



Who Seeks Aggression in Pornography? Findings from Interviews with Viewers

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Abstract

Despite the recent proliferation of research on aggression in pornography, we still know relatively little about the preferences and perceptions of viewers themselves. In particular, very little research has examined how women who watch pornography feel when encountering aggression toward women. To explore this question, we conducted interviews with 122 regular pornography viewers (61 women, 60 men, and 1 gender-diverse). Quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data show that the majority of both men and women reported that they did not enjoy aggressive content. However, in contrast to common conceptions among most scholars and pundits, it was women, not men, who were more likely to report being aroused by aggression, mainly consensual aggression toward women, which was perceived as pleasurable. Women were also more likely to report actively seeking for aggression and wanting to see more aggression in mainstream pornography. These findings challenge long-held radical feminist views regarding the preferences of both women and men and offer new insights on the relationship between gender and sexual fantasies.

Keywords Pornography · Sexual aggression · Viewers' preferences · Gender differences · Qualitative interviews

Introduction

The role of aggression in pornography has long been a topic of both interest and concern for scholars who study the modern pornography industry. In particular, gender scholars and feminist activists have written about gender inequalities in the industry, highlighting reports about high levels of aggression portrayed in videos, as well as claims that almost all aggression is committed by men against women. As such, some feminist writers believe that pornography facilitates the dehumanization of women and justifies and inspires violence against women (Brownmiller, 1975; Dines, 2010; Dworkin, 1994; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Jensen, 2007; Russell, 2000). Conservative religious writers share many of these contentions, while also viewing pornography as immoral, corrupting youth, and distorting their views of sexuality and romantic relationships (Fradd, 2017; Shapiro, 2013).

Estimates regarding the prevalence of aggression portrayed in mainstream rental and Internet pornographic videos

have varied greatly throughout the years, ranging from about 2% (McKee, 2005) to almost 90% (Bridges et al., 2010) of all videos. This wide range appears to stem from the adoption of different definitions of aggression, the analysis of different forms of media at different time periods, and the implementation of varying methodological and sampling approaches (for further discussion of these issues see Shor, 2019; Shor & Golriz, 2019; Shor & Seida, 2021). Most notably, McKee (2005, 2015) has argued for the importance of consent in the definition of aggression and for treating consent as an ongoing process, which considers the entirety of the sexual interaction and takes into account both physical and verbal expressions of consent. Bridges et al. (2010), on the other hand, argued that given the pornography industry's powerful expectations from performers to express enjoyment in response to just about any act or situation, almost no act would be coded as aggressive under a definition that requires a target to clearly show displeasure. They therefore defined aggression as “any purposeful action causing physical or psychological harm to oneself or another person.”

Notwithstanding these diverging definitions and estimates, many scholars and journalists have commonly been citing the higher-end estimates (particularly the study by Bridges et al. 2010), claiming that the (large) majority of pornography

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available on the internet contains aggression, particularly aggression toward women (Bindel, 2019; Brown, 2017; Dines, 2016; Jensen, 2016). However more recent research on popular videos on free pornography websites, challenges these contentions. Recent studies have reported that, using wide-ranging definitions, aggression appears in about 40% of all popular videos (Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Seida & Shor, 2021; Shor & Seida, 2019). When adopting more restrictive definitions that consider consent, rates are even lower, at around 10% or less (Shor & Seida, 2019, 2021).

Regardless of these varying estimates, a long research tradition has been concerned with the potential effects of viewing pornography, particularly pornography that includes aggression, on viewers. Studies have found that the consumption of pornography that includes aggression is associated with both attitudes supporting violence against women (Hald et al., 2010), rape myths, and sexual coercion (Connolly et al., 2010; Malamuth et al., 2000; Wright et al., 2016), and with intentions to commit sexual assault in a hypothetical situation (Foubert, 2016). Others have suggested an association between viewing aggressive pornography and a greater likelihood to actually commit sexual assault (Hald et al., 2010; Milburn et al., 2000; Ybarra et al., 2011). Experimental lab studies have further suggested that the relationship between exposure to pornography (primarily pornography including aggression) and attitudes supportive of sexual aggression may be a causal one, though these studies suffer from issues of ecological validity (Allen et al., 1995; Flood, 2009; Malamuth, 1981; Wright et al., 2016). Exposure to violent pornography may also lead some women to believe that they should accept sexual victimization (Davis et al., 2006). However, the relationship between pornography viewing and actual sexual coercion and aggression remains questionable (Kingston et al., 2008; Kohut et al., 2020; Richters et al., 2008; Vogels & O’Sullivan, 2019).

While the studies above provide important insights regarding the potential effects of pornographic use, we still know relatively little about how viewers themselves perceive portrayals of aggression in pornography. In particular, while some previous research asked women about their experiences with and views of pornography (e.g. Chadwick et al., 2018; Fareen Parvez, 2006; Hempel, 2012; Senn & Radtke, 1990), these studies did not focus on aggression in pornography. Therefore, much remains unknown about the views and responses of both men and women to depictions of aggression in pornography.

The current study explores the sociodemographic factors that shape viewers’ perceptions and possible enjoyment of aggression in pornography, focusing on potential differences between men and women who regularly watch pornography. Relying on 122 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with frequent viewers from various countries, age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sexual orientations, I explore

how these factors shape preferences regarding pornography that includes aggression.

Gender and attraction to aggression in pornography

Which factors might explain why some viewers are more likely to find pornography that includes aggression appealing? Given that women and men are often represented differently in pornography and often perform very different roles, the gender of viewers emerges as a key characteristic that might influence their experiences, perceptions, and affinity toward acts of aggression. The rapid advent of digital technologies in the consumption of pornography has facilitated viewers’ access to pornography over the last two decades. This was particularly influential for women, as it allowed them to consume pornography privately and anonymously (McKeown et al., 2018). Indeed, recent studies suggest that pornography use among women has been on the rise (Chesser et al., 2018; Fradd, 2017) and that women represent one of the fastest-growing demographic groups among online pornography consumers (Attwood et al., 2018; Chowkhani, 2016). Data released by Pornhub, the world’s largest pornography website, suggest that 32% of the visits to the website in 2019 were by women, up from 29% in 2018 and 26% in 2017 (PornHub, 2019).¹

How might we expect the gender of viewers to shape their response to aggression in pornographic videos and their preferences when watching these videos? Scholars of sexuality have argued that men’s attitudes toward sexuality tend to be more “liberal” than those of women (Peterson & Hyde, 2010), suggesting that they may find alternative depictions of sexuality, including aggressive ones, more appealing. In addition, the large majority of aggressive and/or degrading acts portrayed in mainstream heterosexual pornographic videos are conducted by men and directed toward women (Bridges et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015). As such, one might expect that women who view pornography may resent such acts, identifying with the pain or humiliation experienced by the women who perform in these videos.

Indeed, many scholars assume that demand for aggression is driven almost entirely by male audiences and that aggressive portrayals are prominent because mainstream pornography is made almost exclusively with men in mind and creates a sexual world centered on men’s pleasure (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2015; Fitzgerald & Grossman, 2017; Paul, 2005). Starting in the early 1970s, prominent feminist theorists have

¹ Of note, one should exercise caution regarding the figures released by Pornhub, as the website does not release full information regarding the methods it uses to calculate statistics such as viewing by gender.

argued that pornography is intrinsically misogynistic and fosters violence against women by portraying women as sexual objects who enjoy being humiliated, degraded, and treated aggressively by men (Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 1994; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Russell, 2000). More recently, some pornography scholars and pundits have suggested that over the years, men who frequently watch pornography have gradually become desensitized to aggression (Dodige, 2007; Fradd, 2017; Hilton & Clark, 2011; Paul, 2010). Some of these writers have further claimed that men often actively seek aggressive and demeaning content once the thrill and excitement previously achieved by more traditional “vanilla” videos begin to diminish. In doing so, they suggest, these men are similar to drug addicts who consume higher doses when they are unable to reach the same high as with the previous dose. Such claims continue to receive wide publicity, despite contrasting findings in recent research (Landripet et al., 2019).

