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This study posits that pornography, combined with the pervasiveness of smart phone technology, possesses the ability to negatively affect individual and social behaviors, impact command climates, and influence military culture writ large. Military leaders are encouraged to recognize the pornography threat and address the connection between the psychological and cultural impacts of pornography on individual and social behaviors such as loneliness, depression, and inappropriate sexual conduct. This study acknowledges the ongoing debate surrounding the censorship and definition of pornography. Therefore, a broadly accepted definition is used to help frame the problem. The study defines pornography as "professionally produced or user-generated pictures or videos (clips) intended to sexually arouse the viewer." The study then provides evidence from the field of neuroscience supporting the hypothesis that repeated and sustained exposure to internet pornography can be both personally and interpersonally harmful. Indeed, available research indicates that internet pornography contains the potential to influence cognitive functionality producing cascading effects on the user's personal and social behaviors. The study then explains how the pervasiveness of the smart phone may exacerbate the negative effects of internet pornography, and how Gen Z, the generation to which young service members belong, is disproportionately affected. Finally, the study identifies steps taken by organizations outside of the military to mitigate the negative effects associated with internet pornography use.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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**TITLE:**

**EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF PORNOGRAPHY ON THE UNITED STATES  
MILITARY**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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## Executive Summary

### Exploring the Influence of Pornography on the United States Military

**Author:** Major Benjamin J. O'Donnell, United States Marine Corps

**Thesis:** Pornography, combined with the pervasiveness of smart phone technology, possesses the ability to negatively affect individual and social behaviors, impact command climates, and influence military culture writ large. Military leaders ought to recognize the pornography threat and address the connection between the psychological and cultural impacts of pornography on individual and social behaviors such as loneliness, depression, and inappropriate sexual conduct.

**Discussion:** This study acknowledges the ongoing debate surrounding the censorship and definition of pornography. Therefore, a broadly accepted definition is used to help frame the problem. The study defines pornography as “professionally produced or user-generated pictures or videos (clips) intended to sexually arouse the viewer.” The study then provides evidence from the field of Neuroscience supporting the hypothesis that repeated and sustained exposure to internet pornography can be both personally and interpersonally harmful. Indeed, available research indicates that internet pornography contains the potential to influence cognitive functionality producing cascading effects on the user’s personal and social behaviors. The study then explains how the pervasiveness of the smart phone may exacerbate the negative effects of internet pornography, and how *Gen Z*, the generation to which young service members belong, is disproportionately affected. Finally, the study identifies steps taken by organizations outside of the military to mitigate the negative effects associated with internet pornography use.

**Conclusion:** The study offers two major recommendations based on its overall findings. The first recommendation asks the Department of Defense (DOD) to acknowledge existing evidence that indicates internet porn use may negatively impact military culture and, as a result, is detrimental to the overall readiness of the services. The DOD should then commission a team of industry professionals, social scientists, psychologists, and subject matter experts (military and civilian) to shine a light on the issue and conduct further research to understand the relationship between internet pornography use and the military. This commission should work directly with existing behavioral health offices in the military to encourage integrated research efforts and data sharing. The final recommendation is to develop a preliminary education series, targeting leaders, that outlines potential influences of internet pornography on command cultures. The educational series should also enable leaders to make informed unit level policy decisions and provide communication tools to facilitate effective and meaningful internet porn related conversations with Gen Z service members.

DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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## *Introduction*

### *Problem Statement*

The United States expects the young men and women of its Armed Forces to be professional managers and expert practitioners of violence in war. Military professionals exhibit qualities and virtues unique to military service that allow the professional to go forth into battle and righteously take another human life when called upon to do so by the state. Among the virtues required of the military professional is a strong sense of understanding or discernment between right and wrong in the context of war. America trusts its service members to skillfully carry out the duties of war making and, to borrow a line from the Marine's Hymn, "keep [their] honor clean" in the process.<sup>1</sup> A future war, particularly against a peer adversary, will undoubtedly require the absolute best of every warfighter – mind, body, and spirit. These elements must be fostered and developed within a military culture where warfighters learn to trust each other without reservation and treat each other with absolute dignity and respect. This paper posits that American service members are susceptible to attack from an unlikely yet exceedingly powerful adversary that seeks to infiltrate and influence the culture in which young warfighters learn their professions of arms. In barracks rooms and berthing spaces of every Base, Post, and Camp across the Department of Defense (DOD) a battle for the mind, individual and collective, is quietly taking place. Pornography, if left uncontested, possesses the capability to attack military culture and negatively influence individual and collective behaviors. Indeed, this study will explain how pornography may be one of the greatest threats facing young service members and the military culture to which they belong. This paper argues that the "pornification" of society and pervasiveness of the smart phone combine to create a legitimate threat to the mental, physical, and spiritual health and wellbeing of America's young service members. Military leaders are encouraged to recognize the pornography threat and address the

connection between the psychological and cultural impacts of pornography on individual and social behaviors such as loneliness, depression, and inappropriate sexual conduct.

