

Enjoyment, Exploration and Education: Understanding the Consumption of Pornography among Young Men with Non-Exclusive Sexual Orientations

Abstract

This qualitative research examines the influence of pornography consumption on young men with non-exclusive sexual orientations. Drawing on 35 in-depth interviews with men from an elite university in the Northeastern United States, we examine how pornography was experienced as a leisure activity to be consumed in free time. Rather than focusing on the potential harms of pornography, we use an inductive analytic approach to explore the broader range of experiences that participants had, since the time they first consumed pornography. We also demonstrate that pornography had educational benefits for our participants, related to their sexual desires, emerging sexual identities and for developing new sexual techniques. This study is part of a growing body of research that seeks to develop a holistic understanding of pornography in society, addressing the absence of the lived experience of the consumer in most pornography research.

Introduction

Pornography is a central site for debates about the regulation of sexual expression in society. Feminist writing in the 1970s and 1980s developed a critique of pornography that claimed social problems, such as rape and gender inequality, were perpetuated through forms of pornography that were equivalent to violence against women (e.g. Dworkin, 1979). A substantial body of research has explored the negative effects of consuming pornography (e.g. Klaassen & Peter, 2014; Mitchell, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2003; Sirianni & Vishwanath, 2015), at the expense of other outcomes that could occur (McKee, 2012); we call this focus on potential harms the *negative effects paradigm*, and it is pervasive in the study of pornography.

However, Attwood (2011) contends that a paradigm shift has begun in how pornography is studied: an increasing amount of research eschews a behaviorist approach that looks for causal links to negative social outcomes in favor of one that recognizes the complexity of pornography and the importance of context in terms of its actors, social hierarchies and consumer groups (e.g. McKee, 2009; Mowlabocus & Wood, 2015). Even so, there remains a dearth of qualitative accounts from consumers of pornography related to their experiences, attitudes and behaviors.

This study addresses this absence by using in-depth interviews with 35 young adult men to understand their uses of pornography in their adolescence and contemporary lives. The study recruited male youth with non-exclusive sexual orientations (neither exclusively gay nor exclusively straight) from an elite university in the Northeastern United States in order to understand the experiences of pornography consumption of young men whose sexual identities do not fit into the monosexist norms of U.S. culture. Adopting an inductive analytic approach, we find that internet pornography consumption was a feature in all participants' adolescence, and that it was framed as an ordinary and unproblematic component of their

lives. Pornography was understood as a form of pleasure to be consumed during free time, and we apply the conceptualization of sex as a leisure activity (Attwood & Smith, 2013) to understand this engagement with pornography. Participants also used pornography to explore their sexual desires, emerging sexual identities and for developing new sexual techniques. By focusing on how young adult men with non-exclusive sexual orientations consume pornography, we contribute to a more holistic understanding of the nature of pornography in society.

The Changing Social Context

Significant social change related to sexuality has occurred over the past 30 years. Attitudes toward non-marital sex have liberalized (Twenge, Sherman & Wells, 2015), with a fundamental shift in society regarding the rationale for sexual intercourse away from procreation toward pleasure (Treas, Lui & Gubernskaya, 2014). This focus on sexual pleasure is particularly visible in many youth cultures, where casual sex in the form of “hooking up” is a normalized behavior (Bogle, 2008). Furthermore, there is increased discussion of and legitimacy attached to non-normative sexual behaviors, such as group sex and kink activities (author citation; Frank, 2013).

As part of these trends, pornography has become more accessible online and has permeated through, and been normalized in, many aspects of popular culture—a process McNair (2013, p. 3) calls “the pornographication of mainstream culture.” Studies estimate that pornography is consumed by between 86-96% of men, with only slightly lower rates for women (Rosser et al., 2012). While General Social Survey data finds lower rates of pornography consumption (at 34% in 2010), this can be explained through a combination of a broad sample that does not account for gender or age (and thus generational differences),

alongside a continued unwillingness among many adults to admit to consuming pornography (Wright, 2013).

