

# THE PORN GAP

How is Pornography Impacting Relationships  
Between Men and Women Today?

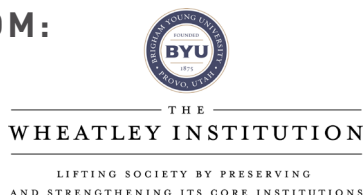


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## How is Pornography Impacting Relationships between Men and Women Today?

Brian J. Willoughby, Galena K. Rhoades, & Jason S. Carroll

### A REPORT FROM:



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### NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

The Wheatley Institution produces consequential scholarship in key topics consistent with its core mission of lifting society by preserving and strengthening core social institutions.

The Austin Institute fosters high-quality social science that creates flourishing persons, stronger families, and better policy.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## ○ **There is a Gender Gap in the Frequency of Viewing Pornography**

Among those in dating relationships, women were almost twice as likely than men to report never viewing pornography (36% vs. 19%), a difference that remained stable and even rose when comparing married women and men (51% vs. 25%). Among those married, only a quarter of married men reported no current pornography use while over half of all married women reported no pornography use over the last year.

Differences were even larger when looking at frequent pornography use that occurs at the weekly or daily level. Among dating individuals, men were more than two and a half times more likely to be viewing pornography alone in a weekly pattern compared to dating women. For married couples, the gap of frequent pornography use alone is even greater with a third of married men reporting frequent use, but less than 1 in 16 married women reporting similar levels.

Differences were also strong and consistent when looking at specific types of pornography content. Men were over three times more likely to view extreme pornography weekly compared to women, over four times more likely to watch hardcore pornography weekly or more compared to women, and over five times more likely to watch softcore pornography weekly compared to women.

## ○ **Women Are Less Accepting of Pornography**

Both men and women generally agree that pornography viewing is not acceptable for teens, although strong gender differences emerge. While almost 1 in 3 men agree that it is acceptable for teens to view pornography, only about 1 in 10 women feel the same. For adults, roughly half of both men and women agree that pornography viewing is acceptable for adults. A deviation from this trend appears to be married women, who are generally less accepting than men and less accepting than dating women of pornography viewing for adults, regardless of their relationship status.

## ○ **Pornography is Most Common among Young Men**

A notable cohort difference found is that men under 30 years of age report a much higher level of daily pornography viewing (17.3%) than men over 30 years old (6.9%). That means that men in the rising generation are nearly two and a half times more likely to view pornography on a daily basis than their older peers.

## ○ **One in Five Couples Report Conflict Related to Pornography**

In our national sample, 20% of all couples reported some degree of conflict in their relationships due to pornography. Also, 1 in 4 men reported actively hiding their pornography viewing from their partner. A significant number of women also expressed concerns about their partner's pornography viewing, with almost 1 in 3 dating women reporting they worry about their partner being more attracted to pornography and their partner thinking about pornography while being intimate. For married women and men, more than 1 in 5 report the same anxieties. Also, almost 1 in every 3 dating women agreed that they were worried that their partner was withholding some details about their pornography viewing. Married women and men were generally less anxious about pornography concealment, but still 1 in 4 still reported some worry about this issue.

## ○ **Pornography is Associated with Lower Relationship Quality**

Couples where both partners report that they do not use pornography report the highest levels of relationship stability, commitment, and relationship satisfaction; with 90% or above of these couples reporting that their relationship is stable, committed, and satisfying to them as a couple. A consistent reduction in relationship stability, commitment, and relationship satisfaction was noted as the relative frequency of pornography use increased within couples. Lower levels of relationship quality were consistent across both couples with a similar level of use (both monthly users and both daily users), as well as for couples with a reported gap in use between the partners. In comparison to couples who avoid pornography, couples where men use pornography regularly and women use pornography occasionally were 18% less likely to report that their relationship is stable, 20% less likely to be strongly committed, and 18% less likely to report that they have high relationship satisfaction. Although not a common pattern, couples where both partners view pornography on a daily basis report a 45% decrease in stability and a 30% decrease in commitment levels compared to couples where both partners do not view pornography at all.



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# INTRODUCTION

It is clear that pornography is now a part of the new frontier for modern dating, courtship, and marriage relationships. But, we have little understanding on how couples are navigating this trend – particularly since we know there are well-documented differences between men’s and women’s use of pornography.

It is no secret that pornography has become commonplace in our modern society. While sexually explicit material is not a new phenomenon, widespread access to the internet, the advent of “smart” technology, and the rise of social media have all contributed to a modern culture that is saturated with pornographic content. Recent estimates suggest that nearly 80-90% of young adults report some exposure to pornography (Davis et al., 2018) with the average age of first exposure often between 10-13 years old (Sinkovic et al., 2013). With high-speed internet and smart phones being introduced into the market in the early 2000’s, a large proportion of our adult population has now grown up for most of their lives with easy and free access to pornographic content. While much of the research interest and attention on pornography use has rightfully focused on teens’ viewing of pornography, the impact on adults and their relationship experiences matters, as well.

Despite pornography viewing being a common behavior, we know very little about its potential impact on romantic couples. The large proportion of the teen and adult population who report not only previous, but current pornography use all but guarantees that most romantic couples must navigate, either openly or privately, the role pornography plays in their relationships. The purpose of this report is to shine a light on this topic that seems so common among our modern romantic couples yet is rarely explored. We hope to provide accurate information that will help provide a clearer understanding regarding how pornography is being used, discussed, and negotiated in relationships. Given the gender gap in pornography viewing and the specific challenges it may cause in relationships between men and women, we focus on couple relationships between men and women in this report.

## The Pornography Gender Gap

As an important framing for this report, it is important to note that the vast majority of the information outlined in this report will be reported separated by gender. Perhaps the most consistent finding of pornography studies to date is that there is a sizeable gap that exists between men and women when it comes to their personal use and acceptance of pornography. Dozens of studies have shown that men are more likely than women to view pornography, and this is particularly true of viewing pornography regularly on a weekly or daily basis (Albright, 2008; Buzzell, 2005; Carroll et al., 2008; Cooper, Galbreath, & Becker, 2004; Emmers-Sommer, Hertlein, & Kennedy, 2013; McKee, 2007; Stack et al., 2004).

Although previous estimates of the prevalence of pornography viewing in the United States have varied considerably, recent estimates using improved measurement reveal that in an average week approximately 46% of men and 16% of women intentionally view pornography (Regnerus, Gordon, & Price, 2016). Among young adults, this gap may be even more pronounced, with Carroll and colleagues (2008) finding that nearly 90% of young adult men reported using pornography within the past 12 months; with nearly half reporting weekly or more frequent use and more than one-fifth reporting near daily use. Young adult women’s use patterns were markedly different, with only about one-third reporting use at some level. However, the majority of emerging adult women using pornography reported a once a month or less pattern of use, with only 3% reporting a use

pattern of weekly or more often. Estimates of pornography acceptance also show that approximately half of young adult women believe viewing pornography is unacceptable (Carroll et al., 2008). When this finding is paired with the fact that nearly 9 of 10 young adult men report using pornography at least to some degree, it appears as though one-half of heterosexual women are seeking to partner with only 10% of men - the ones who do not use pornography.

This “pornography gap” raises a number of questions about dating patterns and the relationship dynamics that arise between men and women related to pornography viewing, such as:

- What happens to men’s and women’s pornography patterns when they enter committed romantic relationships?
- Do men decrease or stop their pornography use as they enter into committed romantic relationships?
- Do men keep using pornography, but hide it from their partners?
- Do women start or increase their use of pornography when they become romantically involved with a man who engages with pornography?
- Does a new pattern of pornography viewing emerge during the coupling process that shifts from individual use to couple use?

The answers to these questions are not well understood in the pornography and couple formation literature. In all likelihood, the answers to these questions differ from couple to couple. The patterns that emerge as couples navigate these issues surrounding pornography likely influence future couple patterns and outcomes – for better or for worse.

In this research report, we summarize the findings of a new survey fielded in 2020 entitled “The National Couples and Pornography Study.” This study consists of two related samples. The first sample consists of 3,750 individuals who are in committed heterosexual couple relationships. The second sample consists of 713 matched heterosexual couples (1,426 individuals). Both samples were surveyed to examine romantic partners’ pornography viewing rates, patterns of viewing pornography alone or together, relationship boundaries related to pornography acceptance, and the frequency of pornography-related conflict in their relationship.

# METHODS

## OVERVIEW OF DATA AND PROJECT

The National Couples and Pornography Study consisted of two nationally diverse samples in the United States. Data were collected independently by Qualtrics from their existing data panel during 2020.

### Individual Sample

The first data set included a large sample of individuals in committed relationships who agreed to participate in an online survey about their relationship and sexuality. All data collection procedures for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the first author's university. The sample was recruited from across the United States based on quotas for age, race, education level, and geographic region aimed at creating a demographically diverse sample. To qualify for the study, participants were required to be over 18 years of age and currently in a committed couple relationship (seriously dating, cohabiting, or married). The final individual sample was comprised of 3,750 individuals. For this report focusing on gender, only participants in relationships with the opposite gender were included in analyses.

### Couple Sample

A second dataset of 713 romantic couples (1,426 individuals) was also collected that consisted of matched partners – couples for which both partners or spouses completed the survey. For this dataset, Qualtrics asked their panel participants if their partner would also be available to participate in the study. For those who said yes, participants provided their partner's email address and following completion of the survey, the partner was sent an email with a link and instructions on completing their survey. For this report, only participants in relationships with the opposite gender were included in analyses.

Many of the individuals in the couples were married in their first marriage (53.8%), with 21.8% cohabiting, 17.6% remarried, 5.5% not living with their partner, and 1.3% in an open relationship. The average relationship length was 11.8 years (SD = 10.4). The largest racial group was Caucasian (79.1%) followed by African American (6.8%), Mixed Race (5.5%), Latino (3.6%), Asian American (3.2%), and Other (1.9%) participants. Over fifty-seven percent (57.7%) reported a yearly household income between \$25,000 and \$75,000, while 15.1% of the sample reported an income less than \$25,000, and 12.7% were greater than \$100,000. In terms of religious affiliation, the largest group was Christian (47.6%), followed by No Affiliation (26.8%), Other (18.7%), and Atheist or Agnostic (6.9%). The average age of men in the sample was 44 years (SD = 12.2) and for women it was 41.7 (SD = 11.5) with a combined range from 18 to 89. For educational attainment, the largest group were those having at least a four-year degree (37.9%), with those having some college (24.9%) or a two-year degree (13.6%) following. Just over twenty-three percent (23.6%) had never attended college.

All participants for both studies completed an informed consent form prior to being asked any questions in the survey. As part of that informed consent, participants were assured of the confidentiality of their data (including that their partner would not have any access to their responses for the partnered dataset). Following completion of the survey, participants were compensated directly by Qualtrics, at the standard rates they utilize for online panels. In order to substantiate data quality, five attention checks were inserted throughout the survey in both studies. Examples of these items were "If you are reading this question, please select 'Somewhat important'" and "If you are reading this question please move the slider to '65'." Couples in which one or both partners did not pass all attention checks throughout the survey were removed from the final sample.



# SECTION I

## PORNOGRAPHY USE IN AMERICA AND THE GENDER GAP

Pornography has received attention from both the public and the academic community over the last two decades. While policy makers have grappled with how much to regulate the pornography industry, researchers have sought to understand how the increase in accessibility of pornography may be impacting various aspects of our society. Much of this social science research on pornography has focused on teens and young adults – typically investigating pornography as a personal sexual behavior or as a risk behavior similar to binge drinking or permissive sexuality. Less research exists on the effects of pornography in adults' lives. In particular, there is limited research on pornography in marriage and other romantic couple relationships.

It is also true that many pornography researchers come from a psychology background which tends to focus on individual behavior and perceptions. Pornography researchers who do study couple relationships tend to be clinically trained and focus only on problematic pornography use or individuals seeking treatment for compulsive or habitual use. Thus, very little research exists on how pornography affects the average couple. One of the goals of the National Couples and Pornography Study was to contextualize pornography use within research on marriage and couple relationships to investigate the potentially wide-ranging and complex ways that pornography can influence couples.

