

The Authority of Pornography

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The dichotomies structuring the pornography debates, typically divided into camps of pro and anti, allow little exploration of overlaps between positions and ambiguity within. Answers to addressing the existence of sexism in pornography for example, are commonly split in similar ways to the sexualization debates: either sexual protection – reduce or limit what is available – or sexual celebration – increase or open out what is available.¹ In this, an account of women’s sexual agency is reproduced as either unconstrained, thus equally available to all, or constrained and thus not really free: we are either empowered or victims.

Such divisions are implicated in the minimal empirical attention paid to women’s relationships to porn. This absence is notable given the breadth of theoretical work on women and porn,² much of which posits pornography as a useful vehicle for the expression of women’s sexual subjectivity – often to the detriment of addressing the ambiguity that one finds in women’s actual accounts, the ambivalence in their attitudes, and the multiplicity of their positions. Previous research on women’s relationships to pornography has consistently found that there is no universal ‘woman’s’ experience of pornography.³ This supports an intersectional approach that pays attention to how the lived experience of pornography is mediated through the context within which it is practiced; a context which is shaped by gender, as well as by age, sexuality, ethnicity, and class.

Despite this, empirical research has largely stalled at analyses focused on cause and effect, even with agreement across positions on pornography as to the problems in such an approach,⁴ with philosophical approaches mainly situated in the realm of text—of pornography as speech.⁵ This has meant that what could have provided an

¹ See Nicola Gavey, “Beyond ‘empowerment’? Sexuality in a sexist world,” *Sex Roles* 66, no. 11/12 (2012); also Fiona Vera-Gray, “Girlhood, agency, and embodied space for action,” in *Nordic Girlhoods: New Perspectives and Outlooks*, ed. Bodil Formark, Heta Mulari and Myry Voipio (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

² For examples see Jane Juffer, *At home with pornography: Women, sex, and everyday life* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1998); Clarissa Smith, *One for the girls!: the pleasures and practices of reading women’s porn* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007); Amalia Ziv, *Explicit Utopias: Rewriting the Sexual in Women’s Pornography* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 2015).

³ Karen Ciclitira, “Pornography, women and feminism: Between pleasure and politics,” *Sexualities* 7, no. 3 (2004); Charlene Y. Senn, “Women’s multiple perspectives and experiences with pornography,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1993); Z. Fareen Parvez, “The labor of pleasure: How perceptions of emotional labor impact women’s enjoyment of pornography,” *Gender & Society* 20, no. 5 (2006).

⁴ See the discussion by Lynne Segal, “Does pornography cause violence? The search for evidence,” in *Dirty looks: women, pornography, power*, ed. Pamela Church Gibson and Roma Gibson (London: British Film, 1993); and from an anti-pornography perspective, Karen Boyle, “The pornography debates: Beyond cause and effect,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 23, no. 2 (2000).

⁵ See for example Rae H. Langton. *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Jennifer M. Saul, “On treating

exploration beyond causal or legal analyses, has ultimately left the embodied ‘doing’ of pornography largely unexplored.⁶ In such an arena Robin Morgan’s famous injunction that, ‘[p]ornography is the theory, and rape the practice,’⁷ has been dismissed as an expression of a causal relationship – that pornography *causes* rape – a claim that is unable to capture the lived ambiguities of how agents act, and are acted on, in situation. If instead we take up the revision of Andrea Dworkin that, ‘[p]ornography is the theory, pornography is the practice,’⁸ we are invited to move away from ontology, towards an exploration of how pornography functions in relation to our understandings of sex and sexuality. Such a move is not the same as arguing for a supra-social account, denying the existence of the self outside of social construction. Nor is it claiming a direct causal line from theory into practice. Rather, it invites us to ask questions about how pornography operates as a *social practice*, organizing and authorizing our sexual practices and pleasures.

Drawing on empirical research with one hundred women on their relationships to and experiences of online mainstream pornography, this chapter reveals how their accounts demonstrate the authoritative position of pornography in relation to their experiences of sex and sexuality. It begins by giving a brief outline of the research methods and sample characteristics before entering the study’s findings, detailing women’s accounts of the function of porn in their lives in terms of pornography as expression, as exploration, and as expectation. It ends in considering the implications for moving the porn debates forward, suggesting that an understanding of pornography as social institution helps situate its practice and meaning for the individual within its social and structural functions.

