

# Consent Communication (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 *consent communication* 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 *consent communication* 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

A common research hypothesis states that pornography depicts sex mostly without consent communication, especially explicit verbal communication. To test this hypothesis and code pornographic material accordingly, it is necessary to clarify the concept of “consent communication” and use valid and reliable measures for different types of consent communication.

Here it is important to conceptually differentiate between consent communication *between characters* in the fictional world of the porn scene and

consent communication *between performers* on set (or consent of performers to have their image be recorded and disseminated as pornography). This distinction becomes murky with regard to amateur pornography, which ostensibly is meant to depict “authentic” sex (although this sex may still be performative), and also professional pornography in which a performer is playing “themselves” as opposed to a character. Some production studios (especially those specializing in BDSM content) embed interviews with performers into their videos, in which performers indicate that they consented to the activities presented.

**Table 1.** Example studies.

Coding Material	Measure	Operationalization (excerpt)	Reliability	Source
<b>Consent Communication:</b> Whenever in the sequence of sexual activities depicted in pornography a new activity is started, the question arises if all participants have consented to the new behavior. Sexual consent between characters can be communicated verbally and nonverbally (Willis et al., 2020). Further, verbal or nonverbal communication may be explicit or implicit (Willis et al., 2020). Apart from issues of performer health protection, explicit consent communication on camera is also regarded as relevant in terms of modelling behaviors for audiences.				
N=50 segments (length 20 min. each) from a random sample of 50 bestselling pornographic films (1 segment per film) depicting a total of 1,109 sexual behaviors	Explicit verbal sexual consent	“Straightforward statements, questions, or responses expressing agreement to engage in sexual behavior stated using words for actual sexual behavior or a very close synonym”. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).	Cohen’s Kappa: .72	Willis et al. (2020)
	Implicit verbal sexual consent	“Verbally initiating sexual behavior or communicating agreement to engage in sexual behavior without explicitly using the word sex or other close synonyms. The content of the words may not be sexual in nature, but the connotation or tone of voice used by the characters implies sex or is sexual in nature”. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).	Cohen’s Kappa: .63	
	Explicit non-verbal sexual consent	“Behaviors or actions that are sexually explicit including bodily touching in a sexual way”. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).	Cohen’s Kappa: .76	

Coding Material	Measure	Operationalization (excerpt)	Reliability	Source
N=50 segments (length 20 min. each) from a random sample of 50 bestselling pornographic films (1 segment per film) depicting a total of 1,109 sexual behaviors	Implicit non-verbal sexual consent	“Behaviors or actions that imply interest in engagement in sexual behavior”. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).	Cohen’s Kappa: .65	Willis et al. (2020)
	No response	“Characters do not say anything, do not resist, or let the sexual activity happen without much action. The person is a passive participant in sexual behavior, but not uncomfortable, distressed, or showing signs of disinterest”. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).	Cohen’s Kappa: .72	
	No sexual consent shown	“Scene begins or video cuts away and comes back with characters engaging in sexual behavior without any preceding actions to assess consent”. Binary coding (1: present; 2: not present).	Cohen’s Kappa: .95	

For more nuanced analyses of consent communication, the sex/gender of the persons involved in consent communication can be coded (see DOCA entry “[Performer Demographics \(Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography\)](#)”) and the respective sex acts that are to be consented to (see DOCA entry “[Sex Acts \(Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography\)](#)”). Furthermore, relationship status between characters might play an important role for consent communication (Willis et al., 2020): Characters in established relationships might be more likely to communicate sexual consent nonverbally than those in casual encounters (see DOCA entry „[Relational Context of Sex \(Portrayals of Sexuality in Pornography\)](#)“).

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