

**Women's Use of Sexually Explicit Materials:  
Making Meaning, Negotiating Contradictions and Framing Resistance**

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## ABSTRACT

The prevalence of male-centric pornography has been attributed to accepted (heteronormative) notions of gender specific sexual arousal, with men being characterized as visually stimulated and women naturally more aurally and emotionally receptive (cf. Christensen 1990, Faust 1980, Soble 2002). It has been argued that “if women reject the freedom to enjoy pornography and even male cheesecake, it must be because – no matter what permissions society gives us – women do not want it” (Abramson and Pinkerton 1995: 184). As women are not imagined as the intended recipients of these materials, this study was interested in how women connect their use of sexually explicit materials to their sexual biographies in the on-going process of (re)presenting their sexual identities. I wanted to not only explore what women conceptualize as sexually explicit materials and how they make sense of what they are seeing, but how and why these materials are used, the meanings attributed to these materials and the pleasures derived from them. To this end, 26 women between the ages of 25-35 were interviewed, either individually or as part of a focus group. A theoretical analytic, which bridged interactionist accounts of meaning-making and Foucauldian accounts of discourse, discipline and docile bodies, was articulated to account for how pornographic spectatorship is created, maintained and regulated. Regulation and resistance were situated within broader understandings of sexual scripts and governmentality, focusing on the construction (meaning-making) and deconstruction (resistance) of understandings of mainstream/*malestream* pornography. This research resulted in two interesting outcomes: (a) the redefinition of ‘gaze’ to account for active female spectatorship, as described by the women who participated in this study; and (b) discussion surrounding the ‘ethical use’ of pornographic materials, conceptualized via a governmentality lens. For the women who participated in this study, engaging with sexually

explicit materials was not a passive experience. The narratives elicited demonstrate that these women did not merely absorb pornographic representations unquestioningly; they interrogated them, both subconsciously and consciously, brought new meanings to them and understood them through a decidedly female gaze – their own. These findings suggest a disruption to the assumption of female sexual passivity reverberated throughout patriarchal society.

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*Well behaved women seldom make history.*  
- *Laurel Thatcher Ulrich*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Representations of sex and sexuality are such an indelible part of the cultural landscape that we hardly seem to notice them, that is, unless objections are made against such representations by special interest groups, or they reflect something other than the hegemonic male gaze. ‘Sex sells’ is a common idiom; however, it is predominantly the female sex that is doing the selling (Ciclitira 2004). It is often colloquially remarked that films are replete with female nudity, scores of magazines line store shelves depicting women in various stages of undress, and highly sexualized female figures are used to entice consumers to buy everything from cars to fast food.<sup>1</sup> When the reverse occurs, that is, males portraying overt sexuality, domesticity or emotionality, it is frequently done for “comedic relief” (O’Brien 2008: 377) or are over-exaggerated to appeal to cliché stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> This is illustrated by the popular book *Porn for Women* (2007), which depicted clothed men doing housework.<sup>3</sup> It appears that, if media representations can be considered an indicator of broader social processes, women are equated with sex and sexuality, but female sexual desire is rarely acknowledged or even seriously depicted. The cultural script is consistent: women *are* sex, men *own* sex.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Esquire (23 September 2010) published a blog featuring some (humorous) examples of sex food advertisements commencing from the 1880s, to the more recent, and highly controversial Burger King advertisement that featured a woman with her mouth open facing a “super seven incher” steak sandwich. Online at: <http://www.esquire.com/blogs/food-for-men/sexy-food-advertisements-092310>

<sup>2</sup> Although current research indicates that men are increasingly being depicted as sex objects, the male figure is represented as hypermasculine to negate any association with a traditionally female conceptualized concern with appearance and ethics (Flood et al. 2007).

<sup>3</sup> *Porn for Women* (2007) was written by the Cambridge Women’s Cooperative founded in 2005 by women, for women. According to their website, their mission is “to redefine the way we look at pornography” and “recover the term ‘pornography’ from the gold-chained, hairy-chested, leisure-suit wearing, mouth-breaking knuckleheads and reclaim it for the rest of us.” While I concede that while the book has a particular charm, on a broader scale, it serves to reify heterosexist gendered stereotypes that (a) domestic housework is the domain of women whose only desire is that men would partake and, (b) by virtue of titling the book *Porn for Women*, that women are not interested in pornography or outright depictions of sex, belittling women’s sexual fantasizing.

Sexuality, like gender, is central to our concept of selves. Ussher (1997: 4) argues that not only are these constructs significant to our lives, they also “appear to be subjects which completely consume our minds – at least if we take the continuing proliferation of images of sex and sexuality in the mass media as indicators of popular concern.” Contrary to what such images may suggest, sexuality, particularly female sexuality, is not a homogenous entity; it is a contested and constructed terrain (Berkowitz 2006, Butler 2004, Slade 2001, Turner 1996). The boundaries of acceptable feminine sexual expression are contradictory, simultaneously porous and constrained. Ussher (1997: 4) asserts that “representations of ‘woman’ seethe with sexuality, yet for centuries women have been condemned for exploring their own sexual desire.” It is no wonder, then, that pornography – the representation of, traditionally only female, sex and sexuality (Bhattacharrya 2002) – is also highly contentious and contested. What meaning do these contradictory images have within this social context? Furthermore, how do women make sense of this conflicting experience of sexuality? By focusing on women’s engagement with pornography and other sexually explicit materials, the most visible representations of sex, this research attempts to critically engage with these questions.

### **Gendering Pornography: Area of Interest and Research Questions**

Traditionally, women’s access to pornography and other sexually explicit materials has differed from men’s. According to Juffer (2004: 6) this fact has been attributed to women’s historical positioning within the home, as “men generally have [had] more time and mobility to consume porn than do women.” As a result, women lacked the leisure time and economic resources to actively seek out sexually explicit materials (Juffer 2004). While it is popularly asserted that men engage in pornography more often than women,

commentators suggest that the Internet has served to ‘domesticate’ pornography, allowing women the ease and privacy to explore this genre by bringing it into the home (Ciclitira 2004, Penley et al. 2013).<sup>4</sup> This, however, does not include the vast literature on women’s use of erotica, or erotic literature, particularly Harlequin-type romance novels (i.e., Hardy 2001, Sonnet 1999, Wu 2006). The notion that women are hesitant to engage with, or admit to engaging with, such materials is curious, especially since recent research indicates that women are accessing and increasingly demanding pornography (cf. Hardy 2001, Smith 2007). Such assumptions surrounding female engagement with sexually explicit materials may reflect persisting gendered stereotypes regarding the consumption of pornography which focus on men and the male gaze, reiterating ideas that women are not interested in such imagery. Obenberger (2007: 47), for example, states that “recreational erotica seems to cut across all strata of our society with a democratic disregard of race, creed, education, income and generation.” Absent from his assertion about the consumption of pornography is the gender variable.

This study commences from the perspective that (some) women do engage with pornography and sexually explicit materials for their own sexual pleasures, elucidating the meanings attributed to this engagement. The purpose of this research is to account for gender, by exploring women’s engagement with sexually explicit materials. As such, this research has a decidedly feminist agenda. Emergent issues such as the negotiation and/or construction of sexual selves are also explored. Specifically this study seeks to address the following questions:

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<sup>4</sup> The Internet Filter Review (2010) reports that 1/3 of visitors to adult websites are women, with 9.4 million women accessing adult websites each month. They also note that 70% of women keep their adult cyber activities secret. These figures, however, do not specify the rationales provided for viewing these sites, the types of adult sites visited, nor do they explore the reasons women identify for not disclosing this behaviour.

1. How do women who actively seek out sexually explicit materials experience these materials? That is, how do women understand their use of, or engagement with, these materials?
2. What is the significance that women attribute to sexually explicit materials in their understandings of their identity(ies) or sense of self?

This study is exploratory in nature, as it seeks to understanding the experience of women who engage with sexually explicit materials for their own sexual pleasure, through the use of both focus groups and individual interviews.

The aim of this research is to ‘gender’ pornography, that is, to acknowledge the multifarious ways in which gender operates through pornography and other sexually explicit representations and, alternately, how pornography and sexually explicit representations operate through gender. To ‘gender’ pornography is to render gender visible. As Crawley et al. (2008) highlight, gender is the main way society is organized, however, it is unspoken. We often do not recognize the way that certain foods (e.g., salad and yogurt) are gendered, that is, marketed as ‘feminine’ food products (cf. Crawley et al. 2008). This invisibility allows gender to maintain itself as *natural* or *implicit*, not constructed. However, material reality is not neutral. Speaking to how a historical event becomes something that can be communicated via a televised newscast, Hall (1991: 118) highlights that “the event must become a ‘story’ before it can become a *communicative event*.” The processes whereby an event becomes ‘a story’ and through which that story is passed to the receiver, however, are not neutral. Similarly, it can be argued that for a sex act to become ‘pornography’, it must also pass through “the formal sub-rules of discourse ‘in dominance’” (Hall 1991: 118). While, as I will outline in Chapter Three, the Theoretical Framework, messages are not

inherent in pornographic depictions, the cultural discourses/scripts that render pornographic depictions intelligible by the audience are not neutral – they are gendered.

While the nude depiction of women and women as pornographic actresses have always been essential to the genre, women's experiences engaging with pornography has received limited empirical scholarly attention,<sup>5</sup> although this is changing with the broader recognition of feminist porn as a genre.<sup>6</sup> According to commentators, the pornography industry has experienced a dramatic shift. This is evidenced by the emergence of a multitude of sexually explicit materials made by female porn producers for female consumers, potentially subverting the dominant narratives available in conventional pornography (Hardy 2001, McElroy 1995, Schauer 2005, Smith 2007), as well as the increasing focus on sexual acts being performed on the female actress within pornographic videos. While pornography has been feminized, it is still coded male, attending to male fantasies (or what is envisioned as male fantasy) and the male gaze (Attwood 2005b, Hardy 2001, Schauer 2005, Willis 1983). The bulk of pornography is *of* women, not *for* women. Gendering pornography ensures that we attend to what it means for women to consume sexually explicit materials, paying particular attention to how pornographic spectatorship is gendered.

### **A Criminology Dissertation on Sexually Explicit Materials: Pornography as Deviance**

According to Hunt (1993), pornography as a separate genre of representation did not exist until the early nineteenth century. Prior to this, sexually explicit depictions were a

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of data collection, research conducted by Ciclitira (2004) and Smith (2007) were notable exceptions. While Smith (2007) explored a (now defunct) pornography magazine for women, Ciclitira (2004) interviewed 40 women who were encouraged to discuss “how they define pornography; their experience of viewing pornography; whether or not pornography had affected their self-image; their sexual fantasies and behaviour; their likes and dislikes about pornography and erotica; and their views about the censorship of sexually explicit material” (288).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, an edited collection entitled *The Feminist Porn Book. The Politics of Producing Pleasure* (2013) includes essays by feminist porn producers, pornographic actors and scholars. While the collection provides much intellectualizing on the genre of feminist porn, absent are empirical studies of the genre itself, or its users.

satirical “vehicle for using the shock of sex to criticize religious and political authorities” (Hunt 1993: 10), and anything that could be considered politically suspect (e.g. criticism of the king or the church) was regulated (Kipnis 1996, Lacombe 1994, McNair 1996).

From the outset, what was to be labeled as pornography was done so based on political and classist divisions. As access to printed material increased generally, and the ‘common man’ was better able to gather his own collection of explicit works, the bourgeoisie began to fear for the morals of those beneath them (Hoff 1989). It was only then that a distinction began to be made between acceptable ‘high’ erotica (which the rich could afford) and unacceptable ‘low’ pornography (what the poor could afford) (Carol 1994, McNair 1996, Preston 1995). Books on birth control and other politically sensitive issues were also deemed unacceptable for the ‘morally lax’ and ‘easily corruptible’ (i.e., women, children and the poor) (Carol 1994, Schneir 1994), not only as a means to control the masses but also to maintain the heteronormative status quo. To delineate this point, Rubin (1992 [1983]) maps a hierarchal system of sexual values through which sex acts are appraised in Western societies. In this system, “the charmed circle”, comprising of ‘acceptable’ sexualities such as heterosexuality, marriage, monogamy and sex-for-reproduction, is perpetually threatened by the “sexual rabble”, those who fall in the “outer limits” (Rubin 1992 [1983]); outside the bounds of moral acceptability and sexual decorum. As a result of this hierarchy, constrictive sexualities are framed as normative, justifying the denigration and punishment of those individuals and sexualities that confound (conservative, religious) expectations of proper sexuality.

This classist division formed the basis of definitions of obscenity and the obscene. Canada, following Great Britain, and the United States adopted obscenity legislation that

based its definition of obscenity on protecting weak-minded and/or immoral individuals (Hoff 1989, Jochelson and Kramar 2011). In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, with the sexual revolution, civil libertarians, artists and much of the general population came to see obscenity laws as outdated and subjective (Jochelson and Kramar 2011) and lobbied for action (Holmes and Holmes 2009). Obscenity laws were eventually changed to focus on sexually explicit materials that had no social or artistic redeeming values (Juffer 1998, Lacombe 1994, Schneir 1994). In Canada, changes to obscenity provisions in the *Criminal Code of Canada*,<sup>7</sup> followed from the 1992 Supreme Court decision in *R.v. Butler*, eponymously referred to as the *Butler* decision.<sup>8</sup> Rejecting an approach to obscenity based on moral disapproval and modesty, the Supreme Court of Canada, focused instead on the likelihood of harm caused by, and the threat to equality posed by, sexually explicit materials. While it recognized the harms pornography posed to society in general, and women, in particular, as a result of the demeaning and dehumanizing depiction of sex, the *Butler* decision “made it clear that sexually explicit depictions were protected by the *Charter*’s freedom of expression guarantee even if their sole purpose was to sexually arouse, as long as they do not involve sex and violence” (Busby 1999: 47). In addition, it was stated that work with artistic merit was protected as freedom of expression. As a result of these definitional changes to obscenity in Canada and the United States, the pornography industry increased exponentially. As long as it had some sort of social or artistic merit, pornographic material was unlikely to be censored.

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<sup>7</sup> Obscenity provisions are found in section 163 of the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

<sup>8</sup> *R v. Butler* (1992), 8 C.R.R. (2d) 1 (S.C.C.) is a leading Supreme Court of Canada decision on pornography and obscenity censorship. The case revolved around the seizure of an entire inventory, mostly comprising of sexually explicit materials for heterosexual men and a small number involving gay men, of a video store owned by Donald Butler (Busby 1999). This case was the first time when the Supreme Court of Canada had to consider the effect of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms right to free expression (section 2) vis-à-vis obscenity laws.

### *Women's Use of Sexually Explicit Materials as Deviant*

The ubiquitous nature of pornography is undeniable. While Hollywood produces approximately 400 films per year, this number ranges between 10,000 to 11,000 films by the pornography industry (Williams 2004). Although men are frequently envisioned as the main consumers of the genre, Juffer (1998) highlights that the number of women accessing pornography and other sexually explicit materials have steadily increased over the past three decades, largely prompted by the emergence of technology that enabled its domestication. By 1986, half of North American households had VCR's, opening up the possibility of bringing pornographic films from public theatres, peep shows and arcades into private homes (Williams 2008). Williams (2008: 305) writes: "Private screening takes us out of public scrutiny and gives us control over what, when and where we screen." This is particularly relevant for women's engagement with pornography, as the shift from public to private has facilitated women's opportunities to make use of these materials (Juffer 1998).

While technological advancements have, in a large part, increased women's access to pornographic content, shifts within the industry itself also served to recognize a diversity of viewership. Upon noting the success achieved by female porn producers such as Candida Royalle, Susie Bright and Nina Hartley, who had created a new genre of female-centered pornography which focused on storylines, romance and female pleasure, the mainstream adult industry followed suit, creating the category of 'couples porn'. This genre "reflected Royalle's vision and generally followed a formula of softer, gentler, more romantic porn with storylines and high production values" (Penley et al. 2013: 11). The emergence of couples porn signaled a shift in the mainstream adult industry towards a recognition of female sexual desire, although narrowly defined.



Women's engagement with the pornographic, however, has not been without contention. Many (radical) feminist debates position pornography as representative of a male sexual fantasy that is inherently violent and degrading, arguing that through constant exposure, women have "internalized a false view of [their] own sexuality" (Bryson 2003: 193). Other feminist factions defend pornography and its use, viewing it as a medium of sexual expression as well as a tool for resisting traditional, and often repressive, roles for women (Strossen 2000).

While the number of women watching pornography, or admitting to doing so, is steadily increasing, we (including the academic community) continue to speak and write about pornography as though men are the only ones doing the watching (Boulton 2008, Levy 2005, Loftus 2002, Senn 2003). The creation of a new academic journal devoted to the study of pornography is evidence of a shifting academic concern towards the sociological study of pornography and its users.<sup>9</sup> Attwood (2005a: 72) confirms that "research that focuses on women as active users of pornography is practically non-existent." Conceptualizing pornography as primarily a masculine viewing experience reinforces socially constructed cultural scripts that women are not as sexual as men. This works to "suppress knowledge about the way sex differences are socially produced" (Rice 2009: 256), and feeds into patriarchal assumptions of women's sexuality as biologically passive. When women are envisioned as part of the pornographic audience, discussion often focuses on the negative or harm promulgated by their viewership, rendering absent questions of agency, self-reflexivity or the possibility of engagement-as-resistance (Ciclitira 2004). This research seeks to trouble

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<sup>9</sup> *Porn Studies* will commence with its first issue in Spring 2014. Anti-pornography activist Gail Dines has been vocal against this journal, not only sponsoring a petition to change its editorial board, which includes Tristan Taormino a feminist porn producer and activist, but critiquing the journal for its pro-pornography perspective. Online: <http://www.xbiz.com/news/162712>

the continued perception that women do not watch pornography, or use sexually explicit materials, by interviewing women who do.

### **Defining Terms: Pornography or Sexually Explicit Materials?**

North American culture (although not strictly confined to this geographic location), with its strong puritanical Christian roots, has long been suspicious of, and hostile to, representations of sex and sexual conduct, whether it be in books, films, photography or other mediums (Jochelson and Kramar 2011). More than a simple biological fact, sex has been placed under the purview of the moral and political. Instead of a depiction of an oft-repeated, universal and commonplace act, erotic or pornographic representations are often imbued with the power to corrupt and undermine the population at large and the social fabric of the nation. Indeed, as described by Foucault (1978), sex is not only central to the generation of the populace, but also to an individual's access to, and intelligibility of, their own body and their identity as a person. Sex is not only pervasive, but constitutive of identity. According to Foucault (1978: 156), this explains "the importance we ascribe to it, the reverential fear with which we surround it, the care we take to know it." Not only is sex power, but power is deployed through sex.

We are living in a culture which purports to value (or at least exalt as a moral imperative) partnered love and affection, while simultaneously exploiting sex (the outcome of partnered love and affection) as a commodity to sell products (Bhattacharya 2002). The term 'pornography' itself is charged with multifarious meanings and interpretations. As is the common adage, one person's pornographic, is another's erotica, and yet another's filth and degradation. Yet, who is in a position to define which category a sexually explicit representation belongs? While the complexity surrounding sexuality and its representations

are an important consideration, and one that is frequently engaged with throughout this dissertation, the purpose of this research is not to reconcile the irreconcilable, or to engage in semantic arguments surrounding the definition of pornography. Rather, it is to explore what pornography, and other sexually explicit materials, mean to the women who use them, to examine the juncture at which pornography intersects with women's sexual, social and personal lives and to comment on broader structural constraints to identity and meaning-making, such as stigma, taboo and empowerment.

Throughout this chapter, and indeed throughout this dissertation, the terms 'pornography' and 'sexually explicit materials' are used coterminously, a testament to the inherent tensions within the genre which come to the fore particularly when conducting academic research. With respect to the exploratory nature of this study, I was hesitant to use the signifier 'pornography' as it may have pejorative connotations that can marginalize, or exclude, other sexually explicit materials that women seek out for their own sexual and erotic fulfillment. It also evokes traditional notions of pornography as something that is consumed and created primarily for men, thus potentially alienating women who do not view themselves as engaging with pornography *per se*. This is buttressed by the fact that the term is often used synonymously with descriptors such as 'violent', 'degrading' and 'humiliating' (Busby 1999, Ciclitira 2004, Cowan and Dunn 1994).

As a researcher, however, I must remain cognizant that 'pornography' is the identifier that society uses to designate the array of materials (books, magazines, videos, photographs) that depict overt sexual conduct. As such, women living in this cultural and social epoch will likely utilize this term in the absence of other designations. This was evidenced by some participant's unfamiliarity, and initial lack of comfort, with the term

‘sexually explicit materials’, which will be highlighted in Chapter Six. Furthermore, the majority of empirical and theoretical academic literature of the genre favours the term ‘pornography’. Taking into account these factors, throughout this dissertation the term ‘sexually explicit materials’ will be the main identifier used to refer to any medium, broadly defined, used for the purposes/intentions of, but not limited to, sexual arousal and release, entertainment, curiosity and education. For the purposes of this research, however, while I use the signifier ‘sexually explicit materials, I left the phrase undefined, allowing the participants to fill in what these terms mean to them. I contend that by not focusing simply on the consumption of pornography, which is a topic of narrow definition, an investigation of the engagement with sexually explicit materials, broadly defined and which includes pornography, allows for a larger exploration of the usage patterns of a variety of materials by women, as well as of the significance of these materials. This follows from Cilcitra (2002) who asserts that using a predetermined definition might hide the individual variances of meaning people assign to different materials.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

This chapter provides an introduction to this research, situating it within the broader social context, and details the research questions this project addresses. The subsequent chapter, the Literature Review, summarizes three bodies of academic scholarship: (a) conceptualization of mainstream pornographic representations as heteronormative and male-centric; (b) feminist perspectives on pornography, which are categorized as pornography-as-harm, pornography-as-representation, and pornography-as-self actualization; (c) the gendered commodification of sexual representations, with particular reference to research

detailing women's consumption of sexually explicit materials; and (d) an overview of the emergent genre of feminist pornography.

