

Chapter 17

Just Fantasy? Online Pornography's Contribution to Experiences of Harm

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Abstract

Mainstream pornography is popular, freely accessible, and infused with themes of male dominance, aggression, and female subservience. Through depicting sex in these ways, mainstream pornography has the potential to influence the further development of harmful sexual scripts that condone or endorse violence against women and girls. These concerns warrant the adoption of a harms-based perspective in critical examinations of pornography's influence on sexual experiences. This chapter reports on findings from interviews with 24 heterosexual emerging adults living in Aotearoa/New Zealand about how pornography has impacted their lives. Despite a shared awareness among participants of mainstream pornography's misogynistic tendencies, and the potential for harm from those displays, men's and women's experiences were profoundly gendered. Men's reported experiences were often associated with concerns about their own sexual behaviors, performances, and/or abilities. Conversely, women's experiences were often shaped by how pornography had affected the way that men related to them sexually. Their experiences included instances of sexual coercion and assault which were not reported by the men. These findings signal the need for a gendered lens, situated within a broader harms-based perspective, in examinations of pornography's influence.


Keywords: Pornography; relationships; violence against women; internet; gender; sexual scripts

Introduction

Pornography is a topic that incites debate, controversy, and angst in community, political, and academic circles. Research on pornography is often imbued with

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moralistic evaluations, strong personal opinions (Böhm, Franz, Dekker, & Matthiesen, 2015), and it remains a contentious issue for academics due to the difficulties involved in establishing causal links between pornography and sexual violence (Vera-Gray & McGlynn, 2020). Pornography has been central to much feminist scholarship and activism due to its potential contribution to gendered harms, in particular its role in influencing harmful sexual attitudes, behaviors, and perpetuating violence against women and girls. Early feminist anti-pornography scholarship located pornography – and the associated sex industry – as situated within a patriarchal structure of men’s control of, and violence against, women (Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 1981; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988). These critiques focused on its rampant misogyny and violent portrayals of heterosexual relations. Feminist scholar Andrea Dworkin (1981) identified male power as intrinsic to pornography and defined it as:

...the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures and/or words that also includes women presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; or women presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or women presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or women presented in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility, or display. (p. xxxiii)

Feminist scholars drew links between pornography and women’s experiences of sexual violence, leading Robin Morgan (1980) to conclude that “pornography is the theory; rape is the practice” (p. 139). Strong objections to pornography encouraged efforts to censor it, seeing it as “the preferred solution to the pornography problem” (Bronstein, 2011, p. 328). However, many feminist activists and scholars were critical of the anti-pornography position. Calls for censorship were considered by some as an attempt to minimize and suppress women’s sexuality (Duggan, Hunter, & Vance, 1995; Rubin, 1984; Vance, 1984). Lisa Duggan (1995) argued that the anti-censorship position set out to “counter anti-porn accounts of ‘pornography’ as a unified (patriarchal) discourse with a singular (misogynistic) impact” (p. 7), thereby recognizing the potential for alternative readings of pornography, especially those which prioritize women’s pleasurable experiences and alternative and transgressive works (Attwood, 2005).

While the division in perspectives on pornography is often characterized by anti/pro-pornography positions, some scholars suggest that such binary distinctions and framing stifle the possibility for understanding the complexities and nuances in the debates through critical readings of pornography and its influence (Smith & Attwood, 2014). Though anti-pornography feminism thrusts a focus on pornography as sexual domination, and pro-pornography feminism situates it as a more complex force in women’s lives, some scholars argue that “sexuality cannot be viewed solely as sexual domination” but at the same time cannot be understood as “unproblematically a site of unmodified pleasure and agency,” thereby making it necessary to understand sexuality – and therefore pornography – “as a terrain of struggle and contradiction” (Cossman & Bell, 1997, p. 22).

The divide in feminist perspectives on pornography continues today, however, with many scholars occupying either anti-pornography or “porn-sympathetic” positions. Indeed, as [Karaian \(2005\)](#) notes

...as long as there exists burning desire, the flames of passion, and their representation in one form or another, both the bonfire that is the pornography debate, and feminists, will roar on. (p. 133)

[Boyle \(2014\)](#) contends that porn-sympathetic scholarship often focuses on the genre’s peripheries, such as feminist or queer pornography, thereby “ignoring or sidelining important feminist questions about violence and inequality while advocating a more hedonistic world-view linked to sexual practice” (p. 229). A harms-based approach to pornography remains dominant in the field of pornography studies, and many contemporary critiques continue to focus on the misogyny, aggression, racism, and gender inequity which is inherent in much mainstream pornography ([Boyle, 2010](#); [DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016](#); [Jensen, 2007](#)).

