# "My iPhone Changed My Life": How Digital Technologies Can Enable Women's Consumption of Online Sexually Explicit Materials

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**Abstract** Digital technologies continue to change the ways women can access and consume sexual materials online, including pornography. Yet, limited research has considered the possibilities of digital technologies to enhance women's access and consumption of online pornographic materials. In this paper, we use a cyberfeminist lens to examine women's experiences consuming online sexually explicit materials, which most women defined as pornography including videos and images. In particular, we consider the ways women who identify as porn consumers can use digital technologies to enable and enhance their consumption of these pornographic materials. Drawing on qualitative, in-depth interviews with 11 women, our findings illustrate the ways women can use digital technologies to consume pornography online in ways that help them to fulfill their sexual needs, embrace and explore their sexual selves, connect in sexual relationships, and normalize their sexual desires.

**Keywords** Cyberfeminism · Pornography · Consumption · Digital technologies

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## Introduction

The internet has become a context where sexually explicit material (SEM)—including pornography—is pervasive. Digital technologies have made sexual content more visible and accessible in mainstream culture than ever before (Attwood 2009) and consumers of online sexually explicit materials have been shown to not only represent a significant portion of the population in Western countries (Castleman 2016, November 3; Perrin et al. 2008), but to also include a growing proportion of women users (Carey 2011, April 7; McKee et al. 2008). For instance, Smits (2016) suggested women represent one of the fastest growing groups of online pornography consumers. Lending support to this suggestion, de Cadenet (2015, October 19) found 31% of women reported watching pornography every week and 90% reported accessing pornographic content online. Similarly, Albright (2008) found in a study of 15,246 respondents in the Unites States that 75% of men and 41% of women reported purposefully viewing pornography online. These studies illustrate that there is a growing demand for online pornography, and women are making up a larger segment of the porn consumer-base (Penley et al. 2013).

Yet, despite the rise in both access to and use of sexual content by women, to date, much of the research on pornography consumption continues to focus predominantly on men's consumption. Toward this end, Spracklen (2015) noted one of the biggest forms of internet leisure, for men, is masturbating to pornography. Given this focus, the ways in which women are consuming this content online remains somewhat veiled, and hence, not well understood (Attwood 2009), even though they represent a growing group of consumers. As such, there is a need to consider more closely the experiences of women who actively consume pornography to more fully understand the implications of their consumption. Using a cyberfeminist lens, the purpose of this paper is to examine the ways women consume sexually explicit material online, focusing specifically on women's experiences who identify as online pornography consumers. In particular, we consider the possibilities for women's online pornographic consumption enabled by using digital technologies. Most broadly, we define pornography as material (printed or visual) that explicitly features sexual activity for the purpose of sexual arousal and stimulation. However, in keeping with our feminist lens, we let the perspectives and experiences of the female participants direct the specific definitions and examples of pornography. To set the foundation for this paper, we turn our attention first to looking at the ways pornography consumption has been taken up and debated in the feminist literature and broader porn studies literature over time.

## Literature Review

Feminist debates on pornography are highly divisive in North America (Ciclitira 2004; Penley et al. 2013), with some feminists taking an anti-pornography position and others taking a pro-sex position. This divide, as Penley et al. (2013) explained, "emerged out of a debate between feminists about the role of sexualized

representation in society and grew into a full-scale divide that has lasted over three decades" (p. 10). Feminists who take an anti-pornography perspective have critiqued pornography for having negative impacts for women's sexuality and lives (Dines 2010). They consider pornography as fundamentally oppressive to women (Penley et al. 2013), and ultimately dangerous, as it objectifies, dehumanizes, and depersonalizes its subjects, many of whom are women (Attwood 2005; Smith and Attwood 2014). Feminists who take this position are also concerned that pornography can undermine "traditional values of marriage, family, and monogamy by showcasing sexual freedom, thus setting the stage for sexual liberalism and 'amoral' or 'irresponsible' sexual behavior" (Döring 2009, p. 1093).

