

The Philosophy of Pornography

Contemporary Perspectives

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24. Schaschek, *Pornography and Seriality*.
25. See Susanna Paasonen, "Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0, and the Meanings of Amateurism," *New Media and Society* 12, no. 8 (2010): 1297–312; Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*.
26. See Feona Attwood, "No Money Shot? Commerce, Pornography and New Sex Taste Cultures," *Sexualities* 10, no. 4 (2007): 441–56; Shoshana Magnet, "Feminist Sexualities, Race and the Internet: An Investigation of Suicidegirls.com," *New Media & Society* 9, no. 4 (2007): 577–96.
27. Simon Hardy, "The New Pornographies: Representation or Reality?" in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. Feona Attwood (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), 3–18; Paasonen, "Labors of Love."
28. See for example Susanna Paasonen, "Homespun: Finnporn and the Meanings of the Local," in *Hard to Swallow: Hard-Core Pornography on Screen*, ed. Darren Kerr and Claire Hines (New York: Wallflower Press, 2012), 177–93.
29. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 106.
30. David Bennett, "Pornography-Dot-Com: Eroticising Privacy on the Internet," *Review of Education/Pedagogy/Cultural Studies* 23, no. 4 (2001): 384; Mark Dery, "Paradise Lust: Pornotopia Meets the Culture Wars," in *C'lick Me: A Netporn Studies Reader*, ed. Katrien Jacobs, Marije Janssen, and Matteo Pasquinelli (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2007), 125–48.
31. Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*, 71–72, 78–88.
32. See Alexa ratings for top 500 sites: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites>.
33. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 48–49.
34. Williams, *Screening Sex*, 128.
35. Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London: Routledge, 2002), 142.

Chapter Two

Pornography Makes the Man

The Impact of Pornography as a Component of Gender and Sexual Socialization

Matthew B. Ezzell

In the spring of 2013 I taught a course on the sociology of gender at James Madison University. As a class, we were discussing media and gender socialization, and, not surprisingly, the topic of pornography came up. I mentioned to the class that I was interested in studying male pornography *refusers*—men who make a conscious choice, for any reason, not to consume pornography. Without pause, one of the men in the class blurted out, "Good luck finding them!" The class laughed.

The man's joke and the ensuing laughter reflect existing patterns of pornography consumption among young men in the United States. Put simply, the overwhelming majority of college age males are active consumers.¹ In my own research with an international team of scholars from the fields of communication studies, psychology, and sociology, in fact, we found that 89.1 percent of young men in the United States are active consumers. Of that group, 58.7 percent consume pornography weekly and 13.2 percent engage in daily consumption, mostly (97.4 percent) via the Internet and almost exclusively (99.5 percent) for free. Further, in a shift from previous research² we found that almost half of our respondents (48.7 percent) had exposure to pornography prior to the age of thirteen. In this context, although men may choose to consume pornography for any number of reasons (entertainment, escape, release, revenge), it is clear that pornography is something more than fantasy. It is, instead, real: the men and women used in its production are real, the money traded in global commerce around it is real, the consumers are real, and the impact that it has on those consumers—and on others in

consumers' lives—is real. At the most basic level, pornography is now a core component of boys' and young men's gender and sexual socialization. How can we make sense of it?

SEX, GENDER, PATRIARCHY, AND MANHOOD

One of the first questions asked of a pregnant woman is “Are you having a boy or a girl?” Many expectant parents who have not “found out” the anticipated biological sex of the fetus have faced frustration and, sometimes, anger from friends and family who wonder how they will buy a gift for the baby shower. Such routine interactions highlight the centrality of sex and gender as organizing principles of social life, the belief in two-and-only-two discrete sexes, our cultural conflation of biological sex and cultural gendered identities, and the gendering processes that begin before a fetus has left the womb.

To clarify terms often confused in dominant cultural discourse, when we refer to “sex” we are typically referring to body markers/signs that we label “female” and “male.” And, as noted, only two options are generally put forward. But that is not all that occurs biologically in the human condition. Biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, in fact, argues that biological sex is not a clear-cut and natural distinction in the human species, but a continuum of difference: “While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many bodies . . . that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females.”³ Sex, in the way we typically think of it, is not a given. And yet we have created a two-sex system that is enforced culturally and politically, and it is so deeply woven into the fabric of our social world as to appear natural and inborn. It is neither. We must uphold it through rituals of daily interaction, many of which are taken for granted. My student's joke in class, for example, can be read as an interactional display of “manliness,” a way to place himself, as a “man” in this system, in the category of pornography “user” and to also reaffirm pornography consumption as a normative component of masculine signification.

