

What Themes in Pornography Lead to Perceptions of the Degradation of Women?

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We assessed ratings of nine themes in commercial pornography to test feminist theory about what is degrading to women in pornography. Ninety-four female and 89 male college student volunteers rated nine brief excerpts of sexually explicit material. Seven of the nine themes depicted two types of inequalities—active subordination and status inequality; one theme depicted female indiscriminate availability; and one theme depicted equal sex. Participants viewed the themes either with or without accompanying definitions. Consistent with feminist theory, both men and women who viewed the excerpts rated active subordination more degrading than status inequalities and both types of inequalities more degrading than sexually explicit material with equality, with one qualification. Women rated all inequalities and availability more degrading than equal sex, whereas men rated active subordination themes and status inequalities more degrading than nonreciprocated sex, female availability, and equal sex. In general, video clips without the definitions were rated as degrading as those presented with definitions, with some variations in ratings of status inequality themes. Suggestions for future research to assess degrading aspects of pornography are provided.

The effects of pornography have been debated among the social science and conservative religious communities (Wilcox, 1987), among feminists (Russo, 1987), and also among psychologists. Within psychology itself, there have been theoretical disagreement and empirical inconsistency regarding the effects of nonviolent but degrading sexually explicit material. One problem in the research on degrading pornography is the lack of an empirical foundation on what aspects of sexually explicit materials are perceived as degrading. Although there is no objective criterion regarding the definition of degrading pornography, there may be consensus on what types of images are more or less degrading. The purpose of the current research was both theoretical and methodological: (a) to test feminist theory regarding the importance of subordination or inequality in defining degrading pornography and (b) to provide evidence suggesting useful types of material in future work assessing the effects of degrading pornography on attitudes and behavior.

Some researchers have concluded that violence exerts the harmful effects, whereas others view degra-

dation as equally harmful. Donnerstein, Linz, and Penrod (1987) suggested that harmful attitudinal and behavioral effects result from the violence portrayed, with or without sexual explicitness. Linz (1985) and Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1988) have found desensitization effects on men to female victims of violence following sexually or nonsexually explicit violence, but not to nonviolent sexually explicit material. Malamuth and Check (1981, 1985) demonstrated that exposure to portrayals of sexual violence in which the women appear to enjoy rape increased acceptance of rape myths and violence against women.

In contrast, Zillmann and Bryant (1982) proposed that degrading but nonviolent pornography has pervasive attitudinal, if not behavioral, effects. Zillmann (1989) and Zillmann and Bryant (1982) reported varied negative effects of degrading pornography in both men and women, including sexual and victim desensitization and changes in broader attitudes and values toward sex and toward women. Check and Guloien (1989) also found that exposure to degrading sexually explicit material was as likely as violent sexual material to

increase male proclivity for coercive sex, and both were more likely to do so than was erotica.

The discrepancies in findings have been attributed to source of research volunteers (newspaper recruitment versus college students) and use of excerpts versus feature-length films (Linz et al., 1987); experimental procedures, such as dissociation of the film-viewing phase from the collection of the dependent variable (Linz et al., 1988); and use of men versus women. Recent work using college women has indicated increased mood disturbances in response to nonviolent as well as to violent pornography (Senn & Radtke, 1990) and more negative feelings toward rape victims as a function of exposure to sexually explicit nonviolent films than either eroticized (nonexplicit sex) violence or covert violence (Borchert, 1991).

We thank Eileen Lynch, Steve Edwards, Robin Campbell, Doug Pruitt, and Arnie Perez for their help in data collection.

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A major problem in research on degrading nonviolent X-rated pornography has been how to define "degrading (to women)" pornography, with different researchers using quite varied material as stimuli. Researchers also disagree on the terminology to be used for this class of pornography, which is distinguished from erotica and violent pornography. Some prefer the use of the words *dehumanizing* (Check & Guloien, 1989), others *common pornography* (Zillmann, 1989), and still others *degrading pornography* (United States Attorney General's Commission on Pornography, 1986). The term *degrading* may be thought to be a more pejorative label than either *dehumanizing* or *common*.

Violent pornography, defined as material depicting "sexual coercion in a sexually explicit context" (Donnerstein et al., 1987), has been easier to operationalize than has been degrading pornography. A particularly difficult distinction is that between nonviolent/nondegrading and nonviolent/degrading sexually explicit material.

Antipornography feminist writers, such as Steinem (1980) and Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988), have contended that the inequality, domination, and objectification of women in pornography are degrading. For example, Steinem (1980) used mutuality and equal power versus inequality as the major distinction between what she labeled *erotica* versus *pornography*. To Steinem, erotica occurs between equals, whereas pornography is unequal sex, part and parcel of sexual inequality. Similarly, Hill (1987), a philosopher, suggested that a public display of low status is degrading, i.e., a loss of personhood by being treated as a means, not an end. Garry (1978), another philosopher, argued that women are degraded in pornography by violation of the moral principle to respect persons. Among psychologists, the moral framework of care and responsibility proposed by

Gilligan (1982) leads to the inference that sexually explicit materials that exploit and depersonalize human beings are morally problematic.

