



## Are variations in gender equality evident in pornography? A cross-cultural study

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 21 January 2011

Received in revised form 6 June 2011

Accepted 23 July 2011

#### Keywords:

Pornography  
Gender equality  
Cross-cultural  
Empowerment  
Feminism

### ABSTRACT

In 1960, feminist groups and scholars published critiques of common “male-centric” views of sexuality. They analyzed pornography, traditions as to who initiates sexual encounters, the (non)existence of foreplay, and common (male dominant) sexual positions. Some even said such activities should be abolished (see [Dworkin, 1985](#); [Firestone, 1970](#); [Solanas, 1971](#)). Today, the appropriate role of sexuality, specifically the role of pornography in women's lives, probably sparks the biggest debate among feminists. The majority of research on pornography focuses on its misogynistic biases and maladaptive effects, while the minority of literature contends that pornography can be egalitarian and thus be empowering for women. There is little research to test these competing hypotheses as to the value of pornography for women.

This paper was designed to investigate whether or not in societies where men and women are relatively equal in status versus unequal, different kinds of pornography flourishes. Three countries that differed markedly in the status of women (based on their United Nation's Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) ranking published in the 2007/2008 Human Development Report) were selected for comparison: Norway (1), the United States (15), and Japan (54). We then compared the nature of their most popular pornography.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypothesis that – consistent with their GEM ranking – popular Norwegian pornography would depict women in more empowered positions than pornography from the United States and Japan. Results supported this hypothesis. This finding could be attributed to the wider variety in Norwegian pornography, e.g. greater variation in the women's age, weight, and body positioning. There were no significant differences in the extent models in the three countries appeared in demeaning positions.

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In 1988, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon promoted civil rights anti-pornography legislation ([Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988](#)) under the assumption that pornography diminishes gender equality by promoting an image of women as inferior to men. Several empirical studies have examined the claim that pornography disempowers women, fostering sexual aggression ([Baron & Strauss, 1989](#); [Linz, 1989](#)) and potentially generating and reinforcing sexual discrimination ([Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988](#)). Conversely, the minority body of feminist literature contends that pornography can have positive effects and potentially be empowering for women ([Strossen, 1995](#)). However, very little empirical analysis of the relationship

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<sup>1</sup> The first two authors won two awards for this research: (2011) 1st Place, Society for Cross Cultural Research Conference: Best Student Paper Competition; and (2011) 1st Place, Third Hawaii Psychology Student Research Dinner: Presentation Award.

between gender equality and the characteristics of pornography, or the impact of powerful/subservient women in pornography and gender equality exists (Baron, 1990). In addition, the sparse research that does exist was generally conducted in the United States or the West. This is a general problem in American psychology, of course (Arnett, 2009). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate whether cross-cultural differences in gender equality are reflected in a culture's pornographic images. In subsequent research, we would examine whether such cultural differences in depictions also have an impact on women's actual empowerment and disempowerment.

### 1. Cross-cultural variations in gender equity

According to social structural theory, the division of labor by gender and the gender disparity in power create psychological gender differences (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Applying this theory to sexuality, men are historically more self-sufficient and dominant, and thus are able to use women for casual relationships without commitment (Eagly & Wood, 1999), while women have less power and earning potential than men and must seek long-term, committed relationships with powerful men to obtain protection and resources (Eagly, Wood, & Johanssen-Schmidt, 2004). An unequal distribution of power by gender promotes the idea that women are less valuable than men. One of the consequences of this disparity is the rendering of women into objects whose sole purpose is to satisfy male sexual desires (Hekma, 2008). Thus, social structural theory would predict that gender differences in power create gender differences in sexual attitudes, feelings, and experiences (Petersen and Hyde, 2010).

While men tend to have more power than women in most parts of the world, the magnitude of this difference in power varies across cultures. It seems reasonable to predict that more egalitarian societies (as compared to countries with larger power differentials) should have smaller gender differences in men's and women's sexuality (Petersen and Hyde, 2010).

