

# Agency as an Elephant Test for Feminist Porn: Impacts on Male Explicit and Implicit Associations about Women in Society by Immersive Pornography Consumption

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## **Abstract**

Given the availability and consumption of pornography on the Internet, questions of its influences on society are increasingly salient. Some pornographic content can be categorized by presenting 'female-friendly' and 'female-degrading' themes, which seem diametrically opposed. This study initially hypothesizes female-friendly pornography improves implicit and explicit male attitudes about women in society while female-degrading pornography damages them. It examines these hypotheses in part by tracking changes in outcomes of implicit association tests after immersive viewing of pornographic media in each category. Further mixed-method analyses indicate these hypotheses are broadly supported but suboptimal for addressing important questions in critical porn research. Building on work by Fritz and Paul (2017), the variable of female agency is shown to produce statistically significant semi-paradoxical results which challenge the assumptions underlying a facile categorization of pornography into female-friendly and female-degrading subtypes.

*Keywords:* Porn studies; feminist pornography; female-friendly; female-degrading; implicit association; agency; authenticity

With the advent of the Internet and streaming video, pornography consumption by men and women has increased dramatically (Böhm et al. 2015), especially among young males, among whom it is nearly universal (James 2011). Among other effects, this medium has increased opportunities for genre inclusion, including of feminist pornography production, and has had impacts upon porn-consumer agency. Concordantly, a growing corpus of research has shown that pornography may have a number of wide-ranging effects upon its consumers, who increasingly utilize the medium as a means of sex education (Albury 2014; Barker 2014; Böhm et al. 2015; Hald and Malamuth 2008; Hardy 2008). Consequently, pornographic consumption may significantly influence society, consumers, and individual sexual relationships (cf. MacDougall 2006). As Hardy notes,

It is widely recognized that porn has the power to move the body and to structure desire in new ways. ... The problem that now needs to be addressed is not so much that pornographic representation might exert an external and malign effect on the reality of lived sexual lives but that it is an increasingly significant part of that reality. (2008, 63)

Determining the impacts of pornography, however, can be difficult. For instance, although Hald and Malamuth find that *self-reported* effects of pornography consumption upon both women and men ‘in various areas, including their sexual knowledge, attitudes toward sex, attitudes toward and perception of the opposite sex, sex life, and general quality of life’ (2008, 614) are minimal, being slightly stronger and more positive in men and slightly dimmer and more negative in women, other researchers indicate more significant and potentially concerning effects (e.g., Attwood 2004; Barker 2014; Bridges et al. 2016; Jensen 2007; Langton 2009; Malamuth, Addison, and Koss 2000; Shaw 1999; Whisnant 2010; Wright et al. 2015) such as increased partner objectification, lower self-reported intimacy levels, and changes in relationship quality.

Pornography has, in fact, been a rich source of research by feminist theorists and psychological researchers over the past several decades (e.g., Barker 2014; Ciclitira 2004; Corsianos 2007; Dworkin 1980, 1985; Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988; MacKinnon 1989a, 1989b; Paasonen 2007, 2014; Smith and Attwood 2014; Steinem 1980), yet many relevant questions remain not only unanswered but surprisingly difficult to answer (Fritz and Paul 2017). Particularly, open questions center upon ways the consumption of various types of pornography may influence attitudes about women and women’s roles in society. Controversially, for instance, Padgett, Brislin-Slütz, and Neal (1989) showed that men who consume pornography tend to have more positive attitudes about women than their peers, but Shaw (1999) found that women perceive male consumers of pornography to hold more sexist attitudes about women, with more avid consumers of pornography having commensurately more sexist attitudes. More recently, Wright et al. (2015) identified potential links between consuming female-degrading pornography and analogous real-life outcomes in certain men. These observations agree with assessments by Whisnant (2010) and Jensen (2007), who indicate female-degrading themes in pornography contribute significantly to sexism in male consumers. Recent research has attempted to make sense of these apparent discrepancies, including attempts to outline and understand a *feminist* pornography (Fritz and Paul 2017; Liberman 2015; Taormino et al. 2013). Of particular interest, Susanna Paasonen (2007, 2011, 2013, 2014) has identified the connection between affective intensities and the influences pornography might have that reach beyond mere themes of ‘control, power, and gaze’ (2013, 531).

