



'I'm just curious and still exploring myself': Young people and pornography

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Abstract

Young people's encounters with sexual media are the subject of intense concern, but the research underpinning policy debate and public discussion rarely pays attention to the complexity of these. In this article, we show how encounters with pornography are increasingly presented as matters of health and well-being, but often from a standpoint of 'exposure and effects' that offers little in the way of understanding the significance of pornography in people's lives. We consider what our recent research on porn consumption suggests about young people's encounters and engagements with pornography – focusing on porn as an 'outlet', the development of porn tastes and the relation of porn to young people's developing sex lives and imaginations. We argue that it is productive to understand pornography as a site for developing sexual identities and relationships, as a form of sexual leisure and play, and in relation to the broader emergence of mediated intimacies.

Keywords

Audiences, mediated intimacy, play, pornography, sexual health, young people

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It was an advertisement for a foot fetish video
A man running after a car with a dressing gown on and you could see his penis
A man being done up the arse by another man
It was a pornstar's photograph
Man masturbating his penis
Just a man posing naked
Two women kissing and undressing each other
It was of topless girls in some online video game
It was a hentai of a busty girl growing a massive penis and then sucking it
It was the cover of *Maxim*
Images of human anatomy
A naked woman on a magazine in a shop
It was a drawing of a hand job
A hentai 'parody' of a popular cartoon, depicting rape
It was a fanfic that I had found, during a trip
A depiction of a film of a couple having sex, in the movie *Kinsey*
It was an adult dating site
It was a diagram of female reproductive body parts
A man and a woman were spooning naked in a bed
It was the nude drawing scene from *Titanic*
I just remember a popup of a naked woman and being terrified that my parents
would see it on the screen
I had had fantasies about spanking for a long time so I googled it
It was a vagina with Homer Simpson's face tattooed onto it
I think it would have been the Sailor Scouts from *Sailor Moon*
Some Page 3 girl doing whatever it is Page 3 girls do
I believe it was a nude frontal photograph of Pamela Anderson
My Mom had a book about AIDS that featured a few erect penises of anonymous
men and Close-ups of vulvas
A woman in a bikini simulating oral sex (on a banana!)

These responses are from a small project, part of our broader long-term research on porn audiences. The project 'what are you looking at?'¹ asked young people to describe who was in the first sexual image they ever saw and what was happening. These varied responses which take in a range of media forms and genres – drawings, diagrams, books, magazines, photographs, mainstream film, adverts, video, fanfiction, hentai, dating sites, pop ups, games – and depictions – not just 'having sex' but drawing a nude, spooning, masturbation, posing naked or topless, hand jobs, oral and anal sex, and rape – stand in stark contrast to the way in which young people's encounters with sexual media are generally presented, almost always in 'pornography', occurring on the Internet and taking a predictable format. In this article, we reflect on what we have learnt from our research with young porn consumers. We begin by contextualizing our research and explaining our approach, set out some key findings and end by contrasting our work with broader public and political discussions about pornography, in which porn encounters are increasingly presented as matters of health.

We show how the research that is most visible in these public and political spheres adopts a concern with ‘exposure and effects’ and thus offers very little in the way of understanding the significance of pornography in young people’s lives. We identify ways in which our approach presents a significant departure from those accounts, opening up the possibilities of understanding the libidinal economies of young people’s online engagements with sexual media beyond the wash and spin cycle of surveying young people’s porn use in order to find the means of cleansing and purging new media of sexual content. This is not to suggest that there are no questions to be asked about the desirability or otherwise of, for example, young people’s access to pornography as forms of sex education, but to argue for conceptualizations of the ‘powers’ of porn that are adequate to the complexities of the ‘sexual’ and its diverse connections across media and everyday life. Our research sought to understand the varying ways in which sexually explicit media might be significant for the construction of sexual identities and the ambivalence that young people can feel toward the categories of ‘ignorance’ to which policy reports often assign them.

The pornresearch.org project

Our research project made use of a questionnaire hosted at <http://pornresearch.org/> during 2011 and aimed at examining people’s everyday engagements with pornography. It differs from much existing porn research in its refusal to see porn in abstract terms and in its interest in understanding what research participants mean when they use the term porn and what kinds of porn they engage with. It emphasizes the context of porn consumption in relation to a number of factors, such as participants’ age, gender and sexual orientation and their feelings about sex.

It takes this approach in line with a tradition of cultural studies which sees cultural texts and their consumption as complex, significant and deserving of proper investigation. This tradition stands in opposition to the understanding of media as forms of ‘stimulus’, ‘message’ or ‘content’ and their consumption as ‘exposure’, ‘response’ or ‘effect’, which is found in much public ‘commonsense’ discussion of media, as well as in earlier communication research approaches and often in contemporary mainstream psychology. This framing has been roundly criticized for its lack of theoretical framework and appropriate methodology (see, for example, Barker and Petley, 2001; Gauntlett, 1998). In contrast, we are interested in ‘the meaning and use of media and culture in people’s daily lives’ and use methods ‘that seek to gather audiences’ working understandings, evaluations and self-perceptions’ (Barker, 2014: 150). Our work is also part of a paradigm shift in porn studies that has focused on contextualizing pornographies – not only in relation to the individual histories and memories of audience members that encounter them, but to other genres, aesthetics and hierarchies of cultural value and to the broader frameworks of sexual discourse, custom and regulation (see Attwood, 2011b, and for examples, Knudsen et al., 2007; Kyrölä and Paasonen, 2016; McKee, 2005; McKee et al., 2008; Smith, 2007; Spišák and Paasonen, 2017). It is related to work on the risks and opportunities for young people online (Livingstone et al., 2011; Livingstone and Haddon, 2009) and more firmly connected in its aims and ethics to the broader project of understanding the relation of young people, new media

and forms of sexual and digital citizenship (see, for example, Albury, 2016; boyd, 2014; Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Buckingham and Willett, 2013; Hasinoff, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2009; Marwick and boyd, 2014).

