

Perceived Effects of Pornography on the Couple Relationship: Initial Findings of Open-Ended, Participant-Informed, “Bottom-Up” Research

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Received: 19 October 2015 / Revised: 14 May 2016 / Accepted: 26 May 2016 / Published online: 8 July 2016
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Abstract The current study adopted a participant-informed, “bottom-up,” qualitative approach to identifying perceived effects of pornography on the couple relationship. A large sample ($N = 430$) of men and women in heterosexual relationships in which pornography was used by at least one partner was recruited through online (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and offline (e.g., newspapers, radio, etc.) sources. Participants responded to open-ended questions regarding perceived consequences of pornography use for each couple member and for their relationship in the context of an online survey. In the current sample of respondents, “no negative effects” was the most commonly reported impact of pornography use. Among remaining responses, positive perceived effects of pornography use on couple members and their relationship (e.g., improved sexual communication, more sexual experimentation, enhanced sexual comfort) were reported frequently; negative perceived effects of pornography (e.g., unrealistic expectations, decreased sexual interest in partner, increased insecurity) were also reported, albeit with considerably less frequency. The results of this work suggest new research directions that require more systematic attention.

Keywords Pornography · Sexually explicit material · Relationships · Sexual satisfaction · Relationship satisfaction · Relationship quality

Introduction

Much of the empirical research concerning pornography’s impact on couple relationships can be legitimately characterized as a confirmatory search for the presumed harms of exposure. Pornography research has typically involved theoretically guided experimental and correlational investigations of pornography use on selective close-ended endpoints. Coupled with this narrow deductive focus, many studies in this area assume that pornography is detrimental to relationships (Poulsen, Busby, & Galovan, 2013; see also Hare, Gahagan, Jackson, & Steenbeek, 2014); such studies limit assessment of pornography’s impact to endpoints that are likely to suggest harm to relationships, and unsurprisingly, often confirm the negative impacts of pornography that were initially assumed (e.g., Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012; Morgan, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004; Wright, Tokunaga, & Bae, 2014; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988). Summarizing findings of research that takes such an approach, Zillmann (2000) has noted that exposure to pornography leads to “dispositional changes” that include:

...diminished trust in intimate partners, the abandonment of hopes for sexual exclusivity with partners, evaluation of promiscuity as the natural state...Cynical attitudes about love emerge, and superior sexual pleasures are thought attainable without affection toward partners. The institution of marriage is seen as sexually confining. Increasingly, having a family and raising children is considered an unattractive prospect. (p. 42)

Specific investigations involving experimental exposure to pornography or correlates of pornography use have identified potential relationship threats that include positive attitudes toward casual sex (Carroll et al., 2008; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988), reduced commitment to relationships (Lambert et al., 2012), positive attitudes toward

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infidelity (Wright et al., 2014) and extra-dyadic sexual behavior (Lambert et al., 2012; Maddox, Rhoades, & Markman, 2011), diminished satisfaction with the sexual characteristics of current sexual partners (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988; see also Kenrick, Gutierrez, & Goldberg, 1989; Weaver, Masland, & Zillmann, 1984), and reduced sexual and relationship satisfaction (Morgan, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; see also Stack et al., 2004).

At the same time, other “top-down” theoretically guided research employing close-ended assessments of similar endpoints challenges the notion that pornography has strong negative effects on relationships. Some correlational studies have failed to find evidence of associations between pornography use and endpoints that are indicative of relationship harm (Staley & Prause, 2013; Štulhofer, Matković, & Elias, 2004 as cited in Štulhofer, Buško, & Landripet, 2010; Wilson & Abelson, 1973), and other correlational studies report evidence that suggests that associations between pornography use and negative relationship outcomes are attenuated by several moderating variables including gender (Štulhofer et al., 2007), the content of pornography that is used (Štulhofer et al., 2010), and shared as opposed to solitary pornography use (Maddox et al., 2011).

Mixed findings aside, studies that adopt harm-focused approaches place limits on what can be learned about the typical effects of pornography use. From a methodological perspective, investigations assuming that pornography will be harmful to relationships will either confirm negative effects, fail to confirm negative effects, or identify variables that attenuate negative effects, and will tell us little about the occurrence of neutral or positive effects which may also be experienced. Findings of such investigations, moreover, are at odds with observations reported by persons who live in relationships in which pornography is used, which typically suggest that pornography users (Albright, 2008; Grov, Gillespie, Royce, & Lever, 2011; Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Hald, Smolenski, & Rosser, 2013; Wilson & Abelson, 1973) and their partners (Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003) perceive more relationship benefits than harms associated with the use of pornography.

To better understand the impact of pornography on relationships, it is necessary to move beyond investigator driven harm-focused research by adopting an approach that is open to the possibility that pornography can potentially have neutral or even beneficial impacts on relationships (for a similar argument, see Hare et al., 2014). The utility of such an approach is well illustrated by two related but separate lines of inquiry that were guided by participant-informed observations to examine *both* beneficial and harmful effects of pornography on the couple (e.g., Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Poulsen et al., 2013; for a balanced research approach that did not rely on participant observations, see Daneback, Træen, & Månsson, 2009). While the results of these two studies are not identical, taken together, they appear to suggest that men’s use of pornography may be associated with lower sexual and relationship fulfillment among couple members while women’s pornography use may be associated with increased sexual and relational fulfill-

ment among couple members. Of course, we are not arguing that positive effects *must* exist—Staley and Prause (2013), for example, failed to find compelling positive or negative relationship consequences following experimental exposure to pornography—but positive or neutral effects *could* exist, a point which much of the literature fails to consider seriously (e.g., Lambert et al., 2012; Manning, 2006; Morgan, 2011; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006; Stack et al., 2004; Wright et al., 2014; Zillmann, 2000; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988).

Although the field would benefit from more studies that are well grounded in the observations of people who have experience living in relationships in which one or both partners use pornography, existing descriptive research that could be used for this purpose has important shortcomings. Large-scale descriptive studies concerning perceived effects of pornography on the couple relationship (e.g., Albright, 2008; Bridges et al., 2003; Grov et al., 2011; Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Hald et al., 2013) are again, largely “top-down,” close-ended assessments of assumed effects of pornography on the couple relationship.¹ These assessments have not typically been sensitive to the possibility that pornography may not have *any* meaningful effect on many couples, and they are targeted toward researcher-based expectations about the impacts of pornography on the couple which may or may not correspond to the actual experiences of individuals whose couple relationships have included encounters with pornography. Given the limited range of close-ended endpoints that have been investigated in such studies, this research approach also may fail to capture important positive, negative, neutral and null perceived effects of pornography on the couple relationship.

As an alternative, open-ended, qualitative, participant-informed assessments of perceptions of the impact of pornography on couple relationships offer an important advantage over “top-down” close-ended descriptive studies. Such approaches are uniquely suited to the identification of a potentially broad range of impacts of pornography on the couple relationship that correspond to what laypersons have actually experienced. At present, open-ended qualitative research that touches on pornography’s impact on relationships exists, but it has limited value for gaining a thorough understanding of the range of potential effects of pornography on the couple. A number of studies in the open-ended literature have selectively and intentionally recruited individuals—mostly women—whose relationships have been significantly damaged by pornography use or other problematic sexual behaviors (e.g., Bergner & Bridges, 2002; Schneider, 2000a, b; Zitzman & Butler, 2009) and such selected informants are not likely to assist in understanding the range of non-pathological impacts of pornography on the couple. While this research makes

¹ Grov et al. (2011) is somewhat of an exception, in that the researchers primarily discuss a re-analysis of the close-ended items used in Albright (2008) but also present a limited analysis of open-ended qualitative data which is mentioned below.

it clear that a number of individuals feel that their relationships have been very significantly damaged by pornography—a conclusion which we would regard as entirely plausible—these studies can only speak to the most extreme negative effects of pornography use on the couple and this limitation has been recognized by researchers in the field (e.g., Bridges et al., 2003; Resch & Alderson, 2014). While other qualitative research has not specifically recruited selective samples (e.g., Benjamin & Tlusten, 2010; Boynton, 1999; Grov et al., 2011; Hare et al., 2014; Hemple, 2012; Senn, 1993; Shaw, 1999; Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, & Irizarry, 2010), studies within this literature are of variable utility: some rely on very small sample sizes (e.g., Benjamin & Tlusten, 2010; Boynton, 1999; Hare et al., 2014; Shaw, 1999); several samples are exclusively female (e.g., Benjamin & Tlusten, 2010; Boynton, 1999; Hare et al., 2014; Hemple, 2012; Senn, 1993; Shaw, 1999), one presents a very limited analysis of a potentially rich dataset (e.g., Grov et al., 2011); and none of the studies comprehensively probe the impact of pornography use on the couple relationship specifically.

