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Just a fantasy: How the discourse of fantasy attempts to resolve the conflicts of porn consumption

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Discussion of the status of pornography as a form of media which blurs the boundary between fiction and reality is common in the academic debates on porn. Arguments are made from all sides which complicate the idea that pornography is simply a form of fiction or representation, from critical interpretations which focus on the production of porn to more celebratory understandings which explore how pornography consumers use porn in ways that expand their “real-world” sexual experiences. Despite this, the idea of an unambiguous boundary between reality and fantasy structures much of the public story of porn. Often framed around a clear distinction between “porn sex” and “real sex”, again we see this used both by those who are supportive of pornography and those who critique it. The dichotomy is ubiquitous in educational resources for young people, such as KB Creative Lab’s (2013) explaining the differences between porn sex and real sex, and common in discussions of pornography by workers in the porn industry such as the series hosted on Pornhub, ‘Ask a Porn Star’ created by the porn production company Woodrocket. It is also a distinction that is regularly drawn on by pornography users in discussing what they watch and why. But what does it actually do?

We have both previously conducted research to explore what porn means for men (Garner, 2016) and for women (Vera-Gray, 2020). Our studies involved different samples and approaches, yet

were connected through the application of Garner's (2016) concept of a "pornography biography". This is the story of how porn came to occupy the space it does in the broader landscapes of participants' lives, contextualising their consumption practices. We found many gendered points of departure in the biographies of participants in comparing our studies, but we also found points of overlap. One of the most pervasive of these was an experience of conflict arising from an awareness of the relationship between porn and violence against women, and a shared drawing on the discursive structures of fantasy in an attempt to resolve it. For women this resolution was grounded in an appeal to fantasy and reality as being in a relationship of dichotomous oppositional difference (Hill-Collins, 1986), something which functioned to enable and explain the difference between personal arousal and political standpoint. For men it was more difficult to hold onto a clear boundary between fantasy and reality as the porous nature of the two was more evident in their everyday lives. Instead, though men still drew on the discourse of fantasy as a motivator for using porn and an anchor for sexual desires, it was used without specific form or substance, an empty lexicon designed to conceal tacit knowledge of porn's role in violence against women. This chapter brings our two studies together to explore these similarities and differences. We begin with a brief outline of the studies methodologies and sample characteristics before moving onto a discussion of how the relationship between reality and fantasy has been addressed so far in academic work on porn.

Methods and sample

The data drawn on here was originally collected for two separate studies: Garner's (2016) work on men's engagements with sexualisation of culture and Vera-Gray's (2020) study on women's relationships to porn. Detailed information is available in prior publications for these studies,

however in order to situate the data used for this discussion we give an overview of the studies here.

For Garner's (2016) study, twelve men from the UK took part in two in-depth interviews looking at their engagements across the broad spectrum of sexualisation—including pornography—with an additional 151 men taken part in a qualitative survey allowing for anonymous responses. The men were predominantly White British and self-defined as straight or heterosexual. The study did not offer a definition of porn, but worked with the men's own definitions. In the main, discussions focused on commercially available online pornography. All men made reference to violence against women and degradation in porn, but were also keen to distance themselves from it as consumers.

In Vera-Gray's (2020) study, one hundred women from the UK participated in in-depth interviews exploring the role of pornography in their lives. Recruitment deliberately targeted women with different investments in pornography with the final sample including women who produced pornography, both regular and irregular porn consumers, and women who had not used porn themselves. The sample had a particularly wide range of sexualities, broadly grouped into five categories: asexual (2%); bisexual (35%); heterosexual (46%); lesbian (7%); and something else such as unsure, questioning, or fluid (10%). Almost half of all participants fell into the 25-34 age range (45%), with the other half divided between 35-44 (24%), 18-24 (16%), 45-54 (12%) and 55 and over (3%). Just over three quarters (77%) of participants identified as being from a White ethnic background, with 15 percent from a Black ethnic group, five percent with dual heritage (Black-White, Asian-White, or Arab-White), and just three percent identifying

themselves as having an Asian ethnicity. As with Garner's (2016) study, pornography was not defined for participants though the vast majority referred directly to free mainstream online visual pornography when situating their responses. Indeed, one of the key findings of the study was that women's use of pornography was predominantly this kind of mainstream "tube site" material rather than independent or feminist porn, "erotica" or other written material which often form part of the narrative about the kinds of porn women access.

