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Digital natives' experience of early and continuous exposure to pornography



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Abstract

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With the technological advancements of the 21st century, online pornography has become increasingly available to children and adolescents, and this research aims to investigate how individuals who started watching pornography at an early age experience pornography. The study implements a phenomenological approach and is based on 13 qualitative interviews with participants who started watching pornography before the age of 15. In doing so, this research utilised Simon and Gagnon's (1973) sexual script theory and Porn Literacy theory as the theoretical framework through which to analyse the data. The results indicate that the participants' sexual scripts evolved over time through their consumption of pornography and sexual interactions and incorporated various aspects of pornography that had an influence on such things as their expectations of sexual encounters, gendered perspectives, body image, and amount and type of pornography sought out. Porn literacy seemed to be an ability that the participants developed over time, which allowed them to critically engage with pornography and observe how it had affected them.

Keywords: Pornography, Sexual Script, Porn Literacy.

Popular science summary

Pornography has become increasingly accessible to anyone with a device that can access the internet, and studies show that since the normalisation of personal computers and high-speed internet in homes, children and adolescents are watching it at an increasingly early age.

People who have grown up with access to the internet have always had pornography at their fingertips whether they choose to access it or not, and it seems to be increasingly common for young people to be exposed to pornography by peers, or to stumble upon it by accident.

Through in-depth interviews with 13 participants who started watching pornography at an early age, I set out to investigate how they experienced and thought about pornography. This inquiry covered themes such as early experiences of pornography, long term experiences of pornography, sexual attitudes and behaviours, education, body image, gender, and trends.

The theoretical framework used for this research is Sexual Script theory, conceptualized by Simon and Gagnon in 1973, by which the way people learn to have sex from their cultural context, media, and sexual interactions can be understood, and Porn Literacy which is the ability to critically analyse what is seen in pornography. The interviews provided varied results as no one's experience with pornography is like another's, although some shared similar thoughts and experiences. The general opinion of the participants was that porn presents an inaccurate picture of sex, and that children should not be watching it, although that when they started watching pornography they more or less understood that it was not really the same as sex, although as the participants had started watching pornography at an early age, most of them had used it as an educational tool for sex to some extent. It was also found that mainstream pornography usually uses a gender dynamic that puts the male actor in the dominant role and the female actor in the submissive role, and that some of the participants had copied that dynamic in their own sex lives, even though they preferred not to. In terms of body image, the difference in genital appearance was a concern for some participants, but they knew it was an unrealistic standard to compare themselves to. It seems as though the participants' sexual scripts, the guidelines they follow in sexual interactions and their thoughts and expectations about sex, were somewhat affected by their pornography consumption. Some of the participants reported a positive relationship to pornography by which they had been able to explore their sexuality, and some had more complicated relationships to it. Although some participants had internalised aspects of pornography, they were all able to critically engage with what they were watching in pornography, and it seems as though this ability evolved over time as they became more experienced.

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1.0 Introduction

We have entered a new era of pornography, one that is not characterised by a struggle to discreetly find pornographic images or texts, but one where porn is always at your fingertips in various mediums and categories, and there is more content available than a person could conceivably consume in a lifetime. As opposed to the studies that have been conducted on the long-term effects of viewing pornography that concern individuals who were born before the digital era, this study will concern the individuals who were born after this development, ‘digital natives’ as coined by Wolak *et al.* (2007) and their long-term consumption of pornography. The average age of exposure to pornography occurs between 11-14 years old (Bernstein, S. *et al.* 2022, Horvath *et al.*, 2013; Martellozzo *et al.* 2016; Harrison and Ollis, 2015). In this study the participants’ ages of exposure ranged from 8 to 14 years old and while they might not have started watching it by choice immediately after their first exposure, they all began within two years. The interest in this particular topic stems from me being a digital native who grew up in the digital era with unlimited internet access and witnessed my generation be exposed to pornography at a very young age at which we were too young to understand what we were watching and the potential consequences. As mentioned by several participants, ‘shock porn’, and videos featuring extreme violence such as beheadings and animal torture were part of adolescence, seen perhaps as a rite of passage to have witnessed and withstood the trauma and disgust from seeing the acts portrayed in ‘2 girls 1 cup’, the ‘pain olympics’, and similar videos that became memes and an uncomfortable but nonetheless accepted part of our online experience. This early exposure to pornography and extreme violence online that my generation, and future generations were and are experiencing, piqued my interest in seeing how these experiences might affect the individuals who grew up with this content. As many of the studies conducted on the experience and effects of pornography consumption are outdated in terms of data analysis, the form of pornography their research subjects used, and the age of their exposure, the evolution of online pornography has been staggering in terms of technical advancement, reach, content, and profit, I was motivated to contribute to adding to the gap in the current research landscape of the effects of early and continuous exposure to online pornography.

1.1 Aim of the study and research question

The aim of the study is to investigate how individuals who were exposed to pornography at an early age experience pornography. In doing so, I will attempt to answer the following questions,

1. If individuals who are exposed to pornography at an early age use it as an educational tool.
2. If continuous exposure to pornography allows the viewer to develop an ability to critically engage with pornography, and if that makes a difference in regard to how they experience it.
3. How long-term pornography consumption can impact the viewers' body image.
4. Can early and continuous consumption of pornography lead to a desensitisation to pornographic content and an escalation of content sought out?
5. If the participants have been able to identify any trends related to pornography.

These questions will be revisited in the analysis chapter.

1.2 Delimitations

This study does not aim to discern or take a stance on whether or not pornography is good or bad, nor will it discuss the pornography industry as a whole. Furthermore, it is not an attempt to analyse a link between the consumption of pornography and sexual violence or provide a statistical analysis of pornography consumption. It will not explore the reasons one may develop a maladaptive relationship to pornography.

1.3 Current Pornographic Landscape

For digital natives, pornography in its many forms, has always been a few clicks away. This porn is vastly different from what was available just a few decades ago in terms of category, medium, and technology. While pornographic videos are still the most popular way to consume porn, the current pornographic landscape is saturated with pornographic online games, cartoons, 3D animation, written stories, audio, podcasts, Gifs, illustrations, and virtual reality simulations among others. The number of websites these are accessed through are also increasing and it is also being shared on social media platforms that were not necessarily intended for that end, such as Reddit, Tumblr., Archive online, Instagram, snapchat, kik, WhatsApp, Twitter, and OnlyFans. Sexually explicit content is widely available across most online platforms, and one need not to be actively looking for it to come across it; some websites host ads that are sexually suggestive, advertising sexually explicit games. One may also stumble across sexually explicit content by conducting Google searches for something

innocuous and even meant for children as it may exist as something sexual for certain subcultures. The sheer number of different kinds of sexually explicit content is so astronomical that there exists a term called ‘rule34’, that was first used in 2006 in a post on the website 4chan listing ‘rules of the internet’ (Know Your Meme, 2022), the term essentially means that if you can think of it, there is already pornography of it. This mainly applies to media that is not necessarily sexual, anything from an animated children’s tv shows to live action movies and franchises. In many cases this type of pornography will be animated, illustrated, or use a written medium such as fanfiction, but creators can now also use technology that is colloquially known as ‘deepfake’, a technique that employs AI’s ability to ‘deep learn’ from images to distort and animate images of a person (Karnouskos, 2020; Langa, 2021). This is commonly seen in pornography where famous actresses’ faces are cut into pornographic videos to make it look as if they are actually in the video or with ‘revenge porn’ where the perpetrator no longer needs to possess sexually explicit footage of the victim but can create it digitally.

In 2022, 34 countries ban pornography outright. Some countries including Algeria, Japan, and Singapore only restricts access, while these restrictions can sometimes be bypassed by VPN’s, some countries like China, Iran, and Belarus (Bischoff, 2022) have banned the use of those as well. The most well-known and most used websites for viewing pornography are xvideos, Pornhub, and XNXX. In March 2022 xvideos received 3.2 billion visitors (to compare, Netflix received 2.3 billion visitors that month) meaning that it was the tenth most visited website globally, Pornhub received approximately 2.2 billion visitors, and XNXX received approximately 2.5 billion visitors (similarweb, 2022). While many of these websites, like Pornhub, claim not to host content that contains illegal activities or simulations thereof, videos such as these remain widely accessible on these websites. A strategy to avoid accountability for hosting such videos that these websites employ is to not explicitly include the terms that explicitly state that the video contains for example rape, underage actors, or incest. This method has been argued by Vera-Gray *et al.* (2021) to potentially normalise such acts as the titles do not include the damning terms and thus does not codify them as illegal or negative.

1.4 Pornographic debate

In 2022 pornography remains a contested subject, including debates on gender equality, misogyny, social welfare, and freedom of speech. One of the main arguments against porn is that it is inherently violent and portrays abuse of women. Numerous studies have been conducted that investigate the link between pornography use and sexual assault and coercion and although they have not had statistically significant results regarding sexual violence, they have found more basic correlations between the porn consumption and negative views about women and beliefs of rape myths (Marshall, Miller, Bouffard, 2021; Marshall, Miller, Bouffard, 2021; Tarzia and Tyler, 2021; Wright, Kraus, Tokunaga, 2016; Allen and Emmers, 1995). The main counterargument in this debate is that the acts are scripted and performed by paid actors who have a choice whether or not to enact them. Other counterarguments include the notion that pornography can be empowering for the actors and viewers alike, and that it can help individuals explore their sexuality. A further argument for pornography is that it can be used as an educational tool, which is possible, although considering how children and adolescents often lack a concise framework of how sex is performed, this form of education may not help them understand what sex is like. This relationship between porn and education will be examined later in this paper.

1.5 Masturbation

Sex, masturbation, and pornography will always be under social and political scrutiny, and the moral judgments passed onto them differ depending on culture, politics, and social norms. Western society has a complicated relationship with porn. Even though it has gone through sexual revolutions and liberations, sex, and especially sex for profit, is still something that is being debated and scrutinized on a social and political level. Viewing porn, while fairly common, is still something that is associated with social deviance to some extent, both due to the complicated nature of the porn industry and the act of masturbation. Due to pornography's pervasiveness, this research will consider pornography as a form of mass media that will likely have an effect on how individuals and society engage with the messages that are derived from it. As argued by Shor and Seida (2021), whether or not one consumes pornography or has a positive or negative viewpoint of it, it plays a role in how society understands sex and gender dynamics. While it is a common act, there is still social stigma associated with masturbation. Haus and Thompson (2019) have, using Simon and Gagnon's (1973) sexual script theory, linked this to the socially acceptable context in which sexuality can be expressed, namely during heterosexual intercourse which turns masturbation into an

improper and shameful act. This notion is internalised through sexual socialisation, the content of which will vary based on the cultural context. As there are different sexual social standards based on gender, female masturbation and women breaking sexual norms in general face more stigma than men (Haus and Thompson, 2019). Although masturbation and pornography consumption are becoming more common with women (McNabney, Hevesi, and Rowland, 2020), the viewing of pornography still carries some notions of shame for women as their “sexual morality” (Milestone and Meyer, 2012, p.107) remains pertinent to how she is perceived, and due to pornography’s reputation as a form of media that is inherently cruel to women.

2.0 Literature review

The following texts concern different aspects and influences of pornography including assumptions and expectations about sex, sexual behaviour or script, body image, gender roles, and the prevalence of violence.

