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**The positive and negative effects of pornography as attributed by
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The positive and negative effects of pornography as attributed by consumers

Abstract

Little research has been conducted asking what range of effects pornography might have on consumers. In the literature it has been assumed that the primary effect will be to create negative attitudes towards women, but this assumption has not been tested. No experimental research has been done on what possible positive effects the consumption of pornography might produce. As a preliminary step in such a project, a survey of 1023 consumers of pornography in Australia asked consumers to specify whether they felt that pornography had had any effect on their attitudes towards sexuality, and to specify that effect. 58.8% of respondents thought pornography had had a very positive or a positive effect on their attitudes towards sexuality; 34.6% felt it had had no effect; and 6.8% thought it had a negative effect or a large negative effect. The main positive effects, in order of reporting, were: making consumers less repressed about sex; making them more open-minded about sex; increasing tolerance of other people's sexualities; giving pleasure to consumers; providing educational insights; sustaining sexual interest in long-term relationships; making consumers more attentive to a partner's sexual desires; helping consumers find an identity or community; and helping them to talk to their partners about sex. The most common negative effects were that pornography led consumers to objectify people; caused them to have unrealistic sexual expectations; caused relationship problems; caused loss of interest in sex; and led to addiction. Now that these possible positive and negative effects have been identified, further research can be conducted to investigate the extent of these effects for consumers of pornography.

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Introduction

There exists an extensive literature investigating the possible effects on consumers of exposure to pornography. However, most of this literature starts from the assumption that the major effect of such exposure will be the creation of negative attitudes towards women (for an extensive discussion of this literature, see McKee, 2005a, McKee, 2005b). It is difficult to find experimental research that starts by attempting to map the possible effects that pornography may have on consumer. There is a small amount of speculative work which suggests that possible positive effects might include providing the materials for identity formation for marginalized sexual communities such as gay men and lesbians (Flood & Hamilton, 2003, p. 24); challenging restrictive gender roles (Duggan, Hunter & Vance, 1988, p. 82); or therapeutic benefits such as overcoming shame about sex (Winick, 1984, p.209; Kimmel, 1990, MacDonald, 1990). There exists no experimental literature on these possible benefits.

This article presents the results of a survey of 1023 consumers of pornography in Australia. This is part of the 'Understanding Pornography in Australia' research project funded by the Australian Research Council. Two forms of data gathering were used to gather information about consumers of pornography in Australia. The first was the survey. The second was detailed interviews with forty six consumers of pornography (see McKee, 2006).

The survey provided a variety of useful data, including evidence that age, voting intention and religion are more reliable predictors of negative attitudes towards women than pornography consumption. This has been reported elsewhere (McKee, 2007). This article reports on information provided by the survey on the range of possible positive and negative effects resulting from exposure to pornography. This has not previously been published.

Method

The method involved in the survey has been described in detail elsewhere (McKee, 2007), and will be summarised here. The survey was administered both as a hard copy enclosed in a mail order pornographic catalogue and as an online instrument, publicised in the media and online. 5000 paper copies of the survey were sent out and 367 valid responses were received — a 7.3% response rate. This is a low response rate, perhaps explained by the fact that, although pornography is legal in Australia, public debate still tends to brand its users as perverse if not criminal (see, for example, Hamilton, 2004). 656 valid responses were

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received from the Internet (after they had been checked for duplicate responses, completeness, internal consistency, and multiple responses from single IP addresses), for a total of 1023 responses from consumers of pornography.

The survey instrument consisted of forty one questions, refined after a small pilot project was run in April 2003. It included ten questions asking for basic demographic data (1-8, 33-34), three questions about sociability (9-11), four questions about general cultural consumption (12-15), seventeen questions about use of and thoughts about pornography (16-32) and seven questions about attitudes towards women (35-41) (see Appendix 1).

The questions about the use of and thoughts about pornography included a mixture of open and closed questions. The results reported in this article were generated in response to question 32. The question asked ‘What effects has pornography had on your attitudes towards sexuality?’, and offered a five point Likert scale: ‘A large negative effect’; ‘A small negative effect’; ‘No effect at all’; ‘A small positive effect’ or ‘A large positive effect’. In any case where respondents identified an effect — positive or negative — they were also asked to ‘Provide brief details’, and a box was provided for open answers. The details that were provided in the open section were coded by the author. A taxonomy was developed by reading through all the answers. The author then went through all the responses again and counted the answers in each category, as far as possible using keywords for consistency (see below), but also employing common sense when it was clear that an answer should fit into a given category even if it did not use a keyword.