Shifts in the content of mainstream pornography, in conjunction with its increased accessibility and popularity, provide the foundation for ongoing academic attention to pornography and its potential contribution to harms. The aim of this chapter is to explore how internet pornography has influenced the lives of a sample of heterosexual emerging adults living in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This chapter begins with an examination of the changing content of internet pornography. It demonstrates how mainstream pornography routinely displays misogynistic and aggressive behaviors which are markedly gendered, in that women are overwhelmingly the receivers of such acts. It then considers these behaviors through the lens of sexual script theory and posits how the portrayal of such behaviors in pornography can contribute to harmful experiences for both individuals and their partners. Following this, the chapter provides an overview of the study and participants, before moving to present participants’ perspectives on the content of pornography. While acknowledging that pornography can be experienced both positively and negatively by viewers, this chapter focuses on the negative impacts reported by participants in detail. In so doing, it differentiates between how these negative experiences were discussed by men and women both individually and in their intimate relationships. Ultimately, this chapter concludes that attention must be paid to men’s and women’s differential experiences of harm. It affirms the need for a harms-based approach to understanding mainstream pornography’s influence on people’s lives.

The Changing Nature of Internet Pornography

As a genre, pornography has a decades-long history and has been immensely popular in both magazine and video formats. Pornography refers to:

...visual depictions that are intended to sexually arouse the viewer, such as still photos, magazines, adult cable television channels, or

VHS movies. Today, pornography is more likely to mean online video; and in the future, technological changes may again shift how these visual depictions are delivered to the consumer. (Tarrant, 2016, p. 3)

Men's pornographic magazines emerged in the 1960s and were the dominant way that men engaged with the genre at this time. By 1972, popular men's magazine *Playboy* recorded a circulation rate of over 7 million copies per month, making magazine sales responsible for half of company revenue and most of the company's net income (Gunelius, 2009). In the 1990s, and owing to technological advances, pornography transformed from the glossy pages of *Playboy* to both VHS and DVD formats. The dynamic evolution of the video pornography industry in the mid-1990s saw adult pornography generating revenue of \$3.1 billion dollars from rentals and sales (Dines, 1998). Today, pornography is now almost completely accessed online. Internet pornography is increasingly accessible, with entire "tube" sites now dedicated to pornography. Tube sites follow a similar platform to websites such as YouTube, where content can be uploaded and engaged with by viewers across the globe (Tarrant, 2016).

Mainstream pornography is immensely popular, much more than *Playboy* was at its peak in the 1970s. Mainstream pornography refers to the most common genres and representations of sex in internet pornography, operating within hegemonic norms of gender, sexuality, and commerce (Sostar & Sullivan, 2017). For instance, visits to the most popular site, Pornhub, totaled over 42 billion in 2019 alone, averaging 115 million visits per day (Pornhub, 2019). During the global COVID-19 pandemic, Pornhub offered viewers free membership to "premium" content to encourage social distancing, with Pornhub reporting a nearly 25% increase in daily traffic following the announcement (Pornhub, 2020a). The landing page of Pornhub's website shows that at the time of writing there are 11,821,291 videos available to view (Pornhub, 2020b). Pornhub is one of thousands, perhaps millions, of websites dedicated to pornographic content. The sheer volume of content available suggests there is massive viewer demand for the genre.

Reliable data regarding the revenues of pornography websites is difficult to locate due to the multifaceted nature of the internet industry and the range of activities included under the porn umbrella. Revenue estimates for pornography websites are also wildly varied. Tarrant (2016) suggests that an "often-repeated figure is that people spend \$3,000 every second on internet porn; another is that industry revenues surpass earnings by Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple, and Netflix combined" (p. 42). The pervasiveness of internet pornography websites suggests that pornographic magazines have been surpassed – perhaps even buried – by the very industry they inspired.

