WHAT DO PEOPLE DO WITH PORN? QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTO THE COMSUMPTION, USE, AND EXPERIENCE OF PORNOGRAPHY AND OTHER SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MEDIA

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This article reviews qualitative research into the consumption of pornography and other sexually explicit media emerging from a range of subject areas. Taking a critique of quantitative methods and a focus on measuring sexual effects and attitudes as a starting point, it considers the proposition that qualitative work is more suited to an examination of the complex social, cultural, and political constructions of sexuality. Examining studies into the way men, women, and young people see, experience, and use explicit media texts, the article identifies the key findings that have emerged. Qualitative work shows that sexually explicit media texts are experienced and understood in a variety of ways and evoke strong and often contradictory reactions, not all of which are represented in public debates about pornography. These texts function in a range of different ways, depending on context; as a source of knowledge, a resource for intimate practices, a site for identity construction, and an occasion for performing gender and sexuality. The article reviews these studies and their findings, identifying what they suggest about directions for future research, both in terms of developing methodology and refining approaches to sexuality and media consumption.

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Researching Sexually Explicit Media

The use of pornography has long been a source of public unease, largely as a result of the perception that its use is widespread and growing, and that its consumption results in undesirable social "effects." More recently, this unease has spread to other forms of sexually explicit material in mainstream media. Particular areas of concern have been television, magazines for men and women, and the Internet. Disquiet about this form of media consumption reproduces a longstanding set of social anxieties about the mass media, sex, and technology, and tends to rely on a view of all three as highly dangerous. It is most typically manifested in the language of regulation and policy making, though it also finds expression in common-sense thinking and popular criticism. A recent journalistic piece by Edward Marriott is indicative of this response; moving almost immediately from a brief consideration of changes in the way pornography signifies in contemporary culture to a set of concerns about sexually explicit media; "How does it affect relationships? Is it addictive? Does it encourage rape, paedophilia, sexual murder? Surely tough questions need to be asked?" (2003: 46). His conclusion is familiar too: pornography is addictive, deadening, "a source of bondage" (2003: 89).

Academics are also interested in pornography; indeed the literature on porn is vast. The obscene and the explicit have provided a focus for historical, anthropological, and literary enquiry, most of this focused on pornographic texts and on the history of pornographic regulation and production (Attwood, 2002). In addition, the consumption of sexually explicit material has been of interest for a variety of academics working in a range of subject areas, for example, in leisure, media, psychology, health and education. However, there has been relatively little qualitative empirical work in this area, and because of this, I have chosen to focus on it in detail in this review. I will examine research that focuses on "consumption" in a variety of ways; for target audiences, in terms of more general "impact," in relation to education and identity formation, and as part of a repertoire of everyday sexual practices. The purpose of the review is to bring together the findings that are emerg-

ing across a range of dispersed subject areas, and to consider what these suggest about future directions for research. This is particularly necessary precisely because of its dispersal across subject areas and because the lack of recognition it has been accorded so far makes it difficult to know what has been achieved in the field. Despite my efforts, I realize that there will be some serious gaps in my discussion. However, I hope this will provide a starting point for a sustained examination of work in this area.

Typically, at least until recently, the focus of research into pornographic consumption has been on "effects," to investigate, for example, whether pornography causes violence or results in callous attitudes towards women (see Gunter, 2002 for an overview). This very narrow focus has meant that there are quite serious gaps in our knowledge about the consumption of sexually explicit material. In addition, this focus and the methods it suggests are extremely problematic. The notion that media texts have "effects" on their audiences is now widely seen by media theorists and researchers as a very crude and simplistic view of text-audience relationships. Methods tend to be inadequate, generally involving the performance of experiments that bear little relation to the actual conditions in which pornography is consumed. Findings from this kind of research also tend to be inconclusive; Lynne Segal argues that "inconsistency is the only consistency to emerge from empirical research which ignores both the semiotic and the social context of images of sexual explicitness" (Segal, 1994: 359).