Right now, the majority of social science research on pornography is a “Goldilocks mixture” of studies that are either too large or too small. The large, census-level studies have good samples, but often measure pornography use with single-question measures that do not capture frequency, intensity, duration, type, and personal acceptance of pornography patterns. Smaller studies sometimes have better measurement, but their samples are not demographically diverse and lack sufficient statistical power to identify effect sizes. Because few studies have specifically investigated pornography within the full context of couple relationships, most studies are ill-equipped to increase our understanding of this immensely complicated phenomenon.

In this first section of the report, we sought to examine the prevalence of pornography use among women and men in committed relationships. We examine these trends by gender and look at trends in terms of frequency of viewing, duration of use, types of content viewed, as well as acceptance of pornography. We also examine pornography awareness and examine the degree of pornography concealment or openness that is occurring between romantic partners.

### Pornography Use

Our own data mirrored the consistent trend found in previous studies and show that the gender gap between men and women in pornography use is still strong and consistent in data collected in 2020. Figure 1 shows the pornography viewing frequencies of men and women, separated by relationship status – dating or married. These numbers are based on viewing respondents' reports of watching what would traditionally be defined as “hardcore” pornography alone, without their partner. Hardcore pornography is typically defined as pornography that features detailed depictions of actual sex acts that display full nudity. The term is used in contrast with less explicit softcore pornography which typically depicts simulated sexual acts with limited nudity. For this study, hardcore pornography viewing was measured by asking each individual how often in the last year they had viewed specific acts of sexually explicit content that showed various types of unstimulated sex acts, such as penetrative sex and mutual masturbation. As can be seen, men are more likely to view pornography than women across all relationship statuses. However, these differences are the most pronounced at the extremes;

when considering the percent of men and women who never view pornography and the percent of men and women who reported viewing pornography weekly or daily. Among those in dating relationships, women were almost twice as likely to report never viewing pornography (36% vs. 19%), the difference was even more pronounced among married men and women (51% vs. 25%).

**FIGURE 1 – SOLO Hardcore PORNOGRAPHY USE BY GENDER AND RELATIONSHIP STATUS**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

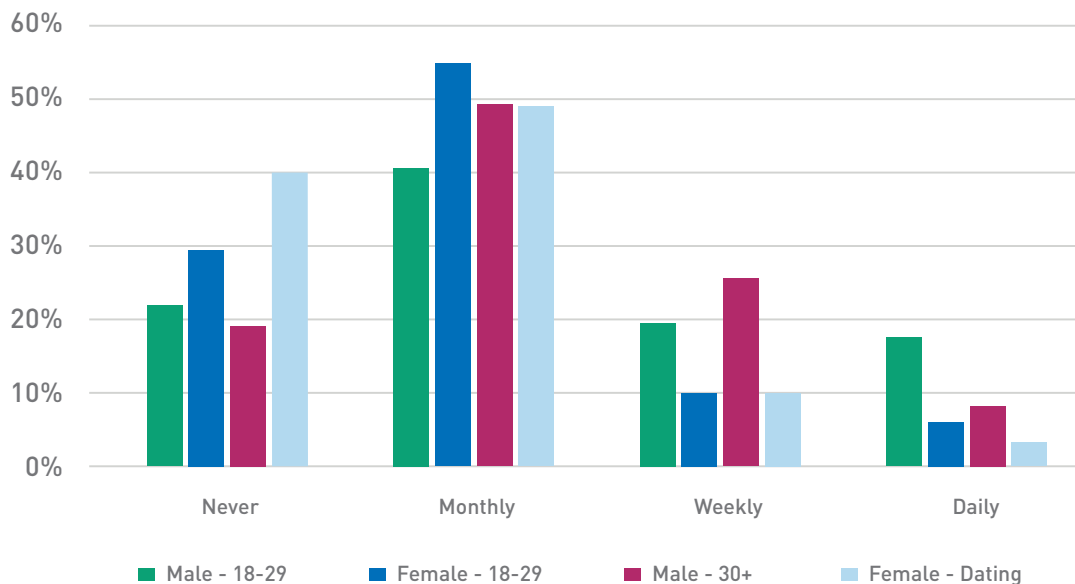
Differences were even stronger when looking at frequent pornography viewing that occurs at the weekly or daily level. Among dating individuals, men were more than two and a half times more likely to be viewing pornography alone in a monthly or weekly pattern compared to dating women. In fact, one-third of dating men reported frequent pornography use (23.9% weekly + 9.6% daily = 33.5%), compared to nearly 1 in 8 of women (10.1% weekly + 3.3% daily = 13.4%). For married individuals, the gap of frequent pornography use alone is even greater, with a third of married men reporting frequent use (23.3% weekly + 9.8% daily = 33.1%), but only slightly less than 1 in 16 married women reporting similar levels. In fact, just looking at daily use patterns, married men are seven times more likely to report such frequent use, with slightly more than 1% of married women reporting daily pornography use compared to nearly 10% of married men.

Married men are seven times more likely to report frequent use, with slightly more than 1% of married women reporting daily pornography use compared to nearly 10% of married men.

Younger men under 30 years of age report a much higher level of daily pornography viewing (17.3%) than men over 30 years old (6.9%) – that means that men in the rising generation are nearly two and a half times more likely to view pornography on a daily basis than their older peers.

We also examined how age and generational difference may suggest further shifts in the modern pornography gender gap. Figure 2 below focused solely on dating couples and separates men and women based on age groups, one younger cohort (18-29 years of age) and one older (30+ years of age). Here it can be seen that the difference in weekly pornography use between men and women remains high for those dating across age cohort groups. What shifts when considering younger couples compared to older couples is the nature of their collective pornography use pattern. Older couples have a common pattern of a non-using female partner (nearly 40%) coupled with a pornography viewing male partner. Younger couples have a pattern of a low-level use female user, coupled with a male partner who uses pornography frequently. In fact, a notable cohort difference is that younger men under 30 years of age report a much higher level of daily pornography viewing (17.3%) than men over 30 years old (6.9%). That means that men in the rising generation are nearly two and a half times more likely to view pornography on a daily basis than their older peers.

**FIGURE 2 – Hardcore Pornography Use for Dating Individuals by Gender and Age**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

What is perhaps most striking about these numbers is that they represent only pornography use alone. This means that these differences, stark as they appear, represent sexual behavior that individuals are engaging in without their partner while currently in a romantic relationship.

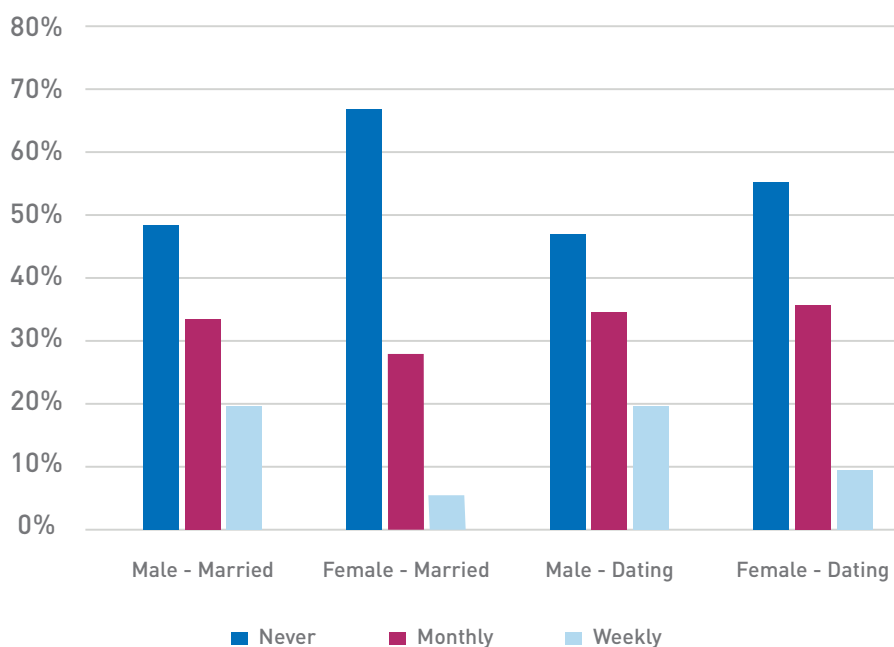
## Joint Pornography Use

One new and defining characteristic of modern pornography has been the rise of couples who utilize pornography together as a couple (Carroll et al., 2017). To help estimate the extent of couple pornography use, Figure 3 overviews reports of using pornography together as a couple, broken down by gender and relationship status. As can be seen, based on both male and female reports, about half of all non-married couples report some level of joint pornography use, with dating men slightly more likely to report joint use compared to women. Among married individuals, a stark difference in reporting can be seen between husbands and wives. While about half of all married men report watching pornography with their spouse, only about a third of married women report the same behavior.

**1 in 5 men in a relationship report viewing pornography together with their partner weekly or more.**

This difference may suggest a few things about how married men and women are thinking about pornography use that happens together. Perhaps many married women who are viewing pornography with their partner do not view this as a “joint” activity, merely believing they are humoring their male partner’s desire to incorporate pornography into the relationship. Another possible explanation is that married women remain less likely to accurately report joint pornography use, perhaps suggesting higher personal concealment among women in reporting their pornography use. What does appear clear is that many romantic couples appear to now utilize pornography use not only as an isolated individual behavior, but as a regular part of their couple intimacy. Overall, about 1 in 5 men in relationships reported viewing pornography with their partner at least weekly.

**FIGURE 3 – PORNOGRAPHY TOGETHER**

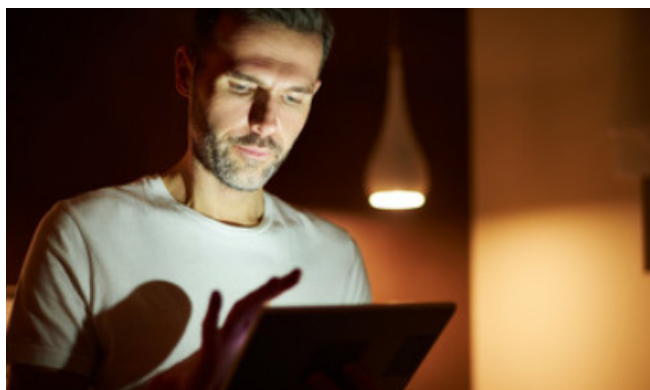
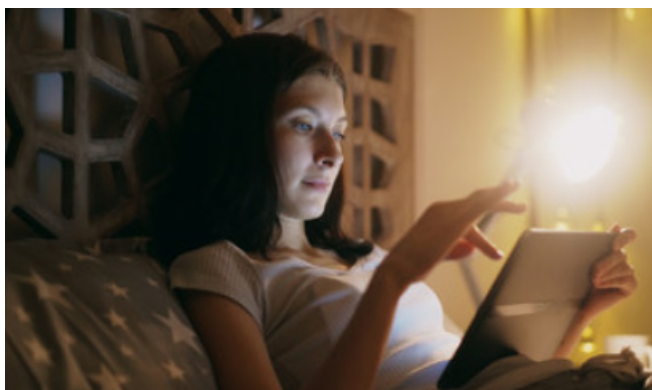


SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

## Types of Pornography

As we have noted, general questions that ask about pornography use are of limited value if the specific types of content viewed are not included. We found that further gender differences emerged when exploring pornography use by the specific type of pornography content that was viewed. Figure 4 breaks down monthly and weekly viewing of pornography across three categories, softcore pornography (sexual material with simulated sexual acts that does not explicitly show genitalia), hardcore pornography (sexual material with full depiction of actual sex acts and nudity), and extreme forms of hardcore pornography (sexual material that involves violence, lack of consent, and/or group sex involving more than two people).

