

Hercules and Barbie? Reflections on the influence of pornography and its spread in the media and society in groups of adolescents in Sweden

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ABSTRACT **Objectives** To describe and get a deeper understanding of how groups of young women and men reflect on and discuss pornography and its spread in the media and society, and its possible influence on sexual behaviour and relationships.

Methods Six focus group interviews were conducted with teenagers, three with women ($n = 17$) and three with men ($n = 18$). Open questions about pornography and its spread in the media and society were discussed. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed according to Grounded Theory.

Results The core category 'A discriminatory sexuality' illustrates how participants felt regarding the messages conveyed by pornography portraying a man's role as dominant and a woman's role as subordinate. Pornographic messages were described as 'Fiction' depicting a distorted reality. Feelings of ambivalence towards pornography were expressed: anxiety and fear, but also inspiration. Participants said pornography occurred everywhere in the media and society, and felt pressured by messages relating to looks and sexual techniques.

Conclusions Pornography and its spread in the media and society were considered as presenting a discriminatory image of body ideals, sexuality and relationships. Despite this awareness, both men and women considered pornography as sources of knowledge and inspiration: an apparent paradox.

KEY WORDS Adolescents; Pornography; Sexuality; Attitudes; Grounded Theory

INTRODUCTION

Sexual and reproductive health includes the ability to have a responsible, satisfying and safe sex life together

with the freedom to choose if and when to procreate¹. The Swedish Government equality policy is aimed at creating equal conditions for women and men, and

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two of 11 public health domains include sexuality and reproductive health².

Pornography has no well-defined meaning but one definition is sexually explicit pictures, texts, or other material whose primary purpose is to cause sexual arousal³. There are many different genres within pornography. One difference between the genres of pornography is the degree of fully consenting equal partners^{4,5}. Texts and pictures in pornography are spreading in society and media channels, a so-called 'spill-over-effect', meaning that pornography is slipping into popular culture and becoming an integral part of fashion magazines, commercials and music videos⁴. Pornographic material then becomes normalised and a part of young people's daily life^{4,6,7}. Adolescents who were exposed to sexualised content in the media (including television, music, movies, magazines) reported greater intentions to engage in sexual activity⁶. Television and other mass media are important sources of sexual information for young people⁸. Exposure to sexually explicit material in on-line films has previously been related to the belief that women are sex objects⁹ and associated with greater sexual uncertainty and more positive attitudes toward uncommitted sexual exploration, such as relations with casual partners/friends or with sexual partners in one-night stands¹⁰.

In Sweden, an estimated 99% of all 12–24 year-olds have access to the Internet¹¹. Seventy percent of 15–17 year-olds belong to one or several e-communities and links containing pornography are frequent in these communities¹¹. The Internet is also increasingly used as a forum for sexual activity¹².

In a Nordic report, 99% of young men and 86% of young women aged 14–18 had been in contact with pornography, albeit to a varied extent⁷. In 2005, 86% of a group of Swedish 18-year-old high-school students had accessed pornography and 30% of the men watched pornography every day or every week. The students had watched different genres of pornography, mostly 'soft porn', but 'hard porn' and violent porn to some extent¹³. Three out of four men believed that pornography can influence the sexual behaviour of others, and 25–50% of respondents believed that pornography influenced their own sexual behaviour¹³. Interview studies with young women and men have shown that pornography creates sexual demands and expectations^{13–17}.

Watching pornography is often a social activity when groups of young women and men get together^{18,19}. The aim of this study was to describe and get a deeper

understanding of how groups of young women and men reflect on and discuss pornography and its spread in the media and society, and its possible influence on sexual behaviour and relationships.

METHODS

Grounded Theory

The basic principles of Grounded Theory include theoretical sampling and analysis, constant comparison, theoretical sensitivity and saturation. Theoretical sampling is used to reach saturation and is guided by the emerging categories. Saturation is reached when new data fit into the categories already devised²⁰. In Grounded Theory, a strategic sampling of participants is recommended to maximise the variations and opinions in the group studied²¹. Since few studies describe how young women and men reason and reflect on pornography, this study had an inductive approach. This means that data were gathered within an area with a view to describing and analysing a phenomenon, which later allows generation of hypotheses regarding relationships between phenomena²¹. An unprejudiced approach is required when analysing data so that the context and the main message mediated by the participants can be correctly apprehended²¹.

