

# The relationship between consumption of pornography and consensual sexual practice: results of a mixed method systematic review

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## **Abstract**

This article reports on the findings of a systematic review of literature on pornography use and sexual consent published between January 2000 and December 2017. The review found that there exists little research explicitly addressing consent. There exists an extensive literature on the relationship between the consumption of pornography and sexual aggression/violence; however, this work fails to distinguish between consensual (kink, spanking, BDSM) and nonconsensual acts (sexual harassment and rape). Our thematic analysis found that there is no agreement in the literature reviewed as to whether consumption of pornography is correlated with better or worse *understandings* or *practices* of sexual consent. The majority of articles that identified correlations between aspects of sexual health and pornography consumption incorrectly assigned causality to pornography consumption.

## **Keywords**

pornography, sexually explicit material, consent, sexuality, gender

## **Introduction**

This article reports on a mixed method systematic review of academic research, published between January 2000 and December 2017, about the relationship between pornography use and sexual consent. The data emerge from a project that seeks to understand the relationship between the consumption of pornography and healthy sexual development. The concept of healthy sexual development (HSD) was developed by McKee et al. (2010) as a multidisciplinary framework for sexual health research, and includes attention to sexual consent, relationship skills, sexual agency, and more. There is ongoing public concern about pornography's impact on sexual health, respectful relationships, and issues of consent (Waterson, 2019). Consent has become increasingly visible in public debates as a key aspect of healthy sexual practice, particularly in relation to addressing sexual harassment and sexual assault (Fischel, 2019). Many commentators are concerned that the consumption of pornography is related to consumers' ability to understand and practice sexual consent (see for example Tankard Reist, 2021). In this context it is useful to have a clear understanding of the findings from academic research on this topic. However there currently exists no clear agreement across academic disciplines about this issue (McKee, 2015). In this context the current article offers a cross-disciplinary systematic review of the literature in this area. This review focuses on peer-reviewed journal articles that report on empirical research with pornography users that engage with practices and understandings of sexual consent.

Increasingly, education about sexual consent falls under the rubric of sexualities education, particularly programs that have a 'sex and relationships' focus (Department for Education UK, 2019). Consent is therefore a matter of sexual health. The World Health Organization defines sexual health as:

a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled (World Health Organization, 2006, p. 5)

This definition, along with a broader sexual health focus on HSD, prefaces the need for further consideration of consent in relation to pornography use. This paper comes from a larger project that systematically reviewed pornography literature that encompassed some of the key themes of HSD (McKee, Litsou, Byron, & Ingham, 2021), including consent. McKee et al.'s approach was chosen as it was developed by authors from a range of academic disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, it avoids heteronormativity by refusing to name or imply minority sexual acts or forms of relationships as necessarily being 'unhealthy' (McNeill, 2013) and provides a series of clearly delineated domains of sexual health whose relationship to the consumption of pornography can be investigated by applying them to experimental and cross-sectional studies.

The interdisciplinary project team comprises researchers from Film and Television, Psychology and Media and Cultural Studies. The team's interdisciplinarity ensures their ability to undertake a systematic review that addresses relevant academic research from many disciplines within the humanities and the social sciences, making generically-sensitive interpretations of articles that use a range of conceptual frameworks, methods, and understandings of what constitutes data and arguments.

## **Previous literature on pornography and consent**

Because the body of this article will report on a systematic review of literature on the relationship between pornography consumption and consent, the following literature review focuses specifically on previous literature about consent more generally, and not exclusively relating to pornography use. This literature can valuably inform current and future pornography scholarship.

