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Running Head: EFFECTS OF PORN ON GAY, BISEXUAL, AND QUEER MEN'S
BODY IMAGE

The Effects of Pornography on Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Men's Body Image: An
Experimental Study

By

Neil Gleason

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Experimental Study

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's
committee.

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Abstract

Because gay male pornography often depicts idealized images of male bodies and is widely consumed by gay men, recent studies have investigated the relationship between gay men's pornography consumption and body image. However, the limited research on the subject has reported conflicting results and has only utilized correlational and qualitative methodologies. This is this first known experimental study to investigate the impact of pornography on gay, bisexual, and queer men's body image. Eighty-seven gay, bisexual, and queer men were assigned to watch either an "amateur" pornographic video, "professional" pornographic video, or a nature video, and then completed several body image questionnaires. Results indicated that exposure to pornography did not affect scores on measures of genital body image, drive for muscularity, or social physique anxiety. There was also no correlation found between participants' self-reported history of pornography use and the body image measures. These results contradict previous correlational studies showing a positive relationship between pornography use and body dissatisfaction. Implications of these findings are discussed

Introduction

Gay male pornography constitutes a disproportionately large share of the pornography industry; it is estimated that 20-30% of pornography produced is gay male pornography, and this pornography creates 30-50% of the pornography industry's revenue (Thomas, 2000). Several studies have indicated that gay men consume pornography at a higher frequency than heterosexual men (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Træen & Daneback, 2013). In addition, gay male pornography is ubiquitous in gay male culture (Thomas, 2000), and some argue that it serves as a form of cultural and sexual validation for gay men (Escoffier, 2003).

Despite the relevance of pornography to gay male culture, very few studies have investigated the effects of pornography on gay, bisexual, and queer men (Bishop, 2015). Pornography research in general has largely focused on heterosexual pornography (Morrison, 2004a), with the majority of studies examining the effects of pornography on men's aggression toward women (Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000). Of the few studies on gay, bisexual, and queer men, most examine the effects of pornography on high-risk sexual behavior (i.e., unprotected anal sex in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic; Bishop, 2015). A handful of studies have examined the relationship between pornography consumption among gay, bisexual, and queer men and their body image, though all have been correlational or qualitative (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Hald, Træen, Noor, Iantaffi, Galos, & Rosser, 2015; Morrison, 2004b; Morrison, Morrison, & Bradley, 2007).

At the same time that there has been this a lack of research on the effects of pornography, public interest in the subject has largely focused on anti-pornography advocacy. Currently, the Republican party of the United States, as well as the states of

Utah, South Dakota, and Virginia have declared pornography a public health crisis (Freeman, 2016; Waltman, 2017). Advocates of these public policies have cited scant evidence to back up their claims, and the evidence that has been cited usually has a heteronormative focus, such as the negative effects of heterosexual men's porn consumption on their female partners and children (Boaz, 2016). It is therefore important to note that these policies, which primarily aim to reduce male consumption of heterosexual pornography, have implications for all consumers of pornography, many of whom are gay, bisexual, and queer men.

Review of the Literature

Current studies on the relationship between pornography consumption and men's body image have yielded inconsistent results. Among gay men, higher levels of pornography consumption have been correlated with increased drive for muscularity (Morrison, Morrison, & Bradley, 2007) and increased social physique anxiety (Duggan & McCreary, 2004). In samples where the majority of men were heterosexual, higher levels of pornography consumption were correlated with decreased genital body image (Cranny, 2015; Morrison, Ellis, Morrison, Bearden, & Harriman, 2006) and increased muscle dissatisfaction (Tylka, 2015). However, these same studies have found that pornography consumption has no relationship with genital body image among gay and straight men (Morrison, Harriman, Morrison Bearden & Ellis, 2004; Morrison, Morrison, & Bradley, 2007) and no relationship with drive for muscularity in gay men (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; See Table 1 in Appendix A for more details). Therefore, the available body of research offers limited evidence of a correlation between pornography consumption and men's body image.

Two qualitative studies have found that gay, bisexual, and queer men report very few negative effects of porn consumption. In a qualitative study by Morrison (2004b), a sample of 10 gay men indicated that they viewed pornography as a masturbatory aid and little else. If they perceived any negative effects of pornography, they thought it likely negatively affected others rather than themselves (i.e., the third person effect; Wu & Koo, 2001). A study of Norwegian men who have sex with men found that the majority of the sample believed pornography had a positive impact on their sexual identity and sexual functioning. Only 7% of the sample reported any negative effects (Hald et al., 2015). However, these results should be interpreted with some skepticism, as men may not be consciously aware of how pornography affects their attitudes.

