



“I’ve got to put one side aside if I want to enjoy it”: Pornography, Perceived Reality, and Pornography Viewers’ Negotiated Pleasures

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Abstract

Questions as to how audiences view pornography have been a longstanding topic of academic research. A promising avenue of such research has investigated how pornography viewers perceive the content of pornography as ‘real’ (or not), and what such perceptions might mean. The interest of the current study is to interrogate pornography’s claims to ‘realness’ and its audiences negotiation of these variously contested claims. Analysing interview data with 30 pornography viewing men, this study investigates assumptions about what realism perceptions might look like for pornography viewers. The findings illustrate how these pornography viewers negotiate the ‘reality’ of pornography as a part of the pleasure of viewing pornography itself. Specifically, participants described perceptions of reality in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, subscribing to some aspects of reality as essential (i.e. bodily evidence of sexual pleasure) while divesting from others (i.e. contrived scenarios, fake seeming performances, some forms of violence) for their continued enjoyment. Overall the results suggest that viewers can, and must, make judgments about what is, and is not, real about pornography, and that this is an integral part of the pornography viewing experience. In turn, these findings challenge assumptions in public discourse, education, and research about how pornography viewers interact with pornography, and they reveal the central role of an ambiguous ‘realness’ at the heart of these interactions.

Keywords Pornography · Perceived reality · Sexuality · Porn literacy · Qualitative Research

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Introduction

In the 1972 essay *The World of Wrestling*, Barthes outlines the differences between professional boxing and professional wrestling. He describes boxing as a contest of excellence, whereby the story of the boxing match plays out in real time before the spectator. For the audience, the outcome of a boxing match is largely unknown, with the narrative of the contest developing with each moment. By comparison, in professional wrestling Barthes describes the spectacle of a match as depending upon a series of meaningful narrative plot points, each of which plays out a drama to be decoded by the audience. Here the physique of the wrestler acts as a tangible site where gesture, mimicry, and exaggeration purport to convey the clearest possible signs of passion in the unfolding drama. In the process of such exaggeration, gesture and meanings are carried to their extremes and signs become caricatured as to most readily communicate the drama of the contest. Thus, unlike in boxing, the audience of the wrestling match is presented with the possibility of having to distinguish between the reality of physical action on show and the narrative conventions that overlay the scene.

Like professional wrestling, pornography also calls upon its audience to negotiate which elements are, and are not, 'real', between pornography's ambiguously affected performances, variously contrived scenarios, and elsewhere. In both wrestling and pornography, a secondary layer of interpretation is offered to the audience who work to untangle the 'performed' from the 'real' physical action playing out before their eyes. As Ullén (2013, p. 338) suggests, "pornography literally presents us with the naked truth of sexual organs in action, yet it does so in a way which is wholly in consonance with the consumer's desire to transcend the conditions actually regulating the practice of sexual action". Thus, just as the narrative structure of a professional wrestling match does not dismiss the possibility that the wrestlers might be "really hitting each other" (Barthes, 1972; *Communication Studies* 298, 2000, p. 532), so too pornography relies on the possibility of a mediated 'realness', whereby 'real' action threatens to upset or usurp contrived narrative structure and the spectacle of performance.

Thus, a question arises as to how much of the appeal of watching professional wrestling and pornography both depend upon an audience's role in decoding the vividness of the performance and the reality of bodies in action. For example, like professional wrestling's threat to exhaust all meaning in its action, leaving only limited room for ambiguity in its excess of signification, the narratives of pornography are intrinsically built upon the necessary 'realness' of the physical action portrayed. Pornography has always been sold through its claims to show some truth about sex as bodily confession (Williams, 1999), and this negotiation between the fidelity of sexual representations in pornography and a pornography viewer's perception of such media as 'real' have acted as a central and time worn site of debate. Whether these debates surround some feminist's arguments around pornography as a representation of men's sexual domination of women, both narratively and literally (for discussion see Bronstein, 2011; Kipnis, 1998; Levin-Russo, 2007; Vance, 2002) or the concerns that pornography might change its audience's perceptions of acceptable

sex, the 'realness' of pornography has remained a central—if sometimes obliquely referenced—concern. Indeed, as Levin-Russo (2007) has highlighted, there is a curious tension in the way that both modern pornographic genres and anti-pornography movements have made appeals to the materiality of what makes up pornography (see also Hardy, 2008). That is, somewhat ironically, critiques of pornography on the grounds that real people are having real sex echo exactly the narrative that most pornography is *itself* attempting to sell: on both counts the argument rests on pornography as transparently depicting 'real' sex (i.e. the possibility that the performers might be "really fucking each other") by folding fantasy elements into pornography's stark documentation of physical action.

Yet, as discussed below, pornography research generally appears to have similarly fallen for pornography's claim to represent some 'truth' about sex, without adequately accounting for what might be decoded by its audiences as real or unreal, reality or representation. My interest hereafter is in exploring these often side-lined considerations in pornography research: the pornography audiences' navigation between the material realities of pornography's filmed sexual content (real people 'really' having sex) and its simultaneous promise of fantasy and contrivance (real people 'performing' real sex). As Ullén (2013, p. 341) suggests, "for pornography to work—for it to provide the sexual stimulation it promises—the consumers must hold their awareness of its phantasmatic nature in suspension for as long as they partake of it" (see also Patterson, 2004). In other words, a pornography viewer must seemingly negotiate the 'realness' of a pornographic scene as mediated by both the material reality of the sex acts, the level of contrivance of a given scene, the ambiguous promise to reality offered by pornography as a genre, along with their own subjective assessment of where these—and other—vectors meet (see Parvez, 2006). In what follows I begin by interrogating the relatively recent trend towards researching pornography through a theory of perceived realism. I go on to highlight challenges inherent to such a method through a qualitative analysis of pornography viewers' accounts of negotiating what they read as 'real' in pornography. Specifically, I aim to investigate a nexus of understanding (e.g. between perceptions of the 'real' and 'fake', or something else) by presenting an analysis of interviews with men who view pornography, and their responses to questions about their experiences of parsing their perceptions of the 'realness' of the pornography that they view.