The Current Study

To date, participant-informed impacts of pornography on the couple relationship have not been sought out or identified in a large-scale systematic fashion. Such observations are important for guiding balanced “top-down” theoretically derived close-ended research that seeks to understand pornography’s typical impacts on couple relationships. To this end, the current study adopted an open-ended, “bottom-up” approach in order to identify the potentially broad range of perceived *positive*, *negative*, *neutral*, and *null* effects of pornography consumption on the couple relationship. It was hoped that this approach would generate novel end points of interest for further systematic study.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited through diverse media channels between October 4, 2013 and December 6, 2013. Advertisements were posted on LinkedIn, Kijiji, Craigslist, local newspapers of record, on our laboratory webpage, and Facebook and Twitter feeds. Minor variations of recruitment advertisements were generally reposted on these platforms every 3–4 days. Recruitment advertisements were short and involved several versions of the following messages: “Does your romantic partner use pornography—without you? Tell us about it!”; “Are you in a romantic relationship and using pornography? Tell us about it!”; “Do you ever use pornography with your romantic partner? Tell us about it!” All advertisements directed interested persons to an online letter of information and

consent which was connected to an online survey hosted by Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). Additional recruitment efforts involved both local and national (within Canada) media interviews that described our interest in conducting a study concerning people’s experiences with pornography use within relationships and which contained recruitment advertisements. Participation was limited to men and women, 18 years of age and older, who were currently involved in a heterosexual romantic relationship of at least 3-month duration. The decision to limit recruitment to heterosexual couples was based largely on pragmatic issues (i.e., difficulty recruiting non-heterosexual respondents, concerns regarding the analytic time required for an even larger sample, etc.), lack of foundational research concerning the impact of pornography on non-heterosexual relationships, as well as our own lack of expertise with respect to non-heterosexual relationships.

Our online letter of consent was accessed 776 times. Of the 552 individuals who initiated the study, $N = 430$ (77.90 %) individuals who met inclusion criteria (in a heterosexual relationship of 3 months or more duration) provided responses to the open-ended questions concerning pornography use and relationships that are the focus of the current research. All such persons were currently in relationships in which pornography was used by at least one partner. No compensation was offered to participants. The procedures used in this study were reviewed and approved by the research ethics board at the University of Western Ontario before study implementation.

Measures

The online survey consisted of a pool of 104 open- and close-ended questions that assessed demographic information, experiences using pornography within relationships, the types of pornography used, reasons for using pornography, and perceived effects of pornography use. We note that use of pornography is distinct from other online sexual activities such as information seeking, purchasing of sexual products, and online sexual interactions, although some research lumps together all forms of “online sexual activity” (e.g., Cooper, Morathan-Martin, Mathy, & Maheu, 2002), introducing considerable ambiguity in results. Recently, lay conceptualizations of “pornography” have been studied empirically, and the results across several studies suggest that pornography can be reasonably characterized as the depiction of nudity and sexual behavior (Kohut, 2014). Consequently, at the outset of survey, pornography use was defined for participants as “intentionally looking at or listening to: (a) pictures or videos of nude individuals, (b) pictures or videos in which people are having sex, or (c) written or audio material that describe people having sex,” the study instructions went on to explicitly exclude sexually interactive online and offline behaviors from the definition of pornography use:

For the purposes of this study, viewing real-time nude individuals (in person or online), or participating in interactive sexual experiences with other human beings (in person or online) are not considered “using pornography.” For example, viewing a live webcam show, participating in live sex chat, and getting a “lap-dance” in a strip club are not considered “using pornography” for the purposes of this study.

Following these instructions, participants were first asked about their solitary use of pornography. If they had used pornography alone, since the beginning of their relationship, they were asked about the content and frequency of their pornography use, reasons for using it, and evaluations of their solitary use of pornography. In separate questions, participants were asked if they thought their solitary pornography use had had an impact on themselves, on their partners, or on their relationships. For each affirmative answer, participants were asked to provide both open-ended descriptions of the positive (if any) and negative (if any) impacts of their solitary use of pornography. If participants indicated with the close-ended questions that no impacts of solitary pornography use had been observed, participants were asked instead to describe how they thought their solitary use of pornography *could potentially* positively and negatively affect themselves, their partners, or their relationships. This approach was used for two reasons. First, we did not want participants to learn—through trial and error—that open-ended questions could be skipped by indicating on the close-ended questions that pornography had no impacts. Second, by their nature, such responses should denote perceived impacts that have yet to be experienced, but that lie within the realm of potential experience. We have an interest in comparing and contrasting perceived impacts of pornography from these potential impacts, and such an analysis will be made available in a forthcoming report when it is completed.

Similar strategies were employed to assess participants’ experiences with and perceived impact of *joint pornography use with their relationship partners*, as well as their experiences with, and perceived impact of their *partners’ solitary use of pornography* on the couple relationship. In total, the survey contained 42 open-ended questions inquiring about participant’s perceptions of the consequences of pornography use within their relationship, though individual participants were only ever asked to respond to 6–20 open-ended questions, depending on the nature of their own and their partner’s pornography use. Most participants completed the survey in less than 25 min ($Mdn = 22.31$ min).

Thematic Analysis

Responses to open-ended questions concerning effects of pornography use were analyzed across the specific questions asked (i.e., positive and negative impacts on the self, the partner, and the

relationship, including both observed and hypothetical impacts) using an adapted version of the six steps of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and employing NVivo 10 software (QSR International Pty Ltd., 2012). To this end, an open coding approach guided the inductive categorization of participants’ responses. The themes that were identified in this process were founded on excerpts of raw data to ensure that the data interpretation remained directly linked to the words of the participants and not investigators’ *a priori* theories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To the extent possible, we tried to maintain an essentialist/realist epistemology rather than speculate about the hidden meanings behind the responses; however, a degree of interpretation was occasionally employed, especially when responses were ambiguous. Finally, while we analyzed responses to questions concerning the perceived consequences of pornography use, we did not focus our analytic attention solely on the perceived outcomes of such use, deciding instead to identify any-and-all salient aspects of participants’ responses when answering these questions (e.g., circumstances surrounding pornography use or its impact, attitudes toward pornography use, etc.).

The first two steps of the thematic analysis were conducted by each of the three authors independently. In the first step, the authors familiarized themselves with the data by reading through the responses and taking note of their initial impressions. In the next step, the authors independently generated codes that described ideas found in the data and collected illustrative responses to describe each code. Next, the authors met to share their independently derived codes in an effort to reach consensus about the salient ideas expressed by participants. At the end of this meeting, the authors agreed on a list of 39 initial codes representing the most salient ideas that could be found in the data, along with a short description of each. Given the size of the dataset, research assistants were then employed to systematically identify all examples of the 39 salient codes in the dataset.

In the third step of the thematic analysis, the first author reviewed the responses that had been assigned to each code, removed responses that appeared to have been coded in error, decomposed collections of references assembled under one code into related but differentiable codes (which created additional codes), and finally, assembled the resulting codes into overarching-and-underlying hierarchical “themes” composed of one or more codes. In the fourth step, the same author reviewed and edited the resulting themes to ensure that they represented collections of relatively homogenous responses that provided sufficient coverage of the ideas expressed in the dataset. This process resulted in a total of 66 themes. At this stage of analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend creation of a pictorial conceptual map that highlights salient interconnections among themes. Within the rich and diverse dataset at focus, however, conceptualizing all possible relationships among 66 themes would have required consideration of 2145 possible links. As a serious analysis and organization of this nature is not practical, and indeed, would result in a very “busy” conceptual map that would be dif-

difficult to interpret, we decided instead to focus on a descriptive review of the themes concerning the impact of pornography on the couple relationship that emerged in this analysis of our dataset together with discussion of the most prominent connections among themes that were observed. Connections existed when two or more themes overlapped with one another within the same excerpt of text. To minimize the discussion of incidental connections between themes, we focused our discussions below on connections that occurred many times in the dataset.