Talking to women about porn

The accounts given here are drawn from a wider project on women’s experiences of mainstream online pornography. The project, Women on Porn,⁹ involved an online questionnaire together with in-depth telephone interviews with one hundred women.¹⁰ Participation was open to women over the age of 18 who were living in the United Kingdom at the time of the study. Questions were developed through building on the two largest previous studies of women’s relationships to pornography, and aimed to

things as people: Objectification, pornography, and the history of the vibrator,” *Hypatia* 21, no. 2 (2006); and Melinda Vadas, “The Manufacture for use of Pornography and Women’s Inequality,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005).

⁶ Jason Mason-Grant, *Pornography embodied: from speech to sexual practice* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

⁷ Robin Morgan, “Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape,” in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer (New York, NY: William Morrow and Co, 1980), 139.

⁸ Referenced by Catharine A. MacKinnon as personal communication. See Catharine A. MacKinnon, “From Practice to Theory, or What is a White Woman Anyway?,” *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 4, no. 1 (1991): 21.

⁹ For more information see the project website www.womenonporn.org [accessed: 8 October 2018].

¹⁰ The questionnaire was hosted on Survey Monkey between the 1st October 2016 and 31st of December 2016, and comprised of fifty questions ranging from first exposure to initial access, pornography refusal, and regular practice including most used search terms and sites.

cover the range of relationships to pornography.¹¹ Recruitment came from a variety of sources, and aimed to encourage participation from women without a clear position on pornography, as well as to increase participation from groups under-represented in pornography research.¹²

The questionnaire closed with a total of 1,684 respondents. Women completing the questionnaire were directed to a page where they could leave contact details if they wanted to talk more about their responses through an in-depth interview. Contact details were held separate to their questionnaire responses in order to maintain anonymity. In addition, interview information was available through the project website, and links to this were included in all blogs and advertisements for the project.

In total 229 requests for interview were received, resulting in 122 booked interviews, of which 100 took place. Interviews were held between March and July 2017 and were conducted over the phone or audio-only Skype, digitally recorded, and professionally transcribed.¹³ The decision not to conduct interviews face to face was initially a practical one, due to reasons of geography and number of participants, however on reflection this method proved immensely useful in enabling women to speak about difficult subjects including, for some, the types of pornography they used, histories of abuse, and experiences of masturbation and sex. Interviews averaged an hour, and participants were invited to share any thoughts following the interview via an anonymous online form. Eight interviewees shared follow up information. An interview schedule was developed to guide the semi-structured interviews. The schedule was centered around exploration of women's engagements with pornography, what Maria Garner has termed their 'pornography biographies.'¹⁴ Women were invited to talk through their experiences of pornography from the first time, through any experiences with partners, up to their relationship to it today.

Sample characteristics

Participants were asked to self-define their age, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and religious belief. These categories have been collapsed to allow for an analysis of

¹¹ See Ciclitira, "Pornography, women and feminism: Between pleasure and politics"; Senn, "Women's multiple perspectives and experiences with pornography".

¹² The survey link was sent out through social media networks. Several high profile feminists shared the link including Caitlin Moran and the Guilty Feminist Podcast. In addition, paid advertising was used to target minoritized ethnic women, with adverts appearing in the Voice, Gal-Dem, and the Eastern Eye, and a call for participation circulated among Black British studies academic networks. Blogs were also written for the Voice, the Women's Equality Party, Mumsnet, and Shh! Women's Erotic Boutique.

¹³ Participants were asked to choose a name for the research process and publication. Some used their real names as a way of challenging the silence around women speaking about pornography, others used pseudonyms. Some women were asked to choose pseudonyms, or different pseudonyms, in order to allow a unique name for each participant. Transcripts were thematically coded in NVIVO. For the data presented here, this coding began with the broad code of function. This code was used to look beyond the level of pornography's use for masturbation, aiming instead for a deeper understanding of the roles of pornography in women's sexual lives.

¹⁴ Maria Garner, *Conflicts, Contradictions and Commitments: Men Speak about the Sexualisation of Culture*, Doctoral Thesis, London Metropolitan University, 2016.

demographic spread and to help maintain participant anonymity. Almost half of all participants fell into the 25-34 age range (45%), with the other half divided between 35-44 (24%), 18-24 (16%), 45-54 (12%) and 55 and over (3%). Just over three quarters (77%) of participants identified as being from a White ethnic background, with 15 percent from a Black ethnic group, five percent with dual heritage (Black-White, Asian-White, or Arab-White), and just three percent identifying themselves as having an Asian ethnicity.