In contrast, Dworkin and MacKinnon's (1988) views are based on a political rather than a moral argument. In their view, pornography sexualizes the subordination of women and is a form of sex discrimination. Their proposed civil ordinance spelled out in a more detailed way their definition of pornography. Some of their criteria included the "graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures or in words that also includes women dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities, in postures or positions of sexual submission, servility or display, or women's body parts . . . exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts, or women presented as whores by nature or inferior or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual" (p. xxxiii). Thus, the subordination and objectification of women in sex is degrading.

All these definitions imply that the absence of apparent "choice" is not the defining characteristic of degradation. That women participate in their own subordination in pornography does not remove its degradation. The issue of equality is central. All these definitions include the ideology, either politically or morally, that the woman is less than the man. Although feminist writings on pornography have proposed critical elements in pornography that are degrading to women, most researchers testing the effects of degrading pornography have not used the core feminist concepts of inequality and subordination in the definition and selection of stimulus materials.

A point of view about what constitutes degrading pornography that does not fully capture the feminist view is that of Zillmann (1989). To him, degrading (common) pornography "depicts women as sexually insatiable and socially

nondiscriminating in the sense that they seem eager to accommodate the sexual desires of any man in the vicinity and as hypereuphoric about any kind of sexual stimulation" (p. 135). Donnerstein et al. (1987) also defined degrading sexually explicit material as that which depicts women as "willing recipients of any male sexual urge (excluding rape) or as oversexed, highly promiscuous individuals with insatiable sexual urges" (p. 4). These definitions focus on unbridled sexuality as itself constituting the degradation of women. The extent to which men's availability and insatiability are degrading to them is rarely discussed. When the degradation of women is associated primarily with their display of sexuality, rather than by the ways in which sexuality portrays their subordination, not only is a double standard of sexuality being used, but also subordination is discounted.

Stock (1991), using the video clips from the current study, found that for both female and male college students, the viewing of unequal sex (themes of dominance, objectification, and penis worship) led to more negative mood states (depression, hostility, confusion) than did exposure to either female availability without inequality, violent pornography, or sexually explicit erotica depicting mutuality. Among the women specifically, compared to erotica and availability, exposure to both nonviolent but degrading (unequal) pornography and violent pornography increased negative moods. Stock's research supports the conclusion that female subordination, more than female sexual availability, is seen as degrading to women.

To investigate what aspects of pornography are seen as degrading, we used different themes, including themes of active and status inequality, availability, and equal sex, in X-rated pornography (see Table 1 for themes and definitions).

Nine themes found in pornographic X-rated video materials

were examined. Steinem's (1980) discussion of unequal power in pornography and a content analysis of dominance and inequality in X-rated videos (Cowan, Lee, Levy, & Snyder, 1988) guided the selection. In the content analysis, oral (i.e., spoken rather than physical acts) dominance and verbal aggression were frequent (in 28% and 20% of the sex scenes), as were status inequalities, such as age, clothing, and occupational differences (39%) and spoken inequalities (18%). The portrayal of the idea that women enjoy being coerced was present in 14% of the scenes. On the basis of this analysis, themes in pornography were chosen to reflect the blatant and subtle dimensions of subordination and inequality, as well as equal status sexually explicit behavior and availability.

The baseline theme was that of equality—material indicating two people who did not previously know each other engaging in various sexually explicit acts, without any difference in power. The category which most clearly captured Zillmann's (1989) definition was availability, in which the availability of the woman to anyone was more clearly expressed than in the equality theme. Three status inequality themes were used: status inequality,

status reduction, and unreciprocated sex. Three more blatant, extreme, and process (rather than state-defined) themes of subordination were objectification, dominance, and penis worship. Penis worship (including the glorification of semen, the "money shot") is a common aspect of X-rated material (Williams, 1989), and it is the rare scene (Cowan et al., 1988) that does not conclude with a close-up of semen. Objectification, as indicated in the word itself, reduces the actor's status as a human being to that of an object or a nonperson. The theme in which women mean *yes* when they say *no* or show initial resistance (submission) best illustrates rape mythology. Submission suggests that the person submitting after initial resistance has less power than the other person and, as a theme, most bridges violent and nonviolent pornography.

All but equal sex and availability showed various types of inequalities. Aside from the theme portraying equal sex versus the seven themes displaying inequalities, these themes are not mutually exclusive. For the purpose of this study, we examined these themes as independent categories.

The dependent variables were ratings of degradation and, secondarily, subjective arousal. In accordance with feminist antipornography theory, we expected that active subordination themes would be rated more degrading than status inequalities, and both active and status inequalities would be rated more degrading than equal sex. Because feminist theorists suggest that subordination (or inequality), not mere availability, is the key aspect of degradation, we expected that availability would be rated less degrading than active subordination. Both men and women were expected to rate dominance, objectification, penis worship, and submission more negatively than the status inequalities, and the status inequalities, as well as availability, more negatively than equal sex.