Pornography and Perceived Realism

As surveying the bulk of historical psychological research literature on pornography makes clear, pornography's ability to variously 'effect' its viewers has been its most consistent recurring motif, no matter the delivery medium of the pornography in question (see Donnerstein et al., 1987; Fisher & Barak, 1991; Malamuth et al., 2000; Montgomery-Graham et al., 2015). Yet, an often overlooked question in the majority of both pornography research and debate has been an in depth interrogation of viewer's perceptions of pornography's 'realness'. This might seem surprising when considering that the very nature of pornography relies on an undermining of simple distinctions between 'real', 'fake', 'contrived', 'authentic', 'genuine', and so on. This

is not to say that nuanced research looking at audience perceptions of pornography's mediated realness have not been undertaken at all (see for example Ciclitira, 2004; Goldstein, 2020; Parvez, 2006; Scarcelli, 2015), but is to highlight that the questions of the audience's perception of whether what they are viewing as 'real' or not would seemingly be central to a discussion about what people are supposed to learn from pornography, and how they are ostensibly 'effected'. Indeed, the full chain of causal claims to pornography's effects would seemingly hinge on a consideration of whether fantasy and reality can be parsed or not (Butler, 1990; Cameron & Frazer, 1987), and if they can, which parts are read as fantastical and which are read for realness (Byron et al., 2021).

One way in which the question of pornography's 'realness' has been approached (as understood by its audience) is through the nascent study of 'perceived realism' (see Baams et al., 2015; Byron et al., 2021; Charig et al., 2020; Hald et al., 2013; Peter & Valkenburg, 2006, 2010; Wright et al., 2021). By way of example, Wright (2011) has suggested that perceived realism is a central moderator in the Acquisition, Activation, and Application model (3AM). Such a model posits that sexual media will impart sexual scripts to its viewership (i.e. scripts are acquired) which may in turn be activated and applied depending on a wide range of moderating factors. In the case of pornography, a viewer might acquire a script from pornography because of the modelling of sexual behaviours by attractive models. In turn however, the application of that script may be counteracted by new information in the form of parental education (see Wright et al. 2021). Thus, the 3AM model suggests an increased likelihood of script acquisition if media is perceived as realistic. Indeed, according to Wright et al. (2021) the higher the degree to which an audience perceives pornography as realistic, the higher the probability that the audience will acquire new scripts. As a case in point, Wright et al. (2021) recently investigated rates of condomless sex and range of pornography viewing as moderated by levels of perceived realism. Their results suggest that high levels of perceived realism and range of exposure were associated with a higher probability of condomless sex reported by participants. Clearly then, questions as to whether audiences perceive pornography as realistic or not are expected to tell us something about the pedagogical import of pornography's content (see also Baams et al., 2015; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010).

However, while perceived realism appears instrumental, an interrogation of the conceptual basis of 'perceived realism' raises important questions in its application. For example, as Byron et al. (2021) indicate in their systematic review of pornography literacy literature, questions as to what is 'unreal' about pornography are too frequently assumed (i.e. what exactly is unreal about the sex in pornography?). Indeed, according to Busselle and Greenberg (2000), given the complexity of measuring perceptions of reality, research on perceived realism must make careful distinctions between *which* reality judgements participants are making (i.e. perceived probability, perceived plausibility, social realism, magic window, identity, and utility), at what level (i.e. global, genre, series, episode, character, etc.), and the process through which realism judgements are made (i.e. during or after viewing?). Further, questions arise as to how the chosen measures of perceived reality relate to the variables being measured, and which other elements may be at play: What is the

target behaviour? How is this behaviour operationalized? How is such an operationalized behaviour measured, analysed, and so on? Finally, if indeed as Busselle and Greenberg (2000; also Wright et al., 2021) suggest perceptions of realism increase as specificity increases, we must in turn ask how audience perceptions of reality (and thus script acquisition from pornography) can be meaningfully captured in the case of pornography's ambiguous blending of material sex acts, performance, and variously contrived scenarios. As other researchers of perceived realism more broadly have pointed out, even wholly fictional narratives like Spiderman, and car chases in action films are 'realistic' in at least *some* respects (Ashley, 2016; Busselle et al., 2004). This is not to suggest that *every* element need be accounted for in research on what is, and is not, perceived as real, but to signal that the complexity of perceived realism judgements are unlikely to be reliably captured through a single question measure, or even a battery of questions if these questions are not theoretically robust and specific to the topic of research (Busselle et al., 2004). Thus, in what follows my aim is to qualitatively dig more deeply into what 'perceived reality' might mean for pornography viewers. In conversation with both Wright et al. (2021) and Byron et al. (2021) the current study seeks to contribute conceptually to the literature on perceived realism in pornography by interrogating the ways in which both the material sexual practices (i.e. the sex acts themselves) and generic conventions of pornography might complicate viewers perceptions (and thus future investigations) of realism in pornography.

