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Hentai and the Pornification of Childhood: How the Porn Industry Just Made the Case for Regulation

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Hentai and the Pornification of Childhood: How the Porn Industry Just Made the Case for Regulation

Abstract

One of the most popular genres of online pornography today is hentai, sexualized animation, and cartoons in the style of Japanese anime. Data from Pornhub, the world's best-known pornography website, as well as a recent report from a British regulatory agency and our research, show that much of hentai appeals to children and depicts child-like characters engaged in sexual violence. In almost every instance, this violence targets female characters. Hentai, we show, encourages adults to see minors, especially girls, as legitimate targets of sexual violence. Until the day when these depictions of sexual violence are eradicated, we call for three ameliorative steps: age verification legislation; civil lawsuits; and sex education through a porn-critical lens.

Keywords

pornography, hentai, anime, sexual violence, child pornography, child sexual exploitation material

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EDITORIAL

HENTAI AND THE PORNIIFICATION OF CHILDHOOD: HOW THE PORN INDUSTRY JUST MADE THE CASE FOR REGULATION

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ABSTRACT

One of the most popular genres of online pornography today is hentai, sexualized animation, and cartoons in the style of Japanese anime. Data from Pornhub, the world's best-known pornography website, as well as a recent report from a British regulatory agency and our research, show that much of hentai appeals to children and depicts child-like characters engaged in sexual violence. In almost every instance, this violence targets female characters. Hentai, we show, encourages adults to see minors, especially girls, as legitimate targets of sexual violence. Until the day when these depictions of sexual violence are eradicated, we call for three ameliorative steps: age verification legislation; civil lawsuits; and sex education through a porn-critical lens.

KEYWORDS

pornography, hentai, anime, sexual violence, child pornography, child sexual exploitation material

IN ITS LATEST "YEAR IN REVIEW," Pornhub (2022) announced that the most popular search term on the site was "hentai." The term is an English loanword from a Japanese phrase that, in the early 20th century, came to mean *sexual perversion*. In the West today, hentai refers to pornified renditions of anime, the distinctive, colorful, action-packed style of Japanese animation much beloved by kids everywhere. The characters in hentai typically *look* like kids, except for their enlarged breasts and genitals—that and the fact that they are typically entangled in brutal, often monstrous sex. The latter is true since a common theme in hentai is a grotesque creature penetrating a girl with an enormous phallus or tentacle.

This was not the first-time hentai appeared in the annual list of Pornhub's most popular search terms. But it coincided this year with the release of a study by the British Board of Film Classification or BBFC (2022), an independent regulatory agency. The study examined online computer-generated or drawn images – cartoons and animation - depicting the sexual abuse of children and child-like characters. A key find-

ing of the report was that “children aged 6-12 are,” compared to adults, “disproportionately exposed to pornography sites specializing in non-photographic content” (Meridian et al., 2022). That content mainly consists of hentai—the content prominently featured on Pornhub.

At first glance, hentai looks like it might have been plucked from the Cartoon Network. But the genre is rife with graphic sexual violence. It’s also enormously popular, especially on “tube sites,” such as Pornhub, which hosts terabytes of freely available, user-uploaded porn clips. In January 2023, for example, Pornhub hosted more than 109,000 hentai videos, some with more than five million views, including “steppaunt Caught Her stepnephew Jerking Off & Decided To Help Him,” “Fucking my student in the bathroom,” and “hentai prostitution festival.”

The leading US lobbying group for the porn industry—the ironically named Free Speech Coalition—celebrates “body sovereignty” (Free Speech Coalition, n.d.). That boast is hard to square with Pornhub’s hentai video titled “schoolgirl gets it rough for the first time.” The same is true for Pornhub’s “Demonic Lust” channel. The only way to accurately convey the type of content on this channel is to retain the misogynistic cruelty it brazenly advertises, which porn viewers find so alluring: “dark fantasies with sweet girls banged by evil creatures...monsters non-stop fuck innocent beauties, penetrate all their tight holes and cover girls with powerful streams of alien’s cum.” The sexual violence in hentai is so extreme that in real life, it would result in the bloody harm and death of the women and children so victimized.

