

Degradation (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)

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KEYWORDS

sexuality, sexual scripts, media representations of sexuality, visual communication, video pornography

BRIEF DESCRIPTION

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 or relational dynamics and related gender roles via quantitative content analysis (for research reviews see Carrotte et al., 2020; Miller & McBain, 2022). This entry focuses on the representation of *degradation* as one of eight important dimensions of the portrayals of sexuality in pornography.

FIELD OF APPLICATION/THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

In the field of pornographic media content research, different theories are used, mainly 1) general media effects theories, 2) sexual media effects theories, 3) gender role, feminist and queer theories, 4) sexual fantasy and desire theories, and different 5) mold theories versus mirror theories. The DOCA entry "[Conceptual Overview \(Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography\)](#)" introduces all these theories and explains their application to pornography. The respective theories are applicable to the analysis of the depiction of degradation as one dimension of the portrayals of sexuality in pornography.

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).



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EXAMPLE STUDIES FOR MANUAL QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSES

A common research hypothesis states that pornography often depicts sexuality which is degrading towards women (by men). (Conversely, an indicator against degradation is the depiction of sexual agency of women, i.e., representations of women actively initiating and guiding sexual encounters, and enjoying self-determined and reciprocal sex acts.) To test such hypotheses and code pornographic material accordingly, it is necessary to clarify the concept of “degradation” and use valid and reliable measures of different types of degradation. In addition, it is necessary to code the sex/gender of the person depicted as the source and/or the target of the respective degrading act.

It is important to note that in the context of pornographic content research, researchers conceptualize degradation differently. Also, it should be

noted, that there is some overlap between the variable degradation and the variable violence in the context of pornographic portrayals of sexuality. For example, the depiction of “name calling” in a pornographic scene can be understood as an indicator of “violence” (namely verbal aggression) or of “degradation”. Name calling is covered as verbal aggression (following Fritz et al., 2020; see DOCA entry “[Violence \(Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography\)](#)”), hence, it is not covered here again as degradation, even though some authors do so (such as Gorman et al., 2010). In general, one can argue that all violent acts – apart from being potentially painful and harmful – have a component of degradation because they put the target of violence in a subordinate role. However, not all degrading acts are violent (e.g., degradation by systematic lack of sexual reciprocity does not entail overt aggression).

Table 1. *Example studies.*

Coding Material	Measure	Operationalization (excerpt)	Reliability	Source
<p>Degradation: Degradation in the context of pornography is defined as a depiction of sexuality that is not characterized by mutuality, respect and equal power but instead is characterized by non-reciprocity, inequality, dominance, objectification and dehumanization, usually with men in the superior role and women in the subordinate role (Cowan & Dunn, 1994). Several variables indicating degradation during sex have been developed and are measured together with the sex/gender of persons involved, such as unreciprocated sex (e.g., female performer gives oral sex but does not receive it; male performer orgasms but female performer does not), status inequality (e.g., male performer depicted as older, better educated, more affluent than female performer), expressions of dominance (e.g., male performer ties female performer up or orders her around), objectification (e.g., male performer ejaculates on female performer’s body or face; gaping of the vagina or anus; double penetration of vagina or anus of the female performer) and dehumanization (e.g., male performer urinates on female performer’s body). While consensus can be reached between some researchers and media users that respective sex acts appear degrading to them (Cowan & Dunn, 1994), others disagree and either do not find these acts inherently degrading or recognize that they may be part of sexual fantasies and role play of degradation (Miller & McBain, 2022). Apart from issues of performer health protection, degrading acts are also regarded as relevant in terms of modelling behaviors for audiences.</p>				
N=45 pornographic videos from 15 different adult websites (3 videos per website)	Display of body	Being degraded: Actor displayed showing a higher level of nudity in comparison to co-actor(s). Binary coding (1: yes; 2: no).	Percentage agreement 100% for all degradation variables in codebook	Gorman et al. (2010)

Coding Material	Measure	Operationalization (excerpt)	Reliability	Source
N=45 pornographic videos from 15 different adult websites (3 videos per website)	Domination	Degrading another: Actor displayed showing control and being in the dominating position, i.e. directing the co-actor(s) and the sexual acts. Binary coding (1: yes; 2: no).	Percentage agreement 100% for all degradation variables in codebook	Gorman et al. (2010)
	Submission	Being degraded: Actor displayed in the submissive role, i.e. following demands, allowing to be moved in any position. Binary coding (1: yes; 2: no).		
	Ejaculation onto the face	Being degraded: Actor's face or mouth displayed as being ejaculated on. Binary coding (1: yes; 2: no).		
	Exploitation	Degrading another: Actor displayed as using another with less power (e.g., due to age, social status, social role) as sexual object. Binary coding (1: yes; 2: no).		
	Lack of reciprocity	Degrading another: Actor displayed as disregarding mutuality and reciprocity during sexual acts and focusing only on their own satisfaction. Binary coding (1: yes; 2: no).		

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