A wide range of sexualities was given by participants. In particular women identifying as bisexual in the sample is significantly larger than would be expected in the general population.¹⁵ Broadly sexuality was grouped into five categories: asexual (2%); bisexual (35%); heterosexual (46%); lesbian (7%); and other (10%). The ‘other’ category included where participants said they were unsure or questioning, or gave answers such as sexual or fluid. Half of participants identified as middle class (50%) and over a quarter identified as working class (28%). The remainder were lower middle class (11%), upper middle class (5%), and unsure (4%). In addition, the vast majority of participants were either atheist (59%) or agnostic (13%), with the remaining quarter of participants identifying across a range of religious belief systems including as Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jewish, Muslim, Pagan, and Sikh.

As attributing all of a participant’s demographics to their quotes here could make them identifiable – particularly given the uniqueness of some religious and class identifiers – only information regarding participants’ age, ethnicity, and sexuality is used.

The functions of pornography

Building on the broad agreement across varying positions on pornography about the problems with attempting to establish causality between pornography consumption and sexual action,¹⁶ meta-analyses on the evidence on pornography and young people have adopted a slightly different approach: that of sexual scripts.¹⁷ Sexual scripts refer to what we understand sex to be, across five connected areas: (1) what is considered sex, (2) who sex is for, (3) what events/acts should or should not happen in sex, (4) how people should respond to these events/acts, and (5) the consequences of the sex

¹⁵ In 2016, when this study took place, census estimates for women bisexuals sat at under 1% of the population, compared to over one third of the research participants.

¹⁶ See for example Boyle, “The pornography debates: Beyond cause and effect”; Segal, “Does pornography cause violence? The search for evidence.”

¹⁷ Scott R. Braithwaite, Gwen Coulson, Krista Keddington and Frank D. Fincham, “The influence of pornography on sexual scripts and hooking up among emerging adults in college,” *Archives of sexual behavior* 44, no. 1 (2015); Niki Fritz and Bryant Paul, “From orgasms to spanking: A content analysis of the agentic and objectifying sexual scripts in feminist, for women, and mainstream pornography,” *Sex Roles* 77, no. 9/10 (2017); Chyng Sun, Ana J. Bridges, Jennifer A. Johnson and Matthew B. Ezzell, “Pornography and the male sexual script: An analysis of consumption and sexual relations,” *Archives of sexual behavior* 45, no. 4 (2016); Yanyan Zhou and Bryant Paul, “Lotus blossom or dragon lady: A content analysis of ‘Asian women’ online pornography,” *Sexuality & Culture* 20, no. 4 (2016).

events/acts.¹⁸ Scripts can differ across individuals as they are influenced by a range of sources – some of which are shared (such as religion), and some of which are not (such as family). They can also change across our life course through interaction with different sexual partners or through different sexual experiences, as well as being influenced by popular culture – such as the meanings and practices of sex we see represented in mainstream movies or novels. Applied to the study of pornography, sexual script theory suggests that through porn users can *acquire* understandings about sexual practices and desires, *activate* existing understandings of sexual practices and desires, and *apply* understandings of sexual practices and desires.¹⁹

In this way, unlike causal theories, exploring pornography through the lens of sexual scripts allows space for the role of agency in how the lessons of pornography are taken up by the individual, at the same time recognizing how pornography forms part of the landscape through which individual expressions of agency are realized.²⁰ Importantly sexual script theory operates mostly at the level of the individual; that is the focus is on the individual in terms of what is acquired, activated, and applied. Yet women’s descriptions of the functions of pornography suggest the need for conceptual tools that can account for something a little different than this.

What their accounts reveal is how, in addition to operating on an individual level, pornography has both a social and structural function. Though their experience of porn differed it was understood in a similar way, namely: as a form of expression or conversation about sex and desire; as a way to explore or validate sex and desire; and as a means to judge expectations and gain instruction on sex and desire. Taken together, such similarities demonstrate a shared understanding of pornography as a *social institution*;²¹ one that acts to authorize sexual practice and pleasure.

Pornography as expression and conversation

As Ashley explains, the use of pornography as a tool for expressing sex and sexuality was understood for many participants as indelibly connected to a wider cultural silence around sex.

