

WOMEN AND SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL

The Influence of Sexually Explicit Material on Women's Sexual Behavior and Attitudes

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine the influence of sexually explicit material (SEM) on women's sexual behavior and attitudes. Anti-pornography feminists believe that viewing SEM will be associated with more negative sexual attitudes and behavior. In contrast, pro-sex feminists believe that viewing SEM will be associated with more positive sexual behaviors and attitudes. Participants were obtained by completing an online survey. They were asked to report about their experience with SEM the previous year. Next, the participants answered the Rouse-Pattison Sexual Behavior Scale (2004). Finally, the participants completed Noll and Fredrickson's (1998) Self-Objectification Scale, for themselves and for sexual partners. . Results showed that women who frequently view/read SEM participated in more frequent sexual activity. Also, they were slightly more likely to objectify themselves, and slightly more likely to objectify their sexual partners.

## The Influence of Sexually Explicit Material on Women's Sexual Behavior and Attitudes

In 2006, Laramie Taylor stated that sexual expression is partly biologically determined, but is largely socially constructed. Both women and men are taught how to be sexual beings; however, according to Taylor, boys learn what it means to be a sexual male and girls learn what it means to be a sexual female. Boys and girls learn to be sexual beings through interactions with parents, peers and romantic/sexual partners. However, this is not the only way that they learn to be sexual beings; it is clear that sexual media content serves an educational function for many young people. One way that the media helps educate young people about sexual experiences is through pornography. In our society it is easy for young people to be exposed to pornography and other sexually explicit materials because the sex market is very high in the United States. For example, the USA is the world's leading producer (73%) of online pornography, and most of the users are young men (MacKay, 2001). However, though most of the users are young men it has been noted, by Attwood (2006), that sexual representation, products and services are becoming more accessible to a wider group of consumers. This has led to more consumption of pornography by not only men but also women. It was also found that individuals who consume high levels of pornography tend to be more sexually active and report a higher frequency of masturbation (Hald & Malamuth, 2008). In Hald and Malamuth's study they only looked at pornographic movies and photos, and it has been noted that there is a difference between women and men and their type of sexually explicit material consumption.

Men and women tend to use different types of sexually explicit material. While men are more likely to view pornographic movies and photos, women are more likely to read sexually explicit texts, including romance novels (Lawrence & Herold, 1988). In both cases, several

researchers have noted that the use of these materials may have negative consequences, especially in cases where individuals are using fantasy to compensate for a disappointing reality (MacKay, 2001). Reality can be seen as a disappointment to these young people, because the fantasy world they are indulging in puts sexual experiences on unrealistic pedestal. Indeed, research has shown that men who were exposed to a great deal of pornography create an unreal and unrealistic expectation in their minds about their sex lives, have more frequency of sexual activity regarding various acts performed and taking responsibility and the role their wives fulfill in their expectations (Fordham, 2006). These are some of the negative effects that have been associated with exposure to pornography.

Unfortunately, most of the studies that have been done on this subject of pornography and its effects have only included males because pornography and other sexually explicit materials have commonly been seen as masculine tools of sexuality. However, there have been a few studies that included females and sexually explicit materials; however, these studies have been few and far between. Michael Young (1979) has studied the sexual attitudes and behaviors of female readers and non-readers of erotic materials. He found that women, who made a habit of reading erotic novels, had sexual intercourse more often than those that did not read the erotic material. Exposure to erotic material was not related to either attitudes towards or participation in oral sex. It is important to note that this study was done over 30 years ago and should be replicated given, that more women are exposed to sexually explicit material today, because it is easier to obtain. In a more recent study, Kelli-an Lawrence and Edward Herold (1988); found that there has been an increase of use of sexually explicit materials. Attitudinal responses to sexually explicit material were almost equally divided between enjoying these materials and not enjoying these materials. However, the reasons for use of such material have varied from, by

chance occurrence to partner's suggestions to entertainment. Some other reasons included learning about sexuality, prelude to sexual intercourse, and enhance sexual fantasies. These reasons are important because there are two feminist theories that have opinions about the use of sexually explicit material.

As mentioned above the use of sexually explicit materials by women has increased, (Lawrence & Herold, 1988), and as a result feminists scholars have begun to weigh in on the possible effects for women on viewing or reading such materials. These two viewpoints that have emerged are strongly at odds with one another. The first theory is the pro-sex feminists. They suggest that when women view/read sexually explicit materials they are taking control of their sexuality. Also, they believe that to enjoy pornography is a form of resistance to a culture that would not allow women to engage in sexual pleasure at all, and that pornography is a small zone of sexual freedom (Philipson, 1984). Pro-sex feminists believe that if women partake of these sexually explicit materials then they are liberating themselves in a culture that does not see that women have the right to be sexual.

