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# **Enjoyment, Exploration and Education: Understanding the Consumption of Pornography among Young Men with Non-Exclusive Sexual Orientations**

## **Abstract**

This qualitative research examines the influence of pornography consumption on young men with non-exclusive sexual orientations. Drawing on 35 in-depth interviews with young men from an elite university in the Northeastern United States, we examine how pornography was experienced as a leisure activity to be consumed in free time. Rather than focusing on the potential harms of pornography, we use an inductive analytic approach to explore the broader range of experiences that participants had, since the time they first consumed pornography. We demonstrate that pornography had educational benefits for these young men, related to their sexual desires, emerging sexual identities and for developing new sexual techniques. This study is part of a growing body of research that seeks to develop a holistic understanding of pornography in society, addressing the absence of the lived experience of the consumer in most pornography research.

**Key words: consumer; leisure; men; porn; pornography; sexuality**

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## Introduction

Pornography is a central site for debates about the regulation of sexual expression in society. Feminist writing in the 1970s and 1980s developed a critique of pornography that claimed social problems, such as rape and gender inequality, were perpetuated through forms of pornography that were equivalent to violence against women (e.g. Dworkin, 1979). A substantial body of research has explored the negative effects of consuming pornography (e.g. Flood, 2009; Klaassen and Peter, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2003), at the expense of other outcomes that could occur (McKee, 2012); we call this focus on potential harms the *negative effects paradigm*, and it is pervasive in the study of pornography.

However, Attwood (2011) contends that a paradigm shift has begun in how pornography is studied: an increasing amount of research eschews a behaviourist approach that looks for causal links to negative outcomes in favour of one that recognizes the complexity of pornography and the importance of context in terms of its actors, social hierarchies and consumer groups (e.g. McKee, 2012; Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015). Even so, there remains a dearth of qualitative accounts regarding the consumers of pornography.

This study addresses this absence by analysing in-depth interviews with 35 young adult men with non-exclusive sexual orientations from an elite university in the Northeastern United States. Adopting an inductive analytic approach to understand their uses of pornography, we find that internet pornography consumption was a feature in all participants' adolescence, and that it was framed as an ordinary and unproblematic component of their lives. Pornography was understood as a form of pleasure to be consumed during free time, and we apply the conceptualization of sex as a leisure activity to understand this engagement with pornography. Participants also used pornography to explore their sexual desires, emerging sexual identities and for developing new sexual techniques. As such, we contribute to sociological understanding of the nature of pornography in society by examining the

experiences of pornography consumption by young adult men whose sexual identities do not fit into the monosexual norms of U.S. culture.

### **The Changing Social Context**

Significant social change related to sexuality has occurred over the past 30 years. Attitudes toward non-marital sex have liberalized (Twenge et al., 2015), with a fundamental shift in society regarding the rationale for sexual intercourse away from procreation toward pleasure (Treas et al., 2014). This focus on sexual pleasure is particularly visible in many youth cultures, where casual sex in the form of “hooking up” is a normalized behaviour (Bogle, 2008). Furthermore, there is increased discussion of non-normative sexual behaviours, such as kink activities (Wignall and McCormack, 2015).

As part of these trends, pornography has become more accessible online and has been normalized in many aspects of popular culture—a process McNair (2013: 3) calls ‘the pornographication of mainstream culture’. Studies estimate that pornography is consumed by between 86-96% of men, with only slightly lower rates for women (Rosser et al., 2012). While General Social Survey data finds lower rates of pornography consumption (at 34% in 2010), this can be explained through a combination of a broad sample that does not account for age and thus generational differences (i.e. older people have lower rates of pornography consumption), alongside a continued unwillingness among many adults to admit to consuming pornography (Wright, 2013).

A key driver of this increased consumption is the role of the internet (Edelman, 2009). Owens et al. (2012: 100) contend that it has allowed people of all ages to consume sexually explicit content, and that this is increasingly common for adolescents. Paasonen (2010) also highlights how the internet has facilitated a rise in amateur pornography, where people upload self-recorded videos of themselves having sex to websites such as xtube.com. She

highlights how this user-created content provides a new type of pornography that transcends some of the feminist debates around coercion, objectification and the morality of pornography (e.g. Dworkin, 1979).