Study group and procedure

This study was conducted in one medium-sized and one small city in Sweden in 2006 and 2007. Participants were recruited from a youth centre, two high schools with different high school programmes, one in each city, and from a youth recreation centre. Personnel at the different recruiting locations approved the study and assisted the project leader in recruiting participants. Information about the project was also available through advertisements in schools, saying: 'Do you want to participate in a group interview? We will discuss pornography in society and the media and its influence on sexual behaviour'. Participants volunteered to participate and were not asked about any demographics, but since we used a strategic recruitment process, we believe the sample represents youths with different socioeconomic backgrounds. The inclusion criteria were gender, age between 16 and 19 years, and the ability to speak Swedish fluently. Seventeen

young women and 18 young men, aged 16–19 years, with a mean age of 17, agreed to participate.

Focus group interviews

Six focus group interviews were conducted according to the principles of focus group research²². Interaction is the key to this method as it deepens the opinions expressed and provides illustrations from different perspectives²². Each of the groups – three of which were with women (W_1, W_2, W_3) and the other three with men (M_1, M_2, M_3) – comprised between four and eight participants. In each group, a moderator led the discussion and an assessor observed and wrote theoretical memos. In the male groups, the moderator was an experienced male social worker whereas in the female groups, the moderator was a registered nurse. The assessors were either a researcher or a registered nurse. The topic guide contained open-ended questions covering the following themes: reflections about pornography and its spread in the media and society; sexual behaviour, sexual techniques, feelings in relation to pornography, and gender aspects. The interviews, lasting approximately one hour, were held in a quiet room at each of the recreation areas and were tape-recorded with permission from the participants. The interviews differed in aspects and views even though a topic guide was used. After each interview, the moderator and the assessor discussed the interactive communication between the participants.

Analysis of data

After each interview data were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were examined line by line and substantive codes were formulated in words close to the participants' vocabulary. Data were analysed and a constant comparison was performed between the empirical data and the emerging model assuring credibility and dependability. When all interviews were completed all substantive codes were examined to make the data comprehensible²¹. Theoretical memos were linked with the data, and analytically interpreted. Similarities and differences in the data were identified and systematically compared, and any emerging theme was discussed until agreement was reached between the researchers. Closely related concepts were formed into categories summarising the content and these were labelled (Table 1). Each category was then analysed to search for possible

variations. The core category, answering the question: 'What is this all about?' was identified and the other categories were related to the core category²¹.

Ethics

Verbal and written information regarding the aim and procedure was given to all participants. All participants were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and without declaring any reason. The Ethical Committee at Mälardalen University, Västerås, Sweden, approved the study.

RESULTS

The core category 'A discriminatory sexuality', encompassing all data, described how young women and men in groups reflected and reasoned about pornography and its spread in the media and society, and the possible influence on sexual behaviour and relationships. This core category included five categories: (i) It is everywhere; (ii) Pressuring sexual messages; (iii) Distorted reality: 'Fiction'; (iv) Ambivalence, and (v) Inspiration. These five categories had variations or subcategories related to them, which are integrated in Figure 1 describing a preliminary model based on how groups of young women and men reflect on pornography and its spread in the media and society.

Core category – A discriminatory sexuality

The overall opinion permeating the discussions, encompassing all the categories, was 'A discriminatory sexuality'. The participants claimed that pornography and its spread in the media and society presented an unattainable body ideal through porn star stereotypes, where the body was the main issue: the woman, symbolised as 'Barbie' and the man, symbolised as 'Hercules'. The man was the leader, strong and well built. The woman was represented as a thin body with large breasts and subordinate to the man.

It can give a very distorted aspect of how it really should be [...] It feels like the man sort of controls the woman which is extremely unhealthy if the guy practises that in a relationship, and if she accepts it. (W_1)

Pornography on the whole builds on incorrect gender roles. Reality does not exactly look like that. (M_1)

Table 1 Examples of citations, substantive codes, subcategories or variations within categories of the core category 'A discriminatory sexuality.'