In the fifth and sixth steps of our analysis, the resulting themes and their prominent connections were clearly identified, described, and illustrated with relevant participant responses. Accompanying each theme, we also listed the number of the times that theme was discussed in our dataset (i.e., the number of “references”). These values should be interpreted very cautiously, as the same respondents can discuss a theme more than once. Furthermore, this study was designed to provide a summary of as many different perceptions of the impact of pornography on relationships as possible, and it was not designed to provide an assessment of the hierarchy of prevalence of such perceptions. Themes that are poorly represented in this dataset should not be ignored in favor of themes that are articulated more frequently as doing so will only augment the impact of any sampling biases that may have occurred in this study.

The responses reported in the results section are largely verbatim, though some spelling and grammatical idiosyncrasies were corrected to improve readability.

Results

Participant Characteristics

Of the $N = 430$ participants in the current analysis, most were located in Canada ($n = 341$; 79.30 %) or the United States ($n = 73$; 16.97 %) at the time of the survey, with the remaining participants located in Australia, France, Italy, Japan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. Most participants were recruited through the interview/advertisements that appeared in Metro News (50.47 %; $n = 217$), or through the ads posted on Facebook (37.21 %; $n = 160$), and our laboratory webpage (5.81 %; $n = 25$). Approximately, half of the participants identified as male (48.82 %; $n = 206$) and half as female (51.18 %; $n = 216$); most were Caucasian (80.95 %; $n = 340$); and the mean age of participants was $M = 32.32$ ($SD = 10.91$) years. Most participants were living with their romantic partner (56.74 %; $n = 244$), or dating them exclusively (33.95 %; $n = 146$), and the remaining participants were in long-distance relationships, dating several partners, or in polyamorous relationships. Relationship duration ranged from 3 to 552 months (46 years) and average relationship duration was $M = 85.45$ months ($SD = 99.37$), or approximately 7 years.

More male participants (91.75 %; $n = 189$) than female participants (82.87 %; $n = 179$) reported using pornography since the beginning of their current relationship, $\chi^2(1) = 7.45$, $p < .01$. Among such participants, a slightly larger proportion of male participants (99.47 %; $n = 188$) than female participants (94.41 %; $n = 169$) reported having used pornography alone (i.e., without their partners), $\chi^2(1) = 8.11$, $p < .01$, and male participants used pornography alone ($Mdn = 3$ –4 times per week) more frequently than female participants ($Mdn = 1$ –3 times per month), $\chi^2(6) = 91.48$, $p < .001$. Of the participants who had used pornography since the beginning of their relationships, similar proportions of male participants (65.64 %; $n = 107$) and female participants (70.19 %; $n = 113$) reported also using pornography together with their relationship partner, $\chi^2(1) = 0.77$, *n.s.*, and the frequency of partnered use reported by male and female participants was similar as well ($Mdn =$ Less than once a month), $\chi^2(6) = 2.42$, *n.s.* Finally, a much larger proportion of female participants (90.58 %; $n = 173$) reported the belief that their partners consumed pornography alone, compared with male participants (46.71 %; $n = 78$), $\chi^2(2) = 87.84$, $p < .001$, and females compared to males reported that their partners consumed such material at a higher frequency ($Mdn_{Female} = 1$ –2 times per week vs. $Mdn_{Male} = 1$ –3 times per month), $\chi^2(6) = 31.07$, $p < .001$.

Among solitary users of pornography, video (95.41 %; $n = 353$), pictorial (38.92 %; $n = 144$), and textual (35.95 %; $n = 133$) forms of pornography were used most frequently, with few people reporting use of audio (2.43 %; $n = 9$) or other forms of pornography (2.90 %; $n = 10$). Male solitary users were significantly more likely to report using video (98.47 %; $n = 193$), $\chi^2(1) = 8.93$, $p < .01$, and pictorial stimuli (47.96 %; $n = 94$), $\chi^2(1) = 14.33$, $p < .001$, than female solitary users (video: 91.95 %; $n = 160$ /pictorial: 28.74 %; $n = 50$), while female solitary users were significantly more likely to report using textual pornography (48.85 %; $n = 85$), $\chi^2(1) = 23.76$, $p < .001$, than were male solitary users (24.49 %; $n = 48$). When using pornography with their partners, most participants reported the use of video content (95.41 %; $n = 208$) and comparatively few reported using pictorial (14.61 %; $n = 32$), textual (6.85 %; $n = 15$), audio (1.38 %; $n = 3$), or other stimuli (3.21 %; $n = 7$). With respect to the content of pornography that participants reported using, responses varied tremendously and analysis is ongoing and will be reported more thoroughly in a subsequent manuscript. A sample of responses includes “almost exclusively shemale porn,” “BDSM. Male dominant, female submissive,” “girl–girl, guy–girl, threesomes,” “male and female foreplay and vagina intercourse,” “Straight Teens, Virgins, Twinks,” “Woman with large breasts. Middle aged women. . . Not so much into men.” Participants provided a total of 3963 responses to 42 open-ended questions that asked about the effects of pornography use on their couple relationship. Thematic analysis identified 66 themes with each theme represented by between 621 and 5 individual responses. Given space constraints, detailed descriptions are

provided for the themes that appeared in more than 100 responses in the dataset and their hierarchical subthemes when present (17 themes in total), an arbitrary cut-off due to space limitations. Abbreviated descriptions of the remaining 49 themes can be found in Table 1.

No Negative Impacts

A great many participant responses indicated that there were *No Negative Impacts* (621 references) of pornography use on themselves, their partners, or their relationships (e.g., “None” or “I don’t believe it’s had a negative impact”), and *No Negative Impacts* was, by a substantial margin, the most common theme reflected in the dataset. We note that the *No Negative Impacts* theme is the opposite of the *No Positive Effects*² theme which was reflected considerably less often (34 references) among participant responses.

Source of Information

Pornography as a *Source of Information* (353 references) was a very well-represented theme with many connections to other themes in our dataset. Some participants discussed how pornography had educational value for them in a general sense (e.g., “Good teaching tool”), while many reported that pornography was a source of new sexual ideas (e.g., “We include it in our sex life for ideas and as something to enjoy together”; “Gives him ideas for our sex life and ideas for discussion”). In this way, the *Source of Information* theme was often linked with the *Sexual Experimentation* theme which is discussed in the following section. Participants also indicated that pornography as a *Source of Information* was used to improve their sexual technique (e.g., “I feel like pornography also helped educate me on how to perform oral sex better”) and such references were connected to the *Skilled Lover* theme. Finally, a few participant responses connected pornography as a *Source of Information* with the *Better Sex* theme (“When we first met, he didn’t know how to use his fingers the way that I liked, and I had trouble explaining and showing him what I liked so he watched a video, and it helped us improve our sex life”).

Within the *Source of Information* theme, a subtheme, *Learn About Sexual Likes and Dislikes* (33 references) represented participant responses concerning how pornography has helped people to discover, explore, and learn about their own sexual likes and dislikes (e.g., “Pornography allows me to explore the different aspects of sexuality on my own, letting me learn about the different

things that are out there. I find it helps me figure out what I may or may not like”). As was the case for the parent category, *Source of Information*, there were several connections between the *Learn About Sexual Likes and Dislikes* subtheme and the *Sexual Experimentation* theme (e.g., “It has (and I believe it will continue to) help me understand my own kinks, and the types of things I dislike, and maybe introduce me to some new things that I hadn’t thought of. All of these things can be brought into the bedroom”).

Sexual Experimentation

Another very common theme pertaining to the impact of pornography on the couple concerned *Sexual Experimentation* (343 references). The vast majority of these references indicated that pornography contributed positively to sexual experimentation within couples (e.g., “She enjoys using toys and positions that we were first exposed to by pornography”). As noted, pornography was often cited as a *Source of Information* that expands couple sexual repertoires, inspires sexual experimentation, and normalizes sexual variety, and as such there were connections between *Sexual Experimentation*, *Source of Information*, and *Sexual Variety*.

Within the *Sexual Experimentation* theme, the *Sexual Variety* subtheme (217 references) reflected participant responses which clearly indicated that pornography contributed to the enactment of sexual novelty, or sexual creativity, variety, or “spice” (e.g., “Has kept our sense of fun and experimentation alive in our marriage”). In many cases, participant responses indicated that pornography provides fresh ideas (*Source of Information*) that serve as inspiration for sexual variety (e.g., “He shows me things that he finds particularly interesting and sometimes we try them together”). In other cases, responses indicated that watching pornography together is itself a novel experience that adds variety to a couples’ repertoire (e.g., “We use porn sometimes as foreplay, for a change of pace; it gives us options, and therefore keeps our sex life fun”). A few participants explicitly discussed *Sexual Experimentation* as a function of increased *Sexual Comfort* (e.g., “He has become more comfortable to experiment and do whatever he wants”) which is also captured in the *Open to Experimentation* subtheme, discussed next. *Sexual Experimentation* often involved both partners and was perceived as contributing positively to participants’ sexual lives, and consequently, there were connections between *Sexual Experimentation* and *Sexual Communication*, *Learning About Each Other*, *Made Communication Easier*, *Increased Intimacy*, *Better Sex*, and *Increased Arousal Response* themes.

