

## “IT WAS SOMETHING TO BE DONE IN SECRET”: REFLECTING ON THE MATERIALITY OF PORNOGRAPHY IN THE FAMILY HOME

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I first came to porn when I opened my dad's secret drawer. I was 10 yrs old. It was exciting and fun. I started to use porn regularly in my early teens. Porn helped me greatly in recognising my sexual preferences. And now I am a happy porn user with vast sexual experience and everlasting curiosity for incredible world of sexuality (1742, male, bisexual, 25-36).

This short exploration of the secret of pornography in the family home emerges from a broader project into the motivations and experiences of individuals of all ages and sexual orientations engaging with pornography. The larger project focused on individuals' recollected histories with pornography, exploring narratives that complicate the framing of young people's encounters as “exposure to pornography” likely to result in negative “effects”.<sup>1</sup> Previous articles have acknowledged widespread concerns regarding the impact of sexual media on the well-being of young individuals while advocating for more nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding sexual materials throughout one's life.<sup>2</sup> That research highlighted the evolving landscape of porn consumption, emphasising its potential in the development of sexual identities,<sup>3</sup> as a form of leisure and play,<sup>4</sup> and its connections to the broader emergence of mediated intimacies.<sup>5</sup>

1 M. A. Horvath, L. Alys, K. Massey, A. Pina, M. Scally, J. R. Adler, “Basically... Porn is Everywhere”: A Rapid Evidence Assessment on the Effects that Access and Exposure to Pornography Has on Children and Young People, Office of the Children's Commissioner, UK, London 2013.

2 F. Attwood, C. Smith, M. Barker, “I'm just curious and still exploring myself”: Young People and Pornography, “New Media & Society”, 20(10), 2018, pp. 3738-3759; F. Attwood, C. Smith, M. Barker, *Engaging with Pornography: An Examination of Women aged 18-26 as Porn Consumers*, “Feminist Media Studies”, 21(2), 2021, pp. 173-188; C. Smith, F. Attwood, M. Barker, *Queering Porn Audiences*, in M. Laing, K. Pilcher, N. Smith (eds.), *Queer Sex Work*, Routledge, Abingdon-New York 2015, pp. 177-188.

3 C. Smith, F. Attwood, M. Barker, *Queering Porn Audiences*, cit.

4 C. Smith, M. Barker, F. Attwood, *Why Do People Watch Porn: Results from PornResearch.Org*, in L. Comella, S. Tarrant (eds.), *New Views on Pornography: Sexuality, Politics, and the Law*, Praeger, Santa Barbara 2015, pp. 277-296.

5 Our research methodology involved the distribution of a questionnaire through social media channels, completed online to gather comprehensive data. Rather than aiming for a representative sample, a diverse demographic was sought, encompassing individuals of various ages, sexual orientations, and levels of engagement with pornography. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, both quantitative and qualitative questions were employed to explore consumption patterns and delve into detailed accounts of porn consumption. The resulting dataset comprised over 5,000 responses, enabling exploration of gender patterns and frequency of engagement with pornography, while qualitative data provided nuanced insights into participants' experiences, enriching our understanding of the significance of pornography in individuals' lives. See: C. Smith, F. Attwood, M. Barker, *Queering Porn Audiences*, cit.; C. Smith, M. Barker, F. Attwood, *Why Do People Watch Porn: Results from PornResearch.Org*, cit.

In this piece I delve into an aspect of the domesticity of pornographic encounters,<sup>6</sup> examining the integration of porn into the household and its impact on familial relationships and individual biographies. The incorporation of pornography into discussion of the material cultures of home may appear to transgress traditional boundaries, given the portrayal of the home as a sanctuary of privacy and safety, and pornography is often depicted in anti-pornography narratives as an invasive presence in the home.<sup>7</sup> Even so, in what follows I'd like to explore some of the ways the stigmatized object that is porn is a form of intimate media managed within the emotional and social spaces of the family sphere.