Method

The remainder of this article draws on excerpts from a series of interviews conducted with 30 male pornography viewers. Interviewees were recruited via an interview article with the author, published by a widely syndicated national news organization in Aotearoa New Zealand. Potential participants entered their email address into a linked survey and were sent an invitation email ($n = 111$), eventually netting a total of 30 completed interviews. The ages of interviewees ranged between 18 and 71 ($M = 42$, $SD = 13.36$). The cohort was relatively sexually diverse (57% heterosexual, 26.5% bisexual, and 16.5% homosexual) and irreligious (83.3%) (16.6% Christian). All participants were informed of their right to terminate the interview at any time, and were asked their permission before the commencement of audio-recording. This study received ethical approval from the University of Auckland Ethics Committee before any recruitment was undertaken.

All interviews were conducted by myself and followed a similar interview guide, although its semi-structured nature allowed for elaboration, clarification, and departures from the question at hand. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and for the sake of anonymity all interviewees hereafter are coded with a capitalized letter (e.g. Interviewee K). Interview transcripts were coded thematically by identifying repeated patterns of speech, metaphors, and explanations employed by interviewees, first within, and then across transcripts as they related to the 'realness' in pornography (and related conceptualisations). It is worth foregrounding that a specific domain of questioning in the interviews attended to questions of pornography's

‘realness’, as well as addressing topics relevant to this domain (i.e. “what do you think about the performers in pornography?”). Thus, while the analysis of the following extracts is drawn from the whole data corpus, the process of analysis can be described as a deductive, or theoretical thematic, form of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). That is, within the interviews participants were encouraged to reflect on ways that they might distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ pornographic scenarios, simulated and genuine displays of pleasure, performance and authenticity, and so on. Thus, from the outset, it is worth noting that the extracts presented hereafter are not intended as representative of pornography viewers overall, and nor are they presented here as strictly ‘realist’ accounts of the experiences of the 30 men interviewed.

It is important too to note that the following extracts are understood as illustrative of a narrative conceptualisation of these men’s activities as told within an interview context. This is an important consideration that follows from the suggestion of Busselle and Greenberg (2000; also Busselle et al., 2004) that in studies of perceived realism, researchers must be mindful of *when* viewers process their perceptions of realism in media (i.e. between online judgments and memory-based judgments) and how these inform both approaches to research and the subsequent interpretation of findings. That is, the following extracts should be understood as firmly situated as memory-based judgments, informed by interviewees’ various viewing experiences at different points in time. Finally, I wish to foreground the following with an acknowledgment of my place as the author in selecting the following extracts. Although I present the extracts hereafter only lightly edited (for clarity), and in a way that attempts to preserve the discursive formation of their account (i.e. in unbroken and contextualized stretches of text, all emphases retained), these extracts have still been conducted and picked by myself, a researcher interested in presenting a narrative about the complexity of perceived reality within interviews on pornography more generally (although it is worth noting that hereafter I draw from a diverse range of different interviewees).

Results

In what follows I offer the selected extracts and observations as a form of conceptual provocation and as an appeal to consider the place of the viewer in questions of pornography as being perceived as more or less ‘real’, and the possible consequences of such perceptions. To do so I present three overlapping thematic sections, each headed with a quote from a participant. Each section is presented as speaking specifically to the complexity of perceptions of realism in different ways, and illustrating how pornography viewers negotiate such perceptions. The sections overlap in the sense that in all of the following sections—and was prevalent throughout the data corpus—perceptions of pornography as ‘real’ or ‘unreal’ were routinely described by participants in contested, contextually contingent, and idiosyncratic ways. While the following three sections seemingly demonstrate a willingness on the part of interviewees to believe the content that they view as ‘real’ at some points in time, at

the same time such expectations of realism are contested between and within most interviewee accounts.

Readings of Pleasure: "Is she actually enjoying it or is she just doing it for the camera?"

If questions of perceived realism aim to investigate questions of what a viewer supposedly learns from pornography (as relevant to pornography literacy initiatives), then arguably the way in which the physical interactions of bodies are supposed to provoke pleasure (or not) should make up a strand of such investigation. As Williams' (1999) has argued, the history of pornography can be understood as an attempt to visually capture the bodily confession of (women's) pleasure. Williams argues that pornography attempts to circumvent the conscious—and thus suspect—performance of feminine pleasure by attempting to document women's embodied sexual excitement, a "frenzy of the visible". In this sense, pornography's generic and narrative conventions work as a vehicle through which the 'genuine' confession of women's sexuality might be witnessed by the same visual criteria of men's. That is to say, where men's pleasure may be authenticated through visible erections and ejaculations, the authenticity of women's pleasure in visual media are only verified through repeated confessions to pleasure that are *performed*. As the extracts in this section suggest, perceptions of pornography as 'realistic' or not are read by some viewers through the evidence elicited by the bodies of the performers on screen:

A. Um, for me, it has to be believable. I find it really- if you have a chick that's just moaning when any guy touches her or, you know, just way over the top and all the rest of it, it's like 'No, sorry. I'm moving on', you know. And the guy of course- because it's obvious when he enjoys it because it's- his- well, actually I have seen videos where guys have come and then it's- you can tell that they just didn't really enjoy it, it was just making money and just- I'm just a cock for hire and that was it, you know.

INTERVIEWER. That's the, yeah- the money shot, literally.

A. Yeah. And I'm out and see ya'. And so I think when it comes to women, I like to see women enjoy themselves, but I like that it has to be believable because it's like, if they're crap at it and that it's just like [claps hands] I'm not- I can't picture myself being there. It's like you're just going through the motions. It's like you know, it's like pfff [dismissive sound]

INTERVIEWER. You mentioned earlier that, your like, okay, they're an actor and they're, you know, doing their job. At the same time, is there an element where it's sort of like it has to in a way not be acting? Do you know what I mean?