Work from within this tradition, which takes seriously the need to listen to the people who are the focus of research, has helped to amplify our understanding of the ways that porn signifies socially and publicly for young people. For example, Marco Scarcelli (2015) has shown how porn can occupy a symbolic role in interactions between girls and boys, enabling 'border games' as ways of managing peer group membership. Monique Mulholland's (2013) work shows how young people negotiate pornography in complex ways, demonstrating an ability to parody it while watching for a range of purposes including sexual satisfaction. What is particularly compelling in this project is her sketching out of the way that public and private are redrawn in these kinds of negotiations, creating a 'new normal' in which some kinds of engagement around porn become acceptable while others are excluded. Research by Spišák and Paasonen (2017) suggests that young people's perceptions of pornography are more diverse than is typically assumed in public debate and that pornography may not be the most pressing sexual issue for young people. This is borne out by other studies that show that although 93% of 9- to 16-year-olds go online weekly and 60% go online everyday or almost every day, only 14% have encountered sexual content there; and the vast majority of these are at the upper end of the age group. Engagement with pornography online is much less prevalent than many people think (see Rovolis and Tsaliki, 2012; Tsaliki et al., 2014, for a discussion).

The purpose of our research was to develop a rich data resource which would illuminate engagements with, experiences of, and feelings about, pornography. We were not seeking any kind of a representative 'sample', given that it is far from clear what would count as the 'population' for pornography consumption, but instead to richly populate all of the subcategories generated by our questionnaire. We aimed to recruit widely, by age, gender, sexual identification and level of involvement with porn (see Barker, 2014 for a discussion). The questionnaire was open from the end of February to the end of June 2011 and was advertised by means of social media and using whatever media opportunities came our way. The large number of responses suggests that we can be fairly confident of a good mixture and spread of accounts. Of course, such accounts are not transparent, but they have value in enabling us to think about the ways in which people are able to talk about their experiences, their sense of themselves, the kinds of interests they have in sex, how pornography might fit (or not) in their intimate relationships, and how it might contribute (or not) to explorations of what it means to be sexual. Our data enable the exploration of how pornography might matter to people.

While we were interested in possible patterns and relations in participants' responses, we also wanted to elicit more detailed accounts of porn consumption than have been pursued elsewhere. By adopting an approach that combines quantitative and qualitative questions we were able to pursue both kinds of information. Our quantitative questions were designed to allow us to look for patterns, categories, tendencies and relations in the data and were of three kinds: self-allocation multiple-choice questions (e.g. asking people to say how important pornography was to them); some personal and demographic information; and questions about possible orientations (e.g. reasons for looking at porn; the kinds of sources they use; and meanings of sex in their lives).

With these quantitative questions came a series of qualitative ones that were intended to let us see what people's narratives, views, feelings, positions and judgments were. Some linked directly to a multiple-choice question (e.g. having asked people how important they felt pornography was to them, we asked them to tell us why they had answered as they had). Other questions were prompted by our desire to get people to think about and tell us about their experiences in distinctive ways (e.g. we were interested in the idea of a *personal career* with pornography so we asked people to try to tell us about a 'history of their engagement with pornography in ten sentences'). We also asked people to tell us the kinds of sexual stories that most attract them, and about a pornographic moment or scenario that they had found especially arousing. We asked people if there was anything about them as individuals that would help us understand the answers they had given. Answers to this ranged from 'nothing' to lengthy stories.

By coupling quantitative and qualitative questions in this way, we were able to capture a body of quantitative data from which to generate patterns, categories and relations and a dense body of qualitative kinds of 'talk' to throw light on these. This qualitative talk also makes it possible to examine portraits of interesting individuals and the ways that different aspects of their answers interweave. We made a number of statistical analyses including chi-square cross-tabulations, which highlighted various significant relationships, for example between frequencies of looking at porn and gender. A substantial portion of answers were examined to generate a picture of the kinds of things participants had expressed and how. After this, interesting recurring topics were selected and examined by using relevant keywords and manually verifying these to make sure that the context in which the keyword was mentioned was relevant to the topic. Portraits of individuals were also identified by using keyword searches, as well as by scanning answers to key questions for length and density. This allowed us to draw out key concepts, criteria and reference points, and to identify key terms and expressions used by individuals. In turn, these were used as search terms in order to investigate the kinds of associations and frames within which key terms operate.

In the following section, we begin with some discussion of the responses as a whole, before moving on to focus on the talk generated by our under 18 participants.