<i>Citations</i>	<i>Substantive codes</i>	<i>Subcategory/variations within category</i>	<i>Category</i>
'It is shown everywhere. Wherever you are.'	Shows up Wherever you are		It is everywhere
'The negative, you can say that it is negative, I think many feel demand because of the constant exposure in media. About what to do, and where we should do it, I mean everything. There has to be advice about everything, not be able to choose by yourself. Feeling of demand of having to perform certain things.'	Feeling pressure Advice about everything Not able to choose Must have performed certain things	Messages about: – looks – sexual techniques	Pressuring sexual messages
'It is a porn star stereotype. Very large breasts, thin waist and I think you receive a distorted image of what a natural look is like. That becomes the ideal.'	Porn star stereotype Large breasts, thin waist Distorted aspect It becomes the ideal	– demanding – empathy	Distorted reality – 'Fiction'
'You get upset and maybe sad when they do this. It can be so nice, I have heard. You might get mad, depending on who asks. If it is a guy who likes it, then it might make you happy.'		– contradictory feelings	Ambivalence
'Sometimes it is beautiful. Everything is not coarse and so on.'	Sometimes beautiful Not always coarse	– genre dependent	
'It may be a way to learn.'	A way to learn	– sexual techniques	Inspiration
'You might get inspiration to try something new.'	Inspiration		

[...] I don't think the men are the only ones doing it. It feels more like a taboo for women [...]. It is not as well discussed that women watch pornography or read pornographic magazines, because it is more discussed that men do it and that it is ok for them [...]. Men brag about having had sex and then they appear as cool while women are seen more like 'whores', they can't, it becomes a whole different aspect.

A woman could never say: I'm horny three times a day because that woman would be very singled out. A man can say: I need to masturbate again and the other men would say yes [...]. (W₃)

It is everywhere

The participants, in particular the men, claimed 'It is everywhere', referring to easily available pornographic material also spread into the media and society, implying that pornography was almost impossible to avoid.

Another thing is also that the media are so easily accessible now. These young people who are less than ten years old can easily get hold of it at that age [...]. (M₃)

I simply think it is everywhere. It is such an integrated part of society nowadays that it would almost not work without it. (W₁)

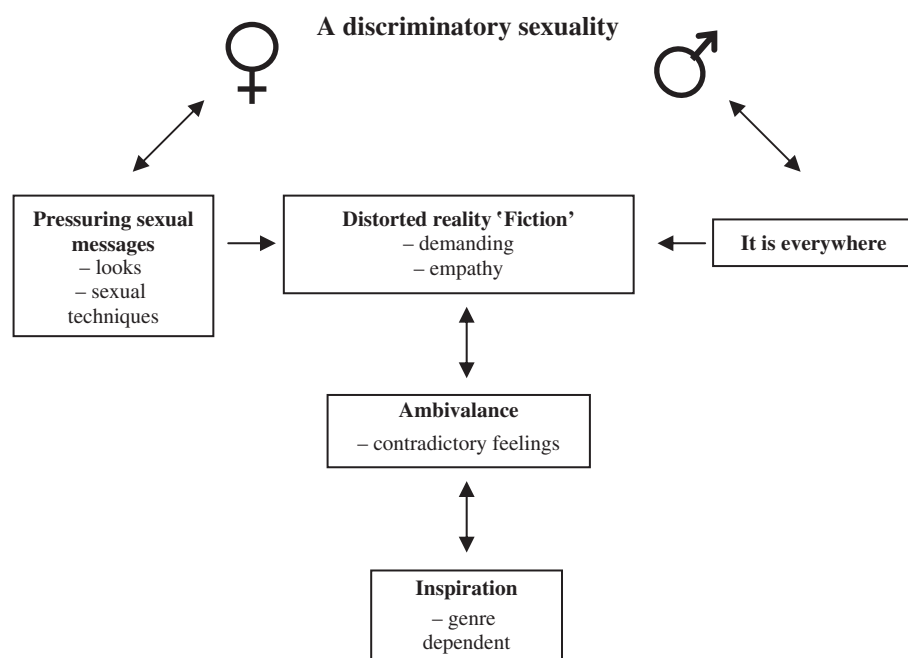


Figure 1 Preliminary model of the process of pornographic spread in the media and society, and its influence on relationships and sexual behaviour, according to young women and men in focus groups.