### Research Questions and Methodology

This paper will be organized around the following research questions to address this problem: [1] How is pornography defined and conceptualized in the academic literature? It is important to acknowledge the diverse personal and professional experiences with this topic; therefore, providing a broadly accepted definition establishes a foundation for the reader and helps frame the problem. [2] What evidence exists to suggest that repeated and sustained exposure to pornography can be both personally and interpersonally destructive? Despite the potential difficulty and discomfort associated with this topic, an increasing amount of data suggests that it should be addressed. [3] How has the pervasiveness of the smart phone exacerbated possible negative effects of pornography? In what ways is Generation Z disproportionately affected? Understanding the impacts of pornography on this particular demographic is especially important in the United States military context where the majority of its junior enlisted are members of Generation Z. [4] Finally, what steps have been taken by private and public organizations (both within the United States and overseas) to combat the negative effects associated with pornography? The findings from these research questions will be summarized in the final section of the paper in the form of a recommendation for action to military leaders.

### Defining Terms

A myriad of definitions exist throughout academic literature to explain several key terms used in this paper. The author used two criteria to choose among the many available options the



most suitable for this work; 1) Appropriateness within the professional military context and 2) widely used, cited, and accepted throughout academia.

Pornography, or “porn” for short, is the first and most important term defined. The literature review in the following paragraphs acknowledges the ongoing debate surrounding what is and is not pornography. For the purposes of this study, however, the paper uses the following definition of pornography, “professionally produced or user-generated pictures or videos (clips) intended to sexually arouse the viewer.”<sup>2</sup> Another phrase often used throughout the work is “pornification of society.” Some researchers and social scientists will also use the word “pornographization” or replace “society” with “culture.” Some also refer to the pornification of society as the “sexualization of culture.” One sexuality scholar summed the idea well by defining the phase as:

The public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies, and panics around sex.<sup>3</sup>

Presently there exists a diverse range of academic work devoted to defining and understanding addiction, specifically porn addiction, from a scientific perspective. Most experts recognize two types of addiction, chemical and behavioral.<sup>4</sup> The first, chemical addiction, most commonly refers to exogenous drug addiction. The second type of addiction is behavioral and commonly referred to as natural process or endogenous addiction. This paper adopts The American Society of Addiction Medicine’s (ASAM) definition of addiction. ASAM explains addiction as, “a primary, chronic disease of brain reward, motivation, memory and related circuitry. Dysfunction in these circuits leads to characteristic biological, psychological, social, and spiritual manifestations. This is reflected in an individual pathologically pursuing reward and/or relief by substance use and other behaviors.”<sup>5</sup> The clinical and scientific explanations of

addiction are important to this current work to establish a baseline for the reader and ensure consistency throughout the paper.

The final term used frequently throughout the paper is “Generation Z” or “Gen Z”. There are several schools of thought who attempt to pin specific dates to the beginning and end of Gen Z. Therefore, the Oxford Dictionary’s succinct definition is the most appropriate for use in this paper. The dictionary describes Generation Z broadly as, “[a] group of people who were born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s, who are regarded as being *very familiar with the internet* [emphasis added].”<sup>6</sup>

### **Literature Review**

The current literature review acknowledges the vast amount of scholarly work devoted to pornography and addiction. The research covers a broad range of themes but primarily focuses on the neuroscience of addiction, the harmful side effects of internet addiction including the connection between pornography and destructive individual and social behaviors, and the implications for Generation Z. This section will begin by defining key terms used commonly throughout the paper such as pornography, or “porn”, internet addiction, and sexual violence. Defining these oft debated terms establishes a foundation or framework for the paper to build upon. The paper will then examine the most prominent negative impacts of repeat internet pornography exposure and focus on porn’s destructive effects on individual mental health, social behaviors, and interpersonal relationships. The literature review will conclude by arguing for why generation Z has become disproportionately affected by internet pornography due to the pervasiveness of the smart phone. After the literature review is complete, the next section of the paper will identify steps taken by private and public organizations to combat the negative effects associated with pornography. The paper concludes with recommended actions the DOD should

take to address the growing problem of internet pornography across the force and proposes further areas of research.