Anti-pornography feminists have voiced concern for the rise in access and availability of sexual materials available online. Their concern stems from the potential harms or risks to women from online sexual activities (Döring 2009). For instance, online pornography can increase the amount of pressure women feel to engage in and perform different sexual acts represented in pornography. Online pornography can also lead to women having low body-image and heterosexual men having expectations of women's bodies that are unrealistic (Albright 2008). For instance, Shaw (1999) illustrated the ways women can experience negative impacts on self-image by consuming sexualized images of women's bodies. Shaw (1999) discussed how pornography materials have the potential to impact "women negatively by making them feel inadequate about their own bodies, thus exacerbating dissatisfaction with their appearance and loss of self esteem" (p. 209). This impact is particularly true since many porn stars' bodies may not be representative of "real bodies," due to cosmetic surgeries such as breast augmentation and labiaplasty to enhance their sex appeal (Penny Light and Parry 2016).

Moreover, a study by Stewart and Szymanski (2012) that looked at how women were impacted by a male partner's problematic consumption of pornography, found women's self-esteem, relationship quality, and sexual satisfaction were affected negatively by their partner's consumption. Similarly, Szymanski et al. (2015) found for young couples in a heterosexual relationship, that men's reported pornography use led to a decreased level of relationship satisfaction. Moreover, they found men's consumption of pornography in these relationships also contributed to women experiencing greater levels of psychological distress.

Given many of these concerns, Dines (2010) argued sexuality has been hijacked by pornography and this has negatively influenced understandings of culture, gender, identity, relationships, and intimacy. As these examples illustrate, anti-porn feminists view consumption of SEM online, and pornography, more specifically, as socially dangerous to women (Attwood 2005). Yet, pornography, as Smith and Attwood (2014) illustrated, "is NOT a neutral topic" (p. 8). In particular, focusing solely on the dangers of pornography, as a critical approach to pornography (Smith and Attwood 2014), fails to consider how women's sexuality might benefit from women's engagement with SEM (Smith 2007, 2010). Penley et al. (2013) explained,

> Claiming that explicit sexual representations are nothing but gender oppression means that pornography's portrayal of explicit sex acts is a form of

absolute discipline and subjugation for women. Within this frame, women who watch, study or work in pornography bear the mark of false consciousness – as if they dabble in fire while ignoring the risk of burning. (p. 13–14)

Pro-pornography or sex-positive feminists consider the potential value of SEM, including and pornography—for women's lives (Attwood 2005). Early work taking this position by Juffer (1998) examined the possibilities of women's access to SEM, including erotic fiction, sexual self-help books, videos for couples, and lingerie catalogues. This work was particularly influential in drawing attention to the expanding landscape of women's consumption of SEM and encouraging feminists to pay more attention to understanding the ways women access and consume pornography in their everyday lives, when previously, little to no research has considered women's experiences consuming SEM.

Since then, several studies have surfaced that have explored in more depth the ways in which women can and do consume SEM, including pornography (cf. Albright 2008; Chowkhani 2016; Ciclitira 2004; Neville 2015; Sanders-McDonagh 2015). For example, Chowkhani (2016), in her study examining women's experiences consuming pornography in urban India, found that women can gain greater acceptance of their sexuality, their bodies, and their sexual desires by watching pornography. However, these benefits of consumption were countered for women in her study with the potential risks associated with their consumption, including the impact to their reputation if their consumption was made public.

In her ethnographic research Sanders-McDonagh (2015), examined the ways women consume pornography in the form of public sex shows in Amsterdam. She argued that focusing on the ways these pornographic spaces and practices can be conceptualized as solely for men, fails to consider the ways women can also be active and desiring consumers of pornography. In particular, her work draws attention to the importance of considering the ways contextual factors, not simply content, may impact women's consumption of pornography.

Parry and Penny Light (2013), in their examination of women's consumption of the popular book series, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, found women consumed erotica as part of their leisure through digital technologies, including e-readers and social networking. They also found using digital technologies for consumption enabled women to consume the books in private. This work has brought attention to the ways women can consume erotica online using digital technologies and the ways digital technologies can enable and enhance women's access to this type of SEM. However, research remains limited as to how and why women adopt new digital technologies to consume pornography online, more specifically, and the implications of their consumption (Attwood 2005; Döring 2009).

This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature. We argue greater attention needs to be paid to understanding how women are consuming pornography online and the implications of their consumption, particularly for women who identify as porn consumers. Although we recognize women can experience limitations when consuming pornography online, we have chosen to focus this paper on exploring the possibilities of women's consumption enabled through digital technologies. More specifically, the research questions explored in this paper include: How do women

use digital technologies to consume pornography online? In what ways do digital technologies enable women's consumption of online pornography?

