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Engaging with Pornography: an examination of women aged 18-26 as porn consumers

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Abstract

In this article we discuss a large scale research project aimed at uncovering people's everyday engagements with pornography. We focus on women aged 18-25; the only category of our participants in which women outnumbered men. Looking at responses from women in this group we examine their narratives, views, feelings, positions and judgments. We focus in particular on the elements of pornography that engaged them in terms of content and scenario, style and aesthetics, emotion and thought, tone and mood, and identification and we consider the accounts of four participants in more detail. Our discussion illustrates what different forms of engagement with pornography can look like and outlines what they suggest about the possible relations of porn engagement and sexuality. We situate our discussion in relation to qualitative cultural studies work, a tradition of feminist audience studies, an emerging porn studies, and accounts which understand both sexuality and media and consumption as part of everyday life.

Introduction

'Are you ready to join the club?' asks the trailer for *The Book Club*, a 2018 film that charts the impact of EL James' *Fifty Shades of Grey* on the sex and love lives of four older women

when they adopt it for their book club group. As a romantic comedy starring Hollywood veteran actresses Jane Fonda, Candice Bergen, Diane Keaton and Mary Steenbergen, the appearance of the film suggests that women's interest in pornography is becoming a mundane and mainstream fact in popular culture. Yet identifying as a female consumer of porn has traditionally been fraught with difficulties; female consumers of pornography have been 'dogged by questions of harm, subordination, objectification and authenticity and the need to consider women's well-being before their own pleasures in watching or reading porn' (Clarissa Smith 2013, 167). Now, due partly to the 'Fifty Shades phenomenon' (book trilogy 2011-2013 and cinema adaptations in 2015 and 2017), films like *The Book Club* and reports in publications like *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* (see Hannah Betts 2015; Olivia Fleming 2017) which describe increasing numbers of women engaging with porn, women's porn consumption is more visible than ever before. Yet despite this, and a documented history of women's active engagement with porn, pornography is more frequently visible in public discourse in quite different ways – as an example of media which is toxic for women, and as entirely lacking in value. In contrast to its everyday presence in many women's lives, it is often deployed as a topic in order present sex in its most spectacular and transgressive aspects, or depicted as trivial and worthless.

In this article we draw on a research project aimed at engaging people's everyday engagements with porn (see Atwood 2015b), focusing in particular on some of the accounts from women aged 18-25. Our project aimed to capture the richness and complexity of audience engagement in line with an approach which foregrounds 'the meaning and use of media and culture in people's daily lives' (Martin Barker 2014, 150). It draws on a cultural studies tradition and on feminist audience studies which have taken the media interests of women as their focus (see Liesbet van Zoonen 1994; Ien Ang and Joke Hermes 1996; Hermes 2014 for a discussion), prioritised understanding media in relation to everyday life, and argued for the importance of locating their significance in relation to particular situations and contexts. Our project can also be understood as part of a developing 'porn studies' that has highlighted the existence of myriad forms of pornographies and their significance as sites of both 'meaning' and 'mattering', 'making sense' and 'sensing' (see Susanna Paasonen 2014 for a discussion), connected with bodies, imagination, and the realm of sexuality. We show that, while most public and political commentary condemns pornography as having little value, female consumers offer much more complex stories of the significance of porn in their lives - what it means and how it matters. It may be lifechanging, a space for an intimate 'private sexuality', a resource in sexual relationships, a way of pushing the boundaries of what counts as sex, or a much more mundane part of everyday life.

The pornresearch project

Our project made use of an online questionnaire that combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Our aim was to develop a rich resource which would illuminate people's engagements with, experiences of, and feelings about, pornography, by gathering audiences' working understandings, evaluations and self-perceptions. We aimed to recruit widely, by age, gender, sexual identification, and level of involvement with porn (see Atwood 2014 for a discussion), advertising the questionnaire by means of social media and whatever media opportunities came our way. The questionnaire was open for four months

in 2011. The large number of responses - 5490 over a four month period - suggests a good mixture and spread of accounts. Of the 5490 responses we received, 68.4% identified as male and 31.6% as female. Sexual orientation broke down as heterosexual (70.1%), gay (3.4%), lesbian (1.0%), bisexual (16.5%), queer (5.5%) and unsure (3.4%).

