

“Out of sight and out of mind”: Detachment and men’s consumption of male sexual
dominance and female submission in pornography

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Abstract

It is generally accepted that pornography is widely consumed by young men and that mainstream heterosexual pornography is characterized by a dynamic of male sexual dominance and female submission. What is less agreed upon, is whether such pornography is a source of “sexist education” (Flood, 2010) for men, or whether men engage with it in an empathic (Weitzer, 2011) and ethical (e.g., McKee et al., 2008) manner. In this study we discuss findings from interviews with 21 young men about pornography and its consumption. They described it as normative for men to watch pornography and they described “extreme” content as “normal”. It was clear that they were unused to having to account for the appeal of pornography. Men’s discussion of male sexual dominance and female submission, and violence against women within pornography was characterised by detachment. Most of the men did not take up the challenge to notice and critically respond to the sexism within the material they described. There were some exceptions, with a minority of the participants reflecting on the ethical dilemmas posed by their consumption of such pornography.

Assumptions about the subjectivity of men who consume pornography have a key place in debates about its alleged harms and benefits. Why do men watch it? What effect does it have on them? And how does it relate to their sexual desires and practices and, in particular, to the way they view and treat women? These questions about the psychology of pornography consumption are difficult, if not impossible to answer in any general and definitive sense. What we can do, however, is look at the ways men talk about pornography and its consumption and explore what this talk suggests about how it fits within a broader fabric of the sociocultural production of gender.

Contemporary academic critics, celebrants, and those who attempt to be agnostic about pornography agree on two things: (1) It is widely consumed by men, and (2) within the wide genre of pornography there exists material that is sexist or misogynist, which even researchers who are generally upbeat about pornography find “deeply offensive and abhorrent” (McKee, Albury & Lumby, 2008, p. 173) (e.g., Albury, 2009; Boyle, 2010b, 2010c, 2011; Bridges, 2010; Dines, 2010; Flood, 2009, 2010; Garlick, 2011; Jensen, 2007, 2010; Kimmel, 2008; McKee et al., 2007; Hardy, 2004; Maddison, 2009; Mooney, 2008; Paasonen, 2006, 2010; Tyler, 2010; Whisnant, 2010). Across this broad spectrum of views, what scholars disagree on is the extent to which this kind of material characterizes pornography as a whole, and the likely mode of engagement that male consumers have with pornography in general.

High profile critics of pornography describe mainstream heterosexual pornography as woman-hating (e.g., Dines, 2010), and claim that it teaches men that sex is “the acquisition of pleasure by the taking of women” as Jensen (2002) puts it. Such pornography is widely described as characterised by acts of male sexual control and female submission, even by scholars who do not write from an “anti-pornography” platform (e.g., Garlick, 2010; Hardy, 2004; Paasonen, 2006; 2010b). At best, according to Garlick (2011), most of it offers

“fantasies that affirm the existing reality,” that is, “a largely gendered, heteronormative reality in which men remain in control” (p. 235-236).

On the other hand, some researchers adopt a more recuperative stance towards porn. Weitzer (2011) for instance, is concerned that critics make claims that are “evidence-thin” (p. 670). He is critical of Jensen (2010), for example, in claiming that ““pornography demands men abandon empathy””, while providing “no evidence ... that male viewers do not empathize with the women in porn” (p. 667). Similarly, researchers like Smith, Attwood and Barker (e.g., Attwood & Smith, 2010; Smith, Attwood, & Barker, no date) and McKee, Albury and Lumby (2008) lament a lack of attention within arguments against pornography to “the silenced voice” (Smith, Attwood & Barker, no date, p. 2) of consumers. The alternative view thus offered by these critics of the critics of pornography is that male consumers are savvy, possibly even sensitive viewers. It is implied that they are more likely to be watching “alternative” porn, such as user-generated content that shows “real” bodies and more egalitarian sex. Or, if they do watch the more extreme “hardcore” material, it is implied that they may be just as likely to engage with it in a way that is empathetic and ethical.

We do not have to assume that pornography is by definition bad to want to know more about both of the kind of pornography that is popularly consumed and the way that men (in particular) engage with it. In light of troubling, albeit contested, claims about the material and representational treatment of women in mainstream (heterosexual) pornography (e.g., Boyle, 2011; Bridges, Wosnitzer, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010; Dines, 2010; Jensen, 2007; Whisnant, 2010), how might men in ostensibly gender-egalitarian societies account for its appeal? In this study we asked young New Zealand men about the nature of men’s pornography consumption, as they understood it, in their/our cultural context. We were interested in the general picture of what they understood pornography to be, and what they

understood to be normative consumptive practice. We also directly asked men what they found appealing about pornography, and specifically asked them to account for its appeal in relation to features like male dominance, violence and the “degradation” of women, which we suggested could be seen as problematic in relation to a broader ethic around gender equality. As such, it could be seen that we were highlighting for them an “ideological dilemma”. With an issue as contested as pornography, offering an opinion is, in effect, presenting “a stance in a controversy” that has to be understood in relation to the opinions it is opposing (Billig, 2009a). Such opinions do not arise in a vacuum, as Billig notes (referring in general terms to controversial issues, not pornography *per se*), but are inevitably crafted from the “rhetorical tools of ‘common sense’” (Billig, 2009b). Thus, in orienting to questions about the appeal of pornography men are implicitly required to produce accounts that position themselves as worthy masculine subjects *of some kind*, drawing on the cultural tools for meaning-making at their disposal. They have to account for their views about the production, consumption and appeal of pornography in relation to other views (their own and others’) about the relationship between pornography and masculinity for instance, and possibly conflicting views about the relationship between pornography and egalitarian gender relations. The ways they are able to do this show us the discursive resources, or the ideological apparatus, that are available in a particular cultural context, and how these highlight normative gender power relations in relation to (hetero)sexuality.

In this paper, we focus our analysis on men’s accounts of the consumptive practices and appeal of pornography, in relation to questions that highlight contradictions between its appeal on the one hand, and its arguably sexist gender politics on the other hand. We explore the discursive strategies that men used to account for its potentially dilemmatic appeal.

The Study

We interviewed 21 men across 10 interviews. As our interest was primarily in the cultural resources that men have for talking about pornography, we sought to interview men in pairs or small groups in order to better facilitate conversation that helped to elucidate a sense of shared masculine terms of engagement with the topic. We conducted five interviews with two participants, three interviews with groups of three participants, and two with single participants (in both cases due to the other scheduled participant not turning up).