### *Pornography*

This section of the literature review acknowledges the ongoing debate surrounding the censorship and definition of pornography. Traditionally, the liberal perspective promotes freedom of expression, by consenting adults, to produce and consume pornographic material.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, for moral and religious reasons, the traditional conservative perspective views pornography as obscenity and opposes the production and consumption of pornographic material due to the harm it causes the participants.<sup>8</sup> The complicating matter continuing to fuel the debate is the issue of identifying a proper definition of pornography. Researchers and social scientists rarely agree. Ascribing an appropriate definition to the term proves more daunting than expected. Even a Supreme Court Justice famously once said, “I can't define pornography, but I know it when I see it.”<sup>9</sup> Several sociologists and psychiatrists characterize many popular definitions of pornography as overly broad, irrational, emotionally charged, or overtly dismissive throughout their works.<sup>10</sup> Attempting to solve the porn definition dilemma, one analytical philosopher suggests a rational approach to identify what is and is not pornography. He explained that what makes something pornographic is the reasonable belief that the material will be used as pornography by most of the audience for which it was produced.<sup>11</sup> The phrasing here is important to the current work in that it helps mitigate possible counter-argument based on subjective perspectives. In other words, it helps combat the “what you consider porn, I consider art” argument. Indeed, using this logic, it is reasonable to believe that explicit content projected by websites like *PornHub*, for example, intends to illicit overt sexual arousal of the projected audience, and not simply for artist viewing pleasure. A wealth of information exists within the

religious and secular arenas addressing the censorship, non-censorship, and associated definitions of pornography. Therefore, the current paper deliberately and rationally anchor terms and definitions using logic and reasoning to reduce the space needed to develop counter arguments based on subjectivity and stereotype. Indeed, this paper will avoid addressing issues from a moral perspective and research will focus on reviewing and analyzing data from across scientific disciplines to support the thesis. The next section of the literature review moves from defining pornography toward understanding the neuroscience of addiction and possible damage caused by repeat exposure to pornography.

### *Neuroscience of Addiction and Pornography*

Dr. Donald Hilton is a board-certified neurosurgeon and expert in the field of behavioral addiction. In a 2009 talk he provided a description of addiction useful to this current study, “addiction is present when there is continued compulsive pleasure-seeking behavior despite adverse consequences, whether the stimulus is from a chemical or an experience.”<sup>12</sup> In a 2011 study, he and a colleague argue that all addictions, exogenous and endogenous, not only produce chemical changes within the brain but anatomical and pathological changes as well. Brain damage caused by physical changes to the structure of the brain manifest as cerebral dysfunctions called hypofrontal syndromes.<sup>13</sup> Further, Fowler et al’s 2007 study, “Imagining the Addicted Human Brain,” uses magnetic resonance imaging to reveal brain damage caused by various types of addiction. Fowler et al. explained:

The frontal cortex is a brain region that supports logical thinking, goal setting, planning, and self-control. Numerous MRI studies have documented that addictive drugs cause volume and tissue composition changes in this region and that these changes are likely associated with abusers’ cognitive and decision-making problems.<sup>14</sup>

The study highlights that addiction (chemical use or behavioral process) contains the potential to create behavioral dysfunction by altering or damaging the brain. Fowler et al., however, do not directly address neither pornography nor internet related addictions.

Many behavioral scientists argue that behavioral addictions do indeed exist and can damage the brain just as potently as chemical substances. A well-known brain imager, Anna Rose Childress, once said, “sex addicts resemble cocaine addicts and probably share with them a defect in “inhibitory circuitry.”<sup>15</sup> Hilton and Watts’ 2011 study agrees. They describe the major defect associated with hypofrontal syndromes as damage to the “braking system” within the prefrontal cortex of the brain.<sup>16</sup> An overwhelming number of researchers agree that people who suffer from hypofrontal syndromes display aggressive behavior, lack judgement in strategic decision making, dismissiveness of potential negative consequences, and damaged self-control functions. Though the Hilton and Watts article supports the current paper’s notion that pornography addiction negatively influences behavior it does not thoroughly explain if and why pornography itself is indeed addictive.