Sex differences in response to the nine themes were also expected. Because we focused on female subordination and women more than men tend to identify more with the characters in erotic stimuli (Morokoff & Dinero, 1988), we expected that women would rate the themes as a whole more degrading and less arousing than would men. Also, the closer identification of women than men with the female characters should result in stronger (negative) correlations between degradation and arousal among women than among men.

The study consisted of two parts. First, participants were exposed to nine clips, each representing a theme in pornography. Because these participants were given a label and definition of each theme viewed, demand characteristics may have affected their responses to the video clips. Another group was run later, exposing participants to the same videos but without definitions. The first group was useful in determining whether participants believed the clips captured the experimenters' definitions and categorizations. To assess the effects of the material with and without definitions, the two parts were combined in a single design,

Table 1

Category Definitions

Sexually Explicit Behavior: Sexual activity that is explicit and mutual without indicating an affectionate personal relationship between the two people. ("Equal" was not used with participants.)
Availability: Sexual activity showing that the woman is available to anyone who wants her. She is nondiscriminating.
Unreciprocated Sex: Sexual activity that is one sided. The woman is used to satisfy the man's needs. Her gratification is not important.
Status Reduction: Sexual activity that incorporates the idea that a high status woman can be reduced to a purely sexual being.
Status Inequality: Sexual activity and the accompanying scenario that indicates inequality. The woman appears to have less power than the man; she may be younger, less educated, less intelligent, etc.
Submission: Sexual activity that begins with the woman's unwillingness to participate and ends with her loving it. In this category, <i>no</i> ultimately means <i>yes</i> .
Penis/Semen Worship: Sexual activity that revolves around worship of the penis. The ejaculate (semen) is especially central to the woman's satisfaction.
Dominance: Sexual activity and the related scenario that explicitly shows that the man is dominant. He may command her to do what he wishes or insult her without any regard for her desires.
Objectification: Sexual activity that treats the woman as an object or a plaything.

consisting of nine themes (within-subject effect), sex of participant, and video exposure with and without accompanying definitions.

Method

Subjects

One hundred five college women and 92 college men participated in the study (65 women and 53 men in the video plus definitions condition and 40 women and 39 men in the video only condition). Complete data were obtained from 182 subjects (55 women and 50 men in the video plus definitions condition and 39 women and 38 men in the video only condition).

The mean age of these subjects was 25.81 (SD = 8.31). Sixty-eight percent were single, 63% White, 10% African-American, 17% Latino(a), and 4% Asian-American. Ninety-five percent reported themselves as heterosexual. The mean number of previous exposures to X-rated pornography was *some* (3 to 5 times). The age of first exposure to pornography was 15 for men and 20 for women. The samples for the two conditions, drawn from the same student population, did not differ on any background variables, including age, political orientation, self-identification as feminist, previous exposure to pornography, or age of first exposure to pornography.

Students in both conditions of the study were solicited in various upper division psychology classes or on the bulletin board advertising availability of psychology experiments for extra credit. Prospective participants were informed in writing or orally before volunteering that they would be watching and rating non-violent pornography and that the material would be sexually explicit. Participants were assured anonymity, and other ethical precautions were used. They were told their participation was voluntary, they could leave at any time, and they would be alone in the room when viewing the clips. Fourteen

subjects failed to complete the ratings, 10 because they chose not to rate one or more themes and 4 because of missing individual ratings.

Materials

The two investigators and a female graduate student selected the themes and examples by reviewing approximately 20 X-rated films available in video stores, where the X-rated material is kept in a separate area. To be able to show each subject all nine themes, clips lasting fewer than five minutes each were selected. Two short examples of each of the nine categories were selected, matched as closely as possible for attractiveness of the actors. For example, in the objectification scenes, one scene consisted of three men putting penises and objects (a scarf) in different orifices in a manner that suggested that the woman was a receptacle, with mostly close-ups of genitals; in the other objectification scene, the man dispassionately observed the woman stimulate herself while criticizing and commenting on her performance. The availability scenes involved sexually explicit behavior in a context that suggested that for the female participant, any man would have sufficed, and the woman instigated the sexual activity. The penis worship scenes included one "money shot" scene, and in the other scene, Tracy Lords, ringed by a group of men with penises pointed at her, expressed adoration of their penises. In one status inequality scene, the man was much older than the teenage woman. In the other, a waitress dropped a plate, and for punishment, the maitre d' had her perform fellatio on him. Most scenes included both fellatio and coitus; however, some scenes did not include both. The match of the videos with the themes depended more on the context of the behavior than the sexual acts themselves.