Most of the men were in their early twenties (sixteen were aged between 20 and 25), three were in their late teens (18, 19, 19) and two were 30 or older (30, 32) (see Appendix 1 – we have not identified participant characteristics beyond age in order to help preserve anonymity). The majority identified themselves as Pākehā or New Zealand European (17), with others identifying themselves as Pākehā/Māori, Indian, Korean, and Russian. Most participants were studying at University (17), three were working and one identified himself as unemployed. We did not ask men to identify their sexual identity.

The research was framed as an investigation into the “appeal” of pornography, and potential participants were given written information stating that we were interested in “men’s perceptions and views on the use of pornography, the content and why it is appealing”. We sought men who had “some experience with pornography”, and were comfortable enough to talk about the topic. Potential participants were also told that the research could be “thought-provoking” and “challenging”, and they were given an indication that the interviews would include questions around the definition and use of pornography, including “extreme” forms of pornography, questions around why men like pornography and whether it was seen as degrading to women.

Men were recruited through a variety of methods: advertisements were placed around the university campus and posted on a School of Psychology webpage that notifies students

of various research projects they can voluntarily participate in (not as part of any coursework credit scheme); the first author ‘cold called’ men at a bar and in other public spaces on campus; our professional contacts and those in our wider research group were asked to pass on information about the study to their wider networks, as were participants in the study. (We did not personally know any of the participants at the time of the interviews.)

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on campus by the first author, a Pākehā (New Zealand European) woman aged 22 at the time. They lasted approximately one hour and were audio-recorded with participants’ permission, and later transcribed verbatim by the first author. The transcription used simple notations to mark pauses, word emphasis, stutters and minimal encouragers (see Appendix 2); they were not edited for grammatical correctness. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

Participants were advised (both in a written information sheet and verbally at the beginning of the interviews) only to answer questions they were comfortable answering and that they could leave the interview if they wished. They were informed that the research team would treat their participation with confidentiality, and that any quotes reproduced would be anonymous. When two or more participants were interviewed together, we asked them to only share views and stories that they were comfortable with others in the group knowing. We encouraged all participants to be sensitive to and respect the privacy of material shared by others, but explained that we would not be able to ensure the privacy of material disclosed in the presence of other participants. The scope of the interviews was designed to allow the participants to answer questions from the perspective of their views about “guys in general” or “guys they know”, rather than from the point of view of their own personal experiences. Although we did not preclude participants drawing on personal experience in answering questions (and many did so), this approach was taken for two reasons: (1) to clearly signal the focus of our interest in understanding shared cultural mores, rather than individual

psychological factors, and (2) to facilitate recruitment because we thought this focus would be of interest to a wider range of men. Our questioning was at times provocative, although within a style consistent with the tone of language and interaction set by the participants. While discussion was not restricted to heterosexual pornography, mainstream heterosexual pornography was the primary focus of all interviews due to our interest in the gendered dynamics of porn (and also because this is what most participants focussed on).

The physical safety of the interviewer was taken into account by conducting interviews on campus, with someone from the School of Psychology knowing her whereabouts. She was also supported through de-briefs and discussion with members of our wider research group. Overall, however, the process of conducting the interviews was emotionally challenging as in the interests of establishing rapport she found herself engaging with language and ideas that were not uncommonly disrespectful of women. The extent of this, and its impact, was unanticipated (see Antevska, in process, for further discussion).

Like all interview-based research, characteristics of interview formation (such as whether they are conducted with individuals or groups; whether the interviewer is of the same gender, ethnicity, and so on, as participants), methods of recruitment, the nature of questions and style of questioning all shape the particular responses available for analysis. Given the relatively sensitive (and prone to sensationalizing) subject of these interviews, and particular dynamics of our interview formation (e.g., more than one participant, female interviewer) certain kinds of masculine performativity may have been heightened (as we discuss later). It is therefore important to emphasise that we are not making claims about men's deeply held personal views; we are making claims about their talk, their accounts, and what it is possible – and what it is difficult – to say in circumstances such as these.

Analysis

Our analysis pivots around two related questions: How do a group of young New Zealand men describe the norms and appeal of pornography and its consumption? And how do they discuss the content, production and consumption of mainstream pornography in relation to questions about portrayals of gendered dominance and submission, and violence? For instance, do they notice the sorts of features that contemporary critics of pornography are concerned about and whether or not these are at odds with social values around gender equality?

There are three over-arching points to be made about our data. First, participants described it as normative for men to be consuming pornography. They described it as highly accessible, and overall they spoke with familiarity about a wide range of pornographic genre, including material that some might consider “extreme” (practices like “ass to mouth” [“ATM”], for instance), but which they suggested was normal within the pornography they watched. Second, it was clear that our participants were not used to having to explain the existence or appeal of pornography. Overall, their talk suggested a discursive milieu in which pornography and its consumption was so normalized and naturalized that they were not under normal circumstances required to stop and think about it, or explain it. It ‘just is’ – in the sense of both its pervasive existence and its appeal. In this way they echoed the “deafening silence” (p. 66) that Kimmel (2005) has observed to characterize men’s response to the debates around pornography. Third, the primary mode of engagement with potentially troubling questions about women’s role within pornography, and wider possible meanings and implications of the common male dominance-female submission pornographic dynamic, was one of detachment. Participants spoke in a way that implied they did not want to see it, think about it, or care about it. As one man said, when asked if they were concerned about pornography being male dominated and the prospect that the woman performing in it might

not be having a great time: “Not at all, not a single smidge, don’t give a shit” (Eric). In this interview, when the men were talking about the possibility that women might get mistreated within pornography, the other participant said: “you know that it happens, but you just don’t care” (Brian); thus echoing the industry’s simultaneous acknowledgement and lack of concern about the treatment of women performers (Boyle, 2011).

A certain level of detachment was evident in the accounts of all the men we interviewed, although not always as callous as expressed here by Eric and Brian. For five men, their detachment was to varying degrees overtly precarious. For this minority the consumption of mainstream pornography was unsettled in some way by discomfort associated with critical reflection on the sexism within it.

