

Victoria Tng Ka Min

victoriatng.2024@socsc.smu.edu.sg

Title: What role does pornography play in shaping society's unrealistic perceptions of gender and sexuality for women in modern-day society?

Abstract: This essay examines the role of pornography in shaping society's unrealistic perceptions of gender and sexuality, particularly its adverse impacts on women. While acknowledging that men are also affected, the discussion centers on the disproportionate effects pornography imposes on women, given its male-centric production and consumption. Drawing on gender socialisation and objectification theory, the essay explores how pornography reinforces traditional gender roles, objectifies women, and perpetuates harmful stereotypes that marginalise their autonomy. It delves into pornography's normalisation of sexual violence and its role in shaping societal norms around "acceptable" sexual behavior, often to the detriment of women's boundaries and agency.

The paper also considers the potential for alternative subcultures within the porn industry, such as feminist and ethical pornography, to challenge patriarchal norms by prioritising female empowerment and agency. However, the influence of such movements remains limited compared to mainstream content. Ultimately, the essay underscores how pornography perpetuates a cycle of objectification and exploitation, raising critical questions about its role in society's views on consent, gender, and sexuality. By critiquing these dynamics, the paper contributes to broader discussions on the need for societal and cultural reform to counteract the harmful effects of mainstream pornography.

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Victoria Tng Ka Min

School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University

SOCG001: Understanding Societies

Dr George Wong

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Declaration: I declare the following work is my own original work and that I have tried to acknowledge works that I referred to. The usage of OpenAI in my report is strictly used in refining sentence structures and for grammar checks only.

In this paper, I ask the following question- **what role does pornography play in shaping society's unrealistic perceptions of gender and sexuality for women in modern-day society?** Before I begin, I would like to preface that although this essay primarily focuses on the impacts on women, it does not imply men are unaffected by the adverse effects of pornography. I decided to focus on this as pornography is "generally made for men, by men" (Newport, n.d.), and in today's society, it is widely recognised that women frequently bear the brunt of its negative effects.

"Pornography" (or "porn") is any sexually explicit content that has the purpose of eliciting sexual arousal ("Pornography," n.d.). Rapid digital advancements have rendered us useless without technology, proving our over-dependence and dying need for it to sustain our livelihoods. Despite the plethora of benefits technology may bring along, it has also caused the issue of increased accessibility to pornographic material. The internet creates a black hole where nothing is subjected to social norms and conventional values, allowing for issues that may have been taboo, pornography, etc, to be discussed openly (Agbanusi, 2020). Pornography has been gaining traction due to its large increase in materials available

to adults and children. Agbanusi (2020) states that “12% of the websites on the internet are pornographic, that is about 24,644.172 websites”, and “every second, 28,258 internet users are watching pornography”. If that doesn’t serve as a call to action, it reflects the true gravity of the issue.

With that being said, this essay intends to utilise gender socialisation and the objectification theory to uncover the ways pornography reinforces traditional gender roles and the way it often depicts women as objects, which adversely impacts society’s views. Gender socialisation is relevant in showing how repeated consumption of pornography can distort women’s perceptions of gender norms and sexuality (Agbanusi, 2020). Additionally, the objectification theory provides a perspective on how women are constantly objectified and seen as inanimate objects simply created for male satisfaction (Agbanusi, 2020).

Furthermore, this essay will touch on how pornography contributes to the shaping of society’s ideas of “normal” sexual intercourse and the issue of pornography as a subculture (Saputra, Siregar, & Izzihar, 2018). Lastly, ending off with the way pornography perpetuates sexual violence.

Pornography is usually one of the main ways most adolescents learn about sex, aside from sex education talks carried out by their schools. Pornography contains values, norms, and expectations that not only shape their perceptions and attitudes about gender roles but also reinforce harmful, inaccurate stereotypes that can further perpetuate discrimination against women (Nadrowski, 2023).

In reference to Barchielli et al. (2024), women are typically objectified and/or exploited in mainstream pornography while being portrayed as submissive, subservient, and demure when placed in the presence of men. This aligns with the gender socialisation processes that dictate how men and women are supposed to act within society. Traditional gender roles are reinforced when women are stripped of their

identity and reduced to their physical attributes, while men are shown as dominant and assertive. On top of that, there are unfavourable double standards when it comes to the topic of sex in regard to both men and women. Women are expected to remain “pure” until marriage, or else they are to be subjected to “slut-shaming”, while the men are free to do as they wish (Newport, n.d.). Gender socialisation theory highlights how men are encouraged to explore their sexuality freely, without any judgement, while women are subjected to stricter standards of sexual behaviour, reinforcing the notion of male sexual dominance and female submission. Pornography continues to perpetuate this double standard by viewing male sexual behaviour as praiseworthy while vilifying female sexuality.

In addition, the objectification theory reflects how the imbalance of power creates an expectation that women are merely objects that were created for male satisfaction and could be nothing more without a man. Women are primarily valued for their sexual purity and not their autonomy or desires. The concept of “purity” reduces women to simply being a vessel of morality whose value is solely based on her sexual restraint and “untouched” state. This objectification undermines their agency, reinforcing a system where women are either displayed as “prizes” for men to obtain or degraded when they deviate from the sexual norms. The concept of the “male gaze” –where women are portrayed as objects for male pleasure and validation (Mwedzi, 2021) –has resurfaced once again.

This objectification also contributes to the stereotype that women should be/are dependent on men, further perpetuating a cycle of reinforcement in which women are expected to internalise such submissive roles. Furthermore, the normalisation of rape, incest, underage sexual activities and voyeurism in pornography highlights how media can distort societal perceptions of what is normal and acceptable (Fight the New Drug, n.d.). They make inhumane and sadistic actions into light-hearted forms of entertainment that are slowly being accepted by the general public.