Theoretical Approaches to Studying Pornography and Body Image

There are three theoretical bases to understand when considering the impact pornography can have on gay and bisexual men's body image: Cultivation Theory (Potter, 2014), Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), and Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Cultivation Theory states that images in the media are perceived as accurate depictions of reality. Therefore, viewers may believe that the bodies portrayed in pornography are accurate depictions of typical bodies in the real world. A study by Kvalem, Træen, Lewin, and Štulhofer (2014) found that men who perceived pornography as more realistic also perceived more positive effects of pornography in their own lives and reported greater pornography consumption. The study also indicated that self-perceived effects of pornography use were positively correlated with genital appearance satisfaction and sexual self-esteem. The sample included both straight and gay men, so the results suggest that, at least among men in general, one's

perception of the realism of pornography has some influence on how pornography affects body image.

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954) states that individuals compare themselves to others to understand how their opinions and abilities measure up. Because male actors in pornography often have “ideal” body types and above average penis size, male viewers may compare themselves negatively to these actors. This theory also states that the degree of comparison an individual makes between themselves and another person depends on the degree to which they identify with the other person. A study by Schwartz (2009) interviewed several gay men, and found that the majority compared themselves to media images of male bodies, particularly when they were coming out. These men reported decreased body satisfaction and self-esteem as a result of these comparisons. A study by Kvalem, Træen, and Iantaffi (2015) found that gay men tend to consume pornography that depicts body types similar to their own, and that gay men with “less ideal” body types tended to prefer consuming amateur pornography. These two studies indicate that gay men often compare themselves to media images of male bodies, and that social comparison may be related to the types of pornography they consume and how this pornography affects them.

Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) states that women learn to internalize and prioritize observers' views of their bodies. Because pornography quite literally portrays an “observer's view” of the naked body, it may perpetuate the internalization of this perspective. While this theory was originally developed to describe women's body image, it has been found that gay men self-objectify more than straight

men, and that increased self-objectification is related to increased body dissatisfaction (Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbride, 2007).

Studies on the effects of media consumption on men's body image have largely produced findings consistent with these theories. A meta analysis of studies found that media images consistently affect men's body image (i.e., body satisfaction, body esteem, and self-esteem) in both correlational and experimental studies (Barlett, Vowels, & Saucier, 2008). Other studies have found that media images of ideal bodies can significantly influence men's satisfaction with their muscularity (Leit, Gray, & Pope, 2002) and even levels of depression (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004).

Fewer studies have specifically investigated media effects on body image for gay and bisexual men. Several studies have found that gay men tend to experience greater body image dissatisfaction than straight men (Morrison, Morrison, & Sager, 2004; Peplau et al., 2009). Gay men have also reported greater social comparison pressures and pressures from the media, indicating that they may more susceptible to media influence on body image compared to straight men (Carper, Negy, & Tantleff-Dunn, 2010; Frederick & Essayli, 2006; Levesque & Vichesky, 2006).

Aims of Current Study

This study is the first to experimentally examine the effects of pornography on gay and bisexual men's body image. The goal was to confirm a connection between pornography exposure and increased body dissatisfaction, as indicated in previous studies (Duggan & McCreary, 2004; Morrison, Morrison, & Bradley, 2007), and to investigate the relative effects of "amateur" and "professional" pornography. It was hypothesized that individuals exposed to pornography will report greater body dissatisfaction on

measures of body image compared to individuals exposed to a nature video. It was also hypothesized that individuals exposed to pornography supposedly depicting “amateur” actors will report greater body dissatisfaction than those exposed to pornography supposedly depicting “professional” actors. This effect is predicted by Social Comparison Theory, as men should identify more with “amateur” actors than “professional” actors, and therefore compare themselves more to the “amateur” actors.

Methods

Participants

Approximately 342 individuals initiated the online survey, and of these, 122 participants (35.7%) completed enough of the survey to be included in analysis. Participants were eliminated if they indicated they were transgender, genderqueer, intersex, or gender-nonconforming ($n=21$) or if they were not able to correctly answer questions about the content of the video they watched ($n=14$). Of the 87 participants included in analysis, the majority of participants in the study identified as gay ($n=49$; 56.3%) and white ($n=65$; 74.7%). A wide age range was represented, from 18 to 67 ($M=34.62$). For a full description of participant demographics, refer to Table 2 in Appendix A.