## Theoretical Orientation

This paper is guided by a cyberfeminist theoretical orientation. Feminists who use cyberfeminism represent diversity in terms of the theories they use, the debates they engage in, the practices they explore, and the politics they employ (Daniels 2009; Flanagan and Booth 2002). Indeed, there are a plurality of ways cyberfeminism it is taken up and approached by feminists (Daniels 2009). Richards (2011) noted, because 'cyberfeminsm relies on plurality, fluidity, and ironic play' (p. 10), it is more accurately described in its plural form, cyberfeminism(s) (Daniels 2009; Richards 2011

Despite resisting categorization, Daniels (2009) noted the common thread apparent in all cyberfeminist work is an interest in understanding the relationship between gender and digital technologies. Yet, Richards (2011) pointed out, simply exploring the ties between gender and digital technologies 'does not create a cyberfeminist' (p. 10). Instead, she continued, "cyberfeminists engage in the nexus of gender and digital technologies in a manner that is subversive while playful, hopeful even if hostile" (p. 10). While cyberfeminist research can (and often does) include critiques about equality in cyberspace (Flanagan and Booth 2002), it can also consider the possibilities of technology to *enhance* women's lives and the "innovative ways women are using digital technologies to re-engineer their lives" (Daniels 2009, p. 103). With these ideas in mind, in this paper we utilize a cyberfeminist theoretical lens to examine how women can use digital technologies to enable and enhance their consumption of online pornography. We shift next to detailing the methods we used to collect and analyze the data, before sharing our findings.

## Methods

Participants were recruited for this study using purposeful sampling. This type of sampling approach is used to collect information-rich data to fuel greater insights and deeper understandings of a phenomenon (Patton 2002). More specifically, criterion based sampling, as a form of purposeful sampling, was used to recruit women who were open to speaking about their sexuality and who were also consumers of online SEM, including pornography. If women met the criteria, the study was open to them regardless of their racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual identities, socio-economic statuses, religions, etc. Participants were recruited through a sexual workshop centre in Toronto, Canada that is focused on providing a safe and comfortable environment for women to explore their sexuality. Several women who participated in the study passed on the information about the study to other women in their lives who they thought might be interested in participating. In this way, snowball sampling was also used to recruit participants.

For this paper, we analyzed transcripts from 11 interviews with women, ranging from 23 to 47 years of age. We selected these eleven specifically as these participants focused their interviews on their consumption of online pornography, both images and videos, as opposed to some other areas related to SEM consumption (e.g., explicit educational materials) explored in the larger study. Still images, fan fiction, explicit television shows, pornographic videos (primarily accessed online using websites or 'tube' streaming sites, such as YouPorn or XHamster) and written materials (e.g., primarily books and fan fiction) were most frequently mentioned as types of sexually explicit types of materials consumed. The participant profile represented diversity in terms of sexual identities, relationship status, employment status, race and ethnicity, education levels, and household incomes. More specifically, participants represented a wide variety of sexual identities including heterosexual, lesbian, pansexual, fluid, and bisexual. A number of women identified as single, but a few women were in committed relationships (married or common law). Most women were employed (although not all) in a variety of careers including education (both teachers and students), manufacturing, birthing professions, hospitality, administrative, sport and recreation, and retail and service industries. Two participants had children. Most of the participants identified as Caucasian, but others self-identified as mixed race. The education levels of participants ranged from a high school diploma to completion of a doctoral degree. The household incomes of participants ranged from $10,000 to over $80,000.

In-depth interviews were used to collect the data for this paper since they are focused on gaining rich data about specific life experiences (Hesse-Biber 2007). A research assistant, trained to conduct in-depth, conversational interviews, was hired to conduct the interviews. Each interview lasted on average between 60 and 90 min. The interviews explored pornography and digital engagement across participants' sexual histories and sexual practices, as well as their feelings/attitudes about sexual culture, and sexual well-being.

The interviews were then transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcripts. Schwandt (2007) noted, thematic analysis is an exploratory approach whereby researchers create 'codes (marks or indexes) sections of a text (e.g., a transcript, field notes, and documents) according to whether they appear to contribute to emerging themes' (p. 291). When analyzing the data, we focused on understanding the women's experiences consuming online pornography using digital technologies. We shift next to outlining the themes that emerged from our analysis.

## Findings

Our analysis revealed four themes connected to how digital technologies enabled women's experiences consuming online pornography. These themes include: *fulfilling sexual needs; embracing and exploring sexual selves; connecting in sexual relationships; and normalizing sexual desires*. We outline each of these themes next, using direct quotes from the transcripts to provide a rich description of each and pseudonyms to maintain participant confidentiality.

