Behind Closed Doors: Unpacking College Students’ Complex Relationships With Pornography Consumption

Samantha K. Saucier
University of Maine

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors

Part of the Sociology Commons, and the Women's Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors/357

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.
BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: UNPACKING COLLEGE STUDENTS’ COMPLEX

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PORNOGRAPHY CONSUMPTION

by

Samantha K. Saucier

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Sociology, Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies)

The Honors College

University of Maine

April 2018

Advisory Committee:
Jennie Woodard, Adjunct Professor of Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies, Honors College
Amy Blackstone, Professor of Sociology
Jordan LaBouff, Associate Professor of Psychology, Honors College
Heather Lakey, Adjunct Professor of Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies
Rebecca White, Adjunct Professor of Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies
ABSTRACT

This thesis is a quantitative and qualitative study of University of Maine students attitudes and consumption habits of pornography. It contains a literature review of anti-pornography feminism from the Second Wave, as well as an overview of sex-positive and sex-critical theories of pornography from more recent years. The goal of the thesis is to understand how sex-negative and/or sex-positive ideas have or have not permeated college student’s understanding of pornography. Over 800 students were surveyed about pornography consumption through the Psychology Department’s Fall prescreen. 4 students from the survey, who all happened to be women, were interviewed about their relationships with sex and pornography. The findings of this study suggest that young adults (18+) have nuanced and multifaceted relationships with pornography. Men reported watching pornography at a higher frequency than women, but men and women both reported that they do not believe pornography is similar to real life sex. The interviews suggest a significant level of porn literacy and gender consciousness among consumers. It was found that participants were more likely to have sex-positive ideas about their own consumption habits than others’. Additionally, this research is significant because it serves as a pilot study for future sex-positive models in pornography research. The study also provides a lens through which feminism can be more inclusive of sex workers’ rights.
For Lori: friend, partner,

life coach, Pisces.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1
Literature Review 7
Methods (Survey) 34
Results (Survey) 35
Discussion (Survey) 39
Interviews 41
Methods (Interviews) 43
Results (Interviews) 44
Discussion (Interviews) 69
Conclusion 84
Works Cited 91
APPENDIX A: Survey Questions 94
APPENDIX B: Interview Guide 97
APPENDIX C: IRB Approval 98
APPENDIX D: Full Interview Transcriptions 100
Author’s biography 150
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 32
Figure 2 35
Figure 3 36
Figure 4 37
INTRODUCTION

On December 8th, 2017, feminist icon Gloria Steinem led a protest against a Pornhub pop-up shop in New York City. Pornhub, the most popular Internet source for pornography in the world, opened the shop for a few weeks with the hopes of establishing a more permanent business in the future. The store sold sex toys and branded merchandise with the Pornhub logo and also offered a space where people could make their own porn and stream directly to the website’s homepage. Steinem, alongside a dozen or so other activists from the National Organization for Women (NOW), protested outside the shop with signs that read “Pornhub sells incest” and “Pornhub has no place in NYC.” Their main concern was that Pornhub encourages violence against women. Steinem claimed that Pornhub was “the source of the poison that is in our system.”\(^1\) The protest itself was small, but organized. Steinem’s famous face does not require overwhelming numbers to support her message. Her own presence, alongside the well-placed podium and easily garnered media attention, are enough to made headlines. And they did.\(^2\)

In the shop, Steinem reportedly asked a worker why they were selling handcuffs, and what did those handcuffs have to do with free will and democracy?\(^3\) Handcuffs are perhaps the most visible and accessible element of BDSM. It is common knowledge that handcuffs and other sex props are comparatively popular items in the bedroom. The sex

---

2 CBS, New York Daily News, and Huffington Post were among just some of the news networks covering this story.
3 Grasso, “Gloria Steinem,” The Daily Dot.
toy industry makes $15 billion a year worldwide. Steinem’s question exemplifies the obtuseness of the anti-pornography movement, which has long espoused the same narrative that Steinem did against Pornhub. Choosing to use sex toys is exactly an exercise in free will, just as is choosing to watch pornography.

Steinem has long been a leader of the feminist anti-pornography movement. She is also arguably the most prolific face among feminists today. What does it say about feminism when a leading activist, such as Steinem, and an organization, such as NOW, publically decry pornography as a source of violence against women in our culture? This is the same exact ideology that Steinem has touted since the 1970’s, an idea with which she has collaborated with conservative lawmakers and activists to further the anti-pornography movement. Their argument is easy and compelling, and designed in a way that makes any opposition seem complicit in violence against women. However, breaking down that argument will reveal that it actually punishes the autonomous and consensual sexual activity it seeks to encourage.

While Pornhub, like most corporations, is not the epitome of ethical business practice (they got their start by pirating the content of sex workers), they represent how the vast majority of people access pornography. In 2017, Pornhub saw an average of 81 million visits per day, with 28.5 billion annual visits, and transferred enough data to fill the memory of every iPhone in the world. This is proof enough that a lot of people are

---

5 Steinem was not protesting Pornhub’s stealing of sex worker content. She was protesting pornography and a company that provides it to the masses.
watching pornography. If Steinem is correct, are all of these people consuming content that makes them accepting, and even perpetrators, of violence against women?

Women in the industry say it is not so simple. Porn performer and activist Lorelei Lee commented, “When Steinem says sex work is the invasion of our bodies she is saying that our consent does not matter. When you deny our ability to consent you deny our ability to talk about our actual rapes.”7 Steinem is not the only person speaking about porn and sex work in this way. Anti-pornography sentiments are quite common. In February of 2018, comedian Chelsea Handler tweeted, “There is an entire generation of children whose first memory of their President is a man who supports child molestors, wife beaters, Russian hacking, and porn stars.”8 Sex work and pornography are so often demonized as social corrupters promoting violence to the masses. In reality, this is a one-dimensional ideology that reinforces essentialist ideas about gender.

Sex work-inclusive feminism, like Lee’s, offers an alternative to the anti-pornography, anti-sex work platform that Steinem and other boast. Additionally, porn scholars are beginning a new age for understanding pornography holistically and academically. Sharif Mowlabocus and Rachel Wood stress the need for a more nuanced research model because hegemonic anti-porn arguments “build on a particularly entrenched form of ‘common sense,’ loosely based upon anecdotal evidence and partially researched statistics, while drawing on hegemonic assumptions of sexual ‘purity’ (and the

---

7 Lorelei Lee (@missloreleilee), “When Steinem says sex work is the invasion of our bodies she is saying that our consent does not matter. When you deny our ability to consent you deny our ability to talk about our actual rapes,” 2/14/18, Tweet.
8 Chelsea Handler (@chelseahandler), “There is an entire generation of children who’s first memory of their President is a man who supports child molestors, wife beaters, Russian hacking, and porn stars. It is our responsibility to make that a memory and not a consistency. We all have a moral obligation. Keep going,” 2/10/18, Tweet.
purity of sexual subjects).”9 Again, the simplicity of anti-pornography arguments are persuasive because they appeal to “common sense,” but lack sound, bias-free academic evidence.

The realities of consuming porn are diverse and nuanced in such ways that it cannot be a homogenized experience. With the sheer volume of porn content accessible today, it is increasingly difficult to pinpoint exactly what pornography is or is not, and even more difficult to understand what porn “does” or not. The word pornography has become an umbrella term for the drastically varied sexually explicit content available to anyone with Internet access. It is imperative now more than ever to understand pornography and its consumption in all its complexity.

This understanding cannot be achieved when approached from a place of blame. Pornography has been the scapegoat of not only anti-pornography feminists, but also religious conservatives and “family values” groups for some time. Their policing of sexuality only hurts those who are already marginalized for their consensual sexual practices. For decades, anti-porn groups have claimed that pornography is a threat to “healthy” sexuality. They have done this without the necessary research to back up that claim, and have instead relied on conceptions of normative sexuality to shape what should or should not be a part of someone’s sexual behavior. This thesis argues that a sex-positive lens is essential in order to truly understand what it means to be a consumer of pornography.

The framework of sex-positivity examines the notion that capitalist, patriarchal societies often privilege some sexual behaviors over others, and punish those who

---

practice what does not fit into the boundaries of “normal” sex. Typically, abnormal sex is that which does not involve procreation. Sex-positivity, in practice, means dismantling systems of power that oppress sexually marginalized communities such as women and gender minorities, queer persons, and sex workers. It also means discussing sex in a stigma-free manner in order to acknowledge the social nuance in which sex exists. Some of the most stigmatized people in the United States are people who disobey the norms of sex, such as sex workers, whose sex for pay cannot deny the role of pleasure in a sexual exchange.

For the same reasons, pornography is often a source of social shame. Unashamed, pleasure-based sexual activities violate the idea that sex should be procreative. Consuming pornography is spurious to reproduction, and thereby abnormal enough to solicit social shame. This thesis will explore how sex-negative, anti-pornography scholarship has affected cultural discourse surrounding pornography, and how actual consumers of pornography experience shame, gender, pleasure, and sexuality in relation to that discourse.

Over the course of this thesis, there are many opportunities to be introspective about how pornography intersects with one’s own life. Pornography is an intimate subject, and for this reason it can feel quite personal to read about. This thesis adopts a sex-positive lens through which to see pornography. Such a lens involves approaching pornography from a place of curiosity and open-mindedness, which allows a more complex exploration of what pornography is and what it means to those who engage with it.
In order to move porn scholarship toward a more nuanced and holistic research framework, Susanna Paasonen suggests "an analytical perspective that is able to account for the force of porn to move us in embodied and unpredictable ways, and one that does not start from fixed assumptions or received knowledge concerning what pornography is, what pornography does or what it can do." Porn research must model a desired shift in mainstream ideology by approaching scholarship with a willingness to accept nuance, even (perhaps especially) if we feel uncomfortable with some aspect of pornography. Sex-positive porn scholars today work to integrate this perspective into the broader academic scope of pornography scholarship, and this thesis attempts to contribute to that integration.

The first section of this study is a literature review which provides an overview of the history of anti-pornography feminism since the 1970’s. The review outlines major thematic narratives of anti-pornography scholarship and activism, which inform the research questions explored for the rest of the thesis. This section examines how the rise of contemporary sex-positive and sex-negative ideologies about pornography and sex are rooted in Second Wave concepts and advocacy.

The following sections display the methods and data collection for two rounds of research. The first round was a quantitative survey that asked respondents about how often they consume pornography and how similar they think pornography is to sex in real life. The data showed that an overwhelming amount of women reported never watching pornography while men watched more frequently, and that generally the respondents felt pornography was unrealistic.

---

The second round of data collection involved four qualitative interviews with respondents to the survey. The interviews investigated participants general feelings and attitudes surrounding pornography, particularly their awareness of how their gender may affect their experiences as a porn consumers. The interviewed were analyzed for themes of sex-positivity and negativity that were outlined in the literature review. The analysis explores how the participants’ exemplify both autonomy and pleasure-based relationships with pornography, which directly contrasts how anti-porn scholars conceive of young people’s relation to porn. Ultimately, the interviews demonstrate why a nuanced and sex-positive understanding of pornography is necessary in porn scholarship.

The concluding part of this thesis discusses a hedonistic-based model of understanding pornography consumer behavior. Additionally, the research suggests that young people possess porn literacy in ways that are time and context specific to porn today. This exploration of pornography is further relevant in the scope of pornography as a whole because of its implications for more sex-positive perspectives on people who create pornography. Analyzing a stigmatized area of sexuality through a sex-positive lens can assist understanding of the privileging of sexual behaviors. Examining stigmas about pornography ultimately lead to evaluating stigmas about sex.
Historically, contemporary porn studies is linked explicitly to anti-porn scholarship. The first journal exclusively dedicated to pornography, *Porn Studies*, only published its first issue in 2014. Although the field that now calls itself porn studies is young, pornography research has been prevalent much longer. Porn studies is distinct from the whole of pornography scholarship in that it typically contains cultural criticisms from feminist and media theory. Other scholarship is largely anti-porn focused or quantitatively driven, while *Porn Studies* has so far shown more attention to theory and social critique while maintaining a sex-positive (or sex critical) framework. This literature review outlines some of the major pornography scholarship since the 1970’s, including a history of anti-pornography feminist ideologies and the rise of sex-positive scholarship. This review defines various sex-negative and sex-positive ideas about pornography have may have bled into contemporary conceptualizations of the pornographic landscape.

**History: The rise of anti-pornography feminism**

The sexual revolution of the 1960’s illuminated many issues of sexual health and oppression. Although this period brought light to many systemic problems, many feminists activists were left feeling like the promises of the revolution were not met. Sexual liberation did not undo sexual oppression, and left much to bedesired in terms of how men treated women. Feminists pushed back against the idea that sexual liberation began or ended with a willingness to have sex. Pro-sex ideologies about sexual liberation lacked substantial critique of the hegemonic heterosexuality and rape culture that feminists had long known were integral to sexual power structures. Consciousness raising
groups cultivated a feminist awareness of the pervasiveness of rape and violence in women's lives, and many feminists began to prioritize anti-violence against women activism in their work. A series of rhetorical shifts (outlined below) evolved the anti-violence against women movement into the feminist anti-pornography movement and the pornography wars of the 1970’s and 1980’s.

Post-sexual revolution, feminists groups such as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAM) sought the cause of men’s violence. They were concerned with aspects of society that may normalize violence against women and thereby teach men that it was acceptable. At this time, there was a shift in feminist thought from being anti-violence against women, to specifically combatting images of gendered violence and sexualization in the media. The group Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) addressed these concerns in the latter half of the 1970’s. WAVPM believed that violent images in films, advertisements, and pornography led to violence against women. WAVPM expanded these ideas to the belief that sexual explicit material (and sex work) taught men that women were “sexual playthings.” They posited that heavy gender coding in the media informed men that gendered violence was normal or expected.

By 1979, the group Women Against Pornography, founded by prominent feminists such as Gloria Steinem and Susan Brownmiller, made a conscious shift in rhetoric that aimed the movement exclusively against pornography. Pornography served as a unifying entity to rally against, which brought together feminists and non-feminists (or people not primarily concerned with violence against women) alike who were willing

---

to push the narrative that pornography was an enemy that created a socio-sexual script for violence against women.\textsuperscript{12} WAP member Robin Morgan sums up the ideology of this movement with the claim, "pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice."\textsuperscript{13} WAP utilized Catharine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin's anti-pornography ordinances, which portrayed pornography as a violation of women's civil rights,\textsuperscript{14} to reorient their movement solely to pornography (even nonviolent porn) as a single purveyor of violence against women.

Mackinnon and Dworkin’s anti-pornography work had tangible outcomes outside of the academic realm, attracting right-wing support and playing a significant role in the Attorney General’s commission on pornography in the 1980’s.\textsuperscript{15} This is one of the reasons why these two scholars are so visible against the more hidden history of anti-violence against women activism in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Mackinnon (a legal scholar) and Dworkin (a radical feminist writer) are often the faces of the feminist anti-pornography ideas because they represented the movement as a whole in the public eye due to their collaboration with conservatives. While these two influenced the scope of pornography-related studies and activism for decades to come, it is also essential to understand the anti-pornography ideas of Mackinnon and Dworkin’s predecessors to conceptualize how this movement molded porn scholarship and attitudes of today.


Mackinnon, Steinem, and other anti-pornography feminists chose to define pornography not in terms of obscenity but of content. They claimed that pornography is that content which specifically depicts violence against women.\textsuperscript{16} Sexually explicit content that does not fit this description was classified as erotica. Anti-porn feminists of this time measured violence irresponsibly broadly. A slap or choke and a rape scenario each constituted violence according to WAP scholars and movement leaders. This is problematic because they only considered how violence in pornography may appear from an audience perspective. They did not factor in the role of consent in porn production, nor did they suppose that an audience member may be aware of that consent. Choking should be coded the same as a rape scenario. Their inexact understanding of pornography has shaped conceptualizations of sexually explicit media to this day.

WAVPM and WAP were both concerned with the implications of readily available sexually explicit content in the media. Many feminist activists believed there was a direct correlation between this material and violence against women.\textsuperscript{17} One of the first ever Take Back the Night marches, led by WAP leader Andrea Dworkin\textsuperscript{18} and others, went through the sex district of San Francisco to protest pornography’s encouragement of violence against women.\textsuperscript{19}

Not all feminists of this time period were against porn, and many were very careful to make the distinction. In fact, what is now known today as sex-positivity was

\textsuperscript{16} Jennifer Mather Saul, Feminism: Issues and Arguments (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), chap. 3.
\textsuperscript{17} Susan Brownmiller, Against Our Will: Men, women, and rape (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1993).
\textsuperscript{18} Take Back the Night is a speakout and march for survivors of violence. TBTN is widely accepted as a successful demonstration of feminist praxis aside from this example.
\textsuperscript{19} Andrea Dworkin, “Pornography and Grief,” in Take Back the Night: Women on pornography, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: W. Morrow, 1980).
born during this time thanks in part to the scholarship of Gayle Rubin. Rubin’s “charmed circle” (see page 39) is still used today by porn scholars to discuss the social location of pornography. Feminist anti-censorship accounts of the time were resistant to WAP’s insistence on the eradication of sexually explicit materials altogether. Pro-sex, or sex radical, feminists (terms that have since evolved into sex-positive) felt that anti-porn movements shamed sexuality and reinforced socially constructed sexual roles. Anti-porn/pro-sex tensions of the time were deemed the Feminist Pornography Wars for a reason. Pressure to be against pornography was intense, and many felt conflicted to join forces with WAP because they worked with conservatives to push the anti-pornography agenda, compromising their other feminist values such as abortion access, queer rights, and racial justice.

At the height of WAP, anti-porn feminists were understood to be in the majority. The focus on the negative effects of pornography on society laid the foundation work for how we conceptualize pornography today, even though consumption, distribution, and content of pornography have all drastically changed since the 1980’s. Below are outlined some of the major thematic narratives that have come out of the anti-pornography scholarly framework, as well as more recent shifts in scholarship that challenge increasingly outdated perceptions of pornography and sexuality.

---


21 Varda Burstyn, Women Against Censorship (Vancouver: Douglass and McIntyre, 1985).

Cause/effect narrative:

Anti-pornography feminists of the late digital age believed that the consumption of materials wherein either violence and/or hypersexualization of women was present would cause men to think they had a right to access women’s bodies. Many feminists dedicated themselves to anti-pornography work in the hopes of eradicating violence against women. This idea permeates much of the theory and research about pornography that exists today.

The cause/effect narrative is the hyperfocus on pornography’s effect on its consumers, usually with the hypothesis that pornography causes negative ideas or behaviors related to sex and sexuality. Anti-porn scholarship and advocacy portrays pornography as the root-cause of larger societal issues such as misogyny, rape, violence against women, and premature sexual activity. Historically, the academic focus on the “effects” of pornography has been supported by problems of correlation vs. causation in psychology studies and, of course, the scholarship of authors such as Mackinnon and Dworkin.

Anti-porn scholars’ (such as Mackinnon) concern with the “effects” of pornography translates into the perspective of pornography as “real” rather than a suspension of reality. Mackinnon’s theory of pornography claims that porn depicts real sexual acts (in the sense that they are actually happening) and is therefore just as real as those same sexual acts that take place in everyday life outside the context of pornography. She claims, “the image of the person [in pornography] is still that person. And the sexual use of the person in the materials by the consumer is a real, actual, sexual

---

act for the user.” For Mackinnon, pornographic images are real to their consumers, even though they are fabricated by the actors in them. Mackinnon is concerned with the implications of violence, particularly rape, that this statement implies. By this logic, a consensual depiction of sexual violence is equal to actual sexual violence.

Mackinnon was concerned with pornography before the birth of the Internet, which radically shifted the norms of pornography consumerism. Pornography produced during the traditional age of media differs from the pornography created after the rise of the Internet. The Internet’s revolutionary facilitation of media-sharing accounts for much of this difference. Pre-Internet pornography, to level with the anti-porn movement of the 1970’s and 1980’s, was often limited to what could be found in an adult video store or was shown in a porn theater. Porn being less accessible also means having less diverse material.

However, this does not mean that pornography must be the cause of violence against women. The works of Mackinnon, Dworkin, Brownmiller and others from WAP may no longer fit into pornography scholarship because of the changes brought forth by the Internet. WAP’s research and theory now may better serve as an example of historical feminist understanding of pornography if pornography was indeed vastly different and primarily violent before the Internet. However, since their targeting of pornography was exclusionary of sex workers and punished consensual sexual behaviors deemed “abnormal,” WAP’s seemingly outdated ideas cannot be dismissed as a sign of the times. These anti-porn ideas nevertheless permeate both cultural and social science understanding of pornography and reinforce sex-negative approaches to pornography.

consumption. Although the pornography they challenged is now historical, anti-porn ideologies are far from gone.

Stuart Hall provides insight into how receiving messages through the media may actually function. In “Encoding/Decoding,” Hall critiques the theory of media communications as a loop wherein creators of media produce a message that is delivered to the consumer, who receives that message in its intended and purest form. Instead, Hall suggests that messages in media are “encoded” and then “decoded,” or interpreted, by consumers of that media. He claims that messages must be interpreted by consumers before they can have an “effect” on them.  

His theory can be applied to pornography consumption, as well. The potential space between encoding and decoding are essential in the case of pornography because it stresses that images from porn are not necessarily blindly received by consumers and adapted into their sexual scripts. Applying Hall’s theory to pornography consumption captures the nuanced relationships between porn creators, distributors, and consumers. This perspective relates more closely to how porn scholars of today conceptualize pornography.

A few decades after Mackinnon and the pornography wars, pornography scholars such as Feona Attwood and Linda Williams reflect on the consequences of the anti-porn advocacy that has shaped policy and culture. They posit that anti-porn arguments undermine the multi-faceted reality of pornography and paint porn as a one-dimensional mass entity, when this cannot be true due to the sheer volume of pornography in existence as well as the many ways pornography is consumed and understood.

Pornography, in other words, is vastly more complex than in virtually all aspects of anti-porn critique.

In order to move away from causation-based rhetoric, Attwood advocates for a “radical contextualism” of pornography that understands porn as time and context-specific phenomena that evolves fluidly with society. She argues that pornography must be studied specifically, not broadly, and with attention to pornography’s location in society and academics. What is conceptualized as pornography is more accurately deemed “pornographies,” especially in relation to how the Internet has transformed the distribution, consumption, and variety of content. “Pornography” is more useful as an umbrella term in order to underscore its diversity of both content and context.

The cause/effect narrative is present in the discourse of many issues that, like pornography, are taken to be hyper-personal. Discussion of pornography may feel so intimate or uncomfortable that opinion forged from experience can override research or theory as the ultimate source of truth. Anti-porn scholars created a seemingly visceral tie between violence against women and sexually explicit media that remains strong enough to feel like common sense today. But why would consensual acts agreed upon and depicted between actors in pornography translate into non-consensual acts in real life? If porn consumers (in research these consumers are usually men) are more primed for violence or aggression, but the porn they watch does not contain non-consensual acts, then porn is not causing their violence.

---


The anti-porn feminist response to this phenomenon would be that sexually explicit material promotes sexual objectification, which allows violence. However, this assumes that the natural response to viewing sexually graphic content is violence, and that men are only a step away from abusive or violent behavior - an essentialist argument that reinforces socialized gender roles. If it is known that women do watch porn, why is there no fear of them perpetuating this same violence? Additionally, the supposed inherent connection between porn and objectification assumes a negative outlook on sexually explicit content and sexual expression.

**Anti/pro-porn dichotomy**

The anti/pro dichotomy refers to two polarized camps: anti-porn and pro-porn. Anti-porn, which has already been discussed at length here, encapsulates the ideologies of those persons and institutions which believe pornography causes harm, is immoral, and/or should be eradicated from society in order to protect some group (women or children, for example) or idea (such as sexual purity) from violence, promiscuity, or other perceived danger. Pornography consumption is frequently framed as an addiction (or, sometimes, a public health crisis) in current anti-porn discourse. There is not only a lack of supporting evidence to suggest that excessive porn consumption resembles addiction, but also the evidence that does support porn consumption as addiction develops from a combination of negative biases and limited experimental methods.30

Pro-porn groups advocate that pornography is generally good and should continue to exist for any multitude of reasons. Some pro-porn advocates claim that pornography

---

prevents violence rather than causes it\textsuperscript{31} or should exist because it is a form of free speech.\textsuperscript{32} Pro-porn ideas differ from sex-positivity in that it lacks the social critique necessary to understand the context in which porn and sex exist and interact. While issues of free speech, for example, are important to porn scholarship, a multifaceted understanding of pornography is essential to the nuance of censorship issues.

Pro-porn camps are sometimes critiqued for being too uncritical of pornography and the socio-sexual context in which it is consumed and created. Pro-porn ideology can be categorized under \textit{sexual libertarianism} - a hands-off sex-positivity wherein diverse sexual experiences are encouraged rather than shamed, but also are not assessed for hierarchies and privileges outlined by previously mentioned sex-positive and sex-critical thinkers like Gayle Rubin and Feona Attwood.

The sexual revolution of the 1960’s produced similar outlooks on unstructured sexual liberation, which many feminists resist because sexual liberation does not dissolve sexual oppression. One way sexual libertarianism manifests is through pro-sex and, in this case, pro-porn, advocacy. The women’s “empowerment” model presents underdeveloped pro-sex ideas of sexual liberation, but with a proto-feminist twist.

\textbf{It’s “empowering” for women}

Women’s empowerment strives to elevate women to levels normally reserved for men. It is the close cousin of the “girl power” movement, which seeks to indoctrinate the idea that “girls can do anything they want to do.” Similarly, women’s empowerment is about incorporating feminist notions of gender equality into all spheres of life. Women’s

\textsuperscript{31} Pauline Bart and Margaret Jozsa, "Dirty books, dirty films, and dirty data," in \textit{Take back the night: Women on pornography}, ed. Laura Lederer (New York: W. Morrow, 1980), 204-217.

\textsuperscript{32} Saul. \textit{Feminism Issues and Arguments}, chap. 3.
empowerment works similarly to a reclamation; a group’s adoption of ideas, symbols, or words previously used to denigrate said group. However, as mainstream media appropriates feminist imagery and language for capital gain, empowerment is typically encouraged without changing the social structures that created inequality making empowerment necessary in the first place. The goals that empowerment seeks to accomplish will never come to fruition if the systems claiming they support gender equity make no structural changes to support women.

The praxis of women’s empowerment begs the question, “can [social experience normally considered problematic for women] be empowering for women?” often without changing that experience at all. This question is frequently framed to be about women’s sexuality or sexual performance. “Can stripping be empowering for women,” or “Can makeup be empowering for women?” The same is asked of pornography. The question suggests that pornography on its own is not empowering for women, and that empowerment would make pornography consumption a superior experience for women. It gives the appearance of feminism but not the structural changes necessary to be feminist. Such questions also fail to consider women’s agency and social position in these acts. Which women does the question “can pornography be empowering for women?” ask about? Consumers, creators, or producers of pornography?

