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## Pornography Use and Sexism Among Heterosexual Men

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## Pornography Use and Sexism Among Heterosexual Men

## Abstract

The idea that pornography promotes sexism is a commonly purported one. This study employed an online sample of heterosexual men ( $N = 323$ ) to investigate the relationship between pornography use (in terms of both overall level of pornography use and use of violent and/or humiliating pornography) and old-fashioned and modern sexism. The moderating effects of agreeableness and perceived realism of pornography were also assessed. Level of general pornography use and use of violent and/or humiliating pornography was not predictive of either sexism measure. Agreeableness was negatively predictive of both sexism measures, whereas perceived realism was positively predictive of sexism. Agreeableness and perceived realism did not moderate the relationship between level of pornography use and any of the outcome measures.

**Keywords:** Attitudes; Men; Pornography; Sexism

### **Pornography Use and Sexism Among Heterosexual Men**

Theories of sexual media socialisation generally contend that if pornography can shape the attitudes and behaviours of consumers, it does so as a result of the kinds of behaviours and social relations it routinely depicts. Referencing *sexual script theory* (Simon & Gagnon, 1986)—which posits that human sexual behavior is guided by organized cognitive schemas known as “scripts”—this process of sexual media shaping the attitudes and behaviors of consumers is sometimes referred to as *scripting*. Scripting effects may be very specific or more abstract. Abstract scripting occurs when “consumers infer the underlying philosophy guiding media models’ actions (e.g., the pleasurable nature of recreational sex) and then apply this generalized script to scenarios beyond those overtly depicted” (Wright & Bae, 2016, pp. 556–557). Inferring and internalising sexist beliefs as a result of viewing pornography in which women are presented as “less than” men, would be an example of abstract scripting.

So how does pornography portray women? There is some content analytic work to suggest that mainstream pornography frequently depicts women in degrading or objectifying ways. For example, themes of female submission, male domination (Gorman, Monk-Turner, & Fish, 2010), and exploitation (Klaasan & Peter, 2015) have been found to occur frequently in mainstream pornography. Furthermore, when unequal power dynamics are present between characters, women are much more likely to be depicted as the submissive partner (Klaasan & Peter, 2015). Other content analyses have found pornography to focus on men’s pleasure at the expense of women’s pleasure (Fritz & Paul, 2017; Klaasan & Peter, 2015). Finally, some authors (Bridges et al., 2010) use pornography’s frequent inclusion of, what they term, “degrading” sex acts (e.g., external ejaculation) as evidence that much of mainstream pornography debases women. Not all authors agree that mainstream pornography is highly demeaning of women (e.g., McKee, 2005), nonetheless, it appears likely that at least

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some pornography contains generalized scripts which present women in limited and problematic ways. Accordingly, pornography may promote sexist beliefs among consumers.

In the prejudice literature, a distinction is frequently made between “old-fashioned” and “modern” forms of prejudice (Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995). Old-fashioned prejudice (also called classical, blatant, or overt prejudice) is characterised by explicit endorsement of negative stereotypes of outgroup members. Modern prejudice (also called covert prejudice) is subtler in nature. It is characterized by perceiving discrimination against the outgroup to be a thing of the past, and antagonism toward those who act contrary to this view. It is argued that as the expression of overt prejudice has become less socially acceptable, those who hold prejudicial beliefs are more likely to express these beliefs in their subtler, modern form (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005). Accordingly, measuring only old-fashioned forms of prejudice may not accurately reflect attitudes regarding an outgroup.