Pornography critic Gail Dines (Dines, 2006, 2010; Dines et al., 1998) has similarly contended that male viewers often prefer watching acts of aggression and humiliation because these present a novelty and add “an edge” to their viewing experience. But perhaps even more importantly, in line with other radical feminists (Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 1989; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988), Dines has argued that such acts are attractive to men primarily because they celebrate the tension and thrill derived from sexualizing gender inequalities. Many men, she suggested, therefore actively look for these acts and view them as a primary source of pleasure not merely out of boredom but rather because they represent an erotic fantasy of male dominance and women’s subordination. Thus, videos that celebrate the degradation and abuse of women are for many men thrilling, providing greater sexual tension and sexual pleasure. Or as Dines told *The Guardian*: “To think that so many men hate women to the degree that they can get aroused by such vile images is quite profound” (Bindel, 2010).

Other prominent feminist critics of pornography, such as Karen Boyle (2010) Robert Jensen (2007, 2016), Pamela Paul (2005), and Chris Hedges (2015) have echoed these contentions. Popular critical documentaries on the pornography industry over the last decade, such as *The Price of Pleasure* (Picker et al., 2008), *After Porn Ends* (Wagoner, 2012), *Hot Girls Wanted* (Jones et al., 2015), and *Pornocracy* (Ovidie, 2017) have painted a similar picture. These documentaries focus on female pornography performers on the one hand and on male producers, directors and consumers on the other. Women who view pornography are either completely ignored or it is assumed that it is hard for them to find pornography that appeals to their taste because most pornography includes aggression or acts considered demeaning to women.

The sometimes-unspoken assumption in these documentaries and in some of the academic literature is that few women,

if any, would enjoy watching pornography in which other women are the recipients of aggression. This approach is also manifested in frequent calls for creating different kinds of pornographic videos, ones that would be produced and directed by women and would portray more egalitarian sexual interactions, while excluding acts of aggression or humiliation, so that women would be able to enjoy them (Baier, 2017).

Empirical research on viewers’ perspectives regarding aggression in pornography

Previous research on viewers’ perceptions of aggression in pornography appears to problematize some of the above mentioned assumptions about gender differences in consumption and attitudes. Some of this research explored sexual fantasies. Friday (1973) examined the fantasies of more than 400 women, showing not only that they had sexual fantasies, but also that these fantasies included very explicit and even taboo content, including some fantasizing about sexual domination, submission, and aggression. Subsequent studies exploring sexual fantasies (Bader, 2002; Kahr, 2007; Maltz & Boss, 2001) also reported substantial interest by both men and women in themes of submission, domination, and various aggressive practices. More recently, large-scale surveys in the United States (Lehmiller, 2018), in Canada (Joyal & Carpentier, 2017), and in the Czech Republic (Bártová et al., 2020) have found few substantial differences between women and men in their interest in and fantasies about practices such as bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, and sadomasochism (BDSM).

Former studies on the perceptions and views of pornography also offer a nuanced story in terms of the relationship between gender and viewers’ preferences regarding pornography containing aggression. Some of these studies focused their attention on men and their preferences. Bogaert (2001) examined the reported viewing preferences of young men, who were presented with fictional promotional descriptions of pornographic films. Participants indicated that they were much less likely to watch films described as including sexual violence than those with descriptions that included other types of sexual content (e.g. those described as featuring insatiable women or erotic scenarios). Loftus (2002) found a similar pattern when conducting interviews with a small sample of male pornography viewers. Most of these men did not find depictions of dominance or aggression against women arousing, instead reporting that they found them to be offensive or disturbing and that they preferred videos that did not include overt aggression.

Other studies focused on women’s preferences and perceptions. In one of the earlier studies, Senn and Radtke (1990) used an experimental research design to examine young

women's judgements of violent and non-violent pornography images. Participants rated violent sexual images more negatively compared with both nonviolent images and erotic images. Fareen Parvez (2006) conducted in-depth interviews with a racially- and socioeconomically-diverse group of women regarding their views of pornography. Although her study did not explicitly focus on attitudes regarding sexual aggression, some of her interviewees did mention attraction to what they called "extreme things", along with considerable unease with what they termed "degradation" or "abuse" in pornography (p. 623). Hempel (2012), who interviewed young educated women who regularly consume pornography, found that many of them expressed a positive view regarding sexually explicit materials. However, similar to Parvez, Hempel's study did not focus on participants' attitudes toward aggressive practices in the pornography they consume.

Other research on pornography viewing by women has suggested that they tend to dislike pornography produced by men for male audiences, where women are being degraded or exploited (Cowan & Dunn, 1994; Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2004; Laan et al., 1994). Some scholars therefore conclude that women prefer nonsexist and nonviolent pornography, designed specifically for female audiences (Glascock, 2005; Mosher & MacIan, 1994). More recent research, however, has begun to problematize the common notion of women as passive and powerless recipients of pornographic content. In some studies, women reported that they were more likely to enjoy content that they chose themselves, in which they could imagine themselves as participants (Goldey & van Anders, 2016; Janssen et al., 2003). In addition, women who view pornography frequently report a mix of positive and negative affect (Goldey & van Anders, 2016; Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Laan et al., 1994). Chadwick et al. (2018) have thus argued for a more complex and nuanced understanding of women's relationship with pornography, where women can simultaneously enjoy pornography and experience negative affect. According to Chadwick et al., many women actively negotiate conflicting affective experiences with pornography to gain positive outcomes. Female viewers are able to watch pornography in ways that incorporate both sexual pleasure and sexual danger, creating a powerful tension where sexuality incorporates restriction, repression, and danger on the one hand and exploration, pleasure, and agency on the other (see also Vance, 1984).

Finally, studies comparing the preferences of men and women who watch pornography further put into question the assumption that women are unlikely to seek or enjoy aggression in pornography. On the one hand, men consistently report attitudes of greater acceptance toward sexually explicit materials than do women (Broman, 2003; Carroll et al., 2008; Evans-DeCicco & Cowan, 2001; Nicklin et al., 2020). On the other hand, when focusing more specifically

on videos containing depictions of sexual aggression, recent studies offer a more counterintuitive account. Hald and Štulhofer (2016), for example, conducted an online survey of more than 2,000 Croatian men and women who consume pornography online. Heterosexual women in their study were more likely than heterosexual men to consume pornography depicting violent sex (simulated rape, aggression, and coercion), sadomasochism, bondage, and dominance, while men were more likely to consume pornography that included anal sex. Data recently released by the website Pornhub suggest a similar trend. According to this data, women were "twice as likely to watch content featuring 'Gangbang' and 'Double Penetration'" (PornHub, 2018). Furthermore, in 2014, both 'rough sex' and 'bondage' made the list of Pornhub's top-16 searches by women, but not by men (PornHub, 2015).

Other factors potentially associated with attraction to aggressive pornography

In addition to gender, I also examine other potential sociodemographic and behavioral variables that may affect viewers' interest in aggressive pornography. As there is little previous theoretical literature to provide guidance on the potential effects of these factors, I chose an inclusive exploratory approach, examining a host of variables that might theoretically matter. First, I examine the effects of interviewees' *age* on their affinity toward aggression in pornography. On the one hand, one might expect older interviewees to be more conservative and thus less willing to entertain alternative expressions of sexuality. On the other hand, as some have suggested (Doidge, 2007; Fradd, 2017), it could also be that older viewers have gradually tired of mainstream "vanilla" sex and would therefore be more likely to search for more "kinky" or "extreme" materials. A similar argument could be made for interviewees' *age at first exposure to pornography* and *frequency of viewing pornography*, with those exposed earlier and more often being more likely to seek aggression, seeking to diversify their viewing experiences.

I also examine the potential effects of the *country* in which interviewees grew up. Again, the potential effects of this variable are uncertain, but one might expect a difference between Western and non-Western countries, with the former perhaps adopting a less judgmental approach toward pornography and its consumption, and in particular toward the consumption of "hardcore" materials. I also analyze interviewees' *sexual orientation*. As with the other variables, the direction of the effect here is unclear. On the one hand, sexual minorities may be more attuned to issues of gender inequality and thus more likely to resent aggressive and humiliating acts. On the other hand, non-heterosexual interviewees may also be more open to and accepting of different forms and expressions of sexuality when compared with heterosexual

interviewees. Finally, *relationship status* might also matter. I expect to find less attraction to aggression in pornography among men and women who are in a romantic relationship, perhaps because they are more attuned to the actual feelings and desires of partners in a sexual relationship. Alternatively, the causal direction in such an association could be reversed, where individuals who are interested in aggression may find it harder to find and sustain a steady romantic relationship.