Alongside the shifts in the way pornography is produced has been a dramatic shift in content. Today's pornography is a world removed from the images that previously graced the pages of *Playboy* magazine, with Jackson Katz (2006) arguing that people of a certain age who associate pornography with *Playboy* magazine imagery would be shocked by the brutality inherent in mainstream content. DeKeseredy and Corsianos (2016) argue that mainstream pornography

frequently depicts behaviors such as heterosexual anal sex, double penetrations, double anal, double vaginal, and ass-to-mouth sequences which are infused with themes of male dominance and female subservience. They conclude that mainstream pornography is inherently misogynistic as “the most common images that overwhelmingly cater to a straight male audience are images of women always ready for sex, always willing to please, and always sexually satisfied” (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2016, p. 11). That said, female subservience is not always featured in the pornographic script.

Moreover, sexualized images often intersect with racialized and classist stereotypes regarding women's sexuality. In pornography, women of color are often depicted as “animalistic” (Mayall & Russell, 1993; Walker, 1980), or as bound and restrained, linking directly back to the history of slavery (Amoah, 1997). Amoah (1997) argues that depicting women of color as insatiable serves to reinforce the notion that she needs to be “restrained for her own good, and the white slave master was doing her a favor by enslaving her” (p. 211). Such racialized and sexualized stereotypes have powerful implications, as they can ultimately culminate in Black women's experiences of sexual violence being viewed as less important or less credible (Crenshaw, 1991).

Previous content analyses of internet pornography report that aggression (Fritz & Paul, 2017; Shor, 2019), sexual violence (Gossett & Byrne, 2002), degradation (Gorman, Monk-Turner, & Fish, 2010), gender inequalities (Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Vannier, Currie, & O'Sullivan, 2014), and racism (Shor & Golriz, 2019; Zhou & Paul, 2016) are frequently found in mainstream content. In a recent analysis of age, aggression, and pleasure in 172 videos available on Pornhub, it was reported that 43% of videos included visible depictions of aggression, 15.1% included nonconsensual aggression, and that female performers were more likely to respond pleurably to aggressive behaviors (Shor, 2019). The author concludes that these videos promoted and endorsed aggression and degradation, thereby reinforcing problematic ideas about young women's sexuality (Shor, 2019).

Ultimately, today's pornography presents an assemblage of easy-to-access, misogynistic, and hostile depictions of heterosexual relationships that are freely available online with the click of a button. Presenting pornography in this way runs the risk of normalizing such practices for viewers, particularly in the absence of comprehensively delivered, holistic relationship and sexuality education. In light of these concerns, sexual script theory is often used as an overarching framework for understanding the effects of pornography (Bridges, Sun, Ezzell, & Johnson, 2016; Marshall, Miller, & Bouffard, 2018). Sexual script theory is commonly used within feminist writing on sexuality and rape (Frith, 2013). It contends that sexual acts follow a script that is influenced by our social and learned interactions (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Sexual scripts are “cultural messages which define what counts as sex, how to recognize sexual situations, and what to do in sexual encounters” (Frith, 2013, p. 100). Pornography's “formulaic” depiction of sex (Young, 2014) often prioritizes masculine sexual pleasure and structures the way sexual pleasure is enacted and visualized, enforcing an essentialist gender ideology in online depictions (van Doorn, 2010).

Theoretically, then, these depictions can operate as a key cultural site for influencing the development, acquisition, and activation of sexual scripts in sexual encounters (Wright, 2011). Known as the “3AM model” of media sexual socialization, it suggests that pornography can provide viewers with

...sexual scripts they were unaware of (acquisition), prime sexual scripts they were already aware of (activation) and can encourage the utilization of sexual scripts (application) by portraying them as normative, acceptable, and rewarding. (Wright, 2013, p. 319)

Previous research has demonstrated how pornography can contribute to experiences of harm. Much of the concern about pornography and its harmful influence relates to children or young people’s engagement with the genre (Flood, 2010; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016); however, concerns have also been raised about adult usage. Research with men has suggested that pornography can play a pivotal role in the development of hostile attitudes or sexually aggressive behaviors among some men (Hald, Malamuth, & Lange, 2013; Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000; Malamuth, Hald, & Koss, 2012). For instance, a 2010 meta-analysis of nonexperimental studies reported a positive association between the viewing of pornography and attitudes which support violence against women, especially when viewers engage with sexually violent content (Hald, Malamuth, & Yuen, 2010). Survey data show that viewing pornography can influence men’s sexual scripts as they are more likely to use pornography during sex, request specific sexual acts of a partner, or deliberately fantasize about pornography during sex to maintain their own arousal (Sun, Bridges, Johnson, & Ezzell, 2016). Qualitative research with male viewers also suggests that a common practice in pornography – ejaculation on a woman’s face – can serve as a powerful model for men’s offline sexual encounters (Sun, Ezzell, & Kendall, 2017). More recently, research has also demonstrated the way that viewing pornography can become compulsive for viewers (Duffy, Dawson, & das Nair, 2016; Sniewski, Farvid, & Carter, 2018), and that this can result in unrealistic expectations of sex and sexuality for some men (Sniewski & Farvid, 2020).