Typically, any one sexually explicit scene in X-rated material

contains more than one theme. For example, penis worship is at the end of almost all sexual episodes (Cowan et al., 1988) and had to be blocked out of the clips not used to illustrate penis worship. In this research the stimuli were selected from commercial pornography, and it was impossible to find clips illustrating the theme without any other unique characteristics. In one condition we told participants what they would be watching on the rating sheet for each clip by using the relevant definitions in Table 1 on the top of their rating sheets. In the second condition, the definitions were not provided. To assess the face validity of the clips selected for each theme, subjects provided with the definitions rated how well each clip or scene represented the category. Table 2 presents the films we used for the two sets of nine themes.

Measures

The anonymous questionnaire filled out by participants prior to the experimental session included demographic and other background information, including a number of sexual experience and sexual attitudes measures, and other attitudinal indices. These data on attitudinal and background correlates of ratings of pornography are in preparation and not presented here.

For participants who viewed the sexually explicit clips with the definitions, the top of the rating sheet included the definition of the type of scene participants were viewing as defined in Table 1. Thirteen adjectives based on Check and Guloien's (1989) work were rated on 14-point scales ranging from *not at all* to *extremely* sexually arousing, stimulating, boring, educational, realistic, obscene, offensive, aggressive, degrading to women, disgusting, dehumanizing, affectionate, and exciting.

On a 7-point scale, the participants indicated how well the selection illustrated the category

Table 2

Films Used for Experimental Clips

Category	Video Set A	Video Set B
Equal Sex	<i>I Ate a Pie</i>	<i>I Ate a Pie</i>
Stat. Reduction	<i>Animal Impulse</i>	<i>Talk Dirty to Me</i>
Availability	<i>Barbara Broadcast</i>	<i>Animal Impulse</i>
Nonreciprocation	<i>Teenage Runaway</i>	<i>Naughty Neighbors</i>
Penis Worship	<i>Tracy I Love You</i>	<i>Barbara Broadcast</i>
Dominance	<i>Vamp</i>	<i>Insatiable</i>
Inequality	<i>Debbie Does Dallas</i>	<i>Barbara Broadcast</i>
Submission	<i>Insatiable</i>	<i>Behind the Green Door</i>
Objectification	<i>Nothing to Hide</i>	<i>Vamp</i>

definition. Room was provided for additional comments on the bottom of each rating sheet. For the group exposed only to the clips, the rating forms had one modification. The question regarding how well the selection illustrated the category definition was omitted.

Procedure

Same-sex experimenters were used. One or two participants (same sex) were run at one time in separate rooms with the experimenter remaining outside the rooms during the rating session. When the participants arrived at the experimental session with their questionnaires, the questionnaires and rating sheets were given a number, and the participants put their questionnaire in a cardboard box with a slit on top. This procedure was used to assure them that their responses would not be identified. When the experimental session was over, the subjects put their rating sheets in the same box.

The participants given the definitions were instructed to rate each scene they viewed, not solely to the theme as stated on the rating sheet, but to the theme as it was portrayed in the particular clip. All participants were asked to be as discriminating and specific in their ratings as possible. They were told that we were interested in comparing their reactions to the different themes and they could go back and change answers. We also encouraged them to write as many additional comments as possible.

Participants were given nine videos (of Set A or Set B) which were in the same randomly determined order as were their reaction sheets. Each scene was on a separate videotape. Subjects were to insert the first videotape in the VCR and play it, stop it when done, and eject the cassette. After completing the rating sheet for that selection and when they were no longer responding to the previous scene, they were to insert the next videotape. Thus, the time between viewing clips was determined by the participants. The experimental sessions ran from one to one and a half hours. After the sessions, each participant was given a three-page debriefing statement which included a description of the purpose of the study, reinforcement that these themes are fantasy and that women do not enjoy being dehumanized, dominated, or verbally abused, and a statement that they should not be distressed if they found the depictions arousing.

Results*Preliminary Analyses*

Orthogonal factor analyses of the ratings using SPSS Principle-Components were performed to develop indices more reliable than 13 individual adjectives. The analysis yielded three significant factors for the nine sets of ratings, with adjectives loading greater than .75 retained. Factor One (eigenvalue = 6.39) was defined by six adjectives. The six adjectives and their factor loadings were obscene (.85), offen-

sive (.89), degrading to women (.88), disgusting (.88), dehumanizing (.90), and aggressive (.78) ($\alpha = .95$). Although the name of this factor might be more inclusively called the evaluative dimension, to designate material termed *degrading* sexually explicit material in the literature (e.g., Linz et al., 1987), this factor was called *degradation* here and was the primary dependent variable of interest.

The second factor, labeled *arousal* (eigenvalue = 2.21), was defined by the following three adjectives: sexually arousing (.90), stimulating (.91), and exciting (.87) ($\alpha = .97$). Scores on both degradation and arousal scales were based on unweighted averages of those items loading highly on the factors. The third factor (eigenvalue = 1.14), labeled *positive evaluations*, consisted of three adjectives: educational (−.68), realistic (.80), and affectionate (.57). Internal consistency of the items on Factor Three was lower than the other two factors, $\alpha = .52$. Because of the low reliability of this scale, the uniformly low mean scores on it (the highest mean was 4.00 on the 14-point scale), and the lack of relevance to the concern with what is viewed as degrading, analyses of positive evaluations are not presented.