Engagement and early encounters with porn

We received 5490 completed responses; of those, 3743 identified as men (68.4%) and 1726 as women (31.6%). Sexual orientation broke down as follows:

Heterosexual	3842 (70.1%)
Gay	186 (3.4%)
Lesbian	56 (1.0%)
Bisexual	905 (16.5%)
Queer	303 (5.5%)
Unsure	189 (3.4%)

A number of broad themes emerged across our participants' accounts of the significance of porn in their lives:

porn consumption as a response to boredom, in which one's body asserts itself and demands attention

porn consumption to aid an intensification of bodily pleasures

porn consumption as a way to intensify masturbation as a wind-down from forms of stress

porn consumption as a site for voyeurism, and the attraction of the sight – and sound – of bodies sexually engaged

porn consumption as part of the attraction of the kinky, the naughty and the dirty, and the desire to explore a forbidden domain

porn consumption as a compensation for inadequate sexual opportunities, including those related to participants' age

porn consumption within an ongoing relationship

porn consumption as a means of exploring one's sexual self/identity

porn consumption as part of a wider recognition of the force of sex

porn consumption as a leisure choice in its own right

porn consumption as an aesthetic/erotic experience. (Smith et al., 2015)

Our questions about participants' early motivations in encounters with porn also yielded a range of responses:

I was a young girl and was curious about my body and all those new feelings. (Female, heterosexual, 18–25, United States)

To see what sex was all about. (Female, heterosexual, 18–25, Canada)

To learn to please women. (Male, heterosexual, 26–35, United States)

To try to convince myself that I wasn't gay. (Male, gay, 26–35, United States)

Because it was intriguing and inappropriate. (Male, queer, 18–25, United States)

With college neighbors watching the filthiest things they could find. (Female, heterosexual, 26–35, United States)

I had nearly gone in to celibacy, but suddenly my body ached after something and porn became a good way of connecting to my body. (Female, queer, 26–35, Sweden)

I looked for images that reflected a couple of niche fantasies. (Female, bisexual, 26–35, United Kingdom)

I had a slight weight issue and porn allowed me to feel better about myself. (Male, 26–35, heterosexual, United States)

As Martin Barker (2014) has noted, ‘a first level of discovery’ in studies which take audiences seriously ‘is, very commonly, variety and diversity’ (p. 150). Our project is no exception in this sense. In these responses, we can see not only the variety in people’s accounts of their motivation for engaging with porn and its significance for them, but the relation of that variety to individual participants’ relationships with their bodies, with other people and with their knowledge about sex. Some engagements with porn seem to relate directly to the body, as a way of making space for its demands, taking care of it, and intensifying its pleasures. Others relate more broadly to seeking sensation or satisfaction, to relieving stress, or exploring feelings and orientations. There are also particular kinds of curiosity and intrigue: about sexual practices, bodies and feelings; about orientation, desire and identity; about looking and listening; about the forbidden and the filthy. Sometimes porn engagement is a response to existing and emerging fantasies and interests, or to anxieties about the body which may or may not be primarily sexual. Porn is also a source of material that can be educational, in terms of learning particular skills, of thinking through issues of sexual identification, or of measuring desire in terms of a relationship with social and cultural norms.

In the following section, we focus on the under 18s group and discuss their responses in relation to porn as an outlet, porn tastes, porn and sex lives, and porn and imagination.

The under 18s

Orientation	Female	Male	Total
Heterosexual	13	42	55
Gay	0	6	6
Lesbian	0	0	0
Bisexual	15	9	24
Queer	1	3	4
Unsure	4	3	7
No answer			1
Total	33	63	97

A total of 97 under 18s completed the questionnaire, and their responses offer important insights into their understandings of pornography, sexuality, sex, sexual orientations and identities. Just as with the larger cohort, two-thirds of our participants were men ($n=63$)

and one-third female ($n=33$). The table gives a breakdown of sexual orientation by gender.

Our participants in this cohort were overwhelmingly from the United States with 65 in total (46 men and 19 women); Canadians were the next largest group but way behind the United States with only 10 (half of which were men), the United Kingdom came in with nine (of whom two were women); and seven men and one woman from Australia completed the questionnaire. From Brazil and Israel, we had one male and one female completion each; and one person from each of New Zealand, the Philippines, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Germany, Finland, Austria and Malaysia. It is interesting that so many Americans responded to the questionnaire but as the questionnaire was in English, perhaps that is the only observation we can make – with such small numbers from outside the United States it would be difficult to make any meaningful comparisons about location.

Porn as an ‘outlet’

Some of our young participants used the questionnaire to comment ironically on their presentation as ‘subjects of concern’ – often at some length. Often too, their accounts emphasized its relative lack of importance in their lives:

I look at porn. Then I masturbate. The End. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

Porn is just for when I’m bored. (Male, bisexual, Israel)

I don’t rely on porn, but I watch it frequently. I don’t consider it important. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

Here, porn is presented as unimportant, inessential and used instrumentally. All the same, it has value in terms of the pleasure it provides, the way it eases someone into masturbation:

Pornography doesn’t do much except provide the easiest way for me to masturbate. (Male, unsure, Australia)

It keeps my fantasies creative, but I can live without it. (Female, heterosexual, Canada)

I don’t take it seriously but it’s pretty nice. (Male, heterosexual, United Kingdom)

And this value is not only about sexual pleasure. Porn may offer a space for relaxation, time out of the mundane, a way to release stress, frustration and tension, and even provide a means of getting away from being preoccupied with sex and back into the everyday:

It’s a getaway, as crazy as that sounds, from everyday life. Like all entertainment, really. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

Watching/reading/looking at porn helps me relax. (Female, unsure, United States)

I find it as a great way to relax after a very hard day. (Male, gay, United States)

It relieves stress and provides an easy outlet for frustration, and feels good! (Male, heterosexual, United Kingdom)

I rely on it to an extent to release tensions and to help me get on with my day when there are things besides sex that I need to be thinking about or that I would rather be thinking about. (Male, bisexual, Australia)