2.1 Pornography’s effect on sexual assumptions and behaviour.

In their 2019 study, Garceau and Ronis, using Simon and Gagnon’s (1973) sexual script theory, outline how individuals with no sexual experience base their sexual script and expectations of sexual encounters on what they can observe around them, including interpersonal information such as other individuals’ experiences, and cultural information such as media and religion. They argue that when these observations include pornographic content, the adolescent may incorporate “atypical” (Garceau and Ronis, 2019, p.39) assumptions and behaviours into their sexual script. Religion, family, and peers were also found to be influencing factors to their assumptions about their first sexual encounter, which are generally promoted to be meaningful, romantic, and consensual which, according to the participants of the study, especially the female ones, did not match their actual experiences. The discrepancy between their expectations and reality meant that the sexual script that they had developed prior to their first sexual experience was not confirmed and had to change.

This study’s place in my research lies within their use of sexual script theory to describe how both peers and media influence the script before an individual has their first sexual encounter

Mattebo *et al.* (2012) aimed to outline how young people make sense of pornography and how it may affect sexual behaviours and attitudes. The research is based on interviewing groups of 16–19-year-olds, and the overarching theme of the results of the group discussions was that porn presents an inaccurate picture of sex where the actors were seen to be fulfilling unrealistic beauty standards and reproducing gender power relations which may lead to a

“discriminatory sexuality” (Mattebo *et al.* 2012, p.42). The women interviewed particularly noted how the messages they receive from porn could make them feel pressured into trying the things they watch, as to not be seen as boring as porn depicted women as always being willing and submissive to their male counterparts. This ‘always willing’ female archetype in pornography raised concern among the women as it risked creating an unrealistic norm for them and promote unwanted sexual advances. They also suggested that that the beauty standard of the actors had a negative effect on their self-esteem and body image. In terms of positive effects, both inspiration and education were mentioned, if briefly, as in many other studies. The individuals interviewed seemed aware of how porn may affect their attitudes and behaviours in terms of the unrealistic image that porn presents and were able to critically analyse the messages and their feelings around them, although they still internalised some of these messages regardless.

Similar effects were seen in Häggström-Nordin *et al.*’s (2006) study that found that adolescents who watched pornography had had their sexual identity influenced by it and had developed assumptions about sexual encounters and demands for their partners based on pornography, and that some had adopted a mindset where traditional sexual gender roles were seen as the norm. The female participants also reported that they felt more pressure to keep up with the demands of the male partners and anal sex was identified as a trend among adolescents. Similarly, Brown and L’Enge (2009) also found a statistical relationship between adolescent pornography consumption and ‘less progressive gender role attitudes’ (Brown and L’Enge 2009, p.139) for both genders.

Massey, Burns and Franz (2020) also attempted to outline the link between pornography consumption and sexual behaviours and attitudes of young people, and suggest that pornography offers a limited representation of sex, sexuality, and gender roles that young people are exposed to and may internalise by continuous viewing, but also that these stereotypes are reproductions of power relations that are also depicted in mainstream media. The notion that young people may develop sexual attitudes and behaviours based on the unrealistic standard in mainstream pornography is also supported by Tsitsika *et.al*’s (2009) study of Greek adolescents. Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson’s (2010) study also suggests that adolescents who watch pornography are likely to use it as a reference for how to have sex, although the participants noted that pornography depicted sex as being rough and intense and portrayed the women as subservient to her male co-actors. They also noted that the physical aspects of pornography, both regarding appearance and function, reproduce an

unattainable standard that the female participants especially reported as having a negative effect on their body image.

The effect on body image has also been noted in Crouch *et al.*'s (2011) study that found that concerns about labial appearance was the leading reason for seeking labiaplasty. The study incorporated data from 33 women seeking labiaplasty, and four women in this group named pornography as their reason for trying to do so. While pornography may not be the leading cause in labial body modification, it is possible that it is contributing to a standard of genital appearance that many cannot match without surgery.

Weinberg *et al.* (2010) argued that there are two processes that are enabled by consumption of pornography, namely normalization, the idea that the more sexually explicit material an individual consumes the more normal these acts they are observing become, and “erotic empowerment” (Weinberg *et al.* 2010, p. 1391), the ability to expand sexual scripts and re-enact the behaviours observed or simply being able to think about sex in a manner unaffected by aspects of their real lives. The study found a correlation between porn consumption and expanding sexual boundaries either theoretically or practically. Many participants reported feeling empowered and gaining confidence to try new things with their sexual partners, which confirms the empowering and normalising potential of porn in this specific sample. The limitations of this study included their small sample size, and as noted by the authors, sexual preference and exploration can be developed outside of porn consumption and can also be the factor that leads individuals to increase their porn consumption. This is an example of how individuals may use pornography as an educational tool, as the participants felt inspired by what they had watched and wanted to try it themselves.

Amahazion (2021) also noted that the participants of his study that investigated the effects of porn use of young Eritreans had used pornography as an educational tool. Pornography is not legal in Eritrea, and the government block access to pornographic websites. Socially, sex and porn are not commonly discussed and are considered taboo topics. However, porn is largely accessible to those who know how to get it, which is very common according to the participants. They found that as young Eritreans did not receive adequate sex education from their school or parents, and the taboo nature of the subject of sex, pornography was sometimes used as a method of education about such matters, which Cheney, Kamusiime, and Yimer (2017) had also found in Uganda and Ethiopia. They found a statistically significant relationship between porn consumption in the last year and a negative view of women, and

while this result does not indicate that watching porn is the only factor that led to this result, it suggests a relationship between the two, which has also been found in similar studies (Marshall, Miller, Bouffard 2021; Tarzia and Tyler 2021; Wright, Kraus, and Tokunaga 2016). As most studies conducted on the topic of the effects of online pornography have been conducted in western countries, this article is interesting as it shows that the phenomenon of using pornography at a young age is happening worldwide, even in countries where the government is attempting to censor internet usage.

Marston and Lewis (2014) suggest that anal sex is becoming more commonplace amongst younger people, and that its prevalence in porn is often attributed as the cause. The reasons the interviewees provided for engaging in the act included copying what they had seen in porn, the idea that it must be good if other people do it, a sense of accomplishment, and competition with and pressure from peers, the latter of which was seen as the most salient factor of men engaging in the act. The study also outlined the prevalence of the idea that women would not consent to or enjoy anal sex and therefore in order to engage in anal sex, the man would have to either coerce them or non-consensually penetrate the woman anally without prior discussion or preparation. This idea had been normalised amongst the men interviewed but was not necessarily seen as rape. While porn may not have been the main factor leading to engaging in anal sex, the rarity of depictions where condoms are used and preparation with lubricant is shown may lead to risky and painful anal sex. This study is relevant to this research as anal sex is something that is becoming more common in both porn and mainstream sexual encounters and with the lack of education about it, porn remains the main representation of how to engage in it.

2.2 Education

In studies that attempt to highlight positive aspects of pornography, education is frequently listed as the main or only beneficial aspect (McNabney, Rowland, and Hevesi, 2020; Amahazion 2021; Mattebo *et al.* 2012; Kubicek *et al.* 2010; Weinberg, M. *et al.* 2010; Gimenez-Garcia *et al.* 2021; Dawson, Nic Gabhainn, and MacNeela 2020). However, mainstream pornography does not exhibit a realistic portrayal of intercourse, and in most cases leaves out discussions of consent, physical preparation for acts such as anal intercourse, and other aspects that could be educational. For individuals who receive little to no information about sexual intercourse through school or their parents, porn can be more interesting in an educational sense as they do not receive information about sex from elsewhere. This is also true for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender individuals, as

information about sex from their perspective is commonly left out of sexual education, parental guidance, and mass media. Although the educational aspect of porn is more salient for this group, the behaviour and bodies depicted in porn remain unrealistic and a poor resource for information about healthy sex. To consider pornography as having an educational benefit, one must assume that the viewer is an adult who is already aware of how to have safe sex. Then, it may be educational in terms of learning about different sexual acts or positions, whereas children and adolescents who do not have an adequate framework of what sex is beforehand will likely end up with a skewed perception of how sex is done, both in the sense of power relations, physical acts, and the bodies that perform them (Harper and Hodgins, 2016; Peter and Valkenburg, 2006). Litsou *et al.* (2021) found that adolescents 'learn' how to have sex from pornography, both in terms of mechanics and sexual roles but noted that this education was not adequate as pornography showed very different sexual situations and mechanics than sex in the participants' lives and did not show use of contraception, and thus developed unrealistic expectations of sex (Litsou *et al.* 2021, p. 247). They noted that there was an additional pressure for young women to emulate the behaviour of female porn actresses whose main objective was perceived to be to please their male counterparts regardless of their own pleasure and comfort.

2.3 Porn literacy

Using the concept of Porn literacy, the ability to critically engage with the content and messages of pornography, Dawson, Gabhainn, and MacNeela (2020) argue that pornography presents a skewed and unrealistic view of sex that children and adolescents risk internalising during continuous consumption, and therefore they set out to create a model of porn literacy that included youth-derived approaches to porn literacy as to help young people critically engage with porn. Through groups sessions with adolescents, they identified some issues the participants found relevant to porn literacy, namely that consent was rarely visible in porn, that porn mainly depicts bodies that are considered to be an unrealistic beauty standard for men and women including genital appearance and function, that porn was a unrealistic representation of sex, that the discussions and preparation the actors go through before an act are not shown, and that young people might use it as an educational tool. In regard to queer people and porn, education came up as a core concept as it is often used as education for them as non-heterosexual and cisgender sex is rarely discussed in schools' sex education or at home. This study's relevance lies within the suggestions that came from adolescents who

watch porn themselves and knew how their perceptions were or could be affected by porn, even though they were able to critically engage with it.

2.4. Violence

Shor and Seida (2021) conducted their research of the common assumption that mainstream pornography is becoming more violent based on a review of the existing literature that attempted to link pornography and violence and a content analysis of 409 online pornographic videos on Pornhub. Their definition of violence or aggression in porn include both physical acts and cues of consent that include verbal and nonverbal indicators of lack of consent and unhappiness but did not include incest. Their content analysis did not indicate that mainstream pornography is becoming more violent, although violent content may be more widely available than before. Due to the vast amount of pornographic content that is uploaded daily, the majority falls under the “long tail” (Sullivan and McKee, 2015, p.70), essentially material that exists online but is not mainstream or commonly sought after. From their interviews they found that most of the participants did not feel as though porn had a negative effect on them. They largely developed an ambivalence to it after continuous use, and many found that porn had had a neutral or positive effect on their sexual exploration. They also noted contradictory feelings about porn in participants who were aroused by violent scenes but afterwards felt guilty about watching them or did not want to be treated that way in real life. Some of the participants who watched more aggressive content claimed that they could remain unaffected by separating the fantasy of the violent porn and their actual sexual desires and attitudes, effectively developing a form of porn literacy.

Similarly, Vera-Gray *et al.* (2021) explored how prevalent depictions of violence are in mainstream pornography and how these are established as “normative sexual script” (Vera-Gray *et al.* 2021, p. 1). Drawing on prior research on the subject and an analysis of Pornhub, Xhamster, and Xvideos violent sexual content and using Simon and Gagnon’s (1973) sexual script theory, the study concerns violent pornography’s effect on normative societal standards and understanding. The study utilises the largest sample size in the literature and uses the United Kingdom’s legal definitions of violence, coercion, and consent. It focuses on how the video is presented to the viewer and uses the sample of the first available videos on the websites rather than focusing on individual habits of consumption. The most common form of sexual violence depicted in these videos was sex between family members, especially those related by blood. The second most common form was physical aggression and sexual assault. The third most common form was image-based violence, namely non-consensual filming and

posting of videos, and the fourth form were videos depicting coercion and exploitation. The results also suggested a relationship between anal sex and aggression, and racialised depictions of black male performers as aggressive in pornography. They argue that videos depicting illegal acts are readily available on the most popular and free porn websites, and that videos depicting sexual violence are available on the very first page for new users, and that there is a significant discrepancy between what these websites claim to prohibit and what is readily available. They conclude that the prevalence of sexual violence in porn may promote a normative framework that accepts rape and sexual violence or make them seem acceptable to the public, and that the titles that imply but do not explicitly describe an illegal act such as rape may contribute to the normalisation or trivialisation of such violent acts, distorting the social perception of what counts as sexual violence.