These complex and controversial debates about pornography—which is intrinsically complicated (cf. Cowan and Dunn 1994)—underscore the need for rigorous, detailed, and innovative research. Porn research can be uniquely difficult, however, both because scenes contain a wide variety of dynamic and interacting themes (Cowan and Dunn 1994) and because it must take into account the myriad complicating effects that come with understanding the subjectivity of images (cf. Kuhn 1994; MacDougall 2006). Fortunately, significant progress has been made in these overlapping domains, most relevantly by Paasonen (2007, 2011, 2013, 2014), drawing upon Eve Sedgwick (e.g., Sedgwick 2003; Sedgwick and Frank 1995). Quoting Sedgwick and Frank (1995), Paasonen observes, ‘Since cultural images and texts afford multiple interpretations by definition, studies of representation may slide into relativism where representations are deemed as “kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic”, depending on the context’ (2014, 137). Indeed, she notes,

The imageries of pornography actively play with, and try to evoke, such ambivalent entanglements in order to grab audience attention. An image may evoke disgust in one person, amusement in another, or sexual arousal and fury in yet others. There is no guarantee that an image evokes any particular sensations at all, and one person’s sensations vary over time, given that the relationship between sensing and making sense is both unpredictable and contingent. (2014, 139)

This inherently affective and subjective understanding of images and its relationships to the affective—along with the epistemological issues Paasonen (2014, 139) sees arising therefrom—form the basis for what pornographic performer Stoya identified as a lingering ‘elephant test’ for pornographic content (2014, 201; cf. Attwood 2002). It is these concerns the present study seeks to interrogate in greater depth and specificity.

As noted by McKee (2014), ‘porn studies can benefit from conversations about methodology across disciplines, and from more creative mixes of research methods with objects of study’ (61). It is this lacuna into which that the present study attempts to fit. It applies a mixed-methodology approach to allow the reliability of quantitative assessments to complement the validity of qualitative investigations to arrive at a more robust and penetrating analysis of the relationships between pornography consumption and male associations about women. Ultimately, it attempts to draw upon qualitative and measurable impacts of the subjective appreciations of images—particularly in terms of assessing female agency and scene authenticity—to add clarity to ongoing discussions about what leads pornography to be *feminist* pornography (e.g., Fritz and Paul 2017; Liberman 2015; Taormino et al. 2013; Young 2014).

Due to the disparity of results obtained by pornography researchers, and keeping with observations in thematic surveys, such as those done by Cowan and Dunn (1994), Fritz and Paul (2017), and Hambleton (2016), there are compelling reasons to suspect pornographic content-type can influence its potential social impacts. Specifically, drawing upon these studies and rich veins of literature regarding the negative impacts of sexual objectification of women, especially when associated with pornography (e.g., Attwood 2002, 2004; Ciclitira 2004; Corsianos 2007; Glascock 2005; Langton 2009; Leonhardt and Willoughby 2017; McKee 2005; Shaw 1999; Tylka and Kroon Van Diest 2015), we hypothesized that consuming pornography broadly construed as ‘female-friendly’ could improve implicit and explicit associations about women in male subjects while consuming pornography that can be labeled ‘female-degrading’ may damage those associations. Here, we present data challenging these facile categorizations and illustrate by example how deep, self-reflective feminist engagement with pornography can potentially help its consumers identify latent sexist themes.

### **Classifying Pornography: Female-Degrading, Female-Friendly, and Feminist**

Pornography is not monolithic. In the words of the respected pornographic performer Stoya, who echoes Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, ‘Pornography is most easily defined as an elephant test; we know it when we see it, but our individual definitions vary. Pornography contains a broad spectrum of aesthetics, sexual acts, and target audiences’ (2014, 201). This—which dramatically highlights the ways subjective understandings of images becomes central to studying pornography’s influences on its consumers—applies not only to pornography writ large (see Attwood 2002) but to individual pornographic scenes and even particular elements within scenes, which Cowan and Dunn (1994) indicated as a significant complication to their research. Classifying pornography can therefore be difficult even without the epistemological complications of subjective interpretation (cf. Paasonen 2014). In their words, ‘A major problem in research on degrading nonviolent X-rated pornography has been how to define “degrading (to women)” pornography, with different researchers using quite varied material as stimuli’ (Cowan and Dunn 1994, 12). Fritz and Paul (2017) faced similar difficulties in classifying ‘For Women’ scenes. Indeed, as Stoya (2014) alludes to and Fritz and Paul (2017) recognize, this categorization rarely has much to do with feminism or women and is largely as a marketing tool for mainstream studios (and Tube sites), which is doubly problematic as it is under this misleading rubric that many consumers access this material.