To assess the extent of gender equality in a given society, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) developed a gender empowerment measure (GEM). The GEM ranks a total of 93 countries on a composite index measuring gender inequality in three dimensions of empowerment: (1) economic participation and decision-making; (2) political participation; and (3) decision-making and power over economic resources (UNDP, 2007). We would predict that countries with higher scores on the GEM, reflecting greater equality, would tend to display smaller gender differences in sexual attitudes and behavior than would less egalitarian societies (Petersen and Hyde, 2010). Consistent with this prediction by social structural theory, Eagly and Wood (1999) found a negative correlation between the magnitude of gender equality on the 1995 GEM and the magnitude of gender differences in mate preferences. The objective of the present study is to continue this line of inquiry into the relationship between gender empowerment and sexuality by attempting to determine whether or not variations in gender equality have an impact on the type of pornography that is most popular in a given country. Specifically, we would predict that the higher a culture rates on the GEM, the more images of women in pornography would reflect a powerful status.

### 2. Pornography and the disempowerment of women

According to anti-pornography feminists, pornography both creates and perpetuates gender inequality through promoting a sexist ideology and discriminatory practices against women (Baron, 1990; Dworkin, 1985; MacKinnon, 1984, 1989). First, pornography promotes a sexist ideology by erroneously portraying women as inferior to men and as objects of male sexual gratification (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1982). Consequently, men learn to devalue and exploit women, having been indoctrinated by such anti-female propaganda (Brownmiller, 1975). The second critique by anti-pornography feminists is that pornography promotes discriminatory practices against women, violating their civil rights (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988). Dworkin and MacKinnon state that:

The bigotry and contempt pornography promotes, with the acts of aggression it fosters, diminish opportunities for equality of rights in employment, education, property, public accommodations and public services (1988, p. 33).

This critique assumes that pornography is not just fantasy or simulation, but documented discriminatory acts against women with malign consequences.

### 3. Pornography and the empowerment of women

In opposition to the anti-pornography legislation proposed by MacKinnon and Dworkin, pro-sex and anti-censorship feminists created the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT) to defeat the legislation (Duggan, Hunter, & Vance, 1985; Ellis, Jake, Hunter, O'Dair, & Tallmer, 1988). FACT argued against the legislation based on the following objections (Amicus Curiae Brief, 1984):

1. The language of the legislation is broad in scope and could easily be used to restrict sexually explicit materials that women find arousing and empowering;

2. The legislation disempowers women by conferring upon judges, not feminists, the power to decide which sexually explicit materials “subordinate” or “degrade” women;
3. Social science research does not support the legislation's assumption that pornography harms women.

Indeed, consistent with FACT's argument, most research has suggested that exposure to nonviolent pornography is unrelated to a sexist ideology (Baron, 1990). Padgett, Brislin-Slütz, & Neal (1989) found that attitudes towards women and women's issues were not significantly related to exposure to nonviolent pornography. Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod (1988) were also unable to find a relationship between exposure to nonviolent pornography and either the tendency to sexually objectify women, or the belief in traditional sex roles.

In 1995, Nadine Strossen, then president of the American Civil Liberties Union, also argued against the censorship of pornography. Strossen claimed that censorship does not reduce violence against women, but actually endangers women's rights by endorsing the stereotype of the helpless female victim. Indeed, Baron (1990) examined the relationship between circulation rates of soft-core pornographic magazines and gender equality in the 50 American states, finding that gender equality is actually higher in states with higher circulation rates of pornography. In support of the anti-censorship faction, Baron suggested that both pornography and gender equality flourish in more politically tolerant societies that place fewer restrictions on sexually explicit speech and evidence greater commitment to equal rights.

The campaign against anti-pornography legislation relied heavily on the anti-censorship, rather than pro-sex, argument – and rightly so, given the lack of empirical data on the potentially empowering effects of pornography. The purpose of this study is to empirically weigh in on the theoretical debate on pornography by quantifying elements that would be considered empowering or disempowering in the pornographic images from three different countries: Norway, the US, and Japan. The following hypotheses are evaluated: countries with greater gender equality, as rated by the UN, will have pornography that is (1) more representative of empowered women, and (2) less representative of disempowered women than will countries with a lower rank on the GEM. The question of what impact such differences will have on viewers will have to await subsequent research.