Adorno, Horkheimer, and Schmid Noerr (2002) also mentioned the potential effect of viewing violence in media while writing about the Culture Industry, which they describe as the phenomena of standardized mass cultural commodities such as radio, newspapers, television, and art as something that molds individuals into a submissive and unthinking mass. This mechanism operates to reproduce the ideology of capitalism in cultural form and disseminates it throughout society, reinforcing its hold on the mentality of its citizens. These cultural commodities do not challenge the mind or require any critical thought. Rather, they garner cheap laughs, promotes mindlessness, and mirrors the labour the individual conducts during their workday (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Schmid Noerr, 2002, p.109), the veritable circenses of capitalism. As my research considers pornography to be mass media, it is interesting to look at it through this lens as they suggested that the content that the culture industry produces exists as an extension of reality, a reproduction that is meant to be similar enough to resemble real life so that the audience member can recognise the context and internalise the reproduced messages. In its standardization of socially acceptable images, it creates a model that reproduces the status quo to adapt oneself to (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Schmid Noerr, 2002, p.99). In regard to violence, they argued that in the process of rendering the consumer of the culture industry's products complacent, it also makes them more used to the idea of being subjected to violence by being subjected to repeated images and narratives in which violence is present and meant to be enjoyed (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Schmid Noerr, 2002, p.110). The relevance of this theory for my study concerns the exploration of the effect that mass media can have on the individual and society, and how the status quo is reproduced in mass

media, such as pornography, and the notion of violence as something one can get used to both on screen and as the perpetrator or victim thereof.

3.0 Theory

The theoretical framework that this study utilises is primarily based on Simon and Gagnon's (2005) theory of sexual script, and the theory of Porn Literacy. While sexual script theory was formulated long before the development of today's pornographic landscape, it remains relevant and widely used today as a framework that describes how outside influences such as media and social interactions influence individuals' perceptions and sexual behaviour as it does not directly concern pornography. Regardless of its age, sexual script theory stands the test of time as it argues that the scripts, while partly developed individually, and partly through social interaction, are culturally informed and embedded and will change parallel to sociocultural change. Therefore, this theoretical framework will be dominantly utilised to analyse the data in this research. The reason for using porn literacy is that it concerns the ability to critically engage with pornography and is becoming an increasingly common term in discussion about young people's porn viewership, which this study also concerns. These theories, though slightly different, are compatible when combined in this research as sexual script theory acts as the basis of which sexual experience and behaviour is developed in a way that has the potential to be influenced by sociocultural aspects such as media, and porn literacy pertains to how individuals negotiate their understanding and internalisation of messages from this media.

3.1 Sexual script theory

Drawing on social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, Simon and Gagnon's theory of sexual script is based on the notion that each individual's sexuality is subjectively developed through social learning. The 'script' refers to the guidelines or playbook that the individual develops that include his or her assumptions and expectations about sexual encounters derived from the world around them, including peers and media such as pornography, their actual sexual experiences, and their sexual fantasies. These create the script, the actions that the individual drawing from their experience thinks are appropriate to enact during sexual intercourse, inspires their social behaviour, and allows sexual situations to occur (Simon and Gagnon, 2005, p.13).

Simon and Gagnon suggest that this script is influenced on three levels: "cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic script" (Simon and Gagnon, 1986, p.98). *Cultural*

scenarios mean the structure and prerequisites for specific roles in society that must be fulfilled, which are vague enough to allow for improvisation as the cultural roles script vary within themselves based on demographic characteristics. *The interpersonal script* is a combination of agreed upon standards of sexual conduct that is used in sexual encounters. *The intrapsychic script* refers to the desire, motivation, and fantasy of an individual that exists in parallel to the others, effectively allowing the individual to imagine different desires and outcomes to scenarios that is made necessary by the absence of social consensus and increasingly differentiated social order in modern society (Simon and Gagnon, 2005, p.14). In terms of sexual script, the three levels imply that sexuality does not come instinctively, rejecting the idea that sexuality simply stems from biological processes within the body and biological determinism, or that it is developed spontaneously, devoid of societal influence (Simon and Gagnon, 2003, p.492), but is developed through social interaction and is influenced by socially constructed symbols that are reproduced in social interactions and imbue the individuals' scripts with social meaning.

In sexual situations with another individual an interpersonal script will be followed that exists as an amalgamation or compromise of their respective scripts, influenced by factors such as age, gender, and "moral competence" (Simon and Gagnon, 1986, p.116). When individuals are 'rewarded' for their script, or merely find out that it is appropriate, it is likely that they will continue to return to that script in future interactions, although over the course of the individual's life cycle their sexual script will likely change. There may also be a discrepancy between two individuals' scripts, in which case the personal sexual script may also be altered after a sexual encounter as they learn and incorporate aspects of the others script.

The life cycle is also important in terms of what sexual script is seen as appropriate for what age, which is a complex and culturally dependent problem in itself, and in a differentiated society there are less structural guidelines of what is appropriate for each age group. While external cues from cultural scenarios are important for the development of the sexual script, the internal or intrapsychic thought process plays an important role in terms of creation of desires, imagination, and mental rehearsal of sexual scenarios which are typically reinforced by the rewarding nature of masturbation. These fantasies are not always played out in real life, as they may go against conventional or acceptable interpersonal sexual scripts, which is relevant to this research as many of the participants noted a discrepancy between what kind of porn they watched and thought about while masturbating and what they actually did in a sexual situation with another person.

An important aspect of the sexual script as a theory that suggests that individuals derive their sexual behaviours and attitudes from their environment which includes social interaction and media consumption and reproduce them, is that these in turn influence the societal normative standards of sex (Simon and Gagnon, 2005, p.198). In interacting with other individuals and cultural information or symbols, what is considered acceptable and desirable changes, and the sexual script will in most cases adapt accordingly, although deviations from what is seen as culturally appropriate do occur and can create their own sexual subcultures, to which some of the participants of my research belong.

Although Simon and Gagnon (2005) discussed pornography, they argued that pornography is inextricably connected to guilt and representations of deviant sex, and something that is not widely used (Simon and Gagnon, 2005, p.199) which I would argue, through the normalisation of pornography consumption, is not as accurate today as it was in 1973.

This theory is however relevant to my study as it creates a framework by which the participants experience with pornography and sexual experience and development can be understood as informing each other. It will be used continuously throughout the analysis chapter as the different aspects of the participants careers of pornographic consumption are discussed.

3.2 Porn Literacy

Porn Literacy, similarly to media literacy, is the ability to critically analyse and engage with the messages in pornography. While no author has been credited with coining the term, this is a concept that has been widely used by social scientists, psychologists, and educators as a way of understanding how young people in particular engage with, and understand pornography (Dawson, Gabhainn, and MacNeela, 2020; Byron *et al.*, 2021; Goldstein, 2020).

Because pornography, like other forms of media, has the potential to influence various aspects of sexual perceptions such as body image, gender roles, expectations, sexual violence, sexual stereotypes and fetishization (Dawson, Gabhainn, and MacNeela, 2020), porn literacy as a concept was developed to describe the introspection and critical thinking that can process these. In parallel to media literacy, porn literacy encourages individuals to analyse what they see in pornography, who is producing it, who benefits from it, who it is made for, and what message it is conveying explicitly or implicitly. This theory is somewhat related to Simon and Gagnon's (2005) sexual script theory as it suggests that an individual's sexual script,

including assumptions and behaviours, may be altered by the consumption of pornography over time if they do not develop porn literacy (Vandenbosch and van Oosten, 2017).

Porn literacy is something that is suggested to have the potential to develop over time as children and adolescents commonly have less developed critical analysis skills and as some children and adolescents lack sexual education and experience and are thus more likely to take what they see in pornography at face value. This adoption of cultural information into sexual script, as suggested by Simon and Gagnon (2005), will most likely change with influences of social and sexual interactions where these assumptions are either met or rejected.

While porn literacy is mainly used today as an educational tool or method of intervention for younger people watching pornography, in this research it will be used to illustrate how a form of porn literacy may develop over time through continuous exposure to pornography, and to observe if this self-reported ability prevented the participants from internalising attitudes and behaviours from pornography.

4.0 Methods

4.1 Research process

This research is based on 12 qualitative interviews and an analysis of the existing literature regarding their experiences with pornography. As the study concerns individual experiences of porn consumption over time, a phenomenological approach was selected as it allowed the participants to describe their experiences and history of consuming pornography and their thoughts around it. Phenomenology as an approach to qualitative research focuses on what meaning the respondents attribute to a phenomena and the themes that they think adequately describes it. These themes are derived from the participants' experiences, and in combining and comparing the narratives, emerging patterns can be discerned (Paley, 2017, p.14). It was also useful for this research as it does not intend for the researcher to assume how the respondents may experience or make sense of the phenomenon but is rather used to describe, in detail, how they experience and attribute meaning to it (Tracy, 2020, p.65). The selected approach encouraged the participants to walk me through their career of pornographic consumption from the first time they were either exposed to pornography unwillingly or looked it up willingly, and how their habits, attitudes, and interests evolved from there. It provided insight about how their age, relationships, and experiences played a role in altering

these over time, how it changed the meaning for them, and how they felt about it at the time of the interview.

The interviews were semi-structured, and I used an interview guide with open-ended questions, so that the participants could elaborate at their leisure and offer more detail and perspectives that I might not have considered at first. This occurred multiple times and the interview guide was adjusted accordingly so that I could ask the other participants about the same element. I also contacted past participants for their perspective on the matter and in cases when clarification was needed on certain answers after transcribing their interviews. The interview questions were derived from both my individual deliberation about what areas of the topic would be interesting and relevant for this study, and the material I had read beforehand. The questions about the habits and development of the participants came from my own interest in how the pornography use from a young age may progress and change over time. The questions about the educational potential of porn came from the studies that listed it as a benefit. The questions regarding the participants' ability to critically engage with porn came from the porn literacy theory, and the question regarding how this ability had developed over time came from my own thoughts about the theory. These interview questions followed a linear path through the participants' career of pornography consumption, ending with general questions about perceived trends in contemporary sexual encounters and pornography. The analysis chapter will follow a similar structure to mirror the participants' linear development and how the previous research and theory applies to it.

The interviews, all of which were conducted in English, ranged from 40 minutes to two hours in length. 11 of the interviews were conducted via Zoom, one was conducted via Discord video call, and one was conducted via reddit messenger. Although it has been argued that conducting interviews over video call does not promote the development of a rapport between interviewer and interviewee, individuals, especially younger ones, are becoming more accustomed to communicating in that manner and therefore I believe I was able to establish a rapport with the interviewees. I would further suggest that it may have made the participants more comfortable to not meet in person and participate from their own homes while discussing this topic. While most participants were happy to participate in the interviews with their cameras on, 2 participants preferred to not to, and one interview was conducted through a Reddit messaging service, which were options that were offered before the interview. Although two participants selected the option of not using the video function on the call, I was still able to establish rapport with them and they proved to be the longest and most detail-

rich interviews. Most of the participants expressed that this was the first opportunity they had had to talk about their experiences with porn in a setting free of judgement, as there are still some notions of shame attached to the subject. Some of the participants spoke more freely than others, seemingly relieved to have someone to discuss the topic with at length, and some were more conservative about the details provided. Directly after the interview I wrote down a summary of the interview, how it felt, how the participant reacted to different questions, and anything that stood out or was particularly interesting.

The interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and stored on my computer that only I had access to, and transcribed. The data was anonymised, and no identifying data was included in the transcripts. After being transcribed, I read through each interview and made notes of emergent themes and initial patterns, subsequently the transcribed interviews were collected in NVIVO and coded by major themes and patterns such as: 'Early experience', 'Desensitization & Escalation', 'Mirroring' and subthemes within them such as: 'Expectations', 'Evolution of interest', and 'Partner reaction'. After coding the transcripts, they were compared for which, and how many times the codes were used, and the related accounts were compared in order to get a better picture of the results and emerging patterns. While the data collection structure of this research is replicable, the results of this study are derived from the specific accounts of the participants and are thus not generalizable.

4.2 Sampling

Invitations to participate in the study were posted in two Facebook groups for students at Lund University and in two communities on Reddit that concerned the topic of pornography in some sense. One female participant was recruited through snowball sampling and was referred to me by one of the male participants, and the other female participant was recruited from another course I had attended at Lund university who asked to join when I explained the study to her. As the recruitment of participants, barring the two female participants, took place online in public groups. The participants come from all over the world, thus this study is not limited to analysing respondents from the same country but from a global perspective. 11 of the 13 interviewees identified as men and the two others identified as women, one of the women was bisexual and one of the male participants reported that he may potentially not be heterosexual, an aspect that he discovered as a result of pornography, and the remaining sample identified as heterosexual. Two of the male participants were virgins and the interview guide was adjusted accordingly. Four of the male participants self-identified as 'porn addicts', while the rest of the participants expressed not having a maladaptive relationship to porn

consumption. I felt as though it was important to include individuals who exhibited problematic pornography usage as well as individuals who did not, as their perceived addiction is a consequence of their porn consumption and the reality of many individuals. Following this argument, I also thought it was important to include the narratives of the two virgin participants, one of whom was a 'porn addict' as the research question does not necessarily require the participants to have had any sexual experience with another individual, and since they only had their sociocultural information from their environment and media to base their ideas about sex around. This also provided interesting data.

4.3 Participant Profile

The following is a brief summary of the participants' information relevant to the study. As part of these interviews concerned the early stages of the participants' career of pornography consumption, it was difficult for some of them to pinpoint exactly at what age their first experience with pornography had occurred, and therefore some of the following ages are estimates.

- Toby, a 26-year-old man who was shown pornography around the age of 12/13 and identifies as a porn addict.
- Amir, a 18-year-old man who saw pornography for the first time at 14 years of age.
- Nick, a 22-year-old man who was shown pornography by a peer around the age of 11 and identifies as a porn addict.
- Lucian, a 19-year-old man who saw pornography for the first time at the age of 13.
- Beth, a 22-year-old woman who was shown pornography at the age of 11.
- Maheen, a 22-year-old man who saw pornography for the first time around the age of 9/10.
- Warren, an 18-year-old man who saw pornography for the first time around the age of 13.
- Max, a 23-year-old man who was shown pornography at the age of 10.
- Chay, a 25-year-old man who discovered pornography at the age of 12 and identifies as a porn addict.
- Noah, a 20-year-old man who discovered pornography at the age of 10.
- Cilla, a 24-year-old woman who saw pornography for the first time at the age of 8.
- Ethan, a 30-year-old man, and the oldest among the research participants who was included as he grew up along with the introduction of high-speed internet in common

households who saw porn for the first time around the age of 10/11 and identifies as a porn addict.

4.4 Reflexivity

Following the recommendation of Rose and Johnson (2020), the coding procedure was recorded in detail in order to generate a replicable research strategy, and the meanings of each code were written down in a code book for reference in order to ensure that the sections that were assigned to each code was congruent with the meaning. As an example, the meaning of the code 'Mirroring' was 'Participant exhibited mimicry of something they had seen in pornography, not limited to actions but also responses to partners actions, either with or without telling their partner about it'.

As social research cannot be conducted in a manner that is wholly devoid of the researcher's personal bias, I attempted to be as reflexive about my role as a researcher already versed in the pornographic landscape. I did my best to set aside my own assumptions and values while talking to the participants, analysing the interviews, and interpreting the data.

I continuously reviewed my analysis for traces of the aspects of my identity such as my gender and personal experience that might influence these phases of the research (Bryman, 2016), although my personal experience also granted me an insight into the phenomena. My expectations of the results were also scrutinized while interpreting the data. These expectations were partially met, and some results were unexpected such as the gendered influence pornography had on the participants' sexual behaviour.

I believe that having a neutral standpoint about pornography, not seeing it as a societal ill that is inherently violent towards women or a sexually empowering form of media helped in the interpretation of the participants narratives as while we share somewhat similar experiences, I tried not to pass judgement onto their narratives. I do believe however that pornography should not be as readily available to children as it currently is which is an opinion I share with the participants of this study.

4.5 Ethical considerations

While it can be a sensitive subject for some, the interviews posed little to no risk or consequence for the participants and interviewer, and methods that could alleviate stress such as conducting the interview without a camera, conducting the interview through email or a messaging service, and skipping questions were options that were made available to the participants. Prior to the interview, participants were sent a document describing the study

and how their data would be used, anonymised, and stored in order for them to give informed consent to participate. They were also informed prior to the interview that if there was any question they did not feel comfortable answering then we would simply move onto the next one, and that they could pull out of the study at any point. However, this never occurred and most participants spoke openly, and at length about their experiences. As this is a subject that is not discussed very often, for some of the participants it was a relieving experience as they had not been able to discuss their experiences and feelings around their porn consumption. However, I do not believe that the interviews took on a “quasi-therapeutic” (Brinkmann and Kvale 2009, p.73) nature as they were fairly short, one-off interviews and no emotional connection was produced. I would argue that my role as a researcher and stranger made it easier for them to discuss their experiences freely, as I did not know them personally and bore no risk of revealing the data in a way that they could be identified, and that I would not judge them for their actions or preferences.

5.0 Analysis

The format of the analysis chapter follows the participants’ narratives of their careers of pornography consumption and the research questions, starting with the participants’ early experiences of pornography and expectations about sex, its influence on their body image, the supposed educational nature of pornography, the development of their pornography consumption, possible desensitization to pornography and addiction, and perceived trends.

5.1 Early Experiences

As mentioned in the introduction, the age at which the participants of this study first saw porn ranged from 8 to 14, and most participants had their first experience with pornography between the age of 11 to 12. When asked about their friends and similarly aged peers’ experiences, the participants whom had first seen it between ages 10 and 14 reported that most of their peers had also seen it or started watching pornography by choice at that age or slightly earlier, whereas Cilla, the participant who had first seen it at the age of 8 did not know if anyone around her had similar experiences as she was too ashamed to talk to anyone about it at the time, although she claimed that it was common for the children at her school to learn about it and start watching it around the age of 10. Some of the participants were also shown pornographic content by their peers or were told to look up certain terms that would lead them to sexually explicit content and started their careers that way.

The initial reactions varied from participant to participant. Some experienced negative emotions such as disgust, fear, and shame at what they had seen, and some exhibited a sense of wonder and confusion at the scenes and an urge to watch more. In many cases the participants had not quite understood what they were watching, not having an adequate reference of what sex was or looked like at that age, but most understood that it was something slightly exciting and something that they should not be watching as can be seen by the following statement by Nick, Noah, and Cilla describing their first time watching pornography:

I absolutely did not register it. I just saw like an image of people, and I didn't even think about like what was going on. But it was like confusing to me.... Like the first time I watched it. I mean, it felt good. I mean whatever, I guess I, I wasn't really thinking about the logistics of it, but I was feeling good while using it.- Nick

I don't really remember what I saw first, I think it was like a cartoon maybe? And that led me through like a rabbit hole of trying to find more of that but I was so young and really didn't even know what words to describe it really...so I was stumbling around googling 'Boobs' and sifting through the results, it was exciting y'know, I knew I wasn't supposed to do it, but I don't know if I knew why... But like I remember seeing like 'human' porn for the first time and like feeling disgusted by the penises. I don't know if, if I'd ever seen one before that...and I felt kinda excited but also disgusted at the same time but I still kept watching it almost every day after that. -Cilla

When I saw it for the first time I thought like immediately wow, exhilaration, excitement, you know like something that was uh, that's been missing from my life was suddenly revealed to me. -Noah

Interviewer: *And when you saw it for the first time, did you know that what you were watching was sex?*

No, I just thought, oh, you know, like 'looks pretty good to me' and I felt very nice at the time, but uh, when I was that young, I only had like a slight idea, I didn't fully understand it. -Noah

As opposed to the examples above, Lucien knew what porn was and that he was not supposed to be watching it at the age of 13, which had a considerable impact on his first experience with pornography:

When I first started, I felt immense guilt. Like I did something very, very bad when I first watched it. And I was like, I remember I was like, shaking. I was quite mind blowing. - Lucien

These mixed reactions largely resemble those found by the participants in Allen and Lavender's (2015) study where the participants noted a combination of feelings, most noting excitement and curiosity, but also shame. Not all of the participants were exposed to the same type of pornography; some were exposed to more intense forms which often made it more challenging for them to contextualise it as sex. Nick's first experience with pornography was the '2 Girls 1 Cup' video mentioned in the methods section, that depicts very niche fetishes. Another participant, Ethan, recounted what he thought was his earliest experience with pornography, and while it was one of, or his first experience, he still had an inkling that what he was watching was not necessarily what sex was like due to the unusual nature of the act:

It involved a woman and a drill and a dildo on the end of the drill and it was very like 'what the fuck' and so that was like it, definitely.... I don't know if that was the very first, but that's definitely the.... The one that sticks out the most, it was like really, really early on, you know? And I definitely like. Wanted to definitely see more definitely. I mean, it definitely like.... captured my attention or whatever, but I think I was aware as well that like that's not normal. - Ethan

Only half of the participants had sexual education in school, and only one participant reported that pornography had been mentioned, if briefly, and only one had mentioned safe sex practices outside vaginal penetration by a penis. The motivation for asking about what was covered in their sexual education came from the idea of using pornography as an educational tool when pornographic videos rarely include the preparation the actors go through before certain acts and frequently exhibits risk-taking sexual behaviours. Only one participant's parents had talked to him about pornography and how it was not an accurate representation of sex, and only one other participant had parental controls enabled on the device he used to access pornography that he claimed he circumvented with ease. While not all participants had unlimited access to devices that could access pornography or rooms in which privacy was guaranteed, they always found a way around these hurdles in order to watch it. A few of the questions in the interview guide that concerned how the participants thought various aspects of their sexual attitudes and behaviours had been affected by porn were met with some confusion as they had nothing to compare their actual experience to.

I really truly don't know, I don't know what the alternate would be, It's hard to talk about change because when.... the thinking started when I started to watch so I don't know how it would have been without it. -Amir

I only have one example of how the life of Maheen could go, and that is with having started working porn at the age of nine. Had I had another example I would be able to compare them. -Maheen

These participants had been exposed to porn before they had any reference to sex and sexuality that strayed beyond the clinical description provided by some schools and parents, and therefore they struggled to answer as in their experience there was not a time where pornography was not their main reference regarding sex and influencing their sexual script.