Even so, the increased consumption of pornography has occurred alongside persistent mainstream discourses of its ‘cultural harm’ (McGlynn and Rackley, 2007). The multiplication and intensification of these debates within academia is manifest in the new discipline of *porn studies* (Smith and Attwood, 2014), with an academic journal of the same name. Research on pornography has expanded significantly, moving from a near-total focus on the potential harms of pornography to a broader interest in the social dynamics of how pornography is consumed and the variegated ways in which people interpret and process their experiences of viewing it (Comella and Tarrant, 2015; Weinberg et al., 2010).

### **Pornography Consumption and the Negative Effects Paradigm**

The predominant strand of research on pornography has examined how it negatively affects people’s sexual behaviours and their attitudes toward sex (Antevska and Gavey, 2015; Brown and L’Engle, 2009)—something we call the negative effects paradigm. It is argued that pornography transmits a script for sexual intercourse that is acquired through consumption of pornography, which then has an effect when the viewer applies it to their own sexual behaviour (Wright, 2013). The contention is that ‘via social learning, those who view pornography incorporate the actions they view into their own sexual scripts’ (Braithwaite et al., 2014: 112). Thus, where pornography is readily available and education about sexual intercourse more broadly is sparse, it is argued that pornography can have a significant impact on how sexual intercourse is understood and enacted.

In the negative effects paradigm, studies have documented how exposure to pornography is associated with a range of sexual activities deemed ‘risky’, including anal sex

or sex with multiple partners, with the notion that prevalence of these behaviours will increase when pornography is consumed (Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009; Sun et al., 2014). Particularly problematic in this argument are the assumptions underpinning the conceptualisation of ‘risky’ sex, where risk is associated with particular types of sexual activity with no attention paid to safe-sex practices. Similarly, it has been argued that viewing pornography depicting rape will lead to increased acceptance of rape myths, violent sexual fantasies and perpetrating rape (Donnerstein et al., 1987; McGlynn and Rackley, 2007); although there is empirical research refuting these claims (e.g. Diamond et al., 2011; Ruddock, 2015)

The negative effects paradigm is particularly evident in research that examines adolescents’ use of pornography (Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009; Flood, 2007). One branch of this research examines ‘involuntary’ or ‘unwanted’ experiences of pornography, where adolescents see pornographic material without intentionally seeking it out, as it is argued that pornography has worse effects when young people see it accidentally (Mitchell et al., 2003; Rideout, 2001). Yet pornography is also framed as damaging when adolescents desire to consume it: while arguing that the risks of pornography use among young people may be ‘overstated’, Ybarra and Mitchell (2005: 485) argue that ‘those who report intentionally seeking pornography may be facing multiple challenges, including delinquent behavior and substance use’.

In a qualitative study of 23 ethnic minority youth, Rothman et al. (2014) report pornography as an ordinary component in participants’ daily lives. Yet because ‘using pornography as a model for sexual activity had negative consequences for some females in the sample’, they contend that pornography had damaging consequences for young people more broadly, despite not being in-line with the evidence provided in the study:

[T]he ubiquity of pornography on the Internet and proliferation of Web sites where users post their own amateur videos may be increasing the likelihood that minors create [Sexually Explicit Material], exploit sexual partners, disseminate sexually explicit images of underage peers, and pressure their dating partners to engage in sexual acts that could hurt or upset them. (p. 8).

However, despite the predominance of the negative effects paradigm in the literature, research is starting to contest it and argue for a broader examination of the impact of pornography on those who consume it (McKee, 2010; Ruddock, 2015).

### **Contesting the Negative Effects Paradigm**

While dominant in pornography research, the negative effects paradigm faces critique on a number of fronts (Comella and Tarrant, 2015; Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015). Most significantly, a growing body of empirical research on pornography consumption, both among adolescents and more generally, rejects findings that it has negative effects. For example, Luder et al. (2011) examined the relationship between exposure to online pornography and risky sexual practices among young people. Using multiple data sets, they found that exposure to online pornography did not result in greater sexual behaviours deemed risky. Similarly, Sinković et al. (2013) found no correlation between pornography consumption at an early age and risky sexual behaviours in Croatia. Indeed, Owens et al.'s (2012) systematic literature review of the impact of internet pornography on adolescents found that the evidence for correlations between pornography consumption and a range of social and health outcomes were inconclusive, with little replicability across studies.