Chapter Three outlines the Theoretical Framework guiding this research. Focused on the various meanings attributed to sexually explicit materials by the women who use them, interactionist sociology is the underlying sociological perspective of this dissertation. The theoretical framework is informed by Foucault's (1977) conceptualization of power-knowledge and discourse. Under this rubric, identity/subjectivity and resistance are also theorized and linked to sexual script theory, as conceived by Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]). Sexual scripts are largely unconscious mental schemas, which guide how people behave and process information during a sexual event. For Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]) such scripts are "involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting limits on sexual responses and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience" (19). How sexual scripts (cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic) work to inform the process of meaning making will be placed within broader societal context. Spectatorship and the viewing experience is also theorized, particularly what is known about pornographic/erotic spectatorship and its relationship to identity formation.

Positioned within a feminist epistemology, the Methodological Framework is presented in Chapter Four. Data collection methods, namely focus groups and individual interviews, are reviewed, as are ethical considerations and limitations of the methodological design. Twenty-six women were interviewed for this research: six women participated in focus group interviews and twenty women in individual interviews, in a city in Southern Ontario (Greater Toronto region) and in Eastern Ontario (National Capital region). Three

women participated in both the focus group and individual interview sessions. A discussion of discourse analysis, the method of data analysis, follows. The following chapter, Chapter Five attends to some conceptual and epistemological issues of what it means to be a feminist scholar producing female-centered texts. It also examines certain 'ethical' practices relevant to this research, including interviewing in public spaces and anonymizing identities and locations.

Chapter Six is the first of four data analysis chapters, assessing collectively the narratives elicited by the participants. As there exists little empirical data about how women engage with sexually explicit materials and with what types of materials women engage, this chapter provides the contextual framework for the dissertation. It outlines not only how these specific twenty-six participants conceptualized and operationalized the term 'sexually explicit materials', but also serves to position these women within the/a pornography audience, by examining the processes by which they viewed these materials through a decidedly 'female gaze'.

Chapter Seven examines the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts and normative boundaries women participants negotiated with in the scripting of their personal, social and sexual identities with respect to their engagement with sexually explicit materials. The manner in which these twenty-six women negotiate, or contest, these scripts is the focus of Chapter Eight. In doing so, this chapter creates a space for women's agentic screening of these materials as well as for their everyday acts of resistance. Assessing the potentially subversive act of imparting a decidedly women-centered approach into the pornographic genre, Chapter Nine speaks to how the women I spoke with responded to the question: If you could create sexually explicitly materials solely for women, what would it look like? The

narratives elicited as a result of this question are addressed in this chapter as a means to revert to the original aim of this research – to gender pornography and provide an account of sexually explicit materials which takes women’s sexual desires and fantasizing as its source.

The conclusion, Chapter Ten, briefly summarizes key research findings before situating the research findings within broader social understandings of women’s use of sexually explicit materials, particularly within a post-feminist<sup>10</sup> context wherein themes of sexual liberation and empowerment serve to evoke criticism of women’s collusion with patriarchy. The importance of shifting attention away from discourses of passive female sexuality to understanding pornography as an embodied practice that women actively engage with is discussed. In addition avenues of further inquiry are highlighted.

The central theme reverberating throughout this dissertation is the conflicted and diverse meanings attached not only to the participant’s engagement with sexually explicit materials, but to the broader way these meanings served to complicate understandings of identity and subjectivity. Rather than a cohesive account of sexual pleasure derived from their engagement with sexually explicit materials, what ensues is a collection of engagements, fraught with tensions and contradictions. The women I spoke with not only engaged with the materials for sexual pleasure, but for other reasons including curiosity, education, sexual exploration and self-validation. However, these engagements were not always pleasurable but fraught with conflict as the women made sense of their feelings about not only these materials and their use of these materials, but how their consumption of these materials fit into their self-positioning within the social world. For the women I spoke with,

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<sup>10</sup> Said to have emerged in the 1990s, the postfeminist, or third-wave, perspective claims that feminism is irrelevant, and that as a result of conservative rhetoric that feminists are ‘anti-men’ or ‘anti-sex’, many women are identifying as non-feminist (Hall and Rodriguez 2003). It is underscored by the need to regain female sexuality and sensuality that previous feminisms have eschewed, and female empowerment is evidenced by the scores of women willingly posing nude (cf. Levy 2005)

the diversity of the meanings attached to this engagement – and the conflicts between these meanings - served to highlight the complications of identity performance, particularly when female sexuality and desire, is culturally mired in stigma, taboo and discourses of sexual acceptability. Highlighting the tensions and contradictions in the narratives elicited is not a means to undermine sex-positive feminists. Nor is it to lend credibility to anti-pornography feminists, who view any explicit sexual representation as the subjugation of women and to whom extend the label of ‘false consciousness’ to any woman who uses and finds pleasure in such materials. Rather, speaking to these tensions and contradictions serves to nuance thinking about the complexities of pornographic spectatorship, unsettling conventional, essentialized and biologically deterministic notions of female sexual desire and fantasizing, and focusing on how identity is performed/expressed through and via these sexual engagements.



## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter aims to provide a cogent overview of pertinent empirical and theoretical literature on pornography, and sexually explicit materials more broadly, within which to situate this research and contextualize the diversity of experiences and intellectual and emotional conflicts inherent in the narratives collected. The contentions the research participants of this study expressed surrounding their engagement of, and meanings attributed to, sexually explicit materials, mirror the conflicts in academic theorizing of the genre. These contentions also offer a glimpse into how the construction of the pornographic viewer as essentially male serves to create tension in how women situate their own spectatorship.

This chapter encompasses four broad categorizations of scholarly literature. First, the notion of pornography as male practice will be highlighted, underscored by a discussion of heteronormativity as it relates to how, and what, representations are conceptualized as ‘mainstream’. Although differing representations exist within pornographic depictions, leading to the assertion that the industry appears to be shifting away from male-centric sexual fantasizing, such assertions incorrectly assume that all representations are equally privileged. Instead, as will be outlined, alternate representations outside of heteronormative discourses are treated as obscene, literally off/scene (Williams 1999 [1989]), rather than mainstream.

Discussion then turns to an overview of the different feminist perspectives on pornography, a complex topic that has been part of feminist academic writing for over thirty years (Kemp and Squires 1997). Many feminists defend pornography, viewing it as a medium of expression and a means of resistance (i.e., for breaking traditional and often

repressive roles of women) (Strossen 2000). Other feminists view pornography as representative of a male sexual fantasy that is inherently violent, arguing that through constant and early exposure, women have “internalized a false view of [their] own sexuality” (Bryson 2003: 193). Rather than viewing these debates as a simplistic dichotomy between anti-porn and pro-porn feminists, which as Penley et al. (2013: 14) assert is “one of the unfortunate results of the porn wars,” I conceptualize feminist perspectives as a ternary which builds upon Smart (1989)’s framework: pornography as harm; pornography as representation; and pornography as self-actualization. I conclude this section by highlighting that these positions are largely theoretical, rather than empirically based, further supporting the necessity of this research.

The third categorization of literature focuses on sex and sexual desire, outlining sexuality as a discursive fact. Here I employ the works of Foucault (1978) and Butler (2004, 1997). The notion that women’s bodies are deemed ‘pornographic’ is highlighted, paying particular attention to the gendered narratives which suggest that women are not sexual while simultaneously sexualizing them. It is to this that the paucity of research on women’s use of pornography is explained. Literature focusing on the types of sexual commodities marketed to women is discussed, as are the types of sexually explicit materials available specifically for women. In doing this, I outline first the importance of the Internet in domesticating pornography by bringing it from the public to the private domain, and secondly the pervasive body of literature on erotica and romance novels as sexually explicit materials for women. This section also highlights the empirical research that exists on women’s use of pornography, however limited.

Finally, this chapter concludes with an overview of literature on feminist pornography, that is pornography created by and for women, centering on notions of sexual ‘authenticity’. While pornography from a female perspective is not a new genre *per se*, as Nina Hartley and Candida Royalle were creating women-centric pornographic films in the early 1980s and 1990s, feminist pornography as a genre gained tremendous ground in the United States in the early 2000s (Penley et al. 2013). The idea of ‘authentic’, or convincing, sexual representations and depictions was a theme reverberating throughout the narratives collected, and as such, is an important conceptual framework to examine in order to situate the participant’s scripting of their engagement with sexually explicit materials. In scripting, identities are (re)presented with an awareness of culturally appropriate femininity and appropriate female sexuality. Understandings of pornography not only presuppose a male audience, but are bound by notions of heteronormativity which is where the reader’s attention is now drawn.

### **Conceptualizing the ‘Mainstream’: Heteronormative Representations**

Pornographic representations depicting heterosexual sex acts continues to be constructed as the norm, or the mainstream (i.e., that which is the most readily accessible and available), despite the fact that a wide variety of pornographic genres exist, including growing ‘alternative’ pornographies such as “dyke porn,” “indie porn”, and BDSM (bondage/domination/sadism/masochism) (Williams 2008, 2004). Opposite-sex (heterosexual) and monogamous romantic, sexual and marriage relations are taken for granted such that, regardless of how accepting we deem Western culture to be,<sup>11</sup> individuals who fall outside of these normative boundaries, Rubin’s 1992 [1983] “sexual rabble” who

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<sup>11</sup> Ferber, Holcomb and Wentling (2013) cite the “ever-increasing rates of violence against those who don’t conform to normative notions of gender and sexuality” (xvii), as an indicator to the contrary.

are denigrated for not conforming, are compelled to ‘come out’ and rationalize their behaviours/actions/identity(ies) and create a public space for their existence. While popular media are focusing more on gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, transsexual and intersex individuals, as well as on different relationship configurations, such as polyamory, these accounts occur within a social context of institutionalized heterosexuality, with its reiterations of monogamy and gendered hierarchies (Fassinger and Arseneau 2007, Ferber et al. 2013). These accounts have been critiqued as being *of* these heterosexual transgressors, not *for* them. The norms and values that structure gender and sexuality, thereby placing a high premium on compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchy, are referred to as heteronormativity (Sharma 2009).

Jackson (1999: 163) writes that heteronormativity is “the normalization of heterosexuality which renders any alternative sexualities ‘other’ or ‘marginal’.” Living outside of a heterosexual pairing, having sex differently than what is deemed *natural* (penis-vagina penetrative sex) has ramifications for identity construction, identity performance and group identity. Berlant and Warner (1998: 548) write: “by heteronormativity we mean the institutions, structures of understanding and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged.” Though heteronormativity is not only restricted to sex, as it is also embedded in the whole field of social relations and social life, it is a particularly useful concept in the scripting of women’s engagement of sexually explicit materials. While the most accessible and available pornography continues to portray women as the primary object of heterosexual male desire, with an uncomplicated “female sexual willingness as the premise of pornographic scenarios” (Ciclitira 2004: 285), women actively engage and negotiate with this space. A space which,

much like all social spaces, is largely controlled and influenced by society, context and discourse.

The denial of women's own sexuality is a key component of Rich's concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" (1980: 638). In heteronormativity, women's sexuality is built upon men's sexuality: without male pleasure there is no female pleasure (Williams 1999 [1989]). This includes the centrality of the male orgasm. More than a simple biological fact, sex has historically been discussed and defined from a man's point of view (Williams (1999 [1989])). Heterosexual sex begins with the male erection and finishes with the male orgasm, framing female sexual pleasure as secondary, lacking, irrelevant or wholly based on the satisfaction she receives in knowing her male partner was sexually pleased. Mainstream heterosexual pornography is based upon, and relies on, heteronormativity. The most spectacular moment in mainstream pornography is the 'money shot', the external depiction of male ejaculation or the moment of male orgasm (Williams 1999 [1989]). As pornography is based upon the achievement of sexual pleasure (both for the audience and the actor(s) involved), the money shot signals that the scene can move on as pleasure has been achieved (Williams 1999 [1989]). This focuses the film and the audience on men's sexual pleasure, rendering women's orgasms and sexual pleasure either invisible, ancillary, or as an attribute of the male erection only.

Barker (2000) argues that as a result of "the script of phallogentric pornography rehears[ing] the same story again and again... a story that is steeped in hierarchies," female pornographic actresses "serve merely as the conduits by which male pleasure is achieved" (650). Heteronormative understandings of women's sexual pleasure (both in and outside pornography) define it as dependent on the male orgasm, so that it is through knowing,

seeing and experiencing her male partner's orgasm that she is able to experience her own pleasure. In mainstream heterosexual pornography, women's orgasms are generally (re)presented through sounds, words and facial expressions, and seem to exist only as a step along the way to the ultimate climax, the male orgasm (Barker 2000, Williams 1999 [1989]). Her pleasure, if it exists, exists because of him, and especially because of his erect penis. Another heteronormative aspect to mainstream heterosexual pornography is the passivity of women's sexuality. Men are the initiators of sex and women are waiting to be taken by men (Fassinger and Arseneau 2007). Even when women are portrayed as the sexual initiators, the sexual actions being performed are done for the purpose of male sexual pleasure and fantasizing.

Heteronormativity creates a single and universalizing definition of sex, gender and sexuality, conceptualized as the gender box structure (Crawley et al. 2008). The only two sexes, male and female, are connected to the only two genders, man and woman, and this can only result in one form of sexuality, heterosexuality. Accordingly, Butler (1999 [1990]: xi) writes: "one is a woman, according to this framework, to the extent that one functions as one within the dominant heterosexual frame and to call into question is perhaps to lose something of one's sense of place in gender." Also included in the heteronormative female/woman trajectory of pornography is the inscription of race and class. The quintessential woman in pornography is a white woman, a middle/upper class woman, a heterosexual woman, and a woman who is more concerned with her male partner's sexual interests/pleasure/satisfaction than with her own (Cohen 2006).

How institutionalized heteronormativity affects individual people changes from person to person. How each person negotiates with heteronormativity changes depending on

how successfully each individual embodies their socially constructed ‘appropriate’ sex, gender and/or sexuality. Jackson (1999: 13) writes:

To argue that the power hierarchy of gender is structural does not mean that it is not exercised uniformly and evenly at the level of interpersonal sexual relations, nor that our practice and experience is wholly determined by patriarchal structures and ideologies. There is some room for maneuver within these constraints. To deny this is to deny heterosexual women any agency, to see us as doomed to submit to men’s desires whether as unwilling victims or misguided dupes.

Heteronormative understandings of passive female sexuality are either challenged or reinforced as women choose to engage with sexually explicit materials for themselves or describe it as something they do for the men in their lives, as women choose to script their decisions about this engagement as though they are passive participants or as though they are actively seeking their own sexual pleasure. While it can be asserted that various different pornographies exist and have become normalized,<sup>12</sup> the use of these materials themselves is still collectively imagined as a male activity in which “women are permitted to experience desire only in certain circumstances and only in certain acceptable ways” (Fassinger and Arseneau 2007: 494). Thus it has been argued, and as the next section articulates, that while pornographic representations have traversed into the realm of the mainstream, or the everyday, it is only those representations that depict heteronormative sexual activities that are pervasive. All other representations, regardless of quantity and variety, have remained entrenched within the obscene.

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<sup>12</sup> Although one can be led to question: What exactly is it that has been ‘normalized’? Has it been the overt depiction of heteronormative or of non-normative sexual behaviours? While the latter may result in individuals lamenting the ‘decay’ or ‘perversity’ of society, these representations are not common, although they generate controversy.

### ***From the Obscene to the Mainstream: Pornography as Contested***

It has been asserted that one of the most significant cultural changes in the past twenty-five years has been the widespread acceptance and normalization (i.e., the mainstreaming) of sexually explicit materials, particularly pornography (Bernstein 2005, Ehrenreich 1983, Levy 2005, Paul 2005, Randall 1989, Slade 2001), leading to the increasingly *hypersexualized* nature of current culture (Attwood 2005*a*, Cole 1989, Jacobs 2007, Juffer 1998, 1996, Levy 2005, McNair 2002, Nathan 2007, Nikunen 2007, Paul 2005). As a result, numerous terms have been coined to describe, or comment on, the widespread porn-aesthetic said to be inundating Western societies, such as “pornified” (Paul 2005), “pornographication” (McNair 1996), “porno chic” (McNair 2002), “pornosphere” (Ciclitira 2004), “pornification” (Attwood 2005*a*) and “raunch culture” (Levy 2005).

Not all pornographic content, however, has been privy to this liberalization of sexual mores. That is, although it is seemingly pervasive in our *hypersexualized* society, this porn aesthetic is not new, not is it particularly innovative. Occidental societies have been sexualized or concerned with the sexual, devising ways to speak about it *ad infinitum*, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Foucault 1978). Sexual desire is a powerful human force (Bhattacharrya 2002), and as such is utilized and/or manipulated to achieve various aims - whether as part of a regulatory regime, such as through the use of self-governing techniques such as self-esteem and body image (Wolf 1991), or as a tool to market goods and services to a consumer society (Turner 1996). Rather than being *hypersexualized*, it can be said that sexual imagery and representations are now manifested in society in a new manner, coinciding with the physical and discursive shift of pornography from the public sphere into the private domain, increasing access and visibility.



While, as Juffer (1998) argues, home technologies have allowed pornography to be domesticated, that is rendered into the mundane or every day, the content itself does not challenge heteronormative or patriarchal conceptions of sex, gender or sexuality, it reaffirms them. The pornographication (i.e., the infiltration of the obscene into the mainstream) (McNair 1996) is highly gendered and reiterates conventional wisdom that men are the desiring and women the desired. Historically marked as a male genre in dominant discourse (Attwood 2005*b,c*, Diamond 1988, Hardy 1998, Juffer 2004, Nathan 2007, Nikunen 2007, Rubin 1993, Schauer 2005, Smith 2007), pornography has largely been filtered through the male imagination or the male gaze (Bernstein 2005, Carter 2000, Ciclitira 2004, Diamond 1988, Hardy 1998, Nathan 2007, Shauer 2005, Willis 1983) which has generally meant a privileging of male fantasies and the subsumation of female fantasies. It can also be argued that there is a privileging of heterosexual fantasies and a subsumation of homosexual fantasies when they do not speak to heterosexual male desire (i.e., mainstream girl-on-girl pornography that is made for the sexual pleasure of men).

The ubiquity, or mainstreaming, of pornography does not preclude the fact that it continues to be highly contested, that is: “charged with stereotype and polemic, informed by ideology of one sort or another, and...tied to disputes about freedom, morality, privacy, gender relations, community, the Constitution, art, crime, effects of media and the formation of sexual attitudes” (Randall 1989: ix). While it was obscenity which is the historical and current target of regulation in Western societies, not pornography *per se*, legal concern with these materials dates back to the early 1800s, as changing technology, namely the printing press, made sexually explicit materials available to wider audiences (Clinard and Meier 2010, Strub 2010). While the stigma and condemnation surrounding sexually explicit

materials pre-dates that advent of feminist theorizing on the subject (Rubin 1993, Spector 2006), these materials still present as unsettling in present society, as many individuals are “already uncomfortable with pornography and a little afraid of being contaminated with this aura of disrepute” (Rubin 1993: 36). This is evidenced by the myriad of empirical studies focused on providing evidence of a causal link between pornography and violence against women (cf. Allan et al. 1995, Bergen and Bogle 2000, Boeringer 1994, Shope 2004), as well as sexual deviancy (cf. Hunter et al. 2010, Kernsmith and Kernsmith 2009, Stack et al. 2004).

According to Härmä and Stolpe (2009: 109), “[p]orn is often seen as disturbing the boundaries between reality and representation, [which is] part of the reason why it arouses such concern.” As such, the debate over these materials is not only simply about sexual mores, as popular discourse suggests, but involves “disagreements about the relation between individual autonomy and society, as well as varying conceptions of the good life” (Spector 2006: 421). Indeed, sexual behaviour and expression are among the most thoroughly ordered and regulated aspects of our lives (Foucault 1978, Randall 1989). The “transgressive themes and images” depicted in pornography confound us because they both “invite and repel” (Randall 1989: ix). These materials are simultaneously “unnatural and artificial”, both in the sexual acts, relationships and actors presented, and “too real” in their ability to titillate, as they elicit physical arousal from their audience (Härmä and Stolpe 2009: 109-110). In this sense, pornography represents more than mere representation or depiction of physical sex acts, it also acts as a discursive site onto which various political and social tensions are created, reified and contested.

