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CHAPTER X
THE CONTENTS AND CONSUMPTION OF PORN:
WHO IS WATCHING WHAT EXACTLY?

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Abstract

This chapter reviews research into the contents and consumption of pornography to provide sex educators with a picture of the average porn consumer and the messages they would receive through their consumption. Such information has the potential to inform both programs designed to bolster porn literacy and the use of pornography to promote sexual learning. As will be seen, research into the contents of pornography is varied and, at times, complicated to parse. For example, answering the question of whether pornography is degrading requires a nuanced consideration of ways in which agency and objectification may be expressed. Some aspects of pornography are more plainly problematic from a sexual education perspective (e.g., infrequent depictions of condom use, minimal overt discussion of consent). Pornography use is close to ubiquitous, especially among younger men. Around half of younger men are frequent porn users. Pornography is most frequently used for solitary masturbation, although use with a sexual partner is not uncommon (especially among female porn users).

Introduction

Sex educators might consider two broad approaches to pornography: 1) “pedagogy about porn,” that is, teaching porn literacy to encourage critical reflection on the contents of porn, and 2) “porn as pedagogy,” that is, the use of porn to promote sexual learning (primarily among adults).¹ The pedagogy about porn approach often focuses on the harms of pornography – the assumption being that, unless educated on the unrealistic nature of porn, some consumers may internalize problematic messages contained within pornography. It is often assumed that negative outcomes may be especially likely among younger people, who have less real-world sexual experience to contextualize what they see in pornography and may seek out porn to fill in knowledge gaps not addressed by traditional sex education.² Many young adults indicate using pornography as a source of information about sex, more so than parents, sexual partners, friends, media, and healthcare professionals.³ The porn as pedagogy approach is less harm-focused, acknowledging potential benefits of pornography for consumers.

Although these approaches differ in the assumed effects of pornography, both require sex educators to have a thorough knowledge of the contents of pornography, as well as the prevalence of porn use. After all, without knowledge of the contents of porn, it would be difficult to know what “inaccuracies” a porn literacy program would need to address or what aspects of sexual health could be enhanced through engagement with pornographic texts. Similarly, knowledge of the prevalence of porn use can provide sex educators context as to the need to address pornography in sex education programs.

The following chapter presents the takeaway findings of two review articles. One of these articles reviews studies into the contents of porn.⁴ The other reviews studies into the prevalence of porn use.⁵ In this way, the first half of this chapter aims to give insight into the messages that porn users are exposed to through their consumption of pornography. The second

half of this chapter then aims to contextualize this information, outlining who is exposed to such messages, how frequently, and under what circumstances.

What Is Being Watched? The Contents of Pornography

To gain insight into the contents of pornography, many researchers have employed a technique called “content analysis.” This technique involves analyzing the contents of a “text” (e.g., advertisements in fashion magazines). In porn research, this typically entails collecting a sample of pornographic videos (e.g., a random selection of clips from Pornhub). Trained coders then view sample videos to record the frequency of target behaviors. For some target behaviors (e.g., condom use), this coding process is relatively objective (i.e., either the male performer is wearing a condom, or he is not). Other target behaviors are far more “in the eye of the beholder” and require researchers to develop a comprehension definition of the behavior under investigation. This section gives an overview of this literature, broken down in terms of the major thematic areas addressed by this research.

Violence and Aggression

A major focus within this content analytic literature is violence within pornography. This is perhaps not surprising given the public concern with the effects of violent pornography on consumers. The most fundamental question here is *What percentage of porn contains depictions of violence?* But even a question that is as straightforward as this is difficult to answer. The crux of the matter comes down to what one counts as “violence.” In this literature, there are two schools of thought. One is that we should count any act capable of harming *regardless* of the intention of the person performing the act or the reaction of the person receiving the act. Using this definition, a scene depicting rape (simulated or otherwise) would be categorized as “violent,” but so would a scene in which a male performer inserts his penis

very far into the mouth of a female co-star, causing her to gag—even if the female character is clearly enjoying this and asking the male character to “go deeper.” Even a playful slap on the buttocks would be categorized as “violent” if taking this approach. Proponents of this school of thought argue that this approach better captures aggressive acts which have been normalized. This is especially important if one believes that the problem with violent pornography is that it communicates to consumers that aggressive sex is “the norm” and pleasurable for all.