Method

Sampling strategy and recruitment

Since there is no comprehensive list of online pornography viewers, we had to use a non-probability sampling method. While this method limits generalizability, it is still useful in obtaining rich descriptive data, revealing certain trends, and generating hypotheses. It is also well-suited for research that seeks to identify and explain highly specific and complex events, processes, preferences, and views (Tansey, 2007). We used a mix of voluntary and purposive sampling techniques. First, in order to obtain the preliminary list of potential interviewees, we advertised both physical and virtual recruitment ads. These ads invited participants to share their experiences and preferences while watching pornography. The ad did not include any specific language about aggression. We posted printed copies of the recruitment ad in coffee shops, public gathering spaces, recreation centers, universities, and community centers in the city of Montreal. In addition, we posted it to Craigslist, Kijiji, and to several Facebook groups, primarily those of current and former students in several North American universities.

About 90% of the interviewees reported that they became aware of the study online, about half of them through Kijiji or Craigslist and the other half through the various Facebook groups. This partly explains the large share of students in the sample (see below) as well as the relatively wide geographical and national distribution of participants. We recruited individuals over the age of 18 who have watched pornographic videos online at least once per month over the previous year. To encourage participation, we offered each participant a \$20 compensation.

We then applied a theoretically-driven purposive sampling strategy. This strategy was designed to increase variability in theoretically-important factors, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. For example, we sought to reach a roughly balanced number of men and women. Therefore, toward the end of the recruitment process, when we realized that the sample includes more women than men, we gave preference to the recruitment of men who agreed to participate in the study and did not interview some of the women who wished to participate. Similarly, we gave preference in

later stages of the recruitment process to older individuals (over the age of 25), in order to increase representation of this population.

The final sample includes 122 interviewees—61 who identified as women (one of them transgender), 60 who identified as men (one of them transgender), and 1 who identified as gender-diverse. In Table 1 I present some of the key descriptive statistics of the sample of interviewees. Although we spoke with interviewees from a wide variety of countries (28 different countries²) and geographical regions, including substantial representation for interviewees from Europe, South Asia, and East Asia, nearly half of them were Canadian (45.0%). The interviewee list also includes a relatively high share of younger people. Nearly 60% of them were 25 or younger (the average age of the sample was about 25), though it should be noted that more than 60% of Pornhub users are younger than 34. Finally, students (71.3% of all interviewees), and individuals from relatively affluent socioeconomic backgrounds (77.1%) were also over-represented in the sample. Nevertheless, we were able to reach a diverse sample, which captures some of the most theoretically-important features and characteristics that could influence viewers' preferences and attitudes toward aggression in pornography.

Procedure

Following approval from a university research ethics board, all interviews were conducted in either French or English by two highly-skilled and well-trained research assistants. These two languages are spoken by nearly one quarter of the world's population and are official languages in nearly half of the world's nations. Both interviewers were graduate students in their twenties, a fact that helped in establishing rapport and a sense of comfort, as most interviewees were also in their twenties. One of the interviewers was a woman and the other a man, and both interviewed both women and men. Of note, there were no noticeable differences between interviews conducted by the two interviewers, suggesting that their gender did not significantly affect interviewees' responses or their level of rapport and comfort in sharing intimate preferences and experiences. Both research assistants met with the project leader multiple times before beginning to interview to discuss various scenarios and conducted training interviews vetted by the project leader. During the period of the interviews, interviewers continued to meet regularly with the project manager to discuss and resolve various issues that came up during interviews.

² We spoke with interviewees from Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Costa Rica, France, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Korea, Lebanon, Mauritius, Mexico, Pakistan, Peru, Romania, Russia, Singapore, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Syria, the United Kingdom, the United States, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the interviewees' sample ($n = 122$)

	Women ($n = 61$)	Men ($n = 60$)	All ($n = 122^*$)
Mean number of views per month	6.8	15.3	11.4
Mean age	23.9	25.6	24.7
Mean age of first watching pornographic videos	12.6	11.9	12.2
<i>Age categories</i>			
18–19.9	14.8%	0.0%	7.4%
20–24.9	50.8%	51.7%	50.8%
25–29.9	21.3%	36.7%	29.5%
30–34.9	6.6%	6.7%	6.6%
35–39.9	3.3%	1.7%	2.5%
40+	3.3%	3.3%	3.3%
<i>Region of residence (at least until age 18)</i>			
North America	55.8%	53.3%	54.6%
South and Central America	6.6%	5.0%	5.7%
Europe	18.0%	10.0%	13.9%
Middle East	0.0%	5.0%	2.5%
South Asia	9.8%	15.0%	12.3%
East Asia	8.2%	10.0%	9.0%
Africa	1.6%	1.7%	1.7%
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
Caucasian	59.0%	46.7%	52.5%
Latin American	9.8%	6.7%	8.2%
Middle Eastern	1.64%	6.7%	4.1%
East Asian	13.1%	21.7%	18.0%
Southwest Asian	13.1%	15.0%	13.9%
Indigenous American/Canadian	0.0%	1.7%	0.8%
Black	3.3%	1.7%	2.5%
<i>Sexual orientation</i>			
Heterosexual	70.5%	85.0%	77.1%
Homosexual	1.6%	6.7%	4.1%
Bisexual	24.6%	6.7%	15.6%
Queer/pansexual/sexually fluid	3.3%	1.7%	3.3%
<i>Relationship status</i>			
Single	47.5%	58.3%	53.3%
In a relationship	52.5%	41.7%	46.7%
<i>Socioeconomic background</i>			
Low	4.9%	5.0%	4.9%
Medium	21.3%	15.0%	18.0%
High	73.8%	80.0%	77.1%
<i>Education</i>			
High school graduate	6.6%	8.3%	7.4%
Undergraduate degree (completed or in process)	70.5%	71.7%	71.3%
Advanced degree (completed or in process)	23.0%	20.0%	21.3%
<i>Occupation</i>			
Student	70.5%	73.3%	71.3%
Manager	1.6%	0.0%	0.8%
Clerical support	3.3%	1.7%	2.5%
Service and Sales	14.8%	20.0%	18.0%
Independent/business owner	3.3%	1.7%	2.5%
Unemployed/not working	6.6%	3.3%	4.9%

*The overall number of interviewees consists of 61 women, 60 men, and 1 individual who identified as “gender-diverse”

Social desirability and acquiescence bias are always a possibility when conducting survey research and interviews, especially when speaking about such sensitive issues, which often receive social censorship. In an attempt to reduce this bias, both the interviewers and the interviewees were encouraged to avoid revealing their real names or any specific identifying details. All interviews were conducted via Skype audio (without video), in an effort to increase interviewees' sense of confidentiality and encourage them to speak candidly about their preferences, experiences, and views. Indeed, most of the interviewees appeared to be open about their preferences and views, even when these did not seem to conform with conventional preferences and were willing to share them without noticeable reservations. To the extent that social desirability bias still existed, it likely suppressed to some extent interviewees' willingness to report attraction to aggressive content. As such, the analyses may still be underestimating the prevalence of such preferences among the sample.

Interviews lasted between 30 and 120 min. They were recorded (with the consent of the interviewees) and subsequently transcribed, coded and analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the latter, I utilized an open coding strategy, which is useful in gaining a rich understanding of under-researched phenomena (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I therefore derived the codes directly from the text, identifying preliminary themes. Upon second examination, I revised the coding scheme by renaming, re-categorizing, and combining certain themes. I then used this coding scheme to carefully code each of the 122 interviews, revising the coding scheme as I continued in the research process.

Interviewees were presented with some specific questions, but were also allowed to speak more broadly about other experiences with sexuality and views about pornography. When asking about aggression, we first requested interviewees to tell us which acts they considered to be aggressive and under what circumstances. We then also examined preferences using conventional definitions of aggression in recent content analyses of pornographic content (e.g. Bridges et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015). We thus asked viewers whether they at least sometimes found each of the following 12 acts to be arousing: (1) biting; (2) pinching; (3) kicking; (4) pulling hair; (5) hitting of the face; (6) hitting of the body; (7) choking; (8) forced gagging; (9) spanking; (10) sadomasochism; (11) rough handling; (e.g. pushing, shoving, tossing, shaking); and (12) forceful penetration (vaginal or anal) with penis, hand, or another object, with an apparent intent to cause pain/discomfort. To reduce ambiguity, we asked about each of these acts separately (please see the full interview guide in the "Appendix").