Though neither study makes claims to representativeness, their shared methodological approach—particularly the application of the concept of the "pornography biography"—enabled a density and richness in the data which throws up questions and challenges for some of the key divisions structuring the porn debates at large. For the rest of this chapter, we will focus on just one of these, namely the line between fantasy and reality, in order to explore what participant accounts make visible about the functions of this distinction.

Troubling the line

Unlike the neat separation of reality from fantasy that we see in much of the public discussion of porn, academic work from both critical and pro-pornography scholars regularly troubles the line between the two. It has been a stalwart principle in arguments which reframe pornographies from cultural texts to processes and practices of inequality, that pornography is both a representation and a reality. In her arguments against some academic framings of pornography, Gail Dines (1998) emphasises the reality of the contexts of production of pornography, claiming that "to [the women in porn] pornography is not a polysemic text, a fantasy to be savoured, a form of

sexual liberation or discourse. It is an event that forever changed their lives, and has to be dealt with every day” (Dines, 1998, p. 164). Similarly, Natalie Purcell (2012) directly engages with the reduction of pornography to “only fantasy” by highlighting its industrial foundations, arguing that pornography is in many senses the opposite of fantasy; it is a material reality, a consumer product and profit-generating commodity that shapes people’s lives.

It is not only, however, those who are critical about pornography who critique the positioning of porn as just fantasy. Simon Hardy (2008) highlights the overlaps by looking to how pornography seeks to represent the real claiming that “if we consider pornography as a commercial genre concerned with the explicit representation of human sexuality, we see that throughout its history one of its defining characteristics has been the attempt to make its representations seem as authentic as possible” (p. 60). Martin Barker (2014) conceptualises fantasy as existing in the zone between “relations between bodies, selfhood and cultural permissions and forbidding” (p.157). Instead of a line between fantasy on one side and reality on the other, porn is thus positioned in a liminal space providing a library against which to measure our sexual selves. Such a conceptualisation connotes a symbiotic relationship rather than a clear separation between porn, fantasy and sexual selfhood, porn becomes a “means through which adults, try out self in sexual-society, reimagining themselves through others reimagings” (Barker, 2014, p. 146). This notion of a symbiosis is also found in Barker’s work with Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood, focusing on the meanings of pornography for queer people. Here the clear boundary between fantasy and reality is troubled again by the argument that fantasies have functions in “real” life such as supporting relationships or maintaining a sense of self (Barker, Smith & Attwood, 2015). We see something similar in more recent work from Paasonen (2021a; 2021b)

who sees porn as affording “an affective resonance” that can lend its products transgressive appeal. For Paasonen too, porn is positioned as an enabling agent in sexual selfhood and transgressions from the restraints of normativity, by offering sexual imagery, space and potential which resonate with the sexual realities of users rather than being wholly separate from it.