The lack of broader empirical support for the negative effects paradigm can be attributable to methodological and theoretical flaws. Methodologically, negative effects have only been found in laboratory conditions (SSSS, 2007), yet these studies lack ecological

validity. McKee (2007) highlights that while pornography tends to be consumed on a voluntary basis for pleasure in naturalistic settings, participants in laboratory research do not have control over: the type of pornography they watch; how long they consume it for; whether they view it alone or with others; and whether they are allowed to masturbate (they frequently are not). As such, negative effects from laboratory studies likely reflect the *context* of the consumption and not the *content* of the pornography.

Furthermore, there are significant issues with the theoretical framework of the negative effects paradigm, which has tended to apply a simplified form of sexual script theory. In its broader context, sexual script theory recognizes the complexity of how cultural scenarios of sexuality intersect with people's interactions (Simon and Gagnon, 1986)—sexual scripts are not passively learned and recited, but are rather *actively* interpreted by individuals in sophisticated ways involving agency and contestation (Frith and Kitzinger, 2001). Yet scripting theory in the negative effects paradigm assumes a causal relationship between consumption of pornography and the activation of scripts present within it, with scant attention paid to how the person engages with the pornography (Wiederman, 2015). As such, the theoretical foundation of the negative effects paradigm does not enable the required complexity to understand pornography consumption, and further research is needed to develop a sophisticated understanding of how people consume pornography.

### **A New Approach for Studying Pornography Consumption**

In order to move beyond the negative effects paradigm, McKee (2012) called for pornography to be conceived as a form of entertainment. He argued this would establish a different research agenda than one which is focused on potential negative effects. A growing body of work connects sexual practice with leisure frameworks in order to understand the social nature of sexuality (Wignall and McCormack, 2015; Newmahr, 2010). This enables

examination of sexuality that moved beyond a medicalized model where sex is viewed through a lens of risk, to one where pleasure and risk are balanced within a complex social context. Conceptualized as ‘leisure sex’ (Attwood and Smith, 2013), sex is viewed as a form of leisure activity (Stebbins 2001) rather than a ‘risky’ behaviour or social problem.

Central to leisure studies is the notion that it can take *casual* or *serious* forms. *Serious leisure* involves activities that require significant time and energy, such as surfing and rock-climbing. Stebbins (2001: 305) defined an act of *casual leisure* as a ‘relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it’. It includes passive entertainment, eating or drinking, and social play. Stebbins (1997, 2001) identified six key characteristics of a casual leisure activity, which consist of it being: 1) immediately and intrinsically rewarding; 2) relatively short-lived; 3) pleasurable; 4) sociable; 5) relieves boredom; and 6) requires little or no special training to enjoy.

Independent of whether particular sexual activities are casual or serious leisure, qualitative data on pornography consumption must always consider the context and sexual circumstances of the person consuming it. In this way, and drawing on data from an online survey of over 5,000 young people, Smith et al. (2015) show that young people consume porn for a variety of reasons, including: as a leisure activity in its own right; as an erotic experience; out of boredom; and to explore sexual identity. Similarly, interviewing high school students, Mulholland (2013) found that young people negotiate pornography in complex ways, demonstrating an ability to parody it while watching it for a range of purposes including sexual satisfaction. Thus, social context – which includes demographics such as age, gender and sexual orientation – must be considered when understanding the consumption of pornography.

## **Aims and Objectives**

In this exploratory study, we provide an empirically grounded framework by which to understand pornography consumption as a form of leisure activity. Examining the experiences of consuming pornography of 35 young men who have non-exclusive sexual orientations, we demonstrate that pornography is best understood as a leisure activity in their lives. We then explore the educational benefits of this consumption, related to their sexual desires, identities and learning new sexual techniques. We situate these findings in participants' contexts as young adults with non-exclusive sexual orientations and explore the consequences this has for future research and social policy.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Unlike much research on pornography consumption (e.g. Vörös, 2015), this research is part of a broader project: on the experiences of young men with sexually non-exclusive orientations from an elite university in the Northeastern United States. An emergent body of research documents the diversification of sexual identity labels (Kuper et al., 2012), including terms such as 'mostly gay' and 'mostly straight' to understand those who do not identify as exclusively gay or exclusively straight (Savin-Williams, in press; Vrangalova and Savin-Williams, 2012). Yet these studies are primarily from a developmental psychology perspective, and there is a lack of sociological literature on these groups' social experiences in a monosexist culture. As such, this article is part of the broader project of providing a sociological evidence-base from which to understand the lives of young men with non-exclusive sexual orientations.