I think the best thing about having pornography in society is that it will hopefully open up a wider dialogue, no pun intended, hopefully it’ll open up a wider dialogue about sex and respect as well as consent and all the kinds of politics that surround it because sex education at school was appalling so it’s no wonder why a lot of guys and a lot girls turn to porn. (Ashley, 25-34, Black African, Bisexual)

¹⁸ Zhou and Paul, “Lotus blossom or dragon lady.”

¹⁹ Paul J. Wright, “Pornography and the sexual socialization of children: Current knowledge and a theoretical future,” *Journal of Children and Media* 8, no. 3 (2014).

²⁰ Fiona Vera-Gray and Clare McGlynn, “Regulating Pornography: Developments in evidence, theory and law,” forthcoming.

²¹ The defining features of a social institution as drawn on here are outlined by Patricia Yancey Martin, “Gender as Social Institution,” *Social Forces* 82, no. 4 (Jun., 2004).

This silence extended to include the body, in particular women's bodies as sexually desiring not only sexually desirable. In the absence of social dialogue about the female sexual body—distinct from the female sexualized body²²—women like Sorrel talked about pornography as an expression of what the body looks like as well as what it does.

It's weird to think of it now but you have this thing that was part of your body, which is your vagina, but you never looked at it, especially being Caribbean, all you were told is that you have to wash it and you have to wash it three times a day, and it has to be exceptionally clean but you weren't really allowed to look at it or do anything, it was supposed to be covered and you have to keep your legs crossed. I remember with my brother's porn magazines, even though those images were white women, I was looking at it and thinking, 'Oh, does it have that, does it have lips?' Then I would think, I wondered if mine was like that because I'm a little black girl and these are white women. It was always about gaining information from outside, even though it wasn't really even me but it was me. (Sorrel, 45-54, *African Caribbean British, Sexual*)

For Alig this expressive role was not only about individuals; pornography can also work to express desired and desirable sexual acts to a sexual partner. Combined with the descriptions of Ashley and Sorrel, we start to see one of the social functions of pornography: in the absence of broader conversations porn becomes a way of communicating sex and sexual pleasure to ourselves and to others.

Well, if you're going to watch porn together then it has to be something that you're both comfortable with. So you need to, in some ways, talk about what you like to watch, and then find something that you both like. But it's kind of hot. I mean, I guess with that partner I was comfortable to say what I liked and what I didn't. But sometimes you watch some things and it can be, 'Oh actually, I'd like to try that.' Or, 'Oh, I really don't like that.' Or, 'Oh, I like that, I forgot to say.' Whatever, you know, like, sometimes things come up and you're like, 'Yeah actually, I like that.' (Alig, 25-34, *White Other, Unsure*)

Some women spoke of a conflict in how handing over such a function to pornography can in fact limit what is and can be articulated as sex. Their concern lies in how, by functioning to enable sexual expression, the sexual pleasures and practices most commonly represented in pornography become the 'dominant narrative'²³ on sex; in effect establishing a hegemonic sexual script against which others are measured.

I mean, for me personally, I think it's a good thing. I think it can help the conversation about sex being a lot more open. Because porn is so readily

²² Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, "Embodying orgasm: Gendered power relations and sexual pleasure," *Women & Therapy* 24, no. 1-2 (2002).

²³ Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle N. LaFrance, "Telling stories without the words: 'Tightrope talk' in women's accounts of coming to live well after rape or depression," *Feminism & Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2011).

available and it's everywhere, and it's easier to talk about sex, I think. But then, I'm not sure the conversations that it leads to are necessarily good ones. Just because you're talking about porn it doesn't mean you're having a good conversation. So in terms of the expectations it creates, people might see things in porn and it might lead to amounts of conversation amongst friends about whatever they've seen. But the conversation might be, 'I want to do that.' And it may be that whatever you've seen may be something particularly extreme that you may not, or shouldn't, be practicing, you know, if you're not an experienced person trying these things. I worry about the kinds of conversations it might lead to in that respect, but also it can lead to good conversations, just about sex generally, about what people like, which is a good thing. (Angelica, 25-34, Black British, Heterosexual)

The best thing was that it semi-normalized sex, because you know in a society where we don't talk about it and you never mention it and everyone's doing it but no one can say that they're doing it, it was, you know, there's lots of proof that people are having sex. The flip side of that is they're not, are they? It's a performance and a director requested a particular thing, even down to a camera angle, they're after a male viewpoint, aren't they? So, in hindsight that's not at all what's happening, but a few years ago that is how I saw it. That it was a way to normalize sex and to learn a bit more about different experiences that I might want to have. (Nat, 18-24, White, Heterosexual)

As Nat's account shows, some participants connected the use of pornography as a vehicle to communicate about sex and sexuality to its use as a tool for sexual exploration. Such a connection speaks to another social function of pornography; this time as a practice that legitimates sexual scripts.