A. Oh, yeah, has to be real?

INTERVIEWER. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

A. Yeah. Like the classic example is because you get a visual cue when a guy enjoys himself the ejaculation, so it becomes popular when women ejaculate. When they squirt it becomes a visual cue therefore it becomes- you can now

relate to it and, you know, you can go ‘she’s enjoying herself because she squirted’.

INTERVIEWER. Right.

A. So, because obviously, you know, normally women will- it’ll be all internal and all you’ve got to go for is the, you know, what’s going on their face. So because there’s a visual cue, now you can go ‘that’s more believable’, you know.

Here A. offers a textbook description of the appeal of Williams’ (1999) frenzy of the visible. He not only talks about the importance of a perception of pleasure, but his search for possible visual cues through which such pleasure can be evidenced. Moreover, A. also describes the other negotiations of reality in that unrealistic moaning, over reacting, or an awareness of the financial incentive to have sex can disrupt perceptions of pornography’s content as realistic. Accordingly, in questioning perceptions of realism and the veracity of pleasure as viewed by an audience, other men also described their perceptions of pleasure (and what they learned from such pleasure displays) as contingent on similarly corporeal bodily—and thus ‘real’—evidence:

INTERVIEWER. I was kind of wondering if you ever like wonder about like the- the pleasure of the actors, like do- I mean, because it sounds like to you that sort of-

B. Yeah, yeah, but- but they’re not all actors. So, you know, in- sorry-

INTERVIEWER. No, okay.

B. They’re- they’re not all actors because you-

INTERVIEWER. Or performers let’s say or...

B. [Sighs] Um, yes, definitely. So, I- the more that I believe that they’re sensing or feeling what they’re doing, the better.

INTERVIEWER. Right. So, there has to be an element of like, reality or, um-

B. Yes. Which is why I don’t particularly like still [image] pornography ‘cause there is no- unless you can see that’s, you know, somebody’s extremely wet or something there’s no... there’s no real way of understanding what their emotional state is.

Both A. and B. describe the importance of perceiving the ‘realness’ of pleasure as evidenced in the bodies on display. In this sense, there are signifiers identified (i.e. squirting, facial expressions, wetness) which work to bridge the gap between a perception of the displays in pornography as more or less real. Here we see a direct link between the ‘real’ signifiers of pleasure (i.e. the types of responses one might see in a real life sexual encounter), and the deployment of these signifiers as evidence of ‘real’ pleasure on screen.

When considering these extracts in light of a question of perceived realism, work is being done here by viewers to parse the narrative conventions and the possibility of pornography’s content as ‘unreal’ or unlikely as superseded by the ‘real’ action of performer’s bodies. In this sense, both of these extracts show evidence of the men drawing on particular knowledges of what ‘real’ pleasure might look like, and applying this knowledge in pursuit of their own pleasure. However, this is not to suggest

that these bodily signifiers were the *only* ways for pornography viewers to apply a sceptical lens to the pleasure displays in pornography. Indeed, other interviewees described the 'realness' of the pleasure displays in pornography as more ephemeral and contextually idiosyncratic. For example, in the following C. is describing his use of search terms to identify pornography that he might enjoy:

C. [...] so I sometimes type in a search thing I really like um, like 'passionate connection'. When I watch porn I really like to see that connection.

INTERVIEWER. Yeah. Like a re-

C. I don't- I hate watching porn where a guy's off looking somewhere else. Probably at the director or a TV or out the window. Barely any connection.

INTERVIEWER. Yeah. So you can tell the difference?

C. If I ever have there's nothing else going on but yeah, absolutely.

INTERVIEWER. Yeah.

C. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER. So that it's important to have that sort of er I guess authentic kind of-

C. Apparent authentic.

INTERVIEWER. *Apparent* authentic.

C. And that can be even- I laugh at myself that that can be suggested in the title, and I can carry that over for a while until I just get entirely disgusted about what's happening, 'cause it's bullshit.

Here C. describes his navigation on the internet, and his employment of a specific search criterion ("passionate connection") in the pursuit of 'apparent' authenticity. At the same time however, C. describes a sort of distancing, whereby his own critical reading of the pornography he is viewing ostensibly creates a distance between the viewing and his belief in its 'realness'. Thus, across these extracts the men interviewed describe a search for some sort of 'proof' that what they are watching is transcending a performance and getting at some form of genuine response from those on screen, be it bodily response or 'authentic' connection. In doing so their accounts suggest a complex reading of the content of pornography in that they simultaneously invest in aspects of the content displayed, yet also maintain a critical distance from other parts of it.

Returning to the analogue of professional wrestling described in the introduction, we see here echoes of the question as to how audiences might make distinctions between the material reality of the action, and the possibility that such action is also contrived (see also Paasonen, 2011). Personal experience, sexual knowledge, expectations, and other subjective measures are set alongside the content of pornography the comparisons through which judgments of realism are made. The men's selection of specific criteria of pleasure in bodies, along with their apparent ability to read pornography at multiple levels of realness, suggests that the educational elements of pornography are countervailed by the reading of different *realisms*. That is, the question of perceiving pornography as realistic becomes contingent upon which level of realism is being interrogated (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000), with the extracts above suggesting that multiple claims to 'the real' in pornography can be rejected by viewers, while also attending to very specific elements not captured in

conceptions of perceived reality as global, genre, series, episode, or character claims to realism. Similarly, Levin-Russo's (2007) taxonomy of the realness of pornography also misses this detail, because here the realness of production (i.e. that pornography captures unstimulated, authentic sexual acts) is complicated by these men's critical readings of pornographic sex as both simulated and unstimulated simultaneously.