Research with women suggests that many are concerned about pornography’s influence on men’s attitudes and behaviors (Gurevich et al., 2017; Shaw, 1999), which is a realized fear for women who report pornography being linked to their sexually abusive experiences (Bergen & Bogle, 2000; DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017, 2018). In relationships, research suggests pornography is more likely to have negative effects on relationship quality, sexual satisfaction, and self-esteem for women (Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003; Schneider, 2000; Stewart & Szymanski, 2012; Tylka & Kroon Van Diest, 2015). Research also suggests that women feel pressured to embrace pornography in intimate relationships (Benjamin & Tlusten, 2010; Resch & Alderson, 2014).

In light of the range of negative effects that pornography can have on intimate relationships, there is a surprising lack of critical criminological perspectives on adult pornography (DeKeseredy, 2015). Much more insight is needed which examines the gendered dynamics and complexities of adult pornography,

especially in intimate relationships. The empirical study described below contributes to understandings of adult pornography and the complex ways that pornography is experienced by viewers and their partners. The analysis provides a critical insight into the way that mainstream pornography influenced the lives of a sample of emerging adults living in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It explores how men and women differentially experience harms attributed to pornography both on an individual and relational level, such as feeling “addicted” to pornography, experiences of sexual harm, and relationship distress and instability.

The Study

The data which inform this chapter are drawn from a doctoral project involving semi-structured interviews with 24 emerging adults living in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The project was an exploratory study of the pleasures and pains of pornography for individuals and their partners. It was conducted in a country where little is known about the effects of adult men's and women's engagement with pornography, despite high levels of engagement by both genders.¹ Ethical approval for this research was sought and provided from the author's institution prior to data collection.

The study was open to participants who felt that pornography had either positive and/or negative influences on their lives. The research was restricted to self-identifying heterosexual men and women between the ages of 18 and 30, thereby understood as being in “emerging adulthood.”² The rationale for only recruiting heterosexual participants was because the study was focused on heterosexual pornography and because the researcher identifies as heterosexual and would therefore be an “outsider” doing research in other communities. Although the research was limited to self-identifying heterosexuals, a small number ($n = 3$) identified as bisexual during the course of interviews.³ Future research on queer experiences with, and of, pornography would be a welcome addition to the wider pornography literature.

In total, a self-selected sample of 24 participants (13 men and 11 women) participated in this research via one-on-one, face-to-face interviews at locations across the North Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand. Participants were recruited via Facebook and Twitter pages dedicated to the project, as well as local advertising in bathrooms at tertiary institutions. Recruitment flyers invited participants who were keen to talk about pornography and who felt that pornography had affected their lives in either positive or negative ways. Demographically, participants were diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, educational background, and relationship status. Participants in this research were aged between 18 and 30, with a median age of 24 years. Participants in this study were given the opportunity to self-identify their ethnicity, with New Zealand European/Pākehā ($n = 15$), Caucasian/White ($n = 4$), Māori ($n = 6$), European ($n = 1$), Chinese ($n = 1$), Australian ($n = 1$), and Italian ($n = 1$) backgrounds reported by participants.⁴ Participants reported a range of relationship statuses, including single ($n = 5$), nonmonogamous/friends

with benefits/casual ($n = 3$), currently de-facto partnered ($n = 13$), engaged ($n = 1$), and married ($n = 2$).

The small-scale nature of this study, in conjunction with its voluntary and self-selecting nature, limits the generalizability of the findings reported beyond the cohort. While gathering generalizable data was not the purpose of the project, there is likely some bias within the sample. It is possible that participants who volunteered to take part were more comfortable or forthright speaking about pornography generally, or that participants were more likely to report negative effects or concerns about their own, or their partners' use, of pornography, given the dominance of a harms-based perspective on pornography in wider society. That said, the data which inform this chapter provide a unique insight into a range of diverse experiences with pornography, with many supporting prior findings reported in the literature.