Another kind of research method that has been used in this area is the survey, generally as a way of determining public attitudes towards sexually explicit material. For example, recent attitudes surveys suggest that people believe there is more talk about sex on television, and that attitudes to sex in the media and in real life have become more permissive (BSC, 1999; Millwood Hargrave, 1999; Hill & Thompson, 2000). Although surveys give a useful snapshot of public opinion, they are limited because of the way they structure the responses of the public through their use of "closed" questions, and because they miss the "ambivalence, uncertainty, and inconsistency" in the positions people take up in relation to issues of sexuality (Bragg & Buckingham, 2002: 7). Many media theo-

rists argue that more useful insights into media consumption can be achieved by the use of *qualitative* methods, rather than the *quantitative* methods represented by surveys and experiments (Segal, 1994; Hardy, 2004). Qualitative research tends to be more small-scale, but it provides richer and more detailed information. Qualitative methods include interviews and focus groups, as well as more innovative and creative methods, for example, those involving drama or art. These methods are more suited to picking up on the complexity of meanings that sexuality has for individuals and groups, and on the importance of context in the construction of these meanings.

Testimonies and Talk

As I have argued, the public debate about pornography as a social issue has generally relied on quantitative research that attempts to measure the effects of porn as a way of establishing whether it is "harmful" or not. However, some qualitative data has emerged from the pornography debate. For example, the controversial public hearings in Minneapolis in 1983 that sought to establish that pornography constituted discrimination against women made use of a number of testimonies. These included statements from researchers, academics, and ex-performers, and also from victims of violence and sexual harassment. Those giving testimony associated pornography with violence, intimidation, prostitution, child abuse, and sex addiction, and with creating a climate where men view women as objects and women fear men (Everywoman, 1983). A similar use of testimonies was made in the publication of letters to the British MP Clare Short following her attempt to introduce a bill to ban "Page 3" pictures in tabloid newspapers. The letters argued that such pictures work to "create a sexual culture that encourages sexual assaults on women and rape and sexual abuse on women and children" (Short et al., 1991: xxvi).

Personal testimonies have also been used by male academics and activists who identify with feminism (Macdonald, 1983; Jensen, 2004), and who believe it is important to speak from individual experience about pornography, eschewing academic distance for

an "embodied, personal" place (Jensen, 2004: 246). These testimonies generally adhere to a radical feminist and anti-pornography approach. In contrast, a number of feminist pro-pornography testimonies have emerged, often, though not always, from women who have become involved in the sex industry as practitioners. Where "male feminists" comment on the negative impact of mainstream and sexist porn, these women are more concerned with challenging the conventions of pornography through the creation of alternative and transgressive work (Tisdale, 1994; Palac, 1998; Sprinkle, 1998; Bright, 2000). Typically, they also celebrate the potential of pornography. For example, Lisa Palac writes, "Once I figured out how to use porn and come—how to look at an erotic image and use my sexual imagination to turn desire into a self-generated orgasm—my life was irrevocably and positively changed.... For the first time in my life, I felt sexually autonomous"(Palac, 1998: 34-35).

Testimonies of this kind provide a rather unusual form of qualitative production within a debate dominated by a fascination with measuring effects, but they are interesting for the way they demonstrate the range of meanings that sexually explicit media have for different individuals and groups. More typically, qualitative work in this area has used interviews to explore the consumption of sexually explicit media. Less commonly used are methods such as focus groups or participant observation. Whatever the method, *talking* has emerged as a vitally important way of examining how pornography is used and experienced, or of exploring the range of attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and political positions taken up in relation to a range of explicit media. Qualitative work with men, women, and young people is summarized in the following sections.

Men

An early example of men's talk about pornography can be found in Shere Hite's report on male sexuality (1981). A large-scale survey, Hite's study nevertheless offered men the opportunity to express their feelings about pornography, a surprisingly rare occurrence in research into sexual attitudes. In the Hite report, men described

their familiarity with porn from an early age and their use of it to promote male bonding, as well as for the purposes of individual sexual stimulation. While some men expressed indifference, hostility, or mixed feelings about porn, many reported that it made them feel good; as one man noted of the porn model, "It does me good to think she wants *me*" (1981: 783). The majority of men in this survey believed porn did not represent "how men and women really are" (1981:788), several said it told the truth about men, or at least their fantasies, while others thought it gave an "unreal picture of sexual relations" and provided "sexual misinformation" (1981: 789). A few men objected to the sexism in porn, though most still found it arousing. Interestingly, Hite's report on female sexuality (1976/2000) contains no section on pornography, and porn is only mentioned in the context of the problematic nature of the sexual revolution for women (Hite, 2000: 430-440).