My student's comment highlights one of the ways that we perform the gendered “cultural conceits”⁴ of masculinity and femininity—expectations, norms, and values associated with “being a man” or “being a woman”—that are laid on top of the cultural construction of a male/female dichotomy. Importantly, gender is not something that we *are* but something that we *do*.⁵ In that sense, our gendered identities must be achieved and maintained. It is important to note, further, that gender is not a category of difference but a category of *inequality*. To signify a gendered identity is to claim status within an economy of power. “Being a man” carries more cultural weight than

“being a woman.” Because they are culturally constructed, the hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity shift across time and place, but within the gendered economy of power masculinity is necessarily about dominance, and femininity is necessarily subordinated in relation to it.⁶

We live in a patriarchy. Sociologist Allan G. Johnson argues that social systems are patriarchal to the extent that they are male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered.⁷ This means that under patriarchy men tend to be in positions of power and authority, what is seen as normative and valuable tends to be associated with men and masculinity, and the cultural focus of attention tends to be on men and the things that men do. This does not mean that every male in our society has equal access to the use of power over women or feels powerful in his life. Many men do not feel powerful, in fact, and many feel like failures *as men* because the cultural mandates of masculinity are impossible to fully attain. This can be particularly difficult terrain for boys to navigate. Violence prevention educator Paul Kivel summarizes the constellation of meanings associated with modern patriarchal masculinity as follows: “Be tough, be aggressive, don't back down, don't make mistakes, be in control, take charge, have lots of [heterosexual] sex, have money, be responsible, don't show any feelings, and don't cry.”⁸ Although these messages are both impossible to fulfill and personally unhealthy, boys often internalize them, as they come early and often. And the stakes are high as the bounds of gender presentation and performance are policed in subtle and overt ways, up to and including acts of physical and sexual violence.

Because patriarchal masculine ideals are impossible to fully achieve and because of intersections of systems of privilege and oppression, many boys and men cannot reap what sociologist R.W. Connell calls the full “patriarchal dividend”—the advantages typically conferred on males in a patriarchal society.⁹ When men's access to patriarchal advantages is threatened in some way, or when their claim to a masculine self is discredited, they may resort to displays of compensatory masculinity.¹⁰ That is, in an effort to make up for their lack of access to the highest benefits and privileges of men in a patriarchal context, they may perform exaggerated “manhood acts”—acts that signify a masculine self and are “aimed at claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation.”¹¹ Men perform compensatory manhood acts in many social settings. Some men with physical disabilities, for example, may center their masculine identities on the control they exert over others occupationally, while others may (over)emphasize their physical strength, athleticism, or sexual prowess.¹² As one man with physical disabilities put it: “I've overcompensated by trying to please my [sexual] partner and leave little room to allow my partner to please me. . . . Some of my greatest pleasure is exhausting my partner while having sex.”¹³ This example highlights the importance of (hetero)sexual prowess as a signifying act of manhood under modern constructions of patriarchal masculinity. And within

that fact we can glimpse one of the functions of pornography under patriarchy—it is both a means through which boys and young men are socialized to understand what it means to “be a man” sexually and, through its consumption, a signifying manhood act, a means through which boys and young men enact an identity as a man.

PORN MAKES THE MAN

Pornography exposure for young boys today is, as noted, nearly ubiquitous. In the absence of comprehensive sex and sexuality education in the schools and in the absence of comprehensive and timely discussions about sex between parents and their children, pornography and other forms of sexualized media function as the primary source of adolescents’ sex education.¹⁴ For example, in our study my colleagues and I found that although 89.1 percent of men are active pornography consumers, only 31.4 percent agreed or strongly agreed that sex education at school was helpful to them in learning about sex, and only 24.6 percent agreed or strongly agreed that sex education at home was helpful. In this context, pornography serves as a powerful source of information about sex, gender, and sexuality that is not mitigated by alternate forms of sex education. What is the content of this education?

The overwhelming bulk of modern pornography is created by and for heterosexual men. Of course, women and other populations of men also consume pornography, but these groups have been under-researched and the driving force of the industry, in terms of sales and production, remains focused on heterosexual men.¹⁵ The content of pornographic media varies from still images in magazines and websites to videos and films available on the Internet or on DVDs. Still images are produced across a wide continuum: glossy and “pretty” images of women by themselves in a range of poses and engaged in a range of activities (standing in a field, bathing, penetrating themselves, etc.) to images of women with other people engaged in a range of activities (various sex acts, bondage, etc.). Despite the wide availability of “tamer” fare, the driving force of the industry is increasingly “harsher” material that is more explicitly degrading, aggressive, and violent. For example, in content analysis of industry-identified top-selling videos, psychologist Ana J. Bridges and her colleagues found that over 88 percent of scenes involve acts of physical aggression (e.g., spanking, gagging, hair pulling, choking, and slapping)—overwhelmingly against women—while over 48 percent involve verbal aggression, principally name calling (e.g., “bitch” or “slut”).¹⁶ This highlights the ways that the mainstream pornography industry is phallocratic—it typifies male power and dominance.