The long-term impacts of consuming such media include the reinforcement of harmful gender stereotypes, where men are trained to perceive women as beneath them, and women, in turn, internalise these roles, often questioning their purpose in society and believing their worth is measured by their ability to satisfy male desires.

Ultimately, pornography's portrayal of women as subservient objects feeds into a broader cultural context that continues to marginalise women and normalise the sexual exploitation of their bodies.

Moving on, pornography has played a significant role in influencing what society deems as "normal" sexual behaviour. It allows viewers to explore unconventional fetishes and obsessions that they might not be able to explore in their day-to-day lives. Examples can include odd fetishes like feet fetishes, the normalisation of the use of toys during sexual intercourse, sexual intercourse at unconventional places, etc. Pornography's role in presenting such unconventional fetishes and preferences as desirable or "normal" shapes society's attitudes towards them, potentially influencing what people deem acceptable or stimulating in sexual relationships.

According to Orlowski (2012), pornography can challenge restrictive norms around female sexuality by promoting diverse desires and sexual agency. Her article states that pornography is "an outlet to express themselves" as it normalises diverse desires by showcasing a myriad of sexual preferences, practises and body types that are rarely included in mainstream depictions of sexuality. The normalisation aids the battle against traditional narratives that restrict women to unrealistic and strict societal standards. Furthermore, the presentation of such unconventional representations of sexuality can validate these women and prevent any negative feelings of shame, particularly for those whose identities may not align with conventional norms. Hence, nurturing a more inclusive and accepting society towards sexuality.

On the other hand, this essay begs to differ. The social construction of sexuality explains how cultural influences, including pornography, shape societal norms and standards (Baker, 2021). Pornography reinforces the idea that unconventional fetishes and the use of sex toys are part of “normal” sexuality by its frequent portrayal. Though it may seem like a good way to embrace interpersonal differences, many women do not have the luxury to “express themselves” or discover their true desires as they are being pressured by society to conform to sexual ideals that do not align with their boundaries. They are expected to be eager when engaging in practices that align with male desires instead of their own. Additionally, even though porn culture has accepted such unconventional behaviours, society shows its discontent in various ways. A prime example would be sex stores. Sex stores utilise the male gaze while marketing their products solely towards cis-gendered men (Vogt, 2018). They discriminate against minority groups, including women and queer people, by selling products that are not tailored to their needs. As mentioned earlier, women are expected to be “modest”, and thus, the use of sex toys for anything other than male pleasure seems unnecessary and looked down upon. Such portrayals also complicate the topic of consent, as they may normalise the expectation of certain sexual behaviours in all relationships.

In short, this essay argues that our patriarchal society does not allow women the space to breathe, nonetheless, to navigate their sexualities using a medium that was “generally made for men, by men” (Newport, n.d.), despite the plausible benefits mentioned by Orlowski.

Next, to address the potential positive aspects of pornography, this essay will introduce the role of subcultures within the pornography industry. Alternative subcultures, such as feminist or ethical porn movements, resist and/or criticise mainstream pornography by challenging stereotypical representations of gender and sexuality in porn. Such subcultures promote sexual empowerment, body positivity and

female agency. For example, Malone (2024) mentions that feminist pornography prioritises women's pleasure, presents women as "powerful and physically strong", and avoids presenting women as objects.

From a feminist theory perspective, these movements prevent traditional patriarchal depictions by uplifting women and allowing them to be active agents of their sexuality. Using the objectification theory, feminist porn resists objectification by emphasising women as subjects, not objects (Malone, 2024). Hence, fulfilling the intention of achieving gender equality while rejecting male-centred portrayals of female sexuality.

However, despite the amount of effort, such subcultures tend to be niche and mainstream pornography still perpetuates harmful stereotypes due to their large influence over the porn industry. As a result, the porn industry continues to produce mediums that objectify women while reinforcing patriarchal norms. This issue shouldn't be taken lightly, as it normalises aggression towards women and raises vital questions about the role of pornography in shaping unhealthy views of consent and sexual behaviour. Building on the desensitisation to sexual violence discussed earlier, pornography places the ugliest side of humanity on full display. Though it is known that women, too, can be rapists, men remain the main perpetrators of sexual assault as well as the largest consumers of pornography (Jiménez Aceves & Tarzia, 2024). While there is no direct causal link between rape and pornography (Russell, 1988), pornography contributes to the incidence of rape by instilling attitudes that dehumanise women and normalise violence against them. The consumption of violent porn does not guarantee that one will be/is a rapist. However, it can definitely expose people to harmful ideas and perspectives that may lead them on that path.

In addition, Russell (1988) found that over 60% of male students acknowledged that they might rape or sexually assault women if they were guaranteed immunity from punishment. This statistic highlights how

pornography may reinforce rape myths --false beliefs and attitudes about rape that minimise the harm suffered by victims or blame them (Barchielli et al., 2024). Pornography desensitises individuals to sexual violence, thereby encouraging rape culture.

Lastly, the “headless women” trope in Hollywood, where women are decapitated or only left with their sexual parts on display to present them as objects to the male gaze (Khan & Mehmood, 2023), shows that this issue of objectification and dehumanisation is not limited to pornography. It is a systemic issue that needs to be addressed for society to change its perceptions and expectations towards women.

In conclusion, this essay exposes the detrimental impacts of pornography on women, from dehumanising to the perpetuation of unrealistic and harmful sexual expectations. It emphasises the need for movements like #ThisIsNotConsent or feminist critiques to put a stop to these destructive portrayals. Sexual intercourse meant to be an intimate and beautiful act, has unfortunately been tainted by pornography. It brings about one last question—how did we let such an instrumental part of human connection be reduced to exploitation?

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