Porn scholars Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood explain how questions of women’s empowerment get in the way of understanding the relationship between

---

33 For example, corporate entities and businesses have adopted feminist language into their mainstream marketing. Companies such as Dove and Aerie boast women’s empowerment, but they do so in the context of selling their products that have historically been used to tell women that they need to change their appearance. Switching the narrative does not change anything about the companies or products, but merely reinforces the relationship between women and gendered marketing.
pornography, its consumers, and society at large: The women’s empowerment narrative reinforces the anti/pro pornography dichotomy, although its rhetoric gives the appearance of a more nuanced discourse. “Being pro-sex or less than antagonistic to sexual media is to rely too heavily on the potentials for ‘being empowered.’”\(^\text{34}\) Attwood and Smith cites this construction of empowerment as the result of an increasingly neoliberal view of sexuality.

Questions of women’s empowerment can set up false ideations of what a truly feminist society may look like. When it comes to sexuality, it is irrelevant whether or not a woman is empowered by something. For many people, sex is a reality, not a tool of political or social subversion. A sex-critical lens advocates for the understanding of pornography as historical, cultural, and sometimes patriarchal phenomena, while also defending a positive stance on sexual pleasure.

It’s not what women want

With the push for porn as empowerment comes a complementary narrative: women are naturally disinterested in what pornography has to offer. If pornography is the mirror image of men’s sexual fantasies, it is the opposite of what women’s sexuality represents. Anti-porn scholars curate the notion that sexual desire naturally differs by gender, deepening the chasm between two already dichotomized perceptions of sexuality. Dworkin took this sentiment so far as to claim that pornography is the “new terrorism” and the “propaganda of sexual fascism.”\(^\text{35}\) As demonstrated previously by Bronstein, antiporn feminists of the Second Wave often aligned femininity with a predisposition for

\(^{34}\) Attwood and Smith, “Anti/critical/pro porn studies.”

romance and softness, rather than the corporeal focus of pornography. Noted masculinities scholar Michael Kimmel perpetuates this idea in his book, *Guyland*, by claiming that women are not interested in pornography because “women’s sexuality in real life...usually requires some emotional connection.” Anti-porn feminists did not invent this framework; much of the literature from this time assumes patriarchal conceptions of sexual expression. The assumption that pornography disenfranchises women, just as the assumption that pornography empowers women, obscures the potential for nuanced exploration of women’s sexuality while reinforcing the gender binary.

**The collapse of porn & men’s desire**

It would be in vain to claim that pornography (both the media content and the industry) is exempt from patriarchal influence or ideology. Anti-porn ideology frequently positioned pornography as a tool of men’s sexual desire, created by and for men to aide men’s sex lives. Elizabeth Cowie notes that in response to pornography creators catering to men, there is also exists an ideological collapse of pornography with men’s desire. To assume that men who watch pornography will cause harm (of some kind) to women or children is to assume that “the images of pornography - which, by any definition, involved very varied kinds of scenario - ‘represent’ male sexual attitudes and desires: that the two are the same.” That is, men’s desires are perceived as synonymous with the content of pornography and vice versa. Cowie also inputs that this collapse further

---

assumes that consuming pornography will not only “‘teach’ men these attitudes but also will teach them to expect or to re-create the same scenarios in actuality.”

The historical relationship of pornography to men, perceived or actual, envelops the construction of men’s sexuality as hypersexual and “primal,” as well as goal-oriented and ignorant. Anti-porn feminists in WAP and WAVPM adopted these patriarchal ideas about gendered sexual differences, elevating the idea that men themselves were responsible for women's oppression, rather than a patriarchal system of interlocking oppressions. They saw men’s sexuality as fundamentally different than women’s sexuality, and posited that pornography was a direct and clear representation of what men want out of a sexual experience. Carolyn Bronstein sums up this perspective:

"Pornography violated the female body and the nurturing, life-affirming female values that many feminists prized. It was the perfect expression of male sexuality: violent, genitally focused, and emotionally detached.”

This essentialist argument maintains prevalence in much of anti-porn scholarship. Under the pretense that men are inherently not only more sexual but also more sexually aggressive, there is an ignorance of the systemic powers that create and reinforce patriarchal violence, placing the blame for violence solely on individual men. While individuals should be held accountable for violence they commit, that violence can only be prevented by dismantling essentialist theory and praxis and the systems they reinforce.

Men are also perceived as incapable of intelligent consumption of pornography through this collapse. Emotional intelligence has been used throughout anti-porn

39 Morgan, “Theory and Practice.”
40 Bronstein, Battling Pornography, 40.
advocacy in an attempt to measure the “morality” of pornography consumption.\textsuperscript{41} However, advocating for emotional intelligence as a prerequisite to pornography consumption is not a realistic approach to porn reform. Nor is it sex-positive to say that only people with a certain amount of emotional intelligence should be allowed to consume porn.

The collapse of porn with men’s desire prohibits nuanced understanding of human sexuality. Hyperfocus on the effects of pornography creates this conflation between what men want from women with the content coming out of the porn industry. However, porn content experiences diversification everyday, making it increasingly more difficult to define pornography as one entity. This diversification can largely be attributed to the Internet as a primary medium for pornography.

\textbf{Pornography and the Internet}

Today, anti-porn rhetoric continues to manifest in theory and research, while more sex-critical scholarship works to push back against decades of sex-negative work. With the rise of the internet, concern with the “pornification” of culture has added to mainstream scapegoating of pornography. “Pornification” implies that pornography is responsible for the sexualization of non-porn media content, as well as the commodification of sexual voyeurism and what Laura Mulvey called the “male gaze.”\textsuperscript{42} Anti-porn sentiments of today can be traced back to the idea that there exists a normative sexuality that can and should be regulated.\textsuperscript{43} With pornography in abundance on the internet, pornography is now framed as a health issue that leaves people (again, typically

\textsuperscript{41} Attwood and Smith, “Emotional Truths,” 41-57.
\textsuperscript{43} Attwood and Smith, “Emotional Truths,” 41-57.
men) susceptible to porn addiction and desensitization to both sexual imagery as well as real life sexual encounters.\textsuperscript{44} However, the idea that porn (and sex, for that matter) is addictive is a controversial issue among health professionals.\textsuperscript{45}

Before the Internet, people accessed porn by visiting adult entertainment shops and video stores and buying issues of magazines such as the infamous \emph{Playboy}, featuring fully nude women and sexually explicit content. Without Amazon Prime, Pornhub, or any of the multitude of sites that the Internet brought forth, one usually had to interact with another person in order to obtain pornography. Now, pornography exists within the privacy of our own laptop and phone screens, anytime we want it, and often for free.

Concern for child exposure of pornography has long been on the front lines of anti-pornography work, particularly activism. Because the Internet makes pornography more accessible, concern for the effects of childhood exposure of pornography crop up more frequently in porn discourse. The Internet has shifted societal relationship to pornography in multiple ways that necessitate porn studies to evolve as quickly as pornography does.

The relationship of society to pornography is time and context specific. In recent decades, the rise of the Internet has drastically changed many aspects of the social world. Pornography is no exception to this. Not only did the Internet make fertile the grounds for pornography consumption and distribution like never before, but also the pull of


\textsuperscript{45} It is generally agreed that porn or sex addictions are not addictions in the way that some drugs can induce because they do not illicit the same physiological response. Supposed addictions to porn, sex, or relationships are often seen as coping mechanisms for other psychological issues. Kirsten Weir, “Is Pornography Addictive?” \textit{American Psychological Association} 45, no. 4 (2014).
pornography drew people into this new virtual space, making the Internet more popular and appealing.\(^46\)

In addition to increased accessibility, the Internet brought with it an opportunity for a dramatic change in the pornography industry itself - in a multitude of ways. First, websites dedicated entirely to pornography were born. The most popular of all these sites today, Pornhub.com, began by pirating the work of smaller porn corporations and sex workers and putting it on Pornhub for free. In 2012, 80% of everyone in the world watching Internet porn was watching on Pornhub, or one of its smaller sister sites.\(^47\) Stolen films are still a primary source of content for Pornhub and virtually all mainstream porn websites. Because of the piracy, porn makers struggle to make profit, giving power to larger and more mainstream porn companies that can sustain themselves with subscriptions, an issue close to many sex worker activists.

In addition to the rise of porn websites, the market for porn production also evolved. Pornographic film has existed for as long as film itself has, and porn websites have been curated around the existence of the pornographic video. However, the new ability to livestream video to an Internet audience has opened up a new field of sex work: webcamming. People who work in this part of the industry make money by livestreaming themselves (often on specialized websites) to public and private audience while engaging in cybersex. This process differs from other Internet pornography in that it is 1) live and 2) is a simpler exchange of goods and services where the person camming is typically in charge of all of their own work and interacts directly with the consumer. This work is


inextricably tied to pornography, however, because these livestreams are frequently stolen and uploaded to sites like Pornhub, where a non-live audience consumes it as they do other pornographic content. In this sense, watching this content after it has been uploaded to a porn site creates a similar viewing experience to other porn, except it has been made free to the public.

Porn production can also be individualized. Homemade, sexually explicit videos can easily be shared to a large, anonymous audience both for free or for profit. Since homemade porn has no affiliation with the pornography industry, it is more likely to represent different tastes and perspectives than a professionally made film. Additionally, homemade porn is not necessarily created for profit, and may reflect only the ideas of the person(s) in the video. Not-for-profit porn and homemade content complicates the idea of pornography as an entity and once more necessitates the use of the word “pornography” as an umbrella term. These developments demonstrate how the Internet has diversified the pornography market and made content more accessible.

It is important to note that the supply and demand relationship of pornography consumption and distribution is not what it may seem. Higher quantities of porn, or of certain types of porn, does not have to indicate that those pornographies are in higher demand. Seemingly higher quantities of pornography does not necessarily correlate to a higher demand for pornography post-Internet.48 This is especially true because large porn conglomerates such as Pornhub are sometimes a middle man of pornography, which filters and molds what kind of porn is accessible and visible to the global sphere or Internet porn consumers. Greater access and higher volumes of pornography did not

---

concretely arise out of a consumer desire to consume pornography at higher rates. Instead, this phenomenon may be indicative of a number of explanations such as the nature of the Internet as market, or of the necessity of porn creators to produce higher quantities of content to make up for their lost profit due to piracy.

The current level of porn accessibility is a frequent marker of concern in research. Some of this concern arises from anti-porn ideas about what kind of material is being viewed, and what the consequences are for their consumption. The growth of the pornography industry with the boom of the Internet means that pornography itself has become more diverse. Accessibility to this wealth of material means that consumers could be watching a multitude of types of pornography.

Since pornography is not one entity, many anti-porn arguments, such as the notion of empowerment or the collapse of porn with men’s desire, dissolve upon consideration of transgressive porn. Transgressive porn is that which challenges the more (at least seemingly) heteronormative narratives. Queer porn, “feminist” porn, homemade porn, and countless more genres are arguably pushing the boundaries of what is normally conceptualized as pornography. In other words, transgressive porn disrupts cis-heteronormativity. As the porn industry diversifies and websites like Pornhub continue to thrive off of freely uploaded content, accessible porn has greater potential to be transgressive now more than ever. Uniformity in pornography has become a thing of the past, if it ever existed.

Not only is pornography non-generalizable as whole, it is also difficult to quantify consumption experiences when scaled down. There are many variables that can effect porn consumption habits, some such as age, gender and, religiosity, are more quantifiable
than other factors related to porn such as emotional state, user-friendliness of a porn site, or perceptions of sex and sexuality. Factors of the self can shift perceptions of porn content as a whole. For example, a person who feels uncomfortable with the idea of having sex *may* be similarly uncomfortable with pornography. Conversely, porn content can shape both perceptions of the self and of pornography in general. For example, a porn consumer could pick up on pornographic norms about body hair, which could shift their perspective on their own body hair and its role in sexuality.

One’s interpretation of pornography, both intentional and unconscious, can vary the consumption experience to the extreme. Interpretation, in this case, refers to the individual contextualization of pornographic content that varies from consumer to consumer. Pornography consumption can be both a highly individualized and personal experience, which means multiple people can experience a single pornographic film in multiple ways. The question becomes one of how people are interpreting the porn they watch, and what that interpretation means for pornography consumption in the age of the Internet.

**Porn as education**

The cause/effect narrative lends itself to scholarly focus on pornography as a source of education. Asking “what does pornography do?” will yield answers, especially in quantitative research. Anti-porn feminist concern is with pornography as a normalizing discourse or as a sexual script from which pornography consumers learn that women are hypersexual playthings for men. Pornography as education implies that pornography teaches something to its consumers. However, studies on what that something might be are inconclusive.
This is not to say that porn consumption is exclusively an individualized experience; many studies prove that watching porn is primarily done out of sexual arousal, pursuit of pleasure, and for masturbatory aid.\textsuperscript{49} However, pornography has become increasingly diverse, making unique and personalized pornographic experiences more possible and accessible. The assumption of universal reactions to porn materials becomes progressively irrelevant as more specialized perspectives and measures of porn consumption phenomena become necessary.

People have different reactions to different porn images, and these reactions are still subject to change day by day, person to person. We cannot pin down what one image or film means according to reactions to that image or film. Pornographic content is not only time and context specific, but also subject to the individual and unique experience of consuming that content in a given time.\textsuperscript{50} Watching pornography may not yield the same reactions based on the time and context both in which the pornography was created and of the person watching. Concern with pornography consumption often focuses on responses of arousal, yet there are many other ways to experience porn whether arousal is present or not. For example, one may watch a pornographic video and experience boredom, disgust, sadness, laughter, joy, engagement or detachment, and/or any other host of responses, physiological or emotional.\textsuperscript{51} Similarly, one may consume pornography for a number of nonsexual reasons, including boredom, frustration, pain management, or curiosity.\textsuperscript{52} Interpretation plays its role in diverse experiences of porn

\textsuperscript{50} Attwood, “Reading Porn”
\textsuperscript{51} Paasonen, “Between Meaning and Mattering,” 6.
\textsuperscript{52} Bryant Paul and Jae Woong Shim, “Gender, Sexual Affect, and Motivations for Internet Pornography Use,” \textit{International Journal of Sexual Health} 20, no. 3 (2008).
consumption. Additionally, people’s feelings about their bodies and sex change how they interact with pornographic images.

Anti-porn ideology manifests in much of pornography research due to effect-focused regression analysis. Correlation vs. causality is frequently muddled due to preconceived notions about porn’s “effects.” Although many studies show that pornography and other sexual phenomena coincide, there is a lack of conclusive evidence to prove porn makes these other phenomena happen. A major critique of quantitative research on pornography is that it focuses on negative or neutral effects, rather than potential positive outcomes. These outcomes may include but are not limited to: a cultivation of sexual tastes, knowledge of diverse sexual practices, and a removal of stigma from pleasure-based sexual activities.

Fantasies

In addition to the idea that pornography teaches its consumers about sex, porn scholarship has had a long history of discussing the implications of fantasy and its role within pornography. Anti-porn scholarship typically focuses on how pornography informs (usually men’s) fantasies, while sex critical theorists have attempted to uncover what fantasy actually is in the first place, as well as discuss the relationship between fantasy and pornography.

---

55 Alan McKee, “Humanities and social scientific research methods in porn studies,” Porn Studies 1, no. 1-2 (2014)
56 Barker, “Psychology and Pornography.”; Cowie, “Pornography and Fantasy.”
Mackinnon and other anti-pornography feminists of the time argued that pornography was real in the sense that the actions occurring on screen were actually happening. For these scholars, there was a strong connection between what happens in porn and what happens in real life sex because of porn. The collapse of men’s desire with pornography is ever present in the anti-pornography feminist discourse of fantasy. The “realness” of pornography even translated into rape scenarios portrayed in porn. Mackinnon and Dworkin equated rape scenarios with actual rape for the reason that it was being portrayed as such on screen. This logic fails because pornography (especially the pornography WAP was watching in theaters in the 70s and 80s) is created in a controlled environment where the actors consent to the scene work before it happens.58

Concern with effects of pornography stems from the idea that pornography is being perceived as “real” by its consumers. Anti-porn scholarship has attempted to measure emotional intelligence in order to paint pornography as a unit of powerful persuasion that unconsciously teaches people what sex is supposed to look like.59 Recent scholarship has researched the applications of Paul J. Wright’s sexual script model (known as “3AM”), which refers to three A’s: Acquisition, Activation, and Application, wherein each step furthers the process of taking an acquired idea or act from pornography and implementing it in one’s own sex life.60 While some research has used this model to study how pornography may cause nonconsensual sexual behavior,61 the model can also

58 There are exceptions to this, of course. Accounts of nonconsensual sexual situations have been encountered by porn people of all kinds. However, to equate a fake nonconsensual scenario with real-life rape 1) leaves a lot to be desired by actual survivors of sexual assault and 2) does not make sense outside of a strictly theoretical framework, which it was not constructed in in the first place.
59 Attwood and Smith, “Anti/critical/pro porn studies.”
be used to understand how pornography is involved in the reinforcement of seeking pleasure-based sexual behaviors.

What is fantasy, anyway? How significant is the relationship between porn and fantasy for a consumer? How does porn function as a fantasy genre? According to Linda Williams, fantasy is not a “wish-fulfilling narrative” but is rather “marked by the prolongation of desire.” Williams defines fantasy as a cinematic setting rather than a narrative. It is a place where we go to engage in surreal scenarios, rather than a sexual script that always translates to real-life desire and/or actions. Fantasy is a suspension of reality, not an extension of it. In general, porn relies less on conventions of realism than film and other media. This is one of the reasons Williams posits for why pornography is deemed as “low culture.” Porn is typically created to stir a bodily response, a purpose which can be thought of as “lesser than” in a society that privileges the workings of the mind over the body - especially when it comes to policing sexual behavior. Society has a tarnished view of pornography precisely because it is designed to evoke a sexual response, and anti-porn scholars often do not acknowledge this social bias within their own work. Here, Rubin’s charmed circle is once again useful in understanding the hierarchy of sexual behaviors and oppressions.

---

The dichotomy of porn as real and porn as succinctly unreal clash upon the question of authenticity in pornography. Authenticity, in this context, refers to how elements of pornography (such as scenario, sexual acts, physical appearances, sounds, emotions, or dialogue) appear realistic or unrealistic to the consumer. With the assumption that most porn consumers know that what they are watching is a construction, fantasy and authenticity are not necessarily distinct entities.\(^6^3\) Seeking “authentic” pornography may be an extension of fantasy, but does not necessarily indicate fantasy to be representative of ideas and acts that are desired in real-life.

Anti-porn scholars and activists have recently turned their concern to pornography’s effects on young people. The narrative of pornography as a public health crisis continues both as a cultural discourse and in law. Meanwhile, sex-positive porn scholars explore the relationships between pornography and embodiment, fantasy, and autonomy. These tensions of discourse merit several research questions to uncover the realities of how young people experience porn. This study will explore questions such as: How are college-aged people experiencing pornography both abstractly and viscerally? In the age of the Internet, which rapidly and constantly shifts both what pornography is and how we access it, how has pornography and its consumption changed from what it was at the time of WAP, and have ideas about pornography evolved or remained the same since this time? Because of the careful cultivation of negative ideas about pornography that remain present in the United States, this study seeks to understand young peoples’ consciousness of sex positivity or negativity in their own attitudes about porn and sex. This study investigates how college students are perpetuating or resisting sexual/gender essentialism in their attitudes towards pornography through a multi-step research design.

64 In April 2016, Utah Governor Gary Herbert passed a bill that considers pornography a “public health hazard.” (SCR009). It was the first state bill of its kind. As of February 2018, Republican state representatives in Florida have done the same. Arkansas, Tennessee, South Dakota, and Virginia have passed similar legislature while Pennsylvania and Kansas have tried but not succeeded. (Josh Marcus, “Florida Republicans are trying to declare porn a public health crisis,” Vice News, 1/19/18. https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/a3n87g/florida-republicans-are-trying-to-declare-porn-a-public-health-crisis
METHODS (SURVEY)

Data was collected in two rounds using quantitative and qualitative methods. Over 800 University of Maine students were surveyed about their porn consumption habits. From this pool, respondents were selected to participate in an interview exploring in-depth their relationships with pornography.

All participants took part in the University of Maine Psychology Department’s Fall 2017 pre-screen, which asks respondents to answer questions about a variety of topics that researchers may use to recruit subjects for future studies. All participants in this survey were students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Maine. In addition, all respondents considered for the interview round were between the ages of 18 and 25 and enrolled as a student at the University of Maine. The total pool of the survey was 828 respondents. In the survey, 41.8% of respondents self-identified as male and 58.2% as female.

Pre-screen subjects were asked two questions on likert scales. They were asked, “How often do you watch video pornography on the Internet?” (PornWatch) and “Indicate how you feel about the following statement: Generally the sex in pornography is similar to sex in real life,” on behalf of this study (PornReal) (see Appendix A for full questions and response options).
RESULTS (SURVEY)

Participants who identified as men reported watching pornography at a much higher rate than the women respondents (see Figure 1). Participants, on average, reported watching porn between a few times a year and 1-2 times a month (2.62, 1.63, see Figure 2). Further, participants reported that they disagreed that pornography is similar to real-life sex (2.51,1.43, see Figure 3).

While there were a small number of survey respondents that did not identify themselves as “male” or “female,” that number unfortunately was not large enough to include meaningful analysis of their data. For this reason, only those who selected male and female will be a part of this analysis.

Overall, men reported watching porn at a significantly higher rate than women. An average of 3.8 indicates men consume porn between 1-2 times a month and 1-2 times a week. The 1.75 women’s average indicates that many of the women who responded never watch porn, or only watch a few times a year.
Further examination into the frequencies of porn consumption by gender will reveal the skew of the women’s results. The gendered difference in means is driven by a difference in distribution. Many more women than men reported not watching porn at all. The median response for men was “1-2 time a week.”
When controlling for only those respondents who do consume pornography, the average for women becomes significantly higher. However, although these averages are potentially significant, analyzing for only people who consume porn removed 295 women and only 28 men, meaning this changes almost nothing about the men’s analysis and only reports statistics from less than 200 women, which slimmed down the potential participants for the interview portion of the research. The averages for just those respondents who consume pornography were 4.085 for men and 2.94 for women. Cutting out all those women makes this analysis confounded by gender. Such a small sample of women limits the scope of the analysis.

For the second question, the vast majority of respondents indicated that they either strongly disagree, disagree or somewhat disagree that sex in porn is similar to sex in real life. An additional 156 people selected “neutral.” These numbers are similarly
presented when broken down by gender. The difference in average between men and women’s responses (2.64 for men, 2.42 for women) is statistically significant, but not necessarily meaningful because they are only differentiating in the space between “disagree” and “somewhat disagree.”

Figure 4
Responses to the pre-screen survey displayed an overwhelming gender divide in pornography consumption wherein men were much more likely to consume pornography than women. Men also consumed pornography at a higher frequency than women, 61.7% of whom reported never watching pornography. This is a stark contrast from the mere 9.2% of men who reported never consuming porn. In total, the 41.1% of respondents who claimed to never watch pornography was higher than expected.

The overall averages for PornWatch and PornReal showed that respondents consume pornography at a relatively infrequent rate and generally disagree that pornography represents “real-life” sex. While women consumed pornography at a lower rate than men, they generally agreed with men about how realistic or unrealistic pornography is to sex in real life. Even if men and women are consuming pornography at different rates, the similarity in response to PornReal suggests that choosing to watch porn has little to do with seeking realistic sexual scenarios. Additionally, consuming pornography more frequently does not necessarily indicate believing it is more realistic than people who consume it less often. Further exploration into this could dissuade the narrative that men who consume pornography at high rates lack emotional intelligence.

It is worth noting the subjectivity of both of the terms “sex in porn” and “sex in real life.” It was not the intention of this study to understand specifically what kind of porn people are watching and how that relates to either the sex they are actually having or, more generally, the way they believe sex to look in real life. Rather, the juxtaposition of these two concepts demonstrate that whatever porn people are watching (or not...
watching - this sample includes those who responded that they never consume porn) is overwhelmingly dissimilar to their understanding of sex in real life.

While the responses to PornReal by gender were similar, men did report a slightly higher average. These differences, though small, are statistically significant, meaning that the men who responded were more likely to believe porn was similar to real life sex than the women respondents, although only slightly so. These averages, however, come from a sample wherein a significant portion of respondents did not consume pornography at all. This is still true when controlling for only people who consume porn, but because that eliminates so many women from the analysis, PornReal is no longer statistically significant for women.

Since this study is primarily concerned with the relationship between pornography and those who do watch it, it may be more fruitful to turn the attention to only those respondents, although understanding people who do not watch pornography and their perceptions of it also merits further study.
INTERVIEWS

The second round of data collection utilized qualitative interviews to focus exclusively on respondents who do consume pornography. The intention of this study was to explore how college students interact with the themes of sex positivity and negativity surrounding pornography outlined in the literature review. Qualitative interviews were a central part of the research model for multiple reasons. First, pornography is an intimate topic. Research on pornography is likely to bring up personal and/or emotional experiences and feelings for participants, which deserve to be explored in depth, at the discretion of the participant. Pornography is also taboo, which inhibits conversation about these personal experiences. This taboo quite possibly also inhibits qualitative research itself. Additionally, hearing nuanced stories of pornography and allowing them the space to be complex, troubled, positive, and problematic should be at the forefront of pornography research. Qualitative interviews creates this space in a way that embodies feminist praxis.

Interview questions were constructed in order to guide the discussion toward both detail-oriented accounts of pornography consumption, as well as an exploration of general feelings and attitudes about pornography. The intention of the interview round was to investigate how participants interpreted their own relationship with pornography versus how they perceived other’s relationships with pornography, and to examine the tension (or lack thereof) between those two perceptions for themes of sex-positivity and sex-negativity. This analysis will follow the interview data.
Methods (Interviews)

There were 828 respondents to the survey. To be selected for an interview, survey respondents must have indicated that they consume pornography at least 1-2 times a month, which was 374 respondents. Participant selection was done midway through prescreen data collection, so the number of viable interview candidates was lower. All options for the porn realism question were acceptable for the interview round.

25 qualifying survey respondents were selected for contact. The 25 respondents were grouped in sections of 5 differing consumption rates and opinions on porn realism that corresponded to similar habits of a person in each sequential group. These differing habits were labeled 1-5. For example, a respondent classified as a 1 in each group may watch pornography about 3 times a week or more and somewhat disagree that porn is similar to sex in real life. A 5 in each group may watch porn about 1-2 times a month and somewhat agree that porn is similar to sex in real life. A true random sample for this study is impossible because participants self-selected to partake in the interview. Pseudo-random selection attempted a representative sample of respondents. The goal was to have at least 5 interview participants that all had differential porn consumption rates and opinions on porn realism. The 25 respondents were contacted in rounds of 5 to ensure this variety. The classifications of the 4 respondents were 1, 2, 3, and 5.