#### 4. Disempowerment/empowerment, gender equality, and type of pornography

As addressed above, pornography is predominantly viewed as disempowering for women, or as denying women power and self-agency. Regarding gender equality, women's roles in pornography can often be considered disempowering when they deprive female pornography actresses or models of equal status to men through a variety of ways. In a large portion of hardcore pornography (that includes penetration during sexual activity) the erect penis is the most important organ (Hirdman, 2007). Women are often used as little more than receptacles for the penis, and very little attention is paid to female pleasure, and female centric techniques, such as clitoral stimulation. Images like the “money-shot” where focus is on the male ejaculating on the woman's face or body often show the female recipient ecstatic to be serving as the recipient of this practice (Cowan & Dunn, 1994; Williams, 1989), when there is objectively limited physical pleasure than can be derived from it, without the physical stimulation of other areas such as the clitoris. In hardcore pornography, there is also much opportunity for violence, such as hitting, slapping, and pushing, that portrays male dominance over women in the pornographic context (Cowan, Lee, Levy, & Snyder, 1988; Williams, 1989). Moreover, women are often portrayed as willing participants in these acts of humiliation or violence (Cowan & Dunn, 1994), which negates female power and agency to seek pleasure and respect, and derogates women to a lesser status than men.

In choosing to only use images of individual women, we are predominantly dealing with softcore pornography (Hirdman, 2007), which circumvents the possible occurrence of certain disempowering features of hardcore pornography discussed above. However, there are still elements of softcore pornography that may be disempowering to women. Past research has dealt with the formulaic positioning of women's bodies within visual media that disempowers women by stating that desirable poses for women are ones that make them vulnerable or inferior to the viewer (Kilbourne, 1993), who, for pornography, is presumably male (Dines, Jensen, & Russo, 1998; Hald, 2006). This type of deferential positioning is a common factor in softcore pornography, and thus creates an inequality between the female subject and the male viewer. Another way in which a power disparity is created between the subject and viewer is through the practice of infantilizing the woman, either through diminutive body positions or through costume. Other disempowering factors that were considered in the current research are itemized in Section 5.

As disempowerment is the negation of individual power and self-agency, empowerment is the self-possession of these resources. Within the context of gender equality and pornography, we are interested in elements of pornography that embody empowerment for women and lessen the inequality between the female subject and male viewer. There is little past research as to how empowerment is generally represented in physical form, so we constructed empowering factors by considering what the opposite, or absence, of disempowering factors would look like for female softcore pornography models. Instead of being positioned in the traditional vulnerable, diminutive, and uncomfortable female poses, empowering representations of women include strong, physically powerful, and comfortable stances. Instead of trying to make the body look as small and feminine as possible, models may stand up straight, to their full height, and gaze directly at the viewer. Women are not made to look childlike through body position or costume, but are depicted as adults. The difference in power between the subject and viewer, between women and men, is decreased when women are represented as whole,

independent, strong individuals instead of merely an object for male consumption. The empowering factors we considered in the current study are elaborated in more detail in the following section.

## 5. Methods

### 5.1. Sample

The unit of analysis was a still image of a single woman, collected from the popular pornography of Norway, the United States, and Japan. Our first step was to identify “mainstream” Web sites and magazines that featured “mainstream” pornography stars, pornography Web sites, and pornography magazines. In order to determine which were the most common erotic pornography stars, sites, and magazines in Norway, America, and Japan, we contacted colleagues from Norway, the US, and Japan, who were currently involved in sexuality and erotica research. These researchers were identified from the membership lists of the International Academy of Sex Research (IASR), and the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex. We asked these authorities to (1) help us identify the most popular pornography stars, sites, and magazines in their countries – the kind of mainstream magazines (akin to the U.S. *Playboy* magazine) sold in train stations and at newsstands, and (2) to tell us how we might secure sales figures for such sources. In the case of the U.S. and Japan a simple perusal of the Web supplied some information on popularity and sales figures.

