

# TEENAGE KICKS

Teen culture is becoming more sexualised than ever before, and pornography has become part of mainstream youth culture. Teens are bombarded by graphic sexual images online, on their mobiles and on MTV. Teen girls think it's normal to dress like the Pussycat Dolls and have the Playboy logo on their school folders. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. Teens' use of online and covert mobile porn is so widespread that it is almost a rite of passage. With greater scrutiny on teens' viewing of porn, brands that use titillation as a means to sell may find they receive more complaints.

Educators and the media question what sort of impact porn is having on teens, for example, the possibility that it may be contributing to an increase in teenage pregnancies, self-harm, or STDs. On the other hand, some online porn may perform a useful role, filling a gap in sex education. The question is, can the gap be filled more constructively by relevant sex education programmes, which even encompass the discussion of porn?

A European-wide programme called EU Kids Online has been launched to study children's use of the net, in particular, online pornography,

following a slew of alarming statistics. The three-year project will combine research from 18 countries, assessing risks and children's and parents' responses.

[www.lse.ac.uk/collections/EUKidsOnline/](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/EUKidsOnline/)

A number of studies highlight the prevalence of online porn and teens' exposure to it. The Sex Education Forum reports that half of British children online are exposed to porn, while almost a third receives unwanted sexual comments via email, chat, IM or text. According to a BBC report, the Internet hosts around 250 million pages of pornography. A quarter of 12 to 16-year-olds online see some of these sexual images at least once a month (a third of boys and a fifth of girls).

42% of 10 to 17-year-old Internet users in the US have seen online pornography in the past twelve months, according to a recent study by the University of New Hampshire. Some of this viewing is inadvertent, or undesired, with 66% of those viewers claiming that they had not intended to see the images. The number of teens who reported unwanted exposure to pornography had increased by 25% compared to a 1999/2000 survey.

A recent BBC3 documentary *Teens Hooked on Porn* examines the possible link between the easy availability of porn and the rise in teen pregnancies. The programme features teen boys who watch several hours of hardcore porn daily. It explores anger and inhibition and raises questions about the role of parents, schools and religious groups.

Darryl, age 17, thinks this is normal behaviour and readily shares porn via Bluetooth with his mates. 16-year-old Malcolm has been a heavy viewer of porn from the age of 13. He recognises that he has an addiction and is seeing a therapist. Colin, age 14 and a devout Christian, also recognises he needs help, but is reticent to talk to his pastor.

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Younger children are also interviewed for the programme, which also examines the topic of the earlier sexualisation of children.

## Normalisation

Most teens said they were not disturbed by what they saw, which suggests normalisation of these images. Mobile phone wallpapers of variously undressed women are common among boys and no one bats an eyelid. Nuts, Loaded and FHM are readily found in school playgrounds.

Kids commonly post photos of themselves on their online profiles and some of these are pornographic. Last August, the headteacher of Helston School in Cornwall reportedly asked the website bebo.com to remove the school's entry (created by students), after it was discovered that young teens had posted soft porn pictures of themselves on the popular networking site.

The social acceptability of porn among teens is manifest. Girls are now under pressure to see it as 'acceptable' and just harmless fun or they're labelled 'gay' or 'prudes'. Sometimes the material can be construed as harmless fun. Part of music video history, Benny Benitez' Satisfaction film, for example, is a cheeky, bubble gum-tastic chicks and power tools extravaganza. But, further up the sleaz-ometer somewhat and you get to Paris Hilton's infamous sex video. Whether or not that counts as harmless fun is questionable.

An alarming trend is the viral distribution by teens of increasingly violent porn, some of which depicts teen sex. Bluetooth makes it easy to share mobile material. Last May, for example, two 16-year-old boys were arrested for making a porn video of a 14-year-old girl on a mobile phone and sending it round to school friends in Perth, Scotland.

## Education

Sex education in schools has come under scrutiny in recent years. Research by the NSPCC, released last year, found that UK children are receiving incomplete sex education in schools, with 93% of teens reporting that their lessons included no information about sexual abuse. The charity has been lobbying to improve sex education for teens, putting sex in the context of relationships, peer pressure and the law.

To some extent, sexual issues are being tackled in schools, but the extent of coverage is variable. For example, PHSE (personal, health and social education) and Citizenship classes cover the issue of consent in relation to the law. Language and sex is another topic addressed in some schools, which encourage discussion about slang and colloquialisms for males and females and for sexual parts of the body. The extent to which slang empowers males vs. females is addressed. The problem is that this is a drop in the ocean compared to the amount of sexual stimulus teens receive through various media, which deliver mixed messages.