As the BBFC report stated, Hentai promotes “an interest in abusive relationships.” Much of the hentai available on free porn sites consists of characters from movies, television, games, and the internet “likely to be familiar or appealing to children” (BBFC, 2022). Pornhub features cartoons, animation, and costumed skits drawn from a wide range of children’s entertainment and games. Over the past few years, Pornhub’s yearly reviews have listed Star Wars, Wonder Woman, Elastigirl, Pokémon, Batgirl, Harley Quinn, Fortnite, Skyrim, Splatoon, and Minecraft. A quick search of the site can readily find pornified videos of Toy Story, Zootopia, Harry Potter, Sailor Moon, Elsa from Frozen, The Little Mermaid, Dora the Explorer, and My Little Pony. In recent years, too, other popular search terms and categories listed on Pornhub’s yearly reviews, which may well attract the interests of minors and predators alike, have included “gamer girl,” “babysitter,” “cosplay,” “schoolgirl,” “father-daughter,” and “bratty sis.” The site also features female teens tagged as “small,” “exxxtra small,” and “innocent,” as well as “runaway,” “homeless,” and “abandoned.” All these videos represent violent, often illegal, and nonconsensual sex as desirable and pleasurable.

A fan favorite is Projekt Melody, a hentai character with a girlish face and large breasts. Projekt Melody is a virtual porn star. She has a giant presence on YouTube and TikTok, which are the top social media destinations for teens and pre-teens (Pew Research Center, 2022; Perez, 2022). She livestreams on the sexual webcamming site Chaturbate and sells porn videos on OnlyFans. She has the username, projekmelody, for her non-porn OnlyFans page (n.d.). She also has a Pornhub channel which has received 10 million views. Projekt Melody seems tailor-made to entice kids to seek out porn – and to arouse adults who seek out kids. Another popular theme in hentai is incest, which almost always involves depictions of children. We googled “hentai incest” in January 2023 and received 5.4 million results, including “Father Daughter Virgin Incest Hentai” and “Brother-Sister Incest.” The latter was hosted by Hentai.tv, which displayed advertisements for Brazzers, another MindGeek company with its own Pornhub channel (n.d.). This abusive content is not tucked away in some obscure, dingy corner of the internet. Pornhub is not akin to a sleazy peep show on the edge of

town in the 1950s. It is the best-known porn site globally. At the end of 2022, it was the 13th most-trafficked website worldwide, ahead of Netflix, receiving 2.7 billion visits in November alone (Similarweb, 2023). Its orange and black logo is probably recognizable to more young people than the Playboy bunny, itself a furry facade for Hugh Hefner's appalling sexual violence (Dines & Silverman, 2022).

Pornhub follows the same playbook. Through its online Pornhub Apparel shop, the brand is marketed on consumer goods from hats, hoodies, and holiday socks to water bottles, cookie cutters, and yoga mats. Like Playboy, Pornhub attempts to cultivate a liberating ethos that conceals a history of abuse. Pornhub has recently been served with numerous lawsuits for sex trafficking, rape, and other forms of nonconsensual sex, and hosting underage performers (e.g., Ritter, 2021).

Pornhub is a commercial success. Since it is a private company, much like its competitors (e.g., XVideos, xHamster, and XNXX), Pornhub has no legal obligation to release financial reports. Based in Canada, Pornhub is the flagship enterprise of MindGeek, the largest global porn conglomerate. MindGeek is headquartered in Luxembourg but mainly operates out of Montreal and has satellites in Dublin, London, Nicosia, Los Angeles, and Bucharest. The MindGeek empire encompasses dozens of porn sites such as YouPorn, RedTube, Mofos, Twistys, PornMD, MILF Hunter, My Dirty Hobby, and Fakehub. The latter—which includes Fake Taxi, Fake Driving School, and Fake Cop—is entirely premised on unlawful deception. MindGeek also operates an advertising company (TrafficJunky) and an online payment platform (ProBillr). The firm has experienced some turnover at the top. But its on-the-books annual revenues have climbed to \$450 million (Financial Times, 2022).