Given this, a key criterion for eligibility in the study was that participants did not identify as 'exclusively heterosexual' or 'exclusively homosexual', as measured on a Kinsey-type 9-point scale of sexuality (see Savin-Williams, 2014 for discussion of issues with

Kinsey-type scales). The participants in this study were male, aged between 18 and 32 (mean 21). All participants had their adolescence in the United States. Participants studied a range of majors across the university, with no bias toward any degree. While the elite nature of the university means that students share high educational qualifications, the system of grant support available to students from within the State meant there was a diversity of class backgrounds.

Approximately 75% were White, with one African American, three Asian American, and five multiracial individuals. Participants were asked to describe their ethnicity, and the first three categories listed were those used by participants, while the final category represents a number of terms (including multiracial). Ethnicity did not feature in the research questions of the broader study, and the relatively diverse ethnicity sample occurred naturally from the recruitment process.

Participants were recruited through posters and flyers disseminated through various academic schools, residence halls, cafés, social venues, email lists, and Facebook groups. The title of the advert was ‘Mostly Straight, Bi or Mostly Gay?’ and informed participants about the broad aims of the study, contact details of the lead researcher, and that participants would be remunerated \$10 for participation. There was no course credit. Eligibility criteria were that participants had to be male, have a non-exclusive sexual orientation and study at the university where data collection occurred.

### *Procedures*

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to develop a rich understanding of participants’ sexual identities, behaviours and lives. Interviews averaged 65 minutes, and some were considerably longer. Participants were asked questions on a number of topics related to their life experiences, sexual identities and behaviours. Questions on pornography

included: why they watched it, their attitudes toward it, their history of watching pornography, how they accessed it, frequency of consumption, and their perspectives of how it impacted upon them. Several times pornography also arose as a topic when participants responded to other more general questions. Given the semi-structured nature of the interviews, a range of follow up questions were asked that varied between interviews. Religious upbringing was not part of the interview schedule, but was discussed when raised by participants.

All interviews were undertaken by the lead author. They occurred in a private interview room, were digitally recorded, and transcribed by the second author. All participants provided written informed consent immediately prior to interview, and ethical approval was gained from the first author's university, which was accepted by the university where data were collected.

A modified grounded theory approach to analysing the data was employed (Charmaz, 2014). This involved both authors coding the transcripts independently, using constant comparative methods. Emerging codes were discussed and developed into focused codes. Then, undertaking a form of analysis Dey (1993) calls middle-range coding, we continued this analysis alongside deeper engagement with the literature, combining our own themes with existing frameworks to develop a theory grounded in the data and engaged with existing debates (Urquhart, 2013). These theoretical themes were then related back to original transcripts to confirm internal coherence (Charmaz, 2014). It is through the process of coding, logical abstraction and inter-rater reliability that rigour is assured (Charmaz, 2014). Data are retrospective in nature, and this has been shown to be valid for research on sexual minority experiences (Rivers, 2001). There is no evidence to suggest that participants were misrepresenting their experiences and beliefs.

## **Results: Early Pornography Consumption**

Participants watched pornography from an early age, with the average self-reported age of first consumption being 14 years old and the youngest aged 8. While this is slightly older than other research has suggested (Brown and L'Engle, 2009), the mean age may be skewed in our qualitative sample because several participants had their access to pornography restricted by their parents. For example, James said, 'I couldn't watch it at home. Our computer is right in the middle of the living room and we have a big window and my aunt lives across the street'. Peter had a similar experience, saying, 'I shared a room with my sister and a computer with my family. So the only representations [of sex] I saw were on TV'. Demonstrating a persistent desire to consume pornography, Matthew regularly had his access blocked by his religious parents:

I started watching it in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I had no idea what a browsing history was. That's how my parents found out, and they were very angry...I watched it again in 9<sup>th</sup> grade and got caught again. Then after I learned how to clear browsing history, they got something that swept the hard drive. In 11<sup>th</sup> grade I thought this was unfair, so I went and bought a small tablet for gaming and for porn.

Participants who watched pornography at an earlier age were able to do so because they had access to their own computer or privacy in their internet use. For example, Grant said, 'I started watching porn around the time I started jacking off [masturbating], maybe 11 or 12. I had a computer so it was easy'. Similarly, Zach said, 'We have a desktop that was in my room originally, so I watched it on that'. However, he added that this pornography consumption was interrupted by fears about being discovered: 'I got nervous because every time my family used it I was worried that they would find something that I hadn't deleted'.