Readings of Pornographic Conventions: "Some of its more real than others"

In Macleod's (2020) analysis of feminist pornography viewers' the preference for so-called 'authenticity' acts as fertile, and sometimes contradictory, ground for ontological debates about pornography's realism. For Macleod's participants, appeals to 'realness' become complicated when set alongside the viewership's identification of particular moral and ethical concerns. In what Macleod calls the 'consensual catch-22', feminist pornography viewers describe being seemingly suspended between seeking to be convinced of a scene's 'realness', while at the same time maintaining an understanding of a scene as 'not real'. For example, in the case of wanting to view scenes that featured depictions of non-consent, Macleod's participants describe both attending to the realism of a performance while also assuring themselves that they were not watching 'real' rape. In this sense a critical distance from narrative contrivances of pornography can work to protect viewers from a full identification with a particular scene as real. Yet, as Busselle et al. (2004) describe, such critical distancing risks interfering with the pleasure and emotional involvement desired of the viewing experience.

This consensual catch-22 is emblematic of the issue explored in this section. Namely, how participants describe a viewing experience that is at once fulfilling of possibly taboo or 'unrealistic' scenarios in a way that balances their critical readings of the artifice of a scene and other pornographic conventions. More importantly here for the discussion of perceived realism, the question becomes one of how viewers are able to make such distinctions—or at least if they are aware of them—and in turn, whether this parsing of real and the unreal scenarios (as opposed to bodily display) works in practise to inform perceptions of one's own pornography viewing as 'real enough', but not too real:

INTERVIEWER. When you come across material that you understand to be extreme or you feel is extreme, what's that like?

D. Um, I guess I regard that with- I suppose curiosity. Occasionally arousal as well. Um, definitely discomfort. I generally don't watch it much unless I don't realise what it's about. I do- I particularly recall one video where in it is - I don't know what it said in the title that made me click on it - but it was like a- it was basically a rape video but apparently the girl was- that's what her fantasy was but it was incredibly well done like acting wise yeah, like realistic. So it made me really really uncomfortable and I didn't- I definitely didn't watch that and I made sure not to ever go back into that person because I discovered that that was all they did was that sort of video.

INTERVIEWER. That was a- that person as in the actor?

D. That company.

INTERVIEWER. That company. I'm interested- just sticking with that for a second- So, despite knowing that- um or- or having an understanding that there was a fantasy element there, there were still- it was still a turn off to see? D. Yeah. Yeah. So, to me, while I get the whole um... power play dynamic with, you know, someone who's in power versus someone who's vulnerable, and how that can be part of the arousing nature, for my personal preference I'd prefer it to be more equal- an equal relationship I guess, like real life and that just took it all- a bit too much to the extreme. Yeah, like it was pretty realistic so I was quite discomfited so I just thought well I don't actually have to watch it, so- it's not doing any- it wasn't doing anything for me.

Here D. describes a balancing between a sense of discomfort and the possibility of being aroused, not by the realism *per se* (although this is described as a factor), but the fantasy elements of unequal power. This blending of discomfort as arising in response to the narrative, perhaps contrived parts of pornography suggest a nuanced consensual catch-22, wherein the realism of the action is not the *only* complicating element in such pornography. At the same time, D. describes the narrative elements of the pornography viewed as raising discomfort in a representation unlike his real life expectation.

Here, as in other accounts offered by interviewees below, the investment in a scene as real or not becomes a navigation of arousal, discomfort, curiosity and so on, and a way to make sense of these states. For example, in the following extract, E. uses an analogy of the difference between 'normal' movies, documentaries, and pornography in order to describe how he ostensibly differentiates between content that he will and will not watch. Again we can see a complex negotiation between messaging of media as ostensibly 'real' through convention, and the differentiation between pornography and documentary in actual content. That is, like D. above, while pornography can offer a documentary-like realism (i.e. to purport real action), a critical reading of the generic conventions of pornography offers more nuanced readings to the viewer:

E. I think that I have a very good ability to do that okay and that's why even watching normal movies. I can watch shoot 'em up movies, slit them open, cut their throats, whatever, okay. Do the same thing in a documentary and I'm queasy and closing my eyes or I'll cry depending what the situation is okay? So if you give me a shoot 'em up gangster movie-

INTERVIEWER. Yeah and you'll be-

E. -I don't care if somebody gets shot in the head and their face blows apart. I can just sit and watch it. And being able to differentiate between 'that's real and that is fantasy', and I can do it there, and I can do it there and I think I do it very successfully. And so when it comes to porn... I just think that- I just step far enough back away from it that I know that- that probably the stuff that I'm watching, 99% of it is all staged, acted, contrived, or whatever.

INTERVIEWER. There is that porn that tries to cross those boundaries though isn't there? There's that so-called 'reality' porn.

E. Yeah, yeah. Which is what I was talking about the Bait Bus thing, you know, they are trying to make that a reality thing, you know, but-

INTERVIEWER. But you know.

E. I have a very good idea, you know. There's other ones that I watch where, you know, an older guy in Czechoslovakia goes round and finds a young teenage boy and, "How old are you?" "Eighteen and three months." "Right, good. Okay." Bang. And then within half an hour they're having sex and one thing and another. Okay, he's playing with money the whole time. Okay.

INTERVIEWER. Are you like, is that real or...?

E. No. Well, I see- I *suspect* it's not real. It's all been- all been staged and organized. Yeah.

Here E.'s description of the contrivance of the pornography seems to act as a way to help distance himself from what he is watching, despite this separation not being absolute. While his description of the pornography that he is watching leans more heavily toward a conception of pornography as more similar to an action movie than a documentary, his description of distinguishing between the 'real' and fantasy elements of pornography return to a detailed reading of pornographic convention (i.e. "within half an hour they're having sex", "he's playing with money the whole time"). Here the consensual catch-22 relies on E.'s somewhat ambiguous reading ("I *suspect* it's not real") of the pornographic scene that makes the scenario of an older man soliciting barely legal teenage boys in Czechoslovakia contrived enough to be enjoyable.

