

Pornography and Violence Against Women

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“Porn is a story about women... and, as such, any problems with porn are for women to sort out” (Boyle 601). In feminist discourse, much research and debate has been dedicated to the topic of pornography and how it affects women. For instance, the “Sex Wars” and divided feminist movements have attempted to distinguish whether female sexuality is hindered or empowered by pornography and all the gender roles wrapped up in it. In this manner, the issue of pornography occurs in a feminist sphere, steeped in theory and largely ignored by the vast population that engages in it: men. “The focus on women’s experience can – however unintentionally – extend the pornographic reductionism that porn = women. This is not (just) a woman’s issue” (601).

It is the goal of this paper to address how pornography negatively impacts not only women but men as well. By examining pornography and how it pertains to male sexuality and patriarchal systems, the issue of how men are influenced by pornography becomes apparent. In a society that deems pornography as normal and something in which all boys engage in as part of sexual awakening, men learn that eroticized submission is an attainable reality. As a result, pornography contributes to violence against women by normalizing male dominance, fostering feelings of aggression in a sexual context, and creating a tool of abuse in intimate partner relationships as well within the porn industry.



The link between pornography and violence against women can be examined through many different lenses. In order to understand the magnitude of the issue and how it penetrates our society, many different narratives have to be explored. The broadest is theory and social construction. In Part I of this paper, I will explore the construction of male sexuality and how pornography plays into this creation. In Part II, I will take theories linking pornography to increased violence and verify them by presenting data collected in research and experiments. Lastly, in Part III, I will move away from experiments and data and focus on the real-world experiences of women. By examining women within pornography, as well as victims of sexual abuse at the hands of pornography, theory and research will intersect to demonstrate the harmful

effects of pornography on both male and female sexuality.

Finally, according to the community-accountability model, pornography’s contribution to and reinforcement of violence against women occurs within multiple levels of the community. From the individual level, males learn about their sexuality through viewing pornographic images (Douglas, Bathrick, and Perry 251). Within the primary community, they are socialized to view sex as something they are entitled to (Hooks 75). Finally, at the macro community, mass media in the form of a multi-billion dollar porn industry instructs them to view women as submissive (Douglas, Bathrick, and Perry 251). In this manner, the macro community mirrors back and

reinforces the idea of male dominance that men internalized as children. The scope of pornography and its ability to shape male sexual attitudes, from society right down to the individual, from theory to lived experience, from controlled experiment to personal abuse, is best demonstrated in the context of the community-accountability model.

Part I: Theory, Male Sexuality, and Patriarchy

In order to understand pornography's function, the construction of male sexuality must first be understood. According to Bell Hooks, children learn from mass media about their sexuality more than any other source (Hooks 77). These outlets usually portray sexuality in outdated patriarchal modes, in which the male dominates the woman into a position of submission (77). At the same time, our society continues to operate on the assumption that sex is something men have to have, and that men will "go mad if they cannot act sexually. This is the logic that produces... 'a rape culture'" (78). During adolescence, boys learn that while they are meant to prove their manhood through their sexuality, they must simultaneously repress it. Thus, they are exposed to the paradox that makes patriarchy's promise of sexual dominance impossible to attain: the promise of constant sex, because he "has to have it", can never be fulfilled because women do not operate on the same assumption. Hooks explains this conundrum when she states:

Encouraged to relate to sex in an addictive way... which says "he's gotta have it," males must then adjust to a world where they can rarely get it, or never get it as much as they want, or where they can get it only by coercing and manipulating someone who does not want it, usually someone female. (82).

Against this backdrop of anger due to broken promises, men have to find a different outlet for their sexual despair.

Faced with the need to reaffirm his manhood in a patriarchal system, men grapple to find an outlet to express their sexual dominance. Because men can never satisfy their sexual appetite, sexual obsession becomes normalized through media such as pornography.

Michael Kimmel verbalizes how porn appeases their lust by explaining, "pornography can sexualize that rage, and it can make sex look like revenge... Most men feel powerless and are often angry at women, whom they perceive as having sexual power over them: the power to arouse them and to give or withhold sex" (Hooks 83).

Yet the harm that this fantasy causes women is not contained to just the male's imagination. According to Catherine MacKinnon, an anti-pornography legal scholar, pornography harms all women because it defines women as subordinate to men. Pornography violates and possesses women, and by sexualizing this concept male dominance becomes perceived as sexy (Stark 290). According to MacKinnon's theory, pornography works by first endorsing and sexualizing women being harmed in order to please men sexually. As a result, woman's status becomes reduced in relation to their male counterparts. At the same time, these engendered depictions become sexual fantasies for men. They become engrained in men as normalized, and their actions towards women – from sexist remarks to rape – help perpetuate a world in which men are superior (Stark 294). To MacKinnon and Hooks, pornography feeds into a larger system of male supremacy that harms women by keeping them inferior to men. As a result, violence against women occurs because one sex must assert dominance and control over the other.