The alternative school of thought argues that categorizing acts like consensual spanking or deep throating as “violent” is incongruent with what the average person means when talking about violent pornography. It also runs the risk of stigmatizing those who engage in BDSM or even just rough sex, which, according to a recent survey of undergraduate students, is a practice that many younger adults engage in and enjoy.⁶

As an example of how different approaches to defining violence can influence findings, one study in the *harm regardless of intention* camp reports 88% of best-selling pornographic film scenes to contain violence.⁷ Another study, which takes the alternative approach to defining violence, reports 2% of best-selling pornographic film scenes contain violence.⁸

The importance of this different philosophical approach to understanding violence has led some authors of more recent papers to report the prevalence of “visible aggression, regardless of consent” alongside the prevalence of “non-consensual aggression” (acts which are met with verbal or physical resistance). If focusing only on mainstream heterosexual porn, somewhere between one percent⁹ and 15%¹⁰ of scenes contain non-consensual aggression, whereas between 13%¹¹ and 45%¹² of scenes contain visible aggression of any kind.

The literature is consistent in the findings that the vast majority of aggressive acts depicted in pornography consist of either spanking, slapping, or gagging (inserting something, such as a penis, very far into the partner’s mouth, causing them to gag). These behaviors are typically directed at women by men.^{13,14} Women most typically react with pleasure in response

to these behaviors.¹⁵ According to one study, visible and non-consensual aggression occurs more frequently in videos of gay male partners as compared to videos of heterosexual partners.¹⁶ The literature consistently indicates that extreme sexual violence (e.g., depictions of rape) is rarely depicted in mainstream pornography.¹⁷

Objectification and Degradation of Women in Pornography

Of course, depicting violence is not the only way pornography may model problematic behavior for consumers. Some researchers analyze pornographic texts for depictions of objectification and degradation, especially of female characters. The idea is that exposure to these messages could promote non-egalitarian attitudes. As you might imagine, the concepts of “objectification” and “degradation” are even more difficult to pin down than “violence.” Accordingly, different authors take different approaches to examining objectification and degradation in pornography. For example, some researchers focus on markers of sexual agency, as it is argued that a lack of sexual agency indicates objectification. When considering sexual agency, researchers may look at who initiates sex, who appears to control the direction of the sexual encounter, and the relative social status of sexual partners (e.g., a boss would be categorized as being of a higher social status than an employee).

A few studies have found that male and female characters are equally likely to initiate sex in pornography,^{18,19} equally likely to be of a higher social status,²⁰ and typically share control of the direction of the sexual encounter.²¹ When power is not shared equally, men are more likely to be depicted as the dominant partner, and women are more likely to be depicted as submissive.²² One research team indicates that about a third of Internet porn videos portray domination by a man, and about half portray submission by a woman, with 22% of scenes depicting sexual reciprocity between partners.²³

It is worth noting that genre may play an important role in how male and female characters are portrayed. Men are more likely to initiate sex, control the direction of sex, and be of a higher social status in “teen” videos. The reverse is true for videos featuring older female performers.^{24,25} This said, another study found that sexual agency of female characters did not markedly differ between heterosexual feminist, “for-women,” and mainstream videos.²⁶

Other researchers code for the presence of sexual acts which they believe to be degrading to the receiving partner. Acts that researchers have used to index degradation include ejaculation onto the face or body, ass-to-mouth (i.e., oral sex immediately following anal sex), and double penetration. Although double penetration and ass-to-mouth are far from ubiquitous in mainstream pornography, they appear to occur with some frequency—double penetration in 17% of mainstream Internet porn videos²⁷ and ass-to-mouth in 4% of Internet porn scenes.²⁸ By contrast, external ejaculation is more common, with multiple studies indicating that around half of heterosexual Internet porn videos depict ejaculation onto the partner.^{29,30} Critics of this approach might question the appropriateness of researchers making blanket determinations about the legitimacy of particular sexual acts. It also ignores the context in which acts occur. Whether the recipient of external ejaculation interprets this behavior as degrading likely depends on the context of the situation.

Another approach that is taken is to examine whose pleasure is privileged in porn. The answer to this question would appear to be *men*'s. Male performers are much more likely to be depicted reaching orgasm than female performers,^{31,32,33} and female-to-male oral sex is depicted significantly more frequently than male-to-female oral sex.^{34,35} This said, it would be inaccurate to claim that pornography is devoid of female orgasm or cunnilingus. A 2020 review found that female orgasm is depicted in around 15-20% of mainstream videos, with cunnilingus occurring in just under half of videos.³⁶ The point is merely that there appears to be a bias towards men's pleasure in porn.