Pornography and the context of consumption

In all of the interviews we directed discussion primarily about pornography addressed to heterosexual males. To ensure we had common ground when participants discussed pornography, we asked them how they would define it. Although initial responses included the very broad “naked ladies” (Chris) and the very particular “any act that exploits a female’s body” (Ian), most men suggested that pornography was characterized by explicit sex: “beautiful people just getting fucked” (Eric), or “men, or women, fucking things” (Carlos). Most participants agreed that what made something *pornography* was that it was sexually explicit material that was intended to sexually arouse to the point of masturbation. In this way it was distinguished from sexualised advertising, “lads’ mags”, and “fetish” material (that blurred the boundaries between the erotic and the shocking, humorous or disgusting). Their working definition was therefore consistent with dictionary definitions of pornography (e.g., OED Online), although possibly more narrow. As one man said, “the soft core stuff isn’t really regarded as porn really” (Liam). While its sexual appeal was portrayed as the overriding reason for men’s interest in pornography, participants also spoke about it providing

them with more general entertainment, saying that it could be “funny” or provide interest for its novelty value, or the “impressive” physicality of the performers (Brody), and so on.

All participants indicated that videos available on the internet were what men most commonly consumed, and they spoke with familiarity about a wide range of different kinds of pornography, and about using pornography-specific online sites to access free content posted by others. Pornography was described as highly accessible: “sometimes, you want to like, got to make it difficult for yourself [so you] go out of your way to look for the best of the best” (Sam). Participants gave the impression of having accessed a wide range of sub-genres. “You’d be hard pressed to faze me” (Brody), noted one participant, referring to the variety and extremity of the content he’d viewed. Different forms of pornography were talked about as if they were simply different ranges of a product, like any other product, available for consumption within the contemporary marketplace. The wide variety of forms of pornography could readily be normalized as catering to the individual tastes of different consumers – echoing the cliché introduced into the pornographic vernacular in the landmark 1972 film *Deep Throat*, “diff’rent strokes for diff’rent folks” (Williams, 1999, p. 110). So for instance, in accounting for increasing “extremity” in pornography Sam noted: “it’s to cater for the people with these fetishes, like, these- everyone has got a fetish for something”.

Overall, pornography consumption was portrayed as existing in a liminal space between the private and the public; something that is normalized, joked about among men, occasionally viewed in groups, but mostly a solitary sexual activity (associated with masturbation) that is not discussed seriously with others. Although men sometimes talked about women also watching pornography, the general sense was that this was masculine terrain: “Well like, as we said, porn is catered to males” (Ben). The participants in our study had volunteered to talk to a researcher about pornography, and so it is possible that they are not typical of all men of their age in terms of their familiarity and comfort with the genre. Yet

they strongly endorsed the idea that it was normative for men to watch pornography, offering responses to a direct question about whether all men watch porn such as: “I’m pretty positive most of them do” (Ethan), “I haven’t met a man who doesn’t” (Owen). The presumed universality of pornography consumption was further reinforced by the apparent need to explain why some men would *not*; with participants offering reasons such as a lack of exposure, squeamishness or religion. Although we may infer, to some extent, that men were referencing their own cultural context – and, in particular, referring specifically to *young* men – any such distinctions were not raised or explored.

Several men agreed that pornography has become more “extreme”. For some this was spoken of in matter of fact terms, as if simply the commercial and behavioural realities of consumption: “after seeing the same old thing it just gets boring, so they- try to push the boundaries and take innovative new approaches” (Ryan). Ryan went on to suggest that before long “it just becomes stock standard so they constantly try... to find new things to try”. In this way men spoke as consumers operating with a wider free market logic of consumption that rarely demands ethical accounting. It becomes normal and natural to look for new products, to “discover what you like” (Adam). As another participant explained, “You always want to broaden your horizons, so” (Ben). He referred to sites that offered “the new, kind of like, really cool things that get like, really great, rating or whatever” (Ben), and went on to describe a site that advertised “a girl who was going to lose her virginity” in a pornography scene. The ethos of neoliberal consumption trumps consideration of sexual ethics and gender politics, which might otherwise create an ideological dilemma if that girl was thought about as a real young person rather than a commodity. Questions about the possible “back story” to the production of the material they might enjoy, or possible “side stories” in relation to the place of pornography alongside relationships and broader gender relations do not need to be confronted.

Notably, acts such as ass to mouth (ATM), where a man anally penetrates a woman and then puts his penis in her or another woman's mouth), was unlikely to be counted in this "extreme" category, judging by the responses of participants with whom we discussed it. Consistent with Bridges et al.'s (2010) content analysis of "best-selling pornography videos", which found that ATM occurred in 41% of scenes, it was instead normalized as illustrated in the exchange below (Alex is the female interviewer):

Alex: Well because someone said to me like, I was talking about you know extreme kinds of porn and they were like what are you talking about ass to mouth isn't extreme like-

Eric: I wouldn't call it extreme at all-

Alex: It's pretty-

Brian: Nah I wouldn't call it extreme-

Eric: I'd call it standard, (*Alex:* Yeah) if ass to mouth has happened in a porno I wouldn't think, haha, ass to mouth, I'd just be like that happened- (*Brian:* Yeah it's pretty standard eh-) now this is happening-great.

[...]

Brian: I wouldn't skip through it just, (*Eric:* Yeah) it's just normal I guess-

Many of the men referred to having watched pornography that enacts violence. Not uncommonly, they attempted to distance themselves from explicitly violent content, by implying that it was not the kind of material they had deliberately sought out. But this did not mean either that they would necessarily stop watching it, having come across it, or that they would be inclined to generate a critique of it. In one interview, for instance, two men referred to their personal limits in relation to more extreme content: "like there is stuff I will not watch" (Karl), to which Jack responded "Oh of course, but, yeah, a lot of the time you're like,

that's a bit- but you keep watching", to which Karl agreed. This did not seem to be an uncommon response. As we see in the following exchange, watching material that might be outside the realm of what a man would actively seek out was sometimes "accommodated" through reference to the women who was subject to the violence ostensibly enjoying and/or consenting it.

Alex: Have you guys seen, like, violent porn?

Ethan: I haven't, like specifically searched it.

Sam: I saw umm I think it was like a four on one, like four guys on one but they totally, one was beating the woman (*Alex:* Wow) but she seemed to be enjoying it which is weird.