The history of academic research about pornography and consent is complicated. We first note that there is no widely accepted definition of consent in the sexual health literature (Baldwin-White, 2019). With that caveat, we note that there does exist a tradition of research on consent and sexual behaviours. This includes a study where Canadian and US university students aged between 18 and 24 years were asked about how they decline potential sexual activity. Results showed that they declined by saying ‘no’, by indirect verbal excuses such as ‘not being in the mood’, by using excuses such as ‘not having a condom’, by using active behavioural cues like moving away or by using passive behavioural cues like being unreceptive. This research also highlighted that women and men did not vary when it comes to refusal communication (Marcantonio & Jozkowski, 2019). Willis and Jozkowski (2019) recruited 84 students aged between 18 and 24 years from a US university to complete an online survey regarding how they established consent in their sexual relationships. It was shown that when people have previous sexual experiences with a specific partner, they tend to assume their partner’s willingness to engage in sexual activities with them. But for the times people did not have adequate previous sexual experiences with a specific partner, they relied more on both verbal and non-verbal communication cues in order to establish consent. Baldwin-White (2019) conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gather information about college students’ perception of consent. Students were between 18 and 25 years old and enrolled in a large US university. It was found that college students did not

have a consistent, coherent or precise definition of consent and that participants often described it using vague language (Baldwin-White, 2019). Martellozzo et al. (2017) found that only 55% of their male sample and only 35% of the female sample either agreed or strongly agreed with a statement that sex should be 'agreed to by everyone involved' (p. 39).

There also exists some research on how consent is depicted in the media – for example, in one study researchers assessed how consent and refusal communication were depicted in 50 popular, mainstream, English-language films from 2013, where it was found that consent and refusal communication were usually nonverbal or implicit (Jozkowski et al., 2019).

Martellozzo et al. (2017) utilized a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods in order to examine the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of young people in the UK, aged 11 to 16. They reported that young people who had seen pornography felt that it was not a good model for consent and that only 23% of the male sample and 13% of the female sample reported that online pornography had informed them about giving consent (Martellozzo et al., 2017). More recently, Willis, Canan, Jozkowski, and Bridges (2019) conducted a content analysis of fifty 20-minute segments taken from best-selling pornographic films in America (as reported by *Adult Video News* trade magazine), in order to check whether pornography depicts sexual scripts regarding consent. They found that consent communication was often depicted via nonverbal communication cues and that verbal cues were less frequent; female characters were more likely to show nonverbal cues and fewer explicit verbal cues than male characters; sometimes sex was happening without ongoing communication; explicit verbal cues were less likely to be used for manual-genital stimulation; and, lastly, it was common for characters receiving sexual pleasure to indicate (or imply) their consent by not doing anything or by not resisting (Willis et al., 2019).

However, when it comes to research on the relationship between the consumption of pornography and the practice of consent, the literature is complicated by a confusion about

whether ‘violence’ includes or does not include attention to consent. Research about pornography and violence/aggression has been at the heart of academic pornography research since the inception of the modern tradition in 1970 and 1971, with the publication of the studies commissioned by the US President’s Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (Johnson et al., 1970, p. 173). The most common focus of these studies was whether consumption of pornography was correlated with (or even led to) violence/aggression (see, for example, Ben-Veniste, 1971; Cook & Fosen, 1971; Davis & Braucht, 1971; Goldstein, Kant, Judd, Rice, & Green, 1971; Johnson, Kupperstein, & Peters, 1971; Johnson et al., 1970; Kupperstein, 1971; Kupperstein & Wilson, 1971; Kutchinsky, 1971a, 1971b; Mosher & Katz, 1971). This work represented the start of an extensive tradition of pornography research, leading to hundreds of academic articles exploring the relationship between pornography use and aggressive/violent behaviour (Allen, Emmers, Gebhardt, & Giery, 1995).

At first glance it might appear that research about sexual aggression will necessarily have something to say about sexual consent. However, a review of the literature in this tradition demonstrates that this is not necessarily the case. It is true that Baron and Richardson define violence as: “Any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment” (1994, p. 37) – emphasising that in order to be violent, an act must not be consensual. But other definitions exclude consent from consideration, counting any acts that might cause harm as violence, regardless of consent. For example, Stanko’s (2001) “often-cited definition of violence” (Ray, 2011, p. 7), describes it as:

any form of behaviour by an individual that intentionally threatens to or does cause physical, sexual or psychological harm to others or themselves (Stanko, 2001, p. 316)

