

# CULTURE REFRAMED

SOLVING THE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS OF THE DIGITAL AGE

Dear Ethics Committee Members,

Thank you for taking this bold step in investigating the practices and business model of MindGeek, the largest and most influential pornography company in the world. These hearings are long overdue, and Culture Reframed<sup>i</sup> encourages other governments to follow your lead. In this testimony we document the harms of pornography on young people and provide the committee with multidisciplinary research that demonstrates how access to—and consumption of—pornography undermines the healthy emotional, social, and cognitive development of young people.

## Introduction

My name is Dr. Gail Dines, and I am a Professor Emerita of Sociology (Wheelock College). My area of research is the impact of pornography on young people, and the ways porn consumption disrupts healthy development. Culture Reframed argues that in light of the multidisciplinary empirical evidence, pornography is the public health crisis of the digital age. Moreover, this is a stealth public health crisis because few parents, or experts charged with child protection, are aware of the multiple harms of pornography on young people.

## The Problem

### Impact of Pornography on Young People

Most young people today access Pornhub through social media sites that are targeted to teens. In addition, young people increasingly are exposed<sup>ii</sup> to porn, either intentionally or by accident. Porn sites are among the most traveled sites in the world. Pornhub<sup>iii</sup> alone had 42 billion visits in 2019. Pornhub boasts, “That’s as if the combined populations of Canada, Poland, Australia and the Netherlands all visited Pornhub every day!”

Today’s mainstream internet porn—what most boys and young men are regularly viewing—is free, hardcore, and undermining the healthy sexual, emotional, and cognitive development of our

youth. Youth are not simply exploring sexuality by viewing the *Playboy* pinups of past generations. Rather, this is about repeated consumption of scenes depicting violence-laden sex acts. The most respected and cited study<sup>iv</sup> on the content of mainstream pornography found that 90% of the most popular porn videos contained at least one aggressive act.

## **Boys**

Studies<sup>v</sup> show that males, on average, first view internet pornography between ages 11 and 14, and recent anecdotal evidence from the medical community puts it even earlier, between ages 8-10. Researchers<sup>vi</sup> from across disciplines have shown that the earlier a boy views pornography, the more likely he is to:

- Experience increased anxiety and depression
- Have poorer academic performance
- Have decreased capacity for empathy, connection, and healthy relationship skills
- Experience lower empathy for rape victims; increased likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviors
- More likely to commit sexual abuse
- Experience increased erectile dysfunction.

## **Girls**

With respect to hypersexualized media and girls, over 20 years of research<sup>vii</sup> shows that exposure to sexualized images contributes to girls’:

- Self-sexualization leading others to objectify them
- Feelings of shame, appearance anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders
- Low self-esteem
- Increased depression and anxiety
- Increased likelihood of early sexual activity
- Increased tolerance of sexual violence.

## **At-Risk Youth**

While hardcore porn use among youth crosses boundaries of gender, class, race, and geography, its impact is compounded when used by youth who are already at risk due to other social factors. We hypothesize that the stresses on these youth<sup>viii</sup>, which already tax their resilience, combined with fewer social resources to protect them, lowered social visibility, and less social tolerance for their behaviors, are likely to result in increased negative impacts of porn culture. Of particular note is the fact that pornography has increasingly become a “grooming tool” that pimps use to recruit low-income and marginalized youth into trafficking.

## Why Government Legislation is Needed to Protect Children

Following Nicholas Kristof's article<sup>ix</sup> in *The New York Times*, Pornhub—MindGeek's largest and most profitable site—was the object of harsh public criticism. MindGeek quickly responded by issuing a Commitment to Trust and Safety<sup>x</sup> and removing content that was not uploaded by verified users<sup>xi</sup>. MindGeek's response is best understood as a classic corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy designed to bolster a company's reputation and legitimacy when threatened by regulation or criticized in the media.

The main problem with the CSR strategy is that self-regulation in response to external pressures represents a weak form of governance that is not really accountable to the public or regulators. Companies do the minimum to “manage the stakeholders” and, most importantly, for MindGeek, to protect its mainstream business by drawing a sharp line between unacceptable illegal activities and the legal content that meets its guidelines. Pornhub's statement on December 8, 2020, declares that “At Pornhub, nothing is more important than the safety of our community... This is why we have always been committed to eliminating illegal content, including non-consensual material and child sexual abuse material.”<sup>xii</sup> The statement goes on to list a number of steps to filter out illegal content from the site.