A key driver of this increased consumption is the role of the internet (Edelman, 2009). Owens, Behun, Manning and Reid (2012) contend that it has “allowed people of all ages to encounter, consume, create, and distribute sexually explicit content, and a growing body of data reveal these phenomena are increasingly common for adolescents worldwide” (p. 100). Paasonen (2010) also highlights how the internet has facilitated a rise in amateur pornography, where people upload self-recorded videos of themselves having sex that are freely available on websites such as xtube.com. She highlights how this user-created content provides a new type of pornography that transcends some of the feminist debates around coercion, objectification and the morality of pornography (e.g. Dworkin, 1979).

Even so, the increased consumption of pornography has occurred alongside persistent mainstream discourses of its “cultural harm” (Dines, 2010; McGlynn & Rackley, 2007). The multiplication and intensification of these debates within academia is manifest in the new discipline of *porn studies* (see Smith & Attwood, 2014), as well as an academic journal of the same name. In this context, research on pornography has expanded significantly, moving from a near-total focus on the potential harms of pornography (e.g. Flood, 2009) to a broader interest in the social dynamics of how pornography is consumed and the variegated ways in which people interpret and process their experiences of viewing pornography (Comella & Tarrant, 2015; McKee, 2010; Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner & Irizarry, 2010).

Pornography Consumption and the Negative Effects Paradigm

The predominant strand of research on pornography has examined how it negatively affects people’s sexual behaviors and their attitudes toward sex (Antevska & Gavey, 2015; Brown & L’Engle, 2009; Wright, 2011)—something we call the negative effects paradigm. It

is argued that pornography transmits a script for sexual intercourse that is acquired through consumption of pornography, which then has an effect when the viewer applies it to their own sexual behavior (Wright, 2013). The contention is that “via social learning, those who view pornography incorporate the actions they view into their own sexual scripts” (Braithwaite et al., 2014, p. 112). Thus, where pornography is readily available and education about sexual intercourse more broadly is sparse (Albury, 2014), it is argued that pornography can have a significant impact on how sexual intercourse is understood and enacted.

In the negative effects paradigm, studies have documented how exposure to pornography is associated with a range of sexual activities deemed “risky,” including anal sex, sex with multiple partners and early sexual activity (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Sun et al., 2014). Similarly, it has been argued that viewing pornography depicting rape will lead to increased acceptance of rape myths, violent sexual fantasies and perpetrating rape (Donnerstein, Linz & Penrod, 1987; McGlynn & Rackley, 2007); although there is a lack of empirical research supporting these claims, as well as evidence refuting the hypotheses (Diamond, Jozifkova & Weiss, 2011; Rubin, 1993; Ruddock, 2015)

The negative effects paradigm is particularly evident in research that examines adolescents’ use of pornography (e.g. Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009). One branch of this research examines “involuntary” or “unwanted” experiences of pornography, where adolescents see pornographic material without intentionally seeking it out, as it is argued that pornography has worse effects when young people see it accidentally (Mitchell et al., 2004; Rideout, 2001; Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2007). Yet pornography is also framed as damaging when adolescents desire to consume it. For example, while arguing that the risks of pornography use among young people may be “overstated,” Ybarra and Mitchell (2005, p. 485) find that “those who report intentionally seeking pornography may be facing multiple challenges, including delinquent behavior and substance use.”

In a small qualitative study of 23 ethnic minority youth, Rothman et al. (2014) report pornography as an ordinary component in participants' daily lives. Yet because "using pornography as a model for sexual activity had negative consequences for some females in the sample," they contend that pornography had damaging consequences for young people more broadly:

[T]he ubiquity of pornography on the Internet and proliferation of Web sites where users post their own amateur videos may be increasing the likelihood that minors create [Sexually Explicit Material], exploit sexual partners, disseminate sexually explicit images of underage peers, and pressure their dating partners to engage in sexual acts that could hurt or upset them. (p. 8).

However, despite the predominance of the negative effects paradigm in the literature, research is starting to contest it and argue for a broader examination of the impact of pornography on those who consume it (McKee, 2010; Ruddock, 2015).