Hilton asserts that “Pornography is a visual pheromone shrinking relationships, populations, and brains, and we must bring it into the light of understanding through the illumination and magnification of knowledge. We must understand what pornography causes, a true brain addiction in every sense of the word.”<sup>17</sup> Norman Doidge, well-known psychiatrist and author, digs deeply into the content of the above statement in his book *The Brain that Changes Itself*. Doidge suggests that the brain is less rigid than many scientists previously believed and describes the brain as plastic or flexible. Doidge explained that neurological pathways are created and altered as new behaviors are learned or experienced.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the data suggests the brain is very capable of modifying old or building completely new brain maps particularly with

repeat exposure to a stimulus. According to Doidge, compulsive and chronic internet pornography usage produces a constant release of dopamine into the brain's reward system.<sup>19</sup> The result of course is a neuroplastic change in the brain to reinforce the experience produced by the stimulus or activity. Doidge went on to describe how these neuroplastic changes build brain maps for sexual excitement and suggests that previously established brain maps for "natural" sexuality cannot compare to the newly developed ones.<sup>20</sup> The release of dopamine into the brain fuels the creation of maps generated by continued compulsive viewing of internet pornography. As the brain slowly becomes acclimatized to the current stimulus, however, the addicted individual must progress to more explicit and graphic forms of internet pornography to maintain a higher level of excitement.<sup>21</sup> Doidge's work supports the current studies suggestion that internet pornography may become addictive to some users.

### *Negative Effects of Pornography*

The second portion of the literature review focuses on pornography's potential negative influence on individual mental health, social behaviors, and interpersonal relationships. Yoder et al's 2005 article "Internet Pornography and Loneliness: An Association?" outlines research conducted to identify a possible connection between frequency in internet pornography usage and levels of individual loneliness.<sup>22</sup> The researchers determined an association between the two existed within the subjects who participated in the questionnaire. Yoder et al discovered the more an individual viewed internet pornography the lonelier they were based on a well know loneliness scoring rubric.<sup>23</sup> The researchers discovered the converse to be true as well in that less frequent internet pornography users scored lower on the loneliness scale.<sup>24</sup> The researchers did not directly address internet pornography *addiction*, but it stands to reason that individuals addicted to internet pornography are generally more depressed or lonelier than those who are not

addicted (limited users) or do not view internet pornography at all. Yoder et al's research is useful to the current study by identifying how repeat exposure to internet pornography can negatively impact individual mental health but fails to explain why.

Several studies help illuminate potential explanations by relating internet porn addiction and smartphone addiction. One study suggests that smart phone users are in danger of paying a high cognitive price for pervasive overuse or abuse of the technology. Indeed, researchers offer that “even when people are successful at maintaining sustained attention—as when avoiding the temptation to check their phones—the mere presence of these devices reduces available cognitive capacity.”<sup>25</sup> The cognitive defects become exacerbated with increased use and dependency. Researchers explain the connection between smartphone use and addiction through the lens of cognitive absorption. Cognitive absorption is a broad term generally defined as, “a state of deep involvement with software.”<sup>26</sup> Cognitive absorption occurs when there exists a, “temporal dissociation, focused immersion, heightened enjoyment, control, and curiosity.”<sup>27</sup> A further study suggests that addictive smartphone internet usage produces “cognitive dissociation” that is often linked to reduced cognition, depression, and loneliness. In 2019, Psychologist and PhD Linda Hatch explained the strengthening and dangerous connection between internet addiction and dissociation or “getting lost in the smart phone.”<sup>28</sup> Smartphone internet addiction produces repeated dissociation between the individual's online experiences and their real world. Hatch explains how time spent in a dissociated state online, absent from the real world, can lead to isolation and depression.<sup>29</sup> Pornography only complicates the issue. She explains, “When the escape into tech involves porn, masturbation, cybersex and any sexually arousing material, the dissociative experience becomes many times more compelling due to the powerful sexual reward involved.”<sup>30</sup> The author's research devoted to dissociation assist the current study's efforts to identify connections between internet pornography addiction and destructive social behavior.

Most research surrounding pornography and destructive behavior seems to focus on heterosexual social relationships and sexual behaviors. Paul Wright and Robert Tokunaga, in a 2015 study, argue a connection exists between male propensity to display attitudes supportive of violence (ASV) against women as well as objectification of women and their consumption or exposure to pornography, men's magazines, and reality TV. They define pornography as "as content appearing in any mediated venue that depicted female nudity and/ or graphic sexual acts involving women such as intercourse or oral sex."<sup>31</sup> They discovered in their research that, "the more men reported exposure to these media, the stronger were their notions of women as sex objects, and the stronger their notions were of women as sex objects, the more they expressed ASV."<sup>32</sup> Their research provides evidence important to the current study's position that internet pornography addiction may influence behaviors and attitudes regarding "normal" sexual interactions between males and females.

