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## **Doing the naughty or having it done to you? Agent roles in erotic writing**

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## **Doing the naughty or having it done to you? Agent roles in erotic writing**

Frequent criticisms of pornography have argued that it reproduces hegemonic misogyny by emphasising representations of females as passive, powerless and submissive. Nevertheless, attempts to substantiate such claims have been scarce. This paper seeks to provide empirical evidence on this question through an analysis of the representation of sexual activity in a large corpus of online pornographic stories. I employ corpus linguistic methods to examine the grammatical patterns used to attribute agency to male and female participants in sexual acts. The analysis shows these narratives tend to represent sexual intercourse as an asymmetric engagement between an agent and a patient, rather than as a joint collaborative activity. Although representations emphasising female agency are not rare, they are significantly less common than those assigning males the agent role, thus reinforcing rather than challenging dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. Linguistic methods such as these have the potential for a more nuanced and finer-grained description than is often possible for visual materials, and can profitably add to our understanding of gender and genre differences in pornography.

Keywords: written pornography; online pornography; corpus linguistics; corpus-aided discourse studies; corpus stylistics; transitivity; gender

### **Introduction**

Once hidden in secret museums open only to ‘people of mature age and respected morals’, pornography is an increasingly salient part of contemporary cultural life (Attwood 2011; Nikunen et al. 2007). As obscenity laws restricting their public dissemination were progressively lifted over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, explicit representations of sexual activity have become staples of a range of media forms, from print to photography, film and animation (Paasonen 2007, 44). Not only is pornographic production itself a multi-million dollar industry (Voss 2015), but the influence of its aesthetics and conventions is increasingly apparent in everyday life, from the self-

representations of dating site users to the content of magazine advice columns and online forums (Nikunen et al. 2007).

This growing 'pornification of society', however, is not without opposition. Critics have argued that the normalisation of explicit sexual representations causes a range of social and psychological damages, from inspiring perverse desires in audiences whose 'normal' appetites have been deadened by overexposure (Jensen 2007, 121) to generating dissatisfaction with real bodies that do not meet the glamorous standards of print and film (Shaw 1999, 206). One particularly important strand of anti-pornography criticism has been driven by feminist concerns about the patriarchal underpinnings of porn, regarded as a vehicle for misogynistic views of women who are objectified, degraded and portrayed as submissive (Jensen 2007, 48). But although these views have been extraordinarily influential in shaping public debates about pornography, their empirical basis has been called into question. More than 25 years after Williams' (1989: 29) complaint that 'so much has been written about the issue of pornography and so little about its actual texts', there is still considerable uncertainty about the actual degree of objectification, degradation and submissiveness in the way porn portrays women (Bridges et al. 2010; Gorman et al. 2010; McKee 2005).

In this paper, I seek to extend this tradition of research through a systematic evaluation of gendered patterns of agency in amateur pornographic narratives. Using a corpus of stories drawn from an online archive of porn stories, I explore the way sexual agency is construed by focusing on the linguistic patterning of verbs representing sexual activity. In the following section, I review some of the key arguments about the potentially harmful nature of porn, before summarising prior attempts to ground these arguments on the empirical examination of porn content.

## **Porn and its discontents**

Few cultural practices have attracted the degree of public and political attention that has been lavished on porn. Driven by the perception of an ‘unstoppable flood of pornographic materials into all cultural interstices’ (Wicke 1991, 68), policy-makers, legal experts and media commentators have deplored the pornification of culture and advocated vehemently for regulatory measures to stem this tide. But while the earliest critical voices objected to porn on the basis of a ‘Western religious, Victorian, and [...] puritanical heritage’ (Meyer 1993, 1152) that assumed sexually-explicit materials to be corrupt and corrupting, much of the debate since the 1970s has been driven by feminist concerns about the role of pornography in fostering both actual and symbolic violence against women.

One object of critique has been the presence of physical and verbal abuse in porn, under the assumption that such representations provide audience members with socio-cognitive scripts that normalise aggressive sexual behaviour and undermine taboos against violence (Bauserman 1996, 406). Critics have focused on pornography featuring rape and sadism —especially when these are presented as provoking sexual enjoyment in their victims (MacKinnon 1989, 91)— as well as on behaviours that, while not physically violent, can nevertheless harm the dignity and self-worth of the recipient: verbal insults or moral humiliation, seen as ‘part of a system of violence, if not violence itself’ (McKee 2005, 278).

A more fundamental criticism focuses on the denial of female agency in pornographic representations. From this point of view, porn plays a critical role in the systematic oppression of women not simply through legitimising misogynistic violence, but through the formulaic reproduction of scenarios performed in accordance to traditional gender roles (Crawford & Popp 2003). By assigning sexual initiative and

control to male characters, porn would reproduce and disseminate ideals of gendered inequality. In the best case, women are placed in sexually submissive roles that tie in with conventional ideologies, and reinforce their subordinate status by defining their worth in terms of their attractiveness to men (Gill 2003); in the worst, they are denied their humanity and regarded as ‘anonymous, panting playthings, adult toys, dehumanized objects to be used, abused, broken and discarded’ (Brownmiller 1975, 394; see also Bauserman 1996; Jeffries 2007, 1).