Contesting the Negative Effects Paradigm

While dominant in pornography research, the negative effects paradigm faces critique on a number of fronts (Comella & Tarrant, 2015; Mowlabocus & Wood, 2015). Most significantly, a growing body of empirical research on pornography consumption, both among adolescents and more generally, rejects findings that it has negative effects. For example, Luder et al. (2011) examined the relationship between exposure to online pornography and risky sexual practices among young people. Using multiple data sets, including the 2002 Swiss Multicenter Adolescent Survey on Health, they found that exposure to online pornography did not result in greater sexual behaviors deemed risky. Similarly, Sinković, Štulhofer, and Božić (2013) found no correlation between pornography consumption at an early age and risky sexual behaviors. Indeed, Owens et al.'s (2012)

systematic literature review of the impact of internet pornography on adolescents found that the evidence for correlations between pornography consumption and a range of social and health outcomes were inconclusive, with little replicability across studies.

The lack of broader empirical support for the negative effects paradigm can be attributable to methodological and theoretical flaws. Methodologically, negative effects have only been found in laboratory conditions (SSSS, 2007), yet these studies lack ecological validity. McKee (2007) highlights that while pornography tends to be consumed on a voluntary basis for pleasure in naturalistic settings, participants in laboratory research do not have control over: the type of pornography they watch; how long they consume it for; whether they view it alone or with others; and whether they are allowed to masturbate (they frequently are not). As such, negative effects from laboratory studies likely reflect the *context* of pornography consumption and not the *content* of the pornography.

Furthermore, there are significant issues with the theoretical framework of the negative effects paradigm, which has tended to apply a simplified form of sexual script theory. In its broader context, sexual script theory recognizes the complexity of how cultural scenarios of sexuality intersect with people's interactions (Simon & Gagnon, 1986)—sexual scripts are not passively learned and recited like actors, but are rather *actively* interpreted by individuals in sophisticated ways that involve agency and contestation (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Yet scripting theory in the negative effects paradigm assumes a causal relationship between consumption on pornography and the activation of scripts present within it, with scant attention paid to how the person engages with the pornography (Wiederman, 2015). As such, the theoretical foundation of the negative effects paradigm does not enable the required complexity to understand pornography consumption, and further research is needed to develop a sophisticated understanding of how people consume pornography.

A New Approach for Studying Pornography Consumption

In order to move beyond the negative effects paradigm, McKee (2012) called for pornography to be conceived as a form of entertainment. He argued this would establish a different research agenda than one which is focused on its potential negative effects. A growing body of work connects sexual practice with leisure frameworks in order to understand the social nature of sexuality (author citation; Newmahr, 2010). Conceptualized as “leisure sex” (Attwood & Smith, 2013), this enables examination of sexuality that moved beyond a medicalized model where sex is viewed through a lens of risk, to one where pleasure and risk are balanced within a complex social context. Here, sex is viewed as a form of leisure activity (Stebbins 2001) rather than a “risky” behavior or social problem.

Central to leisure studies is the notion that it can take *casual* or *serious* forms. *Serious leisure* involves activities that require significant time and energy, such as surfing and rock-climbing. Stebbins (2001, p. 305) defined an act of *casual leisure* as an “immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it.” It includes passive entertainment, eating or drinking, and social play. Stebbins (1997, 2001) identified six key characteristics of casual leisure activities as a broad set of behaviors whose characteristics include being: 1) immediately and intrinsically rewarding; 2) relatively short-lived; 3) pleasurable; 4) sociable; 5) relieves boredom; and 6) requires little or no special training to enjoy.

Independent of whether particular sexual activities are casual or serious leisure, Attwood and Smith (2013, pg. 335) also contend that “any examination of sexual leisure will need to engage with the particular commitments and engagements of sexual cultures.” Indeed, Smith, Attwood and Barker (2014) highlight that qualitative data on pornography consumption must always consider the context and sexual circumstances of the person consuming it. In this way, and drawing on data from an online survey of over 5,000 young

people, Smith, Barker and Attwood (2015) show that young people consume porn for a variety of reasons, including: as a leisure activity in its own right; as an erotic experience; out of boredom; and to explore sexual identity. Similarly, interviewing high school students, Mullohand (2013) found that young people negotiate pornography in complex ways, demonstrating an ability to parody it while watching it for a range of purposes including sexual satisfaction. Thus, the social contexts – which includes demographics such as age, gender and sexual orientation – must be considered when understanding the consumption of pornography.

