

Exploring the Connection Between Pornography and Sexual Violence

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This article examines the relationship between sexual violence and pornography. Data about women's experiences of sexual violence and their abusers' use of pornography were collected at a rape crisis center from 100 survivors. Findings include that 28% of respondents reported that their abuser used pornography and that for 12% of the women, pornography was imitated during the abusive incident. The effects of pornography on women's experiences of sexual violence are discussed.

Since pornography became increasingly available throughout the 1960's and 1970's in the United States, the effects of such materials have been largely debated by politicians, religious leaders, activists, and academics. The relationship between sexual violence and pornography has been of particular concern to researchers and is the focus of this article. This debate is critical given the prevalence of violence against women and the consumption of pornographic material in the United States. Researchers estimate that in 1995, 43% of American men were exposed to one of the seven most popular pornographic magazines¹ (Russell, 1998). Diana Russell (1998) argues that this is probably a conservative estimate of pornography usage, given that hundreds of magazines exist and that this estimate does not include the number of men who regularly watch pornographic movies, look at pornographic pictures on the Internet, or create their own pornographic material.

Two schools of thought have emerged about the effects of pornography and whether or not there is a causal connection between pornography and violence against women. On one side of the debate are those who argue that pornography has no harmful effects. In fact, some early research on pornography found it to produce a "cathartic effect" and thereby to reduce the amount of sexual assault (Ben-Veniste, 1971; Kutchinsky, 1971). As a result, laws restricting the production, sale, and distribution of pornography were relaxed and pornography became a more prevalent part of American culture (Russell, 1993).

On the other side of the debate, many feminists have argued that pornography is associated with violence against women and contributes to the high incidence of rape in this country (Russell, 1993). Evidence documenting the harmful effects of pornography for women has led some feminists to organize and fight against the pornography industry in a variety of ways including engaging in acts of civil disobedience, boycotting publishers of pornography,

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picketing video stores that distribute pornography, and so forth (see Russell, 1993). While some feminists (see Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988)² have argued for a civil rights approach to challenge pornography on the basis that it has detrimental consequences for women, others oppose pornography but maintain that the creation of civil rights antipornography ordinances is a dangerous form of censorship (see Vance & Burstyn, 1985).³ Feminist analyses of pornography vary considerably as do the social and political strategies recommended by feminist activists, however, most agree that the relationship between pornography and violence against women is cause for concern. Before addressing the role that pornography played in the experiences of sexual violence of women in this sample, we will briefly discuss the connection between pornography and abuse evidenced in previous research.

Early evidence for the "cathartic effect" of pornography was derived from a Danish experiment (Ben-Veniste, 1971; Kutchinsky, 1971). This so-called natural experiment showed an overall decrease in sex crimes after the repeal of laws restricting the sale of pornography. However, many researchers have criticized the conclusions reached by Kutchinsky and Ben-Veniste (Baron & Straus, 1984; Court, 1984). For example, Baron and Straus (1984) in their discussion of Kutchinsky's findings argue that:

... a closer look at his data shows that, although the total number of sexual offenses decreased, the number of rapes reported either stabilized or increased. The change in the composite number of sex offenses hides increases in the number of rapes. (p.188)

Similarly, Court (1984) found that the decrease in Denmark's sex crimes was actually a reduction in lesser crimes such as exhibitionism, peeping, and indecency toward girls. Since the controversy surrounding this research and the laws developed in part as a result of it, more research was clearly needed. Since the Danish experiment, the majority of studies on pornography have utilized an experimental methodology.

Experimental data have shown that exposure to pornography increases aggression in male participants in the laboratory (Donnerstein, 1984). This effect has been found most consistently when subjects are exposed to aggressive/violent pornography (Donnerstein, 1984; see Fisher and Grenier [1994] for an exception). Exposure to pornography in the laboratory has also been found to increase subject's acceptance of rape myths (Allen, Emmers, Gebhardt, & Giery, 1995; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1984). Common rape myths include "women cause their own rape by the way they dress and act" and "women make false claims about rape after consenting" (Becker, Bowman, & Torrey, 1994, p. 226). Participants exposed to pornography in experiments have recommended shorter prison terms for rapists in a mock trial than for those who were not exposed to pornography (Zillman & Bryant, 1984). While some researchers believe that experiments probably overstate the connection between pornography and sexual violence, Jensen (1995) argues that it is possible that experiments understate this connection because they do not allow researchers to measure the effects of pornography consumption over time. Furthermore, as Jensen (1995, p. 34) argues, it is important to consider whether the effects of watching sexually violent pornography will be even more pronounced outside of the sterile laboratory setting—in the "real-world environment in which male aggression is often encouraged and sanctioned" (such as fraternity houses or in male peer groups).

