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Sexual Violence in Pornography: How Prevalent Is It?

Abstract: We examine the treatment of female characters in videocassette pornography. Using a systematic sample, we analyze 209 vignettes in 40 x- to xxx- rated videos commercially available from a national chain in the local market. We found that most videos had sexually violent or dehumanizing/degrading themes; however, a significant number also had a theme of intimacy. As expected, we found little evidence (one case) of extreme sexual deviance. Extreme sexual deviance was the kind of sexual violence the 1986 Commission on Pornography assumed was commonly available in pornography today. We also examined how the race of the actor shapes pornographic violence. As hypothesized, we found that black women experienced more violence from both white and black men than was the case for white women. White women, in fact, experienced least violence when paired with a black man. Our work replicates that of others in that we found few intimacy themes in material where black actors were present.

We examine the treatment of female characters in videocassette pornography. Cowan and Campbell (1994) write that videocassettes are the primary form of pornography production and distribution in the United States. Adult video rentals comprise 12 percent of the video rental market (Johnson, 1991). Sexism and sexual violence found in pornography have been widely examined and analyzed. The U.S. Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (1986) and other researchers (Check and Guloien, 1989) generally divide such violence into three broad categories. Sexual violence in pornography involves the overt use of force; degrading or dehumanizing pornography contains verbal cues, cues of status inequality, or subordination where women are objectified; finally, pornographic material may be neutral in regard to the degradation or dehumanization of women in that the actors

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are by choice mutually involved in given action. The Commission on Pornography (1986) suggested that sexual violence was prevalent in widely available pornography (Longino, 1994; Dobson, 1996). The Commission asserted that themes of extreme sexual deviance, including bestiality, urophilia, coprophilia, child molestation, and the whipping, raping, mutilation, or killing of women, were commonplace in pornographic material available in the United States today.

To date, there is a marked gap in the scholarly literature on pornography, as very little study has been devoted to the relationship between the race(s) of the actors in pornographic material and the treatment of the female actor. Cowan and Campbell (1994) studied the correlation between racism and sexism in interracial pornography. They used aggregate measures of physical and verbal aggression, inequality cues, racial cues, intimacy, and submission. They found that the treatment of female actors in pornography was related to the race(s) of the actors participating in a sex act. For example, white males were more physically aggressive toward black than white females. Black males, on the other hand, were more physically aggressive toward white than black women. White and black females were equally submissive, but they submitted in different ways. Males ejaculated more frequently on the faces of white females than on those of black females, but black females were more likely to perform fellatio in a kneeling position. Black males demonstrated less intimacy than did white males and were portrayed as prodigiously endowed animals. One weakness of this study is that the authors utilized a convenience sample.

In a similar, but less comprehensive study, Mayall and Russell (1993) conducted a content analysis of pornographic magazines, films, videos, books, games, and cards. They found that female performers acted in accord with racial stereotypes. For example, Hispanic women were portrayed as sexually aggressive; Asian women were depicted as human dolls; and black women were likened to animals. The researchers suggest that pornographic depictions of different races both foster and reflect cultural stereotypical myths. Both studies argue that sexism and racism are present in pornography. Much of the journal literature on pornography looks at the issue from the standpoint of the law. Interestingly, little journal research examines the content of themes of the pornographic material itself (Yaffe and Nelson, 1983).

How pornography influences behavior has received much research attention. Researchers examine how pornographic material may influence violent behavior, especially violence against women. Interestingly, virtually no research to date looks at how women's behavior may be shaped by viewing pornography. Generally, investigators are divided into two schools of thought. First are those who believe that pornographic material may be enjoyed, for whatever value it may have, and

that this behavior does not impact other areas of an individual's life (Willis, 1994; Hartley, 1994). In other words, they do not see a link between pornography and personal or societal violence against women (Duggan, Hunter and Vance, 1994; Strossen, 1995). In her work, Nadine Strossen quotes Gore Vidal's quip that "the only thing pornography is known to cause directly is the solitary act of masturbation. As for corruption, the only immediate victim is English prose" (1995). Strossen (1995) writes in *Defending Pornography* that the link between pornography and violence is one that has yet to be made. Finally, others point to the case of Japan, where pornographic material is easily and readily available yet the incidence of rape (one indicator of violence against women) is no higher than in other countries that restrict access to pornographic material (Gentry, 1991; Strossen, 1995). We could debate at length how societal views about women, in a society such as Japan, are shaped by pornographic material and how this influences definitions of societal problems within the society. Nevertheless, in looking at aggregate statistics on a particular measure, the link between violence and pornography is difficult for some to draw (Murphy, 1964; MacKinnon, 1991; Strossen, 1995).