Still, it is necessary to classify pornography and its themes if we are to understand it and its impacts on society. Despite their negative stances on porn, observations from antipornography feminists provided cornerstone insights that enable our current approach. As summarized by Cowan and Dunn,

Antipornography feminist writers, such as Steinem (1980) and Dworkin and MacKinnon (1988), have contended that the inequality, domination, and objectification of women in pornography are degrading. ... All these definitions imply that the absence of apparent 'choice' is not the defining characteristic of degradation. That women participate in their own subordination in pornography does not remove its degradation. The issue of equality is central. All these definitions include the ideology, either politically or morally, that the woman is less than the man. (1994, 12)

Cowan and Dunn challenge this view, however, and add granularity by developing nine themes common within pornography. They assess these according to how degrading-to-women they may be. In general, their results support the contention that female subordination in pornography is typically perceived as female-degrading. For example, they found one of the most female-degrading themes in pornography is 'penis worship.' In this sense, ostensibly female-degrading pornography seems easily detected. Upon further examination, however, it may not be so clear when subjectivity comes into play: When is a female performer engaging in 'degrading' 'penis worship,' and when is she authentically and agentially (Fritz and Paul 2017; Liberman 2015; Young 2014) connecting to veridical enjoyment of her sex partner's penis? Furthermore, how can one tell (Paasonen 2011, 2014)?

Similarly, Fritz and Paul focus specifically upon what they term 'For Women' pornography, which they characterize as depicting 'less aggressive depictions of sexual acts and more focus on female pleasure' (2017, 640). These female-friendly themes partially comport with Cowan and Dunn's (1994, 18) noted relevance of depictions of female sexual arousal and orgasm. They also agree with Hambleton's analysis of female-friendly pornographic production under the Silk Labo label in Japan: 'According to Silk Labo films, women desire love, security, communication, and safety, as well as sex and pleasure' (Hambleton 2016, 434). Poignantly, Fritz and Paul (2017) focus primarily upon the role of sexual agency in establishing pornography as female-friendly. Female agency, they conclude, is indispensable to distinguishing pornography best classified as being merely 'For Women' from content more rightly recognized as *feminist*, in the sense developed by Taormino et al. (2013). This too, however, depends for the consumer upon subjectivity and thus an 'elephant test.'

For Taormino et al., 'Although Feminist pornography is also created to elicit sexual arousal and is sold for a profit, the creators also attempt to craft content to show agency and genuine pleasure as well as to challenge traditional gender roles and heteronormative beauty standards' (cited in Fritz and Paul 2017, 641). It also depends heavily upon agency in production. That is, 'the key distinction in Feminist pornography is the intent of the creation' (641). Hambleton (2016) partially problematizes Silk Labo's approach for the same reason, recognizing that female-friendly pornography, even when popular, is not necessarily *feminist* in orientation. Thus, female-friendly scenes tend to depict themes many women find arousing, but they may not carry feminist intent or impact. This intention gap led Liberman (2015) to conclude that many women turn toward feminist porn and away from female-friendly porn because the latter often contains many problematic themes for women, like taking on very feminine roles and sexual personae. Furthermore, it is this that leads Young (2014), in agreement with Stoya (2014, 201), to conclude that what ultimately defines feminist porn is not so much specific content as authenticity—in Stoya's words 'scenes where people are (or do a

very good job of appearing to be) excited and aroused by the scenario they are performing in and the partners they are performing with' (2014, 202)—which reflects agency in the performers. This, then, can reflect both content-oriented agency (the characters and scenes portrayed display agency) and production-oriented agency (the performers themselves can navigate the scenes, their roles in production, pay, etc., with agency), which complicates superficial analyses. This dual-mode appreciation of feminist agency in pornography is crucial to understanding the thrust of Stoya's insider's view and to understanding how off-set agency in production opens up opportunities for agentic participation in otherwise 'degrading' sexual practices (cf. Moorman 2017).

These factors therefore seem to create an easy 'elephant test' for determining when pornography is female-friendly or female-degrading, but simple attempts fail. For instance, pornographic scenes portraying usually strongly female-degrading themes such as female subordination, female depersonalization, violence against women, and penis/ejaculate worship may have been made explicitly with subversive feminist intent or may be subjectively perceived otherwise and therefore present as feminist (Fritz and Paul 2017). In this sense, the status of 'feminist' pornography renders simple categorizations facile while it remains difficult to categorize in itself (cf. Attwood 2002; McKee 2014).