Part II: From Theory to Research

While theorists such as MacKinnon and Hooks have laid the groundwork for understanding the link between pornography and violence against women, they are operating on broad assumptions that do not address individuals. While they contend that male dominance subjects women to harm, this alone cannot prove that pornography influences men to act violently. Pornography and its link to violence against women must be proven by actual research. By examining four different studies which all found a correlation between pornography viewing and increased aggression or violence, theory comes closer to explaining individual behavior.

In a study conducted by Ana Bridges, Robert Wosnitzer, Erica Scharrer, Chyng Sun, and Rachael Liberman, the researchers studied the level of aggression within best-selling pornography videos. They divided aggression into two categories: physical (pushing, biting, gagging, choking, mutilating, etc) and verbal (name calling, threatening physical harm) (Bridges et al. 1072). By studying a sample of fifty of the most popular films over a 7-month period, the researchers analyzed 304 scenes and determined the level of aggression within them (1070-1071). The researchers found that only 10.2 % of the scenes did not contain any aggression. Furthermore, women were the targets of aggression 94.4 % of the time, and were significantly more likely to be spanked, choked, and gagged than men (1076).

The sexuality portrayed in these movies was almost always aggressive. The most important finding in this study pertains to the idea of the “rape myth”, in which women being dominated through pain at first resist but eventually express enjoyment. This study did not observe rape scenes, but did note that almost all of the aggression inflicted on women was done so with their enjoyment and without resistance. This is more troubling than the rape myth, because it makes aggression invisible and the viewers become desensitized. Viewers come to see domination as something that women find pleasurable and enjoyable (1080). Through pornography, sexual violence becomes pleasurable to the viewer.

Therapemythwasalsoanissuethatcameupinastudy examining sexual violence in mass media. In an experiment where subjects (both male and female) were exposed to nonaggressive pornography over an extended period of time (4 hours and 48 minutes a day for six months), startling attitudes towards pornography emerged (Donnerstein and Linz 613). After the duration of the experiment, subjects were more likely to: tolerate violent pornography; less supportive of sexual equality; and more lenient towards punishment of rapists. Even more troubling was the way male subjects increased their sexual callousness towards women. For example, they were accepting of statements such as “A man should find them, fool them, fuck them, forget them,” and “a woman doesn’t mean no until she slaps

you” (Donnerstein and Linz 613). This study demonstrates the worry that pornography feeds into a rape culture, in which women secretly desire to be raped or do something to encourage rape. By normalizing this myth, pornography in this study perpetuates male sexual dominance over women.

The 1970 Presidential Commission on Obscenity and Pornography concluded that there was no relationship between erotic exposure and increased aggression, and more importantly, sex crimes. This conclusion was later challenged by the research findings of Edward Donnerstein (Donnerstein 277). Donnerstein wanted to examine the effects of media presentations on aggression towards women (286). In his study, 50 % of college females reported some form of sexual aggression, and 39 % of the sex offenders in his survey indicated that pornography had something to do with the crime they committed (287). In his closing, Donnerstein urges “there is ample evidence that the observation of violent forms of media can facilitate aggressive response, yet to assume that the depiction of sexual-aggression could not have a similar effect, particularly against females, would be misleading” (287).

Finally, the theory of pornography as a tool for learning about male sexuality was demonstrated in a study conducted in Italy. Though the article was studying Italian teenagers, it notes the correlation between American teenagers as well. The study states that in the United States, 42 % of young internet users have viewed online pornography (Romito and Beltramini 1). The researchers explored pornography as a teaching tool for sexual violence, stating, “women and children who have been sexually abused often report that the perpetrators used violent pornography to normalize particularly humiliating and violent practices to “teach” them what to do” (2). The research also found that boys were “5 times more likely” to view porn than their female counterparts, adding to the idea that watching pornography is part of socially constructing adolescent masculinity (10). Another group investigated by this study were teenage girls who view pornography. The research found that “among girls who watched pornography, those exposed to ... sexual violence were more likely to watch

material that included violence against women than those not exposed” (11). The researchers again turn to the idea of pornography as a teaching mechanism by abusers, explaining that young women might watch pornographic material in order to “normalize” their abuse (11). The researchers also add that studies indicate that perpetrators of sexual violence use pornography to teach children what to do (11).

In the four studies above, different methods and experiments were employed to explore different aspects of pornography. Pornography was found to foster a rape culture over extended periods of viewing, sexualize aggression into a pleasurable experience for women, increase sexual violence towards women, and teach victims to “normalize” their abuse. As a result, these studies demonstrate that the ideas put forth by theorists are not abstract but actually grounded in reality.

As a result, the lived experience of women who suffered as a result of pornography speaks to the percentages and numbers put forth in surveys and experiments. Finally, by



examining the individual experiences of women, the link between theory and how it plays out in real life demonstrates the harmful effects of pornography.