Survey research has consistently shown a relationship between pornography and self-reported likelihood of committing rape (Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1984; Russell, 1993). Specifically, an average of 35% of males admit some likelihood of raping (i.e., extremely likely, somewhat likely), if they could be assured they would not get caught. An even higher number, 48%, admit some likelihood of using force to obtain sex. Strong bivariate

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associations of all types of pornography and likelihood of using force to obtain sex have been found. Importantly, multivariate analysis has revealed the strongest correlation to be between exposure to hard-core violent and rape pornography and self-reported likelihood of using force (Boeringer, 1994).

While many of the studies that reveal a relationship between sexual violence and pornography have used male research subjects, other researchers have considered how pornography affects the lives of women in the "real world" by using women respondents. For example, Senn (1993) asked women:

Have you ever been upset by someone trying to get you to do something they had seen in pornographic magazines, movies, or books? (p. 190)

Senn (1993) found 24% of the 96 women studied answered "yes" to this question. Additionally, those who answered "yes" were more likely to have been the victim of threatened or actual sexual violence.

In one of the most comprehensive studies of sexual violence to date, Russell (1984) and her staff conducted interviews with a random sample of 930 women in the San Francisco area. Russell (1993) found that 14% of the women interviewed had been asked to pose for pornographic pictures and 10% reported having been upset by someone trying to get them to enact what they had seen in pornographic pictures, movies, or books. Additionally, Russell's (1993) study revealed a relationship between pornography and violence in the participants' lives. Specifically, 32% of the 87 women who reported experiences of wife rape had been asked to pose for pornography. Twenty-four percent of the wife rape survivors were upset by requests to enact pornography. Furthermore, there were at least 15 cases of rape or attempted rape that the women interviewed attributed to their abusers' use of pornography.

Pornography has also been found to play a role in sexually violent dating relationships in college. In their extensive study of violence against women on Canadian college campuses, Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1997) found that 8.4% of the 1,638 women in their sample reported being upset by their dating partner trying to force them to enact what they had seen in pornography. Of those women who had been sexually abused, 22% admitted to being upset by someone trying to force them to enact what they had seen in pornographic material (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998). In their survey of male college students, Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1997) found a statistically significant relationship between those men who admitted to sexually victimizing their partners and those who admitted to trying to force their partners to enact what they had seen in pornographic media.

DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998) argue that some men collectively learn to sexually objectify women during their exposure to pornographic media by viewing films or reading magazines together. Additionally, the Internet allows men to share sexually violent material with each other in cyberspace. DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998, p. 88) argue that cyberspace technology now enables people to "engage in on-line victimization of women . . . by . . . 'virtually assaulting' or 'virtually raping' women who use pornographic, real time communications media." Preliminary data reveal that women who are "virtual victims" experience considerable psychological trauma similar to women who have been actually assaulted (Ferguson, 1996, in DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998). These researchers do not argue that pornography causes the sexual victimization of women, however, they conclude that pornography plays a major role in woman abuse (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997).

While the effects of pornography continue to be debated among researchers, there is a growing body of research that supports the notion that pornography is related to the sexual victimization of women. The current study was conducted to further delineate the relationship between pornography and sexual violence against women.

METHODOLOGY

In order to develop a greater understanding of the relationship between pornography and violence experienced by women we developed a 14-item questionnaire. Respondents were asked about their experiences of violence, their abuser's use of pornographic material, and the effects of the abuser's use of pornography. This questionnaire was completed by workers at a small rape crisis center in the Northeast based on responses given by survivors of violence during telephone and face-to-face interviews. Data collection on this project began in April 1997, and over a 12-month period, 100 questionnaires were completed. All data were analyzed using SPSS.