Asking consumers of pornography for their insights into the genre is still, surprisingly, a contentious methodology — although self-reporting is an increasingly common methodology for analysing the effects of pornography on its consumers as long as researchers are aware of the limitations of the approach (see, for example, Padgett, Brislin-Slutz & Neal, 1989; Potter, 1996, p. 82; Richters, Grulich, de Visser, Smith, & Rissel, 2003, p. 181). Several Australian commentators have suggested that consumers of pornography are unreliable sources of information as they are likely to lack self-insight, be criminal, immoral, or mentally ill (either deluded or addicted) (Trad 2004, Gilding, 2004, Castles, 2006). However, this is unlikely as there exists no evidence that, as a population, consumers of pornography are any less reliable than any other survey population.

It must also be borne in mind that this is a self-selecting sample. It is therefore likely that the negative effects of pornography are over-reported in this survey, and that the real percentage of consumers experiencing a negative effect is smaller. As Bright has noted, ‘it’s a lot easier being critical with porn’ than to publicly admit enjoyment (cited in O’Toole, 1998, p. 338). And, indeed, this is generally the case with research into the media, as those consumers who

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are disgruntled and unhappy with the media tend to be overrepresented in self-selecting samples. People are less motivated to make the effort to report that they are happy with a media product. Beyond this, there is an experimenter demand in effect in researching popular culture where audiences, aware of its low status, tend to denigrate even those things they enjoy, in order to demonstrate to academic researchers that they are not cultural dupes (Seiter, 1990).

Results and discussion

Basic demographic data from the survey has been reported elsewhere (McKee, 2007).

In response to the question ‘What effects has pornography had on your attitudes towards sexuality?’, consumers gave the following responses:

Table 1: Effects of pornography

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Large neg effect	11	1.1
	Small neg effect	58	5.7
	No effect	354	34.6
	Small pos effect	320	31.3
	Large pos effect	261	25.5
	Total	1004	98.1
Missing	No answer	9	.9
	Uncodable	10	1.0
	Total	19	1.9
Total		1023	100.0

As can be seen, far more respondents (a total of 58.8%) felt pornography had had a positive effect than those who thought it had a negative effect (a total of 6.8%).

This in itself is a surprising result, as it is difficult to find any serious academic research that has investigated the possible positive effects of exposure to pornography. The result accords with O’Toole’s journalistic work. He analysed letters and emails from almost two hundred consumers and found that: ‘most people [who use pornography] seem to find their time with porn pleasurable rather than sad, demeaning, addictive or harmful’ (O’Toole, 1998, p. xi). As noted above, previous writers have speculated about some possible positive effects, but have not explored these. The only possible effect that has been investigated specifically within the experimental (as opposed to survey) literature is the negative effect of creating negative

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attitudes towards women. This fact alone suggests that this survey may be useful — it does, at least, point us towards an exciting new avenue for research. If, indeed, it is possible that there are positive effects resulting from the exposure to pornography, then it is vital that researchers begin to investigate these.

What might these effects be?

In asking respondents to describe the effect that pornography had on their sexuality we left the question open, allowing them to define this for themselves. From this, we can provide a list of the most commonly cited effects of pornography, both positive and negative.

It seems reasonable to list the potential positive effects first, given that substantially more consumers mentioned positive than negative effects. In analysing the responses to the open question, a number of common ideas, marked by recurring words, emerged. By far the most common positive effect described was becoming less repressed and more comfortable about sex (141 respondents, 13.8% of all respondents). Key recurring terms were ‘relaxed’, less ‘inhibited’, and more ‘open’. 99 respondents (9.7%) said that pornography had made them more open minded and willing to experiment sexually (key terms were ‘open-minded’ and ‘adventurous’). 68 people (6.6%) said that pornography had made them more ‘tolerant’ (a common word) of other people’s sexual pleasures — commonly with the caveat that this was true ‘so long as no-one gets hurt’. 65 (6.4%) mentioned the arousal and pleasure they got from pornography personally (common words were ‘arousal’ and ‘stimulation’). 57 (5.6%) used terms like ‘education’ and ‘learning’, talking about basic information, such as how bodies worked, as well as techniques and ideas. 47 respondents (4.6%) talked about using pornography to maintain interest in sex within a long term relationship (using terms such as ‘spicing up’ and ‘variety’). 29 respondents (2.8%) responded that pornography had made them more attentive to their partner’s pleasure in sex. 24 (2.3%) stated that it had helped them find an identity or community (using language such as finding out that they were ‘not alone’). 21 (2.1%) said it had helped them to open discussions with their partner about sex.

These results can be compared with the results of Winick’s research, where he suggests that the readers of pornography might be ‘obtaining information, exercising fantasies, obtaining reassurance, collecting and comparing materials, seeking stimulation and obtaining guidance in overcoming sexual difficulties’ (Winick, 1985, p. 209).