The pornification of childhood is concerning on four fronts. First, it effectively grooms men into seeing children as legitimate sexual targets. And so, Pornhub and hentai groom men into preying on minors for non-consensual sex, rape, and child sexual abuse. Some might suggest that hentai, cartoons, and animation are colored by sophomoric humor. After all, they are not real children, and so are the moral equivalent of a get-out-of-jail-free card. But the evidence suggests otherwise. Adults who collect real child sexual exploitation material view more hentai—and bestiality and teen porn—than non-offenders (Steel et al., 2021). More, “clinical experience and now research evidence are accumulating to suggest that the Internet is not simply drawing attention to those with existing pedophilic interests but is contributing to the crystallization of those interests in people [really, men] with no explicit prior sexual interest in children” (Wood, 2013). Additionally, viewers of virtual-child porn and “barely legal” videos experience a change in their cognition (Paul and Linz, 2008). They are “more likely to associate sex and sexuality” with *any* depiction of minors, even non-sexual images. For girls, moreover, early exposure to porn is a risk factor for later sexual abuse (Harsey et al., 2021). And over 40% of men who view videos of child sexual exploitation on the dark web self-reported that they *actively tried to contact real children* (Insoll et al., 2022). Hentai not only frames youth and preadolescents as the legitimate objects of adult sexual desire. It sets men on that very path.

Second, hentai and all pornography put young people at risk for a slate of harms to their mental, sexual, and physical health (e.g., Horner, 2019). Teens and pre-teens who view porn are more likely to sexually harass, assault, coerce, strike, and insult intimate partners; engage in unsafe sex; self-report struggles with relationship skills; harbor hostile sexism; and tolerate violence against girls and women (e.g., Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2019; Rodríguez-Castro et al., 2021; Wright et al., 2021; Huntington, Willoughby, and Rhoades, 2022; Waterman et al., 2022). Girls who consume porn may

also develop impaired self-esteem (Behun & Owens, 2020) and believe that the role of women in sex is to play a “supportive role” for male pleasure (Tholander, 2022).

Third, hentai seemingly grooms children into becoming adult consumers of porn. While much of Pornhub is free, its business model depends on “premium” subscriptions. Hentai ensures that today’s kids are tomorrow’s paying customers. Moreover, Pornhub and most other tube sites gain revenues by selling banner ads, pop-up ads, and other advertisements. The more eyeballs on the site, regardless of age, the more pornographers profit.

Fourth, much of the content on Pornhub and other major pornography websites depicts legally defined criminal acts of sexual violence (Fritz et al., 2020; Vera-Gray et al., 2021). Most of that violence is aimed at women, who are slapped, spit upon, choked (what is medically defined as non-fatal strangulation), kicked, punched, verbally abused, and smeared on some sites with feces and urine.

Pornhub itself has unwittingly offered a cogent rationale for decisive action against its own industry. A variant of anime that sexualizes girls is called “lolicon,” or “loli” for short. The name is derived from Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Lolita*. (The boys’ version is dubbed *shotacon*.) If you search for videos tagged #lolicon or #loli on Pornhub, you are greeted with a large warning: “Your search could be for illegal and abusive sexual material, where children have suffered harm. Do not cross the line from legal, adult images to illegal images.” The warning also adds, “If you are worried about your sexual thoughts about minors, you are not alone,” and directs ‘worried’ users to an organization with a helpline. By issuing this warning, Pornhub testifies to the existence of a credible connection between viewing hentai and perpetrating child sexual abuse.

CALL TO ACTION

The recent Pornhub “Year in Review” and BBFC report serve as a call to action to protect the lives of women and children constantly under threat due to the predatory porn industry. Hentai is no feminist utopia that advances sexual agency, autonomy, free speech, artistic license, or resistance against sexism. Instead, hentai perpetuates the patriarchal and heteronormative assumption that men are entitled to mistreat women and children sexually.

We propose a three-pronged attack on the misogyny that underpins hentai’s production, distribution, and popularity. These proposals will help young people escape the commodification of violent sex marketed by hentai and porn. This way, they can begin developing a sexuality outside of the pornified images that are the wallpaper of the culture.

Before we lay out our proposals, we want to be clear that the obvious solution to this problem would be to criminalize the production and consumption of animated porn that depicts child-like characters engaged in sexual violence (see Al-Alosi, 2018). But we also recognize that this is a Herculean effort. In the meantime, we propose three ameliorative solutions: age verification legislation, civil lawsuits, and sex education through a porn-critical lens.

1. AGE VERIFICATION LEGISLATION

None of the major porn sites, especially tube sites, are safely hidden behind paywalls and age gates. They are fully accessible to minors. Pornhub doesn’t even bother

to ask viewers to click a perfunctory I'm-over-18 button. A tween would find it far harder to buy a lotto ticket than to see hentai of a putative age-mate.