Although some commentators have noted their acceptance and normalization into mainstream society (Bernstein 2005, Ehrenreich 1983, Levy 2005, Paul 2005, Slade 2001), sexually explicit materials, and pornography specifically, are fraught with tension, particularly as they relate to women (Rubin 1993). On the one hand, these materials are vilified for their perceived contribution to the sexual objectification of, and violence against, women. On the other hand, for women, pornography represents a space of contradiction where watching it could symbolize an active and assertive sexuality, thus complicating heteronormative definitions of women's passive sexualities.

Heteronormative discourse brings with it a lexicon, a 'database' women draw from in the scripting of their sexual biographies. Watching porn, which is participating in an explicitly sexual space, is indicative of a masculine, not a feminine, sexuality (Juffer 1998). This masculine sexuality wants to experience pleasure and uses porn to achieve it (Barker 2000), therefore demonstrating an active sexuality. This contradicts heteronormative understandings of passive female sexuality and so, although women draw from heteronormative discourses in the scripting of their relationships to sexually explicit materials, as will be demonstrated through this dissertation, they make use of various strategies to justify and rationalize the contradiction of women watching pornography. It is to these 'interruptions' of heteronormative, and hence male-centric, understandings of pornography, by women, that is the focus of this research.

### ***Pornography as Male Practice***

Presupposing the normalcy of a very limited and rigid definition of heterosexuality, heteronormativity works in conjunction with equally essentialized notions of sex and gender and of the inherent, or 'natural', match between biological sex and gender role (Crawley et

al. 2008, Pearson 2009, Rich 1980). According to heteronormative conventions, women's sexuality is based upon men's sexuality and centred on the male orgasm - without male pleasure there is no female pleasure (Rich 1980). As heterosexual sex is defined as beginning with the male erection and finishing with the male orgasm, female pleasure is conceptualized as secondary, lacking, irrelevant or wholly based on the satisfaction she receives in knowing her male partner was sexually pleased. Mainstream heterosexual pornography is based, and relies heavily, upon heteronormative conventions, that are "bound up with the representation of properly gendered bodies and heterosexual desire" (Härmä and Stolpe 2009: 109). As pornography is centred on the achievement of sexual pleasure (both for the audience and the actor(s) involved), the 'money shot' signals that the scene can move on, pleasure has been achieved (Williams 1999 [1989]). As Härmä and Stolpe (2009) explain, this culmination of male arousal is "generally used as a measure of porn's 'reality,' both in terms of its production and consumption" (110). It is for these reasons, the privileging of male sexual fantasizing and arousal, that I redefine mainstream pornography as *malestream*. This is not to say that women do not engage with these materials, but rather aims to provide an account of the intended audience.

The prevalence of pornography geared towards men has been attributed to the accepted (heteronormative) notion that "most heterosexual women are not aroused by pictorial representations of naked men" (Abramson and Pinkerton 1995: 184), and the idea that men feel they are entitled to access multiple, attractive sexual partners (Bernstein 2005, Ehrenreich 1983, Paul 2005), as espoused by an "unfettered, consumeristic Playboy philosophy" (Bernstein 2005: 112). The convention that sexual arousal is gender specific, with men being characterized as visually stimulated and women being naturally more aurally

and emotionally receptive is frequently asserted (Abramson and Pinkerton 1995, Christensen 1990, Faust 1980, Irigaray 1985, Soble 2002), particularly with respect to the preponderance of romance novels available to women (Nathan 2007, Radaway 1986, Snitow 1983, Willis 1983) as well as catalogues, such as Victoria's Secret that function "for many of its [female] consumers, as a kind of sexually explicit representation" (Juffer 1996: 27). Referring to instances of defunct pornographic magazines created for women, such as *Viva* which ceased publication in 1980,<sup>13</sup> Abramson and Pinkerton (1995: 184) argue that "if women reject the freedom to enjoy pornography and even male cheesecake, it must be because – no matter what permissions society gives us – women do not want it."

While pornography magazines geared towards women do not thrive as well as those created for men, Cole (1989: 38) opines that they are nonetheless "important lesson[s] in objectification: reduce a woman to tits and ass and she looks like a woman. Reduce a man to pecs and ass and he look by conventional standards less than a real man." While provocative, such viewpoints as espoused by both Cole (1989) and Abramson and Pinkerton (1995) are largely ideological and beg the following questions: (a) Why is female sexual arousal problematized as opposed to the socially constructed and gendered meanings attributed to pornography and arousal? (b) Are females genuinely less interested in visual representations of nude men, or do dominant sexual discourses indicate that men are not reducible to sex objects but as 'success' objects?<sup>14</sup> Although outside the purview of this research, future empirical analysis to understand gender variance in corporeal objectification would provide answers to these questions.

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<sup>13</sup> The same fate occurred to *Playgirl*, founded in 1973. Originally geared towards women, this magazine boasted a 50% gay male readership. It ceased print publication in January 2009 and now only offers online content.

<sup>14</sup> See Davies (1990) for a discussion surrounding the discursive conceptualization of men as 'success' objects.

Conceptualizing pornography as primarily a masculine viewing experience reinforces perceptions that women are not as sexual as men. This works “to suppress knowledge about the ways sex differences are socially produced” (Rice 2009: 256) and feeds into heteronormative assumptions of women’s sexuality as biologically passive. Ciclitira (2004) argues that even when women are considered as viewers of pornography, questions of agency, self-reflexivity or the possibility for resistance are absent, as they would contradict heteronormative conceptualizations of passive female sexuality. Feminist scholars have further nuanced the understanding of pornography, and its consumption, by turning attention to its social meaning and effects, namely whether it constitutes harm and degradation, a reflection of social gender norms, or a tool for self-actualization and liberation. The following section turns to these differing feminist approaches.

### **Feminist Perspectives: From Harm to Self-Actualization**

The feminist ‘porn wars’ of the 1980s generated a bifurcation within feminism: anti-pornography feminists and anti-censorship feminists. Pornography has the ability to inspire strong opinions and great controversy, as evidenced by academic scholarship debating whether the main issues is the victimization of women by men through violent sexuality or the repression of women’s sexuality. While supporters and opponents of pornography disagree about its associated merits and harms, discussion of sexually explicit materials regularly acknowledges the great power of such material, whether positive or negative.

Still occupying a key position within the debate, initial feminist responses in the late 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, within the context of the violence against women movement, tended to focus on pornography’s potential for harm, and on the ways in which certain aspects of sexuality (as it is culturally constructed and represented) victimize and

oppress women (cf. Barry 1979, Cole 1989, Dworkin 1981, Paul 2005). A growing conviction arose that the lower status of women was directly related to women's traditional sexual role; pornography promoted and collaborated with male sexual hegemony, perpetuating the stereotypical view of women as both victims and temptresses (Cole 1989, McElroy 1995). Other feminists have framed the debate with regards to pornography as a tool of women's liberation (cf. Assiter and Carole 1993, Dority 1998, Duggan et al. 1985, Ferguson 1984, McElroy 1995, Rodgeron and Wilson 1991, Smith 2007), while yet another faction has discussed the regulation of sexually explicit materials from the perspective of concerns about censorship (cf. Ellis et al. 1988, Linsley 1998, Rubin 1993, Strossen 1995).

Although referenced within the literature as: anti-pornography, anti-censorship and pro-pornography; or some variant of this ternary (cf. Gotell 1996, McElroy 1995), this triadic perspective is insufficient as it fails to fully recognize the myriad of feminist theoretical perspectives that have emerged or that are subsumed within each category. While some feminisms may fall into one of the three major factions, it is essential to note that these divisions are not as tightly bound as such over-simplification implies. Smart (1989: 116) argues that "it is impossible in this field to identify a simply bipartisan distinction between different feminist approaches," as these categorizations cannot "encompass the complexities of the different feminist positions. This bipartisan distinction was in reference to radical (i.e., anti-pornography) and socialist (i.e., anti-censorship) feminist positions on pornography, which Smart (1989) argued was not useful, or insufficient, to understanding the full scope of feminist theorizing on the topic. It is one thing to take a theoretical stance on pornography (whether for or against), and another to pronounce oneself on the topic of censorship. For instance, anti-censorship feminists might have varying stances on pornography, that is they

may be either pro- or anti-), but they are united on the fight against censorship. It was as a result of this lack of nuance that Smart (1989) used the categories: pornography as harm and pornography as representation to identify the major differences between the positions. I add here a third category to account for the emergence of the pro-pornography, or liberation, feminism in the 1990s: pornography as self-actualization. These three feminist positions will now be discussed in turn.

### ***Pornography as Harm***

Shifting the discussion of pornography away from ideas of morality, and towards considerations of pornography as a cause of harm (Brownmiller 1976, Cole 1989, Dworkin 1981), it was argued that “pornography degraded women, lied about our sexuality, and encouraged violence against women and children” (Ridington 1992: 17). Viewed as harm, pornography exists not as a “representation of neutral (hetero)sexual practices...but a statement about women and a practice of male power over women” (Smart 1989: 120). For Dworkin (1981), who defined pornography as the “graphic depiction of whores,” the genre demonstrates that in a male supremacist society, women are only valued for their sexuality. Defined as one of the most visible patriarchal demarcations of gender discrimination, pornography is deemed to be profoundly harmful to women, in particular, and society in general. Since it represents a male sexual fantasy that is inherently violent, women exposed to pornography are said to have “internalized a false view of [their] own sexuality” (Bryson 2003: 193).

Mobilizing around Robin Morgan’s (1974) infamous assertion: “pornography is the theory, rape is the practice,” feminists espousing the pornography as harm perspective emphasized the victimization of women and the damage perpetuated by pornography though



normalizing sexual scripts that involve the objectification, dehumanization and degradation of women by men (Berger et al. 1991, Cole 1989, Dworkin 1981, Jeffreys 1990, Russell 1993, Paul 2005). Asserting that pornography is a form of misogyny that promotes a system of sexual exploitation and female sexual slavery, it is argued that it serves to create a social climate in which rape, prostitution and incest are tolerated and accepted (Barry 1979, Dworkin 1981). As a result, pornography as harm feminists favour legal action against pornography (Berger et al. 1991) in order to censor and/or cease its production, and as such are commonly identified as anti-pornography.

Three main charges have been leveled against pornography by anti-pornography feminists, all related to the concept of harm. First, it has been argued that pornography is dehumanizing, reduces women to parts, treats women as sex objects, stereotypes women as sexually uninhibited, and depicts women as subordinate to men (Dines et al. 1997, Dworkin 1981, MacKinnon 1986, Brownmiller 1975). The second charge is that pornography is directly related to violence against women. Anti-pornography feminists argue that there is a cause and effect relationship between men watching pornography and acting violently towards women, including committing rape (Cole 1995, Dines 2010, Dworkin 1981, MacKinnon 1986, Paul 2005). The third charge is that pornography is a mechanism by which men dominate women (Dworkin 1981, MacKinnon 1986). This led to the successful passing of anti-pornography ordinances in Minneapolis and Indianapolis in the 1980s, which were later overturned. The proposed law, if it were in place, would have allowed women or groups of women to take producers or distributors of pornography to civil court for damages. Defendants would be charged with “coercing the plaintiff(s) into pornography” (McElroy 1995: 15).

### *Pornography as Representation*

While some feminists, as outlined above, espoused the belief that pornography was the issue, causing the degradation of female sexuality and harm to society in general, other feminists disagreed, arguing that pornography was not the problem, and that its censorship posed a greater threat to women's liberation than did sexually explicit imagery (Ellis et al. 1988, Rodgerson and Wilson 1991, Ridington 1992, Strossen 1995). Pornography, under this perspective, mirrors the sexism of society, it does not create it. Rather than being a powerful patriarchal force, producing a sexist society, pornography merely reflects, represents and reifies current sex and gender roles (Rodgerson and Wilson 1995); and it is no different than other sexualized images of women in the media (Rubin 1993, Rodgerson and Wilson 1995).

Highlighting the fact that women have historically had less sexual liberties than men, similar to the pornography-as-harm feminists, pornography-as-representation feminists are fundamentally concerned that the "perception of women as sexual objects imposes social penalties on women who do not express their sexuality in a way that is pleasing to men" (Jaggar 1983: 179). Although troubled by the societal repression and distortion of women's sexuality (Berger et al. 1991, Rodgerson and Wilson 1991, Rubin 1993), they argue against governmental and legal regulations banning pornography, likening pornography to a symptom of social ills (Faust 1980, King 1985, Nathan 2007). For King (1985: 79), "censoring pornography is like using an Aspirin to cure cancer: it might ease the pain but does not eliminate the disease, and may well have serious side effects." Pornography as representation feminists, predominantly anti-censorship, insist:

That the way to counter the dangers associated with sex was not to censor images of women as sexual objects but to challenge the central assumptions about sexuality which determine sexual ideology in our culture (Rodgerson and Wilson 1991: 12).

Apart from a focus on its representativeness and arguments based on freedom of expression, feminists from this perspective also resist regulation or censorship of pornography on the grounds that prohibitions could “make a lot of women ashamed of their sexual feelings and afraid to be honest about them” (Willis 1983: 462). It is argued that if pornography allows women to explore their sexuality, to condemn pornography would be to condemn this exploration (Crawford 2007).

### ***Pornography as Self-Actualization***

The most recent voice to emerge is that of pro-pornography advocates, or sex radicals, who begin with the premise that pornography can be, and is, beneficial to both male and female consumers. Responding to the pornography as harm critique, they question why expressions, looks and gestures which recognize a woman as a sexual being are considered antithetical to her personhood (Assiter and Carol 1993, McElroy 1995, Soble 2002, Strossen 1995), suggesting that pornography can be used as a means to counter repressive patriarchal notions that denied women access to their sexuality (Assiter and Carol 1993, Berger et al. 1990, Burstyn 1985, Cornell 2000, McElroy 1995). Warnke (1999) notes that by condemning sexually explicit imagery, pro-censorship feminists do more than just censor materials that may be deemed sexist and misogynist; in effect, they are “promoting legislation that would suppress materials through which women can discover different views of an authentic sexuality and, indeed, different ways of being sexual” (124).

Staunchly against censorship, pornography-as-self-actualization feminists believe that restricting pornographic representations will serve to inhibit women’s discovery of sexual pleasure through visual stimulation (Assiter and Carol 1993, Berger et al. 1991, McElroy 1995). Arguing that women’s experiences of pornography and sexuality is not as

universally victimizing as those espousing views of harm and degradation portray (Faust 1980, McElroy 1995, Rodgerson and Wilson 1991), it is argued that sexually explicit representations can serve as a vehicle for women's sexual liberation and provide a safe avenue for the investigation of female sexuality (Assiter and Carol 1993, Berger et al. 1991, McElroy 1995, Palac 1998, Rodgerson and Wilson 1991, Snitow 1983), as well as provide a counter-narrative to the heterosexist status quo (Barker 2000, Carter 2000, Jacobs 2007). Stating that "the essential feature of sexuality should not be emotional intimacy *per se*, but the exchange of physical, especially genital, pleasure" (Berger et al. 1991: 40), the main objective of libertarians is to advance women's sexual freedoms.

Most recently, queer theory has reaffirmed the importance of analyses based on sex and gender, advancing the social constructionist theory that one's sexual identity is not 'natural' and therefore individuals cannot really be described using essentializing terms. Indicating that consuming or participating in the production of sexually explicit materials is solely a personal choice, queer theorists view phenomena such as prostitution, pornography (both heterosexual and homosexual) and BDSM as legitimate and valuable expressions of human sexuality (Doyle 2006, Slade 2001, Tucker 1990, Ussher 2007). Queer theorists also note the transformative aspects of sexually explicit materials, and their ability to expand the boundaries of sexual desirability (Ussher 2007). The notion that pornography can be best understood as transgressive of heterosexist norms rather than supportive of them, although not solely by queer theorists, has been advanced (Carol 1994, Doyle 2006, Jacobs 2007, Rubin 1983, Smith 2007, Ussher 2007, Vance 1992).

### *Theoretical Positioning On Pornography*

The last thirty years has seen much debate about pornography: its meanings, pleasures, pains and effects (Smith 2007). This debate, however, has been largely ideological and theoretical. There are significant problems in only theorizing about pornography, particularly about the pains or pleasures women encounter as a result of sexually explicit representations. Many theorists have posited that pornography for women is different than that for men, locating Harlequin-type romantic fiction as a visible demarcation of this difference (Hardy 2001, Radaway 1986, Snitow 1985, Wu 2006). Some scholarship has located women's sexuality in touch or sound rather than gaze (Irigaray 1985). In this instance, it is argued that female sexuality is emotionally, psychically and physically different from the sexuality of men, and that pornography is thus unable to fit with women's erotic potentialities. Furthermore, it has been suggested that this notion that pornography is somehow outside the purview of women's erotic potential is actively produced with the intention to distort, even to destroy female sexual desire in the service of institutionalized heterosexuality (Dworkin 1981, Jeffreys 1990, Levy 2005, Paul 2005). Others have argued that pornography can and does hold particular pleasures for female subjects and that its use can be best understood as transgressive of heterosexist norms rather than supportive of them (Carol 1994, Vance 1992).

While at an intuitive level I am inclined to place myself with the pornography as representation group, I am unable, and unwilling, to strictly adhere to one perspective, particularly since such positions are not as neatly bound as they are often presented. To do so would be to imply that pornography, and the meanings attached to it, exist as a cohesive, unified and regimented entity. Whether pornography is sexist and degrading, or

emancipatory and liberating, none of these are intrinsic qualities of pornography; although as feminist theorists indicate these may form part of the social characteristics that locate porn in society. Pornographic depictions created within a sexist, heteronormative and patriarchal context, are liable to be read, and culturally situated, by its audience in particular way that reaffirms these norms; however, this does not change that some women may experience these depictions as liberating.

Betty Dodson, pioneer in women's sexual liberation, and who in 1968 held the first one-woman show of erotic art, recounted a story she heard while at attendance at the 1987 Women Against Pornography (WAP) conference, in order to highlight the militancy through which some anti-pornography feminists pinpoint pornography as the singular cause of blame to the exclusion of other social facts. Dodson (2013: 28) writes that at the WAP conference a woman in her mid-thirties described childhood sexual abuse inflicted on her by her father, who when her mother went grocery shopping, would take out "disgusting filthy pictures" and force her to perform an "unnatural act". While this woman did not specify the nature of the abuse, she went on to blame the entire incident on pornography – if it were not for pornography she would not have been the victim of abuse. However, one must be critical of these one-dimensional attacks, particularly since they are void of empirical causal evidence.

Dodson (2013: 28) challenges:

There was no mention of society's denial of sexual expression, especially masturbation. Maybe the father was a devout Catholic who knew he'd go to hell if he took his own penis. How about the nuclear family taking some of the blame with its restrictive sexual mores? But none of these possibilities occurred to her. She was adamant that "dirty pictures" had been the sole cause of her incest.

To what extent can societal ills and the objectification, degradation and violence of women be blamed on pornography? If pornography is a representation of society, is it merely

representing and reflecting back itself or has pornography become the scapegoat for a myriad of issues that we dare not speak, so as not to disrupt the heteronormative status quo?

It is as a result of these sorts of questions that I am unwilling to commit myself to a particular perspective on pornography. While on a personal level, I have an uncomplicated relationship with pornography and other sexually explicit materials,<sup>15</sup> as a researcher, my positioning is conflicted. While I personally do not ascribe meanings of ‘degradation’ to individual sex acts or sexually explicit representations, and believe that the messages one attributes to pornography is more reflective of the viewer, than the material itself, as a researcher I must acknowledge the tenuous position of pornography within the literature. As the following discussion will highlight, sex and sexuality are socially constructed, and as such there is no ‘right’ sexuality, just as there is no ‘right’ interpretation of pornography. We cannot divorce pornographic representations from the society that produces it; therefore we cannot unequivocally claim to know what its effects are. In this respect, it has been argued that feminism and pornography has a common but conflicting interest: they both focus on women as sexual beings (Ciclitira 2004, McElroy 1995). As McElroy (1995) explains, pornography is the representation of the physical act of sex itself, while feminisms examine the historical, economic, political and cultural impacts of sex on women. It is this link between feminism, pornography and female sexuality that will be considered in the next section.

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<sup>15</sup> This is to say that I recognize myself as a porn-positive feminist. I personally do not view pornographic depictions as either degrading or not degrading – as I believe that meanings are not inherent in images or actions (i.e., determinations of ‘degradation’ stems from the viewer who interprets an image/action in a particular way, not the image/action itself). When screening these images, my own decision-making centres on determinations of activities and situations that I can place myself in (whether real or fantasized) as opposed to those I cannot.

## **Women, Sexual/Erotic Desire and Sexually Explicit Materials.**

The 1960s and 1970s ushered in significant changes, such as the rise of modern feminism, the adult entertainment industry and the sexual revolution, leading to shifts in cultural attitudes towards sex, particularly female sex, in North America. This is not to indicate, however, that sexuality was completely repressed or unspoken of prior to the advent of these changes, as the repression hypothesis would suggest. According to this hypothesis, sexuality was not only confined to the home and “absorbed into the serious function of reproduction” (Foucault 1978: 3), but made to disappear through an “injunction to silence” (Foucault 1978: 4). It is a common assertion that sex was repressed prior to the advent of the sexual revolution – that it was unspoken if done outside of specific reproductive confines. However, Foucault (1978) asserts that this is not entirely correct, although he is neither interested in contradicting the repression hypothesis, nor does he deny the fact that sex has been a taboo subject in Western cultures. Primarily interested in the discursive fact of sexuality, Foucault (1978) aimed to understand how and why sexuality was made into an object of discussion (although he never did acknowledge gender as a field of discourse). In questioning the repression hypothesis, Foucault addresses the discursive paradox of sexuality, that is, the simultaneous loud proclamations that sex is repressed and the multitudinous ways that sex has been articulated, stating that:

What distinguished these last three centuries is the variety, the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing and redistributing what is said about it: around sex, a whole network of varying, specific, and coercive transpositions into discourse (1978: 34).