In reporting the negative effects, it is worth noting the small numbers involved. Even the most unusual positive effect was reported by more people than the most common negative effect. The most common negative effect, mentioned by 18 people (1.8%) was that pornography led to them to objectify people (key terms ‘objects’ or ‘objectify’). 16 people (1.6%) responded that porn caused them to have ‘unrealistic’ expectations, both about themselves and other

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people's bodies and pleasures. 5 people (0.5%) said that pornography had caused problems in a relationship, 4 people (0.4%) found it had led to a loss of interest in real sexual contact, and 4 others had problems with addiction to pornography.

Conclusion

This data has important implications for future research into the effects of pornography. It is vital that we do not take the responses from the surveys on face value, but that we begin to research their validity. It is bad science to start from the assumption that there is only one possible effect of exposure to pornography without asking as a first step what range of effects in fact might be produced.

We now have an extensive experimental literature examining one possible effect of such exposure — the possibility of creating negative attitudes towards women. But according to consumers of pornography themselves, this is one of the least likely effects of exposure (1.8%). They report, as more likely effects, becoming less repressed about sex, becoming more open-minded about sex, becoming more tolerant of other people's sexualities, giving them pleasure, providing sexual education, maintaining sexual interest in long term relationships, being more attentive to a partner's sexual pleasure, finding an identity or community, and making it possible to open discussions with their partners about sex. All of these effects were reported more commonly than the creation of objectifying attitudes. It seems only reasonable that research into the effects of pornography should be broadened in order to see whether it is possible to replicate these effects experimentally. It may indeed be that future research finds it impossible to create such effects, but it behoves us as social scientists to find out whether this is the case.

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Appendix 1

Survey instrument.

1. How old are you?

Under 18

19-25

26-35

36-45

46-55

56-65

66+

2. What is your annual income before tax?

Under \$12,000

\$12,001-\$20,000

\$20,001-\$30,000

\$30,001-\$40,000

\$40,001-\$60,000

\$60,001-\$80,000

\$80,001-\$100,000

\$100,001+

3. How would you describe your own ethnicity?

BOX

4. At what stage did you complete your formal education?

Still studying

Primary

Secondary

Tertiary (including TAFE and university)

Postgraduate

5. Which sex are you?

Male

Female

Other (please specify)

BOX

6. With which sexuality do you most identify?

Straight

Gay/lesbian

Bisexual

Celibate

BDSM

Other (please specify)

BOX

7. In which area do you live?

City, urban

City, suburban

Town

Small town

Rural

Remote

Other (please describe)

BOX

8. In which state or territory do you live?

ACT

NSW

NT

QLD

SA

TAS

VIC

WA

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- | | |
|--|---|
| 9. When you have guests in your home
are they mostly: | Imparja |
| Family | Fox 8 |
| Friends | Fox Sports (including Fox Sports Two and
Fox Footy) |
| Work colleagues | Other (please specify) |
| I don't entertain people in my home | BOX |
| 10. How often do you go out socially? | 13. What kinds of music do you most like
to listen to? (please tick as many as
necessary) |
| Less than once a week | None |
| About once a week | Top 40 chart music |
| More than once a week. | Classical |
| 11. How would you describe the status of
your current sexual relationships? | Country and Western |
| Single | Dance |
| Celibate | Easy listening |
| Partnered, monogamous couple | Hip hop |
| Partnered, open couple | Jazz |
| Partnered, monogamous multiple partners | Metal |
| Partnered, open multiple partners | Opera |
| Married, monogamous | Rock |
| Married, open relationship | Other (please describe) |
| Other (please describe) | BOX |
| BOX | 14. What kinds of books do you like to
read? (please tick as many as necessary) |
| 12. Which television channel do you tend
to watch most often (please tick only
one)? | None |
| None | Horror |
| Seven | Crime |
| Nine | Thriller/adventure |
| Ten | Science fiction |
| ABC | Romance |
| SBS | Literature |
| WIN | Poetry |
| NBN | Biographies |
| Prime | Lifestyle (cooking, gardening, travel etc) |
| | Other non-fiction |

