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GENDER IDENTITY CONFUSION AND USE OF PORNOGRAPHY

James McTavish ♦
Philippines

Abstract

An increasing number of young people are unclear about their gender identity, with more and more males now identifying as females (and *vice versa*). This modern phenomenon is welcomed by many, although Pope Francis has been an outspoken critic of the so-called “gender ideology.” He describes it as a new form of ideological colonization. The growing gender identity confusion is matched by a concurrent increase in internet pornography. The vision of human sexuality and intimacy now portrayed on screen is often skewed, and sends a confusing message to young people. This author explores the possible connection between increasing internet pornography use and the growing gender identity confusion, especially among young people in an Asian context.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Gender Identity Confusion, Ideological Colonization, Pope Francis, Internet Pornography, Young People

In a recent pastoral event, a young married man shared his experience of watching pornography. He commented that before

♦Fr James McTavish, from Glasgow, Scotland, has spent over 15 years as a missionary in the Philippines. He originally studied Medicine at Cambridge University, England, and qualified as a medical Doctor. He gained his Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (FRCSEd), before doing specialty training in Plastics and Reconstruction. He then heard the call of the Lord to heal the Body of Christ through evangelization – “Give me life by your Word” (Psalm 119). He completed his Licentiate in Moral Theology at the *Alphonsianum* in Rome and a Masters in Bioethics at the *Regina apostolorum*, graduating *summa cum laude* in both, before teaching courses at the Loyola School of Theology, Ateneo de Manila and in the University of Santo Tomas, Manila. He has published over 50 articles in international journals on moral theology, sexual ethics, bioethics, and spirituality, along with 9 books. He is currently the Provincial of his *Verbum Dei* community in the Philippines. Email: jamesmctavishfmvd@yahoo.co.uk

marrying he was quite a heavy user of internet pornography. He watched various types and said that “after seeing so much pornography on screen, I started to become confused about my own gender.” I would like, in this short essay, to unpack and explore this statement. I will first outline some aspects of gender identity, especially the increasing incidence of gender identity confusion exacerbated by gender ideology which will be critiqued. I will then turn to the topic of internet pornography to highlight some salient features, especially its negative consequences on sexuality and relationships. Finally, I will share some reflections on possible connections between pornography usage and gender identity confusion.

1. Confusion Regarding Gender Identity

A survey on sexuality and gender was carried out in Manila in 2018. The survey was done on 357 youth, with respondents coming from local universities (74%), a Catholic community for singles (16%), and parish youth (10%). Questions were asked regarding gender identity, and this was differentiated from sexual attraction and sexual experience (which each had their own set of correlating questions). Regarding gender identity, the responses were: same as biological sex (81.6%), undecided (5.9%), opposite biological sex (dysphoric) (9.6%) and no answer (2.9). The survey revealed that approximately 10% of males aged 18-25 identified with the opposite biological sex.¹ This is a startlingly high rate of gender identity confusion considering that the estimated rate of gender dysphoria (people who experience some degree of gender variance) in the United States is 0.6%, and in the United Kingdom, 0.6% - 1% of the adult population.^{2, 3} It is highly

¹Edwin Albert T. Valles, “A Survey on the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Sexual Experience of Metro Manila Youth and Their Correlation to Environmental Factors toward Pastoral Accompaniment,” August 2018, Manila, Philippines. He also found a correlation between identification with the opposite biological sex and having predominantly opposite sex friends or all opposite sex friends, and attending a gender exclusive school. A soft copy of the survey is available with this author. The study, done by Edwin Valles on the incidence of gender identity confusion, has real value in the Philippines context as there is a scarcity of available data here.

²“Reform of the Gender Recognition Act - Government Consultation,” Presented to Parliament by the Minister for Women and Equalities by Command of Her Majesty, July 2018, 81-82. Available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/721725/GRA-Consultation-document.pdf

³The term gender dysphoria can be used as a clinical diagnosis, with strict diagnostic criteria applicable, or in a general way to express some degree of gender variance (such as a male who *feels* like he is a woman). In this article, the latter use of the term gender dysphoria is generally employed.

likely that the high rates of gender identity confusion experienced by these Filipino males is a consequence of what Pope Francis refers to as “ideological colonization.” The Philippines has already passed through more than four hundred years of oppressive colonization so it was a surprise when on his visit here in 2015, Pope Francis again warned: “Let us be on guard against colonization by new ideologies. There are forms of ideological colonization which are out to destroy the family.”⁴ The ideological colonization he was referring to is the ideology of gender.⁵ In our apostolate we can readily see the effects of ideological colonization, with increasingly large numbers of young males in the Philippines being unclear about their gender identity, along with a mass media (especially television, cinema and internet content), that through various media personalities, avidly promotes gender identity confusion.⁶

1.1. Pope Francis on Ideology of Gender

Pope Francis outlined his grave concerns in various moments. Here follows a selection of some of his most relevant discourses.