There is thus agreement between writers working on either side of the debates that porn is not separate from our sexual reality nor from sexual fantasy but rather that the three are enmeshed together, shaping and reshaping each other. There is considerable divergence, however, about whether this relationship generates beneficial impacts or potentially harmful outcomes. For writers who are critical of pornography, violence against women is, as Boyle (2011) argues a core part of the “acknowledged story of pornography” (p. 601), but this is rarely the simplistic relationship of cause and effect that such writers have been charged with. Rather it is a recognition that violence against women is an undeniable reality, situating and constraining the freedom and safety of women and girls working within the porn industry, at the same time as violence, packaged as fantasy, is integral to the content of much commercial pornography. Violence against women is in many ways thus foundational to the reality through which pornography and fantasy take shape and have meaning and the situation within which we take up our sexual subjectivities and freedom. For the more celebratory analyses, violence against women is often positioned outside of the reality of pornography users and thus beyond the symbiotic relationship between reality, fantasy and porn. These analyses focus on porn’s power to enable sexual freedoms, ignoring the potential constraints and ambiguities of porn, as well as how its “affective resonances” may have material implications. These can be seen in the data from women about the social functions of pornography, particularly as a form of expectation and

instruction about sex—discussed in detail in Vera-Gray 2020—and are further brought out by our discussion here of participants’ conflicts in using porn.

The conflicts of porn

Personal conflict is an underrepresented lived experience of using porn. Earlier work with men has explored how continued use of pornography can sit in tension with men’s relationships with women, and require a “moral reckoning” (Hardy, 1998); evoke guilt and shame (Jensen 1998) and encourage users to suspend and erode their own moral objections to women’s abuse in pornography (Whisnant, 2010). For women, it has been acknowledged that women make claim to personal enjoyment in porn, while being politically troubled by it (Ciclitira, 2004) and more recently, Paasonen (2021b) has suggested that, for some women, conflict itself can be a valuable fuel for sexual fantasy. Yet the actual nature of this conflict and how men and women negotiate it to be able to experience pleasure from engaging with pornography remains underexplored. This is particularly interesting given that experiencing a sense of personal conflict and seeking to resolve this was one of the key shared threads in the pornography biographies of participants in our studies. As we will discuss, women and men drew on the discourse of fantasy in different ways to resolve this conflict, though it was largely unsuccessful for both.

Men spoke about experiencing a sense of political and personal conflict in their pornography consumption, arising from their gendered situation as men in a broader context of men’s violence against women. Here, men’s conflict orbited around how porn shapes their lives and relationships with women in negative ways as well as a political and ethical tension linked to porn’s implication in sexual violence and gender inequality. This latter tension was so prevalent

across discussions with men, that it emerged as a “tacit knowledge” (Garner, 2016) forming a nucleus in how men made sense of pornography and their use of it. In Nick’s words:

If I am honest with myself so I see porn as being very much about male desire dominating in sex and this turns me on. Rape is a hidden subtext to porn, in fact I think that is part of its attraction to men to have so much power over women (Nick, 25-34, White British)

Men’s conflicts with porn went beyond guilt and shame linked to taboo and transgression, to an implied understanding of its implication in violence against women and the overlaps between fantasy and reality, as demonstrated by Barry, Louis and Jack:

Fundamentally it is an exploitative industry and even people who feel guilty and they think it’s because of their wives, partners or girlfriend, I think it’s because they know it’s a creepy industry. (Barry, 25-34, White British)

It can be quite disconcerting and uncomfortable to think that vulnerable people are manipulated into pornography. I’m not saying that is everyone, but I would suspect that that it is a large proportion of the industry and that’s uncomfortable and disconcerting (Louis, 25-34, African Caribbean British)

It doesn’t really make me feel that nice. It’s painful basically, I can’t describe it in any other way, it’s like physical pain in my gut. It feels wrong like I’m not

really being true to myself because it's not really what I want, I'm not being true to myself. It sounds quite grand, but it's just, that's how it is (Jack, 25-34, White British)

For women, a clear sense of conflict in their pornography consumption also arose. For some this oriented around a similar tension to that described by the men, namely arousal at images of women's sexual submission and humiliation at the same time as concern for the conditions of its production. As Makeda noted:

Some of the things that turn me on or that arouse me sexually, might be things that are totally against my principles or my political position... I have no shame around my use of porn in a general sense but I also I don't really like it. I think that the way that women are portrayed is for most part, disgusting, offensive and ought to be wiped off the face of the planet. (Makeda, 45-54, Black African)