### **Implicit Association**

According to *Harvard Project Implicit*, 'A *stereotype* is a belief that members of a group generally possess some characteristic (for example, the belief that women are typically nurturing). An *implicit stereotype* is a stereotype that is powerful enough to operate without conscious control' (original emphasis) (Project Implicit 2007b). These are contrasted against 'explicit attitudes and beliefs [which] are ones that are directly expressed or publicly stated' (Project Implicit 2007b). Implicit attitudes often arise in the form of associations; for instance, one might implicitly associate men with science and career and women with home and family. Moreover, these implicit associations may remain invisible from conscious awareness even while they form the bases for problematic stereotypes and prejudices, which can in turn reinforce systems of dominance and oppression in society (Greenwald and Banaji 1995; Greenwald et al. 2002; Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998). *Implicit* attitudes may also show a mismatch with *explicit* attitudes on the same subject (cf. Nosek 2007a, 2007b) for two reasons: first, 'a person may be *unwilling* to accurately report some attitude,' and second, 'a person may be *unable* to accurately report an attitude' (original emphasis) (Project Implicit 2007b) due to lacking conscious awareness of it. In this sense, assessing implicit attitudes about women in society as they are influenced by the consumption of pornography may provide a useful tool that yields insight into how to better classify pornographic content as feminist by means of *impact* rather than just intent, even if a clear definition remains elusive.

Usefully, implicit attitudes are reliably testable by means of an *implicit association test* (IAT) (Nosek, Greenwald, and Banaji 2005). *Project Implicit's* IATs mix concepts associated with one variable like 'gender' and another like 'suitability to science' and ask respondents to sort associated keywords as quickly as possible. As implicit attitudes are testable (Project Implicit 2007a), malleable, can change by exposure to various inputs (Blair, Ma, and Lenton 2001), and can be primed (Abelson et al. 1998), they represent a potentially fruitful site for research into whether priming by means of immersive pornographic consumption can influence underlying attitudes about women in society. (NB: *immersive* pornographic consumption is utilized to account for the point raised by Hald and Malamuth [2008] indicating shifts in attitudes from pornography consumption may be slight.) Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Wright et al. 2015), we began from a hypothesis that immersive consumption of female-friendly pornography may improve male implicit associa-

tions about women in society and that immersive consumption of female-degrading pornography may damage them. To assess this, we used the *Harvard Project Implicit* Gender-Science implicit association test (IAT) as a proxy for attitudes about women in society.

## Methods

Quantitative data for this study were obtained by taking the *Harvard Project Implicit* Gender-Science IAT test both before and after immersively viewing pornographic videos of each experimental type. Outcomes were coded on a scale ranging from -3 to +3 according to: 'strong' (+/-3), 'moderate' (+/-2), and 'slight' (+/-1) bias (positive values indicating bias toward associating females with science and negative values associating males with science), with 0 indicating no bias. Both (male) principal investigators (PIs) participated in collecting data, and similar data were obtained from two male volunteers trained in the experimental method and instructed on how to record and report their results. These volunteers were recruited directly by the PIs from among their peer group.

For the purposes of this experiment, attention was focused upon heterosexual pornographic videos, which can be the most degrading and thus most in need of critical investigation, although we note that it is less celebratory of queer sexual practice than most porn in the feminist genre. Videos were classified into two broad experimental types, 'female-friendly' and 'female-degrading,' by applying two filters, one gross and one fine. The gross filter selected pornographic videos from online 'tube' sites (particularly PornHub.com and Xvideos.com, among others) by means of their classifications or 'tags' (cf. Mazières et al. 2014), choosing to use these for-profit (and problematic for performers) interfaces to dictate classification because these are among the most common (and most in need of critical consideration) points-of-contact for many porn consumers. Under the 'female-friendly' heading, videos categorized on tube sites with tags such as 'female friendly,' 'for women,' 'popular with women,' 'romance/romantic,' 'love/ing,' 'erotic/a,' 'couple,' and 'glamcore' were chosen (see Fritz and Paul 2017). 'Female-degrading' videos carried tags such as 'facial' (Sun, Ezzell, and Kendall 2017), 'extreme' (cf. Jones 2015; cf. Purcell 2012), 'bukkake' (Sun, Ezzell, and Kendall 2017; cf. Vörös 2015), 'domination,' 'punishment,' 'rough sex,' 'tit/orgasm torture,' 'daddy,' 'old man/age play' (Cowan and Dunn 1994, 13, 16), 'blow/gangbang,' 'fetish,' 'leash/ed,' 'control,' 'gag/ging,' 'penis/cock worship' (Cowan and Dunn 1994, 13, 16), 'gape/ing,' 'peeing/pissing/golden showers,' 'forced,' 'bimbo,' 'slut,' and 'disgrace.' Additionally, videos presenting themes of women being sexually exploited in particular social dynamics were classified as female-degrading (for example, such themes are classified under scenario tags such as 'casting,' 'realtor,' 'boss,' 'secretary,' 'nurse,' 'babysitter,' 'maid,' and 'school/girl') (cf. Bridges et al. 2010; Cowan and Dunn 1994; Glascock 2005; Lodder 2016). Scenes depicting violence against women such as rape (and simulated rape) and murder were excluded from this study, not only for ethical reasons but because their mere status of 'extreme' does not satisfy the criterion of *female-degrading* (cf. Olson 2016). A finer filter was then applied to videos by a real-time subjective assessment of the content: If a video was insufficiently female-friendly or female-degrading in the subjective determination of the viewer, that scene would be terminated, and the viewer would progress to a new video within the experimental category.