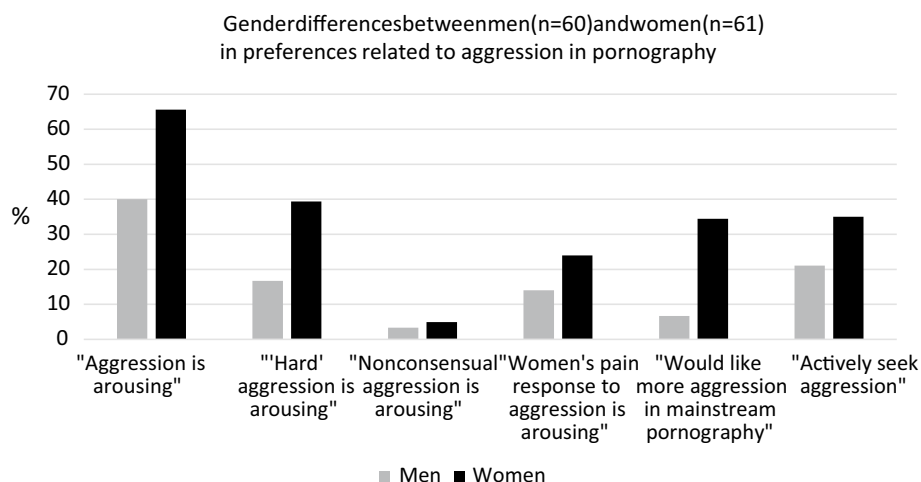
Coding and analysis

The female research assistant entered the responses to questions with a clear answer (e.g. responses to demographic questions and questions with either a positive or a negative response) into a spreadsheet. In particular, we coded binary variables for each of the six questions regarding aggression presented below (1 = yes). The project leader then went over all of the coding, paying particular attention to the questions regarding aggression, to verify the validity of the coding. Since questions with a very clear answer, inter-coder agreement between the research assistant's coding and that of the project leader was very high (over 97% for all of the variables), with Kappa statistic scores higher than 0.84, indicating excellent agreement. We resolved any disagreements that did occur (in the very few cases where interviewees did not provide a completely explicit answer to a question) through discussing them among the research team and reaching a consensus.

- (1) Do you at least sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by *any* acts of aggression in pornography (see list above)?
- (2) Do you at least sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by any "*harder*" acts of aggression in pornography (defined as choking, forced gagging; kicking, hitting of the face or body parts, rough handling, and sadomasochism)?
- (3) Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by *non-consensual* aggression in pornography?
- (4) Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by women in pornography expressing pain/discomfort in response to aggression?
- (5) Would you like to see more aggression in pornographic videos readily available to you?
- (6) Do you actively search for aggression in pornographic videos?

I present both quantitative and qualitative analyses. First, the relatively large number of interviews and the precise questions facilitate quantitative comparisons between different groups, including a logistic regression analysis to determine which interviewees' characteristics might be associated with their opinions and viewing preferences. In addition to the quantitative analysis, I also performed a qualitative analysis, identifying common themes coming from the interviews and exploring the particular ways in which interviewees think about aggression in pornography. This qualitative analysis allowed an exploration not only the differences between groups but also the more nuanced explanations for these differences and the ways in which they may have differed according to interviewees' characteristics.

Fig. 1 Gender differences between men ($n = 60$) and women ($n = 61$) in preferences related to aggression in pornography



Results

All of the study participants reported encountering aggression in some of the videos that they watched. However, most interviewees believed that the context of the act mattered and many of them did not consider acts that were clearly consensual as aggressive. For example, while 30.33% of the participants considered hair pulling to be aggressive, the rest of the interviewees either considered hair pulling as not aggressive (23.77%) or said that it depended on the context and would not be considered aggression if the video conveyed clear consent. In contrast, half of the interviewees considered gagging to be an aggressive act, regardless of the context, while most of the other interviewees said that it might be considered non-aggressive when there was clear consent.

The most prominent differences were associated with gender. Slightly more than half of the interviewees (53.3%) in the sample reported that they enjoyed at least some aggression in pornography. However, as shown in Fig. 1, while only 40% of the men reported enjoying some forms of aggression, nearly two thirds of the women (65.6%) said that they enjoyed aggression ($\chi^2 = 7.940$; $p = .005$). Furthermore, while only 16.7% of the men declared that they enjoyed “harder” aggression, this figure was significantly higher (39.3%) among women ($\chi^2 = 7.700$; $p = .006$). Only 5 interviewees reported enjoying nonconsensual aggression, 3 of them women. In addition, 24% of the women in the study reported that they found it arousing when women in pornography expressed pain in response to aggression, compared with 14% of the men, though this difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 1.624$; $p = .202$). Less than 20% of the interviewees stated that they would like to see more aggression in mainstream pornography. However, the share of women who expressed this preference was significantly higher, with 34.4% of all women interviewed, than that of men, with only 6.7% of the men interviewed ($\chi^2 = 14.219$; $p < .001$). Finally, women were also more likely to declare that they actively

sought for aggression in pornographic videos, with 35.0% of them saying that they sought aggressive pornography, compared with 21.1% of the men, though this difference was also not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.808$; $p = .094$).

In Table 2 I present results from a multivariate regression analysis, in which I explore the effects of various demographic factors, including gender, on the most common expressions of viewers’ reactions and preferences to aggression in pornography. These include enjoying some types of aggression (Model 1), enjoying “harder” aggression (Model 2), wanting to see more aggression in mainstream pornographic videos (Model 3), and actively seeking for aggression (Model 4). The results show that when controlling for other covariates, gender remains the most consistent predictor of one’s preferences. Women were significantly more likely to report enjoying aggression (including harder forms of aggression), wanting to see more of it in mainstream videos, and actively searching for videos including aggression. Most other variables, including age, country, sexual orientation, and one’s level of socioeconomic background and education were not significant predictors of these preferences. Interviewees who were in a relationship were less likely to find hard aggression arousing and to actively seek aggressive videos. Conversely, higher usage of pornography websites (a higher number of visits per month) was associated with a higher likelihood to seek aggressive materials and those introduced to sex at a younger age were also more likely to report enjoying at least some forms of aggression.

How do women view aggression in pornography?

While most of the women in the sample reported that they at least sometimes found some forms of aggression to be arousing, nearly all of them (95%) said that they did not enjoy nonconsensual aggression. The qualitative analysis clarifies that most of the women in the sample who enjoyed aggression were able to enjoy it because they believed both partners

Table 2 Logistic regression predictors of interviewees' preferences toward aggression

	Model 1: find some aggression arousing	Model 2: find "hard" aggression arousing	Model 3: would like to see more aggression in mainstream videos	Model 4: actively seek aggression
Gender (woman = 1)	3.88 (2.74)**	3.58 (2.29)*	16.55 (3.64)***	3.59 (2.25)*
Age	0.93 (− 1.76)	0.97 (− 0.72)	0.95 (− 1.03)	0.97 (− 0.83)
Age when introduced to pornography	0.85 (− 1.84)	0.93 (− 0.87)	0.87 (− 1.36)	0.96 (− 0.46)
Number of views per month	1.03 (1.15)	1.00 (0.01)	1.04 (1.29)	1.05 (1.87)
Country (non-Western = 1)	0.77 (− 0.54)	0.73 (− 0.58)	1.83 (0.99)	1.37 (0.60)
Sexual orientation (non-heterosexual = 1)	2.24 (1.41)	1.47 (0.70)	0.45 (− 1.20)	2.05 (1.32)
In a relationship	0.58 (− 1.23)	0.28 (− 2.55)*	0.67 (− 0.74)	0.35 (− 2.14)*
Model chi square (<i>p</i> value)	27.02 (0.0014)	18.65 (0.0284)	26.21 (0.0019)	17.61 (0.0400)
Pseudo r squared value	0.1723	0.1359	0.2185	0.1314

All coefficients are odds ratios, with two-tailed *t* statistics in parentheses. The four dependent variables were all correlated to some degree, ranging from $\phi=0.3238$ (for the correlation between wanting to see more aggression and actively seeking aggression) to $\phi=0.5965$ (for the correlation between finding aggression arousing and finding "hard" aggression arousing)

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001

in the video had at least some degree of control over the situation and were able to avoid acts of aggression in which they did not wish to participate.