Interviews took place in a closed room and were audio recorded and later transcribed. Participants were asked multiple open-ended interview questions such as “Why do you think people watch pornography?” and “How do you define the term ‘fantasy’?” The interviews were structured so that the participants could be asked follow-up questions and discuss any thoughts they felt were relevant. Interviews took place for
30 minutes to 1 hour. At the end of the interview, participants were again asked to answer the questions from the pre-screen survey.
RESULTS (INTERVIEWS)

Participants were asked a series of questions covering a range of topics related to pornography including inquiries of their consumption habits, gendered experiences with porn, fantasies, and realism and/or authenticity in porn content. Participants were often asked multiple follow-up questions, and were invited to bring up any topics and ideas they felt relevant. All of the participants ended up being women, despite the fact that multiple men were invited to partake in the research, as well. Only speculation is possible as to why the only people who responded were women. Perhaps it was that the researcher was also a woman. It was the intention of this research to have a multiple-gender analysis of pornography consumption, but the self-selection of participants also may have something to reveal about gender.

The four participants who took part in this study were Alice, Leah, Jessica, and Renée.65 Alice, 19, was the most familiar and most comfortable with pornography out of the group. While some others thought of pornography’s benefits only in terms of themselves, Alice was passionate about the existence and creation of pornography. She was very interested in amateur and homemade pornography and spoke enthusiastically and thoughtfully about porn and sexuality in general. Leah, 18, had only been watching pornography for about a year, a significantly shorter period of time than the other three participants. Despite this, she seemed to have a similar familiarity and ease with pornography and her own sexuality in relation to porn consumption. Most of the time, she spoke quietly but with self-assurance. Jessica, 19, had been consuming porn for many

65 All participants names have been changed.
years and felt that not many women in her life were as comfortable with porn and sexuality as her. She had formed opinions about pornography that often catered to her own sexual preferences. Renée, 18, had also formed her opinions about pornography through personal experience. Out of all the participants, Renée had the least amount of knowledge about porn production, and generally had less ability to discuss gender than the others. Despite this, she was still very open to discussing pornography and sexuality.

All of the participants were asked to define pornography at the beginning of the interview, and then were given a working definition for the purpose of the interview. Defining pornography is sometimes a point of contention, so this was done to prevent misunderstanding. This study only examines pornography that is sexually explicit (containing genitals) videos depicting sexual acts, specifically accessed on the Internet. All participants were in agreeance with this definition, although they also understood that pornography exists in other mediums and can be conceptualized in different forms.

Next, participants were asked to answer questions about their own pornography consumption habits. This was done to get a sense of different reasons why the participants watched pornography. When asked where they access porn on the Internet, all the women specified Pornhub, two referenced Tumblr, and one additionally frequented Kink.com. All of the women utilized pornography primarily for sexual purposes, both as an agent of arousal and masturbation. While most of the time they watched porn by themselves, some participants watched porn with a sexual partner on occasion, and some additionally consumed porn recreationally with friends.

Alice shared that social sharing of porn with her friends was commonplace, and cited having a selective group of friends that shared pornographic content on Tumblr with
one another. She reported this experience as being, “like a review, almost….It’s definitely casual social sharing of like, ‘hey, check this out,’ or like ‘wow this is huge,’ [laughs] stuff like that.” Sharing pornography amongst friends was a hobby. Alice was not only at ease discussing pornography, but was passionate about its existence and prevalence in her life, so much so that she created her own homemade pornography of herself, and circulated that content with these friends. She wanted to create the pornography she wished was more prevalent, which for her was a homemade and honest depiction of her sexual preferences. Sharing pornography with friends and discussing the content with them in a casual manner provided a sense of community for Alice that did not judge her self-identified sexual openness.

Jessica usually kept pornography consumption a solo experience. She felt that porn viewing was “not really a friend-type thing,” and that any casual porn sharing in her life was done more as a joke between friends. Renée also cited watching porn with friends when she was younger, mainly as something to make fun of. Jessica and Renée found humor in pornography as they found some of it to contain images, sounds, and storylines they found unrealistic to the point of ridiculousness. They cited watching pornography with “ridiculous” elements to be a comical activity among friends, especially as young teenagers. Leah had watched porn with friends “out of curiosity.”

When it comes to choosing which porn to watch on a situational basis, the participants tended to choose whatever popped up first on their website of choice. Sometimes, they would seek out a broad category of interest, such as “lesbian,” “sci-fi,” or “anal.” They tended to be satisfied with the content most easily available to them on
their websites of choice. None of the participants had ever paid for porn and were mainly content with what they could access for free.

All the participants were asked questions about porn and education. They responded with stories about learning a lot from porn but not learning enough from it, having lackluster sex education, and navigating sexuality as young women mostly on their own.

Renée had a wavering opinion on pornography and education. When first asked to define pornography, she claimed that it was primarily entertainment and “not really an education tool like some people think it is.” A few moments later, when asked if she had ever watched porn to learn something, she said yes, acknowledging that she had just claimed otherwise. Later in the interview, Renée talked about her experience learning about sex from pornography as a young teenager:

Renée: I didn’t know anything about sex really until I think a friend showed me [pornography] and then it piqued my interest to watch something else. I wasn’t watching it to know how to have sex. But as I grew older, and I had all these things in my head of what I’ve seen in porn, I would look it up and [think], “is this a real thing, is this pleasurable, do people do this or not?” and it was kind of a vessel to educate myself. But it wasn’t something that I could or would recommend for anyone to get for their sole educational purposes.

Renée’s also felt her sex education was lacking in substantial and necessary information. Additionally, Renée cited her family’s history of teenage pregnancy and her upbringing for her lack of knowledge about sex. “I’ve just been raised to think the guy just wants you to have sex.” Renée struggled with describing her gendered attitudes about sex and pornography throughout the interview, but acknowledged events and people in her life that shaped those ideas. Her ideas about pornography throughout the interview tended to be more negative than the other 3 women.
Alice frequently made the distinction between amateur porn and big production content. She preferred amateur and homemade pornography to larger productions because it seemed more realistic and authentic to her. She based her perception of authenticity on the performance of the people in the porn. Porn was more realistic if it was relatable to her own sex life. Alice’s knowledge of the porn industry informed her preferences, as well, and she disliked the scripted nature of large-scale productions.

Alice: I just don’t like that [large-scale porn production], I think that’s too plain. And there are some people that are totally interested in it like that, but I just like real things. I don’t like unrealistic things….I feel like a lot of porn is unrealistic especially when it’s done by larger production companies because [actors] are just told that [they] have to do this and that’s not maybe really how you get off if it’s not your style of expression. So, I think the production needs to be a little more individual-based rather than a large group of people just deciding.

Jessica also felt that amateur videos were more realistic than large-scale productions. “The amateur videos and stuff like that is usually realistic because it’s usually people with their partners that are just filming themselves having sex, but then there’s the staged porn that’s so fake.” Both Jessica and Alice said they were drawn to authenticity in pornography, and noticed that this authenticity was more likely to be present in lower-production pornography.

Jessica also had knowledge of porn production. Her desire to learn about the industry stemmed from her concern about the role of consent in the content she was watching. She wanted to be sure that the actors had all consented, and she gained an understanding of how consent functions in a professional sexual setting such as a porn set.

Jessica: If it’s a professional, then they have to meet the person [they are doing a scene with] beforehand, and it really showed to me how much of a relationship they establish before the video versus if they didn’t at all, and you can compare that and it makes me feel better about watching it because I know that both of them are more comfortable.
Jessica connected the presence of consent with the presence of emotions in pornography. Her ability to read the emotional pleasure of the actors in a porn scene felt like a prerequisite to the actors’ authentic physical pleasure, and also to Jessica’s enjoyment of pornography. There was an assumption that there was only consent if she could see it. The absence of emotion, on the other hand, created a distinction between pornography and her own personal experiences with sex.

SS: Do you feel like pornography reflects the sex that happens in real life?

Jessica: I have had the experience where yes, it does reflect that, and also I’ve had times where it’s like, “this is not porn. This is completely the opposite.”

For Jessica, porn was similar to real life when the actors on screen had a “connection.” If she was convinced by their chemistry and saw an emotional connection between the actors in a porn, then she could relate it more easily to her own life. Porn was different from sex in real life when that connection was not present or not convincing. “If you see a casual hookup video, and you see that they’re not [acting] like [a] couple, you’re like, “oh, this is just porn.” This last remark suggests that content that is “just porn” for Jessica is characterized by a lack of convincing acting, or a lack of fantasy.

Renée also felt that realism in porn relied on emotions, as well as the authenticity of sexual performance. She believed that porn was often unrealistic because of the fact that it was constructed, and much of this was tied to her reading of the porn performers’ emotions.

Renée: I feel like it is [realistic] but it isn’t. If you’re watching, especially like, straight porn, I guess, it gives you a very basic understanding of like, what goes where, and like what positions you can do, but I think a lot of the emotion and passion of the lovemaking and stuff isn’t there, because...the people are hired to do that. Also like I feel like it gives
some misconceptions. Like if you don’t know what sex is, and you watch this stuff, you’re gonna think it’s gonna be that way, but when it actually happens it’s nothing like that.

Leah noticed differences between amateur pornography and higher production videos. Although she identified more with the sexual acts depicted in amateur porn, she watched content of all production levels.

Leah: High production can be like a little more discomforting than like, the amateur stuff because...the amateur stuff can be a little more realistic and toned down, and sometimes the high production stuff is just so out there and like, over the top.

Later in the interview, Leah again discussed why she generally preferred lower-production pornography, “Sometimes [porn] just doesn’t seem as sexy to me when I think about like, what it actually is. An actor, actress, two actresses, whatever it is.” Leah enjoyed pornography more when it seemed relatable, and therefore more realistic.

Emotional connection between actors also contributed to Leah’s porn preferences and her ability to relate to what she was watching. However, she also discussed how her arousal was not always uniform, and that emotions were sexually significant to her but not always necessary or desired.

Leah: I definitely like, in my own sex life, to think of emotions as a big part of sex for me. That’s why, also, like what we were saying about those high production [videos], that’s why you kind of lose that emotion and like sensitivity as opposed to watching more like, chill porn...I would definitely say that emotion, as a part of sex, arouses me just as much as any physical thing. But also sometimes I can be like - I’m just horny. I don’t need emotion. It all depends.

Leah accepted that her day to day feelings about porn depended entirely on what the content was and how aroused she was at the time of interacting with that porn. “When I think about porn when I’m like, not aroused, there’s a huge difference between when I’m watching it and I’m like, using it and when I see it totally out of context. I think it’s really
like, mentally what state you’re in, that’s how you’re going to perceive it.” Leah’s relationship with pornography was fluid and relaxed - it changed based on how she felt at any given point of time, and she was comfortable with that.

Jessica also made these distinctions in the pornography that she watched versus pornography she did not like. The roles and scenarios in porn played a significant role in how Jessica perceived the ethicality of a porn video. She did not like that incest or rape content existed.

Jessica: Typically, what I watch, generally is what I could see myself doing, or what I think is like ethical, in a way. There’s like, a lot of categories, on websites, that are like brother-sister, and that’s gross. So to me, I stray away from that, and I’ll just watch the categories that I feel are relevant to my life.

SS: So, you said ethical -

Jessica: Like, I don’t like the rape fantasy videos, like those to me are [perpetuating] rape culture, and I don’t really like it.

When asked to elaborate on her feelings about rape fantasies, Jessica shared her concern that porn featuring nonconsent, although she it knew it was staged, would normalize sexual assault for susceptible people, particularly young boys or socially immature persons.

Jessica: For some, it’s just porn, whatever. But for others, they might watch it and be like “oh, this is okay,”....like especially for younger kids, because no one follows the age restriction for porn. Like especially like young boys, that worries me that they’re getting the wrong impression with that and the wrong impression of the right way to treat a woman or a man, or like anybody else for that matter. And that’s like my biggest worry with that category is specifically the age that’s watching it and like the maturity of the person that’s watching it as well.

At the end of her interview, Jessica said that educating young people about the “negative aspects” of pornography in sex education courses would lower rates of sexual assault.
Renée also had worries about pornography teaching what she perceived as negative ideas or habits to young people. These negative ideas involved a disconnect between sex and love/emotions. Pornography was her primary source of sex education, and she felt like it failed to teach her realistic methods of communication between sexual partners.

Renée: To me, like, even if porn is fake, it’s kind of like on an emotional basis, like, “I want sex give it to me now.” Not necessarily like a loving kinda thing. I think it makes bad habits and bad communication with your partner….Also like I’ve seen some non-hygienic things that I don’t think are very good….

SS: Do you think you’ve picked up any bad ideas from pornography, either the ones you’ve mentioned, or otherwise?

Renée: Um, I think like for me, it was like, how to interact with your partner when it comes to sex. Like, when I started having sex, I didn’t really know what to expect with how the talking of it went, like “hey, let’s do this thing.”

Renée projected her connection between sex and emotion onto how she believed sex should function, and her categorization of pornography as unemotional informed her attitudes toward various pornographic content. Interestingly, she blamed porn for her lack of sexual negotiation skills, rather than her admittingly limited sex education. Additionally, like Jessica, Renée referenced some categories of pornography that she felt were unethical.

Renée: Sometimes you just come across something, like, a genre, that’s kinda just sick. Like, it’s kinda gross, and like in your head it’s like, not a good thing. Like some of the taboo stuff.

SS: Can you give me some examples?

Renée: Like, bestiality, ugh, like scat stuff, it’s gross. Of course these are my opinions, there are people that are into it and like, you do you I guess, but for me personally, things that go against my own morals are like, ick.
Renée and Jessica both acknowledged that their moral views of certain pornographies that they did not personally enjoy were not universal opinions or experiences. They approached reconciliation of their own preferences with the autonomy of consumers of porn themes they found unethical.

Renée also brought up rape scenarios after being asked if she felt pornography reflects sex that occurs in real life. “There are some weird things out there that people do, and like, there is rape porn, and other sorts of stuff. It doesn’t reflect the mainstream, but it reflects what people do and are into, and if people weren’t into that, it wouldn’t be there.” She felt that these themes were not necessarily reflective of something a person would want in their sex life just because they consumed it in porn form. Her discussion of fantasy reflected this idea, as well: “I think some people, like if you watch more taboo genres, they want the riskiness of it but not the taboo [part] of it.” Similarly to other participants, Renée thought of fantasy as something that intersects with one’s sex life, but does not always dictate the sexual activity that one takes part in.

Jessica had a visceral experience of pornography affecting her sex life. She recalled a moment during sex with a man wherein he hit her without her consent, and saw pornography as the cause of the incident:

Jessica: In my own experience, I’ve been with a couple of guys who are like, “well, all girls like that.” And I’m like, no, all girls don’t. If I’m a girl, and I didn’t like it, then there’s your flaw. Which was later followed by like, “well, in all the porn videos, that’s

---

66 A few interviews brought up the question of the supply/demand relationship and pornography. There was a belief that porn existed in quantity and content because there was a demand for it. However, researchers show that this relationship is not so. There are many products that are supplied without initial demand. Martin Barker suggests that porn is created and then affects myriad tastes by providing the option to consume it. Source: Martin Barker, “The ‘problem’ of sexual fantasies,” Porn Studies 1, nos. 1-2 (2014), 151.
what happened.” Like, it’s not okay. And the wrong idea is met with like, “well, you secretly like it.” Like, no, I don’t. When I say no, it means no.

Jessica, although bothered by this incident, acknowledged that a lack of sex education in tandem with pornography may have allowed the situation to occur. She described the incident as what she hopes was “a learning experience for him.” Jessica seemed to have very clear and practiced boundaries of consent that were informed by her own set of morals, which carried over into the pornography she was comfortable consuming.

Like Renée’s awareness of porn performance, Jessica used knowledge of the porn industry to explain what she perceived as emotional disconnect in pornography. This was especially troubling to her in terms of rape scenarios, and she struggled to reconcile the autonomy of the actors with their depictions of (consensual) nonconsent.

Jessica: It really depends on the actors at [the time of filming] to establish a connection or not, and like I feel like it’s not really up to directors at that point. Except like, in the rape scenario videos which is totally weird to me, and totally mind-blowing, because those are all filmed professionally, and the actors have met before, so like, why would you agree to doing that? And that’s where I don’t really understand the logic behind it, and that I don’t know why people do that.

While she could not relate to wanting to participate in rape fantasies, Jessica recognized that gendered power dynamics were a common in some of pornographic content. She felt that having a gender divide in pornography was easier and more effective marketing purposes. Jessica’s concept of fantasy in general fell in line with her perceptions of rape fantasy. She described fantasy as “something you don’t necessarily think you can attain yourself….On the other hand, it could be something like, that you hide. Things you don’t want to happen in real life.” Jessica’s definition of fantasy was directly related to a person’s ability or desire for a sexual act to manifest in their sex life outside of their imagination.
Jessica had a rather clear definition of fantasy. She saw sexual fantasy as distinct from sexual behavior. She did not believe fantasies were representative of how people would behave during sex. Jessica did not feel this way about fantasies of nonconsent, however, and feared it may affect the sexual behavior of people who watch it. When asked to put herself in the mindset of someone who does watch consume porn with those themes, she turned to a discussion of power.

Jessica: To me, I guess it would be a stance of like, needing dominance in their life, and like, not having that, and not having control, [which] I don’t think is a purely sexual thing. I think it’s definitely based off of their emotional needs, and the way they live their life, so let’s say that they’re lacking control in their work, or control in their personal life and things like that, that they would turn to something like [fantasies of nonconsent] so they could second-hand feel the control.

Jessica recognized that power dynamics were prevalent in not only rape scenarios, but also much of pornography and sex in general. She also felt that power dynamics were more obviously prevalent between men and women in pornography, rather than in same sex interactions, and that this is done because it is easier to market pornography this way.

Alice enjoyed consuming pornography with power dynamics, and discussed how she felt about other people perceiving her kinks. From her personal experience with BDSM, she had clear boundaries between sexual fantasy and reality, and it seemed easiest for her, out of all the participants, to draw those boundaries in a way that approached sex positivity.

Alice: I am really really into watching [power play] because I’m very submissive I just know that’s a thing...that I like, and so for me, because I get off on that [I understand it]....Some people, they could see it as hurtful to women...I am conscious about [how other people feel about submission], without a doubt, because I don’t feel comfortable expressing to people that I like that unless I am comfortable with them, unless I really know them, because it’s so taboo and because people - that’s the first thing they say, “Well, you know, women should be treated equal.” And I am all for that but this is a kink
that I enjoy, this is a form of porn that I enjoy watching, and if that’s what I like I shouldn’t have to justify whether or not I support this power dynamic.

Alice was aware of how her sexual preferences may be perceived by others. She felt her kinks and porn consumption habits did not detract from her liberal political leanings, and that they did not necessarily have anything to do with one another. Alice extended this sentiment when generalizing about other people’s porn and sex preferences, as well.

Leah also enjoyed fantasies of male dominance. Unlike Alice, these fantasies were not something she desired in her sex life with her partner, but she enjoyed watching pornography with this content. Leah also did not believe these preferences to impact her gendered life outside of sex.

Leah: I, in sex, am definitely attracted to men. And I would like to feel a little inferior, in the moment, where a guy is taking control, but I would kinda keep that in, just like, I wouldn’t let that affect my normal life. If I watched a video and it was a guy controlling a woman, and being aggressive, I wouldn’t carry that over [into real life sex]. After I watched that video, I would just be like, “it’s just porn.” It’s just staged. It doesn’t make me feel inferior to any guy.

Leah was confident that gendered power dynamics in pornography she watched did not impact how she felt about herself or men.

Some participants demonstrated a difference between what they felt about their own pornography consumptions versus others’. Jessica, for example, worried that pornography may teach harmful ideas about consent or women, but felt that pornography did not affect her in that way. Alice felt like she was a conscious consumer of pornography, but that other people were likely to be less thoughtful about what they watch: “I am like, thinking about it like consciously as I am watching it but for some people they are literally just focusing on getting off. And I am focusing on getting off,
too, but...I’m interpreting it more than someone else.” Additionally, both Alice and Jessica adopted a “to each their own” philosophy throughout their interviews, in which they would make a claim about the way they perceive other people to interact with porn, and then step back from that claim and acknowledge that they could not fully infer or understand someone else’s habits or ideas.

Leah, who had a mainly positive relationship with pornography, also displayed differences in how she perceived her own relationship with pornography and how it may affect others:

Leah: [Porn] can also cause, like, unrealistic ideas about what sex can be.

SS: Do you think you’ve experienced that? Do you think you have unrealistic ideas about sex?

Leah: Not really, at this point I’ve kind of been able to distinguish between that kind of porn fantasy and what would actually happen.

SS: Where do you think the difficulty is with people who do have a hard time distinguishing? Why is that difficult?

Leah: Right now, and throughout high school and at this point in my life I feel like there’s definitely room to explore stuff like that, but I feel like you need some time and space to like, take things you see in porn and like, try them, you know?

Leah did not feel that she or any of her sexual partners had unrealistic ideas about sex at the time she was involved with them. Leah was the only participant who did not consistently begin consuming pornography until after she became sexually active, and this projection onto other people’s perceived experiences of pornography could be because she already had a semblance of what sex was like for her when she began watching.
Tensions of perceiving others’ relationships to pornography manifested frequently in discussions with the participants about gender. The participants were asked a series of questions about gender and pornography, which primarily yielded discussions about how men and women interact with porn. Alice, for example, thought she experienced porn differently from men:

Alice: I feel like men, they think with their dick more than they do their brain so when they’re watching porn...they’re thinking about like coming and like getting off and climaxing and feeling that peak. Whereas I, or like a female, may you know fantasize about somebody or, also experience this climax and this peak and this overwhelming sensation but just think a little bit deeper than a man would.

Alice also mentioned that she did not want to categorize all men, but generally she perceived the men in her life to engage with pornography in this way. She found men were more likely to engage in “goal-oriented sex” and wanted others to approach sex and pornography with her level of open-mindedness.

Although she did feel men were likely to behave in a certain way sexually, Alice believed this was due to socialization, rather than biology. She did not think that men or women were inherently different from one another, but that social forces shaped how people are, including how they perceive their own nature: “Everything we do is influenced by something and we almost don’t even know what’s natural or like what’s our own nature anymore because we’re influenced in so many ways and divided and categorized because as humans...want everything to be categorized.” Alice was hesitant to even comment on gendered differences because she felt so strongly that they were a socially constructed phenomenon.
Alice was more concerned with other people's disdain for pornography's supposed negative influences than those influences themselves. While she believed pornography was an important part of sexuality, she acknowledged that potentially problematic depictions of gender may exist within a volume of pornography content.

Alice: There’s definitely split [gender] roles. I mean it’s the way we see the world, right? Men are supposed to be this rough, you know, person, with, you know, a big dick and they are just supposed act upon it and be rough and be forceful and be dominant. And women are supposed to be, you know, submissive and take it and look good and be pretty while they’re having sex, and everything is supposed to be an art and it’s supposed to be glamorous, but it’s literally just sex.

Alice knew that pornography was not any more exempt from patriarchal values than other media or institutions.

Renée felt the differences between how men and women watch pornography lied in their interpretations of realism. She believed men took pornography more literally than women, and that men were more likely to believe pornography was realistic, whereas women took pornography less seriously. She also spoke about gendered difference in pornography itself:

Renée: I’ve never really thought about the gender roles before, but women are.... What people see in pornography, they see men kinda accurately, like how they act in sex, but not women exactly. As I was saying earlier, not every woman can climax and I don’t know if they’re real or fake but most of the women in the pornographies tend to finish in their sessions. I think that men think when they watch pornography and are then sexually active is that all they’ve gotta do is this little bit, and then they’re done. And I think that’s just the biological part of it, and I think that’s incorrect in pornography.

Renée connected the way sex was depicted in pornography to how sex is outside of pornography. She thought men behaved similarly in pornography and in real life, but pornography failed to accurately portray women.
Contrary to Alice, Jessica felt she experienced porn similarly to men. She responded this way because she felt that many women experience shame surrounding pornography to the extent that they choose not to use it. Jessica, being comfortable with pornography much more than the women in her life, identified more with how men may feel about porn.

Jessica: Personally, I like to think that [my experience is] similar, because I don’t really take it as seriously as most women do - most women meaning my friends that I have personal experience with - like I know a lot of them only talk about porn, or anything sexual when they’re in a closed setting and I’m kinda like, “yeah, sex is cool, whatever.” I don’t sugarcoat it or bubblewrap it. It’s not something that needs to be hushed. And I think generally, the guys I know are having the same general feeling about it.

Jessica recognized that attitudes towards pornography are connected to attitudes about sex, and that experiences with both pornography and sex can differ by gender. Like Alice, she knew this was due to gender socialization through shaming of women’s sexuality. She felt that since coming to college, the women she met seemed to be more open about pornography and about sex in general. She speculated that this may be because of a change in the general culture that has allowed women to be more open about sexuality over the last few years, but not as open as men. Additionally, Jessica’s use of the term “seriously” (“I don’t really take it as seriously as most women do”) suggests she perceives the women in her life to have less casual relationships with pornography than her.

Leah also felt her experiences with porn were similar to her male friend’s experiences, and recalled how her perspective of pornography has changed since she started using it herself:

Leah: I have a lot of friends who are guys, I think [I] generally get the same reaction out of [porn] and I don’t find it like embarrassing to talk about it in front of guys because it’s
the same thing, you’re both using porn for like, kind of the same reasons. But, I think before I started using it I definitely thought it was weird, like strange, and I feel like it’s more common for guys to use it and that’s just kind of the norm, you know, that most guys will watch porn, so I feel like girls who haven’t tried it kind of get weirded out. But, now that I’ve used it, it’s like, not as weird.

Leah attributed these gendered experiences to socialization. She pointed to differences in how boys and girls are raised around sexuality that may cause a discrepancy in how men and women engage with pornography and masturbation.

Leah also discussed gendered perceptions of porn performers by her peers and in the media. She brought up this topic towards the end of the interview when asked if there was anything else she would like to speak about. Leah noticed that the media often portrayed porn stars negatively, especially if they were women.

Leah: [People use] that term [porn star] as like, a negative thing, or if people talk about porn, they’re like “oh, all those sluts” and it’s generally kinda negative. Specifically towards the women. A guy’s not gonna watch a video of a man having sex with a woman and be like, “oh, he’s a slut,” you know?

SS: Why do you think that is?

Leah: I just think that’s the way it’s been, and that’s the stereotype, and that’s not fair at all, it’s just the way women have been treated and portrayed overall.

