



Cybersecurity experts form team to tackle porn addiction

A group of women academics with a passion for technology have joined hands to raise awareness about the dangers of being exposed to pornography inappropriately, especially for young children

A team of women at Nelson Mandela University in the Eastern Cape wants to tackle porn addiction in communities by creating a safe space for people to go if they believe that porn exposure or addiction is having an impact on their lives or those of their children, and they need help dealing with it.



By Estelle Ellis

The team includes Prof Darelle van Greunen, director of the Centre for Community Technologies, Prof Kerry-Lynn Thomson of the Centre for Research in Information and Cyber Security, and cybersecurity expert Dr Noluxolo Gaza.

Together they intend to tackle this escalating problem, which has become very serious in the past few years, especially since the forced isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

“A few months ago, a few of us were talking about how we can combine our passion and interest for cybersecurity and taking technology to communities. Then we started talking about the topical issues that we needed to consider,” says Van Greunen.

“There was quite a lot of coverage in the press about porn addiction at the time. It was always an issue, but it is more of a pressing issue now.”

Thomson says they are working from the viewpoint that it is great to roll out technology and give children access to the digital space, but it is negligent to do so without warning them about the risks.

“Porn addiction is one of those risks,” she says.

The plan is to start by giving caregivers information so that they can understand the technology environment they are creating, especially for children.

“It is an uncomfortable topic for any parent or teacher to broach with a child or a teenager,” says Thomson. She points out that research shows that children will likely be exposed to porn between the ages of eight and 12, though some will encounter it at a younger age.

Thomson says even videos that are considered “safe” to watch, like *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Peppa Pig*, are being corrupted by creators who are inserting inappropriate sexual behaviour and violence into videos that look like they are these cartoons.

“Also, even if a parent is doing everything possible to prevent a child from being exposed, we have all heard the story – they go to a friend’s house where there are no controls. I say let’s raise awareness of this issue. Kids are getting addicted to porn as well.”

At this stage, says Thomson, the idea is to do a series of short videos that are to the point.

“These will explain what porn addiction is, how harmful it is and how this can be children’s first sexual encounter and shape the way for them going forward. It can encourage them to be promiscuous at a much younger age.”

This, in turn, will increase their risk of HIV, teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence, Thomson explains. “Look at the way women are portrayed in porn. It shapes the way they are thinking.”

The videos will also address the issue of what to do if a child is exposed to porn and how to intervene if

there are signs that a child is becoming reliant on it. “We are not experts, we want to raise awareness,” says Thomson.

Van Greunen says the team wants to involve other role-players, including teachers and experts in the social sciences, at a later stage.

“We want to build on the lessons we have learnt during the Covid-19 pandemic on how to reach people, broach sensitive topics and tackle stigma.

“We want to combine these lessons with what we know works and then take the content, digitise it and

on to younger age groups. “That will be a whole different set of videos.”

In the next phases of the project, the team will consider developing an app to connect people to a professional who can help them with their addiction concerns in real time.

“Ultimately, in time to come, one can have a network of psychologists and social workers who can talk in real time,” says Van Greunen. “There are people in South Africa, psychology experts, who will be able to help. We will in time involve them as well to see what would be the best way. There may be therapy one can offer via technology. You have to be realistic.”

Van Greunen says the team realises that stigma will be a huge issue. “We want to set up an ecosystem to deal with porn addiction in South Africa.”

According to Thomson, they also want to distribute content to inform parents and caregivers how they can prevent their children being exposed to porn.

“There are arguments that show that porn in the right context can be beneficial, but not for little kids. This is something new that is done in secret. They have these devices and their parents don’t always know what they are thinking,” says Thomson.

“It changes the way they view sex. Research shows that children find it harder to recover from porn addiction than adults, mostly because they are exposed to it when they can’t tell the difference between fantasy and reality. It then becomes their normal.

“People think it is a safe space, but they do not realise how harmful it is.”

Like any addiction, “you start with something small and then you explore further”, Van Greunen adds.

The team is also considering expanding the project to include training law enforcement officers. This is necessary, says Van Greunen, because new internet legislation was introduced in South Africa in March and further amendments will follow.

“We must know how to implement this legislation,” she says.

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