Such critiques often assume implicitly that mainstream pornographic representations do, in fact, display this objectifying<sup>1</sup> character. But the automatic identification of ‘public displays of sex [with] public displays of sexism’ (Meyer 1993, 1119) has been called into question by more than two decades of critical research. The ‘unhelpful view of pornography as a monolithic entity’ (Attwood 2010, 4; cf. Maingueneau 2007, 81; Paasonen 2007, 48; Wicke 1991, 76) has begun to give way to empirical explorations of the specific formal and content patterns of the various genres of representation of explicit sexual activity (Smith 2010, 107).

### **Porn and its contents**

Such examinations, nevertheless, remain relatively rare. Over the course of almost four decades, few attempts have been made to systematically describe the degree of objectification depicted in sexually-explicit materials (Bridges *et al.* 2010, 1066, Klaasen & Peter 2015, 721). One difficult task facing such analyses is establishing a useful operationalisation: objectification cannot be observed directly on a text's surface (Meyer 1993, 1117). Content-analytic work has often struggled to provide clear definitions of this concept (Smith 2009, 25), let alone comprehensive guidelines for correlating it with explicit semiotic features.

McKee (2005: 278) distinguishes two main conceptualisations of objectification. The first of these associates objectification with the performance of non-normative behaviours outside the ‘charmed circle’ of sexual practice (Rubin 1984, 280); however, there is little consensus about which specific behaviours should be considered objectifying. Authors have debated whether ejaculating on a partner, sexual promiscuity or pubic shaving fall under this concept (e.g., Cowan & Campbell 1994), but the labile nature of the boundary between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ sexual behaviours makes the fruitfulness of such debates questionable. More radically, approaches such as these are intrinsically incompatible with a “pluralistic sexual ethics [based on the] concept of benign sexual variation”, in which sexual acts are judged by “the way partners treat one another, the level of mutual consideration, [and] the presence or absence of coercion” (Rubin 1984, 281).

This pluralistic view is better captured by focusing on the degree of agency accorded to the represented characters, rather than the specific behaviours they engage in. McKee (2005: 279) points out that the defining characteristic of objectification is ‘ignoring the wishes of one sexual partner and treating him or her as an object’; from this point of view, the direct expression of such wishes, the initiation of sexual activity, and the control of its pace and form can be seen as features of non-objectifying representations. This has been the approach taken by a majority of content-analytic work (Brosius *et al.* 1993; Cowan *et al.* 1988; Gorman *et al.* 2010; Klaasen & Peter 2015; McKee 2005; Prince 1987; Salmon & Diamond 2012; Vannier *et al.* 2014)., which has largely found no significant differences between the degree of agency accorded to female and male characters.

Such a definition, however, is not without its drawbacks. Features such as sexual initiative are sometimes impossible to determine in a precise fashion, since porn texts

may begin *in medias res* with no clear depiction of initiation (Brosius *et al.* 1993, 166; McKee 2005, 284). In a similar manner, the control of sexual activities can be represented by a number of distinct features —from explicit verbal directions to physical prompts— and can change repeatedly even within a single encounter. As such, it is poorly captured by a dichotomous variable such as used in most coding schemes<sup>ii</sup>; this crude contrast may obscure important gradations across texts. The imprecision thus introduced is compounded by the frequent practice of coding the ‘theme’ of a text or passage as a whole (e.g., Cowan *et al.* 1998; Gorman *et al.* 2010), as lack of granularity makes it more likely that coders' judgements will be affected by their implicit evaluative biases (McKee 2005, 285)<sup>iii</sup>. The comparability and validity of measures of sexual agency still raises important concerns, and these become all the more clear when modalities other than the visual are considered.

### **Written pornography**

In line with a general tendency “to understand porn in terms of the visual” (Paasonen 2010, 139), content-analytic research on agency and objectification in porn has devoted a disproportionate amount of attention to cinematic forms. This emphasis can be understood as an answer to technological booms (home video in the 1970s, online video sites in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century; cf. Brown & Bryant 1989, 14; van Doorn 2010; Voss 2015, 27); however, it also reflects the social concerns and the epistemological assumptions driving much critical research on pornography (Prince 1987, 30). The conception of porn as a dangerous stimulus automatically provoking harmful physical, behavioural and attitudinal effects is better reflected in ‘the arresting of the visual [...] where pornographic images seem to fuse themselves directly to the eye, rather than taking the more circuitous route of the mediation of print’ (Wicke 1991, 75). Perhaps because of this, detailed analyses of objectification in written pornography have been



relatively scarce;<sup>iv</sup> more generally, porn scholarship has displayed “a conspicuous blind spot when it comes to the written word” (Hester 2014, 10; cf. also Morrish & Sauntson 2007, 116; Paasonen 2010, 139).