In an address to Bishops in 2016 he said:

In Europe, America, Latin America, Africa, and in some countries of Asia, there are genuine forms of ideological colonization taking place. And one of these – I will call it clearly by its name – is [the ideology of] ‘gender’. Today children – children! – are taught in school that everyone can choose his or her sex. Why are they teaching this? Because the books are provided by the persons and institutions that give you money. These forms of ideological colonization are also supported by influential countries. And this terrible!⁷

In *Amoris laetitia* he again referred to the problem of gender ideology:

⁴Pope Francis, Meeting with Families, January 16, 2015, Manila, Philippines. Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150116_srilanka-filippine-incontro-famiglie.html.

⁵“US foreign policy has often been used to advance ideological views, as through the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and cultural agencies. The State Department has even instructed US embassies and consulates to advance ideologies such as gender theory.” National Catholic Bioethics Center, “Transgenderism: Cultural Overview – How Did We Get Here?” Available at https://www.ncbcenter.org/files/3115/2459/5858/2017-Cultural_Overview.pdf.

⁶ See for example how transgender characters, playing humorous roles in a commercial, are used to sell house paints in a Filipino setting at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v73FMplQ0y8>. Such commercials make the whole transgender issue appear so colourful and fun, which I do not find so helpful or truthful, as it tends to trivialize the suffering these individuals may experience.

⁷Pope Francis, Apostolic Journey to Poland, Meeting with Polish Bishops, July 27, 2016. Available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/july/documents/papa-francesco_20160727_polonia-vescovi.html

Yet another challenge is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender that “denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time.” It is a source of concern that some ideologies of this sort, which seek to respond to what are at times understandable aspirations, manage to assert themselves as absolute and unquestionable, even dictating how children should be raised. It needs to be emphasized that “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated.”⁸

Later in *Laudato si'* Pope Francis outlined further related concerns regarding the body as a created reality:

It is enough to recognize that our body itself establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings. The acceptance of our bodies as God’s gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one’s own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek “to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it,”⁹

He continued to express his concerns in an address to the Academy for Life in 2017:

The recent proposals for restoring the dignity of the person by radically eliminating any difference between the sexes, and, as a result, the covenant between man and woman, is not right. Rather than opposing negative interpretations of sexual difference that eliminate the value of that difference for human dignity, these proposals would simply eliminate this difference by proposing techniques and practices that make difference irrelevant to human development and to human relationships. But a “neuter” utopia removes both the human dignity of sexual

⁸ Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 56. https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

⁹Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 155.

difference and the personal aspect of the generation and transmission of life. The biological and psychological manipulation of sexual difference, which biomedical technology now presents as a simple matter of personal choice – which it is not! – risks eliminating the source of energy that nourishes the covenant between man and woman and makes it creative and fruitful.¹⁰

It is clear from these various discourses of Pope Francis that he is a vocal critique of gender ideology and with good reason too.¹¹

1.2. What are the Elements of Gender Ideology?

Some of the proposed tenets of the new gender ideology are:

1. That one can freely choose one's expressed gender. A male, can in any moment, express that he is now actually a female. Feelings alone can now override the biological, anatomical, physiological and genetic data.¹²
2. Sex at birth is now referred to only as "assigned gender" and may not be the *actual* gender.
3. As gender can be freely chosen, so also can sexual orientation (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual, asexual, etc.) and sexual behaviour (same sex, opposite sex, etc.).
4. Sex is no longer "binary," i.e. male or female. Instead it is a spectrum so one could find that a person is 50% male and 50% female.
5. Children who identify themselves with the opposite gender have a right to change their identity, name, referring pronouns (so the boy becomes "ze" or "they", etc.), to assume the identity of the opposite sex, to use their bathrooms, to spend the night in rooms of their