Therefore the history of academic research on pornography and violence/aggression does not map neatly onto research on pornography and sexual consent. This is further complicated by

emerging research on sexual coercion. Sometimes sexual coercion is introduced as a separate category, which may not involve physical aggression, but could involve actions such as:

‘telling them what they want to hear’; saying nice things about the victim or saying that s/he is special; telling them ‘it will be good’; proposing marriage; and promising that it will not be ‘just one time’ ... saying mean things; criticizing the victims or calling them ‘mean’; questioning their heterosexuality; comparing them to past partners; accusing them of cheating; crying or pouting; making them feel guilty; threatening to stop loving the victim; saying that the victim has stopped loving them (Kernsmith & Kernsmith, 2009, p. 596)

At other times, studies discuss sexual coercion and sexual aggression as though they are synonymous (Baer, Kohut, & Fisher, 2015).

This review focuses on sexual consent, and so includes some, but not all, of the academic research on pornography and violence/aggression; and includes some research that is concerned with consent and coercion but does not address violence/aggression. We chose to focus on consent even though it has not historically been the most important category in research on pornography because in the definition of sexual health used in this project consent is vital. It is also important to remember that practices such as BDSM are not unhealthy where there is adequate consent (McKee, 2015).

## **Method**

As a full account of the method of this study has previously been published (McKee, Byron, Litsou, & Ingham, 2020) we offer here a summary of key points. A Delphi Panel provided the search terms for a series of systematic literature reviews addressing the relationship between pornography and domains of healthy sexual development (McKee et al., 2010). Full



details of the search process are provided in the Search and Analysis protocol ([https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Search\\_and\\_Analysis\\_Protocol/12955052](https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Search_and_Analysis_Protocol/12955052)). This article is one of a series presenting the results of these systematic reviews.<sup>1</sup> The researchers searched all relevant peer-reviewed journal articles using ProQuest, EBSCO, Scopus and JSTOR databases. The search terms included all of those suggested by two or more of the panel members. For this domain, we searched: porn\* OR “sexually explicit material” OR “visual sexual stimuli” AND consent\* OR rape OR coercion OR unwanted OR violen\* OR aggress\* OR assault OR objectif\* OR force\* OR submiss\*. We note that this list of terms is extensive and inclusive – for example, research on sexual objectification might find that people treat sexual partners as objects, and thus do not pay attention to consent. Irrelevant articles were excluded later in the process and so at this point in the search the team agreed to err on the side of inclusiveness.

For articles to be included in this SR they had to be published in English language, in peer-reviewed scientific journals, between January 2000 and December 2017. They had to be discussing the consumption of pornography and to offer original qualitative and/or quantitative data. On these grounds review articles were excluded.

All searches and comparisons of results were conducted independently by two members of the team according to SR guidelines, in order to minimize the potential for errors (Aromataris & Pearson, 2014; Butler, Hall, & Copnell, 2016; Higgins & Green, 2008). Abstracts and titles from the results were then screened to exclude duplicate and irrelevant articles. A final list of articles that addressed the relationship between the consumption of pornography and sexual consent was produced including 34 articles. A table providing details of all included articles is available at

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<sup>1</sup> We explain why we chose to undertake a systematic literature review rather than a formal meta-analysis in (McKee et al., 2021)

([https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Table\\_of\\_Included\\_Articles\\_Consent\\_with\\_page\\_numbers\\_pdf/13363313](https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Table_of_Included_Articles_Consent_with_page_numbers_pdf/13363313)).