A variety of ages were represented in the sample with most (40%) falling between ages 20 and 29. However, other age groups were also strongly represented with 38% of the sample falling between ages 30 and 59 and 13% falling between 13 and 19. Two participants were under age 13 and age was not ascertained for 6 participants. With regard to racial diversity, 78% of the respondents were White; African Americans, Latinas, and Asians constituted the rest of the sample in relatively equal numbers. All of the participants in this study contacted the rape crisis center for help due to violence/abuse they had experienced.

The most common type of violence experienced by women who contacted the center was completed rape (37%). Some participants also experienced sexual assault (18%) and attempted rape (1%). Other types of violence experienced by women in the sample included physical assault (25%), emotional assault (26%), and verbal assault (23%). Many of the women in this sample experienced multiple types of violence. Participants were given the opportunity to describe types of violence they experienced other than those listed above; responses to this item included stalking, kidnapping, having been held hostage, death threats, and sexual harassment.

Finally, participants were asked to describe their relationship to the person who abused them. Current spouse/partner (18%) and former spouse/partner (13%) were among the most common responses. Many of the abusers were also family members (15%) or friends/acquaintances (17%). Some abusers were also dates/boyfriends (8%) or strangers (10%). The remainder of the respondents did not categorize their abuser in any of the above ways but instead explained that their abuser was a boss, roommate, minister, or coworker.

RESULTS

This study indicates that pornography is clearly implicated in some of the abusive experiences of women in this sample. Twenty-eight percent of the 100 participants said that their abusers used pornography. However, the majority of respondents (58%) answered that they did not know about their abusers' use of pornography. As other researchers such as Russell (1995) and Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1997) have indicated, this finding is not surprising, given the secretive nature of pornography consumption and the fact that many women are unaware of their partners' use of pornography. Even a woman who knows her abuser well may not know the answer to questions about his pornography usage. The respondents who were assaulted by those whom they did not know well (including strangers, dates, coworkers and so forth) were less likely to know if their abuser used pornography unless it was mentioned or utilized during the abuse.

A significant number of women surveyed indicated that pornography was part of the actual incident of abuse. When analysis was limited to those women who indicated that their abusers used pornography, approximately 40% said the pornography was part of the abusive incident. In one case, the abuser regularly watched pornography as he abused his partner,

while in several other cases, the abuser viewed/used the pornography before committing the violent acts. The types of pornography used by the abusers of women in this sample were quite varied and many men used multiple forms of pornographic material. Magazines (54%) and videos (50%) were most commonly used, with 18% of abusers using "home sex movies." Respondents were also given the opportunity to describe other types of pornography used by their abuser; responses included that their abuser watched the playboy channel, pay-per view, or went to strip clubs. Five of the women were forced to participate in the making of pornography. All of these women mentioned that their abuser videotaped or took pictures of the sexual violence to use privately or sell to others. One woman said her abuser used the photographs he had taken of her as blackmail.

Consistent with feminist research, participants were asked if they believed their abusers' use of pornography affected the nature of the abuse they experienced. Thirteen percent of the total sample answered "yes" to this question, while the majority (58%) answered "don't know." When analysis was limited to those whose abusers used pornography, 43% of survivors believed the pornography affected the nature of the abuse. In the cases where the pornography was used during the incident of abuse, it is clear that the pornography affected the nature of the abuse.

The participants in this study believed that pornography affected the nature of the abuse in a variety of ways. Importantly, none of the participants believed that pornography decreased the frequency or level of violence they experienced. In fact, 21% of the respondents whose abuser used pornography indicated that they believed pornography increased the frequency of the violence they experienced, while 14% said pornography increased the level of violence. Eighteen percent of the women believed their abuser became more sadistic with the use of pornography.

It is also significant to note that 12% of the total sample said that pornography was imitated in some way during the abuse. For the majority of these women, the abusers imitated what they had observed in pornographic material to victimize them. Lastly, a total of 14% of the participants reported being upset by someone trying to force them to do what was seen in pornography. This finding supports the work of Senn (1993) and Russell (1993) who found 24% and 10%, respectively, of women in their research answered "yes" to the same question.