A second subtheme, *Open to Experimentation* (126 references), is also reflected within the responses that comprised the *Sexual Experimentation* theme. The *Open to Experimentation* subtheme included responses that indicated that pornography contributes to a mental state of readiness to experiment sexually (e.g., “More willing to try new things with my partner”). Other

² When additional themes are introduced in the results section, they will be discussed in sections that follow, for common themes, and in Table 1, for less common themes.

Table 1 Themes receiving fewer than 100 references in the dataset

Theme	References	Description	Salient connections
<i>Lying and Secretiveness</i>	93	Responses indicated that pornography use is hidden, concealed, or lied about or implied that it is not known to the pornography users' partner. Pornography use itself is hidden, as is use of specific types of content (presumably content that is assumed to be non-normative or offensive)	<i>Impact of Lying, Concern about Discovery, Hurt, Shame and Guilt, Mistrust, Anger Resentment and Conflict</i>
<i>Impact of Lying</i> (subtheme)	22 of 93	Responses described how partners respond negatively to lying and keeping secrets. Some point out that even when pornography use itself is not the issue, lying about it is still an issue. For those that have been lied to, there are some mentions of ongoing trust issues. For the person lying or hiding use, there are several references to subsequent guilt and shame	<i>Lying and Secretiveness, Anger Resentment and Conflict, Mistrust, Shame and Guilt</i>
<i>Concern about Discovery</i> (subtheme)	19 of 93	Responses expressed concern about pornography use being discovered. Some people hide their use from their partner out of shame or embarrassment while others do it because they fear their partner's response. In a minority of cases, their primary concern is about children, co-workers, or peers finding out about their pornography use	<i>Lying and Secretiveness, Hurt, Anger Resentment and Conflict, Shame and Guilt</i>
<i>Porn Replaces Partner</i>	90	Responses involved the perception that pornography was replacing or was in competition with partnered sex. Some responses provided a rationale by mentioning that pornography is easier, more interesting, more arousing, more desirable, or more gratifying than sex with a partner. Alternatively, some porn users pointed out their partners' may feel like they are in competition with pornography	<i>Decreased Interest in Sex, Less Satisfied with Partner</i>
<i>In Competition with Porn</i> (subtheme)	9 of 90	Responses that explicitly mentioned that a person may feel like they are in competition with pornography or with porn stars	<i>Personal Insecurity</i>
<i>Better Sex</i>	86	Responses indicated that pornography improved sex, made it more enjoyable, or more pleasurable. Some responses discussed improved sexual satisfaction	<i>Source of Information, Sexual Variety, Sexual Experimentation, Made Communication Easier, Orgasm, Skilled Lover, Increases Intimacy</i>
<i>Increased Arousal Response</i>	75	Responses concerned how pornography gets people in the mood, makes them excited, turned on, horny, or aroused or improves ability to orgasm. A minority of responses used physiological language (e.g., "more wet"). Note that it was occasionally difficult to differentiate true arousal responses from sexual interest responses so some overlap with <i>Increased Interest in Sex</i> is simply a product of ambiguity in the responses	<i>Increased Interest in Sex, Source of Information, Sexual Experimentation, Learning about Each Other, Orgasm</i>
<i>Decreased Arousal Response</i>	71	Responses discussed how pornography use is desensitizing, decreases the ability to achieve or maintain sexual arousal, or to achieve orgasm. Note as above, it can be sometimes difficult to differentiate true arousal responses from sexual interest responses so there is overlap with <i>Decreases Interest in Sex</i> .	<i>Sexual Desensitization, Decreased Interest in Sex, Changing Pornography Consumption</i>
<i>Sexual Desensitization</i> (subtheme)	17 of 71	Responses that specifically described desensitization as the effect of pornography use. Often the context is vague, making it difficult to infer much meaning from surrounding context. In other places it is explicitly connected to impaired sexual arousal	<i>Decreased Interest in Sex</i>
<i>Increased Interest in Sex</i>	71	Responses considered how pornography use increases libido, sex drive, sexual desire, interest in having sex, makes people more receptive to sexual advances, or leads to having sex or more sex	<i>Increased Arousal Response, Sexual Experimentation, Better Sex, Compersion</i>

Table 1 continued

Theme	References	Description	Salient connections
<i>Shame and Guilt</i>	71	Responses discussed how pornography use causes shame and guilt. A number of participants referenced the unhealthy or negative portrayal of women or sexuality as a source of shame. Others identified their partners' lack of approval, or society more generally, or their personal insecurity (failure to live up to ideals)	<i>Lying and Secretiveness, Impact of Lying, Concern about Discovery, Reinforces Stereotypes about Sex and Gender</i>
<i>Increases Intimacy</i>	68	Responses concerned how pornography use, primarily shared pornography use, reinforces connections, makes people closer, creates deeper emotional connections, promotes bonding, and increases intimacy. There were also a couple of mentions of trust specifically, and one mention of love. There are clear connections with communication and personal disclosure about fantasies, preferences, and even extra-dyadic targets of attraction	<i>Sexual Communication, Made Communication Easier, Learning about Each Other, Sexual Experimentation, Sexual Variety, Better Sex</i>
<i>Addiction</i>	60	Responses revolved around too much use, "reliance" or dependence on pornography, pornography using being obsessive, or becoming a sex addict. The reliance and dependence terminology suggests theoretical connections with decreased sexual interest and arousal as well as desensitization, though this terminology was used infrequently in discussions of addiction in this sample	<i>Decreased Interest in Sex, Decrease Arousal Response, Loss of Intimacy or Love, Lying and Secretiveness, Porn Replaces Partner, Shame and Guilt</i>
<i>Sexual Discordance</i>	57	Responses typically involved one partner wanting to try something the other found unacceptable. For example, responses included a lack of shared interest in pornography or specific sexual preference depicted in pornography, and ensuing disgust, disappointment and even guilt in the non-interested party. Mismatches in sexual desire or interest were coded separately in <i>Differences in Sex Drive</i>	<i>Personal Insecurity, Crave Unacceptable Behavior, Disgusted or Disturbed, Disappointed in Porn User</i>
<i>Skilled Lover</i>	56	Responses involved how pornography improves sexual skills. This was often discussed generally but there are also specific mentions of greater sexual stamina (for men), and more advanced techniques such as: fellatio, cunnilingus, acting like a porn star, and genital massage	<i>Source of Information, Confidence, Better Sex, Experimentation, Sexual Comfort</i>
<i>Open-Mindedness</i>	56	Responses discussed being more open, sexually open, open-minded, or sexually open-minded. It was not always clear as to how these mentions were implied	<i>More Accepting, Sexual Comfort, Source of Information, Sexual Communication, Made</i>
<i>Orgasm</i>	55	Responses indicated that pornography is used for, enhances, or speeds up orgasm. It was clear from many references that orgasm was discussed in both solitary and shared contexts of pornography use	<i>Eases Sexual Frustration, Better Sex, Positive Affect</i>
<i>Jealousy or Envy</i>	53	Responses discussed how pornography fueled jealousy of other women (primarily) as porn users express more sexual interest in others. With that in mind, it was often not clear what the intended meaning of jealousy was when participants use the term in their responses. Jealousy was sometimes used in place of envy in the sense of coveting the bodies others or the attention that others get. Envy was also occasionally mentioned alongside jealousy as if the two are different but related issues	<i>Personal Insecurity, Mistrust, Porn Replaces Partner, Anger Resentment and Conflict</i>