Participants kept their viewing of pornography hidden from their parents. The deleting of browser history was a common way to do this. For example, Miguel said, 'I liked porn, but

I was always nervous that my parents would see it. I always deleted my history'. In addition to deleting their browser history, participants strategized about when to watch pornography: Luke said, 'I knew my mum's schedule. I had a solid two hours between the time I got home from school and the time she got home from work. Or I would just do it while she was sleeping'.

Contrary to social fears about the loss of 'childhood innocence', concerns about early pornography use were absent from participants' narratives (Mulholland, 2013). 21 of the 35 participants discussed watching pornography from a young age and explicitly stated it was not problematic, with several making reference to it being helpful. For example, Alan said, 'Porn was a good thing. It helped me feel less confused about myself'. Marcus saw pornography as an ordinary part of sexual development, arguing it was 'the common way for boys to transition into being sexual'. Challenging the notion that pornography consumption promotes early sexual activity (Brown and L'Engle, 2009), he added, 'I had this outlet so I didn't feel like I needed to have sex'. Similarly, Luke described how he used pornography as a way of delaying having sex, saying, 'It wasn't that I was denying sex to myself, I was denying it to other people'. No participant raised concerns about their consumption of pornography. Indeed, rather than being a source of concern, pornography was an ordinary component of early sexual experience that was viewed positively by the majority of participants, and neutrally by the others.

### **Pornography Consumption as a Leisure Activity**

In order to examine whether pornography consumption can be viewed as a leisure activity, we draw on six characteristics of casual leisure (Stebbins, 1997, 2001). These include: 1) being immediately and intrinsically rewarding; 2) relatively short-lived; 3) pleasurable; 4) sociable; 5) relieve boredom; and 6) require little or no special training to enjoy. Using this

definition, it is possible to evaluate whether framing pornography consumption as a leisure activity maintains heuristic utility.

First, all participants used porn as a means of sexual gratification, corresponding with it being *immediately and intrinsically rewarding*, as well as *relatively short-lived*. When asked why he watched pornography, Stuart exemplified participants' responses when he said, 'I think the main reason is getting off. That's the end goal'. All participants discussed sexual gratification at some point, with over three quarters stating it was central to why they watched it.

Speaking to the *pleasurable* aspect of consuming pornography, and in addition to sexual gratification, some participants also discussed the importance of 'quality' in their usage. For example, Rory said, 'I will think, "I'm going to find a good video and take a little more time with this and get some release and feel good about that"'. Luke echoed the preferences for 'good porn', adding, 'I like porn with a story. Straight porn generally has no good backstory. You can see the interactions between the guys in gay porn - they have some sort of relationship and a basis for why they're having sex'.

Several participants discussed particular tastes they had related to pornography, including favourite websites—cockyboys.com was particularly popular. Matthew said, 'Maybe I'm a porn snob, but I prefer Jake Bass [a gay male porn star associated with cockyboys.com] because it's a lot less corny. I hate porn with "porn talk"'. Describing the type of pornography he gains most pleasure from, Zach said:

I like cockyboys.com. There's a lot of foreplay, with little kink. And they're romantically involved...First they hang out for a weekend and socialize, and at the end of all that, then they record the porn. I feel like that makes it a lot more real.

John also discussed authenticity, saying, 'When porn is real, that turns me on more than fake shot pornography. I like it when it's real people who have real personalities on camera'. The

use of authenticity to explain pornography preference is interesting as it is a concept that has been used to legitimize acceptable forms of behaviour in other online spheres (Morris and Anderson, 2015), and might speak to identity management practices more broadly. Nonetheless, discussion of preference of pornography, alongside its quality, highlights the pleasurable nature of its consumption.

Related to the *sociable* aspect of casual leisure, while all participants consumed pornography individually, some participants watched it with others as a bonding activity. Talking about how he would share pornography with his friends, Rory said, ‘Normally we talk about it in a joking manner, like, “this is the funniest video I’ve seen”. Some people here are really open about talking about porn, especially ones they’re into or they think are funny’. Similarly, Brendan said:

I've had a few friends joke around. I have one gay friend and one straight friend here, and one is getting me to watch more straight porn and the other is getting me to watch more gay porn. I feel like they're playing tug of war with my sexuality. I find it funny.