Aims and Objectives

In this exploratory study, we provide an empirically grounded framework by which to understand pornography consumption as a form of leisure activity. By examining the experiences of consuming pornography of 35 young men who have non-exclusive sexual orientations, we document that they have consumed pornography during their adolescence and demonstrate that pornography is best understood as a leisure activity in their lives. We then explore the educational benefits of this consumption, related to their sexual desires, identities and learning new sexual techniques. We situate these findings in participants' contexts as young adults with non-exclusive sexual orientations.

Method

Participants

Unlike much research on pornography consumption (e.g. Smith et al., 2015; Vörös, 2015), this research is part of a broader project on the experiences of young men with sexually non-exclusive orientations from an elite university in the Northeastern United States. As such, a key criterion for eligibility was that participants did not identify as “exclusively

heterosexual” or “exclusively homosexual,” as measured on a Kinsey-type 9-point scale of sexuality (see Savin-William, 2014). The participants in this study were male, aged between 18 and 32 (mean 21), with a range of racial demographics. Approximately 75% were White, with a small number of Black, Asian, and multiracial individuals. All participants had their adolescence in the United States. Participants studied a range of majors across the university, with no bias toward any particular degree.

Participants were recruited through posters and flyers disseminated through various academic schools, residence halls, cafés, social venues, email lists, and Facebook groups. The title of the advert was “Mostly Straight, Bi or Mostly Gay?” and informed participants about the broad aims of the study, contact details of the lead researcher, and that participants would be remunerated \$10 for their participation. There was no course credit. Eligibility criteria were that participants had to be male, a non-exclusive sexual orientation and studying at the university where data collection occurred.

Procedures

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to develop a rich understanding of participants’ sexual identities, behaviors and lives. Interviews averaged 65 minutes, and some were considerably longer (the longest was 135 minutes). Participants were asked questions on a number of topics related to their life experiences, sexual identities and behaviors, including questions about use of pornography. Questions on pornography related to why they watched it, their attitudes toward it, their history of watching pornography, and how it impacted upon them, among other questions. Several times pornography also arose as a topic when participants responded to other more general questions. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, a range of follow up questions were asked that varied between interviews.

All interviews were undertaken by the lead author. They occurred in a private interview room and were digitally recorded, and transcribed by the second author. All participants provided written informed consent immediately prior to interview, and ethical approval was gained from the first author's university, which was accepted by the university where data were collected.

A modified grounded theory approach to analysing the data was employed (Charmaz, 2014). This involved both authors coding the transcripts independently, using constant comparative methods. Emerging codes were discussed and developed into focused codes that we used to develop a "theory of the phenomena that is grounded in the data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 80-81). These theoretical themes were then related back to original transcripts to confirm internal coherence (Charmaz, 2014). It is through the process of coding, logical abstraction and inter-rater reliability that rigour is assured. Data are retrospective in nature, and this has been shown to be valid for research on sexual minority experiences (Rivers, 2001). There is no evidence to suggest that participants were misrepresenting their experiences and beliefs.

Results: Early Pornography Consumption

Participants watched pornography from an early age, with the average self-reported age of first consumption being 14 years old and the youngest aged 8. While this average is slightly older than other research has suggested (Brown & Lenge, 2009), the mean age may be skewed in our qualitative sample because several participants had their access to pornography restricted by their parents. For example, James said, "I couldn't watch it at home. Our computer is right in the middle of the living room and we have a big window and my aunt lives across the street." Peter had a similar experience, saying, "I shared a room with my sister and a computer with my family. So the only representations [of sex] I saw were on

TV and they're censored.” Demonstrating a persistent desire to consume pornography, Matthew regularly had his access to it blocked by his religious parents:

I started watching it in 7th grade. I had no idea what a browsing history was. That’s how my parents found out, and they were very angry...I watched it again in 9th grade and got caught again. Then after I learned how to clear browsing history, they got something that swept the hard drive. In 11th grade I thought this was unfair, so I went and bought a small tablet for gaming and for porn.

Participants who watched porn at an earlier age were able to do so because they had access to their own computer or privacy in their internet use. For example, Grant said, “I started watching porn around the time I started jacking off [masturbating], maybe 11 or 12. I had a computer so it was easy.” Similarly, Zach said, “We have a desktop that was in my room originally, so I watched it on that.” However, he added that this pornography consumption was interrupted by fears about being discovered: “I got nervous because every time my family used it I was worried that they would find something that I hadn’t deleted.”