Exhibiting such a phallocratic orientation, Bridges and her colleagues found that in the 88 percent of pornographic scenes involving overt physical

aggression, over 95 percent of those aggressed against responded with neutrality or pleasure.¹⁷ Mainstream pornography, thus, constructs a particular representation of masculinity tied to sexualized aggression and a representation of femininity tied to sexual subordination and (desired) victimization. These representations are expressions of the hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity under modern patriarchy and, given the early age of first exposure and high rate of consumption among boys and young men, they can be particularly powerful in shaping boys and young men’s sense of self and others.

As noted above, in our research my colleagues and I found that almost half of our respondents had been exposed to pornography prior to the age of thirteen. Research shows that a majority (70 percent) of these early exposures are unintentional.¹⁸ Whether it is intentional or not, however, research also demonstrates that children’s reactions to early exposure to sexualized media are commonly negative: disgust, shock, embarrassment, anger, fear, and/or sadness.¹⁹ Such early exposure may be to harsh or “extreme” material, and the children may not have the cognitive skills or resources to critically engage it. As an example, in 2012 I spoke with a small group of high school-aged boys (fifteen to sixteen years old) about pornography and sexuality. The group of boys did not know one another, but they had all seen the same pornographic material because of the popularity of peer-to-peer file-sharing networks and the common practice of sharing material via e-mail and/or text messages with friends.²⁰ Although they had seen the same material and shared it with other friends, none of the boys had actually talked about what they had seen with those friends or shared their feelings in response to it. In our discussion, they described explicit acts of violence, bondage, scat-fetishism (material centered around a sexualized focus on feces), and bestiality, and they had no idea what to do with what they had seen. They had encountered depictions of interactions that they could not imagine enjoying themselves. But, because the women in the material had all responded with pleasure, the boys were scared and perplexed. They asked, “Is that what girls actually want?” “How could they like that?” “Are girls going to expect me to do that to them?”

Despite the common experience of early negative reactions to pornography, the majority (89.1 percent in my research) of boys and young men go on to engage in active consumption. And regardless of the fact that boys and young men may not purposefully seek out displays of sexualized violence and aggression against women when they first become consumers, interview data with consumers and content analysis of online forums suggest that exposure to “harsher” content is difficult to avoid²¹ and that many men’s consumption follows a pattern of desensitization and escalation such that they actively look for more extreme material over time.²² So, boys and young men on the whole experience early exposure to pornography, go on to become

regular and active consumers in large numbers, and tend to seek out more extreme material the longer they consume. Why and how is this important?

MEDIA MATTER²³

What we consume on the page or the screen has implications for life off of it. The majority of social science research on pornography has focused on its effects, particularly on consumers' attitudes and behaviors. However, debates are ongoing regarding the usefulness of effects research.²⁴ Experimental research, for example, may give us clues about the ways in which consumers interact with media, but it has limitations. For example, answers to questions about attitudes toward women do not necessarily speak to the enactment of any particular behaviors. Experiments also do not replicate the conditions of consuming pornography as part of a daily or weekly practice over the course of years. Further, experimental studies do not replicate the ways that boys and men use pornographic material to facilitate masturbation.²⁵

Addressing some of these concerns, more recent research has begun to question the ways that media translate into perceptions of reality, attitudes, and behavior. This line of research springs out of "cognitive scripts" theory, which posits that media influence attitudes and behavior by providing a heuristic model outlining "what should or should not be happening, how people should or should not behave in response to what is or is not happening and what the outcomes of a particular course of action should be."²⁶ Building off of communications scholar and psychologist L. Rowell Huesmann's work on information processing, in addition to social cognitive theory,²⁷ cultivation analysis,²⁸ uses and gratifications theory,²⁹ media dependency theory,³⁰ and priming theory,³¹ communications scholar Paul Wright developed a sexual script acquisition, activation, application (₃AM) model of sexual socialization that explains how exposure to media can impact behavior.³² Put simply, the ₃AM model argues that media shape our worldview by creating a readily accessible heuristic model (i.e., a script) for decision making. This approach addresses some of the criticisms of previous effects research as it provides a model for the links between attitudes and behaviors, theorizes the impact of media consumption over time, and includes analyses of the context and experience of media consumption on the potential impact of that media.