Significant differences in rated degradation and arousal between the two clips representing each theme were found for a number of themes; however, the overall degrading ratings and exciting ratings did not vary by set of stimuli. For the analyses, responses to the two clips depicting each of the nine themes were combined. Regarding subjects' judgments in the group provided with the theme definitions as to whether the clips reflected the intent described, all mean ratings were between 5.04 and 6.38 on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely well*). Thus, subjects believed the clips captured the definitions. No sex differences were found on this measure.

Comparisons of the two clips representing each theme were performed on judgments of how well each clip represented the category only among female subjects, because the male experimenter running male subjects for the video condition with the accompanying definitions forgot to note which video set each subject viewed. Eight of the nine ANOVAs showed no significant difference between clips. The one significant difference was for the submission theme, for which the clip from Set A was rated more representative of the theme (mean = 6.00) than the clip from Set B (mean = 5.04), $F(1,57) = 6.60, p < .02$.

For the analyses of the degradation and arousal scales, repeated measures analyses of variance using SPSS-PC MANOVA with sex of subject and exposure to video clips and definitions versus exposure without definitions (exposure condition) served as between-group factors, and the nine themes as a within-group factor were performed. Sex differences in category ratings were examined with analyses of variance. Paired t -tests were used to analyze differences between pairs of themes when the main effect of theme or interactions of themes with other variables was significant, using a .001 critical level of significance to protect against capitalization on chance given the large number of t -tests.

Degradation Ratings

The main effects for theme and sex of subject were significant, F for theme (8,1448) = 70.95, $p < .001$ and F for sex of subject (1,181) = 19.06, $p < .001$. The main effect for group, interaction among sex and group, and interaction among theme, sex, and group were not significant. Interactions of theme with sex, $F(8,1449) = 2.70, p < .006$, and theme with group, $F(8,1448) = 4.08, p < .001$ were found. Simple effects tests for themes within sex and for themes within groups were significant, $ps < .001$.

Women rated the themes significantly more degrading than did men (Women's $M = 7.97, SD = 3.00$, Men's $M = 6.01, SD = 2.84$). All but one theme was rated as more degrading by women than by men, $ps < .001$. Little distinction between men and women was found on equal sex, $F(1,191) = 4.22, p < .05$.

Main effect of theme. Paired t -tests for themes across sex and group conditions indicated four clusters of categories consisting of (a) dominance, objectification, and penis worship; (b) submission, status reduction, and status inequality; (c) availability and nonreciprocation; and (d) equal sex. Objectification, dominance, and penis worship were rated significantly more degrading than were the other six themes. The themes of submission, status reduction, and status inequality were not significantly different and were rated more degrading than availability and nonreciprocation, which, in turn, were rated more degrading than sexually explicit material. Sexual explicitness without any form of inequality was rated significantly less degrading than all other eight themes.

Interaction of theme and exposure group. Although a main effect was not found for exposure group (definitions plus video vs. video alone), the interaction between group and themes indicated some variation among the themes depending on exposure condition. When the video clips were viewed without accompanying definitions, three distinct groupings emerged. Objectification, dominance, and penis worship were rated similarly and more degrading than submission, status reduction, and status inequality, which, in turn, were rated significantly more degrading than availability, nonreciprocation, and sexually explicit material. The only exception to these categories was that penis worship was not significantly different from status reduction.

When the participants were exposed to the definitions and the

video clips, objectification, dominance, and penis worship were rated similarly. Submission was rated less degrading than objectification and dominance but not significantly less degrading than penis worship. Submission was rated more degrading than status reduction and availability but not more degrading than status inequality. Status reduction, status inequality, availability, and nonreciprocation were rated similarly, with only status inequality significantly more degrading than nonreciprocation. All themes were rated as significantly more degrading than was equal sex. On the basis of these comparisons, distinct groups, in which all themes within a group were similar but different from all themes in other groupings, did not emerge. However, equal sex was rated singularly less degrading than all other themes.

The examination of the themes by group interaction by comparing group differences in each theme revealed three themes in which the provision of definitions resulted in more negative ratings than when the videos were viewed without accompanying definitions: submission $F(1,190) = 5.07, p < .03$; availability $F(1,190) = 7.19, p < .008$; and nonreciprocation, $F(1,190) = 5.46, p < .02$.

Interaction of theme and sex. The theme by sex interaction describes variation in the groupings of themes by women and men. Women rated objectification, dominance, and penis worship equally degrading and more degrading than the rest of the themes. Submission, status inequality, status reduction, and availability were similar to each other, with the exception that submission was rated as more degrading than availability. These four themes were rated as more degrading than was nonreciprocation, which, in turn, was rated as more degrading than was sexually explicit material. Among men, dominance and objectification were rated similarly and

as more degrading than were the rest of the themes. Penis worship, submission, status reduction, and status inequality were rated similarly and as more degrading than were availability, nonreciprocation, and sexually explicit material. In contrast to women, men did not rate equal sex as less degrading than availability and nonreciprocation and did not rate penis worship as degrading as objectification and dominance.