Participants kept their viewing of pornography hidden from their parents. The deleting of browser history was a common way to do this. For example, Miguel said, “I liked porn, but I was always nervous that my parents would see it. I always deleted my history.” In addition to deleting their browser history, others also strategized about when to watch pornography: Luke said, “I knew my mum's schedule. I had a solid two hours between the time I got home from school and the time she got home from work. Or I would just do it while she was sleeping.”

Contrary to social fears about the loss of “childhood innocence,” concerns about early porn use were absent from participants’ narratives (Mullohand, 2013). 21 of the 35 participants discussed watching pornography from a young age and explicitly stated it was not problematic, with several making reference to it being helpful. For example, Alan said,

“Porn was a good thing. It helped me feel less confused about myself.” Marcus saw pornography as an ordinary part of sexual development, arguing it was “the common way for boys to transition into being sexual.” Challenging the notion that porn consumption promotes early sexual activity (Brown & L’Engle, 2009), he added, “I had this outlet so I didn’t feel like I needed to have sex.” Similarly, Luke described how he used porn as a way of delaying having sex, saying, “It wasn’t that I was denying sex to myself, I was denying it to other people.” No participant raised concerns about their consumption of pornography. Indeed, rather than being a source of concern, pornography was an ordinary component of early sexual experience that was viewed positively by the majority of participants, and neutrally by the others.

Pornography Consumption as a Leisure Activity

In order to examine whether pornography consumption can be viewed as a leisure activity, we draw on six characteristics of casual leisure (see Stebbins, 1997, 2001). These include: 1) being immediately and intrinsically rewarding; 2) relatively short-lived; 3) pleasurable; 4) sociable; 5) relieve boredom; and 6) require little or no special training to enjoy. Using this definition, it is possible to evaluate whether framing pornography consumption as a leisure activity maintains heuristic utility.

First, all participants used porn as a means of sexual gratification, which corresponds with it being *immediately and intrinsically rewarding*, as well as *relatively short-lived*. When asked why he watched porn, Stuart exemplified participants’ responses when he said, “I think the main reason is getting off. That’s the end goal.” All participants discussed sexual gratification at some point when discussing why they consume pornography, with over three quarters stating it was central to why they watched it.

Speaking to the *pleasurable* aspect of consuming pornography, and in addition to sexual gratification, some participants also discussed the importance of “quality” in their usage. For example, Rory said, “I will think, ‘I’m going to find a good video and take a little more time with this and get some release and feel good about that.’” Luke echoed the preferences for “good porn,” adding, “I like porn with a story. Straight porn generally has no good backstory. You can see the interactions between the guys in gay porn - they have some sort of relationship and a basis for why they’re having sex.”

Several participants discussed particular tastes they had related to pornography, including favorite websites—and cockyboys.com was particularly popular. Matthew said, “Maybe I’m a porn snob, but I prefer Jake Bass [a gay male porn star associated with cockyboys.com] because it’s a lot less corny. I hate porn with ‘porn talk.’” Describing the type of porn he gains most pleasure from, Zach said:

I like cockyboys.com. There’s a lot of foreplay, with little kink. And they’re romantically involved...First they hang out for a weekend and socialize, and at the end of all that, then they record the porn. I feel like that makes it a lot more real. John also discussed authenticity, saying, “I really like amateur college porn. When porn is real, that turns me on more than fake shot pornography. I like it when it’s real people who have real personalities on camera.” The discussion of what type of pornography participants most enjoyed, alongside its quality, highlights the pleasurable nature of its consumption.

Related to the *sociable* aspect of casual leisure, while all participants consumed pornography individually, some participants watched porn with others as a bonding activity. Talking about how he would share porn with his friends, Rory said, “Normally we talk about it in a joking manner, like, ‘this is the funniest video I’ve seen.’ Some people here are really open about talking about porn, especially ones they’re into or they think are funny.”