A more recent and narrowly focused account of men's pornographic consumption (Loftus, 2002) builds on these early findings. In David Loftus' study, men are more critical of pornography, use and respond to it in a wider variety of ways, and describe attempts to show sensitivity in their attempts to negotiate their porn use with female partners. Loftus argues that the assumptions underlying anti-porn politics and effects research—that porn is a simple reflection of men's sexual desires and practices, that it is addictive, and that it causes violent and callous attitudes towards women—are simply not borne out by his findings. Instead, for the men in this study, porn is about "beauty, fun, women's pleasure, female power and assertiveness, and fantasy largely separated from the real world" (Loftus, 2002: 245).

That Loftus' relatively recent study should provide such a striking contrast to the familiar stereotypes of male porn users is a measure of how little work has been carried out in this area. As Simon Hardy notes in *The Reader, The Author, His Woman, and Her Lover* (1998), the neglect of actual porn consumers in debates about pornography is a pretty "amazing omission given the kinds of claims that have been made" about its effects (1998: 98). In this, the first ever in-depth study of men's engagement with porn, Hardy establishes a picture of the complex role of pornography in men's lives;

there is a social use of porn typically associated with adolescence, a private and sexual use associated with late adolescence before young men have actual sexual encounters, and a mature use when men reconcile their use of porn with their relations with women, if they have not abandoned it by this stage. Mixed feelings about porn are often experienced by men, and in particular, porn use is often seen as incompatible with healthy heterosexual relationships. It is the reader's *active* engagement with the text that makes it stimulating; an engagement made possible by the text's provision of a model of female sexual subjectivity for the reader to draw on, and a gap that it leaves for him to inhabit. But Hardy finds that readers may also decode porn in different ways, accepting the portrayal of heterosexuality in the text (a "preferred" reading), disagreeing with it (an "oppositional" reading), or, most commonly, by decoding in a "negotiated" way. This most often takes the form of accepting the *general* depiction of female sexuality in pornography, while excluding individual experience, to produce an understanding such as, "Women in general like to be dominated, but my woman does not" (1998:146). Hardy notes that, "negotiated decoding enables the individual to continue to enjoy the pleasures of pornography while securing his emotional investment in his partner," a form of reading typically made by men who have reconciled pornographic consumption with their heterosexual relationships (1998: 148).

In an interesting conclusion, Hardy notes the apparent absence of an "erotic discourse" or a "symbolic dimension" in the men's own sexual (emotional and egalitarian) relationships. Real sex appears unable to compete with the vivid "discursive definition and elaboration of the erotic in pornography" (1998: 149), and men's belief that eroticizing real sex and real women works to degrade them makes it very difficult to articulate a different form of heterosexual eroticism. In the absence of this, men worry that the "effects" of porn may be to "spoil one's sexuality in such a way that one is less able to engage in an interaction with another person, a person in three dimensions...." (1998: 154). Despite the problems of establishing new forms of eroticism, Hardy concludes that "the solution might also be self-perpetuating, for, once the circle is broken and women are able to act as subjects, female sexuality need

no longer be eroticized in terms of submission" (1998: 164). Hardy's study shows that men's relationships with pornography are complex and often problematic, and raises broader questions about the form and place of erotic discourse in the experiences and practices of heterosexual couples.