We acknowledge that our approach for identifying articles prioritises being replicable rather than being exhaustive. Other systematic reviews have used more organic methods for identifying articles – for example, ‘snowballing’ from the reference lists of articles identified through a database search, or asking colleagues for recommendation (Guyatt, DiCenso, Farewell, Willan, & Griffith, 2000). Such an approach has the advantage of increasing the exhaustiveness of the survey, but the disadvantage of reducing its replicability. In such a situation it is always necessary to make a judgment between these two ‘epistemic virtues’ (Fallis, 2008, p. 1668). In this article we chose to privilege replicability. We accept that there may be relevant articles that are not catalogued on the databases we searched, or which use terminology that was not identified by our global Delphi Panel and thus have not been found in these searches. However, the virtue of replicability for the review, in our view, outweighed this limitation. The articles were submitted to two forms of analysis; a quantitative content analysis (making a numerical count of textual features) and a qualitative thematic analysis. After careful consideration we decided not to use a standardized quality assessment tool. Even tools designed for mixed methods appraisal (such as Hong et al., 2018) are intended only for mixed method social scientific research. They ask for judgements about the quality of ‘data’, ‘methods’, ‘analysis’ and ‘findings’. One of the insights of our research project is that there exist across humanities and social scientific disciplines profound differences about what count as data, methods, analyses or findings (Litsou, McKee, Byron, & Ingham, 2021), such that it is not possible simply to score these in an objective way as required by quality assessment tools.

The content analysis reviewed aspects of research design, methods, the populations studied and implications, as well as whether the article claimed causality. Full details of all of the

elements that were reviewed are provided in the second part of the Search and Analysis protocol. The content analysis was deliberately exhaustive, gathering as much data as possible that could then be used to identify any relevant patterns. We also reviewed the instruments used in each article. For some of the included papers the authors used validated scales, for other papers the authors produced their own questions and some papers reported on qualitative methods, using either focus groups or interviews. Some of these measures were about intentional violence such as rape while others were about the possibility of committing sexual violence. Our analysis of the instruments used found that authors took no consistent approach towards consent, including whether or not they measured consent. This finding informed our results, discussed below

([https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Table\\_of\\_Included\\_Articles\\_Consent\\_with\\_page\\_numbers\\_pdf/13363313](https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Table_of_Included_Articles_Consent_with_page_numbers_pdf/13363313)). The research team then conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify the themes of discussion when pornography researchers discuss the topic of sexual consent. Researchers independently read the articles, using an inductive approach to identify the key themes in each domain (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The full team of researchers then discussed the possible themes identified and, over the course of several discussions, agreement was reached about which were the most dominant. As with the coding and analysis of themes from other HSD domains we had intended to pay particular attention to how articles from social sciences and humanities disciplines differently engaged with the themes; however, all articles relating to sexual consent originated from social science disciplines.

## **Results**

### *Domains for analysis and numbers of articles*

The initial search, after removing duplicates, returned 678 articles. Of these, 576 were excluded after screening of title and abstract and a further sixty-eight were excluded after full texts were reviewed. In total, 34 articles (listed in [https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Table\\_of\\_Included\\_Articles\\_Consent\\_with\\_page\\_numbers\\_pdf/13363313](https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Table_of_Included_Articles_Consent_with_page_numbers_pdf/13363313)) were identified as providing relevant data about the relationship between the consumption of pornography and sexual consent and were thus included for analysis.

The journals in which most of the articles were published are *Violence Against Women* (four articles) and *Violence and Victims* (three articles). Following these, two articles were included from each of the following journals: *Aggressive Behavior*; *Archives of Sexual Behavior*; *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*; *Sex Roles*; and *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*. Initial coding revealed that, of the 34 articles, 29 report on data collected from a single point in time. Three articles use data collected at more than one time point, and one was based on an experimental design. Data were mostly collected through surveys only (N=25) with five using interviews and/or focus groups. A minority of articles (N=3) used mixed methods. Most of the articles (N=26) report correlations or regressions.

We also report in this article on the ways in which articles in this sample dealt with causality. In public debates about the effects of pornography it is often claimed that pornography causes changes in sexual behaviour or attitudes (see for example Tankard Reist, 2021). We gathered data in relation to this in our content analysis, and given the importance of such questions in the media it was decided to report on this data in the article. Nineteen of the articles explicitly claim that pornography causes changes in other variables despite the fact the data were not presented to support this claim. Twenty articles imply causality – implied causality was measured through article references to terms including the ‘effect’, ‘impact’, or ‘influence’ of pornography. Only 14 of the 34 articles avoid incorrectly claiming or implying causality. To clarify the logic of this analysis: whereas “the correlation of risky sexual practices with

pornography consumption” means the same as “the correlation of pornography consumption with risky sexual practices”, it is not true that “the impact of pornography consumption on risky sexual practices” means the same thing as “the impact of risky sexual practices on pornography consumption”. The language of “impact” implies a unidirectional causal relationship.