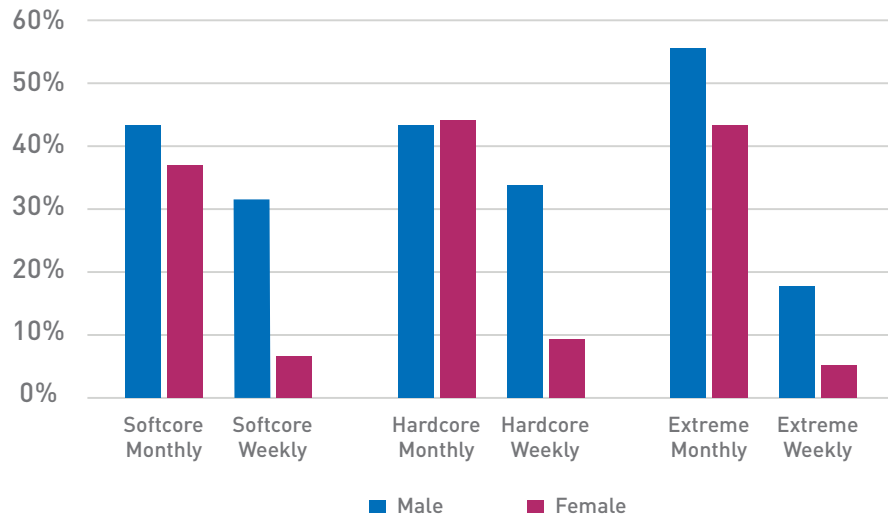
Nearly 45% of women report viewing hardcore and extreme content pornography at a once per month or less level.



Weekly or more often, men are 3 times more likely to watch extreme pornography, 4 times more likely to watch hardcore pornography, and 5 times more likely to watch softcore pornography than women.

While gender differences were less pronounced at the monthly use levels, notable differences emerged between men and women when comparing weekly or more use of all three types of pornography (softcore weekly or more: 31% men vs. 6.1% women; hardcore weekly or more: 33.2% men vs. 8.8% women; extreme weekly or more: 16.6% men vs. 5% women). Men were over three times more likely to view extreme pornography weekly compared to women, over four times more likely to watch hardcore pornography weekly or more compared to women, and over five times more likely to watch softcore pornography compared to women. Although it is worth noting that while women reported viewing all types of content at lower frequency levels than men, nearly 45% of women did report viewing hardcore and extreme content pornography at a once per month or less level.

**FIGURE 4 – PORNOGRAPHY USE BY GENDER AND PORNOGRAPHY CONTENT**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

### Attitudes about Pornography

While these behavioral differences appear significant and match previous research, how similar or dissimilar are men and women in their attitudes and values about pornography? Using a similar scale, we measured participants personal acceptance of individuals watching pornography alone. Figure 5 shows these acceptance levels, again broken down by gender and relationship status. Overall, most people appear to approve of viewing pornography, with well over 70% of the national sample noting some level of approval. However, in this graph a clear paradox appears to emerge. While married women are slightly less accepting of pornography use than married men, dating women are more likely to report being accepting of pornography use than men. The paradox here is clear - why are women, who are significantly less likely to view pornography, just as accepting, or perhaps even more accepting, of pornography use than men?

Although it is worth noting that while women reported viewing all types of content at lower frequency than men, nearly 45% of women did report viewing hardcore or extreme pornography in the last year.

Scholars, who have noted similar trends in other data (Carroll et al., 2017), have suggested that perhaps such findings reflect women attempting to justify the behavior of their male partners. Or it is possible that while both men and women are answering the same questions about acceptance, they are actually interpreting them quite differently. It is possible that many women are internally referencing their own low levels of use in what they deem “acceptable,” rather than the high levels of use among some men. Many spouses will approve or disapprove of their spouses’ pornography use not solely on whether it happens or not, but will have “acceptance thresholds” depending on the frequency, duration, and type of content being viewed.



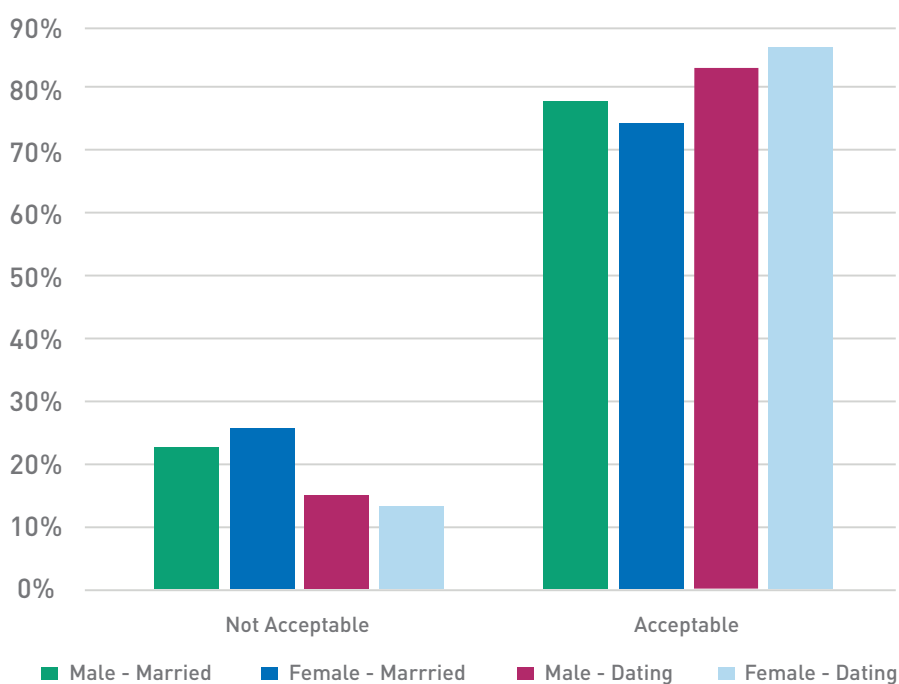
It's reasonable to assume that even the most accepting of spouses will have limits and boundaries to what they feel is acceptable use. For some, it will be about the duration of use and whether or not it is impeding full involvement in the relationship. For others, it will be a line with certain content, and even infrequent or one-time viewing of certain types of pornography will be seen as a violation of relationships boundaries.

And for others, any pornography use will be deemed as unacceptable to their relationship expectations. In short, acceptance differs by degree, not simply in kind. Given the pornography gap that exists for many couples, we should also be mindful that each partner in the couple will often have different personal reference points for determining acceptance for pornography.

As another exploration of the acceptance of pornography, Figure 6 shows the percent of men and women, separated by relationship status who believe that viewing pornography is acceptable at different stages of life – specifically for teens, young adults, and adults. Both men and women generally disagree that pornography viewing is acceptable for teens, although strong gender differences emerge. While it was unclear if opinions would vary based on the gender of the teenager, almost 1 in 3 men agree that it is acceptable for teens to view pornography, only about 1 in 10 women feel the same. For adults roughly about half of both men and women agree that pornography viewing is acceptable for adults in various types of relationships. The only deviation from this trend appears to be married women, who are generally less accepting than men and less accepting than dating women of pornography viewing for adults, regardless of their relationship status.

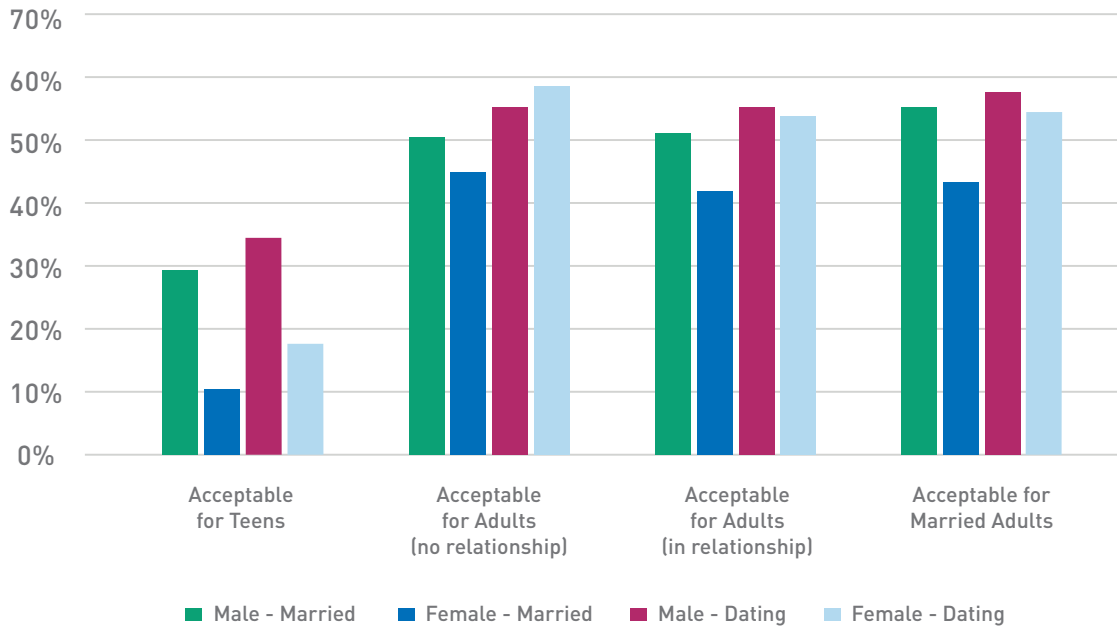
While married women are slightly less accepting of pornography use than married men, dating women are more likely to report being accepting of pornography use than dating men. The paradox here appears clear - why are dating women, who are significantly less likely to view pornography, just as accepting, or perhaps even more accepting, of pornography use than dating men?

**FIGURE 5 – ACCEPTANCE OF PORNOGRAPHY USE**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

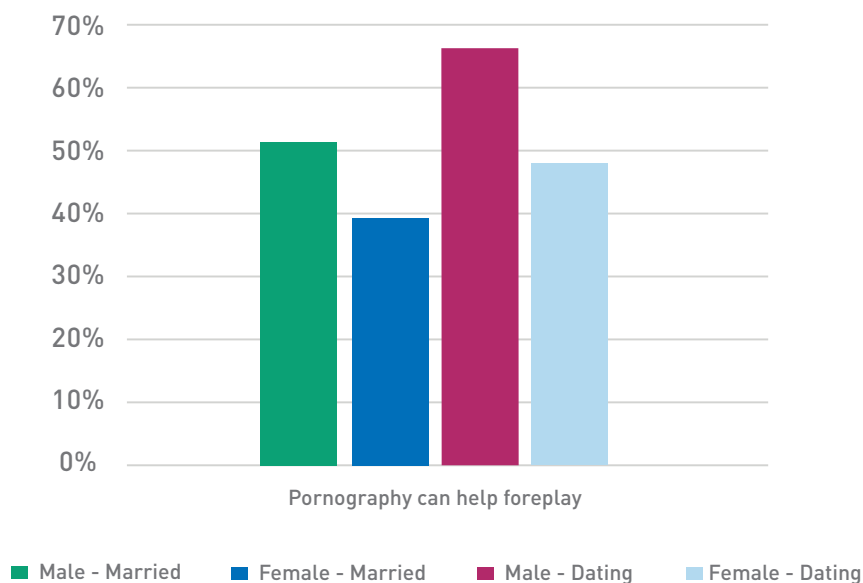
**FIGURE 6 – ACCEPTANCE OF PORNOGRAPHY ACROSS THE LIFESPAN**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

This general acceptance of pornography use among adults does not seem to be merely passive acceptance. In the minds of many adults, viewing pornography is not a neutral experience. When asked about the potential benefits of pornography use, many men and women appear to believe that pornography use may enhance their sex life. Figure 7 shows that over 50% of married men and over 65% of dating men agree that pornography can help enhance foreplay. However, less than 40% of married women and less than 50% of dating women agree. While many men and women do appear to believe that pornography can benefit their intimate lives, again a gender gap in this belief appears.