Women

If studies of male consumers of pornography are scarce, research that focuses on women as active users of pornography are practically non-existent. Journalist Loretta Loach's (1992) brief discussion of women who enjoy pornography remains a rare example, despite the fact that, as Loach noted, they might be more representative of women than is usually credited; even in 1992 some statistics appeared to be indicating that the numbers of female porn consumers were growing, representing 30% of the total in Australia and 40% in the United States. The "sexually erudite" women interviewed by Loach felt that anti-feminist views of women as victims of porn were "hopelessly misplaced," missing the significance of sexual representations as productive of "pleasure, knowledge, and control too" (1992: 270-272).

Loach's short paper is interesting, not only because it highlights the invisibility of female consumers in pornography research, but because it picks up on the importance of feminism for women's attitudes to pornography. This theme has been taken up elsewhere. Cowan et al.'s study (1989) of feminist and fundamentalist women found a number of similarities and differences in their attitudes to pornography. The women shared a lack of familiarity with porn, coupled with strong views about it. These typically took the form of a belief that most porn was characterized by violence, a strong dislike of the way women were depicted in pornographic texts, and a belief that porn contributed to violence against women. However, the groups differed in their definitions of pornography, with fundamentalist women more likely to define porn in relation to "explicit nudity or sexual acts" and feminists more likely to relate it to women's objectification. Cowan's study also found differences between "anti-porn" and "anti-censorship" feminist views, the

former expressing a "responsibility and care" approach to morality which emphasized the welfare of others, and the latter tending towards a "justice" orientation stressing individual rights. A more recent paper by Karen Ciclitira (2004) also notes how feminism may be implicated in women's relation to pornography. Feminism appears to have made a strong impact on women's views of porn, and on its presence in their lives, often in complex and difficult ways. Women reported "contradictions between their beliefs, feelings, and actions" (2004: 293), resulting in a series of political and practical dilemmas that have not been addressed in academic and political writings. Some expressed concern about an anti-porn stance that they saw as drowning out other voices, and felt that the porn debate had caused them to "re-evaluate whether or not they want to be a part of the feminist movement" (2004: 296). Pornography's significance as a very powerful cultural and political symbol is notable here.

A different approach to women's relationships with pornography takes a wider focus by comparing female and male uses of sexually explicit media, or by looking more closely at women's responses to sexual images of men and women. Two pieces of work are interesting examples of the comparative method. A study by Beth Eck (2003) examines how men and women respond to opposite and same-sex nudes from artistic, pornographic, and erotic media. Eck shows that men look at images of women in ways which "reproduce and sustain heterosexual masculinity," for example, by passing judgment on their desirability. In Eck's study, women also assumed this judgmental stance, but "their eyes were simultaneously on their own appearances," so that they often evaluated images as though they represented "a part of themselves" (2003: 697-698). Men appeared to have no way of discussing images of the male body, particularly in pornographic settings, and often emphasized that they had "no response" to them. Women were also less comfortable looking at images of male bodies, though they reacted in more diverse ways, welcoming them, being guiltily attracted to them, or rejecting them. Eck notes that to gaze at a male body suggests an improper (homosexual) viewing position for men and an improper (active, unfeminine) viewing position for women. She explains these

responses in terms of the "shared, readily available cultural scripts for interpreting and responding to female nude images" (2003: 691), but not their male equivalents. The lack of "fit" between an active gaze, pornographic setting, and the male body is particularly apparent here. As Eck shows, looking, gender, genre, and sexual identity are intimately linked, providing the framework for consumption practices around sexually explicit media.

The second of these studies (Shaw, 1999) focuses on pornography as "a form of leisure practice" for men and its impact on women. In this study, most women reported that though they were familiar with pornographic material, they made no use of it, and came into contact with it only through men. Women used the term "pornography" for "violent" sexual images which "scared" and "disgusted" them, and reported that "sexy" or "erotic" images in mainstream media also made them embarrassed and uncomfortable (1999: 203-205). Their reactions to sexually explicit material of both types included feeling "inadequate, self conscious, and dissatisfied with their own bodies," and they expressed anxieties about the possible effects on men's attitudes towards women, leading to potential dissatisfaction with their partners' bodies, a tendency to categorize women only in terms of their sexual appearance or availability (1999: 206), and increased pressure on women to participate in unwanted sexual acts. Some women identified positive outcomes of using pornography, for example, learning something new about sex or the heightening of sexual pleasure, but those who had relationships with porn users tended towards "strong dislike" or "uncomfortable acceptance" of their partners' consumption. Despite this, they were reluctant to voice their objections because of a concern with "freedom of choice and individual rights," and because of a fear of being seen as old-fashioned and anti-sex. Most women were also uncomfortable with the idea of censorship, except where children were concerned (1999: 207-208). As in Eck's study, Shaw finds that sexually explicit media function in different ways for men and women, with sexualized images of women's bodies appearing to impact negatively on women's self-image and relationships with men. Women's relationship with pornography is structured by dis-