Pornography as exploration and validation

Both Alex and Abigail spoke positively about the validating function of pornography. For them, this function again sits firmly within a social context that allows little space for women to explore or endorse their sexual desires in relation to those of other women.

It's very affirming to find porn with the sex that I like, that is really varied and multifaceted and really interesting for me, for all sorts of reasons, personally. My identity as a very sexual being has been affirmed by it, I guess. Because I have been at school or in particular social groups that are more judging of sexuality, or just more uncomfortable with open conversations about it. Being able to have my own outlet, that isn't related to anyone else and doesn't depend on anyone else. I can tell everyone else to bugger off and I'd still have it, at the end of the day, and I'd be fine. (Alex, 25-34, White British, Bisexual)

I think personally it's been the source of my sex ed, my sexual aspiration, I feel like it filled a void where my school did not teach me about anything. And obviously I have a job now with regards to it which is helpful but more personally than that, it made me feel valued and valid and it made me realize

my desires and it made me comfortable in a way that I was able to go out and pursue those that was safe, in a way that was informed and in a way that helped me be empowered, that helped me to know what I want and to be able to explore myself sexually as well. (Abigail, 18-24, White British, Sexual)

Alongside descriptions of how pornography worked to affirm sexual pleasures, women also spoke about using pornography as a means to safely explore sexual practices without the commitment of doing this with another person. This is not only about pornography authorizing existing desires, but also being used as an authoritative source of inspiration and experimentation, as Ella and Trish describe.

It's enjoyable and it can be eye opening as well, it's a way for you to explore the things that are possible, things that you might potentially enjoy that you wouldn't necessarily come across otherwise until you found like a partner who would suggest it or like through their own experimentation. I think that's valuable and I think it's just an enjoyable tool that people can use for their own pleasure. (Ella, 18-24, White European, Heterosexual)

I think watching porn definitely made me go 'Oh, I like the look of what's happening in that video, I want to try that out' so I guess that helped with some things, you know, with being confident in what I want or what I definitely don't want on the other flip side. (Trish, 25-34, White Irish, Heterosexual)

Here pornography functions to open out what is possible as 'sex', with this broader understanding for some translating into sexual practice. This movement shows the ways in which the functions of pornography aren't wholly separate and exclusive. The exploratory function can become more instructive, as Sadie explains.

It's also opened my eyes to different kinds of sex and sexual practices, because often we're made to feel that only straight 'vanilla sex' exists and I think that has allowed me to be a bit more creative when I'm having sex. I learned to give oral sex to men, for example, through a combination of porn and tutoring from a partner. If I was ever faced with the prospect of giving oral sex to a woman, I think I'd look to porn for tips. (Sadie, 25-34, Black Caribbean, Heterosexual)

Though for some exploration and instruction were connected, more often the exploratory function of pornography was described as a means in itself. This exploration was linked to fantasy, a way of exploring the possibilities of sexual practice and desire without any commitment or intention to bring this into one's own sexual life.

I guess it's given me quite a lot of sexual pleasure, I suppose. It's a place to put those darker fantasies that you don't necessarily ever want to do in real life. I'm not particularly guilty person but it's not something that you'd have a place to explore otherwise and I guess occasionally there's stuff that I wouldn't perhaps even want to share with a partner, although that feels maybe ambivalent. (Leonora, 35-44, White British, Lesbian)

I think being able to fantasize and being able to vicariously have sex that I would never feel safe having, or don't even want to have. So, I think I've learnt through experience that things that I fantasize about aren't necessarily the kind of sex that I want to have. So I really love not hardcore BDSM, but I want to watch and fantasize about really hardcore BDSM. So being able to see other people do that sort of stuff and fantasize about it gives me that. I can have those experiences a little bit but not actually have to have them, which is good. (Harper, 25-34, White British, Bisexual)

Like Harper, Stine directly links this function of fantasy to notions of safety, in particular for Stine this is safety from sexual violence. This connection reveals the importance of understanding women's accounts of their pornography use as stemming from a particular context where expressions of women's sexuality are not only discouraged, they are routinely positioned in terms of danger.