We found no agreement in the sample about the definition of pornography, what constitutes a suitable taxonomy of kinds of pornography or measures of pornography consumption (see Kohut et al., 2020). The articles in the sample refer to at least 13 different kinds of pornography, some overlapping, some referring to content, others to medium: ‘violent’, ‘hardcore’, ‘sadoomasochistic’, ‘rape’ ‘erotica’, ‘gonzo’, ‘violent/degrading’, ‘softcore’, ‘mainstream’, ‘degrading’, ‘adult-child sex’, ‘child’ and ‘internet’.

We also note that none of the articles attempted to define ~~or measure~~ consent. Despite this being a key aspect of healthy sexual development, we found no work that employed indicators to measure the sophistication of either consumers’ understanding of how sexual consent should operate, ~~nor of their consensual practice in sexual encounters~~.

In the next section of the article we discuss the results of the thematic analysis. This identified two key themes. The first is that there is no agreement in the literature as to whether consumption of pornography is correlated with better or worse *understandings* of sexual consent, including having attitudes accepting of sexual violence, or likelihood of bystander interventions in cases of sexual violence or coercion. The second is that there is no agreement in the literature as to whether consumption of pornography is correlated with better or worse *practices* of sexual consent including practising sexual violence or taking bystander actions in cases of observed sexual violence.

*Finding 1: There is no agreement in the literature as to whether consumption of pornography is correlated with better or worse understandings of sexual consent including having attitudes accepting of sexual violence, or likelihood of bystander interventions in cases of sexual violence or coercion.*

We struggled to identify a consistent set of findings in this group of articles in relation to pornography consumption and understandings of, or attitudes towards, consent. Some articles found correlations between pornography use and attitudes towards sexual consent. One found a correlation between women viewing pornography and being less likely to intervene as a bystander during a sexual assault, and more likely to believe rape myths (Brosi, Foubert, Bannon, & Yandell, 2011); another found that men who viewed pornography were less likely to say they would intervene as a bystander, more likely to rape a woman if they were assured they would not get caught or punished, and more likely to believe rape myths, than those men who did not watch pornography (Foubert, Brosi, & Bannon, 2011). Another article found a correlation between pornography use and attitudes supporting violence against women, but only for men who are at high risk for sexual aggression and are self-reported frequent consumers of pornography (Malamuth, Hald, & Koss, 2012).

However, other articles found that exposure to non-violent pornography had no effect on bystander willingness to intervene, nor to bystander efficacy; while exposure to violent pornography for men but not for women was correlated with bystander willingness to intervene but not to bystander efficacy (Foubert & Bridges, 2017). Others found no effect on rape myth acceptance or attraction to sexual aggression after exposure to violent and degrading pornography (Isaacs & Fisher, 2008); no link between pornography use and attitudes towards sexual coercion (Tomaszewska & Krahé, 2016); and no relationship for men between reading pornographic magazines and aggressive sexual attitudes (L. D. Taylor, 2006).