As we see in this exchange, postulating a woman's choice, pleasure or enjoyment of even explicit violence can allow a participant to glide over the issue (see also Boyle, 2011). Within the literature definitions of violence are highly contested. Researchers coding pornographic content come up with wildly different figures for the percentage of scenes in contemporary pornography that they would code as aggressive or violent. Researchers like McKee et al. (2008) might code this kind of scene as "not violence" because of the woman's apparent enjoyment of it (perhaps rendering it in their eyes a performance of consensual BDSM). However, the fact that Sam refers to the woman's enjoyment in this scene as "weird" (in a nonchalant sort of way) clearly reveals, we would suggest, that it is not being read within a logic of consensual BDSM. Nevertheless, he watches it, describes it in a way that distances himself from the humanity of the woman performer (she is just a "one"), and does not take the opportunity to register any sense of being troubled by this violence. The fact that he does not celebrate the violence, or justify it, but rather simply notes it, arguably speaks to a kind of banal acceptance of sexual violence against women in at least some pornographic contexts.

Even portrayals of extreme sexual violence appear able to be recuperated through reference to the apparent consent of the victim:

Chris: Umm, but then the lines are quite blurred I think, around, where, the degraded and, consensuality begins and ends, yeah for instance, you'll come across clips that, the person, you know being, seemingly, umm... tied up and whipped and raped, by twenty or thirty people (*Alex:* Mmm) and you watch the entire thing, and then there will be an interview at the end, with them, umm quite normally, talking and laughing about the segment that they've shot (*Alex:* Mmm) umm, so it takes what is quite a degrading scene and, normalizes it, at the end, by making it quite clear, that it was something that they'd gone into consensually, and enjoyed.

In this account, the participant refers to the gender neutral "person", which could perhaps be read as a sort of psychological or rhetorical defence against too close a recognition of the troubling gender politics of such a scene (which would invariably cast a woman as the willing victim and men as the group enacting the violence). Within the kind of filmic technique that Chris refers to both the pornographic violence and the "reality" confession could in theory be regarded as performances – yet there is no question in the mind of the viewer about which one is "real" and which one is "fantasy". To question this too deeply would be potentially troubling for a man who has just masturbated to a scene that looks like group rape. In implying that it would not constitute degradation if the "person" who was "tied up and whipped and raped, by twenty or thirty people" (appeared to) consent to it, the consumer is saved from any complicity in the abuse that they have not only witnessed, but possibly enjoyed. Yet any woman's claim to enjoy "rape" by so many men surely begs more careful consideration than taking it at face value as the whole truth and the only story. As Boyle (2011) has shown, women porn performers' public accounts of their

experiences are marked by contradiction and ambivalence, such that stories of coercion, abuse and harm sit alongside rhetoric of choice and empowerment. The industry itself acknowledges the abuse of women within pornography (and at best the strain on their bodies) and, Boyle (2011) argues, it actually thrives on this focus on women and the notion that they have chosen their fate.

The general tenor of the participants' talk about more extreme violent content was mostly, although not exclusively, nonchalant. While ostensibly not seeking it out, they spoke in ways that suggested their initial preferences and ethical boundaries became unstable. Whisnant (2010) has described a similar process evident in men's online talk about their pornography consumption. She argues that the industry actively "grooms" men in ways that erode their moral "capacity for empathy and solidarity with other human beings" (p. 131); describing processes that go beyond the measures that any industry might engage in under capitalism to promote and manipulate consumption for profit.

Accounting for the appeal of pornography

In relation to our interest in men's accounting for the appeal of pornography it is notable that participants said pornography consumption is not something that is widely discussed. Moreover, their style of talking within the interviews suggested that it was not the sort of thing that they were used to providing an explanation for. Men often gave truncated "just is" responses, punctuated with long pauses and hesitations.

The appeal of pornography was thus depicted, by and large, as obvious and natural, arising from some kind of innate male sexual drive: "cause guys are really horny... I guess it's like how guys are supposed to be" (Sam). Some raised biologically essentialist justifications for this: "like an evolutionary sort of thing" (Ethan), "it's genetic" (Sam). In this line of argument, sex is essential to men, and "because like, obviously you can't have sex like every single day" pornography makes sense as a substitute – "it's kind of the closest you can

get to it without having to imagine it (Alex: Ok) yeah” (Sam). (To which Ethan responded, “imagination is quite a hard thing to use, especially once you’ve started looking at porn [Sam: Yeah]”). Many of the men related it to an intrinsic pleasure of looking at women’s bodies: “boobs and vagina... I don’t know it’s just naturally appealing, you see that and you’re like, yep, I like that” (Jacob); or to watching people have sex: “I’m trying to think beyond the just like, absolute obvious, which is just the obvious... which is just watching people fuck” (Eli), “I like seeing dicks go into pussies ‘cause it reminds me of putting dicks in pussies” (Eric).

At the same time as men invoked biology to explain the naturalness of pornography consumption, they also talked about processes of learning to use pornography that suggested the role of the cultural context in shaping the possibilities for consumption. One man, for instance, described the process of going from being “a young guy, and not knowing anything about pornography” in terms of “desensitizing yourself”: “slowly learning more and more about it... what’s acceptable and what’s not”, until “eventually [you] get to just full blown, porn watching” (Owen). That he describes this as a process of desensitization and learning seems to acknowledge that men’s use of pornography is not simply a raw biological given. In another study in the same cultural context (Gavey et al., 2010), two young men talked about the pressure they had felt to watch pornography within the “homophobic” context of their all-boys high school. One said that “ever since third form [a level of schooling in NZ in which students are 12-14 years of age] I, I’ve had some people in class who would be watching porn on their phones”, and that “some of us weren’t actually- hadn’t actually accepted pornography yet so we were like ‘don’t show me and stuff like that’”. He said that “as we grow older I guess we just accept it,” giving the strong impression that this was at least in part because “we were scared of what people would think of us,” (with his friend adding “if we reject the pornography”), meaning that it would be read as being gay.

Defending appeal in response to questions of ethics and gender politics

Overall, we found that participants were familiar with the kind of pornography that would be widely critiqued as sexist. Yet, whether or not they identified themselves as liking this kind of pornography, there was an overwhelming (although not universal) refusal, reluctance or inability to critique the sexism within mainstream pornographic representations of women and men. Instead the predominant position that men appeared to adopt in the interviews was one of detachment. This detachment was precarious for some men, who responded with discomfort and reflection to questions that sought to problematize features such as gendered dominance/submission dynamics, sexual violence, and acts that can be read as sexually humiliating or degrading towards women.