¹⁰ Pope Francis, "Accompanying Life: New Responsibilities in the Era of Technology," Address of Pope Francis to the Academy for Life, October 4, 2017. Available at <https://www.nbccenter.org/resources/news/pope-francis-address-academy-life/>

¹¹A recent letter from the American College of Pediatricians outlining serious concerns regarding the ideology of gender shows that the views of Pope Francis also have a sound basis in current medical understanding. See American College of Pediatricians, "Joint letter to HHS-DOJ-DOE" regarding the upholding of the definition of sex. Available at https://www.acped.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/12.4.18-Final_Revised_-12.4.18-Joint-letter-to-HHS-DOJ-DOE-Uphold-Definition-of-Sex.pdf

¹²For many negative consequences of gender identity confusion, see the well-researched and thought-provoking reflections of Ryan T. Anderson in his excellent book *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment*, New York: Encounter Books, 2018. Also American College of Pediatricians, "Gender Ideology Harms Children," updated September 2017, available at <https://www.acped.org/the-college-speaks/position-statements/gender-ideology-harms-children>.

preferred gender on school outings, to compete in athletic and sporting events of the opposite sex, to take puberty suppressing medication,¹³ then cross sex hormones and as an adult to undergo “sex change” surgery.^{14, 15, 16}

1.3. A critique of Gender Ideology¹⁷

The Pontifical Council for the Family explains:

Starting from the decade between 1960-1970, some theories... hold not only that generic sexual identity (‘gender’) is the product of an interaction between the community and the individual, but that this generic identity is independent from personal sexual identity: i.e., that masculine and feminine genders in society are the exclusive product of social factors, with no relation to any truth about the sexual dimension

¹³See Hruz PW, McHugh PR, Mayer LS. “Growing Pains - Problems with Puberty Suppression in Treating Gender Dysphoria,” *The New Atlantis* 52 (Spring 2017) 3-36. Available at <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/growing-pains>

¹⁴The term “sex change” is misleading. “We are either male or female persons, and nothing can change that. A person can mutilate his or her genitals, but cannot change his or her sex. Changing one’s sex is fundamentally impossible; these procedures are fundamentally acts of mutilation.” National Catholic Bioethics Center, “FAQ on Gender Identity Disorder and ‘Sex Change’ Operations.” Available at <https://www.ncbcenter.org/resources/frequently-asked-questions/gender-identity-disorder-and-sex-change-operations/>. Sometimes the term “Sex Reassignment Surgery” (SRS) is employed but this too can be problematic. For example, SRS in no way can alter the genetic component (which is marked in every cell of the body) of our sexual identity. For a scholarly account of the complex medical and moral issues surrounding sex reassignment surgery see Fitzgibbons RP, Sutton PM, O’Leary D, “The Psychopathology of ‘Sex Reassignment’ Surgery – Assessing Its Medical, Psychological, and Ethical Appropriateness,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 9.1 (Spring 2009) 97-125.

¹⁵“Resolutions and policies of medical associations and legislative and regulatory actions promote so-called gender affirmation and gender transitioning, even in prepubescent children, and mandate the compliance of schools, health care providers, health care payers, social services, and others. Such regulations are coercive and based on a false understanding of human identity. Gender transitioning insists on affirming a false identity and, in many cases, mutilation of the body in support of that falsehood.” The National Catholic Bioethics Center, “Brief Statement on Transgenderism,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly*, 16, 4 (Winter 2016)599-603, at 599.

¹⁶For a scholarly account of the complex medical and moral issues surrounding sex reassignment surgery see Fitzgibbons RP, Sutton PM, O’Leary D, “The Psychopathology of ‘Sex Reassignment’ Surgery - Assessing Its Medical, Psychological, and Ethical Appropriateness,” *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 9.1 (Spring 2009) 97-125.