The Content of Mainstream Pornography: Participants' Perspectives

Virtually all participants in this research who viewed pornography described it as content which fits within a definition of mainstream pornography; that is, it was largely heterosexual, involving cisgender performers, and which was freely available on tube sites, with Pornhub being the primary site for viewing content. Many participants described pornography as a genre which conformed to normative ideas about gendered bodies, sex, and power. Further, many participants recognized that depictions of aggression and/or degradation were frequently portrayed in content on tube sites. In light of this, many participants thought "amateur" content depicting sex between "real" partners was more authentic. However, the concept of "authenticity" in pornography can be contentious, as amateur pornography is still designed to serve the imagined consumer, traditionally men, with commercial wishes and expectations (Ashley, 2016).

Much of the content that participants described viewing included bodies which conformed to Western standards of beauty. Participants frequently spoke about how women's bodies in professionally produced, studio pornography were "plastic" or "fake" and conformed to a *Playboy*-esque stereotype. In defining the stereotype, Tom, 28, summed this up as "very white. Very blonde. Very fake." Men's bodies were not immune to Western ideals of attractiveness in professional pornography, with some male participants referring to male bodies in pornography as "masculine," "ripped," "jacked," and able to perform like a "sexual machine."

Many participants were critical of pornography, suggesting it did not depict "real" sex; rather, it was "scripted," "fake," "unrealistic," "plastic," "superficial," and "glossy." Intimacy – or lack thereof – also featured in some participants' descriptions of sex in internet pornography. Rach, 27, felt pornography presented a "very unrealistic picture of a healthy, intimate relationship with someone you love," especially in professional pornography which Cameron, 24, felt lacked "any kissing or any caressing or any intimate touch." It was suggested by one

participant that intimacy-based content was “niche” and not found on mainstream sites. Tina, 21, felt that the sex depicted in pornography was hard “like bang, bang, bang” and lacked “warmth.” Internet pornography was also described as infused with power imbalances and gender inequality. Women performers were described as “submissive” and not “in control.” Matt, 19, suggested that sex in internet pornography was oriented around the “wants of the male.” Aggression in pornography was ever-present, especially in heterosexual pornography which was “dominance-based,” “demeaning to women,” “male-focused,” “misogynistic,” “derogatory,” and “borderline violent.” Many participants accepted that much pornography was scripted, and therefore unrealistic, but some concerns were also expressed about the welfare of female performers in pornography, especially in “harder” or more aggressive genres.

The Potential for Harm: Participants' Views on the Harms of Pornography

Given the frequency of aggressive and misogynistic depictions, many participants in this study were aware of pornography's harmful potential, both for themselves and for others. Pornography was understood by several men as something that could be “bad” or “dangerous,” with Chris, 20, suggesting that

...there is the dominant narrative about how it can ruin your view of women and sex itself. And there's definitely room for that. I feel like it's definitely a danger.

Further, overexposure to pornography was seen by Derek, 25, as something which contributed to “womanizing” ideas among young men, and Matt, 19, felt that while he could distinguish between pornography and fantasy, he could see “a lot of men not seeing through that at all. Especially if that's the only exposure that they have to sex, is through pornography.” Pete, 25, was worried about the “societal impact” of pornography, and George, 25, felt that critical conversations about pornography's role in informing rape culture were overdue. The idea that pornography could be bad was nestled alongside the view that pornography could also be “very good” or “fine” when viewers were “balanced,” had a “healthy view,” or the “right education” about what they were viewing in pornography.

Women's fears about pornography related to female performer's safety, but also their own safety in their offline relations with men. Many expressed a strong aversion to aggressive pornography, and several women were anxious about whether such videos depicted real experiences of violence or aggression. Holly, 25, enjoyed pornography as a genre, but hated “real demeaning, aggressive porn toward women” because “yeah it could be fake but it could be real.” Carly, 24, suggested that heterosexual pornography had “dirty talking and a lot of like derogatory speak to women” which she hoped was merely a portrayal and not a real reflection of how the female performer was being treated, indicating a shared concern for other women's safety in pornography. This commentary echoes

previous findings that suggest women's ability to experience pleasure from pornography is regulated by whether they can alleviate concerns about the treatment of female actresses and empathize with them (Gurevich et al., 2017; Parvez, 2006).