Pressuring sexual messages

Looks and sexual techniques

The women described how the media use sex to reach out with messages about looks and different sexual techniques and experienced that the media gave sexual advice that pressured them.

I think many feel pressured by everything that is printed in the magazines. About how to do and where to do it [...]. You feel pressured into having to perform certain things. (W₃)

Condoms were rarely shown in pornographic movies.

It seems rather rare that they use contraceptives [...] especially with those who have sex with lots of people and often, they should really prioritise that. But it seems rather rare in films [...]. (M₃)

Distorted reality 'Fiction'

Demanding

The women experienced pornography and pornographic messages used in other media as representing

women and men in a gender-stereotypic way named 'porn-star stereotype'. The women were represented as underweight with large breasts. This was viewed as demanding if it became an ideal of how young women should look.

A porn-star stereotype. Very large breasts, thin waist and I think you get a very distorted aspect of what a natural look is. That becomes the ideal. (W₃)

The men described the male and female representations within pornography as 'Barbie and Hercules'. They used the word 'Fiction' meaning a presentation separated from reality with unequal relations between men and women. The men described the male representation as well built and muscular.

The female does not have to be muscular but she should be thin and have a light suntan and the perfect body. I think very few females have that exact body. (M₃)

The face is usually not so important [...] they should have a big ... or quite big, not small anyway... (M₁)

In porn movies and stuff there is always this, large penis, and things that follow with that,

I think it is a distorted picture that all guys are so muscular, a changed picture sort of....

Shining bodies without a single hair.

I agree that it has become more common with really shaved guys. (M₃)

The women were represented as easy-going, which meant easily accessible for sex. The women in pornography and the pornographic messages used in other media, looked up to the man and depended on him. They were often represented as weak and subordinate.

The man is dominant most of the time and the woman is lying there accepting. That you notice in regular movies as well, then you can see this thing about the secretary. The man is cheating with the secretary. There are never female managers depicted with a male secretary performing oral sex on her [...]. (W₁)

The men described pornography and pornographic messages in other media as easily accessible, for children too, and discussed dangers in watching pornography at an early age, possibly creating a distorted view of sex.

If you see it too early you can get a distorted sexuality. [...] That girls always are turned on, always ready, foreplay is not necessary. [...] You copy just like it. Not just a little of inspiration but you really try to copy. (M₂)

Ambivalence

Contradictory feelings

The women described pornography and pornographic messages in other media as creating ambivalence and different emotions, from arousal to fear and agony.

[...] During sex you have to know everything that everybody talks about and that is so idiotic. You might even become afraid and develop feelings of discomfort and lose your arousal. But above all I think it can be very sexually exciting. (W₂)

Both men and women preferred an equal relationship, where sexuality and love belong together, however, sex without having a traditional relationship (casual relationship) was an alternative. They considered that love and sexuality could be separated.

You can have sex without love. But someone always develops feelings. That always makes you feel sad. (W₁)

The men also discussed negative and positive aspects of pornography and pornographic messages in other media.

I think it can develop all kinds of feelings, you can be happy, you can be mad. Many get very angry due to different kinds of pornography. Many are feeling disgusted, hurt, maybe you feel remorse. (M₂)

Empathy

The women expressed empathy for people with sexual problems. They meant that everybody has a right to sexual satisfaction and that pornography or other media containing pornographic messages could help people with different sexual problems.

It is almost a little bit sad, that they don't get aroused [...], but some people really need that. They can't get aroused in any other way and you should not give them Viagra as a primary solution when there are pictures and other media instead. (W₁)

Inspiration

Pornography and its spread in the media could be inspiring, since people have different needs and preferences, and therefore give individuals or couples sexual satisfaction.