This two-factor model of prejudice has been applied in the context of racism (Swim et al., 1995), heterosexism (Cowan, Heiple, Marquez, Khatchadourian, & McNevin, 2005), attitudes toward people with intellectual disabilities (Akrami, Ekehammar, Claesson, & Sonnander, 2006), and sexism. Old-fashioned sexism is characterized by endorsement of traditional gender roles (e.g., viewing women are nurturers), negative female stereotyping (e.g., believing women to be less intelligence than men), and endorsement of differential treatment of men and women (Swim et al., 1995). Modern sexism is associated with insensitivity to gender inequality, antagonism toward the demands of women’s advocates, and resentment about special favours for women (Swim et al., 1995). While modern sexism may seem “less bad” relative to old-fashioned sexism, it can still have damaging effects. The foundational belief of modern sexism is that gender discrimination is no longer present within our society (Becker & Swim, 2011). Accordingly, endorsement of modern sexist beliefs can promote maintenance of the status quo and a lack of action to address gender inequality

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(Becker & Swim, 2011). This is further complicated by the fact that many do not recognize expressions of modern sexism as prejudicial (Barreto & Ellemers, 2005).

The extant research into the association between pornography use and sexism is mixed. Longitudinal studies has found pornography use to be associated with viewing women as sex objects (Peter & Valkenburg, 2009), and less progressive gender role attitudes (Brown & L'Engle, 2009). Conversely, several experimental studies have failed to show an association between experimental exposure to pornography and sexism (Barak & Fisher, 1997; Barak, Fisher, Belfry, & Lashambe, 1999; Padgett, Brislin-Slütz, & Neal, 1989), or have found experimental exposure to pornography to be associated with sexism, but only among men low in agreeableness (Hald, Malamuth, & Lange, 2013).

Cross-sectional studies have found pornography use to be unrelated to sexism (McKee, 2007); associated with more egalitarian beliefs regarding some gender issues (e.g., women working outside the home; Kohut, Baer, & Watts, 2016); and associated with endorsement of hostile sexism (Hald, Malamuth, & Lange, 2013).

To our best knowledge, only one study has previously assessed the relationship between pornography use and old-fashioned and modern sexism (Garos, Beggan, Kluck, & Easton, 2004). This small, cross-sectional study found pornography use to be unrelated to old-fashioned sexism and negatively associated with modern sexism.

### **Potential Moderators**

These cross-study inconsistencies may indicate the need for researchers to account for moderating variables. Compared to general sexism, pornography's association with attitudes supportive of violence against women (ASV) has been studied extensively (see Allen, Emmers, Gebhardt, & Giery, 1995; Hald, Malamuth, & Yuen, 2010), with several moderators of this relationship being suggested. These include agreeableness and the perceived realism

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of pornography. Given the conceptual overlap between ASV and general sexism, these variables may also affect the nature of the relationship between pornography use and sexism.

**Agreeableness.** The Hierarchical Confluence Model of Sexual Aggression (HCM) posits that the effect of pornography on sexually aggressive attitudes differs as a function of risk for sexual aggression (Malamuth & Hald, 2017). That is, the effect of pornography will be more pronounced among individuals who are already high on risk factors for sexual aggression and less pronounced, or non-existent, for those who are low on such risk factors. Two distinct constellations of risk factors are recognised as part of this model (Malamuth & Hald, 2017): hostile masculinity (HM) and impersonal sex (IS). HM involves a narcissistic and hostile orientation (particularly towards women), and sexual gratification from domination. IS involves a detached orientation toward sexual relations.

The HCM has been expanded to understand the influence of the big-five personality factor *agreeableness* on the association between pornography use and attitudes toward women. Experimental exposure to pornography has been found to be associated with attitudes supporting violence against women (Hald & Malamuth, 2015) and hostile sexism (Hald et al., 2013) among low-agreeableness men, but not high-agreeableness men. It has been suggested (Malamuth & Hald, 2017) agreeableness acts as a parsimonious (albeit loose) index of HM and IS (i.e., those high in agreeableness will likely be low in HM and IS).

**Perceived Realism.** Perceived realism of pornography refers to the degree to which individuals believe that the sexual situations depicted in pornography are accurate representations of “real-world” sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010). Hald et al. (2013) have suggested that perceived realism may moderate the relationship between pornography use and attitudes toward women, such that those who think pornography is realistic in its depictions of sexual behaviours and relationships are more likely to be influenced by it.