The mean ratings and standard deviations of the combined degradation factor for the entire sample, the two exposure conditions, and women and men are presented in Table 3. These means describe the main effect of themes, the interaction of themes and group, and the interaction of themes and sex.

Arousal Ratings

Analysis of the arousal ratings for the nine themes by subject sex and by exposure group indicated significant main effects of theme, $F(8,1488) = 10.61, p < .001$, sex of subject, $F(1,186) = 31.20, p < .001$, and group, $F(1,186) = 6.62, p < .01$. In addition, a significant theme by sex of subject interaction was found, $F(8,1488) = 4.59, p < .001$. In contrast to the degrading scores, no interaction of themes by group was found. Although the arousal scores in general were not high, men found the material more arousing than did women, men's $M = 5.54, SD = 2.54$; women's $M = 3.63, SD = 2.16$. Men responded with higher arousal scores than did women to seven of the nine themes, $ps < .001$, with the exception of submission and equal sex. The main effect of

group indicated that those exposed to the videos alone found them more arousing ($M = 5.09, SD = 2.77$) than those exposed to the videos with definitions ($M = 4.15, SD = 2.29$).

Main effect of theme. The main effect of theme indicated that explicit sex and submission were rated significantly more arousing than the other seven themes and not different from each other, all but one $ps < .001$ (submission vs. availability, $p < .004$). The only exception to this lack of distinctiveness in arousal ratings to seven of the nine themes was that availability was rated significantly more arousing than status reduction.

Interaction of theme and sex. The interaction between theme and sex indicated that for women, sexual explicitness and submission were equally arousing, and both themes were more arousing than the remaining seven themes. Men rated the themes more similarly arousing; however, submission and penis worship were rated significantly more arousing than status reduction, and submission was also rated significantly more arousing than status inequality. The means and standard deviations of the arousal ratings for the main effect of themes and for the themes by sex interaction are presented in Table 4.

Intercorrelations Between Degrading and Arousal Scales

Intercorrelations between degradation and arousal scales were computed for women and men in both conditions together and in the two conditions separately. Overall, a significant difference between men and women in the correlations was found (women = $-.55$, men = $-.33$), $Z = 1.81, p < .05$. Although intercorrelations of all degrading and arousal ratings showed trends in the direction of a stronger negative association among women than among men, two themes in particular showed significant differences: availability: women = $-.54$, men =

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations of Degrading Ratings by Themes, and Themes by Exposure Condition and Themes by Sex

Themes	Entire Sample	Condition		Women	Men
		Vid. + Def.	Vid. Alone		
Objectification					
Mean	9.12	9.21	9.00	10.43	7.68
SD	3.61	3.59	3.54	3.20	3.51
Dominance					
Mean	8.87	9.15	8.46	9.91	7.68
SD	3.68	3.66	3.71	3.38	3.70
Penis Worship					
Mean	8.34	8.56	8.03	9.65	6.91
SD	4.01	3.91	4.15	3.71	3.86
Submission					
Mean	7.40	7.94	6.63	8.13	6.62
SD	3.92	3.86	3.90	4.04	3.66
Status Reduction					
Mean	7.02	6.95	7.11	7.79	6.15
SD	3.82	3.76	3.92	3.83	3.63
Status Inequality					
Mean	6.99	7.31	6.50	7.90	5.98
SD	3.82	3.83	3.77	3.79	3.60
Availability					
Mean	5.97	6.65	4.97	7.02	4.84
SD	4.62	3.95	4.05	4.27	3.52
Unreciprocated					
Mean	5.71	6.29	4.86	6.48	4.86
SD	3.90	3.78	3.94	4.13	3.46
Sex. Explicit					
Mean	4.62	4.46	4.86	5.09	4.11
SD	3.36	3.10	3.72	3.52	3.12

Note. Vid. + Defin. = video condition with definitions provided; vid. alone = video conditions without definitions provided. Range = 1-14. The higher the mean, the more degrading the rating.

Table 4.

Means and Standard Deviations of Arousal Ratings by Themes, and Sex by Themes

Themes	Condition		
	Entire Sample	Women	Men
Submission			
Mean	5.78	5.25	6.41
SD	4.09	4.29	3.78
Sex. Explicit			
Mean	5.49	5.23	5.76
SD	3.64	3.80	3.47
Availability			
Mean	4.67	3.70	5.75
SD	3.69	3.52	3.61
Objectification			
Mean	4.29	3.07	5.67
SD	3.39	2.98	3.31
Dominance			
Mean	4.23	3.34	5.24
SD	3.44	3.29	3.37
Penis Worship			
Mean	4.17	2.58	5.96
SD	3.62	2.62	3.80
Status Inequality			
Mean	4.11	3.25	5.06
SD	3.59	3.39	3.59
Nonreciprocated Sex			
Mean	4.04	2.86	5.41
SD	3.45	2.73	3.71
Status Reduction			
Mean	3.84	3.07	2.81
SD	3.12	4.72	3.23

Note. Range = 1-14. The higher the mean, the more arousing the rating.