I would probably say it provides a space to explore certain things that you might be interested in without having to put your own body in that situation. So when I was exploring the idea that anal might be something I was interested in, it allowed me to look and see do I get turned on by watching these images? Do I get turned on by the idea of it, before I've already committed myself to a situation where I've said to a guy, 'Yes cool, go on then,' and something like that because again, I do feel, and it's wrong and I know it's wrong, but when you enter into a sexual situation, if you've consented to do one thing and you change your mind, it's almost like it's too late and that's wrong because it's never too late. I can tell you to get the fuck off me but it's almost easier to just go along with it than voice your lack of concern and have it ignored, which is a pretty sorry state of affairs, isn't it? (Stine, 25-34, White, Heterosexual)

The importance of situating women's experiences of pornography within a social order that limits women's sexuality at the same time as requiring it is thus brought forward. It is not enough to highlight the role of porn as a vehicle for women to explore sexual fantasies they may feel unsafe to practice. Discussions of pornography must be situated: accounting for and addressing the broader social context where for many women, sex is a site of unsafety.

Pornography as expectation and instruction

Overwhelmingly, the most common function of pornography for most participants was as a form of instruction. As shown in the discussion of pornography as expression, this use of porn must be understood as arising out of a context where sexual pleasure and practice, particularly for women, remains stigmatized and unspoken. This led to many women speaking about seeking out pornography in their childhood and adolescence to gain information on what sex looks like and how to do it.

I got a little bit obsessed with it when I was that age, you know, and I think it was like this thirst for knowledge because nudity, we don't walk around naked

as perhaps nature intended, anymore and adults really don't want to talk to us about sex and things like that, so I was kind of like 'Oh, maybe I could learn something.' (Amelia, 25-34, White Irish, Bisexual)

I think if I just wanted to learn certain things, I would just go on and just be like, 'Ooh what's that about?' Because even like within the [Black British] community, a lot of the time when people speak about things, you still don't know. Like for example, you'll hear men talking about if a woman knows how to be on top, she needs to know how to ride. So, when I would see things like that in music and stuff, I'd be like okay, I need to know how to do this because it's the expectation of me that I should know how to ride and be on top. So, I would go and look that up and be like okay, I need to learn how to do that. (Bonita, 25-34, Black British, Heterosexual)

While for some women pornography functioned as a useful way to learn what was expected of them sexually, for others such expectation was experienced as alienating them from developing their own expectations of sex, as Makeda describes.

Well I think that particularly if I consider how young children are, I was 12 when I first saw porn and I know that I'm certainly willing to bet my right hand that my cousins, my mum's cousin's children whose house I watched it at, they will have seen it much earlier than that. So those are our first expressions of human sexuality that we're exposed to and we grow up thinking that that's what it is and that's what we think is normal and that we then try to reproduce in our own sexual lives. That's some fucked up shit, excuse my French, because it completely limits our possibilities to truly know ourselves and to really open up to another person and then let another person get to know us, sexually and in other ways because I think sex is linked to many other parts of our relationship, be those relationships intimate or not. (Makeda, 45-54, Black African, Heterosexual)

However pornography's instructive role wasn't limited to women's early experiences. Some participants spoke about returning to porn during their sexual lives in order to learn new skills or refresh how to *do* sex and pleasure. This suggests that the 'acquiring' nature of sexual scripts should be understood as an iterative process in relation to pornography, a process that can extend across one's sexual life.

I think there was a point in my life where I'd never given a blow job. And I guess that at one point it was kind of like I was watching porn to see how other women do it, to get, like, almost like a little tutorial. I think that's the only time I've probably watched it for a particular purpose though, other than just to get off. (Kush D., 35-44, African, Straight)

Sometimes I'll watch something and be like 'That looks really hot, I want to try that' like if someone's kind of fucking you from behind and then they might like pull you up so that they're kind of like holding you and then you're a bit more upright, like I remember thinking, 'Oh I really want someone to do that to me' and then I got someone to do that to me and it was fun, so like definitely [learning] positions and stuff. (Zoe, 25-34, White Jewish,

Fluid/Bisexual)

Pornography's instructive role was experienced not only by women directly – learning what to do themselves – but also for many women through their sexual experiences with men. Kirsten discusses this in relation to the sexual practices of an ex-boyfriend who used pornography, and how she experienced his behaviour as instructed through porn.