We asked participants ‘how important would they say porn is in their lives?’ All 5490 participants answered this question, and across the age categorizations, the most frequent response was ‘only a little’ important (35.7%), followed by ‘quite’ important (33.4%), and with the least frequent response for ‘extremely’ important (5.2%). There was a significant association between the frequency of looking at porn and age. About 22.6% of those aged 65 years and above stated that they viewed porn ‘as often as they can’ – a much higher proportion than all other age groups, followed by 10.3% of the under 18s. The oldest and youngest participants were similar in terms of patterns of engagement around frequency but they accorded pornography different levels of importance, which seem to be connected to the way that age and the state of the body are related. For older participants, looking at porn provided a means to connect with a ‘world of sex out there’, ‘for reconnection with my body’, ‘for recognition of my sexual interests’, to find stories that ‘dramatise what sex is all about’ and ‘to see things I can’t do’. There is a strong sense here of sex being something that they feel cut off from that porn may be able to provide a means of recovering. The middle age groups (26–35, 36–45 and 46–55 years) cited ‘to get into the mood with my partner’ as a main reason for viewing porn – more than the young and older age groups. Younger age groups (under 18s and 18–25 years) cited the following main reasons for viewing porn: ‘When I feel horny’, ‘Sometimes I’ve nothing better to do’, ‘When I’m bored, can’t relax, can’t sleep’ and ‘for a laugh’ more than older age groups. For younger participants, the emphasis was also on porn as a ‘safe outlet’ or discovering potentialities and possibilities in the absence of other opportunities:

The process: Horny – No girl = porn;) (Male, heterosexual, United Kingdom)

I tell myself I shouldn’t, but hormones get the better of me sometimes. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

Young, no boyfriend, hormones. I need to vent somehow and it also helps with sleeping and getting rid of frustration of any kind. (Female, unsure, United States)

Porn provides ways of venting, soothing oneself, grappling with the experiences of growing up, with changes in the body, with the surges of desire and ‘hormones’, but it is also employed with some deliberation as part of a strategy for developing a sexual repertoire, a readiness for sexual relationships or a responsible approach to sex:

If I couldn’t view porn anymore, it would probably lead to some bad decisions in choosing someone to have sex with. The urge would be more prevalent and being at risk for STDs would

probably be higher. Porn prevents me from using a booty call or just hanging out with girls to get sex. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

Good porn gives me ideas for new positions to use, let's me view how bodies other than my own work, and even shows me how to operate different sex toys. Without porn, I'd probably seek to learn this through experience. However, seeing this first is much safer (safer than promiscuity) and can open your mind to different ideas, or even give you an idea of what isn't appealing for you. Porn eliminates some of the tricky trial-and-error aspects of sex and leads to a definitely more interesting sex life. (Female, heterosexual, United States)

These responses suggest that porn engagement may also compensate for inadequate sexual opportunities and can provide a way of exploring one's sexual self/sexual identity. A number of responses show a young person wanting to be sure they are not behaving 'stupidly' or 'recklessly', with porn providing an outlet for 'indiscriminate' behaviours, which might put the individual at risk, emotionally as well as physically. It may provide a space for exploration and learning, or enable the separation of desire from sexual activity or particular kinds of social situations. In these types of response, young people appear to be using their encounters with pornography as part of their reflections upon their readiness for sex, what they might like to engage in, with whom, how and what might be ethical considerations for themselves and prospective partners.

In all the commentary in the press, educational and policy arenas, the talk is about the ubiquity of Internet porn and the ease with which young people can access it. We certainly found that the Internet had made searching, seeing and sifting through sexually explicit images much easier, but there are clear indications that young people are exercising a range of skills and knowledge in that access:

Uh ... I'm proud to say that I never downloaded porn in my life (too dangerous, what if someone finds it?), so I'm usually a fan of imageboards, sites like Redtube and artists databases. It's easier and the content is limitless. Also, I read way too much *Literotica* and 'smut fanfics', because imagining everything and it all being just the way I like it is so nice! I don't like the magazines (turning the pages makes the experience so mechanic ...), and I still haven't watched a film in a DVD yet so I can't tell you HOW it is to me ... I'm a fruit of the new generation! (Female, bisexual, Brazil)

Imageboards and forums are the best resources for me. 4chan, plus4chan, etc. have boards devoted to pornography. I don't pay for material. Sometimes I just use google or look up the source of an image or video for more. (Female, unsure, United States)

[I] search for it on the internet, links from friends/boyfriend, posts on message boards, etc. Its the easiest way! Theres so much out there, its simple to just type in to Google what you're looking for and it'll spit it right out. (Female, heterosexual, United States)

I happened upon a database once, and I tend to just search there. Sometimes I torrent and save things to my computer. The first one, it's just convenient because if I want to I can delete the browsing history, and there's no signing in, which is nice. (Female, heterosexual, United States)

only one website, because I greatly dislike the process of going through websites, most probably because I feel guilt. Even the website I have used is very male orientated, and often misogynistic, but I've found little on the web for female-orientated porn. (Female, unsure, United Kingdom)

Blogs or porn tubes. Blogs are usually geared towards one specific niche, which is nice and tubes allow you to browse a wide variety. (Female, bisexual, United States)

These young women are making choices of where to view based on multiple dimensions of convenience – for example, that the material is free, and on specificity as well as the breadth of material on offer. Similar responses were given by our male participants, although perhaps these were longer and more detailed in their descriptions of where they look, what for and how:

I usually find the porn that I look at (hentai) by searching in either image or story databases (stories known as doujin or doujinshi). For example, I browse danbooru.donmai.us for images and fakku.net for stories. I browse these because they are a convenient way to find high-quality hentai. For example, danbooru has an immense database with each image marked with 'tags', which I can use to find images of particular characters that I like. I generally use a character tag combined with the tag 'order:score', which lets me find the images that others have rated the highest. Again, this lets me find high-quality images conveniently. On fakku.net, I search in series that I like and look for the stories that look promising from their covers (I look for high-quality drawing, drawing styles that I like, and colored drawings instead of black and white ones, which are generally more well-drawn because they signify a lot of effort on the author's part). I also look through the most recent newposts on the front page, where prominent uploaders display what they have uploaded recently, and where many of the stories are often very well drawn. This website and method also helps me quickly find good doujinshi. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