The charity Womankind Worldwide is piloting a scheme 'Challenging Violence, Changing Lives' in British schools, to educate teens about male violence against women. Issues of pornography and prostitution are also addressed in the Year 11 programme. Lis Martin, the creative director, says: 'What teachers are saying is that younger girls are vulnerable to approaches from older, sophisticated men from outside school. Porn is used in chatroom grooming. Yet girls are also visiting porn sites to find out what they need to do to please boys. They aren't questioning abusive relationships.' (*The Guardian*, 30 January 2007)

The effects of female objectification are far reaching. One in four women still faces discrimination at work and 17% have felt sexually harassed at the office, according to a new survey by Harris Interactive in the US. Nearly half of women who experienced discrimination did not

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report it because they did not think it would make a difference. 25% of those who did complain said it was never addressed by the person they confided in.

## Virtual porn

Virtual environments offer the opportunity for teens to explore their sexuality, to experiment with relationships and spin sexual tales, as well as experience the obvious titillation. Teens can date and break-up online, cheat on their real world boyfriends and girlfriends, or change their sexual orientation. Online worlds have checks in place, but teens are adept at getting around them. Where there's a will, there's usually a way.

The news that Playboy Magazine is entering Second Life has caused a stir in the blogosphere, but there are already well established players in this game, such as Marilyn Murphy's in-world erotica magazine *Players*, complete with nude avatar centrefolds. Post Sixx Grrls, such as Orchid Glitterbuck, or Taylor Barnes, are current pin-ups of Second Life. Most 'girls' have their own columns in the readily accessible *Second Life Herald* ([www.secondlifeherald.com](http://www.secondlifeherald.com)). The Post Sixx Grrrl Pageant is growing in popularity, thanks to word of mouth.

Residents of Second Life have had the freedom to indulge their fantasies, aided by 'relationship software'. A new product, the Rendezvous Couples Animator, is a sex-free relationship tool for Second Life, which sets your avatar in

couple-mode. You can spend all your days in Second Life kissing and canoodling, stroking each other's hair, swimming or flying through the air. The Isle of Lesbos enables girls (or guys with girls' avatars) to explore same-avatar-sex relationships. When experiments go wrong, Get A Life, the widely syndicated advice column in Second Life, steps in to offer a helping hand.

In theory, the 'over 18' garden is only open to adults, but age play - using an avatar that's older or much younger (even childlike) as part of a fantasy - is still practiced. The German media Mainz TV and Speigel Online report that German authorities are scrutinising the virtual world for age play, following demonstrations in Second Life to curb in-world child pornography. The developers Linden Labs have attempted to crack down, but unverified accounts are not uncommon. The debate rages on. Follow the strand of discussion at: [www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2007/05/german\\_media\\_no.html#more](http://www.secondlifeherald.com/slh/2007/05/german_media_no.html#more)

Now, several European countries are limiting residents' ability to create childlike avatars and display them in restricted Mature areas of the virtual world. In an attempt to address criticism, SL director of community affairs Daniel Linden managed to fan the flames, yet attracted further criticism from other quarters - Second Life residents who now felt their freedom was being curtailed.

The Second Life policy, announced by Linden in May, is: 'Real-life images, avatar portrayals, and other depiction of sexual or lewd

acts involving or appearing to involve children or minors; real-life images, avatar portrayals, and other depictions of sexual violence including rape; real-life images, avatar portrayals, and other depictions of extreme or graphic violence, and other broadly offensive content are never allowed or tolerated within Second Life.'

Virtual titillation is much more widespread than online worlds and video games provide teens with all kinds of visual stimulation. Former Australian Big Brother contestant Krystal Forscutt has been chosen to feature in Electronic Arts' new *Need For Speed* racing game, ProStreet. Forscutt was photographed from all angles to allow EA to create a digital 3D rendering of her body, capable of mimicking her movements and mannerisms. The Big Brother celebrity was recently voted runner up in FHM's 'Sexiest Aussie Babes' list. In return, she stands to gain international exposure for her digital image, clad in various sexy 'flag girl' outfits.

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## Brand titillation

Axe has been a purveyor of teen titillation from the offset, and continues to lead the way. Its viral campaign Let the Game Continue ([www.letthegamecontinue.com](http://www.letthegamecontinue.com)) offers movie-length escapades, featuring attractive women to warm the hearts of teen boys. The film tells the story of a guy, whose car has gone up in flames, trying to get home, encountering various hotties on the way.