Most participants expressed concern over the availability of porn to young children, as they themselves had first-hand experiences of the consequences, and, looking back, regretted having been exposed to it or seeking it out themselves. Amir claimed that he felt that it was important for his development to have started watching pornography. Several participants pointed out that they thought that adults should be more proactive in teaching children and teenagers about what they might come across on the internet. Many said that if they had children themselves, they would talk to them about porn at length and explain how it can affect a young mind instead of simply saying that it is bad to watch it and limit their access to the internet and devices up to a certain age even though they suggested that their theoretical children would most likely be exposed to pornography at some point regardless of their measures. Some participants, like Toby and Beth, stated that they thought the conversation about the availability of porn should be a public discussion in order to promote awareness of the potential consequences and some form of change, although they were not hopeful about the outcomes.

So, I think, uh, uhm, I really think the government can't really do anything about it, so it has to be the culture that change. So, I think stuff like those subreddits and.... Well, optimally it would be stuff that goes more mainstream. That just tells people that those addictions can happen, for example, that erectile dysfunction's can happen, and that there are, that their fetishes can be way more extreme and sometimes really illegal and hurting for people. Yeah, just telling people that that is a realistic risk when you watch porn, I think this could change some things, yeah? -Toby

It's like, no one wants it to change enough to actually do anything about it, and most people don't want it to be harder to get porn like we were so used to it being so available and easy that they don't want there to be more safeguards against it. -Beth

These participants were concerned about future generations going through the same processes they had. Even though they did not all report negative experiences of pornography, they thought that it was possible to be introduced to it at too early an age and that it posed a risk of creating a skewed perception of sex. They were, however, not optimistic about the accessibility of pornography changing to protect children and argued that the conversation needed to happen in the private and public space in order to change the culture around it.

5.2 Expectations and Assumptions

As the participants started watching pornography at an age where their knowledge of sex was rudimentary, pornography was one of the few resources of information they based their expectations and assumptions about sex on. These expectations and assumptions are part of an individual's sexual script and intrapsychic scenarios as they inform what the individual thinks is normal or acceptable in a given situation (Simon and Gagnon, 2005). Some participants expressed a similar confusion and disappointment when faced with a real-life sexual situation as the participants in Garceau and Ronis's (2019) study as there was a discrepancy between what they thought sex was going to be like and how they expected their partner to behave and how they would perform and what actually happened. In these cases, their sexual script was altered due to an interpersonal encounter in which their script was not reciprocated or received well. One of the main ideas promoted by pornography that influenced their expectations and assumptions of sex before their first sexual encounters was that sex was going to be intense, and that their partners would always match their sexual needs and interests. They felt as though porn had "hyped up" sexual intercourse for them and expected the willingness and skill the actors exhibited. In line with Garceau and Ronis's (2019) study, Ethan and Beth also expressed that their expectations of sex and virginity loss was changed by their pornography consumption, as eventually sex was no longer seen as something that they felt could be as 'special' as other forms of media portrays it.

It definitely made it seem...like it definitely didn't make it seem like it [sex] was a special thing anymore if you know what I mean 'cause I was, I was aware when I was a kid that there is this thing that happens that is very kind-of sacred in a way, like I, I wouldn't say I grew up in like a religious household or anything like that, but that was

definitely a thing that was...had like an air of mystery about it, you know and it was kind of one of those things where you kinda...once you kinda see it for that, uh, it kind of just dissipates the importance of it I guess.-Ethan

Ethan had, as the participants in Garceau and Ronis's (2019) study, developed an expectation of sex as something special based on the sociocultural information around him which changed when he incorporated the information from pornography into his sexual script.

I think it like, de-mystified sex for me...like I felt more prepared for what would happen even though I wasn't when it actually happened...but it felt so different, like I thought it was gonna be some really like...intense and feel really good but really it was uncomfortable and like a little embarrassing? - Beth

Similarly, Beth had developed false assumptions based on pornography which she used as a reference for sex, and while it may have made sex seem less special, it had made it seem as though it would have been a more significant experience. Their assumptions were not met in their actual experiences, and in some cases, as with Toby, felt a little alarming as the pornography he had been consuming presented a picture of sex as something that was intense and violent.

Well, with a few videos of vanilla porn that I watched, it was hard because, well as I said, I thought this was how sex is supposed to be. Weird, violent, and energetic thing, and uhm, at that point I had no real-life experiences so I couldn't. I think I didn't have the tools to critically watch it. Yeah, at that point it really had affected me when it comes to those videos-Toby

This example follows the pattern of the participants who did not have an adequate framework of what sex and pornography were before starting their career of pornography consumption and were therefore concerned about what they were watching and expected of their own future sexual encounters. This also relates to Garceau and Ronis's (2019) theory that individuals create their expectations of what sex would be like on the cultural information around them before they have sex, and for these participants, pornography seems to have had a considerable impact on this expectation.

Chay stated that porn had influenced his assumptions about how sex would be like, but had these assumptions changed when he had his first sexual encounter.

We kind of expected that but actually, of course it was not the case. But then, uh, then, let's say, uh... I like met someone who could like teach me how to properly do stuff. So then like at first, I thought I knew, but it was actually not how it worked at all. And, uh...So let's say no like no, it's like it didn't teach me how to have sex or anything. - Chay

Maheen expressed that he was concerned about the discrepancy between the ecstatic act of porn actors and his actual sexual partners who did not match their enthusiasm.

Well, there was this expectation that....so whenever you watch porn you see people react in a very euphoric and uh, expressive manner, they will be happy and ecstatic and all that so. When I would go in and had sex with my partner, they would be like I... I wouldn't feel the things that I expected. -Maheen

Their sexual scripts were altered with experience, although there was some disappointment and confusion about the unmet expectations. Cilla noted that she assumed that sex would be more similar to pornography and in line with that, allowed her partners to take their sexual liberties with her in ways she did not want but thought she should put up with as she thought:

That is how sex was done, I thought that what I was watching was real...I mean not real...on some level I knew it wasn't real, y'know they're actors and all but like I thought that was how I should act or be, I didn't know what to do when they made me uncomfortable or hurt me, I thought it would all feel good and that I was wrong for not thinking it did so I kinda just...put up with it.-Cilla

She had learned from pornography and based how she thought she should behave during sex on what she had seen, which was largely submissive women enjoying what was done to them without complaint. Beth also noted that she had internalised the messages from pornography in a manner that made her more likely to let others cross her boundaries because of the willingness exhibited by the women in pornography.

Like I thought I had to be game for anything y'know? And it wasn't like really...extreme things but like I let some of my partners convince me to do things I wasn't comfortable with like anal and like some like degradation stuff, like I'd seen that before cos I was kinda into BDSM stuff in porn but then it wasn't so nice in real life, maybe it was just the guy I was doing it with, but like it was fine.... but I always felt kinda shitty afterwards and then I'd agreed to it once and he would just expect it

again and more and I just felt pressured to be...fuck, I dunno....cool? But....man this is complicated, but like, there were moments when I thought I was into it, and I went looking for it...like more BDSM-style things because that's what I watched in porn and I thought I would like it and I kind of did? But not really, like the good feeling didn't outweigh the bad and I ended up feeling taken advantage of sometimes but like I felt as that's what I was supposed to do? - Beth

It was not only the women who expressed that they felt as though pornography had influenced what they thought their partners expected of them. Maheen also stated that pornography had made him think that he needed to mirror the male dominance exhibited in mainstream pornography when he didn't want to take that position.

As a man, as a male, you have to be dominant. You have to be the...the one that takes the lead. And whenever that didn't happen, it went to, you know, an awkward stalemate of sorts and I had to force myself back in. Uh, due to my partner having a similar expectation. [...] It [porn] threw a lot of fog into what I actually wanted, and I then believed that I wanted other stuff. But through some self-exploration I, I know what I'm into right now. [...] I really thought that I was really into BDSM and hitting stuff and. But I'm really just...the like the exact opposite, so porn, definitely influenced that. And it would really. It could have really shaped me very more into more, let's say permanent toxic position towards myself, yeah. But it didn't. -Maheen

In the case of Maheen, Beth, and Cilla, pornography seemed to be able to influence their sexual scripts to the extent that the participants could convince themselves to some extent that they did want or enjoyed certain practices, which resembles the results of the Mattebo *et al.* (2012), Häggström-Nordin *et al.* (2006), and Litsou *et al.* (2021) where the female participants noted that they sometimes felt pressured to comply with their partners' unwanted sexual behaviour. The non-progressive gender roles that are commonly reproduced in mainstream pornography have been noted by several studies (Löfgren-Mårtensson and Månsson 2010; Häggström-Nordin *et al.* 2006; Massey, Burns, and Franz 2020; Brown and L'Enge 2009) as an aspect of pornography that is sometimes incorporated into an individual's sexual script. It seems, however, that the participants' assumptions changed over time as they came to understand their relationship with porn and how it affected them. Their porn literacy appeared to be in a continuous state of development, starting off as them knowing that pornography probably was not a completely accurate depiction of how sex would be like but

still believing that it would be similar, to knowing it was a fantasy portrayed by actors while still internalising some of the messages, to being able to critically analyse how porn had affected their assumptions and behaviours through introspection. Toby also exhibited a similar development as he had used pornography as a form of guideline of what to do during sexual encounters, which over time became unnecessary as he became more experienced and comfortable with himself.

In contrast, Cilla claimed that she still struggles somewhat with letting go of some of her past habits.

I know now that what I was doing wasn't healthy and that like...some people I saw as friends or partners really just took advantage of me because I had...I had that thought that I should let them not use me...but like, yeah ok use me for lack of a better word....and I can look back now a think like oh that time that I thought was like a 'fun' experience was actually not ok but I think I convinced myself to think that to like protect myself? In some way...But like I know I shouldn't do that now but sometimes I feel myself slipping into that, not submissive, but like accommodating role with new partners and I have to try to stop myself but like....[sigh] yeah it's not always so easy I guess. -Cilla

From the interviews it seems as though most of the participants had their early sexual script affected by their pornography consumption, as it was the primary source of information about sex that they received, and their assumptions and expectations about sex were thus influenced by it. These were somewhat altered when they had their first sexual encounters and realised that it did not match their expectations, although it seems as though some remained as part of their sexual script such as Beth and Cilla's notion that they should be willing to accommodate to their partners' desires regardless of their own comfort. The idea that they, as women, should be more accommodating to their partners is not only enforced by the image of the woman in pornography who is up for anything, but is also reinforced by societal standards of women's heteronormative sexual agency (Fahs, Swank, and Shambe, 2020) that promotes the notion that women should be accommodating to her partners' desire but not let her desire exceed that of her partners'. The expectations were not limited to the participants' expectations of themselves or their partners but also their assumptions of what their partners expected of them as in the case of Beth, Cilla, and Maheen, who altered their behaviour to match that imagined expectation.

Max expressed that when he was younger, his continuous pornography consumption had made him dislike female bodies that did not resemble the bodies he was watching in porn, effectively raising the beauty standards he thought women should live up to, noting that pubic hair and stretch marks were a turn-off for him when it came to potential sexual partners. This supports Weinberg *et al.* (2010) and Löfgren-Mårtensson and Månsson's (2010) findings, as the repeated exposure to a certain type of body normalised an unrealistic standard presented in pornography. He went on to express that after a few years of having intercourse with women he understood that it was an unrealistic standard to hold women to. Nick noted having a similar attitude to women's bodies based on pubic hair and how large their breasts were during his teenage years but had since then changed his mind about such things.