Foucault’s interest, therefore, is not in sexuality itself, but rather the discursive fact of sexuality; in the ways in which an object of discussion comes to be spoken about in a particular manner, the knowledge derived from that mode of speaking, and the power



derived from that knowledge. In contrast to the notion that there existed a historical silence around sexuality, is the revelation that it was spoken about, albeit in different ways.

The theoretical positioning of sex and gender as cultural and discursive constructs also emerged in this era, suggesting that neither sex nor gender are immutable or biological (Butler 2004, 1997, Foucault 1978). For Butler (2004, 1997), the categories of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are created through individual symbolic behaviours and rituals and maintained through their repeated reiterations. The corollary of this position, which is asserted throughout this dissertation, is that sex and sexuality are both capable of being constructed and deconstructed through these reiterations.

Sexuality, like gender, is learned and constructed through representation (Bhattacharyya 2002, Crawley et al. 2008, Foucault 1978), although “sexual desire and pleasure are often thought of as belonging to an essentially pre-social, inherent, or ‘given’ realm” (Mason-Grant 2004: 121). The claim that pornography subordinates and silences women has been challenged by some researchers who argue that sexually explicit materials do not have singular meanings, nor do they command only sexist understandings of gender (Soble 2002, Strossen 1995, Warnke 1999). This is in line with Arcand (1994) who argues that pornographic images of themselves are neutral; it is through individual reaction to these images, that meanings arise.<sup>16</sup> Strossen (1995: 162) states that while “pro-censorship feminists may well view a woman’s apparent welcoming of sex with a man as degrading...because of their negative attitudes toward women’s ability to make sexual choices. Other viewers are likely to see such a scene as positive and healthy.” Sexually explicit materials, by providing a wider repertoire of communication about sex, may also

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<sup>16</sup> Arcand (1994: 434) writes: “La pornographie n’est qu’une suite d’images sur papier ou sur écran qui, en elles-mêmes, sont sûrement inoffensives. C’est plutôt la réaction que ces images peuvent susciter qui inquiète.”

provide opportunities to try out a myriad of erotic possibilities (Bhattacharyya 2002, Plummer 1975). Furthermore, and markedly against the pornography as harm perspective, Strossen (1995: 146) argues:

Ambiguous and positive interpretations apply to the full range of sexual speech, including violent imagery and imagery that might well be labeled ‘subordinating’ or ‘degrading’, such as rape scenes and scenes dramatizing the so-called rape myth – namely that women want to be raped.

This is not to negate the fact that we can still be concerned with the social reactions that images trigger or evoke, but it is individuals who give meaning to those images.

The existence of divergent interpretations and responses to sexually explicit materials challenges the idea that pornography has any single and/or inherently harmful impact on women and society; the notion that pornography has the power to silence or subordinate may be brought into question. As indicated previously, the literature suggests that sexually explicit representations can even invite viewers to rebel against conventional notions of female powerlessness, vulnerability and respectability, or to explore the origins of their sexual fantasies (Jacobs 2007, Strossen 1995). At the very least, such materials make aspects of human sexuality available for public debate and critique (Strossen 1995, Warnke 1999), particularly with respect to the broader social significance of pornography.

Although meaning is not inherent to any particular sexual representation, it is important to reflect on the fact that meanings do not emerge and remain in a vacuum. The societal context that gives rise to meaning, and enables its transformation, maintenance and proliferation, must enter into the analysis. “Sex,” for Bhattacharya (2002: 159):

Has been revealed as highly historicized, deeply social, always contextual – and as a result, always vulnerable to reworking by other shifts in the terrain of the social. However timeless and natural it may feel, sexual expression must bear the impressions of other determinations – otherwise how would we make sense of it?

In this respect, sexually explicit materials have been defined as simply one genre, among many, in a patriarchal society “in which visual representation generally objectifies, sexualizes and demeans women” (Kappeler 1986 cited in Schauer 2005: 45). The argument that these materials not only shape the practices and possibilities of sexual behaviours, but that these representations subconsciously permeate everyday consciousness and structure social relations, has been advanced (c.f. Bhattacharyya 2002). As a result, Butler (2004), examining the role of fantasy in feminist politics, argues for a more complex understanding of the relation between representations and their referents, focusing both on the ways that representations can call into question the ontological status of entities and on how ‘the real’ is produced through social action. According to Butler (2004: 503), “feminist theory and politics cannot regulate the representation of ‘women’ without producing that very ‘representation’: and if that is in some sense a discursive inevitability of representational politics, then the task must be to safeguard the open productivity of those categories, whatever the risk.” Cornell (2000) advocates political alliances be created between feminists and the pornography industry in order to create representations of sexuality that would benefit women, in a bid to “unleash the feminine imaginary, rather than on constraining men” (553); further emphasizing the importance of fantasy for realizing transformative feminist projects (Butler 2004, Cornell 2000, Snitow 1983). In this sense, there appears to be theoretical consensus that while meanings are not inherent to sexual images, these materials have been symbolically inscribed in and by patriarchal structures of gender.

### ***Marketing Sexually Explicit Materials to Women***

While representations of ‘woman’ seethe with sexuality, and women’s bodies are regarded as ‘pornographic’, the boundaries of femininity are constrained, with women being

condemned for exploring their own sexualities (Assiter and Carol 1993, Berger et al. 1991, Berkowitz 2006, Faust 1980, McElroy 1995, Rodgeron and Wilson 1991). Traditional gendered narratives identified women as being not sexual (although sexualized), forbidding women pleasure for its sake (Smith 2007). If women admitted “to taking pleasure from sexuality expressed outside of a ‘loving, equal relationship’ or in unconventional acts, [they were] perceived to be somehow legitimizing male violence rather than acting assertively” (Assiter and Carol 1993: 16). However, women *are* sexual beings, and the proliferation of sexually explicit materials created for women indicates that some women do desire and seek out sexually arousing materials (Juffer 2004, McElroy 1998, Nathan 2007, Smith 2007). This shift in discourses surrounding female sexuality and its representation in pornography continues to elicit much theoretical and practical debate.

Over 30 years ago, Faust (1980: 3) asked the following question: “If women are going to have equality with men, why not have pornography for women?” This question, although not as controversial now as it was when initially posed, speaks to broader conversations surrounding women’s desires for, and engagement with, sexually explicit materials. Despite studies that demonstrate that some women do actively engage with sexually explicit materials, Attwood (2005c) points out that the marketing of sex products for women focuses strongly on toys and clothing, whereas pornography still remains entrenched within the male domain. When produced with the female consumer in mind, commentators suggest that the female sex market uses stereotypical notions of style, fashion and self-expression associated with femininity (Hardy 2001, Juffer 1996, Nikunen 2007), reifying phallogentric depictions of gender (Barker 2000, Hardy 2001, Schauer 2005) and reflecting a consumeristic and commodified discourse of female sexual pleasure and self-

identification (Attwood 2005c). Marketed to women as a form of health and self-development, it has been argued that sex has become increasingly ‘desexualized’ (Attwood 2005c). Sex shops, aimed at female consumers, are “not sexual...not about desire,” indicating that women “still can’t participate [in sex] for the same reason men do – just because we like it” (Boynton 2003 cited in Attwood 2005c: 404); sex is sold to women as a set of fashion and design accoutrements (Attwood 2005c, Storr 2002) that women must purchase to partake in their sexuality. Romance novels depict an additional way in which female sexuality is commodified, packaged and sold back to women. This genre is based on “selling fantasies to women that emphasize the kinds of fidelity and love that echo the ideologies of consumerism and capitalism” (Wu 2006: 134).

Academic scholarship on the topic of the consumption of sexuality has highlighted that there may be some merit to the notion that sexuality is something that men already own/possess and it is something that women need to *buy* (cf. Attwood 2005c, Hardy 2001, Juffer 1996, Nikunen 2007, Storr 2002). As a result of sex being constructed from a male-centric position, that is sex begins and ends from a male vantage point (i.e., commencing with an erection and culminating in ejaculation), men do not need to do anything additional to prepare for sex. Sex is constructed as being for men. However, as previously noted, for women pleasure is defined through male pleasure and their ability to sustain this pleasure (Rich 1980). This sustains the commercialization of sexual and gender-normative accoutrements for women – if we want to participate in (heteronormative and patriarchal conceptualizations of) sex and sexuality, we need to purchase the necessary items to feel sexy and sexually desirable. Whether women are genuinely more attentive to the aesthetics of sexuality, an area which has received limited empirical analysis, merging the

pornographic with everyday female pleasure and autonomy legitimates “a kind of pornographic consumption in a way that opens up subject positions not completely determined by patriarchal relations” (Juffer 1996: 45). There is some theoretical support for the notion that through pornography women can begin to re-appropriate these images of female sexuality and desirability, using them to their own advantage thus unsettling their original patriarchal meanings (Butler 1997, Schauer 2005).

### ***The Internet as Shifting Women’s Access to Sexually Explicit Materials***

Internet pornography “is a hugely profitable business for thousands and a popular activity for millions” (Berne 2007: 16), which may have allowed sexually explicit representations to physically, and discursively, shift from public space into the private domain, rendering the talk and depiction of sex simultaneously more socially acceptable and mainstream, as well as, hidden from public view (Juffer 1998). Speculating about the relationship between new technologies, the development of ‘cybersex’ and what this means for society, Attwood (2002) argues that:

It is in this arena that the boundaries that have guaranteed pornography its special place within culture are most obviously collapsing. Here, it is not only the categories of pornographic and mainstream, private and public, licit and illicit, but those of read and text, real and representational, producer and consumer which may be ceasing to function in familiar ways.

Technological advancements have significantly altered not only who was, and could, consume ‘live’ pornographic depictions and where, but the relationship that viewers have to their engagement with such materials (Berne 2007, Ciclitira 2004, Johnson 1998, McNair 2002, Williams 1999 [1989]). Improved access to information about sex, particularly safe sex, as well as opportunities for women and minorities to produce and distribute their own sexual representations (Ciclitira 2004, Kibby and Costello 2001), have been cited as positive benefits of new technologies. Innovations such as videotapes and videocassette recorders

‘domesticated’ and ‘privatized’ pornography (Juffer 1998), by allowing consumers to bring sexually explicit films out of adult theatres and into their homes (Berne 2007, Bernstein 2005, Ciclitira 2004, Lane 2001, Nathan 2007), which, some authors suggest, has led to the interest in, and rise in the production of, more deviant forms of sexually explicit materials (Berne 2007, Paul 2005). It has allowed users to explore different aspects of their sexuality without publicizing it, as “previously, people depended on a sort of public ‘eye’ to keep viewers of pornography in check. Many rightly assumed that being forced to ask someone, face-to-face with, for material or buying a ticket at a theatre would feel shameful to the pornography user” (Berne 2007: 15). For women the domestication of sexually explicit materials has been of central importance, as Rubin (1993: 36) contends that “‘respectable’ women did not get much opportunity to go into porn shops and theatres or to view pornography” prior to these technological advancements which enabled greater access, which as a result of its mainstreaming became both private and more normalized.

Highlighted within the literature, it appears that the Internet has facilitated a democratizing change within the adult entertainment industry (Ciclitira 2004, McNair 2002), resulting in the influx and diversity of pornographic images, movies and literature available to any person who seeks them out, all within the privacy and comfort of one’s own home. Unlike VCR’s and DVD’s, which consumers still have to rent or buy at adult video stores – making their sexual behaviours and fantasies visible to others (Berkowitz 2006) – the Internet is identified as an anonymous, affordable and accessible (Cooper 1998) way to engage with pornography, particularly for women (Ciclitira 2004, Jacobs 2007, McNair 2002). Juffer (1998) notes the proliferation of ‘women friendly’ sexually explicit sites on the Internet, while Nikunen (2007: 81) argues that current porn-for-women articulates and reifies

an essentialist approach towards sex “emphasizing active male sexuality and romantic female sexuality.”

While current research has noted an increase of female-focused pornography online, the assumption that women were not accessing sexually explicit materials prior to the emergence of the Internet is problematic, as it does not account for the range of materials that some women may consider sexually explicit or to which they previously had access. Neither does it account for the wide array of sexually explicit content that was used within the context of the home since the Victorian era, including: books, magazines and photographs.

### ***Erotica and Romance Novels: Sexually Explicit Materials for Women?***

Pointing to the astonishing sales of romance and erotic fiction (c.f. Slade 2001, Wu 2006),<sup>17</sup> commentators have noted that the appeal of this literature may be sexually motivated, but “differ over whether the form should be called pornographic, and if so, what that means” (Slade 2001: 846). To this end, there has been much theorizing over the distinction between pornography and erotica (Berger et al. 1991, Bernstein 2005). Pornography, here, is defined as sexual representations that treat female bodies as objects to be controlled and dominated and portrays sex that is violent, degrading and dehumanizing (Berger et al. 1991, Smith 2007), while erotica involves images or depictions of “mutually pleasurable sexual expression” (Steinem 1980: 37) that celebrate the body and sexuality between equal and consenting participants (Berger et al. 1991). As a result of traditional gendered narratives that women are not ‘naturally’ as visually aroused as men are, but rather

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<sup>17</sup> Citing the Romance Industry Statistics, Wu (2006) reports that: romance novels comprise 54.9% of paperback novel sales, over 80% of readers are women between the ages of 17-54, and that 63% of this group either have a college degree or some form of college education – dispelling myths surrounding the types of women who read the genre.



female arousal is linked to aural and emotional triggers (c.f. Abramson and Pinkerton 1995, Christensen 1990, Faust 1980, Soble 2002, Wu 2006), it is generally accepted that pornography is a male genre, while erotica is female terrain. For instance, Hazen (1983:117) acknowledges that “male pornography has to do with slippery bodies first and foremost. Women’s pornography, or rather, the literature that provides women sexual excitement, is romance.”

There is general consensus in the literature that women seek different materials for sexual arousal than men. Snitow (1983) argues that Harlequin romances, in particular, offer women warm, friendly and respectful fantasies that exalt the sexual experience. Romance novels are described as providing a way for women to discover their own sexuality (Smith 2007, Thurston 1987, Wu 2006). For Smith (2007: 203), claims about the pornographic nature of romance novels can be a “means of valorizing/recuperating romance reading for women ... if it is also about getting turned on, it serves a good purpose: the need for women to own and express their sexuality.” Romance novels offer “glamorized images of powerful, sexy women, together with, at times, the more mundane reality assumed to lie behind the glamour” (Lewallen 1988: 87). Furthermore, commentators suggest that within romance novels women are depicted as both the passive recipients of male desire and actively desiring sex (Faust 1980, Hardy 2001, Lewallen 1988, Smith 2007).

It is important to note that this genre has been problematized. Douglas (1980: 26) argues Harlequin-type romances, “a duel of sexual stupidity,” presents women as enjoying physical abuse from males. Although not generally identified as such, romance novels frequently depict rape and other forms of “sex-plus-violence” (Douglas 1980, Faust

1980:146).<sup>18</sup> Hardy (2001: 437) notes that with few exceptions, the scenarios in erotic fiction for women, where men “issue orders or abuse, while the women begged, pleaded and moaned,” depict “through the connotations of their gestural exchanges, a gendered power relation of male domination and female submission.” Other scholars argue that the stereotypes inherent in the genre reinforces the repression of women and supports their subordinate status, as romance novels reflect gendered patriarchal values (Faust 1980, Wu 2006).<sup>19</sup> This is not to indicate that women who engage with romance novels or erotica are essentially engaging in traditional images of women being sexually dominated by men, but that as the literature on pornography indicates, the meanings attributed to sexually explicit materials are contingent upon the individual accessing such materials. In this respect, and of interest to this study, women may negotiate their engagement with romance novels, erotica as well as pornography in various ways. Focusing on the use of Western romance novels in India, Parameswaran (2002: 832) notes that:

Young women’s fascination for the commodities of Western material culture in imported romance fiction is located in their desire to experience their identities as cosmopolitan, global consumers. In negotiating the boundaries of tradition, Indian women readers construct romance fiction as modern manuals on sexuality that afford them escape from the burdens of preserving the honour of family and community.

This demonstrates the importance of researching what sexually explicit materials mean to the women who engage with them, as it is important to understand how theoretical analyses of such materials may or may not correspond to data emerging from empirical analysis.

While the extant literature on women’s engagement with sexually explicit materials focuses on the gendered marketing of sexual accoutrements or on women’s use of gender-

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<sup>18</sup> Faust (1980: 146) describes: “It [the genre] puts the heroines into décolleté gowns that display their always perfect bodies and handicap them in a struggle. These exquisite girls are always having dresses torn from quivering flesh by ardent or brutal men.”

<sup>19</sup> Krentz (1992) on the other hand argues that the discourses available in romantic fiction – virginity, heroism, seduction, subversion, empowerment and happiness – are not necessarily anti-feminist or patriarchal.

appropriate erotic or romantic fiction, there is a small, but growing, body of research which examines women's use of pornography. The following section explores this literature.

### ***Women Using Pornography***

Research on pornography use has historically focused on males and the negative effects of their consumption, such as attitudes towards women and changes in levels of sexual aggression. Against a backdrop of increased accessibility and the emergence of sex-positive feminism, researchers have begun to acknowledge that pornography has a female audience, who not only engage with these materials but derive pleasure from them. In this context, there exists a small number of qualitative studies that have focused specifically on women's views of pornography and comparisons of those attitudes to feminist positions of previous decades (Boynton 1999, Ciclitira 2004, Cowan et al. 1989), and on women's accounts of their experiences with consuming pornography (Ciclitira 2004, Parvez 2006, Senn 2003, Smith 2007).

The research done on women consumers of sexually explicit materials portrays women as anything but passive observers, and asserts that their feelings about pornography are complex, individual and lack uniformity. Ciclitira (2004) found that many women experience ambivalence about their private enjoyment of pornography, which she did not predefine, and feminist anti-porn political messages. Some women felt their involvement with feminism impinged on their ability to enjoy pornography, and some have found themselves conflicted with feeling of guilt and shame: they both were aroused by and consumed pornography, but had political reservations about the treatment and representations of women in pornography (Ciclitira 2004). Ciclitira did find some evidence to suggest that as women, both heterosexual and lesbian, have begun to produce their own

erotica and pornography, women consumers begin to feel more “permission to enjoy porn” (2004: 295). These feelings of ambivalence and contradiction, however, can be attributed to dominant cultural discourses that pornography is a genre for men. Wilson-Kovacs (2009) reported that in her interviews with heterosexual women, pornography was seen as a genre for men and was interpreted as demeaning to women. Despite this, some women reported finding pleasure in pornography, though “pornography was perceived as devoid of any acknowledgement of women’s desires and real-life sex” (Wilson-Kovacs 2009: 155).

Finding sexual pleasure in pornographic representations does not mean that women uncritically engage with these materials, or that these materials are politically neutral. The data available suggests that women engage in much identity and emotion work (Hochschild 1983) during their use of sexually explicit content. The women participating in Boynton’s (1999) study were shown pornographic images and asked to comment on them in a group setting. Several consistent themes were found; including that women described the pictures by identifying with, or distancing themselves from, the models (i.e., ‘like me’ and ‘not like me’ discourses). Enjoyment or comparison with the images on display was tempered by conversations surrounding the comfort, attractiveness and sexual capacities of the models. Similarly, Parvez (2006) found that while women porn consumers found pornography arousing, their arousal was mitigated by concern over the how convincingly the porn actress appeared to display pleasure. The women disliked “fake bodies, fake plots and fake pleasure” (Parvez 2006: 617), noting that women’s references to fake porn served as euphemisms for pornography made by and for men. Ultimately what distinguished ‘good’ pornography from ‘bad’, centered on women’s pleasure “good pornography, in other words,

is where the female porn actress is really enjoying herself. Consequently, bad pornography involves fake pleasure” (Parvez 2006: 617).

While there exists some data on women’s use of pornography, the extent to which women seek out, or are able to identify feminist pornography, remains empirically unexamined. Although this research touches marginally on participants perceptions of ‘women’s porn’, it is important here to address the genre of feminist porn, particularly since the notion of ‘sexual authenticity’ has been highlighted in the literature as a concern by women who use pornography. The genre of feminist pornography is particularly interesting, as it is infrequently considered within larger theoretical feminist discussions on pornography. For instance, what does it mean to speak of pornography as harm or as representation when we take feminist pornography as the subject of discussion? As of yet, these sorts of conversations remain abstract, as the genre of feminist pornography has not yet entered the collective imagination or mainstream. The following, and final, section of this chapter will focus briefly on this emerging genre, as it lends much to the discussion surrounding how to explore and explain women’s engagement with sexually explicit materials more broadly.