*Finding 2: There is no agreement in the literature as to whether consumption of pornography is correlated with better or worse practices of sexual consent including practising sexual violence or taking bystander actions in cases of sexual violence.*

Similar to our findings in relation to the consumption of pornography and sexual consent attitudes, there were no consistent findings in relation to pornography use and sexual consent practices. Some articles suggest that there is an association between men being sexually aggressive (noting that this did not always mean non-consensual practices – it could involve consensual kinky practices) and using pornography (pornography generally, not just violent pornography) (Bonino, Ciairano, Rabaglietti, & Cattelino, 2006; D’Abreu & Krahé, 2014; Gwee, Lim, & Woo, 2002; Mikoriski & Szymanski, 2017; Simons, Simons, Lei, & Sutton, 2012; Vega & Malamuth, 2007). For example:

...adolescents who use pornography seem more likely to establish relationships with their peers characterized by greater tolerance towards unwanted sexual behaviour (Bonino et al., 2006, p. 281)

...frequent corporal punishment in the family of origin combined with consumption of pornographic materials increased the probability that males reported engaging in coercive sexual practice (Simons et al., 2012, p. 381)

Our finding supports assertions about links between rape and pornography (Gwee et al., 2002, p. 54)

In each of the above arguments presented throughout these papers (but not exclusive to these papers), there is no indication of what types of pornography are being used, nor is there an indication of how pornography is understood (and used) by the participants and researchers

involved.<sup>2</sup> We noted that some articles presented claims about the kinds of content the authors thought pornography is likely to involve, without presenting data or references to support these descriptions: for example, “Pornographic materials generally portray women as ready and willing to satisfy men’s every sexual desire” (Simons et al., 2012, p. 382).

Another article found a correlation between women’s pornography use and all forms of sexual aggression except physical violence and intimidation, though the authors do admit that not enough information was collected about the types of pornography used and the context of its use (e.g. alone or with a partner) (Kernsmith & Kernsmith, 2009). Other articles found a relationship between the use of violent pornography and sexual aggression, but not between the use of non-violent pornography and sexual aggression (Baer et al., 2015). Furthermore, articles found no relationship between viewing ‘violent and degrading’ pornography and self-reporting of sexual coercion or aggression (Gonsalves, Hodges, & Scalora, 2015), or between pornography exposure and sexually aggressive behaviours (Burton, Leibowitz, & Howard, 2010).

## **Discussion**

Our analysis finds that research on pornography and aggression does not neatly capture the distinction between consent and non-consent. This research tradition does not single out non-consensual aggression, including also consensual acts such as BDSM, which can be part of healthy sexual development.

In reaching this conclusion we note that, in accordance with Malamuth et al., that there is a ‘high degree of heterogeneity among studies’ in this area (Malamuth et al., 2012, p. 427).

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<sup>2</sup> While Bonino et al. (2006) do consider and compare two sites of pornographic media – films/videos and magazines – nothing is said of the pornographic content within these media formats.



This is not surprising given that, as Gonsalves et al. note regarding their focus on ‘online sexually explicit media’,:

Several concepts lacked specific operational definitions. This issue plagues this body of literature and may have influenced the results (Gonsalves et al., 2015, p. 218)

Scholars of pornography and sexually explicit media, as noted above, are often not comparing like with like, either in relation to pornography (i.e. violent, non-violent, or all types), or regarding the potential ‘effects’ of sexually aggressive behaviour, sexual coercion, attitudes to violence against women, or sexual assault. For the purpose of improving our understanding of how pornography may impact on sexual consent within the context of sexual health, this constitutes a problem; there is no agreement in this literature about where sexual consent fits into this discussion, and little indication that consent is important in this area of research. Given the centrality of consent to all healthy sexual practice (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2012; Carmody, 2009; McKee et al., 2010) it is surprising how none of these articles explicitly focus on consent. Yet all articles are implicitly about consent in their focus on sexual assault, coercion, and violence. We discuss possible next steps in addressing these issues below, when we consider some implications of the research.

As stated above, we found confusion in this literature about whether consideration of consent is important. Some research about pornography and sexual violence excludes consent from consideration, even though in sexual health research this is pivotal to determining violence from acceptable behaviour. Indeed, we found in this sample evidence of research where consent was framed as negative. For example, Walker et al. write that pornography shows ‘violence’ where ‘female actors displayed eagerness or willingness to comply’ (Walker, Temple-Smith, Higgs, & Sanci, 2015, p. 201), where this is argued to be negative. They also refer to scenes of spanking, gagging, hair pulling and choking as scenes of ‘physical aggression’ regardless of the existence of consent (Mondin, 2017; Stevens, 2014). We note

that existing research shows that female consumers of pornography have complex preferences for the kinds of material they consume, including material showing consensual ‘female submission’ which therefore cannot simply (and necessarily) be understood as ‘degradation’ (Smith, 2007). From the point of view of HSD it is important to consistently distinguish consensual acts (kink, spanking, BDSM) and nonconsensual acts (sexual harassment and rape). For healthy sexual development, eager and willing consent to sexual acts – whether vanilla or BDSM – is a positive outcome.