Materials

Videos

Two 5-minute videos were used in this study. The first video was a compilation of three different gay male pornographic videos depicting male actors engaged in various sexual activities, include kissing, oral sex, and anal sex. The researchers attempted to use

videos that depicted “typical” pornographic actors that could be perceived as either professional or amateur. The second video depicted butterflies and flowers in nature.

Measures

Male Genital Self-Image Scale

The Male Genital Self Image Scale (Herbenick, Schick, Reece, Sanders, & Fortenberry, 2013) is a 7-item questionnaire that assesses men's attitudes toward their genitals. Participants are asked to respond to 7 statements using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Statements include “I am satisfied with the size of my genitals” and “I think my genitals work the way they are supposed to work.” The scale has demonstrated good reliability and validity in a large nationally representative sample (Herbenick et al., 2013).

Drive for Muscularity Attitudes Questionnaire

The Drive for Muscularity Attitudes Questionnaire (Morrison, Morrison, Hopkins, & Rowan, 2004) is an 8-item questionnaire that assesses attitudes toward muscularity. Participants are asked to respond to 8 statements using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. Statements include “Muscularity is important to me” and “I wish my arms were more muscular.” The scale has demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha=.82$) and construct validity (Morrison et al., 2004).

Social Physique Anxiety Scale

The Social Physique Anxiety Scale (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989) is a 12-item questionnaire that assesses anxiety about having one's body assessed by others. Participants are asked to respond to 12 statements using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *not at all characteristic of me* to *extremely characteristic of me*. Statements include

“I am comfortable with how fit my body appears to others,” and “when in a bathing suit, I often feel nervous about how well-proportioned my body is.” Martin et al. (1997) reviewed the internal consistency of the Social Physique Anxiety Scale and eliminated 3 items that were deemed unnecessary. The resulting 9-item measure demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha=.89$) and construct validity (Martin et al., 1997). This revised 9-item measure was used in this study.

Attitudes Toward Erotica Questionnaire

The Attitudes Toward Erotica Questionnaire (Lottes, Weinberg, & Weller, 1993) is a 17-item questionnaire that assesses a participant's attitudes about a particular piece of sexually explicit media. This questionnaire was used primarily to assess potential mediators of the hypothesized relationship and to give legitimacy to the deception (i.e., that the purpose of the survey is to assess attitudes toward sexually explicit media).

Other Questions

A 5-item questionnaire assessing participants' use of various forms of pornography in the past was adapted from Morrison, Morrison, and Bradley (2007). These questions assessed the number of times the participant viewed pornography on Internet, DVD, TV, magazines, and books in the past 6 months. Participants were also asked to report demographic information, including their age, gender identity, biological sex, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, relationship status, and their agreement with the statement “religion is very important in my life” (5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from a variety of sources in order to increase the sample size and the diversity of the sample. The majority of the participants ($n=53$) were recruited from the website www.gayresearch.com, which is a website designed for researchers to recruit LGBT study participants. Other sources of recruitment included an on-campus research participant pool ($n=6$), recruitment from the local community via posters and emails to LGBT organizations ($n=1$), and online recruitment via Facebook and Twitter ($n=25$).

Participants were provided with a link to an online Qualtrics survey. The survey began with an informed consent document. Recruitment text indicated that the purpose of the study was to assess gay, bisexual, and queer men's' attitudes toward sexually explicit media. This minor deception was used to prevent expectation effects. Participants were made aware that they may be exposed to sexually explicit content during the informed consent process, and were asked to take the survey in a private location. After giving informed consent, participants were asked their age and date of birth. If the participant indicated that they were under the age of 18, the survey was immediately discontinued. After entering this information, the participants were again reminded that they may be exposed to sexually explicit material.

After participants agreed to participate in the research, they were randomly assigned to one of three video conditions. Participants in the first condition viewed a video featuring male porn actors engaging in various sexual activities. The participants were told that the actors in the video were professional pornography actors. Participants in the second condition were shown the same pornographic video, but were told that the

actors in the video were amateur pornography actors. Participants in the third condition viewed a video depicting butterflies and flowers.