### **Pornography By and For Women: Centrality of ‘Authenticity’**

An important consideration arises when attending to the meaning-making practices of women who engage with pornography – that of the existence of ‘feminist’ pornography. The ternary of feminist positioning described above (pornography as harm, pornography as representation, pornography as self-actualization), focuses almost exclusively on mainstream/*malestream* pornography and its alleged meanings and implications to

individuals and society. This focus is largely to the exclusion of the lived experiences<sup>20</sup> of the women (and men) who not only are employed within in the pornography industry, but who seek to create pornographic content that transgresses heteronormative ideals. Voices of the women who worked in the industry began to emerge within the literature in the 1990s, with the release of several anthologies (i.e., Cornell 2000, Delacoste and Alexander 1998, Elias et al. 1999, Juno and Vale 1991, Nagle 1997). It was also during this time that women such as Candida Royalle, Nina Hartley, Annie Sprinkle, Susie Bright and Tristan Taormino came out as feminist pornographers.

In describing feminist pornography, and the impetus behind the creation of Femme Productions, Royalle (2000: 540) explains that she “began Femme with three aims in mind. I wanted to show that it was possible to produce explicit porn that had integrity, I wanted to show that porn could be non-sexist, and I wanted to show that porn could be life-enriching.” In conjunction with differences in aesthetics, equitable labour practices in production, collaborative filming techniques, and the importance of consensual sex acts taking into account actor preference, the depiction of ‘real sex’ is vital to feminist pornography. This type of ‘authenticity’ work is identified by Peterson (2005) as “seeking authentic experiences” and it is a primary way women set their films apart from mainstream porn produced by men and attract women consumers.

While literature on sexual ‘authenticity’ focuses on its importance to men seeking out commercial sexual exchanges, the concept of authenticity is also starting to gain prominence

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<sup>20</sup> The notion of ‘lived experiences’ is central to Dorothy Smith’s (1999) discussion of institutional ethnography as a way to expose ruling relations, those textual forms of coordination and control in which “power is generated and held in contemporary society” (Smith 1999: 79). Located within the standpoint of women, taking account of women’s lived experiences is to commence sociological inquiry from the “actualities of the everyday of people’s embodied living” (Smith 1999:73). While I do not adhere to the standpoint feminist epistemological position, as this perspective has been subjected to several critiques (cf. Parent 1998), I find the concept of ‘lived experiences’ especially salient when examining a topic that has historically been framed from the male point of view (Williams 1999 [1989]).

in creation and availability of feminist pornography and understanding women as part of the pornographic audience. It is also prevalent in anti-pornography feminist accounts of women who are argued to be suffering from false consciousness. Thus it appears that the aim of depicting 'authentic' sexual desire, fantasy and experience binds both feminist pornographers and anti-pornography feminists. While both groups espouse competing visions of 'authenticity' neither reflects upon what this concept means.

As a result of being assaulted by sexual media catering to men, girls and women are said to be alienated from their authentic sexual desires, and are instead engaging in, and seemingly finding (false) pleasure from, a sexist and misogynist raunch culture (i.e., going to strip clubs, exchanging sexual displays for beads, undergoing breast enlargement surgery, watching pornography) (cf. Levy 2005). However, for Levy (2005), and similar commentators, the notion of 'authentic sexual desire' is never conceptualized. What is women's authentic sexuality, if it is not the sexuality that they are engaging in? Furthermore, how can we say that this sexuality being performed by women is not genuine to them? Ward (2013: 133) further questions: "Is there such a thing as sexuality unmediated by culture? And if so, who decides the content of this authentic female sexuality?" If we agree that sex, gender and sexuality are socially constructed, they are constructed within the context of society. There is no fundamental truth to these constructs, they are inevitably culturally mediated. Even sex which is seemingly biologically determined at birth via the presence of a penis or a vagina, is complicated by the existence of external genital that do not meet certain lengths (i.e., an appendage can be considered too long to be called a clitoris or too short to be identified as a penis), and the occurrence of external genitalia that do not match internal reproductive organs (Crawley et al. 2008). The fact that our culture has neatly categorized

two dichotomous sexes based on external genitalia, to the invisibility of other possibilities constructs how sex is envisioned and what is ‘normal’ (Fausto-Sterling 1993).<sup>21</sup> In light of this, the critique becomes not whether or not engaging in “raunch culture” (Levy 2005) is sexually authentic, but why female sexuality, for anti-porn feminists, is always polarized between erotic (good/respectable) and raunchy (bad/false consciousness)?

Feminist porn, on the other hand, purports to take women into account as part of the pornographic audience. While it “does not assume a singular female viewer, but acknowledges multiple female (and other) viewers with many different preferences” (Penley et al. 2013: 10), feminist pornography purports to offer the female audience sexually explicit materials that they will enjoy. This fundamental premise of depicting genuine female pleasure was originally built into the criteria (later expanded to include ‘traditionally marginalized people’),<sup>22</sup> used to assess films for the Feminist Porn Awards, created in 2006 in Toronto by Channele Gallant and the staff at Good for Her, a feminist sex-positive sex toy store. Although feminist approaches to pornography privilege women’s genuine desires and experiences, in contrast to mainstream/*malestream* pornography, the same contention around what is meant by ‘authentic’ and ‘genuine’ sexualities, and how do women come to desire what they do, exists. Ward (2013: 135) expands on this point, stating:

Sure, market research may indicate that women do, in fact, have group preferences (for deeper plot narratives, close-ups of female orgasms, and so on),

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<sup>21</sup> It has been argued that intersexuality is common, just not spoken about (Crawley et al. 2008). For instance, in the United States it is estimated that 1/1500 children are born with noticeably atypical genitalia. Online: <http://www.isna.org/faq/frequency>

<sup>22</sup> The current criteria are as follows: (1) Women and/or traditionally marginalized people were involved in the direction, production and/or conception of the work; (2) The work depicts genuine pleasure, agency and desire for all performers, especially women and traditionally marginalized people; and/or (3) The work expands the boundaries of sexual representation on film, challenges stereotypes and presents a vision that sets the content apart from most mainstream pornography. This may include depicting a diversity of desires, types of people, bodies, sexual practices, and/or an anti-racist or anti-oppression framework throughout production. And of course, it has to be hot! Overall, Feminist Porn Award winners tend to show movies that consider a potentially female or trans viewer from start to finish. Online: [http://www.goodforher.com/feminist\\_porn\\_awards](http://www.goodforher.com/feminist_porn_awards)



but even these “feminist” preferences have been marketed to us, and arguably mirror simplistic cultural constructions of femininity, such as the notion that women’s sexuality is more mental or emotional than physical.

While this is not to say that feminist pornography as a genre does not challenge mainstream/*malestream* pornographic representations, but that we cannot divorce ideology of what women find ‘authentically’ pleasurable from the patriarchal, heteronormative and consumerist context from which they arise. The recognition, however, enables us to critically examine our desires and their origins, allowing us to think creatively about our engagement with these materials and how this engagement and the meanings attributed to it are individually and socially located.

### **Towards an Empirical Understanding of Women’s Engagement**

Extant literature on pornography has examined several aspects. Empirical research has focused on the negative effects of pornography on men’s attitudes and behaviours towards women (cf. Dines 2010, Paul 2005, Monk-Turner and Purcell 1999, Cowan and Dunn 1994, Malamuth and Donnerstein 1984, Padgett et al. 1989, Segal 1993). Other research has examined attitudinal changes, particularly with respect to the relationship between pornography consumption and the acceptance of rape myths (cf. Davies 1997, Linz 1989). Ethnographic accounts of adult retail establishments (cf. Tewksbury 1990, Stein 1990), content analysis of pornographic websites (cf. Cowan and Campbell 1994, Gossett and Byrne 2002), and narratives surrounding the anti-pornography movement (cf. Friedman 2003, Greek and Thompson 1992) are also prevalent. Although the majority of research on pornography has focused on its negative ramifications and served to pathologize its consumers, there does exist a limited, but expanding, collection of empirical study on pornographic actors and actresses (cf. Abbott 2010, Griffith et al. 2012), alternative non-mainstream pornographies (cf. Bensinger 1992, Collins 1998-1999, DeVoss 2002, Thomas

2010), and women's use of erotic or pornographic materials (cf. Smith 2007, Parvez 2006, Ciclitira 2004). This research adds to this literature by focusing broadly on the use of sexually explicit materials, not just pornography *per se*, and attending to women's engagement with these materials and the meanings thus attributed.

While the feminist conversation surrounding pornography targets the social positioning of, and reactions to, pornographic imagery, the discussion of the various positions within the pornography debate demonstrates that there is no universal understanding of the meanings that sexually explicit materials convey to individual viewers. Rather, the diversity of perspectives mirrors the range of messages contained in, and attributed to, pornography. While some women may feel victimized and harmed by such imagery, others have felt liberated by their use and enjoyment of sexually explicit materials. In addition, some research indicates that women have felt simultaneously victimized and liberated (Ciclitira 2004, Smith 2007), as pornography itself is contradictory in nature, "contain[ing] both a threat and a promise, both potential risks and dangers as well as potential benefits and opportunities" (Berger et al. 1991: 64). These attitudinal tensions are not only experienced by women, but also by men (cf. Kimmel 1990, Paul 2005). Although it is essential to acknowledge the theoretical debates surrounding pornography, Smith (2007: 47) argues that "the focus on the rights and wrongs of pornography has largely been conducted at the level that does not deal with the individual and perhaps very ordinary details of a 'pornographic' text." Our understandings of the genre need to move towards a "contextualization of pornography" (Attwood 2002: 93), that explores the real experiences of those who engage with these materials and the meanings they attach to them, rather than just analytically focusing on the sexually explicit representations themselves.

Rather than reiterating theoretical positioning on pornography and what it *may* mean to women and society in general, this study will draw upon empirical data, collected via two focus groups and twenty individual interviews, to substantiate and/or create theoretical frameworks surrounding women's use of sexually explicit materials. O'Toole (1999: 284) remarks that, "it has never occurred to anyone to ask porn users what's going on...[F]olks think they already know all there is to know about porn users: they look at dirty images, they become aroused, they're sad." By speaking to women themselves, this research will move beyond much of the current pornography scholarship that is largely theoretical in nature, and address a gap in the literature by gendering pornography, and accounting for women's use of pornography.

This research examines women's experiences of their engagement with sexually explicit materials and what it means for them and their social and sexual lives, through a particular theoretical lens. The following chapter presents the theoretical framework of this research, based on an analytic linking interactionist sociology, discourse/power/knowledge, and sexual scripting theory. The role of discourse, the multiplicity of discourses, and the interconnection between power, knowledge and (multiple and fragmented) subjectivity(ies) are highlighted as central to Foucault's theorization of the relationship between government and thought. Sexual scripting theory, as conceptualized by Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]), will be used to put into practice Foucault's theorization of governance, in particular the role played by technologies of the self in creating a self-governing, regulating regime with respect to female sexual desire, including a discussion of resistance. Theories of spectatorship will be drawn upon to elucidate the processes of identity making and formation.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretical interdisciplinarity is necessitated to understand pornography if we want to make sense of the multiple layers of meanings involved in the performance of sex(uality), the discursive structure of representations of sex(uality), the differential opportunities for access to these materials, and the complexities of viewing and interpreting these materials. Each element involves complicated relationships of power, as well as possibilities for the enactment – or transgression – of gender norms and inequalities. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, extant literature on pornography is largely restricted to theoretical accounts of societal implications or empirical accounts that not only reiterate stereotypically gendered patterns of use (i.e., men use pornography, women are more interested in romance) but serve to pathologize users and render them deviant. Women are socialized to view their sexuality as problematic (Oerton and Phoenix 2001), however the processes through which this socialization occurs and is taken up by women need to be further elucidated. Lorde (1984: 53) has stated that:

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant the suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

How pornography operates as a source of power-knowledge, and for what, and whose, aims “the suppression of the female erotic” serve are important points to theorize. Little research has been done in the area of actually understanding the phenomenon of pornography and the personal meanings that individuals assign to it (Attwood 2005a).

This chapter takes up the task of reconciling the works of interactionist sociology, in particular sexual scripting theory, with Foucault’s writings on discourse, power and subject(ivity), to articulate an analytic through which to frame, understand and theorize

women's spectatorship of, and engagement with, sexually explicit materials. These seemingly personal and individual processes do not exist independent of the culture through which they arise. The articulation of the interplay between interactions (individuals-selves, individuals-individuals, individuals-society) elucidates how women come to understand, and frame, their engagement with sexually explicit materials. It is as a result of this interrelatedness between the individual and the social, that we can view interactionist frameworks and Foucault's writings as complementary. Indeed several scholars have also taken up this task, including Castellani's (1999) theorization of 'discursive interactionism', and Hacking (2004: 278) who in characterizing Foucault's work as "top-down" because "he starts with a mass of sentences at a time and place, dissociated from the human beings who spoke them, and uses them as the data upon which to characterize a system of thought," uses Goffman's "bottom-up" research to complete this theorization by accounting for how individual interactions and exchanges are constitutive of identities.

In order to bridge this analytic between interactionism and Foucault's writings, this chapter will work through several conceptual stages. I highlight interactionism as a broad theoretical orientation fundamentally concerned with the co-constructed nature of meanings and interpretations. Pornography, as a genre, is situated in relation to this framework, underscoring the premise that meanings are not inherent in material culture but rather ascribed through interaction and engagement. This is not to say that pornographic imagery cannot evoke in its audience particular feelings and thoughts, as meanings arising from any interaction do not just dissipate once the interaction is complete, instead they are reiterated and drawn-upon in subsequent interactions – they act as scripts. In this sense, sexual scripting theory (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]) is then described, which makes coherent a

multi-level approach to the study of sexual encounters through the theorization of cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. As will be described, while sexual scripting theory emphasizes sexual encounters as socially/culturally produced and situated, it never elucidates how cultural scripts materialize. This is where Foucault's writings on discourse, discipline, and technologies of the self, serve to nuance, or complete interactionist accounts of sexual engagement, allowing for a detailed discussion of how discourses of sexuality and 'the pornographic' frame the way people think of their relations with themselves and others. It is through discourses of sexuality, Foucault (1978) argues, that subjects and subjectivity are constituted. It will then be argued that these subjectivities are evoked and materialized, through our experiences as spectators of the pornographic. This is not to denote that individuals are passive objects of the sexual messages, symbolism or discourses that appear across the screen, instead a focus on the engagement with, rather than the consumption of, sexually explicit materials is suggestive of the fact that screening sex involves constant (re)interpretation to make sense of, and make intelligible, the images being viewed. It is through a conceptualization of agentic screening practices, that I frame the discussion of resistance which concludes this chapter.

### **Interactionist Sociology**

Interactionist sociology is a broad theoretical orientation under which many perspectives are subsumed (i.e., symbolic interactionism, labeling, social constructionism). The crux of interactionism is that the social world is actively constructed, rather than passively experienced, and that all social interaction involves meanings and interpretations. From this perspective, it is not the structure or system of society that creates and/or shapes our thoughts, as there does not exist a social structure, or 'society', that is outside of our

interpretations of it (Blumer 1969), rather we create ‘society’ through our constant action and interaction with each other.

Credited with coining the term symbolic interaction, Blumer (1969: 180) defines the term as “the peculiar and distinctive character of interaction as it takes place between human beings,” noting that the “peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or ‘define’ each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions.”

Interactionism proposes that we learn to interpret and give meaning to the world through our interactions with others (Blumer 1969, LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). Individual meanings are negotiated from shared interpretations created by social exchanges, which in turn, help shape behaviour (LaRoss and Reitzes 1993). That meaning is not inscribed in an object is a central tenet of interactionism.

Interactionism is fundamentally concerned with the emergence of meaning, that is, “the definitions that individuals attach to the full range of objects that comprise their life world” (Burnier 2005: 502). In studying how meanings are formed and how these meanings are understood and acted upon, interactionists view individuals as active interpreters of the world around them, and human life is envisioned as actively constituted by interactions between one another (Prus 1996, Schwandt 2000).

While individuals create meaning through interaction with others and their environment, these meanings do not stay at the level of intellectual abstraction. Nor do they disappear once a given interaction is complete. Analysis that stays at the micro-analytic level neglects to account for the myriad of ways these meanings form part of our repertoires and change our realities, by acting as a “source of rules, norms and mechanisms of control” (Crossley 2006: 4). Not only are meanings created via interaction, but those interactions help

to shape those meanings. It is an active and reiterative process that not only shapes reality, but our understanding of, and actions within, that reality. Relating this discussion to pornography, Mason-Grant (2010: 10) argues that “the conceptualization of pornography – what it is, what it does, and how it works – is intimately intertwined with what both society and individuals decide to do with and/or about pornography.” Thus pornography cannot, and should not, be conceptualized as a genre with implicit and unanimously agreed-upon meanings. Meanings are ascribed by individuals and created through interaction with self, others and society.

### ***Pornography as Interpretive Practice***

According to interactionist sociological perspectives, meanings are not implicit in material culture. It is through interaction with these materials, individually and with others, that meanings and interpretations emerge. Evidenced by the multitude of terms coined to describe the alleged *hypersexualized* nature of Western society, as outlined in Chapter Two, Kipnis (1996: viii) argues that we are “in the midst of a massive wave of social hysteria focused on pornography.” While much academic attention has been paid to essentialized, pathologized and ideological descriptions of the supposed meanings innate to pornographic depictions, as well as the assumed societal effects of pornography as a cultural expression, few accounts have understood pornography as a constructed and interpretative practice (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). Holstein and Gubrium (2005: 454) define interpretive practice as:

Engag[ing] both the *hows* and *whats* of social reality; it is centered in both how people methodically construct their experience and their worlds, and in the configurations of meaning and institution life that inform and shape their reality – constituting activity.



Rather than espousing an interpretation of sex(uality), pornographic depictions can be viewed as presenting a vision of sex(uality) that is differentially interpreted by its consumers and non-consumers alike.

Sexually explicit materials, pornography in particular, can be described as an aesthetic genre encompassing a wide range of explicit depictions that emphasize human (heterosexual and male-centric) sexuality, overriding all other considerations (Faust 1980, Simon and Gagnon 2005 [1973]). Faust (1980: 20) argues that the sole purpose of pornography is to document sexual activity, “cramming the greatest possible variety of partners, activities and orifices into limited space and time.” Depicting the act of sex, manifested in a variety of ways, the meanings and experiences attributed to such representations speaks to one’s engagement with pornography and are not inherently ascribed to the content itself (Smith 2007, Soble 2002). Soble (2002: 19) explains that:

The meaning of the content of various pornographies cannot be read straight off from the surface content of the images; the images are more complex than the critics of pornography allow, especially when we take into account what the images mean to those who consume them for purposes of sexual arousal and sexual pleasure.

This understanding of pornography as interpretative rather than inscribed leads us to consider the following question: What does an image of a nude woman, a couple engaging in sexual activity, or a man masturbating, mean? In themselves these representations signify nothing. They are simply visual depictions, or symbols, of sexual acts or sexuality. The meaning, or the point, of these images gets ‘filled in’ and defined by the viewer’s cognitive, situational and cultural positioning.

This conceptualization of pornography as interpretative is intimately tied to interactionist accounts of the meaning-making process, described above. As Plummer (1975: 12) states: “the object itself does not possess ‘meaning’ but rather the meanings arise

through interaction, and remain constantly negotiable.” Engagement with sexually explicit materials relies on the personal disambiguation of ambiguous sexual depictions, enabling individuals to experience these materials, their sexuality and sexual arousal on their own terms (Soble 2002). It is the failure to read pornographic images from the perspectives of individual viewers, or the insistence that there exists one ‘true’ meaning that viewers attribute to this imagery, that results in the (mis)representation of pornography as being wholly sexist and misogynistic in all circumstances and for all viewers (Assister and Carol 1993, Soble 2002, Strossen 1995). According to Miller (2008: 711), meaning is a negotiable process, an interpretative practice, because “the image does not pre-exist its apprehension by the viewer and thus has no truth prior to the encounter.” Understanding sexually explicit materials in this manner enables us to consider these representations as a medium of expression (Kipnis 1996), generating insights into the meanings and significance attributed to these materials by those who actively engage in them.

This discussion is not to imply that meanings are not culturally or socially situated, although it has been identified that a limitation of a purely interactionist approach is the beliefs that there does not exist a material social structure, and that “sociality is entirely the product of intersubjective meaning and social action” (Jackson 2007: 13). As Valverde (1987: 126) explains, “we use our knowledge of both the production and the consumption processes involved in pornography to interpret the picture and ascribe to it a meaning.” Within a patriarchal society, several ‘truths’ exist. That pornography is representative of male sexual desire and fantasizing (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]), that sexual double standards exist wherein women are stigmatized for asserting their sexuality (Pheterson 1993), and women continue to face intimate and structural violence (i.e., sexual assault,

domestic violence, feminization of poverty, etc.), inform us about the nature of gendered and sexed relations within our society. Valverde (1987) argues that if these realities did not exist, and did not serve to render women powerless, passive and vulnerable, these meanings would not be ascribed to sexual representations of women. That is, “it is not the picture itself which creates these feelings. If men never raped women in real life, the same picture would not have the same power to make us feel violated” (Valverde 1987: 126).

Although meanings are not inherently inscribed into the pornographic, our ideas are not conceived of in a vacuum. As Brosius, Weaver and Stabb (1993) reiterate, pornography cannot be defined outside of its social implications, because it revolves around the endorsement of a male-centric viewpoint towards sex and women. It is here that sexual scripting theory provides an entry point to examine how meanings, particularly relating to sexuality, are constructed through an interplay of interaction at the societal/cultural, interpersonal and individual/intrapsychic level.