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- | | |
|---|--|
| Other (please describe) BOX | None - mainly view/download free material from the internet |
| 15. If you regularly read a newspaper, which one? | None - mainly borrow/exchange with friends |
| Don't read a newspaper | Videos |
| The <i>Daily Telegraph Mirror</i> | DVDs |
| The <i>Courier Mail</i> | Magazines |
| The <i>Mercury</i> | Novels |
| The <i>Australian</i> | Internet (pay sites) |
| The <i>Herald Sun</i> | Other (please describe) |
| The <i>Australian Financial Review</i> | BOX |
| The <i>Age</i> | |
| The <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> | 18. How large is your current collection of pornography (including magazines, videos, DVDs, downloaded internet material, novels or any other format)? |
| The <i>West Australian</i> | None |
| The <i>Koori Mail</i> | Under 10 items |
| The <i>Advertiser</i> | 11-25 items |
| The <i>Northern Territory News</i> | 26-50 items |
| Other (please describe) | 50+ items |
| BOX | |
| 16. How much money do you spend on pornography each month? | 19. Do you use your pornography only once, or do you use it more than once? |
| None - don't get new material | Don't use pornography |
| None - mainly download free material from the web. | Only once |
| None - mainly borrow/exchange material with friends | Sometimes go back to favourites (please list) |
| Under \$50 | Often go back to favourites (please list) |
| \$51-\$100 | BOX |
| \$101-\$150 | |
| \$151+ | 20. Do you think there are any 'classic' porn videos, DVDs, novels, internet sites or magazines? |
| 17. Which kinds of pornography do you mainly buy? (tick as many as necessary) | No |
| None - don't get new material | Don't know |
| | Yes (please list them) |

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BOX

21. How do you decide what pornography
you're going to buy? (please tick as
many as necessary)

Don't buy pornography

Recommendation from a friend

Reviews in magazines

Reviews on the internet

Advertisements in magazines

Advertisements on the internet

Description in catalogues

Cover photograph

Description on back cover

Because of the author

Because of the star

Because of the director

Other (please describe)

BOX

22. How do you usually consume your
pornography?

Don't consume pornography

Alone

With a partner

With more than one partner

With a crowd

Other (please describe)

BOX

23. How many times would you use
pornography in an average week?

Don't consume pornography

Less than once a week

Once a week

Up to three times a week

More than three times a week

24. In an average week, how many hours
would you spend using pornography?

None

Less than an hour a week

Between one and three hours a week

Between three and five hours a week

More than five hours a week

25. What do you think makes for good
pornography? (please tick as many
boxes as necessary)

Quality of writing

Good storyline

Specific kinds of sex (please specify)

BOX

Attractive actors/actresses

Good acting

Enthusiasm in sex scenes

Realistic settings

Real-looking bodies

Good production values (lighting,
camerawork, etc)

Other (please specify)

BOX

26. Generally, how happy are you with the
pornography that you consume?

Very unhappy

Unhappy

No strong feeling

Happy

Very happy

27. If you answered 'unhappy' or 'very
unhappy' to the previous question,

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how would you improve the pornography that you consume?	31+
BOX	32. What effect has pornography had on your attitudes towards sexuality?
28. Which of the following practices do you like to be present in pornography? (please choose as many as necessary)	Never consumed a pornographic text
Rape, simulated	A large negative effect (please provide brief details)
Rape, real	A small negative effect (please provide brief details)
Murder during sex, simulated	No effect at all
Bestiality	A small positive effect (please provide brief details)
Children having sex	A large positive effect (please provide brief details)
None of the above	BOX
29. Have you ever been shocked or disturbed by a pornographic text?	33. How do you usually vote?
Never consumed a pornographic text	Liberal/National
No	Labor
Don't know	Democrat
Yes (please provide details)	Green
BOX	One Nation
30. Have you ever applied anything that you saw in pornography in your own sex life?	Other (please describe)
Never consumed a pornographic text.	BOX
No.	34. How would you describe your religion?
Don't know	Catholic
Yes (please describe)	Anglican
BOX	Protestant
31. How old were you when you first read or saw pornography?	Methodist
Never consumed a pornographic text	Other Christian
Under 16	Buddhist
16-20	Atheist
21-30	Muslim
	Other (please describe)
	BOX

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	Strongly disagree
35. How would you describe your own	Disagree
politics about gender?	No opinion on the issue
Strongly against feminism	Agree
Slightly against feminism	Strongly agree
Not interested in gender politics	
Slightly feminist	39. It is acceptable for a woman to stop a
Strongly feminist	sexual encounter at any point, no
	matter how keen she may have been
	initially.
For each of the following statements,	Strongly disagree
please tick the box that shows the extent to	Disagree
which you disagree or agree with the	No opinion on the issue
statement.	Agree
36. Women should get equal pay for equal	Strongly agree
work.	
Strongly disagree	40. It is acceptable for women to be
Disagree	sexually assertive.
No opinion on the issue	Strongly disagree
Agree	Disagree
Strongly agree	No opinion on the issue
	Agree
37. Women should have access to	Strongly agree
abortion on demand.	
Strongly disagree	41. I would not mind working for a female
Disagree	boss.
No opinion on the issue	Strongly disagree
Agree	Disagree
Strongly agree	No opinion on the issue
	Agree
38. It is acceptable for women to continue	Strongly agree
to work outside the home after they	
have children, if they want to.	

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