DISCUSSION

For a significant number of women surveyed, pornography played a role in their experiences of sexual violence. As revealed by other researchers (see Bergen, 1996; Jensen, 1996; Russell, 1993) this study indicates that pornography may be used by abusers in a variety of ways to dehumanize and victimize women. Many of the women in this sample reported that their abusers had forced them to enact what they had seen in pornography or forced them to appear in pornographic pictures. Importantly, 5% of the total sample voluntarily reported that they had been forced to pose for pornographic pictures. Of course, it cannot be determined how many other women would have answered affirmatively if they had been directly questioned about being forced to participate in the making of pornography.

It is also significant that 12% of the women in the sample reported that pornography was imitated during their experiences of abuse. While several were forced against their will to imitate scenes from pornography, most were victimized physically or sexually by their abuser acting out what he had seen in pornography. This corresponds with Jensen's (1995) findings that some abusers use pornography as a training manual for abuse. Abusers may

incorporate into their own sexual lives what they see depicted in pornography. Similarly, these results correspond to Bergen's (1996) research with wife rape survivors. One third of the women in her sample reported that their abusers used pornographic material and, most significantly, pornography consumption was clearly associated with those men who most sadistically raped their wives. These findings raise concerns about all pornography that is dehumanizing but particularly that which is sexually violent and sadistic in nature.

A guiding focus of this research was to further understand the effect of pornography on women's experiences of violence. Of those women in the sample who indicated that their abuser used pornography, more than 40% responded that pornography affected the violence and none indicated that pornography had a positive effect on their experiences of violence by decreasing the level of violence or frequency of assaults. Thus, there was no evidence found in support of the "cathartic effect" of pornography use in this sample. This finding is consistent with the radical feminist view of pornography as well as the body of research that has documented the misogynistic effects of exposure to pornography (Malamuth, 1984; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1984; Russell & Trocki, 1993; Schwartz, DeKeseredy, 1997).

Overall, the findings of this research support the idea that there is a relationship between pornography and violence against women. However, as other researchers such as Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1997) and Jensen (1995) have argued, correlational data do not prove causality. While we cannot say that pornography causes violence against women, this research does provide more evidence about how pornography plays a role in the sexual violence experienced by some women. Given the importance of isolating the causes of violence against women, we believe nationally representative samples of men and women are needed to determine how pornography impacts their lives. Such studies should include not only college-aged samples, but also a variety of populations at various life stages. Given the increasingly prevalent dissemination of pornography on the Internet, research should address the effects of cyberporn for men as consumers and women as "virtual victims." DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998) suggest conducting on-line interviews with UseNet clients, and World Wide Web site masters to generate more qualitative data on this subject.

Future research on the effects of pornography should specifically target understudied populations of women. For example, research on the role of violent pornography in the lives of women of color should be conducted with specific questions about the types of pornography used and the racist portrayals of people of color (see Mayall & Russell, 1993). It is also important to examine the effects of violent pornography on other understudied populations including elderly women, women who are institutionalized, and women with disabilities. Notably, Elman (1997) argues that the health and relative immobility of girls and women who are disabled may make them particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation through pornography. In conclusion, more qualitative research with a variety of women who have been victimized is needed so that the true "experts" on violence against women can explain in detail how pornography played a role in the latter's abuse.

NOTES

¹The seven magazines include *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Hustler*, *Club*, *Gallery*, *Oui*, and *Chic*. See Russell (1998) for a detailed description of how this statistic was derived.

²The basis for advocating for civil rights antipornography ordinances is the argument by some radical feminists that the First Amendment was created to protect the free speech of all people. They maintain that pornography differentially harms women and "undermine(s) women's

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equal exercise of rights to speech and action" (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988, p. 100). For a detailed discussion of this debate see Russell (1993), and Berger, Searles, and Cottle (1991).

³For example, Gronau (1985) argues that pornography plays a functional role in society by providing evidence of the rampant sexism in society. If pornography is censored, this evidence of a patriarchal society will become hidden, thus making it more difficult for women to challenge.

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