Sociologists John Gagnon and William Simon in 1973 first theorized the "sexual script" as a core component of sexual socialization that could provide a worldview that guides and shapes sexual decision making.³³ This conception of the sexual script is similar to symbolic interactionist understandings of social life.³⁴ Using the dramaturgical metaphor of social life as theater,

symbolic interactionists theorize that social life is played out by social actors presenting selves and enacting roles on social stages in front of various audiences. Scripts, in this conception, provide the guidelines for lines of action in a given social context. Put simply, and in regard to sexual behavior, scripts "tell us how to behave sexually."³⁵

According to Huesmann and as applied to pornography by Wright in his ₃AM model, these sexual scripts must first be acquired (capture the attention of the consumer) and activated (called to mind by the consumer in context) before they are applied (used to guide decision making). All three steps can be moderated by other factors, including *audience* factors (e.g., gender, age, motivations, existing sexual scripts, moral standards, media dependency, apathy, forethought), *content* factors (e.g., arousal value, salience, prevalence, rewards and punishments), *accessibility* factors (e.g., context, frequency and duration of exposure, vividness), as well as *situational* factors (e.g., sexual arousal, script-situation correspondence). Given the increased anonymity, accessibility, and affordability of online pornography, the barriers to acquisition are low. The prevalence and salience of pornographic sexual scripts, in fact, make them almost impossible to avoid. More frequent use and consumption patterns that develop over the course of years, particularly when consumption involves cognitive and/or enactive rehearsal (i.e., masturbation to orgasm), increases the likelihood of activation. Once the pornographic sexual script is acquired and activated, particularly in the absence of meaningful and alternative sexual scripts, it can be applied in real-world contexts.

In these ways, the ₃AM model breaks down the effects process into three components—the impact of media on acquisition of sexual scripts, the impact of media on the activation of sexual scripts, and the impact of media on the application of sexual scripts. Springing out of this model, and based on his review of accumulated studies that address sexual behavior, Wright concludes that sexualized media "almost certainly exert a causal influence on youths' sexual behavior."³⁶ To put this in other terms, the earlier boys and men are exposed to pornography and the more they consume and the longer that consumption takes place, in a context lacking effective or meaningful alternative scripts for gender and sexuality, the more likely pornography will directly shape the attitudes and behaviors of those boys and men.

In what ways can pornography shape the experiences and behaviors of boys and men? Some researchers have found positive³⁷ or neutral³⁸ effects. For example, in its function as a primary form of sex education for young people, pornography *can* provide information about the human body and sexual practices, thus increasing a sense of sexual competence and decreasing a sense of sexual shame.³⁹ But other research suggests that the impact of pornography can be negative. In a thorough review of existing literature, for example, sociologist Michael Flood notes that pornography consumption can shift boys' and men's sexual practices and expectations, harm female part-

ners' sense of intimacy, encourage sexualized and sexually objectifying understandings of girls and women, and intensify boys' and young men's acceptance of and participation in sexual violence.⁴⁰ As an example, Neil Malamuth, Tamara Addison, and Mary Koss found that boys and men who are predisposed to violence (i.e., boys and men who are impulsive, hostile to women, and promiscuous) may seek out violent pornography which, in turn, may increase their likelihood of engaging in sexually aggressive and controlling behavior.⁴¹ Other studies have found that boys and men who habitually consume pornography are more likely to describe women in sexual terms; to view women in stereotypical ways; to hold attitudes supportive of violence against women, and/or to engage in acts of violence against women;⁴² that pornography consumption is associated with having multiple sexual partners; paying for sex;⁴³ and having lower levels of commitment in romantic relationships and higher likelihoods of infidelity;⁴⁴ and that consumers of paraphilic pornography (i.e., BDSM, fetishism, bestiality, and/or violent/coercive pornography) are more likely to experience diminished overall sexual satisfaction due to suppressed empathy for their sexual partners.⁴⁵

Interviews with consumers speak in concert with the empirical studies mentioned above. Based on a nationally representative poll and in-depth interviews, U.S. journalist Pamela Paul documented a range of self-identified personal effects of pornography consumption.⁴⁶ Although some respondents highlighted positive effects, many men spoke to negative effects as well, including habituation and desensitization; an increased tendency to objectify women in and outside of pornography; pushing sexual partners to try positions/practices seen in pornography; pressuring women to have sex; experiencing sex with partners as boring; dependence on pornography to facilitate masturbation; dependence on mental images of pornography to maintain erections during sex with a partner; and feelings of depression/lack of control. Echoing Paul's work, therapists Wendy and Larry Maltz argue that pornography consumption can negatively shape some users' sexual desires and practices, deaden libido and ability to perform sexually, and compromise users' ability to connect emotionally and sexually with partners.⁴⁷