**Fulfilling Sexual Needs**

Our findings reveal how digital technologies increased the ease of access in which women consumed pornography online as a way to fulfill their sexual needs. As Ava explained, "I used to use my computer but God bless my iPhone…changed my life." She continued, "I could view pornography without having my clunky laptop or without having any additional thing in the bed or on the night stand; it was just me and this very sleek little hand-held device. Yeah. It's very, very handy." Similarly, Megan mentioned,

> I only use my cell phone when I'm super lazy. By lazy I mean if my laptop is under my bed and I'm on my phone on Instagram and I come across a photo that I find attractive that slightly turns me on then I just go to my web browser on my phone because I'm too lazy to reach down and get my computer.

Moreover, Sophia shared how she started consuming porn because she had "access to a computer and the Internet in the privacy of my own room." As these findings illustrate, technologies can enable women's use of and engagement with pornography.

For many women in this study, pornography was consumed online as a stimulant for sex, predominantly with themselves. For example, Sara noted, "I like to watch it and visualize when I'm masturbating." Sophia also shared, "I mostly use it to masturbate when I'm alone." Women noted how they consumed pornography for self-gratification. For instance, Emma shared, "I watch a lot of pornographic materials and its sole purpose is it helps me to get off." Sara likewise noted, "I like to watch it because it's got a purpose for me and that's to get me turned on so that I can get off." And as Ava explained, "I recognize that this is a tool that I use to get my rocks off I guess."

In addition to consuming online pornography using digital technology to fulfill their sexual needs, several women also spoke about how they consumed to improve their mood and for stress- and anxiety-relief, relaxation, and escapism. For example, Megan shared, "I personally need to get off several times a week otherwise I'm a cranky bitch. I'm cranky and I have no patience." Sara also shared, "Well, it helps me live…it makes me a happier person, that's for sure." With regards to stress-relief, Sara explained, "Physical for sure…it's good to release tension and it's good for your blood flow, so it's good for everything. I mean, again, because I'm consuming the porn while I masturbate." Zoe also shared, "I use porn as anxiety relief." For Emma, she explained how she used porn to relax: "Today I'm not working, and I just want to chill out, so that's what I do." Whereas Megan shared how in addition to consuming pornographic materials for pleasure and relaxation that she consumed these materials to escape. She explained, "It kind of brings my mind away from reality." Hazel also spoke about how she consumed pornography online for escapism reasons: "I go to websites that I know and then any free porn website has links to other sites…and you can just sort of fall down a rabbit hole until you find something that you like." Related to the above comment by Hazel, interestingly, most women spoke about consuming free pornography through digital technologies. For example, Sara shared, "it's nothing political. It's just I can get the

job done for free, so I do." Ava also explained, "I'm not interested really in paying for video clips."

## Embracing and Exploring Sexual Selves

Women also spoke about how technology helped them be independent consumers of online pornography and to consume how and when they wanted. For example, Hazel shared, "the internet is my oyster and I can drive that process however I want." Similarly, Ava described, "a couple of finger taps on my personal telecommunications device and I get what I want, what I'm looking for." She further explained, "It's a need that I'm able to meet on a regular basis without needing to ask for permission or speak to someone else about it." In this way, many women viewed their consumption of online pornography using digital technologies as highly personal and as a way to embrace and explore their sexual selves.

For example, many women spoke about how their consumption helped them to foster a sense of sexual independence because it was rooted in personal choice. Sara shared, "It's something I want to do." Sophia also noted, "It's just me time I guess." And Sophia spoke about how her consumption helped her feel empowered. She explained,

> it does make me feel empowered in the sense that I can access these things, I'm comfortable with them. I'm comfortable with my body. I'm doing it freely so the sexually explicit material that I consume now and have consumed for years has been independent. It's been driven by my own preferences and choices and so I think that is nice particularly since I've been in relationships a lot of my 20′s. So, having control over an aspect of your sexuality that is only for you and only yours.

Ava also noted how her consumption of online pornography helped her to focus on her own sexual pleasure and to put her own sexual needs first. She explained, consuming SEM online helps her to remember "my own pleasure is actually of paramount importance."