I used to just use free vid sites, but the search process proved too shotgunned, and the quality too low. Now I use refined Google searches which allow me to dig up usernames:passes for nearly any production/amateur site. This way, I can browse a sites full content, download the videos [sometimes even using browser tools to get the flash video straight out of the streamer], and then store them for use later. This way, I keep scenes I'm particularly fond of – and to be honest, it's probably become kind of a hobby. Just another kind of collection. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

In the above responses, we can see the acquisition of skills and the becoming practiced enough to view oneself as a hobbyist with tastes and preferences. Beyond noticing the sheer breadth of places that they are searching and that the answers above give considerable insight into tastes (which we cover in more depth below), we should also note that there is a symbiotic relationship between their choices, their experiences and the technology. This goes beyond simply having access to the ways in which young people are utilizing the affordances of new technologies to both consume and produce for themselves, in ways that some see as outside of the parameters of porn. For example, this young woman told us at some length about the ways in which tech has impacted her relationship:

I'm currently in France while my boyfriend is in Australia and we have 'webcam sex' fairly regularly over Skype. I like it because it makes me feel closer to him and it's a more pleasant

way of getting sexual satisfaction compared to masturbating all alone. In my particular situation, the feeling that 'sex is about connection' means that the webcam sex in my life is pretty important and I think I would miss it (although I'd be okay). In my ordinary life, pornography contributes extremely little to the place of sex in my life and so it wouldn't make a difference if I couldn't see it. Firstly, I'm young and luckily for me have only spent six months without a sexual partner since I became sexually active. So I guess I haven't had as much chance to explore sex yet, nor been driven to investigate pornography. (Female, heterosexual, France)

This account is very interesting because while this young woman took part in our research in spite of, as she writes, 'never looking at pornography', her answers highlight the complexities of the interactions between representations, relationships, sexual identities and sense of self that young people are working through.

Porn tastes

I first came to porn when I was young, mostly out of curiosity and being a little bemused at why some people found it arousing. Later I began to use it for sexual satisfaction; over time, I browsed a wide variety of porn and found the kinds that I enjoyed the most. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

Tastes in porn shift and develop with experience and knowledge, as with other kinds of cultural practices. In this extract, porn begins as unknown and monolithic – an 'it' – but becomes 'kinds' over time and with the investment of browsing. Tastes may also be related to specific sexual interests:

I really got into transgender related material and transformational material I.E. men turning into women and vice versa. I was interested and aroused by the material not entirely because I want to be a woman, but more because I find the transfer of power and change stimulating. So I look more at transformational and domination material. (Male, bisexual, Australia)

Tastes were also something that participants acted on, rather than simply being preferences developed through pleasure and arousal. As this participant goes on to recount:

Most recently I have been trying to limit myself to erotica type material on these subjects. I have decided to stay to the written word rather than visual because I want to reclaim some bodily mystery and make the human form more exciting. (Male, bisexual, Australia)

Since I have no romantic partner, I use pornography solely in masturbation. Obviously, porn makes masturbating easier. However, it also adds a romantic element to it. I suppose many people would view my infatuation with fictional drawn characters as quite odd; nevertheless, that's how I am, and masturbating to images of said characters stirs up romantic feelings as well. If I had no opportunity to look at porn, I suppose masturbation would become more about basic pleasure than emotion. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

These comments suggest that engaging with porn is part of a broader process of developing tastes, becoming aware of likes and dislikes, of seeing where particular desires might lead, and of making decisions about following these. This may involve

broadening or narrowing sets of sources, or moving between more and less explicit forms of pornography. In addition to being a means to physical arousal and its satisfaction, it may focus on seeking out scenarios that play imaginatively with power or offer spaces for emotional or romantic scenarios and feelings.

Porn and sex life

I feel pornography usually gives me ideas for actual sex when it's not for my own, solo gratification. (Female, bisexual, United States)

It keeps sex fun and spontaneous. (Female, heterosexual, United States)

I'm just curious and still exploring myself. (Male, gay, Malaysia)

Ah, it gives me ideas, feeds my imagination, and I can always use it for a quick fix. If I couldn't look at it anymore, I think I'd miss the ideas it gives. The fantasies and stories I'd miss out on, and how good masturbating feels when those stories are new and nice. (Male, gay, Philippines)

If I couldn't watch porn anymore, I would feel incomplete, because porn is a vital piece in sexual life in my opinion. (Male, heterosexual, Brazil)

I enjoy watching/using porn. Its also helped me realize my sexuality, and really generally how sex works ... as well as the best ways to do it. It also has shown me different stereotypes of how people are 'supposed' to look, and, with less mainstream porn, has helped me feel comfortable with how I look. Also, it's fun. (Female, unsure, United States)

Here, porn is part of young people's emerging sex lives: as a source of ideas, a means of keeping sex and masturbation exciting and pleasurable, a space of and marker for exploration, food for the imagination. For some, it is also part of considering and understanding sexuality in a broader sense.