This is especially surprising given the prominence of written narrative in modern pornography. Cocks (2016) discusses how stories involving a range of erotic content, from simply suggestive storylines to explicit discussions of flagellation and bondage, could already be found in pre-WW2 pulp magazines, although our records of their contents and distribution are too fragmentary to assess the prevalence of specific themes. The mainstreaming of publications such as *Penthouse* or *Hustler* greatly increased the availability of such stories, and book-length pornographic fiction also became commonly available by the 1960s; while some publishers focused on ‘literary’ works, others provided the mass market with ‘trashy airport novels’ made interesting only by their explicit sexual content (Kammeyer 2008, 80).

In one of the earliest empirical works on porn, Smith (1976: 22) examined the characters, plots and themes of a sample of adults-only paperbacks, claiming that ‘the male dominates the sex behavior in these paperbacks regardless of the kind of sex, the setting, the people, or the numbers involved’. The criteria employed to arrive at this assessment, however, are hardly explained; there is no principled description of how ‘themes’ are defined, let alone a codebook relating it to specific plot elements or events. Subsequent work by Jensen (1993), who analysed a similar sample of later novels, is even more limited in its methodological description. Jensen's (1993: 98) claim that in these books ‘women are routinely presented as objects [and] embrace their own objectification’ is supported only by a few anecdotal exemplars. These works are characteristic in making sweeping statements about the representation of woman without providing evidence at a scale that would justify generalisation.

Though audience-generated content has been significant from early on (with much of the narrative content in top-shelf magazines coming from readers' letters; Smith 2007, 55), only with the development of online platforms curating such content did it begin to receive scholarly attention (Juffer 1998, 102; Klaassen & Peter 2015; Paasonen 2010). Barron & Kimmel (2000: 164) analysed whether participants were presented in a “dominant, submissive, or ambiguous power position” in 50 stories posted to the Usenet group alt.sex.stories, arguing that such stories display the gendered patterns of dominance and submission criticised by anti-pornography feminists. The authors attribute the predominance of non-egalitarian relations and large numbers of submissive female characters to the homosocial nature of online environments. However, the lack of clear operational criteria for measuring power raises again many of the concerns about reliability discussed in the previous section.

### **Agency and the linguistics of sex**

Though a growing body of work on porn (e.g., Baker 2005; Koller 2015; Morrish & Sauntson 2007) has adopted an empirical stylistic approach in which a close examination of the language of a corpus of texts is used to ‘back up intuitions about [their] meaning’ (Mills 1995, 5), few studies have taken advantage of the analytic purchase that these methods can offer to study gendered patterns of agency, a task for which they are uniquely well-suited.

In order to portray an action in verbal form, a speaker needs not only to refer to the various characters involved in it, but also to grammatically encode the form of their participation (Simpson 1993, 88). Verbs denoting material processes—that is to say, representing our experience of and interaction with the physical world—involve the specification of an agent (the doer of the action) and a patient (the one upon whom the action is visited). The choice of roles expresses the author's understanding of each

participant's degree of involvement and activity: 'the extent to which a character is the passive "victim" of circumstance, or is actively in control of the environment, making decisions and taking action' (Mills 1995, 111).

The examination of linguistic participation roles, known as transitivity analysis, has long been used by stylisticians and discourse scholars to investigate responsibility attribution in a range of genres, from fiction and news to legal proceedings, political speech and example clauses in syntax textbooks. Of particular relevance to the current paper are the examinations of transitivity patterns in romance fiction, in which female characters are typically portrayed as passive objects (Mills 1995, 115–6; Talbot 1995, 81; Wareing 1994, 124–5): women appear as actors far less frequently than men; they often appear as the patient of men's actions, while the converse is rare; and what actions they do take are typically represented as affecting their own body, rather than exerting an influence on other characters or events.

An analogous analysis can be applied to sexual activity. A verbal expression of a sexual event, such as intercourse between two participants, is impossible without an implicit judgement of their relative agency. Although all the examples below are referentially equivalent, each of the versions conveys a clearly different picture of the degree to which each participant takes an active role:

- (1) Alex fucked Bobbi
- (2) Bobbi fucked Alex
- (3) Alex and Bobbi fucked

The first two versions imply, without asserting it explicitly, that the action is not completely reciprocal; emphasis is placed on the intentionality of one of the participants (Morrish & Stauntson 2007, 126). This primary role is occupied by the subject in active

clauses and by an adverbial complement in passive ones; depending on the syntactic complementation patterns of the verb, the patient role in active clauses is taken by a direct object ('Alex fucked Bobbi'), by a prepositional object ('Alex made love to Bobbi') or by an adverbial adjunct ('Alex had sex with Bobbi').

However, this is not the only possible construction. Verbs of sexual activity belong to a broader class in which 'it is possible for both participants to be actively involved to the same extent' (Manning 1997, 44). This meaning can be conveyed through the syntactic pattern illustrated in (c) above, in which the action is presented as a joint activity performed by both participants together. There is a clear difference in connotation between this pattern, which emphasises the reciprocity of the action, and the former one, which implies that one participant is doing something *to* someone else (Manning 1997, 59; Morrish & Sauntson 2007, 126–7).