Another group of researchers, however, makes the argument that consumption of pornographic material is correlated to the objectification of women as well as to violence against women within a society. Andrea Dworkin writes that pornography is a critical issue because "pornography says that women want to be hurt, forced, and abused; pornography says women want to be raped, battered, kidnapped, maimed; pornography says women want to be humiliated . . . pornography says that women say "No but mean Yes—Yes to violence, Yes to pain" (1994). Likewise, Longino (1994) finds a probable link between exposure to representations of violence against women in pornography and the committing of sexually abusive or violent acts against women (Goldstein, Kant and Hartman, 1973). These researchers aim to show a link between pornography and violence against women; however, to show a correlation exists does not prove a causal relationship (Demare, Lips, and Briere, 1993). Strong beliefs exist on each side of the question. Undoubtedly, the debate on the nature of the relationship between violence and pornography will continue to hold a place in the professional literature. Our purpose here is to see if extreme sexual violence, which some researchers believe is common in widely available pornographic material, actually characterizes the content of such pornography. Surely this type of material exists; however, we believe that it is a separate market that one must seek out.

In our work, we look at the prevalence of each of the three types of violence in videocassette pornography. We expect most vignettes will contain sexual violence or degrading/dehumanizing theme material and that few will offer theme

units of neutrality. Unlike the Attorney General's Commission (1986), we do not expect to observe acts of extreme deviance in widely available pornographic videos. We also examine how violence in pornography differs by racial composition of the actors. We expect more sexual violence and degradation/dehumanizing themes in vignettes with black actors regardless of gender. Unlike Cowan and Campbell (1994), we expect to observe more violence toward black women regardless of the race of the male actor. Given the prevalence of racist themes in pornographic material today (Hoch, 1979; MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1988; Mayall and Russell, 1993), we expect both white and black men to display more violence to black than white women. Further, we do not expect black women or men to be proportionally represented in neutral pornographic material. Rather, we expect to replicate Cowan and Campbell's (1994) finding that black actors demonstrate less intimacy in pornographic material than do their white counterparts.

Methods

Our work, utilizing a systematic sample, relies on a content analysis of forty pornographic videos. We used a random sample of 40 out of 3,375 commercially available x- to xxx- rated videos from a national chain in the local market. We obtained a list of all adult videos currently carried. The sampling frame included all available adult videos; however, some were excluded because of their length, cast composition, or unavailability.

We chose to analyze videos which were approximately two hours in length. Thus, videos that were longer than this time frame were excluded from our analysis. The vast majority of videos were two hours long. A few videos were "extravaganzas" and were typically four to six hours in length. We wanted the videos examined to be all the same length, and therefore the longer videos were excluded from our analysis. We also excluded videos that had all-male or all-female casts because we were interested in relationships between male and female actors (see Table 1 for a list of videos analyzed). Finally, our sampling interval was every eighty-fourth video off our sampling frame. If that video was no longer available, we selected the next available video. If none of the videos in that section were available, we selected the video that would have been located where the original video should have been. There was a high-volume turnover in the store. This is common, we were told, for this market. Basically, viewers want access to new material, and therefore the store manager was constantly ordering new videos. At the same time, older videos were discarded or sold. Given these considerations, we believe our sampling strategy, as stated above, provides a representative sample of videos on the market today.

TABLE 1
Videos Reviewed

Pajama Party 2	Masque
Gold Diggers	Monster Facials (6)
Buttwatch	Heavy Hootered Harlots (12)
Stiff Competition	I Can't Believe I Took It Up the Ass
XXX Completely Naked	Internation Lover
Dirty Stories 6	Private Film 25
Confessions	White Lies
Dark Encounters	100% Amateur (31)
Brunette Cum Suckers	Poonani
Cherry Poppers: the College Years (2)	More Dirty Debutantes (57)
Amateur Home Video	Dirty Debutantes (3)
Black Cheerleader Search (5)	New Ends (8)
Anal Auditions (6)	Shane's World (2)
Amateur Extravaganza	Takin' It to the Limit 3: Kickin' Ass
Anal Strippers Exposed	Pussyman 12: Sticky Fingers
The Bottom Dweller (5)	Screamin' Reamers 11
Skin	Up and Cummers: Sperm Suckers
18 and Over-anxious	Bad Girls 7: Lust Confined
Fresh Meat	Homegrown Video: Heads I Win
Lactamania	My Cousin Ginny