¹⁷A useful primer on gender issues is McHugh PR, Mayer LS, “Sexuality and Gender Findings from the Biological, Psychological and Social Sciences,” *The New Atlantis* 52 (Fall 2016) 4-116. Available on line at: <https://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/introduction-sexuality-and-gender>.

of the person. In this way, any sexual attitude can be justified, including homosexuality, and it is society that ought to change in order to include other genders, together with male and female, in its way of shaping social life.¹⁸

One of the real dangers of gender ideology is that it attempts to radically separate sex from gender. In doing so, gender is cut adrift from the core sexual identity. Being cut adrift, one is then more prone to be blown around by whatever current of thought is trending. With the foundation of gender cast aside, sexual attraction to what is different and truly “other” loses its anchor. Young people are quasi-encouraged now to experiment with homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, and asexual behaviour, or other variations, with all being given the same value in the name of “tolerance” and “acceptance” of the person and their choices. It seems that all the sexual dimensions of the persons can be selected from an *a la carte* menu to include such combinations as a male who for the majority of his life is heterosexual, then starting to identify as a female, who is homosexual, but in behaviour in bisexual. Or a female who identifies as a male but is asexual. A seemingly infinite variety of combinations is on display.¹⁹ Commenting on this “fluidity,” Massimo Gandolfini responds:

we are still waiting for someone to provide genetic, hormonal, phenotypic, neurological or some other type of evidence – as long as it is objective, intelligible and describable in scientific terms – of how a person can be “naturally” queer in the morning and gay or lesbian in the afternoon, after being heterosexual for the first twenty or thirty years of life.²⁰

There are strong pressures to conform to this ideology. Many claims are now being made which verge on pseudo-science and often go unchallenged. For example, in the LGBT nomenclature, other groups are now being included so the ever-lengthening acronym is now commonly deemed to be LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual,

¹⁸Pontifical Council for the Family, “Family, Marriage and ‘De Facto’ Unions,” 2000, 8, Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_20001109_de-facto-unions_en.html.

¹⁹Some devastating consequences of this new found sexual “freedom” are seen in the soaring HIV rates among Filipino youth. The Philippines, a predominantly Catholic country, is one of the few countries worldwide where HIV-AIDS is on the increase, with the vast majority of cases occurring in homosexual and bisexual young males.

²⁰Alberto Capriolo, “An interview with Massimo Gandolfini,” in *Sexuality, Gender & Education*, ed., Giorgia Brambilla and Joseph Tham, Rome: IF Press, 2018, 39-46, 45.

transgender, queer, intersex, asexual). The “I” here stands for “intersex” and refers to a group of congenital anomalies of sex identity and sexual characteristics. Being a medical diagnosis, it has very little to do with the LGBT reality as the Intersex Society of North America explains:

The truth is that the vast majority of people with intersex conditions identify as male or female rather than transgender or transsexual. Thus, where all people who identify as transgender or transsexual experience problems with their gender identity, only a small portion of intersex people experience these problems.²¹

The sad consequence of gender ideology is that real cases of gender dysphoria may be overlooked or missed amidst the sea of gender confused males in the Philippines.²²

Commenting on gender identity confusion, Dr Edward Furton, the Director for Publications at the influential National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, USA writes, “the age in which we live contributes to the confusion. The claim that sexual identity is imposed on us by society – and therefore is malleable and subject to choice – is one of the great delusions of our time.”²³ The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* notes:

Faced with theories that consider gender identity as merely the cultural and social product of the interaction between the community and the individual, independent of personal sexual identity without any reference to the true meaning of sexuality, the Church does not tire of repeating her teaching: ‘Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity.’²⁴

In refusing to be swept along by gender ideology the Church is taking a courageous stand. She is also helping guide many young people who are being led astray by baseless theories of human sexuality, which rely less and less on medicine and science, and more

²¹ Intersex Society of North America, “What’s the Difference between Being Transgender or Transsexual and Having an Intersex Condition?” Available at <http://www.isna.org/faq/transgender>

²² For more on the clinical diagnosis of gender dysphoria see for example the American Psychiatric Association, “What Is Gender Dysphoria?” Available at <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria>

²³ Edward J. Furton, “Confusion about Sex and Gender,” *Ethics and Medics* 40, 2 (Feb. 2015) 3-4.

²⁴ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004. 224, Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

on more on trending opinions, even among moral theologians.²⁵ The words of St Paul to Timothy come to mind:

Proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching. For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine but, following their own desires and insatiable curiosity, will accumulate teachers and will stop listening to the truth and will be diverted to myths. But you, be self-possessed in all circumstances; put up with hardship; perform the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry (2 Tim 4:2-5, New American Bible).