-.30, $Z = 2.03$, $p < .05$, and submission: women = -.50, men = -.23, $Z = 2.10$, $p < .05$. Differences were found between women and men when they were exposed to the video plus definitions (women = -.68, men = -.33, $Z = 1.70$, $p < .05$) but not when they were not given the definitions (women = -.55, men = -.34).

Discussion

Several conclusions can be drawn from these results. First, the findings support the feminist perspective, especially the more political definitions (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Steinem, 1980), that subordination degrades women in pornography, not sexuality. Participants found dominance, objectification, and penis worship the three most degrading themes, more so than the themes of status inequalities, availability, and equal sex. These themes most clearly depict active subordination and most blatantly disrespect women.

In dominance and objectification, not only were women subordinate in status, but they were also reduced to objects and sexual subordinates. Although dominance and objectification are the themes that feminist critiques of pornography have identified as most degrading to women (e.g., Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988), penis worship, the most unifying and ubiquitous theme in pornography (Cowan et al., 1988), explicitly reminded viewers that pornography is male centered.

Themes of status reduction and inequality, the less active and more subtle forms of subordination, were rated less degrading than dominance, objectification, and penis worship, but more degrading than female availability and equal sex. These status inequality themes, along with submission, were rated moderately degrading, with scores around the scale midpoint. As expected, equal sex was rated the least degrading. Regarding findings

discrepant from the predictions, submission was not rated among the most degrading themes, and availability and nonreciprocation were rated less degrading than we expected.

Although Zillmann and Weaver (1989) found that "female instigated sex" (such as that portrayed in the availability clips in the current study) produced a greater trivialization of rape among men and women participants combined than did consensual sex, our findings suggest that female availability, at least as portrayed in our videos, was not very degrading. In fact, men did not differentiate between availability and equal sex.

Submission, or the rape myth that *no* means *yes*, is a deceptive or an ambiguous theme. It was not rated as degrading as we had predicted; it was rated more negatively when viewed with a definition that labeled it as *no* means *yes*; and it was rated, along with equal sex, as the most arousing theme by both women and men. Further, it was one of two themes rated as equally arousing by both women and men. When faced with the video examples, the intellectual response to the rape myth that women mean *yes* when they say *no* may have been modified by the emotional (arousal) component to the depictions. This theme was portrayed (in the clips used) with a greater focus on the woman's face and her pleasure, in contrast to her genitals. This more personal portrayal may explain why submission was more sexually arousing than other themes. Also, previous research has demonstrated that portrayals of realistic rape are significantly less arousing than portrayals of rape in which the female is portrayed as becoming sexually aroused (Malamuth & Check, 1980; Malamuth, Heim, & Feshbach, 1980). Future research is needed to compare the submission theme, not to realistic rape, but to themes in which the woman says *yes* and means *yes*.

The last exception to the predictions was that nonreciprocated sex was not viewed as degrading as were other inequalities. Apparently, the belief that one person is being satisfied by the other does not lead to the assumption of inequality. A number of comments about this scenario suggested that the woman satisfying the man did not imply that it would not be reciprocated.

The second major issue concerned whether women and men would order the themes in the same way. Notwithstanding gender differences in both ratings of degradation and arousal, both similarities and differences were found between men and women in comparisons of theme ratings. Both rated objectification and dominance as the most degrading; however, women rated penis worship as degrading as objectification and dominance, and men did not. Also, women rated equal sex significantly less degrading than the other eight themes, whereas men rated nonreciprocated sex, availability, and equal sex as least degrading, with no differences in their ratings of these themes. In the penis worship and nonreciprocated sex categories, the difference between women's and men's ratings is explainable by the fact that, in both themes, the men, but not the women, are being satisfied and worshiped. Despite these distinctions, both men and women distinguished between equal explicit sex and explicit sex that presented women as actively subordinated or subordinate in status.

Earlier research indicated that a greater proportion of college women chose to view "softer" erotica rather than hardcore material compared to college men (Kenrick, Stringfield, Wagenhals, Dahl, & Ransdell, 1980). College women also evaluated degrading and violent pornography more negatively and chose to have it legislatively controlled more than did college men (Cowan & Stahly, 1992). This gender gap in attitudes toward pornography also has been

found in national surveys (Burton, 1989).

