

Sex Acts (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 *sex acts* 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 sex acts as one dimension of 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

Common research hypotheses state that pornography depicts sexuality as exaggerated regarding the variety of depicted sex acts, including commonly depicting statistically uncommon acts. More specifically, it is hypothesized, that the typical heterosexual porn script (which often includes oral, vaginal, and anal intercourse altogether in one scene) might normalize, or even prescribe, engagement in oral and anal intercourse in everyday heterosexual encounters. To test such hypotheses and code pornographic material accordingly, it is necessary to clarify the concept of “sex acts” and use valid and reliable measures for different types of sex acts. In addition, it is necessary to code the sex/gender of the person depicted as

involved in the respective sex acts in different roles (e.g., giving or receiving oral sex).

It is important to note that in the context of pornographic content research, researchers conceptualize sex acts differently. In particular, some researchers categorize some sex acts as violence or degradation, while other researchers cover them as more or less common sexual practices (e.g., “hair pulling” can be understood and coded as violence or as an element of consensual rough sex practices; “name calling” can be understood as verbal aggression or degradation or as an element of consensual dirty talk practices; see DOCA entries “[Violence \(Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography\)](#)” and “[Degradation \(Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography\)](#)”).

Table 1. *Example studies.*

Coding Material	Measure	Operationalization (excerpt)	Reliability	Source
<p>Sex Acts: Various types of sex acts can be differentiated such as oral sex, spanking or ejaculating on the body (Carrotte et al., 2020). Usually, in pornography research, sex acts related to rough sex and some types of BDSM are categorized as “Violence” (see DOCA entry “Violence (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)”) and sex acts related to paraphilias such as fetishes, kinks and some types of BDSM are categorized as “Degradation” (see DOCA entry “Degradation (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)”). Respective categorizations are based on some observers’ moral evaluations and disregard consent and the pleasure of participants (or that of other observers). Hence, depending on the researcher’s perspective, the full spectrum of consensual sexual activities can be subsumed under “sex acts” or only a sub-set of sexual activities that are regarded as normative and normophilic (Miller & McBain, 2022; Zhou et al., 2019).</p>				
N=3,053 pornographic videos randomly selected from Xvideos.com	<i>Kissing</i>		Percentage agreement average across all variables in codebook: 98%	Zhou et al. (2019)
	• Light kissing	Light kissing between actors on mouth. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).		
	• Deep kissing	Deep kissing between actors on mouth. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).		
• Kissing and sucking on body	Light and/or deep kissing between actors on mouth and sucking on the other actor’s body. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).			

Coding Material	Measure	Operationalization (excerpt)	Reliability	Source
N=3,053 pornographic videos randomly selected from Xvideos.com	<i>Manual / digital sexual stimulation</i>		Percentage agreement average across all variables in codebook: 98%	Zhou et al. (2019)
	• Manual stimulation of penis (type of manual/digital stimulation)	Manual stimulation of penis. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).		
	• Manual stimulation of vulva and/or vagina (type of manual/digital stimulation)	Manual stimulation of vulva and/or vagina. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).		
	• Manual stimulation of anus (type of manual/digital stimulation)	Manual stimulation of anus. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).		
	<i>Oral Sex</i>			
	• Fellatio (type of oral sex)	Oral-penile contact between actors. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).		
	• Cunnilingus (type of oral sex)	Oral-vulva or oral-vaginal contact between actors. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).		
	• Anilingus (type of oral sex)	Oral-anal contact (a.k.a. rimming) between actors. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).		
	<i>Intercourse</i>			
	• Vaginal intercourse (type of intercourse)	Penetration of one actor's vagina by another actor's penis. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).		
• Anal intercourse (type of intercourse)	Penetration of one actor's anus by another actor's penis. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).			

Coding Material	Measure	Operationalization (excerpt)	Reliability	Source
N=50 popular pornographic videos from Pornhub.com	<i>Orgasm</i>			
	• Female orgasm	Overt orgasm of female performer, as indicated by the presence of “squirting” or other verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., facial contortions, moaning, verbal statements communicating orgasm). Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).	Percentage agreement: 92%	Séguin et al. (2018)
	• Male orgasm	Overt orgasm of male performer, as indicated by the presence of ejaculate or other verbal and nonverbal cues (e.g., facial contortions, moaning, verbal statements communicating orgasm). Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).	Percentage agreement: 100%	

The selected sex act variables can be complemented with further variables that go into more detail. For example, for many sex act variables it makes sense to differentiate between the passive/receiving and active/giving role of the performers involved (e.g., receiving oral sex or giving oral sex). Furthermore, in addition to the act of vaginal or anal intercourse different intercourse positions (e.g., lying, sitting, standing positions; woman on top or bottom during intercourse) could be coded. For a discussion of measurement problems and best practice regarding coding female orgasms see Lebedíková (2022).

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