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# He's Just Not That Into Anyone

**Even, and perhaps especially, when his girlfriend is acting like the women he can't stop watching online.**

By Davy Rothbart Published Jan 30, 2011



Photographs of men watching online pornography, taken on January 25. (Photo: Phillip Toledano)

I met the woman at a Broadway show, but the night's best piece of acting, I'd say, came from me, back at her East Village apartment, after we'd been having sex for about 25 minutes, with Neil Young wailing the song "Comes a Time" from the laptop on her bedside table. The dried-out condom had a full-bodied choke hold on me, but I'd already stopped twice to put on a fresh one, and I knew, as I kept

earnestly pumping away, that one more condom wouldn't make the necessary difference. Had I just given up, things might have played out the way they often did, with shades of confused disappointment and inadequacy on the part of the woman and mumbled apologies and awkward shame from me. But that night, ingenuity struck—unable to actually get off, I found myself flying a fresh route: I faked it.

Why would I, a healthy guy in his thirties, need to fake an orgasm? It was mystifying. I wasn't on antidepressants, which I'd heard could decrease sensation. I got plenty of exercise. It didn't seem to matter which woman I was with, or what kind of condom we used, or whether I'd downed one glass of whiskey or ten, or if we listened to Neil Young or Al Green, as I learned through trial and error (mostly error). Over the course of months, I picked a dozen suspects out of the lineup and gradually cleared each one. Except, perhaps, the most obvious.

"Pornography? It's a new synaptic pathway." This is what John Mayer said in a candid interview with *Playboy*. "You wake up in the morning, open a thumbnail page, and it leads to a Pandora's box of visuals," he continued. "There have probably been days when I saw 300 vaginas before I got out of bed."

Porn's allure and ubiquity isn't exactly titillating news. The question that still remains, however, is how this tsunami of porn is affecting the libido of the American male or, more selfishly, mine. First I came across a post on Sanjay Gupta's blog by Ian Kerner, a sexuality counselor, who wrote that he noticed a distinct rise in the number of men approaching him with concerns about delayed ejaculation. Kerner went on to attribute much of the problem to a "rapid proliferation of Internet porn" which leads to "over-masturbation," something I'm very familiar with. Then I read about a University of Kansas study that found that 25 percent of college-age men said they'd faked orgasms, which, I'll admit, was oddly comforting to hear. But it

wasn't until I interviewed dozens of men with varying porn-watching habits (and a few very open-minded women) that some unexpected themes began to emerge. Porn is not only shaping men's physical and emotional interest in sex on a very fundamental neurological level, but it's also having a series of unexpected ripple effects—namely on women.

**F**or decades, hand-wringers have warned of a porn epidemic that would tear the nation's moral fabric asunder. But if online porn has spread a sickness, it's one that's less like Ebola and more like a midwinter cold. The initial symptom for a lot of guys who frequently find themselves bookmarking their favorite illicit clips appears to be a waning desire for their partners. Jonas\*, a 34-year-old ad exec, told me, "I get on SpankWire or X Videos—you could carve ice sculptures with my dick. I take a girl home from the bar, though, and I'll be up for a minute while she's going down on me, but once I put a condom on and we start going at it, it's like the *Challenger* exploded—all the flags are at half-mast."

Then there's Stefan, a 43-year-old composer, who has no problem getting aroused when he has sex with his wife. "In order to come, though, I've got to resort to playing scenes in my head that I've seen while viewing porn. Something is lost there. I'm no longer with my wife; I'm inside my own head."

As John Mayer told *Playboy*, "How could you be constantly synthesizing an orgasm based on dozens of shots? You're looking for the one photo out of 100 you swear is going to be the one you finish to, and you still don't finish ... How does that not affect the psychology of having a relationship with somebody? It's got to." Most of the men I interviewed admitted having a similar habit of jumping quickly from porn clip to porn clip (which explains the rise and popularity of "cumshot" montages and other rapidly edited compilations). Kerner went so far as to coin the term "sexual attention deficit disorder." For a lot of guys, switching gears from porn's fireworks and whiz-bangs to the comparatively mundane calm of ordinary sex is like leaving halfway through an Imax 3-D movie to check out a flipbook.



(Photo: Phillip Toledano. Casting by Wulf Casting.)

"I used to race home to have sex with my wife," says Perry, a 41-year-old lawyer. "Now I leave work a half-hour early so I can get home before she does and masturbate to porn." Throughout the course of our conversation, Perry insists that he's still attracted to his wife of twelve years. Still, he says, she can't quite measure up to the porn stars he

views online. "Not to be mean, but they're younger, hotter, and wilder in the sack than my wife," he says. "Me and her, we still 'do it' and everything, but instead of every day, it's maybe once a week. It's like I've got this 'other woman' ... and the 'other woman' is porn."

Ron, 27, an architecture student, met his girlfriend when they were both undergrads. She goes to school in another city, and Ron says that for the past couple of years, he's had weekly "dates" with his favorite porn stars, which he looks forward to all day and even showers and shaves for, as though preparing for a live-action rendezvous. "Mondays are for Gia Jordan," he says. "Tuesdays for Sasha Grey." Wednesdays he has a reprieve—a Portuguese night class. "I always look forward to Thursdays the most—Kasey Kox," he says. "Then, on the weekends, I hang out with my girlfriend." Occasionally, when he returns to his apartment on Sundays, Ron explains, he roams the web looking for candidates to spend time with on Wednesday nights in case he has leftover energy after his language class. "I don't like to believe that porn is replacing anything I have with my girlfriend," he says, "but I've always loved sex, and I've always had a lot of it, so I really had to stop and think about it when she asked me recently why she always has to be the one to initiate things. And she was right; I guess I've been fading from her. It's like all that time with these porn stars was subduing any physical desire for my girlfriend. And, in some weird way, my emotional need for her, too."