Historically, pornography has been relegated to the realm of secrecy, concealed within what has been termed a «secret museum».<sup>8</sup> Even in today's era of widespread accessibility, attempts are made to conceal its contents in public spaces, indicative of prevailing societal attitudes towards sexuality.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, within the home, societal expectations necessitate privacy and boundaries around expressions of sexuality, contributing to the invisibility of certain objects, such as pornographic media. This invisibility, explored through sociological perspectives on secrecy, plays a crucial role in the intricate dynamics of family life, contributing to the complex tapestry of relational and emotional work within domestic spheres, as explored in a recent article by Sophie Woodward and Cornelia Mayr to argue for the significance of hidden objects in negotiating and maintaining secrets in everyday life.<sup>10</sup> Hidden objects, whether «wilfully concealed»<sup>11</sup> or actively involved in creating social relations and identities, serve as forms of communication, expression, and consumption, shaping individual actions and choices within familial contexts.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the concealment of objects, such as pornography, within the home reflects broader societal norms and expectations, influencing the dynamics of familial relationships and interactions.

Our exploration of individuals' histories with pornography revealed a recurring theme of “uncovering a secret”, underscoring the significance of sexual discovery. For example, in the quotation which opens this article and in these accounts:

I first came to porn out of curiosity. I didn't know much but the technical facts about sex, and I barely knew what a vagina looked like. I started out printing pictures online when my parents were out, then masturbating to the pictures after everyone was asleep. More recently

6 J. Juffer, *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday life*, NYU Press, New York 1998.

7 P. Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families*, Henry Holt and Company, New York 2005.

8 W.M. Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*, University of California Press, Oakland 1996.

9 P. Blake, *Age Verification for Online Porn: More Harm than Good?*, “Porn Studies”, 6(2), 2019, pp. 228-237; B. Romney, *Screens, Teens, and Porn Scenes: Legislative Approaches to Protecting Youth from Exposure to Pornography*, “Vermont Law Review”, 45, 2020, pp. 44-124.

10 S. Woodward, C. Mayr, *Secret Objects in the Home: Potency, (In)visibility and Everyday Relationships*, “Cultural Sociology”, 18(3), 2023, pp. 354-369.

11 A. Barnwell, *Family Secrets and the Slow Violence of Social Stigma*, “Sociology”, 53(6), 2019, pp.1111-1126 (p. 1112).

12 D. Miller (ed.), *Home Possessions: Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, Routledge, London 2021; D. Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, Polity, London 2008.

I've settled into a routine of masturbating to erotic videos before bed every night (2019, male heterosexual, 18-25).

I first came to porn as a kid, we found some of my father's porn. Actively we searched more from paper trash, during lower grade. My first decent boyfriend had great appetite of porn, he and his friends amused themselves with it (1841, female heterosexual, 26-35).

Pornography, as a material object, holds hidden secrets associated with adulthood, sex, love, and inner life, representing a form of sexual socialisation.<sup>13</sup> This process aligns with Michel Foucault's argument that sexuality is a historical and discursive construct shaped by power dynamics.<sup>14</sup> Encountering adult's pornography can introduce young individuals to diverse sexual discourses and communities, potentially influencing their beliefs and behaviours.

I know technically it's not porn, but the first time I watched the first *Emmanuelle*. I was at a friend's house, I was 8-9 years old, parents were out, all we knew was that it was something we weren't supposed to watch. That was exciting. Now I'm older I enjoy moments where I'm doing something I shouldn't and may be caught (2186, male heterosexual, 26-35).

The experience of discovering adult pornography could be transformative, evoking a range of emotions and thoughts: it might be likened to a "primal scene", triggering a confrontation with parental or authority figures' sexuality that might be confusing or discomforting,<sup>15</sup> although in the accounts we received there seems to be more sense of "celebration" of having uncovered a secret:

I first came to porn when my brother would find my dad's hidden tapes when we visited him. I grew up in a fundamentally Christian home so porn was always forbidden but who can stop a determined boy going through puberty, right? My dad always had videotapes and magazines and I remember snooping in their room to find it. I remember that day the way you'd remember a particularly awesome Christmas morning (683, Male heterosexual, 26-35).