There is limited evidence that the gendered patterns observed in romance novels might apply as well to sexually-explicit stories: Mykietiak (2015: 475) observes that female participants in cybersex encounters tend not to represent themselves as agents, leaving such roles to their male interlocutors instead, while Koller (2015: 266) shows how agentivity can index hegemonic masculinity in a detailed analysis of a queer narrative. Nevertheless, transitivity analysis has never been applied systematically to measure the gendering of sexual agency in porn stories as a genre. In the following section, I describe how this analysis was implemented in the current study and the materials employed in it.

## **Methodology**

### ***Materials***

The data analysed here were collected from *Literotica.com* (2016), one of the oldest and

largest erotic fiction repositories online and the object of some prior research (Paasonen 2010; 2011; Wheaton 2016). The site ranks #786 in the SimilarWeb (2016) index of worldwide web traffic, being the 44<sup>th</sup> most popular site in the adult category and the most popular erotic story site overall. About half (50.33%) of its 3 million monthly visits come from the US, with significant access also from Germany (9.57%), the UK (8.32%), Canada (4.70%) and India (3.63%).

Established in 1996, Literotica does not only archive more than 1.5 million individual stories, but —unlike the Usenet newsgroups researched by Barron & Kimmel (2000)— it also allows authors to categorise submissions under 32 different sub-genres and annotate them with keywords about participants, topics and sexual acts. Readers can also rate submissions, and the subsequent ranking is included in all story listings, providing users with a range of tools for identifying content suited to their specific taste (cf. van Doorn 2010, 418).

A significant aspect of the site is, in fact, the degree to which the roles of producer and consumer are integrated (Wheaton 2016, 56). Together with the main archive, Literotica presents users with a great amount of writing advice in the form of how-to guides, volunteer editing services and discussions of storytelling technique in its user forums, and offers incentives for participation in the form of periodical awards and seasonal contests. Much of this advice ‘represents a normative model of a “good story” as one involving plot and character development, complexity, and non-explicit elements’ (Paasonen 2010, 144), though stories vary quite widely in how far they realise this model, and range from elaborate novellas to wall-to-wall sexual accounts. In the same manner, Literotica imposes few restrictions on the content it will publish: only bestiality, mutilation, snuff and underage sexual encounters are banned. Within these limits taboo subjects are an ‘object of emotional investment’ (Paasonen 2011, 109), and

some of the most popular categories concern incest, BDSM and canaulism. The site thus covers a broad spectrum of writing, from stories close to the traditional notion of erotica as focused on ‘character motivation, desire, and sexual build-up’ (Paasonen 2010, 151) to others primarily concerned with the fleshy details of bodily sensation.

In order to ensure that the sample would capture the central aspects of the ‘appeal and experience of the erotic and pornographic’ (Paasonen 2010, 154) to the site's audience, stories were selected from the top-ranked narratives in the archive. I downloaded the 300 individual stories with the highest ratings; items from categories other than short stories were excluded. In order to concentrate on gendered patterns of activity, items from the ‘Gay Male’ and ‘Lesbian’ categories are ignored in this paper. The resulting corpus comprised just under 5,385,000 word-tokens<sup>v</sup>. The documents were filtered through a Python script to extract the story text, which was then uploaded to the Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff *et al.* 2014) for automatic part-of-speech and grammatical relation tagging.

### ***Methods***

In order to investigate the representation of sexual agency, I examine the participant roles attributed to male and female characters accross all instances of the most frequent verbs used to describe a discrete act of intercourse (e.g., ‘every time we fucked like wild animals’<sup>vi</sup>), or an habitual sexual relationship (e.g., ‘Jan and George have been fucking like monkeys for about eight months now’). Drawing on the work of Manning (1997: 47–51), I compiled a list of verbs of those verbs of sexual activity that can take both reciprocal (e.g., ‘Greg and I were having sex almost every night’) and non-reciprocal forms<sup>vii</sup> (e.g., ‘this erotic dream where I made love to one of my female classmates’). The attested terms and their frequencies can be seen in Table 1. The three most frequent items, accounting for 97.2% of the cases, were selected for subsequent analyses;

ranging from the euphemistic to the taboo, they provide a useful approximation to the lexical field of sex.

[INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE]

I included all instances in which identifiable participants were associated with a process expressed as a finite verbal phrase (e.g., ‘we fucked each other with our tongues’) or a non-finite one (e.g., ‘I want you to fuck me over and over’), as well as cases in which body parts were used to metonymically stand for a participant (e.g., ‘her fingers fucked against the soft flesh inside her cunt’, ‘her soon to be husband was getting fucked by a huge cock’; cf. Simpson 1993, 112; Wareing 1994, 124). In order to exclude instances of non-literal use (such as expletive or intensificative uses of FUCK), a concordance showing each instance of these verbs in context was annotated with the functional categorisation scheme of McEnery and Xiao (2004: 257). Table 2 lists the scheme's categories and gives examples from the corpus. Only instances categorised as literal usages were retained in the sample. Finally, each of these instances was tagged for transitivity, gender and number of agent, and gender and number of patient. Cases in which the identity of either participant was impossible to recover were tagged separately and excluded from subsequent calculations.