While this is an important distinction, feminist scholars of pornography have argued throughout the years that the concept of consent within pornography is problematic and often hard to identify with any degree of certainty (Brownmiller, 1975; DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2015; Dworkin, 1989). According to Bridges et al. (2010), the genre of pornography often requires performers to express enjoyment following just about any act or situation. Considering these powerful expectations, they argued, almost no act would be considered aggressive under a definition that requires a target to clearly show displeasure, rendering sexual aggression invisible.

As such, it is important to further explore and try to understand the differences reported above between men and women in their pronounced enjoyment of representations of aggression in pornography. The following complimentary qualitative analysis brings the voices of the interviewees and their actual perceptions and meaning-making regarding aggression in pornography. To maintain the interviewees' confidentiality, all the names mentioned below are pseudonyms.

About one third of the women in the study initially declared that they did not enjoy any acts of aggression in pornographic videos. However, even within this group, *most* of the women later on confided that they *did* sometimes enjoy viewing acts like spanking or hair pulling; they just did not perceive these acts as aggressive when they were clearly consensual and seemingly pleasurable to all performers. For example, Perry, 40, a customer service manager from Canada, said that she does not enjoy aggression and tries to actively avoid it: "I'll see words like 'extreme' or 'hardcore', and I'll avoid them off the bat." But she also said that "certain scenes can be arousing, I guess, like hair pulling, or when

one of the two takes charge kind of forcefully." Some of the women interviewed said that they did not find aggression arousing, but that they also did not find it offensive and they could see why others enjoy it as long as it is consensual (e.g., Bailey, 28, a Canadian yoga instructor; Aisha, 18, a student from Pakistan; and Cindy, 26, a retail worker from China). Others had a more negative view of aggression. Josephine, 24, a customer relations agent from France, told us: "I feel bad when I watch [aggression]... I think it gives a bad image of women, especially to younger women... [It] can condition girl[s] to being treated badly and with violence by men."

However, as noted above, about two thirds of the women said that they regularly enjoyed at least some aggression and more than half of the women in this group (those who said that they enjoy aggression) were also aroused by "harder" forms of aggression. Of note, most of them said that they had an attraction to aggressive acts or dominance prior to watching pornography and they did not feel that viewing pornography had changed their preferences. Tamika, 20, a student from Tunisia, said she liked "choking, spanking... [, and] dom/sub situations." Bianca, 21, a student from Canada, liked "seeing spanking and hair pulling; gagging too... I also like facials [and] getting tied up; also when someone is being held down... I'd like to see more women choking guys or pulling guys' hair." Similarly, Xenia, 19, a student from the United States said that she enjoyed "facials, gagging, choking, and slapping... Humiliation depends on mood. Sometimes I like it; sometimes it grosses me out." Such accounts were very common. Chloe, 26, an entrepreneur and business owner from France:

Facials can be something looked for. I find spanking, spitting, choking, and facials all okay and arousing. It depends on the context... I would like to see more

aggressive acts. My favorite website has become too soft and erotic. I would like to see more spanking, choking, and slapping.

Some of the women who said they liked aggression named BDSM videos as their favorite genre. Lisa, 18, an American student of Chinese origin told us: “I like BDSM; I don’t mind it as long as it’s consensual... I look up like key terms in Google, then go to PornHub via that. Like ‘BDSM’ I guess, or ‘pain’, or ‘torture’.” Maria, 20, a student from the UK of Hispanic origin, had similar preferences: “I enjoy slapping, spanking, facials, gagging, choking, and hair pulling. I prefer it when a man ejaculates on a woman’s face. I’d say that every time I watch porn, I look for BDSM, or dominance.” Like many others, Mehri, 22, a Canadian student, was attracted primarily to the dominance aspect of aggressive videos: “I like choking, facials, pulling hair. I also like it when guy says ‘you want it’ and she says ‘yes, I do’.” Jennifer, 27, a graduate student from China, was quite specific about her BDSM preferences, although she did not view them as particularly aggressive:

I like BDSM if I’m feeling it. And I like bondage, and spanking, whipping, and just something with paddle, like spanking with paddle... I seek for bondage, spanking, BDSM, or sex toys, but that’s not super aggressive I guess... I occasionally dabble in more aggressive/rape-ier videos, but when I do, my conscience tells me it’s wrong. But usually I want girl to enjoy herself. I don’t really like violent acts that seem to be harming the female in any way. When I started watching porn in China I had to use other sites, like Japanese sites, and there are a lot more unacceptable things there.

Like Jennifer, many of the women in the study who said they enjoyed portrayals of aggression directed at women stressed that they only enjoyed these when they felt the female performer was deriving some pleasure from the act. For example, when asked about her experience with acts of aggression in pornography, Stephanie, 41, a university administrator from Canada, said:

I like it; I love it! Not necessarily rape but I like submission. For me, aggression is exciting and very arousing. I look for facials, hair-pulling, spanking, gagging, all of these acts. I enjoy watching submissive/dominating materials: rape scenarios, aggressive thrusting, when women are pinned down. I find it liberating... I’m aggressive; I like to be dominated. It’s a way to let go... I like to be held forcibly in positions. I like when [the] man is aggressive and dominating and when the woman has to perform stuff.

Stephanie sought BDSM material and enjoyed it. But she was careful to delineate the actions she felt were acceptable

and unacceptable. Although aggression is clearly an integral part of BDSM, these videos also often show commitment to women’s pleasure and wellbeing. Still, similar to Jennifer above, many of the women interviewed felt a sense of shame and ambivalence for enjoying videos that included aggression toward women. For example, Lisa, 18, an American student of Chinese origin, told us: “I like aggression while I see it. But after [I finish watching] there are times when I feel bad that I liked it... I was told to get away from those types [of acts].” Maria, 20, a student from the UK of Hispanic origin, also sometimes felt guilty about her sexual preferences: “After I see it [aggression], I feel sometimes guilt about watching it... Aggression isn’t a good reason to be aroused.” Similarly, Floriane, 22, a Canadian student, told us: “I enjoy dominance, facials, hair pulling, spanking, gagging, [and] binding... I just go into bondage, BDSM, dominant... [But] after [I finish watching, I] sometimes feel a bit bad... I reflect on it and find it problematic.” Melissa, 22, a Canadian student, provides another example for this ambivalence:

[I] search for humiliation or videos related to BDSM. Verbal aggression too I like, like name-calling towards the woman. While I’m [watching I’m] just aroused. But after [I finish] it’s kind of... I like gender equality, so it’s a moral struggle between values and [my] aroused brain... I keep watching and I finish. Then, after, I think it’s probably really bad.”

Of note, Melissa, like many other interviewees, also emphasized that the fact she likes seeing aggression or humiliation in videos does not mean that she would like to also experience these in her own sex life: “Sometimes, when it’s one girl and a lot of men, I enjoy watching it because I know it’s fake. But I’d never do that [in my own sex life]. Or even like extra aggressive dominance. I’d be offended if a partner did that.” Similarly, Floriane said that she would not enjoy in her own sex life some of the acts that she likes watching: “I like cumshots. I wouldn’t want that [in my own sex life], but I like it in porn.” Maria agreed: “extreme pain isn’t something I’d like in life vs porn [where I do enjoy it].” Alani, 34, a government administrator of West Indian decent, who grew up in Canada, shared a similar penchant for aggressive pornography, while stressing that she enjoyed it merely as a fantasy:

I search for forced [sex in pornography]... Gangbang; rape... I look for more submissive stuff, more like dominant males, not in whips ways, more in forceful ways. I don’t like it when [the] woman is more dominant, that’s not my thing... It’s not like I want to be raped. I just like extreme dominance... I like the forcefulness of any acts; someone taking control of another... I watch and am aroused, unless it’s too much, or it feels too real... [My ideal video] would include forced choking,

or using someone as [an] object, even if in real life I don't like that.