### **Sexual Scripting Theory**

If meanings are not pre-given in sexually explicit materials which are then passively absorbed by individuals, how do they come to be continuously reiterated as behavioural sequences or interactions? Sexual scripting theory examines the ways in which culture shapes individual perception and expression of appropriate and normative sexual behaviours (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]).

Sexual scripts are defined as the “implicit rules that individuals develop for themselves regarding the who, when, what, where and how of their sexual behaviours and identities” (Baber 1994: 60). They can be described as the ‘blueprints’ of sex; the specific guidelines, or rules, that individuals develop to determine, guide or constrain sexual exchanges (Baber

1994, Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). Sexual activity, which is understood as the interplay between cultural messages about sexuality, identifications of situations as sexual, and interpersonal negotiation (Maticka-Tyndale 1991), can be theorized as the end result of a codified sequence of events likened to the script of a play (Escoffier 2007, Frith and Kitzinger 2001, Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). In this sense, two Goffmanian concepts are evoked: that of dramaturgy (1959), in which life is likened to a never-ending play via which individuals are conceptualized as actors performing on a stage, learning how to play our assigned roles through socialization with others, and ritual (1967), those “factors common to all of the social situations in which it is performed” (57). It is through an analysis of these scripts, or factors, that we can understand the meaning of any given ritual, or sexual encounter.

Against a backdrop of biological and essentialist understandings of sex and sexuality,<sup>23</sup> there exists a significant amount of both theoretical and empirical literature on their constructed nature. Weeks (1986: 24) stresses that sexuality is shaped by a myriad of social constraints, arguing that “far from being the most natural element in social life, the most resistant to cultural molding, it is perhaps one of the most susceptible to organization.” Similarly, Plummer (1975) suggests that nothing is inherently sexual, but naming it makes it so. Without ‘labels’ attached to certain behaviours, feelings or states, sexual conduct is unlikely to occur. To illustrate this point, Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]) offer the example of a man entering his hotel room to find a nude woman laying on the bed, noting that the man’s initial reaction will likely not be one of sexual arousal. Without the proper script (i.e., that the nude woman is the man’s partner, that the man knew the nude woman

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<sup>23</sup> Historical writers of sex have viewed sex as a basic biological force, a natural energy and powerful instinct (cf. Krafft-Ebbing 1984, Malinowski 1963).

would be awaiting him, and the reasonable expectation that a sexual encounter will occur), the man is likely to experience other reactions such as paranoia (i.e., he is being ‘set-up’ by his wife or her lawyers), or an embarrassed hasty retreat coupled with a momentary reflection to ascertain that he did in fact enter the correct room. The point of this scenario, according to Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]: 14), is to convey that meaning is not inherent. A nude wo/man does not always signal sex. Following from this analysis, Oerton and Pheonix (2001: 387-388) similarly reiterate:

[E]mbodied, potentially erotic, intimate, physical encounters do not exist in and of themselves. They become meaningful only in the context of symbolically dense discursive terrains. In this respect, the same encounters can be known simultaneously as sex and something else altogether different.

Rather than being innate, sexual meanings are always socially and culturally organized through scripts.

Scripts, those culturally and socially recognized ways of interpreting and responding to a range of sexual stimuli (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]), become the “templates used to interpret and respond to situations as sexual” (Maticka-Tyndale et al. 2005: 28), determining an individual’s choice of sexual actions and experiences related to these actions. They are the codified ways in which beliefs and expectations regarding sexuality and sexual behaviours are organized. Unlike conceptions of sexuality that frame it solely as a function of physiological processes, sexual scripting theory emphasizes that sex, both its desires and resultant actions, are a cultural phenomenon. One of the main strengths of sexual scripting theory is the elucidation of the relationship between the social and the personal to study sexuality and sex encounters. In conceptualizing the theory, Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]) distinguish between three interrelated levels of script: cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic. Each will be described in turn.

### ***Cultural Scenarios/Scripts***

Cultural scenarios are those “instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life” (Simon and Gagnon 1999: 29), and are external to the individual (Simon and Gagnon 1987). They represent the broader social and institutional frameworks, as well as the systems of signs and symbols through which the sexual is experienced. Functioning like regulatory discourses, cultural scenarios structure the possibilities for, and limits of, individual thought and behaviour, providing the normative course of action. Borrowing from interactionism, for Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]), sexuality is learned by individuals from culturally available messages conveyed through broad ranges of sources (i.e., home, religion, peers, school, popular media, folklore, etc.). Embedded in cultural scripts are messages about “appropriate objects, aims and desirable qualities of self-other relations” (Simon and Gagnon 1987: 365). Individuals not only adapt cultural scripts to particular interpersonal relationships, but they also modify and internalize cultural scripts, which then become intrapsychic scripts (Frith and Kitzinger 2001, Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]).

### ***Interpersonal Scripts***

Individual do not just passively take-up cultural scenarios/scripts that exist surrounding sexuality; instead these scenarios function as guidelines for how to interpret sexual exchanges. It is through interaction with others in social settings, which draw upon cultural scenarios that interpersonal scripts develop. Simon and Gagnon (1999: 29) defined interpersonal scripts as that “mechanism through which appropriate identities are made congruent with desired [societal] expectations,” suggesting that the interpersonal level is where the individual actor not only embodies the full range of expectations and desires that an individual holds for themselves, but the anticipated responses from others. It is these

“representations of self and the implied mirroring of the other or others” (Simon and Gagnon 1987: 365) that combine to create social and sexual exchanges.

Interpersonal scripts can be seen as forming the practicalities of social interaction and the enactment of an individual’s understanding of cultural scripts. It is at this level where an individual becomes a ‘scriptwriter’, authoring their own modes of action from the available cultural scenarios. This is a particularly useful characterization as it allows room for individual modification of the various cultural scripts that exist. This modification can be enacted through interactions with others, but are also taken up reflexively.

### ***Intrapsychic Scripts***

Intrapsychic scripts are where the transformation from cultural messages to interpersonal action is revealed (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). This level of scripting refers to the “internal, mental rehearsals of sexual(ized) scenarios, drawing on fantasies, arousals, [and] preferred modes of engaging one’s sexuality” (Plante 2007: 32). At the “realm of self-process” (Gagnon and Simon 1987: 364), intrapsychic scripts are the most individual and unique level of scripting (Plante 2007). They constitute the private world of desires and wishes that is linked to social behaviours and meanings (Escoffier 2007, Whittier and Simon 2001). It is at this level that individuals reflect upon, and engage with, the complexities, conflicts and ambiguities, that are endemic at the level of cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1999). It is in these conversations with ourselves, that personal meanings are created. It is in the relationship between all three levels of scripts that sexuality is socially produced, organized, maintained and transformed. However, it is also at the juncture between these three levels of scripting that contradictions and tension can arise, especially if scripts themselves are diverse and conflicting.

A central theme underlying this dissertation is the conflictual diversity of accounts surrounding these women's use of sexually explicit materials, which were the result of negotiating, disclosing, confirming and/or rendering invisible particular scripts or discourses. The women I spoke with not only situated their use of sexually explicit materials within broader cultural and interpersonal spheres, but they engaged in a continuous process of self-reflection with respect to this use. As we will later see, while some of the women I spoke to ascribed feminist discourses of pornography as objectifying and degrading (cultural scripts), the personal meanings (intrapsychic scripts) of empowerment and validation they found through pornography, served to complicate their engagement. This is a particularly salient point to highlight, and one that is not fully addressed by sexual scripting theory. Scripts of gender, sex and sexuality, although co-constructed through interaction, are not neutral. They arise from a foundation of capitalistic relations and are built upon patriarchal and heteronormative social structures (Bartky 1990). We cannot divorce women's conflictual engagement with sexually explicit materials from the gendered reality in, and through which, this engagement occurs.

### ***What of Gendered Socialization and the Gendered Content of Scripts?***

Far from being an immutable biological fact, sociologists have acknowledged the role that socialization plays in sexual meaning making and experiences. Gagnon and Simon (1977: 2) explain that:

In any given society, at any given moment in its history, people become sexual in the same ways they come everything else. Without much reflection, they pick up directions from the social environment. They acquire and assemble meanings, skills and values from the people around them. Their critical choices are often made by going along and drifting. People learn when they are quite young a few of the things they are expected to be, and continue slowly to accumulate a belief in who they are and ought to be throughout the rest of childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Sexual conduct is learned in the same ways and through the same



processes; it is acquired and assembled in human interaction, judged and performed in specific cultural and historical worlds.

While Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973], 1977) describe the ways in which socialization shapes individuals' experiences of their sexual selves and formation of beliefs about sex as well as knowledge of gender roles, they offer little critical analysis of how these differential experiences of gender socialization interacts with the ways people learn about and experience sex. Conceptualizations of sex and gender that do not recognize the social dimensions of sex and gender also serve to continually impact empirical scientific studies of gender differences.

According to dominant psychoanalytic and pharmaceutical frameworks, if women are failing to achieve sexual pleasure, experience pain or have low desire for sex then there is something fundamentally wrong with their bodies. Not only are there various female sexual arousal, desire and pain disorders in the DSM-IV-TR, but pharmaceutical companies now label and repackage such disorders as an ailment (i.e., female sexual dysfunction), and provide drugs to treat it (Moynihan and Mintzes 2010). However, if our cultural scripts, born out of patriarchy and heteronormativity, teach us only about one kind of sex (e.g., that which is focused around penetrative sex, the male erection and ejaculation), is the problem really that women's bodies are deficient and that women just are not as sexually inclined as men, or that the scripts are already gendered precluding the opportunity to learn and experience sex in any other manner?

The processes by which women learn how to act, think and feel about sexuality, sexual desire and sexually explicit materials are socioculturally constructed (Baber 2002). Examining women's sexualities, Baber (2002: 149) argues that "in the process of constructing and understanding of the world and developing a sense of self as a sexual being,

each woman locates herself within an available discourse that influences her thoughts and actions.” While the majority of women position themselves within dominant cultural discourses, this positioning is not static, and women may resituate themselves as the result of contradictions, tensions and ambiguities in their lived experience (Baber 2002, Gavey 1993).

Jackson (2007: 5) notes that a theoretical strength of Gagnon and Simon’s sexual scripting theory is that “rather than viewing sexuality and gender as inextricably interrelated,” they avoided conflating them and instead argued that “the sexual self was developed on the basis of the prior construction of a gendered self.” That is, for Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]: 23) individuals are gendered first, and one’s “ultimate sexual identity” is predicated not only on the continuous building of these conventional gender identities, but on the patterned adult reactions, throughout childhood and adolescence, to behaviours deemed sexual. If we reduce the sexual to the level of scripts, that serve to limit and delimit sexual conduct and encounters, then we must take into account that gender as a social practice serves to differentiate cultural scripts which are then inscribed into interactions and taken up intrapsychically. If sexuality and gender are co-constructed, they must be deconstructed together.

This is not to say that sexual scripting theory has not been taken up by researchers who examine the types of cultural scripts available that serve to script sexuality in particularly gendered ways. Drawing on Rich’s (1980) theory of compulsory heterosexuality, Kim et al. (2007) used sexual scripting theory to analyze the prevalence of heterosexual and heteronormative scripts in primetime television programs. As one of the main sources of information about sexuality (Brown and Stern 2002), the pervasiveness of heterosexual scripts in popular and mainstream media serve to normalize and render

invisible other sexual options. Kim et al. (2007) argue that, as the most reified and least variable cultural scenario on appropriate sexuality, heterosexual scripts have a normalizing and regulatory function.

While sexual scripting theory provides an interactionist account to theorize sexual conduct and encounters, Jackson and Scott (2001) argue that it does not adequately explain how culture provides the content of these scripts. If the central function of sexual scripts is to organize how individuals can, and do, interpret, or engage in, a specific sexual scenario, relatively stable patterns of repeated interaction are assumed, to ensure the consistent reiteration, or performance, of the script. It is at this juncture that a discussion of Foucault's (1978, 1977) articulations on power and discourse prove useful.

While interactionist sociology, as I have described, is able to show how meanings arise and are maintained through the social exchanges, both verbal and non-verbal, between individuals (Blumer 1969, Goffman 1967), and sexual scripting theory outlines the three dimensions of meaning inscribed in sexual interactions, that help to organize or govern its conduct (Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]), they fail to provide an account of how these meanings are first circumscribed, or embedded, by culture. Questions such as: 'What gave rise to these scripts, and sustain their continuous reiteration?' are not easily answered using interactionism alone. It is for this reason that Hacking (2004) indicates that interactionist and Foucauldian perspectives complement each other. Hacking (2004: 278) articulates that lacking in Foucault is "an understanding of how the forms of discourse become part of the lives of ordinary people, or even how they become institutionalized and made part of the structures of institutions at work," while simultaneously lacking in Goffman's sociology is "an understanding of how the institutions he described came into being, what their formative

structures are.” Here too I take up this critique with Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]), particularly with respect to that lack of nuance in delineating differences in gendered socialization, but to the mechanisms that produce cultural scripts that are always already gendered.

### **Production of Docile Gendered Bodies**

The construction of female sexuality and erotic power is an established practice of patriarchy which has taken many forms. Stiritz (2008: 243) notes:

The continuation of male supremacy depends upon women being docile bodies, isolated, subjected, used, transformed, improved, dissociated, dominated. As long as women remain in such a condition they are de-centred and mystified, and they will not challenge efforts to control them.

Here Stiritz (2008), evoking Bartky (1990), refers to docile bodies, in the Foucauldian sense, where female bodies serve not only as a locus of disciplining and controlling female sexuality, but in perpetuating patriarchy. Though Foucault did not describe gender-specific disciplinary practices (McLaren 2002), in *History of Sexuality: volume 1*, strategies used to contain female sexuality were outlined, where female sexuality is specified, created and contained within specific norms. The first was a “hysterization of women’s bodies: a threefold process whereby the feminine body was analyzed, qualified and disqualified – as being thoroughly saturated with sexuality, whereby it was integrated into the sphere of medical practices by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it” (Foucault 1978: 104). To this categorization of women’s bodies and sexuality as intrinsically pathological, was added the strategies of “a socialization of procreative behaviour,” and the “psychiatrization of perverse pleasure”. Although not explicitly referring to female sexuality alone, these served to relegate women’s bodies to the medical and psychiatric realms. The body, as the locus of

sexuality, was scrutinized and addressed in minute detail to reveal its biological and psychological ‘truths’.

Thus, rather than being characterized by sexual repression, as is frequently asserted, Foucault (1978: 17) argues that since the Victorian period we have experienced an “incitement to discourse” – the increasing inventiveness and multiplication of discourses surrounding sexuality. This is evidenced by the increasing examination of the conscience via the confessional and medical technologies of sex, characterized by “the wide dispersion of devices that were invented for speaking about it, for having it be spoken about, for inducing it to speak of itself, for listening, recording, transcribing, and redistributing what was said about it” (Foucault 1978: 34). Although there existed, in the Victorian period, a number of discourses surrounding sexuality, authorized speech was delegated largely to juridico-medical experts. Sex was, and continues to be, spoken about, the concern for both Foucault and feminists, surrounds the question of: Who is doing the speaking?

Ehrenrich and English (2005 [1978]) trace the historical psychoanalytic problematization of female sexuality as sexual deviance. Speaking to the power accorded to medical experts, they write:

The experts wooed their female constituency, promising the “right” and scientific way to live, and women responded – most eagerly in the upper and middle classes, more slowly among the poor – with dependency and trust. It was never an equal relationship, for the experts’ authority rested on the denial or destruction of women’s autonomous sources of knowledge: the old networks of skill-sharing, the accumulated lore of generations of mothers. But it was a relationship that lasted right up to our own time, when women began to discover that the experts’ answer to the Woman Question was not science after all, but only the ideology of a masculinist society, dressed up as objective truth (7).

Through the ability to analyze and categorize individuals, experts were seen as judges of normality, or ‘truth’. Their role was to construct norms of morality and behaviour; the normalizing gaze becoming a mechanism of discipline (Foucault 1977). “The judges of

normality are present everywhere,” Foucault (1977: 304) asserts, and “it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements.” It is through this subjection to this normalizing gaze that individuals are made into subjects, but also into objects of subjectification. Inscribed into bodies are these relations of disciplinary power, which detail appropriate gestures, desires and habits as codified by ‘experts’, the purpose of which was to increase the economic utility of the body and render it obedient (Foucault 1977). In effect, the normalizing gaze of the ‘expert’, as a disciplinary technology, was to produce docile bodies (Foucault 1977).

While this account of how bodies are inscribed and produced by discourse, serves to trouble understandings of subjectivity and identity as pre-existing and solely the domain of the biological (Grosz 1994), several feminist theorists have critiqued Foucault’s omission of the role gender plays in how bodies are rendered docile. Bartky (1990: 132) asserts that Foucault “is blind to those disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is particularly feminine,” looking to disciplinary practices that serve to construct the ‘feminine’ such as dieting, exercising and beauty regimens. Patriarchy and heteronormativity, as an institutional discourse, serves to create specific ‘truths’ about sexuality, gender, pleasure, desirability and attractiveness, that mark women’s bodies as inferior and ‘other’ (Bartky 1990). The “disciplinary practices of femininity,” Bartky (1990: 143) contends, aims to turn women into “the docile and compliant companions of men.” As a result, it is only through a detailed understanding of women’s oppression and positioning within patriarchy, that we can appreciate the extent to which women’s lives, bodies and subjectivities are constructed.

This is not to suggest that Foucault (1977) uncritically accepted the disciplinary technology of the normalizing gaze. Indeed, he spoke to the rigorous enforcement of the status quo onto our lives, including its encroachment into more private aspects such as sexuality, which “became the privileged site for subjectivity, and for the exercise of normalizing, disciplinary power” (McLaren 2002: 148). While Foucault does not specifically attend to gender, Grosz (1994) contends that his focus on the corporeal body as the material site of social practices and inscribed by social and historical forces, lends to the feminist concern regarding the relationship between social power and the production of sexually differentiated bodies.

As outlined in Chapter Two, feminist theorists have attended to how pornographic representations are imbued into patriarchal gender relations, and how these patriarchal gender relations manifest themselves visually in pornography. However, it is not enough to conduct either empirical micro-level studies in individual interactions, or grand-scale theoretical analyses, as it is the interplay between interactions (of individuals-selves, individuals-individuals, and individual-society) that constitutes human action and creates a regime through which we are self-governing. For instance, the question: How do the gendered and sexed discourses inscribed within patriarchy come to shape, or regulate, women’s experiences with, and attitudes toward, sexually explicit materials? is an important one to examine, and flows from Foucault’s characterization of the normalizing gaze as productive of subjects. In order to understand how women come to be spectators of the pornographic, a genre marked as normatively masculine, and what differentiates feminine spectatorship, it is important to highlight the social, political and historical contexts in which women’s bodies are marked as sexually ornamental (Bartky 1990), and the spectatorial gaze

as male. That is, to understand the processes through which women become subjects and objects of sexuality and to uncover who is doing the speaking on female sexuality, pleasure and desire. To follow Foucault's thesis regarding subjects, subjectification and subjectivity, I will first need to outline what Foucault means by 'discourse', 'discipline' of the body and disciplinary technologies.

### **Discourse, Discipline and Subjectivities**

In conventional language, discourse is used as a linguistic concept to refer to dialogue or conversation in the form of written or spoken expression. However, Foucault's concept of discourse entails a much more complex process involving the production of meaning, the creation of knowledge, the (re)production of power and the formation of 'truth' (Hall 1997, Mills 1997, Phillips and Jørgensen 2002). According to Foucault (1972: 117), discourse is "made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions can be defined...posing its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality." Discourses, then, both define and produce what is known, establishing meanings and boundaries of the knowable. They simultaneously enable and delimit our ability to convey and construct knowledge(s) on a given topic, such that certain ways of knowing become easily attainable, while others are restricted or placed beyond accessibility (Hall 2001, Rose 1999). Foucault insists that nothing has meaning outside of discourse as it both forms and informs the objects of our knowledge; they are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972: 49). Foucault (1972) maintains the material world retains no meaning beyond its discursive articulation, echoing the interactionist sentiment, outlined above, that the material world retains no meaning beyond those created and sustained through interactions. This however does not preclude material



existence. Although describing how bodies come to be subjected to, and by, discipline, Foucault assumes the existence of a pre-inscriptive body (Brush 1998). Thus, for Foucault (1977) the body already exists, however, it comes to be socially and historically delineated and constructed. As Hall (2001: 73) explains, “the concept of discourse is not about whether things exist but where meaning comes from.” Discourse, then, is both conceptual and substantive; simultaneously possessing a linguistic dimension and embodied through various social practices. It serves to produce the object of which it speaks.

Discourses, of which the disciplines of medicine, psychiatry and penology produce and propagate, made certain forms of political domination, or social control, possible. All societies define, shape and guide the manner in which bodily experiences are lived into specific cultural patterns; the body is the physical medium through which social control, or power, is exercised. It is also the active site of struggle and resistance to relations of domination (Foucault 1977), as will be discussed in the final section of this chapter. Forms of domination, which embrace the body in everyday life, hold the body in subjection to social forces. The most successful effects of power are those which have no need for punitive interventions, but which attain their objectives through the attribution of meaning to ‘normative’ forms, acts and behaviours of the body (Foucault 1977). Indeed, Foucault’s aim in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) was to trace the shift from punitive corporeal control to control through discipline, while in *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1* (1978), the focus was turned to the ways in which power operates discursively through the deployment of sexuality (McLaren 2002).