Our questionnaire used a mixture of quantitative and qualitative questions, allowing us to capture a body of quantitative data which generated patterns, and categories, and relations among these; and a dense body of qualitative 'talk' where people explain to us how and why they take certain views and make certain judgements. Our quantitative questions included self-allocation multiple-choice questions; requests for some personal and demographic information; and questions about possible orientations - for example, reasons for looking at porn. Qualitative questions were used to elicit views, feelings, stories, positions and judgments, for example, the kinds of sexual stories that attract participants and scenarios they find particularly engaging. Analyses highlighted significant relationships, for example between frequencies of looking at porn and gender and then we examined a substantial number of responses to identify key terms and expressions which we used to do further searches, to see the kinds of associations and semantic frames within which those key terms operate. Individual portraits were also selected for examination in order to explore the detail of accounts of engaging with pornography.

A number of broad themes emerged across accounts of the place of porn in their lives;

- porn consumption as a response to boredom, in which one's body asserts itself and demands attention
 - porn consumption to aid an intensification of bodily pleasures
 - porn consumption as a way to intensify masturbation, particularly as a winddown from forms of stress
 - porn consumption as a site for voyeurism, and the attraction of the sight—and sound—of bodies sexually engaged
 - porn consumption as part of the attraction of the kinky, the naughty and the dirty and the desire to explore forbidden domains
 - porn consumption as a compensation for inadequate sexual opportunities, including those related to participants' age
 - porn consumption within an ongoing relationship
 - porn consumption as a means of exploring one's sexual self/identity
 - porn consumption as part of a wider recognition of the force of sex
 - porn consumption as a leisure choice in its own right
 - porn consumption as an aesthetic/erotic experience
- (see Smith et al. 2015).

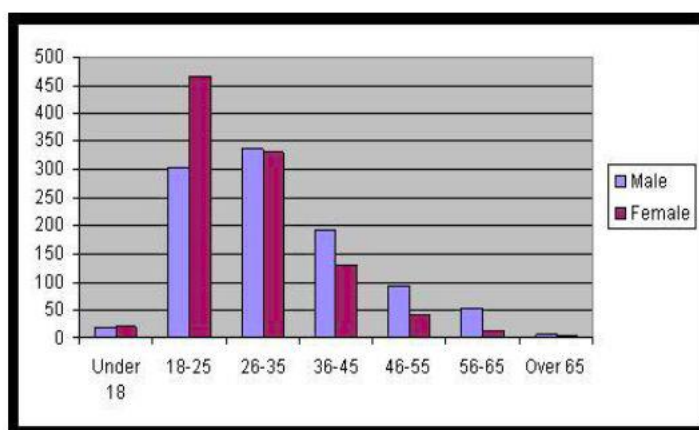
These themes can be understood as motivating particular orientations towards pornography (Attwood 2014) - the ways in which people seek out and select what to look at, the criteria they have for registering what is satisfying and exciting or disappointing, disturbing and disgusting, and their different 'careers' into and through pornography. They also suggest that while porn may have a part to play in terms of providing a space for transgression, it can be linked to a more general attraction to looking at 'sex', as well as to the broader spheres of leisure and aesthetic experiences of sexuality and/or sensuality. Pornography can play a part in generating and intensifying physical pleasure in specifically sexual ways but it

also has other roles such as calming stress or tending to the body. Sexually explicit imagery may or may not be part of a sexual relationship with another, a way of exploring the self as sexual, compensating for the lack of sex in life, or taking on a particular significance in relation to the realm of sexuality understood more broadly.

We found a number of gender differences in our participants' responses. For example, male participants described their engagement with pornography as more important and more frequent than female participants. Men reported that they were more likely to seek out porn when feeling bored, or having nothing better to do. They were also more likely to use downloads, amateur sites and specialist sites catering to specific sexual interests, while women were more interested in fiction sites and sex blogs. Male participants were more likely to use porn to express arousal ('when I feel horny'), whereas female participants tended to seek out such materials as a means to arousal ('when I want to feel horny'). Female participants were more likely to engage with porn as a means to reconnect with their bodies and to share it with partners. Differences were also evident in relation to participants' age and sexual orientation. For example, 26-35 year olds were most likely to say that viewing porn was important to them, while the 18-25 group were least likely to find it important. Queer participants were more likely to describe engagement with porn in order 'to feel involved in a world of sex out there' (26.1%), 'to reconnect with my body' (16.2%), 'for recognition of my sexual interests' (52.5%) or 'to see things I wouldn't do' (11.2%) than other participants. These differences among and between groups illuminate how approaches making general claims about porn's significance and effect are, at best, unhelpful; while the range of 'uses' outlined in our data show the variety of ways pornography is connected to feeling, bodies, relationships and a realm of sexuality.