[INSERT TABLE 2 AROUND HERE]

Rather than a traditional narratological approach, then, the study adopts that of distant reading, in which ‘the reality of the text undergoes a process of deliberate reduction and abstraction [...] fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection’ (Moretti 2005, 1). The analysis does not focus on each individual instance of discourse—in which other textual elements beyond the transitivity roles in this particular clause contribute to a nuanced assignment of agency—but rather on the

recurrent expressive choices that characterise specific verbs of sexual activity. These patterns are not necessarily obvious or even salient to the human eye (Mills 1995, 4), but nevertheless play a key role in readers' meaning-making by shaping the connotations attached to terms. Bringing attention to forms of expression that are statistically more —or less— frequent than would be expected, corpus-based stylistic methods orient the analyst to the typical choices that language users make, and thus to the underlying assumptions made when discussing different groups, concepts or categories (Partington *et al.* 2013, 19).

Although Paasonen (2007: 44–45) warns against forms of reading porn that work ‘effectively to distance the reader from the text’, arguing that detached description runs against the spirit of the fleshy encounters that pornographic texts aim to provoke, my emphasis here is not on replicating the ‘affective reactions, sensations and experiences’ of readers faced with an individual story. Rather, the intention is to explore the gendered discourses of sexuality sedimented in the recurring stylistic choices of the genre, which constitute the default background against which any individual story is read (Wareing 1994, 118). By specifying explicitly the concrete set of criteria to be used for the characterisation of these discourses, approaches such as this seek to ensure the reproducibility and replicability of analysis (Jeffries 2007, 10; Mills 1995, 12). The disciplinary divide between the textual and the statistical in McKee's (2014: 55) taxonomy of porn research methods is avoided through a ‘nuanced, detailed and rigorous approach to language in use’ (Koller 2015, 258) that provides a natural framework for interpretation.



## Results

### *Reciprocity and verb choice*

One notable feature of the Literotica corpus is that reciprocal representations (expressed through plural noun phrases in the agent position, with an optional co-referring patient such as ‘each other’ or ‘one another’) are far less common than non-reciprocal ones. Table 3 displays their proportion across literal uses of the three verb phrases under investigation. Figure 1 shows a histogram of the distribution of individual stories in the corpus according to their rate of reciprocity (for ease of visualisation, all three verbs have been collapsed). These data suggest that the stories in the sample tend to draw on a discourse of sexual activity as asymmetrically driven by the agency of one main participant— that is to say, something that an agent does *to* a patient, rather than a joint action collaboratively undertaken by all parties.

[INSERT TABLE 3 AROUND HERE]

Although for all verbs the non-reciprocal use is more common, the sharpness of this asymmetry grows as the choice of term sheds romantic overtones to concentrate specifically on the sexual nature of the act. Instances of MAKE LOVE are almost equally likely to be presented as the joint activity of participants as they are to emphasise one of them; in comparison, and consistently with prior findings (Manning 1997, 53; Morrish & Sauntson 2007, 126), reciprocal uses of HAVE SEX or FUCK are markedly less frequent. These differences are highly significant (Pearson's  $\chi^2=686.99$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p < 0.00001$ , with Cramér's  $\phi=0.41$  indicating a medium-to-strong effect).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE]

Authors often show an intuitive grasp of the different connotations attached to verb choice. Explicit metalinguistic commentary contrasts the various possible

designations for sexual activity and explains the narrative voice's selection in terms of the passion and vigour, but also the reciprocity, attached to the act:

- (4) And then *she was fucking me. We didn't make love.* No, no, no. *Sarina fucked me like a woman possessed.*
- (5) 'It's just that we seem to avoid doing anything...dirty,' she explained. 'Like, *we only make love; we don't ever "just have sex."*'
- (6) I wasn't supposed to kiss him, and definitely wouldn't *let him fuck me.* Now *we were actually making love* and it wasn't one-sided.

### **Gender and participant roles**

In non-reciprocal representations, expressions of sexual activity encode male characters as having the active role almost twice as frequently as female characters. Table 4 shows the breakdown by gender of the agents in such clauses. The discourse in which these stories are embedded, then, is one where both cooperative and female-led views of sex are dwarfed by the frequency of a male-dominant view.

[INSERT TABLE 4 AROUND HERE]

To put this in a slightly different manner, across this corpus the reader is more likely to find descriptions of sexual activity in which females are presented as the passive object of men's actions than all other possible patterns of agency put together (2280 out of 4254, a rate of 53.59%). It is typically men who FUCK women or, far less frequently, MAKE LOVE to them. The only verbal phrase associated more frequently with female agents than with male ones is HAVE SEX, in which the obligatory preposition *with* suggests a more egalitarian implication. These differences are highly significant (Pearson's  $\chi^2=90.14$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p < 0.00001$ ), although the effect is not as great as it was for non-transitive uses (Cramér's  $\phi=0.11$ ).