Porn and imagination

Nearly half our participants mentioned the issue of 'fantasy' or 'imagination', with more younger than older participants referring to it (see Barker, 2014):

I think that *now* if I had no opportunity to look at it any more I would be disappointed, as there are some kinks and interests that I can explore through porn that I would never participate in or want to participate in beyond fantasy. (Female, bisexual, United States)

I would miss the imagination the most, had I had to give up porn. (Male, heterosexual, Israel)

Fantasy and imagination themselves are of importance here. The variety of sex represented in porn was also a theme, a variety presented as 'vast', 'staggering' and 'almost infinite':

Porn reminds me of the almost infinite variety of what sex can be like, which appeals to me as it demonstrates the staggering diversity and potential of humankind, as well as giving me ideas to use in bed. (Female, queer, United States)

I would miss the vast array of material to look at on subjects that in real life very rarely occur. (Male, heterosexual, Australia)

What is interesting here is the sense that fantasies are valuable, not only because they may occur rarely in real life but because they may not be possible or desired there:

I feel that porn gives me a chance to ‘live’ some fantasies that I wouldn’t want to/be able to in real life. I would miss it if I couldn’t look at it anymore. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

I think that pornography allows a kind of release from my boundaries regarding sex; while there are physical and emotional boundaries I place on what I allow myself to do during sex, when I’m watching porn I can forget them and focus on the pleasure. In fact, I can do this with fantasizing; again, porn merely expedites the process by giving me something visually instead of just mentally. (Male, heterosexual, United States)

And this value is not always ‘only’ sexual but similar to other kinds of culture, offering enjoyment, happiness, interest, identification or a sense of discovery:

... porn is art. An art that everyone can enjoy, and I enjoy a lot ... I love watching porn because it makes me feel happy and it makes me discover new things, not only about me, but about the world. (Male, heterosexual, Brazil)

I spend a good deal of my free time viewing porn, not for masturbation but simply because it is interesting. It has become a part of who I am. (Male, queer, United States)

Porn may be interesting in its own right, a way of crossing boundaries, engaging with the ‘diversity and potential of humankind’. Like other forms of art and culture, it can offer a means of discovering things about the self and the world.

Porn, sex, health, media

Research is not carried out in a vacuum and in this final section we locate our work within current debates about media, sexuality and health, and about pornography in particular. In the early 21st century, sexual health has become a buzzword (see Epstein and Mamo, 2017). It is increasingly understood not only as a matter of the body but, as the World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) has defined it – as ‘a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being’. Media have rapidly become the focus of attention in discussions about sexual health, most often as a problem, especially where young people are concerned.

Pornography has been a particular area of anxiety. There are claims that young people are becoming addicted to porn; especially young men whose porn consumption leads them to ‘neglect their school work, spend huge amounts of money they don’t have, become

isolated from others, and often suffer depression ...' (Dines, 2011). The addiction recovery website *Your Brain on Porn* describes a necessary process of 'rebooting' as a way of recovering from porn addiction, by abstaining from consumption, which means 'No artificial sexual stimulation'; no 'pixels, audio and literature. If it's not real life, just say 'no'".

Some groups have argued that porn represents a public health crisis and some states in the United States and Canada have passed resolutions to this effect.² An advert for *Covenant Eyes*, the accountability and filtering software that helps people to restrict their own access to porn, features white, affluent smiling parents and children in front of their home, and promises to eradicate the public health crisis of pornography 'one family at a time'. The radical feminist anti-porn campaign group *Stop Porn Culture* has reformed as *Culture Reframed*, focused on 'solving the public health crisis of the digital age'.

Calls to health 'have traction' as Gail Dines (2014) explains in an account of her shift towards a public health stance, a shift also visible in the rebranding of the right wing group *Morality in Media* as *The National Center of Sexual Exploitation*.³ They also work to obscure the question of who has the power to decide what counts as healthy, and often underpin the pathologizing of the variety of sexual practices that people engage in, the many reasons why people have sex, and their differing ideas of what sex is or means. An account by someone identifying as a recovered addict on *Your Brain on Porn* makes this form of pathologizing clear in his description of the groups and practices that he associates with 'sick porn':

I started looking at Internet porn when I was 11. I immediately became hooked, and spent hours daily viewing porn. Simply seeing a pair of exposed breasts was enough to get me off. But desensitization soon kicked in, and I began developing fetishes to get the same hit from porn. It started out with different ethnicities, then lesbians, then watersports, then scat/beastiality/BDSM/tranny, and then any combination of the above to create the sickest porn imaginable. I can remember sitting in school fantasizing about the sick porn that I could search for that night ...⁴

While this may seem an extreme, not to mention racist, homophobic, transphobic and kinkphobic view, many other 'health'-based stances draw on a similar notion of a particular kind of heterosexual sex as special and sacred, in contrast to sexual practices that are characterized as 'debased, dehumanized, formulaic, and generic' (Dines, 2010). In addition, as in the *Your Brain on Porn* account, they depend on an idea of porn consumption as a 'slippery slope' from the sacred to the debased, whereby people become desensitized and 'end up masturbating to images that had previously disgusted them' (Dines, 2011). Casual sex, kinky sex, rough sex – or practices like anal and oral sex – are presented as both naturally disgusting and politically dubious activities that fall outside of a 'charmed circle' of healthy sex (see Rubin, 1984 for a discussion).