These quotes clarify that while most of the women in the study clearly seek and enjoy aggression, the majority of them are mainly aroused by the aspects of being dominated (or, less frequently, dominating others) and letting others take control of the sexual interaction. Aggression for them signals passion, the lack of inhibitions, and letting go, and is thus both liberating and exciting. It often exists as a fantasy, which can be enjoyed precisely because it is limited to pornographic videos and does not permeate real-life sexual interactions and intimate relationships more generally.

Why do most men dislike aggression in pornography?

Much like the women in this study, the large majority of the men in the sample (97%) reported that they did not enjoy nonconsensual aggression. Like most women, the men who reported at least sometimes enjoying acts of aggression were able to enjoy these acts because they believed both partners in the video had at least some degree of control over the situation and were able to avoid acts of aggression in which they did not wish to participate. Still, as the figures presented above show, most of the men did not find aggression, even consensual aggression, to be arousing and the large majority of them wanted to see less of it in videos.

Some men described aggression as “a complete turn-off” (Shawn, 34, a Canadian student). Others found it degrading or demeaning: “[when encountering aggression] I move on. I close the video and find a good one... People don't respect each other; I don't see how people can go that low. I don't understand why you'd like it... I am ashamed of what society makes people do.” (Pierre, 29, a personal assistant from France). Arshan, 28, from India, noted that he actively tried to avoid aggressive pornography: “I find anything involving [acts such as] slapping, gagging, etc. aggressive. I just skip the content and never revert back to it. When I encounter aggressive porn, I just skip it ASAP, and also almost never visit that site [again].”

Ramy, 25, a student from India, explained why he did not enjoy aggression in pornography: “[S]ex is a passion. [It is] about love, feelings, not pain or aggression.” Henry, 20, a student from Hong-Kong, also found aggressive acts uncomfortable:

I avoid aggressive and male-dominating porn because it becomes more uncomfortable for me... I don't like aggression; I personally dislike it. I consider myself a feminist and passionate about gender equality so it bothers me for those reasons... It's a turn off for sure. It sort of disgusts me. It makes me feel that porn needs to evolve in many ways.

Omar, 24, a science student who grew up in both Syria and Saudi Arabia, expressed similar preferences:

I avoid physical aggression. If it pops up, it's a turn off... I will skip [the] video. If it's only one scene, I might skip [the] scene. But if it's too much, I'll change the video... I feel that it's something I don't want to do, I cringe and I don't like it, I wouldn't want to be a part of it. I just skip them.

Of note, even among the minority (40%) of men who said that they did enjoy some acts of aggression in pornography, many still preferred to see fewer videos containing aggression. Craig, 25, a production coordinator from the United States: “I would like to see less aggressive acts. I don't need to see it all over; I can search for it if needed.” Similarly, Kai, 22, a Chinese student, who said that he found acts such as mild spanking, hair-pulling, and gagging arousing, preferred “to see less aggression; it's better.” Khalid, 22, a student from Canada, found aggression arousing when both parties were clearly enjoying the acts. However, he also said that if he could design his ideal video, “it would include intense and intimate, and passionate scenes but no violence or aggression.” James, 22, from the UK, who is currently unemployed, also said that while he enjoyed some BDSM videos, his ideal video would not include these acts: “I don't think so. For me, it's demeaning... If they're [the performers] not super into it, nah, I'll pass.”

Interestingly, however, when asked what their ideal video would look like if they could control its content, a few of the male interviewees said that they would include some aggression in it, *despite* their personal preference for non-aggressive content. Alex, 24, a student from Russia: “I don't really care for them [aggressive acts]. But I guess you gotta have a bit of them, because it's the market.” Similarly, Pierre, 29, a personal assistant from France said:

If I could design my ideal video, maybe it would have some aggression, just because it sells. If it were for me, no aggression would be there... [But] I'm okay with a small amount of aggression. It's easy to skip. Everyone has to be happy.

Exposure to aggressive scenes in pornographic videos brought Barry, 22, a student from Singapore, to question whether he was doing something wrong or having the wrong sexual preferences: “[Watching aggression in pornographic videos] makes me question if I'm not being aggressive enough sometimes. Or if there's a general preference for aggression. I wonder if people like it and whether they are pretending or not.” Much like Barry, Zach, 24, a student from Canada, also said that he disliked aggressive acts, but questioned whether these acts are there because other viewers enjoy watching them.

I'm not an aggressive person, I don't want to hit someone... It's not natural for me... [So when I watch aggressive acts in pornographic videos] I'm thinking: "No, I don't want to see this." But after, I think about how bad it is. I wonder how much of the aggression out there is because people actually like it. Or people just see it all the time [and have become used to it].

Alex, Pierre, Barry, and Zach all seem to believe that while they themselves do not enjoy aggressive content and would prefer not to watch it, many—or perhaps even most—pornography viewers have a preference for such content, as shown by the presence of aggressive acts in many of the videos that they have watched. They are therefore willing to make concessions and include some minor acts of aggression in videos, just to “keep everyone happy,” noting that it is easy to skip such content.

While the majority of the male interviewees said that they did not find aggression arousing and preferred to see fewer portrayals of aggression in mainstream pornographic websites, such preferences were not universal. Ishan, 24, a PhD student from India said that he enjoyed some aggressive acts, particularly when it appeared that female performers were enjoying them:

Sometimes girls want to be slapped, the pain can arouse them. If she wants it, give it to her. There are girls who want it. But I'm not sure if it's an act, or [if] they need to get paid... As long as her expression shows that she wants it, it's okay. Sexuality is very complicated. There's a thin line between pain and pleasure.

Nathan, 40, an administrative coordinator from Canada, elaborated about his preference for “forced fellatio, slapping, dick slapping, anal, and just screaming.” But he also stressed the importance of seeing performers take pleasure in the activity:

If it hurts without being sexually pleasing it has no interest... Sometimes it's too much, so I skip. Otherwise, I get into it. I have to admit though that I feel guilty at the end... I have also seen aggression between two men. I'd say that my main interest in these types of videos is that there is aggression in them, so I'll search specifically for aggression in gay videos. I would use keywords [like] ‘punishment’.

Liang, 22, who emigrated as a child from China to Canada, expressed some similar preferences, saying that he enjoyed “bondage, choking, spanking, hair-pulling, gagging, and facials.” However, he also emphasized avoiding any acts where “it looks like the female is in actual pain”:

That ruins it for me... It's very important. I like to see female enjoying herself; ideally both parties enjoying themselves. I prefer videos that show the woman reach-

ing an orgasm... If the dominant party gets [the] sub to say something, like getting them to say ‘thank you’, that's arousing; it's a show of dominance... I assume and hope I am applying consent correctly. I do my best to see everyone enjoy themselves and that they can stop anytime.

Of note, these interviewees, as well as other men the study (and also many of the women), were attracted to the exploration of the relationship between pleasure and pain in sex. For some, it could be either a man or a woman experiencing these contrasting sensations. They all expressed interest in pornographic videos that included variations of BDSM and all emphasized the importance of both performers enjoying the acts. None of them professed to being interested in the humiliation of women for the sake of it and they all stressed that the explicit or assumed consent of female performers was an important issue for them.

Discussion

This study examined the factors that are associated with viewers' arousal by aggressive pornographic videos. The majority of the interviewees, whether men or women, did not seek aggression in pornography and did not want to see more representations of aggression or pain. However, in contrast to common perceptions among most scholars and pundits, it was women, not men, who were more likely to report an affinity to portrayals of aggression in pornography. When compared to men, the women interviewed were significantly more likely to report becoming aroused by aggressive acts, and more specifically by “hard” aggression. Women were also more likely when compared to the men to report being aroused by female performers' pain in response to aggression, actively seeking aggression, and wanting to see more aggression in mainstream pornography. These results remained significant when controlling for different covariates, while none of these covariates was a consistent predictor of viewers' various preferences.

Implications for theory and future research

The findings do not lend support to the common view that most men who watch pornography online actively seek videos containing aggression. In contrast with long-held views that many men enjoy watching aggression against women (Brownmiller, 1975; DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2015; DeKeseredy & Hall-Sanchez, 2017; Dines, 2010; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Russell, 2000) and that they seek more of it with time (Dodige, 2007; Fradd, 2017; Hilton & Clark, 2011; Paul, 2010), most of the men said that they were not

aroused by aggression, particularly ‘harder’ aggression, and that they did not actively look for it.