Also important are the complexities around the use of the term ‘degrading’ in this academic tradition – often linked with violence through phrases like ‘violent and degrading’ (Foubert & Bridges, 2017; Isaacs & Fisher, 2008, p. 1) or ‘violent or degrading’ (Foubert & Bridges, 2017b; Gonsalves et al., 2015; Romito & Beltramini, 2015). Ten of the 34 articles use the term ‘degrading’ on more than one occasion in their discussions about pornography, but we note there is no consistency of what is meant by the term across authors. Some articles present no definition (Baer et al., 2015; DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017; Foubert & Bridges, 2017b; Gonsalves et al., 2015; Klaassen & Peter, 2014). Some define degrading pornography as being the same thing as violent pornography (Romito & Beltramini, 2015). One quotes a tautological definition from Check (1985):

sexual explicit materials that ‘degrade, debase, and dehumanize women... even if they do not contain explicit depictions of violent behavior’ (Isaacs & Fisher, 2008, p. 2, citing Check)

The closest that we come to a definition of ‘degrading’ in these articles is when they suggest particular sex acts or themes that the authors propose to be ‘degrading’. These include depiction of an ‘unequal female-male power relationship’ (Isaacs & Fisher, 2008, p. 6) ‘a number of men ejaculating on women’s faces’ (in common terms, ‘bukkake’) (Isaacs & Fisher, 2008, p. 6), or ‘double penetration (one woman penetrated anally and vaginally

simultaneously' (Walker et al., 2015, p. 201). We would argue that this is a heteronormative form of analysis (Stoops, 2017; Warner, 1991). We note that consensual engagement in bukkake or double penetration is unproblematic from the perspective of sexual health so long as suitable methods are taken to prevent STI transmission. We note that research shows that a majority of people agree that such acts are degrading (Isaacs & Fisher, 2008, p. 6) – this tells us that society generally is heteronormative and disapproves of sex acts outside of the 'charmed circle' (Rubin, 1992). Consent is a more important variable than whether or not people engage in acts that a majority of people think are 'degrading'. We note that 'consent' is a central aspect of healthy sexual development (McKee et al., 2010). By contrast, whether or not people engage in sex acts that are considered by the majority of the population to be 'degrading' is irrelevant to healthy sexual development. For example, gay men may partake in anal sex, which is considered 'degrading' by many people – but as long as it is informed and consensual it does not necessarily mean that they are not partaking in a healthy sex life.

## **Limitations**

As with every systematic review it is possible that relevant articles have been omitted because they did not appear in the searches, despite the advice of the Delphi panel and the use of extensive databases for the searches. It is also possible that the search terms used were not entirely exhaustive and may have missed relevant articles.

Because this systematic review focused only on journal articles published in English within a specific timeframe (January 2000 - December 2017), books, book chapters, unpublished materials, material published not in English and material published before January 2000 and after December 2017 are by default excluded. In regard to the earlier date, the study design is based on our position that the cumulative nature of academic research should mean that the

findings of earlier work will inform the articles that were included; in regard to the latter date, it was necessary to set a final date in order to finalize the analysis.

## **Implications**

Public discussions about the effects of pornography on consumers continue to be heated. As Nelson et al note, for example, increasing numbers of American States have introduced resolutions declaring pornography a ‘public health crisis’ despite the lack of clear data suggesting that this is a useful way to understand the genre (Nelson & Rothman, 2020), Concerns about ‘pornography addiction’ are similarly gaining traction (K. Taylor, 2019), again without clear medical data to support this model of consumption (Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2020). In many cases, these debates appear to be driven by anti-pornography activism (Bronstein, 2011). This article provides important data for evidence-led discussions in this area.