Qualitative data were obtained in several ways. First, subjects recorded subjective feelings concerning their attitudes toward women in society during and immediately after pornographic viewing sessions. Second, subjective levels of arousal, including compulsive impulses to masturbate, were recorded and coded on a scale from zero to five as follows: zero (no arousal), one (slight arousal), two (obvious physiological arousal), three (distracting arousal), four (overwhelming arousal and spontaneous compulsion toward auto-

erotic touch), and five (acted-upon need to interrupt viewing session for autoerotic relief) (cf. Cowan and Dunn 1994; Paul 2009). Third, subjects were encouraged to note their subjective assessments of portrayals of apparent female agency and scene authenticity (desire to be involved in the scene and apparent chemistry between/among performers). These were then coded and assigned a score from zero (low agency/authenticity) to five (high agency/authenticity). Finally, subjects met with the PIs, who also met with each other, once per week during experimental periods for semi-structured interviews/discussions about their assessments of the experimental variables. These were recorded and subsequently transcribed and coded thematically.

From February 6, 2017, through February 9, 2018, each of the PIs undertook the following protocol approximately five days per week: (1) each took the *Harvard Project Implicit* Gender-Science IAT test to achieve a baseline measurement; (2) each proceeded to watch pornographic videos of one experimental type or the other, randomly determined each day by coin flip, for approximately two hours, making notes about levels of sexual arousal, compulsory impulses to masturbate, agency and authenticity, and salient attitudes about pornography or women in society; (3) immediately following pornographic viewing, each took the Gender-Science IAT test again and recorded the measurement; (4) after a break of two to four hours, the test-viewing-test protocol was repeated with pornography of the other experimental type.

Throughout the experimental period, this protocol resulted in PI1 viewing roughly 1056 hours of pornographic videos of the two experimental types (528 hours of each type) and taking the Gender-Science IAT 1056 times. PI2 similarly viewed approximately 992 hours of pornographic videos (496 hours of each type) and took the Gender-Science IAT 992 times. Forty-eight semi-structured discussion/interviews between the PIs occurred. In identical fashion, Volunteer 1 reported engaging in 60 hours of pornographic viewing, took 60 Gender-Science IAT tests, and provided three semi-structured interviews with the PIs. Volunteer 2 reported engaging in 220 hours of pornographic viewing, took 220 IAT tests, and provided seven semi-structured interviews. This resulted in a total of 2,328 IAT results corresponding to approximately 2,328 hours of pornographic viewing. This yielded 1,164 observations of how IAT results changed (or did not change) after two-hour blocks of immersive pornography viewing, with half (528) of these observations applying to female-friendly pornography and half to female-degrading pornography.

Qualitative data were analyzed by thematic analysis with a grounded theory approach. That is, a qualitative assessment of emergent thematic elements within the qualitative data provided insights not accessible by means of quantitative analysis (cf. McKee 2014). Emergent themes were sought in terms of overall subjective perception of relationships between the two types of pornography and their effects on attitudes about women in science/society and in how these variables were affected by subjective levels of arousal. This led to the incorporation of agency and authenticity as pertinent subjective variables after four weeks. These data were then compared against the quantitative data to create a more comprehensive analysis of the questions at the heart of this study: Does the viewing of pornography impact implicit male attitudes, associations, and biases about women or women in society/science? Does the type of pornography, female-friendly versus female-degrading, impact these attitudes? Does female-degrading pornography negatively influence male attitudes, associations, and biases about women in science/society? Does female-friendly pornography do the reverse? How do (apparent) female agency and authenticity impact these attitudes? Are these variations influenced by levels of sexual arousal in male consumers of pornographic videos? And, how does the variable of *feminist* themes in pornography effect these variables?