Even so, we also found a number of similarities across groups; 'When I feel horny' came out as a top motivation for engaging with porn across the board, as did the choices of 'Sex keeps you healthy, physically and emotionally' and 'Good sex requires communication with your partner(s)'. By far the most popular sources of porn for men and women were porn tube sites, while roughly equal numbers consumed porn in DVD and magazine form.

Women aged 18-25



As the table above illustrates, there is a significant spike in the number of women in our 18-25 age group. This is the only category in which female respondents exceeded men and clearly the numbers of younger respondents outstrip those in the older age ranges. We can't know whether young women's interests in pornography are simply a 'passing phase', perhaps part of the way in which interests in sexual representations might change over the life course, or whether it signals a wider generational shift that might, over time, reduce the overall differences between male and female interests in sexually explicit imagery. In any case, for our purposes here, there is something very interesting in those significant numbers of women aged 18-25 who wanted to tell us about their engagements with pornography, especially as this is a group that many media commentators are worried about. In this article we focus on the qualitative responses of women in the 18-25 age group, taken from a random sample of 100 responses, in order to examine their narratives, views, feelings, positions and judgments. We begin by giving examples of the range of things that participants said about their encounters with porn; focussing on the kinds of elements that engaged them, in terms of content and scenario, style and aesthetics, emotion and thought, tone and mood, and identification. We move on to look at four participants in detail - chosen because of the way that they illustrate quite different orientations to pornography within the context of an individual's life.

As a range of studies have shown, women's porn consumption displays a variety of tastes and affiliations; whether these foreground women pursuing their own sexual pleasures; narratives that combine sex and romance, 'domesticated' and 'safe' stories of sex, or transgressive themes and tropes (see Feona Attwood 2018 for a discussion). In our project participants noted a range of scenarios and stories that they found engaging:

Stories that include one or several of the following topics: incest, pedophilia, watersports/urination, humiliation, BDSM, breathplay, bloodplay.

Stories about people my own age (early 20s).

Threesome scenarios

Scissoring

I like stories about rape and humiliation. I also like stories about households where women are totally submissive to a man and controlled by him.

I like watching men and women, I like the idea of the situation more than the physical action of sex.

Styles and aesthetics were also commented on:

I like to see close-up shots of genitals, and I like to see chemistry. Things that are shot in a soft-focus, music-soaked 'for women' way really annoy me.

Good porn is passionate, smart, sexy, not overly lewd.. sounds contradictory and perhaps too demanding, but I prefer quality.. this is why I like most of the vintage gay porn and some of the full length bomba (bold/sexy movies).

For some, good porn was very clearly linked to ideas about authenticity, although this could be complexly articulated, foregrounding characteristics such as relatability, intimacy, immediacy and intensity:

Stories I can relate to so very very natural and not fake. I love dominance play and gender bending. but in more of an at home intimate way not clearly fake acting crap porn. When girls are tied down and forced to have orgasm. You can't back away and have to feel the whole intensity of an orgasm.

While for others, porn offered a different opportunity, to toy with ideas;

Porn is something ... Outlandish, creative. .. Unrealistic. Sex itself is about connecting intimately with someone, it helps you just ... Forget about everything but who you're with. Porn allows me to think, wonder and toy with ideas outlandish ideas like robots, aliens and other things.

That idea of being apart from others also underpinned another participant's pleasures though, as she goes on to explain, as a route into not thinking;

I feel like looking at pornography gives me a chance to have sex with myself. I would miss being able to look at it because it lets me not think about myself and to just kind of be freaky with myself. I want to have sex AND look at porn, for different reasons. Porn is just for me only. Sex is for me and someone else.

In some accounts women describe how the tone and mood of porn scenes are key to their charge;

Gay porn affects me on a deeper level than anything else so far, I experience it as more visceral, focused and decisive Stories that emphasize want. I need a certain mood (or at least, an allusion to it) that shows that the people involved want/need/desire sex either for itself or as an expression of emotions. In short, if the people on the screen can make me believe they really want what they are doing, I will probably respond to it, regardless of their physical characteristics or the constellation of partners.

For this young woman, porn works as a performance she can believe in and that calls out a particular kind of visceral response in her. Another notes the importance for her of the 'emotional release between the characters'. Both of these responses register the importance of authenticity for them, but this does not reference the 'fake' performance styles and 'plastic' bodies often attributed to porn, or the absence of realistic characters and recognisable lifelike scenarios; here it is much more closely associated with expressing or mobilising emotion, affect and sensation. One participant spelt out the importance of

the anticipation before sex - when people pause right before a kiss or right before penetration, or oral sex, and let the anticipation and tension build. I also like it when one person is aroused past the point of coherence, and the other person is teasing them, until they finally give in and beg ...