Finally, some researchers^{37,38} investigate the issue of objectification within pornography by analyzing videos for film conventions used to humanize characters and convey agency (e.g., looking directly into camera). From this lens, it appears that female performers are more likely to be presented in a way that implies agency. For example, compared to male performers, female performers are more likely to be centrally located within the camera frame, to look directly into the camera, and to speak.³⁹ One study reports that pornographic films are equally likely to be presented from the point of view of a male or female character, but female performers are more likely to speak to camera.⁴⁰ Conversely, male performers are “actively hidden from view and often silent”⁴¹ which has been interpreted as dehumanizing male characters.

Safe Sex and Consent Communication

Sex educators might also be interested in portrayals of safe sex practices and consent communication in porn. Multiple studies have examined condom use in mainstream pornography. The consensus finding is that condom use is infrequently depicted in heterosexual pornography, occurring in between under one percent⁴² and 11% of scenes.⁴³ Discussions of safe sex occur even less frequently.^{44,45} In contrast to heterosexual pornography, condom use is relatively common in gay male pornography, with protected anal sex being depicted as frequently as unprotected anal sex—depicted in 34% and 36% of scene, respectively⁴⁶ (this said, a recent trend toward condomless “bareback” sex in gay male porn has been noted by scholars⁴⁷).

Only one study has examined consent communication in mainstream pornography.⁴⁸ Here researchers examined whether, and what kind of, consent was garnered for each sexual behavior shown in top-selling pornographic films. In around a quarter of cases, no consent communication was shown (i.e., the scene starts with the performers mid-coitus). Explicit

verbal consent was uncommon; however, it was not absent, making up about 12% of the consent cues. Nonverbal consent communication (e.g., bodily touching in a sexual way) was more common than verbal consent communication. Female characters were found to use fewer explicit verbal consent cues than male characters. The authors argue that, for these reasons, pornography may promote some problematic ideas around consent: that explicit verbal consent isn't normal and that men are direct, while women are indirect, when it comes to communicating consent.

Who Is Watching? Consumers of Pornography

The review of content analytic studies would suggest that mainstream pornography models some problematic behaviors, for example, unprotected casual sex. The content analytic evidence could also be interpreted to indicate that mainstream pornography is not as dangerously problematic as some critics of porn claim. Knowledge of the contents of pornography naturally results in questions around the consumption of porn use. How common is porn use? How many people are frequently exposed to the potentially problematic messages contained within porn? The chapter will now attempt to provide a picture of what is typical in terms of porn use by reviewing surveys into porn use behavior.

Prevalence of Porn Use

A few large-scale surveys are available to draw on for information about the prevalence of porn use. Two particularly useful large-scale surveys are the General Social Survey (GSS)⁴⁹ and Relationships in America (RIA) survey.^{50,51}

The GSS has been ongoing since the 1970s. The GSS assesses porn use via a single question "Have you seen an X-rated movie in the past year?" In 2018, 39% of male participants and 20% of female participants answered in the affirmative to this question. Among

participants ages 18 to 26, 59% of men and 38% of women answered yes. In contrast, far fewer older participants (ages 64+) indicated that they had seen an X-rated movie in the past year (13% of males and 4% of females).

A major strength of the GSS is its sample. The survey samples households at random, meaning it produces a sample that is a good representation of the general population. However, some researchers query the adequacy of the question used to assess porn use. The term “X-rated movie” is somewhat outdated. (Is a 10-minute clip on Pornhub a “movie”?) The timeframe specified by the item (“the past year”) is also very broad. Such a measure cannot distinguish between participants who use porn once a year and those who use porn once a day.

The RIA study surveyed US adults ages 18-39. The study, conducted in 2014, assessed the use of porn with the question “When did you last intentionally look at pornography?”⁵² Response options related to different time periods (e.g., “today,” “3-4 weeks ago”), allowing researchers to get a sense of the percentage of participants that have intentionally viewed porn in the past week, month, and year. Around half of male participants indicated that they had intentionally viewed porn in the past week and month (46% and 56% of participants, respectively), with 69% reporting doing so in the past year. Among female respondents, 16%, 26%, and 40% indicated intentionally viewing porn in the past week, month, and year, respectively.

