect. To some young people pornography represents sexual possibilities and enjoyment, while others find it to be disgusting and degrading.

Most of the studies in this anthology use the young people's own definitions of and experiences with pornography as a starting point. Rarely, if ever, do young people talk explicitly about, or even mention, pornography with homosexual content. Instead, they seem to refer implicitly to heterosexual pornography. This is not to say that they are unaware of the existence of gay porn. And comments on homosexuality are made in various contexts. However, this anthology does not deal with young people's view on and consumption of gay porn. That is a subject for future research.

This anthology is divided into five sections: (1) theoretical and methodological perspectives and approaches to pornography, (2) studies of frequencies and distributions of pornography, (3) media and pornography, (4) access, entrances and approaches to pornography and (5) social-pedagogical implications and strategies.

In the theory and methods section, the first chapter focuses on the issue of the mainstreaming of pornography and the contemporary fascination with 'porno-chic'. With examples primarily from Danish debates, the development of porno-chic is discussed in relation to the concepts *volume*, *clean-up* and *fragments*. The second chapter discusses theories by Giddens, Foucault and Baudrillard in rela-

2. Thank you to Christian Graugaard who kindly allowed us to use the phrase *Generation P* from his article in *EKKO* (Graugaard 2004).

tion to young people using pornography. In the third chapter, with examples from Norway, two opposite trends of the mainstreaming of sexualisation are discussed in relation to issues of backlash and experimentation. The fourth chapter analyses potential effects of pornography on young people's sexual socialisation and sets up a model for a new methodological approach and meta-theoretical discourse.

In section two, frequencies and distributions, the first two chapters present and discuss some results of the NIKK-project's online-based questionnaire. The first chapter is a base-line data presentation of responses from 1776 young people in Norway, Denmark and Finland (Swedish speaking). These show that 99% of the males and 86% of the females between 12 and 30 years old have viewed pornography. The second chapter discusses Icelandic teenagers' exposure to pornography. The third chapter focuses on gender differences in behavioural, situational and interpersonal patterns of pornography consumption in a sample of 688 young heterosexual Danish men and women, ages 18 to 30. The fourth chapter provides insights into the complex issue of high frequency consumers of pornography in Sweden.

In the media and pornography section, the first chapter presents a study of young Swedish girls' and boys' visual self-representation on the Internet and in magazines. Codes of performativity, cultural frames of femininity and softporn codes for girls 'body-ism' as opposed to 'face-ism' for boys are analysed. The second chapter contains a media analysis of Internet pornography on for-free porn sites and self-representations on youth websites in Norway. In the third chapter of this section pornography on the Internet is analysed in relation to issues of paedophilia. The fourth chapter provides an analysis of the construction of gender, body and sexuality in young boys viewing male bodies in pornography. With examples from films made in the United States and Great Britain, the fifth chapter discusses pornography produced and directed by women in an effort to re-vision pornography and promote gender equality.

The fourth section, on access, entrances and approaches to pornography, contains four chapters. In the first chapter the process of normalization and gender-specific 'porn careers' among Swedish girls and boys aged 14-20 are analysed on the basis of qualitative interviews and focus group data. The second chapter discusses Norwegian girls' essays containing their views on and experiences of pornography. The third chapter presents a qualitative interview study about young Swedish men's use of pornography. Among other things, the author analyses the men's reflections on the relationship between pornography and

'real' sex. The fourth chapter discusses how Swedish teenage girls cope with pornography at the crossroads between respectability and shame.

The last section of the anthology discusses the challenges that mainstreamed pornography in the media and public spaces presents to the education system in the Nordic countries. On the one hand, sex education in the schools has been compulsory for a long time, which means that there is a fairly long tradition of how to approach issues of sexuality in educational settings. On the other hand, the massive exposure of pornography over the last few years presents new challenges to this system, including the development of new and adequate pedagogical methods. These challenges and issues are discussed in the last two chapters of the anthology.

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