Table 1 continued

Theme	References	Description	Salient connections
<i>Relieves Stress</i>	52	Responses described how pornography use relieves stress, tension or frustration. The affective regulatory properties of pornography use also came up in <i>Less Burden or Pressure</i> , but in that case, it is a partner's porn use that alleviates negative affect (guilt, shame, frustration, etc.)	<i>Alternative Outlet, Positive Affect, Prevents Inappropriate Behavior</i>
<i>Anger Resentment and Conflict</i>	45	Responses indicated that a partner's pornography use makes people angry and resentful, and contributes to arguments	<i>Damaged Relationship, Disappointed in Porn User, Loss of Intimacy or Love, Lying and Secretiveness, Mistrust, Relationship Dissolution</i>
<i>Compersion</i>	42	Responses concern how one partner's enjoyment of pornography makes the other partner happy or sexually aroused. There appears to be a tendency for women to express happiness and for men to express sexual arousal in response to a partner's use	<i>Positive Affect, Communication, Increased Arousal Response, Alternative Outlet, Acceptable Outlet</i>
<i>Loss of Intimacy or Love</i>	42	Responses concerned a loss of intimacy or love. There was some diversity in this category of responses. Some indicated that pornography makes sex more recreational and less about love or closeness, while others said that their partner does not like their porn use, which creates a distance in the relationship. A couple of comments suggest that distancing is a function of the discrepancy between desired pornography-inspired behavior and actual sexual behavior with a partner. Finally, at least one participant suggested that porn use contributes to a fear of intimacy	<i>Anger Resentment and Conflict, Mistrust, Less Enjoyment of Real Sex, Disappointed in Porn User</i>
<i>Prevents Inappropriate Behavior</i>	42	Responses concerned the belief that pornography use prevents infidelity, use of prostitutes, and rape	<i>Safe Exploration, Alternative Outlet, Source of Information, Acceptable Outlet</i>
<i>Safe Exploration</i>	35	Responses discussed how pornography provides a safe or low risk way to explore or act out fantasies that people do not wish to act out or otherwise cannot act out, in real life. There were some specific mentions of exploring threesomes, and a few mentions of same-gender sexual behavior. Some references were made to solitary exploration while others are clearly instances of couple exploration	<i>Source of Information, Prevents Inappropriate Behavior, Learn About their Own Sexual Likes and Dislikes, Learning About Each Other, Sexual Communication</i>
<i>No Positive Impacts</i>	34	Responses indicated that there are no positive impacts of pornography use. Clear anti-thesis of <i>No Negative Affects</i>	
<i>Confidence</i>	33	Responses discussed how pornography use improved a person's sexual confidence	<i>Source of Information, Skilled Lover, Sexual Experimentation, Sexual Comfort</i>
<i>More Accepting</i>	32	Responses indicated that Pornography has made users more accepting of the sexual practices and preferences of others	<i>Open-Mindedness, Open Communication, Sexual Experimentation, Open to Experimentation, Sexual Comfort</i>
<i>Disgusted or disturbed</i>	31	Responses described how pornography itself is disgusting or disturbing, pornography use reveals something that is disgusting or disturbing to the viewer, or a partner's use of pornography is disgusting or disturbing	<i>Perceived Exploitation, Reinforces Stereotypes</i>
<i>Disgusted or Disturbed with Partner's Use (subtheme)</i>	24 of 31	Responses indicated that a partner's pornography use, specifically, is disgusting or disturbing. Many of the discussions appear hypothetical, often men guessing about their partner's presumed reactions if they were to find out, though some appear to report experienced reactions	<i>Reinforces Stereotypes</i>

Table 1 continued

Theme	References	Description	Salient connections
<i>Eases Sexual Frustration or Tension</i>	30	Responses suggested that pornography provides sexual release, eases sexual frustration, or eases sexual tension. Because of the vagaries of language, these responses may be completely synonymous with <i>Orgasm</i> or they may be subtly different in that they invoke an avoidance of unpleasant state. This distinction may be more academic than practical / meaningful	<i>Orgasm, Better Sex, Alternative Outlet</i>
<i>Mistrust</i>	29	Responses discussed how pornography use contributes to mistrust or damaged trust	<i>Impact of Lying, Damaged Relationship, Lying and Secretiveness, Impact of Lying, Loss of Intimacy or Love, Anger Resentment and Conflict</i>
<i>Reinforces Stereotypes About Sex and Gender</i>	28	Responses were concerned pornography's perpetuation of sexism, contribution to male domination or degradation of women, or reinforcement of sexual objectification	<i>Unrealistic Depictions, Shame and Guilt, Personal Insecurity, Disgusted or Disturbed</i>
<i>Damaged Relationship</i>	28	Responses described how pornography use damages or puts strain on relationships, marriages and sex life. There was some discussion of how people want less sex from a partner because the partner uses pornography	<i>Anger Resentment and Conflict, Relationship Dissolution, Mistrust, Decreased Interest in Sex, Personal Insecurity</i>
<i>Time Wasting Distraction</i>	27	Responses indicated that pornography use takes time that could be better spent elsewhere or that its use makes people late for appointments. Specifically, it takes away from chores, quality time with partner, other entertaining pursuits, exercise, school work, employment, dating	<i>Addiction</i>
<i>Crave Unacceptable Sexual Behavior</i>	24	Responses discussed how the content of the pornography that is used is strange or unacceptable or something that bothers their partners, or discussed how pornography use could lead, or has led people to engage in behavior that they regret, that is unacceptable, or that their partner would not accept	<i>Sexual Discordance, Shame and Guilt, Unrealistic Expectations</i>
<i>Relationship Dissolution</i>	23	Responses involved how pornography use contributes or may contribute to relationship dissolutions. The reasons that were offered for this consequence were diverse: porn contributes to infidelity or is perceived as possible infidelity, porn use negatively impacts sexual behavior, or porn use leads to a loss of interest in having sexual relations with the current partner	<i>Damaged Relationship, Anger Resentment and Conflict</i>
<i>Hurt</i>	17	Responses described how an individual's pornography use hurt their partner, or the expectation pornography use could hurt a partners. These responses were strongly connected to hidden or secretive pornography use. Partner's feelings, romantic relationships, and sex life were all specifically identified as things that were or could be hurt by pornography use. Anger was mentioned alongside hurt several times	<i>Lying and Secretiveness, Concern about Discovery, Anger Resentment and Conflict, Shame and Guilt</i>
<i>Less Enjoyment of Real Sex</i>	17	Responses suggested that pornography makes real sex more boring, more routine, less exiting, or less enjoyable. A minority of responses described a loss of intimacy, or loving component of having sex together	<i>Decreased Arousal Response, Decreased Interest in Sex, Loss of Intimacy or Love, Unrealistic Expectations</i>
<i>Less Satisfied with Partner</i>	17	Responses indicated that pornography use lowers interest in, or satisfaction with, or desire for, or attraction to a sexual partner. Partners feel like they are in competition with porn or porn stars	<i>Porn Replaces Partner, Decreased Interest in Sex, Personal Insecurity</i>

Table 1 continued

Theme	References	Description	Salient connections
<i>Disappointed in Porn User</i>	15	Responses expressed disappointment in, or devaluation of, or resentment towards porn using partner. One response expresses a disappointment in them self (as well as the partner) for failing to meet their partner's sexual needs. Large overlap with "Anger Resentment and Conflict"	<i>Anger Resentment and Conflict, Loss of Intimacy or Love, Decreased Interest in Sex</i>
<i>Porn User is Disappointed</i>	11	Responses suggested that porn use makes the user disappointed in, or resentful of their partners. This is partially to do with a perceived failure of the porn users' partner to meet sexual needs that are influenced by pornography. There was no overlap with responses coded under <i>Less Satisfied with Partner</i>	<i>Unrealistic Expectations</i>
<i>Unrealistic Depictions</i>	9	Responses indicated that pornography itself depicts unrealistic sex, bodies and scripts	<i>Reinforces Stereotypes About Sex and Gender, Unrealistic Expectations</i>
<i>Betrayal</i>	8	Responses described how pornography use led to, or might lead to feelings of betrayal	<i>Mistrust, Lying and Secretiveness</i>
<i>Sexual Autonomy</i>	8	Responses discussed how pornography plays a role in developing personal sexual space, or how it is important to have a sexual relationship with one's self, even when in a relationship. The original coder did not identify any references, potentially contributing to the low reference count	<i>Sexual Comfort, Alternative Outlet, Learn About Sexual Likes and Dislikes</i>
<i>Negative Impact on Fantasy</i>	7	Responses described the negative impact of pornography on fantasy. Some of the responses suggested a concern about relying on pornography in place of sexual fantasy, while others concerned "intrusive" pornographic fantasies that occur or are relied upon when having sex with a partner	<i>Decreased Arousal Response</i>
<i>Changing Pornography Consumption</i>	6	Responses described how pornography consumption changes, or might change, in order to accommodate declining arousal responses. Most responses suggested greater diversity of use, and reliance on more extreme, bizarre, or harsh materials. One response suggested an increased reliance on specific stimuli, and one response simply indicated more frequent use	<i>Decreased Arousal Response</i>
<i>Difference in Sex Drive</i>	6	Responses that explicitly described how pornography contributes to, or is used to manage differences in sex drive. There are many more references where differences in sex drive are easy to infer (e.g., I use pornography when my partner is not interested), but few references explicitly made this point	<i>Alternative Outlet, Decreased Interest in Sex</i>
<i>Perceived Exploitation</i>	6	Responses described how pornography involves the exploitation of or harm to those involved in its production. Some responses expressed concern that the type of pornography that a partner is interested in may be exploitive. The original coder did not identify any references, potentially contributing to the low reference count	<i>Disgusted or Disturbed, Reinforces Stereotypes About Sex and Gender</i>
<i>Impact on Sleep</i>	5	Responses indicated that pornography use helps people sleep, but also keeps at least one person awake when they should be asleep	<i>Positive Affect, Relieves Stress</i>