**FIGURE 7 – AGREEMENT THAT PORNOGRAPHY CAN HELP FOREPLAY**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study



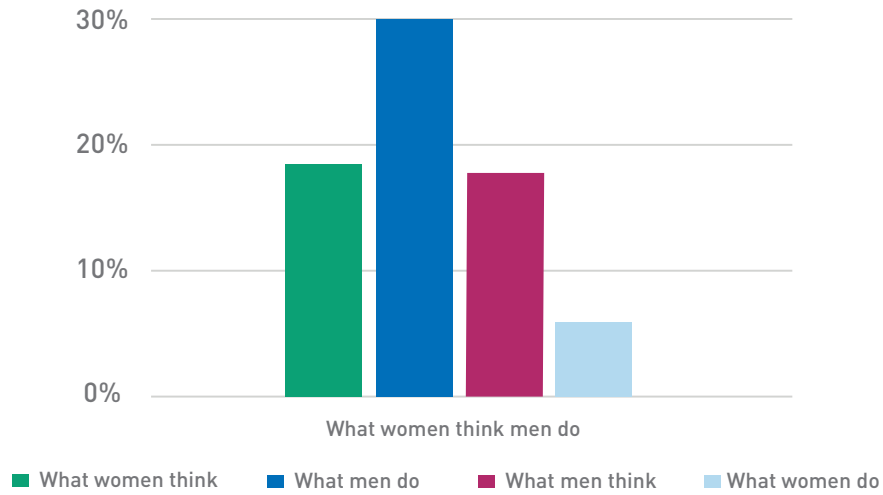
## Partner Awareness and Concealment

The previous data point to a clear difference in how men and women both consume pornography and think about its role in a relationship. In particular, large and consistent gaps continue to exist in the frequency and type of pornography viewed by men and women. One obvious issue with this gap in behavior is that it sets up a high probability that partners may hide behavior they think their partner may not accept or approve of. Some may be aware of the stark differences between men and women in general, and between themselves and their partner. Others may simply be unaware of the large gap that exists in pornography use frequencies and content. Either way, this gap could ultimately cause issues for some couples. Next, we review what partners know about one another's pornography habits.

Men report viewing weekly pornography at rates almost double the estimate of women.

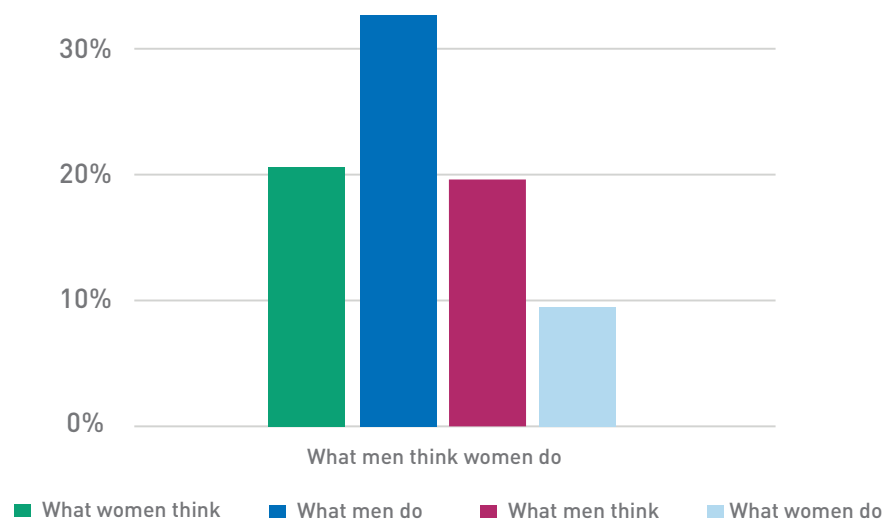
One interesting finding that emerged when exploring perceptions of use among men and women was that men appear to consistently overestimate the pornography use of women, while women consistently underestimate the pornography use of men. Figures 8 and 9 below illustrate these discrepancies found in men's and women's predictions of pornography use among the opposite sex. In each graph, men's and women's weekly pornography use is shown for both softcore and hardcore pornography viewing, along with the estimated weekly pornography use from the opposite gender. As can be seen, the frequency in which men are viewing pornography is consistently more than what women predict their usage to be. In fact, men report viewing weekly pornography at rates almost double the estimate of women. On the other hand, men consistently overestimated the amount of weekly pornography use viewed by women, estimating almost double the weekly pornography use for both softcore and hardcore pornography than what women actually report doing themselves.

**FIGURE 8 – MEN’S & WOMEN’S ESTIMATES AND ACTUAL WEEKLY USE OF SOFTCORE PORNOGRAPHY**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

**FIGURE 9 – MEN’S & WOMEN’S ESTIMATES AND ACTUAL WEEKLY USE OF HARDCORE PORNOGRAPHY**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

It is important to keep in mind that these numbers reflect what men and women believe the opposite gender is doing in general. But, what about within their own relationships with their own partner? Are partners more in tune and on the same page when it comes to their pornography viewing? As we have noted, one of the least studied areas of pornography use is focused on actual couple dynamics. Most of the research on relationships and pornography use relies on data collected from individuals, and not couples. This has made it difficult to explore how pornography operates at the couple level and how couples navigate pornography use within their relationship.

To that end, we utilized our national U.S. dataset of 713 couples to examine pornography in relationships between men and women. Using this data, we were able to explore the inner workings of pornography within specific relationships. We first explore simple awareness of partners' pornography use to see if romantic partners had a general sense of the amount of pornography their partner was using. Figure 10 below shows how accurate these assessments were in the survey. While more accurate than the general estimates above, those in a relationship were still surprisingly inaccurate in their reports of their partner's pornography use. While just under half of men reported accurate pornography use for their partner, the other half were inaccurate to some degree. Those who were wrong in their assessment were equally as likely to underestimate as they were to overestimate their partner's use (about 1/4 in both categories). On the other hand, women were even less likely to accurately report their partner's pornography use. Only about a third of women were accurate in their assessment of their partner's pornography use. In this case, women were much more likely to underestimate their partner's pornography use (almost 40%) compared to overestimating it (about 25%).

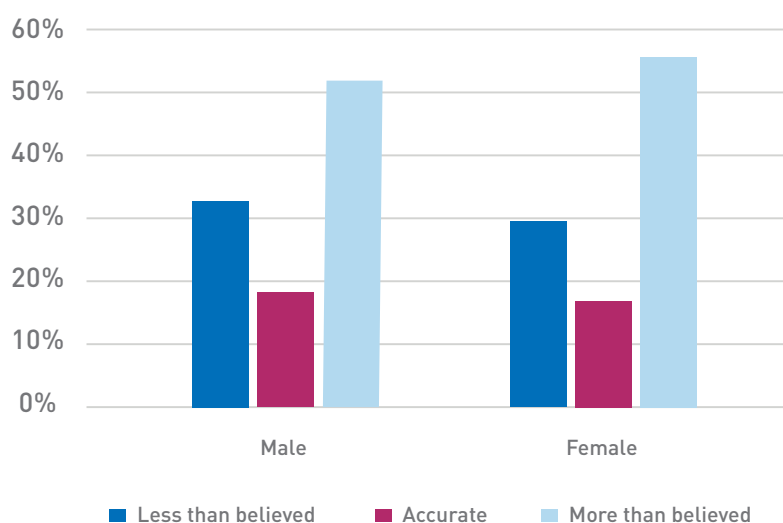
**FIGURE 10 – PARTNERS' AWARENESS OF EACH OTHER'S PORNOGRAPHY USE**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

Of course, many of the partners who are accurate regarding what their partners were viewing are likely couples where neither partner views pornography. Are couples where one or both partners regularly view pornography just as accurate in their perceptions of their partner's use? We looked again at awareness levels of partner use, but this time we explored the level of accuracy only when the other partner was regularly viewing pornography. In Figure 11 you can see that among those with a partner who reported viewing pornography, partners were generally much less accurate in their perceptions of their partner's use. For both men and women, over half of all partners underestimated the pornography use of their partners. This suggests that when partners are utilizing pornography alone, the majority of their partners are either unaware of this use or not aware of the extent of such use.

**FIGURE 11 – PARTNERS' AWARENESS OF EACH OTHER'S PORNOGRAPHY USE AMONG ACTIVE VIEWERS**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

These stark gender differences reported in this section of the report not only suggest that pornography use remains perhaps one of the most gendered behaviors, but it also points to a modern paradox for romantic couples. Men and women appear to be utilizing and thinking about pornography in very different ways. This continued “pornography gap” between men and women suggests that pornography may be the single greatest issue on which modern men and women misalign in romantic relationships. That pornography use appears to be increasing and becoming more prevalent suggests that this porn gap may be one of the most important yet understudied sources of differences within relationships for modern couples. If anything, such differences may be becoming more complex and important to consider.



## SECTION II

### COMMUNICATION, CONCERN, AND CONFLICT - COUPLE DYNAMICS AROUND PORNOGRAPHY

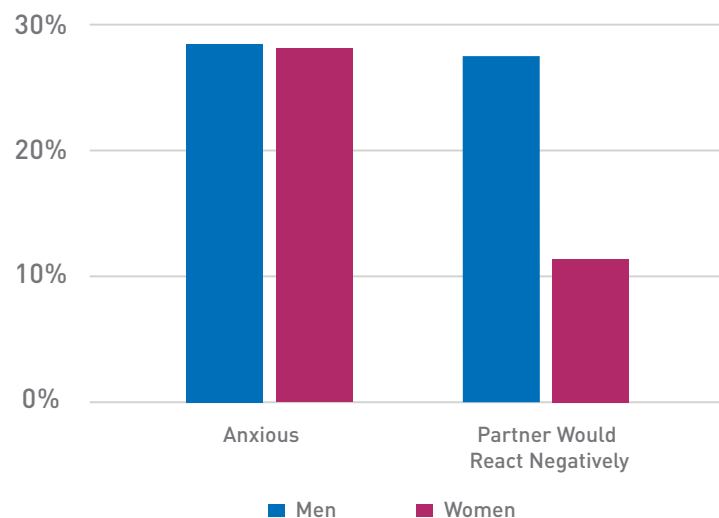
With clear differences between men and women in both their acceptance and use of pornography, what is even less clear is how these differences effect couples - and how partners are negotiating and making sense of such differences in their relationship. Before specifically exploring how such differences may be impacting the health and well-being of couples, it is first important to consider how couples may be talking (or not talking) about these differences in pornography use. As we noted in section one, it appears that many partners and spouses are unaware or misinformed about the pornography use of their partner. Does this suggest that couples are rarely talking about pornography openly? Such lack of communication may become a key factor in understanding any potential relationship quality differences that do emerge between couples based on their pornography viewing profiles.

A third of men and women feel anxious about discussing pornography with their partner.

#### Communication About Pornography

On the surface, many of the couples in the study appeared not to fear conversations about pornography. As seen in Figure 12, only about a third of both men and women agreed that they felt anxious discussing pornography use with their partner. Even less reported that they agreed that their partner would react negatively if they disclosed engaging in pornography to him or her (although men were about twice as likely as women to report fear of negativity).

**FIGURE 12 – ANXIOUS COMMUNICATION ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY**

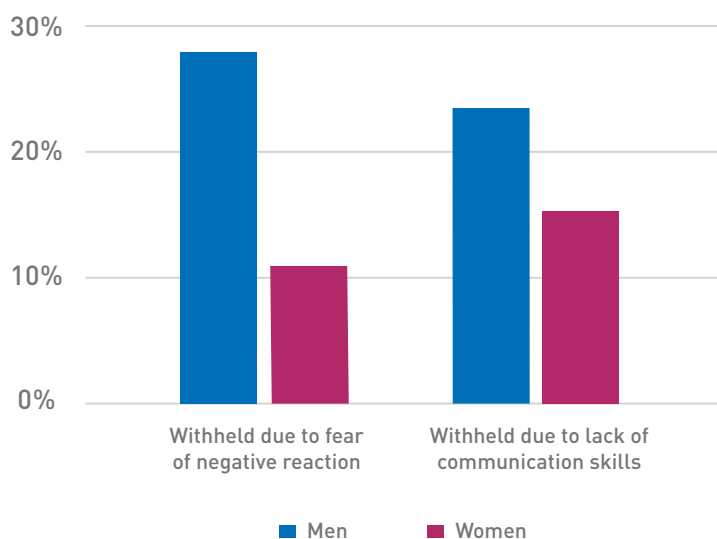


SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

While these findings appear to suggest that the majority of couples are discussing pornography openly, there also appears to be a significant minority of couples who do feel anxious about pornography related communication. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this appears to directly translate to the percent of individuals who actively hide their pornography use from their partner. We assessed two common reasons why individuals might elect to withhold their pornography viewing; fear of their partner's reaction and feeling like they did not know how to communicate about pornography use. As seen in Figure 13, about 1 in 4 men reported hiding or withholding their own pornography use from their partner due to either fear of their partner's reaction or not knowing how to communicate about it. While not a majority, this number is significant, suggesting that roughly 25% of men report that they are actively hiding pornography use from their partner.