Leah additionally noticed that porn stars are portrayed to be a certain type of woman. They are seen as “unsuccessful, or like porn’s kind of like, dirty. I don’t agree with that. I think if someone’s willing to be that confident about their body, then that’s great. And like, in 2017, anything anyone wants to do, that’s great. You go. I’m not gonna judge anything at this point.” Leah was angered by these stereotypes because of their negative image of women.

All of the women cited experiences of shame surrounding pornography and sexuality, some of which were distinctly gendered. They all cited this shame as taking
place in the past when they were less comfortable expressing their sexuality, or when they did not know much about sex, as opposed to the time of the interview, when they felt at ease speaking in depth about pornography. While some of the women had been shamed recently, they felt the shaming did not affect them in the way that it had when they were younger.

Jessica recounted a moment early in high school when her mother found pornography on Jessica’s phone’s web browser and reacted negatively. Jessica panicked and told her mother that she had given her phone to some boys at school and they must have been responsible for the porn. She felt very ashamed in the moment to have been consuming pornography. She also spoke again of the first time she watched porn, which was by accident. She remembered feeling scared in that moment because her sex education class taught her it was illegal for minors to consume pornography, so she worried she would get in trouble for breaking the law.

Alice’s experience of shame was ongoing as a young person, when she felt she could not speak to her parents about pornography without judgment. She feels her parents’ sex-negative reactions to pornography shaped her relationship with sex growing up.

Alice: I know I couldn’t talk to my parents about it - every time I brought up something I literally got shunned for it, “why are you thinking about that? Why are you watching it?” not being able to, you know, express and explore myself. And I think that’s really damaging. It definitely affects people, and it makes them not want to talk about it. Alice has since become quite open with her sexuality and knew that other people were likely to have experienced shaming like she had. Although Alice felt self-assured enough to navigate that shaming, she worried that general societal shaming of sexuality prevented people from having a healthy sex life. She told a recent story of when her friends shamed one of her kinks in front of her:
Alice: They brought [my kink] up at the house the other day while I was there. And they were like “I don’t understand how people can do that,” totally just like, under-the-rug shamed me right then and there. And that’s just like, that’s lame you know? That people are gonna totally like bash you for something, and like shame you for enjoying something that’s maybe not something that everybody digs. So I think there’s a lot of shame, and it sucks.

Many facets of Alice’s sexuality seemed stigmatized by society at large. Her consciousness of that stigma allowed her to process that shaming without completely internalizing it. She felt passionately that sexuality and pornography should be stigma-free, and experiencing stigma only made her feel more strongly.

Renée experienced shame both as a young teenager and recently about watching porn. She described this shame as arising from feeling like watching pornography is not a good use of her time. She also described how having a boyfriend perpetuated some of this shame:

Renée: When I was like 13...I would feel ashamed that I was taking time away from family, and like friends and stuff to go and watch this thing. I don’t really feel ashamed any more, and I hardly ever watch porn anymore, because I have a boyfriend. If I do, I would feel ashamed that like “oh I’m watching this instead of having sex with my boyfriend.” Because like, my boyfriend he told me, like “we’re together now, so maybe we shouldn’t watch porn” and we made a promise not to watch porn either, and we have watched porn together, not even doing anything [sexual], just to make fun of it.

Renée discussed how this arrangement with her boyfriend arose out of jealous feelings. He did not want Renée watching other men in pornography, and she did not feel very comfortable with her boyfriend watching women in pornography. Despite this agreement, Renée continued to consume pornography at a regular rate because masurbation helped her sleeping pattern. She acknowledged that despite her jealous feelings toward women in porn, she never felt like she would rather be involved romantically or sexually with a man she saw in porn than her boyfriend. She referred to the agreement as a “silly little
thing.” Renée cited consuming higher rates of pornography with women only, rather than heterosexual pairings.

Similar to some of the other women, Leah felt casually about pornography, whereas she previously felt shame. Like the others, watching pornography as a young teenager was a somewhat frightening experience for her. She shared her experience of learning to feel comfortable with her sexuality, and pornography’s role in that journey.

Leah: Throughout high school I had a lot of different sexual partners and I still never orgasmed and...one of my best friends - she had been masturbating for a pretty long time - she would always tell me, “you really just have to figure it out yourself first before you expect a guy to do that to you.” ….I have a boyfriend and he does not go to school here so I was like “I’m going to have to figure out how to do something about this.” So like, over the summer...one night I was like, “I’ll just watch porn, maybe it will help me out, maybe it won’t but at least I’ll just give it a try.” And then, I kind of just became more familiar with it, and like, I did learn how to make myself orgasm which was nice and that’s kind of when I became more familiar with it and became more familiar with porn. And really, like, it does feel natural. And I would always think it was so unnatural before just because of the stereotype. You don’t hear as much about girls masturbating as you do about guys, and so I was just like “oh that’s a guy thing.” But it’s not.

Leah felt that pornography helped her take control of her own sex life by helping her orgasm. This was a relatively recent addition to her sex life, and she seemed eager to express how grateful she was to have pornography at her disposal. “I can say that I’m a lot more in touch with my own sexuality than I was before but it’s because of porn.” Her personal experiences with pornography led to positive feelings about herself and her own sexuality.

When asked if she had ever watched porn to learn something, Alice had a pragmatic response, “I have, yeah, looked at categories, like blowjobs, maybe to get like a better like visual understanding because I’m a visual learner, so if I’m watching something it’s easier than just reading, you know, a Cosmo article.” For Alice, porn was
frequently a tool of many sexual purposes. She welcomed learning from porn, and felt that this has regularly enhanced her life.

SS: Do you think porn can cause any good habits or ideas?

Alice: Creativity [laughs]. You can get really creative with new ways to get off - new positions.

SS: Do you think that has happened in your life?

Alice: Absolutely. I’ve tried many different things because I’ve just stumbled upon, like, porn videos just searching. Like, Kink.com is one of the biggest influences for me because I love all of the channels that they have, I like a lot of the toys that they use, a lot of the props that are involved, like vibrators and stuff. And so, it has definitely encouraged me to be creative and seek new things.

Jessica also felt that she had learned positively from pornography. Like Alice, Jessica’s relationship with pornography was not only in the pursuit of sexual pleasure, but also facilitated the creation of a pathway to sexual self-acceptance and autonomy.

Jessica: My mom was not really open with talking about sex, at first, until she found out that I’d had sex. So that was really unhelpful. But, I didn’t really know what to do, how it worked, what to expect, so I turned to porn….I learned that like, you always have an option, and it’s meant to be fun. That’s the biggest thing I took out of it. It’s supposed to be fun and feel good. That’s one of the better things I learned through porn. Obviously I learned the positions and stuff like that…things like that I wouldn’t have known unless someone would’ve told me.

For Jessica and Alice both, pornography partially filled the gap that was left by lackluster sex education. Where sex education existed, it was minimal, and mostly covered abstinence, pregnancy, and sometimes basic contraceptive usage. While pornography provided more insight into a pleasure-based education, neither woman felt that the pornography they consumed was an adequate substitute for sex education. However, they did agree that sex education should be more comprehensive, and that people would benefit from including discussion about pornography in the curriculum.
Jessica, who identified as being very comfortable with pornography, discussed how her exposure to porn over the last several years led her to the conclusion that pornography is what one makes of it.

Jessica: I think that I’m more open to talking about it now versus when I first started watching porn or when I was like a freshman in high school because I’ve had the experience with it, been in steady relationships, been in rocky relationships. I’ve seen the good and the bad of it, and to me, it’s like hit that point where it’s like, sex is just sex. Unless you make it something special, or make it something real. And like, same thing with porn. Porn is just porn, unless you make a big deal of it.

While Jessica was at ease with pornography and her own sexuality, she did not approach the subject with the same enthusiasm as Leah or Alice, who both felt strongly about pornography’s role in their own sexual autonomy. Jessica thought pornography functioned similarly to other media because of the diversity of content accessible to everyone.

Jessica: To me, the variety of porn that’s out there is similar to the variety of like, TV shows and movies. It’s ridiculous how much you can find. An easy comparison is music, because like, everyone likes different music, and everyone likes different porn. Personally like people tend to turn their attention to things they like, and to things that make them feel good.

Jessica believed that pornography could teach positive self-esteem through pleasure-seeking practices because of this variety of content. She felt there was pornography for everybody, and being able to identify with sexual content could lead to positive feelings about oneself.

Alice spoke about how pornography is malleable based off of everyone’s individual interpretation. She discussed how pornography is often thought of as content catered for men, and that men were supposed to be the people who benefit the most from pornography. Alice believed that consuming pornography was an individualized experience that varied from person to person, regardless of gender.
Alice: You can watch anything and you could easily say like “yes, this is for men” and “yes, this is for women.” But like there’s no written definition or description of like “this video is intended for men” you know? So it’s kind of just how, I think each person on their own interprets it because it could go either way….The way the world is at this moment in time [people] automatically assume it’s geared towards men because men are just told all the time to you know like, “go on pornhub if you want to get off” and they never tell women that. They just tell women to like, “go get fucked.”

Alice’s “to each their own” perspective made room for a nonjudgmental and stigma-free discussion of pornography and sexuality. She was aware that consuming pornography could often be a gendered experience, but her consciousness of this allowed her to begin removing herself from negative ideas about women’s sexuality, and additionally recognized that each porn consumer’s unique sexual preferences would yield a different consumption experience. Alice’s knowledge of porn production contributed to this opinion, as well.

At the end of each interview, the participants were asked to answer the 2 questions from the survey once more. This was done in order to have an updated understanding of their responses, rather than use the data from when they had responded to the survey months prior. Alice and Jessica claimed to consume porn 1-2 times a week at the time of the interview. Leah was watching porn 3 or more times a week while Renée said she consumed 1-2 times a month. When asked to re-answer the question about similarities between porn and real life sex, Alice selected “disagree” but emphasized that her answer depends on the type of porn. She felt that amateur porn was more similar to real life sex. Leah “somewhat disagreed” to the statement, while Jessica and Renée both chose “somewhat agree.”

Through interviews we can see how these women’s stories and opinions fall into or break out of hegemonic ideas about pornography. Moving into the discussion, it will
become apparent how the women interact with ideologies of pornography and sexuality, and how making space for pleasure in a woman’s life can be an inherently political act. Additionally, the methods of this study appeared to have impact on the findings in ways that will be discussed.
DISCUSSION (INTERVIEWS)

There are many social factors that contribute to the construction of this research. One influence is that all of the interview participants and myself are white. We attend school in the whitest state in the country, although the participants were from different states. Race did not play a significant role in the discussion of pornography in this particular thesis, but that does not mean it does not have a crucial role in pornography scholarship. The perspective of this research, therefore, stems from a point of privilege. Additionally, privilege is invoked by our relationship to higher education and its economic implications. My ability to conduct this research is due in part to the privileges afforded to me by attending a higher education institution.

All of the women’s stories about pornography naturally intersected with their experiences of sex, gender, relationships, and consent. They shared complex opinions and emotions about porn and sexuality. Sometimes their perceptions conflicted with one another. Sometimes they afforded more generosity to some pornographies than others. Sometimes they were wholeheartedly positive, other times they were cynical and dismissive. Many of their feelings about pornography were not fully developed, nor can they be expected to be, as this was the first time they had expressed them aloud. Even if they occasionally lacked language, these women had strong opinions about pornography that were informed by their own experiences as well as social forces of which they were both aware and unaware. Their interviews dispelled some anti-pornography sentiments and reinforced others, but ultimately demonstrated a consciousness about pornography that many anti-porn scholars have assumed porn consumers do not possess.
All the participants were women, which affects the data in ways we cannot be sure about. If this study were to be continued, it would benefit from including men in order to compare and contrast their experiences with porn with these women. It would be especially imperative to research how men feel about the supposed collapse of pornography with their own desire, which some of the participants in this study felt was a true phenomenon. Perhaps the fact that all the participants were women says something about the research model. Participants had to go out of their way to meet with a woman and discuss an intimate topic like pornography. It is possible that the 18 and 19 year old men that were contacted for the study were uncomfortable with that premise. It is also possible that they were simply disinterested, either in the topic or in participating in research. However, having all women for this second round of data collection emphasizes their relationships to pornography in ways that the first round could not, since so few women actually reported consuming pornography.

This analysis explores the dynamics of the interviews in relation to themes of sex positivity and negativity. The interviews contained several common subcategories, such as gendered experiences and content, in which participants discussed pornography through a gendered lens either intentionally or not. There was also a theme of education, learning, and interpretation, where participants commented on how pornography does or does not teach consumers as well as how they react to porn content. They also touched frequently on realism, in which participants talked about pornography being realistic and authentic in some aspect of their own definition, or unrealistic in that regard. As noted in the data, participants also discussed matters of fantasy, shame, and larger topics relating to pornography such as sex education and porn production.
These themes intersect in multiple ways that often proved inseparable from one another throughout the interviews. One topic easily flowed into the next, and the participants frequently connected concepts with ease and familiarity. Difficulties arose when only when they did not have the language to describe (usually) a gendered concept. For example, Renée admitted to having never thought about pornography through a gendered lens before the interview, which was further demonstrated through the frequent pauses her in speech and her use of personal anecdotes when discussing gender.

One thing that stood out in all of the interviews was the participants’ willingness to partake in discussion. All the women appeared to be comfortable and even eager to discuss pornography, as evidenced not only by how much information they shared without prompting but also by enthusiastic and engaged body language, such as continuous eye contact and frequent hand gesticulation. Since all four women behaved in this way, it is likely that their comfort levels with pornography prior to the interview led them to be comfortable enough to agree to the interview in the first place. Definite conclusions about this comfort cannot made since the interview sample size was so small and comprised of only women. That no men participated in the interview does not necessarily mean they are less comfortable talking about porn.

The fact that the women were so comfortable with pornography and that they were all active consumers disproves the idea that women are uninterested in pornography, or that pornography is not appealing to women. This stems from the idea that women are uninterested in sex, and some scholars have suggested that women prefer softer, more emotional sex than what is found in pornography. While some of the women discussed how emotions are important to them in sex, they did not watch pornography for
its emotional significance. In fact, they felt that pornography was often unemotional precisely because it was staged. Nevertheless, these women utilized pornography explicitly in the pursuit of their own pleasure. Their narratives counteract writers such as Dworkin and Mackinnon, who claim women do not like pornography on the assumption that not watching pornography (and sexual disinterest) denotes a moral superiority in women. The participants’ use of pornography was almost entirely hedonistic.

The interviews also dispelled another common idea outlined in the literature review: while the women spoke positively about pornography, none of them described pornography as empowering to themselves or others. They shared experiences of pornography assisting them in becoming more accepting of their sexual selves, but none of the participants felt that pornography as an entity caused any universal experiences amongst consumers. In fact, one of the shared experiences that the participants did have was acknowledging both the variety of porn content and the diversity of consumption experiences. They knew enough from experience to know that being a woman who consumes pornography is far too nuanced an experience to be solely empowering or disenfranchising. Those experiences were at times positive and powerful, and other times not particularly special or noteworthy. Like other media, some works provoke us in meaningful or lasting ways while others may be enjoyable but forgettable.

It is possible that one of the reasons the participants did not believe pornography to be particularly empowering was because they insisted their experiences with porn and sexuality were not inherently different from that of a man’s. Jessica and Leah, for example, both perceived that watching pornography was the same for them as it was for men they knew. They defined men’s experiences with porn to be pleasure-based and
comfortable, and identified with these qualifiers. Alice responded that she felt her experience with pornography differed with that of men’s because she perceived herself as being more socially conscientious of pornography than men. However, she also believed her sexuality was not inherently different from men’s, and that she had the same sexual potential as men. Pornography is never seen as a tool of empowerment for men because it is often an assumed part of their lives.

The participants had varied awareness of how gender may or may not affect their experiences with pornography, but all of them had at least some awareness. Their consciousness of their gendered experiences with porn mixed with their choice to consume porn frequently and consistently breaks down the idea that young women are unconsciously consuming pornographic material that could be “harmful” to them. The participants demonstrated an active and conscious relationship with pornography that directly opposes the anti-pornography narrative that women are uninterested in porn.

Overall, the participants were more likely to apply their level of gender consciousness to their own lives than to others. They frequently spoke openly about how they thought their gender affected their experiences with porn, sex, and relationships. They were more likely to revert to stereotypes or hegemonic ideas about gender when referring to other people, particularly men. The participants were less introspective about men’s potential relationship with pornography and, more often than not, reinforced the collapse between pornography and men’s desire. This is an area of the study that would have greatly benefited from men participating. Continuation of this study should focus on men’s gender consciousness.
This difference in opinion on porn consumption that varied between the self and others was also based in how “relatable” specific pornography was to the participants. They wanted to consume porn that they could relate to because it made the content seem more realistic to them. This correlation demonstrates the subjectivity of both relatability and realism in pornography. If the participant could relate to a pornographic film (the subject matter of the film could more effectively transport them to a place of fantasy) then they were more likely to rate that pornography as realistic. There are a multitude of variables that go into such a relationship with pornography, which should be explored through further study. It is also possible that the relationship between relatability and realism is mutually reinforcing and that perceptions of realism can also make pornography relatable to a consumer. In this regard, each are equally subjective.

Beyond perceptions of realism, the participants also correlated relatable porn content with their own ethical code. The participants displayed their attitudes toward pornography more often as objective rather than subjective. Even if they attempted to acknowledge that different consumers have different preferences, participants had difficulty empathizing with people who consume pornography they felt differed from the porn they preferred, particularly if they felt that porn was “unethical”. Leah, Renée, and Jessica expressed not only disinterest but disgust at some porn genres they did not like. They felt some genres of porn (particularly those that featured consensual nonconsent or a similarly taboo subject) were immoral or “gross.” Interestingly, the participants showed differences in taste when they discussed genres of pornography they did not watch. While some pornography that they did not watch but did not find offensive was simply
unrelatable or unrealistic, pornography they found “unethical” was deemed so because the participants were disturbed that other people may find it realistic.

A lot of the participants’ “to each their own” statements about pornography and sex can be classified as sexual libertarianism. This is where perceptions of other people’s relationships with porn conflict with attempts to be nonjudgmental. Their ideals about sexual freedoms surrounding pornography approach sex positivity, but do not quite reach it. Rather, the participants demonstrated a stigma-reduced understanding of their own porn consumption habits that was not always transmitted to their perceptions of other consumers. While each of them emphasized that all porn consumers have different preferences, their discussion of those preferences did not yield the same generosity that they afforded their own porn habits.

Participants’ discussion of other people’s porn habits often reverted to a cause/effect narrative. Their conflicting opinions about their own habits versus others, and their occasional inability to articulate a porn-related matter because they felt so complexly about it, demonstrates the ineffectiveness of this narrative. The participants would make claims about the effects of porn and would either immediately counter it with an alternate narrative, or unknowingly conflict themselves later in the interview.

While the participants understood porn quite fluidly in the context of themselves, they did not always have the words to describe pornography in the context of their larger society. This is unsurprising, considering how most participants disclosed that the interview was the most in-depth conversation about pornography they had ever had. If conversations about pornography with peers, family, or in sex education were limited, it makes sense
that these women had difficulty conceptualizing other people’s relationships with pornography with the ease and openness that they did their own.

Discussions of realism and authenticity in porn were not only recurring in the interviews, but also informed the participants’ perspectives on different pornographies. The participants had somewhat varying definitions of what constituted “realistic” pornography, but some of the major qualifying points they discussed were plot, sexual positions, perceived chemistry of performers, and authenticity/presence of orgasm (especially for women performers). For most of the participants, pornography was more realistic if it was relatable, meaning they could identify with what was transpiring in the pornographic film. Many participants found amateur or homemade pornography more realistic for this reason - it was less likely to feature the dramatized performances of some big name porn companies, and more likely to depict lesser known actors, or even people who are not porn professionals in any capacity, without augmented bodies. Again, these perceptions were mostly subjective. For example, one participant discussed how women in porn often orgasm, which she felt was not realistic to real life sex. Another participant commented that women in porn do not often orgasm, which was not relatable to her. Participants also discussed that the women’s orgasms themselves were over-the-top and therefore unrelatable, or unrealistic.

The participants’ draw to what they perceive as more “realistic” porn suggests their desire to relate to porn content may produce a more pleasurable watching experience. Just as reading a relatable book more easier transports the reader into the story, invoking their empathy and emotions, watching relatable porn assists in consumer pleasure. Consumers may have a more arousing experience if they can envision
themselves more easily in a pornographic scene. The participants’ search for authenticity demonstrates both their pursuit of pleasure as well as a resistance to “mainstream” pornography, however they may perceive that.

Although participants emphasized this push for authenticity and relatable porn content, they also shared fantasies that they do not desire outside of watching it in porn. Leah, for example, enjoyed watching porn where the woman was being dominated by a man, but did not see this as a part of her sex life outside of seeing it on screen. When asked to define fantasy, all of the participants described it as that which is only desired hypothetically, rather than elements that one would actually like to incorporate into their sex life, just as the example Leah shared. This discrepancy suggests that watching pornography, even relatable pornography, does not necessarily indicate that consumers wish to recreate those scenes in their personal lives. Simulation theory may provide one explanation for this phenomenon. Theodore Bach suggests in “Pornography as Simulation” that consuming pornography involves the same basic cognitive process as imagining how we would respond in a given hypothetical situation. In other words, consuming porn involves either mentally adopting the role of one or more of the actors, or simply imagining interacting with a situation as a third party observer.67 Pornography’s simulatory properties reinforce it as a fantasy genre.

However, the opposite appears to be true, as well. Some participants spoke about how they do want to bring elements of pornography into their lives. Alice, for example, said that watching pornography taught her a number of sexual possibilities that she has

---

since tried and discovered she enjoys. Alice’s pursuit of pleasure in pornography became tangible in her sex life. Renée discussed elements of lesbian porn that she wished were present in sex with her partner. Whether or not elements found in porn were brought to fruition by the participants, they did express a desire to recreate them in their lives. These examples, in conjunction with the stories about relatable pornography above, demonstrate that porn consumption is not a universal experience. Some aspects may be desired by some consumers, while others may not. Pornography is comparable to other forms of media in this sense. Consumers cultivate their own tastes which are more apt to be satisfied by certain pornographies rather than others. It is important to recognize the complexities of both consumers and pornographies in order to understand this. Wright’s 3AM model (Acquisition, Activation, Application) could be helpful here once more in interpreting the participant’s acquisition of sexual behaviors and desires from porn. His theory was intended to explain the acquisition of new knowledge from pornography, rather than previously held desires that are sought out in porn by consumers. The participants often demonstrated both behaviors - learning about sex from porn and also searching for content they already know they like.

Through their discussions of authenticity and pleasure in pornography, the participants demonstrated an understanding of fantasy much in line with Linda Williams’ definition. That is, they believed that their own fantasies were a suspension of reality, rather than a continuation of their sexual behaviors. Whether or not they wanted their fantasies to actualize did not seem to interfere with this idea. The participants seemed comfortably rooted in their ideas of fantasy, which may have a gendered component. Research by Martin Barker demonstrated that women associated ideas of fantasy or
imagination with porn more than twice as likely as men did when asked what they would miss about porn if it went away, which suggested that fantasy primarily was a way to relate to pornography. Once again, the participants’ knowledge about fantasy was not always extended into their perceptions of others’ relationships with porn. Their consciousness of fantasy, like gender, was primarily understood in the context of how pornography intersected with their own lives.

The interviews offered insight into the methodology of the first round of data intake. Although the participant’s definitions of what made porn “realistic” varied, they all seemed to be more or less in agreement that pornography was generally dissimilar to real life sex, but that this definitely depends on the type of porn being consumed. However, when asked to agree or disagree to porn being similar to real life sex, the responses amongst the participants still differentiated from one another. The incongruence of answers perhaps reflects the ambiguity of the question itself, which was purposeful during the construction of the research methods. Regardless of the participant’s answers during the survey and the interviews, it is evident that respondents overwhelmingly believe that porn is mostly dissimilar to real life sex.

Another monumental theme throughout the interviews was shame. The participants found shame to be persistent in their lives, especially as women. Their gender consciousness informed their perceptions of the stigmas of watching pornography. All of their feelings of shame both in the past and present were experienced at the hands of sex negativity and anti-porn ideas perpetuated through major institutions in their lives.

---

68 Martin Barker, “The ‘problem’ of sexual fantasies.”
such as friends, family, and formal education. Participants combatted shame through their consciousness of sex-negativity that they gained as they grew older, and expressed that they wished they had been taught more about pornography and sex when they were younger so that they may have avoided shame.

This research finds young people use pornography in pleasure-seeking situations that reinforce and inform sex as a pleasurable experience. For the interview participants, porn curated a pleasure-based understanding of sex in a way that nothing else had. Grubbs and Braden describe this pleasure-seeking model as *hedonic pursuit* in “Pornography and Pleasure-Seeking: Toward a Hedonic Reinforcement Model.” The interviews showed the women’s use of pornography was primarily hedonistic, meaning women watched porn when they wanted to feel aroused, masturbate, and achieve orgasm. They also sought out new sexual behaviors in porn that could be adapted into their sex lives, and cultivated their sexual fantasies. The model of hedonistic pursuit provides an alternative to the narrative of pornography consumption as an addictive behavior. Like many of the participants mentioned, consuming pornography is similar to consuming other media such as music or video games. Grubbs and Braden also suggest it may also be similar to eating for pleasure, rather than a compulsive behavior over which the consumer could lose control. The Hedonic Reinforcement Model better represents how young people are experiencing pornography.

After considering hedonistic pursuit, there still exists the fear that consumers, particularly young people, somehow do not understand pornography and could fall victim

---

to its “harmful” ideas. However, the women who participated in this study demonstrated not only a willingness to discuss pornography, but also an nuanced awareness of what pornography is, how it is made, what its functions are in the social and sexual world, and its relationship to the Internet. Their relationships with pornography are dramatically different from generations before them because of the Internet’s many structural changes to how they access and consume porn. From this knowledge alone, it is apparent that pornography research must reflect the autonomous ways young people relate to and understand porn. Just as many young people today have a sense of Internet literacy, they may also have porn literacy. They are literate in Internet pornography in ways that may be elemental in the larger scheme of all there is to understand about porn, but this literacy is likely to be much greater and more nuanced than those who do not (or have not) grown up with dual exposure to both the Internet and Internet porn.