Exposure and effects

Policy debates about young people and porn and much of the academic research that is mobilized in them are also spaces in which exaggerated claims are put forward and particularly narrow models of healthy sex and media consumption are drawn on. As we have noted, there are serious problems with the approach such research takes. In addition, the

body of evidence itself is extremely inconsistent (Segal, 1994), with little replicability across studies (Owens et al., 2012) and an overall ‘sense of ambiguity and profound confusion’ (Stoops, 2017). However, this has made little difference to its political take up. As Whitney Strub (2016) has noted, when the US President’s Commission on Obscenity and Pornography ‘undertaking three years of social-science research, released its monumental report in 1970’ found no evidence of harm in porn consumption, President Nixon denounced its ‘morally bankrupt conclusions’ and the report was rejected. A more recent UK report assessing the evidence from an expert panel (Nash et al., 2015) for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport concluded that

the vast majority of children’s online experiences and interactions are not about sex or pornography.

it is ‘hard to obtain a consensus on the number of children accessing pornography’ especially online, given that ‘recent UK and EU surveys had suggested that traditional mass media rather than the internet was the primary route’.

rates of unwanted exposure vary considerably across studies with figures ranging from 4% to 66% of children and young people reporting this.

despite ‘a vast array of academic research devoted to the effects of exposure to sexualised imagery on children and young people’, this ‘is inconclusive and contradictory’.

Yet, they also noted that

The policy position underpinning this project specification is that pornography causes harm to children and we understand that we are not expected to challenge this. However, we would like to emphasise that the relatively limited academic evidence of harm means that any policy interventions should proceed on the basis of a precautionary principle, namely seeking to avoid possible risks in the absence of certainty.

Their comment makes clear the relation between politically driven campaigns against pornography and academic research, and the lack of progress in this area since Nixon’s rejection of the 1970 report. Researchers are not expected to challenge policy positions on pornography, regardless of the quality of evidence supporting these.

The theme of young people’s ‘exposure’ to pornography is a recurring refrain in much of the research which is drawn on in policy debates, implying that young people in their millions are constantly stumbling upon porn – a problem made all the more urgent by the availability of handheld devices giving children unfettered access to the web. In the accounts of exposure, we see oft-repeated claims that 70% of young people using the Internet are accidentally happening upon pornography when browsing for their school homework. That statistic is from Kaiser Family Foundation research published in 2001, and perhaps we should ask why statistics of this kind have such longevity although web searching technologies have changed so radically since the turn of the millennium. We might also ask what are the politics of the 66 repetitions of the claim that children are ‘exposed’ to pornography in the 2013 ‘Rapid Evidence Assessment’, initiated by the UK

Government in advance of legislative changes to the classification of some pornography as ‘extreme’?

The issue of where young people encounter sexually explicit media is increasingly vexed, as the responses of our participants outlined at the beginning of this article suggest. Although the policy focus is unremittingly on ‘Internet pornography’, young people learn about sex from a wide variety of media and the wide use of social media by young people has made it increasingly difficult to decipher what encountering ‘online pornography’ might mean. In their study, Martellozzo et al. (2016) use the term ‘exposure’ more than 40 times, implying unwanted contact. They report that 28% of their young participants had seen pornography inadvertently, and only 19% had actually searched for it. But as their study makes clear, the participants had seen porn on Tumblr, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, all social networking sites which young people actively use for sharing and engaging with friends, acquaintances, celebrities, discussions, opinions, images and videos. How useful or appropriate the notion of ‘exposure’ (given that these are spaces that are central to and chosen by young people for communication) to ‘Internet porn’ (given that these are non-Internet platforms) is, in this context, unclear.

Research of this kind is notable for its marked lack of curiosity about what participants have in mind when they report that they have encountered pornography, despite the fact that the term is used to reference a wide variety of materials. Many studies drawn on in policy deliberations do not ask what their participants mean by the term ‘pornography’, and it is impossible to know what their responses refer to. Many researchers, such as Martellozzo et al., are not able to report on what kinds of pornography young people encounter because they do not ask them. This approach reinforces arbitrary and abstract categories, producing limiting and inflexible understandings of the style and content of various pornographies and presents the meanings of pornography for young people as being without variety and divorced from context.

Instead a focus on ‘exposure’ is almost always associated with a concern with ‘effects’, usually presented as ‘negative’, suggesting a ‘corrupting influence, and slippery slope to doom, all ... set in motion by that word “exposed”’ (Barker, 2014: 143). The Rapid Evidence Assessment (Horvath et al., 2013) is typical in this respect, concluding that porn affects children and young people’s sexual beliefs and that it is linked to their engagement in risky behaviours; claims that are not convincingly borne out by the studies they review. And like the contemporary ‘porn as a public health issue’ focus noted earlier, this kind of approach is frequently underpinned by a moralistic view of sex that presents ‘sexual permissiveness’, sexual experimentation (particularly anal sex) and sometimes even an interest in sex as a ‘negative’ effect (see McKee, 2010 for a discussion). The fit of this approach with a limited understanding of media, its support for regulatory and policy agendas, and its resonance with conservative views of sexuality that lack any concept of ‘benign sexual variation’ (Rubin, 1984) may well be the most compelling reason for its continued use.

Porn consumption, sex and sexuality

In this article we have shown how, by moving away from an exposure and effects model, research on pornography can open up more productive forms of investigation to explore

the connections between porn and sexuality and develop the study of media, sexuality and health. This is not about presenting a 'pro-porn' case. Indeed, the point for us is to move beyond simplistic notions of media engagement that would support the idea of any media genre being wholly 'good' and 'healthy' or 'bad' and 'unhealthy', or as working as an entirely positive or negative force in a person's life. It is also to challenge assumptions about desirable social and sexual behaviour and the significance of media consumption in relation to this. By situating porn consumption within an approach to sexuality as 'all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being – desires, practices, relationships and identities' as well as sexual 'interests, acts, expressions, and/or experiences' (Sedgwick, 1990: 27), we can begin to chart how it may function in a variety of ways, both public and private, and in relation to young people's understandings of sexuality, sex, sexual orientations and identities.