A decade younger than Makeda, both Kush and Katie spoke about something similar:

A couple of times I've been disgusted by myself, by some of the things that I've found that turn me on. I'm watching a woman gagging on a man and being slapped in the face, and I'm disgusted but I'm turned on at the same time. I don't like the fact that it's brought me to those two places in equal force. I think that's the borderline of your principle versus your desires. (Kush, 35-44, African)

If I watch something on *Pornhub* I find myself being turned on and I come very quickly watching it but afterwards I feel very conflicted about it. I'm enjoying watching it and I come and then I just think that I'm participating in something that offends so much of what I stand for. It's not shame, I don't feel that strongly about it but I do feel slightly disappointed in myself. I finding myself thinking, 'What kind of feminist am I, in bed with my phone watching this kind of thing?' (Katie, 35-45, White British)

Though this is partly similar to some of the conflicts arising in Macleod's (2020) study on how feminists who watch porn discuss their ethical decision making, Macleod suggested that these conflicts arose from the stigma attached to pornography, sex work and sexuality more broadly. In contrast, here many women, together with the men in Garner's (2016) study, were explicit that this conflict most often arose in relation to how pornography was implicated in violence against women and girls. As such, rather than the tension between the personal and the social, implied by the idea of stigma, here the conflict can be understood as arising from a tension between political analysis and personal arousal; the overlapping nature of which is a key tenant of both radical and black feminism, both traditions which centre how political realisation of oppression arises from examining seemingly personal experiences (e.g. Hanisch 1970; Combahee River Collective, 2014 [1983]). What we find across both our studies is pornography users expressing a struggle to separate the personal from the political, resulting in a conflict similar to what Jensen (1998) termed the "pain of pornography"; a conflict with its genesis in a recognition of porn's relationship to violence against women. Women and men in our studies demonstrate an implicit and sometimes explicit recognition that violence against women is an inseparable part of the

relationship between pornography and reality. It is in an attempt to reconcile the conflict between this recognition and their personal pleasure, that the discourse of fantasy is used.

The discursive function of fantasy

Across both of our studies, participants appealed to the discourse of “fantasy” either directly or implicitly in close connection to articulations of conflict. When we looked at how fantasy functioned in the accounts of our participants, we found that though it was used for similar purposes, its relationship to reality was often framed in different ways.

Women often drew on a clear separation between fantasy and reality to talk about the difference between what they want to see being done to the women on screen—something experienced as arousing—and what they want to be done to women, including themselves, in real life.

Not every image of rape in porn is actually rape, in fact you don't want to see those, you want to see the ones where it is acted, because it is a fantasy. We all know the reality is shit but the fantasy can be really, really, really a turn on. (Victoria, 35-44, White Irish)

Quite a lot of the pornography that I enjoy is about punishment and I know enough about how bodies work to know that I don't think it is actually pleasurable. But there is a fantasy here, that it would be pleasurable and mind blowing and I am interested in that fantasy. Not the actual reality of the sex. (Vanessa, 25-34, Black British)

As made explicit by both Victoria and Vanessa, the appeal to “fantasy” enabled them to take pleasure in what created a source of conflict; that is pornographic depictions of forms of violence, harm, or dominance being enacted against women. It worked to create a space where the contradictions between one’s personal pleasure and political position could be held together, a space which sits beyond usual ethical principles. Katie made the work of fantasy in resolving her conflict explicit, claiming that in relation to porn “in a way, there is no right and wrong, because it’s just a fantasy.”

However, for this appeal to fantasy to function successfully as a form of conflict resolution women needed to evoke a clear separation between themselves as women for whom it is a fantasy and the performers as women for whom it is a reality. It was here that many struggled and the clear separation between fantasy and reality fell down. This is evident in the accounts of Harper, as well as Kush who talked about the particular importance for her of not separating herself from representations of other women of African or Caribbean heritage.