John Foubert, Matthew Brosi, and Sean Bannon sought to identify possible connections between college age male pornography usage and bystander intervention, rape myth acceptance, and behavioral intent to commit sexual assault in their 2011 study at Oklahoma State University.<sup>33</sup> The researchers discovered a strong correlation between frequency of pornography use and destructive behavior. The study showed that males who view pornography are significantly less likely to intervene as a bystander, report an increased behavioral intent to rape, and are more likely to believe rape myths.<sup>34</sup> Foubert, et al's disturbing discoveries provides evidence supporting the current study's thesis and the dangerous connection between pornography usage and destructive social behaviors. Similar research conducted by Michele Ybarra and Richard Thompson in 2018 supports this paper's themes. They identified that repeat exposure to violent pornography as a predictor of perpetration of multiple types of sexual



violence.<sup>35</sup> A similar study also links pornography to increased female sexual victimization. Researchers discovered that 14 to 19 year old females who watched porn stood a much higher chance of being victims of sexual harassment or sexual assault than those who do not.<sup>36</sup> The potential for this kind of disturbing outcome has heightened significance for a specific generational demographic, which will be discussed in the following paragraph.

### *Pornography and Generation Z*

“Generation Z,” also commonly referred to as Gen Z, and iGen are terms used to describe Americans born generally between 1995/1997 and 2012.<sup>37</sup> This paper will exclusively use the term Generation Z for the sake of consistency. This portion of the literature review recognizes just a sampling of academic work completed to unpack the uniqueness of the generation to which over 50% of Active Duty personnel in the United States Military belong.<sup>38</sup> The Marine Corps’ numbers are even higher. Indeed, 70% of the Marine Corps’ enlisted ranks are populated by Gen Z men and women.<sup>39</sup> Gen Z is the most technologically connected and socially networked generation to date; and this paper will argue that internet pornography disproportionately affects Gen Z due to the pervasiveness of the smartphone.

Over 96% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 own a smartphone.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps more surprising is the fact that over 25% of Gen Z received their first smart phone by the age of 10.<sup>41</sup> Well known psychologist Jeanne Twenge argues that the smart phone is causing severe psychological damage to Gen Z. Indeed, screen time, fueled by addictive online content, is resulting in less face-to-face social interaction and more cases of clinical depression than any previous generation.<sup>42</sup> Twenge warns that Gen Z is “on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades.”<sup>43</sup> Twenge does not specifically address Gen Z usage of internet pornography but additional statistics and data helps to make the connection. Studies suggests that 50% of Gen

Z males spend at least five hours a day on their phones.<sup>44</sup> Though it is possible that Gen Z spends most of their screen time texting and surfing social media, a case can be made that more nefarious activities are also occurring. James White, author of a recent Gen Z focused book provides some alarming data. He offers data suggesting as many as 70% of 18-34 year-olds regularly view internet pornography.<sup>45</sup> He continues to posit that the average Gen Z American is first exposed to and begins watching pornography at 11 years old.<sup>46</sup> The case is strengthened by considering the enormity and pervasiveness of the internet porn industry. As an example, *Pornhub*, just one of many popular internet porn sites, releases an annual “year in review” proudly sharing with the world their massive numbers. In 2019, the site received over 42 billion visits (115 million visits a day) – 8.5 billion more visits than 2018.<sup>47</sup> Pornhub also claims that the largest percentage of its users range between 18 and 34 years old.<sup>48</sup> These statistics are especially disturbing given the recent findings of Kristof devoted to the prominence of elementary and middle school-age videos found on the site.<sup>49</sup> This discovery led to leaders in the credit card industry, Visa and Mastercard, cancelling their business with Pornhub.<sup>50</sup> Though it is impossible to know in detail the demographics associated with porn site visits, it is important to consider the likelihood that many fall within the Gen Z demographic and are the very service members the military so values.

### **Implications for the Military**

#### **Avoiding Uncomfortable Conversations**

A 2019 Gallup poll discovered that 61% of Americans find pornography morally wrong.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, as previously mentioned, the porn industry enjoys continued unprecedented success. The apparent disconnect between Americans’ thoughts on morality and the reality of what they do in their private lives is fascinating for many reasons. Perhaps the

disparity, at the very least, helps illuminate military leaders' apprehension or reluctance to address porn use within their commands. Some military leaders may simply be unprepared to respond to a chance encounter with service members and porn – particularly in the barracks – leading to an awkward exchange and rapid break in contact. Whatever the reason, the reality of the situation needs addressing through open and frank dialogue. Preparation and readiness to engage in educated conversation and patient discussion is key. Military leaders cannot remain hesitant to address possible porn issues within their commands while members of their ranks suffer the consequences of its influence on their culture.

### *Internet Porn: A Public Health Crisis?*

What is a public health crisis? Unfortunately, experts seem to disagree. The myriad of formulaic definitions and the complex nature of issues to be possibly label a “crisis” encouraged professors at Boston University’s School of Health to weigh-in on the subject. According to the professors, the problem “must [1] affect large numbers of people, it must [2] threaten health over the long-term, and it must [3] require the adoption of large-scale solutions.”<sup>52</sup> Does internet pornography fit within the aforementioned parameters to be labeled a public health crisis? The jury appears divided on the issue; however, an increasing body of evidence has led several American states to make declarations in the affirmative.