In this section we will discuss the ways in which men mostly dismissed potential concerns about the ethics of some of these features of pornographic material, as well as the different ways in which detachment was achieved.

Male dominance / domination

In a society that prizes the idea of gender equality, how might men (in this case, young men) account for their private consumption of material that eroticizes male dominance (or domination) and female submission – a dynamic that is widely reported to characterise mainstream heterosexual pornography (e.g., Boyle, 2010a; Bridges et al., 2010; Dines, 2010; Garlick, 2010; Paasonen, 2006). Participants agreed that sexual domination was in “pretty much most porn” (Brian); and that “it’s always the dude dominating the girl” (Eric). Some participants suggested that there were also pornographic depictions of women dominating men, but when queried by the interviewer, this was almost always agreed to be of a different nature to the depictions of men dominating women – and both were regarded as “for” a male viewer.

When the question of male dominance came up in discussions, it was rarely responded to as if it was something distasteful, and deserving of critique. Instead, it was more likely to

be minimized through humor or distancing or rationalized through claims around individual choice on the one hand and biological realities on the other. Thus, some men suggested that although male dominance was enacted in pornography, it was not what they personally were attracted to – that is, it was beside the point of their own pleasure. The other main response was to naturalize and at least implicitly defend male dominance within pornography. Across the interviews, then, in these kinds of ways, we could see men simultaneously side-stepping the issue and endorsing male dominance, but very rarely confronting it.

Male dominance: Beside the point: As the following extract shows, recognition of domination in the pornography one watches is not necessarily something that prompts the need for any kind of ethical accounting. Men may deflect its importance, in relation to what they find appealing, with a blasé tone that reveals its perceived mundaneness.

Alex: So for you guys like, what's sexy about porn is like, like seeing sex-

Eric: The visual appeal, seeing, the action of sex and seeing the vagina (*Brian:* Yeah.) (*Alex:* Yeah) that's definitely, the appeal like I would not put it down to like domination or anything like that, although, whatever I'll watch it-

Alex: So you'll watch it and it's kind of in the background, and it's kind of normal but it's not why you watch it- (*Eric:* Yeah.)

Eric: I'll watch- I'll watch like a weird porn like then I'll just be like, well that was good, but I only watched a weird porn for the pussy and the visual, didn't actually watch it so-

The use of the word “weird” here, in relation to “domination,” is noteworthy. It could be heard as marking such material as beyond the norm. However, given what follows in the conversation it is perhaps revealing of a kind of splitting, which makes it possible to narrate this consumption in recognition that the material is in fact troubling when heard in the light of day, albeit unproblematized in his usual private engagement with it. When the interviewer

queried this connection, the other man in the interview responded that “pretty much most porn has got like, domination” (Brian), to which Eric agreed, “Yeah most of them do.”

Male dominance: It is the point: Although this kind of distancing from any appeal of dominance *per se* was a common way that men responded to questions about its place in pornography, some men were not as cautious about endorsing the pleasure associated with watching a woman be sexually dominated. In the extract below, for instance, Sam reveals a favorable acceptance of sexual domination, a minimization of it (“fun” does not require much investment or vulnerability), as well, arguably, as an attempt to head off potential gender-based critiques by referencing the possibility of women’s sexual domination:

Sam: I don’t think I really care about the power balance or anything, I don’t know, sometimes it’s fun though like... like when the guy is just completely dominating, but sometimes it’s funny when the chick is completely dominating.

It could be argued that Sam is positioned through masculine privilege with the luxury of not having to “care about” any power imbalance. As a man, he can watch another man sexually dominating a woman, without needing to negotiate any identification with the object of this domination (the woman performer herself or women in general). By contrast, women who enjoy pornography have described a more ambivalent and qualified pleasure, contingent upon believing in the authenticity of female performers’ pleasure, and unsettled by acts of male domination (Parvez, 2006). One woman in Parvez’s study described feeling like bursting into tears or being sick after having watched “a rape scene”. Another woman referred to a scene where “I felt like she’s being raped”, saying that “that turned me off to no end” (Parvez, 2006, p. 623). As a masculine consumer, Sam instead has the option of finding a man “completely dominating” a woman simply “fun”. It suggests a form of engagement that is detached without identification or even recognition of the experience of the woman in the

scene. Unlike the women interviewed by Parvez (2006) several participants indicated that whether or not the female performer experienced real pleasure was irrelevant: “I wouldn’t really care” (Ian), “I don’t think people really care” (Carlos). Others indicated that men might want to “live with the illusion” (Brody) that it’s real. As Jack said, “I trick myself into thinking that it’s real”. While Sam moves to invoke some kind of gender equivalence by referencing the possibility that a woman can also be depicted as “completely dominating”, his suggestion that this reversal is “funny” is in marked contrast to the way that women consumers interviewed by Parvez (2006) reacted to male dominance. It thus reveals something about the way in which such a depiction within mainstream pornography is unlikely to actually turn the tables of power.

In another exchange below, discussing “point of view” pornography (filmed from the angle of the male performer’s perspective), dominance could again be seen to be done and then undone. Alex’s challenge about the appeal of dominance (or even domination) is avoided by both claiming that the word is misleading and that actual dominance doesn’t “really” appeal:

Eric: it’s just from the guy’s vision (*Alex:* Mmm) you (*Brian:* Yeah) see sausage
(*Brian:* And nothing else) and you can just like- yeah dominating that, bang.

Alex: And so that appeals the like dominating-

Eric: Nah the POV point of view stuff, but the dominating doesn’t really appeal I
just say that, I say dominating in like the fact that (*Brian:* It’s just his word to
use-) it’s just a word, (*Brian:* Yeah) I wouldn’t take that out of context, well
you can if you want to-

These exchanges arguably hint at the tensions that exist, and yet are unexplored for male consumers, between the values of gender equality that exist on the surface of public discourse and the nature of the actions they are watching and the language they might slip into in

representing them. While it is difficult to sustain a defense of the pleasure of dominance or domination, perhaps, in front of a challenging female interviewer, the mode of disengagement (when there is any) is weak and individualized: it “doesn’t really appeal” for one man, it is “fun” but not something “I really care about” for another. In both cases, the opportunity to notice and refuse the values of systemic sexual inequality is not taken up.