These findings echo those reported—though often ignored in the literature—by Loftus (2002), nearly two decades ago, suggesting that most of the men who view pornography do not enjoy watching sexual aggression. The findings regarding the preferences of men in the study are also in line with those of Bogaert (2001), who reported that young men indicated that they were much less likely to watch pornography described as featuring sexual violence than pornography described as featuring other types of erotic scenarios, particularly ones where women express passion and pleasure.

Furthermore, even those men who said that they did enjoy aggression mostly claimed that they would not like to see more of it in mainstream videos. They further emphasized the importance of consent and visible pleasure, particularly by female performers, as well as the thin line between pain and pleasure, noting that they enjoyed seeing performers experiencing and expressing both of these sensations simultaneously. Taken together, these findings stand in contrast to popular theories that suggest that sex, particularly as it is represented in popular pornography, is merely an extension or expression of patriarchy and men’s violent dominance over women (Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988), and that the sexualization of gender inequalities is perhaps the primary reason many men enjoy pornography (Dines, 2010).

As for women who watch pornography, the results of this study echo the findings from research on women’s fantasies, which showed that many women fantasize about sexual domination, submission, and aggression (Bader, 2002; Bártoová et al., 2020; Kahr, 2007; Maltz & Boss, 2001). One recent large study by Lehmilller (2018), who surveyed more than 4000 Americans about their sexual preferences and fantasies, reported that most participants had fantasized about being sexually dominated (93% of women and 81% of men) or dominating someone else (76% of women and 85% of men). Most of them also had fantasies about spanking or whipping a partner (60% of women and 56% of men), receiving pain or punishment (79% of women and 49% of men), and being tied up during sex (85% of women and 73% of men).

As for women’s pornographic preferences, the finding that most of the women expressed dislike for pornography in which women were degraded or exploited is also in line with much of the previous literature (Cowan & Dunn, 1994; Glascock, 2005; Glascock & Preston-Schreck, 2004; Laan et al., 1994). However, these findings also join more recent research that problematizes the notion that all women (or almost all of them) find aggression in pornography to be objectionable or that men are much more likely than women to consume pornography depicting aggression (Hald & Štulhofer, 2016). Chadwick et al. (2018) have challenged common assumptions about women as passive and powerless recipients of

pornographic content and highlighted women’s ability to enjoy pornography while simultaneously experiencing negative affect or conflicting emotions about its content. They also emphasized the powerful tension between sexual pleasure and sexual danger; restriction and agency, a tension which has the potential to enhance fantasy and sexual excitement.

The findings of this study also echo those of the literature on the growing mainstreaming of BDSM practices, particularly in pornography (Langdridge & Barker, 2013; Saunders, 2018). The BDSM genre in pornography is clearly distinguishable from other genres such as “forced sex” (Wilkinson, 2011), as it portrays voluntary and consensual exchanges of dominance and submission between consenting participants (Barker, 2013; Ogas & Gaddam, 2011). The cultural process of BDSM mainstreaming and normalization correlates roughly with the release of E.L. James’ 2012 trilogy *Fifty Shades of Grey* (Tomazos et al., 2017), which sold more than 100 million copies worldwide (Green, 2015) and was particularly successful among female audiences. Along with the success of the *Fifty Shades* enterprise, both demand for and supply of similarly-themed pornography has increased substantially (Pegg, 2018). According to Pegg (2018), this suggests a global cultural shift towards the normalization of BDSM. The voices of the viewers in this study, particularly those of women, seem to reflect the growing demand for and normalization of BDSM practices in pornography. They can also help to explain the success of the *Fifty Shades* enterprise and similar erotic literature and films in recent years, as they showcase that large audiences, particularly among women, have frequent fantasies about BDSM practices and seek such materials.

The tastes and preferences of this rapidly growing audience for pornographic materials have often been ignored, sanctioned, or problematized. Some believe that women who fantasize about being the recipients of aggression or dominance by others (be it men or other women) are a small minority, perhaps victims of former sexual abuse, and/or victims of ideologies and worldviews shaped by male patriarchy. Indeed, former research has suggested that women who suffered negative and/or traumatic events were more likely to have forceful sexual fantasies (Shulman & Home, 2006) view pornography as acceptable (Broman, 2003) and to be attracted to BDSM practices (Hempel, 2012). Similarly, Romito and Beltramini (2011) reported that women who were exposed to family psychological violence and to sexual violence were significantly more likely to watch pornography, especially violent pornography than those who had not been exposed. These findings may account, at least in part, for the relatively greater attraction found among female participants in this study toward aggressive pornography. Of note, study participants were not explicitly asked about past traumatic experiences, though some of them brought these up of their own volition. However, since women and girls

tend to experience greater degrees of sexual violence and abuse (Barth et al., 2013), it is possible that these experiences have contributed to shaping their pornography viewing preferences.

Regardless of the origins of some women's attraction toward aggressive pornographic content, I believe that the common tendency to ignore, belittle, sanction, or stigmatize these preferences is problematic. Such responses promote moral judgement and stigma, resulting in feelings of guilt and shame among women who hold a preference for viewing aggression or acts of dominance in pornography. Indeed, women who had such preferences often felt discomfort and guilt about them. While most of the women in the study reported enjoying at least some acts of aggression, many of them also expressed embarrassment or shame because of these preferences, citing both common social norms and tensions between their own conflicting beliefs. The latter correspond with more nuanced understandings of women's attitudes toward sexuality and pornography, emphasizing tensions and conflictual emotions, as women might simultaneously experience pleasure and excitement alongside danger, fear, and other negative emotions (Chadwick et al., 2018; Vance, 1984).

It is important, of course, to remain aware of the many voices and preferences expressed by women (and men) in this study and be careful not to conclude that women's right to enjoy fantasies and depictions of aggression and dominance dictates a necessity to do so (Saunders, 2018). Yet, it is also important not to ignore or trivialize what women are telling us about their preferences and experiences and allow both women and men to explore various sexual fantasies without judgement and guilt. In the tradition of feminist thought and research, we should truly listen to what people are saying and respect their framing of and knowledge about their experiences, rather than merely rely on our own preconceptions.

Strengths and limitations

This study has several notable strengths. It is the first systematic study that focuses specifically on viewers' preferences and views about aggression in pornography. We were able to interview a substantial number of men and women from a variety of countries and representing a diverse set of sexual orientations. The analysis is able to offer a mix of quantitative results with an in-depth investigation into viewers' emotions and ambiguities related to the pornographic content they consume. Moreover, many of the findings appear counterintuitive or stand in contrast to prevalent arguments about the preferences of women and men related to pornography, thus challenging some of the common views about the industry and what different viewers seek in it.

However, it is also important not to overgeneralize the findings of this study. First, younger individuals, students,

individuals from a higher socioeconomic background, and Westerners were over-represented in the sample. In addition, interviewees from non-Western countries may not represent the viewership in their country, as they were mostly relatively well-educated and all spoke English or French. While any attempt to assess the preferences of those who were not represented in the sample remains speculative, it is possible that more conservative audiences and those with less education would have reported to be less attracted to aggressive pornographic content (though such reports may not always be genuine and may be highly influenced by social desirability bias).

Further caution is required regarding non-significant findings from the regression analysis, given the limited number of participants in the study, which resulted in limited statistical power to detect potential differences. In particular, I did not find a significant effect for place of residence (Western vs. non-Western) and for sexual orientation, despite having considerable heterogeneity in these two variables. I could also not find an effect for age, though here there was relatively less heterogeneity, particularly in terms of interviews with older viewers (over the age of 30). Future research, targeting a larger sample size (for example, using questionnaires), should therefore further explore the role of these factors in influencing viewers' attraction to and arousal by aggressive content.

As for the main finding of this study, it is important to be careful about what the difference between men and women actually entails. First, differential reporting is always possible. Is possible that given the current social atmosphere, in the wake of the MeToo movement, at least some of the men in this study with felt uncomfortable to share their actual views and preferences for fear that these will be judged as misogynistic or as condoning sexual assault. However, while this could certainly be the case, the reverse is also possible, as the women in the study often expressed some embarrassment and shame when talking about preferences for aggressive content. It is therefore possible that at least some of these women held back and did not fully share such preferences for fear of being judged.