These issues of 'mood' are not confined to building anticipation, savouring tension, creating intensity and releasing it; other and apparently more mundane layers of experience and encounter can also matter a great deal. One woman describes how she likes

virginity, and awkward fumbling sexual experiences that aren't perfect and everyone feels a little embarrassed. Actually, that's another good one - I like embarrassment and shame I like people being cared for and soothed and guided through sex so they find it enjoyable, and also two equally inexperienced people trying to figure out how this thing works! * I like discomfort emotionally, like because of embarrassment, or because they don't really want to do this sex but feel they should/have to, or discomfort physically, like awkward sex where neither is totally comfortable or because their partner is teasing them and not letting them come until their arousal becomes quite uncomfortable. * I like pretty realistic stories about sex. Where the characters sometimes get things wrong or when they sit down and talk about what they're going to do rather than just letting themselves get swept away into a kink they coincidentally both share ...

Here, the messiness of feelings and sensations - of all kinds of awkwardnesses - become the site of interest and engagement, as well as operating as demonstrations of care and carefulness in meeting these. The complexities of realism for this woman are worth noting – her interests in 'realistic stories' do not seem to be predicated on whether the action is authentic or by its intensity, or being swept away, but by its acknowledgement that planning can be part of the scene and that things can go wrong.

For another woman it is the pull and charge of a single image which works partly because of its undecideability;

One of my favourite pieces of porn I still like a lot is just a picture of a topless red-head guy. I still can't decide whether he's real masculine or absolutely androgynous. Either way, he's so attractive, every time I see this picture I stop for a while just to look at him.

Her account suggests that a very familiar image can retain its magic, its ability to arrest her attention. We can't offer generalisations from this except to note that her motivations and her attempt to put into words her responses to the image of the redhead guy reveals the differences and complexities of being a porn consumer which are not accessible via other research methodologies. Indeed, there is a lack of really useful academic vocabulary to describe and situate this kind of account, both as an instance of media consumption and of sexual desire and experience.

Earlier research has shown how women's engagements with porn are complex and diverse. Women may 'encounter it in the context of their relationships, in their social environment,

or accidentally' and they may experience it as 'a means of arousal or education' (Sarah Ashton, Karalyn McDonald and Maggie Kirkman 2018, 346). They may see pornography as 'valuable, as detrimental, as a mix of the two, or as initiating dissonance' (Ashton et al. 2018, 344), it may be a source of 'uneasy personal enjoyment and intimate anguish' (Dana Wilson-Kovacs 2004, 8), and there may be contradictions between their beliefs, feelings, and actions in their engagements with porn (Karen Ciclitira 2004, 293).

Queer, feminist and lesbian porn have been associated with widening conceptions of sexual agency, the discovery of desires (Ingrid Ryberg 2015) and the formation of a particular taste culture amongst some feminist groups (Rachel Liberman 2015). As Katrien Jacobs (2018) notes, feminist and queer sex/porn spaces can feature as 'sanctuaries' for women, because of the way they intersect with a broader social mission of social and political reflection and engagement. Porn consumption may become a way to find 'a break from daily routines', while sharing narratives about it can function as a way of claiming sex as an aspect of feminism (Veronika Tzankova 2015). Porn designed for women can open up a space where they might fashion a way of recognising their desires and see themselves as 'beautiful, sexy, assertive, romantic, loving, worthy of loving' (Smith 2002, 226). It 'may provide an important space for engaging imagination, the body and sexuality (Smith 2013). In addition, consuming porn may be part of an 'interrelated network of sexual practice' in which consumption may be linked to 'researching, writing, and producing erotic texts' (Rachel Wood 2015) - indeed for many women production and consumption are intimately bound together (Lucy Neville 2018).

In some of our participants' accounts porn engagement is a source of political tension and of disruption between strongly felt aspects of the self:

I identify as a feminist, queer, politically 'radical'. Most of the time, I don't watch the kind of porn I'm 'supposed' to watch - the alternative, queer, collectively-made, egalitarian kind. I watch the offensive, straight-male, messy-blowjobs kind of porn. I want to find a way to talk about this within feminism, within queer circles, without being ostracized. I think that a lot of the porn I watch is offensive and degrading to women. I don't feel comfortable with it. Yet it turns me on. I want to understand this in a way that isn't shutting out parts of myself. I feel like there are a lot of feminists/queers out there who might also be turned on by things they're politically 'against'. How do we confront the realities of misogyny, racism, oppression in some elements of the sex industry without demonizing sex workers or our own right to pleasure?