Yes, but that is the aim that it can give a little inspiration to the relationship. There are many people using it, to develop themselves a little. (W₁)

Genre dependent

Different genres could be inspiring to different peoples' needs. However, the women considered pornography less accepted by young women, even though the right amount of pornography could be a source of inspiration within a sexual relationship.

Sometimes it is beautiful. Everything is not coarse and so on. (W₂)

[...] It is not often discussed that young women watch pornography or pornographic magazines, because there is more talk about young men doing it and that is more ok. (W₃)

There was also some concern whether rapists might find inspiration or not.

Rapists and such people may have seen something. I am not quite sure, maybe they have seen something somewhere, I don't know.

That might become positive to society. There is pornography where they get raped, although it is just acting. Maybe they can watch that instead of raping women and gain the same pleasure?

Or they might get inspired.

Or they might get inspired and then it becomes negative. (M₁)

Sexual practices

The participants considered it as positive that pornography and pornographic messages in other media could inspire people to learn about and try different sexual techniques. They also regarded pornography as an aid for people unable to achieve sexual satisfaction in other ways. New sexual practices were sometimes tested after having watched pornographic films.

Maybe you get inspiration from it, and it affects the way you have sex. (M₂)

It could be a way of learning new things too. (W₁)

DISCUSSION

The core category 'A discriminatory sexuality' illustrated how the participants experienced pornography and its spread in the media and society, as creating separate conditions for women and men, where men dominate and women are subordinate. Similar disparate gender patterns are described by Connell who claims there is a social order in society, a gender hierarchy based on men on top and women in subordination²³. Both genders in our study, however, preferred equal relationships with sexuality and love interconnected.

The women reported how the representation of the female body in pornography created a normative ideal of how a woman should look to be attractive. These superficial attributes were impossible to reach naturally. The female participants seemed, however, well aware of this problem and had a critical discussion of body ideals in pornography and pornographic messages spread in other media¹⁸. Messages from society regarding

gender equality and public health² seem to be in conflict with those from pornography and other media with pornographic messages. Some participants reflected on it and had a critical-analytical approach towards these messages, whereas others did not give it much attention. One of the handling strategies described in previous studies was normalisation, incorporation of pornography in daily life^{7,17} supporting the findings of this study.

Both women and men were affected by the sexual demands created by pornography and pornographic messages in other media, experiencing these as frightening and discriminatory which is in opposition to the Swedish public health goal of enhancement of a sexuality free from prejudice, discrimination, coercion and violence². Many different factors affect general wellbeing, for example self-esteem, confidence, socio-economic status, relationships and sexual orientation². Swedish adolescents have good physical health but many report psychological problems. Young women in Sweden report a significantly lower degree of wellbeing than young men^{24,25}. A population-based sample of Swedish 18 year olds revealed that 1.8 % of girls and 1% of boys had sold sex for money or other reimbursement. Those students had more psychosocial problems than other students and they also watched pornography to a greater extent²⁶. Another study reported that men watching pornography, both sexually violent and non-violent, had more positive attitudes towards violence against women²⁷.

Even if constant exposure to pornography and pornographic messages was more often expressed in the men's groups, this seems to be a general experience regardless of gender since previous studies report that both young women and men often feel surrounded by pornographic messages^{7,9,17,28}. The participants also commented on the lack of contraceptives and expressed opinions of discontent suggesting an ability to critically think in relation to pornographic films and messages. The neglect of contraception in pornographic material might contribute to attitudes that contraceptives are not necessary and thereby to the high rates of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies in many countries, including Sweden.

Both positive and negative feelings were described, and this contradictory experience is supported by previous studies^{7,19,28}. The participants experienced pornography and media with pornographic messages as inspiring and a way to reach different kinds of sexual satisfaction, which also has been found in other studies^{7,17}.

However, some women expressed concern over how this inspiration might lead to unwanted sexual activities. There was also some concern regarding the pornographic image of an always sexually willing woman, which might contribute to difficulties saying no in real life or that such an answer would not be taken seriously. Some of the young men stated uncertainty over whether rapists find inspiration from pornography. These reflections from participants in our study are worrying as the influence from these images and messages might lead to a discriminatory sexuality. Therefore it is important that health workers and teachers are aware of the impact that pornographic material may have on young people's sexual health and counterbalance this with discussions. Media literacy could be another tool for sexuality and relationship education by providing adolescents with the cognitive framework necessary to question the influence of pornography and its spread in the media and society.