[INSERT TABLE 5 AROUND HERE]

Conversely, the patient role is more frequently assigned to female characters whatever the particular verb employed; Table 5 shows the ratio of male to female patients for all three terms. This finding echoes MacKinnon's (1989: 124) claims about the gendered nature of pornographic scripts; though the difference is probabilistic and not categorical, it seems indeed true that 'man fucks woman; subject verb object' is the dominant (though not the exclusive) grammar of pornography. Once again, metalinguistic commentary embedded in the narratives acknowledges this default view as the expected state of affairs:

(7) *Men do the fucking . Women get fucked.* That's the way of life.

[INSERT TABLE 6 AROUND HERE]

It is important to note that this gendered emphasis on male agency is not a general feature of these narratives. The preference for a male agent does not extend to all verb phrases, and other actions are more frequently presented as undertaken by female characters. Table 6 compares the ratio of male to female agents of verbs of sexual activity with the other four most frequent material processes mentioned in these texts: PULL, KISS, MOVE and LEAVE. All these are more frequently predicated of a female agent than of a male one, in proportions roughly comparable to that shown by HAVE SEX. This suggests that the emphasis on male agency is specific to the cultural politics governing the conceptualisation of sexual activity, and not simply an artefact caused by narrative focalisation through male characters.

## **Discussion**

### *Textual constructions of sexual dominance*

The results presented here offer clear if limited confirmation for earlier claims of male dominance in written erotic fiction. As seen in Figure 1, stories can range from the strictly egalitarian, in which all verbs of sexual agency are presented as the collaborative accomplishment of all participants, to the strictly asymmetrical, in which all instances distinguish an agent and a patient. The ‘ideology of male supremacy’ that reduces women to ‘powerless sexual objects who crave violence and sex at the direction of a man’ (Jensen 1993, 102) seems therefore far less universal than critics have argued: although most writing in the Literotica corpus tends to place male characters in an active role, female agency is not rare and few stories fail to acknowledge it at some point in the narrative (cf. Vannier et al. 2014, 260).

Nevertheless, the distribution of agency is heavily skewed towards asymmetry. Only a fourth of all stories prefer collaborative formulations to agent/patient ones, while almost 36% employ exclusively the latter pattern. This seems to suggest a more pronounced inequality than in the materials analysed by Barron and Kimmel (2000: 164) and Vannier et al. (2014: 260–1), in which shared control was the norm. Direct systematic comparisons, however, are difficult because of differences in objects, units and methods of measurement.

Prior work exploring submission and dominance in pornographic stories has typically failed to provide operational definitions linking sexual agency to any particular features of plot or characterisation. Although Jensen (1993), for example, couches his claims about female objectification in porn in terms of what is ‘usual’, ‘routine’ or ‘typical’, these essentially probabilistic and quantitative concepts are not supported with any quantitative findings that would allow us to meaningfully compare different texts.

The lack of replicable —and therefore refutable— empirical data limits the value of such studies as a benchmark.

Research focusing on visual porn genres is often more precise in operationalisation, but conceptual differences still prevent straightforward comparison. Many studies use the initiation of sexual activities as a proxy for agency (e.g., McKee 2005; Prince 1987, Salmon & Diamond 2012). But while it is true that ‘traditional sex role norms give men greater freedom to initiate sexual intercourse’ (Crawford & Popp 2003, 24), this cannot capture any changes in sexual initiative taking place *in medias res*. Even studies that distinguish initiation from control (such as Vannier *et al.* 2014) would benefit from finer-grained measures: the reduction of the latter to a dichotomous variable ignores cases in which participants either alternate in the dominant role or switch from asymmetric to cooperative patterns in a negotiated manner (Paasonen 2007, 50–51).

The approach taken here, in contrast, follows McKee's (2005: 288) call for ‘more detailed understanding of the workings of pornography across media’ by operationalising agency as a function of all verbal representations of sexual activity. The additional statistical detail yielded by this approach suggests the existence of a range of distinctive clusters —corresponding to different types and genres of porn— instead a misogynistic monolith. The plot of agency patterns in Figure 1 shows three distinct peaks, one each at the least and most egalitarian extremes, and one roughly intermediate between them; such a distribution is not clearly accounted for by the distinction between pornography and erotica (Paasonen 2010, 150), and the specific differences between these clusters still requires a more detailed characterisation. Future research exploring dominance and agency in pornography should benefit from

examinations of how these features are distributed within the structure of a narrative, rather than conceiving of them in global terms.

### ***Gender, culture and agency***

A closer examination of non-reciprocal portrayals of sexual agency shows a clearly gendered pattern, with women placed in the agent role only half as frequently as men. These results represent a departure from previous content-analytic work on porn, which has largely found no evidence of gendered patterns of agency (Klaasen & Peter 2015; McKee 2005; Prince 1987; Salmon & Diamond 2012).