Open to Experimentation responses indicated that pornography made people feel more comfortable with experimentation (e.g., "It has made me more comfortable being adventurous with my

partner"), more open to trying out new things (e.g., "Open minded to new sexual experiences"), or more adventurous (e.g., "She's more adventurous, confident"). Connections were observed

between the *Open to Experimentation* subtheme and *Sexual Variety* and *Sexual Communication*, as mental readiness to experiment was often translated into enactment of sexual variety with a partner. There were also connections between *Openness to Experimentation* and *Source of Information* and *More Accepting* themes, some of which appeared in the same responses (e.g., "...I believe it has made us more accepting and willing to try new things in general. It is nice to have a partner that is educated and motivated to be creative in the bedroom"). Finally, a few responses also made clear connections to *Sexual Comfort* (e.g., "Seeing other women do things to themselves and the men gives me permission to try them if I want to, I feel less self-conscious about my body, my noises, or how silly I may or may not look during sex"), suggesting that a disinhibitory effect of pornography may contribute to sexual experimentation for some individuals.

Sexual Communication

Participant responses that referred to *Sexual Communication* (299 references) were very common in the dataset. Many of these responses involved descriptions of how pornography positively impacted sexual communication between partners, but a number of responses simply described open communication about pornography use with the couple relationship (e.g., "I want my partner to feel sexually open with me and I think pornography in this day and age is just part of how we fulfill sexual desires whether we are in a relationship or not"). In this respect, some discussions specifically suggested that being non-judgmental about pornography use fosters more open sexual communication, (e.g., "Also it is something he doesn't have to worry about me being jealous of. It was easier for him to be open up about how often he watches it and masturbates").

A major subtheme within the overall category of *Sexual Communication* involved *Made Communication Easier* (231 references). In particular, many responses concerning sexual communication specifically indicated that pornography use *Made Communication Easier* by increasing openness and honesty (e.g., "We have less secrets from each other, more open to each other now") or by increasing comfort in disclosing personal sexual preferences (e.g., "It helps us facilitate a conversation about kinks, fetishes, wants and won't's in the bedroom, etc."). *Made Communication Easier* also reflected the impact of pornography on increasing acceptance of the sexual desires of others (e.g., "I feel it has made her more open minded about sexual practices and fantasies, and able to be more confident in expressing her desires"), by helping people be more direct (e.g., "It's helped me be more frank about what I want"), and by providing opportunities to have discussions (e.g., "It has increased our intimacy and created more opportunities for discussion"). Consequently, the *Made Communication Easier* subtheme had strong connections with *Learning About Each Other*, *Sexual Variety*, *Open to Experimentation*,

Increased Intimacy, *Sexual Comfort*, *Better Sex*, and *More Accepting* themes.

A second major subtheme within *Sexual Communication* involved one or both partners *Learning About Each Other* (210 references). Many participants reported that pornography facilitates learning about one another by lowering barriers to honest communication or providing a context for such communication (*Made Communication Easier*), and this in turn allowed partners to discuss personal sexual preferences with one other (e.g., "It's also given us a great jumping-off point for discussing our differing levels of sexual desire, what each of us can find sexy versus a turn-off, discovering what I find sexy (which is a learning experience even for me at times) and for me to learn about what he finds sexy"). There were also many discussions of how pornography allowed people to educate themselves about what they like so that they can communicate these preferences to their partner (e.g., "I also have a better idea of what I like and would be able to potentially communicate that to future partners"). As choice of erotic stimuli indicates something about a person's sexual preferences, there are those who learn about their partners preferences by taking note of the types of sexual material they enjoy (e.g., "It allows me to see what type of pornography or sexual experiences that he enjoys") which is conceptually similar to the *Learn about Sexual Likes and Dislikes*, but is partner-rather than self-focused. Still others use pornography to explicitly communicate their sexual desires (e.g., "We use it to show each other what we feel like doing with them. It reinforces our connection, both sexually and through the demonstration of open communication"). As personal disclosures facilitate the development of intimacy, it is not surprising that *Learning About Each Other* was often connected to *Increased Intimacy* (e.g., "Sharing personal information that society may consider taboo has made us closer; you and me against the world"). There were also notable connections between *Learning About Each Other* and *Sexual Variety*, *Open to Experimentation*, *Increased Intimacy*, and *Increased Arousal Response*.

Alternative Outlet

Responses which indicated that pornography provides an alternative or additional sexual outlet comprised the theme of *Alternative Outlet* (167 references). Participants often indicated that sexual outlets are needed when partners are absent or when partners lack interest (e.g., "It can get her an orgasm when I am not available or not in the mood"). Some participants discussed how pornography was used as way of dealing with discrepant sexual drives (e.g., "Keeps us from arguing about not having enough sex") and others discussed the importance of feeling sexually fulfilled (e.g., "He could fulfill desires he doesn't know how to express to me"). It is important to note that none of the *Alternative Outlet* responses had an overtly negative tone. Many of these responses were expressed with neutral language, but a subset con-

tained explicitly positive language, and these were coded as the subtheme *Acceptable Outlet*.

Reduce Pressure or Burden (76 references) comprises a subtheme of *Alternative Outlet* which clearly described how pornography can reduce pressure on one partner to have sex with the other partner and such responses were well represented (e.g., “It keeps me from pressuring him to take off his underwear. It keeps me from making frequent comments about how we still aren’t having sex”). In general, these responses seemed to indicate that pornography provided an additional or alternative sexual outlet for one partner, thus reducing the sexual demands that they would otherwise be placing on the other partner. Interestingly, such responses were provided by both pornography users themselves, as well as the partners’ of pornography users (e.g., “Less pressure on me to satisfy him alone”).

Acceptable Outlet (27 references) represents an additional subtheme within *Alternative Outlet*, comprised of responses which indicate that an individual was aware of his or her partner’s solitary pornography use and that such pornography use was perceived positively (e.g., “Both my partner and I watch porn sometimes, and I think it is helpful that we are not relying only on each other for sexual gratification”). Some responses elaborated on this subtheme by indicating that a partner’s solitary pornography use makes both partners happy (e.g., “I’m happy to know that when I’m away he is enjoying himself”), that pornography use is healthy (e.g., “It allows him to explore his sexuality in a healthy way”), or that the partner’s pornography use lowers anxiety about infidelity (e.g., “He knows he has carte blanche to jack off to porn if/when he needs to, so hopefully feels less pressure to look for sex elsewhere”).

Positive Affect

Responses which indicated that pornography makes participants happy comprised the *Positive Affect* (114 references) theme, and responses included those indicating that pornography is enjoyable, exciting, entertaining, or makes people happy, relaxed, or satisfied (e.g., “Provides entertainment and pleasurable endorphins similar to other forms of entertainment like going out, participating in a sport, watching movies or playing video games”; “Seeing this Porn gives me a feeling of life and of joy. A zest for living”). There were many connections between *Positive Affect* and *Acceptable Outlet* that reflected happiness at a partner’s response to pornography (e.g., “They get to be stimulated by whatever interests them. That makes me happy”). There were also responses that indicated that pornography use promotes happiness indirectly by improving the pornography using partner’s day-to-day mood (e.g., “I am in a better mood after orgasms so I think that’s a positive impact for my boyfriend”) by contributing to *Sexual Variety* or *Better Sex* (e.g., “It makes things interesting in the bedroom with my man. Helps keep our sex life exciting, which makes both of us happier”), or through *Increased Interest in Sex* (e.g., “It has given

my partner an outlet for enjoyment and gets him turned on so I can reap the benefits of his heightened mood at a later time”).