In addition, while the sample included men and women from different ethnicities, coming from various countries around the world, with diverse sexual orientations, occupations, and relationship statuses, the sample cannot be described as representative of all pornography viewers. Most notably, viewers from North America, students (and those with higher education), and viewers coming from a higher socioeconomic background were overrepresented in this sample. And while the analysis did not show that any of these factors significantly affected one's preferences for aggression, it is possible that results would have looked somewhat different with a more representative sample of viewers.

Another potential concern for generalization comes from participants' self-selection into the study. On the one hand, it is possible that both the men and the women who volunteered to participate in this study were different than those who chose not to participate. For example, the former group might be more open about their sexuality or more willing to entertain alternative forms of sexuality (including ones that contain aggression). On the other hand, most of the interviewees had a high level of education and many of them expressed commitment to gender equality and accepted or endorsed feminist ideas. As such, it is also possible that pornography viewers who were not represented in this study would be less bothered by portrayals of aggression in pornography when compared to interviewees in the current study.

The findings of this study should also not be generalized to all women (or to all men). While studies show that most men, especially in the West, are consumers of online pornography, this is probably still not the case for most women, despite their growing share among viewers (PornHub, 2019). It is possible that women who find aggression arousing in the first place are relatively more interested in visual representations of sexuality. It is also possible that pornography viewing itself shapes women's preferences. That is, ongoing exposure to portrayals of aggression in online pornography might shape viewers' tastes and increase the likelihood that they will enjoy watching these acts in the future. However, it is important to note that I did not find clear support for this in the interviews. In fact, most of the interviewees who claimed that aggression was sometimes arousing also said that they had an attraction to aggressive acts or dominance prior to watching pornography and did not feel that viewing had changed their preferences.

Finally, it is important not to conclude that many or most women (or men) are likely to seek or enjoy aggression in their own sex lives. The findings do not provide any evidence for such an inference. In fact, many of the women who stated that they were aroused by aggression in pornography also emphasized that it was the visual representation of a fantasy that allowed them to feel aroused, while at the same time maintaining a sense of comfort and safety. Many of them clearly stressed that they would not want to experience or try the acts they enjoyed on the screen in their own sex life and the same was also true for many of the men interviewed here.

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Code availability Interviews cannot be shared as they contain potentially identifying information. Coded data and STATA code will be shared as an online appendix.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Not applicable.

Appendix: Interview Guide

Part 1: Demographics

1. Obtain individual's: age, gender identification, ethnicity, immigrant status, sexual orientation/identity, relationship status, habituation status (e.g. with parents, alone, with a friend), occupation, education/income (if not current students), and parents' occupation/income/education). Where did you see ad for this study?

Part 2: Past/Early Experiences with Pornography

1. Could you tell me about the first (or the earliest that you can remember) time you *watched* porn? What age were you? (With whom did you watch it? What were your thoughts before, during, and after? What did you *think* and *feel* about the experience?)
 - a. *Note for interviewer: Differences/contradictions or overlaps between thoughts about porn and emotional reactions to porn?*
2. Thinking about your earliest experiences with porn, did anything stand out for you? (probe: was anything exciting? Invigorating? Gross? Humiliating? Arousing? Boring?)

Part 3: Current Experiences with Pornography

1. How frequently do you watch pornographic materials? When was the last time you watched pornography? Where do you typically watch it?
 - i. Which websites?
2. Could you describe the "process" of how you navigate the website(s) you visit?
3. What type of pornography do you prefer to watch?
 - a. Are there certain aspects that you look for? That you avoid? (Probe: categories, tags, scenarios)
 - b. Do you alter pornography in some way while you watch? (e.g. fast-forwarding, rewinding, stopping, skipping, muting)
 - c. Do you watch it by yourself?

- i. If someone watches porn with someone else, ask about frequency of co-viewing vs solo viewing; pre- and antecedents to shared viewing; etc.

Part 4: Aggression & Consent [remind interviewee that everything is confidential and that you understand the sensitivity of the topic—iterate that they can skip questions at any time. Also make note of any gendered patterns to answers in this section].

We'll now move on to discuss aggression in particular:

1. How do you define aggression in the context of pornography? (i.e. What makes you think of something as aggressive?) (*Prompts: could be verbal, physical, contextual, or something else*)
 - a. What acts would be included as aggressive (prompt if needed: facials, hair-pulling, spanking, gagging, slapping on face, choking, etc.)?
 2. Have you encountered pornography that features some sort of physical or verbal aggression? How frequently do you encounter these materials?
 3. Do you sometimes enjoy watching aggressive porn? If so, which acts do you enjoy seeing in porn?
 4. * Ask specifically about each of the following acts:
 - a. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching spanking?
 - b. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching biting?
 - c. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching pinching?
 - d. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching forced gagging?
 - e. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching choking?
 - f. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching kicking?
 - g. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching hitting face of body?
 - h. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching rough handling (e.g. pushing, shoving, tossing, shaking)?
 - i. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching facials?
 - j. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching slapping on face?
 - k. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching hair pulling?
 - l. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching BDSM?
 - m. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by *non-consensual* aggression in pornography?
 - n. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by forceful penetration (vaginal or anal) with penis, hand, or another object, with an apparent intent to cause pain/discomfort?
5. How important is it for you to see the woman in the video enjoying herself? Do you prefer to watch videos where women express clear pleasure at the acts they are performing? Is it important whether this pleasure seems genuine or not?
 6. How important is it to see the women reach orgasm? Do you prefer such videos?
 7. How important is it to see the men reach an orgasm?
 8. Where would you prefer the men to ejaculate (e.g. in the vagina; on the face; in the mouth; on a particular body part)?
 9. Do you like to watch anal penetration? If so, do you prefer it to vaginal penetration?
 10. Do you prefer the camera to focus on the woman, the man, or both?
 11. Is it arousing for you to sometimes see women express pleasure in response to aggression?
 12. Is it arousing to sometimes see them express pain/suffering in response to aggression? If so, in which situations/acts/scenarios/categories?
 13. Do you like it when women take charge of the situation or do you prefer them to play a submissive role?
 14. Do you actively seek aggressive materials?
 - a. If so, how often? What kinds? And how? (e.g. titles that convey aggression; categories that might feature aggression)
 15. How do you respond when you encounter aggression in pornography? (*Note for interviewer: Differences/contradictions or overlaps between thoughts about porn and emotional reactions to porn.*)
 - a. What do you do/*think/feel* when encountering aggression or “humiliation” in a pornographic video (e.g. skip; still watch; curious; aroused)?
 16. What types of aggressive acts do you find “acceptable” or “arousing”, if at all? (*Probe about specific types of acts from our definition of aggression, going from spanking to hitting or gagging*)
 17. Do you think that the aggression you see (if any) in pornography impacts your life?
 - a. (*If YES*) How?
 - b. (*If NO*) Why not?

18. In what ways, if at all, do you think that the aggression you see (if any) in pornography impacts your intimate partner(s)? (if participant has a partner who is aware of their porn watching)
19. In what ways, if at all, do you think that the aggression you see (if any) in pornography impacts your intimate relationship(s) or sexual encounters?
 - a. *Probe: Can you think of elements that you've gotten from pornography (or that your partner got from pornography) that you or your partner have wanted to try? In what ways (if at all) has this impacted your sex life? Your relationships and/or sexual encounters?*
20. What are things you enjoy seeing in porn that you don't enjoy in real life and vice versa
21. If you could design/direct your own "ideal" video, would it include any aggressive/hard sex acts?
 - a. If so, which ones?
22. Regarding the selection of videos in your favorite porn site, would you like to see more/less/the same amount of videos containing aggressive or arguably "humiliating" acts? What type of acts would you like to see more/less of? (Probe with examples: facials, anal, gagging, spanking, etc.)

Part 5: Sexed and Porn

1. How do you think, if at all, have your experiences with porn helped/inform your knowledge of sexual practices?
2. Do you think there is a direct link between porn and sex education? If so how and in which ways?
3. Specifically, with sexual consent, did porn play a role in your conceptualization of sexual consent?
4. Do you think porn helped/ hindered your understanding of sexual consent?
5. Do you think porn offers realistic portrayals of consent being given?
6. Do you think you implicitly/explicitly internalize the scenarios that you see, particularly surrounding consent?

Part 9: Wrap-Up

Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to discuss?

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