Another way that some participants refused the opportunity to position themselves as critical of the sexist elements within mainstream pornography was to naturalize women’s desire for sexual submission (alongside men’s “natural male domination”, Eric). Eric, for instance, drew on his own sexual experience (in the process indicating that not all men draw a clear distinction between what they watch and how they approach actual sexual encounters), to claim that: “The girls love being submissive as well- (Alex: Yeah) when I have sex with a girl they love being submissive they’re never like, get down there Eric-”

As well as approaching the issue of gendered dominance and submission in an abstract way, participants were also asked about particular pornographic sexual acts that can be read through this dynamic, or otherwise seen as sexist, degrading or humiliating towards women. For example, the way men talked about the “money shot” or “cum shot”, where a man (or men) ejaculate(s) on a woman’s face or body as a way of signaling the end of the performance, was revealing for how issues like male dominance and female degradation were oriented to. The so-called money shot has been described as a process of “marking”, in which masculine claim is laid upon the territory of the female body (Cook, 2006; Moore & Weissbein, 2010). Just as with male dominance in general, it was again evident that this act was not something that most of the men we interviewed were used to accounting for. In some ways this is not surprising, given that since the 1970s it has “assumed the narrative function of signaling the climax of a genital event” within “hard-core” pornography (Williams, 1999, p. 93; even though it waned, according to Williams, 1999, for a period between then and

now). For participants it was simply a taken for granted part of the (heterosexual) pornographic script – the logical way to finish a scene – “I’d see it as a normal progression, it’s just where it ends” (Chris); “how else would you finish” (Eric), “how else are you supposed to end it though” (Brian). In such cases, the strong implication was that nothing more should be read into it.

According to some men, the money shot should not be seen as problematic because it is not an act that would be performed in “real life”. Karl, for instance, said he would never perform the act, even if given the opportunity, but within the world of private consumption he suggested that men might watch “a facial” and “at the end be like cool, I’ve seen that video, you know, now I can go to class”. (It is worth noting that not all young men appear to draw such a clear line between sexual acts enjoyed in pornographic fantasies and acts they initiate with, or “on”, women [e.g., see Crabbe & Corlett, 2013]). Much in the same way as men dismissed the appeal of domination more abstractly, men sometimes dismissed questions about “ass to mouth” or the “cum shot” (Eric and Brian) by simply stating that they were beside the point of their pleasure and that they “more prefer the pussy shots, they’re better” (Eric): All of these kinds of responses provide a slippery defense of these kinds of pornographic portrayals – the men do not declare any strong interest or investment in the practices, but nor do they take up the opportunity to critically respond to them. The issues are avoided.

However, while men sometimes downplayed and/or detached from any reading of the money shot in relation to gendered power dynamics, some also recognized it could be read as a display of dominance:

Sam: Maybe they think it’s hot that they’re like rubbing in on her or something.

Ethan: Yeah probably (*Sam:* Dominating) probably another dominance thing, just getting her, to taste his seed or something

Similarly, with regard to ATM, Eric suggested that some men would find it appealing because of “domination that’s the masculine- masculine thing”: “You’re doing what I want you to do, sort of buzz”.

Some men not only depicted the money shot as essential to the (heterosexual) pornographic script, but seemingly approvingly linked it to male dominance:

Karl: Yeah, you have to, have the money shots, the cum shot, that’s very important.

Alex: Why do you have to have the money shot, what’s hot about the money shot?

Karl: ‘Cause it’s, it represents-

Jack: You don’t feel complete unless- (laughs)

Karl: I don’t know I guess you could say it’s representative, of, the fact that, the woman’s being dehumanized, that it’s- it’s the, it is coming on her face it’s degrading her, yeah, it’s synonymous with the fact that it’s that kind of master slave mentality, not quite (*Alex:* Mmm) I mean, ‘cause she could be a slave by pleasing you as well, if that makes sense (*Alex:* Yeah) it’s not domination, top and bottom thing, (*Alex:* Yeah) so it’s, that kind of, complete, yeah chauvinistic, kind of idea, by that I mean, like we’ve been watching that since we’ve been ten the cum shots so we can’t really talk objectively (*Alex:* Yeah) ‘cause like, it’s just how it is.

According to the “sexpertise” (Potts, 2002) offered by one participant, the appeal of the money shot should extend to women as well: “Ahh having shot stuff from cock on your face from a female perspective and the idea that being dirty naughty, umm, (*Alex:* So do you think that the girl-) I’d say it’s really appealing yeah” (*Carlos*). While *Carlos* conceded that this might not apply to all women, he suggested that being “dominated” and “degraded” is “a common fantasy”, even if “women probably wouldn’t admit to it”. Given this, he advised, an act that is “so disrespectful”, like “a cum shot to the face”, “can really intensify the

experience for them” if they are “like really turned on”. Here Carlos moves beyond claims to know the desires of women performing in pornography, to make a claim about the sexual desires of women in general. As argued elsewhere, the notion that women in general like to be sexually dominated, and yet cannot speak of this (“wouldn’t admit to it”) sets up murky conditions for consensual sexual relations and ripe conditions for sexual coercion (Gavey, 2005). Even for women who do want to take up a submissive sexual position, these kinds of assumptions would be highly problematic, as such desires are unlikely to constitute a *carte blanche* acceptance of being treated in any kind of dominating, disrespectful and degrading way. As Barker (2013) has discussed, within BDSM communities, for example, there have recently been moves to recognize the complexity of consent and acknowledge that, just as in mundane heteronormative relations, gendered abuse does also happen within BDSM interactions. In contrast to Carlos’s claims about women’s likely response to the money shot, research suggests that women, including those who like pornography, are more likely to find ejaculation on a female performer’s face “repulsive” (Parvez, 2006), than they are to find it appealing. Ciclitira (1998) also found the money shot was not popular among the women she interviewed, reminding them of “who’s boss”. Indeed, Williams (1999) suggested that the decline of the money shot within mid-1980s hard-core films that were made to appeal to a new heterosexual couples market, was linked to its lack of appeal for women.