Unrealistic Expectations

The most common theme that reflects a perceived negative consequence of pornography on the couple relationship involves responses that indicated that pornography use contributes to *Unrealistic Expectations* (114 references) in the sexual domain. It is noteworthy that most participants whose responses reflected this theme employed identical language (e.g., “Unrealistic expectations”) and many failed to elaborate on the meaning of this expression or the specific way that pornography contributed to such expectations. Among responses that provided more information, specific mentions were made of expectations about appearance (e.g., muscles, thinness, pubic grooming, and penis size), performance (stamina, erections, achieving orgasm), likes and dislikes (e.g., “Unrealistic expectations, perhaps. In porn, everyone is comfortable with all sex acts that my partner may not be comfortable performing or simply not interested in”), and relatedly, willingness to engage in particular sexual behaviors (e.g., unwanted behaviors, ejaculation on partner’s face). Not all *Unrealistic Expectations* were directed to the sexual partner of the pornography user, however, as some unrealistic expectations appeared to involve pornography users themselves or to involve expectations about men and women generally (e.g., “Unrealistic expectations and perceptions about male and female bodies and sexuality”). Some expectations appeared to have the potential to generate *Personal Insecurity* (e.g., “And gets these ideas that I really want a guy with a huge cock like in the videos”; “I worry about being judged for having pubic hair!”). A small number of responses mentioned *Unrealistic Expectations* together with discussions of *Decreased Interest in Sex* (e.g., “Potentially a reduction in lack of desire for my partner or unrealistic sexual expectations”).

Sexual Comfort

A substantial number of individuals reported that pornography use promotes comfort or self-acceptance of a user’s sexual behavior, or their body, or their sexuality more generally, and such responses represent the theme of *Sexual Comfort* (112 references). Some responses reflected increased comfort quite generally (e.g., “he benefits from me being more okay with my sexuality and from me being more clear about my desires and our sex life is improved”) and others specifically indicated that pornography use reduced shame, guilt, or anxiety (e.g., “Reduced his level of shame surrounding his kinks and sexual preferences”). A small number of participants also discussed how their sexual comfort increased because pornography acknowledges users’ non-normative sexual preferences and desires (e.g., “one good thing is that by seeing bondage/bdsm in porn I don’t feel as weird about liking it”; “It’s helped me to accept that I enjoy kinky sex, and has greatly helped me to become okay

with being a sexual person. I was raised in a religion that strictly emphasized not having sex before marriage and truly believed in that for quite some time, so reconciling my desire to have and enjoy sex outside of marriage took a lot of work, and porn helped me become okay with it”). *Sexual Comfort* was often discussed alongside mentions of pornography as a *Source of Information* that contributes to *Sexual Experimentation* (e.g., “I think it allows me to let go of some of my inhibitions, provides different ideas or technique that I can use with my partner”) and there were many connections to *Sexual Communication*. There were also notable connections between *Sexual Comfort* and being *More Accepting of the Sexuality of Others* (e.g., “I believe that pornography has helped me become more open and accepting of who I am, accepting my sexuality and the sexuality of others. I believe it has taught me that the body and sex are meant to be enjoyed”).

Decreased Interest in Sex

A significant number of participant responses indicated that pornography has contributed to a *Decreased Interest in Sex* (103 references) with a partner. For many people, decreased interest or decreased frequency in sex appeared to be specifically connected to their relationship partner (e.g., “takes precedence over my attraction to my partner”), rather than decreased interest in sex more generally, creating strong connections between *Decreased Interest in Sex* and the theme of *Porn Replaces Partner*. Connections between *Decreased Interest in Sex* and *Less Satisfied with Partner* (e.g., “Lack of desire for partner. Wishing partner was more like pornographic characters”) and *Personal Insecurity*, were also noted. While not predominant in this category, there were also connections to *Decreased Arousal Responses*, though such responses, when they occurred, appeared to describe a temporary rather than chronic condition that resulted from orgasm through use of pornography as an *Alternative Outlet* (e.g., “When watching porn, I often masturbate. It has happened on occasion that I would masturbate when she wasn’t around, and later that day she would want sex and I couldn’t”).

Personal Insecurity

A significant number of responses also reflected the view that pornography use resulted in *Personal Insecurity* (103 references). Often, respondents discussed how their partner’s use of pornography contributed to decreased feelings of self-worth (e.g., “I feel like I’m not enough. Feel like he reads these stories because I don’t satisfy him sexually, that some-how there is something wrong with me. I feel like I can’t make him as excited as the porn does, so I actually don’t enjoy sex as much as I used to”). Respondents also reported that their own use of pornography could negatively contribute to their partners’ insecurity (e.g., “She would likely be insecure about herself and her ability to “keep me satisfied”). Only a few responses indicated that a

respondent’s pornography use elevated his or her own feelings of insecurity (e.g., “I feel very insecure about being attractive to others because of the higher standard of fitness, attractiveness, healthy look, young, slutty, poly or swing-friendly”) or how their own use of pornography caused them to devalue their partner (e.g., “I feel like porn makes my partner look “ugly” in my eyes. I don’t find my partner attractive anymore and my relationship of 20 months is suffering”) and such responses are suggestive of connections to *Less Satisfied with Partner*, *Porn User is Disappointed*, and *Damaged Relationship*. Specific insecurities that were mentioned included negative impacts on self-esteem, attractiveness, and desirability as well as feelings of self-consciousness, body concerns, sexual performance concerns, general insecurity, and inadequacy. There were several instances where respondents mentioned instances of *Personal Insecurity* alongside instances of feeling *In Competition with Porn* (e.g., “I feel very self-conscious, and sometimes competitive in a way that I could never compete with a porn star”). There were a small number of connections between *Personal Insecurity* and *Jealousy or Envy* (e.g., “He can sometimes get jealous if I’m watching it and he’s not there. And he gets these ideas that I really want a guy with a huge cock like in the videos, he gets insecure in a way but not all the time”).

A number of additional themes, reflecting less common participant responses (fewer than 100 references), appear in Table 1. It can be seen in the table that themes related to pornography replacing one’s partner, contributing to better sex, decreasing sexual arousal, increasing interest in sex, increasing couple intimacy, and damaging relationships, among many others, were also coded within our dataset.

Discussion

In an effort to provide descriptive information that will help to address shortcomings in the literature, the current research adopted a participant-informed, open-ended, “bottom-up” approach that uncovered a very broad range of perceived impacts of pornography in the couple context. In so doing, we identified several important themes, including the modal report of *No Negative Impacts*, as well as themes that indicated clear positive (e.g., *Sexual Communication*, *Sexual Experimentation*, *Sexual Comfort*, etc.), and clear negative consequences (e.g., *Unrealistic Expectations*, *Decreased Interest in Sex*, *Personal Insecurity*, etc.) of pornography use for the couple relationship. While a similar number of positive and negative perceived effects were identified, generally speaking, positive effects of pornography use were reported more frequently than negative consequences by participants, and there was a predominant tendency for participants to reject the view that pornography contributes to negative consequences (e.g., *No Negative Impacts*). It would appear that many individuals experience effects of pornography on themselves and the couple relationship that do not conform to the investigator imposed, close-ended endpoints represented in the bulk of published experimental and corre-

lational research in this area. The results of this work suggest several interesting new research directions that require systematic attention.

The most common response in this sample, by a very large margin, was that pornography had *No Negative Impacts* on the pornography users, their partners, or their relationships. While we cannot be certain about the generalizability of findings from this study alone, the modal report of *No Negative Impacts* of pornography use in the current sample of some 430 individuals who are in relationships where at least one partner uses pornography, should call into question the merits of solely pursuing negative relationship effects of pornography in harm-focused research, to the exclusion of other potential effects. While this observation may violate the expectations of many, we would like to raise the very real possibility that pornography may have little to no apparent perceived impact—positive or negative—on relationships for many couples. As a consequence, we strongly recommend the inclusion of endpoints that can directly assess the absence of both perceived positive and perceived negative effects of pornography in future closed-ended descriptive research.