Part III: Pornography, Violence, and Effects on Women

Janet Hinson Shope, in her research on the effects of pornography on abused women, painfully observed: “The women depicted in pornography are often silent, their mouths covered, gagged, or filled. In our attempt to empirically validate the harm of pornography, we also have silenced women’s voices. Women’s accounts... are minimized and/or ignored” (Shope 69). Shope touches on one of the pitfalls of

studying violence against women. By focusing on theory and case studies, we often forget the consequences of the subject in which we are studying. Violence against women, and how pornography plays a role at multiple levels, is ultimately about listening to the women who have endured the abuse we are trying to understand. Shope attempts to return to this idea in her article by studying the role pornography played in 271 battered women’s relationships. In her findings, of the women who were sexually abused, 58 % said pornography played a role in their abuse (66). In a similar study examining the use of pornography on abused women, out of 198 abused women, 40.9% reported use of pornographic material by their abuser (Cramer et al. 327). In another study, one out of four abusive men made their partners participate with them in their use of pornography, by either watching it or simulating

the performances. These abusers were measured as being the most violent out of all abusers (329). It can be easy to forget the horrible experiences behind these numbers. In contrast to controlled experiments and studies conducted by researchers, these findings reflect the actual abuse being

inflicted on women through pornography. While pornography in and of itself might not have caused their sexual abuse to begin, it contributed to it during the duration of their abuse. Shope’s retelling of women’s accounts about the role pornography played in their abuse makes it abundantly clear that pornography is not just a harmless imitation of erotica:

When I was 10 or 11, my stepfather made me watch two movies and then do what the women had to do in them. In one of the movies a lot of men raped a woman, and did whatever else they wanted to her. The other movie showed a woman being cut up alive after the men had sex with her. My stepfather threatened to do the same to me if I told anyone what he was doing to me. That is why I would rather have died than tell anyone. (69).

Shope implores people to remember that, “if we examine pornography as one of many factors that makes sexual violence more probable, then we are more open to hearing women’s experiences and asking relevant questions” (69). By moving away from the abstract and remembering that pornography functions as a tool of abuse every day, the link between it and violence against women becomes impossible to differentiate.

Finally, it is important to remember that the woman behind the screen is also experiencing abuse at the hands of men. The pornography industry makes no attempt to hide the abuse women suffer within the industry; instead, by acknowledging the problems in the system, the industry places the responsibility on the individual woman. In other words, women are aware of the risks and are responsible for creating boundaries or themselves within pornography (Boyle 596). Because women in porn are seen as doing “work” and therefore providing their “consent”, any abuse on the set is chalked up to the requirements of the job she was paid to do (Boyle 600). However, women who work in porn are constantly subject to male coercion, because the boundaries they set for what they are comfortable with are constantly pushed. For them, “no” has little meaning, and producers will verbally berate women until they give in to a scene that they had not consented to (598). Horrendous abuse such as anal tearing and ripping of orifices is often justified as occupational hazards. Boyle attempts to display empathy for these women when she pleads:

I want you to imagine through your own body the physical experiences that Kami Andrews describes in her blog. Now think about that experience being filmed and sold... We do need to challenge the pornographic narrative that porn performers are a breed apart and assume that porn performers are – in other aspects – like us and that their bodies and minds matter. (601).

It is tempting to simplify pornography as something that only affects those that choose to partake in it. Patriarchy would have us believe that it is just a harmless fantasy, and that women can find sexual liberation in using their bodies to earn money. However, it is impossible to overlook the harm that pornography causes to not only the women who face abuse because of its existence, but to all of society that partakes in it. For men, it traps them in an unfulfilling sexuality, in which women never live up to the expectations they were promised. By teaching young boys that women are sexually subordinate – objects that can be violated and humiliated for sexual enjoyment – pornography creates a violent view of sexuality. For women, the effects are much more dangerous. From the theoretical standpoint of submission to the personal experiences of pornography-induced sexual abuse, there is no denying that it touches every woman’s sexual experience in some way. What does it say about our society when the biggest entertainment industry profits off the abuse of women? The silence that surrounds pornography speaks louder than words.



Emily Gutierrez is a junior in the Emory College of Arts and Sciences. She is a double major in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and English Creative Writing. Her areas of interest in Women’s Studies are feminist theory, sexualities, media depictions of the body, and male intimate partner violence. She has incorporated many of these ideas into her writing as well. Last year, she was awarded the Grace Abernathy Scholarship by the Creative Writing department for her promise as a fiction writer. She is currently the Editor-in-Chief of the Emory Pulse, and the co-founder of the Black Dog student reading series. This semester, she was chosen by Salman Rushdie to participate in his Master Craft fiction class. On campus, she has been involved in events such as Relay for Life and Take Back the Night, and has attended many functions held by the non-profit The Partnership Against Domestic Violence. A sister of Gamma Phi Beta sorority, Emily plans to go into non-profit after graduation with the hopes of going on to get a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing.

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