Uneasy detachment

As noted earlier, not all men were uniformly accepting of the portrayals of male sexual dominance and female sexual submission within mainstream pornography. While most men appeared to readily distance themselves, or detach, from any challenges about the ethics or the gender politics of the material they consumed, five of the 21 men we interviewed showed some reflexive engagement around these issues. One participant expressed acute uneasiness

about mainstream pornography, indicating that his consumption was to some extent troubled by, rather than detached from, ethical questions:

Will: I think all men that have opportunity to watch porn, (*Alex:* Yeah) ‘cause it’s just ah, you can’t, well, yeah you can’t control yourself and you, you tell yourself it’s wrong to watch it, but you know, in the end, you somehow, it’s a question about how long before you start watching it.

Alex: Why do you think it’s wrong to watch it?

Will: Well you know it, umm, well it’s just, I don’t know it, pornography it’s just so umm, it’s like so barbaric, it’s so raw (*Alex:* Mmm) it’s like, it perverts the nature of how, men and women should express their love for each other, (*Alex:* Mmm) and you know it’s just, yeah, it’s more about um, the physical need, not the emotional need (*Alex:* Yeah)

Other participants demonstrated a degree of detachment that was sufficient for them continue consuming mainstream pornography, but not sufficient for them to completely ignore the gender trouble within it. Eli and Brody, for instance, responded to a provocative challenge about the treatment of female porn performers in a way that showed both critical awareness of these issues and an ability to suppress this awareness. At the same time (as we show further on), they were able to reflect on the ethical dilemma involved:

Eli: If she’s doing it with a smile on her face and she looks like she’s enjoying it
(*Brody:* Yeah)

Alex: So no one’s got any issues about the fact that she [the female performer] probably got ass raped for the first eight hours of her day and if she doesn’t do this then she’s not getting paid so-

Brody: That is, that’s the context of, her day, and that and that’s not something we see
(*Alex:* Yeah) (*Eli:* Exactly) and that’s not something we register so-

Alex: So you don't think anyone thinks, like just because she's getting paid-

Brody: No way, they're seeing her having apparently a really good time and it's whoa-

Alex: She like-

Brody: She's taking a fair few cocks there like-

Eli: Yeah, but there's the assumption that she's actually entered this arrangement fully knowing (*Brody:* Yeah) her rights and, take it as she is getting paid and that sort of stuff (*Brody:* Yeah)

Eli: That's a tricky situation and like that's something, that I've kind of put out of sight and out of mind, in general. (*Alex:* Yeah)

Eli and Brody were older (30 and 32) than the other participants, which is possibly significant in a number of ways. They had grown up in a time and place where pornography was less readily accessible (household internet connections were slow, free wifi connections were not available in schools, universities, and other public places, and teenagers were less likely to have personal internet capable devices). As adult men, however, they had also had longer-term experiences with pornography and more opportunity to reflect on it in relation to their own sexuality and relationships. Over the course of the interview they discussed their uneasiness with their consumption of pornography, and one had deleted his collection on several occasions in the past, but had always “kind of like re-justified it slowly just gone, oh I'd really like to have a bit of a wank” (Eli). These men expressed discomfort with the “negative attitude towards women” in pornography and the way in which “quite often the woman is always in a submissive role” (Eli). Brody added concern about “when you see someone like Belladonna [well-known pornography performer], or whatever, like just what she's made to be acceptable to be done to women.” Although these men consumed

pornography, Eli remarked that “I guess we both still sort of understand that on some level it’s wrong morally.”

Eli: But like I said I’ve been kind of readdressing the whole issue myself like

(*Brody:* Right right yeah-)

Brody: See just this conversation today is going to have me... (*Alex:* Laughs) like, I’m going to be over analyzing a lot of shit now (Laughs)

Eli: Yeah because like (*Alex:* Yeah) (*Brody:* For good reason) kind of like put in to a compartment of like consuming porn and you know having a bit of a jerk, (*Alex:* Yeah) it’s very intimate and very yourself sort of things (*Alex:* Yeah)

Brody: Yeah yeah ‘cause you’re not having to explain, to anyone or like justify it to anyone ‘cause it’s just you, yeah-

Eli: Yeah it’s just hidden it’s kept away from anything else, and, so it is quite easy to separate from the rest of your life I guess (*Brody:* Yeah), but yep, when I go home I’m going to delete some stuff-

Space for ethical consumption: In discussions with those participants who reflected critically on the nature of mainstream pornography, or who were open to the possibility that there was an ethical dimension to be considered, it was clear how little sociocultural space there was, outside of the particular research context, for questioning and potentially troubling the nature and consumption of pornography:

Ryan: Yeah, I’ve never really thought about it in that way, I suppose, thinking about the social implications of porn is not something I particularly do I just kind of watch it, but like (laughs) (*Jos:* Mmm) yeah, I don’t know, what do you think, Ben, Jos.

Alex: So you think at the end of the day you probably could, recognize like power things (*Ryan:* Yeah) like going on in porn but you probably just wouldn't pay attention or-

Ryan: Probably not (*Ben:* Yeah) and it's like I say, I- I mean it's like we said earlier, your porn habits are your porn habits, and they're kind of your own, and- I mean even if you do, possibly see a power imbalance it's not something that's ever going to be discussed with anyone, because when would you discuss it with your peers like, you would just be, an unusual thing to do- (*Alex:* Not necessarily discuss it but-) yeah but for that reason you don't look for it though, (*Alex:* Yeah) 'cause I mean, what's the- what's the point I suppose (*Alex:* I don't mean necessarily-) "I watched this terribly, umm this terribly offensive pornographic film the other day (*Alex:* Laughs) because the man was completely dominating" (*Jos:* (Laughs)

In explaining that men (in his peer group) would be unlikely to discuss the ethics and gender politics of porn, Ryan suggests a connection between this discursive no-go zone and his own avoidance of recognition of any social issues related to porn. There was some hint within the interviews that opening a space to have such discussions might lead some men to notice and/or articulate ethical trouble spots that are otherwise overlooked and/or unspoken. In the interview referred to earlier, in which Will expressed some sense of an ethical struggle over his consumption of porn, one of the other men he was interviewed alongside was asked if he had anything to add. He replied, "I don't think it's, I don't think of it when I'm watching it as wrong (small laugh) like every now and again, maybe, it depends." (Jack).

In contemporary New Zealand, as elsewhere in the world, young men's pornography consumption is not only normalized, but seemingly shielded from social critique by the insularizing neoliberal logics of individual privacy, freedom and expression. Young men

appear not to be typically offered any critical lens for questioning the sexist portrayals of women and supremacist portrayals of (hetero)sexual masculinity in the kind of everyday pornography that is widely consumed.