Interestingly this woman is assessing herself and her own reactions both in the moments of viewing and after, so that her viewing becomes a spur to questions about broader political engagements with pornography, even if she has yet to find the space to have those conversations. Her struggle, over 'the question of sexual desire and fantasy, and their apparent potential incompatibility with political and ethical principles' (Jean Grimshaw, 1993: 145), has long preoccupied feminist philosophers as diverse as Sandra Bartky and Sheila Jeffreys. The complexities of desire are not transparent and many responses demonstrate that sexual desire can be experienced as 'profoundly unsettled, disparate and often decentred' (Grimshaw, 151). For some respondents engaging with porn featuring gay

male sex sparks a range of sexual identifications which seem impossible to specify absolutely, although the testing of oneself against representations is clear;

I went through phases of identifying as straight, lesbian, bi, kinky, vanilla, hypersexual, asexual, aromantic (and a couple of other things I haven't any labels for) over time. I started 'returning' to watching porn when I was maybe 19 or 20, and with more awareness of what I might like or not ... I have come to identify as genderqueer, or possibly FtM.

Here porn is a catalyst for exploring the precarity of sexual desires and the possibilities for developing sexual identities which runs quite counter to the accounts of sexual desire as learned through a process of indoctrination into 'properly' gendered response. Another woman describes how

I first discovered porn as a teenager. It was something 'not talked about' in my family. It was sort of thrilling to have a secret. Exploring the world of sexuality through porn was more of a research project. What do people do? It was a study of sexuality while fostering my own. Without porn I might not have realized I was a transexual.

This woman went on to describe how she now likes furry porn - not because she identifies as a furry, but because of the level of imagination evident in that kind of production. She notes, 'I find it boring (and ironically, unrealistic) to watch...actual people'. Identification, in the sense that she uses it here, is not taking up a pre-existing position, or representative of the 'actual', nor is it about relating to a fictional character, but is instead about entry into a process which may be thrilling and creative in and for itself, and which opens up 'the world of sexuality' in order to think through the self alongside representations.

As these accounts suggest, engaging with porn may intersect with politics; it can soothe or disrupt relations between different aspects of the self, connect spheres of a life or keep them fixed, atomized, held apart and isolated. And engagement is not a static 'thing' but has dimensions that extend across space - so that sexuality can be 'a world' to explore, an uncomfortable or thrilling secret, a space for learning and thinking or for wonder and being 'freaky' - becoming, across time, perhaps a project, a series of phases, a place to leave and return to with different kinds and levels of awareness.

Four Women

In this next section we look at four accounts from women to show in more detail how different sorts of interests, engagements and investments play out in the experiences of particular individuals, how these are woven together and how they comprise particular motivations to pornography. These accounts share some characteristics, but also reveal a range of engagements with sexually explicit materials. We do not claim that these portraits fully 'represent' how women in this age group engage with sexual media; instead we offer them as examples of what differing forms of engagement with pornography can look like, what they suggest about the relations of porn engagement and sexuality, and more specifically how they articulate porn engagement with

different sexual desires, practices and lifestyles.

Abby

I first came to porn at the early age of 13 while flipping through cable channels and landing on cinemax. No one else was awake so I watched it and continued watching it on the weekends after everyone went to bed until our free subscription ran out. This was my first encounter with sex and what it looked like and how it was done. I didn't view porn again until I was 18 and in college and used the internet to find free porn because I was curious and because I had enough privacy that no one knew what I was doing. I mostly look for free porn and I like stuff that is more realistic and results in real orgasms. Most recently I have enjoyed gay and lesbian porn because it seems the most realistic and the most mutually pleasurable. Even though I am straight, I find it takes too much time to find straight porn that doesn't look degrading or fake.

This account - from Abby, a heterosexual woman in the UK, describes porn as 'only a little' important, something she engages with 'several times a month'. More importantly she recounts a secretive relationship with porn, saturated with a keen sense that porn is understood as shameful by others so her interests in it must be kept away from her partner; yet, at the same time, it has real significance for her which she wishes she could acknowledge. Abby writes

I really wish the porn was more acceptable in society. I wish women were allowed to talk about masturbating and viewing porn as a healthy part of their sexuality. But because this is not so, I feel extremely uncomfortable with the thought of sharing this information with any of my close friends or even my partner.