In 2016, the state of Utah successfully passed into law a bill that proclaimed pornography a public health crisis. The resolution declares:

This concurrent resolution of the Legislature and the Governor recognizes that pornography is a public health hazard leading to a broad spectrum of individual and public health impacts and societal harms.<sup>53</sup>

The state resolution continues by calling the porn problem an “epidemic” and lists over 20 harmful mental and physical effects of pornography use; many of them discussed in this essay.<sup>54</sup>

In 2020, Utah continued to attack the porn issue by signing into law legislation requiring pornography producers to include a “warning label” on all content deemed obscene.<sup>55</sup> Utah provided a powerful example for other states to emulate. Since 2017, 16 additional states passed similar legislative resolutions declaring pornography a public health crisis. Five of those states’ resolutions, so far, successfully passed through both the Senate and House and one state Governor, from Tennessee, signed an anti-porn bill into law (Ohio and Texas’ bills are still in committee at the time of the current study).<sup>56</sup>

The porn issue is not uniquely American. Pornography has rapidly become a global issue particularly with the proliferation of the internet and affordable smartphone technology. In 2020, Thailand’s government took an unprecedented, and exceedingly unpopular, stance against pornography and banned many internet pornography websites like *PornHub* because they violate its internet laws.<sup>57</sup> In 2017 the United Kingdom (UK) nearly passed a law-making porn more difficult to access. Indeed, Part 3 of the Digital Economy Act of 2017 was specific legislation attempting to censor pornography in the UK. Part 3 would have forced online porn customers to provide proof of age over 18 years old and forced internet providers to block all adult content unless customers “opted in” to the content.<sup>58</sup> Part 3, however, was scrapped in late 2019 after numerous delays and pressure from porn industry lobbyists.<sup>59</sup> Actions taken around the world to combat that perceived harmful effects of pornography are encouraging, but the efforts of the well-intentioned are consistently rebuffed by powerful special interest groups and those who fail to acknowledge data supporting their claims.

#### *Current Sentiment: Tacit Acceptance*

The Military Honor and Decency Act of 1996 prohibited the “sale or rental of sexually explicit material on property under Department of Defense (DOD) jurisdiction.”<sup>60</sup> Despite

congressional action, the Army and Air Force continued to stock shelves in base and post stores with pornographic magazines until 2013 – and the Navy not until 2019.<sup>61</sup> What were the final catalysts of change? Maybe the DOD, after a decade of turning a blind eye, gained a conscious or felt compelled to adhere to and enforce the 1996 Act following careful consideration of research findings that underscore the negative effects of porn consumption. Dwindling revenue from the sales of pornographic materials also provides a convincing reason for a changed tone and final “adherence” to policy. After all, service members need not purchase off the shelf goods at the post exchange when there exists an entire world of free material so easily accessible on the internet. Indeed, it is reasonable to believe that pornographic magazines simply could not compete with the emerging internet porn industry behemoth. The DOD’s perceived lack of interest and effort to address the seriousness of the porn issue continues to promulgate its tacit acceptance. Perhaps senior leaders should not have been so confused, baffled, and shocked when the Marines United scandal broke in 2017. Available research suggests that internet pornography is not simply a harmless form of free speech, but rather needs to be addressed seriously and specifically by leaders at every level.

Most state level resolutions mentioned in the previous section contain limited powers or authority to ban, censor, or limit the proliferation and distribution of pornography. So why even mention them? The value of a resolution, in this specific case, is in the states’ public recognition that a problem exists – an important first step toward change. The resolution is a call to action and provides a platform to inform and impetus to educate a constituency. The porn resolution acts as a foot in the door to shine a light into a dark room exposing the hidden troubles of the porn industry and the potential negative effects caused by its consumption. The DOD, like many

state legislatures, should consider officially recognizing pornography as a valid health issue that poses a legitimate threat to the mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing of its service members.

In May 2019, the acting Secretary of Defense (SecDef) released a memorandum titled *Actions to Address and Prevent Sexual Assault in the Military* following the DOD's worst year of reported sexual assaults in recent history. The DOD Annual Report on Sexual Assault in the Military for fiscal year (FY) 19 found 6,236 reports of sexual assault across the services - a 3% increase from the previous year.<sup>62</sup> According to the annual document, the preponderance of sexual assault victims in FY19 were female service members ranging from 17 to 24 years old and alleged offenders were almost always the victims' peer.<sup>63</sup> In other words, a majority of sexual assaults were perpetrated by male Gen Z service members. The acting SecDef's 2019 three-page call to action memo to the services concludes with, "we must do everything we can to eliminate sexual harassment and assault in the military."<sup>64</sup> The numbers and statistics provided in the annual report, however, suggest that current strategies are not as effective as they could be. Indeed, since the vast majority of alleged victims and offenders of sexual assault in the military are Gen Z then perhaps a new approach is in order – one that addresses *all* the issues facing young service members.