## Results

### *Quantitative*

In general, the quantitative data in this study are being used as benchmarks to attempt to rigorously track and lend clarity to trends in the qualitative data. It will therefore be presented in brief and included interstitially to punctuate the points being raised within the qualitative analyses below, as well as for framing. For instance, IAT results indicate slightly negative implicit associations between women and science among the (male) participants. This renders them typical according to available *Harvard Project Implicit* data for the Gender-Science IAT, which reports a 70%/19%/11% split between associations of male/neutral/female with science (accessible by completing the Gender-Science IAT).

Of particular interest, among the PIs there was a pronounced drift in overall IAT scores over the course of the study (See Figure). While IAT scores spanning any one viewing session rarely changed, PI1 saw a general decrease in all of his IAT scores as the study proceeded. This corresponded with his increased levels of arousal in viewing female-degrading scenes, which he 'got a taste for.' PI2, by contrast, saw a general increase in all of his IAT scores over the course of the study, and this corresponded most clearly with increased levels of sexual arousal corresponding to highly authentic scenes of any type. Specifically, these impacts were most overt when the IAT-change data sets were restricted to viewing sessions in which participants subjectively rated sexual arousal levels of 4 or 5 (indicating extreme arousal, compulsion to masturbate, and compulsion to masturbate to ejaculatory orgasm while viewing), implicating profound questions for the subject-as-researcher in terms of being both the aroused subject and the 'objective' researcher. Indeed, the clearest results were obtained when considering only those viewing sessions for which participants subjectively rated high levels of apparent female agency and scene authenticity (values of 4 or 5), regardless of the type of scene. These viewing periods also tended to be those producing the highest sexual arousal levels, consistent with a very strong correlation observed between these variables and sexual arousal levels ( $r=0.96$  and  $r=0.92$ , respectively). These results seem to corroborate Paasonen's (2014) recognition of the role affective responses play on subjective interpretations of pornographic images.

### *Qualitative*

All participants (randomly assigned labels of Subjects 1–4) subjectively assessed that immersive viewing pornography in two-hour blocks led them to hold more objectifying perceptions of women. These attitudes were associated with reduced perceptions that women are suited to professional careers, particularly in the sciences. Typical of expressed attitudes in this regard, Subject 3 remarked, 'After a while, you just see so much of it [porn] that it all runs together, and it's just another scene of bodies fucking. The *people* within those bodies just get lost.' When asked about associations between women and professional careers in light of this remark, he responded in a way that indicates immersive pornography viewing conditions him to think in pornographic terms: 'It's difficult after a while *not* to think of women doing anything except as it being some pretext for some kind of sex scene. You just see the setup for a porno everywhere you look.' That is, immersive pornography viewing induced an objectifying sexism in him.

Consistent with this, though results were statistically weak, female-friendly pornographic films typically left the participants reporting feeling warmly and positively about women, women's sexual pleasure, and women's potential to occupy roles other than that of sex object. Furthermore, female-friendly pornographic viewing seemed to increase the participants' awareness and perception of female needs, appeared to increase interest in being supportive and satisfying women's needs, and generally fostered a woman-supportive attitude in participants. "I just want to make sure she's pleased, you know, on every level," Subject 1 commented. On the other hand, female-degrading pornography elicited mostly negative responses on these subjective measures. Subject 4 at one point remarked, 'Unless her professional needs include getting brutally used for forty minutes by several men while waiting for her labs, I honestly have a hard time picturing



any woman doing anything “scientific” after I watch two solid hours of doctor-office-themed pornography including gangbangs.’ That same participant commented, ‘I don’t really like this super-hardcore stuff most of the time, and I think it’s kind of warping my mind’ (cf. Paasonen 2014). Of note, these are the very sexist themes that continually reproduce the virgin/whore dualism by which patriarchal sexism tends to interpret female sex and sexuality (cf. Moorman 2017).

In this sense, female-friendly pornography led participants to subjectively improved attitudes about women’s professional roles in society, whereas female-degrading pornography largely had the opposite effect. Three of the four participants indicated that watching large volumes of female-degrading pornography was making them, in the words of Subject 3, ‘an objectively worse person where it comes to what I wanna do with women’ (the fourth subject indicated that female-degrading pornography is his ‘strong preference in porn under most circumstances’). Paradigmatic of these three subjects, attitudes about women working in scientific contexts were, in Subject 1’s words, ‘too bizarre to contemplate for a while after watching two-hour blocks of porn where women are getting led around on leashes and slapped, apparently to multiple orgasms.’ Ultimately, this was telling, as it reveals that something (sexist) in our male bias which prevents us from seeing a sexually active and aggressive woman in a professional role such as a scientist. Indeed, a vital theme of the study becomes apparent: by simultaneously inhabiting the two conflicting subject positions, aroused subject and ‘objective’ researcher, it becomes clear that both the ‘objective’ scientific paradigm being employed, as well as the researchers employing it by these means, are taking a sexist view of women’s sexuality.