Another key site of discussion around the 'realness' of pornographic conventions was in response to questions of the status of performers in pornography, resulting in interesting discussions about how much of the *persona* of being a performer was itself an act. Here again we see a blurring between the claims to be able to distinguish between the real and unreal elements of pornography's generic conventions, and the ways in which the audiences critical engagement with these elements lead to a complex layering of reality judgments:

INTERVIEWER. Um, do you ever wonder about the actors in pornography?

F. Um, yeah, to a certain extent. Um, you have to distance yourself from them as people only in, er... the fact that, you know, if you see somebody that's being used in an aggressive manner or something like that. What I've noticed lately in a lot of porn is they have like – especially when it has some form of aggression or S and M or something like that – they have like a mini interview at the end.

INTERVIEWER. Oh yeah, like an exit interview?

F. Yeah. And it's so that you can relate to those people and go, 'well she actually *did* enjoy it'. 'Cause, you know, some stuff might look like it's really rough and you're going, 'man, that really hurt', you know, 'how can she enjoy it?', you know, and kind of thing, and then, you know, they give you this get out of jail free clause at the end so that you assuage your guilt-so you can feel okay about it because there's this little video at the end where she goes: "Oh no, that was *so* fun".

INTERVIEWER. [Laughs] What do you think about those videos at the end? I mean, you said "get out of jail free card", which I think is a pretty interesting-

F. Yeah, 'cause it's there to assuage your guilt about- you've just watched someone be abused in some kind of manner and it's to stop you going, 'oh wow, I hope she's okay, oh, I feel really bad for watching that now I'm not going to click on that stuff again', you know. And it's there to make you feel, 'oh no, she's happy with it, it's okay'.

In this account F. describes a complicated interplay between perceptions of a scene as real, and the generic conventions that overlay and complicate these perceptions. Questions about what a pornography viewer perceives as 'real' thus become a stratified investigation, not only of what is perceived of as real or not, but further, *how* such pornography is read as real (see Byron et al., 2021). In other words, the *content* of the media in F.'s case above is superseded by having to ask about which layer of pornography is being addressed (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Wright et al., 2021). F. describes the action as certainly occurring ("being used in an aggressive manner") and therefore apparently perceived as realistic, despite this reality in turn being re-contextualized through an admission of consent, which itself is also read as possibly both real and contrived (see also Antevska & Gavey, 2015). Indeed, in relation to ideas of pornography literacy', here F.'s distancing and scepticism suggests a sophisticated reading of the promise of pornography, in the sense that F. seemingly displays his own ability to read and re-read genre conventions in critical ways (Byron et al., 2021), despite still suggesting revisiting pornography that he may raise feelings of guilt or discomfort.

Reading and Unreading: "Alright it's fake but, like, it's still all good"

In the previous two sections extracts have circled around the negotiation between some parts of pornography (i.e. displays of pleasure and generic conventions) as both real and contrived. In this final section the focus is turned to the possibility of pornography being *only* contrived and the ways that participants respond to this possibility. All of which builds towards illustrating a dichotomy at the heart of pornography and judgments of realism: if pornography purports to show some 'truth' about sex in its performances, then the audience is invited to judge which parts are read as real (or not), and thus such realness must be interpreted subjectively and temporally. By way of example, the following extracts illustrate the importance of Busselle and Greenberg's (2000) consideration of online versus memory-based judgments as described earlier: the 'realness' of pornography is described as mattering in a moment in time, and is in turn described as a state of only temporarily—and temporally—reading pornography's content as realistic.

INTERVIEWER. I've been really interested in things like pleasure. I've been really interested in how those perceptions of performers' pleasure are important. Would you say that depictions of pleasure, or the ways that pleasure is depicted are important to you?

G. [Pause] Yes, okay. I'm going ask what you mean by that question insofar as I've actually corresponded with a couple of actors and a lot of what they say is that... yes, it's enjoyable but it's really hard because it'll take them all

day to shoot a 20 min scene. And so their pleasure is- having gone behind the scenes and knowing the industry per se and all of that you- you sort of- you've gotta distance yourself from... [Sigh] Yeah, yeah, how do I put this? There's part of me that knows exactly what's going on behind the scenes and that they're working really hard to achieve what they're doing. On the other hand, my pleasurable side is watching this saying yeah, they're having a great time and all the rest of it. So, I'm sort of torn between. So, I've got to put one side aside if I want to enjoy it.

Here G. describes a distinction made by many of the participants where they manage to hold two different perceptions of pornography's realism simultaneously. For example, some of the men used examples of their ability to identify what was 'unreal' about pornography in order to find material that they could enjoy, despite this enjoyment depending on their ability to both understand pornography as unreal and convince themselves of its realness *in the moment* of watching it:

INTERVIEWER. So, I mean, there's that whole reality porn thing, there's the whole amateur thing, how much of it do you think is like real- how do you tell the difference between something that's-

H. How do you tell the difference between something like that? I mean-

INTERVIEWER. Is it important to you to tell the difference?

H. Not in the moment but- it's interesting to think like in the back of my mind to have like 'this isn't real' but be able to suspend that disbelief. Because I think if I thought like, 'nah, this isn't real' it'd be a little bit off putting and it would be kind of like I was being duped.

Echoing the complexity of realism judgments in the last two sections, a few participants also offered sophisticated multi-layered readings of when, and how, pornography might be deemed *not* real—and whether this matters. In the following extract I., echoing F. in the previous section, describes how his attempts to peer behind pornography's curtain only revealed what he suspects is another layer of contrivance:

INTERVIEWER. Do you ever wonder about the actors in pornography?