courses of youth, attractiveness, and sexual "liberation," providing an uncomfortable position for them to occupy.

This lack of comfort also emerges in a focus group discussion conducted by Petra Boynton (1999), which examined women's responses to sexually explicit material, focusing on "top-shelf" magazines aimed at men and women. Like Eck, Boynton found significant differences in the way women viewed sexually explicit images of men and women, tending to find the images of men "funny" and comparing themselves to the female models in terms of their attractiveness. Attractiveness emerged as an important theme in this study with the group being "at their most cohesive and animated" during discussions of this theme. Women made use of a clear hierarchy of attractiveness, with fashion models at the top, glamour models second, and amateur models/real women a poor third. The amateurs were often described as "disgusting" "tarts" with "no class" (1999: 455), and skepticism about their real willingness to put themselves on display was expressed. Images of these women, generally less conventionally attractive than professional models, were also seen as "unnatural," a term which the women used to describe images they found unacceptable, usually of models in "low quality" and "explicit" magazines, displaying less than perfect bodies, or adopting poses which exposed their genitalia or featured self-touching. While the women in the group tended to compare themselves favorably to these models, they found it demoralizing to compare themselves to the more conventionally attractive models in less explicit poses.

Boynton notes that throughout the discussion there was a subtext of references to men and a concern with men's sexual preferences. Anxieties about whether men might view them as they view porn models, perhaps comparing them unfavourably and finding their own flawed bodies offensive, appeared to outweigh any concern with porn "effects" such as violence. This concern with acceptable images of female sexuality, expressed quite clearly in relation to issues of body image and beauty, was also matched by a rejection of the sexually explicit, evident not only in the women's distaste for "graphic" visual images, but also in their belief that no woman could genuinely find this kind of imagery appealing. While

Boynton's study confirms women's unease with sexually explicit media, it also reveals that women may use aesthetic rather than ethical or political criteria to construct judgments about these, and it suggests that women's unease is based in a concern about women's attractiveness to men generally, rather than in the sexual nature of pornography.

Another approach to women's experiences with pornography has been to look at the range of different female responses to sexually explicit material. Charlene Senn (1993) discusses four distinct perspectives on pornography emerging from research with women in Canada. The first two of these, a "radical feminist" perspective and a "conservative" perspective, shared a number of characteristics. Both classified sexually explicit material as pornographic and "harmful" and associated it with violence against women. However, women adopting these perspectives also differed in a number of ways. Those who adopted a radical feminist perspective had had unpleasant personal experiences with porn and based their views on those experiences. These women were more likely to identify with porn models and to take an "active stance" against porn, either by attempting to avoid porn and porn users, or by becoming anti-porn activists. By comparison, women who adopted a "conservative" perspective had little personal experience of porn and their stance tended to focus on the harm pornography might cause to others. Conservative women did not relate to porn models, and often saw men as victims of porn. A third perspective, the "humanist-child-centered" perspective, was different from both of these. Women adopting this perspective focused on the potentially harmful effects of pornography on children. These women had little to do with pornography themselves, though they were sometimes involved with men who used porn. Despite this, and a belief that pornography presented women for men's pleasure, they did not identify with women in porn or feel that pornography impacted on them in a negative way. Finally, some women adopted an "ambivalent but mildly pro-pornography" perspective. This position tended to be adopted by women who did not encounter much porn and had not given it much thought. However, these women also had mixed feelings about sexually explicit materials. They had typi-

cally experienced positive early encounters with porn, characterized by enjoyment and arousal. They did not associate pornography with violence and did not identify with women in porn, but they did worry about the unrealistic standards of female attractiveness in porn and associated this with a negative effect on women's body image.