Women also talked about how they consumed pornography online to explore their own sexual interests and to gain a better understanding of their sexual self. As Nora shared, "it allows me to explore my own interests beyond a relationship, independently." She continued, "sexuality is something that's core to everyone's identity…That's a large reason why I access those materials. It's part of that expression and development of understanding myself." And "I want to have a safe space to explore my own interests without any judgment or my partner picking up on it and thinking that is what I want to pursue without me communicating it." Similarly, Megan shared, "it's opened my mind to other opportunities that I wouldn't have thought of without it."

For many women, exploring their own sexual interests also involved learning from the online pornography they consumed. As Emma explained, "it gives me ideas, like of a position I'd like to try or something else I'd like to try to see if I can do it." She noted how, when watching porn online, she considers: "Can I do that? It really turned me on." Nora, in speaking about her online consumption mentioned,

"Everything I've learned that was new certainly came from there. I think in previous generations people learned most of it from their friends gossiping or talking. But…everything I've learned, has come from there."

## Connecting in Sexual Relationships

Women also spoke about consuming online pornography to explore their desires and interests in sexual relationships, whether they were in a sexual relationship currently or not. For example, Nora shared, her online consumption using digital technologies helped to "sort of inform me of what I do want within a relationship to a degree." Ava also mentioned, "Definitely my consumption has helped to [understand]…what I desire and deserve I guess in my encounters." She further explained, "having a vocabulary, an understanding of some things…opened me up to be able to have conversations with partners." Abigail also spoke about how her consumption of online pornography encouraged her to seek out sexual relationships. She described, "Sometimes it may motivate me to date women more, or get out and do this instead of watch a video, you know?"

Several women also talked about how they consumed pornography online with a sexual partner to connect on a relational level. Molly explained how she consumed online porn "to actually connect and engage in a relationship." She continued, "If I'm viewing porn with my partner, then that's just part of our play and that's a pretty creative aspect of sexuality…to just kind of go 'hey yeah, we didn't think of that one.'" Kate noted her consumption was driven to have "better sex…with my partner." To connect with a sexual partner, women also spoke about using online pornography to start conversations about sexual desires and interests and to introduce new ideas into their sexual relationships. For instance, Ava shared, "when I am in a relationship, we get to talk about, well, you show me your favorite clip, and I show you mine. I've built that into my relationships." Kate also mentioned, "I guess it just kind of opens-up conversation for anything, not just sex, feeling more comfortable with the person you're with." Kate also shared, "it's the curiosity, educational thing. What do you think about this?"

In addition to consuming online porn to explore sexual desires and interests in a relationship, women spoke about consuming it to negotiate boundaries in sexual relationships. For example, Molly explained,

> I find it easier to negotiate sex in relationships if there's someone else's sex happening. I'd be like, that'd be too far for me by the way…it takes it away from my partner and puts it into something that's separate from us so no one feels like they're ruining it for the other person or something like that.

Similarly, Sophia shared, "it's just a lot easier to look at someone outside your relationship and say 'see that person's doing something I don't think is attractive,' instead of saying 'you're doing something.' It's a tool."

## Normalizing Sexual Desires

Women also spoke about how through their use of digital technologies to consume online pornography, their sexual desires and interests were socially validated and normalized. Sophia shared, "if it's out there that means that someone likes it." Molly also explained, "For some of my interests, to see that other people share my interests, that's nice." She continued, "there are some things I'm into that sometimes I think, wow, this is a paradox based on the rest of my life. Then to find other women are also there, I'm like OK…we won't judge …Just go with it." Similarly, Nora shared,

> [it's] definitely given me a much more liberal and open mindset. It's shown me alternative lifestyles that I may not have been exposed to otherwise because of the family I've grown up in and the area I come from. It's definitely made me a lot more accepting of and interested in exploring things that I don't understand, I guess.

Several women spoke about how their consumption helped to normalize their desires and in doing so, helped them to feel empowered. Molly expressed that she experienced empowerment through her consumption, noting: "OK there are other people out there experiencing sexuality in a healthy empowered way. And for BDSM, if it's good quality BDSM, that's healthy and empowering." Similarly, Nora described, "Definitely empowered…because through accessing these things I can see what…I could expect or want or desire. It makes me more sort of vocal in pursuing those choices because they have been normalized to some degree by that consumption." However, she also noted that she consumed online porn and talked about her consumption to help normalize sexual desires and interests for other women. She said, "it's something that I do…both for sort of my own pleasure but also…because by expressing myself and by engaging with that side of myself and by talking about it, it does help to normalize it for other women."