I. Ah [Laughs] I guess I do, yeah. I certainly hope that they have been paid well [Laughs].

INTERVIEWER. [Laughs] So do you wonder about their professional working conditions and that kind of thing?

I. Yeah. For quite a while – this is a few years' ago – I was quite interested in the behind the scenes type stuff and there was a few of the production companies that would do behind the scenes at a pornography shoot, you know, like a video shoot. And I always found that quite interesting to see what the dynamic was and that they were actually real people. But nowadays I don't know whether that was still scripted or whether that was a true thing. You just can't trust what you're seeing. So it does concern me because so much stuff now is billed as being a reality type- you know, this is what these guys get up to in their real life but [Laughs] yeah, it- I do struggle to believe that, yeah-

INTERVIEWER. So how do you differentiate when you're watching pornography between something that's real and something that's not? Or something that's billed as being real – you mentioned like 'reality' pornography before which is billed as being real – but how do you know that it's still fantasy?

I. I guess I just assume that it is, um ... and, I mean, if you pay attention to the personal interaction side of things, leaving aside the sexual stuff, you can see that it's, you know, it's very unlikely that the people, both male and female, are going say and do the things that they do. So I just- I just work under the assumption that it's not real and I guess just enjoy it anyway. You know, the reality is not the enjoyable part of it for me I guess so, yeah.

In the case of I., his awareness of the possibility that both pornography and the behind the scenes of pornography are scripted suggests a sceptical reading of the pornographic genre at a global level (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000). In this sense I. qualifies his description of a 'behind the scenes' narrative as another layer of contrivance. However, like G. and H. before him, he describes the 'realism' pornography as not the enjoyable part. Indeed, as the extracts in this section illustrate, an awareness of pornography as unreal is described as somewhat taken-for-granted, dismissed as a generic convention of pornography as a whole. Thus, this section indicates, somewhat ironically, that it is the capacity for critically reading pornography as *not* real that must be dismissed by viewers while viewing it (but not afterwards) in order for pornography to be enjoyable.

Discussion

The current study set out to investigate the ways that pornography viewers negotiate pornography's ambiguous claims to 'reality', and in turn to dig more deeply into the formulation of 'perceived' reality as an investigative tool. The findings of the analysis suggest that the men in this study negotiated the 'realness' of pornography in multiple, complex, and stratified ways. In the first instance, the men showed critical engagements with the different displays of pleasure in pornography and employed their own heuristics for establishing judgments of genuine and performed pleasure. Second, some of the men interviewed also showed a critical awareness and negotiation of the generic conventions of pornography, and described a complex negotiation between these elements and their continued enjoyment of pornography. In the final section the extracts suggest that some of the men worked to disengage from their own critiques and awareness of pornography's contrivance in the moment. That is, here the men described a level of critical reading that they had to reject in order to enjoy the pornography that they were viewing.

The findings of the current research offer at least three key contributions to ongoing research and debate about pornography: research on perceived realism in pornography (and pornography's effects more broadly), contemporary concerns about pornographic literacy amongst pornography's audiences, and more broadly in challenging assumptions about how pornography viewers interact with pornography, and the central role of an ambiguous 'realness' at the heart of these interactions.

First, in light of the previous analysis, the proposition that pornography viewers generally perceive pornography as ‘real’—or at least realistic—presents a series of methodological sticking points for future research. Throughout the preceding analysis, accounts suggest not only that pornography *is* perceived as real in some sense (i.e. as related to the physicality of pornography), but crucially that viewers treat this realism in mediated and esoteric ways. The implications of these accounts for research on pornography range from the specific to the general, and for the sake of brevity I will address only the most pressing implications here for the operationalisation of perceived realism measures. Overall the above analysis illustrates a complex mediation of realism perceptions in a way that must prompt an enrichment and rethinking of research on how audiences perceive what is, and is not, ‘real’ in pornography. Specifically, building upon the recommendations of Wright et al. (2021) this analysis suggests that investigations of script acquisition through perceptions of realism must attend more closely to the different levels at which realism judgments are made. For example, instead of beginning at the level of global questioning (i.e. “is sex shown in pornography similar to sex in real life?”), investigations of perceived realism must begin at much finer levels specificity. Indeed, while Wright et al. (2021) suggest (following Busselle & Greenberg, 2000) that “realism perceptions increase as the level of specificity increases” the current article suggests that even at very explicit levels of specificity, perceptions of realism remain ambiguous (i.e. in evidence of bodily pleasure). Thus, following Busselle et al., (2004), the current research takes an empirical step towards closing the distance between measuring a realism judgement (especially in survey form), and investigating the nuanced and often contradictory ways that such judgments might actually be made by pornography viewers.

Second, it is worth noting that contemporary discussions of pornography and perceived realism tend to focus on the audiences inability to discern between real and unreal elements of pornography (Byron et al., 2021). Yet, as the current analysis suggests, some pornography viewers recount quite specific ways in which their viewing pleasure is mediated by their own judgments of what is real of not. Indeed, the current research offers an interesting contrast to these discussion in the sense that some interviewees seemingly relied on a distancing from the realism of pornography, others were very invested in the “realness”, while others still fluctuated between investment and divestment depending on how and why they viewed pornography (i.e. seemingly simultaneously believing and disbelieving that what they were viewing was ‘real’ in one way or another). Such a contention readily dovetails with other research similarly suggesting that pornography viewers can, and *do*, make critical judgments about what they view. For example, as research by New Zealand’s Office of Film and Literature Classification Office suggests that “the vast majority of young people interviewed thought that porn is not a realistic portrayal of sex or relationships” (OFLC, 2018, p. 32). As a study by Wright and Štulhofer (2019) suggests, some adolescents already exercise scepticism about pornography’s realism. Similarly, in a study with 252 cisgender, heterosexual adults Charig et al. (2020) found that 80% of their sample perceived the sexual portrayals in pornography as unrealistic (see also Smith, 2013). As such, as some researchers on perceptions of pornography’s realism note, future research must take a more nuanced approach to

the operationalisation and application of theory (Baams et al., 2015; Peter & Valkenburg, 2010; Wright et al., 2021). In light of the current findings, I suggest that future research on perceived reality judgments of pornography will likely benefit from a deeper engagement and interrogation of assumptions about how elements of pornography are *already* critically read for 'realness' by its audiences (see Byron et al., 2021).