Concluding points

“Our culture is so infused with sexism that it is often invisible to us.” (Kimmel, 2005, p. 83)

In our interviews men talked about pornography and men’s consumption of it in ways that were almost entirely at odds with the optimistic scenario imagined by researchers like Weitzer (2011), McKee et al. (2008), and Smith et al. (no date). They spoke about pornography that depicts male sexual dominance and female submission as normal and untroubling. The predominant mode of response was one of detachment from any ethical considerations or recognition of its gender politics. This resonates with Kimmel’s (2005) suggestion that, because of the ways men are sexually socialised, “sex for men often requires emotional detachment” (p. 72). Detachment appeared to characterise the kind of engagement that most of our participants had with pornography, including the kinds that depicted sexual violence. Thus, the ideological dilemmas that sexist pornography might produce within an egalitarian society remained so implicit that they appeared to be invisible to most of the participants. It was clear from the ways they talked that the men in general were not used to having the opportunity (in terms of time and space, but also in terms of discursive resources) to think critically about mainstream porn and men’s consumption of it. However, it is important to emphasise that in the context of these directly challenging interviews five men did orient to the gender trouble within mainstream pornography in a way that signalled some willingness (to varying degrees) to critically engage with the issues.

Whisnant’s (2010) analysis of male consumers’ online talk about pornography (in forums such as adulthoodtalk.com) has similarly explored the question of men’s negotiation of

the ethical dilemmas surrounding their consumption of material that crosses their own ethical boundaries (aggressive, dangerous and degrading practices). As she notes, everyday pornography routinely shows women “treated in ways that most people would neither choose for themselves nor accept for those they care about”. The industry shows, and boasts about, female performers pushed beyond the limits of their own sexual boundaries (Boyle, 2011). And yet because we must assume that most male consumers are not either “sociopaths or utterly unregenerate misogynists”, Whisnant (2010) suggests “they must experience ethical qualms about at least some of the pornography they encounter and about themselves in so far as they enjoy such material” (p. 114). That so few of the men we interviewed articulated any qualms of conscience (in contrast to the ambivalence of UK men noted in earlier research, Thomson, 1999, and of a significant portion of Swedish young men in 2001, Johansson & Hammarén, 2007) suggests that the cultural normalization of pornography in general may have increased in the past decade or so, and acceptance of the misogyny within the mainstream genre may also have increased. While it is possible that there are differences between its place in New Zealand culture and British and Swedish culture, we think that is an unlikely explanation.

We come back to the question of masculinity, and how men are able to demonstrate they are worthy masculine subjects through their talk about pornography. According to Bird (1996), heterosexual masculinity (which most of our men performed) in homosocial contexts “means being emotionally detached, competitive, and supportive of the sexual objectification of women” (p. 131). For some young men, a key motivation in both their sexual interactions with women as well as their (objectifying) talk about sex with women seems to be the reinforcement of male-male peer relations and masculine status (Flood, 2008). This dynamic may have played a role in shaping the tenor of men’s talk in some of our interviews. Although our research was not conducted in an exclusively homosocial domain – our

interviewer was a young woman – it could be argued that our method of (mostly) interviewing men in small groups may have heightened participants' orientation towards performing masculinity. It is possible that this conversational context (with other men present) reduced the chance that men would share more sensitive, troubled, and empathic responses. Other researchers have noted the connection between pornography and hegemonic masculinity. Allen (2006, p. 80), for instance, interpreted young men's blunt and enthusiastic proposals for including pornography in high school sexuality education (in survey responses) as, in part, performative: declaring an "active, virile, and powerful" masculinity. According to Barron and Kimmel (2000), we can think of pornography as "gendered speech", a system of communication among men "*about* masculinity" (p. 166, emphasis in original).

Pornographic narratives of violence against women, they suggest, could function in some contexts as "a currency among men as they jockey for position in the eyes of other men" (p. 166). However, whatever the primary drivers of men's acceptance of violence against women within pornography (e.g., boosting an anxious masculinity with an eye on other men's approval or exercising power over women for its own rewards – which may of course not be mutually exclusive), the effects are arguably the same. That is, the turning of a blind eye towards the problematic gender politics and ethics of mainstream heterosexual pornography – whether it be turned with discomfort or in oblivion. In our research, these effects were in evidence in front of both women and (for most participants) other men. This would suggest that for most of our participants the need to present a conventional (hetero)masculinity is not restricted to homosocial contexts and that it took precedence over any incentive to present a more sensitive, egalitarian and heterosocial masculinity. Or, possibly, that their talk was limited by the discursive resources or frameworks of meaning about men and pornography that they had access to; and that these shaped their accounts more than any particular masculinity or other performance "motive".

It is, of course, possible that men who have experienced qualms of conscience about sexist pornography, or were critical non-consumers, were less likely to volunteer to participate in a research project that framed its purpose in terms of exploring what men find appealing about pornography. That a few of the men we interviewed were receptive to thinking more critically about these issues – and that two or three had been doing so before the interview is suggestive that there is another side to the story about men and pornography. While it is important to document men's detachment from the ethically troubling features of the pornography they watch, it is equally important for ongoing research to explore in more detail men's resistance to sexism and misogyny within pornography, and ways that critical attention to its gender trouble are made possible for masculine subjects.

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Appendix One

Participants by interview (ages in bracket)

Interview 1: Jacob (18)

Interview 2: Ethan (20), Sam (20)

Interview 3: Lucas (23), Oliver (20)

Interview 4: Carlos (24)

Interview 5: Brody (30), Eli (32)

Interview 6: Eric (22), Brian (23)

Interview 7: Liam (21), Owen (21), Adam (21)

Interview 8: Ben (20), Ryan (22), Jos (21)

Interview 9: Ian (19), Chris (22)

Interview 10: Karl (25), Jack (24), Will (19)

Appendix Two

Transcription Notation Used

italics denote emphasis

, denotes very short pause

... denotes longer pause

. denotes train of speech is complete

- denotes train of speech ends abruptly

(...) denotes part of interview omitted

(laughs) brackets note non-verbal sounds, laughter and so on

(*Participant:*) bracketed turns denote short comments and overlapping speech