Gender differences emerged in rated levels of degradation and arousal, with men rating all the themes as less degrading than did women and men rating seven of nine themes as more arousing than did women. In absolute terms, seven of nine means of women's ratings of degradation exceeded the scale midpoint (7), compared to only two of the men's means. Even more significant was the finding that compared to men's, women's ratings of degradation were more strongly negatively related to their judged arousal level overall and in the condition in which definitions were provided. In future work on gender differences in arousal to pornography, researchers need to specify precisely the type of material used. An assumption of this research is that pornography specifically degrades women. Future researchers might explore if and how men are degraded in pornography. To determine whether pornography degrades men as well, it would be important to determine whether the same dimensions are viewed as degrading to men as they are to women (e.g., vulva worship in contrast to penis worship).

The findings on the group exposed to both the videos and the definitions should be regarded more tentatively because viewers do not usually have someone around to label and define themes for them. The video plus definitions condition should be viewed more as testing the appropriateness of the theme categorization than as an ecologically valid condition. The definitions did have a dampening effect on the arousal scores. Also, submission, availability, and nonreciprocation were rated as significantly more degrading when the definitions were provided than when they were not. Neither availability nor nonreciprocation was viewed as more degrading than equal sex by participants in the condition in which no

definitions were provided. The differences in exposure groups on availability, the finding that men did not rate availability more degrading than they did equal sex across the exposure conditions, and the lack of differentiation between equal sex and availability in the video alone condition further reinforce the idea that female availability is not viewed as a very degrading theme.

A third major issue and implication of this study is methodological. Donnerstein et al. (1987) have strongly promoted the conclusion from their research that it is the violence in pornography that is harmful, rather than the sex. In their research, they have not found effects of nonviolent sexually explicit material on desensitization to victims. Check and Guloien (1989), in contrast, by separating erotica from degrading (dehumanizing) pornography, have found negative attitudinal effects of degrading pornography that were equal to the effects of violent pornography. One reason for this inconsistency may be that Donnerstein et al. have not used stimulus materials which in this research have been shown to be most degrading. If the stimulus materials have not been selected so as to include at least dominance and objectification, and for women, penis worship, then a fair test of the effects of degrading pornography has not been demonstrated. The pervasiveness of themes of dominance, exploitation, and objectification in commercial pornography (Cowan et al., 1988) also makes the use of such materials in experimental research an issue of external validity. Researchers contrasting the effects of degrading pornography with erotica and violent pornography should choose degrading stimulus materials selectively and should also assess the perceptions of their experimental material.

Regarding the predominance of subordination themes in pornography, a recent content analysis of

pornography suggested that subordination is common in pornography. In their analysis of a random selection of pornographic videotapes available in Germany between 1979 to 1988, Brosius, Weaver, and Staab (1993) concluded that pornography portrays the social and sexual roles of men and women as inequitable across a number of dimensions. Although they did not assess dominance and objectification in exactly the same way as the clips in the current study did, Brosius et al. (1993) noted that women were portrayed as subordinate and subservient to men.

Finally, methodological problems should be noted. It is impossible to find perfectly unconfounded themes in commercial pornography. In any one film, several themes are depicted simultaneously. Further, these themes are captured by the context of the sex scene and in the manner in which people treat each other, not the sex acts themselves. In the selections used in the current study, some differences existed in the attractiveness of the actors, the particular scenarios, the length of the clips, background effects, the particular operationalization of the themes, and so forth. A methodological improvement would have been to have blind evaluators attempt to place the video clips in the different categories.

Another problem is that some of these clips came from older, though classic, films. Whether each theme is representative of more recent pornography is unknown. Brosius et al. (1993) found some variations across time in particular subordination themes, such as an increase in the depiction of women as subordinate to men in institutional contexts in more recent films.

As noted by Linz et al. (1987), exposure to pornography clips is not the same as exposure to entire movies. The complete movies are somewhat more contextual and do have a little more material between the sex scenes and occasional conti-

nunity between clips. Generally, the use of clips is less experimentally valid than if pure examples had been constructed for research purposes and less externally valid than the use of entire movies. Similarly, the context of rating pornography clips in an experimental setting is certainly different from viewing pornography with one's friends or lover. In a laboratory context of viewing clips, it is reasonable to assume that arousal levels are attenuated and, possibly, degradation ratings are inflated. In defense of the methodology used in the study, however, the experimental context was used to isolate and examine the perceptions of theoretically relevant aspects of material thought to be degrading, not to replicate personal viewing behavior.

This research has supported the conclusion that all sexually explicit material is not seen as equally degrading to women. Nor were variations in depicted subordination viewed similarly. Active types of inequality were rated as more degrading than status inequalities, and both types of inequality were rated as more degrading than equal sex. In general, the findings support feminist theory that subordination, not explicit sex, is viewed as degrading to women. Future work, though tedious, needs to continue to examine themes depicted in contemporary commercial pornography in an attempt to determine the pervasiveness and qualities of the themes in pornography that degrade women. If these elements of degradation can be determined, then the attitudinal and behavioral effects of nonviolent but degrading or dehumanizing pornography may be more fully understood.

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Manuscript accepted September 14, 1993