A quarter of men hide their pornography use from their partner.

**FIGURE 13 – PERCENTAGE OF PARTNERS HIDING PERSONAL PORNOGRAPHY USE FROM THEIR PARTNER**

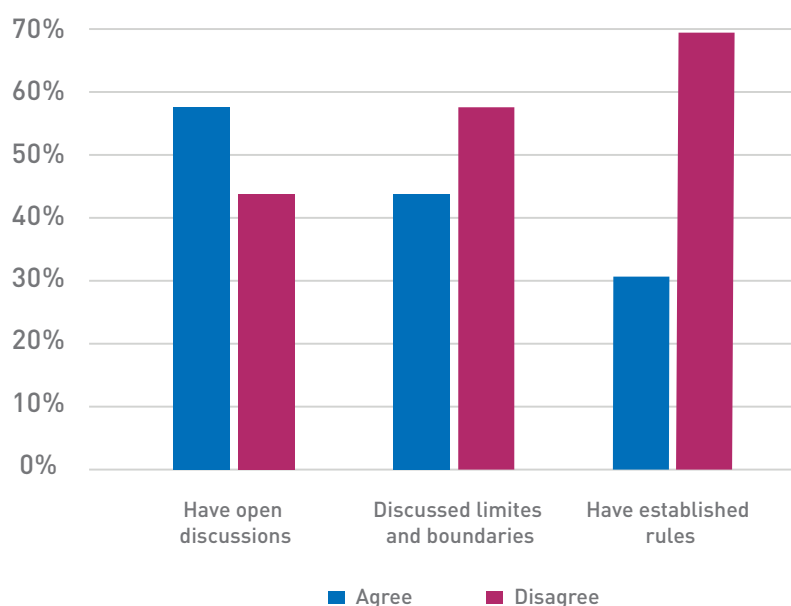


SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

Half of couples discuss pornography openly, but the majority don't have set rules or expectations about it.

But these numbers only tell part of the communication story. Perhaps most significant are the data in Figure 14. This chart shows the percent of couples who report actually having conversations about pornography use in their relationship. This graph shows that only a little more than half of all couples surveyed reported they talk about pornography openly in their relationship. Further, the majority of couples surveyed had neither set rules for pornography use in the relationship, nor had they discussed limits and boundaries around pornography use in their relationship. While many couples reported low to no conflict about pornography use (see Figure 18 below), it is possible that much of this lack of conflict is based on an avoidance of the issue or perhaps based on not realizing the extent of a partner's pornography viewing – based on the lack of accurate assessments of pornography use.

**FIGURE 14 – OPEN DISCUSSIONS AND ESTABLISHED BOUNDARIES**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

## Concerns About Pornography

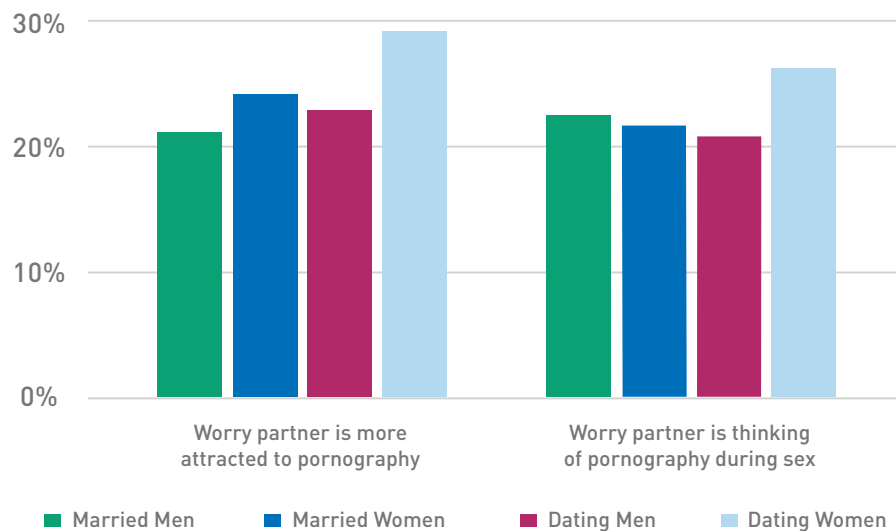
Further examination of specific fears and anxieties romantic partners may have about pornography use within their relationship revealed several notable trends. Even though the majority of individuals reported general acceptance of pornography use by adults, our analyses suggest that accepting something and attitudes about its potential effect in one's own personal life are two different things. When asked specific questions about their anxieties and fears about pornography use, such fears appeared to be almost as common among romantic couples as was their general acceptance of pornography.

**A third of dating women and a fifth or married women worry about whether pornography interferes with sex or how attractive their partner finds them.**

Figure 15 shows anxiety and worry about how pornography may influence sexual intimacy. Dating women appear to have the most worry, with almost 1 in 3 dating women reporting that they worry their partner is more attracted to pornography than to them. About a third of dating women also reported worrying that their partner was thinking about pornography during sex. For married women and men, more than 1 in 5 report the same anxieties.

Here another paradox emerges. Remember, we found that about half of all individuals reported they believed that pornography could potentially help with foreplay in their sexual relationship. Perhaps the 20-40% of individuals who report anxiety about pornography are from the 50% of the sample who did not believe pornography would benefit their relationship. Another possibility is that many partners may have mixed feelings about pornography. They see potential benefits but also worry about how pornography may be shaping their partner's perceptions of them and their intimacy.

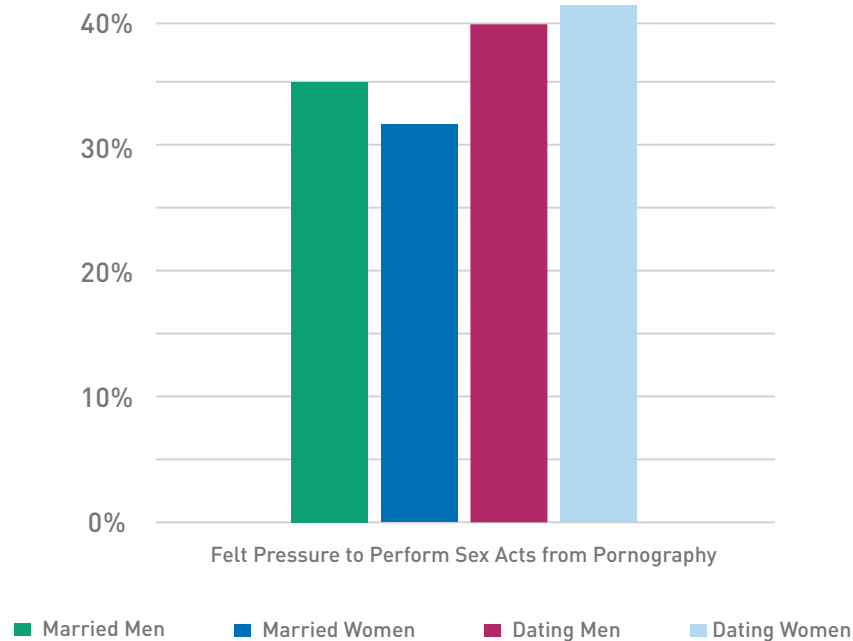
**FIGURE 15 – WORRIES ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY RELATED TO PHYSICAL ATTRACTION AND SEX**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

It also appears that pornography is influencing the sexual scripts of many couples, and a notable portion of partners report that their partner wants them to mimic behaviors they have seen depicted in pornography. Specifically, we asked respondents how much they agree with the statement, “Sometimes I feel that my partner wants me to act out sexual fantasies that come from pornography.” Figure 16 shows that across both men and women, about 30 to 40% of individuals report that this dynamic exists in their sexual relationship as a couple.

**FIGURE 16 – PARTNER WANTS ME TO ACT OUT SEXUAL FANTASIES FROM PORNOGRAPHY**

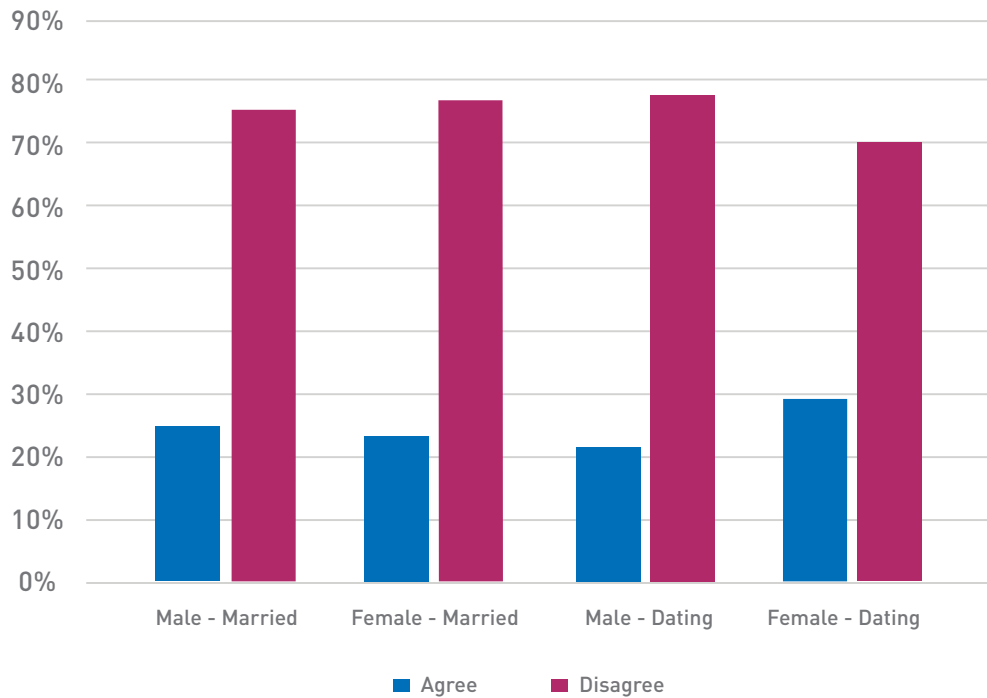


SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

“Sometimes I feel that my partner wants me to act out sexual fantasies that come from pornography.” Across both men and women, about 30 to 40% of individuals report that this dynamic exists in their sexual relationship as a couple.

It also appears that many women also worry about their male partners hiding their pornography use, a seemingly justified concern given the amount of concealment reported by male partners (see Figure 13). Figure 17 below shows that almost 1 in every 3 dating women reported they were worried that their partner was withholding some details about their pornography use. Married women and men were generally less anxious about concealment behaviors, but approximately 1 in 4 still reported some worry about this issue.

**FIGURE 17 – WORRIED PARTNER IS HIDING PORNOGRAPHY USE**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, *National Couples and Pornography Study*

Almost 1 in every 3 dating women reported that they were worried that their partner was withholding some details about their pornography use.