After viewing the video, participants were asked several questions about the content of the video in order to assess whether they paid attention to the video and watched it all the way through. Participants then completed the three body image questionnaires in a randomized order, followed by the Attitudes Toward Sexually Explicit Media Questionnaire, the 5 questions about pornography usage in the past 6 months, and finally the demographic questions. After completing the survey, participants were informed of the true nature of the study and provided with contact information if they had any questions or concerns.

Results

It was hypothesized that participants in the three conditions would report different levels of body satisfaction on the three measures. A one-way MANOVA was conducted, and results indicated that participants did not score differently on the three measures between conditions, $F(3, 81)=1.86, p=.09$. This indicated that individuals in the control condition did not report significantly different levels of body satisfaction compared to individuals exposed to pornography. Additionally, individuals exposed to “amateur” pornography did not report significantly different levels of body satisfaction compared to individuals exposed to “professional” pornography. Mean scores on each measure for all three conditions are displayed in Table 3 in Appendix A.

Of the 74 participants that responded to the the five questions assessing pornography use in the last six months, 60 (68.9%) reported consuming pornography 36 or more times via the internet (the highest possible response). The majority of

participants ($n=65$; 74.7%) report only consuming pornography via the internet.

Therefore, only the internet pornography question was used to examine whether self-reported history of pornography exposure was correlated with the measures of body image. A series of Pearson correlations indicated that frequency of internet pornography use was not correlated with genital self-image ($r=-.02$, $p=.89$), social physique anxiety ($r=-.01$, $p=.97$), or drive for muscularity ($r=.01$, $p=.93$).

Of the 29 participants in the “amateur” condition, only five correctly indicated that the actors in the videos were amateur actors. The other 24 participants indicated the actors were professional ($n=14$) or a mix of amateurs and professionals ($n=10$). In the “professional” condition, 21 of the 30 participants indicated they believed the performers to be professional, while the other 9 believed the actors were a mix of amateurs and professionals. A chi-square test for independence indicated that condition had a significant effect on participants' perceptions of the actors' professional status, $\chi^2(2) = 6.44$, $p=0.04$.

Discussion

This study examined the effects of pornography on gay, bisexual, and queer men's self-reported body image. The results indicated that those exposed to pornography did not report greater social physique anxiety, poorer genital body image, or a greater drive for muscularity than those in the control condition. There was also no difference between individuals exposed to “amateur” pornography or “professional” pornography. In addition, no correlation was found between self-reported pornography consumption in the past 6 months and the 3 measures of body image. These results fail to confirm the findings of previous studies correlating increased pornography consumption to increased

drive for muscularity (Morrison et al., 2007), increased social physique anxiety (Duggan & McCreary, 2004), and decreased genital body image (Morrison et al., 2006). Rather, these results confirm the findings of previous studies that have found no correlation between pornography consumption and genital body image (Morrison et al., 2004) or drive for muscularity (Duggan & McCreary).

Limitations

Several limitations of this study must be taken into account. First, it was noted that the majority of participants exposed to “amateur” pornography reported that they perceived the actors as professionals. While experimental condition did have a statistically significant impact on participants’ responses to the manipulation check, as indicated by the chi-square analysis, the experimental manipulation on this variable was not as successful as intended. This may have contributed to the non-significant difference between “professional” and “amateur” pornography on participants’ self-reported body image.

The online nature of the study must also be considered. There were several benefits to administering the survey online, including easier recruitment, more diversity in the participants recruited, and simulating more naturalistic environment for pornography viewing. However, the online administration also meant that the experimenters could not control for extraneous variables during the experiment, such as distractions in the participant’s environment. The online nature of the study also made it easier for participants to drop out of the experiment, resulting in a dropout rate of 64.3%. This may contribute to attrition bias, as individuals that completed the survey may be qualitatively different from individuals that did not complete the survey. Attrition was

also an issue for the demographics questions; of the individuals included in the analysis, 12 did not complete the demographic questions, likely because they grew bored and ended the survey before the demographic questions were asked. This was especially a problem in the control condition, where 11 out of the 28 participants did not report demographics. Therefore, the control condition may have been demographically different from the two experimental conditions.

Video length may be another limitation, as the video material may have had a greater effect on participants if they had watched it for a longer period of time. However, other experiments have observed significant effects after showing participants videos of a similar length (Mulgrew & Volcevski-Kostas, 2012). It should also be noted that the average length of visits to pornographic websites is generally less than 10 minutes (Pornhub's 2015 Year in Review, 2016). Due to the online nature of the study, it is likely that the dropout rate would have been much higher if the video was longer.