Abby makes most use of tube and amateur sites, noting that 'the free tube sites are my favourite, because I don't want to pay for porn and because I don't want evidence that I watch porn to be laying around'. Free porn is good 'because it is untraceable'. She describes how 'it takes a long time to find something I like' because 'Most porn isn't made for women's viewing' and she normally only watches porn when she is not getting as much sex as she would like. She likes 'stories of intense arousal and orgasms' and engages with porn when she feels horny, for reconnection with her body, for recognition of her sexual interests and to see things she can't do.'

Abby's enjoyment of porn does not rely on an identification based on sexual orientation but on a notion of authentic sex which is characterized by mutual pleasure and 'real' orgasms. Her feelings about sex - chosen from the list of options provided in the questionnaire - are that sex keeps you healthy, physically and emotionally, that good sex requires communication with your partners and that sex works best when there's feelings, especially love. She distinguishes between sex and porn in this way;

Porn is only for me and sex is something different that I do to experience pleasure and connect with my partner. Porn allows me to also have my own private sexuality

separate from what I share with my partner. I would miss it if I could not view it anymore.

Ana

I first came to porn after I started dating my current boyfriend. I had read erotica since the beginning of high school (and use that as inspiration for masturbation), but had never actually looked at footage. My boyfriend was very open about his porn usage, which sparked my interest. After a couple months of torn feelings where I struggled with insecurities about his porn habits, I grew confident enough to start watching it on my own. I started off looking at the kinds of things that he liked, but eventually transitioned to my own interests. Most recently I have become a semi-regular watcher of amateur porn. I usually use Fleshbot for inspiration, or search for what I want on sites like MegaPorn, or ask my boyfriend to find me something he likes. I prefer amateur porn because it is generally less contrived and because it's more readily available.

This account, from Ana, a heterosexual woman in the US, recounts exactly the same set of feelings about sex as Abby (sex keeps you healthy, physically and emotionally, good sex requires communication with your partners, sex works best when there's feelings, especially love), but porn plays a very different role in relation to these. Noting that porn is 'quite' important for her and that she engages with it 'maybe once a week', her porn engagement is focused on partnered sex, relationship and communication, rather than being a 'secret, guilty pleasure'. Whereas Abby noted that porn is 'only for me' and should be 'untraceable', Ana's weekly engagements with porn are an open, shared part of her relationship, something she uses in Skype sex and comparable to 'a sex toy that I've purchased with my boyfriend'. She describes how porn has become increasingly important as a way of maintaining a sexual connection with her boyfriend while she is studying abroad. Porn is part of a shared intimacy and she engages with it when she feels horny, because she wants to feel horny, for reconnection with her body and to get in the mood with her partner.

Ana looks for porn on specialist sites and tube sites because these give her 'the most options to search for short clips' which are the 'most useful' in relation to her sex life. She looks to porn 'to see people performing physical acts that I later incorporate into my own mental stories.' She writes that

Porn allows me to maintain a healthy sexual relationship with my boyfriend while we are across the ocean from each other; we can continue to experience some feelings of intimacy while sharing the same porn footage, rather than struggling to remain on the same sexual page. We would struggle a lot more if I didn't have the ability to look at porn to grease the skids of things like Skype sex.

Here, the complex layering of media and technologies in order to share feeling, create intimacy and maintain a relationship emerge in detail.

Kat

Like Abby, Kat believes that sex keeps you healthy, physically and emotionally, but she also thinks that sex can get you close to who you really are, adding that 'even casual sex expands the length and breadth of intimacy you can feel with another human being'.)

I first came to porn googling 'Angelina Jolie's boobs.' I used porn to recognize my sexual identity. I didn't know any other gay or bisexual girls at the time. Later on, as I got to know my body better and got laid more frequently, it became a recreational masturbatory aid and occasional instructional guide. I used it to learn how to give a good blowjob, ideas for new positions, as a starter for kinky things. Most recently I've enjoyed it for pose references learning how to draw.

Like Abby, Kat believes that sex keeps you healthy, physically and emotionally, but she also thinks that sex can get you close to who you really are, adding that 'even casual sex expands the length and breadth of intimacy you can feel with another human being'). Kat is from the US, identifies as queer and describes porn as 'very' important. She notes that if she had to do without porn she 'would miss almost everything about it. I can't even imagine a scenario where I couldn't access porn that didn't involve Tom Hanks in Castaway style survival skills.'