My colleagues and I found empirical support for these arguments. For example, we found that the more pornography a man watches, the more likely he is to prefer and rely on pornography in order to obtain and maintain sexual excitement and the more likely he is to bring pornography into sexual relationships with a partner. In other words, we found that the more pornography a man consumes, the more likely he is to prefer pornography to sex with a partner, the more likely he is to conjure images of pornography during sex with a partner in order to maintain excitement, and the more likely he is to replicate sex acts seen in pornography during sex with a partner. Further, we found that the more pornography a man watches, the less likely he is to enjoy sexually intimate behaviors (e.g., kissing and cuddling), the more like-

ly he is to experience sexual anxiety (e.g., concerns over sexual performance and penis size), and the more likely he is to sexually objectify women in public. In short, pornography provides men a sexual script that shapes the ways they view and enact their sexual selves, and the more pornography a man consumes, the more he comes to depend on it for that enactment.

THE MALE CONSUMER, THE MALE CONSUMED

When men depend on pornography to obtain and maintain sexual excitement, even with a partner, and when men's pornography consumption pushes them toward derivative, nonrelational, and less intimate sexual practices, we can see pornography not as sexual liberation but as sexual limitation. At the same time, the pornography industry and the consumption of pornographic materials reflect and represent hegemonic ideals of masculinity and male dominance. In this way, we can see that, for men, pornography offers a *collective* gain (beliefs in/enactment of male dominance) but exacts an *individual* cost (decreased empathy and intimacy, dependence, anxiety).

Men's choices to consume pornography, as sociologist Jennifer A. Johnson points out, do not occur in a vacuum.⁴⁸ Instead, they are exercised within the context of intersecting systems of inequality, namely patriarchy and capitalism. Under the modern system of global corporate capitalism, many men are exploited (by other men) at work at the same time that male dominance is maintained within the larger gender order. And even middle- and upper-class men often experience a gulf between their socialized sense of entitlement to sexual and material power and their own lived realities.⁴⁹ This demonstrates what Johnson terms the "male paradox of power" in which many men personally *feel* powerless (or, *less* powerful than they feel entitled to feel) at the same time that men are privileged *as a class*.⁵⁰ The consumption of pornography, in this context, functions as a compensatory manhood act because it allows men across the economic spectrum micro-access to the performance of the hegemonic masculine ideal. A man may feel frustrated by the distance between his sense of masculine entitlement to the patriarchal dividend—an entitlement which is acquired, in part, through the consumption of pornography to begin with—and the realities of life under global corporate capitalism. But the consumption of pornography also allows him a means through which to signify male dominance over women. As an example, sociologist Michael Kimmel points out that the sexual mandate of hegemonic masculinity is unattainable, but many young men feel entitled to sex and frustrated by women's perceived control of access to it.⁵¹ Consuming pornography offers a salve, a way to enact masculinity and "correct" the perceived challenge to male dominance across the board. Consider the words of one college-aged man:

My friends and I share a membership [to a paid pornographic website] so we can watch it together. It's like they get all these girls who are like 19 or 20 and they're just walking around town, going to the mall . . . and then these guys offer 'em some money and they like are naked and sucking and fucking these guys they don't even know, and loving it, for like a couple of hundred bucks. Un-fucking-believable. We're all like "oh, bang that bitch!" and "fuck that little ho." And they're like college girls! It's like so cool. Why aren't they like that here in Amherst?⁵²

The consumption of such material enables the men to express male dominance, to enact identities *as men*, and to bond as men through their joint consumption of an objectified, commoditized, and degraded female body. As Kimmel notes, in the face of the perceived challenge to the men's conditioned sense of sexual entitlement, "watching these girls' sexual humiliation is a way to level the playing field just a little bit."⁵³

MORE THAN A MIND-SET

The impact of pornography goes beyond conditioned attitudes and dependence. It affects real-world social interaction. As my colleagues and I found, the more men consume pornography, the more likely they are to ask their partners to watch pornography with them, the more likely they are to try sex acts viewed in pornography, and the more likely they are to sexually objectify women in public. As I argued in the opening to this chapter, pornography is more than fantasy. It is real. It is implicated in real-world interactions between people. This is true for consensual sexual relationships in addition to instances of men's violence against women.