The participants of this study displayed their porn literacy throughout the interviews. They discussed porn production and how marketing and budget influenced the porn content. They had proficient understandings of porn websites and how to navigate them. They discussed their familiarity with ads on porn sites, and how to distinguish between ads and pornography. Further, they were fluent in differentiating between modes of production in porn, meaning they knew the difference between high-production, big-name porn companies (think Brazzers, Reality Kings, Kink), amateur performances, and homemade content. Perhaps most significantly, their accumulated knowledge of the variety of pornographies accessible to them led them to the conclusion that pornography is about fantasy. While they acknowledged that some aspects of pornography overlapped with sex in real life, they knew from experience that porn is not
typically representative of their own sexual encounters. Participants felt that what made porn realistic or unrealistic relied on who made the porn and how much money they had to make it. Their possession of this knowledge strengthened their porn literacy.

Notably, whatever porn literacy these women have garnered was done so largely on their own, primarily through years of consumption experience. Concerned calls for porn education to be added to sex education programs are increasingly popular under the assumption that young people (particularly young men) are mindless victims that learn to enact violence and inequality through exposure to pornography. Ideally, this could have a positive impact on young people if porn literacy programs sought to destigmatize pornography. However, Kath Albury points out that sex education programs often lack discussion of “power, gender relations and sexual negotiation skills,” which would mean a discussion of pornography would also lack these themes. Additionally, the effectiveness of porn literacy would likely be quelled by the logistics of teaching pornography to minors when it is illegal to actually show them porn or suggest that they consume it in order to gain literacy.70

All of the participants wanted pornography to join the curriculum of sex education in some manner. They desired more breadth and depth of conversation surrounding pornography, and by extension, sexuality, and wished they had been talked to about porn and masturbation as children in order to avoid future shame and stigma. Their admittedly lackluster experiences with sex education left no room for pleasure-based understandings of their own sexualities. The women stressed the importance of having both porn and sex

education in their lives and in others’ lives, as well. Porn told them sex should be fun and pleasurable while other sources failed to. Their consciousness of porn as fictitious enough not to substitute education evidences their porn literacy.

Additionally, interview participants mirrored the overall responses for PornReal in the first round of data intake, which reinforces their porn literacy. They all felt that pornography was not particularly similar to sex in real life. Again, they saw porn as fictitious. Interview participants specified that more realistic porn was the porn that was less fictitious (less constructed) such as homemade content. Knowing that pornography is a construction, and also recognizing differences between pornography and sex in real life further exemplifies the participant’s porn literacy.
CONCLUSION

The anti-pornography movement often strips women of the autonomy that is essential to the politics of consent they preach, a consequence of which being that women are painted as helpless victims by the feminist movement, which so often seeks to do the opposite. Feminists that exclude sex workers from their feminism (often called SWERFS - sex worker exclusionary radical feminists) are still extremely present in feminist circles today. Matters of autonomy and choice are central to feminist thought in seemingly all feminist issues with the exception of the anti-pornography movement. Abortion access and ending domestic violence, for example, are pillars of the feminism that center on the sole idea that every person deserves the right to choose what happens to their body. The idea that women are fully autonomous people is the axle on which feminism turns.

Insisting that women are disinterested in pornography is a continuation of the idea that they are harmed by pornography. If women show interest in porn, anti-porn advocates accuse them of contributing to their own oppression and not possessing the ability to think critically about systemic issues. Women who consume or create pornography are similarly criticized as anti-feminist. Gloria Steinem herself has espoused this rhetoric as recently as her Pornhub protest in December. Such blanket statements are irresponsible and ignore the realities of how pornography intermingles with our lives positively, negatively, and neutrally.

Anti-porn advocates have frequently claimed that pornography is violent and that exposure to this content causes violence against women. These classifications of violence do not necessarily connect to implications of real-life violence for multiple reasons. To
begin, defining violence is meaningless without also measuring for consent, which WAP activists and anti-porn voices of today seem less concerned with in contrast to their primary messages of anti-violence. Consensual violence during sex is common practice for many individuals both in and outside of porn, especially in the BDSM community. In addition, violence is not necessarily equal to degradation or humiliation, neither of which are always undesirable components of a sexual experience. Anti-pornography ideas often fail to demonstrate that there is no one way to have sex, especially in regards to gender. To imply that pornography causes men to be violent toward women is to ignore the larger context in which both porn and sexuality exist. In order to be truly anti-violence, feminists should also be pro-bodily autonomy, however that autonomy is utilized. Deciding there was a “normal” way to be sexual was one of the most divisive and harmful idea feminists ever perpetuated.

It is only once the most marginalized are rid of oppressive structures that society can be truly sex-positive. This is why the ultimate goal of de-stigmatizing pornography is to uplift sex workers, who are often left out of feminism, especially by prominent feminists such as Steinem and organizations such as the Women’s March. Anti-pornography feminists have always perpetuated the marginalization of sex workers by painting them as (often female) victims of the patriarchy who had no choice but to sell their bodies, completely ignoring the fact that many sex workers choose to go into their field and enjoy their jobs just the same as non-sex workers. Like most jobs, there are

71 The first Women’s March in D.C. in January 2017 purposefully left sex workers’ rights out of their call to action. Their statement of “Unity Principles” included many marginalized groups. Sex workers were included at first, saying that we must “stand in solidarity with sex workers’ rights movements,” but the language was later changed to solidarity with “all those exploited for sex and labor.” Elizabeth Nolan Brown, “Women’s March Waffles on Sex Work Rights, Disinvites Women Who Oppose Abortion,” Reason, 1/17/17, https://reason.com/blog/2017/01/17/womens-march-strikes-sex-worker-rights
likely elements of both of these realities, plus a myriad of others. Sex work, whether it is done in front of a camera or not, is stigmatized for being “abnormal.” One of the most negative words for women, “whore,” reflects this perspective. The idea that sex should not be exchanged for money reinforces hegemonic ideologies about normative sexuality.

Sex for pleasure, by its very nature, interrupts the idea that sex should only be for procreation, an idea that has been used to punish and control marginalized groups throughout history. Pornography exists for the purpose of pleasure, and thereby overtly and loudly disrupts the narrative that sex is only for reproducing. It also dispels the idea that there is only one “good” way to have sex, as per Rubin’s charmed circle wherein pornography is listed in the “outer limits.” Because of what pornography generally is, it should not be a surprise that its primary use is for sexual pleasure. That pleasure has been so often confounded with anti-porn narratives of violence against women, a loss of emotional intelligence, and an erosion between porn and men’s sexuality demonstrates the deep-seated social fear of sexual pleasure. Sharing stories of these women’s sexual pleasure through the interviews conducted for this study contributes to a narrative that breaks down stigma surrounding women’s sexuality. If porn consumption is primarily in the pursuit of pleasure, rather than an addiction-motivated habit, it does not make sense for it to be a public health crisis. Pleasure is not a health hazard, although lawmakers in Utah, Florida and other states pushing this legislature may see it as a social hazard. The women interviewed here showed that pleasure should be nothing to fear.

The interviewees also demonstrated an approach of sex-positivity. They possessed some of the foundational ideas of sex-positivity, such as porn literacy and gender consciousness. They displayed a self-taught familiarity with pornography that informed
their intricate understanding of porn and their own sexuality. They also exhibited some sex-negative ideas that were reflective of anti-pornography sentiments, especially when it came to discussing other people’s interactions with porn. Because of this complex mix, many of the participant’s ideas about porn can be classified as sex libertarian. Through a sex-positive lens, we can accept the participant’s multifaceted relationships with pornography without stigma while also critiquing the systemic ideologies that contribute to them. Such is the model of a more sex-positive academic framework.

The participants’ sexual libertarian perspective allowed them to consciously recognized the validity of the diversity of sexual behaviors outside of their own habits or even comfort zone. Sex libertarianism is a no-judgment zone where people are free to explore their sexualities in private. It starts and ends at the self. Sex positivity includes the same hands-off sexuality as sex libertarianism, but it takes the next necessary steps of recognizing, critiquing, and dismantling power structures surrounding sex and the body. Sex positivity, a relatively young concept in academia, exists to deconstruct hierarchies of sexual privilege and oppression, as Rubin identified.

In academia, we use sex positivity as a lens through which to inform our research while simultaneously tackling our biases. In practice, sex positivity intersects with our lives in embodied and intimate ways that can empower, disturb, confuse, and transform us. It causes us to be introspective in uncomfortable ways. Research must be mindful of these diverse and complex experiences, and honor them by offering a nonjudgmental and unbiased space that includes them in the larger discussion of porn studies.

Engaging pornography with a sex positive and critical lens means acknowledging that pornography is not necessarily inherently any one thing. It also means reconciling
with the reality that pornography exists, and always has existed in some form, and will likely continue to always exist. Additionally, pornography is widely used in diverse manners that this study only begins to comprehend. This research could serve as a pilot study for further explorations into the relationship between pornography and sex-positivity.

With all of these ideas in place, we must first recognize that to rid the world of pornography, as anti-porn activists sometimes suggest, is both nearly impossible and also unethical. No method would be able to eradicate pornography and attempting to do so would require heavy amounts of censorship that hurt porn communities, and often first attack content that is more taboo and further away from the mainstream, such as BDSM and same-sex interactions.72 Pornography would continue to be created underground, which would make sex work more dangerous as at risk for incarceration. Second, since people are watching pornography (at whatever rate that is), we cannot approach pornography consumption from a place of shame while simultaneously working within a sex positive/critical framework. To do so would be counterintuitive and counterproductive.

Third, rather than discouraging porn consumption, we must encourage stigma-free understandings of porn through education. Comprehensive sex education in schools is nearly nonexistent, let alone pleasure-based sex education for young people. Sex education that is pleasure-focused is contingent of autonomy and consent, because

---

72 For example, in 2014 UK legislature banned several acts from pornographic content produced and sold in the UK. These acts included some spanking and choking, facesitting, fisting, full bondage, and female ejaculation. They also banned “abusive language” and portrayals of consensual nonconsent. Hurt most were independent porn creators producing queer and female-centered pornography and BDSM content. (Heather Saul, “UK porn legislation: what is now banned under new government laws,” Independent, 12/2/14).
navigating sexuality for the purpose of pleasure requires a deep understanding of one’s own bodily comforts, limits, and rights. We also must move beyond porn literacy into the inclusion of pornography by other dialogues such as art history and film studies, for this seeks to accept pornography as canon.

Lastly, porn research and theory must approach pornography by asking complex questions and accepting nuanced answers. There is no universal truth to the whole of pornography, just as there is not for sexuality. That porn and sex have innumerable manifestations should be a celebration of the diversity of human experience. Porn research must be highly specified and move away from the cause/effect narrative model. Doing so allows space for the intimate stories that were heard in this study. Perhaps most demonstrative was the voice of Alice, whose frustration with sexual silencing and shaming stemmed from her wholehearted belief that porn should not be stigmatized.

Alice: [Porn] is popular behind closed doors. And that’s frustrating because it’s a part of who we are. We are one of the only mammals that have sex for fun - that enjoy this interaction just to have it, to feel this euphoric feeling. It’s such a problem that we’re shunned away from it, we’re shunned from watching it, we’re shunned away from experiencing it. It has to be so hidden and secretive. And it’s such a shame because it’s beautiful.

As sex-positive scholars, educators, and activists attempt to evolve the dominant narrative of pornography and pleasure, it is essential to be introspective about what those narratives are. Who benefits from them and who suffers? How do learned ideas about sexuality and pornography affect how people understand themselves? Examination of these questions assists a cultural shift toward sex-positivity, thereby making space for those at the margins to come to the center.
WORKS CITED


Brownmiller, Susan. Against Our Will: Men, women, and rape. New York: Fawcett


Handler, Chelsea, (@chelseahandler). “There is an entire generation of children who’s first memory of their President is a man who supports child molesters, wife beaters, Russian hacking, and porn stars. It is our responsibility to make that a memory and not a consistency. We all have a moral obligation. Keep going.” 2/10/18. Tweet.


Jenkins, Henry. “So You Want To Teach Pornography?” In *More Dirty Looks*, edited by


https://www.pornhub.com/insights/2017-year-in-review

Lee, Lorelei (@missloreleilee). “When Steinem says sex work is the invasion of our bodies she is saying that our consent does not matter. When you deny our ability to consent you deny our ability to talk about our actual rapes.” 2/14/18. Tweet.


Marcus, Josh. “Florida Republicans are trying to declare porn a public health crisis.” Vice News, 1/19/18.


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A: Survey Questions

How often do you watch video pornography on the Internet?

Never (1)  A few times a year (2)  1-2 times a month (3)  1-2 times a week (4)
3 or more times a week (5)  Once a day (6)  More than once a day (7)

Indicate how you feel about the following statement: Generally the sex in pornography is similar to sex in real life.

Strongly disagree (1)  Disagree (2)  Somewhat disagree (3)  Neutral (4)
Somewhat agree (5)  Agree (6)  Strongly agree (7)
APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

1. Do you feel that pornography you watch reflects your fantasies?
2. Do you think that pornography is a reflection of mens’ fantasies?
3. What words or images come to mind when you hear the word “pornography”?
4. Questions about viewing environment:
5. Where do you usually watch pornography?
6. Who (if anyone) do you watch pornography with?
7. Consumption habits:
8. What are some reasons you have watched pornography?
9. For social or recreational purposes?
10. For sexual purposes (masturbatory or nonmasturbatory)?
11. Other purposes (academic, informational, accidental)?
   a. How do you utilize pornography in these situations?
      i. As a masturbatory aid?
      ii. For arousal?
      iii. As recreational entertainment?
      iv. To learn about sex?
12. On a situational basis, how do you decide what pornography to watch?
13. Is there is a certain genre/category you find yourself drawn to?
14. Questions about interpretation:
15. Why do you think other people watch pornography?
16. Do you feel like pornography is realistic? Why or why not?
17. Do you think pornography reflects sex in real life (i.e. sex that is not happening for the purpose of creating pornography)? Why or why not?
18. How do you feel women and/or men are represented in pornography?
19. Do you think pornography can cause any good ideas or habits? Why or why not?
20. What would you change about pornography to make it more pleasurable for you to consume?
21. How would you describe the term “fantasy”?
22. (If participant is a man) How do you think other men perceive pornography?
   a. (If participant is not a man) How do you think men perceive pornography?
23. (If participant is a man) Do you think your experiences with pornography are similar or dissimilar to other men?
   a. (If participant is not a man) Do you think your experiences with pornography are similar or dissimilar to a man’s experience with pornography?
APPENDIX C: IRB Approval

APPLICATION FOR APPROVAL OF RESEARCH WITH HUMAN SUBJECTS
Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, 400 Corbett Hall
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Samantha Saucier EMAIL: samantha.saucier@maine.edu
FACULTY SPONSOR: Jennie Woodard EMAIL: jennie.woodard@maine.edu
TITLE OF PROJECT: Troubling Pornography: Tensions of pornography consumption habits
START DATE: September 1st, 2017 PI DEPARTMENT: Sociology, Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies
FUNDING AGENCY (if any): N/A
STATUS OF PI: FACULTY/STAFF/GRADUATE/UNDERGRADUATE (F,S,G,U)
1. If PI is a student, is this research to be performed:
   - for an honors thesis/senior thesis/capstone? for a master's thesis?
   - for a doctoral dissertation? for a course project?
   - other (specify)

2. Does this application modify a previously approved project? (Y/N). If yes, please give assigned number (if known) of previously approved project:
3. Is an expedited review requested? (Y/N).
   Submitting the application indicates the principal investigator’s agreement to abide by the responsibilities outlined in Section I.E. of the Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects.
   Faculty Sponsors are responsible for oversight of research conducted by their students. The Faculty Sponsor ensures that he/she has read the application and that the conduct of such research will be in accordance with the University of Maine’s Policies and Procedures for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research. REMINDER: if the principal investigator is an undergraduate student, the Faculty Sponsor MUST submit the application to the IRB.
   Email this cover page and complete application to UMRIC@maine.edu

FOR IRB USE ONLY Application # Review (F/E): Expedited Category: ACTION TAKEN:
Judged Exempt; category Modifications required? Accepted (date)
Approved as submitted. Date of next review: by Degree of Risk:
Approved pending modifications. Date of next review: by Degree of Risk:

Modifications accepted (date):
Not approved (see attached statement)
Judged not research with human subjects

FINAL APPROVAL TO BEGIN
Date
SS: So if we could just start--just tell me how old you are.

I: I am 19.

SS: And what is your gender identity?

I: Female.

SS: Great. So once again, this study is about, broadly, pornography. I’m trying to talk to students about how they feel about it and what their experiences are just to give a voice to that experience, really, so um, yeah. I’ll just start with some questions, I’m going to ask questions about your opinions about pornography, and your own habits, and anything else that you wanna talk about, so cool. Let’s just start with--how would you define pornography?

I: Pornography to me is any videos or pictures that are specifically sexual and often like have nudity and sexual acts depicted in them.

SS: Cool. We’re on the same page. Specifically for this study I’m talking about porn on the internet. Do you usually consume porn on the internet, is that how you usually access it?

I: Yeah.

SS: Could you tell me a few ways you access that, like what websites you would use?

I: PornHub, Tumblr, surprisingly, there’s a lot of porn blogs on there. Super awkward sometimes you’ll pull up your tumblr in class, and you’re just scrolling and you’re like “oh God, not now,” but yeah typically just like Tumblr and PornHub.

SS: Cool. So that’d be like videos on PornHub, and probably a variety of things on Tumblr?

I: Yeah.

SS: Where do you usually consume pornography, like physically, like in your house, etc.

I: Mostly in my bedroom. Typically not the type to watch porn in the living room.

SS: Yeah, I don’t know what your living situation is. And who, if anyone, do you watch pornography with?

I: If anyone, it would be my significant other. Not really a friend-type thing.
SS: So I guess along a similar vein, I’m gonna ask about some reasons that you might watch pornography. So have you ever watched for social or recreational purposes?

I: What do you mean?

SS: Like with friends, or to show someone something?

I: Someone sent me a link to one, but it was like a really funny one and it was more of a joke, I don’t think it counts. Not really a habitual thing.

SS: For sexual purposes, masturbatory or not, have you ever watched porn for informational purposes or to learn something?

I: Yeah.

SS: Have you ever watched it on accident?

I: Yeah, the first couple times I watched porn it was like, totally by accident, I didn’t know it was porn, but I was pretty young.

SS: Oh really?

I: I wasn’t super super young, I was like 12, but yeah.

SS: How did that happen?

I: Um, I was actually just like scrolling through the internet and I didn’t have my pop-up blocker on, and it just popped up and I was like “what the hell is that?” and clicked on it and was like “what is this?” But yeah, that was my accidental experience with porn.

SS: Do you remember what it was?

I: I think it was just straight porn, to be honest. I don’t really remember. Normal things.

SS: So on a situational basis, like day-to-day, how would you decide which pornography to watch?

I: I’m pretty lazy, so typically whatever pops up first on my tumblr, but like, if I’m really in the mood to watch a certain thing, if it’s mood-based, and feelings-wise, that’s typically how I would choose, from there.

SS: Are there any categories you find yourself drawn to?

I: Interestingly enough, lesbian porn, because it’s… I don’t know why, actually. I mean, I identify as bisexual, to me, that was like one of the first genres of porn I watched, so it was like, sentimental.

SS: That’s cool, I might come back to that. Cool. So do you feel as though the porn that you watch, or the pornography that exists, reflects your fantasies or something that you wanna watch?
I: Typically, what I watch, generally is what I could see myself doing, or what I think is like ethical, in a way. There’s like, a lot of categories, on websites, that are like brother-sister, and that’s gross. So to me, I stray away from that, and I’ll just watch the categories that I feel are relevant to my life.

SS: So you said ethical--

I: Like, I don’t like the rape fantasy videos like those to me are appropriating rape culture, and I don’t really like it.

SS: Do you feel like those are common, like, do you think they pop up a lot for you?

I: You know how like on PornHub, there’s a bottom with like, the slides that it goes through? They’ll pop up there, and to me it seems... like I know it’s all staged, but to me, I don’t think that it should be continued. I don’t want to watch it, because I don’t want to support it, and I don’t want to do it.

SS: That’s interesting. I’m really interested in that conversation about rape scenarios in porn, because there’s a long history there. So people who watch those, do you think that it affects them in a certain way?

I: Um, I don’t know. I think it depends on the person. For some, it’s just porn, whatever. But for others, they might watch it and be like “oh, this is okay,” and like “it’s just like porn, it’s okay.” And for me, like especially for younger kids, because no one follows the age restriction for porn. Like especially like young boys, that worries me that they’re getting the wrong impression with that and the wrong impression of the right way to treat a woman or a man, or like anybody else for that matter, and that’s like my biggest worry with that category is specifically the age that’s watching it and like the maturity of the person that’s watching it as well.

SS: Do you think or feel that the pornography you watch reflects the sexual encounters you would like to have in real life?

I: Yeah, usually.

SS: Cool. I’ll come back to that. So, do you feel like pornography is realistic and why or why not?

I: Depends on the situation, like there’s the amateur videos and stuff like that is usually realistic because it’s usually people with their partners that are just filming themselves having sex, but then there’s the staged porn that’s so fake, but like at the same time, this is reflective of if a couple is into roleplaying, that would be something that they would do. And especially if it’s a masturbation video, like obviously you’re doing what you like. So it depends what the video is, but for the most part, I feel like it’s pretty legit.

SS: Do you feel like pornography reflects the sex that happens in real life?

I: I have had the experience where yes, it does reflect that, and also I’ve had times where it’s like, “this is not porn. This is completely the opposite.”
SS: What makes it similar, then? Or different?

I: What makes it similar, depending on what you’re watching, you can see the connection between the two people or you can completely see the disconnect-- and if you see that, and they’re supposed to be a couple, but you see that they’re like actually caring for each other and it replicates those feelings for you, but if you see a casual hookup video, and you see that they’re not like together couple, you’re like, “oh, this is just porn.” And so sometimes yes and sometimes no.

SS: So I guess like measuring for an emotional connection is what would make the difference.

I: Yeah. Which for me, like, as I’ve learned more about the porn industry, makes me kind of like think deeper about it, because the people who do videos, if it’s a professional, then they have to meet the person beforehand, and it really show to me how much of a relationship they establish before the video versus if they didn’t at all, and you can compare that and it makes me feel better about watching it because I know that both of them are more comfortable doing it, and if I don’t see that then I don’t know if they’re consenting, and I’m kind of like “oh no.”

SS: Cool. Do you think it would be beneficial in general for porn to show that part? To show a scenario being constructed?

I: I feel like, maybe not for every video, maybe like a behind the scenes video, or something like that, where they show that that’s what happens, where everyone meets each other, and that it’s all consensual. Something that I didn’t know is that you can revoke consent at any time, and you’re compensated up until the timing that you did. So I didn’t know that, and I was like, oh, that’s super cool. Because, that’s like really meaning you’re not forced.

SS: Do you remember where you learned that?

I: A few different blogs. Not like, tumblr blogs, but actual online blogs.

SS: Cool. That emotional disconnect is really interesting to me. Why do you think that’s happening in porn, if you’re perceiving that there’s no emotional connection, why do you think that that’s the content that’s being made at like a higher volume, or higher production value?

I: I think as like a business thing, it’s something that gets swept over, is their emotional connection, because it’s not their main concern, it’s just like, get the video done, and make the profit off of it, so it’s like, it really depends on the actors at that point to establish a connection or not, and like I feel like it’s not really up to directors at that point. Except like, in the rape scenario videos which is totally weird to me, and totally mind-blowing, because those are all filmed professionally, and the actors have met before, so like, why would you agree to doing that, and that’s where I don’t really understand the logic behind it, and that I don’t know why people do that. But it’s like, mass-produced.
SS: I guess they wouldn’t be creating it--

I: If no one was watching it, yeah.

SS: That’s not necessarily the supply and demand relationship, I guess, but, I mean someone must be watching it, right? So, I don’t know. If you had to put yourself in that mindset, why do you think someone would watch that? Something that had an element of non-consent?

I: To me, I guess it would be a stance of like, needing dominance in their life, and like, not having that, and not having control, so like that I don’t think is a purely sexual thing, I think it’s definitely based off of their emotional needs, and the way they live their life, so let’s say that they’re lacking control in their work, or control in their personal life and things like that, that they would turn to something like that so they could second-hand feel the control. I don’t know if that makes sense.

SS: I understand what you’re saying, yeah. Cool. I think maybe power dynamics are present in a lot of different ways in pornography, and not always necessarily that way, do you feel like power dynamics are present in other porn that you watch?

I: Yeah definitely, there’s like certain videos that like have a very clear sub and a very clear dom. And like, oh, okay, I get it, but then when you relate that back to real life, sometimes that totally does happen. Like a guy is totally a top, or a guy is totally a bottom, it’s kind of relevant, but at the same time you see that there’s a power divide, and then you see in other videos where it’s the opposite, but something that has been done is that it has been shown that there can be more equality, where females can be dominant, males can be submissive, like, it’s done for a reason to make it level for everybody to realize, okay, this is a possibility, and this is a possibility as well and there’s no divide between it.

SS: Do you feel like power or like the dynamics in general are different between lesbian porn and straight porn?

I: Yeah, I definitely think so. So like, in straight porn there’s like very clear, usually, a masculine dominant, but like in lesbian porn, obviously there’s no masculine entity, so like, you can tell which woman is being more dominant, but it’s not trying to betray the fact that she’s a woman, and they don’t force her to take on quote unquote “manly” qualities that there would be in straight porn, so I think that you can see where the power is and where it’s not in both of them.

SS: Why do you think that is? That’s a really big question, but…

I: It’s okay, I think there’s a clear divide because the marketing aspect of it, it’s easier for the consumer to know, to have it blatantly obvious to them, which party is the dominant party. In straight porn, if it’s the male or female being dominant, it’s much easier for the consumer and much more beneficial to the category if it’s clear who’s dominant. So like, even in the BDSM videos and categories like that, there’s sub categories that say like male dominant and female dominant, so that helps their marketing aspect, but in lesbian porn, it doesn’t have that in that subcategory, so I think that’s why it’s easier for straight
porn to take off, but for some reason, lesbian porn is one of the most watched categories out there, so it’s like I don’t know really where or how well marketed the power divide is, because you can’t label it, but it’s very evident when you watch the video, so it’s very easy for the consumer to realize that but there’s no separate category for it, so I think there’s more fluidity in lesbian porn than there is in straight porn.

SS: Lesbian porn is really widely watched. I’m not sure if you’re aware of the statistics, which I don’t know off the top of my head.

I: It’s like, insane.

SS: It kind of implies that there’s a lot of men watching lesbian porn. Do you have any thoughts about that?