Senn notes how the first two perspectives adopted by women in this study—the most frequently adopted in the sample—are also widely represented in public debates on pornography. However, the third and fourth perspectives are largely absent from debate. This study shows that the range of women's views about pornography is not represented publicly. In addition, while there are broad similarities in most women's responses to porn—they are generally critical of it, linking it to harm, taking steps to exclude it from their lives or developing "psychological coping mechanisms" to deal with it—"women's experiences and attitudes towards pornography cannot easily be collapsed into a unitary category of *female*. All women do not think about pornography in the same way nor have they had the same or similar experiences...." (Senn, 1993: 337).

This variety of responses to porn is something also uncovered in the work of Karen Ciclitira who finds that "women's views, experiences, and feelings about pornography are variegated, individual, and complex" (2002: 194). Pornography appears to be a factor in women's lives in a number of different ways. For some women interviewed by Ciclitira, it had functioned as a form of sexual education, for some it was related to the construction of sexual behavior and fantasies, and for over half of Ciclitira's sample it was linked to women's body image. Mixed responses about pornography were common, some women noted a contradiction between their feelings of arousal by pornography and their political stance of feminist disapproval. Many women expressed concern about the treatment of women in the porn industry and anger at being overwhelmed by sexist images of women in a variety of contexts. They noted a general lack of positive representations of active female sexuality, and were unimpressed by the sexually explicit material available to women. However, some women were

able to make use of existing mainstream porn for men and to gain pleasure from this, and some felt that "porn gave them 'permission' to be more sexually active" (1998: 373). In this sense, Ciclitira argues, porn can be seen to "increase as well as to limit options for women's sexuality" (2002: 194). These potentially positive aspects of pornography have also been noted by Clarissa Smith in her study of female readers of the women's porn magazine, *For Women* (2002). Smith notes that for these readers, the magazine provided an affirmation of female desire as "normal, healthy, fun, and valued," and was used by them as a way of asserting their right to personal sexual pleasure, offering them the opportunity to be "politically motivated one minute and a sex kitten the next."

Pornography's contradictory significance in women's lives is something that is also borne out in a recent piece of ethnographic work by Dana Wilson-Kovacs which examines "how women employ sexually explicit materials in everyday passionate encounters,"and is based on a view of sexuality as a form of "cultivated choice developed through life-style preferences"(2004:1). In this study, women reported that pornography generally represented a male contribution to intimate heterosexual routines, and a problem of some complexity as a source of "uneasy personal enjoyment and intimate anguish" (2004: 8). Pornography was problematic for women both within heterosexual relationships and disapproving female peer groups, in both cases, requiring emotional work from women. In contrast, erotica was perceived to be both "informative" and "inspiring," and was more likely to be incorporated into escapist practices of solitary pleasure (2004: 14-15). This study, valuable for the way it attempts to contextualize sexual representations in relation to a range of artifacts and practices, and for its focus on the mundane character of everyday sexual lives shows that questions of access, genre, style, taste, identity formation, practices of intimacy, relationship maintenance and gender norms are all implicated in women's consumption of sexually explicit media. Such questions have also been taken up in studies focusing on young people, which I will discuss next.

Young People

Qualitative work in this area has tended to originate from a concern with sex education or with the development of sexual maturity and sexual relationships amongst young people, rather than from a focus on pornography itself. For example, a study by Holland et al. (1998) examined a range of issues relating to the construction of heterosexuality amongst young men and women, including the way they use media in order to gain sexual information. The study found that while both sexes relied on television for this kind of information, there were also some marked gender differences in the use of media; where girls used dictionaries, books, magazines, and romance novels, boys used pornography which was "easily accessible and possibly hard to avoid" (1998: 77). For young men, the use of porn was "normal," though they distinguished between the use they made of it, as a group activity and for "a laugh," and the way older men used it for solitary sexual stimulation. For some young men, pornography was also educational in terms of the information it provided about female anatomy and sexual technique, though they were unsure how pornographic representations of sex related to real life sexual encounters. Boys and girls in this study both confirmed that girls' response to pornography was ambivalent.