Nevertheless, qualitative analysis revealed a pronounced theme of seeing ‘degraded’ pornographic actresses as exhibiting more personal agency than their female-friendly peers (cf. Moorman 2017). To clarify this, subjects explained that women in female-friendly scenes act in compliance with expected gender roles and sexuality scripts that do not apply naturally to female-degrading sexual situations. A meta-level assessment of the agential choice of the performer may also play a role. As Subject 4 worded it, ‘In female-degrading scenes, you just have this sense that the women involved actively signed up for what’s going on and agreed to all of it, even if the guy or guys are choking and slapping her around or pissing on her. In the female-friendly scenes, you don’t get that. It’s more like the scene is all romantic and seductive, or spontaneous and playful, and like the scene is leading the women.’ Perceptions of greater female agency in female-degrading scenes, but not in female-friendly scenarios, arose consistently in all four subjects. In the words of Subject 1, ‘There’s a very odd thing going on here, though. After watching many, many hours of both kinds of porn, I have this weird feeling like the women in female-friendly scenes are just kind of being led around by social expectations of what sex is “supposed” to be like between men and women whereas the women in female-degrading pornography are really choosing what’s happening to them.’ Subject 2 (who prefers female-degrading pornography) commented on this observation directly, ‘I totally get that. I feel exactly the same way. I love it.’ Subject 1 offered the following analysis, ‘In female-degrading scenes, even though the women are being sorely misused, it’s usually clear that they’re in those situations because they want to be, like they chose that form of sexual expression and enjoyment for themselves. I don’t always get that in the female-friendly scenes.’ Subject 4 identified the potential role played by feminist porn, including the roles of both agency and authenticity, stating, ‘I get it in both cases [female-friendly and female-degrading], so maybe it’s when the scene is more pro-woman overall, regardless of content, it feels more like she’s real and acting how she wants.’

High sexual arousal during viewing generally amplified these sorts of assessments in all four participants (cf. Paasonen 2011, 2014). ‘When I get really into it, when it really gets me, it’s like the girl in the

female-friendly stuff is my girlfriend, and I want the best stuff for her, not just to have sex with her,' Subject 1 remarked, displaying a benevolent sexism born of self-reported 'raging' sexual desire, but only for very pretty performers. In contrast, usual sexism appeared as well, including when he said, 'But when the female-degrading scenes really turn me on, I just want to fuck her like a bimbo, to absolutely wreck her. I don't care who she is. I don't care what she wants. I want to use her like she wants to be used. It's like, "who cares what she wants?"' Subject 2 challenged this, however, by remarking that for him "it's even sexier in those cases knowing she wants to be treated like an object, where the guy fucks her like he doesn't care what she wants—but she really wants *that*." Ultimately, Subject 1 agreed on this point. For comparison, all participants noted that in sessions whereupon they experienced little or no sexual arousal (rated 1 or 2), they did not find the material engaging enough to change their explicit attitudes (cf. McKee 2014, 61). 'I just get kinda bored when it's not turning me on,' Subject 3 noted. 'Like, I just have to slog through a lot more of this until I find a scene I like or until the time's up.'

## Discussion

Consistent with McKee (2014), the qualitative data collected in this study provide a richer look into the interactions between pornography consumption and attitudes about women in society than the quantitative data. Nevertheless, the quantitative data was complementary. For instance, having developed 'a taste' for female-degrading scenes seemed to impact attitudes about women negatively while coming to enjoy authentic scenes, regardless of their content, seemed to improve these attitudes *longitudinally* (cf. Liberman 2015). Further, levels of sexual arousal while viewing, which strongly correlate with levels of perceived female agency and scene authenticity, seem to be variables that may lead pornography consumption to influence gendered attitudes in men. Overall, the data indicate that apparent female agency and scene authenticity seem to be the most relevant variables with regard to pornography's ability to influence how men view women in science/society. Consequently, insights into what constitutes *feminist* pornography and its potential impacts on male consumers are readily available. Indeed, these results may indicate more complexity or ambiguity in what constitutes 'feminist' pornography than simple assumptions allow. In particular, we entered this study assuming women that participate in extremely hardcore pornography were being abused, but consistent with what feminist BDSM writers have insisted for decades (e.g., Rubin 1992; Vance 1992), after viewing many hundreds of hours of it ourselves and reflecting upon the experience, we recognize there is the possibility for powerful female agency in these practices (Moorman 2017). This tells us that the existing social-scientific paradigms for classifying pornography are woefully inadequate and deeply problematic.