I know that sex workers’ conditions are really shit and a lot of women are doing things for money and the more extreme things you do the more money you get, so I worry about being aroused by something that they’ve been coerced into or they are being seriously harmed by. I’m fine being aroused by someone else enjoying S&M but I don’t want to be turned on by someone actually experiencing violence. I don’t want them to be harmed for my pleasure. (Harper, 25-34, White British)

I think we've all got our own boundaries, we've all got the place where we're willing to push. And for me, I think I have that responsibility, as a black woman I can't afford to ignore certain things. If it's happening to anyone that looks like me, then that's still my problem. (Kush)

Women's accounts here are reminiscent of Parvez's (2006) discussion of how perceptions of the emotional labour of female porn performers impacts women's enjoyment as porn consumers.

While women try to hold a clear line between fantasy and reality to reconcile a sense of conflict between their pleasure and their principles, this is made difficult by a struggle to fully separate themselves from the women onscreen.

Men also sought to create this space to locate their personal pleasure outside of their value systems through creating a story of a difference between porn sex and real sex, porn desire and real desire, or, effectively, a porn self and their real self. Though they did not encounter the same struggle as women in terms of needing to separate gendered representations in porn from themselves (primarily because, as men, they were rarely the object of violence), they did talk about the ways in which their experience showed them that the lines between reality and fantasy were blurry; in effect that the distinction between "porn sex" and "real sex" didn't resonate in terms of their own lives. Many men spoke in ways that demonstrated a knowledge of how sex, desire and selves as found in pornography shape and are shaped by sex, desire and selves in the real world.; describing the ways in which pornography bled into real-world interactions with women as well as how real-world interactions fed into their pornography use. Andrew for

example spoke about fantasising using photos of women he knew; using sexual fantasy to make reality into pornography.

I look at pictures of women I know who I want to sleep with so I fantasise about them. In some ways you shouldn't have pictures of your friends to masturbate to but on Facebook people have scantily clad photos and then my thought process is that I would like to see photos of them naked. (Andrew, 25-34, White British)

Similarly, Jim talked about using porn as a pipeline to ways of seeing and fantasising about real life women; using pornography to make reality into sexual fantasy.

If I've been out and talking to girls that I fancy and I've been quite drunk, or still drunk the next day, then I'll be flipping back and forth between my fantasies, and the pornography. And there'll be orgasm after orgasm, because you can fantasise and then go back to porn. (Jim, 35-44, White British)

Later in the interview Jim returns to fantasy, but rather than a boundary he carves out the idea of "loops", to describe what he appears to see as the "dangers" of "rapey type fantasies" potently inflecting desire.

There are dangers in 'rapey' type fantasies, capturing women in the woods and doing them. That might be a consensual video but you don't actually know that as a viewer.

And I know there are things like naked women standing next to dead bodies. That's risky, I don't like some of those loops. (Jim, 35-44, White British)

Jim's discussion of this is particularly telling when connected to his articulations of not just a tacit knowledge but an expertise on violence against women and porn; an expertise he attempts to strategically distance himself from at the same time as articulating. Jim's accounts here are a rejection of the earlier clear division claimed by some of the women between representations of rape as a fantasy and the reality of rape as a viewer, demonstrating a much blurrier line between what he sees being done to the women on screen and what "others" may want to do to women in real life.

The boundaries men expressed around fantasy and reality are thus porous, what Paasonen (2013) would term an "affective resonance" and what Garner (2016) has termed "pornographic recall". While for some such as Jim this appeared to be a source of gratification, as well as something he took caution with and distanced himself from, others framed this symbiosis as an intense source of turmoil. James and Chris for example talked about the impact of porn in changing their reality; namely the ways in which they encounter and respond to women as well as the nature of their sexual desire:

I think it does make you feel, to some degree, dissatisfied. This kind of constant sexual imagery and things, it has caused problems for me in relationships. This kind of constantly looking for this next (gestures clicking a computer mouse) instant thrill, rather

than looking for something that's going to be more satisfying in a whole sense. (James, 25-34, White British)

[I]t creates a discrepancy between reality and fantasy and creates expectations, maybe not expectations but desires that can't be fulfilled in reality. I suppose that does have slightly negative effects, but I am a mature adult and I can think well that's just a fantasy (Chris, 35-44, White British)

Chris's account is an interesting departure from how women attempt to negotiate the fantasy/reality boundary. For women, their conflicting tussles orbit around both themselves and women in porn—and their struggle to try to separate the two—yet Chris's are rooted in individualised fictions of invulnerable masculinity. This reveals how gender organises what's at stake for men and women not only in their porn consumption, but also how they mobilise fantasy/reality demarcations. At the same time as dismissing the possibility of harmful impacts of porn because it is “just a fantasy”, Chris recognises that the world that one encounters in pornography shapes what is expected or desired outside of it. This contradiction reveals how the discourse of fantasy can become something of an arbitrary linguistic insert; an empty lexicon functioning to gently reconcile or conceal conflict. The form of the fantasy is lost in this utilitarian story of porn, and in this any conflict that might arise from the disjuncture between the porn self and the real self—Makeda's pleasure and principles—is concealed.

Conclusion

When we explore the overlaps in women and men’s accounts of using mostly mainstream online porn, what we find is that internal tension is a recurring theme in consumers accounts and an appeal to fantasy is one of the key tools used to resolve it. For women the appeal to fantasy seeks to reconcile the discord between holding a political vision of women’s equality and experiencing arousal in response to images of women being dominated, punished, or harmed. For men, it can function as an empty lexicon; a formless insert to describe the instrumental place porn occupies in their lives or a gentle discursive dodge to reconcile and negotiate a tacit knowledge that porn, and their use of it, is implicated in violence against women. For both, “fantasy” is used to disrupt the relationship between pornography and reality, in order to escape acknowledgement of violence against women as a grounding context for both.

These discursive strategies however, are only ever partially successful because, as academic work from both sides of the debates have shown, the line between fantasy and reality is arbitrary and tenuous. Women struggle to separate their gendered position—their situation as “woman”—from the women they encounter in pornography. This means that though they attempt to mark a clear distinction between what they fantasise about through porn and what they want in reality, the line between the two is complicated by the understanding that what they see in porn is really happening for and to the women they are watching. Men speak about a different struggle, one which demonstrates their tacit knowledge of pornography as implicated in violence against women. Their lives show them how the distinction between “porn sex” and “real sex” is not borne out in practice, with multiple examples of the ways in which the boundaries between the two are blurred. The relationship between fantasy and reality in pornography is thus revealed in

the accounts of pornography consumers to be much more one of ambiguity than dichotomy, and the conflicts of porn remain.

Drawing on Bordo's (1993) argument that cultural landscapes offer either "battlegrounds" or "playgrounds" for identity work, we suggest from this that porn is best conceptualised as a battleground for users. It is a battleground rooted in recognition of violence against women as an inseparable part of the symbiotic relationship between pornography, reality and fantasy, a recognition which, notably, does not need belief in a causal association in order to be experienced as a point of discomfort and unease. This means that arguments which link pornography only to sexual fantasy and liberalism do so at the detriment of structural, material and gendered analyses, and in effect silence critical reflections on pornography. At the same time, perspectives which frame pornography as solely a negative manifestation and practice of power and abuse, also risk dismissing testimonies concerning the uses and gratifications of pornography from both women and men, however complex these may be. Such partial views of pornography as a form of freedom or constraint further embed polemic arguments and cyclical debates, and are complicit in pushing porn users to conceal any internal tensions. What is needed instead is an expansion of the space available to explore overlaps, ambiguities and tensions in pornography consumption—the contours of the battleground—starting with a challenge to the public story that porn is just a fantasy.

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