Finally, the survey only reached individuals who had access to a private computer, and while there was a wide range of ages and sexual orientations represented, the sample was overwhelmingly white. The use of a convenience sample was limiting but necessary for this study, as gay, bisexual, and queer men are a difficult population to recruit.

Future Research and Conclusion

While public discourse and policy decision have focused on the widespread negative effects of pornography, research has not provided the findings necessary to validate these claims. Clinical research has indicated that pornography use can have problematic effects for some individuals, such as individuals with compulsive sexual or

aggressive behavior, but this relationship is not true for the majority of those who consume pornography (Derbyshire & Grant, 2015; Malamuth, Addison, & Koss, 2000). Future research on the relationship of pornography and body image should investigate the effects of pornography on individuals pre-disposed to body dissatisfaction, and should focus on factors that mediate the relationship. This research should also employ methodologies to increase sample size and diversity in order to confirm null findings have not been a result of methodological flaws.

This study is the first experimental study to examine the effects of pornography on gay, bisexual, and queer men's body image. The findings did not confirm any of the significant relationships found in the previous studies, but instead contributes to the growing body of research on gay male pornography that has been unable to find consistent effects on body image. Despite the limitations in its methodology, this study provides data indicating pornography may not have a widespread impact on all gay, bisexual, and queer men's body image, or that its effects are not strong enough to be detected with a priming procedure or self-reported frequency of use.

Appendix A – Tables

Table 1

Correlational Studies Investigating Pornography's Effects on Gay and Bisexual Men

	Genital body image	Social physique anxiety	Drive for muscularity/muscle dissatisfaction
Morrison, Morrison, & Bradley, 2007 N=66	NS	-	$r=.32^*$
Duggan & McCreary, 2004 N=67	-	$r=.27^*$	NS
Morrison, Ellis, Morrison, Bearden, & Harriman, 2006 ^b N=188	$r=-.27^*$	-	-
Cranney, 2015 ^b N=1005	$p<.01^a$	-	-
Morrison, Harriman, Morrison Bearden & Ellis, 2004 ^b N=202	NS	-	-
Tylka, 2015 ^b N=359	-	-	$r=.16^*$

*Significant at $p<.05$ level

^aAnalyzed using odds ratio, no correlation coefficient available

^bMajority of participants were heterosexual men

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Recruitment Method		
gayresearch.com	53	60.9
Campus research pool	6	6.9
Local community outreach	1	1.1

Facebook	15	17.2
Twitter	10	1.5
TOTAL	87	
Age (Mean & <i>SD</i>)	34.62 (14.23)	
Range	18-67	
Race/Ethnicity		
White	65	74.7
Black/African American	1	1.1
Hispanic/Latino	3	3.4
Asian/Pacific Islander	4	4.6
Multiracial	2	2.2
Not reported	12	13.8
Relationship Structure		
Single and not dating	38	43.7
Casually dating	5	5.7
Partnered	22	25.3
Legal partnership	10	11.5
Not reported	12	13.8
Sexual Orientation		
Gay	49	56.3
Bisexual	19	21.8
Queer/Other	7	8.0
Not reported	12	13.8
Agreement with: "Religion is important in my life"		
Strongly Agree	8	9.2
Agree	15	17.2
Neutral	12	13.8
Disagree	15	17.2
Strongly Disagree	25	28.7
Not reported	12	13.8

Table 3

Scores on Body Image Questionnaires for Each Experimental Condition

Experimental Condition	Social Physique Anxiety Scale	Drive for Muscularity Attitudes Questionnaire	Male Genital Self Image Scale
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>
Pornography video –told content is amateur (<i>N</i> =29)	26.33 (7.46)	26.14 (6.66)	21.17 (3.85)
Pornography video – told content is professional (<i>N</i> =30)	27.54 (8.97)	25.00 (7.84)	21.80 (3.43)
Nature video (control) (<i>N</i> =28)	32.14 (8.02)	29.04 (5.13)	20.14 (5.59)

Note: Scores for SPAQ range from 9 (little anxiety) to 45 (extreme anxiety); Scores for DMAQ range from 8 (little drive) to 40 (Extreme drive); Scores for the MGSIS range from 7 (low self-image) to 28 (high self-image).

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