A simple search for the words "pornography," "explicit," and "objectification" in the DOD's Annual Report on Sexual Assault yielded zero results. A similar search in the DOD's official Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) website resulted in the same. Available research suggest that a sexualization of American culture (and by default – military culture) has led to the objectification of women in the minds of too many young men for porn to go completely unmentioned. Consider the convincing critique of military culture offered by Dani Pinter, lead Attorney with The National Center on Sexual Exploitation:

It is naive of the Department of Defense to allow an atmosphere where servicemen may treat women as sex objects in some contexts and then expect them to be respectful and unified with their sisters in arms.<sup>65</sup>

The porn industry appears to benefit from a generalized objectification of women, and the DOD ought to abhor such degradation. Yet the DOD seems resistant to take a position on the issue. Meanwhile, pornography continues, unchallenged, to infiltrate and influence military culture and the behaviors of young American service members. Sexual assault is extensively referenced in this paper because it offers the most compelling case for change. Yet sexual assault is but one of the many possible negative behaviors associated with pornography.

In calendar year (CY) 2019, 498 service members lost their lives to suicide and over 46% of active-duty decedents were 17 to 24 years old (Gen Z).<sup>66</sup> The DOD's annual suicide report for CY 2019 explained, "the two most common diagnoses were (1) Adjustment Disorder (clinically significant distress or impairment in response to a stressor), and (2) Substance Use Disorder (misuse or abuse of mood-altering substances)."<sup>67</sup> The availability of research supporting claims that link internet porn addiction to loneliness, the feeling of isolation, and clinical depression is somewhat limited and far from conclusive. Yet correlations do exist, and the current evidence is convincing enough to warrant further investigation. DOD suicide reporting does not discuss decedents' internet related behaviors and capturing such data points may prove difficult considering the private nature of the behavior. Regardless, the DOD should make an attempt to further understand the possible connections between the two – internet related activities (like pornography) and attitudes and behaviors that lead to depression, loneliness, and suicide.

The following section of the paper provides senior military decision makers several recommendations that will allow the DOD to regain the initiative and defeat one of the greatest threats facing the young military mind.

## *Recommended Next Steps*

### *Activate a Porn Commission*

Military leaders should acknowledge the body of evidence presented in this work (indicating that internet porn use within the ranks may negatively impact individual behaviors and its military culture writ large) and continue an independent study of its own. The DOD is encouraged to create a team of industry professionals, social scientists, psychologists, and subject matter experts (military and civilian) commissioned to explore the relationship between pornography and the military. The porn team should first seek to gain a full appreciation for the size and scope of the relationship by conducting detailed mission analysis before beginning comprehensive research efforts. The team will consolidate existing research and analyze internal and external sources of data to provide decision makers with the information required to communicate guidance to the force. Transparency is key throughout this operation and all interested parties must be kept informed and aware of the team's actions and activities. Therefore, the team will regularly publish its findings to the force and offer periodic briefings to elected and appointed civilian leaders. Another of the team's critical tasks is to integrate with behavioral health related organizations within the DOD, mainly the military health system, Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office (SAPRO), Defense Suicide Prevention Office (DSPO), and the Total Force Fitness branch to inform plan of action development. A strong relationship between the porn commission and existing behavioral health and performance offices within the DOD will facilitate the successful accomplishment of ongoing and future initiatives. Additionally, the commission should assist DOD behavioral health offices in the development of data collection tools that capture information relating to service members' internet behaviors and activities. The SAPRO, for example, should question sexual assault



offenders and victims alike regarding their internet behaviors (i.e. “How frequently do you visit pornographic websites or view pornographic material?”). Likewise, the DSPO should include decedent internet porn usage history in their studies to identify possible linkages with suicide causal factors in service members.

The Porn Commission’s findings will inform future DOD wide policy decisions. However, this study encourages leaders at all levels to immediately begin exploring possible resolutions within their own units. A broad spectrum of measured response type solutions exist ranging from internal (unit level) administrative policy reform to transformational change within the culture of a service. Regardless, leaders must remain heavily engaged throughout the entire process. John Kotter, Harvard Business School professor, explains that leaders must “create a sense of urgency” to spur organizational change.<sup>68</sup> Leaders can instill a determined sense of resolve by communicating the seriousness of the porn issue and declaring the cultural status quo untenable.