There were a couple of times in sex where he did something and I didn't understand what he was doing. He held me on the bed, he held my neck. He wasn't strangling me, he wasn't that extreme. It was just—oh no it wasn't my neck it was my hair. He pulled my hair back and I didn't understand what he was doing. I never said that I liked that. To me it just seemed weird. And I just immediately, my immediate instinct of response in my head was I'm sure he's seen this in porn. Like, I don't know why he thinks that I like this when I really don't. Get your hand out of my hair. (Kirsten, 25-34, White British, Heterosexual)

Lubna's abusive ex-husband also understood the instructive role of pornography, but drew on it more explicitly. She describes how he used it as a tool both to teach her what was expected of her sexually and to justify his own violence.

He became quite violent. I connect those two things together. I'm absolutely sure that what he was seeing was what he was acting out on me. Within a couple of days [of marriage], he'd forced me to perform oral sex on him and I had no idea. I can't even begin to tell you how naïve about sex I was. He actually said to me, 'This is what people do. Do you want to watch one of these films and I'll show you what women who know what to do, do for their men?' ... he would refer back to these videos. 'I'll show you. You watch them with me. You will see what these women do to make their men happy.' (Lubna, 45-54, British Asian, Heterosexual)

These two routes for pornography to act as instruction—through one's own access and through the access of those with whom one has a sexual relationship—do not exist in silos. Instead they can act to reinforce each other, with the authority of pornography constituted and reconstituted through such recurrence. The process needed for porn to operate in this way, as with expression and exploration, is necessarily a social one: this individual function needs to be recognized and enacted by others in order for it to work for oneself. This demonstrates how the lived experience of pornography is both as an individual and social practice. It is this understanding that provides the basis for situating pornography as a social institution.

Pornography as a social institution

The differences seen across the ways that women experience the function of pornography in their lives—from Alex's positive experience of her personal use as a form of affirmation, to Makeda's belief porn has limited her ability to express herself sexually—reveal the need for a conceptual approach that can acknowledge the weight

of dominant narratives on the sexual scripts of individual actors, without universalizing experience or discounting the individual's ability to resist and remake meaning. This need must be balanced with the ways in which the shared functions of pornography across women's accounts demonstrates that it is not enough to theorize porn only in terms of its being an individual practice with individual meanings. What is clear is that there is something more structural going on here in terms of pornography being understood as the authoritative voice on how to speak sex, do sex, and be sexual. Such a role is made explicit in the accounts of Eleanor and Maddie.

I think there's probably a lot of subtle ways in which me and all of my partners have been influenced by the kind of pornography that we've watched. And that definitely plays a role in kind of what I expect in sex and probably what they expect too. So, for example – this is something that I've made an effort to fight against since identifying its role in my life and behavior and expectations in the bedroom – but actually I'm not expecting the same amount of kind of like oral sex from my partner as I would be happy to give them. I think especially when I was younger as well, feeling like I should make really sort of loud melodramatic noises when I come, that sort of thing. (Eleanor, 25-34, White British, Bisexual)

I think a lot of pornography is used to shape sex. I think they're similar in some ways and different in other ways. I'm a lesbian and I feel like my experience of sex is very different from that depicted in pornography, they're just parallel worlds basically, whereas I think that pornography is often used as sort of an educational tool for men and women I think, to depict how this is what sex is like, if you're not doing it this way then you're doing it wrong. (Maddie, 18-24, White British, Lesbian)

To help make sense of this structural function without undermining individual action, Sally Haslanger's work on social practices and Patricia Yancey Martin's on social institutions are both particularly useful.

For Haslanger, understanding social practices begins with an understanding of what she terms 'cultural schemas.' These are clusters 'of culturally shared mental states and processes, including concepts, attitudes, dispositions, and such, that enable us to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought, and affect.'²⁴ Cultural schemas are thus the public meanings that enable us to interpret each other and coordinate together. They help us to interpret unknown situations, providing a map of the familiar to guide us and our actions. Similar to Bourdieu's work on social fields and habitus cultural schemas possess epistemological virtues, providing ways of knowing the world and instructions on how to act within it.²⁵ However Haslanger's concept is not as deterministic as Bourdieu's. In order for cultural schemas to function, they must be recognized, but they need not be endorsed. We can act

²⁴ Sally Haslanger, "Critical Theory and Practice: Ideology and Materiality," keynote presentation at the *Australasian Association of Philosophy*, Melbourne, July 2016, 9.