In regard to gender, Maheen was not the only participant who felt as though pornography had influenced how he felt about sex as a man. Lucien expressed that the sexual gender roles reproduced in pornography had had an effect on his sexual script in terms of what he expected in a sexual situation, and Max and Noah also expressed similar mindsets.

As a man, usually in porn it's always the guy that is dominant. So I guess that's kind of what exists in your mind when you watch? Yeah, yeah, like I said, you're...the man is usually always the dominant part of the video. And woman is usually always the submissive one. And that's why, because like, you would go into a sexual situation and expecting to be the one that's dominating expecting women to be submissive. -Lucien

Again, the gender dynamics portrayed in mainstream pornography had been incorporated into sexual script as a norm. When asked about what kind of gender dynamics they most often observed in pornography, all of the participants reported that it was mainly represented by patriarchal gender dynamics although Nick and Toby reported that they were more interested in the opposite dynamic. The participants were not all sure, however, if this could have any impact on social norms around sex, mainly as they perceived that the dominating male and submissive female was already the social standard for sex among heterosexual people.

5.3 Body image

In regard to body image, the responses from the participants varied. Half of the participants reported that porn had no or very little impact on their body image, many pointing out, as in Dawson, Gabhain, and MacNeela's (2020) study, and Massey, Burns and Franz's (2020) study, how it portrays an unrealistic beauty and genital standard. Amir, however, suggested that it motivated him to work out more. The other participants did report some body image

insecurity based on their pornography consumption; the most common bodily attribute that was reported as something the participants feel insecure about was the genitalia for both the male and female participants.

Oh [laugh] Yup, my, I guess most males, most men, young men, young boys, I guess we have that typical insecurity of the penis size, uhhm, specially knowing how most male actors, I guess are chosen by that physical advantage that they had. -Nick

Mainstream pornography commonly portrays bodies that live up to, and in some cases exaggerate, western societal beauty standards, and bodies that have large, sometimes circumcised, penises, and small labia minora. Similarly to most mass media, pornography also reproduces this standard. Cilla noted that she felt self-conscious about her body and her genital appearance as a result of porn, as her labia minora did not resemble the ones in pornography, she also attributed this to the lack of genital representation outside of porn:

Y'know you never really see other people's genitals up close very often unless you're sleeping together so I don't think many people know how different they look, like they know others look different but they don't know visually and then you get a million pictures from porn and it's all like perfect and pink and small....or big if you're a guy and it's like no way you can match that unless you're a child in the case of the vagina – Cilla

Cilla's narrative corresponds to the arguments of Crouch *et al.* (2011) that attribute some of the reasons women seek labiaplasty surgery to a beauty standard perpetuated by pornography, although she claimed that she would never actually resort to surgery to conform to it.

Look, have I considered it? Yeah...a little, but not as a serious option, same as any plastic surgery I've considered...y'know the pressure of being a woman who doesn't look like they should got to me so yeah, I have considered getting it [labia minora] fixed but I know it's not a big deal like it looks like a regular...I mean there's nothing wrong with it but I get insecure. -Cilla

Beth, while comparing herself to the women she watched in pornography reported that she had, if briefly, considered plastic surgery

Yeah like I know that I'm never gonna have tits like that unless I go through surgery but like I remember when I was younger that really bothered me and I felt really unattractive and now it feels so idiotic that I was comparing myself at 13-14 [years of

age] to porn actresses but I think most people do this right? Like comparing their bodies to others whether it's like...influencers or models and that and I just did it to...porn stars [laugh]. -Beth

Löfgren-Mårtensson and Månsson (2010) found that women were more likely to experience a negative influence on their body image by pornography than men, and while both of my female participants had derived insecurities from pornography, I also found that two of the male participants, Maheen and Lucien, had a somewhat negative view of their general physique as well as a result of watching pornography.

Well, I was never actually like overweight...not to that degree and no, you never have a monster penis. But those are two things that really started to sink in and were internalised and afterwards were, uhhm, expressing the very negative way in my head so. I had expectations of myself that I couldn't genetically meet, let's say. I still do. But I understand logically, and I try to go against them trying to expose myself to the truth and. Yeah, but the body image thing is the is the most major one, I think. - Maheen

While Maheen knew that the standards were unattainable and unrealistic, he still felt on some level as though he should live up to them and actively tried to resist comparing himself to that beauty standard.

Interestingly, the participants who said that their body image had been affected by pornography seemed to be adept at porn literacy and were well aware that what they were watching was an unrealistic beauty standard, yet it still had an impact on their body image. While the beauty standard in pornography is exaggerated, it remains connected to the general western beauty standard. Therefore, it does not seem possible to wholly attribute the negative view of the participants' general physique to pornography, as this is a standard that is perpetuated through most mainstream media, although pornography may amplify this as it is directly associated with sex and sexual attractiveness. The participants' insecurities regarding genital appearance, however, seem to be largely a result of what they had observed in pornography. These findings resemble the ones found by Dawson, Gabhainn, and MacNeela (2020) and by Mattebo *et al.* (2012) that suggested that even though the individuals may be aware of the fact that what they see in porn is largely unrealistic, and express a high degree of porn literacy, they can still be affected by it in many ways including body image and attitude towards other's physical features.

5.4 Education.

In response to being asked if they ever saw porn as an educational tool or something they thought they could use to learn about sex, most participants noted that that was an unhealthy thing for young people to do, as it is an unrealistic representation of how it is generally performed. In terms of education, Amir and Lucien felt as though pornography had a somewhat educational aspect in their experience as it provided a visual reference of how it could be.

Yes, because before I just got to a point where I actually had no idea how it would actually work. Because you know, you get you get in sex education you get it, like explained to you verbally, but you never actually get to see it visually. So maybe it did serve as kind of an education in some way. -Lucien

Here, as seen in the early experiences chapter, they expressed that as they had little other reference of sex, pornography became the one they based their sexual script on.

Most of the other participants who had used or felt as if porn could be an educational tool about real sex regretted doing so, as there was a considerable discrepancy between porn and sex in their own experience. Maheen, Chay, Beth, and Toby reported that they had used porn as an educational tool but were aware that in practice, that form of education did not prove to be helpful.

Interviewer: So, you didn't have sexual education, but did you ever feel like watching porn was something that you could use in order to learn about sex?

Oh God yeah, yeah, I did, like sadly I, I mean I think, uhmm... I can definitely definitely tell you with empirical evidence that it didn't help. It was all over the place, it did not help. But I did try to learn from it. - Maheen

I mean, educational? I...I don't know, like I did, I did y'know, internalise things from porn and thought I knew a lot about it but i....no it didn't work out really [laugh]. Like it taught me things but like they weren't like...good or helpful-Beth

The things the participants learnt from pornography did not seem to help them or correspond with other's sexual scripts and thus they had, in many cases, to alter them accordingly.

Well, it's I would say it's. In the BDSM direction, it's uhm, gave me a lot of ideas and a lot of ways in which I could practise something but... Well, it's. The things they do there they are not safe so. I thought I had learned a lot of things, but well, actually I didn't. -Toby

Of all of the participants, Toby was the one who seemed to have used porn as an inspiration the most in his own sexual encounters of a BDSM nature that he practiced with his friends. Thus it seems as though his sexual script was expanded by pornography according to what Weinberg *et al.* (2010) called ‘erotic empowerment’ (Weinberg *et al.* 2010, p. 1391), although this was not always simply a good thing.

It's had, yeah, uhm. I often without really telling someone, I often want to like act out something that I had seen in porn so pretty much replicate a scene. So..uhm so I, I never told anyone that I wanted to replicate something that I saw in porn, I just told them that I wanted to try out something. So yeah, back then it definitely did affect me. Nowadays it. It Doesn't really, I'm...I feel like I'm. I think that the difference is that I have gained some, I can't think of the word.... Well, I have gained some experience and therefore I know what to do with my body. So, It's easier to just relax a bit and just try feel my own body and try to get into a situation, whereas before I think. I think one of the reasons I wanted to try out these things that I saw in porn was that it was kind of like a playbook, so I don't have to be so uncertain and think about, think about what I'm doing next. I just have to remember what someone did in porn and replayed it.

The discrepancy between pornography and sex was a running theme throughout the interviews, as the participants sexual script seems to have been influenced by their porn consumption and that caused them to exhibit sexual behaviours and attitudes that were not well received with their partners. Therefore, most participants argued against using porn as an educational tool unless they were looking for a specific position, although even in that case they expressed that pornography provides an unrealistic fantasy of what sex can be. The educational aspect of porn, or the internalisation some participants exhibited, seemed to be related to the age at which they began their careers of pornographic consumption as they, at that point, lacked information about it and in some cases did not receive any information from their school or parents, which corresponds to the findings of Litsou *et al.* (2021). These also neglected to explain to the participants how pornography was different from sex and how it

could affect them, and without this knowledge many participants went on to 'learn' how to have sex from it. Although some participants knew that what they were watching was unrealistic and exhibited a fairly high degree of porn literacy, they internalised messages from pornography nonetheless after continuous exposure to it, which supports the findings of Massey, Burns, and Franz (2020) and Dawson Gabhain and MacNeela (2020). While pornography is an inadequate sexual educational tool in the case of adolescents and children, another reason apart from the discrepancy between what happens in pornography and regular sexual encounters as mentioned above, is related to what pornography does not show, namely preparation and consent. These two ideas featured heavily in the interviews with the two women as they argued that porn had made their sexual partners assume that the women would be compliant and willing to be subjected to certain practices such as anal sex and asphyxiation without discussing it first. This resembles the accounts of the female respondents in Litsou *et al.*'s (2021) study, and that pornography's general lack of depiction of preparation and use of condoms made anal sex appear as an act one could perform without preparation, lubricant, or protection without hurting one's partner, a pattern also observed in Marston and Lewis (2014) and Litsou *et al.*'s (2021) study. When asked if their sexual education in school included information about safe anal sex or non-heterosexual sexual practices, only one participant stated that they had.

Yeah I've had a lot of guys just try to 'slip it in' as if it's an accident, no fucking way is that an accident, the holes feel way different, you might put the tip against the wrong hole but if you push it in, that's a decision you are making, and like they never even used lube...just kinda pushed and it was painful and they'd always look so.....what's the word...dejected when I said 'no' like they didn't just try to do something that would hurt me without my consent. I get that they may not know about preparation because they don't like talk to their friends about it or google it and you don't see it in porn but still... -Cilla

Beth noted a similar pattern when asked about what practices she thought that pornography may have helped to normalise in regular sexual encounters.

I think anal has become a more common expectation, well....maybe, like it's not, it's not always expected but I think guys see it as like a goal or something to have anal with a girl, like, like, especially when they're younger, like I don't feel the pressure so much now but like in high school it was like every guy I slept with tried it at some

point, like without even asking...I think it was just a box to tick for them. But it is more common now with adults as well I think...like it's not a shock if someone asks you for it or say they do it. -Beth

The narratives above are similar to the findings of Marston and Lewis (2014) in terms of the rise in popularity and the experience of male partners attempting to penetrate the female partner without verbal or physical penetration, and the lack of information about safe anal sex in pornography and school sexual education, and that of Litsou *et al.* (2021) where anal sex was seen as something adolescents could only learn about from peers or pornography.

Max stated that due to what he internalised from porn, he, like Maheen, felt as though he had to take a dominant position with his female sexual partners and that he sometimes assumed that his partner would agree to, or want to do something without asking them for consent which had created a situation in which he had started asphyxiating a partner without consent as a result of porn, but also from being told by his peers about other women who were into it. However, his sexual script seemed to change, as was the case with the other participants, with time and experience.