Gurevich et al. (2017) suggest that many women fear the way that men interpret and understand pornography, primarily due to how it may influence their attitudes and behaviors in offline sexual encounters. Ultimately, they conclude that these fears are a central dilemma for women and an inevitable pain associated with pornography's pleasures. This was true for a number of women in this study. In mainstream pornography, women are unlikely to respond negatively to targeted acts of aggression from men (Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010; Shor, 2019), and Tara, 20, worried that women's pleasurable – yet scripted – responses to some acts, such as aggression, “might translate to be normal for some people.” Concerns about men's “forceful” nature in pornography were raised, and Jasmine, 18, felt that pornography “convinces guys that it's okay to like treat a girl in a certain way.” Further, Jasmine, 18, suggested that viewing pornography turns off your morals, which could encourage men to perpetrate sexually coercive behaviors:

I don't know, what I've noticed is that when you're turned on and you're watching porn it's normal, it's like enjoyable, but then when you're not and you watch it, it seems kind of like disgusting... It's kind of like your morals when you're not turned on are there but when you are it's like a natural instinct to like switch it off or something. I don't know, I just noticed that and I was thinking that maybe that ties into like when guys sexually assault someone, maybe it just like switches off in their head or something?

While participants in this research had a shared awareness of pornography's capacity to contribute to offline harm, men's and women's reported experiences of harm differed substantially. In discussing how pornography had influenced their lives, both men and women reported a range of positive and negative impacts. In discussing how pornography could be positively experienced, participants described pornography as an important outlet for sexual arousal and pleasure, and most used it as a masturbatory aid. Carly, 24, described viewing pornography as “a means to an end,” and Lilith, 23, reported that watching porn meant an orgasm was able to be achieved through “not much effort.” Others described viewing pornography with a partner as a playful way of enhancing intimacy in the couple relationship. Luke, 28, said that he had “been with partners that have enjoyed watching porn while we've had sex,” and Nadia, 26, reported that she and her partner would view pornography together while they had sex and “it wasn't something that was really given a second thought.”

Conversely, the negative impacts reported by participants were many, particularly those reported by women. The discussion below focuses on those reported negative effects. While there were some similarities in experiences between the genders, the negative offline harms reported by men largely related to their own

sexual functioning or their attitudes toward sex. In contrast, many of the negative harms reported by women related to how men used pornography and subsequently treated them in sexual encounters and/or relationships. This next section examines how men and women experienced offline, gendered harms because of their own, or others', use of pornography.

Experiences of Offline Harm: Participants' Experiences

Speaking openly about viewing pornography can be challenging as it remains a distinctly private practice. First in relation to men, [Kimmel \(2005\)](#) suggests that men are fearful that being open about their concerns about pornography exposes them to other men as less than "real men." However, several men in this study reported that pornography had affected their lives. Pornography was recognized as a force which could affect men's sexual behaviors with their intimate partners, but also their attitudes toward women. Kevin, 25, suggested viewing pornography had "influenced" his sexual behaviors and normalized particular practices – namely anal sex and deep throating – which became something for him to "strive" for in his offline sexual relationships. He reflected that he had not initially considered the influence of pornography to be negative on his experiences of intimacy until his partner raised the issue and he agreed "100 percent she's got a point." Pete, 25, queried whether his early exposure to pornography, in conjunction with extensive use as an adult, had had a negative effect on his life. He accepted that it "probably has had a really significant impact on my approach to sexuality," contributing to his sexual promiscuity, adventurousness, and sexual objectification of women.

Alongside these negative attitudinal effects, several men self-identified as "addicted" to pornography which resulted in a range of negative effects. Pornography addiction has attracted a wave of media attention in recent years, and while many scholars accept pornography addiction as a real issue, others question its existence or clinical utility as a label ([Ley, 2018](#); [Ley, Prause, & Finn, 2014](#)). Several men in this study reported that their compulsive use of pornography had been, or was currently, harmful or problematic in their lives. Most of these men felt unable to talk to others, such as friends or partners, about their concerns about pornography and its impacts. Kevin, 25, indicated that "the conversation never gets that far" in real life, but that there might be "more discussion in online forums where people are anonymous and can talk about their interests free from being judged." That said, the men in this study reported a range of negative effects, including impaired sexual functioning, relationships ending, religious conflict, negative self-esteem, and altered perceptions of the world around them.