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Is it possible that porn is causing men to detach from their partners in more profound ways? Though porn research is the subject of much debate and barb-flinging (with religious groups seizing on any study to prove that porn and masturbation are wrong), scientists speculate that a dopamine-oxytocin combo is released in the brain during orgasm, acting as a "biochemical love potion," as behavioral therapist Andrea Kuszewski calls it. It's the reason after having sex with someone, you're probably more inclined to form an emotional attachment. But you don't have to actually have sex in order to get those neurotransmitters firing. When you watch porn, "you're bonding with it," Kuszewski says. "And those chemicals make you want to keep coming back to have that feeling." Which allows men not only to get off on porn but to potentially develop a neurological attachment to it. They can, in essence, date porn.

And as tripod-in-the-corner porn evolves into a high-def wonderland, our grasp on whether we're watching sex or actually having sex may, with the help of oxytocin, loosen. Many of the men I interviewed spoke of the charge they get from watching their favorite porn actresses. But they also had a tendency to describe the act of watching porn as though it were a real sex act they had participated in—making their emotional investment in porn all the more concrete. "I love when Kasey [Kox] is fully clothed and smiling at me from her bed, or I'm doing her from behind," says Ron, the architecture student. "I get one glimpse of Kasey and I'm so turned on. I get dizzy."

**A**ll of which raises an interesting question: How does having sometimes flaccid, sometimes faked, oftentimes dizzied sex impact the partners on the

receiving end? Sadie, 29, a real-estate agent in Boston, quotes performance artist Nicole Blackman to make her point: “There is no glory in trying to make love to men who only know how to fuck—man after man after man after man raised on porn.’ There have been times in the past,” Sadie continues, “when I would be with someone and thinking, *Jesus fucking Christ, what the fuck kind of stupid porn have you been watching? Did you just smack my kitty? Dumbass!*”

“There’s a failure to distinguish between porn reality and reality reality,” says Monika, 27. “One guy kept shouting at me, ‘Ride the cock, ride the cock!’ I was laughing so hard we had to stop.”

As a result of the blending of reality and fantasy, some women have chosen to willingly play along by a new set of rules in order to keep their men interested: They’re intentionally impersonating porn stars. Sadie, the real-estate agent, says, “A lot of guys have come to expect P.S.E. [the “Porn-Star Experience”] as a common thing—snatches waxed bald, access to every hole—and plenty of women are more than happy to provide. A few might enjoy it, but for most it’s harrowing. I think there’s a fear that if they can’t make it happen, their boyfriend will retreat online.”



(Photo: Phillip Toledano. Casting by Wulf Casting.)

Monty, 31, an actor from Queens, who between shooting scenes spends about an hour a day masturbating to online porn, says he’s noticed the shift. “I was with a girl who seemed to be in an arms race with porn,” he says. “She had this imaginary Soviet Union she kept trying to out-fuck.”

“Women are turning up the dial,” says Evan, also 31. “I’m a pleaser. I get off on a woman’s arousal. But I’ve noticed that women are getting a lot more vocal now. Either I’m doing something I’m not aware of, or women are beginning to mimic what happens in porn. Honestly, it’s kind of weird. I’m not sure if I like it.”

Tony, 48, a web designer in St. Paul, who separated from his wife a few years ago after twenty years of marriage, echoes the thought. “I’ve always thought it’s really hot when women in porn movies say dirty stuff,” he says. “Usually, they’re just literally narrating the shit that’s happening, giving the play-by-play: ‘You’re fucking me! Your dick’s in my ass! I’m sucking your cock right now!’ For whatever reason, that’s what does it for me. But recently a woman I was with started saying all that stuff, and it just kind of spooked me. She seemed slightly nuts.”

And so a conundrum emerges. Men, oversaturated by porn, secretly hunger for the variety that porn offers. Women, noticing a decline in their partners’ libidos, try to reenact the kinds of scenes that men watch on their computer screens. Men, as a result, get really freaked out. They don’t want their real women and their fantasy women to inhabit the same body. Or, as Ron analogizes: “Remember *Ghostbusters?* How in love Bill Murray was with Dana, the Sigourney Weaver character? He feels

lucky to even get her to agree to a date with him, but then when he shows up at her door, she's possessed by demons, floating four feet above her bed, begging him to fuck her brains out. And he's completely rattled by it and can't get out of there fast enough. Well, that's what it's like when your girlfriend suddenly starts acting like a porn queen. You're like, 'Baby, where'd you go? I just want my girlfriend back.'"

**L**ike any thorough researcher, I decided to investigate a theory. I had heard about something called the National Day of Unplugging, sponsored by the New York-based Jewish group Reboot, which encourages people to take a one-day vacation from their tech. But I chose to unplug in my own way: by refusing to visit the usual series of tawdry websites I frequent before bedtime. Now, I'm certainly not trying to indict porn, or to conclude that it has no place in men's lives, whether they are alone or in company. And I'll concede that some couples still find it to be something of a turn-on. But realigning one's relationship to it might just improve one's *actual* relationships—especially if you're often finding yourself in the bedroom, staring into the eyes of a very confused partner. So I did some realigning.

I went without porn for a day. Then I tried it for two. Then three. On the fourth day, I had the fortune of having sex with a woman. And nothing was faked, although I can only speak for myself.