It...it wasn't until I was with my long term girlfriend when I found out like that how long foreplay has to be for the woman and like, cos in porn they just stick it in right away no preparation, like I'd been with other girls but we never really...talked about it, like they'd say no to stuff if they didn't want it but they just kinda...took it, they weren't always wet tho so like I'd have to use spit or lube but I figured that was like the common thing until I met my girlfriend and she told me [laugh]. -Max

His narrative seems to support the arguments of Massey, Burns, and Franz (2020) and Weinberg *et al.* (2010) in how he had internalised lessons from pornography which had also normalised risky practices such as asphyxiation.

Cilla, the bisexual woman, reported that she thought she had learned how to have sex with other women through porn. She, like most other participants, had not received any information about how non heterosexual sex would work or how to conduct it safely, and thus felt in the dark and had leaned on pornography to teach her like the queer participants in Dawson, Gabhain, and MacNeela's (2020) study. Although she sought out other sources of information on the matter before her first sexual encounter with a woman to be prepared.

So like I was really nervous and confused how to do it so I just googled something like [laugh] uhmm, 'How to have lesbian sex' I think...and, and I was kinda disappointed because it turned out that, that what I thought was not right at all....I mean there were similar things but like one of the first things on that webpage was a disclaimer saying like 'it's not how they do it in porn' and I was like 'ah fuck what do I do now?' But I, but I read the rest of it, and it was like ok, like trim your fingernails, be gentle, ask questions, and those things...-Cilla

5.5 Desensitization and Escalation

While some of the participants' first experience with porn had been with more advanced types of pornographic materials such as "2 girls 1 cup" or pornography involving power tools, when the participants started looking for porn by themselves, they mostly started out with fairly standard heterosexual dyad porn and lesbian porn. Over the course of their career of pornographic consumption this evolved for many participants who started branching out to other genres they might have not considered or directly avoided in the past. Two participants stated, however, that their interests had not strayed much from their original categories. Some participants had very distinct interests in certain categories and specific websites they would visit for this content but most watched a less specific and wider variety on the main porn platforms such as RedTube, PornHub, and XNXX. The most common form of porn the participants consumed was videos although Hentai (Japanese pornographic comics), games, audio porn, short stories, and pictures were also named as types of porn they used. The participants were also divided over the notion of desensitisation and escalation of content sought out, some claiming that they had not experienced any significant change in their interest in pornography and mainly watched heterosexual cisgender pornography that could be described as 'vanilla'. Not all participants who had experienced an escalation saw it as something negative, for some it was simply seen as a natural progression of watching pornography from a young age and something that encouraged them to try new things. At the time of the interview some of the participants had been watching porn for over a decade and thus they felt that this was a natural outcome of that timeline and that they were looking for more "experimental" content but not necessarily violent pornography. These narratives resemble those found in Weinberg *et al.* (2010) study where the participants noted a sense of empowerment and inspiration to explore sexually.

Among the participants who had experienced a desensitization to pornography and saw it as a negative thing were the four that identified as 'porn addicts'. However, Beth, Cilla, and Max

also reported a desensitization to pornography. They expressed that over time, the content they started out watching became boring and stopped being as arousing so they started looking for more intense categories of pornography.

It did definitely desensitize, absolutely yeah, I was like I needed, you know, needed other stuff. Like you know, I kind of looked at stuff at first that's vanilla. Whereas the feckin, you know, yeah, you definitely like start to consume more and more. More and more stuff and more and more like You know, like fetishes I guess or whatever you know what I mean like? -Ethan

Toby, who has a problematic relationship to pornography, expressed concern over his desensitization as he was worried that he would continue watching increasingly intense things if he kept watching pornography:

Well, one of the reasons I really committed to trying to quit this addiction, is that I can see myself flirt with more and more extreme ideas of what I could do and. And I see myself.... Uh, thinking about it and getting interested in those kinds of videos so. Yes, it's still a continuous escalation, and I don't think it's will ever stop if I don't stop using it, so I think. Whatever the.... Rock bottom is...whatever the worst thing is it's something that I will realistically do in like 10 years or something. -Toby

Toby was not the only participant who expressed this concern or felt like they had to stop and re-evaluate what they were watching at a certain point. Cilla also expressed a similar concern after a period of escalation. This seemed to be a genuine concern for them both as they could look back over the process of escalation that they had gone through and knew that it was possible. Cilla also expressed concern over the possibility that she would not be able to be aroused by less intense pornography and that this would carry over into her actual sex life.

Beth expressed that she felt guilty from her standpoint as a woman for watching more extreme content at times that included scenes where a woman was not consenting to the sexual act when in real life such a scene would horrify her and not arouse her.

Like I...uh...I came across like non-consensual stuff pretty early and I was like adamant that I would stay far away I was so grossed out y'know? I didn't think that was allowed but she was like...ugh, its, no I don't.....Anyway but later I watched porn for a...a few years I don't know how long it took, but all of a sudden I was like not fazed by rape in porn...like at all, and, and that freaks me out a little...like it wasn't

that hard for me to be, to be like uh, ok, no not ok, but like indifferent and like being able to get off to it, like I never think I specifically sought it out like that but I...I did watch it if it came up but I'd like feel horrible after, just, just staring at the screen like 'what the fuck did I do, this isn't me, it's not...it's not like ok to do this'. -Beth

These narratives somewhat support the arguments in Massey, Burns, and Franz's (2020) study and Weinberg *et al.*'s (2010) study in that the behaviour they were watching had become normalised to them. Although, I would argue that while they may have been somewhat desensitized by pornography, this desensitization concerned only what they watched and not what they would do in real life.

Cilla also reported having her interests escalate over time and expressed that she got to a point when she was 19 where she had to stop and reconsider the things that she was watching as she felt as though it had a negative effect on how she experienced sex. The following is an excerpt from the interview with her about her interests:

Yeah it spiralled pretty quickly, like I got into some heavier things, not illegal but a lot of BDSM stuff and like...I got into fisting at a stupid early age, like 13-14, I hadn't even had sex yet and I was getting off to that, I eventually hit a wall when I considered paying for a subscription to a pretty violent production company that did some weird ass things but at that point I kinda had to like....reconsider a bit. -Cilla

She expressed, however, that she did not have any interest in acting out what she regularly watched, which mirrored the experience of most of the participants that had experienced an escalation in their viewing. This cognitive dissonance between what the participants watched and what they wanted to do in real life, and the guilt some of them felt after watching something more intense than they were used to was also found in Shor and Seida's (2021) study. While the content aroused the participants, they did not want or thought that they would ever emulate the things they watched in real life, either as it would require a considerable effort and willing and understanding partners or because they experienced a significant disconnect between what they like in pornography and what they wanted to do with their sexual partners. This cognitive dissonance is interesting and was seen in several participants who noted a sense of shame and confusion about what they had watched post-orgasm, stating that what they had watched was not things they would do to someone or 'normally' enjoy outside of masturbation, as could be seen in Beth and Cilla's narratives above and Max, Chay, Nick and Warren's narratives below.

I...uh yeah id just shut off, like close down the tab with whatever I'd, I'd watched as soon as I was done like I didn't want to see or like have to face what I was jacking off to...like post nut clarity is bad enough I don't need to deal with like my kinda...I dunno not, anyway...different taste in porn, just click off move on like that.- Warren

Well no [laugh] I didn't give much thought to what I watched like...it's not, it's not me...what I watch y'know....like I, I would never treat a woman like that in real life like I really wouldn't...I mean unless she asked but it's different like I don't want to like force a woman in real life but in porn its pretend but real in a, a weird way and...yeah I guess I try not to think about it really...I, uh, I there's like...some guilt there but like I'm not hurting anyone! It's just on screen...-Max

Yeah, after watching that I would be disinterested, like most of the time we find kind of porn actually, like once, once finished watching, you're like OK why did I watch that. Why did I watch that? Like it's pointless and I would just like forget about it. – Chay

Especially within a couple of certain sub genres, I would feel good doing it. But then, after the orgasm, awful, awful. You know, like you'll watch, you will look at the screen and think like 'what the hell was I watching?' - Nick

These participants did not feel as though the pornography they watched was representative of who they were as people or their values. Although some participants would emulate the behaviours on screen with their sexual partners, especially BDSM-like acts, there were videos they had watched depicting more violent acts where they knew they had 'crossed a line' to a boundary that they would not cross in real life. Pornography seemed to be something that the participants did not analyse or tried to avoid analysing in some cases. The reasons given were mainly attributed to shame, shame that was incurred by experiencing sexual pleasure from watching pornography that did not correspond to the viewers' morals or what they found appealing outside of porn. In these cases, it would appear as though they tried to avoid to let their porn literacy play a role in their experience of pornography as they would, post orgasm, try not to think about what they had just watched.

Israeli (2021) argues that porn acts as a mirror of society, and attributes the gendered power dynamics and racism depicted in porn to this reflection which reproduces the inequality in another medium. If we look at pornography as a form of mass media as described by Horkheimer Adorno, and Schmid Noerr (2002) , we can find distinct similarities in how porn

reproduces societal standards, although in this case the standards mainly pertain to sexual behaviour, beauty, and gender dynamics. Mainstream porn undoubtedly exaggerates these standards, but they are still recognisable as the sociocultural ideas reproduced by mass media. The culture industry is also relevant here in terms of violence and the acceptance thereof. As the authors described the mass media consumers as becoming accustomed to the violence seen on screen and the violence being turned on them, I would argue that there is a similarity between that and the research participants who had become accustomed to watching violent pornography, and the normalisation of, and acquiescence to, violent sexual acts in especially the female participants experience that were continuously exposed to a gender dynamic in pornography that portrayed women as subservient. While it is beyond the scope of this research, the question here is if consumers of pornography become more used to the idea of sexual violence through watching porn or if society as a whole becomes more accustomed to this type of imagery and its actual occurrence, if to be entertained is indeed as Adorno and Horkheimer claimed, “to be in agreement” (Adorno, Schmid Noerr, Horkheimer, 2002, p. 115).

As can be seen in the trends chapter, Beth and Cilla expressed that acts that were not considered mainstream 15 years ago are now becoming more common, and that some of these are violent in nature such as asphyxiation and degradation. Although some of these acts, if practiced within the realm of informed and consensual BDSM-practice, can be safe and enjoyed, they can be violent if not practiced correctly. Israeli (2021) argues further that the viewer is not meant to think about what they have watched or how the pornographic material came to be, as that introspection would pose a problem for the porn industry. The viewers are meant to find a video, masturbate to it, and move on with their day until it is time to watch again and maybe this time, they will watch something more intense.

Nick and Beth noted that they had had come across similar videos when they were younger and felt disgust or fear and not arousal, but would a few years later be desensitized to it and watching videos of that category regularly. The following is an excerpt from the interview with Nick where he recounted watching a pornographic video featuring a transgender actor for the first time:

I was like I was expecting to see something I didn't expect to see, I expected to see a vagina but I saw a penis...and I thought being and then I was really like...confused

like 'whoaa'...uhm, so I clicked right off right off, and I was like 'I never want to see that again'. Uhm, I guess a couple of years later I was using it every day so. -Nick

Nick also watched videos in which it would be implied that he would have to sexually submit to a man and perform sexual acts with him. However, post-orgasm he would experience confusion over what he had just watched as he struggled to feel attraction towards men.