One possible explanation of the difference between the present study and this earlier work lies in the mode of production of the materials under analysis. While research by Smith (1976) and Jensen (1993) focused on published novels, the stories examined here are distributed through a collaboratively-produced website, and have not been subjected to the same institutional editing and selection processes that operate in professional settings (Baker 2005, 157). It may be significant that one of the few studies to find evidence of male dominance, that of Barron & Kimmel (2000), similarly focused on user-generated materials. In the absence of well-constructed corpora of professionally-published pornographic stories for comparison it remains possible that, as Klaasen & Peter's (2015: 11) observe, user-generated work 'may be more in line with what traditional feminists and conservatives have in mind when they argue about pornography' while professional work 'may rather merge with what liberals think of when they argue about pornography'. If the homosocial nature of these online communities is at the root of these strongly gendered patterns, as Barron & Kimmel (2000: 164) suggest, comparisons of sites with different user demographics should reflect this.

It seems more likely, however, that the difference is due to my specific analytic focus on agency rather than dominance, exploitation or inequality. The overall tendency for males to be linguistically presented in agent roles is not only consistent with anecdotal observations about other erotic genres such as cybersex, but also with more systematic explorations of other genres, including related narrative forms such as romance. A number of authors have shown that female characters in such stories are seldom shown as exerting an influence on their environment or their male counterparts. Their discursive characterisation emphasises instead their emotional ‘struggle for self-control’ (Talbot 1995, 83) by portraying them as active in mental but not material processes (Talbot 1995, 84; Wareing 1994, 124). The same patterns can be observed when characters in a same-sex relationship are presented according to the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity (Koller 2015): ‘manly’ men who represent a closer approximation to the hegemonic ideal are more likely than feminine ones to appear as agents.

From this point of view, the ‘public display of sexism’ (Meyer 1993, 1119) evident in the passive representation of women in porn does not seem directly motivated by the sexual nature of these materials, but rather a more general trait of the cultural environment from which they are drawn. Although most critical stylistic applications of transitivity analysis have focused on the detailed examination of a single text rather than covering a broad corpus, and therefore do not provide baseline measures for comparison, there is no reason to assume that explicit sexual representations are in any way exceptional in their gendered portrayal of agency. The characterisation of women as acted upon, rather than acting, and the consequent elision of their initiative and responsibility is a trope is hardly limited to pornography<sup>viii</sup> (Wareing 1994, 135). Partington *et al.* (2013: 166) emphasise that stylistic studies are by nature comparative;

research on the ideology of gender and sexuality embedded in the language of pornography should be scrupulous in contextualising its findings against its expression in other genres, though further advances in the compilation of reference corpora will be required for any systematic attempts.

### ***Fantasy and the pornographic imagination***

A more radical issue when attempting to read off an ideological character in the characteristic conventions of erotic writing has to do with the diverse practices, experiences and intentions through which this writing is produced and employed. Far too often, analyses assume that the gendered scripts present in pornographic materials are internalised by their users (Vannier et al. 2014, 254) without taking into account how these materials' often distinctly fantastic nature influences their interpretation and enjoyment.

Though it is easy to recognise that erotic narratives are not intended as realistic accounts of actual sexual encounters (Baker 2005, 154), the temptation remains to interpret as idealised accounts of the encounters authors and readers would want to engage in. However, this point of view is limited by its inability to address pornographic fiction as *fiction* (Smith 2009, 27). Paasonen (2007: 50) emphasises that erotic narratives conspicuously take place in a 'fantasyland of freely flowing desire' whose unrealistic character is clearly apparent to readers; it is precisely the spectacular nature of this pornographic landscape, the deliberate removal of any barriers to the satisfaction of desire, that makes porn stories *tellable* (Maingueneau 2007, 38).

Such mediated, fictional experiences doubtlessly have a constitutive effect on everyday life, but it is dangerous to ignore the 'distinctions between sexual practice and sexual representation, sexual reality and sexual fantasy, sex and porn' (Attwood 2002, 101). Readers who approach erotic texts seeking information about sexual physiology,



practices or possibilities may, of course, be misled by narratives of inexhaustible desire and unending satisfaction (Juffer 1998, 139); but this represents just one form of engagement with these materials, and the vulnerability of this particular audience should not be necessarily presumed of all others. It is equally likely that scenarios that stylise gendered relations of sexual dominance be enjoyed as bounded, reflexive explorations of erotic possibilities quite distinct from the normative templates for relationships in the broader social world (Wheaton 2016, 53).

From this point of view, female characters' abandonment to an agentive male 'who knows what [they] want without [them] having to ask for it' (Juffer 1998, 138) can be seen as a liberatory fantasy of effortless sexual satisfaction; rather than a denial of female agency, an opportunity to rest from its burden. Like the domination scenes and 'moments of rough sex play' identified by McKee (2005: 283), the fantasies embodied in porn stories can provide a vehicle for sexual experimentation through which readers deliberately transgress the expectations attached to their habitual social roles (Rubin 1993, 22). In the end, the affective dynamics of consumers' and producers' encounters with porn are an empirical matter; careful exploration of the uses and practices of particular groups of readers (or authors) would be needed to go beyond speculation about the possible significance of the genre.