Jack, 21, attributed his erectile dysfunction issues to his compulsive use of pornography, and 25-year old George's use of pornography was at odds with his religious values and his relationship with God. Ethan, 23, felt "guilty" about viewing pornography because his partner perceived it as akin to cheating, and he reported he was "less concerned about consent" when he was unable to manage his compulsive

pornography viewing. Ethan felt that his use of pornography made him feel reclusive because he prioritized viewing pornography over socializing with friends. Chris, 20, recognized the time loss associated with his viewing, noting that

...if it wasn't for the difficulty in stopping if I so desired, I would consider it as an analogous time waster to playing video games. Except with that added danger of warped perceptions if you weren't careful.

Nathan, 28, expressed concern about managing his pornography use in the future. Nathan did not outwardly disclose the type of pornography that he viewed, but he was consciously aware that his pornography viewing was a sign of a bigger problem within himself. He reflected that “for the moment, porn’s fine. But if I don’t deal with it soon then it might not be that great for me.”

In the same way that speaking about pornography was difficult for men, many women in this study felt that it was even more difficult for them to be open about viewing pornography due to their gender. Although women’s levels of engagement with pornography have increased in recent years (Smith, Barker, & Attwood, 2015), their engagement with the genre remains heavily stigmatized. This relates to the shame associated with women’s viewing of pornography, but also because it contravenes ideas about how women should behave sexually (Neville, 2018). Much like the men included in this study, many of the women reported a range of negative impacts that they attributed to either their own, or their partners’, use of internet pornography. These effects varied across women in the study, but included effects on their sense of self and internal identity, on intimacy and security in heterosexual relationships, on sexual behaviors and preferences, and the way that they were perceived – and treated – by others, especially male partners.

Several women described how they understood men’s use of pornography to have affected their sexual experiences, especially experiences of sexual harm. Naomi, 26, said her ex-partner used pornography to coerce her into losing her virginity:

I did feel like I was getting groomed. You know for him to do that he would, you know if I’d sort of say things like I’d like to wait until this point in time, because I had no idea of what I wanted to do, and he’d get quite mad and he’d like pick up his laptop, try and find something porn related to watch and he’d go into the toilet and come back and sort of like sulk for a while. I guess that was sort of like my first experience. I guess in order to like push me along a bit, then he’d start watching it in bed... he’d try and make me feel shit for not doing it so he had to find other ways.

His use of pornography meant she “felt like I had a lot to live up to and that this was the epitome of like the perfect woman.” She also felt inadequate as a partner and pressured to do things such as wear “garish” lingerie as she wanted to “live up to his expectation of what sexual activity should look like.” Twenty-one-year old Tina’s previous sexual partner used to send her videos of “quite dom/sub

porn which kind of instead of being nice it was more of just women being used as an object.” This affected her self-esteem and made her feel like she was only “there for him... it wasn’t anything to do with me.” Miranda, 28, said her ex-partner was heavily interested in “kinky” sex and he encouraged her to view this type of pornography. In order “to please him” she then pushed herself “into doing these kinds of things as well,” despite this being at odds with her own sexual preferences or pleasures. Tara, 20, recalled her ex-partner used to push her head down a lot during oral sex, despite her resistance and refusal for rough oral sex. Holly, 25, thought her partner’s use of pornography contributed to “how he fucks” and his preference for “skullfucking”⁵ her during oral sex, despite this not being enjoyable for her as it reminded her of her previous work in the sex industry.

One woman also felt that her partner’s knowledge about her use of pornography, and her preference for “rough sex,” came with “real-life consequences.” Jasmine, 18, said that her ex-partner was fascinated by threesomes and she suspected he viewed this in pornography as well. He assumed because she was into “rough sex” that she would be “into having sex with other people” and attempted to coerce her into a threesome with her friend while she was drunk. Ultimately, she suggested that women’s openness about viewing pornography encouraged men to assume “maybe you’re a bit of a like a slut or you’re keen for sex,” signaling the pervasiveness of sexual double standards which see men heralded for their sexual conquests and engagements and women shunned for their own (Farvid & Braun, 2017; Farvid, Braun, & Rowney, 2017).