On the other side of this argument are the anti-pornography feminist scholars believe the primary reasons women partake in viewing or reading sexually explicit materials is to satisfy the desires of males and for male gratification. These anti-pornography feminist believe that pornography reduces women to sexual objects to be consumed by men (MacKinnon, 1987). However, the anti-pornography feminists do not only think pornography is harmful to women, but also that men can be degraded through instrumental sexual use by women (Kant, 1963). This belief that viewing or reading sexually explicit material has negative effects for both women and men has been supported through some empirical evidence. Noll and Fredrickson (1998) defined objectification as a person being looked at only for their body and to have that body

evaluated. In that study by Noll and Fredrickson it was found that one consequence for women being viewed as objects is that women start treating themselves as objects and also, that self-objectification could be linked to one being ashamed of one's own body and this can be associated with disordered eating. It was also found that sexual desire produced by pornography frequently leads to the objectification of others (Shrage, 2005). However, it has never been studied that if women that frequently view or read sexually explicit material will objectify their sexual partners.

In this study, it was hypothesized that greater exposure to sexually explicit material would be correlated with greater engagement in a variety of sexual behaviors. Also, that the most frequent reason given by women for viewing sexually explicit materials are because it pleases or brings pleasure to their sexual partners. It was believed that this will be the most common reason because sexuality is seems to be only for male pleasure. It is also hypothesized that exposure to sexually explicit materials will be correlated with greater self-objectification and greater objectification of sexual partners. By self-objectification it is meant that those that have a great frequency of exposure to sexually explicit material will see themselves as only valuing their own bodies from a third-person perspective and focusing on observable body attributes, rather than from a first-person perspective. Also, objectifications of sexual partners is defined, in this study, as seeing sexual partners for their body and evaluate that body based on observable body attributes rather than non-observable attributes.

## Methods

### *Participants*

Women (N = 169) ranging in age from 18 to 57 (mean age = 23 years) participated in this online study. Twenty-three women had to be excluded from this study because either they

did not fill out the Sexually Explicit Material Survey (Appendix) or they were under the age of 18. In terms of ethnicity, 82.8% reported being Caucasian, 7.7% reported being African American, 3% reported being Hispanic, 1.2% reported being Asian, and 5.3% reporting other ethnicities. The marital status of the participants varied in that 46.6% reported being single, 36.9% reported being in a relationship, 15.3% reported being married, and 1.2% reported being divorced. Finally, the participants varied in educational levels in that 6.5% reported having a high school education or less, 64% reported having some college education, 8.9% reporting having an Associate's degree, 11.2% reported having a Bachelor's degree and 9.4% reported having some type of post-graduate education.

The participants answered questions assessing the types and frequency of sexually explicit materials they had experience with, reasons for viewing or reading sexually explicit material, the sexual behaviors in which they participated, their levels of self objectification and their levels of objectification of sexual partners. The participants were obtained on John Krantz's website *Psychological Research on the Net* found, at <http://psych.hanover.edu/research/exponnet.html>.

### *Materials*

#### Types, Frequency and Reasons for use of Sexually Explicit Materials

Participants were given a list of sexually explicit materials (e.g. *Cosmopolitan*, Pornographic magazines, etc.) and were asked to indicate the frequency with which they had read or viewed each in the previous year. Each question was answered on a forced choice scale ranging from 0 times to 2 or more times a week. Ratings were averaged so that higher scores indicated more frequent viewing of sexually explicit materials. In addition, the participants were asked to self report on their reasons for using such materials. An example, to my partner's

suggestion has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material and this was scored on a Likert scale from 1-5, 1 being not a reason at all and 5 being very important reason.

#### Sexual Behaviors

Next, the participants were given the Rouse-Pattison Sexual Behavior Scale to measure to what degree the women participates in various sexual behaviors (Pattison & Rouse 2004). For example, women were asked to indicate how many times in the previous year they have had vaginal intercourse. Each question was answered on a forced choice scale ranging from 0 times to once or twice a day. Ratings were averaged across behaviors so that higher scores indicated more frequent engagement in a variety of sexual activities.

#### Self and Sexual Partner Objectification

Lastly, to assess the degree in which the participants view themselves in objectified ways, participants completed the Self-Objectification Scale (Noll & Fredrickson, 1998). Here, participants are presented with 10 attributes. Five of the attributes are appearance-based (e.g., weight). The other five items are competence-based (e.g., health). For each attribute, participants were asked to report the degree to which the attribute is important to their concept of self. Specifically, participants rated each attribute on a 5 point Likert scale, with 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important. The scale was scored by taking the mean of the competence-based items and subtracting this from the mean of the appearance-based items. Higher scores reflected more objectification (i.e., valuing oneself from a third person perspective by focusing on observed body attributes).