The individual vignette, not the movie, was our unit of analysis. Two hundred nine vignettes were coded. We coded our variables, except race, as present (1) or not present (0). The race of the actor was coded as white, black, Asian, or Hispanic. Our first racial composition included the actual races of actors in each vignette. We re-coded this variable where participants in each vignette were defined as either white or non-white (see Table 2). We examined only the manifest content of each vignette according to the following operational definitions of our categories:

Category 1. Sexual Violence theme units. Violence against women: female is restrained against her will, hair-pulling, hitting, slapping, or kicking.

Extreme sexual deviance: the kind of image which the 1986 Attorney General's Commission on Pornography claimed is prevalent in widely available pornography: urophilia, coprophilia, bestiality, and the rape, torture, and murder of women.

Category 2. Degradation/Dehumanizing theme units. Status inequality: the actors are unequal in a way that favors the male, such as marked age difference, or a role, or an occupational inequality (e.g., male supervisor and female employee).

TABLE 2
Racial Composition Coding

Racial Composition (Specific): list the actual races of the participants in each vignette. The specific racial composition of each scene was coded as follows: 1 = white male and white female, 2 = black male and black female, 3 = white male and black female, 4 = white male and two or more white females, 5 = two or more white males and a white female, 6 = two or more white males and two or more white females, 7 = two or more white males and a black female, 8 = white male and an Asian female, 9 = black male and white female, 10 = white male, black male, and two or more black females, 11 = white male and two or more black females, 12 = white male and Hispanic female, 13 = black male and two or more white females, 14 = white male, black male, and two or more white females, 15 = one or more white males, one or more black males, and a white female, 16 = two or more white males, one or more white females, and one or more Asian females, 17 = two or more white males and a Hispanic female, 18 = one or more white males, one or more black males, one or more white females, and one or more black females, 19 = white male, white female, and Asian female, 20 = two or more black males and a white female, 21 = two or more black males, a white female, and a black female, 22 = white male and a Jewish female (she identified herself as a person from Israel).

Racial Composition (non-specific): list the races of the participants in each vignette merely as white or non-white. The non-specific racial composition of each scene was coded as follows: 1 = white male and white female, 2 = nonwhite male and nonwhite female, 3 = any combination of more than two white participants (two white males and one white female, one white male and three white females, etc.), 4 = one white participant and one nonwhite participant, 5 = any combination with more than two participants, at least one of whom is white and at least one of whom is nonwhite.

Vulgar reference(s) to women: female is called or addressed by a crude name.

Subordination: male orders female to perform in a certain way. For example, female performs fellatio while on her knees or she initially refuses to participate in a sex act and later capitulates.

Ejaculation on female: male actor ejaculates on the female actor's face or torso.

Sex for exchange: female participates in sex act in exchange for money, gifts, forgiveness of debt, or any goods or services.

Casual sex: refers to the indiscriminate availability of the female sex. No plausible sexual scenario is set up; the actors are strangers or acquaintances whose relationship is not expected to be sexual in nature (e.g., teacher and student, pool man and daughter of homeowner).

Category 3. Neutral Material theme units. Intimacy: non-sexual touching, use of names, kissing, face-to-face sexual intercourse, and talking during intercourse.

We also include a theme category, "reference to race," which we defined as racial insults or compliments, stereotyped speech, "ethnic" background music, or mention of race.

Results

Violence against women was present in less than a fifth (17%) of all vignettes. We observed one instance (or 2.5%) of extreme sexual deviance. In one vignette a black man who is with two white women in the living room is told by the women to go kill those "expletive" in the other room (a white man and woman). We see him leave the living room and later hear two gunshots. The video ends at this point. You do not see the actors being shot; however, there is the suggestion of extreme sexual deviance so we coded it as such.

Marked status inequality was present in less than a fourth (19%) of all vignettes. Likewise, we did not find much (15%) in the vignettes involving vulgar references to women and even fewer references to race (8%). Subordination was present in 39% of the vignettes. As expected, male actors frequently (85%) ejaculated on female actors. Few (12%) female actors were portrayed as having sex for exchange.

Interestingly, an intimacy theme was present in almost a third (29%) of all vignettes. In fact, intimacy was a more common theme than was violence (in 17% of all vignettes). As one would expect, the vast majority (92%) of vignettes involved casual sex between partners.

