

Conceptual Overview (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Pornography is neither a *documentary media genre* that documents what real sex in everyday life looks like, nor is it a *pedagogical or moral media genre* aimed at showing what *ideal sex* (in terms of health or morality) should look like. Instead, pornography is a *fictional media genre* that depicts *sexual fantasies* and explicitly presents naked bodies and sexual activities for the purpose of sexual arousal (Williams, 1989; McKee et al., 2020). Regarding media ethics and media effects, pornography has traditionally been viewed as highly problematic. Pornographic material has been accused of portraying sexuality in unhealthy, morally questionable and often sexist ways, thereby harming performers, audiences, and society at large. In the age of the Internet, pornography has become more diverse, accessible, and widespread than ever (Döring, 2009; Miller et al., 2020). Consequently, the depiction of sexuality in pornography is the focus of a growing number of content analyses of both mass media (e.g., erotic and pornographic novels and movies) and social media (e.g., erotic and pornographic stories, photos and videos shared via online platforms). Typically, *pornography's portrayals of sexuality* are examined by measuring the prevalence and frequency of sexual practices and related gender roles via quantitative content analysis (for research reviews see Carrotte et al., 2020; Miller & McBain, 2022).

It should be noted that the conceptual differentiation between *erotica* and pornography is complex and that “pornography” remains an ideologically charged, and often negatively connotated, concept. Hence, the research literature sometimes uses the broader and more neutral term “sexually explicit material” (SEM) in place of “pornographic material” (McKee et al., 2020). Furthermore, it must be emphasized that in the context of content analyses of SEM the focus is typically on *legal pornography*. Legal visual pornography is produced with adults who have given their informed consent for their image to be recorded, and then disseminated and marketed as SEM. Illegal pornography is usually beyond the scope of media content research, as the acquisition and use of illegal material would be unethical and illegal for researchers (e.g., the analysis of so-called “child pornography”, or what might be more accurately labeled “images of child sexual abuse”). Criminological and forensic research projects are exceptions to this rule.

FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The theories applied in pornographic media content research primarily come from four academic disciplines: communication science, psychology, sex research, and gender studies. These different theories are fairly similar in their core assumption that pornography users' sexual cognitions and behaviors are molded by the ways in which sexuality is portrayed in pornographic material. Some of the theories also explain the typical content of pornography and point to the fact that audiences might not only be influenced by pornography but can also shape porn production through their preferences. All theories demand content analyses of pornographic material to back up their predictions.



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General Media Effects Theories

Cultivation Theory and Social Cognitive Theory are the most commonly used media effects theories, irrespective of specific media content. They are often applied to pornographic material.

- *Cultivation Theory* (CT) was developed by communication researcher George Gerbner in the 1960s (Gerbner, 1998). CT claims that heavy media users' perceptions of the prevalence of different societal phenomena (e.g., crimes) are shaped by the prevalence with which these phenomena occur in the media they consume (e.g., cop shows on TV). Applied to pornography, CT predicts that heavy users of pornography will severely overestimate the prevalence of sexual practices that are rare in reality, but widespread in pornography. Young people who lack real life sexual experience are regarded as particularly vulnerable for sexual cultivation effects in terms of biased perceptions of the popularity and normalcy of different performances of sexuality (e.g., name calling and slapping during sex).
- Another classic media effects theory that is widely adopted in pornography research is psychologist Albert Bandura's *Social Learning Theory* (Bandura, 1971), later re-labeled as *Social Cognitive Theory* (SCT; Bandura, 2001). SCT claims that people imitate the behaviors of media role models. Applied to pornographic material, SCT predicts that media audiences will develop more favorable attitudes towards, and engage more frequently in, sexual behaviors portrayed positively in sexually explicit material. Such sexual imitation effects may influence not only attitudes toward, and engagement in, sex acts represented in pornography (e.g., anal sex), but also gender role behaviors (e.g., men acting dominantly, women acting submissively during sex), safer sex measures (e.g., lack of condom use), bodily appearance (e.g., breast augmentation), and consent communication (e.g., lack of explicitly asking for, or giving, consent to engage in different sex acts).

Sexual Media Effects Theories

While CT and SCT are broad media effects theories applicable to pornography as well as many other types of media content, Sexual Script Theory and the 3AM specifically address sexual media and their effects.

