

# Relational Context of Sex (Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography)

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**KEYWORDS**

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

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**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 *relational context of sex* as one of eight important dimensions of the portrayals of sexuality in pornography.

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**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 relational context of sex as one dimension of the portrayals of sexuality in pornography.

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**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 sex in pornography is mostly depicted as casual and/or extrarelational, even though real life sex predominantly occurs in committed relationships. To test such hypotheses and code pornographic material accordingly, it is necessary to clarify the concept of “relational context of sex” and use valid and reliable measures for different types of relational contexts. In addition, it is necessary to code the

sex/gender of the persons involved.

It is important to note that the relational context of sex may be determined based on the interactions and dialogue between performers or based on video titles and descriptions. For example, a video might depict sex with little or no dialogue indicative of the nature of the relationship between performers, but include a title or description that contextualizes this relationship (e.g., “Cheating wife has sex with stranger” or “woman surprises her fiancé”).

**Table 1.** *Example studies.*

Coding Material	Measure	Operationalization (excerpt)	Reliability	Source
<b>Relational Context of Sex:</b> Two people engaging in sex (a dyad) can have different types of romantic or non-romantic relationships with each other and with further people outside this dyad. If a person is having sex with a person they just met, this is defined as casual sex; and if a person is in a monogamous relationship and engages in sex with another person outside this relationship, this is considered extrarelational sex or infidelity (Rasmussen et al., 2019).				
N=190 scenes (average length 14 min.) taken from the highest rated section of PornHub (86 scenes) and Xvideos (104 scenes)	Casual sex and further relationship contexts with sex partners	Relationship between dyad members for each dyad engaging in sex during the scene. Polytomous coding (0: no relational information; 1: just met / casual sex; 2: acquaintances/friends; 3: dating; 4: married; 5: not enough information).	Krippendorff’s Alpha average of .74 for all variables in codebook	Rasmussen et al. (2019)
	Extrarelational sex	Sexual scene with at least one of the sexual participants being in a romantic relationship with someone not present in the sexual encounter. Binary coding (1: yes; 2: no).		
	• Extrarelational participant dating (type of extrarelational sex)	Sexual scene with at least one participant dating someone not present in the sexual encounter. Binary coding (1: yes; 2: no).		
	• Extrarelational participant married (type of extrarelational sex)	Sexual scene with at least one participant being married to someone not present in the sexual encounter. Binary coding (1: yes; 2: no).		

If sex is determined to be extrarelational it is possible to further code whether this extrarelational sex is happening with the knowledge, encouragement, or participation of the individual's partner (e.g., as part of a cuckold fantasy). Rasmussen et al. (2019) refer to this as *consensual non-monogamy*.

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