I: I think that really boils down to the fantasy, and the oversexualization of lesbians in general. I can’t remember when it really started, but there was a complete increase in guys being like “oh, I can turn her,” and it’s like, “no, you can’t, that’s not how this works, sorry.” I think to straight men, it comes off as something so much less attainable, that it becomes like “oh, this is just porn.” So like for a lot--and this is totally weird--but a lot of couples that I know, friends-wise, the girlfriends will not let them watch straight porn. And I’m like, why? I don’t get it. I don’t understand. But they will allow them to watch lesbian porn. And I don’t really know why, but they’re like “oh, because it will never happen.” To guys I feel like it’s like… okay, and especially for guys in relationships, it brings them this divide, where they can be like “oh, this is just porn.” Like not like mentally cheating. Like there’s things like that. But like that’s stupid. They gravitate more towards it because it’s hot. I think there’s also the marketing aspect to it, because there’s so much, and it’s there, and it’s just easier, so I think that tends to happen too. And obviously it’s abundant because people watch it, so.

SS: On the topic of fantasy, how would you describe what a fantasy is in the context of porn?

I: To me, I think a fantasy is something you don’t necessarily think you can attain yourself. So like, if you watch a threesome video, and you don’t ever see yourself having a threesome or having the opportunity to have a threesome, that would be a fantasy. So if you just watch regular straight porn and you’re a virgin, you want to have sex in the future, then that wouldn’t be a fantasy because you can see yourself attaining it. So that’s not a fantasy. Fantasy to me, the word, refers to like, unicorns, and leprechauns. On the other hand, it could be something like, that you hide. Things you don’t want to happen in real life. So say you are closeted, and you watch gay porn. It’s a fantasy because it’s not real for you. So the aspect of it not being real has to be there for it to be fantasy.

SS: Would you say either about yourself or maybe other people that porn and fantasy usually go together?

I: Um, sometimes. I think it depends on how like, open you are about porn. For me, obviously, I don’t care. It’s something I’m open to, but for other people it’s like *whispers* “porn.” And they freak out, but like, to some people porn is a fantasy, because they’re like, the lights-off, under the covers only kind of people. And like,
whatever you want to do is cool, but to me, that general mindset would think more so that porn is a fantasy, whereas people like me are more like, no, this is something that happens. Literally, like, if I were having sex with my boyfriend, and someone were to come in with a video camera, that’s porn. It doesn’t have to be like, paid or staged or anything like that.

SS: Do you think that your experiences with porn are similar or dissimilar to men’s experiences with porn, or what you perceive with that?

I: Personally, I like to think that they’re similar, because I don’t really take it as seriously as most women do--most women meaning my friends that I have personal experience with--like I know a lot of them only talk about porn, or anything sexual when they’re in a closed setting and I’m kinda like, yeah, sex is cool, whenever. I don’t sugarcoat it or bubblewrap it. It’s not something that needs to be hushed. And I think generally, the guys I know are having the same general feeling about it.

SS: Do you know for sure, or do you think that guys are more open to talking about sex or porn with each other or in general.

I: Yeah. From my experience, guys I know, they get to know you for one or two days and they know the general feel of who you are as a person, and they’ll be like “oh I watched this cool porn video,” like, they don’t care. But like whereas I knew one of my friends for four and a half years, and after those four and a half years, that was the first and only time that I ever heard her talk about anything sexual. It was one time, when we were at a sleepover, and it was just me and her and we talked about it for like two minutes and it was over. So like there’s definitely a divide. Typically guys are more open about it in my experience. However, coming to college, that’s maybe changed. Guys, yes, are still more open about it but women are generally less scared about it and less hush about it. Some of my friends--and obviously that could just be selective exposure where I surround myself with similar people to me, so they don’t care as much as women in general that I’ve met, but they also don’t care as little as I do.

SS: What do you think accounts for that difference?

I: I think it’s really a culture. I think it’s the way that women were told that they shouldn’t be talking about sex, and they shouldn’t make their needs and wants known. And men were allowed to to that, because it makes them masculine, and it gives them their man card, things like that. I think the way that the culture has appropriated that has changed, which I think is why in the short few years I’ve seen this change from like women being extremely quiet about it to being somewhat open but not as open as males. I think that has changed, and our culture and our society has changed.

SS: How has that, or how does that impact you? Why do you think that you’re more open to talking about that sort of thing.

I: I think that I’m more open to talking about it now versus when I first started watching porn or when I was like a freshman in high school, because I’ve had the experience with it, been in steady relationships, been in rocky relationships. I’ve seen the good and the bad of it, and to me, it’s like hit that point where it’s like, sex is just sex. Unless you
make it something special, or make it something real. And like, same thing with porn. Porn is just porn, unless you make a big deal of it, or you personally make not a big deal of it. Allocating attention to it, really, is where I’ve kind of learned to be different in my own individual self. Personally I tend to like read the room, so if there’s someone I can tell would not be careful, or has made it clear that they’re not comfortable with anything sexual, I wouldn’t do it. I think that’s due to my own understanding and maturity of it, versus like, if I had just started watching porn, and I had this mentality, that could’ve been a bad thing. It comes with time. I know there’s a few people that, especially guys, my middle school friends back home would walk home from school with me and make me cover my ears when they first started to watch porn and talk about it. It was mostly just me, the only girl, trying to be like “I don’t care, say whatever you want!” trying to be the cool girl, say what you want, but it kinda just desensitized me to it. Like, they’re open about it, why can’t I be open about it? So I think that’s where it comes from.

SS: Do you feel like you ever experienced shame for porn?

I: Oh my god, if my mom knew I watched porn, it would be the world’s largest gasp. “Stop don’t say that,” it would be just a nutshow. I accidentally left a browser up on my phone, and my mom was like “Can I borrow your phone to look something up?” and I was like “sure!” and completely forgot about it, and she opened it and was like “What is this?” and completely freaks out and I like lost my mind and I was like “I gave my phone to one of the boys at school and they must have messed around, I’m sorry,” and clicked out of it, and she was like “that’s disgusting,” and I was like, completely downplaying it, but like I was so young that I was like “oh my god, porn is bad,” like a sophomore in high school, and that was one of the only shaming experiences I’ve had with it. Until the reverse happened, and I was like “ha, you can’t say anything.”

SS: So when did you start watching porn?

I: Freshman year of high school. And like that one time accidentally when I was younger, but that doesn’t count.

SS: There’s a lot of ideas out there about porn in general and in scholarship that says that porn teaches bad ideas. Do you think there are things about porn that could teach good things or good habits?

I: I think that it’s definitely just what you turn your attention to. To me the variety of porn that’s out there is similar to the variety of like, TV shows and movies. It’s ridiculous how much you can find. An easy comparison is music, because like, everyone likes different music, and everyone likes different porn. Personally like people tend to turn their attention to things they like, and to things that make them feel good. If you were to... say if you weren’t in the mental preparation to have a relationship but you think that relationships and sex are good, say you watched a nice loving couple like something like that, you can be like, “oh, this can be good,” and it can be something as simple as that, that can completely turns things around for you. Whereas if you were to see something you were not okay with- like that would bring a negative emotion and connotation to it, so I think it’s really dependent on what you’re watching. But I think there are a lot of good connotations to it. Like feeling good about yourself. And a lot of times it’s like a
guy will be like “you’re so hot,” like that feels good, regardless of how much you take from it, it’s still a compliment. Seeing a man compliment a woman can give you a better connotation, like, if you’ve been bullied in school, to be like, oh, I’m a woman, I can be hot too, I can be beautiful too. There’s good messages in it that aren’t necessarily like the frontrunners of it, not what it’s meant for, but there are good ideas behind it.

SS: I’ll ask you the inverse of that--do you think pornography can put out bad ideas or bad habits?

I: I think that’s something that’s really prevalent is like, hitting. And if one partner is not okay with that, then it’s not okay to do. And that’s something that sometimes in porn is depicted as like, a surprise, and a girl just gets like smacked, on the ass or whatever, and she’s like “oh my god,” and like completely reacts to it, but then the guy does it again and completely ignores her reaction. That to me, could go wrong. And then someone could get the idea that this is okay to do, even if “no” is said. That should be something that’s taken seriously, and that can often give the wrong impression that it’s okay to do that, even if it’s not. In my own experience, I’ve been with a couple of guys who are like, “well, all girls like that.” And I’m like, no, all girls don’t. If I’m a girl, and I didn’t like it, then there’s your flaw. Which was later followed by like, “well, in all the porn videos, that’s what happened.” Like, it’s not okay. And the wrong idea is met with like, “well, you secretly like it.” Like, no, I don’t. When I say no, it means no.

SS: Do you think that people, or men, or whoever, do you think they can like… hmm, how do I want to say this? I just think it’s interesting that like men say stuff like that, like “well I saw it in porn, so it’s okay.” I’m wondering where that connection comes from.

I: I think it comes from a lack of maturity on the individual’s end. So if the individual is like only learning about sex from porn, they can often be led in the wrong directions. I think that experience needs to be had. Like, as annoying and uncomfortable as that experience was, it was still a learning experience for him. Yes, it was annoying and disrespectful, but at least now he knows, or at least I hope he does. There’s things like that that completely depend on how the individual is brought into sexual realization and encounters. If it’s only through porn, they can’t choose what they’re learning, and there’s no way to learn right from wrong. And the basics of what to do. It’s not like an info video, it’s just there.

SS: Where was I? Do you think that you either consciously or unconsciously learn things from porn?

I: Definitely, yeah. So my mom was not really open with talking about sex, at first, until she found out that I’d had sex. So that was really unhelpful. But, I didn’t really know what to do, how it worked, what to expect, so I turned to porn. I was like, this is the only way, I didn’t think my friends were comfortable talking about it. I learned that like, you always have an option, and it’s meant to be fun. That’s the biggest thing I took out of it. It’s supposed to be fun and feel good. That’s one of the better things I learned through porn. Obviously I learned the positions and stuff like that. Which, I don’t know if you needed to know that, but things like that I wouldn’t have known unless someone would’ve told me. It’s like, oh, cool, this is how this works.
SS: Did you have sex ed in school at all?

I: We had very minimal sex ed. We had like, the “this is how you don’t get pregnant,” sex ed. Like, “birth control is good. Abstinence doesn’t happen.” We had the “abstinence isn’t real” talk pretty early on, which was important to me. I think we got this in fifth grade, or like, middle school, which is a little young, but it stuck. We got the sex talk in middle school which was uncomfortable because our teacher was super creepy, which is just a personal thing, but like we learned about contraceptives, the whole banana on a condom thing. We all left with lube on our hands, it was funny. We were like 7th graders.

SS: Where did you go to school?

I: I went to school in Greenwich, Connecticut.

SS: Was it a private school?

I: Nope, it was a public school. Greenwich is a weird town, there’s a big big divide, and there’s a big list of people that belong in the town, like one big zipcode, and four or five sub-zipcodes. So there’s towns within the town. They range from like, basically poverty to lower class, middle class, and the wealthiest of the wealthy. Having that mix of people was pretty cool. It was like it’s own little world. I think they were targeting, like our sex ed on, lower class and very low class. I think it was targeted at us, because like how my friends in the wealthier middle school--there were three middle schools, Western Greenwich, Eastern Greenwich, and Central Greenwich--and the most wealthy was Eastern, Western was poor, and Central was kind of a mix of everybody, and Central and Western got more of a “this is life, do this” approach, and Eastern was more sugar-coated. It could’ve just been the teacher that was doing it, but I think that it’s very directed. There were definitely some PTA moms that were like, “I don’t want my daughter to learn about sex,” and I’m like, “Really? Because she’s going to be knocked up if she doesn’t.” So, I’m really glad that I was fortunate enough to get a good understanding of how to protect myself, from like, STIs, how to get checked, and where to get checked. Something I didn’t know about until high school is that our town hall provides free condoms. There’s like a big bucket, and right on the second floor, they do free pregnancy tests on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and they will STD screen you if you prove that you’re lower-class. And that’s so awesome. And another thing I just found out the other day is that if you go to our emergency room and get a pee-screen, they immediately test for pregnancy. They don’t tell you about it, they just do it. That, to me, is like, insane. That’s probably saved like countless babies from Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

SS: It’s always interesting to contextualize sex ed. I’m guessing that they didn’t tell you about porn in sex ed?

I: Um, they told us about porn, but they told us we should always listen to the age labels. I think that they really just wanted to prevent child pornogrpahy and things like that.

SS: That’s surprising, it usually doesn’t even get mentioned.
I: It was a little one, but it stuck. I was in 8th grade and that was when I accidentally watched porn, I was like “oh my god, was that illegal?” I was so scared. Which is the only reason I remember that they talked about it.

SS: Do you think that sex ed would be better if it had information about porn?

I: Absolutely. I think it should always be improved and always be worked on, because it’s so important. I think that talking about part of the negative aspects of porn being explained would definitely lower sexual assault. Because if you’re never told, “this is okay, this is not okay,” then you don’t know. That derives from porn, especially with young boys and young girls, their sense of what’s right and wrong. Like, remind them that this is a business video, this is not real life, and they all consent. This is all consensual, and really stressing the presence of consent.

SS: So if you could change anything about pornography, for anything--either to make it more pleasurable to consume, or just in general, what would that be?

I: Less spammy popups that like destroy your computer, and like, give your computer AIDS, basically, it’s like “ugh, make it stop,” and then you bring it to IT and they’re like “you’ve got a lot of viruses.” But um, I think it would make it more enjoyable in general, is to just have like a little blurb at the beginning or end of every video, like “this was all filmed with consent. All actors in this video have consented to sex.”

SS: Just to ease your mind?

I: Yeah, and like, also to make it like, “oh this is fine.” Just like a two second thing. It would really help.

SS: I’ve asked pretty much all the questions I wanted to ask you, did you have anything else you wanted to comment on?

I: Not much, I think we’ve pretty much covered my entire understanding of porn.

SS: Okay, well, you answered these questions when you did the psychology pre-screen, but I’m going to ask you them again. It’s multiple choice. So how often do you watch pornography on the internet?

I: One to three times a week seems about right.

SS: Indicate how you feel about the following statement: Generally the sex in pornography is similar to the sex in real life?

I: Somewhat agree.

SS: Just to comment on that again, what would make you say that?

I: Somewhat agree would be like, there are definitely some things in porn that I’d be like, wow, that’s athletic, and half the time it’s like this is so vanilla, but it’s cool.

SS: Gonna call my thesis that, “wow, that’s athletic.”
SS: So, let’s just start, if you can just give me your age and gender identity.

I: So, I am 19 years old and I’m female

SS: Okay cool. So, I have a lot of open ended questions and we can just sort of go with the ones that sort of feel best see where it goes. So if you were to give me a definition of pornography, what would that be?

I: Um, the definition of pornography would probably be, for me I guess, pictures and videos of um, intercourse, so like intercourse being like penetration being like, between people. So like basically videos. A lot of them have like, there’s themes to them. It’s like a movie.

SS: So, um, I am going to be specifically asking you about video pornography on the Internet. Is that something that you can relate to?

I: Yes.

SS: Okay, cool. Just so we’re clear. Are there any kind of words or ideas that come to mind when you hear the word pornography? It could be anything

I: It’s really just videos

SS: Do you have like specific websites that you use?

I: Pornhub I guess would be the big one. It’s the most common. Kink.com would also be a big one. Various channels off of Kink.com. Tumblr would be a large one, as well. And that’s probably it.

SS: Cool. So just some like, general questions about you. Where do you usually watch pornography?
I: In my bedroom. Just there.

SS: Who, if anyone, do you watch pornography with?

I: Sometimes my, like, friends with benefits-type person, because I don’t really like, do relationships. Um, a lot of the times by myself but sometimes like with my friends but that would be like, on tumblr with a selected amount of friends usually like comparing videos and stuff because like, I post personal things myself, so we’re usually just discussing that. So yeah I guess I would watch it with some friends.

SS: So you would sometimes watch it for like social or recreational purposes?

I: Yeah, more of like a social but like with feedback,

SS: What kind of feedback?

I: Like a review almost. Like a viewing of porn videos.

SS: Nice, and just like sharing socially or?

I: Yeah, it’s definitely casual social sharing of like, “hey check this out” or like “wow this is huge or like - ” [laughs] stuff like that

SS: And then I’m assuming for sexual purposes as well?

I: Yes

SS: Have you ever watched porn for another reason like academic or informational or accidental or - ?

I: Accidental as in like stumbling upon it on accident?

SS: Sure

I: Yeah I’ve definitely stumbled upon it sometimes you’re not looking for that on your feed - specifically referring to Tumblr. Sometimes you’re not looking for that on your feed and you’re like “okay, wow, here it is. I’m just gonna watch it or scroll past it.” Um, you ask as well...

SS: Academic - like, have you ever watch it to like learn something?
I: I have, yeah, looked at categories, like blowjobs, maybe to get like a better like visual understanding because i’m a visual learner so if I’m watching something it’s easier than just reading you know a cosmo article.

SS: So it’s like a “tips and tricks” sort of thing.

I: Yeah, definitely.

SS: Cool, nice, so I guess on a situational basis how would you decide what kind of porn to watch? Like if you were just to open up your computer and be like “it’s time.”

I: Um, I definitely base it on like mood and what I’m feeling. I’m very open with what I like, I like a lot of different things, a lot of different categories, a lot of different specific parts about like sex that I like if I want to feel something or if I’m into something I’ll watch a video that’s relating to what I want to feel or see. Um, so that could be like a number of things. Honestly it’s just scrolling and if I see something it’s like the “recommended” at the bottom or the “suggested” after you’re watching an initial video.

SS: Like on Pornhub or something?

I: Yeah, yeah. After you’ve like searched something or picked on a category.

SS: Cool. Is there usually like a certain genre or category that you find yourself drawn to or is it totally - ?

I: It’s totally mood - actually I feel like I’m definitely drawn to um, [laughs] I’m just like a sucker for anal sex so, I think that’s definitely where I’m drawn to. And then from there things that are involved with it. I am definitely a huge fan of like rough sex so when I am watching Kink.com, a lot of the previews for that - I don’t have a subscription so I just watch the previews and I’ll just like watch those, specifically rough sex and stuff and like being tied up, like sex and submission type stuff

SS: Cool, so, I’m going to ask you some questions about other people and how other people watch pornography and this is just like your general ideas. So, why do you think people in general watch pornography?

I: To masturbate, to get off, sometimes they watch it i’m sure to learn a thing or two. If they are too scared to seek the proper resources for it, it’s easier to just search it online, and sometimes just watch instead of reading and trying to decipher what they’re saying in
their sentences. So definitely educational purposes. And then like recreational, getting off, um yeah.

SS: Do you think that - whatever this means - do you think that pornography is realistic in any way and why or why not?

I: Amateur videos are. They’re very realistic because it’s real people. Not saying that sex workers that are porn stars - not saying that they’re not real people but they’re given a script, it’s a scene, you’re watching a movie, it’s an act - they’re acting. They’re playing this role this part that has been written out for them so I don’t see that to be too realistic. But i’ve also kind of educated myself on a bit of the background of shooting a porn video and what goes into it out of curiosity because I don’t personally get off to videos that aren’t really realistic so I don’t watch like Brazzers or whatever it’s called, you like stuff that’s made up like that because I don’t feel like I could... like I’m actually experiencing the real like sexual encounter.

SS: So you feel like maybe you seek authenticity, or a perception of authenticity in what you watch?

I: Yes, definitely.

SS: Do you think that other people maybe do the same thing or - ? What’s your general idea?

I: Well I - everybody - to each their own. Everybody likes a different thing within sex, you know like in porn so it’s kind of like whatever they fancy and some people are really into that unrealistic kind of like acting that’s not real and other people are just so drawn to the amateur videos so definitely like to each their own. Sorry this is so vague.

SS: No it’s totally fine, this is a huge topic and it’s just - yeah. That’s interesting I guess some people might say there - some people might be concerned that people watch porn to learn something. I’m not one of those people but that’s something that has come up in a lot of the research that I’ve done. What would you say about that?

I: I think maybe they’re concerned because they don’t know the approach in which to education because you know pron is pretty much taboo - sex is taboo so people don’t like to talk about it- people don’t educate so because we don’t educate the right way or encourage education through like conversation and like being open about it some people could be so closed minded that they don’t want to - they see it as like watching videos isn’t enough and people should know like a lot more detail but if you don’t offer them
those resource then they don’t know where to go and where to start so the only place they know where to start - or think they know where to start - is searching on the web or searching on pornhub or just like watching a movie or reading a book that’s like just pictures - I don’t know stuff like that. Wow, that’s concerning to me to know that it’s a concern of other people that it kind of bothers them that you know like that watching it is maybe not the best way to learn. If that answers the question.

SS: I think maybe um, yeah I think people are - not saying like in the interviews that I’ve done but the things that I’ve read from like academic scholars being concerned about the content of porn and of what is actually in porn and what do people take away from porn. And one of the things that has been like really prominent is like pornography “bad for women” in some way, is it teaching violence against women, like it’s a huge concern that comes up - do you think that women or men are represented in a particular light - like in a positive or negative light - in pornography?

I: Definitely - there’s definitely split roles. I mean it’s the way we see the world, right? Men are supposed to be this rough, you know, person, with, you know, a big dick and they are just supposed act upon it and be rough and be forceful and be dominant. And women are supposed to be, you know, submissive and take it and look good and be pretty while they’re having sex and everything is supposed to be an art and it’s supposed to be glamorous, but it’s literally just sex. So there’s definitely split roles in pornography and I think because of that it can sway a person to not express but not like dive deep into other categories or like other like kinks and stuff and really educate themselves on that because most the time they’re just seeing this split. I know for me personally I am really really into watching - because i’m very submissive I just know that’s a thing and i enjoy being tied up and I enjoy rough sex and I enjoy like being degraded, humiliated, that’s just a thing that I like, and so for me, because I get off on that, like for some people they could see it as hurtful to women. Because it is hurtful you know, arguably, but um..

SS: That’s your personal experience, right? Yeah.

I: Sorry, I’m totally trailing in a different direction.

SS: No, no, it’s great. This is great. So, I heard a couple things. Like, power dynamics I guess. So, do you think that ideas about women and men and like sexual taboos are represented in the porn that you watch and the porn that you seek out and does that bother you? Or are you conscious of it and it’s fine or - ?

I: I am conscious about it, without a doubt, because I don’t feel comfortable expressing to people that I like that unless I am comfortable with them, unless I really know them
because it’s so taboo and because people - that’s the first thing they say. “Well, you know women should be treated equal.” And I am all for that but this is a kink that I enjoy, this is a form of porn that I enjoy watching, and if that’s what I like I shouldn’t have to justify whether or not I support this power dynamic. But it’s definitely there.

SS: Do you think porn can cause any good habits or ideas?

I: Creativity [laughs]. You can get really creative with new ways to get off - new positions.

SS: Do you think that has happened in your life?

I: Absolutely. I’ve tried many different things because I’ve just stumbled upon like porn videos just searching. Like Kink.com is one of the biggest influences for me because I love all of the channels that they have, I like a lot of the toys that they use, a lot of the props that are involved like vibrators and stuff. And so it has definitely encouraged me to be creative and seek new things and like just experience like crazy - I don’t know - it brings out an animal in you but like a good animal.

SS: So it’s like a positive thing.

I: It’s definitely a positive thing. I’m sure there’s negative. I’m sure if someone is really not into it or is new to it and they’re giving it a shot but they don’t actually like it could be hurtful and traumatizing, but i’ve only had positive experiences.

SS: If you could change something about pornography - if you would want to change something about pornography - what would you do, either to make it more pleasurable for you to consume, or just in general if there is anything

I: I would support more amateur stuff. Too much is done by big productions. I’m not feeling like -

SS: You mean like homemade things?

I: Yeah, like homemade things. Like I took it upon myself to make homemade videos. I mean I’m not about to go watch my own homemade videos and like touch myself to myself but I’m sure like people have maybe I will one day but right now I’m not. So yeah, I don’t really like that a lot of it is big productions so I feel like personally I just wanted to contribute to where I wanted to get pleasure, because i’m sure im not the only
one. So that’s why I personally make videos and stuff so that other people if they are feeling the same way can also be like “hey I support that too.”

SS: How would you describe the term “fantasy”?

I: Dream, I’d describe it as a dream, realistic or unrealistic because it’s your imagination, you can make it exactly what you want it to be, your ideal, perfect situation, I’d say your fantasy is what you’ve dreamed of and wanted this whole entire time but maybe you haven’t been able to experience it, or maybe you don’t ever want to experience it you just want to think about it and that gets you off.

SS: Totally. Do you think that there’s pornography that reflects your fantasy. Or, the porn you watch reflects your fantasies?

I: Definitely. It has encouraged me to actually fulfill them.

SS: Nice. Do you feel like - there’s a lot of gendered ideas around porn like this idea that porn is catered towards men or created with men in mind. Do you feel like porn is more of a reflection of men’s fantasies or like more-so than women’s or - how does that make you feel?

I: I interpret as it depends on what you want. I definitely think the overarching is directed more towards males. But females like to get off, too, they like to watch porn, too, just as much as males and even though it’s drawn more towards males I definitely think there’s enough people out there that recognize and produce things that are steered more toward females. You can watch anything and you could easily say like “yes, this is more men” and “yes, this is for women.” But like there’s no written definition or description of like “this video is intended for men” you know? So it’s kind of just how, I think each person on their own interprets it because it could go either way but definitely because of like society and you know the roles and the way people think they should be - not everybody thinks it should be that way - but the way the world is at this moment in time they automatically assume it’s geared towards men because men are just told all the time to you know like, “go on pornhub if you want to get off” and they never tell women that. They just tell women to like “go get fucked.”

SS: The interpretation thing is interesting I think, I am really interested in how people interpret the porn they’re watching. Do you think that’s something that a lot of people experience? Are they consciously interpreting what they’re watching, or do you think it’s pretty random or - does that make sense?
I: It definitely makes sense. I think it’s more random because there’s some people - I know I keep going back to like, personal - like myself, but I overthink a shit ton, and I analyze - excuse me for using that language.

SS: It’s fine.

I: I overthink all the time, and I analyze so hard like everything. And because of that I feel like I am like thinking about it like consciously as I am watching it but for some people they are literally just focusing on getting off. And I’m focusing on getting off, too, but I’m thinking maybe a little deeper into it, not deeper into getting of but deeper into the video and what exactly I am watching and what’s actually going on and I’m interpreting it more that somebody else.

SS: Do you think you do that with other media as well? Like movies and stuff like that?

I: Absolutely. There’s a lot of hidden meanings and a lot of hiddens things that - not like mystery - I don’t know what it’s called but basically like when you’re putting little clues or something in like movies and stuff and you don’t really notice that detail until you watch it several times and you’re analyzing it like “oh okay this makes sense because of this” um, so yeah I don’t know I find that within porn I guess.

SS: I think it’s really cool that you’re interested in the way that’s made. I don’t know if other people feel the same way or not, but yeah. Can you talk a little bit more about - what’s your knowledge about the way porn is made.