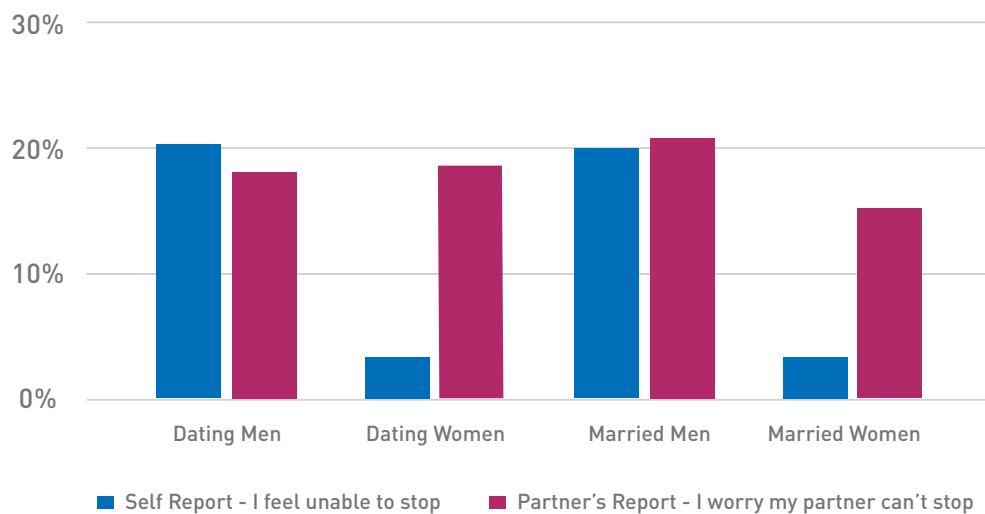
Another area of concern that we discovered in some couple relationships is worry expressed about self-control and whether or not men and women felt they or their partner could stop watching pornography. In particular, we asked respondents how much they agreed with two statements. First, “I feel unable to stop my use of online pornography,” and “I am worried that my partner cannot stop watching pornography.”



Figure 18 shows that 20% of dating and married men agreed that they feel unable to stop their pornography use. Women were dramatically different, with only 4% of dating women and slightly less than 3% of married women reporting they worry that they are personally unable to stop watching pornography. However, some women did report that they are worried about their partner's use, with approximately 1 in five dating and married women reporting they worry that their partner cannot stop watching pornography. This figure closely matches the number of men who worry about their own self-control related to pornography use. Interestingly, approximately 1 in 6 men reported that they worry about their female partner's ability to stop watching pornography, which is about 4 times higher than the level of concern women expressed about their own ability to stop their viewing habits.

20% of dating and married men agree that they feel unable to stop their pornography use.

**FIGURE 18 – WORRIED THAT SELF AND PARTNER IS UNABLE TO STOP WATCHING PORNOGRAPHY**

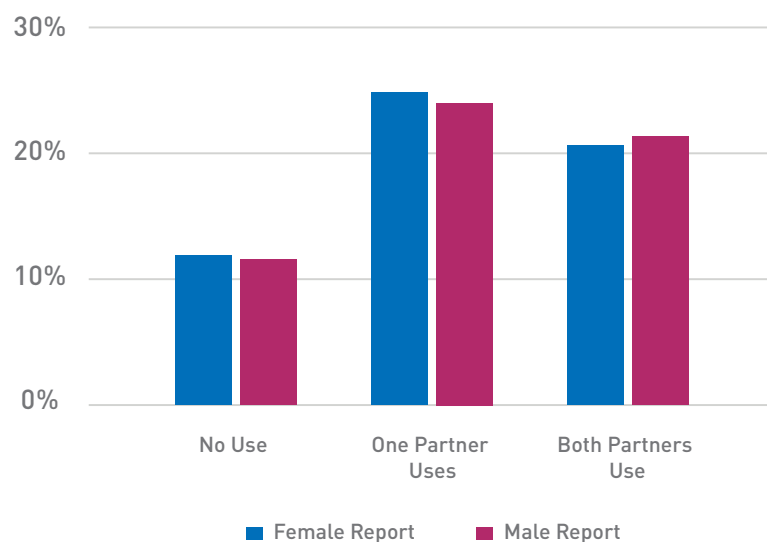


SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

## Conflict About Pornography

While a notable number of couples are reporting anxiety and concerns about pornography in their relationship, is pornography use causing open conflict between couples? When asked to report if pornography use has caused conflict in their relationship, we found that approximately 20% of couples reported that pornography had been a source of conflict in their relationship. Figure 19 shows the percent of couples who reported conflict due to pornography, split by men's and women's reports and based on if one or both partners are an active user of pornography. Not surprisingly, conflict related to pornography use was much less common among couples where neither partner viewed pornography, with only about 1 in 10 of both men and women reporting that pornography has caused conflict in their relationship. However, when pornography was consumed by one or both partners, the opportunities for pornography to cause couple conflict rose steeply. The number of couples experiencing pornography conflict doubled when one or both spouses reported using pornography. One in 5 of both women and men reported pornography conflict in relationships where both partners view pornography.

**FIGURE 19 – PERCENT WHO AGREED THAT PORNOGRAPHY CAUSED CONFLICT IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, *National Couples and Pornography Study*

Taken together, our data show a consistent and important theme related to pornography use among modern mixed-sex couples. A consistent, notable portion of romantic partners, ranging between 20-40% depending on the specific metric, report concerns and anxieties about how pornography use may be influencing their romantic relationship. Such concerns appear to span from concerns about how pornography use may influence attraction levels to a lack of openness related to disclosure of use. Paired with the high frequency of pornography use now reported among dating and married couples, such large percentages suggest that pornography use may be one of the most salient intimacy topics for modern couples to navigate.

# SECTION III

## PORNOGRAPHY AND RELATIONSHIP HEALTH

So far, we have established that a clear and consistent gender gap continues to exist for heterosexual couples when it comes to pornography use. We have also established that although most couples report limited conflict around pornography and low anxiety talking about pornography, a sizeable number, somewhere between one-third to one-fifth have significant concerns and conflict related to pornography. It is also clear that few couples have clear rules or conversations about the pornography use in their relationship and that many men and women harbor fears that pornography may be on the mind of their partner while they engage in sexual intimacy. Is ignorance bliss? Or is the lack of communication about a clearly distinct and gendered sexual behavior creating a potential for harm in these relationships?

Several scholars have found across studies that if pornography viewing is related to relationship quality, that association is likely small, but in the negative direction (Perry, 2020; Wright, Tokuaga, Kraus, & Klann, 2017). These meta-analyses and summary studies have concluded that pornography viewing is likely consistently linked to weaker relationship outcomes. However, the link between pornography viewing and relational health has still been a strongly debated one both in the academic scholarship (Willoughby, 2019; Willoughby, Leonhardt, & Augustus, 2020) and the public forum. While many groups and individuals have attempted to make definitive statements about how pornography use is related to the health of relationships, these efforts have been hampered by long-standing methodological problems. These include poor and imprecise measurement, samples that do not well represent the general public, and a lack of detail regarding the context of pornography use and the content actually being viewed. Given these limitations, a major priority of the National Couples and Pornography Survey was to provide a clear and precise assessment of pornography use among couples and explore how such use was associated with a range of indicators of relationship health.

### Relationship Quality and Pornography Viewing Patterns

We examined couple relationship quality using four standardized measures of relationship wellbeing. These included:

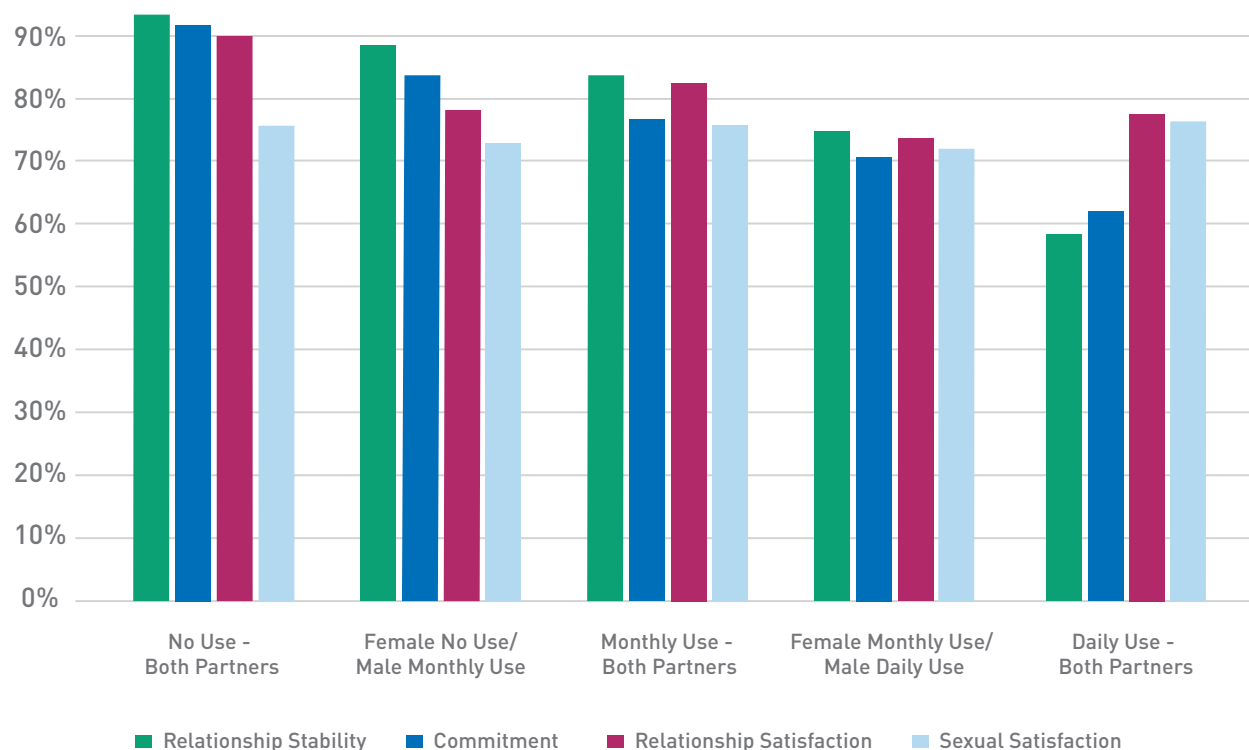
- **Relationship Stability** - Relationship stability was assessed by averaging three items, which asked respondents how often the following three things had happened in their relationship: “How often have you thought your relationship (or marriage) might be in trouble?”, “How often have you and your partner discussed ending your relationship (or marriage)?”, and “How often have you broken up or separated and then gotten back together?” Responses ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). These items were reverse coded so that higher scores indicated more stability (Booth, Johnson, and Edwards, 1983; Busby et al., 2001, 2009; Busby, Ivey, Harris, & Ates, 2007).
- **Commitment** - Commitment was measured with 7 items for assessing dedication from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Each item was rated on a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale. Example items are “I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we encounter” and “I like to think of my partner and me more in terms of ‘us’ and ‘we’ than ‘me’ and ‘him/her’.” Numerous studies demonstrate the reliability and validity of the measure (e.g., Rhoades et al., 2010; Whitton, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2008).

- **Relationship Satisfaction** - Relationship satisfaction was assessed with seven items asking participants how satisfied they were with various aspects of their relationship. Items were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied) (Busby et al., 2001, 2009).
- **Sexual Satisfaction** - Sexual satisfaction was assessed with six items asking participants how satisfied they were with various aspects of their sexual relationship. Items were rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

Of course, noting the vast gender differences that often are found among couples in the utilization of pornography, we first wanted to examine how various patterns of couple pornography use influence relationship quality in the four areas assessed. We employ weighted binary logistic regression models. Statistical significance is estimated by the p values ( $p < .05$ , two-tailed tests) from the binary logistic regression coefficients.

Figure 20 shows predicted probabilities from our regression models for the relative levels of relationship stability, commitment, relationship satisfaction, and sexual satisfaction for couples with different use patterns based on partners reported frequency of use of hardcore pornography. Couple scores were created by summing male and female partner scores on each scale creating an average score on each measure.