Another way of developing our understanding of porn consumption is in relation to research on sex, leisure and play. McCormack and Wignall (2016) note that porn consumption shares the characteristics of 'casual leisure' defined by Stebbins (1997, 2001) – 'immediately and intrinsically rewarding', 'relatively short-lived', 'pleasurable', 'sociable', used to 'relieve boredom' and needing 'little or no special training to enjoy'. Yet, both play and leisure are meaningful, and presenting porn consumption in this way is to underplay the extent to which it also part of a shift in which sex has become widely understood and experienced as 'important to the wellbeing of the individual and society', a feature associated with 'serious leisure' (Rojek, 2000: 18). Sex may be experienced as restorative, resourceful and enhancing the quality of life (Newmahr, 2010). It may constitute a sphere in which individuals can achieve a sense of identity and membership, particularly for example in LGBTI and kink groups. Or it may be experienced like an 'extreme sport', a way of testing the body's limits, creating exciting forms of intimacy and developing the skill and knowledge needed for successful thrill seeking and risk-taking (see Attwood, 2011a; Attwood and Smith, 2013 for further discussion). In our project, young people's responses about their porn consumption certainly suggest that porn can function in these kinds of ways.

Approaches to porn consumption that have rejected an exposure and effects model have also explored the ways in which porn is a site of both 'meaning' and 'mattering', 'making sense' and 'sensing'. This idea – that media engagement goes well beyond the simple learning and copying suggested in the exposure and effects model, and further than concerns with porn's social and political 'messages' – is extremely useful in opening up questions about the 'carnal resonance' of pornography (Paasonen, 2011, 2014) and its connections with the body, imagination, and the realm of sexuality. Susanna Paasonen (2017) has argued that playfulness can be seen as central to a range of sexual activities, as 'a mode of sensory openness', 'a drive towards improvisation', a way of experimenting with 'what bodies can feel and do' and a form of 'exploration through which the boundaries of norms and bodily capacities may be reworked, and possibly expanded'. In this sense, sex can be understood as 'simultaneously serious and ludic'. As our participants' responses suggest, forms of porn experience and exploration may be mundane or special, simple and straightforward or complex and highly significant, but a broad notion of these as play is a useful way of conceptualizing their place in the relations of the body, sexuality and imagination.

Again, this is not about making an argument that porn engagement is ‘just’ play, ‘simply’ fun or inevitably benign. As Paasonen notes ‘play can be asymmetrical, risky, hurtful, violent and damaging in its reverberations’, or it may take challenging forms that revolve around transgression and danger (see also Weiss, 2006: 240). Nor should the emphasis on sex and porn consumption as types of play be taken to suggest that these are not intimately related to political and social issues; indeed as Weiss (2006) notes, sexual play derives some of its intensity from the way it draws on personal experiences, attitudes and social power dynamics.

As Paasonen notes, sexual play is connected to fantasy. ‘Fantasies ... feed into acts of sexual play’ and ‘Acts of play ... feed back into sexual fantasies’, providing ‘affective fuel for sexual desire as that which orients people in their acts of play and relationships to others’. Almost half of our participants mentioned the issue of ‘fantasy’, and mainly in their responses to the question – ‘How do you feel pornography contributes to the place of sex in your life? What would you miss if you had no opportunity to look at it anymore?’ As our participants suggest, fantasy is ‘related to the way we become aware of sex and of our own bodies, our own bodies’ responses to sex, our imagining and understanding of those responses and of the way that sex works. Fantasies are ‘the means through which adults try out versions of self-in-sexual-society, reimagining themselves through others’ reimaginings’ (Barker, 2014: 146).

Finally, by rejecting an exposure and effects model, it becomes possible to situate porn consumption in the broader context of new mediated intimacies, as a site for developing identities, relationships, peer groups, communities and other personal connections, and as a space for intimacies that are more closely focused on the body, on physicality, intensity, affect, interior life and the realm of imagination (see Attwood et al., 2017).

Whether focused on the social and public, or more private and intimate aspects of porn engagement, research needs to depart from an exposure and effects model and from the kind of public health thinking that adopts a medical model of media with very narrow ideas about sexual health. Human sexualities are not narrow sets of behaviours, which can be understood as simply good or bad, healthy or unhealthy. Sex may be a site of bodily knowledge, self-exploration and transformation, and sexual practices – physical or imaginative – a place for human learning, sociability, performance and play. Engaging with pornography may be part of these processes. It can be a means of bonding in peer groups, sexual communities or intimate relationships. It can be a source of arousal, of laughter or disgust. It is a means of feeling the body in relation to particular moments. It operates within the context of the relationships a person is currently engaged in or which they hope to be in the future. Porn consumption is intimately tied to people’s sense of their sexual circumstances: filling out inadequate ones, creating spaces for pleasure, opening up a world of sexuality when a person is not in a relationship and offering ideas about future relationships. In addition to the particular types of information it may offer about the way that bodies look or what particular sexual practices and techniques involve, it presents a broader set of imaginative possibilities about what other people might be doing, something which, despite widespread claims that sex is inescapably visible in contemporary society, is still largely hidden away, part of a forbidden domain.

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Notes

1. Our work in this area has included Attwood (2005, 2007); Smith (2002, 2007, and with Deller, 2013). The development of our pornresearch.org project is outlined later in this article. ‘What are you looking at?’ was a smaller project aimed at young people aged between 16 and 24 years.
2. See, for example, the ‘resolution on the public health crisis’ sponsored by Todd Weiler in Utah, 2016.
3. See <http://endsexualexploitation.org/morality-in-media/>
4. Why Shouldn’t Johnny Watch Porn If He Likes? Your Brain on Porn, 18 February. <https://yourbrainonporn.com/why-shouldnt-johnny-watch-porn-if-he-likes>

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