The solution is to legally require porn sites to block access to users who have not adequately demonstrated, through age assurance and verification, that they have reached the age of legal majority. These laws, too, must be enforced. Many countries already have commercial systems for various online activities and services, including gambling, alcohol sales, banking, SIM cards, weapons, and access to public services. Many companies—e.g., Airbnb, Uber, Tinder, and social media platforms—also require age and identity verification in different countries.

Pornhub employs one private firm to vouch for the identity of users who upload videos. It could easily do the same for viewers. These platforms use various techniques—typically a combination of facial scans, live selfies, driver's licenses, national digital IDs, and credit cards—to verify age. The technology is not new. It only needs the political will to apply it to porn.

According to our research, online pornography is legal in 132 countries. But less than a handful has passed laws requiring age assurance, including France, Germany, and the European Union. Yet none of these political entities have implemented the law. Several other nations are deliberating legislation, including India, Australia, and the UK. We propose that countries legislate, implement, and enforce age verification to restrict online pornography to adults over the age of 18.

2. CIVIL LAWSUITS

The surest way to reign in a harmful industry in a capitalist society is to hit them where it counts: the bottom line. Normally, individual and class-action civil lawsuits against the pornography industry seek damages from producing content (i.e., for non-consensual sex and filming, trafficking, fraudulent business practices, coerced contracts, the use of minors, the failure to uphold workplace safety, and so forth). But we have shown that ample evidence attests to harm from the consumption side of the industry. Not only are women and children imperiled by pornography, but Pornhub and the industry also disseminate videos that are racist and harmful to the transgender and LGBTQ+ communities.

A concerted effort is needed to harness the civil court system to find Pornhub, MindGeek, and other large porn entities liable for making harmful products available. In the US, a new law in Louisiana, effective January 1, 2023, provides “a civil remedy for damages against commercial entities who distribute material harmful to minors” (Louisiana, 2022). This type of legislation can be effectively used against pornographic producers and distributors. Our only caveat is that effective laws must cover not just children, as we noted, but also women harmed by porn.

3. MAKE SEX EDUCATION RELEVANT IN A PORN-SATURATED CULTURE.

Why do young people visit porn sites? Because, they often say, they are not receiving relevant, honest, and scientifically accurate education on sex and relationships from their schools, parents, and communities. The issue is so fraught with conservative and religious anxiety in the US that the topic is almost entirely ignored in many school systems. Too many young people, including those who identify as LGBTQ+, find themselves marginalized or excluded entirely from sex education. Consequently, young people turn to porn (Rothman et al., 2021). And the porn industry is only too happy to comply.

To counteract the tendency of Pornhub and pornography, in general, to serve as the de facto sex educator for kids, we need to pressure lawmakers to legislate the teaching of comprehensive, age-appropriate, and accurate sex education at all levels of the educational system. This must include parochial and homeschooling. These lessons must be vetted by credentialed sex educators who are swayed neither by religious sentiments (e.g., abstinence-only) nor by the porn industry. The curricula must be fully inclusive of all children. It should cover not only health and safety but also the very topics—however uneasy they might make adults—young people want to know about, which includes an in-depth analysis of the harms of pornography.

To address this need, Culture Reframed (2023) has produced a sex-education curriculum with a porn-critical lens so young people can analyze, deconstruct, and critique pornography as the visual enactment and production of misogyny. We aim to teach young people how to resist the onslaught of misogynist images to counter the role pornography plays in writing the sexual script of young people and the culture. This way, we help young people develop an authentic sense of sexual autonomy based on consent, respect, and equality.

These three action steps will help young people resist the harmful ideologies perpetuated by hentai, and the porn industry, that sex is enjoyable only when it is violent. Undoubtedly, some will dismiss our proposals as “moral panic.” But we know these accusations for what they are: an effort to silence feminist activism (Phillips and Chagnon, 2021). As one of us pointed out a decade ago, feminist resistance against the pornography industry is not an effort to police sex (Dines & Long, 2011; Dines, 2010). It is part of a wider project to liberate women and children from material and representational misogyny that produces and reproduces sex-class inequality.

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Mandy Sanchez, Ph.D., specializes in domestic and sexual violence; the intersectionality of gender, sexualities, place, and trauma; the harms of pornography to young people and women; and justice-involved women and children. She co-founded and remains on the Research Center on Violence at West Virginia University board. She is a trained facilitator for the International Inside Out Prison Exchange Program, developing and coordinating programs on trauma/victimization in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. She is Culture Reframed’s Program Coordinator.

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