Discussing a female friend, Fraser said, ‘If we were bored and had nothing to do, we would look up obscure porn and just watch it. Like Japanese tentacle porn. Crazy weird stuff. It was more as a comedy thing than for attraction’. The shared humour when viewing the videos is a clear example of social bonding (Anderson, 2014).

Pornography was also used constructively as a way of *relieving boredom* or aiding productivity (Smith et al., 2015). For example, Luke said, ‘I have watched porn and not done anything, but I was really bored and thought, “why not?” It was there’. In order to help him concentrate, Rory said, ‘I will watch porn and jerk off if I am really stressed so I can get it out of the way to do some homework or something’. While we do not discuss the *lack of training* needed to enjoy pornography, this is evident from how participants started consuming it from an early age as discussed in the previous section. Accordingly, these narratives highlight how

pornography can be considered a recreational leisure activity, facilitating pleasure, social bonding, and relieving boredom, along with physical and emotional stimulation.

### **Educational and Exploratory Uses of Pornography**

While participants highlighted the use of pornography for sexual gratification and as a leisure activity, it also served as an educational tool (Albury, 2014). When the educational aspects of pornography are recognized in research, it is often used as a rhetorical device to critique the paucity of school-based sex education (Sun et al., 2014). Yet participants spoke positively about their use of pornography, describing three ways it was educational: exploring sexual desire; exploring new sexual activities; and as a means of understanding their own sexual identity. Here, participants' sexual context of maintaining non-exclusive sexual orientations is clearly important, and so we also include in this section participants' sexual identity (e.g. mostly gay) as they marked on the 9-point scale (see Savin-Williams, 2014).

Some participants described exploring different genres of pornography out of 'curiosity'. When Adam, mostly straight, was asked about gay pornography, he said, 'I clicked on it out of curiosity. While I'm scrolling down it's like "that's where it is, I should click it."' Similarly, Rory, mostly straight, said, 'I watched gay porn for very short periods of time. It was definitely "let's see if I like this"'. This was true of participants across the sexuality spectrum. For example, Ian, mostly gay, said, 'I clicked on gay porn because I saw it, thought, "What's that?" and it worked for me... It was fun exploring different types'.

All participants initially watched pornography aimed at heterosexuals, with a progression to finding pornography tailored to their sexual preferences. Furthermore, participants reported their choice of pornography changing as they gave greater recognition to their same-sex sexual desires. For example, Joseph, mostly gay, said, 'When I first started watching porn, it was mostly heterosexual. But I noticed I was always more interested in the

guy. These days I mostly watch gay porn'. Matthew, mostly gay, said, 'I started to watch straight porn, and then moved to bi porn. I was looking more at the guy, so I followed the link to gay porn and was like "Whoa, that's hot"'.

Many participants found that pornography was helpful in intellectually processing their sexual desires. When asked about how pornography related to his understanding of his sexual desires, Miguel, mostly gay, responded, 'I hope that it did help... I was looking at the guys in porn to figure out if I liked girls'. Similarly, Marcus, bisexual leaning gay, said, 'I remember watching straight porn and I think that's when it started being "I'm jealous of that girl" and progressing into "I'm attracted to that guy"'.

Pornography consumption also provided a safe space to explore sexual desires. Lee, mostly gay, commented how he 'went to porn for an emotionally neutral location to explore'. He added, 'It was very self-educational trying to figure out what was going on in my brain.' Similarly, Bill, mostly gay, said, 'I started looking at porn when I thought "let's do it, let's figure this out." ... I wanted to finally think about it, not be ashamed of it and see how it all worked'. These narratives highlight the importance of pornography for sexual minorities, not least because of the sexual visibility it provides in a broader heterosexist and monosexist culture that stigmatizes gender non-exclusive sexual desires (Anderson and McCormack, in press).

Participants also used pornography to understand their sexual identities. In receiving confusion and sometimes stigma when they discussed their non-exclusive sexuality, pornography provided a platform for self-confirmation of their sexual identity. 25 out of the 35 participants found useful in this way. For example, when asked if pornography helped him think about his sexual identity, Luke, bisexual leaning gay, said, 'I'd say it made it more definite. There is no way I can enjoy gay porn as much and still be straight'. Matthew, mostly gay, said, 'I've used porn to help me think about my sexuality. That's why I think I'm more

gay than anything else, because it has been more gay porn. I've looked at other porn, but I don't really like it'. When asked if pornography was helpful in understanding his sexuality, Thomas, bisexual leaning straight, said:

I think so. If I didn't understand my ideas through porn, I wouldn't have explored them in real life...I might have had some mixed feelings down the line, but porn helped me to come to an understanding and clarify my sexual attraction.