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

differently to what they suggest but we still know what these ways are (and as such know we are acting outside of proscribed norms).

Social practices consist of interdependent schemas and resources ‘when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time.’²⁶ This moves us away from theorizing the meanings of pornography as though these can be understood outside of the situation within which and through which pornography is experienced. Instead it suggests that pornography must be understood as both situated and situating, an iterative approach that looks not only at pornography’s role in endorsing particular sexual scripts, but also at the role of particular sexual scripts in endorsing pornography.

Though detail on the key features of a social institution are contested, the importance of distinct social practices in constituting them is shared. There is an acknowledgement across approaches of institutions as patterns of social practices that recur over time and geography through the actions of embodied agents.²⁷ As seen across the accounts given in this chapter, pornography fulfills this condition of a pattern of social practices made and remade through individual actions. For pornography to function on an individual level as a form of sexual expression, it has to be understood as being a social practice that *articulates* sex. For pornography to function on an individual level as a tool for sexual exploration, it must also be experienced as a social practice that *legitimizes* sex. For pornography to function on an individual level to set and establish sexual expectations, it must also be lived as a social practice that *demonstrates* sex.

These shared individual functions of pornography are dependent on pornography operating as a social institution, one that authorizes (or not) our sexual practices and pleasures. As claimed by Yancey Martin, institutions are not only “organized in accord with and permeated by power”²⁸, they “have a legitimating ideology that proclaims the rightness and necessity of their arrangements, practices, and social relations.”²⁹ This is part of the reason why alternative forms of sexually explicit media such as those focused on women’s pleasure or relationality, do not have the same explanatory force as porn in its institutional sense (eg. heteronormative, penetrative, male-centered). Such styles sit outside an understanding of pornography as institution as they do not recur in and reflect the schemas or resources that surround us, most of which imply and sustain practices of inequality and sovereignty.

Conclusion

For the women in this study porn functioned in three main connected ways, some of which conflict with others. For some pornography functioned as expression or conversation, a way of communicating sex and sexuality (to oneself and to partners), particularly needed given the ways in which silence situates women’s experiences of sexual pleasure and practice. Connected to this it was also experienced as a source of exploration and validation, a way to experience sexual pleasures and practices that may not be something one wants to explore in their own lives, as well as a way to

²⁶ Haslanger, “Critical Theory,” 8.

²⁷ Yancey Martin, “Gender as Social Institution.”

²⁸ Yancey Martin, “Gender as Social Institution,” 1258

²⁹ Yancey Martin, “Gender as Social Institution,” 1257

validate or affirm existing sexual pleasures and practices. The most common function however, one that works alongside the others, is pornography as expectation and instruction; authorizing what counts as sex.

The relationships between these are not straightforward, some are inseparable and intertwined. Others are contradictory or raise further questions, such as the relationship between validation and instruction (is pornography both affirming and generating what is understood as sexual pleasure?). All of these exist in situation, identified by participants as one lacking other spaces where sexual practices and pleasures are articulated, legitimated, and demonstrated. At the same time in the absence of other outlets, pornography is functioning to shape the situation itself; a situation where porn is positioned as the authoritative source on what sex is and could be.

Developing an understanding of pornography as social institution helps us to theorize this. It illuminates the ways in which pornography guides us to understand the world in particular shared ways that shape the environment and ourselves so that we are prompted towards particular patterns of action, without thereby precluding our ability to act otherwise. It enables an understanding of how the individual and social practices of pornography may contradict each other; one a route for liberation, the other a source of constraint. A relationship between the individual and the structural is established without positing our action as prescribed by these structures, nor as free from their influence. Instead they are seen as entangled, with what Lois McNay terms ‘the incorporation of the social into the corporeal,’³⁰ helping to open new paths for examining what we do with porn and what it does with us.

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³⁰ Lois McNay, “Gender, Habitus and the Field Pierre Bourdieu and the Limits of Reflexivity,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 16, no. 1 (1999): 99.

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