Like Ana she engages with porn when she feels horny and because she wants to feel horny, but also for recognition of her sexual interests and because sometimes she has nothing better to do. For Kat, porn's importance is self-evident because of the range of benefits it offers;

Dude, why wouldn't it be? Learning new techniques, getting fun ideas, not to mention it's freakin' hot. Boyfriends are fun but get to be a chore sometimes. Porn is pure recreation.

Kat's exploration of her history with porn also emphasises the variety of its significances in her life, perhaps best illustrated by the fact she uses a much wider variety of sources and sites than Abby or Ana, citing downloads, specialist sites, indie pay per view sites, authentic sites, amateur sites, alt porn sites, erotic sites, fiction sites, and sex blogs, though she especially likes amateur sites and full length movies (the latter because 'I can settle in with a beer or two without having to worry about having to find a new video mid-session'). Her history shows how consuming pornographic materials may shift over time in relation to life experiences and the development of sexual knowledges and confidence. She usually finds her porn 'on erotic blogs like fleshbot, or by looking up quality porn distributors, reading reviews, and pirating what I think I'll like. So, kinda like how I find all the movies I don't flick my clit to.'

This last comment encapsulates the way in which Kat sees porn as integrated into her life and as similar to other aspects of it. While Ana relates porn to sex and her partner, Kat's sense of porn's connection to her life is much broader. When she says that she would miss porn it is in the same way as she would miss 'my job, my music, my friends, or my hobbies'.

Nicole

Living in Israel and identifying as bisexual, as well as 'switch, slut, and a filthy pervert in general', Nicole offers a very enthusiastic account of what she calls 'positive porn'. While she categorizes pornography as only 'quite' important' and something she accesses 'maybe once a week', her description of it as 'life-changing' suggests its significance to her is high.

I started in hand-drawn porn, comics and stuff, over the internet. this was a huge passion of mine for a lot of years. my male friends tried to explain to me this isn't the 'right' porn, but I didn't listen to them. I felt there was something more interesting, more clever about this porn. recently I discovered positive-porn, which changed my life upside down. Together with exiting the closet, it's helping me exploring new things about myself!

Like Kat, Nicole compares porn to other aspects of her cultural life, saying she enjoys porn like she enjoys things 'like architecture, art, or political articles'. It is also related to fun and the sheer pleasure of looking. Like Kat, she believes that sex can get you close to who you really are, and that porn sex feeds her imagination, adding that '(I love people hence I love sex.)'. Her motivations for engaging with porn are that she wants to feel involved in a world of sex out there, for recognition of her sexual interests, to see things she might do and to see things she can't do. She uses alt-porn and erotic sites, porn she describes as 'maybe geeky porn' and that she considers to be 'positive':

I'm a big fan of <http://sexisnottheenemy.tumblr.com/>. Most porn I see is from there. If I really like something, I'll see what else comes from the same source. Why sexisnottheenemy? because the quality of the pictures, because the many different genders and sexual preferences and practices, because I can't put the people I see there into boxes. Because it makes me happy!

The aesthetics of this website are important but so too its mixing of genders and practices. It is important to Nicole that this site resists categorisations, offers surprises and that that makes her happy. There is something here that illustrates the sheer exuberance of difference, the variety and the challenges that some forms of pornography offer their viewers. Nicole feels very positive about sex and sexuality and she wants to see that reflected in the representations she seeks out.

Conclusion

Qualitative audience research has been used to explore what pornography means to women (Ashton et al. 2018, 335), with its roots in a cultural studies tradition which sees media texts and their consumption as complex, significant and deserving of proper investigation much of this work has refuted the ascription of pornography as only and always harmful, trivial, or trashy. Such research takes a different starting point from approaches to spectatorship which appear to 'know in advance' how audiences operate and offering speculation rather than consideration of the 'real conditions of viewing' (Barker 2009, 287, 294; see also Barker 1998). In this way simple binary notions of 'active' or 'passive' audiences are complicated, as is the idea that people's cultural lives are characterised entirely by either 'structure' or agency'.

Our research follows this tradition, and shows how, even in a small selection of responses, there is variety of understandings, significances and orientations to pornography that stand outside the dichotomous conceptions of liking or disliking pornography. Engagements with porn are also complex. This challenges us to develop our ways of making sense of how people engage with porn. In this conclusion we sketch out some of approaches to sexuality and audiencehood that we think are useful for this.