Within the remaining responses, a number of positive and negative relationship consequences of pornography use were identified, several of which have not been seriously discussed or assessed in experimental and correlational research in this area (e.g., *Sexual Experimentation, Increased Intimacy, Compersion, Jealousy*, etc.). As mentioned, positive as compared to negative perceived impacts of pornography on the couple were recognized more frequently by participants, and such results mirror those reported by Albright (2008), Grov et al. (2011), Hald and Malamuth (2008), and others, and add to the list of specific positive endpoints that should be assessed in future research. Our findings contrast sharply with the largely negative effects summarized by Manning (2006), Zillmann (2000), and others, though here too, we add again to the list of negative outcomes that could be assessed in future research.

Many scholars may be surprised and dismissive of the reports of positive perceived effects of pornography use, as it has been strongly asserted that pornography limits rather than liberalizes sexuality (Dines, 2010). Such assertions have their roots in long-standing radical feminist assumptions that pornography privileges male sexual pleasure, denies female agency, and degrades women (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975). From this perspective, it would seem especially odd that female participants in our sample would report positive effects of their own, and their partners' use of pornography. With that said, several of the positive perceived effects uncovered in this study correspond to known clinical benefits of pornography use, including several benefits that have been established in experimental studies involving women, such as increased sexual arousal and interest (Fisher & Byrne, 1978; Mann, Sidman, & Starr, 1971; Schmidt & Sigusch, 1970), the

acquisition or imitation of pleasurable sexual behaviors (Kohut & Fisher, 2013), and the reduction of sexual anxiety (Wincze & Caird, 1976). In light of such empirical evidence, continuing claims that pornography typically limits sexual expression, especially for women, are dubious at best.

Although there are many findings that deserve additional attention in this study, we are particularly intrigued by the prominent theme concerning pornography's association with sexual communication. Generally, couples who exhibit poor communication tend to have more sexual (Kelley, Strassberg, & Turner, 2006) and relationship problems (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) than couples with better communication skills, so it is particularly surprising that more attention has not followed previous reports that pornography use may be associated with improved sexual communication (see Albright, 2008; Daneback et al., 2009; Grov et al., 2011). MacNeil and Byers (2005, 2009) have articulated two mechanisms through which sexual self-disclosure may contribute to sexual and relationship satisfaction. In the expressive pathway, sexual self-disclosure increases intimacy (operationalized as relationship satisfaction in MacNeil and Byers, 2005, 2009; see also Cupach and Metts, 1991), which in turn, improves sexual satisfaction. With respect to our data, we found that many people expressed how using pornography *Made Communication Easier*, and such responses frequently mentioned *Learning About Each Other* through sexual self-disclosures of likes and dislikes, as well as increased perceived closeness and *Intimacy* that accompanied such communications. MacNeil and Byers (2005, 2009) also believe that sexual self-disclosure can impact sexual satisfaction instrumentally by fostering changes in sexual scripts that optimize sexual encounters for both parties. Consistent with this view, the current study also found that discussions of pornography's role in sexual communication (e.g., *Made Communication Easier* and *Learning About Each Other*) often mentioned an *Openness to Experimentation*, increased *Sexual Variety*, and *Better Sex*. Although our results mesh nicely with this theoretical model, and suggest that pornography use may facilitate sexual communication, sexual self-disclosures, improved intimacy, and perhaps even improved sexual experiences and relationship satisfaction (under certain conditions), further systematic experimental research is needed to determine if pornography use can in fact impact such positive outcomes.

Limitations

The current research has a number of limitations. First, we note that the nature of our findings is of course a function of our sample, and although efforts were made to recruit a heterogeneous community sample with diverse views and experiences in relation to pornography, we cannot be certain of the degree to which we achieved this goal. Some readers may believe that our sample

is particularly erotophilic because of the high rates of female pornography use that we report. While this remains possible, it is hard to be sure as the definition of pornography use employed in this study differs from many used in this field (see Kohut 2014; Short, Black, Smith, Wetterneck, & Wells, 2012), and the span of time we inquired about was longer than is typically considered in other research (we assessed pornography use “since the beginning of your relationship” ~7 years in this sample). Assuming, however, that this limitation is present and the sample is indeed biased, readers should be cautioned again about over-interpreting differences in the relative prevalence of the various themes reported by this sample of respondents, particularly when they are small differences. Future research can and *should* build on this work by assessing the prevalence of each perceived effect identified in this study with samples of known representativeness. In addition, recruiting intact romantic dyads in such an effort would be of paramount importance. While participants were asked to report about dyad-level outcomes in the current study, participants were not recruited as intact romantic dyads and so perceptions of the impact of pornography on the partner or relationship could not be verified independently.

Another reasonable point of contention concerns our use of the frequency counts corresponding to each theme when interpreting the meaningfulness of our findings. We fully acknowledge the hazards of such an approach, as the themes were never designed to be equivalent in their breadth or scope of coverage, and individual participants often mentioned a theme in more than one response. With that in mind, this information was available, and is meaningful, albeit in a limited sense. Our interpretations of the rejection of negative effects, as well as the preponderance of the positive as compared to negative perceived effects of pornography use are fair representations of our data, but may not correspond to the actual prevalence of such perceptions in large representative samples. Well-conducted close-ended research is certainly needed to explore and verify the relative differences in all of endpoints uncovered in the current analysis.

Finally, we are in the process of methodically exploring gender differences, differences across separate relationship patterns of pornography use (e.g., personal solitary use vs. joint use vs. partner’s solitary use), differences across the target of the impact of pornography use designated by our questions (e.g., self vs. partner vs. relationship), and the differences between the observed as compared to the potential impacts of pornography use reported by the sample. The narrative that we have presented in this article concerns a phenomenon that we believe to be quite complex and we hope to refine this “story” as further analysis is completed. Given these limitations, the interpretation and application of our results should be constrained by the understanding that, at this stage, we have merely provided a broad description of rich data concerning the diversity of impacts of pornography on the self and on the couple—including “no impact”—provided by one large community sample.

Future Directions

It is hoped that the results of this study will be used to guide future applications of relevant theories in this field. The themes that we identified here are quite diverse, and while we see the utility of applying several prominent theories to some of these results (e.g., social cognitive theory could be used to expand the discussion of *Sexual Information* and *Sexual Experimentation*; *Personal Insecurity* could be usefully interpreted within Attachment Theory; etc.), to the best of our knowledge, no theory offers a satisfactory explanation that ties all of the responses of this descriptive study together. We would welcome efforts to find ways to incorporate these findings into existing theoretical considerations of pornography’s impact on couple relationships as we endeavor to do so ourselves and we feel that the current participant-informed descriptive findings point the way forward for research in this area.

In a related point, many of the themes identified in this study correspond reasonably well to theoretical constructs with well-articulated operational definitions (e.g., *Sexual Communication*, *Decreased Interest in Sex*, *Personal Insecurity*, *Sexual Comfort*, etc.) but some do not (e.g., *Unrealistic Expectations*), and further work is needed to elaborate on the nature of these themes if quantitative operational definitions are desired for future research. This survey was designed to provide a comprehensive overview of the variety of perceived impacts that participants might identify, consequently, none of the identified themes were probed in extensive detail. It is hoped that the data and the descriptions that we provide, including the interconnections between themes, will guide the design of studies that specifically seek to flesh out these endpoints, so that appropriate quantitative scales can be constructed.

Conclusion

This study has reported observations suggesting that many of the endpoints assessed in existing, well-conducted, correlational, and experimental research do not correspond to commonly reported impacts of pornography on couple relationships. If we continue to pursue research ends that conflict with the observations of persons who have experienced pornography use within their romantic relationships, the actual nature of phenomenon that we are seeking to understand will be obscured. This is not just a problem with potentially overselling the harms of pornography; there is also the potential to occlude the nature of the actual harms that are occurring in some relationships. Indeed, while we have emphasized the predominant positive and null perceived effects reported by this sample, we have also revealed considerable information that suggests different ways that pornography may be harmful in some relationships. For this reason, we encourage all researchers in this area—including our potential detractors—to seriously consider

the implications of observations generated by participant-informed, “bottom-up” approaches, whether they come from our study or work by other researchers, and align their research objectives accordingly.

Acknowledgments We would like to thank Nellie Kamkar for her help with the online survey construction as well as Alexa Momy, Ali Pensamiento, Chad Buckland, Michelle Camilleri, Natalie Thoman, and Terra Duchene who aided with the qualitative data coding. This research was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Grant awarded to Dr. W. Fisher (PI) and Dr. L. Campbell (Co-PI), reference number: 435-2013-1077.

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