As previously discussed, several men reported that they felt addicted to pornography, while several women reported that their partners were addicted. Rach, 27, and Izzy, 30, for instance, were in relationships with “addicted” male partners which negatively affected intimacy, trust, self-esteem, body confidence, and overall relationship stability. Both women reported that it was difficult to talk openly with their friends and family what they were experiencing in their relationships, as others do not view pornography addiction seriously. Izzy’s partner tried to “introduce things from the porn into our sex lives,” which made her feel “awful” as she did not identify as a dominatrix and he expected her to degrade him. Rach’s partner’s use made her fearful for leaving their daughter alone with him, knowing that she could encounter pornography on his phone at any time. Rach reported that she used to find “soiled items of clothing and hand towels” in her home and there was “a pattern to how he treated me before and after” viewing pornography. His use affected her “confidence in intimacy” because he would view pornography then come to bed and use her for “finishing,” leaving her feeling like a “fill-in.” Both Rach and Izzy reported that they were unable to talk about their partner’s use of pornography with others because of the “judgment” around it, and for fear of others thinking they were responsible for their partner’s addiction due to their sexual inadequacy as a partner. Rach’s mother encouraged her to lose weight to be more desirable for her partner, implying that she was somehow responsible for her partner’s decision to compulsively view pornography. Rach reflected that her mother encouraged her to “do yourself up a bit and be more attractive” to stop her partner viewing pornography, which amplified the distress she was feeling in the relationship.

As these excerpts show, a male partner's use of pornography can have serious detrimental effects on intimate relationships which differed from those reported by men, indicating the need for continued investigation into the gendered nature of these impacts.

Conclusion

In line with certain feminist critiques, participants in this study recognized that mainstream content was overwhelmingly one-sided and aggressive, conforming to normative ideas about bodies, sex, gender, and power. Mainstream pornography's portrayals of heterosexual sex are regularly infused with themes of male dominance, male power, and female sexual subservience. These gendered power relations ultimately essentialize ideas about masculine sexual prowess and female sexual availability. These depictions are hosted on free pornography websites which provide a seemingly endless menu of sexually explicit content for a hungry audience of viewers. The demand for mainstream pornography is unprecedented, with porn producers continually creating new content to meet consumer demand and preferences. In turn, the audience engages with this content at levels that far surpass the circulation rates ever reported by popular men's magazines such as *Playboy*. Staggering levels of pornography use are reported by sites such as Pornhub, and these rates continue to increase on an annual basis.

In light of internet pornography's immense popularity and in conjunction with its potential to contribute to the development, acquisition, and activation of sexual scripts in viewers (Wright, 2011), we are right to be concerned about how these depictions may affect those who view pornography, and those in relationships with people who do. While pornography can be a powerful sexual aid, a site for sexual pleasure, and a playful addition to couple relationships, the excerpts included in this chapter demonstrate how harmful pornography can also be for men and women. From compulsive viewing of pornography to experiences of sexual coercion, these harms varied between men and women and thereby affirm the need for a gendered lens when conceptualizing and understanding the harms of pornography both for individuals and for those in relationships. In the absence of a utopian world without free and easy access to hardcore, misogynistic content online, it is critical that we continue to apply a gendered lens to our understandings about pornography from a harms-based paradigm. In so doing, these understandings provide a solid foundation for developing effective and holistic relationships and sexual education for adolescents, and for informing future violence prevention efforts which enhance users' safety and well-being in an increasingly digitally-mediated world.

Notes

1. Pornhub insights data suggest that women make up 35% of New Zealand's pornography audience (Pornhub, 2020c).

2. The concept of emerging adulthood is understood as a developmental period characterized by the exploration of life and love in a variety of ways, especially romantic love (Arnett, 2015). Emerging adulthood is also often characterized by the frequent use of pornography (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2015), and concerns have been raised about emerging adults' susceptibility to the influences of sexually explicit material (Braithwaite, Coulson, Keddington, & Fincham, 2015; Carroll et al., 2008).
3. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and are presented as such throughout this chapter. All participants have been given a pseudonym to ensure anonymity, and pseudonyms accompanied with the age of the participant are used throughout this chapter for individualized quotes.
4. Some participants identified with multiple ethnicities, so the numbers presented here do not add to 24 in total.
5. "Skullfucking" is a commonly used term to describe forcefully penetrating someone's mouth.

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