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Examining the Concept of “Harm” in Sex Consumption

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Sexual morality tends to be decided on one of two grounds: either the intrinsic rightness/wrongness of the act (as advocated for by certain religious and teleological accounts); or based on the consequences, in particular, the harms associated with the act. This paper will be concerned with the latter, consequentialist account. Advocates of sex work and online sex consumption predicate their argument on the liberal belief that a consenting adult is free to do anything provided s/he does not harm another person. Those who morally object to sex work and/or online sex consumption on consequentialist grounds argue that such consumption does lead to harms: to those participating in the acts and to society at large. I will examine both the coherence of these arguments and the existence of evidence for such harms. In particular, I will be looking at evidence for the phenomenon of addictive sex consumption. I will conclude by evaluating whether the supposed harms are sufficient grounds to change current regulations in Ireland around sex consumption, using Hart’s jurisprudential model.

I am a Senior Lecturer in Ethics Studies at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I am currently on sabbatical at DCU to complete my PhD, which is entitled “Reason, Emotion and Literature in Moral Decision-Making”. I am a founding member of the Ethics Society of South Africa, and have been South Africa’s representative on the International Network of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics for several years. I have consulted for the World Health Organisation, the South African Department of Health, and the IAAVI-funded HIV/AIDS Vaccines Group. My publications are generally in the field of the ethics of health research.