Images were then selected from mainstream pornographic magazines and Internet websites, as well as from the portfolios of the most popular porn stars from each nation, in order to capture the most common depictions of women in pornographic images. In addition to how we addressed the issue of defining popular or mainstream pornography above, we also consider “mainstream” as softcore and hardcore pornography that does not cater to sexual fetishes, such as sadomasochism, or sexual minorities, such as gay and lesbian pornography. In order to standardize the comparison between countries, only images depicting a single woman were added to the selection pool. Past research has supported the use of pornographic images from magazines and the Internet for content analysis (Gossett & Byrne, 2002; Malamuth & Spinner, 1980; Matacin & Burger, 1987; Scott & Cuvelier, 1993).

In assembling suitable images, we recruited 12 research assistants from an advanced social psychology class at the University of Hawaii. 4 men and 8 women volunteered to help with this project. As is typical of Hawaii, our assistants came from a variety of ethnic groups: in the main they were Japanese–Americans, European–Americans, and Mixed. The mean age was 20. Research assistants were trained to compile three pools of images from the mainstream pornography sources of each nation. The research assistants compiled a total of 300 images from each country, resulting in 900 images overall. Within each country, images were assigned numbers from 1 to 300; using a random number generator, 60 images were selected from each country to compose the final sample of 180 pornographic images to be used for content analysis.

### 5.2. Measures

Two coding guides for disempowering and empowering factors were created to quantify the level of disempowerment and empowerment present in each pornographic image. Prior content analyses of pornography have predominantly focused on identifying negative or disempowering factors (Cowan & Dunn, 1994; Cowan et al., 1988; Dworkin, 1981). Thus, the disempowerment coding guide was compiled from what past research has deemed demeaning or degrading towards women. The disempowerment scale is a 24-item measure, consisting of yes/no indicators to identify the presence of factors such as:

- The woman being bound and dominated, indicated by the use of props like leashes, collars, gags, or handcuffs;
- The woman being depicted as overly youthful or infantilized, indicated by the use of costumes designed to make her look childlike or young;
- The image focusing exclusively on a woman’s sexualized body parts (Cowan et al., 1988), indicated typically by a full-frame shot of the breasts, butt, mouth or vulva, or if the woman’s genitalia is spread open (Britton, 1999);
- The woman is positioned solely to satisfy the sexual desire of the man, without regard to her apparent comfort or pleasure, indicated by a contorted or unnatural pose, or if she is in a submissive position (e.g. on her knees gazing up at the camera);
- The image represents an idealized and unrealistic body type, with the woman being very thin or underweight, having unnaturally large breasts that appear to be surgically enhanced, or having skin unblemished by scars, stretch marks, or other “undesirable” characteristics.

With no prior research on empowering pornographic content to draw from, the 21-item empowerment scale was created using the inverse of many of the disempowerment factors. These anti-disempowerment indicators included whether the woman is physically *un*-restrained and in a natural pose, if she is *not* made to appear childlike through youthful costumes or facial expressions, or if the frame includes the woman’s entire body or at least her face. Other examples include whether the woman is of average or above average weight, whether she has a natural looking body (e.g. blemished skin including cellulite or wrinkles), and if she is in authoritative or at least neutral position (gazing down or directly at the camera).

Ideally, of course, we would have conducted factor analyses to insure that our scales were in fact measuring separate constructs and that our two scales were indeed reliable and valid. This was, alas, not possible. The University of Hawaii IRB was deeply concerned about exposing college seniors to pornography for any prolonged period. Thus, the number of coders

and the number of ratings coders were allowed to make was severely limited. Even with these severe restrictions, it took almost a full academic year to secure permission to run this study. (To run a proper factor analysis, our statistical consultant, Yiyuan Xu calculated that we ought to have 100 coders (not 12) and that the same coders should rate stimuli on both the scales. This was forbidden as it increased the time coders spent viewing pornography.) An analysis of variance then lies in the future.