A similar scale was used to assess the degree to which participants objectify their sexual partners. Here, participant indicated, for each of the 10 attributes, the degree to which the attribute was important in choosing a sexual partner. The mean of the competence-based items

was again subtracted from the mean of the appearance-based items with higher scores indicating greater objectification of one's partner.

### *Procedures*

The participants completed the informed consent form electronically. Next, participants were asked to fill out the demographic section of the study that asked questions such as, age, ethnicity, marital status, and education level. After the demographics were filled out, participants were presented with the Sexually Explicit Material Survey. Upon completion of the survey, participants submitted their answers and were directed to the debriefing page.

## Results

### Frequency/Reasons for Sexually Explicit Material Use

Across types of sexually explicit material, participants viewing habits were fairly minimal. The mean frequency was 1.52 which corresponds to participants in this study viewing or reading sexually explicit materials between 1 and 6 times a year. When broken down by type of material, however, it becomes clear that viewing habits vary by type of material. Participants were most likely to view sex scenes in movies ( $M = 2.84$ ) and least likely to view pornographic magazines ( $M = .43$ ). The most common reason for viewing or reading sexually explicit material was to satisfy one's curiosity ( $M = 2.23$ ), and the least rated reason for viewing or reading such material is to comply with partner's suggestion, ( $M = .96$ ).

### Sexual Behaviors

The Sexual Behavior scale was reliable at  $\alpha = .93$ . After controlling for age, marital status and education there was a significant positive correlation between sexually explicit material use and sexual

behaviors,  $r(169) = .31, p < .001$ . This correlation indicates that the more sexually explicit material the women view or read the more likely they are to engage in sexual behaviors of various kinds.

#### Self-Objectification

The self-objectification sub-scales were both reliable. The 5 appearance-based items (weight, sex appeal, physical attractiveness, coloring and measurements) had a reliability at  $\alpha = .82$  and the 5 competence-based items (physical coordination, health, muscular strength, stamina, and physical fitness) had a reliability at  $\alpha = .79$ . After controlling for age, marital status and education there was a marginally positive correlation between use of sexually explicit material and self-objectification,  $r(169) = .14, p = .08$ . This correlation indicates that the more sexually explicit material the women view or read the more likely they are to self-objectify.

#### Sexual Partner Objectification

The sexual partner objectification sub-scales were both reliable. The 5 appearance-based items (weight, sex appeal, physical attractiveness, coloring and measurements) had a reliability at  $\alpha = .80$  and the 5 competence-based items (physical coordination, health, muscular strength, stamina, and physical fitness) had a reliability at  $\alpha = .83$ . After controlling for age, marital status and education there was a marginally positive correlation between use of sexually explicit material and sexual partner objectification,  $r(169) = .14, p = .08$ . This correlation indicates the more sexually explicit material the women viewed or read the more likely they are to objectify their sexual partners.

#### Discussion

The results suggest that sexually explicit material use is associated with greater sexual activity. Also, the results suggest a trend indicating that the more frequently women used sexually explicit material the more likely they are to self-objectify and view their sexual partners in objectified ways.

However, it is also, important to note that both self-objectification and sexual partner objectification correlations had low effect sizes, which indicates that there are some women that most likely will not self-objectify or objectify their partners. Future research will be important in determining among which women and under what conditions objectification is most likely to occur. One possibility is that exposure to sexually explicit material is most likely to lead to objectification when it is done to please others rather than to fulfill one's own desires. Some supplemental analyses provide some evidence for this possibility. Specifically, women who endorsed "to comply with partner's suggestion" as a reason for viewing or reading sexually explicit material were more likely to self-objectify objectify their sexual partners. This can be seen with the results that complying with partner's suggestion is the only reason that had a significant positive correlation with self-objectification,  $r(169) = .17, p = .03$  and a significant positive correlation with sexual partner objectification,  $r(169) = .16, p = .04$ . This was, importantly, the only reason to be correlated with objectification. This finding helps support the anti-pornography feminist theory that suggests that women are harmed when they are not in control of their own sexuality. It also supports the anti-pornography feminist theory insofar as it suggests that pornography can be associated with negative sexual attitudes for both men and women.