These moves are particularly cynical in light of the company's history of fighting regulations intended to protect the health and safety of performers and prevent illegal material. MindGeek, along with the industry-lobbying group The Free Speech Coalition, has engaged in a multi-year struggle to overturn US Code 2257<sup>xiii</sup>, which requires documentation of the age of performers, and it has challenged<sup>xiv</sup> proposed regulations in California and elsewhere to protect performers' from sexually transmitted diseases. MindGeek went along with age verification efforts on the consumer end in the UK but simultaneously set up and promoted its own VPN site to get around these restrictions. The porn industry is also mobilizing against proposed regulations<sup>xv</sup> that would make social media companies more responsible — and liable — for content.

Although Pornhub has taken down millions<sup>xvi</sup> of videos that were not posted by verified users, the site still contains large quantities of videos that feature young-looking performers and to violence and torture-related themes. The procedure for becoming a verified user or to join the Model Program<sup>xvii</sup> has been very simple and only requires submitting a photo with your user name and agreeing not to upload illegal material. Pornhub states that it is reviewing this process, but it is unclear how much it will be tightened up.

The problem with the CSR strategy goes beyond the fact that it is largely a public relations exercise rather than any authentic concern for the public's health and well-being. Corporations are

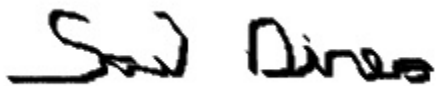
not people and their behavior is guided by the DNA of corporate governance within the discipline of capital markets, leaving managers little discretion. We should therefore not impute companies with personal characteristics or expect them to behave ethically. However, the more important problem with the CSR strategy is that it is intended to protect the core business and bring it into the legitimate mainstream. As the research continues to pile up on the ways porn promotes violence against women and children, it is clear that governments all over the world need to play a major role in regulating this industry to protect the civil rights of women and children.

## Solutions

In light of the empirical data on the harms of pornography, and the inadequacy of self-regulation, we recommend governmental legislation that:

- Holds porn sites accountable for the violence done to women and children in production and consumption
- Withdraws all credit card payment systems
- End to self-regulation by porn sites
- Add the production of porn to the Nordic Model, which criminalizes the pimps and johns, and decriminalizes the prostituted women (filmed prostitution)
- Enforce age-verification for production and consumption

Respectfully submitted by Dr. Gail Dines (February 12, 2021),



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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.culturereframed.org/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanberr/2018/09/28/despite-no-nudity-rule-instagram-is-chock-full-of-pornography/?sh=6ca46ee53e26>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2019-year-in-review>

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- <sup>iv</sup> Bridges, A. J., Wosnitzer, R., Scharrer, E., Sun, C., & Liberman, R. (2010). Aggression and sexual behavior in best-selling pornography videos: A content analysis update. *Violence against women*, 16(10), 1065-1085.
- <sup>v</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>
- <sup>vi</sup> Peter, J., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2016). Adolescents and pornography: A review of 20 years of research. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 53(4-5), 509-531.
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report>
- <sup>viii</sup> Badillo-Urquiola, K., Harpin, S., Taliaferro, L., Ghosh, A. K., & Wisniewski, P. (2017, March). Assessing the Risks Versus Benefits of Conducting Research with Adolescents in Foster Care. In *Badillo-Urquiola, K., Harpin, S., Taliaferro, L., Ghosh, AK, and Wisniewski, P.(2017)“Assessing the Risks versus Benefits of Conducting Research with Adolescents in Foster Care,” Extended Abstract presented at the Workshop on Privacy Ethics at the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooper.*
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/opinion/sunday/pornhub-rape-trafficking.html>
- <sup>x</sup> <https://help.pornhub.com/hc/en-us/categories/360002934613>
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://techcrunch.com/2020/12/14/pornhub-removes-all-unverified-content-following-reports-of-exploitation/>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://help.pornhub.com/hc/en-us/categories/360002934613>
- <sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.counterpunch.org/2013/08/01/a-rare-defeat-for-corporate-lobbyists/>
- <sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-xpm-2012-oct-21-la-me-porn-condom-election-20121022-story.html>
- <sup>xv</sup> <https://www.xbiz.com/news/250712/new-bipartisan-bill-directly-threatens-section-230-of-communications-decency-act>
- <sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/15/business/pornhub-videos-removed/index.html>
- <sup>xvii</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/2020/12/14/22173858/pornhub-videos-removed-user-uploaded-visa-mastercard-verified>
- <sup>xviii</sup> <https://help.pornhub.com/hc/en-us/articles/227078148-Step-Two-Verification>