I: I just assume it’s like a whole cast - you’re getting casted for a production, like a broadway production or like a movie. You audition, you show them what you have, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and if you fit the part for what they’re looking for based on the script that they’ve written and how the director wants it directed then you get it and you have to perform in a certain way. So that’s kind of like the way I see the behind the scenes of it, but i just don’t like that, I think that’s too plain. And there are some people that are totally interested in it like that, but I just like real things. I don’t like unrealistic things. And like I already said, I feel like a lot of porn is unrealistic especially when it’s done by larger production companies because you’re just told that you have to do this and that’s not maybe really how you get off if it’s not your style of expression so I think the production needs to be a little more individual-based rather than a large group of people just deciding.

SS: Have you ever seen any feminist porn?
I: I have not, maybe I have and just not known that it was classified as that.

SS: The interesting thing about feminist porn, whatever that may mean, is that usually you have to pay a subscription to see it. Whereas other things are usually available for free on Pornhub so the accessibility is different. It’s still a higher production it’s just interesting the way it’s shot is usually less like a porn. The way the video looks, does that change our perception of the authenticity? Or I don’t know, if some is just holding a camera, or they are doing it at home - I don’t know.

I: It’s really interesting that you have to pay for it because it definitely limits for other people. Like I don’t know about it because i’m not about to fork out money because no one wants to see that on my bank statement. I don’t think that would be cool - my parents probably wouldn’t like that if they saw I was just subscribing every month to a porn site. It kind of sucks that they restrict it, that you have to pay for it because then you know, people who maybe want to see it or who prefer that method of video over something else aren’t able to have that - not luxury - but aren’t able to experience it because they have to pay for it and they may not want to or they may be restricted because they don’t want their parents to see or they can’t afford it or whatever.

SS: If you could, would you pay for porn?

I: If I wasn’t broke yeah probably, but there’s enough of it out there that’s free where I wouldn’t. If there is something I really liked - like I would probably pay for a subscription to Kink. But I also don’t spend you know, two hours touching myself so I don’t need a full 50 minute video, you know? 10 minutes works just fine.

SS: When was the first time that you ever watched porn?

I: I accidentally stumbled upon it when I was younger, probably 15. Watched it once. That’s around when I started like, figuring out myself. Did not touch it for a very long time.

SS: Figure out yourself how?

I: Like masturbating, and like you know, growing up, puberty, periods, stuff like that. Really figuring out what I wanted sexually. Like, “I’m horny, what do I do with myself?” you know, that kind of stuff. My mom’s an Irish Catholic so that kind of conversation is not appropriate to her even though I was just really eager to understand a little more. So it was just pushed under the rug, don’t say anything about it. So I would just kind of revisit a year later, and then just started watching it constantly. So that was like probably the
first time around 15. Stumbling upon it - it was on a public computer, so that was kind of concerning.

SS: Oh it was just up?

I: No, I had started typing something, and I mistyped. You know when you type on the bar and it’s the first one that’s offered and it’s highlighted? And I clicked enter and I was like “oh my god okay wow.”

SS: Do you feel like you ever experienced any shame for watching porn?

I: Absolutely, absolutely. I’m so open about talking about porn, I’m so open about talking about sex, because I appreciate so much - I think it’s such an art. There’s not enough people that can really appreciate it because we’re brought up to - some of us aren’t - but we’re brought up to believe that it’s taboo and like you can’t do these things and it should be hush hush and secret and “do it in your private room when you have your own private time.” And that’s just so discouraging because some people just get so uncomfortable about it that they’re like “why do you watch it?” and definitely shame you for it, you know, your peers, your parents especially. I know I couldn’t talk to my parents about it - every time I brought up something I literally got shunned for it, “why are you thinking about that? Why are you watching it?” not being able to, you know, express and explore myself. And I think that’s really damaging. It definitely affects people, and it makes them not want to talk about it, um, but I’m also the type of person who’s like, “oh, so you don’t want, like,” I’ll do the exact opposite if you push me like, that, you know? So, I am so open with it, and I don’t care if anybody now has something to say about it. I know people talk about like, for - they brought it up, my neighbors, I’m really good friends with them, we all hang out at each other’s houses and like literally the other day - I’m really into, like kind of into the daddy kink - and they brought it up at the house the other day while I was there. And they were like “I don’t understand how people can do that,” totally just like under-the-rug shamed me right then and there. And that’s just like, that’s lame you know? That people are gonna totally like bash you for something, and like shame you for enjoying somethings that’s maybe not something that everybody digs. So I think there’s a lot of shame, and it sucks.

SS: Do you remember your process of experiencing shame and now being really open about it? How do you think that happened? Like, was it ever internalize?

I: It was definitely internal. I had like several partners after like, some events. Over time, I think the experiences made me want to be more open with myself and I’ve become open to everybody in more ways than one. I’m kind of flat out and blunt with the way that I
feel because I think it’s important to say exactly what you need to say because if you don’t then it could be interpreted wrong because I over-analyze and like think way too hard so I want to know that even though I’m thinking there are several ways this is gonna go I’m making sure that we’re clear and we’re on the same way. So with that, a lot of sexual encounters with people, a lot of hookups. Not a lot, but like a decent amount.

SS: So exploring?

I: Yeah exploring. I became more open with it. I really like having sex in public, secretly I think that’s kind of cool. It’s definitely - I mean like I’m not gonna do it all the time, I’m not gonna like touch myself in public but I’ve definitely like had sex on the beach and in the woods and all these different places and that totally helped me be a lot more open with it. And I really just want people to be so educated on it that I feel like if I talk about it more and I’m so open with it then people won’t be like, “oh that’s weird that you’re talking about it, that’s so taboo, don’t say anything about it,” you know? It’s like, “sex, keep it to yourself,” and it’s like nonononono, it’s cool, it’s cool. And like, everybody knows that I’m open with it, I think it’s a really important thing because it has definitely encouraged my friends to explore themselves a lot more.

SS: Did you have sex ed growing up?

I: - not from my parents. I had a single class in 6th grade that was, you know, the health class - sex ed. “Here’s the video of what happens, here’s your like free 4 condoms like, don’t use them,” like, you know? That sort of, “let me educate you but don’t act upon the education,” and that was it. The rest was me figuring it out and exploring it on my own.

SS: Do you think that more sex ed would be beneficial for more people having an open mind about sex?

I: Absolutely

SS: Do you think we should possibly be incorporating porn education? Not like showing porn but like educating people about porn?

I: Yeah, definitely, because not everybody is going to have sex. Not everybody’s ready for that step. And anyway they can feel more comfortable about experiencing that because - I feel like a lot of people are nervous, you know, the first time when they’re with somebody or whichever way it happens. So educating them and incorporating porn is one of the biggest things because it’s almost like a resource, and using that resource is just another way to push that education in the right direction. I don’t know if it’s Norway
or Sweden, there’s a - we watched a video one time in one class that I was in, Family Interactions, actually, with Susan Caron I think her name is?

SS: Sandy Caron.

I: Sandy Caron, yeah. And it was a video, like, an advertisement about like penises and stuff like just talking about sex ed openly. That was directed towards like a younger crowd. And I think that’s so important, that kind of education, because it makes it more open and okay to talk about and not so like, private and you’re not supposed to discuss it. It makes it so like you’re comfortable growing up and having porn, as well. Like, educating people on these resources of watching it I think definitely helps, as well.

SS: Totally. Do you think that your experiences with pornography are similar or dissimilar to like a man’s experience with pornography?

I: I think mine’s different. I’m very passionate [laughs]. I don’t know. Men - I mean I don’t want to categorize all men.

SS: It’s okay, you can speak broadly.

I: I feel like men, they think with their dick more than they do their brain so when they’re watching porn I’m sure they’re not thinking as much about any like...they’re thinking about like coming and like getting off and climaxing and feeling that peak. Whereas I, or like a female, may you know fantasize about somebody or, also experience this climax and this overwhelming sensation but just think a little bit deeper than a man would.

SS: Do you think there are consequences for that, for men? In terms of men’s sexuality, do you think that’s representative of a problem or?

I: Representative of a problem as in like..

SS: Like, having goal-oriented sex or something.

I: Yeah, I think so. Most of the people I’ve been with, their goal is to come. Literally no passions or emotions or - well, definitely there’s passion and emotion in some people um, but you know, they always want to finish. That’s kind of their thing. And there’s that whole issue where, you know, women never get to finish or men always get to finish and it’s not fair. And I definitely think like, without a doubt, that there is a goal most of the time. Because when they’re watching it on their own, that’s all they’re trying to do is
achieve that goal. So in real life when they’re put to the test or they’re giving it a shot, it’s to get to that goal, and it’s kind of damaging because it’s not fun at that point. You’re just working. It’s not a recreational activity at that point it’s a chore, so I definitely think it shapes in a weird way.

SS: Do you think that that is a phenomenon that happens in tandem with men watching pornography or is it a natural thing? Like, nature vs. nurture? Like, men’s sexuality being more goal-oriented. Does that make sense?

I: Yes, yeah. Sorry let me just try and rewrite your sentence to make it if I’m understanding it correctly. You’re saying that like, how it’s goal oriented..

SS: I’m basically asking you if you think porn does that to men.

I: Yeah. A little bit.

SS: Okay. Do you think that porn teaches them that, did that have that quality before they watched porn? Is it something else, as well?

I: Everything is going to contribute. Every experience, everything you do in life, everything you’re watching, you’re doing, you’re seeing, is going to influence and impact every action and reaction. So I guess you just can’t put a specific label on it. Maybe it’s just because I’m so open..

SS: You’re obviously experiencing it in a very different way than some men would or other people in general.

I: The influences of growing up and the education, all these factors influence the way that somebody is going to interpret and react to something. So I think that it’s a number of things. The nature vs. nurture, definitely, but um, probably much more than that, as well.

SS: Let’s see - I asked a lot of these.

I: I like them, I hope I’m like giving you some baseline..

SS: Do you think - I guess in terms of the nature vs. nurture, which one would you lean towards? In terms of sexuality.

I: Nurture.
SS: Why do you say that?

I: Because we’re always influenced [laughs]. I’m big on this whole influence because we’re everything we do is influenced by something and we almost don’t even know what’s natural or like what’s our own nature anymore because we’re influenced in so many ways and divided and categorized because as humans we do this thing where we want everything to be categorized. It can’t be unknown, it has to have a name or be put in some place, so that’s why I don’t think it’s nature I think it’s definitely nurture.

SS: Definitely. So if it’s nurture, then why do you think porn is being catered to men? Or to a specific idea of men’s sexuality, if you think it is?

I: One more time, sorry.

SS: Like if sexuality is something that is cultivated or socialized, if we’re not born with it and we adopt it or whatever, however that happens, who knows -

I: Well, I think we’re born with an instinct and it grows.

SS: I guess in terms of gender, you’re saying that like men and women are not naturally different. Would you agree with that? Or no? Does that make sense?

I: They are naturally different but it’s because of the influences that we have from that beginning stage that change us and make us either - ugh it’s….honestly like I’m so about like every person is so different like, some men and women are more closer together but like there’s is also that group that isn’t, you know? I guess I’m totally dividing people, like I’m categorizing people myself.

SS: It’s fine. It’s fine to speak broadly because there are some broad phenomena here and there’s also some really individualized experiences. I guess what I was sort of saying was if sexuality is something that we learn, it’s interesting that porn is sort of created with men in mind.

I: Yes, ah okay I see what you’re saying. Yeah because we’re learning to...you know, everything is for the man. We’ve always learned and been told that it’s for the men. So even though we’re learning different experiences and different things, porn is always, at least I’ve been told that it’s always been tailored to men, because it’s always been offered to men. So yeah.
SS: Do you have any other ideas about any of this that you would like to comment on? Like is there anything that when you think of porn that hasn’t been brought up in the last 45 minutes? It can be about you or about anyone else.

I: Porn is just, it’s such an art. And people can experience it in so many different ways. There’s such a large problem with it being almost not accepted by the world, or specifically I guess, you could almost narrow it down to the United States.

SS: Sure, let’s do that.

I: We’ll narrow it a little bit. It’s sad to see it not be - it’s popular behind closed doors. And that’s almost frustrating because it’s a part of who we are. We reproduce, it’s a part of what we do it’s a part of our lives as humans. And we are one of the only mammals that have sex for fun. That we enjoy this interaction just to have it, to feel this euphoric feeling. It’s such a problem that we’re shunned away from it, we’re shunned from watching it, we’re shunned away from experiencing it. It has to be so hidden and secretive. And it’s such a shame because it’s beautiful. People are creating movies, people are creating pictures, these works of art, and you go into a museum and you’re like “wow, that’s a beautiful painting,” like, “wow, Da Vinci really did some cool architect stuff like look at that, that some neat stuff,” you know, “Vincent Van Gogh, look at his Starry Night painting,” that’s art. But like, this isn’t? Because we’re told that it needs to be secret and it’s beautiful but it’s not? SO I think there’s a lot of problems in porn and a lot of it is pushed towards like men and that doesn’t help this problem at all. And the lack of education doesn’t help either. There’s so many things that are kind of knocking it down when it’s so important for a number of reasons. So yeah, I like porn. I think it’s great. I love watching videos. I like seeing other people enjoying it. Like amateur videos that’s one of the biggest reasons I like it because you see someone having so much fun and seeing them literally at their most intense moment and that’s beautiful. So, yeah, I don’t know. Share it with the world. Enjoy porn, watch it, do it, feel it [laughs].

SS: Beautiful [laughs]. That’s great. I just have these - these are the two questions that I asked in the prescreen but I’m just going to ask it right now so I have it. How often do you watch porn on the internet?

I: Now it’s probably - 1-2 times a week is that an option? It’s probably that now because I’m having way more sex. It definitely fluctuates based on how often I’m having sex. If I’m not fucking as much with other people I’m usually doing it 3 times a week.
SS: Cool, and then, just tell me how you agree or disagree with the following statement: Generally the sex in pornography is similar to sex in real life.

I: Disagree. Because of that whole unrealistic/realistic type stuff. I disagree when it’s larger productions and if it’s amateur, I’d say it’s more realistic.

SS: Cool.

I: Support your locals! [laughs]

SS: Cool, anything else?

I: No, unless you have more questions. I like talking about it!

SS: Good I’m glad! This will be done in March, so I can let you know if you ever want to read it.

I: Yeah I totally do. I’m so interested in it, it sounds awesome. I wish you the best of luck on this.

SS: So before we get into it, can I just ask your age?

I: Sure. I’m 18.

SS: And what’s your gender identity?

I: Female.

SS: Okay. Beautiful. So just to get started, how would you define pornography?

I: I kinda think of it as entertainment perse. I feel like it’s not really an educational tool like some people think it is, but it’s kinda more entertainment.

SS: Cool. I like that. So I’m just gonna ask some standard consumption questions. So out of these, what are some reasons that you’ve watched pornography? Have you ever watched pornography in a social or recreational setting, either by yourself or with other people?

I: Yes, I’ve done it by myself, and also with some friends before.

SS: Okay. I’m assuming that you’ve watched it for sexual purposes.

I: Mmhmm.
SS: Have you ever watched porn to learn something?
I: Yes. Even though I just said it’s not educational. (laughs)
SS: Have you ever watched porn by accident?
I: I don’t really think so.
SS: And you said you’ve watched with friends before. What was that like?
I: It was kinda like a friend was like “hey there’s this weird video, let’s watch it,” and we kinda made fun of it. Like, I don’t even remember what it was but we were just middle schoolers and it was really stupid, and yeah.
SS: Do you remember what made it like, fun to laugh at?
I: I don’t, maybe it was just because we didn’t exactly know what sex was? We were just, it was just a silly thing I guess.
SS: How do you usually access pornography?
I: Through the internet.
SS: Like what websites?
I: I guess mostly pornhub, or I’ll look up something that piques my interest and go from there.
SS: On a situational basis, how do you decide which pornography to watch?
I: Honestly it’s usually just what I’m feeling at the time, I honestly don’t know. I’ve questioned it myself, like why am I into this on this day, and this the next day. I don’t really know, I guess.
SS: Is there a certain genre or category you find yourself drawn to?
I: Uh, yeah. It’s gonna sound silly. I like watching lesbian stuff. And, that’s kinda like the main thing I like to watch. Sometimes like fantasy stuff too.
SS: What do you mean by fantasy stuff?
I: Um kinda like, scifi or like those kinda genres.
SS: Oh, cool. Fun. Do you feel like pornography is realistic, and why or why not.
I: Um, I feel like it is but it isn’t. If you’re watching especially like straight porn, I guess, it gives you a very basic understanding of like, what goes where, and like what positions
you can do, but I think a lot of the emotion and passion of the lovemaking and stuff isn’t there, because it’s like the people are hired to do that. Also like I feel like it gives some false misconceptions. Like if you don’t know what sex is, and you watch this stuff, you’re gonna think it’s gonna be that way, but when it actually happens it’s nothing like that, unless you’re really good at it I guess? (laughs) That’s just kinda what I think.

SS: Okay. Why do you think that porn kinda lacks that emotion or lovemaking or however you would put it?

I: I think it’s made for the entertainment of the person watching it. I think the person watching it wants to see people climax, and I guarantee that not every female climaxes and like in every porn it kinda seems like it is, and that’s a false thing because like not every woman can climax. So anyway, that’s kinda like, it’s made to fulfill the fantasy of the people watching it, not the person who’s engaging in the activity at the time.

SS: Do you think any aspect of pornography reflects sex that happens in real life?

I: Um, maybe? There are some weird things out there that people do, and like, there is rape porn, and other sorts of stuff. It doesn’t reflect the mainstream, but it reflects what people do and are into, and if people weren’t into that, it wouldn’t be there. So yeah, I just don’t really--

SS: So you’re saying that themes of pornography are reflective of the things that people want in their lives.

I: Yeah, and like, not even necessarily that people want rape in their lives. I mean, some people might have that fantasy. So, I don’t want to sound weird about it, but I have friends that are like, wanting that kind of rough stuff, and I’m just like, well, you know… (laughs) anyway…

SS: So how would you define fantasy. Like, that kind of fantasy, not like scifi fantasy.

I: Um, okay, so, define it.

SS: Like what is a fantasy in relationship to this.

I: Kinda just maybe certain fantasies, like you want aspects of that in your relationship. Like one of my friends that prefers to watch like the rape kinda porn wants the rough aspect. Not necessarily the non-consensual part but just the roughness. And I think some people, like if you watch more taboo genres, they want the riskiness of it but not the taboo of it.

I: I think entertainment, I think people watch it when they’re lonely, I know I was kinda told one time that it’s a stress reliever to get off from it, and just generally to get off from it. Yeah.

SS: How do you feel that men and women are represented in pornography. Do you think there’s a difference there? What does that make you think of?

I: Um, I think, I don’t know, I’ve never really thought about the gender roles before, but women are.... What people see in pornography, they see men kinda accurately, like how they act in sex, but not women exactly. As I was saying earlier, not every woman can climax and I don’t know if they’re real or fake but most of the women in the pornographies tend to finish in their sessions. I think that men think when they watch pornography and are then sexually active is that all they’ve gotta do is this little bit, and then they’re done. And I think that’s just the biological part of it, and I think that’s incorrect in pornography.

SS: So you mentioned before that pornography is more entertainment than education. Can you talk about… I think you said that some people think that it’s education. Can you talk about that a little bit?

I: Well, I don’t like, personally in my perspective, what happened to me, is that I didn’t know anything about sex really until I think a friend showed me something and then it piqued my interest to watch something else. I wasn’t watching it to know how to have sex. But as I grew older, and I had all these things in my head of what I’ve seen in porn, I would look it up and see-- “is this a real thing, is this pleasurable, do people do this or not,” and it was kind of a vessel to educate myself. But it wasn’t something that I could or would recommend for anyone to get for their sole educational purposes.

SS: Did you have sex ed in school, can you talk about that?

I: (sighs) Yeah, we had sex ed, but it was the last portion of our health class, it was mainly like, they showed us a person giving birth, it was just the average like, have safe sex, thing. We had a… our school didn’t preach, like, abstinence, but we were like, okay, if you make this decision, you have to deal with it.

SS: What state did you have sex ed in?

I: Michigan.

SS: Michigan, okay. Interesting. I always think it’s interesting to hear where people have their sex ed.

I: Yeah, I think in the more Christian or Southern states they may teach differently, and also in private schools, that plays a big part.
SS: Definitely. Do you think that pornography can cause any good ideas or habits.

I: Um, I don’t know, I’ve never really thought about that.

SS: I guess good or bad, if you were to think about both things.

I: I definitely kinda think of bad first, like, bad comes to mind first. I know what I know about sex, and there are definitely some things I would not recommend. I don’t know if you want me to go into detail, or what?

SS: You can, you can say whatever you want.

I: To me, like, even if porn is fake, it’s kind of like on an emotional basis, like, “I want sex give it to me now.” Not necessarily like a loving kinda thing. I think it makes bad habits and bad communication with your partner, or like your sexual partner. Also like I’ve seen some non-hygienic things that I don’t think are very good. But as for good habits, I don’t really know. Like I think of it more as a tool for entertainment. And like, I guess the only thing I could say, is that if you are watching porn for self gratification, and you use it as a stress reliever, that can be a good habit. And I guess if you are getting good education from it, I guess. I guess it just depends on the person.

SS: Do you think you’ve picked up any bad ideas from pornography, either the ones you’ve mentioned, or otherwise?

I: Um, I think like for me, it was like, how to interact with your partner when it comes to sex. Like when I started having sex, I didn’t really know what to expect with how the talking of it went, like “hey, let’s do this thing.” I also didn’t know, like, I don’t know how to explain it. Something like that.

SS: That’s okay. So like, communication. If you could change anything about pornography to make it more pleasurable for you to consume, what would it be?

I: I don’t know. I feel like as long as you’re getting it from like, a… like if you want something to change in your pornography, just pick a different video or a different website, so I guess like, I have an I don’t know/nothing answer for that one. Yeah, like click next video.

SS: How about this instead-- what’s your favorite and least favorite part about porn?

I: My favorite would be the self-pleasure that you can get from watching it, and the stress relief, because it does help me personally, like the pleasure part of it. And my least favorite, is like, sometimes you just come across something, like, a genre, that’s kinda just sick. Like, it’s kinda gross, and like in your head it’s like, not a good thing. Like some of the taboo stuff it’s just not…
SS: Can you give me some examples?

I: Like, bestiality, ugh, like scat stuff, it’s gross. Of course these are my opinion, there are people that are into it and like, you do you I guess, but for me personally, things that go against my own morals are like, ick.

SS: Cool. So, you’ve used pornhub and stuff. Have you ever paid for porn?

I: Mmm-mmm

SS: Do you think you would if you had the money?

I: No.

SS: Okay, why is that?

I: One is like, I have a partner that I’m very into, and like, I don’t need porn, in my life. I don’t need it. There’s so much free stuff out there, and like, you can use your imagination if you really have to. And if I ever did for some miracle reason, it would probably be to get HD or something like that (laughs). That sounds stupid, but…

SS: No, sure. Do you feel like your experiences with pornography are similar or dissimilar in any way to how, like, men experience pornography.

I: Like, in the action, or what they think about it?

SS: Just, like, whatever.

I: I think like in the action, of pulling it up on your computer and doing stuff, it’s pretty similar, it’s entertaining and like whatever. But like, I think when people think of men masturbating compared to women masturbating, there’s definitely a difference there. I think a lot of people, some don’t even know that women do it, or enjoy doing it, but like, they’re like “oh, it’s a guy, and he’s doing that.” But I think that guys sometimes take pornography and like what goes on in pornography a little too literally. Like, yeah, “I’m gonna do this to her, she’s gonna like it,” but women are like, “Oh, I mean it’s kinda fun to watch, but it’s not that accurate, it’s not really gonna happen.

SS: So do you feel like, some people have talked about how pornography is marketed towards men, a little bit more? Do you feel like that’s accurate?

I: Yeah. Advertisements, next to videos, and stuff.. All men. It’s all geared towards men. It’s all like, come meet this hottie, with a girl, and like, grow your junk.

SS: Why do you think that is?
I: I don’t know. It might be because, at least for a while, it seems like it was a little more taboo to think that women maybe go on and look at porn too, and masturbate, but yeah. That’s all I can think.

SS: How old were you when you started watching porn? I know you said middle school, but when did you start watching like, using it?

I: Maybe like, 12, 13, maybe 14.

SS: Would you say that you watched it, not frequently, but consistently?

I: Yeah. I remember, like, I didn’t even like, masturbate or anything like that, I was just watching like, whoa that’s really cool. I don’t even think I knew I could masturbate for a long time. I would just watch, and I that’s how I figured out that sex is a thing, so.

SS: Did you ever experience shame from watching porn in any way, either in yourself or other people.

I: Not really. It wasn’t really like I was ashamed of myself, I was ashamed that I was like, especially when I was younger, I didn’t really know that this was something that was best to do, like, at night or something like that and I would like go into my room and close the door and watch stuff, when I was like 13, and I would feel ashamed that I was taking time away from family, and like friends and stuff to go and watch this thing. I don’t really feel ashamed any more, and I hardly ever watch porn anymore, because I have a boyfriend. If I do, I would feel ashamed that like “oh I’m watching this instead of having sex with my boyfriend.” Because like, my boyfriend he told me, like “we’re together now, so maybe we shouldn’t watch porn” and we made a promise not to watch porn either, and we have watched porn together, not even doing anything, just to make fun of it. Not even too much shame, just like, oh I could’ve been doing something else during this time.

SS: What made you two have that decision to not watch porn, if you want to talk about that?

I: Well, we were long distance for two years. And um, now we’re attending college together, and a lot of it was, like, we were kinda jealous of what other people would see, since we didn’t see each other so much. So like, I didn’t want him watching some hot girl in a porno, and he was like, “well I don’t want you seeing some guy,” and so we were both like, oh, yeah, like let’s not do it anymore, and I naturally did not listen. Like, I just kept doing what I was doing, and I kinda got into the habit, like I was having a hard time sleeping, and masturbation was helping me sleep, it made me tired. And I was like, if I give up doing this, I can’t sleep very well at night. And I don’t know if he ever gave it up or not, I’m gonna assume he did, because he doesn’t ever really do that kind of stuff, but I don’t know, it was kinda a jealousy thing, even though I was watching porn while I was
with him, I was never like, “oh, I would rather be with that guy than him.” I don’t know, it was just a silly little thing we did from being long distance.

SS: So you have a boyfriend, you mentioned earlier that you watch a lot of lesbian porn, can you talk about that?

I: I am bisexual, and I’ve had female partners as well. I’ve only ever had sex with my boyfriend, I’ve never really had sex with a woman. It kinda has been a fantasy thing, and like I don’t know, it seems a little taboo at the same time. I mean, not really, it’s not like lesbians are taboo anymore, but it’s more of like “ooh, this is a new thing.” Also I feel like there are some things that my boyfriend does not feel comfortable or doesn’t want to do that happens more in lesbian porn, so when I watch that, it’s like I kinda feel like, “oh that’s what I’m missing and what I want to feel.”