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Perceived realism as a concept is not limited to pornography research, and is employed in the cultivation effects literature more generally. For example, perceived realism of television programs can influence television's effect on viewer's perceptions of frequently televised themes (Busselle, 2001). This may be because media messages perceived as realistic are more likely to be attended to, stored in memory, and drawn on when making judgements (Wright, 2011).

### **Current Study**

It is also worth noting that violent pornography use has been found to have a more pronounced relationship with ASV than non-violent pornography use (Allen et al., 1995; Hald et al., 2010). Thus, general pornography use and violent and/or humiliating<sup>1</sup> pornography use are assessed separately in the current study. Three research questions are investigated:

- RQ1: Is pornography use (in terms of both overall level of use and use of violent and/or humiliating content) predictive of sexism (old-fashioned or modern)?
- RQ2: Are agreeableness and perceived realism of pornography predictive of sexism?
- RQ3: Do agreeableness or perceived realism moderate the associations between pornography use and sexism?

To the authors' best knowledge, this is the first study to assess the association between pornography use and old-fashioned and modern sexism, outside of Garos et al. (2004).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Data for this study were taken from a larger online survey into the effects of pornography use (see WITHHELD FOR REVIEW). The final sample used in this analysis comprised 323 self-identified heterosexual men<sup>2</sup> ( $M_{\text{age}} = 27.97$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.26$ ). Just under



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half of the sample (45.2%) consisted of students, with the remainder (54.8%) being non-students. The bulk of participants (41.8%) resided in the Pacific (Australia and New Zealand), the US (26.9%), or Asia (19.5%), and under half (46.2%) indicated that they were not currently in a relationship.

### Measures

**Pornography use.** Frequency of pornography use was measured with a scale ranging from 1 = *less than monthly* to 8 = *more than once a day*. Average viewing session length was assessed via a scale anchored by 1 = *less than 5 minutes* and 6 = *greater than 60 minutes*. An index of level of pornography consumption over the past six months was created by z-standardising and then averaging these two items.

Using a dichotomous response format (no/yes), participants were also asked to indicate whether they regularly view violent pornography and whether they regularly view pornography which they feel “humiliates the performers involved” (where regular viewing is designated as at least once per month, over a six-month period). Violent pornography was defined for participants as “pornography depicting violent acts (e.g., whipping or simulations of forced sex).” These two questions were then collapsed to create a single dichotomous variable: regular use of violent/humiliating material (no/yes).

**Agreeableness.** Agreeableness was measured using the agreeableness subscale of Sucier’s (1994) short-form big five scale. The subscale consists of eight Likert-style items anchored by 1 = *extremely inaccurate* to 9 = *extremely accurate*. In the present study the scale had an alpha of .82.

**Perceived realism.** The perceived realism of pornography was measured using a scale developed by Peter and Valkenburg (2010). The scale consists of six Likert-style items anchored by 1 = *fully disagree* and 5 = *fully agree*. Item wording was modified, namely the phrase “sex on the Internet” was replaced by “pornography.” The scale had an alpha of .84.

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**Sexism.** Sexism was measured using the Old-Fashioned Sexism Scale (OFSS) and Modern Sexism Scale (MSS; Swim & Cohen, 1997). The scales consist of five and eight items respectively. All item responses ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. The OFSS and the MSS had alphas of .73 and .80 respectively.

### Procedure

Participation in the study involved completing a confidential online survey (see WITHELD for more details). Participation took about 30 minutes. Students were given course credit in exchange for participant. Non-student participants were recruited through websites which host psychological studies (e.g., callforparticipants.com, lehmillier.com, socialpsychology.org, facebook.com/psychologyparticipantsresearchers) in exchange for the chance to go into the draw for a \$50 gift voucher.

## Results

### Preliminary Analysis

Nearly the entire sample had viewed pornography in the last six months (91%). Median response for frequency of use over the last six months was 3–4 times per week. Median response for average session length was 15–30 min. Around three-quarters of the sample (76.8%) indicated that they do not regularly view either violent or humiliating pornography, 16.1% indicated that they regularly view either violent or humiliating pornography, and 7.1% indicated that they regularly view both violent pornography and humiliating pornography.