Work in this area has taken a contemporary approach to theorizing media, and made use of innovative qualitative methods. Steele (1999), for example, considers young people's use of the media in the development of self-identity, and employs interviews, focus group discussions, tours of teenagers' bedrooms, and journals. Durham (1999) and Kehily (1999) adopt a similar theoretical approach, which focuses on "the active role of audiences in making sense of the media," the ways in which identity is negotiated within interpersonal relations, and a practical orientation that exploits "the potential of qualitative methods for gaining access to these processes of interpretation and identity formation" (Bragg & Buckingham, 2002: 50). What these studies appear to establish is that young people select media texts that relate to their preoccupations and are able to interpret them critically. Media texts thus be-

come resources that are used as part of the performance of gender identities within peer groups. In Durham's study, for example, media references became part of girls' conversations about a range of issues such as sexuality or body image, generally as a way of reinforcing a particular and conservative view of femininity and heterosexuality. In Kehily's research, where girls read magazines together as a way of producing an appropriate sexual identity, boys used a *lack* of engagement with the discussion of sexual material in magazines as a way of demonstrating that some forms of sex talk are distinctly un-masculine. Here, the media functions to provide resources for the different ways in which girls and boys perform and display gender.

A more recent study by Buckingham and Bragg (2003) also finds that children encounter a diverse range of sexual material in the media, though little of this is explicit, that they value the media as a source of sexual information, and that they are "literate ... and critical ... consumers" of media (2003: 7). The media function in a variety of ways for these young people—providing evidence for the assertions they make about their identity, categories for use in defining and "doing" identity, and languages for developing a "place to speak from" (2004: 71-73). The material they encounter contains mixed messages—sex is presented as desirable *and* dangerous—and despite the general perception that sex is a relatively "open" topic in contemporary culture, finding out about it is "still surrounded by shame, embarrassment, and ambivalence," while "romantic aspirations co-exist with a knowledge of sordid realities" (273-278). Increasingly however, the media presents sex in a way which requires young people "to make up their own minds" about it, and young people appear to rise to this challenge by making judgments about sex in the context of an ethical framework, and in relation to "love and relationships" (2003: 8).

As elsewhere, researchers in this area found a much greater acceptance of sexualized images of women and that, generally speaking, boys' and girls' responses to such sexual representations "conform ... to a powerfully heterosexual 'logic'" (2003: 43). Buckingham and Bragg conclude that, in this respect, while the media may play "a greater role in *disturbing* gender and sexual

identities than they do in confirming them" (2004: 126), the contexts of media consumption—the way media texts are framed, understood, policed and used—emerge as an important focus of study. This kind of research inevitably reaches out beyond simple questions of cause and effect and quantification to examine a much broader range of concerns—about the workings of peer groups, families, education; about the construction of moral frameworks, policies of regulation, and practices of self-regulation; about the way we take up our place in the world.

Directions for Future Work

As I have shown, reviewing qualitative research of this kind reveals things about the consumption of sexually explicit media which quantitative research completely misses. Pornography is experienced in quite astonishingly different ways, as a source of oppression and of creative sexual expression, and the testimonies of academics, activists, and consumers demonstrate that sexually explicit media can take on a wide range of meanings in relation to the politics of sex and gender. A range of definitions and uses are reported and consumers appear to display forms of critically distanced and highly engaged audience behavior. Reactions to this kind of media are also intensely contradictory at the affective level; both men and women report being attracted and repulsed, often simultaneously. Making sense of these reactions requires a much broader focus than earlier approaches to sexually explicit media have suggested. As the studies reviewed here show, the significance of the sexually explicit depends very much on its place; for example, pornography functions differently for groups of adolescent boys, for single men, and for heterosexual couples, and acquires symbolic value even, or perhaps especially, for individuals who have no direct experience of it. Its particularly difficult placement within heterosexual relationships, female peer groups and women's relation to both an appropriate femininity and to feminism highlights the very powerful symbolism of this form of representation, as well as the range of factors which work to produce reading and consumption practices. In this sense, media texts are