The deployment of sexuality combined disciplinary techniques over the behaviour of the body with regulatory norms concerning the proper functioning of the body. This

permitted new technologies of medicalized and scientific forms of power to be invested in the ‘normal’ body, which served to link sexuality with pleasure. Foucault (1978: 44) writes:

The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments. It wrapped the sexual body in its embrace. There was undoubtedly an increase in effectiveness and an extension of the domain controlled; but also a sensualization of power and a gain of pleasure.

Sexuality, in becoming an object of analysis, surveillance and controlled, intensified (rendered perverse) the individual’s desire for pleasure, as a result of a power mechanism that was not about the prohibition over the forces of the body, but one of disciplinary control of the body’s capacities (Foucault 1992 [1984]). The body, through the deployment of sexuality, became an object amenable to government. It is through this objectification of the body, and its subsequent subjectification to discipline, that subjectivities are realized.

Our experiences of personhood are understood to be “given to us within the myriad ways we are made transparent to ourselves and others so that we might be rendered calculable and ultimately governable” (Dean 1999: 220). In this manner, personhood is invented “at the multitude of points of intersection between practices for the government of others and techniques for the government of oneself” (Rose 1998: 13). The term ‘invented’ is used here to refer to a particular understanding of subjectivity, in which the individual is not conceptualized as existing as a single, or solid, entity that responds to an external world or that is subjected to power. Instead, the individual is understood to occupy a multiplicity of subject positions (subjectivities) that are both the product, and producer, of discursive practices embedded within networks of power and knowledge (Rose 1998). As Foucault (1980a) asserts:

...the individual is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of

relations of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desire and forces (73-74).

Within this conceptualization, power “works through, and not against, subjectivity” (Rose 1998: 151).

Following Adams (1997), subjectivity not only accounts for an individual’s location within society, but to their own self-identification of their social location and the manner through which this positioning is articulated through self-assigned meanings and expressions. Subjectivity necessarily entails an attachment to the discursive, which “lets us bring meaning to the world around us and to our place within it” (Adams 1997: 15). Subjectivity then is inextricably linked to power-knowledge, as “one is always subject *to* or *of* something” (Mansfield 2000: 3). Subjectification is itself a reflection of the relations of power, one that is integral to an individual precisely because it is part of how they come to understand themselves.

Foucault’s analysis is focused on the structural modes of objectification, or organizing principles, which served to transform human beings into subjects and objects amenable to governance. These modes of objectification, and through which power operates, include ‘disciplinary technologies’, through which an individual is revealed as an object and ‘technologies of the self’, which provide the forms and modalities of self-understanding through which the individual recognizes him/herself as a subject (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). These two modes of objectification give rise to two meanings of the term ‘subject’. With respect to disciplinary technologies, it refers to both being “subject to someone by control and dependence,” when referring to disciplinary technologies, and the act of being bound to one’s own identity (a consciousness of who one is) by self-knowledge and the ability to direct it, when referring to technologies of the self (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982:

212). This double use of the term ‘subject’ is suggestive of the notion that the constitution of individual subjectivity is simultaneously the constitution of an individual’s subjection to power (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). According to Foucault (2003: 130), ‘subject’ “categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him.” The subject is constructed as a result of these social modes of objectification. In this manner, sex functions as both a disciplinary technology and a technology of the self, through which the deployment of sexuality became possible, rendering this aspect of the subject amenable to analysis, categorization, surveillance and control. It is to this understanding of how individuals are constituted as subjects that we see some parallels with Gagnon and Simon’s (2005 [1973]) articulation of the creation of identities.

As already presented, rather than being an immutable biological fact, sexuality is learned by individuals from external culturally available messages found in a broad range of societal institutions (i.e., home, church, schools, politics, mass media, folklore) (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). Messages about “appropriate objects, aims and desirable qualities of self-other relations” (Simon and Gagnon 1987: 365), are broadly available. Individuals not only adapt cultural scripts, adopting them to particular interpersonal relationships, but they are also able to adopt and/or modify them, becoming intrapsychic scripts (Frith and Kitzinger 2001), thus providing an opening for the potential resistance and subversion of these scripts. As elucidated by Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]), not only do cultural scripts guide interpersonal scripts, but they also work to inform an individual’s identity (Fiske 1992). In this sense, the frameworks and meanings that hold societal relations in place are “not only meanings of social experience, but also meanings of self, that is, constructions of

social identity that enable people living in industrial capitalist societies to make sense of themselves and their social [sexual] relations” (Fiske 1992: 285).

With patriarchy and heteronormativity in place as the universal, cultural/social order, particular raced, classed and gendered ideological scripts which support, maintain and reiterate this cultural/social order are produced and disseminated by a variety of institutional and regulatory bodies (i.e., legal, political, medical, judicial, religious). This is in accordance with Foucault’s (1978: 27) iteration of the history of sexuality, positing that when sex became a concern in the relationship between the state and the individual, a whole range of discourses and knowledge was affected, fostering an insistence of effective means for controlling deviant (non-normative) acts and actors, both overtly and in a more subtle fashion through the production of a collective knowledge, which served to render individual objects and subjects. The technology of sex (Foucault 1978), combined disciplinary technologies over the behaviour of the body with regulatory norms concerning the proper functioning of the body. The following section takes up these notions of discipline, discourse and subjectivity and applies it to spectatorship, particularly as it relates to how docile bodies are engaged in the process of self-government.

### **Practices of the Self, Interactive Self-Governance and Spectatorship**

The governmental concern with populations and the regulation of the conduct of individuals through technologies of domination, such as disciplinary, pastoral and sovereign power, is linked in contemporary governmentality with “the promotion of an ethic of the self, which incites individuals to be self-managing, producing particular forms of subjectivity and modes of subjectification” (Gilbert 2001: 201). This self-regulation occurs via a nexus of power and knowledge termed ‘technologies/practices of the self’, which

require individuals to enact, either individually or through collaboration with others “a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and a way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (Foucault 1988a: 18). Technologies of the self speak to how individuals govern their own conduct in relation to the technologies of domination. They also make possible the construction of personal identity (Foucault 1988a). This conceptualization provides an analytic point of entry to understand the multifarious ways individuals conduct their own conduct (cf. McLaren 2002).

Technologies of the self include those connections of power and discourse through which individuals act on, or govern, themselves. They not only contribute to the constitution of subjectivities and the ways in which individuals experience and understand their selves, but also act as a regulatory mechanism through which individuals govern their own thoughts and actions. They are a particularly efficient form of governance, for rather than being taken care of by governments, or other institutions, individuals “are recruited to take care of themselves” (Nettleton 1997: 212). The subjects of this form of self-governance are thus conceived of as “autonomous, independent and self-reliant” (Nettleton 1997: 212), and therefore capable, and willing, to govern themselves.

Central to Foucault’s (1988a) conceptualization of technologies of the self is the notion of ‘ethics’, which designates the “arena of the government of the self...a form of action of the ‘self on self’” (Dean 1999: 13). As a technology of the self, sexuality was constituted as a moral and political domain, not primarily on the basis of religion (i.e., discourses of sin) or aesthetics, but on the basis of the obligation of individuals to make useful bodily resources. Ethics forms one of three dimensions of morality: moral behaviours,

moral codes of proscription, and the relationship of the self to the self (Foucault 1992 [1984], McLaren 2002). It is within the ethical domain of morals that individuals constitute themselves as “moral subjects of [their] own actions” (Davidson 1994: 118), and through which they govern their own thoughts and actions. It is through engaging in specific practices of the self that one lives an ethical life, or becomes an ethical subject – an act that is achieved through individualized action, not through universalizing principles (Foucault 1992 [1984]). One aspect of becoming an ethical subject, that is, formulating oneself as a subject with the proper concern for the body, involves “overcoming the conflict between passion and reason by moderating one’s desires” (McLaren 2002: 67). Maintaining a proper relationship to the pleasures is achieved through regimen, for instance through diet and the regulation of sexual pleasure (Foucault 1992 [1984], McLaren 2002). Spectatorship, the embodied process of viewing (Sobchack 1992), provides a fruitful way to explore the interconnectedness between subjectification, technologies of the self, ethics and regulation.

The regulation of contemporary film can be conceptualized as an exercise in subjectification, where the individual is free to choose the kind of entertainment desired, at the same time becoming ethically responsible both for the choices made, and for the subsequent responses to them (Williams 1999 [1989]). The capacity of films to provoke such intense and affective responses, and in particular physical responses, from its viewers, can and does become a source of cultural anxiety that provokes calls for regulation and control (Sobchack 1992, Williams 1999 [1989]). Discourses of regulation focus on the spectator and encourage the development of normative models of spectatorship which work not only to differentiate between ‘normal’ and potentially ‘deviant’ spectators, but also work to disseminate knowledge about ‘appropriate’ responses to particular kinds of images.

In neo-liberal societies, government is intrinsically linked with what Rose (1999) calls the practice of freedom, where the individual must identify her/himself as a free subject who is responsible for their choices and actions within society. Evoking Foucault, Rose (1999: 88) outlines that “in a very significant sense, it has become possible to govern without governing *society* – to govern through the ‘responsibilized’ and ‘educated’ anxieties and aspirations of individuals and their families.” Much like other domains, the viewing choices made by adults are not entirely free, but rather spectatorial conduct has been shaped by the discourses surrounding cinema and which delineate some cinematic genres as controversial (Williams 1999 [1989]).

In this manner, we might conceive of adult viewers as being subject to “regulation through desire, consumption and the market” (Rose 1999: 87). Consumption, and the “freedom of self-identification through the use of mass-produced and merchandized commodities” (Bauman 2000: 84), functions as a technology that serves to shape identities and render them governable. The spectator’s conduct can be said to be regulated through this regime of choice. As Rose (1989: 231) asserts:

The modern self is institutionally required to construct a life through the exercise of choice...every choice we make is an emblem of our identity, a mark of our individuality, each is a message to ourselves and others as to the sort of person we are...Individuals are expected to...account for their lives in terms of the reasons of those choices

The spectator then, as all consumers, must account for his or her choices, and must justify those decisions in terms of the motives and pleasures of viewing (Rose 1999). This demand for justification becomes pressing when films featuring extreme violence, especially sexual violence, and obscenity, are considered. The ‘free’ choice to view these types of films takes place within a discursive context that identifies them as a threat to the social body, wherein



ethical concerns surrounding hazards to psychological and societal health and personal morality come to the fore (Rose 1999, Wheatley 2009). Thus, the decision to view these films is framed as a moral choice (Wheatley 2009). In this respect, the governing of free and autonomous individuals, according to governmentality, requires that individuals are persuaded to regulate themselves.

Viewers of problematized cinematic genres are “addressed on the assumption that they want to be healthy, and [they are] enjoined to freely seek out ways of living most likely to promote their health” (Rose 1999: 86-87). They are “urged and incited to become ethical beings, beings who define and regulate themselves according to a moral code” (Rose 1989: 245). The individual is therefore conceived as “an autonomous individual capable of monitoring and regulating...their own conduct” (Dean 1999: 12). This “notion of government extends to cover the way in which an individual questions his or her own conduct (or problematizes it) so that he or she may be better able to govern it” (Dean 1999: 12). The question of ethical self-governance does not apply only to the decision to view imagery; it also extends to the spectator’s relations with, and responses to, the events occurring on screen. The spectator is constituted both through the discourses that circulate around cinema and through the texts of the films themselves (Waugh 1992, Wheatley 2009, Williams 1999 [1989]). In this sense, spectatorship functions as a disciplinary practice, but the question remains how this specifically relates to pornography and ‘the pornographic’.

Writing of disciplinary practices more generally, and of systems of normativity specifically, Foucault (1977: 178) outlines the range of techniques used within, and developed through, specific social institutions. He writes:

The workshop, the school, the army were subject to a whole micropenalty of time (lateness, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention,

negligence, lack of zeal), of behaviour (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolences), of the body ('incorrect' attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency).

Although Foucault is not speaking to the social practices constraining spectatorship (although he does speak of the spectacle), if this list is considered in the context of the institutional arrangements surrounding 'the pornographic', it becomes evident how thoroughly policed our viewing experiences are. Entrance and exit from locations deemed sexually charged (e.g., adult stores and theatres, pornographic websites, strip clubs) are often rigorously controlled with regard to age limits, mandating a specific age of access either through requiring the entry of a birth date (although admittedly I have not often come across this), or screening by staff and/or security personnel. Activity, behaviour and speech are also subject to a range of techniques that ensure appropriate standards are adhered to. These range from the disapproval by other clientele (e.g., through glares), signage telling the clientele that one must not engage in certain sexual acts (e.g., no touching of certain body parts, no couples in change rooms), censoring of certain pornographic depictions (e.g., genitalia is often blurred in pornography from Japan), to warnings from staff, and perhaps even eviction from the location if the individual refuses to comply.

What constitutes 'the pornographic' is also highly regulated. Erect penises are deemed obscene and thus must remain out of public view, a convention that is not extended to women's bodies as female nudity is commonplace in mainstream films (Williams 1999 [1989]). Such policing is difficult when applied to Internet pornography, however, calls for a .xxx domain,<sup>24</sup> so that pornographic sites can be more easily identified and separated from other websites, serve a similar regulatory function. Recently, ordinances surrounding the

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<sup>24</sup> Geist, M. (2006 May 22). "The Rights and Wrongs of XXX." BBC News. Accessed online at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/5003920.stm>

mandatory use of condoms in pornography have been tabled in California,<sup>25</sup> against the objections of those working in the pornography industry, in order to socially normalize the discourse/script of 'safe sex'. There are municipal regulations surrounding the proximity of 'adult' establishments to other locations within a community. Similarly, there are guidelines as to how magazines containing nudity are to be displayed. All of these conventions serve to not only regulate 'the pornographic', but also what individuals come to view as 'pornographic'. What is often not spoken about in these conventions is how 'the pornographic' or 'the obscene' is constructed, and how these constructions serve to create gendered notions of sexual spectatorship (i.e., what can be seen, what cannot be seen, or is unavailable to be seen, and by whom) (Sobchack 1992).

Control of the body, its behaviours and its representations, through the disciplinary practices of spectatorship is central to understanding the development of 'the pornographic', as well as the pursuit of pornographic or erotic pleasure. Pornography, as a genre, explicitly addresses the body in its marketing and promises the viewer the intense physical experience while viewing; experiences which are achieved through the social/institutional and self management of the body, as highlighted above. Indeed, as Ciclitira (2002) highlights, it is the promise of arousal that differentiates pornography from materials which are just sexually explicit. However, if the disciplined body of the spectator is a useful (self-governing) body, as Foucault (1978) proposes, it is also a source of considerable concern. Like other cinematic genres, pornography's ability to arouse and physically affect the viewer, are seen to be highly problematic, and as was highlighted in Chapter One, certain groups have been singled out by authorities as particularly vulnerable to such effects (Williams 1999 [1989]). This is

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<sup>25</sup> Bill AB 332, which as of May 2013 was stalled, would require actors in adult films shot anywhere in the state of California to wear condoms during filming.

particularly seen through the history of definitions surrounding the ‘obscene’ and the creation of obscenity laws.

In this sense, not only is spectatorship a disciplinary practice, but ‘the pornographic’ can be viewed as a regulatory discourse, functioning in the role of a sex expert, circumscribing normalizing judgements, concerned with monitoring and categorizing, and exerting normative social pressure over the spectator. It is through delineations of ‘the pornographic’ that particular bodies, sexual behaviours and sexed gender roles are produced and reproduced. As Escoffier (2007: 78) argues, “pornography is a form of discourse in which sexual acts and fantasies are explicitly examined, tested and represented in order to be watched, thought about and engaged.”

This physical and corporeal quality of spectatorship extends beyond the activity of cinema-going. The docile body of the spectator is also a useful body; it is not only subjectified but also rendered a subject (Foucault 1978). Spectatorship is not only a disciplined practice, but it is also a productive one. Regulatory pornographic discourses not only serve to constitute ‘the pornographic’, but also allow viewers to be able to experience ‘the pornographic’. The strategies that serve to constrain spectatorship, also serve to render it possible. If it was not for age limits restricting physical and (for certain adult sites) virtual entry, zoning bylaws, censorship surrounding public depiction of certain body parts or sexual acts, cinematic rating systems, or laws surrounding the obscene, an individual would not be able to experience the deviant, the explicit. It is through this concealment of sex that the erotic is made possible (Williams 2008). These varied disciplinary practices not only help to create certain cinematic forms, but observance of these disciplinary techniques on the

part of the individual is also productive in the sense that it allows her/him to gain access to certain forms of spectatorial pleasure. This pleasure, however, is not neutral it is gendered.

### *Theorizing Women as Spectators*

As highlighted in Chapter Two, pornography is subject to much debate within feminism. While some feminists view pornography as entirely misogynistic, degrading and the epitome of violence against women (e.g., Dines 2010, Dines et al. 1997), other feminists defend pornography, viewing it as a medium of expression as well as a means of resistance, breaking down traditional and often repressive gendered sexual roles ('truths') (e.g., Strossen 2000). The central issue underscoring this research, however, is not whether sexually explicit materials are inherently degrading or empowering, but rather on women's renegotiation of the "terms upon which Western erotica has functioned" (Sonnet 1999: 172). In this sense, the more significant question to answer would be: "Are women able to use erotica as a part of a feminist project explaining independent sexual subjectivity? Or must women's use of pornographic fantasy fiction always be compromised by the traditional power relations held to structure male defined pornography?" (Sonnet 1999: 172). In essence, once we understand the cultural discourses/scripts that structure the field of erotic and sexually pleasurable possibilities, the concern becomes whether or not it is possible for women to derive sexual pleasure from (male-centric) pornographic representations created in a patriarchal society.

Within the broader discursive field of the pornographic, women who engage with sexually explicit materials are subject to the various technologies of government, as described above. Yet, as has been outlined, spectators are not merely passive receptors of these technologies or of the materials they are using. In a theoretical frame where power is

conceptualized as being productive, rather than dominating, women (like all spectators) can be constructed as active subjects who act in compliance, opposition to and in resistance of, the discourses, rationalities and apparatuses of government, as their identities are constituted through technologies of the self.

Understanding how women spectators negotiate, challenge or trouble the messages/images embedded within and around sexually explicit materials provides an entry point into the discussion of how finding validation and empowerment vis-à-vis their engagement with these materials is itself an act of resistance, not only to a genre dominated by representations of male sexual fantasizing, but to normative radical feminist discourses of degradation and misogyny. The final section of this chapter theorizes the nature of resistance and its relationship to agency and subjectivities.

### **Resistance, Agency and the Possibility of Change**

Although the vision of disciplinary power as a totalizing practice would at first glance appear to discourage resistance, power is only truly exercised over free subjects who face a field of possibilities (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982). Indeed, as Foucault articulates: “where there is power, there is resistance” (1978: 95). Resistance forms a part of the discursive, emerging through the “insurrection of subjugated knowledges,” the voicing of the antagonistic “other” whose presence destabilizes power’s claim to “truth” (Foucault 1980*b*: 101). If power entails the universalization of ‘truth’/knowledge (Hall 2001), then resistance can be conceptualized as the voicing of alternative truths and knowledges, which serves to destabilize claims of universality and exposes power as a normalizing ruling rationality.

In their conceptualization of sexual scripting theory, Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]) also allowed for individual agency and change. As Jackson (2007: 4) highlights:

“The sexual self is viewed as actively ‘doing sex,’ not only in terms of sexual acts, but as making and modifying sexual meaning, since intrapsychic scripting is inevitably interdependent with both the interactional and wide sociocultural scripting of the sexual.” Not only are cultural scripts adapted to specific interpersonal exchanges, but, as will be highlighted throughout the analysis chapters, it was at the level of the intrapsychic in which the research participants, through the scripting of their sexual experiences, trouble simplified understandings of their sexuality and sexual pleasure through connections to individual agency and social discourse.

The manner through which spectatorship has been theorized in this chapter provides a conceptual entry point for discussions of resistance. hooks (1996: 2) asserts that “whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach the audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned.” This statement pushes us to think about the messages that are said to be represented in pornographic imagery, and the cultural context in which these messages arise and are constituted. As has been previously asserted, the director’s intended meanings in pornography may not necessarily lend themselves to the meanings a viewer, perhaps a woman in the audience, might get from the film. However, one can ask several questions: Is it possible to watch pornography in order to explore and experience sex and sexual arousal without agreeing to everything on screen? Or, without passively absorbing all of the messages and images presented? Agentic screening practices, as outline above, serve to contest notions of a predetermined audience by problematizing assumptions that the reactions and interpretations of the audience are pre-conceived and controlled. While the aim of pornography is to elicit a corporeal reaction from the audience, “audiences do not just

passively absorb pre-given meanings ‘forced’ upon them by media texts but actively create their own meanings” (Chaudhuri 2006: 42). If, as Hall (1997:33) argues, “the reader is as important as the writer in the production of meaning,” does *malestream* pornography necessarily produce and reflect the same meanings for everyone watching? On the part of the spectator, the viewing experience is not performed all at once, but rather it is done in stages as outlined by Boorstin (1990). These stages of spectatorship demonstrate the active engagement between the viewer and the text.