Similarly, Brendan said:

I've had a few friends joke around. I have one gay friend and one straight friend here, and one is getting me to watch more straight porn and the other is getting me to watch more gay porn. I feel like they're playing tug of war with my sexuality. I find it funny. Discussing a female friend, Fraser said, "If we were bored and had nothing to do, we would look up obscure porn and just watch it. Like Japanese tentacle porn. Crazy weird stuff. It was more as a comedy thing than for attraction." The shared humor when viewing the videos is a clear example of social bonding (Anderson, 2014).

Pornography was also used constructively as a way of *relieving boredom* or aiding productivity (Smith et al., 2015). For example, Luke said, "I have watched porn and not done anything, but I was really bored and thought, 'why not?' It was there." Thomas said, "If it's just that I'm feeling a bit turned on or bored, porn would do it." In order to help him concentrate, Rory said, "I will watch porn and jerk off if I am really stressed so I can get it out of the way to do some homework or something." While we do not discuss the lack of training needed to enjoy pornography, this is evident from how participants started consuming it from an early age as discussed in the previous section. Accordingly, these narratives highlight how pornography can be considered a recreational leisure activity, facilitating pleasure, social bonding, and relieving boredom, along with physical and emotional stimulation.

Educational and Exploratory Uses of Pornography

While participants highlighted the use of pornography for sexual gratification and as a leisure activity, it also served as an educational tool (Albury, 2014). When the educational aspects of pornography are recognized in research, it is often used as a rhetorical device to critique the paucity of school-based sex education (Sun et al., 2014). Yet participants spoke positively about their use of pornography, describing three ways it served as an educational

tool: exploring sexual desire; exploring new sexual activities; and as a means of understanding their own sexual identity. Here, participants' sexual context of maintaining non-exclusive sexual orientations is clearly important, and so we also include participants' sexual identity (e.g. mostly gay) in this section, given its relevance to the topics discussed.

Some participants described exploring different genres of pornography out of "curiosity." When Adam, mostly straight, was asked about gay pornography, he said, "I clicked on it out of curiosity. While I'm scrolling down it's like 'that's where it is, I should click it.'" Similarly, Rory, mostly straight, said, "I watched gay porn for very short periods of time. It was definitely 'let's see if I like this'." This was true of participants across the sexuality spectrum. For example, Ian, mostly gay, said, "I clicked on gay porn because I saw it, thought, 'What's that?' and it worked for me... It was fun exploring different types."

All participants initially watched porn aimed at heterosexual males, with a progression to finding porn more tailored to their sexual preferences. Furthermore, participants reported their choice of pornography changing as they gave greater recognition to their same-sex sexual desires. For example, Joseph, mostly gay, said, "When I first started watching porn, it was mostly heterosexual. But I noticed I was always more interested in the guy. These days I mostly watch gay porn." Matthew, mostly gay, said, "I started to watch straight porn, and then moved to bi porn. I was looking more at the guy, so I followed the link to gay porn and was like 'Whoa, that's hot.'"

Many participants found that pornography was helpful in intellectually processing their sexual desires. When asked about how pornography related to his understanding of his sexual desires, Miguel, mostly gay, responded, "I hope that it did help... I was looking at the guys in porn to figure out if I liked girls." Similarly, Marcus, bisexual leaning gay, said, "I remember watching straight porn and I think that's when it started being 'I'm jealous of that girl' and progressing into 'I'm attracted to that guy.'"

Pornography consumption also provided a safe space to explore sexual desires. Lee, mostly gay, commented how he “went to porn for an emotionally neutral location to explore.” He added, “It was very self-educational trying to figure out what was going on in my brain.” Similarly, Bill, mostly gay, said, “I started looking at porn when I thought ‘let’s do it, let’s figure this out.’ It was more an intellectual space; I wanted to finally think about it, not be ashamed of it and see how it all worked.” These narratives highlight the importance of pornography for sexual minorities, not least because of the sexual visibility it provides in a broader heterosexist culture (McNair, 2013).