At the same time, it is important to note that a contextualised understanding of the diversity in the practices of pornographic consumption, production and interpretation does not negate the importance of documenting dominant patterns in content, characterisation and narrative structure (Juffer 1998, 8). Paasonen (2007: 45) insists on the need to acknowledge the possibility of surprise and contradiction in readers' engagement with individual pornographic texts; at the same time, she emphasises that the mechanical and formulaic character of erotic narratives tends to

make readers themselves perceive them as instances of an abstract type. Especially when considering online archives such as Literotica, there is no reason to assume that users approach porn looking for unique storylines, instead of zapping from story to story in a search for juicy scenes like the reader who browses the pages of Playboy looking for the photographic reportages (cf. Lynn 2007, 9). In cases such as these, a clear understanding of dominant narrative formulae is not only useful but necessary to understand audiences' construction of sexual pleasure, knowledge and identities.

### ***Conclusion***

Through a distant reading of a large corpus of written pornographic stories, this study has sought to contribute to the hotly debated tradition of research on sexual dominance and objectification in porn. Such a quantitative approach can help shed light on the tacit but nevertheless pervasive assumptions embedded in the semiotic substance of erotic discourse. Employing corpus methods to focus on routine linguistic choices makes it possible to measure probabilistic patterns in the representation of agency in pornography's sexual scripts. The typical grammatical and lexical choices revealed in these patterns encode a view of unequal sexual roles, in which women typically are the passive object of male activity. In the fantasy world construed in these narratives, men are twice as likely to be in control of sexual intercourse as women.

My goal in adopting such a distant perspective to investigate the representation of intimate encounters is not simply to measure dominant and minority assumptions about gender and agency, but also to explore the collective conventions of a largely unregulated literary form, 'the "rules" of porn narratives' (Smith 2009, 27) which are irreducible to any individual expression. In order to gain a sense of whether pornographic representations are indeed undesirable, as critics have maintained, it is important to acknowledge the existence of such generic patterns. The significance of

narrative choices within any individual narrative must be interpreted against this backdrop: however diverse online pornographies may be, their landscape is dominated by hegemonic categories (Mazières et al. 2014, 81).

The use of corpus tools and methods does not only allow the quantification and statistical analysis of the data, but can also make apparent subtle forms of characterisation and positioning that are not open to direct observation (Partington et al. 2013, 11). While even the analysis of a single feature —the transitivity patterns of verbs of sexual agency— suggests the existence of distinctive forms of pornographic narration positioned at opposite extremes of the egalitarian/asymmetrical continuum, more delicate analyses can explore the traits that characterise each of these forms. The diversity of their scenarios, characters and relationships can be empirically observed by contrasting patterns of lexical choice, of transitivity, and of gendered agency within each individual story, and by correlating such features with the additional information about the story and its author provided by the repository. In the same manner, these analyses can be extended to other important features identified by previous research — such as the degree of voice or narrative centrality attributed to specific characters, or the relative importance of different forms of pleasure within the narrative development of the normative pornoscript. Such empirical, replicable descriptions of actually-existing pornography are essential to any attempt to go beyond the ‘tired binary’ (Jeffer 1998: 2) of pro- and anti-porn debates.

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The literature on the topic variously labels this phenomenon 'degradation', 'dehumanisation', 'domination' and 'objectification'. In this paper I follow McKee (2005: 278) in preferring the last of these terms.

- ii A further problematic aspect in this strand of research has been the inconsistency of researchers when coding verbal instructions from participants. Gorman *et al.* (2010: 138–9), for example, include demands such as 'lean forward', uttered by a male participant, as directives, but exclude demands made by females such as 'fuck me harder'. Their rationale for doing so is obscure.



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- iii It seems suggestive that projects measuring agency as a single, scene-level variable have tended to find male dominance, while analogous analyses using finer-grained tools have yielded no such results.
- iv The ‘mainstream’ erotic story, in fact, is a somewhat neglected genre. While scholarly interest in language-based pornography has developed over the past decades from a range of disciplinary frameworks, much of it has focused on specific forms and genres that subvert or transgress traditional boundaries, rather than on more conventional texts (Juffer 1998, 15). Thus the interest in transitional periods, such as the progressive definition of pornographic literature in the Victorian era (Kendrick 1987) and the contemporary development of new genres such as cybersex or sexting (Myketiak 2015; Wheaton 2016), or in forms defined by their challenge to the mainstream, such as feminist, LGBTQ or radical pornographies (Baker 2005; Koller 2015).
- v The detailed list of all materials included in the sample is available on request from the author.
- vi This and all subsequent examples are drawn from the stories in the corpus. All emphasis in the excerpts is mine.
- vii This excludes verbs that denote specific actions rather than whole episodes of sexual activity, such as LICK or SUCK, as these do not occur in the joint-agent structure. All subsequent references to verbs of sexual activity should be understood in this narrower sense.
- viii It seems noteworthy, in fact, that many of the most damning results reported by reviews of pornification such as Brown and Bryant's (1989) were found in non-explicit materials, such as detective magazines or mainstream thriller films.