Mainstream pornography reflects a patriarchal construction of masculinity tied to sexual aggression and dominance, but it is not the only reflection of that construction. Indeed, reflections of patriarchal masculinity saturate our cultural landscape. Yet, the media system, as I argued above, is particularly powerful as a mechanism of gender and sexual socialization because of its pervasive reach, because it is rarely mediated by effective alternative scripts, and because it is pleasurable in form. Pornography, while pervasive and more mainstreamed than ever, is not *the* cause of inequality or sexualized aggression. If pornography were eradicated today there would still be men's violence against women tomorrow. It is more apt to consider pornography and other forms of sexualized media as *enabling conditions* for real-world acts of misogyny and sexual violence.⁵⁴ In a world in which popular forms of entertainment and de facto sex education center on male dominance and sexualized depictions of violence and aggression by men against women, and in which the underlying ideology of male dominance and the sexual narratives that reflect it are pervasive and normative, it is more likely that women

will be systematically targeted for acts of sexualized aggression by men. Media, in this sense, both reflect and shape social reality. In other words, although media systems emerge in the context of already existing social realities and, thus, reflect those realities, they also function as agents of socialization which act back on, and shape, those realities.

One of the ways that pornography is implicated in real-world examples of men's violence against women can be seen through interviews with survivors of that violence. Some perpetrators use pornography to choreograph their abuse and others use the abuse as an opportunity to make their own pornography. For example, over 22 percent of the women in Martin Schwartz and Walter DeKeseredy's research on sexual assault in Canada reported being upset by a partner's attempts to imitate pornography in either consensual or nonconsensual contexts.⁵⁵ Of the women in Raquel Kennedy Bergen and Kathleen Bogle's survey of survivors seeking services from rape crisis centers who knew that their abuser consumed pornography, 40 percent said that the pornography was part of the abuse, with 12 percent of the total sample indicating that pornography was imitated during the abuse.⁵⁶ And finally, Diana Russell found that 32 percent of the respondents from a random sample of women in the San Francisco area who reported experiences of wife rape had been asked/forced to pose for pornography as a component of their abuse.⁵⁷ Not every man who consumes pornography will enact such violence, and not every woman who experiences men's violence can link her experiences directly to pornography in these ways, but as Bergen and Bogle conclude, it is clear that "pornography plays a role in the sexual violence experienced by some women."⁵⁸

Even when the links are not so immediately direct, we can see the traces of pornographic ideologies surrounding gender, sex, and violence in other examples of sexual interaction between men and women including explicit acts of men's violence. The Steubenville High School rape case is one such example.⁵⁹ In August 2012, boys fondled, urinated on, and raped an unconscious sixteen-year-old girl at a series of parties over a six-hour period. The perpetrators and other people at the party took pictures of these assaults and posted the images and comments about the girl and the assaults on Twitter, Facebook, and in text messages. The dismissal of the assault of an unconscious girl and the victim blaming that occurred in the moments of the assault and over the days, weeks, and months that followed was staggering in its callousness.⁶⁰ Two of the boys were ultimately found guilty of raping the girl, but victim blaming persisted and public sympathy was often expressed not for the victim—who received death threats following the verdict⁶¹—but for the boys who raped her. CNN correspondent Poppy Harlow, for example, reflected that it was, "difficult, even for an outsider like [her], to watch what happened as these two young men that had such promising futures, star

football players, very good students, literally watched as they believed their lives fell apart.”⁶²

One of the aspects of this story that stands out is not that it happened, but that it received national and international attention. How many other stories of drug-facilitated and filmed sexual assaults take place that never receive such public scrutiny? In 1988 journalist Robin Warshaw reported that although one in four women had had experiences that met the legal definition of rape, only 5 percent of them had reported those experiences to the police.⁶³ Women reported that they did not come forward for a range of reasons, including having a relationship with the assailant, having had prior consensual sexual interaction with the assailant, embarrassment over the details of the assault (self-blame), fear of being blamed by others, and fear of not being believed. The Steubenville case may well not have resulted in police reports either, had the assault not been photographed and shared through social media. Regardless, such instances of men’s violence against women, whether or not they receive public scrutiny, are all too common.