SS: Can you talk about what those differences are?

I: Um, usually it’s like, oral sex, on the female. And a lot of focus more on the breasts and stuff. I feel like a lot of stuff more with my boyfriend is more like, I’ll go down on him, and then we’ll have sex. And it’s not really focused on me, and I’ve actually had talks with him like, “I gotta kinda have some attention too.” It sounds silly. But I guess the excuse right now is like, “dorm beds are shitty.” But yeah, anyway.

SS: Let’s see. So, um, do you think in any way that men are more sexual than women, or women are more sexual than men?

I: I’ve seen all the studies, that are like, men have sex before women, men have more extramarital affairs. In my life, I haven’t really seen that, I’ve kinda seen the opposite. Maybe it’s where I went to school, in South Central Michigan. It’s very rural, and it seems like the women, the girls, there were a couple girls in my school who got pregnant before we left high school, um, but, you know, yeah, sorry, I forgot the last half of the question.

SS: I was just asking your thoughts on men being more sexual than women or the other way around.

I: Yeah. And in my life I’ve seen it more as like the women are more of the promiscuous type. But kinda in my head I have this pre-existing opinion that maybe like men are more like the, get a bunch of girls type.

SS: Why do you think that is? Do you think they’re born that way, or?

I: Um, I think that’s how I was raised. My mom, and most of my mom’s side of the family are from down south, Kentucky. My grandma had my mom at 14. My mom had my sister at 17. My sister had her son at 16. And none of the fathers are in the picture.
I’ve just been raised to think the guy just wants you to have sex, or wants you for your money. My mom was against my boyfriend and I, because long distance for a long time, because, like “he just wants you for this” like ridiculous things. And my mom has been married um, three times. My dad is actually on his fifth wife. I know I said earlier I don’t see it in my real life, but I’ve never met actually any of those peoples’ fathers, and my dad is not the promiscuous type to me, he’s just kinda like, I don’t know. It’s more the women, or maybe more equal.

SS: Is there anything else about pornography or sex that you’ve thought of, that we haven’t talked about that you would like to talk about.

I: Um, not really. Other than like, I think it’s really cool that you’re looking into a pornography studies thing. It’s really cool.

SS: Yeah, it’s really fun. I get to talk to people about porn. I just have a couple of questions, but these were the questions that were on the psychology pre-screen, so you’ve seen them before, but just answer them however feels right to you right now, just so I have it. So the first one is how often do you watch pornography on the internet?

I: I’d say nowadays it’s like 1-2 times a month.

SS: Okay. Indicate how you feel about the following statement: Generally the sex in pornography is similar to the sex in real life?


Subject 018 (Leah)

SS: I'll just start by asking a few questions, we’ll talk about porn and we’ll talk about sexuality and anything else you want.

I: Okay, sounds good.

SS: So, how old are you?

I: I’m 18.

SS: Okay and what is your gender identity?

I: Female.

SS: Cool, so, let’s just start with how would you define pornography if you had to give a definition?
I: I mean, I think it would be anything because so many people like so many different things. I’d say just anything that maybe like excites someone’s sexuality or even mentally. I don’t think generally it has to be just videos, it can be any type of media - writing, pictures, videos, you know.

SS: Cool, would you say that - so, I’m mostly asking about video porn on the Internet just because that’s really common. Is that something that’s reflective of like, porn that you’ve seen?

I: Yeah.

SS: Cool. Can you tell me a little bit about how you access pornography, like websites, things like that?

I: Um, I guess just like, I don’t pay for it. Anything I can get for free online.

SS: Do you use like Pornhub or - ?

I: Yeah mainly Pornhub just because it’s easy.

SS: Cool.

I: It’s really accessible.

SS: Totally. Um, so, would you say that you usually watch porn by yourself or with another person or - ?

I: Most of the time like by myself. But I mean, I’ve watched it with my boyfriend like once. I think it was like one time.

SS: Mhm, so it’s usually by yourself, have you ever watched for like social or recreational purposes either by yourself or with another person?

I: I’ve watched it with like my friends, not in like a sexual way but like out of curiosity.

SS: And I’m assuming that you’ve watched it for sexual purposes as well?

I: Mhm.
SS: Have you ever watched porn to like, learn something? Like to get information or learn about something new?

I: I’ve never like intentionally gone and like searched things to learn something but I do find that when I watch something new I do learn something.

SS: Have you ever sort of watched porn by accident, like stumbled upon it?

I: Oh, absolutely [laughs].

SS: Can you tell me about that a little bit?

I: I mean, definitely, you know, like, any website that doesn’t really protect their ads, ads come up for things. And they’ll like show images and stuff and maybe I’ll click on it or accidentally click on something. Yeah, that has happened.

SS: Some people have had that be their first experience with porn, is that something that happened to you or no?

I: No.

SS: Do you remember your first experience with watching porn?

I: Um, I mean I know like a long time ago. Like back in like the beginning of high school, maybe middle school, I like tried watching it but then I like shut it off because it like freaked me out. So that was like my first like, putting my feet in the water but I didn’t really like get into it. I more got into it like, actually just like this past year when my friend was like, “oh you should try watching porn” and I was like “maybe she’s onto something.”

SS: What freaked you out about it when you were watching it for the first time?

I: I think I was still like so young when I first watched it and it just kind of like weirded me out a little bit. A lot of the videos are just so upfront, blunt, there’s no like leading into anything it just like pops up on your screen and I was like “woah, I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

SS: So on a situational basis, from day to day, how do you decide what porn you’re gonna watch?
I: I could kind of just like, if I’m like feeling up to it - I don’t really think like, “oh I’m gonna watch this,” I just go on and see whatever.

SS: Is there a certain genre or category you find yourself drawn to?

I: Not necessarily. I mean, there are definitely certain categories that I’m not drawn to. But I think pretty much like the most popular videos and like,

SS: Stuff that’s right there?

I: Yeah.

SS: What are some things that you’re not drawn to?

I: Definitely things that freak me out are like, fisting and anything like really aggressive especially like, anally because if I watch that I like hurt. Like I see it and I just feel that pain and that’s not something I want.

SS: Cool. Understandable. So, do you feel like porn that’s available, porn that you watch, is reflective of your fantasies or like sex that you would like to have in real life?

I: Probably not. I feel like a lot of porn is kind of unrealistic just in ways that it’s, you know, kind of staged. So it’s sometimes hard to get that realistic like hold on it. But I think that definitely you can find porn that’s more low-key and kind of like relatable to like what you’d be doing.

SS: Is that something you prefer?

I: Honestly, yeah, sometimes just ‘cause like, it definitely provokes me more because it’s more relatable.

SS: Seems like there’s sort of mainstream pornography that’s higher production and then there’s more amateur stuff. Do you feel like you get a mix of both, or - ? Do you get different feelings from those things? Or do you not know?

I: I don’t really, like, I don’t really think of that that much other than like watching it, but I definitely feel like the sometimes the high, like - whatever...

SS: High production?
I: High production can be like a little more discomforting than like the amateur stuff because like, again what I was saying, the amateur stuff can be a little more realistic and toned down, and sometimes the high production stuff is just so out there and like, over the top.

SS: Yeah, some different scenarios going on.

I: Yeah.

SS: So, why do you think people - like other people, just people in general - watch pornography?

I: I mean I know - a lot of people I know obviously use it to help them if they’re like, masturbating. To like turn them on. But I feel a lot of people could use it more as like a sexual escape. Like sometimes - I mean I have a boyfriend and sometimes I’ll find myself watching something and something will be happening in the video that I would never want to do with my boyfriend, you know?

SS: But it’s also something that you enjoy watching?

I: Um, yeah. Just like, pretty much out of like curiosity.

SS: How would you describe the term “fantasy”?

I: I think that could be different for anyone but generally it’s just like an ideal for someone. And I think definitely fantasy is probably like affected a lot by the media and what they would say. Like, it’s a stereotypical fantasy is a lot of stuff that you would see in porn, you know?

SS: Okay, cool. Yeah, so I’m getting the sense from you that porn, there’s a lot of fantasy in it and it’s not necessarily representative of something that you or other people would want to actually happen in real life.

I: I mean -

SS: I’m just trying to clarify what you’re saying.

I: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, there’s some things more than others that I see in porn that I’m like, “oh, I’d like to recreate that” but then there’s somethings that are so like - I
think by watching the videos, just knowing that it’s like pornography kind of makes it seems kind of out of touch so it doesn’t seem like something I would ever do.

SS: Yeah that makes sense. Those things that you wouldn’t want to do are the more outlandish, like hardcore? I know you mentioned things like fisting - things that have more of a physical response that might be painful for you, that’s understandable. But are there other things that stand out to you in that situation like, I don’t know there’s obviously endless things that could be an example. There’s a lot of like, group sex in porn or different scenarios with different power dynamics, would you say that those are just fantasies?

I: I definitely like, like if I had to recreate some of the themes like that I’ve seen in porn I definitely wouldn’t be opposed to it but I just think that that’s not something I see in my normal sex life, you know?

SS: It’s not on your radar.

I: Yeah.

SS: Cool. That makes sense. Can you talk a little bit more about why pornography is realistic or unrealistic?

I: I definitely think it’s realistic in the sense that it can meet a lot of people’s sexual needs. And I think it’s definitely necessary for a lot of people. And I think it’s definitely a positive thing because it helps people, I don’t know, like, get in touch with their sexuality. But at the same time when you step back and think about what it kind of is, it seems like, more distant, you know? When you think about, “oh it’s not really real,” um, SS: Like it’s not real because it’s constructed?

I: Yeah. It’s staged, or like they’re being paid, or, you know? But I definitely think you can look at it in two different ways.

SS: Yeah that distance is interesting. Do you feel a distance between yourself and what you’re watching?

I: Maybe like, definitely like when I think about porn when I’m like not aroused, there’s a huge difference between when I’m watching it and I’m like, using it and when I see it totally out of context. I think it’s really like, mentally what state you’re in, that’s how you’re going to perceive it.
SS: Do you think there’s an emotional distance, do you think there’s a relationship between what’s happening in porn and emotions or - what’s the relationship there, if you were to put those two things together?

I: I definitely like, in my own sex life, to think of emotions as a big part of sex for me. That’s why, also, like what we were saying about those high production things, that’s why you kind of lose that emotion and like sensitivity as opposed to watching more like chill porn, because I definitely think that’s something important to me, I would definitely say that emotion, as a part of sex, arouses me just as much as like any physical thing. But also sometimes I can be like - I’m just horny. I don’t need emotion. It all depends.

SS: Do you think that you experience pornography in a similar or dissimilar way to men who watch porn?

I: Not really, I’ve talked to - not that in depth, but when it comes to a conversation with my friends, my guy friends because I have a lot of friends who are guys, I think generally get the same reaction out of it and I don’t find it like embarrassing to talk about it in front of guys because it’s the same thing, you’re both using porn for like, kind of the same reasons. But I think before I started using it, I definitely thought it was weird, like strange, and I feel like it’s more common for guys to use it and that’s just kind of the norm, you know, that most guys will watch porn, so I feel like girls who haven’t tried it kind of get weirded out. But, now that I’ve used it, it’s like not as weird.

SS: Why do you think guys are more likely to watch porn and girls are more likely to get weirded out?

I: I mean I definitely think that when we’re younger that men, or boys at that time, are almost like encouraged to masturbate. People pay more attention to like, “oh guys jack off, that’s normal,” but people don’t really like, people don’t put that on girls and I feel like that kind of makes girls uncomfortable. I definitely grew up thinking that masturbation was totally unnatural for me and weird and I obviously knew that all my males peers were doing it, until I started doing it myself and realized that it’s completely natural.

SS: Do you feel like you have other women in your life who are still uncomfortable with pornography and masturbation and all those things?

I: Definitely.
SS: What do you think the difference is? How did you get to where you are now, versus where you were when you started? What’s that process like for you?

I: I was really like, frustrated because I still hadn’t - throughout high school I had a lot of different sexual partners and I still never orgasmed and people kept telling me like, “the only way you’re gonna do it is if you do it yourself,” or, at least one of my best friends she had been masturbating for a pretty long time, she would always tell me, “you really just have to figure it out yourself first before you expect a guy to do that to you.” So, she would always say like, “it’s easy, I do it all the time,” and I’d be like, “you’re lying to me, it can’t be that easy.” And then, obviously I mentioned that I have a boyfriend and he does not go to school here so I was like “I’m going to have to figure out how to do something about this.” So like, over the summer I was like, one night I was like, “I’ll just watch porn, maybe it will help me out, maybe it won’t but at least I’ll just give it a try.” And then, I kind of just became more familiar with it, and like, I did learn how to make myself orgasm which was nice and that’s kind of when I became more familiar with it and became more familiar with porn. And really, like, it does feel natural. And I would always think it was so unnatural before just because of the stereotype. You don’t hear as much about girls masturbating as you do about guys, and so I was just like “oh that’s a guy thing.” But it’s not.

SS: So, do you think that porngoraphy can cause any good ideas or habits? Why or why not?

I: Yeah, definitely. I mean, it did for me because now I’m, like, I can say that I’m a lot more in touch with my own sexuality than I was before but it’s because of porn. But I also think that it can cause - were you going to ask about bad things?

SS: Yeah, sure.

I: I was going to say it can also cause, like, unrealistic ideas about what sex can be.

SS: Do you think you’ve experienced that? Do you think you have unrealistic ideas about sex?

I: Not really, at this point I’ve kind of been able to distinguish between that kind of porn fantasy and what would actually happen.

SS: Where do you think the difficulty is there with people who do have a hard time distinguishing? Why is that difficult?
I: Right now, and throughout high school and at this point in my life I feel like there’s definitely room to explore stuff like that but I feel like you need some time and space to like, take things you see in porn and like, try them, you know?

SS: Some other people have talked about how they think porn has impacted men that they’ve had sex with, do you think that that is relevant to you as well? Or is it not something that you’ve experienced?

I: I don’t really think that I could say that. I mean, I don’t really know like the details of like, the guys who I’ve had sex with if they were watching porn all the time. But, I mean I definitely think that also, I mean I know a lot of my girlfriends they watched blowjob videos when were younger to learn about how to give blowjobs and I feel like guys probably did the same thing. I mean I definitely think that’s how most people - most men get familiar with how to please, you know?

SS: Did you have sex education in school?

I: Yeah.

SS: Where did you go to school - what state?

I: New Jersey.

SS: Did you think it was good sex education? What was that like for you?

I: Yeah I definitely think it was good. It was so long ago when they gave us the talk about like periods and stuff. But I definitely think that they did a better job of saying like, not like sex is bad, but giving you better help because obviously they know everyone is going to be sexually active.

SS: So it wasn’t abstinence only?

I: No, it was a lot more like, encouraging of sexual behavior.

SS: Did you see condoms and stuff like that?

I: Yeah.

SS: Did they happen to talk about porn at all in your sex ed class?
I: I think it may have been like a bullet point. Just like, they didn’t really go in depth about that. I feel like I would remember if they had.

SS: Do you feel like you learn, do you think that you or other people I guess, learn more from sex ed or from porn? Or do you feel like they’re learning different things?

I: I feel like it’s different things because with sex ed it’s like “oh use protections, STDS, you don’t want them.” It’s not like in porn at the beginning of the video it’s like, “oh by the way I get tested every 30 days,” you know? It’s like, it’s a little different.

SS: What would you say the difference is? What are people getting from porn...

I: I think that porn is more based on the pleasure and sex ed is like safety.

SS: If you could change something about porn to make it more pleasurable for you to consume, what would you change?

I: Honestly, the layout of porn websites.

SS: I’ve heard that before actually.

I: Yeah, I mean I know that Pornhub is one thing because it’s probably like the biggest porn site, I’m assuming.

SS: Yeah, it is.

I: I know there are definitely like a lot more smaller ones, which probably have better website layouts but they obviously cost money. I feel like when you go on pornhub, especially for someone who might be going on for the first time, it might be overwhelming. Like you have all those like ads popping up on the side and the videos just start playing themselves, and it’s a lot. You go on and it’s just like woah. And I think that was my reaction when I first went on, when I was younger. I think I was just like pornhub, and I saw it and I was like- ‘close out, close out, it’s too much.”

SS: Is there anything you would change about the actual content that you watch? To make it more pleasurable or interesting, or less something, I don’t know.

I: I mean sometimes I’ll go on and I’ll be like, I’ll have something in mind, and I’ll be like, “I wish I had this video,” or like, had something perfectly for what I want to watch right now. I definitely think that it’s just so broad. But I mean, then again, there are like
specific websites but generally you have to pay for them. And like, I’m not gonna pay for them. At least not right now. You know?

SS: Paying for porn, yeah. If you had the money, do you think you would do it?

I: (pause) Depends.

SS: Depends on what?

I: Definitely depends on the privacy of whatever website. Because like, I would pay for it if I had the money, if there was a website that had like, everything I wanted. I’d pay for it like right away, but I wouldn’t wanna be reminded that I paid for it, you know? I don’t wanna be like, in my email and see “oh, your monthly subscription,”

SS: For privacy reasons?

I: Yeah. Or like, on my bank account, like, “xxx.net.” I just wanna see it when I wanna see it, you know?

SS: What do you think the difference between the porn that’s on the first page of pornhub versus porn that you have to pay for? I mean, what do you perceive that difference to be?

I: Well I mean like I’ve looked at other websites where you’d have to pay for videos, and they’re more specialized. When you go on pornhub you could literally see anything, but I think you kinda have to go on pornhub first to know what you like, and then you can find specific websites for that. But I definitely think they’re more specific.

SS: What is your favorite thing about pornography?

I: I mean, my favorite thing is that it definitely helps me when I masturbate, that’s what I love about it, I’m like, thank god. I also love that it can teach you something. It depends on how you look at it, you know? You can definitely learn a lot about it from watching videos. In a good way.

SS: What is your least favorite thing about pornography? Maybe you’ve already touched on it.

I: My least favorite thing is probably when, like, after you’ve used porn, like, after you orgasm, you’re just like “get that away from me,” I feel like generally that happens. I
don’t usually feel ashamed to use porn, but sometimes it just doesn’t seem as sexy to me when I think about like, what it actually is. An actor, actress, two actresses, whatever it is.

SS: Have you ever felt shame about porn, in general?

I: Yeah. The first time I watched it, definitely. Afterwards I was like, “oh my gosh, I just did that.” But now I’m like, whatever, I just did that.

SS: Do you feel like there’s a difference in the way men and women are presented in pornography? And if you do, what is that difference?

I: I mean, it really depends on the video.

SS: Yeah. Just go with the stuff that you’ve seen, or the stuff that you’ve seen recently.

I: Generally, I think that in porn, women are usually, kinda, if it’s a man and a woman, I think the women are more focused on in the video. I think they generally assume a man is watching it, so it’s like, most of the video is on the woman, you know? But I mean that all depends on what you’re searching for.

SS: Okay, just a few more questions. Is there anything else that comes to mind about porn in general, or fantasy, or your life and pornography, or your friends lives and pornography, or the way those things intersect.

I: (pauses) Not really. I was gonna say another thing that comes to mind is the general idea of a porn star in media. I feel like it’s definitely portrayed negatively.

SS: Do you have any examples of that?

I: No, but just in general, using that term as like, a negative thing, or if people talk about porn, they’re like “oh, all those sluts” and it’s generally kinda negative. Specifically towards the women. A guy’s not gonna watch a video of a man having sex with a woman and be like, “oh, he’s a slut,” you know?

SS: Why do you think that is?

I: I just think that’s the way it’s been, and that’s the stereotype, and that’s not fair at all, it’s just the way women have been treated and portrayed overall.
SS: Are you talking about how they’re portrayed in the media, like porn stars in the media?

I: Yeah.

SS: Do you get that in your day to day life too? Like outside of the media?

I: I mean, definitely like, I’ve heard it outside of the media, but also now that I’m thinking about it, the titles of porn videos, it’s always focused on the girl. It’s always like a slur about the girl, but never negative about the guy.

SS: The titles can be inherently degrading. Do you feel like you watch porn to feel degraded?

I: No, definitely not.

SS: I mean, some people do, which is fine. I think that’s an interesting dichotomy. Yeah.

I: Like think about it, when you hear the word porn star, you always think of a woman. You never hear it and think of a male.

SS: I think they’re sometimes painted to be a certain type of person--women who are porn stars or women who go into porn.

I: Like, unsuccessful, or like porn’s kind of like, dirty. I don’t agree with that. I think if someone’s willing to be that confident about their body, then that’s great. And like, in 2017, anything anyone wants to do, that’s great. You go. I’m not gonna judge anything at this point.

SS: I’d like to ask you something that’s come up in some of my other interviews, which is like, violence against women, whatever that may mean to you, is that something that’s come up in the porn you’ve consumed?

I: I mean, I wouldn’t think the word violence off the top of my head, but I definitely know that there’s a lot of porn that’s like, dominant, and aggressive. I don’t watch porn thinking like “oh, is there consent there?” because I know that they went into it with exactly what they were gonna do. But I know that also, like in the industry that women porn stars are treated terribly, from what I’ve heard. I actually watched a documentary on it, once, on Netflix.
SS: Was it Hot Girls Wanted?

I: (laughs) Yeah, I watched that. I don’t know why, I just saw it on my Netflix, and I was like, “that sounds interesting, I’ll watch that.”

SS: Yeah, I’ve seen a few episodes of it. One thing I do know about it, which is just totally strange, was that the girls that were featured in that didn’t consent to have their videos shown or their social media shown in the actual documentary, so they were also exploited by the documentary, which is telling. You seem to have a lot of knowledge about the industry itself, do you think other people do as well?

I: Um, I definitely think other people who are familiar with porn, but actually now that I think about it, anyone might just not think of the actual industry, but I’m the type of person to think about that. If I watch porn, I’m not just gonna like, be like, oh. I’m gonna think a little more about what that is. And I think you should know a little more about what you’re watching. At least I would wanna know if these people are being treated right. It’s kinda hard to tell, you don’t always know.

SS: Do you think that--some ideas that have come up, that like, putting a disclaimer at the beginning of a video saying “this is a staged scenario,” or “the actors in this have consented”, or, I don’t know, I’ve seen porn where at the end there’s an interview with the actors. Do you think that’s something people would want to see, or that they would benefit from?

I: I definitely think that if they had something like that, like a little word blurb, people wouldn’t even like, regard it. I definitely think that’s a good idea, if it’s actually gonna make someone more comfortable with watching it, to know that it’s all okay, and that there was consent. For some people it could help out more than others.

SS: So maybe there’s a distance with some people who watch porn, where they like, watch porn, and it’s over, and they don’t really think about it afterwards. So, you kind of touched on it a little bit about like, porn that has dominance in it, or when women are portrayed a certain way, and arguably porn is more marketed towards men, do you think there’s a reason that happens? Why it’s marketed towards men?

I: I don’t really know. I think it’s like what I was saying before, where men are more encouraged as boys to masturbate it’s like, more normal, even in the media too, you know? It’s portrayed that it’s more normal for boys to masturbate than girls, and so it’s become a stereotype.
SS: So would you say that it’s more nature than nurture, like it’s taught, or?

I: I think it all depends on what you were around, or what you let social influences determine what you wanna do. Like, I feel like a lot of my friends, when I’m like, “do you masturbate, or do you watch porn,” they’re like “nooooooooo,” it’s like, you can definitely let those influences impact your choices, but for me, that was never something that I let stop me from like trying to masturbate or watching porn. I would never be like “oh, that’s just for guys.”

SS: I’m still struggling with how to get this particular question out, but how do you, in porn that does have like power dynamics, or you think that might be negative on its own, how do you reconcile consuming it? Like, how does that affect you?

I: Like, dominance, like a man over a woman or something?

SS: Sure, like, anything. You’ve talked about porn that’s like, good in the moment and then ridiculous or...

I: I can definitely, I kinda like the idea of… okay, like, saying “being dominated” is so aggressive of a term,

SS: Yeah, and I’m not trying to say that like, being dominated is a negative thing.

I: I, in sex, am definitely attracted to men. And I would like to feel a little inferior, in the moment, where I guy is taking control, but I would kinda keep that in, just like, I wouldn’t let that affect my normal life. If I watched a video and it was a guy like controlling a woman, and being aggressive, I wouldn’t carry that over. After I watched that video, I would just be like, “it’s just porn.” It’s just staged. It doesn’t make me feel inferior to any guy.

SS: You mentioned very briefly, porn with two women. Do you ever watch lesbian porn?

I: I have. And I actually think sometimes it’s a lot more relatable to watch for me, I can relate a lot more to the women in the video, because I know exactly the pleasure they’re feeling, you know? I can look at a guy in a video and be like, okay, he’s hot, he has a nice dick, but if I see a woman being like, eaten out, or a woman being pleasured, I feel like that’s a lot more relatable than seeing a guy just doing his thing. It’s a lot more comfortable, and sometimes I do feel like I focus on women in porn. But again, in real life, I’m not interested in having sex with a woman, I wouldn’t be opposed to it, but it’s not my preference, but in porn, it’s easier to watch.
SS: Is there anything else you’ve thought of in this time that didn’t get brought up?

I: I don’t know, I’ve never gotten so in depth about porn, like this. Well, another thing, with my guy friends, when you mention that you watch porn, any guy would be like “oh my GOD, whoa,” like they’re shocked. And even my friends who are girls are like, “okay, wow” like, it’s not that weird.

SS: So do you wish it was more normalized or easier to talk about?

I: Yeah. And I wish that there was more encouragement for girls to masturbate. Because for guys there’s so much, but for girls it’s just not like that and I wish there was because it’s a great thing.

SS: Yeah, and you mentioned that it’s like, important to your sex life in general.

I: Yeah, it’s like basically masturbation is the safest form of sex. I think it’s important. And I think girls growing up, you have those sexual urges, and then they’re repressed, where guys can grow into them. And I think parents, too, could do more. Because I know, parents are less likely with their daughter, than their son, where like, they expect their son to watch porn and masturbate, and it’s more of a big deal and racy when their daughter does it. I feel like it’s a stereotype that should be broken.

SS: I have just these two questions that you were asked on the psychology prescreen. But I’m gonna ask again so I have them written down. So how often do you watch pornography on the internet?

I: Probably, like, 3-4 times a week.

SS: Indicate how you feel about the following statement: Generally the sex in pornography is similar to the sex in real life?

I: Somewhat disagree.

SS: Okay. Cool. That’s all I have.
AUTHOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Sam Saucier is a Sociology and Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies major with a minor in Spanish. She is the co-founder and co-director of the University of Maine Women’s Resource Center (2017). She has been the President of Student Alliance for Sexual Health for 3 years and has also served as co-chair of the Feminist Collective. Originally from Saco, Maine, Saucier plans to pursue a Masters in Gender Studies at the University of Sussex in Falmer, England in September 2018.