We found that it makes a difference what the racial composition of actors in a vignette is and whether or not violence occurs ($\chi^2 = 39.21$ [.01]). When a white man was paired with a black female, there was more violence (in 33% of the vignettes) than when a black man was with a white woman (8% of vignettes). Interestingly, there was no difference in the amount of violence between a white man and white woman compared to a black man and black woman (12% each of vignettes). When multiple white men were in a vignette, there was always violence when paired with a black female; however, when paired with a white female, violence rarely occurred (15% of vignettes). There was always violence when a white male actor was paired with a Hispanic female; the opposite held (no violence in vignettes) when he was paired with an Asian female. None of the vignettes reviewed contained scenes with a sole black male actor and a sole Hispanic or Asian female. In our revised racial composition, the relationship between violence

TABLE 3
Violence Theme and Race (non-specific). % (N)

Racial Composition	Violence		Total
	Not Present	Present	
White male/white female	87.76 (86)	12.24 (12)	100% (98)
Nonwhite male and female	87.50 (7)	12.50 (1)	100% (8)
Multiple white cast	83.33 (45)	16.67 (9)	100% (54)
One white/one nonwhite actor	84.00 (21)	16.00 (4)	100% (25)
Multiple mixed cast	62.50 (15)	37.50 (9)	100% (24)

N = 209; $\chi^2 = 8.952 (.06)$

and race held ($\chi^2 = 8.95 [.06]$). We found that when the actors consisted of a multiple white cast there was less violence (17% of vignettes) than when the multiple cast was of mixed races (38% of all vignettes) (see Table 3).

We also found a statistically significant difference between the racial composition of actors and whether or not the theme of casual sex was present or not ($\chi^2 = 46.54 [.001]$). Generally, if it was an all-white cast, whether the vignette involved one white female and one white male or multiple white actors, casual sex was more common (92% and 98% respectively) than when actors in the vignette were both black (75% of the vignettes involved casual sex) or partners were of different races (84%). As expected, the race of the actors made a significant difference in whether or not intimacy was drawn in a vignette ($\chi^2 = 18.43 [.001]$) (see Table 4). Few vignettes involving a black male and female actor had an intimacy theme (12%), whereas 40% of vignettes with a white male and female actor involved intimacy. Few of the vignettes involving multiple actors had an intimacy theme (15% of those with a multiple white cast; 8% of those with a multiple mixed cast).

The race of the actors made a significant difference in whether or not there was a reference to race in a given vignette ($\chi^2 = 96.17 [.001]$). There were no references to race in vignettes composed of an all-white cast. There were more race references in vignettes with single actors (one white/one nonwhite [44% of vignettes had a race reference]); or vignettes with one black man and black woman (25%), than when multiple actors of mixed races were present (17% of all vignettes mentioned race). Notably, we did not find any statistically significant relationship between any theme defined to pick up degradation/dehumanizing material and the racial composition of actors in vignettes.

TABLE 4
Intimacy Theme and Race (non-specific). % (N)

Racial Composition	Violence		Total
	Not Present	Present	
(White male/white female	60.20 (59)	39.80 (39)	100% (98)
Nonwhite male and female	87.50 (7)	12.50 (1)	100% (8)
Multiple white cast	85.19 (46)	14.81 (8)	100% (54)
One white/one nonwhite actor	60.00 (15)	40.00 (10)	100% (25)
Multiple mixed cast	91.67 (22)	8.33 (2)	100% (24)

N = 209; $\chi^2 = 18.432 (.001)$

Discussion

As expected, most vignettes we viewed had sexual violence or a dehumanizing/degradation theme. We did not expect to observe, however, the relatively large number of vignettes with a theme of intimacy. We observed only one instance of extreme sexual violence. Our work does not support the findings of the 1986 Commission on Pornography which asserted that extreme sexual violence was prevalent in widely available pornography. As expected, we found more violence in vignettes where black actors were present. Further, black women were the more likely targets of violent acts from both white and black men than were white women. Our work replicates the findings of others as we too observed fewer intimacy themes when black actors were present than was true for all white casts.

We find sexism and racism evident in the pornographic material analyzed. Women continue to be portrayed as sexual objects ever available to perform sexual acts. Women are often cast as the submissive party in these relationships. Black women are the object of more sexual violence from either black or white men. White women suffer the least sexual violence when paired with a black man. Black actors lack intimacy in pornographic material—a theme largely reserved for white pornographic actors.

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