The sad truth is that rape is not an aberration of social norms. As journalism and communications scholar Robert Jensen puts it, “Rape is illegal, but the sexual ethic that underlies rape is woven into the fabric of the culture.”⁶⁴ He goes on:

In the contemporary United States, men generally are trained in a variety of ways to view sex as the acquisition of pleasure by the taking of women. Sex is a sphere in which men are trained to see themselves as naturally dominant and women as naturally passive. Women are objectified and women’s sexuality is turned into a commodity that can be bought and sold. Sex becomes sexy because men are dominant and women are subordinate.⁶⁵

One of the mechanisms through which men are trained to view sex in these ways is the consumption of pornography, not every now and again but habitually and over the course of years. Consuming pornography delivers the sexual script of patriarchy in which men’s sexual aggression is normalized and celebrated. And although we cannot know for certain whether the assailants in the case mentioned above were active consumers, it is telling that in the process of assaulting the victim they documented the abuse with photographs and videos, essentially making their own pornography as a component of the abuse. It is also telling that the boys posted evidence of these crimes on social media outlets, displaying a gross misunderstanding of what constitutes the legal crime of rape, a desensitization to the realities of men’s violence against women and the humanity of the girl they assaulted, and a normative understanding of men’s violence as an act of manhood under patriarchy.

The assailants in these acts of violence seemingly saw nothing wrong with what they had done, at least during and immediately after the assaults. It

was not until photos of the assault began spreading through social media that Trent Mays, one of the assailants, began trying to orchestrate a cover-up.⁶⁶ Robin Warshaw’s work further highlighted that although one in twelve men admitted to engaging in behaviors that meet the legal definition of rape, 84 percent of those men said that what they did was “*definitely* not rape.”⁶⁷ How can we make sense of this?

The normalization of rape in our culture and the failure of many men (and women) to “see” it clearly may relate back to the patriarchal and phallographic sexual scripts that saturate our cultural landscape and which predominate in pornography. When boys acquire, activate, and apply sexual scripts centered on aggressive and predatory masculinity and subordinated and victimized femininity, men’s violence against women can become the norm, the expected pattern of sexual interaction. Recall that Ana Bridges and her colleagues found that 95 percent of those aggressed against in top-selling pornographic videos responded with neutrality or pleasure. Such “consensual depiction of aggression,” they argue, runs the risk of “rendering true aggression against women invisible.”⁶⁸ In this context, a “no” stated directly or indirectly may not be heard as “no” and consent may be assumed a priori. In the pornographic sexual script, men are conditioned to *get* sex and to do things *to* women—as opposed to *with* them—and not to identify and reassess enthusiastic and active consent across the evolving and negotiated process of sexual interaction.⁶⁹

The pornographic sexual script that men are socialized to apply with women is also visible in the phenomenon sometimes referred to as “gray rape,” a sexual encounter between a man and a woman which does not clearly meet the legal threshold for rape but which nonetheless is a violation of the woman’s desires and personal boundaries.⁷⁰ It could refer to an interaction that was not overtly physically violent, a situation in which a woman says no but the man refuses to stop pestering her until he wears her down, or some other context that does not fit the dominant cultural narrative of “assault.” Journalist and blogger Meghan Murphy put it this way:

It’s muddy, yes. But we all know (or should know), that it isn’t ok. It’s what happens to women. It’s a run of the mill experience for many of us in this culture. It’s not something easily categorized as either “rape” or “consensual.” As many of us know all too well, there’s much more middle ground. And that “middle ground” is often disturbingly comparable to legal rape; but sometimes more difficult to talk about or sort out in one’s mind.⁷¹

This is more than “bad sex.” It is a violation of personal space, corporal integrity, and the moral authority to determine what happens to and with your body. That it does not necessarily meet the legal threshold for rape or sexual assault does not lessen the violation:

We know when there is not consent and yet we can't call it rape in a legal sense. These experiences leave us vulnerable to being silenced, blamed, and disbelieved. They leave us feeling unsure of ourselves. We ask ourselves what happened — Was it rape? Was it "borderline assault"? Was it just a bad experience that most women probably have? Should we have said "no" more clearly? Loudly? Firmly?

Certainly it's something more than just a "bad experience" or "bad sex." And yes, it's muddy, *but only because we live in a rape culture, where the lines between consensual, nonconsensual, and legal rape are horribly blurred.*⁷²

Pornography is part of the process in which those lines are blurred. It is not the only part, to be sure, but it is a core component of the gender and sexual socialization through which boys and young men learn to see and experience themselves as men. It is part of how they learn to enact their manhood along patriarchal lines. And it is part of the way that men's violence against women becomes normalized, commoditized, celebrated, and rendered invisible by its very ubiquity.

NOTES

I would like to thank Chyng F. Sun, Ana J. Bridges, and Jennifer A. Johnson, and my colleagues in an interdisciplinary, international research project that addresses pornography consumption and attitudes and behaviors, for their work together and for their support in writing this chapter. Particular thanks go to Jennifer A. Johnson, with whom I drafted a previous version of one section of this chapter. Finally, I would like to thank Robert Jensen for his support, guidance, and example, and the editors of this anthology for their insightful comments and their commitment to creating space for these discussions.