2. Internet Pornography

The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides us with a helpful definition:

Pornography consists in removing real or simulated sexual acts from the intimacy of the partners, in order to display them deliberately to third parties. It offends against chastity because it perverts the conjugal act, the intimate giving of spouses to each other. It does grave injury to the dignity of its participants (actors, vendors, the public), since each one becomes an object of base pleasure and illicit profit for others. It immerses all who are involved in the illusion of a fantasy world. It is a grave offense. Civil authorities should prevent the production and distribution of pornographic materials.²⁶

Pamela Paul, a TIMES magazine reporter, said of the increasing use of pornography:

Today, the number of people looking at pornography is staggering. Americans rent upwards of 800 million pornographic videos and DVDs (about one in five of all rented movies is porn), and the 11,000 porn films shot each year far outpaces Hollywood's yearly slate of 400. Four billion dollars a year is spent on video pornography in the United States, more than on football, baseball, and basketball. One in four internet users look at a pornography website in any given month. Men look at pornography online more than they look at any other subject. And 66% of 18-34 year old men visit a pornographic site every month.²⁷

²⁵"Universities, even Catholic ones, often advance an ethos that accepts and rewards gender theory and punishes those academicians and students who do not conform." National Catholic Bioethics Center, "Transgenderism: Cultural Overview."

²⁶*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2354.

²⁷Pamela Paul, "From Pornography to Porno to Porn: How Porn Became the Norm," in *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Collection of Papers*, Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2010.

Internet pornography is said to be the fastest growing addiction in the world. Some statistics can give a glimpse of the extent of the problem.²⁸

Every Day:

37 pornographic videos are created in the United States.

2.5 billion emails containing porn are sent or received.

68 million search queries related to pornography – 25% of total searches – are generated.

116,000 queries related to child pornography are received.

How Online Pornography Affects Americans:

About 200,000 Americans are classified as “porn addicts.”

40 million American people regularly visit porn sites.

35% of all internet downloads are related to pornography.

34% of internet users have experienced unwanted exposure to pornographic content through ads, pop up ads, misdirected links or emails.

One-third of porn viewers are women.

2.1. Negative Effects of Pornography^{29, 30}

It can be broadly seen in three overlapping categories: personal, psychological and social (especially regarding marriage and family).

• **Personal dangers**

A common misconception is that use of internet pornography is just harmless fun. This myth was blown apart by a fascinating but hard-hitting report from the Witherspoon Institute. The report called “The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations” was the first ever multifaceted, multidisciplinary, scholarly exploration on pornography in the

²⁸ See <https://www.webroot.com/za/en/resources/tips-articles/internet-pornography-by-the-numbers>. Data released by “Pornhub” the world’s most popular internet porn site, reveal that in 2017, 81 million people visited their site each day. Every 5 minutes, Pornhub transmits more data than the entire contents of the New York Public library’s 50 million books and in total 595,482 hours of video were uploaded in 2017. For more staggeringly sad statistics see <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2017-year-in-review>.

²⁹ In a previous article I outlined the negative consequences of internet pornography. Seeing as many found the information helpful, I will reproduce it here in this section. The full article is Fr James McTavish, FMVD & Sr. Ann Marie Bruchalski FMVD, “Internet Pornography – the new pandemic,” *Boletín Eclesiástico de Filipinas*, 87, no. 887 (November-December 2011) 605-620.

³⁰ See also United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Pornography” for additional resources. Available at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/natural-family-planning/resources/pornography.cfm>

internet age.³¹ The report conclusively showed that internet pornography harms the user. Men using pornography found

the way they looked at women in real life warping to fit the pornography fantasies they consumed onscreen... It wasn't only their sex lives that suffered – pornography's effects rippled out, touching all aspects of their existence. Their work days became interrupted, their hobbies were tossed aside, their family lives were disrupted. Some men even lost their jobs, their wives, and their children. The sacrifice is enormous.³²

For many, pornography use can become a slippery slope – what satisfied before no longer suffices, such that increasing time is spent on its viewing. The image viewed often needs to become more graphic or 'harder' to elicit the same effect in the consumer. Chronic effects include anxiety, depression, and even a paradoxical loss of libido – some men reported they even ended up favouring online virtual partners over their own wives. Further areas of serious concern include the use of increasingly violent forms of pornography which can desensitize some users to themes of violence. There is also a link between the use of adult pornography and subsequent transition to viewing of child pornography. In the Philippines context anecdotal reports exist linking sexual abuse of minors with pornography exposure.³³

• **Psychological – the addiction spiral**

The following steps can be observed in the gradual downward spiral of addiction to internet pornography: discovery, experimentation, habituation, compulsivity.