Zero-order correlations between continuous study variables are presented in Table 1. A series of independent *t* tests were performed comparing violent/humiliating pornography use groups on continuous study variables. The groups were found to differ on pornography use only,  $t(321) = -5.32, p < .001, \text{Cohen's } d = .72$ . Those who do not regularly view violent

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and/or humiliating pornography consumed significantly less pornography ( $M = -0.16$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than those who do ( $M = 0.52$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ).

### Tests of Research Questions

The research questions were assessed with two general linear models; one for each outcome variable (old-fashioned and modern sexism). Four predictors (overall level of pornography use, regular use of violent and/or humiliating pornography<sup>3</sup>, agreeableness, and perceived realism of pornography) and four control variables (age, religiosity, education, and relationship status) were entered into the models. To assess the moderating effect of agreeableness and perceived realism two product terms were also simultaneously entered: *overall pornography use*  $\times$  *perceived realism* and *overall pornography use*  $\times$  *agreeableness*.

These product terms were found to be non-significant in the model predicting old-fashioned sexism (*overall pornography use*  $\times$  *perceived realism*:  $b = .02$ ,  $p = .561$ ; *overall pornography use*  $\times$  *agreeableness*:  $b = .01$ ,  $p = .577$ ) and modern sexism (*overall pornography use*  $\times$  *perceived realism*:  $b = -.04$ ,  $p = .539$ ; *overall pornography use*  $\times$  *agreeableness*:  $b < .01$ ,  $p = .897$ ), indicating a lack of moderation (RQ3). Following Hayes (2018), the analysis was re-run, excluding these non-significant interaction terms.

The respecified models significantly predicted old-fashioned sexism,  $F(11, 311) = 8.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .21$ , and modern sexism,  $F(11, 311) = 5.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .14$ . Parameter estimates are reported in Table 2.

Regarding RQ1, overall level of pornography use and violent/humiliating pornography use were not predictive of either sexism measure. Agreeableness was negatively associated with both outcome variables, while perceived realism was positively associated with the outcome variables (RQ2).

## Discussion

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The study did not find overall level of pornography use to have a significant total effect on old-fashioned sexism or modern sexism. These findings are inconsistent with Hald et al. (2013) in which past exposure to pornography was positively associated with hostile sexism (defined as negative affectivity toward women; Glick & Fiske, 1996). On the other hand, this lack of an association is consistent with Kohut et al. (2016), McKee (2007), and Garos et al. (2004), all of whom found pornography use to have no association, or a small *negative* association, with sexism.

In determining the nature of pornography use and sexism, the findings of the current study should be considered alongside the extant research (the majority of which has failed to find a positive association). Together this literature tentatively suggests that pornography use does not readily promote general sexism. However, there is a significant research base to indicate that pornography use promotes ASV (Allen et al., 1995; Hald et al., 2010). On the face of it, this discrepancy is perplexing. How could it be that pornography promotes ASV (which we might think of as a very extreme set of attitudes toward women) but not sexism more generally? Sexual script theory would posit that pornography would have the greatest influence on attitudes relating to domains which it frequently depicts: sex and relationships. While authors such as Gorman et al. (2010) have found pornography to depict gender power-imbalances in relation to sex, pornography is probably less likely to depict instances of gender power-imbalances in relation to family, work, or society more generally (given its primary focus is showing sex). It may simply be the case that any messages pornography communicates about women being *sexually* subservient are not applied beyond the sexual domain.

As mentioned above, the HCM highlights the importance of HM and an IS orientation—which Malamuth and Hald (2017) suggest can be loosely indexed by measuring agreeableness—in the relationship between pornography and attitudes toward women. Lower

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agreeableness was associated with greater sexism. However, agreeableness did not moderate the relationship between pornography use and the outcome measures. This is inconsistent with past research by Hald et al., (2013) and Hald and Malamuth (2015) and the HCM more generally. It may just be that agreeableness is not a sensitive predictor of HM or IS. While it seems likely that those high in HM or those with an IS orientation would naturally be low in agreeableness, not everyone who is low in agreeableness would be high in HM or have an IS orientation.