However, not all participants found pornography initially helpful for consolidating an understanding of their sexual identities. For example, Fraser, bisexual, said:

It was confusing watching both straight and non-straight porn because it made me wonder if it was a phase; could I enjoy straight, lesbian and gay porn? It made me more confused. I wasn't able to fit into a binary with one direct label on it.

Stephen, bisexual leaning gay, reflected this confusion adding, 'For a long time, it was just a mess'. We attribute this confusion to their development within a monosexist culture where non-exclusive sexual behaviours in adolescence are often framed as being part of a "phase" before returning to exclusive heterosexuality, rather than a legitimate exploration of sexual desire (Anderson and McCormack, in press). While it may have confused participants at the time, they argued that retrospectively it was beneficial. For example, Brendan, bisexual, said, 'Looking back at it, it definitely made things more clear that I did like guys. It has helped. The confusing part was me not wanting to accept it'.

The final way that participants described pornography as educational for them was as a means of exploring new sexual activities and techniques (Weinberg et al., 2010). For example, Stuart said, 'I start to get ideas in my head like "maybe I like this", so I search for different things. Or I might just happen to come across them. I have discovered sexual preferences that I have in that way'. When asked why he watched pornography, Edward said, 'Mainly getting off. Also, curiosity and ideas for the future. Sort of like, "oh that would be

interesting to try at some point”’. Miguel described how he would incidentally come across new sexual activities in his pornography consumption, saying, ‘If I saw something new I might think, “oh that’s a good idea”, but I wouldn’t *search* for things to do’.

This exploration of sexual activities extended to kinky behaviours. For example, Thomas said:

It started with lesbian porn... but it moved to the more fetish stuff, BDSM, about 14 or 15. Rather than focusing on the submissive male, I was really intrigued by the dominant male in those scenes. Then it went into the gay BDSM porn.

When asked if pornography was used to explore sexuality, Lee, into a kink known as furry play (Soh and Cantor, 2014), said, ‘Absolutely. There was this progression of looking at porn and then I would catch myself looking at gay porn and furry porn’. Richard discussed a form of Japanese pornography that focuses on oversized disembodied penises: ‘Futanari porn, dick girls. I really do like it, and I don’t know why. I don’t know if it is because of the penis as its own thing or because it is always in the context of femininity’.

Richard was open about his interest in kinky pornography with his heterosexual female partner. He said, ‘My girlfriend knows and is fine with it. She watched it but it didn’t do anything for her’, adding ‘She’s shown me stuff she likes, and that’s been fun exploring too’. While most participants did not discuss in detail how pornography mapped onto their romantic and sexual relationships (a limitation of the broader project focus not being pornography), those who spoke about romantic partners commented they were able to discuss pornography openly. In summary, while using pornography as a tool for learning in educational settings may be problematic, some things cannot be explored in the classroom and participants’ narratives highlighted the positive aspects of pornography in understanding their sexual lives.

## **Discussion**

This research has drawn on interviews with 35 young men with non-exclusive sexual orientations to examine how their consumption of pornography has influenced their lives and identities. Adopting an inductive analytic approach, our findings support the growing body of research that problematizes what we have called the negative effects paradigm (Ruddock, 2015), where studies explore the potential harms associated with pornography consumption to the exclusion of other possible outcomes. Instead, our participants consumed it as a leisure activity, and found it educational in a number of ways—supporting McKee’s (2012) contention that pornography should be viewed as a form of entertainment rather than as a potential harm.

While exploratory in scope, this research highlights key ways in which pornography should be considered as a leisure activity. Stebbins’ (1997) characteristics of casual leisure accurately describe the ways in which participants discussed their consumption of pornography. In addition to a source of sexual gratification, pornography was also used to relieve boredom, bond with friends, and as a source of pleasure. Importantly, our open-ended questions meant that there were numerous opportunities for social harms related to pornography to be raised—yet the only problems related to parents finding out about pornography consumption. The negative effects of pornography consumption for our participants were not related to the content of the pornography but how their parents reacted to them watching it.