Participants also used pornography to consolidate an understanding of their sexual identities. In receiving a lack of understanding and sometimes stigma when they discussed their non-exclusive sexuality, pornography provided a platform for self-confirmation of their sexual identity. 25 out of the 35 participants found it a useful means of this confirmation. For example, when asked if pornography helped him think about his sexual identity, Luke, bisexual leaning gay, said, “I’d say it made it more definite. There is no way I can enjoy gay porn as much and still be straight.” Matthew, mostly gay, said, “I’ve used porn to help me think about my sexuality. That’s why I think I’m more gay than anything else, because it has been more gay porn. I’ve looked at other porn, but I don’t really like it.” When asked if pornography was helpful in understanding his sexuality, Thomas, bisexual leaning straight, said:

I think so. If I didn’t understand my ideas through porn, I wouldn’t have explored them in real life...I might have had some mixed feelings down the line, but porn helped me to come to an understanding and clarify my sexual attraction.

However, not all participants found porn initially helpful for consolidating an understanding of their sexual identities. For example, Fraser, bisexual, said:

It was confusing watching both straight and non-straight porn because it made me wonder if it was a phase; could I enjoy straight, lesbian and gay porn? It made me more confused. I wasn't able to fit into a binary with one direct label on it.

Stephen, bisexual leaning gay, reflected this confusion adding, "For a long time, it was just a mess." While it may have confused participants at the time, they argued that retrospectively it was beneficial. For example, Brendan, bisexual, said, "Looking back at it, it definitely made things more clear that I did like guys. It has helped. The confusing part was me not wanting to accept it."

The final way that participants described pornography as educational for them was as a means of exploring new sexual activities and techniques (see also Weinberg et al., 2010). For example, Stuart said, "I start to get ideas in my head like 'maybe I like this,' so I search for different things. Or I might just happen to come across them. I have discovered sexual preferences that I have in that way." When asked why he watched pornography, Edward said, "Mainly getting off. Also, curiosity and ideas for the future. Sort of like, 'oh that would be interesting to try at some point.'" Miguel described how he would incidentally come across new sexual activities in his pornography consumption, saying, "If I saw something new I might think, 'oh that's a good idea,' but I wouldn't *search* for things to do."

This exploration of sexual activities extended to kinky behaviors. For example, Thomas said:

It started with lesbian porn... but it moved to the more fetish stuff, BDSM, about 14 or 15. Rather than focusing on the submissive male, I was really intrigued by the dominant male in those scenes. Then it went into the gay BDSM porn.

When asked if pornography was used to explore sexuality, Lee, into a kink known as furry play (see Soh & Cantor, 2014), said, "Absolutely. There was this progression of looking at porn and then I would catch myself looking at gay porn and furry porn." Richard discussed a

form of Japanese pornography that focuses on oversized disembodied penises: “Futanari porn, dick girls. I really do like it, and I don’t know why. I don’t know if it is because of the penis as its own thing or because it is always in the context of femininity.” Interestingly, while Richard discussed his interest in this kink pornography, he was open about it with his heterosexual female partner: “My girlfriend knows and is fine with it. She watched it but it didn’t do anything for her.” Thus, while there may be problems in using pornography as a tool for learning in educational settings, some things cannot be explored in the classroom and participants’ narratives highlighted the positive aspects of pornography in understanding their sexual lives.

Discussion

This research has drawn on interviews with 35 young men with non-exclusive sexual orientations to examine how their consumption of pornography has impacted upon their sexual lives and identities. Adopting an inductive analytic approach, our findings support the growing body of research that problematizes what we have called the negative effects paradigm (Comella & Tarrant, 2015; McKee, 2010), where studies explore the potential harms associated with pornography consumption to the exclusion of other possible outcomes. Instead, our participants consumed it as a leisure activity, and found it educational in a number of ways—supporting McKee’s (2012) contention that pornography should be viewed as a form of entertainment rather than as a potential harm.

While exploratory in scope, this research highlights key ways in which pornography should be considered as a leisure activity. Drawing on Stebbins’ (1997) characteristics of casual leisure, we found these accurately describe the ways in which participants discussed their consumption of pornography. In addition to a source of sexual gratification, pornography was also used to relieve boredom, bond with friends, and as a source of

pleasure. Importantly, while we did not focus on potential harms from pornography, our interview schedule and open-ended questions meant that there were numerous opportunities for such issues to be raised—yet the only problems discussed related to parents finding out about pornography consumption. In other words, the negative effects of pornography consumption for our participants were not related to the content of the pornography but how their parents reacted to them watching it.