Although we do not have information on the newly constructed empowerment scale (for the reasons indicated) we do have information on inter-rater reliabilities for both scales: The average effective inter-rater reliability of the disempowerment scale was  $r' = 0.73$ , and  $r' = 0.70$  for the empowerment scale (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1984). The disempowerment and empowerment scales were negatively and minimally correlated ( $r = -0.23$ ,  $p = .002$ ), indicating that while empowerment and disempowerment in this context are not entirely separate constructs, there is a low level of overlap between the two, as approximately 5% of the variance within the two scales is accounted for by their correlation with one another.

## 6. Procedure

We selected twelve volunteers from an advanced class in social psychology to be our raters. The research assistants included four male and eight female undergraduate students, ranging from 18 to 22 years of age. All were US citizens. As is typical of students in Hawaii, the coders came from a variety of ethnic groups, including European-American, Asian Americans, and Mixed. The 12 research assistants attended a training session to familiarize them with the various indicators used in the scales. They were kept blind as to the hypotheses of the study. The research assistants were divided into four groups of three people each. Each of the four groups was assigned 90 images to code (30 from Norway, 30 from the US, and 30 from Japan) on either the disempowerment or the empowerment scale; two teams coded the images using the disempowerment scale, and the other two used the empowerment scale, resulting in each image being coded on both scales. Members of the teams independently coded the images, and then met as a group to address any discrepancies between their individual results and reach a consensus on each item. Thus, each team produced one coding of 90 images on a single scale. Positive indicators ("yes" responses) on this coding were summed, to yield a consolidated score for each of the 180 images (90 from each of two teams) that were compared between each country in a one-way ANOVA.

## 7. Results

### 7.1. Data analysis

The consolidated mean scores on both scales were analyzed using a between-group ANOVA and then with a Scheffe Post Hoc test. In Hypothesis one, we proposed that Norway, the United States, and Japan, which differed in women's status, would also differ in how empowered the pornographic images were. The mean empowerment scores were 11.52 ( $SD = 1.79$ ) for Norway, 10.75 ( $SD = 1.91$ ) for the United States, and 10.60 ( $SD = 1.99$ ) for Japan. There was a significant main effect for country-based differences on the empowerment scale,  $F(2, 177) = 4.033$ ,  $p = .019$ ,  $r = .21$ . As predicted, the results indicate that the empowerment scores do differ significantly between the countries, supporting the first hypothesis. Use of the Scheffe Post Hoc test revealed a significant difference between Norway and Japan ( $p = .032$ ), but not between the US and Norway or the US and Japan. The results indicate that pornography in Norway, a country ranked first in gender equality among ninety-three countries, depicts women in a more empowering way than does Japan, ranked 54 of 93 on the GEM of the United Nations. In Hypothesis two, we proposed that Norway, the United States, and Japan, which differed in women's status, would also differ in how disempowering the pornographic images were.

The means for these countries were 7.03 ( $SD = 2.25$ ), 6.55 ( $SD = 1.35$ ), and 6.88 ( $SD = 1.89$ ), respectively. Contrary to the second hypothesis, there was *not* a significant difference between the mean disempowerment scores for each country,  $F(2, 177) = 1.057$ ,  $p = .35$ ,  $r = 11$ .

## 8. Discussion and conclusion

The objective of this research was to test the hypotheses that countries with greater gender equality will have pornography that has more empowering representations of women and less disempowering representations of women than would exist in less egalitarian countries. Anti-pornography feminists contend that pornography creates and perpetuates sexist ideology and sexual discrimination – a claim refuted by anti-censorship feminists, who suggest that pornography may actually be associated with a tolerant political environment more favorable to gender equity than a sexually restricted society (Baron, 1990).

The reaction against the anti-pornography campaign largely hinged on anti-censorship rhetoric, rather than a pro-sex argument. While several content analyses have focused on the negative aspects of pornography including the prevalence of racism (Cowan & Campbell, 1994), violence (Palys, 1986; Yang & Linz, 1990), and the exploitation of women (Cowan et al., 1988), no content analyses could be found that focused on the potentially empowering aspects of pornography. For this reason, the present research sought to code pornography on two scales – empowerment and disempowerment – to allow us to empirically test the relationship between pornography and gender equity, and provide the first foray into a positive, empowering content analysis of pornography.