### *Equip Leaders*

While the DOD awaits the Porn Commission’s final report it should begin equipping its leaders with basic tools to jumpstart meaningful internet porn related conversations within their units. Available research suggests that pornography influences four of the eight Total Force Fitness (TFF) domains designed to integrate “health, resilience, and human performance” – physical fitness, psychological fitness, spiritual fitness, and social fitness.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, this study recommends the TFF branch take lead in the development of a curricula that enables leaders to effectively communicate the potential negative influences of internet pornography (and other inappropriate internet related sexual behaviors) on service member behaviors and their command climates under the banner of “total fitness.”

Closing the generational gaps between leader and led is critically important to the spread of effective messaging and meaningful dialogue. Military leaders, particularly senior leaders, need to better understand *who* they are leading. Every new generation of young service member – regardless of service – is unique. Military leaders must understand that what worked for Millennials (i.e. leadership strategies) may prove completely ineffective on members of Gen Z. Gen Z is particularly distinct because of the profound impact of the smart phone on its members. Thus, the first installment of the internet porn education series targeting leaders should begin with lessons that illuminate the complexities associated with leading Gen Z.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Summary**

Pornography, combined with the pervasiveness of smart phone technology, possesses the ability to negatively affect individual and social behaviors, impact command climates, and influence military culture writ large. Senior military leaders ought to recognize these potential harms and deal with pornography more seriously. This study acknowledges the ongoing debate surrounding the censorship and definition of pornography. Therefore, a broadly accepted definition is used to help frame the problem. The study defines pornography as “professionally produced or user-generated pictures or videos (clips) intended to sexually arouse the viewer.” The study then provides evidence from the field of Neuroscience supporting the hypothesis that repeated and sustained exposure to internet pornography can be both personally and interpersonally harmful. Indeed, available research indicates that internet pornography contains the potential to influence cognitive functionality producing cascading effects on the user’s personal and social behaviors. The study then explains how the pervasiveness of the smart phone may exacerbate the negative effects of internet pornography, and how Gen Z, the generation to

which young service members belong, is disproportionately affected. Finally, the study identifies steps taken by organizations outside of the military to mitigate the negative effects associated with internet pornography use.

The study offers two major recommendations based on the above findings. The first recommendation asks the DOD to acknowledge existing evidence that indicates internet porn use may negatively impact military culture and, as a result, is detrimental to the overall readiness of the services. The DOD should then commission a team of industry professionals, social scientists, psychologists, and subject matter experts (military and civilian) to shine a light on the issue and conduct further research to understand the relationship between internet pornography use and the military. This commission should work directly with existing behavioral health offices in the military (DSPO, SAPRO, and TFF) to encourage integrated research efforts and data sharing. The final recommendation is to develop a preliminary education series, targeting leaders, that outlines potential influences of internet pornography on command cultures. The educational series should also enable leaders to make informed unit level policy decisions and provide communication tools to facilitate effective and meaningful internet porn related conversations with Gen Z service members.

### Limitations

The current study produced enough evidence to warrant a legitimate DOD response – mainly, to acknowledge the existence of the threat and devote time and resource to the fully understanding the issue. Further research is needed, and recommended, to inform policy decisions on the matter.

The limited scope of this study reinforced the need to avoid detailed discussions regarding the interconnectedness of societal and military ethics and their complicated

relationships with American culture and pornography writ large. Likewise, arguments made for and against pornography from a moral perspective, though important to the greater conversation, were purposefully not addressed.

### *Final Thoughts*

Nevertheless, future war against an undetermined peer adversary will undoubtedly require the very best of every warfighter – mind, body, and spirit. These three interconnected parts of every warfighter must be nurtured and developed in a culture that is grounded in mutual trust, absolute dignity, and complete respect of its members. Yet, these foundational underpinnings are constantly under attack, and not by some peer adversary or nefarious non-state actor, but by pornographic content projected through a six-inch screen of the smart phone.

War has often been described as “long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror.” The adage rings true for anyone who has experienced the highs and lows of combat. The war for influence over the mind, individual and collective, is much different – combat never ceases. Indeed, there exists no “lows” or lulls in a battle with internet pornography. The pornification of society and pervasiveness of the smart phone combine to create a legitimate threat to the mental, physical, and spiritual health and wellbeing of America’s young service members. Nevertheless, internet pornography’s victory over the DOD is not a fait accompli. Military leaders must recognize the severity of the threat and begin to address the issue head on. The war for influence is one the US military can and must win. Time to have some difficult conversations.

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