Our findings extend beyond framing pornography as a leisure activity. A central finding is the *educational* value that participants ascribed to their pornography consumption. Participants valued the ability it provided to understand their non-exclusive sexual desires and identities, as well as exploring new sexual acts and behaviors (such as kink or BDSM). This is particularly useful for those with non-exclusive sexualities because their desires do not fit within dominant typologies of sexuality (Savin-Williams, 2014). While these findings are supported by other studies (e.g. Rothman et al., 2014), most of this research has dismissed the educational benefit by focusing on the potential harms of pornography. However, given our framing of porn as a leisure activity, we contend that our data provides evidence that educational benefits of pornography consumption exist, and are currently an under-examined component of contemporary research on pornography (see also Weinberg et al., 2010).

Importantly, the data in this article come from a broader project on the experiences and sexual histories of people with non-exclusive sexualities. As such, whereas much of the qualitative research on pornography explicitly recruited people to discuss their consumption of pornography (e.g. Smith et al., 2014; Vörös, 2015), this broader study was focused on participants' sexual orientations, identities and life experiences. This is important because, as Smith et al. (2015) highlight, participants in studies about pornography are “intensely aware of the way they are talked about, categorised, and belittled” as users of pornography (p. 269) and, as such, their positionality and motives in the research process needs to be carefully

considered. While interview data always needs to be examined reflexively for strategic self-presentation, by using data on pornography that emerged from participants' broader narratives about their experiences and sexual histories, the issues related to their political perspectives on pornography are minimized.

While research tends to examine how pornography consumption can lead to risky sexual practices (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009; Wolak, Mitchell & Finkelhor, 2007), pornography consumption may have had positive outcomes for some participants. There is evidence that pornography consumption may have delayed first sex on occasion: A minority of participants explicitly stated that they watched pornography instead of having sex, while others called it a "safe space" to explore their sexuality. This is further supported by the fact that participants also used pornography to help understand their sexual identity: Given that research has documented how sexual minority youth have sexual intercourse to confirm their own sexual identity (Dube, 2000), it is possible that consumption of pornography served this purpose for some participants. Thus, while further research with generalizable samples would be needed to test this hypothesis, there is limited evidence that pornography can have positive effects on sexual behaviors.

Finally, our research concurs with a growing body of research that finds people are watching pornography during adolescence, and even before puberty in some cases (e.g. Braun-Corville & Rojas, 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2005). However, a key component of our data is that pornography was actively sought out by participants in general, either through curiosity or sexual desire. No concerns were raised about a loss of "childhood innocence" or that this pornography consumption damaged them. Given that our participants are young adults reflecting on their recent past, they offer a particular perspective on how pornography impacted upon their childhood. We find no evidence to support the negative effects paradigm

in this research, and instead contend that pornography is better considered a leisure activity, even at an early age.

Limitations

Given the convenience sample of the data, this study is exploratory in scope and does not seek to make generalized claims about pornography consumption. In particular, our focus on men with non-exclusive sexual orientations attending an elite university means that our findings should also be limited to these groups. It is possible that the educational benefits of pornography, particularly related to sexual identity, are especially salient for sexually non-exclusive men. The study is also restricted to men, and there are gender differences in experiences of consuming pornography (Smith et al., 2015). Our sample was also relatively homogenous in terms of race, and we have not analyzed race in further detail. We also did not collect physiological data or test psychological and emotional well-being—relying on participants self-report of their experiences (Rivers, 2001). It is also possible that demand characteristics may have affected participant responses, although the interviewer maintained a neutral position when discussing pornography to limit this likelihood (Orne, 1962). Further research is needed to explore our findings in more detail and examine the extent to which they can be generalized to different groups.

Conclusion

This exploratory study has provided an empirically grounded framework from which to explore pornography consumption beyond the negative effects paradigm which focusses on the potential harms of pornography. Responding to calls to consider pornography as a form of entertainment (McKee, 2012), we find evidence that the consumption of pornography can appropriately be considered a casual leisure activity among university-attending men

with non-exclusive sexual orientations; and that they reported no negative effects from viewing it, other than the encountering issues with their parents. As such, this study is part of a growing body of research that seeks to develop a holistic understanding of pornography in society (Smith et al., 2015; Weinberg et al., 2010), and address the absence of the consumer in pornography research (Attwood, 2011).

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