Data in this study were collected through focus group interviews and thus primarily reflect group norms on pornography. In a one-to-one situation it may be easier to express a personal opinion since the topic is sensitive and somewhat private. On the other hand, group discussions could create a feeling of security for the individual, but there is also a risk of peer-pressure for individuals to agree with other participants even though they do not²². The adolescents volunteered to participate in this study. There was a possibility for adolescents with different sexual orientations, as well as different ethnical and socio-economic background to participate. The only inclusion criteria were gender, age and fluency of language. However, this sampling procedure may have failed to capture thoughts and reflections regarding other experiences and opinions than traditional hetero normative. We did not ask for details regarding the participants' use of pornography. However, they stated opinions regarding pornographic movies, for example how women and men are depicted and what kind of sexual activities take place, which would have been hard had they not been exposed to such films. Hence, participants clearly had some experience of pornographic materials.

It was emphasised before each session that the focus of the discussion was on the participants' thoughts and reflections about pornography consumption and its spread in the media and society and the possible influence on sexual practices in general, rather than on

their own experiences, to avoid feelings of intrusion and embarrassment. In previous research it has been shown that the most common genre watched by adolescents was 'soft porn'^{7,13} and there is no reason to believe these young women and men would differ from other adolescents. The interaction between the participants was lively, and the discussions were rich. The participants expressed both opinions of consent and dissent. The results are similar to what was found in individual interviews implying an openness to discuss the topic even in a group setting^{7,17}.

A Grounded Theory approach was used in this study, as an insider perspective on participants' reflections on pornography was asked for²¹. Ensuring a varied analysis and transferability of the phenomenon is crucial²⁹, and thus we recruited participants from different high-school programmes and different cities. Also, we included both men and women, since we know from previous studies that there are clear gender disparities related to consumption of and attitudes towards pornography^{7,17,18}. After six focus groups, saturation of the interview material was considered achieved, since nothing new arose. In order to secure credibility and dependability, two researchers, one more experienced and one less so, independently analysed the substantive codes after each interview²⁰. Later, together, the researchers continued to analyse data until consensus was reached²⁰. The results are presented in a preliminary model, emerging from our data obtained from young volunteers and the context of two cities in Sweden.

Strengths and limitations

Even though the data were gathered some years ago, we believe that adolescents still reflect in a similar way on the influence of pornography since the availability of pornography is constantly increasing via the Internet. It could be seen as a limitation that recruitment of participants was based on general factors such as age, gender and the ability to speak and understand Swedish without consideration of sexual orientation, ethnic or socio-demographic background. Perhaps a more explicit recruitment of different kinds of adolescents, could have given a broader perspective regarding the effect of pornographic messages in adolescents' everyday life. Therefore, in order to test the conformability, the study should be repeated in other contexts, for example among adolescents with different expressed sexual orientations.

The participants experienced messages in pornography and its spread in the media and society as creating separate conditions for men and women – ‘A discriminatory sexuality’. While more young men emphasised that pornography was everywhere, more young women felt pressured by the sexual messages. Pornography represented a distorted reality, ‘Fiction’, and could create anxiety and fear. However, pornography also inspired new ideas and sexual techniques. This is a paradox and needs to be disclosed and explored in open discussions during sexuality and relationship education.

CONCLUSION

Pornography and its spread in the media and society were considered as presenting a discriminatory and

unreal image of body ideals, sexuality and relationships. Despite this awareness, both women and men considered pornography as sources of knowledge and inspiration: an apparent paradox. Personnel working with sexual health and contraceptive counselling should be aware of the impact pornographic messages may have on young people’s views on sexuality and sexual behaviour. Young people need to be equipped with tools, such as media analysis and knowledge about sexual health and equality between genders, to be able to handle increased commercial messages about sexuality in pornography, the media and society.

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