**FIGURE 20 – PREDICTED RELATIONSHIP QUALITY OUTCOMES  
BASED ON PORNOGRAPHY USE FOR BOTH PARTNERS**



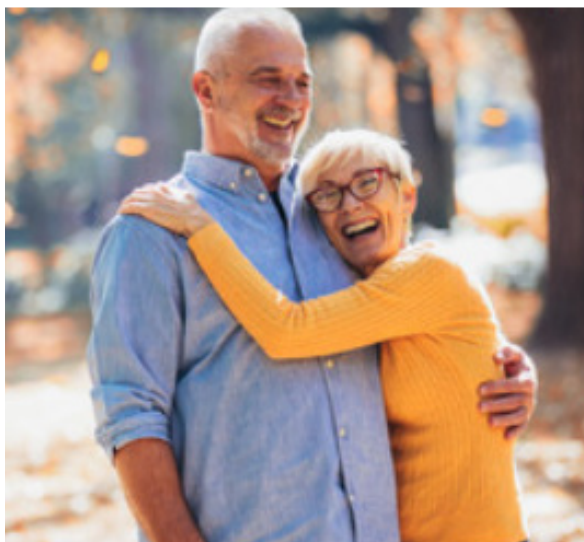
SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

Several noteworthy trends emerge in these analyses. First, couples where both partners report that they do not use pornography at all reported the highest levels of relationship stability, commitment, and relationship satisfaction, with 90% or above of these couples reporting that their relationship is stable, committed,

and satisfying. A consistent decline in relationship stability, commitment, and relationship satisfaction was noted as the relative frequency of pornography use increased. The decrease in relationship quality was consistent across both couples with a similar level of use (both monthly users or both daily users), as well as for couples with a reported gap between the partners.

Of particular note is the comparison of two common patterns, couples where both partners do not use pornography and couples where the women views pornography occasionally (monthly use) and the man views pornography regularly (daily use). There were notable differences between these two groups of couples. In comparison to couples who avoid pornography, these couples are 18% less likely to report that their relationship is stable, 20% less likely to be strongly committed, and 18% less likely to report that they have high relationship satisfaction. Although not a common pattern, couples where both partners view pornography on a daily basis report a 45% decrease in stability and a 30% decrease in commitment levels compared to couples where both partners don't view pornography at all.

The one area of similarity across couple groups was sexual satisfaction, which remained at relatively similar levels across all couples use patterns. So, pornography use does not appear to increase or decrease a couple's odds of being sexually satisfied, but it was associated with significantly lower levels of stability, commitment, and satisfaction.

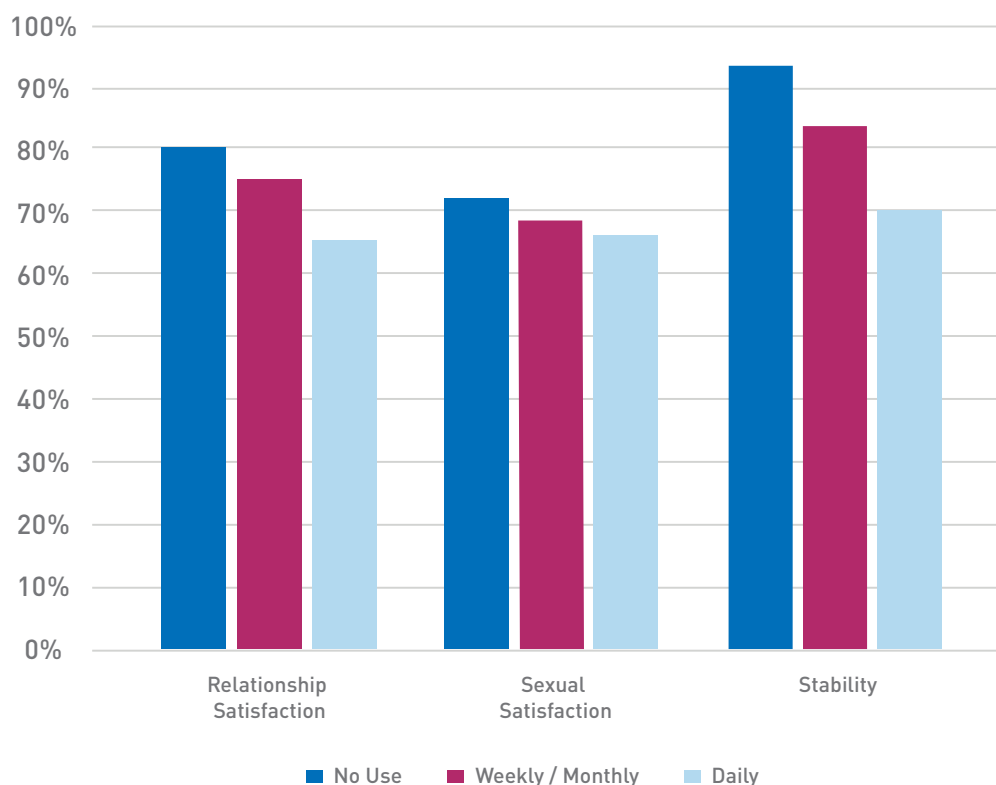


Couples in which both partners report that they do not use pornography at all reported the highest levels of relationship stability, commitment, and relationship satisfaction.

## Partner Use and Relationship Quality

We further examined how partner pornography use rates are associated with relationship quality for both women and men. Figure 21 shows the percent of women who were satisfied with their relationship, satisfied with their sexual relationship, and reported high stability in their relationship based on their male partner's reported pornography use level. In each case, the percent of women reporting positive outcomes dropped when her partner's reported pornography use increased. Compared to women whose partners do not use pornography, women partnered with daily pornography users are about 15% less likely to report high relationship satisfaction, about 10% less likely to report sexual satisfaction, and over 20% less likely to report stability in their relationship.

**FIGURE 21 – WOMEN'S RELATIONSHIP QUALITY BASED ON THEIR PARTNER'S PORNOGRAPHY USE LEVEL**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

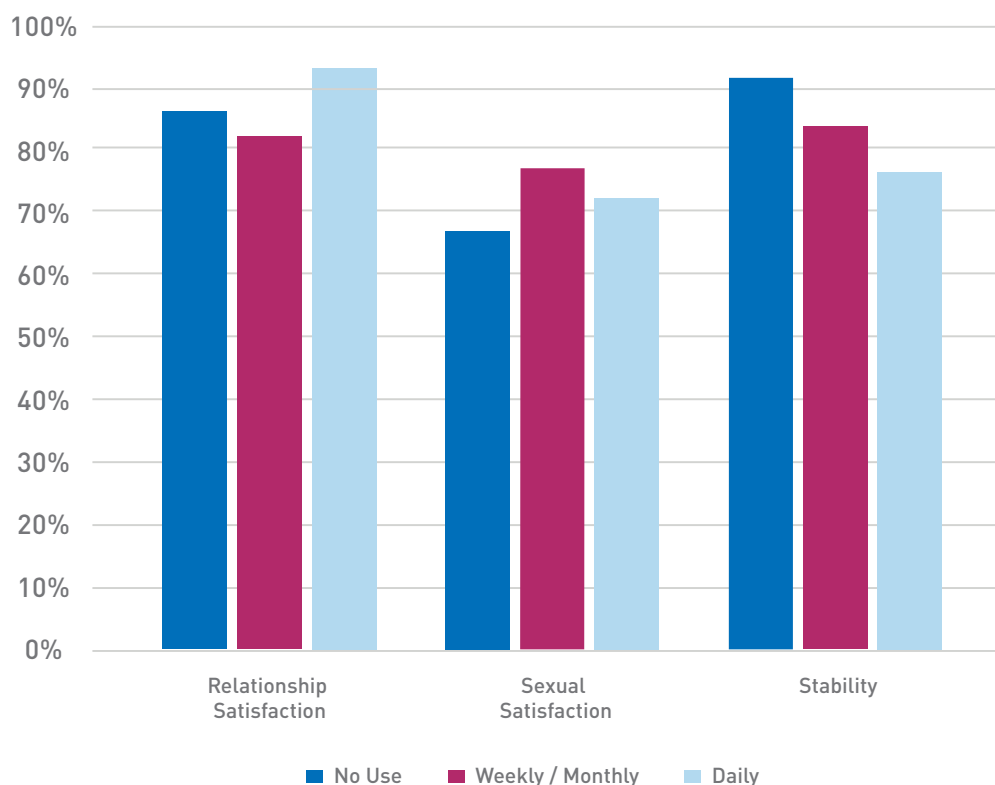
When we looked at men, it was clear that their female partner's use of pornography was associated with a different pattern of relationship quality. Again, it is important to remember that women's use patterns predominately fit a pattern of no use or occasional use, so it's not surprising that women's pornography use appears to influence their partners in a different way, on average. Also, keep in mind that the proportion of women who use pornography daily is very small.

Women whose partners report more frequent pornography use feel less positively about their relationships.



With these trends in mind, Figure 22 shows that female partners' reported pornography use has little association with their male partners' sense of relationship and sexual satisfaction, but a noted downward association with their reported relationship stability.

**FIGURE 22 – MEN'S RELATIONSHIP QUALITY BASED ON THEIR PARTNER'S PORNOGRAPHY USE LEVEL**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

## Exploring Overall Couple Relationship Health

These initial explorations provided only a glimpse into the overall health and quality of these relationships. While pornography use likely varies in many ways from individual to individual and from couple to couple, we next sought to see if there were any general patterns in the overall use of pornography based on the self-reported overall health of those in romantic relationships. While our data was cross-sectional and could not establish if pornography use was causing changes to relationship quality (or vice versa), we could explore if pornography use patterns differed based on the quality of the relationship. The thought process here was simple, if pornography is simply a random behavior that some couples engage in, regardless of the quality of their relationship, we should not see any pattern in the quality of a relationship and pornography viewing behavior. However, if pornography and the quality of one's romantic relationship are linked in some way, we should be able to observe pornography viewing pattern differences based on relationship quality.

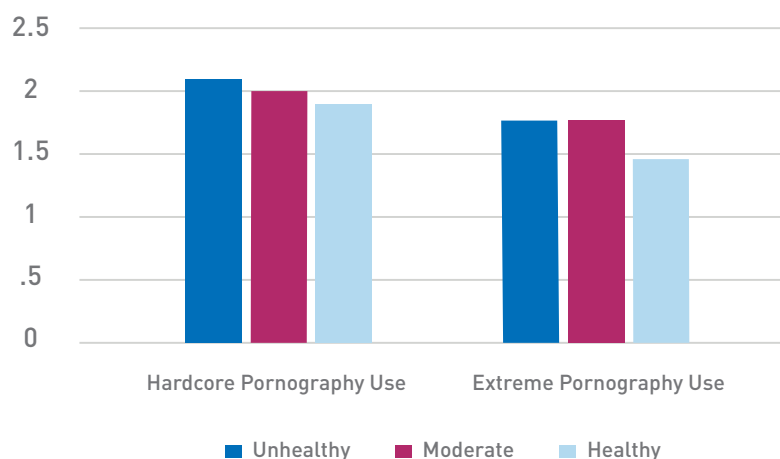
To explore how pornography use is related to overall relational health, a global measure of relationship health was constructed by considering measures of relationship satisfaction, relationship stability, and emotional connection. From these measures, the sample was split into three distinct groups.

- **Healthy Couples** - One group represented those who reported the highest levels of relationship health. To be included in this group, an individual would need to self-report an average relationship satisfaction level of over 4, an average stability score of over 5, and an average emotional connection score of over 6. In other words, this created a group of individuals who reported their relationship as being extremely satisfying, stable, and connected (35% of couples in the individual sample).
- **Moderate Couples** - We then created a moderately healthy group in which individuals reported high scores (above 4 for satisfaction and stability and above 6 for emotional connection) in two of the three categories (23% of couples in the individual sample).
- **Unhealthy Couples** - The final group was created for individuals who reported any other configuration of scores. This included individuals who reported moderate to low health in two or more of the three categories (42% of couples in the individual sample).