In addition to normalizing sexual desires, women also spoke about how their consumption helped to normalize their own bodies and bolstered their self-esteem and body acceptance. Ava explained,

> I think anything that normalizes body types, differing body types…is of enormous value for me. For many years, the only porno scene that I seemed to find was the very young, new, skinny, perfect bodies, or this fetishized 70-year-old grandmother. So there was a period in time where I was like, "I guess…I will enjoy looking at mature pornography for the rest of my life, because that's all there is that looks like me." I didn't have access to…BBW [big beautiful women] pornography that, you know, really could show that a number of different bodies could be pleased and pleasing.

She explained, how it's "a reminder that BBWs are sexy and fuckable. So I sort of couch that into boosting my self-esteem." Sara also spoke about how her consumption helped to normalize different bodies:

it just helps because you get to see so many different kinds of people and what their bodies look like and their vaginas and their ass and all the different cocks and you know it just, everybody has this conceptual or preconception of how they should look, which is of course perpetuated by the main stream media with their photo shopping bullshit but you take your clothes off and you say well yeah, I like this and that looks good and you know what, this porn star is doing this and she looks great but you know my ass looks better than hers or you know it just gives you a good perspective.

## Discussion

In this section of the paper, we draw on our findings to discuss women's experiences consuming online pornography through digital technologies. Our findings support previous research that illustrated consumers of online pornography are diverse in terms of age, sexuality, class, education levels, and gender (cf. Cooper 2000; McKee et al. 2008; Smit 2016). More specifically, our findings highlight how women from diverse backgrounds and identity factors can consume online pornography and that women use different digital technologies to do so. For instance, all the women talked about accessing online pornography using digital devices. The most common types of digital devices women used included: laptops, tablets; and cell phones.

With regards to how they consume, women spoke about accessing pornographic content, both images and videos, primarily, that was free. This finding aligns with research by McKee et al. (2008) examining pornography consumption in Australia. They found nearly half of all users do not spend any money on their consumption. Similarly, Cooper (1998) stressed the affordability of online SEM for consumers. Although several women did express an interest in feminist pornography, more specifically, and consuming pornography that is made responsibly, women in this study explicitly spoke about not wanting to spend money on accessing online pornography. Future studies should consider more closely the monetary value (or lack thereof) that women place on their consumption of online porn through digital technologies and how this aligns with their political ideologies or not. The quality of free SEM should also be explored in light of how digital technologies can be consumed critically.

In addition, it would be worthwhile to explore women's consumption pornography as it serves objectify women. That is, the women in our study discussed consuming pornography that was free. Most feminist informed pornography that seeks to disrupt patriarchal scripts and/or address working conditions for female performers is not free (Penley et al. 2013). Thus, it would be worth exploring women's decisions not to pay for pornography that attempts to address the critiques of pornography in light of women's sexuality and wellbeing.

Several of the other reasons women noted as to why they use different digital technologies at different times to consume pornography online, included: portability, accessibility, efficiency, and convenience. In particular, women noted they preferred to consume online pornography using technologies that are more discrete

and streamlined (e.g., an iPhone compared to a laptop). These findings align with research by Parry and Penny Light (2013) who noted in their discussion of women's consumption of the erotica series, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, that women used different digital technologies to consume SEM. They illustrated the ways digital technologies can influence women's access to this content, and enable women to consume this content in private and discrete ways.

Moreover, Albright (2008) found women consume online porn with the intention of bringing what they watch back to their relationships. Similarly, Döring (2009) noted online pornography is often consumed by couples to increase communication in sexual relationships. Our findings support this work, given that women in this study spoke about consuming online pornography to inform their sexual relationships and to improve their level of communication with their sexual partners. In addition, our study also illustrates how women can use online pornogrpahy as a tool in their relationships to connect with their sexual partners about their sexual desires and interests, to introduce new ideas into the sexual relationship, and to be sexually playful and creative together. While this aspect of consumption was viewed positively by our interviewees, future research should explore explicitly what women are consuming and evaluate how digital SEM represents sexuality. Anti-pornography advocates suggest that all porn is degrading to women (Dines 2010). Clearly, some women do not view it this way and find their consumption educational. The question remains, however, about the value of that learning and how it shapes women's understanding of their own sexuality and their bodies.