The finding that Norway, ranked highest by the UN in gender equity, has pornography that is significantly more empowering than that of Japan is consistent with prior research supporting the argument of anti-censorship feminists, who argue that cultural values are reflected in pornography, which may in turn shape social attitudes. This result may be due to a greater social acceptance of adolescent and female sexuality in Nordic countries than in many other Western cultures (Treen, Spitznogle, & Beverfjord, 2004). Also, from the qualitative feedback provided by the research assistants and a review of the coding results for individual items, the significant difference in empowerment for Norway may lie in a greater variety of body types presented in mainstream Norwegian pornography. Whereas the bodies in American and Japanese pornography tend to conform to a “perfect” societal ideal – thin, young, flawless – the Norwegian pornography evidenced a greater variety of body type and, in the words of a research assistant, “more natural, less surgically modified bodies.” Furthermore, while the preference for heavier set women tends to fall under the fetish category in American pornography, Norwegian pornography displayed a wider range of body types within the mainstream sample.

However, the results of the ANOVA failed to support the hypothesis that greater gender equity would result in less disempowering pornography, as no significant differences were found between countries on the disempowerment scale. This finding could be because mainstream pornography includes many images that are deemed by feminists to demean and disempower women. While Norwegian pornography offers a wider variety of body types – conforming less to a societal ideal that is disempowering to the average woman – there are still many images that do not promote a healthy respect for women.

The finding that Norwegian pornography was both (1) more empowering than Japanese pornography and (2) similarly disempowering as the pornography from the United States and Japan suggests that empowerment and disempowerment within pornography are potentially different constructs. Indeed, the low magnitude of the correlation between the two scales and the results of the ANOVA analysis indicate that these two constructs may be separable. While pornography may have disempowering features, this research supports the hypothesis that some pornography may also include empowering features that correlate with cross-cultural differences in gender equity. While the task of isolating and identifying all empowering features is beyond the scope of the present study, this research suggests that they do at least exist. A content analysis of pornography through an empowering lens is a new, pro-sex approach to complement the anti-censorship critique against opponents of pornography.

One limitation of this study is low inter-rater reliability (average  $r' = 0.73$  for the disempowerment scale, and  $r' = 0.70$  for the empowerment scale), which can be remedied in a replication by more extensive training of the coding assistants. In the present study, coders received a 1.5 h training under the assumption that the coding was straightforward; post-analysis feedback solicited from the 12 coders revealed confusion about a few certain items that were independently resolved on a case-by-case basis. Closer examination of such items and a revision of the scales, in addition to more extensive training, would undoubtedly bolster inter-rater reliability and the validity of the measures. The measures can be further validated in future research by recruiting at least 100 participants to code a few images on both of the scales, and conducting a factor analysis to see whether the disempowering and empowering factors are truly independent of one another.

The second major limitation of the study is the problem in resolving difficulties of cross-cultural comparison. Certain factors complicated an un-biased comparison: e.g., obscenity laws differ between the three nations. Specifically, the law on distribution of obscene materials in Japan's penal code is typically interpreted as the illegality of showing penises and vaginas in pornographic images, which publishers circumvent by blurring certain parts (De Becker, 1938). Another challenge in cross-cultural comparison arose in the difficulty of ascertaining what constitutes mainstream/bestselling pornography in Norway (Treen et al., 2004). While both Japanese and Norwegian nationals were consulted in the data collection process, future research would benefit from a more extensive collaboration with researchers from the cultures in comparison. Such collaboration is critical to developing an empirically sound cross-cultural research methodology that ascertains measurement equivalence (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006) and appropriately identifies the cultural and universal components in question (Smith, Spillane, & Annus, 2006).

In conclusion, this research supports the work of anti-censorship feminists and opens an empirical pathway for the pro-sex approach. As Boyle (2000) argues, anti-pornography feminists may need to eschew the traditional argument that attempts to establish a causal relationship between pornography and violent behavior, and focus instead on how some pornography is produced and consumed in ways that are abusive to women. The present study shows that some pornography may present women in an empowered role and as possessing empowering attributes reflective of cross-cultural differences in gender equity. This result may perhaps lend support to the argument that not all pornography is inherently harmful.

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