Discovery – With increasing availability of pornography online a casual user may happen to stumble on explicit images by chance. Alternatively, they may be introduced to them by a friend. At the beginning, curiosity is aroused by viewing such images. This is the discovery stage.

Experimentation – With curiosity aroused and millions of pornographic sites to choose from, the user easily enters into a stage of experimentation. This experimentation is powerfully reinforced by the sexual high that results from powerful chemicals released by the

³¹Mary Eberstadt, Mary Anne Layden, "The Social Costs of Pornography: A Statement of Findings and Recommendations," New Jersey: The Witherspoon Institute, 2010. PDF version available at <http://afaofpa.org/wp-content/uploads/Social-Costs-of-Porn-Report.pdf>

³²Pamela Paul, "From Pornography to Porno to Porn..."

³³Sr Mary Pilar Verzosa, RGS, "Pornography, Rape and Incest," in *CBCP monitor*, 15, 15 (July 18-31, 2011) A4. When sexually abused girls are asked to describe the abuser "many of them reveal that there is a proliferation of pornography in the house" and that the abuser "is addicted to cybersex or cell phone sex."

brain. Such sexual outlets are a very convenient and powerful way for the brain to feel pleasure, to cope with boredom and deal with mental burn-out. Of course, the user is also spared the ‘angst’ of a real relationship – no need for dialogue, transparency or honesty in a virtual experience. Many seek out pornography and cybersex chat rooms as substitutes for real human connection and intimacy, often trying to fill the “void” of loneliness but such fantasy relationships offered by the internet actually end up making the user more isolated and lonelier.

Habituation – Should the user continue their pornographic quest, tolerance to mild images may develop such that the person becomes habituated. Stronger images may soon be required such that scenes such as sexual violence, which formerly caused repulsion and disgust, may become more and more ‘normal’.

Compulsivity – The addiction is now out of control and the user becomes dominated by the addiction. The effects are destructive: “When the viewing of pornography rises to the level of addiction, 40 percent of ‘sex addicts’ lose their spouses, 58 percent suffer considerable financial losses, and about a third lose their jobs.”³⁴

• **Social effects on marriage and family**

Dr Patrick Fagan of the Family Research Council produced a research synthesis on the effects of pornography especially in the area of marriage and family.³⁵ Among the findings they report that:

- Married men who are involved in pornography feel less satisfied with their conjugal relations and less emotionally attached to their wives.
- Wives notice and are upset by the difference. Pornography use is also a pathway to infidelity and divorce, and is frequently a major factor in these family disasters.
- Among couples affected by one spouse’s addiction, two-thirds experience a loss of interest in sexual intercourse.

³⁴Quoted by Patrick F. Fagan, “The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community,” Research Synthesis from the Family Research Council, Washington D.C., December 2009, from the testimony for U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation of Mary Anne Layden, Ph.D. (Center for Cognitive Therapy, Department of Psychiatry, University of Pennsylvania), November 18, 2004, 2.

³⁵Dr Patrick Fagan, *The Effects of Pornography on Individuals, Marriage, Family and Community*, Family Research Council, Washington DC, December 2009. Available at <https://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF09K57.pdf>

- Both spouses perceive pornography viewing as tantamount to infidelity.
- Pornography viewing leads to a loss of interest in good family relations.

The idea that use of pornography can help marital relations is hard to sustain especially as the relationship values espoused in pornographic “storylines” often involve deceit, infidelity, promiscuity, disrespect, detachment, violence, coercion and abuse. It comes as no surprise then that pornography users are more likely to be unfaithful to their wives, more likely to go to prostitutes and more likely to divorce.³⁶

2.4. Philippines Context

In the Philippines context, the Filipino Bishops in their pastoral letter in response to the grave evil of pornography, wrote:

In the Philippines, 47 million citizens (43% of the population) regularly use the web. Significantly, Filipino children are among the children in Asia with high access to the Internet: 82% of Filipino children use the Internet at least once a week, while 37% are online every day. Given the all-pervasiveness of the Internet, it should not be surprising that pornography has invaded our homes, workplaces, schools, and churches. The Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality (YAFS) Study of Filipino Youth in 2013 has revealed that 56.5% of Filipinos aged 15 to 24 years old have been exposed to pornographic videos and movies, 35.6% have been exposed to sexually explicit reading materials, and 15.5% have viewed pornographic websites. These young people are the future husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, of our nation, whose capacity for self-giving love has been deeply wounded. Therefore, parents must be held responsible in monitoring and supervising their children’s access to the internet.³⁷

Given that Filipino young people are avid users of the net, and that pornography is widely available, there are serious concerns that viewing of pornography can have negative consequences on sexuality.³⁸ The Filipino Bishops note that “empirical studies have shown that prolonged exposure to pornography in young people... is

³⁶For a helpful account, in question and answer style, of the dangers of pornography and how to overcome an addiction to pornography see Jason Evert, “Pornography and Masturbation,” *If You Really Loved Me*, Denver: Totus Tuus Press, 2013, 117-130.

³⁷Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, “Created for Love, Created for Chastity,” A Pastoral Response to the Grave Evil of Pornography, February 10, 2016. Available at http://www.cbcnews.com/cbcnews/?p=72776#_ftnref13

³⁸Pornhub, the world’s most popular internet porn site, announced that in 2017 Filipinos spent the most time on their site per visit, for the 4th consecutive year running. See <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2017-year-in-review>.

also correlated with high-risk sexual behaviors that put them at peril for sexually transmitted diseases.”³⁹ Regular users of pornography have more difficulties to enter into loving and life-giving relationships, with a diminished capacity for authentic intimacy. It can reach the stage where the addicted person prefers online sexual activity over usual marital relations with one’s own wife. Further examples can be given, suffice to say that viewing of internet pornography damages sexual identity and affects sexual behaviour. There is strong empirical data to support this, such as a Dutch study of adolescents, where the authors found “that more frequent exposure to sexually explicit Internet material is associated with greater sexual uncertainty and more positive attitudes toward uncommitted sexual exploration (i.e., sexual relations with casual partners/friends or with sexual partners in one-night stands).”⁴⁰

That use of the internet might lead to gender identity confusion is also clear from a recent study by Lisa Littman of Brown University, USA. She explored the association between increased social media use and gender dysphoria. Littman explains that the

onset of gender dysphoria seemed to occur in the context of belonging to a peer group where one, multiple, or even all of the friends have become gender dysphoric and transgender-identified during the same time frame. Parents also report that their children exhibited an increase in social media/internet use prior to disclosure of a transgender identity.

She named this phenomenon rapid onset gender dysphoria (ROGD).

Conclusion

It is clear that media can influence gender identity, but what about the role of pornography? We know that adolescents are particularly prone to external influences and exposure to pornography can affect their healthy sexual development as often the sexual relations portrayed online are marked by infidelity, multiple partners, sexual violence, abnormal sexual activities and the like. Hardly good role modelling for growing minds. Pornography viewing causes confusion to young people. How might pornography lead to gender identity confusion though? No doubt there are various gender issues raised by pornography, such

³⁹CBCP, “Created for Love...”

⁴⁰Jochen Peter, Patti M. Valkenburg. “Adolescents’ Exposure to Sexually Explicit Internet Material, Sexual Uncertainty, and Attitudes Toward Uncommitted Sexual Exploration: Is There a Link?” *Communication Research* 35 (2008) 579-601, abstract. See <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0093650208321754>

as the depiction of sexual stereotypes e.g. the dominant male and submissive woman, or the maltreatment of female (and male) actors.⁴¹ When same sex behaviour is portrayed, or even bisexuality, the viewer is led to moral confusion about what is right and wrong. Onscreen images and patterns of sexual behaviour are often cerebrally imprinted in the mind of the viewer creating new neural pleasure pathways – as “what fires together, wires together.” This biological priming of possible addiction pathways is compounded by orgasm, as pornography viewing especially in males is often associated with masturbation. Masturbation becomes a skewed “reward” for watching bad behaviours online. This helps explain why pornography viewing, being so morally wrong, is hard to give up because it is so addictive.⁴²