Also of significance is the educational value that participants ascribed to their pornography consumption. Participants valued the ability it provided to understand their non-exclusive sexual desires and identities, as well as exploring new sexual acts. This may be particularly useful for those with non-exclusive sexualities because their desires do not fit within dominant typologies of sexuality (Savin-Williams, 2014). As a result of the skewed

focus of the negative effects paradigm, we contend that the educational benefits of pornography consumption are currently an under-examined component of contemporary research on pornography and require further explicit study (see also Weinberg et al., 2010).

Relatedly, while research tends to examine how pornography consumption can lead to ‘risky’ sexual practices (e.g. Braun-Courville and Rojas, 2009), it may have had positive outcomes for some participants. There is evidence that pornography consumption may have delayed first sex on occasion: A minority of participants explicitly stated that they watched pornography instead of having sex, while others called it a ‘safe space’ to explore their sexuality. This is further supported by the fact that participants also used pornography to help understand their sexual identity: Given that research has documented how some sexual minority youth have sexual intercourse to confirm their own sexual identity (Dube, 2000), it is possible that consumption of pornography served this purpose for some participants. Thus, while further research with generalizable samples is needed to test this hypothesis, there is limited evidence that pornography can have positive effects on sexual behaviours.

Our research concurs with a growing body of research that finds people are watching pornography during adolescence (e.g. Braun-Corville and Rojas, 2010). However, a key component of our data is that pornography was actively sought out by participants in general, either through curiosity or sexual desire. Given that our participants are young adults reflecting on their recent past, they offer an important perspective on the consumption of pornography in adolescence. We find no evidence to support the negative effects paradigm in this research, and instead contend that pornography is better considered a leisure activity, even at an early age. Importantly, the leisure framework still allows for consideration of risk and harm, but does not privilege them over potential benefits. Further studies will need to account for both possibilities.

Further research is needed to determine whether our conceptualization of pornography consumption is generalizable across a range of demographic groups, as there are significant social policy implications if the leisure framework is applicable more generally. Recent laws in the UK regulating ‘extreme’ pornography (see McGlynn and Rackley, 2007) and the introduction of ‘porn filters’ (Greer, 2015) are based on evidence from the negative effects paradigm and have been heavily critiqued (Attwood and Smith, 2010). As such, research supporting the leisure perspective would contribute to these debates by providing an empirical base to the intellectual critique of the regulation of particular forms of pornography (see also Rubin 1993). Furthermore, it could also inform best practice related to teaching about pornography in sex education classes in schools, where debates are regularly focussed on minimizing potential harm rather than exploring pleasure or how best to engage with pornography, including issues of gender inequality that may persist (Albury, 2014).

The data in this article come from a broader project on the experiences of people with non-exclusive sexualities, differentiating it from much of the qualitative research on pornography that explicitly recruits people to discuss their consumption of pornography (e.g. Vörös, 2015). This is important because, as Smith et al. (2015: 269) highlight, participants in studies about pornography are ‘intensely aware of the way they are talked about, categorised, and belittled’ as users of pornography and, as such, their positionality in the research process needs to be carefully considered. While interview data always needs to be examined for strategic self-presentation, using data on pornography that emerged from participants’ broader narratives about their lives minimizes the issues related to their political perspectives on pornography. It is also possible that researcher effect influenced the data, although a neutral position was maintained when discussing pornography to limit this likelihood.

Yet given the convenience sample of the data, this study is exploratory in scope and does not seek to make generalized claims about pornography consumption. Our focus on men

with non-exclusive sexual orientations attending an elite university means that our findings should also be limited to these groups, particularly regarding educational status and gender. It is also possible that the educational benefits of pornography are especially salient for sexually non-exclusive men. Our sample was also relatively homogenous in terms of ethnicity, and we have not analysed ethnicity further. Further research is needed to explore our findings in more detail and examine the extent to which they can be generalized to different groups

Even so, this study has provided an empirically grounded framework from which to explore pornography consumption beyond the negative effects paradigm. Responding to calls to consider pornography as a form of entertainment (McKee, 2012), we find evidence that the consumption of pornography can appropriately be considered a casual leisure activity among university-attending men with non-exclusive sexual orientations; and that they reported no negative effects from viewing it, other than the encountering issues with their parents.

Addressing the absence of the consumer in pornography research (Attwood, 2011), future research needs to examine the generalizability of the leisure framework and examine the consequences of such a framing in more detail, considering both the costs and benefits of pornography consumption.

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