We then compared these groups on their pornography use to see if pornography use varied across the three groups. This comparison controlled for education, political orientation, relationship length, gender, biological children, religious attendance, the importance of religion, and life satisfaction. Both hardcore and extreme pornography use was compared across the three groups.

Figure 23 explores differences based on viewing pornography alone for both hardcore pornography use and extreme pornography use. Here we did observe a clear pattern and both patterns were similar. In both cases, those in the healthiest relationships were significantly less likely to view pornography alone (both hardcore and extreme) compared to those in the moderately healthy category and the unhealthy relationship category. This suggests that those in the healthiest of relationships in terms of relationship satisfaction, stability, and emotional connection, were significantly less likely to be watching pornography alone on a regular basis.

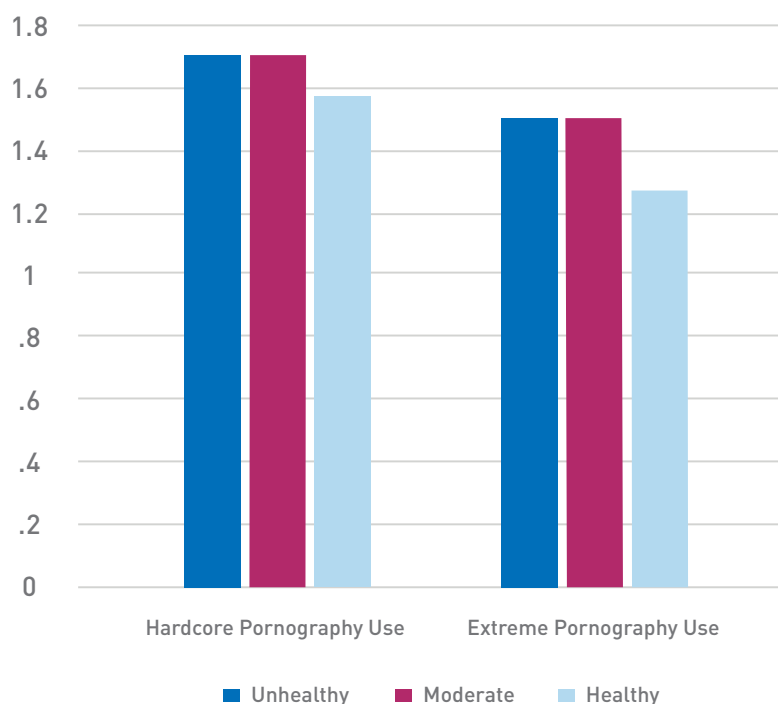
**FIGURE 23 – PATTERNS IN THE HEALTHIEST COUPLES**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

Figure 24 shows the same analyses, only looking at hardcore and extreme pornography use together as a couple. Remember, many scholars have argued that when couples view pornography together, the effect on their relationship may be reversed and positive. However, when we explored the same analyses looking holistically at relational health, the pattern was the same as the pattern we observed for individual pornography use. Those who reported being in the healthiest relationships were significantly less likely to watch pornography together compared to those in moderately healthy or unhealthy relationships.

**FIGURE 24 – PATTERNS IN THE HEALTHIEST COUPLES - USE TOGETHER**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

The pattern here was subtle but clear. While some scholars have argued that pornography is likely to have a detrimental effect on relationships and others have argued that pornography may enhance and support healthy relationships, the data from our project provides a consistent, but slightly different story.

Consistently, across both hardcore and extreme pornography, and across both individual and joint use, couples with the healthiest and highest quality relationship had a significantly lower pattern of pornography use than those in other types of relationships. Pornography use, whether it be alone or with a partner, appeared to be a poor way to distinguish between unhealthy and moderately healthy relationships. However, individuals in the healthiest relationships, those marked by high levels of satisfaction, stability, and emotional connection, were significantly less likely to utilize pornography viewing in their personal lives and together.

Across both hardcore and extreme pornography, and across both individual and joint use, couples with the healthiest and highest quality relationship had a significantly lower pattern of pornography use than those in other types of relationships.

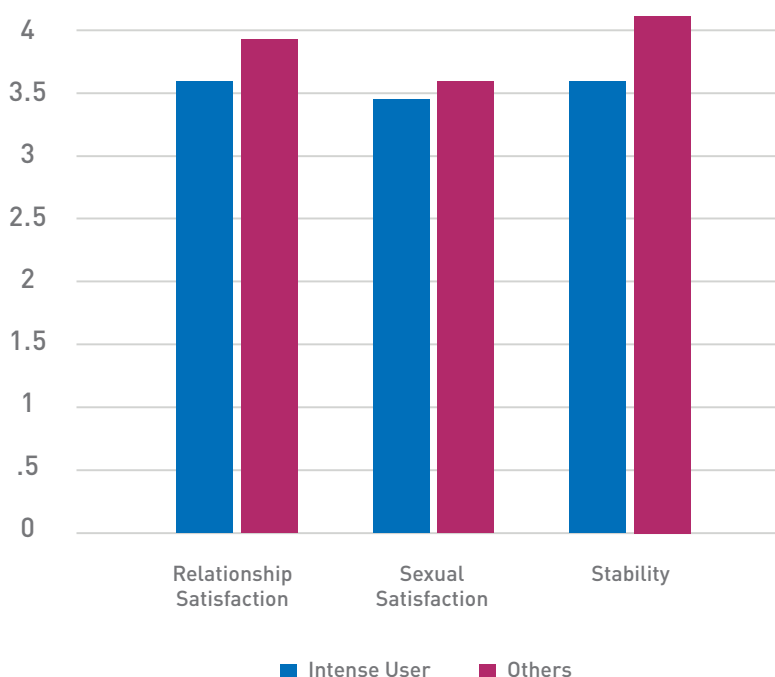
While poor measurement of pornography use may have contributed to some of these previous inconsistencies in research findings, perhaps another reason why scholars have failed to notice this trend in previous scholarship is because such results suggest the association between pornography use and relational health may not be linear, meaning that it may be only those in the healthiest relationships that show differing pornography use patterns than other couples.

Such findings also suggest at least two possible explanations based on the potential directionality of these findings. First, increased and consistent pornography use may at certain levels lead to unhealthy relational dynamics. On the other hand, it is possible that those in unhealthy relationships may turn to pornography to cope with frustrations or lack of satisfaction in their current relationships. It should be noted that we did not find any evidence that for most couples a regular pornography use pattern was associated with excessive negative or hostile relationships. Instead, it appears that those in the healthiest romantic relationships are either actively or passively avoiding regular use of pornography both individually and with their partner.

To get another picture of how pornography may influence relational health, we focused on just intense pornography users. These were individuals who reported almost daily viewing of pornography, reported a typical viewing session as lasting at least 30 minutes, and reported that over 50% of their masturbation was tied to the viewing of pornography. This focused analysis resulted in 41 couples, all with men as the intense user (an insufficient number of women qualified for analyses based on these parameters).

Figure 25 below shows differences between these couples and other couples on couple relational satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and stability. Differences were significant for relationship satisfaction and stability, where couples with an intense male pornography user reported significantly less relationship satisfaction and less stability than all other couples. These results fall in line with previous research suggesting that male pornography use may be particularly problematic in heterosexual relationships (Willoughby, Leonhardt, & Augustus, 2020; Wright, Tokunaga, Kraus, & Klann, 2017). These findings also provide more empirical evidence of the trend suggesting that higher engagement with pornography was associated with less relationship health in our data.

**FIGURE 25 – INTENSE USERS VS. OTHERS**



SOURCE: Wheatley Institution / Austin Institute, National Couples and Pornography Study

# DISCUSSION

## THE PORN GAP AND RELATIONSHIPS

The findings reported in this research confirm and extend other studies that have found that there is a persistent difference in pornography patterns between men and women across relationship commitment levels. While these differences may have little or no practical significance for some couples, emerging research suggests that discrepancies between partners in pornography use are related to negative couple outcomes for others. Specifically, in one of our previous studies (see Willoughby et al, 2016), we found that pornography differences may be associated with worse couple interaction processes such as communication and sexual desire, which may negatively influence relationship satisfaction and stability.

The findings of this report also support our previous claim that the amount of awareness that romantic partners have of each other's pornography use is likely one of the most critical, yet understudied, aspects of pornography use in couple relationships. While scholars continue to debate the direct consequences of pornography use on individuals' attitudes and behaviors, pornography concealment may be an equally critical variable. Research suggests that patterns of concealment in close relationships contribute to feelings of exclusion, reduced trust, and increased conflict, which negatively affects relationship outcomes.

Pornography acceptance and conflict are connected with communication and awareness patterns in couple relationships, although the exact relationship between these processes is not well understood. We found that while most romantic couples do not report regular conflict or anxiety about pornography in their relationship, a notable minority of partners, about 1 in every 3 or 4 couples, report regular anxiety, discomfort, and stress about how pornography is being utilized by their partner or how pornography is influencing their relationship. The consistency of this group of couples struggling to negotiate and make sense of the modern landscape of pornography suggests that pornography use may be one of the more common sources of relationship anxiety among modern couples. These anxieties also appear to remain very gendered, with women in particular reporting anxiety or a lack of awareness of their male partner's pornography use. These findings are particularly noteworthy given that it appears that in early couple formation, many women may have little knowledge of how much their male counterparts are viewing pornography.

### Implications for Couples

When pornography is seen as a part of a couple relationship, rather than simply a personal behavior, couples are better equipped to discuss what pornography means to them in their relationship. Given the general lack of communication about pornography seen among couples in our data, perhaps it is important for partners to begin to discuss several aspects of pornography and how it may be impacting their relationship. Such conversations may be especially important when it comes to what pornography means to each partner and how pornography use may influence their feelings of trust and attachment to each other. Such conversations may help partners to set mutually agreed-on boundaries in their relationship, boundaries that may help more couples navigate the gender gap in pornography use that seems common for many heterosexual couples.

Relationship quality is a result of partners developing a secure attachment with each other, where each partner trusts that the other will be physically, emotionally, and psychologically responsive to his or her needs. Behaviors that are interpreted as disrupting or eroding this trust could have a significant negative impact on couple communication, intimacy, and satisfaction. Scholars and therapists have noted that partner differences in pornography use, and acceptance may influence the partners' sense of trustworthiness and security in the relationship (Butler & Seedall, 2006). Zitzman and Butler (2009) explain:

"Pornography scripts expectations and behavior that place it on a collision course with the requisite dynamics for secure attachment and authentic intimacy in the pair-bond relationship ... the detached, objectifying, exploitive sexuality of pornography directly impacts attachment trust, eroding any safe expectation of one's partner being faithfully for the other" (p.214).

If a partner sees pornography as an untrustworthy act that turns her or his partner's attraction toward others or as an indicator that he or she approaches sex from a self-centered, rather than an other-centered orientation, the partner's sense of security will likely diminish in the relationship.

However, as we have described in our previous research, the "structure of security" in pair-bond relationships may be somewhat subjective and can vary from relationship to relationship (See Willoughby et al, 2016). Differences in pornography use and acceptance will likely influence whether pornography is seen as a violation of relationship trust or attachment threat, thus influencing overall relationship satisfaction. Couples need to explore the trust and attachment issues "behind the behaviors," so to speak, to see if such discrepancies have created attachment threats or injuries. Our current study's findings suggest that couples should discuss several different aspects of pornography, including use, acceptance, and concealment.

Perhaps the most significant, yet difficult dynamic to address as a couple is pornography concealment or the degree to which partners are open with each other about the frequency, duration, and content of the pornography they are viewing. While scholars continue to investigate the effects of pornography use for individuals and couples, one significant way that pornography harms relationships is that it often happens in secret. As our study suggests, many users of pornography typically hide, or at least minimize, their use of pornography from everyone, including their romantic partners.

If this pattern develops, there are two critical threats to the relationships. First, when people engage in this type of self-concealment, it not only often hurts their relationships and leaves them feeling lonely, but also makes them more vulnerable to depression, poor self-esteem, and anxiety. Also, when romantic partners keep secrets from each other, their trust in each other erodes and their confidence in their relationships starts to diminish.