Firstly, our data suggest a view of sexuality as a 'sphere of life' (Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott 2010, 42); a 'realm' (Eve Sedgwick 1990; 1991) constituted across material experiences, fantasy and media; or a 'field' - 'a zone of knowing and imagining how sex works, rewards and punishes, and of relations between bodies, selfhood, and social and cultural permissions and forbiddings' (Barker 2014). Being part of an audience may inform our experience of the sexual realm in important ways – providing opportunities for discovery, secrets, the exploration of a world of sexuality. This can be understood as a process that extends beyond any given encounter with media, and one to which people bring expectations, information and their social and personal histories, something that people return to over time with new experiences and viewpoints, and something they develop careers and histories with. It may involve 'committed, devotional engagements—the moments when being in an audience matters deeply to people'. It may include experiences that are transitory and others that 'leave behind talking points, needling incomplete recollections, recallable pleasures, dream materials, points-of-connection with other parts of our lives'. Being part of an audience can be 'a part of how we conceive of ourselves. Our identities are engaged in multifarious ways in our media/cultural engagements' (Barker 2006, 124-6); whether this takes the form of pure recreation, being 'freaky' with yourself, puzzling over what something means, negotiating the correspondences or disjunctures between pleasure and politics, trying out different sexual identities, or developing tastes.

By listening to what consumers have to say we can see that porn can provide a space for playfulness understood as 'a mode of sensory openness', 'a drive towards improvisation', experimentation with 'what bodies can feel and do', and 'exploration through which the boundaries of norms and bodily capacities may be reworked, and possibly expanded'. It may take on particular importance in relation to the experiences of sexuality as 'spectrums of variation that unfold in experimental play geared towards bodily intensification and pleasure' (Paasonen 2018, 140). The opportunities porn offers for the staging of stories and situations, the pleasures of watching, for conjuring intensity, chemistry, want or a certain kind of mood, for toying with ideas or pursuing varied sensations and states may also be part of the 'sense-making of sexuality', a way of 'talking to' sexuality, and an ongoing self-engagement that informs sexual expression and sexual self-understanding (Joseph Goh 2017). Engaging with porn is part of both sense-making and sensory processes – how it 'means' and 'matters' – and involving 'emotionally charged understandings and educated emotions' (Barker 2006, 124-6) - for many of the participants in our study.

The processes of sensing and sense-making that permeate being part of an audience and inhabiting the realm of sexuality are also 'ordinary'. Understanding audiencehood as part of everyday experience, as Andre Cavalcante, Andrea Press and Katherine Sender (2017) suggest we should, has been important in showing how media consumption is a 'contradictory assemblage of structure/agency, pleasure/pain, routine/rupture, and the

ordinary/extraordinary'. In the same way, if we see sexuality as located within the everyday, we can appreciate how it is part of the fabric of routine day-to-day social life, and may be enmeshed with other, non-sexual aspects of our lives (Jackson and Scott 2010, 162). While novelty, transgression and the spectacular certainly have their place in people's encounters with porn, it is also clear that engaging with porn can be related to a much wider range of processes that 'are often "mundane"' and not particularly well illuminated in terms of whether they can be considered liberatory or transgressive (Wood 2017, 152). Thus, while engagements with porn may provide extraordinary moments, or transfigure the ordinary – opening up experiences that are special, thrilling or even life changing – they may also be experienced as very much part of 'the ongoing negotiation of everyday, mundane, conventional sexual lives' (Jackson and Scott 2010, 162). They are embedded in routines, often part of a pattern of everyday recreation, allied to a range of leisure activities, to habits associated with particular relationships or routines around the body.

Understanding porn engagement as a potentially important site for the exploration of sexuality as a sphere which is developed across media, fantasy and materiality; as a form of sense-making a material experiences, fantasy and media and as an operation of play. Our respondents offer complex stories of discovery and exploration of images and stories interwoven with their own experiences of becoming sexual and orientations to being sexual. Sexual representations occupy a multiplicity of roles and relations in everyday life and its attendant experiences of sexuality. For some women, sexually explicit materials offer important ways of connecting with their bodies, while for others they facilitate planning or preparing for sex with a partner, help them to develop imaginative encounters, or become part of an exploration of sexual preferences and identities. Pornography can represent comfort, shame or joy. It may be felt as something to be hidden or it can be shared. For some it is important to maintain a separation from everyday life but for others its integration has particular resonance. While most public and political commentary condemns pornography as having little value, consumers offer much more complex stories of the ways sexual representations might be generative for them. As we have seen in this brief foray into the responses of women who engage with pornography, porn may be life-changing, a more mundane part of 'pure recreation', a space for an intimate 'private sexuality', a resource for getting onto 'the same sexual page' as another, or a way of pushing the boundaries of what counts as sex.

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