Perceived realism was also not found to moderate the relationships between pornography use and the three outcome measures. Some authors argue that perceived realism is better conceptualised as a mediator (as opposed to a moderator) of the relationship between pornography use and attitudes. For example, Peter and Valkenburg (2010) found perceived realism to mediate the relationship between pornography use and instrumental attitudes towards sex among adolescents, such that pornography use was associated with perceiving pornography to be realistic, which was then associated with more instrumental attitudes. Interestingly, believing pornography to be realistic in its depictions of sexual situations was associated with greater sexism, suggesting that this mediating hypothesis may have validity.

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WITHHELD FOR BLIND REVIEW

Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelations between Continuous Study Variables*

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Level of use	0.00 (0.85)		.21***	-.10	.04	.16**	-.10	-.10
2. Age	27.96 (11.26)			.04	.21***	-.08	-.22***	-.24***
3. Religiosity <sup>a</sup>	3.30 (2.46)				.08	.02	.19**	.09
4. Agreeableness	51.56 (9.53)					.05	-.28***	-.17**
5. Perceived realism	14.34 (4.23)						.27***	.25***
6. Old-fashioned sexism	9.80 (3.25)							.51***
7. Modern sexism	21.18 (5.23)							

*Note.*  $df = 321$ ; all tests two-tailed

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

<sup>a</sup>1-9 scale, with higher scores indicating greater agreement with statement "I am religious"

Table 2

*Regression Analyses Assessing the Effect of Study Variables on Old-Fashioned Sexism and Modern Sexism (after Excluding Non-Significant Interaction Terms)*

	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
Old-Fashioned Sexism				
Level of pornography use	-.19	.18	.282	< .01
Use of violent/humil pornography				
No use of violent/humil pornography <sup>a</sup>				
Use violent/humil pornography	-.35	.40	.382	< .01
Perceived realism	.20	.04	< .001	.08
Agreeableness	-.09	.02	< .001	.07
Age	-.02	.02	.219	.01
Religiosity	.25	.07	< .001	.04
Education				
No university study <sup>a</sup>				
Some undergraduate study	-1.00	.44	.024	.02
Undergraduate degree	-.26	.46	.569	< .01
Some postgraduate study/degree	-.55	.54	.308	< .01
Relationship Status				
Not in relationship <sup>a</sup>				
In relationship, cohabiting	-.71	.44	.103	.01
In relationship, not cohabiting	.27	.42	.526	< .01
Modern Sexism				
Level of pornography use	-.03	1.72	.986	.01
Use of violent/humil pornography				
No use of violent/humil pornography <sup>a</sup>				
Use violent/humil porn	-.28	.68	.679	< .01
Perceived realism	.31	.07	< .001	.07
Agreeableness	-.07	.03	.021	.02
Age	-.05	.03	.115	.01
Religiosity	.18	.11	.105	.01
Education				
No university study <sup>a</sup>				
Some undergraduate study	-1.18	.74	.112	.01
Undergraduate degree	.12	.78	.879	< .01
Some postgraduate study/degree	-1.26	.91	.166	.01
Relationship Status				
Not in relationship <sup>a</sup>				
In relationship, cohabiting	-1.20	.74	.102	.01
In relationship, not cohabiting	-.33	.71	.648	< .01

<sup>a</sup>Reference category

## PORNOGRAPHY &amp; SEXISM

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<sup>1</sup> We assessed use of humiliating pornography as pornography in which female performers are humiliated still models problematic depictions of women.

<sup>2</sup> The analysis was restricted to self-identified heterosexual men as it seems likely that much of the pornography consumed by gay men would not feature women and therefore would not model sexist attitudes for viewers.

<sup>3</sup> The point-biserial correlation between pornography use and use of violent/humiliating pornography was significant,  $r_{bp}(321) = .285, p < .001$ , but not so high as to likely cause issues of multicollinearity in the models.