You may have noticed that considerably more males than females indicated consuming pornography on the GSS and RIA studies. (You may have also noticed that neither the GSS or RIA surveys report on porn use among nonbinary people.) The robust gender gap in the consumption of porn is consistently observed in the research.⁵³ For this reason, our team’s 2020 review focused on men’s use of pornography specifically.⁵⁴

Many smaller surveys into pornography use have also been conducted. These smaller studies tend to have less representative samples than the GSS and RIA studies. That’s because

many of these studies used “convenience sampling” of college students, meaning that their samples tend to be younger and more educated than the general population. However, these studies can still provide useful information in that they tend to be more thorough in their measurement of porn use and related behaviors.

Our review identified 19 studies reporting the percentage of male respondents who consume pornography on a close-to-weekly basis. (Some studies ask about “viewing at least weekly,” others ask about “viewing at least several times per week.”) These percentages were combined to produce a cross-study estimate of the percentage of men to be weekly porn users: 45%. Notably, this figure is close to the RIA survey’s estimate of the percentage of males to have consumed porn in the past week (46%). This should give us some confidence that around half of younger men are frequent (meaning at-least-weekly) porn users. Regarding the amount of exposure, one study reports that the men sampled viewed an average of three hours of pornography per week,⁵⁵ although other studies report figures in the one to two hours per week range.^{56,57}

A few studies have formally compared porn use among heterosexual and gay and bisexual men. These have found higher rates of porn consumption among gay and bisexual men compared to heterosexual men.^{58,59} If gay and bisexual men use more pornography than their heterosexual counterparts, this may indicate that gay and bisexual men get something out of pornography that heterosexual men do not. For example, porn may be useful in helping sexual minority men come to understand their sexuality.

The Internet is the most common method for accessing pornography.⁶⁰ Most consumers primarily access free pornography, with only about 10% of men having a paid subscription to a pornographic website.⁶¹ About 30% of gay and bisexual men report having used a live webcam service.⁶²

Sexual Behaviors Associated with Porn Use

Perhaps unsurprisingly, pornography use appears to be closely tied to solitary masturbation among men.^{63,64} The majority of men, ranging from 74% to 98% in different studies, report having masturbated while watching pornography.^{65,66} Men most typically masturbate on occasions that they view pornography—although this is not to say that men do not also masturbate without the aid of pornography.⁶⁷ When asked their motivations for using pornography, men’s most commonly given responses imply masturbation, for example, *for solo sexual stimulation*,⁶⁸ *for sexual satisfaction*, *to feel arousal*, *to achieve orgasm*,⁶⁹ *horny at the time*, and *wanting to orgasm*.⁷⁰

Using porn with a sexual partner occurs less frequently than solitary porn use.⁷¹ However, partnered porn use is still relatively common. Around 5% of university-aged men and women report using porn with a sexual partner in the past month,⁷² and just under half (46%) of coupled-but-unmarried men and women report having done so ever.⁷³ Around 35% of gay and bisexual men report having used porn with a sexual partner at some point.⁷⁴

Women are far more likely to report only, or primarily, viewing porn with a sexual partner, compared to men, who are far more likely to report only viewing porn alone.⁷⁵ Interestingly, although solitary porn use is associated with sexual and relationship dissatisfaction, at least among men,⁷⁶ using porn with a romantic partner appears to be associated with less sexual boredom,⁷⁷ greater sexual satisfaction,⁷⁸ and more intimacy.⁷⁹

Conclusion

It is hoped that this chapter will be of use to sex educators, whether they are adopting a porn as pedagogy or pedagogy about porn approach. The available literature reveals the widespread use of pornography, especially among younger men, about half of whom appear to

be frequent porn users. The high prevalence of porn use suggests a need for sex educators to consider the role and influence of porn on clients.

The review identifies some potentially problematic aspects of pornography that developers of porn literacy programs may seek to address—for example, porn’s bias towards men’s pleasure over women’s, its portrayal of sex acts that some may perceive to be demeaning or violent (e.g., external ejaculation and gagging) as being highly sexually gratifying for both partners, its eschewal of condoms (at least in pornography aimed at heterosexual audiences), and its lack of overt discussions of consent. The review also highlights some ways in which pornography could be utilized to promote sexual learning. Despite its bias towards men’s pleasure, depictions of female pleasure are not absent in pornography. Thus, there is a potential to use porn as a starting point for discussions of female sexual agency and pleasure. The fact that partnered pornography use is associated with greater sexual satisfaction would also lend support for using porn for sexual learning within relationships. Additionally, the frequency with which gay male porn depicts condom use would suggest that porn has potential for use to promote safe sex practices among this population.

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