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2. See for example Chiara Sabina, Janis Wolak, and David Finkelhor, "The Nature and Dynamics of Internet Pornography Exposure for Youth," *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 11 (2008): 691–93, who found that only 14.4 percent of their respondents had exposure to pornography prior to age thirteen.

3. Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 31.

4. Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 31.

5. See Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 1 (1987): 125–51; Candace West and Sarah Fenstermaker, "Doing Difference," *Gender & Society* 9 (1995): 8–37.

6. See the chapter by Robert Jensen in this anthology for more discussion of these ideas.

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8. Paul Kivel, "Boys Will Be Men: Guiding Your Sons from Boyhood to Manhood," Paul Kivel: Educator, Activist & Writer, 2006, <http://www.paulkivel.com/component/jdownloads/finish/1/37/0?Itemid=31> (accessed 27 Jul. 2013).

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15. For some notable exceptions to the lack of research on populations outside of heterosexual men, see Bridget J. Crawford, "Gay Does Not Necessarily Mean Good: A Critique of Jeffrey Sherman's 'Love Speech: The Social Utility of Pornography,'" *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy and the Law* 5 (1996): 9–20; Scott J. Duggan and Donald R. McCreary, "Body Image, Eating Disorders, and the Drive for Muscularity in Gay and Heterosexual Men: The Influence of Media Images," *Eclectic Views on Gay Male Pornography: Pornucopia*, ed. Todd G. Morrison (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 45–58; Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Video Porn," *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object-Choices (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), 145–68; Christopher Kendall, *Gay Male Pornography: An Issue of Sex Discrimination* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004); Jeffrey G. Sherman, "Love Speech: The Social Utility of Pornography," *Stanford Law Review* 47 (1995): 661–705; Nguyen Tan Hoang, "The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 223–70; Bente Træen, Toril Sorheim Nilsen, and Hein Stigum, "Use of Pornography in Traditional Media and on the Internet in Norway," *Journal of Sex Research* 43 (2006): 245–54.

16. Ana J. Bridges, Robert Wosnitzer, Erica Scharrer, Chyng Sun, and Rachael Liberman, "Aggression and Sexual Behavior in Best-Selling Pornography Videos: A Content Analysis Update," *Violence Against Women* 16 (2010): 1065–85. Although "harsh" material has arguably always been available within the modern pornography industry, even industry insiders point out that the mainstream industry has grown "harsher" over time. Actor/producer Max Hardcore noted that, although in the 1980s and early 1990s a "hot" scene ended with a man ejaculating onto a woman's body, by the 2000s "almost every women [was] . . . into getting throat-fucked and ass-gaped" (see <http://business.avn.com/articles/video/Max-Hardcore-Spreading-The-Love-23363.html> [accessed 13 Jul. 2012]). And producer Mitchell Spinelli reflects that "girls" in the industry today are "younger," "nastier," and "harder" than they were in the 1970s, and noted that to stay relevant in the changing industry he "reinvented" his company to reflect an "aggressive, hardcore, in your face, ass-to-mouth take no prisoners" attitude (see http://www.lukeisback.com/stars/stars/mitchell_spinelli.htm [accessed 13 Jul. 2012]).

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Chapter Three

Truth Claims about Porn

When Dogma and Data Collide

Shira Tarrant

Full disclosure: What I am about to say takes on many sacred cows and directly questions the work of several gifted feminist scholars. These scholars are respected members of activist-intellectual communities. Several are friends and mentors, and one was my doctoral advisor. Writing this piece means ruffling feathers and potentially creating conflict among those I like and respect. *Frankly*, I wonder, *is pornography important enough to risk this?*

The answer is yes. The reason to write about this topic is that pornography is at the nexus of pleasure, danger, freedom, and subjugation. The battle for gender justice is, of necessity, "a struggle also for freedom of expression, as a precursor to self-definition, visibility, and the other privileges that accompany social citizenship."¹ The arguments that pornography invokes matter a great deal in regard to liberty, justice, agency, self-definition, choice—and, thus they also matter for social citizenship. Pornography is a lightning rod for these issues, each of which is central to political theory, gender justice, and a free society. That is why pornography matters. And that is why I am writing about the collision of dogma and data in the current iteration of the sex wars. I anticipate the possibility of being misquoted in the service of dogma. I hope, though, that I will be quoted accurately in the spirit of open dialogue. And, with that said, I begin.

Anti-pornography feminists want to prevent harm to women. This is an important political objective. In pursuing this goal, anti-porn feminists turn to