There has been some research on the consequences of objectification. For example, Noll and Fredrickson (1998) found that women who self-objectify are more likely to report being ashamed of their bodies and are more likely to be at risk for disordered eating. However, future research should examine the consequences of women objectifying their sexual partners. This could also be compared with the consequences of men objectifying their sexual partners. Another direction future research could take is to examine the consequences of sexually explicit material use on other sexual attitudes, not just objectification. One example of another sexual attitudes future researchers might want to consider is relationship satisfaction.

In conclusion, there is some evidence to support the idea that pornography has negative consequences for both men and women. The result that viewing or reading sexually explicit material because of one's sexual partner's suggestion is correlated with self-objectification helps support that idea that women are not being subjects in their own sexuality. It is suggested by Karin Martin (1996) that women are less sexually subjective than men, also, that women rather than taking pleasure in their bodies, claim to dislike them and that women, unlike men, often admit to not knowing when they are sexually excited or when they want to have sex (p. 12). Therefore, self-objectification for women might not only be associated with sexually explicit material, but also, because they dislike their bodies. Furthermore, a possible solution to the problem of women making themselves objects instead of subjects in a sexual relationship is to be taught at an early age to be comfortable within their own skin and body.

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## Appendix

### Sexually Explicit Material Survey

Top of Form

What is your age in years?

What is your race?

What level best describes your education?

Marital Status

Please check all types of sexually explicit material you have personally read or watched

Romance novels

Cosmopolitan

A sex scene in a movie

Pornographic magazines

Still pornographic photos

Pornographic videos

Erotic literature

Please check all the types of sexually explicit material you have read or watched in the previous year

Romance novels

Cosmopolitan

A sex scene in a movie

Pornographic magazines

Still pornographic photos

Pornographic videos

Erotic literature

Please indicate the frequency with which you have read romance novels in the previous year

Please indicate the frequency with which you have read Cosmopolitan in the previous year

Please indicate the frequency with which you have viewed a sex scene in a movie in the previous year

Please indicate the frequency with which you have read/viewed pornographic magazines in the previous year

Please indicate the frequency with which you have viewed still pornographic photos in the previous year

Please indicate the frequency with which you have watched pornographic videos in the previous year

Please indicate the frequency with which you have read erotic literature in the previous year

By Chance Occurrence has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material

Not a reason at all Very important reason

To Pass Time has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material

Not a reason at all Very important reason

As Pure Entertainment has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material

Not a reason at all Very important reason

To Satisfy Curiosity has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material

Not a reason at all Very important reason

To Learn More about Sexuality has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material

Not a reason at all Very important reason

As a prelude was sexual intercourse has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material

Not a reason at all Very important reason

As a Prelude to Masturbation has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material

Not a reason at all Very important reason

To Enhance Sexual Fantasies has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material

Not a reason at all Very important reason

At My Partner's Suggestion has been a reason for me to read or watch sexually explicit material

Not a reason at all Very important reason

Physical Coordination is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Intelligence is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Health is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Weight is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Happiness is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Sex Appeal is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Physical Attractiveness is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Coloring (i.e. Skin tone, eye, and hair color) is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Measurements (i.e. chest, waist, hips) is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Personality is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Muscular Strength is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Stamina is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Physical fitness level is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Artistic Ability is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Compassion is important to my concept of self

Not at all Very important

Physical Coordination is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner

Not at all Very important

Intelligence is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner

Not at all Very important

Health is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner

Not at all Very important

Weight is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner

Not at all Very important

Happiness is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner

Not at all Very important

Sex Appeal is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Physical Attractiveness is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Coloring (i.e. Skin tone, eye, and hair color) is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Measurements (i.e. chest, waist, hips) is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Personality is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Muscular Strength is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Stamina is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Physical Fitness Level is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Artistic Ability is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Compassion is an attribute that I look for in a sexual partner  
Not at all Very important

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have french kissed

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have given manual stimulation to another person

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had manual stimulation received from another person

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had under the clothes fondling above the waist

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had over the clothes fondling above the waist

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have grinded (dry-humping) over the clothes

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had over the clothes fondling below the waist

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had under the clothes fondling below the waist

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have closed mouth kissed

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had oral stimulation given to another person with STD protection

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had oral stimulation received from another person with STD protection

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have given oral stimulation to another person without STD protection

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have received oral stimulation from another person without STD protection

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had vaginal intercourse with pregnancy prevention

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had vaginal intercourse without pregnancy protection

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had vaginal intercourse with STD protection

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had vaginal intercourse without STD protection

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have received anal intercourse from another person with a condom

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have received anal intercourse from another person without a condom

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had mutual masturbation

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have participated in group sex

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had cyber sex (talking dirty to someone online)

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have had phone sex (talking dirty to someone over the phone)

Please indicate how many times in the previous year you have cheating on a significant other