We propose that it is vital that future academic research in this area reach a consensus on the definition of violence, and that this definition must include consent. Given the lack of indicators of consent in this research we also note the importance of developing reliable and valid instruments that can measure both understandings of how sexual consent should work, and of consensual sexual practice. Consent is a key aspect of sexual health. To exclude it from our research of pornography’s effects is counterproductive.

Future research should explicitly focus on the relationship between the consumption of pornography and understandings and practices of consent, rather than focusing primarily on ‘violence’. As we have found, not all sexual acts described in the literature as ‘violent’ are non-consensual.

Furthermore, the concept of consent should be emphasized in sexual health education in order to clarify that sexual assault does not occur because of miscommunication, to decrease victim blame and to place responsibility clearly on the perpetrators of sexual assault (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Marcantonio & Jozkowski, 2019). Media literacy should also be included in sexual education programmes regarding issues of consent (Dawson, Nic Gabhainn, & MacNeela, 2019), as it is not uncommon, especially for young people, to base their sexual behaviours and attitudes on what is depicted in mainstream media and in pornographic videos (Jozkowski et al., 2019; Willis et al., 2019). Since people are using pornography in order to learn about sex, it is very useful for sexual education programmes to know what kind of sexual material people are watching and address them appropriately (Willis et al., 2019).

We strongly encourage humanities researchers to conduct research into the relationship between pornography consumption and consent. Humanities researchers, who focus on the subtleties of meaning, are well placed to offer new insights into the nature and functioning of consent in sexual practice. We note that none of the articles found in this search are from humanities scholars, which was not the case in results from our systematic literature reviews of other HSD domains.<sup>3</sup>

We also recommend a moratorium on the use of ‘degrading’ as a category to understand pornography. As we have noted above, it is commonly used without definition. It thus ends up serving a ‘common sense’ purpose that suggests that consensual minority sexual practices are so unpleasant as to be unacceptable. As explained above, this is a heteronormative approach (Warner, 1991).

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<sup>3</sup> Again, we only included studies where there was empirical research involving porn users, so this limited but did not entirely exclude humanities articles.

In terms of academic research, this article only reports on the literature addressing the relationship between the consumption of pornography and a single domain of HSD – sexual consent. Other articles emerging from this project address other domains of Healthy Sexual Development (Byron, McKee, Watson, Litsou, & Ingham, 2021; Litsou, Byron, McKee, & Ingham, 2020; McKee et al., 2021).

## **Conclusion**

Consent is a vital part of sexual health. Our review shows that it has not traditionally been a major focus of pornography research, often being replaced by a focus on ‘violence’ that does not pay attention to consent. An alternative tradition of research looks at coercion rather than violence (Gonsalves et al., 2015; Tomaszewska & Krahé, 2016). This latter approach is directly related to consent, whereas work on aggression or violence sometimes includes consent and sometimes excludes it. This makes coercion a better focus for research into the relationship between the consumption of pornography and sexual health. By excluding consent from consideration, research is limited in its usefulness for researchers, educators, and activists working to prevent gendered and sexual violence. Violence prevention initiatives are centrally concerned with consent and agency.

More generally, we encourage pornography researchers to start with a definition of sexual health and work backwards from there in identifying areas for research around pornography consumption. This will help us to develop a shared research framework that can link more directly to sexual health promotion. This will then inform the development of policy by ensuring a robust set of data in this area.

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**Data availability statement:** the full list and details of articles included in the systematic review can be found at

[https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Table\\_of\\_Included\\_Articles\\_Consent\\_with\\_page\\_numbers\\_pdf/13363313](https://figshare.com/articles/dataset/Table_of_Included_Articles_Consent_with_page_numbers_pdf/13363313)

### **Declaration of Interest**

The authors have no declarations of interest to declare.

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