- *Sexual Script Theory* (SST) was developed by sociologists John Gagnon and William Simon in the 1970s (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Simon & Gagnon, 2003; Wiederman, 2015). SST argues that human sexuality is not merely a biological instinct, but a highly complex set of cognitions and behaviors shaped by symbolic, social and cultural factors: People develop ideas about how to have sex in terms of organized cognitive schemas or "scripts" that reflect intra-psychic desires (e.g., their sexual fantasies), social norms (e.g., peers' and partners' sexual expectations), and cultural influences (e.g., representations of sexuality in the media they consume). SST stresses that the intrapsychic, social, and cultural determinants of individuals' sexual scripts mutually influence each other and can change over time (Simon & Gagnon, 2003). However, in pornography research, usually only the third element of the theory (cultural influences through media representations of sexuality) is considered. Applied to pornography, SST predicts that sexual scripts presented in pornographic material (e.g., spontaneous anal sex with strangers without condoms or overt consent communication) can shape individuals' sexual scripts.
- The *Acquisition, Activation, and Application Model of Media Sexual Socialization* (3AM) was developed more recently by communication researcher Paul Wright as a specification of SST regarding media influence (Wright, 2011). According to the 3AM, sexually explicit media content shapes cognitive schemas of sexuality in three ways: Pornography can foster the creation of new schemas (schema acquisition), it can prime extant schemas (schema activation), and it can facilitate the utilization of extant schemas to inform attitudes and behaviors (schema application). The 3AM differentiates between specific scripting effects of pornography (e.g., engaging in condom-free casual anal sex without sufficient consent communication after having observed this exact sexual script multiple times in pornography) versus abstract scripting effects (e.g., adopting a more permissive sexual worldview after having observed many people engaging in unrestricted sex in pornography).

The aforementioned general and sexuality-specific media effects theories have been used predominantly to predict *negative (unwanted, harmful)*

effects such as dangerously distorted views of sexuality and gender roles as well as engagement in risky or violent sexual behaviors, while potential positive effects have been mostly ignored. Only recently, has serious consideration been given to the *beneficial effects* of pornography use (e.g., sexual identity validation, sexual empowerment, improved couple communication, sexual skill acquisition, etc.) in the research literature (e.g., Döring, 2021; Döring & Mohseni, 2018; Döring et al., 2021; Kohut & Fisher, 2013; Kohut et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2018; Tillmann & Wells, 2022). Depending on specific negative and/or positive effect assumptions, different aspects of the representation of sexuality will be measured (e.g., expressions of aggression during sex or different types of sexual stimulation techniques).

Gender Role, Feminist and Queer Theories

Typically, analysis of the ways in which sexuality is represented in pornography involves considerations of gender relations, therefore *gender role theories* and *feminist theories of gender (in-)equality* are frequently drawn upon (e.g., Eagly, 1987). There are two main reasons for this additional theoretical focus on gender: 1) Most SEM depicts heterosexual encounters, hence the portrayal of sexuality in pornography implies a portrayal of sexual gender relations (Williams, 1989). 2) Gender relations in the media are often asymmetrical, depicting men and women in superior and subordinate positions, respectively. Such patriarchal gender relations are expected to be reflected, or even exaggerated, in pornographic material. Radical feminist approaches in particular characterize pornography as a portrayal of sexual degradation of women by men, that is so harmful to society that it should be prohibited (e.g., MacKinnon, 1991). Other feminist approaches are also critical of asymmetric gender relations in traditional mainstream pornography and call for more gender equality in SEM, such as in feminist pornography (Williams, 1989). Feminist criticism of gender roles and relations in pornography does not address the demographic variable of sex/gender alone, but also covers other diversity dimensions such as age, race/ethnicity, or disability. According to the *analytical framework of intersectionality*, the subordination and discrimination of women in society and media representations particularly affect those women who have multiple marginalized demographic characteristics (e.g., the representation of white women in pornogra-

phy differs from that of black or Asian women; Fritz et al. 2021). *Queer theory* is also concerned with different racial/ethnic and sexual identities of women and their participation and representation in pornography (Ingraham 2013).

Content analyses of pornography need to take into consideration that pornography is becoming increasingly diverse (Miller & McBain, 2022). Hence, content analyses need to differentiate between various *pornographic sub-genres* such as commercial heterosexual mainstream pornography (traditionally targeting men) versus, for example, women-friendly and couple-oriented pornography, feminist pornography, queer pornography, fetish and kink pornography, or authentic amateur and DIY (do it yourself) pornography in the form of visual or text pornography (Döring, 2021; McKee et al., 2008). Gender role, feminist, and queer theories predict that gender relations in mainstream pornography are more asymmetrical, stereotypical and patriarchal than in women- and couple-friendly, feminist and queer pornography.