Third, and finally, the current research takes seriously and extends the claim made by Segal (1998) that a positivist psychology refuses to grapple with issues of fantasy, identification, and representation, preferring instead modes of analysis that foreclose debate. Specifically, the current analysis begs the questions as to why so much research on pornography remains seemingly uninterested in asking whether the very ambiguity of pornography's realism is a source of pleasure in and of itself. Indeed, as works exploring the complex terrain of pornography's realism by Barthes (1981), Baudrillard (1990), and Butler (1990) readily attest, perhaps pornography's violation of the divide between the phantasm and the real explains pornography's enduring allure. As Baudrillard (1990, p. 28–29) describes:

to one's good fortune, one has never seen one's genitals function from so close, nor for that matter, from so general a perspective. It is all too true, too near to be true. And it is this that is fascinating, this excess of reality, this hyperreality of things. The only phantasy in pornography, if there is one, is thus not a phantasy of sex, but of the real, and its absorption into something other than the real, the hyperreal.

As the current analysis suggests, it is a fascination with negotiation the hyper-real of pornography that works to keep its audience engaged: pornography confronts its audience with an ever-shifting amalgam of hyper-real detail and often outlandish, un-real contrivance. Thus, just like professional wrestling, the audience is constantly, repeatedly offered up a series of contrived scenarios in which they might seek out their own distinctions between what is and is not real: the orgasms, the violence, the sounds, the facial expressions, the scenario, the documentation, and on and on. In this sense, Williams' (1999) description of the appeal of pornography in its promise to uncover some truth about sex (and specifically some truth about women's sexual pleasure) remains prescient and prophetic. There is at work here a meta-fantasy in which the fantasy that the audience must negotiate is not genre specific, but is instead a negotiation of whether or not pornography as a medium is capable of delivering them these truths and showing them something that they can judge as real enough.

Besides the usual limitations of qualitative work of this kind addressed under methods (i.e. the subjective nature of analysis, the lack of generalisability, and so on), here I want to address two key limitations worth further consideration. First, the nature of an interview in which men recount their perceptions of pornography's realism is likely a setting within which participants will take up more critical positions towards their own beliefs in pornography's realness. For example, in both the data corpus and the extracts described (e.g. Interviewee D) there is evidence of men dismissing the 'realness' of pornography in order to not feel duped. In this sense, future qualitative work in this area could attend to the ways in which men orient

to perceptions of pornography in real time (see Vörös, 2015). Moreover such work could look to the specific ways that different cohorts of pornography viewers do such work. Second, it is worth noting that the sections described above overwhelmingly attend to what might be called “social realism” and its levels of specificity, while in the literature on perceived realism there are a number of other possible types of perceived realism (i.e. magic window, plausibility, possibility, probability, identity, and utility; Busselle & Greenberg, 2000). Thus, future research on perceived realism in pornography should attend to specific kinds of perceived reality to better elucidate its application. One obvious example for pornography literacy would be to investigate the utility judgements of pornography (how useful is a realism judgment?). In saying this however, following Busselle and Greenberg, it is worth asking here whether something need be viewed as ‘realistic’ in order to have utility. In other words, whether information in pornography is deemed ‘useful’ may be independent of whether it is deemed realistic.

In conclusion, if perceived realism is to become a key theoretical lens through which to view pornography research, and pornography literacy by extension, then this analysis demands increased fidelity in how this lens is conceptualized and applied. While pornography viewers’ accounts might suggest that realism judgments are contingent, contextual, and idiosyncratic, overall the findings of this analysis indicate that viewers are not naïve to the ambiguous promise of the ‘real’ offered by pornography. On the contrary, as some viewers suggest, pornography is viewed *in spite* of much of its contrivances. This is not to suggest that the pornography viewed does not hold the capacity to influence ‘real life’ sex *per se*, but *is* to suggest that the way that we conceptualize this ‘real’ requires elaboration. As such, while the lens of perceived realism holds promise in the field of pornography research, future research must first grapple first with the possibilities raised in the currents research: pornography, like professional wrestling, is inherently *both* real and unreal in ways that demand nuanced and sophisticated reading by its audience. Indeed, like professional wrestling, pornography is inherently defined by a blending of real and contrived, and it is this blending that may explain the appeal of both mediums. While technological developments have allowed for the capture of sex in ever greater levels of detail in the pursuit of uncovering its ‘truth’, pornography can only ever produce caricatures of sex through its relentless preoccupation with detail. Thus, pornography’s audiences must already work to navigate between ‘real’ and ‘unreal’ elements of pornography in personally, socially, and temporally contingent ways. In turn, what is learned from pornography as a viewer may not depend on whether what is viewed is deemed as realistic or not, but the degree to which one subscribes to the meta-fantasy that has always been sold by both pornography and professional wrestling: that we can peer through layers of contrivance to spot flickers of something we can believe is real enough, if only temporarily.

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