A recent document from the Congregation for Catholic Education entitled “*Male and female he created them*”: *Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*, notes that the affectivity of young people needs to be educated to counter the “continuous bombardment of messages that are ambiguous and unclear, and which end up creating emotional disorientation as well as impeding psycho-relational maturity.”⁴³ There is a real danger of unbridled access to, and consumption of, what is shown on the internet. This is one reason why the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* invites young people to become “critical consumers” underlining that “the means of social communication (especially the mass media) can give rise to a certain passivity among users, making them less than vigilant consumers of what is said or shown. Users should practice moderation and discipline in their approach to the mass media. They will want to form enlightened and correct consciences the more easily to resist unwholesome influences.”⁴⁴

In using the internet, there are many unwholesome offerings which curious growing minds may be tempted to consume. There is some common wisdom in the phrase “you are what you eat.” If a young person is continually nourished by provocative stimuli, showing all kinds of gender typologies, engaging in unhealthy sexual

⁴¹Being a distinct topic, it is not explored further here.

⁴²See for example Todd Love *et al.* “Neuroscience of Internet Pornography Addiction: A Review and Update,” *Behavioral Sciences* (Basel, Switzerland) 5, 3 (2015) 388-433. 18 Sep. 2015. See also the excellent resources available at <https://fightthenewdrug.org>

⁴³Congregation for Catholic Education, “*Male and Female he Created Them*”: *Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education*, 2 February 2019, 42. Available for download at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20190202_maschio-e-femmina_en.pdf

⁴⁴*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2354.

interactions, then the conscience of the young viewer will end up deformed. For this reason, *Amoris laetitia* speaks of the urgent need “to develop a critical sense in dealing with the onslaught of new ideas and suggestions, the flood of pornography and the overload of stimuli that can deform sexuality.”⁴⁵

We can also posit further connections between gender identity confusion and pornography consumption. Andrew R. Spieldenner explicitly acknowledges that “gender categories and gender fluidity can be explicitly performed and demonstrated in sexually explicit media such as pornography.”⁴⁶ We stated earlier that gender ideology proposes a new menu of sexuality to young people, who are now apparently free to choose. If the new sexual flowchart is now “choose your gender identity – choose your sexual attraction – choose your sexual behavior” we can also surmise that the reverse may happen: that experimenting in sexual behaviour can influence one’s sexual attraction and then affect one’s understanding of gender identity.⁴⁷ Our actions often define who we are at a core level. If we lie repeatedly, we become a liar. If we murder, we become a murderer. We accept that our actions can shape or mould our character. There is a connection between the outside (action) and the inside (character). If a person watches pornography, with a mind-boggling array of sexual behaviours (often disordered), this may affect one’s sexual attractions and subsequently one’s gender identity. It is well known that modern internet pornography contains much sexual violence (such as degradation of females) and males who watch this type of content can be affected by it. If the same male is watching large amounts of pornography with sexual roles (and gender identity) being presented in a confusing way (such as group relations, violence, homosexual and lesbian activity, etc.) it is understandable that this external confusion may lead to internal confusion especially among young people.

In the Philippines it is known that young people are heavy consumers of internet and pornography. They also have alarmingly high levels of gender identity confusion. I believe that these two

⁴⁵*Amoris laetitia*, no. 281.

⁴⁶Andrew R. Spieldenner, “Object Lessons: Using Trans Porn in Class to Explore Gender Fluidity,” *Communication Teacher* 33, 3 (2019) 215-220.

⁴⁷The data from the aforementioned research survey of Edwin Albert T. Valles, “A Survey on the Sexual Orientation ...,” would tend to support this. Where gender identity confusion is high, there are also increased rates of same sex attraction (SSA). In the Manila survey, 9% of males expressed SSA which is more than three times higher than the rates in the USA or UK.

elements are inter-connected. If pornography is known to adversely affect sexual thoughts, attitudes, and behaviours we can surmise that it may contribute to confusion in the area of sexual and gender identity. If this is the case, the more a person watches pornography, especially where unhealthy sexual identity and behaviours are shown (in terms of abnormal sexual relationships, violence, same sex activity and bisexuality) it is understandable the deleterious effect on the youth. One such negative effect can be the growth in gender identity confusion. We would do well to be aware of the dangers of both internet pornography and the ideology of gender as well as the potentially alarming connections between them.