Sexual Fantasy and Desire Theories

The above-mentioned effect theories do not address and explain the main *intended effect* of pornography, namely immediate sexual arousal, pleasure and satisfaction. The theories focus on linking the fictional pornographic content directly with real life opinions and behaviors, but mostly ignore the links between fictional pornographic content and *sexual fantasies*. Research shows that many sexual fantasies of people of all genders are unrealistic, extreme, clichéd, violent and norm-violating and that norm-violation is often what makes them arousing (e.g., Bivona et al., 2012; Critelli & Bivona, 2008; Joyal, 2015). The same might be true for pornographic content. Hence, measuring pornography, a fictional media genre, against standards of realism, health and morality might not always be in line with the main entertainment purpose of the genre. Erotizing the forbidden and dangerous (e.g. sex with family members, with mysterious strangers, with authority figures, with non-human creatures) is a common trope of sexual fantasies, hence meaningful variables to measure pornographic portrayals of sexuality could be derived from, and related to, *theories of sexual fantasy* and desire (e.g., Salmon et al., 2019; Stoller, 1985). Indulging in unrealistic and norm-violating fantasies and fictional media contents is part of media entertainment and may

not necessarily lead to norm-violating behaviors. Competent media users should be able to differentiate between fiction and reality.

Mold Theories versus Mirror Theories

When analyzing and criticizing sexuality portrayals in pornography, it is important to realize that media do not just uni-directionally influence public opinions and behaviors (*mold theory*). Rather, media also bi-directionally reflect existing sexual relations and fantasies (*mirror theory*). Recent sex surveys, for example, demonstrate that engagement in consensual BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, Sadism/Masochism) practices and rough sex (e.g., name calling, spanking, hair pulling) is fairly widespread in the general population and enjoyed by all genders (e.g., Burch & Salmon, 2019; Herbenick et al., 2021a, 2021b; Strizzi et al., 2022). Hence, it might not always be the adult industry that influences audiences' sexualities, but also audiences' sexual interests that influence porn production. Particularly in the digital pornography market, producers and vendors can easily analyze audience preferences through the analysis of search terms and download statistics and adopt their content accordingly. Furthermore, general beauty trends in society (e.g., regarding shaving of pubic and body hair, growing of beards, or multiple tattoos and other body art) might be mirrored in pornography (through its selection and presentation of performers) rather than generated by it.

REFERENCES/COMBINATION WITH OTHER METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

Manual quantitative content analyses of pornographic material can be combined with qualitative (e.g., Keft-Kennedy, 2008) as well as computational (e.g., Seehuus et al., 2019) content analyses. Furthermore, content analyses can be complemented with qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys to investigate perceptions and evaluations of the portrayals of sexuality in pornography among pornography's creators and performers (e.g., West, 2019) and audiences (e.g., Cowan & Dunn, 1994; Hardy et al., 2022; Paasonen, 2021; Shor, 2022). Additionally, experimental studies are helpful to measure directly how different dimensions of pornographic portrayals of sexuality are perceived and evaluated by recipients, and if and how these portrayals can affect audiences' sexuality-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (e.g., Kohut & Fisher, 2013; Miller et al., 2019).

EXAMPLE STUDIES FOR MANUAL QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSES

Acknowledging the multidimensionality and complexity of portrayals of sexuality in pornography, a recent research review identified eight main dimensions of analysis (Miller & McBain, 2022) that are adopted and extended in this DOCA entry as: 1) violence, 2) degradation, 3) sex acts, 4) performer demographics (sex/gender, age, race/ethnicity), 5) performer bodily appearance, 6) safer sex practices, 7) relational context of sex, and 8) consent communication. Example studies and measures for all eight dimensions of pornographic portrayals of sexuality are presented in separate DOCA entries (see Table 1).

Table 1. DOCA entries for the eight dimensions of pornographic portrayals of sexuality.

Dimension of Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography	DOCA entry
1) Violence	Violence (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)
2) Degradation	Degradation (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)
3) Sex Acts	Sex Acts (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)

4) Performer Demographics	Performer Demographics (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)
5) Performer Bodily Appearance	Performer Bodily Appearance (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)
6) Safer Sex Practices	Safer Sex Practices (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)
7) Relational Context of Sex	Relational Context of Sex (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)
8) Consent Communication	Consent Communication (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)

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