To wit, Fritz and Paul (2017) have done a thorough study of the distinctions between 'For Women' and feminist pornography and recognize depictions of female agency as a significant and underappreciated variable in scenes deemed 'female-friendly.' As a result, they call for 'an expanded definition of sexual agency building from previous work [that] should incorporate sexual efficacy/assertiveness and sexual embodiment into the construct' (2017, 642). In their words, 'sexual agency is the ability to make individual sexual choices, to vocalize individual desires, and to direct, demonstrate, and experience personal pleasure' (2017, 642). That is, in Fritz and Paul's view, 'feminist pornography is explicitly created to display agency and female pleasure' (2017, 642). Hambleton recognizes the same issue in her analysis of female-friendly pornography: 'While the [actors] demonstrate great sexual awareness and openness, the actresses in Silk Labo's [female-friendly] films behave passively during sex and portray an image of vulnerability. The [male actors] lead the sex scenes, even when female characters propel the storyline outside the bedroom' (2016,

437). In the present study, consistent with these observations, participants indicated that female-friendly porn scenes often depicted women acting in ways that are societally scripted as feminine, which did not enhance their perceptions of agency in female pornographic characters.

The feminist-porn distinction—which seemingly relies significantly upon female agency and performer authenticity—may serve as the crucial variable, thus forcing us to consider that common and naïve intuitions about ‘friendliness’ and ‘degradation’ in pornographic content might be facile. Indeed, it seems that much pornography that is superficially ‘female-friendly’ is, in fact, not (Fritz and Paul 2017; Hambleton 2016; Taormino et al. 2013). Similarly, at least some pornography that appears ‘female-degrading’ (say by depicting scenes of male dominance or female depersonalization [cf. Cowan and Dunn 1994]) can actually be *feminist* in orientation if it preserves female agency in production and enables a perception of female agency in the viewer. Put another way, a scene that casts and depicts a female performer who authentically begs her male counterpart to cover her face in his ejaculate as a form of cock/cum-worship may, in fact, be a feminist porn scene, despite easier assessments. The ‘elephant test’ for the consumer, then, may lie in subjectively determining when she is faking her enthusiasm (cf. Stoya 2014, 202). Thus, the data here reflect the trenchant observation made by Fritz and Paul (2017), Hambleton (2016), and Taormino et al. (2013) that female-friendly pornography isn’t always *feminist* pornography and, thusly, is not always genuinely friendly to women. Here, we add the statement that female-degrading pornography isn’t always *not-feminist* pornography and, thusly, is not always proper to consider as degrading to women. Finally, identifying and questioning this distinction can lead self-reflective (male) pornography consumers to identify, challenge, and disrupt elements of their own sexism.

## Concluding Remark

It is likely that immersive consumption of varying types of pornography can have significant impacts upon men’s attitudes about women in society, with pornography that is in some ways friendly to women improving male attitudes while pornography that depicts the degradation of women injuring them. That these influence male biases about women at the level of implicit association is also likely, especially when the consumption of pornography creates high levels of sexual arousal. This seems intrinsically linked to that which theoretically renders pornography *feminist* in orientation, including highly authentic scenes and those depicting high levels of female agency (cf. Stoya 2014, 202). The data in this study and in others support these contentions, and this agreement shines a light on the importance of relying upon both qualitative analytical methods as well as statistical inquiry when engaging in the study of porn and its many complexities.

As a direction for future research, this study illuminates the need to further refine definitions of what qualifies pornography as *feminist* in nature, not merely ‘female-friendly’ or even ‘female-degrading.’ Particularly, the data here indicate significant overlaps in certain themes such as female agency and scene authenticity that may not be readily apparent by a coarse categorization into ‘female-friendly’ and ‘female-degrading’ typologies. Much in this rests upon the affective and the subjective understanding of pornographic imageries. As such, we raise questions that could only be asked and answered from within the context of porn studies and that may only be answerable by ‘elephant test’: If a woman expresses her agency by being dragged around on a leash, choked, bent over to be used and abused, and ejaculated upon by a half a dozen men who repeatedly call her a ‘worthless little cum-slut,’ and she finds veridical sexual fulfillment or intends subversiveness in such a circumstance—without feeling exploited or subordinated by it—how are we not to see this as consistent with feminist ideology? And ultimately, is *that* the variable that acts subversively in society and fosters more positive attitudes about women in society?

## Ethical approval

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institution and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments, including standard IRB approval which was obtained for this study.

Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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