Four of the participants self-identified as having a porn addiction, which is a contested term as the psychological and medical field have not yet come to a conclusion about its status as an addiction, preferring to call it 'problematic porn usage'. It is not included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; it is, however, included in the International Classification of Diseases 11th Revision by the World Health Organisation under the umbrella of Impulse Control Disorders as '6C72-Compulsive sexual behaviour disorder' that is defined as "'Compulsive sexual behaviour disorder is characterised by a persistent pattern of failure to control intense, repetitive sexual impulses or urges resulting in repetitive sexual behaviour.'" (World Health Organization 2019, 6C72).

Out of the entire sample, these participants seemed to have the most negative outlook on pornography and saw their relationship to porn as maladaptive as it had had a significant impact on their lives. They noted effects similar to those outlined by de Alarcon *et al.* (2019), such as erectile dysfunction, decreasing social interactions, lowered motivation to practice personal hygiene, lack of interest in potential or actual sexual partners, and withdrawal when they stop watching pornography.

I was using it a lot I would say, at least once a day, sometimes twice. You know, I'd say maybe even once a week sometimes just having a binge, like I'd spend all day in bed just watching videos and some of the effects that he [Gary Wilson, TEDex Talk speaker] discussed other things that I'd seen, like you know, brain fog, just feeling tired and lack of motivation like a lack of drive and even like erectile dysfunction performing as well. – Ethan

Like the other participants who identified as porn addicts, Ethan had not realised he had a problematic relationship to pornography until he tried to stop consuming it and found it very difficult to do so as can be seen in Toby's narrative below.

I was 24, at the end of 24, that was October 2020. When I first tried to stop using it for 10 days, which well, it was just impossible. I, I didn't know I was addicted to it, but. Well, when I tried to stop it for 10 days, I found out, and since then it has reduced massively. But when I relapse into using it, I use it even more than before.-Toby

These participants exhibited more time-consuming habits in comparison to other participants, some watching pornography and masturbating multiple times a day until ejaculation became painful. Looking at the sheer amount of pornography these participants consumed it may be possible that they may have undergone a more rapid development than those who did not identify as addicts. Regarding the escalation of the pornographic content he would find appealing, Chay argued that it had changed what he thought was sexually attractive, and that this changed when he stopped watching pornography.

Like it made me realise like how you know, you kind of distort, distort like the, the view that you have especially like, like on what you find attractive or not. So it distorted my view and now like it's like it went back to something more normal. Where like it's...and yeah, well like I have way less let's say like weird tastes, weird fetishes let's say. So yeah, more normal. Let's say too... so now I know it's something that I know, I have to fight against all the time, so it's kind of annoying It's like a constant struggle, let's say, but in another way, like it's allowed me like to understand like what always, how, how, people like are supposed like to interact with each other sexually, like properly so I went back to let's say like a more normal behaviour.-Chay

Similarly to the development that was noted in the expectations and assumptions chapter, Chay experienced a development in his understanding of what is considered appropriate sexual script in his context. This can also be seen as a development of his porn literacy in his understanding that pornography had distorted what he wanted sexually. Chay noted however that if he were to watch porn again, he would try to stay away from the pornography he had been watching in the past but was aware that it would be very possible for that to trigger him to watch more intense forms of pornography.

5.6 Trends

When asked about what recent trends in pornography the participants had identified, all but two participants noted that incest as a theme of videos had become more common, as was also found in Vera-Gray *et al.* (2021) study, whether it be blood or step-relatives, incest has put its mark on mainstream pornography. While this category does not always contain physical

violence, and in some studies these videos are not counted towards the amount of violence in mainstream pornography for this reason, the inherent violence of incest makes this a problematic category. When asked why they thought this had become such a popular category, two theories came up, the first one was that incest is a relatively easy scenario to script and imagine as most people have family members living in close proximity, and the second was that with porn having covered most imaginable categories and fetishes, incest was inevitable and perhaps the most extreme category without being physically violent.

So, like everyone has been watching porn for ages right, so you want more, something different, and the porn industry is looking for the same thing, so incest becomes like the ultimate taboo that people want to watch because it's like.... close to something you could do but you would never you know? But it's so taboo but recognisable...but I dunno I don't watch that shit its weird as hell- Max

Ethan and Beth also noted that transgender actors were becoming more common to see in pornography, and Nick mentioned that pornography that was categorised as 'teen' seemed like it was becoming more popular. In terms of trends in everyday sexual practices, the participants struggled to identify specific ones as it is difficult to generalize about how a society is having sex as a whole, but most noted that sexual acts such as oral sex (performed on both men and women), anal sex, and soft-BDSM practices were becoming more common to experience or hear about. While these are not universal or portray a larger pattern of sexual behaviour, several participants mentioned that they felt that there was an expectation for either them or their partner to certain acts due to how they were perceived as something that "everybody does" and thus everyone should enjoy or be up for it. Warren, Max, and Cilla report that they thought erotic asphyxiation had become a more common thing in sexual encounters as well as more BDSM-like practices and power dynamics as was suggested in Shor and Seida's (2021) study and Vera-Gray *et al.* (2021) study

I feel like...choking is becoming more common and like...trivialized? Like I don't know if I see it more in porn but on social media like women being choked and I think guys picked up on it like I have had men try to choke me without discussing it at all first as if it isn't something that requires a lot of trust and could very potentially kill me? I think that's the same with BDSM, like its getting popular and mainstream to do some of those things but without the proper knowledge of like, how to do it safely, and its becoming a thing that is getting to younger girls because now its like they're meant

to be sexy and up for it and kinky...otherwise they're boring if they just want like....regular sex so I've seen stuff social media from underage girls that are posting about their like kinks and... I dunno I just find it worrying...-Cilla

In combination with a third-wave feminism that inspires women to explore their sexuality and feel empowered by it, there have been trends online across multiple platforms that indicate that young women are becoming more likely to engage in sexual violent acts that they may not want to engage in as they do not want to be branded as 'vanilla', a term that negatively describes 'conventional' sex which in this usage is meant to mean boring. This trend suggests that young women ought to be into more intense and frequent sexual practices, especially in terms of BDSM-like practices such as choking, which can be exciting and satisfying for some individuals if practiced with expertise, but dangerous in a physical and emotional sense if it is not. This is a fairly new trend, and I have yet to find any scholarly resources about the topic. Therefore I think that this is an area that warrants further research as porn and social media are being accessed by increasingly younger individuals. It would have been more interesting to interview more female participants regarding this and their experiences with porn, as it is their bodies in porn that are stereotypically the target of sexual violence.

Examples of this can be found on platforms such as TikTok, where in 2020, a BDSM-inspired challenge that urged the participants to asphyxiate themselves to the point of blacking out caused a 10-year-old girl to accidentally take her own life attempting to emulate it. Beth also reported that she had seen several younger women on TikTok engaging in similar trends in which they presented themselves as 'kinky' and sexually submissive. Other similar trends include the trend where the participant lists their kinks from most to least socially acceptable, the kink-test that went viral where participants would test their level of kinkiness on bdsm.org and post their results on TikTok. As mentioned by one of the participants, Billy Eilish, an American singer discussed in an interview with Howard Stein that her exposure and use of increasingly violent porn made her more susceptible to the violent approaches of her sexual partners and how it normalised sexual violence for her at an early age as that is what she had learnt from porn and thought it was what sex should be like and that not conforming to the standards of violent porn would make her seem 'boring' and 'vanilla'. (Stern 2021).

6.0 Conclusion

While not all participants felt as though pornography had a significant impact on their lives, it seems to have informed and shaped their sexual script in some manner, be it the assumptions they developed about how sex was going to be, how they should act, how their future partner would act, what acts would be pleasurable to their partners, and how to draw boundaries with partners. Pornography was some of the first visual representation of sex they received, and some were too young at the time to recognise it as sex, although most reported that it was something exciting and something they knew they should not be watching. Being exposed to pornography at an early age had sex seem less special to some prior to experiencing it in contradiction to other forms of media as outlined by Garceau and Ronis's (2019) that portray the loss of virginity as something special and meaningful.

It shaped their assumptions about how sex was going to be before they experienced it, making it seem like something intense and a little intimidating for some depending on what type of pornography they were watching. With this assumption came the sexual roles that the participants thought they should play that they derived from pornography, which seems to have been a distinctly gendered dichotomy where they would emulate the gender roles they viewed in pornography to some extent. For the male participants this meant taking on a more dominant or leading role and for the female participants, it meant that they were more submissive and tolerated their partners behaviour despite their discomfort. While the participants claimed that these roles were largely inspired by their porn consumption, it is possible that it could, in addition, have been derived from other forms of media that promote the gender stereotype of man as dominant and women as submissive and the aforementioned sociocultural standards pertaining to women's sexual agency. Although the participants performed these roles, there was a discrepancy between how they thought they should behave and how they wanted to but felt pressured to conform to the gendered roles. This pressure to fill these roles, however, seemed to dissipate over time as the participants had more sexual experience and gained confidence in their sexuality and actual preferences. Some participants did not see it as an issue or something negative to perform these sexual gender roles but rather perceived it as the natural order of things.

The participants used pornography as educational to varying degrees, as many lacked the representation of sexual acts in their education and assumed that some of what happened in pornography would overlap with regular sex, and some used it for inspiration in specific sexual situations. Most of the participants stated that this was not beneficial for them, and that

they eventually had to be re-educated as they had developed what Garceau and Ronis (2019) referred to as an “atypical” script (Garceau and Ronis, 2019, p.39). Based on this I would argue that the studies that tout pornography as ‘educational’ ought to use word ‘inspiring’ or the like as when pornography is used by children and adolescents as sexual education it is not always beneficial.

In terms of porn literacy, the participants’ narratives suggest that they all could critically engage with the content they viewed, and that this ability had evolved over time. The participants who had little notion of what sex was when they started watching pornography seemed to have developed a sense of porn literacy later on in life as porn was their primary source of information about sex. As their porn literacy developed over time, there were times in the participants’ lives when porn had a more significant effect on aspects of their sexuality and sexual script such as their body image, sexual behaviour, and assumption about gendered sexual expectations; it appears as though some participants still experience these despite their porn literacy. It is important to note here that these sexual standards and power dynamics not only exist in mainstream pornography but correspond to the general western standards of beauty and sexuality portrayed in mass media which porn mirrors and exaggerates. The most common aspect of the participants’ body image that was raised as an insecurity caused by pornography was genital appearance and function, although some participants noted a negative influence on their physique as a whole.

Although not all of the participants reported any desensitization to pornography and mainly watched the same type of porn over time, some participants had experienced a desensitization that encouraged them to seek out more niche genres. Some of them experienced a cognitive dissonance between what they watched in pornography and what they thought was acceptable to do or wanted to do in real life. Some felt shame because of this type of pornography that they felt did not represent them as people, but they kept returning to, and they in many cases chose not to think about it after watching it, compartmentalising it to a very private sexual experience. Two of the participants, Nick and Toby, practiced what they watched in real life and belonged to different sexual subcultures categorized by BDSM practices and feminisation. The participants who had a problematic relationship to pornography were the ones with the most negative outlook on pornography, although most participants noted that they regretted started watching it at such an early age.

6.1 Future research

As this is a phenomena that is ongoing and because children are being exposed to it at increasingly younger ages, I believe that it is important for further research to be conducted on the subject as it develops. It will also be interesting to see how these experiences are shaped by new technologies that are, today, not very commonplace such as virtual reality pornography and AI. Future research would benefit from using larger sample sizes that include more queer individuals, people of colour, and women for a more diverse sample than was achieved in this research. I would also recommend that future research would utilise digital ethnography perspective or some form of review of social media engagement around the subject and the sexualisation of young people. I believe that further research should also consider other aspects of the online experience of digital natives such as exposure to violent videos featuring torture and death.

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