I first discovered porn around the age of 16, when I found my father's porn collection. I knew he was hiding something from me, and I liked the challenge of discovering it without him knowing. I continued to secretly browse his porn collection, out of curiosity, and from the thrill of doing something "forbidden". Though my initial interest was in images, I went on

13 S. Healy-Cullen, T. Morison, J.E. Taylor, K. Taylor, *Performing Smart Sexual Selves: A Sexual Scripting Analysis of Youth Talk about Internet Pornography*, "Sexualities", 27(8), 2023, pp. 1656-1672; S.V. Knudsen, L. Lofgren-Martenson, S.A. Mansson (eds.), *Generation P?: Youth, Gender and Pornography*, Universitetsforlag, Aarhus 2008.

14 M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*, Vintage, New York 1990 [Ed. or. *Histoire de la sexualité, vol. 1 : La Volonté de savoir*, Éditions Gallimard, Paris 1976].

15 K.R. Allen, E.A. Gary, E.S. Lavender-Stott, C.E. Kaestle, "I Walked in on Them": Young Adults' Childhood Perceptions of Sex and Nudity in Family and Public Contexts, "Journal of Family Issues", 39(15), 2018, pp. 3804-3831.

to develop an interest in his collection of erotic fiction, and I later wrote erotic fiction of my own. When I went to university, aged 18, I cut down on my use of porn, and rarely browsed a small selection of images I had copied from my father's collection. Though lack of access to my father's collection was a strong reason for this, I was also slightly afraid of what others might think. I have lived with my parents since graduation, though I no longer browse my father's collection as often as I once did, instead preferring to write and re-read my own erotic stories. I believe my father is still unaware that I have access to his porn collection (2088, male heterosexual, 26-35).

This last account offers significant insights into an individual journey with pornography and erotic material within the familial context. Initially drawn to images, this young man's interest expanded to include erotic fiction, ultimately leading to the creation of his own stories; his explorations were facilitated by access to his father's collection, indicating the influence of familial environment on early sexual experiences. Once at university, his consumption reduced, citing both limited access to his father's collection and concerns about judgment by his peers. Even so, he continued to engage with erotica through writing and re-reading his own stories. A really interesting dimension to this account (which seems to run through many of the accounts of finding an adult's stash) is the veil of secrecy surrounding the interactions with his father's collection, suggesting a desire for privacy and avoidance of potential conflict within the family. This account highlights the complex interplay between personal exploration, familial influence, societal norms, and creative expression in shaping an individual's relationship with pornography and erotica.

Moreover, both accounts above highlight intergenerational boundaries and the taboo nature of discussing parental sexuality within the family unit. The silences surrounding Dad's sexual preferences likely stem from societal norms that dictate a separation between parental and child identities – parents are viewed as authority figures whose sexual desires are considered private and off-limits for discussion. The reluctance to delve into Dad's sexual subjecthood may reflect broader cultural attitudes towards parental authority and the preservation of familial harmony. This silence observed between children and parents regarding pornography discovery is perhaps indicative of the larger communication gap surrounding sexuality within the family where many struggle with discussing sexual topics openly,<sup>16</sup> leading to a lack of understanding and communication about sexual preferences, desires, and boundaries and where stigma, «an often unseen and accretive form of social violence – is experienced and managed within families via secrecy»:<sup>17</sup>

I first came to porn when I found in the street a gay magazine, with pictures and stories. Then I started buying my own mags to “enhance” my masturbation sessions. I did that for years

16 M.A.J. Noorman, C. den Daas, J.B.F. de Wit, *How Parents' Ideals are Offset by Uncertainty and Fears: A Systematic Review of the Experiences of European Parents regarding the Sexual Education of Their Children*, “The Journal of Sex Research”, 60(7), 2023, pp. 1034-1044.

