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The positive and negative effects of pornography as attributed by consumers

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

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#### **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.

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

### **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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

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

### 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

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

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

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

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

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

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,

The positive and negative effects of pornography as attributed by consumers

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

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

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

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