Our findings also reveal that women can consume online porn through digital technologies to reduce stress, for anxiety relief and relaxation, and to explore their sexual desires and identities separate from a sexual partner. The findings illustrate that women consume porn online through digital technologies as a form of physical arousal to masturbate. This finding reflects research by Döring (2009) who found, "Used competently, the Internet provides users with an *opportunity* to satisfy their sexual needs" (p. 1091). More specifically, the internet can enable consumers to experience sexual gratification through masturbation and to develop safe sex knowledge. Similarly, Albright (2008) illustrated that women, not just men, consume porn online to masturbate.

In addition, women in this study spoke about consuming online porn through digital technologies for themselves and that in doing so, it gave them a sense of sexual independence and empowerment because they focused on putting their own sexual needs and pleasure first. Many women spoke about how their consumption of online porn was rooted in personal choice, freedom, and control. In line with these findings, researchers have highlighted the ways that people use online spaces to construct their identities (Brickell 2012). For example, Albury (2009) shared the sexual practices and experiences such as those found in pornography "are an important part of many people's self-recognition as sexual subjects" (p. 650). The findings from our study support both Brickell (2012) and Albury's (2009) work, given that women spoke about how their online consumption helped them to explore their sexual needs as well as gain a better understanding of their sexual identities and learn about their sexual interests and desires.

Connected to these ideas, the findings from this study illustrate the ways consuming online pornography through digital technologies can help women to normalize their sexual desires, and to build acceptance of any tensions they confront if their desires do not align with the beliefs and understandings they hold in their everyday life. This finding echoes work by Penley et al. (2013) who noted how online pornography consumption can create "a space for realizing the contradictory ways in which our fantasies do not always line up with out politics or ideas of who we think we are" (p. 15). In addition, Ciclitira (2004) noted in her study of women's experiences of pornography that women spoke about the contradictions they felt between their consumption of pornography and their general beliefs. However, as our findings show, many women built greater acceptance and understanding of their own sexual desires and interests, as well as the sexual desires and interests of others, through their consumption.

In addition, previous research has noted that consuming online pornography may have negative impacts on women's body-image and self-image (Penny Light and Parry 2016; Shaw 1999). In contrast, a study by Morrison et al. (2004) that looked at the impacts of online pornography exposure for both male and female college students found a positive correlation between online consumption and sexual self-esteem for both men and women. Given their findings, they argued for the need "to move beyond a harms-based discourse, and to promote a more multifaceted dialogue about SEM' (p. 154). Our findings support this research and suggests consuming online pornography may have benefits for women's self-image and body-image. More specifically, several women spoke about how consuming online pornography helped them develop body acceptance. They explained that through their consumption of sexual content online they were able to access and see bodies that not only looked like their own, but that were seen as desirable and sexual to others and that these were images not represented in mainstream media. Related to this finding, although this study brings attention to the ways women can consume online pornography through digital technologies, we contend future research should consider in more depth the types and characteristics of online pornography women are consuming using digital technologies, an area of research, that to date, has received little attention (Döring 2009). This is a particularly important aspect of this type of research if we want to ensure that women (and men) have the capacity to critically consume these materials, rather than just assuming that what they see online represents "good" or "real" representations of sex and sexuality. In addition, issues not raised by our interviews should be considered such as how consumption via cell phones and other devices might be viewed negatively, especially if using a work-related device, and how this consumption is related to privacy concerns, particularly if sites exist in countries other than those in which the consumers live,

## Conclusion

Digital technologies continue to change the ways in which women are accessing and consuming sexual materials online, including pornography, yet, research remains limited as to how women are using digital technologies to enable their consumption

of these materials. This study provides important insights into how women are using digital technologies to consume pornographic images and videos, as well as how digital technologies can be used by women to enable their consumption. More specifically, our findings illustrate that women can consume online pornography, purposefully, to enhance their lives. More specifically, in this study women spoke about consuming these materials through digital technologies to explore their sexual identities, desires, and needs, independently as well as in sexual relationships. The findings also illustrate the ways digital technologies can help women who identify as porn consumers, consume pornography in ways that emphasize personal choice, freedom, and control. From this perspective, rather than being seen as passive victims of online sexual content (Döring 2009), digital technologies can support women to be "active media users who are able to consciously and selectively use, interpret, and co-create online content according to their needs, and are also able to reject it" (Döring 2009, p. 1091). With these ideas in mind, we encourage other researchers to pay greater attention to examining the ways women *do* consume online pornography in their everyday lives using digital technologies, and the implications of their consumption.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

**Conflict of interest**  The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval**  All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent**  Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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