17 A. Barnwell, *Family Secrets and the Slow Violence of Social Stigma*, cit. p. 1111.

and years, while living with my parents, despite the fact that my mother threw away every single mag she came across (5145, queer male, 36-45).

This lack of acknowledgement of the child's sexual preferences reflects gender norms and expectations whereby gay male sexuality is framed as the unnamed secret between mother and son.<sup>18</sup> Here the secret might be understood as «protective»,<sup>19</sup> perhaps his mother hoped to avoid saying the wrong thing or wanted to preserve her son's privacy and autonomy even if her silence might potentially contribute to feelings of isolation or shame. Other respondents were not so fortunate as to have their secrets unacknowledged:

My mother caught me masturbating and beat me off with a belt, and locked me in a dark room (I used to panic in the dark) with a candle burning and said: you will have to pray for your sins all night and you will only be able to leave this room once this candle has burnt entirely. I cried throughout the night and felt so guilty (my father was travelling and she said that once he would be back, she would tell him about it and he would be so disappointed that only God could know what would happen to me). I carried that guilt until I was 12 (I didn't stop touching myself, but I had crazy thoughts like I'd get pregnant every time I would touch my vagina and then I would pray). When I reach 12 years old, I finally figured that the whole process had a name: masturbating, and it was completely normal for people to do it (even though my mother always made sure to say out loud that she never had touched herself as she had always had men to fulfil her and touching yourself is something for lesbians and therefore, horrible) (5166, heterosexual female, 18-25).

In the above history, a distressing narrative of familial abuse and control is marked by the mother's physical punishment, religious manipulation, and emotional coercion. The secrecy surrounding the incident likely perpetuated stigma and isolation of the teenager, while the strained relationships within the family surely underscore the complex dynamics at play where discovery, shaming and silencing are recurring possibilities in the everyday of family life.

Porn has always been very important to my life; my first real exposure to sexually explicit media was through Internet porn when I was barely in junior high (and back when the Internet was a novel thing, the ubiquity of porn therein wasn't something kids readily knew about and felt blasé towards). The way my father handled the discovery of my porn viewing was devastating to my young self for years – I was terrified and ashamed at any mention of sex, worried to death he would tell my mother (not for nothing, either; he would occasionally allude to it as I would desperately try to change the subject) (4961, female, queer, 18-25).

18 J.L. Allen, K.Y. Huggins-Hoyt, J. Nobile, D.T. Boyd, *A Descriptive Qualitative Analysis of Gay Men's Recollection of Parental Similarities and Differences in Their Approaches to Talking about Sexual Orientation and Sexual Behaviors*, "Journal of GLBT Family Studies", 17(4), 2021, pp. 393-412.

19 S. Ahmed, *Secrets and Silence in Feminist Research*, in R. Ryan-Flood, R. Gill (eds.), *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, Routledge, London 2010, pp. xvi-xxi.

Both narratives of emotional trauma, highlight the potential impact of experiences of being discovered, suggesting that pornography as an object to be hidden and found can play a significant role in shaping and reflecting familial intimacy dynamics, contributing to the negotiation of emotional and physical distance or closeness among family members.

Thus, the materiality of pornography within the home underscores the negotiation of boundaries between public and private realms, visible and invisible domains, and self and other. There are various ways to think through the secrets and conflicts that are entangled in the place of pornography in the domestic space – how does pornography function within family dynamics, what is its role as a personal, professional, public, and collective secret. If curiosity and exploration of difference drive individuals' engagements with pornography, fostering what Susanna Paasonen has termed «carnal resonance»,<sup>20</sup> then the exploration of moral boundaries and the negotiation of autonomy and adult interests are integral to individuals' experiences with pornography, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards sexuality and intimacy.

20 S. Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance: Affect and Online Pornography*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 2011.