shown to resonate far beyond any simple notion of effect or even reception. Instead, these studies reveal how forms of reading and viewing are gendered, not only in the moment of reception, but also in the wider cultural practices of looking and speaking. Certain ways of seeing and talking appear natural, while there are quite literally cultural blind spots which prevent some consumers from being able to "see" men erotically, or to speak about the explicit, whether this emerges in the form of women's inability to object to its use in heterosexual relationships, or to their anxieties around speaking openly about their enjoyment of it. Aspects previously neglected in academic and political debates emerge in these studies too—for many women it is the issue of body image and female attractiveness rather than violence that is the focus of concern. The importance of sexual styles and aesthetics in various genres of the explicit also emerges as a significant area for study; hierarchies of acceptability and accessibility govern consumers' negotiation of visual and linguistic styles, and of appropriate forms of body image and presentation. More than anything, these studies show how sexually explicit media play a significant role in repertoires of practices and behaviors; as a source of knowledge, in the development and maintenance of individual and group identities, and in the performance and display of gender and sexuality. It is the contexts of consumption which emerge here as the real areas of interest for the ways they produce conditions of access and frameworks for interpretation, and for the ways in which they construct individual and group negotiations, appropriations, and uses of sexually explicit media.

There are a number of possible directions for future work in this area. Some of these involve questions of methodology. It is well established now that a focus on experiments and effects will tell us very little about consumption or sexuality, and it is unlikely that the recent boom in sexuality research which takes the form of "problem driven" and "large scale" surveys will capture the complexity of media use or of sexual practice (Frith, 2000: 276). However, innovative qualitative work is already being carried out into young people's experiences with sexual media and there is no reason why this should not be extended to research with adults. Interviews re-

main a useful method for work in this area, while focus groups may be productive in order to "gain insight into the personal experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings that underlie behavior" and into the participants' "social worlds" (Frith, 2000: 276-280). Because of this, they may help to "shed new light on the meaning of sexuality and on the ways in which individuals understand and make sense of their sexual experiences" (Frith, 2000: 291). Other methods that are able to get at this kind of rich detail are likely to prove similarly effective in this area in the future.

Despite the longstanding public concern about the consumption of pornography, there is still relatively little research that reveals the investments users make in it or the pleasures they get from it. Much more is needed. There is a particular need to examine how different groups of people engage—or fail to engage—with a range of explicit representations, whether these are restricted or mainstream texts, different subgenres of porn or erotica, or explicit materials in varying contexts—in print, video, or on the Internet, for example. In particular, there are real gaps in our knowledge. It has become commonplace to claim that women now use and enjoy pornography in increasing numbers, yet there appear to be no studies of such consumers. In addition, given the current context in which mainstream culture is becoming sexualized (McNair, 2002), research in this area could develop a wider focus on "everyday sexualised images" (Ciclitira, 1998: 7), and on the much broader range of sexual services, technologies, products and practices which are now available. If the intricate connections between cultural representation, identity, and the social characteristics of sexuality are to be understood, approaches which attempt to investigate the links between media texts, attitudes, behaviors, fantasies, and practices need to be developed much more extensively. And, given the importance of the way explicit media works to articulate sexual and gender identities, particular attention should be paid to the political significance of the explicit, and to the range of responses—arousal, disgust, anger, fear, ambivalence, celebration, and resistance—that social groups articulate.

As David Buckingham and Sara Bragg note (2002), in the twenty-first century the media is becoming increasingly important

in providing the resources we use to make sense of our lives. At the same time, there is a shift towards a view that individuals must make their own decisions about what media they consume, and towards an understanding of sexually explicit material as "an occasion for individuals to scrutinize their own desires, conduct and responses" (2003: 76), to manage their "practices of freedom" (2004: 234). Given this context in which the media and sex become important sites for the consideration of "personal ethics" and social issues, qualitative research into the consumption of sexually explicit material is more desirable than ever before.

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