Lee Cooper Denim recently launched the Bottom Inspectors, a cheeky, British examination of the female behind. The films show British Bum Society's Inspector Flemming measuring up women's butts and encouraging them to step into a 'bum cam'-enabled booth to try on a pair of Denim Xfit Lycra jeans. [www.leecooperuk.com/email/bottom\\_inspector4.htm](http://www.leecooperuk.com/email/bottom_inspector4.htm)

Beer brands have a long tradition of using scantily clad women to sell their wares. The cheekiness and humour of their marketing allows them to get away with it. Now and then, they get their comeuppance. Hahn in Australia, for example, recently had its knuckles rapped for the 'boobs' component of its online campaign.

The sex sell is also used in experiential marketing. Girls have long been employed in sampling campaigns. Upping the ante, an Ecuadorean airline recently devised a risqué way to 'attract' customers – adorning the aisles with lingerie models (Reuters, 22 June).

None of this is exactly porn, but it contributes to the normalising of treating females as sex objects. The debate today tends to centre on whether the women featured feel empowered. X-tribes has previously reported on the rise of female 'Raunch Culture' (see Issue 2, 2006 for the full article).

## Torture porn

A new, gruesome genre in film, epitomised by this summer's release *Hostel: Part II*, is being dubbed 'torture porn'. Over the past 20 years, teen horror has established a tradition of featuring nubile youngsters, from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to *Cabin Fever*. Torture porn is more disturbing.

Directed by Eli Roth and produced by Quentin Tarantino, *Hostel* told the story of young American frat boys who check into a Slovakian youth hostel. Little did they know it doubles as a slow death ring, and they are slaves for torture. *Hostel: Part II* tells the story from the girls' perspective.

Critics are polarised. Reviews on the film site Rotten Tomatoes range from 'shockingly violent', 'grotesque pornography' to 'a mature spin on the slasher genre'. Harry Knowles (aintitcoolnews) hailed it as a 'subversive, smart masterpiece'. The film is rated 18, but a leaked version appeared online before the cinema release. Given the kudos of Tarantino, the film undoubtedly did the rounds amongst teens.

*Captivity* is another recent example of torture porn. A girl, strapped to

her chair, is force-fed a cocktail of liquidised human body parts. She's made to kill her dog so that its entrails splatter over her face and upper body. The gory genre extends to video games, but these are somehow viewed as more harmful.

This summer the BBFC (British Board of Film Classification) refused to give the game *Manhunt 2* a certificate, on the basis that its violence was more 'unrelenting' compared to the original *Manhunt* and it offers no 'alternative pleasures' (telegraph.co.uk, 23 June 2007). Gameplay in the original typically includes suffocating people with plastic bags or stabbing them with broken bottles.

*Manhunt* became notorious in 2004 when the press claimed Warren Leblanc, who murdered 14-year-old Stefan Pakeerah, had been 'obsessed' with the game, although it later transpired that he didn't even own it.

The BBFC recently conducted general research into violent video games which included 32 paired depth interviews and eight focus groups, along with interviews with parents and video game professionals.

Still, the BBFC admits that the research 'could not resolve the issue of whether playing games desensitizes people to violence in a way, or to a degree, that has regrettable effects on their behaviour'. The question of why *Manhunt 2* was refused a classification, while *Captivity* was classified, boils down to the fact that

the game is participatory, whereas the film is 'just' a spectacle. rewarding experience.

The example brings into focus the debate about censorship. Is torture porn actually harmful, particularly to teens, or just bad taste? Through being more 'interactive' in gameplay, is violent content really more likely to affect behaviour? The debate goes on, but if there's a scapegoat to be found, it's generally violent video games.

There remain many unanswered questions relating to teens and pornography. It's viewed as an adolescent rite of passage, or, a potentially harmful obsession. It's felt to have a bearing on the objectification of women. Much depends on the individual – how their sexuality is related to feelings of anger, for example. How teens learn about sex, particularly the social or moral context in which it's framed, is undoubtedly important.

Teens will undoubtedly continue to be exposed to porn and it has become more graphic and accessible. The greater the profile of this issue, the more media and brands will come under scrutiny for any content construed as being semi-pornographic. In the future, companies with broad portfolios that include family brands, as well as teen and young male oriented brands, may be more open to criticism from family groups if they produce risqué material for their youth segments. They may be redeemed by offering something over and above pure titillation – an interesting idea, a cheeky wit that anyone can appreciate, or a

This article appears in issue 2, 2007 of X-Tribes Teens. The issue also includes articles on the rise of female geek culture in Japan and how changes in the language used by teens reflects social and cultural shifts.

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