### ***Spectatorship as Agentic***

Boorstin (1990) categorizes three levels of the spectator’s viewing experience: the visceral eye, the vicarious eye and the voyeuristic eye, positing that a successful film must work at all three levels. The visceral eye “is attuned to first-hand experience of thrill, joy, fear and abandonment” (McCarthy and Wright 2004: 85). It speaks to the spectator’s sensory experiences, or their gut reactions, through the evocation of, for example, arousal, disgust, horror or laughter. For Boorstin (1990), visceral experiences alone are insufficient as spectators can build up a resistance to the thrill, or shock, of what they are viewing, thus the vicarious and voyeuristic elements must also be built into a film. The various eye is attentive to the “emotional substrate of action rather than its internal logic and plausibility” (McCarthy and Wright 2004: 85). It speaks to the emotional hold of the film and the extent to which the spectator identifies, or connects, with any given character. It is concerned with empathizing with the character. Boorstin (1990) defines the voyeuristic eye as the logic of the file; the cognition of the story and its associated elements. To experience a film voyeuristically is to do so in terms of the excitement of seeing new things. “It refers to a way of looking that gets up close to things and really looking at them but becoming bored as soon



as the experience of seeing the newness of the thing has run its course” (McCarthy and Wright 2004: 85). Boorstin (1990) notes that when one or more of these levels of viewership are missing, the film will fail in engaging its audience.

For Sobchack (1992), a film is not an empty set of flickering images; it is experienced by the viewer as an intentional subject. That is, “the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience” (Sobchack 1992: 122). Thus, when watching a stream of moving images the spectator not only sees those images, but also interprets them as the product of their lived choices. Moreover, Sobchack (1992: 123) suggests, the vision with which the viewer is presented “is informed and charged by other modes of perception, and thus implicates a *sighted body* rather than merely transcendental eyes.” The film experience then becomes a “*shared* space of being, of seeing, hearing, and bodily and reflective movement performed and experienced by both film and viewer” (Sobchack 1992: 124) As Marks (2002: 125) explains:

If one understands cinema viewing as an exchange between two bodies – that of the viewer and that of the film – then the characterization of the film viewer as passive, vicarious, or projective must be replaced with a model of a viewer who participates in the production of cinematic experience.

Far from being subjected to a text then, the viewer must negotiate its meaning, “contribute to and perform the constitution of its experiential significance” (Sobchack 1992: 10). It is through this interpretation of pornographic and sexually explicit texts that we can conceptualize acts of resistance.

In order to conceptualize women’s negotiations with seemingly problematic spaces like sexually explicit materials as resistant, it is necessary to unpack the concept of resistance and to problematize the tendency to insist on resistance as an inherently overt phenomenon of organized collective action (Scott 1985). Resistance, however, does not have to occur on a

grand scale, as “micro processes of resistance, although often discounted within a totalizing ‘revolution or nothing’ conceptualization, can still maintain a political project” (Thomas and Davis 2005: 729). Applied to the engagement with sexually explicit materials, individual women utilizing various strategies to actively negotiate the various representations they are viewing on screen, reading in books, or have drawn upon in scripting this sexual spectatorship could be indicative of these small acts of resistance. This approach coincides with Weedon (1997 [1987]: 111), who states that “resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject is the first stage in the production of alternate forms of knowledge.” Thus resistance can either take a physical or discursive form.

### **From An Analysis of Discourse to Discourse Analysis**

This chapter has sought to theorize how social relationships, created through our everyday interactive experiences, construct the web of meaning that frames our individual and collective lives. It is through the minutiae of these mundane everyday experiences that larger power relations are created and recreated. Accounting for broader societal forces and regulatory discursive regimes serves to create an analytic surrounding how socialized meanings enable an understanding of how individuals make decisions and act upon them, including those depictions which deviate from societal norms (Crossley 2006).

The concept of sexual scripts is helpful in explaining women’s construction of their sexualities and the process of acquiring sexual subjectivities. Because sexual scripts, as has been conceptualized within this chapter, can be seen to arise from the existing social discourse about sexuality, they carry with them messages regarding sexual normalcy, sexual power and appropriate sexual expression (Baber 1994). In this manner, sexuality can be viewed as a technology of the self, which not only collates one’s own sense of identity

through self-knowledge, but which is also seen to have its own ‘Truth’ or inner nature that is revealed through self-scrutiny (Foucault 1978). Power operates through discipline and technologies of the self, which both serve to reveal individuals into subjects and objects of its effects. While Foucault localizes the modalities of power in disciplines such as medicine and penology, feminist theorists contend that the absence of attending to how formal institutional structures serve to reproduce disciplinary imperatives disguises the extent to which disciplines serves the interest of patriarchal domination in the social and gendered construction of sex, sexuality, and the body (Bartky 1990).

Spectatorship provides a particularly interesting way to explore the convergence of these theoretical constructs. Spectatorship is not a ‘natural’ phenomenon nor is it just a socio-historical construction. Rather, spectatorship, as we conceive of it in contemporary society, is a continuously monitored and policed disciplinary domain. Situating discourses and scripts within the patriarchal and heteronormative context in which they are iterated and reiterated, is important to this research as it seeks gender pornography and what it means for women to be spectators of the sexually explicit.

By working through an analytic that not only bridges theorizing into both individual-level accounts of what sexually explicit materials mean to the those individuals who use them, but also how these meanings are transformed, negotiated with or sustained, it is possible to conceive of a space for both agency and resistance realized through spectatorship. The processes by which this occurs are examined in this research with respect to women’s engagement with sexually explicit materials. As such, this research is fundamentally interested in how women experience and create meaning from their engagement with sexually explicit materials and the broader contexts and discourses which give rise to these

meaningful engagements. The following chapter outlines the methodological framework used in this study to account of women's engagement with sexually explicit materials and to empirically realize the theoretical framework conceived of in this chapter.

#### **IV. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

This dissertation presents exploratory qualitative research focused on understanding women's engagement with sexually explicit materials, and of the meanings that women attach to their engagement with these materials. As such, this research aimed to address the following questions:

1. How do women who actively seek out sexually explicit materials experience these materials? That is, how do women understand their use of, or engagement with, these materials?
2. What is the significance that women attribute to sexually explicit materials in their understandings of their identity(ies) or sense of self?

In order to make sense of the narratives collected, a theoretical framework surrounding the construction/negotiation of sexual subjectivities, spectatorship and resistance was articulated in the previous chapter. This chapter sets out the methodological procedures through which this conceptual framework was empirically realized. The purpose of this research was not only to provide a descriptive account of these women's engagement with sexually explicit materials, but to script a narrative of their spectatorship.

This chapter is divided into three sections which speak to the methodological framework of this study. First, practical considerations surrounding this research, including the specific research methods used to elicit the texts required for analysis – focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews. Issues of sampling and recruitment strategies, ethical considerations are also addressed. Following this, I describe the coding strategies and the analytic method used to make the narratives intelligible. Finally, this chapter offers some

descriptive details about the twenty-six women who were interviewed. Research limitations are also outlined.

## **THE RESEARCH PROJECT: ELICITING TEXTS**

### **Data Collection and Recruitment Strategies**

Using focus groups followed by semi-structured interviews, this research explored the lived experiences (Smith 1999) of the female research participants as it pertained to their engagement with sexually explicit materials. To this end, this study used narratives collected from 26 respondents, via two focus group sessions, one with five participants, the other with four, and 20 individual interviews, each lasting approximately two hours.<sup>26</sup> A purposive sampling method was used in order to “ensure that certain types of individuals or persons displaying certain attributes are included in the study” (Berg 2009: 51), combined with snowball sampling. The results of this study, although non-generalizable, and not intended to be, contribute to discussions surrounding women’s engagement with sexually explicit materials.

Being exploratory in scope, this research accessed a specific type of respondent meeting the following recruitment criteria:

1. Actively and regularly seek out and engage with sexually explicit materials for their own sexual pleasure.
2. Be between the ages of 25-35.
3. Able to communicate in English, the language in which the interviews were conducted.

In order to gain access to research participants, several strategies were employed for the purposes of recruitment to avoid bias magnification. Calls for Participants were posted in

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<sup>26</sup> Three women who participated in the focus groups (two from southern Ontario and one from eastern Ontario) indicated that they also wanted to be interviewed individually, accounting for the inconsistency between number of interviews and number of respondents.

online spaces, such as a website dedicated to this study (<http://sem-study.webs.com>), as well as on Craigslist (Ottawa and Toronto), Kijiji (Ottawa and Toronto) and NowToronto, an alternative newspaper. These sites were chosen not only because they were free to both users and posters, but also as a result of the visibility of similar postings asking for research participants for academic studies. I initially created a Facebook page for this research; however, I removed it early into the study as at the time the words ‘sexually explicit’ or ‘pornography’ were unable to be used when creating, and naming, group pages. Since my name and University of Ottawa email address were added the Calls for Participants, one negative outcome of recruiting in this manner, was that I received, and continue to receive, many unsolicited emails of a commercialized sexual nature.

In order to increase exposure (but not to recruit from), I put a notice on my own Facebook page, linking to the various websites where the Calls for Participants were placed. Some individuals in my personal networks later told me that they disseminated this information using their own social media networks (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, word-of-mouth). In this manner, respondents were recruited via a ‘virtual’ snowball sampling approach. When women inquired about these Calls for Participants (see Appendix A for Calls for Participants), I ensured that they met the recruitment criteria and that they currently resided in cities in Southern Ontario (Toronto region) and Eastern Ontario (National Capital region), as well as forwarded to them, a Letter of Information (see Appendix B for Letters of Information). As this was not a comparative study, equal numbers of women from each geographic area were not attained. A total of nine women from the Toronto region and seventeen women from the National Capital region participated in this research.

### ***Emergent Issues with Recruitment***

Three issues with respect to recruitment merit some additional attention: the recruitment criteria themselves, recruiting participants through online spaces, and using personal networks to assist recruitment. Actively and regularly seeking out and engaging with sexually explicit materials for the express purpose of one's sexual pleasure was the primary recruitment criterion in seeking out women participants for this study. This criterion, however, posed a significant challenge as it highlighted several gaps in existing literature related to women's use of pornography and sexually explicit materials generally. I struggled over questions such as: What does *regular* use of sexually explicit materials necessarily entail? Does it imply a certain time allotted to its use? Does it speak towards a period of time denoted by minutes per day, days per week, or neither? Will a woman who watches five minutes of video per month feel that she does not qualify to participate in this study, even through her use of sexually explicit materials is a consistent and routine part of her sexual life and identity? These questions were further complicated by virtue of the gendered nature of this study. The challenge then turned to: What constitutes women's *active* use of sexually explicit materials, if dominant discourses indicate that women do not use these materials at all? In light of these challenges, this recruitment criterion was left undefined. Participants of both the focus groups and individual interviews were encouraged to explain what active and regular use meant to them in their experiences.

As previously noted, recruitment for this research was conducted through online spaces as well as through word-of-mouth. Unsure of how my proposed research would be received by women, particularly as the first data collection stage was a focus group, I was initially concerned that it would be somewhat difficult to attract women willing to participate



in these sessions. However, after posting my Call for Participants, I was elated by the fact that I immediately received expressions of curiosity, with women emailing me of their interest to participate. I acquired the requisite number of focus group participants within two weeks. Many of the participants indicated that they found out about the study via Calls for Participants that had been posted to Twitter or Facebook statuses through virtual networking. Only one woman indicated she saw the posting on NowToronto (however, through word-of-mouth she recruited another friend who participated). Several women emailed me regarding the Craigslist and Kijiji ads, although none of these women participated in the focus group, they did, however, participate in the individual interviews. While the focus groups were to each have five participants, I invited six women so that in the event that one participant decided not to attend I would still have sufficient participants. I had consistent email contact with each of the women, individually sending them updates regarding times and locations, as well as answering any questions or concerns they had. In the National Capital region, five women participated in the focus group; however, in the Toronto region, only four women were present, even though all six women had indicated to me earlier that morning of their intention to participate.

Recruiting participants for the individual interviews proved a bit more challenging. I commenced recruitment in a similar manner, by placing ads on Craigslist Ottawa and Toronto, Kijiji Ottawa and Toronto and NowToronto in late June 2010. Once again, I also posted links to the locations where the Call for Participants could be found on my Facebook page, in anticipation that personal networks would share the post widely. It should be reiterated here again, that participants did not come from my own personal networks, but rather they were used as conduits to disseminate Calls for Participants. Perhaps it was the

close proximity between the two postings, or the fact that the novelty of my research had worn off, but I did not receive the same immediate response as I had during recruitment for the focus groups. When women emailed me regarding this research, I answered any questions, responding with the Information Letter as well as scheduling interview dates with women who indicated they wanted to do so.

In July 2010, approximately two weeks after placing my ads on Craigslist and Kijiji, I received emails from both of these websites indicating that my posts were removed, with Craigslist additionally suspending my account for violating policies related to soliciting sex. Feeling that my ad was removed unjustifiably (I was not soliciting sex), I did in fact email both Craigslist and Kijiji staff, indicating that my posting was for academic research, as clearly indicated in the title, and that it did not contravene any of their policies. Unfortunately, I did not receive a response, thus eliminating this as a potentially effective recruitment avenue.

Due to the removal of my online ads, I sent out individual emails to all the focus group participants, as well as women who had indicated interest in participating in focus groups but then later declined. These emails thanked the women for their participation and/or initial interest, indicated that I was conducting individual interviews as the second stage of data collection, and asked them to forward the Call for Participants to any woman they felt would be interested and might meet the recruitment criteria. This method proved beneficial, as many of women who had initially emailed me regarding the Craigslist and Kijiji focus group posting, responded that they would be interested in participating in individual interviews – which accounted for the majority of my participant sample.

### *Using Online Spaces for Participant Recruitment*

Demographically, the social context of Internet use and accessibility shows promise for including the voices of more varied participants, including marginalized populations. Data from Statistics Canada (2010) show that approximately eight out of ten households (79%) have access to the Internet, and this figure is increasing steadily. Similar to findings from Bargh and McKenna (2004), sending and receiving email was cited as the most common activity (93%) of Canadian Internet users (Statistics Canada 2010). Males and females tend to use the Internet at a comparable rate, comprising 81.0% and 79.7% of Internet users in 2009 respectively (Statistics Canada 2010). While Internet users tend to have income and educational levels somewhat higher than the national average, Internet usage among underrepresented demographic groups is steadily increasing. In 2005, only 31.2% of Canadian individuals without a high school diploma accessed the Internet, whereas in 2009, this figure increased to 50.7% (Statistics Canada 2010). Similarly, in 2005, 58.7% of those earning an average income of less than \$13,000 used the Internet, while in 2009, 76.2% of individuals in the lowest income bracket did (Statistics Canada 2010).

Given the increasing diversity<sup>27</sup> of Internet users, it can be asserted that the Internet not only provides a means to obtain potentially more varied participants, but also participants that would be hesitant to participate, unlikely to search out calls for participants in other avenues, or inaccessible by other recruitment methods. There is agreement within both quantitative and qualitative literature that participant recruitment via the Internet provides an opportunity to reach diverse (van Eeden-Moorfield et al. 2008) and marginalized or underrepresented populations (Mathy et al. 2002, Mustanski 2001), and is both cost

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<sup>27</sup> The word diverse is not used here to denote representativeness, but is used as does van Eeden-Moorefield et al. (2008) to mean a research sample that includes a myriad of voices, perspectives and social positions.

effective and efficient (Murray and Fisher 2002). Increasingly researchers investigating sexuality and sexual activities have turned to Internet based research methods, including surveys (i.e., Ross et al. 2005) and online focus groups and individual interviews (i.e., van Eeden-Moorefield et al. 2008). In addition, the online recruitment of men who have sex with men (MSM) has become routine (i.e., Raymond et al. 2010). Given that representations of sex, pornography in particular, has been an important dimension of the Internet since its inception, that sex continues to be one of the most frequently searched topics and that approximately 20% of all Internet users admit to engaging in some kind of online sexual activity (Cooper et al. 2000), the use of online spaces for participant recruitment, particularly for sexuality studies, appears to be a viable avenue. Once participants were recruited, the process of data collection commenced.

### **Using Personal Networks to Assist Recruitment**

As indicated above, one of the strategies employed to increase the visibility of this study, was to post a notice on my Facebook page linking to the various locations where Calls for Participants were posted. The use of personal networks to commence the process of recruitment and increase study exposure is not uncommon. Roulston (2010: 98) indicates that recruiting often involves several tactics ranging from “accessing possible participants via personal networks, ethnographic fieldwork, and advertising in public places.” For instance, in their study of sex work, Benoit et al. (2005) used several means to recruit participants: personal networks, advertisements in local weekly magazines, local newspapers, announcements on public bulletin boards, in shops, and through community partner organizations. In her research on Latino women, Madriz (1998) applied a personal approach to participant recruitment, relying upon personal networks, including students,

community leaders, and friends of friends who worked in community organizations. Thus, the use of personal networks facilitates, and is often the first point of entry, into accessing appropriate study participants.

Given the increasing prominence of social media in many individuals lives (Ryan 2013), it is therefore pertinent to question the differences, if any, between engaging in word-of-mouth discussion with personal networks to increase study exposure and expand avenues of recruitment, or exposing personal networks to the same information by posting a status update on a social media site. Close et al. (2013) highlight that while the Internet offers many opportunities to recruit and communicate with potential research participants, it can also “sabotage” the recruitment process as a result of “emails sent to spam folders, discussion board and blog administrators blocking content associated with the researcher, and poor choice or lack of adequate keywords on study websites that diminish search engine exposure.” Potential participants may also be unreceptive to calls for participants, as the Internet has entrusted suspicion surrounding the legitimacy of certain content and users (Koo and Skinner 2005). As such, Internet users are, to some extent, more likely to trust information that has been disseminated by members of their own personal networks (Koo and Skinner 2005), thereby increasing (for the Internet user) the credibility of calls for participants, especially if they are for research of a sensitive nature (Liamputtong 2007). If study participants do not come directly from personal networks, something that is considered bad practice but not necessarily unethical (Roulston 2010), the question then turns to: Does the manner by which researchers engage with personal networks matter?

Although it is a common practice, (Roulston 2010) cautions that researchers must be aware of the implications of this approach. While it may serve to encourage the intimacy and

rapport with participants required of qualitative research, enhancing the generation of data, it may also serve to constrain the narratives elicited. In this regard, Roulston (2010: 99) highlights that “prior relationships with participants – while in some respects facilitating rapport – may also set boundaries on the kinds of topics that can be explored and represented.” Participants may not feel comfortable speaking to certain sensitive issues, as a result of the perceived personal ties between the participant, researcher and the mutual individual linking both personal networks. As such, Roulston (2010) cautions researchers to be attentive to the ethical issues concerning the anonymization of research participants during the reporting and publication phase of the study. Such concerns, however, are not only attributed to the use of personal networks, but, more broadly, of the snowball sampling approach (Roulston 2010).

### **Focus Group Interviews**

Characterized as an interview conducted in a group as opposed to individually, focus groups represent a dynamic research method as “the hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan 1997: 2). Capitalizing on interactions between research participants to generate data, this is a viable method by which to gain preliminary information as respondents are more likely to feel comfortable speaking about various issues in a conversational-style setting. Interested in obtaining “insights into the personal experiences, beliefs, attitudes and feelings that underlie behaviour” (Frith 2000: 276), focus groups lend themselves to the theoretical orientation of this research, that there is not one experience, but many, and that knowledge and selves are developed in interaction, and are perpetually shifting and evolving.

Morgan (1997) writes of the myriad ways that focus groups can be used in a study: as a self-contained method, a supplementary source of data, or one method in a multi-method approach where no method determines the use of another. Focus groups were used here to compile a knowledge base lacking within the existing literature. Completed prior to the individual interviews, the focus groups were meant to elicit themes and avenues of inquiry to be addressed in the interviews. Due to the lack of empirical research regarding women's experiences using sexually explicit materials, it was deemed necessary to build frameworks of knowledge(s) to facilitate the formulation of in-depth questions for individual interviews. In the absence of data regarding what women consider to be sexually explicit materials, their personal feelings regarding these materials and if, and how often, they use these materials, I could not proceed to uncover the significance of these materials to these women, or their relevance to their identities.

Focus groups are an appropriate method not only for feminist research (cf. Wilkinson 1998) but for sexuality research (cf. Frith 2000, Montell 1999), often generating rich data. They have been shown to foster a sense of safety and community, allowing for open conversations and discussions between participants (Patton 2002). In this manner, focus groups can be considered an appropriate method for feminist research as they “allow for a more egalitarian and less exploitative dynamic than other methods, and the interactions among participants produces a new and valuable kind of data” (Montell 1999: 44). As a result, they have the potential to be both consciousness-raising and empowering for participants. Focus groups afford researchers “access to the kinds of social interactional dynamics that produce particular memories, positions, ideologies, practices and desires among specific groups of people” (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005: 904). Focus groups

also serve to de-centre the role of the researcher, facilitating the democratization of the research process and promoting dialogic interactions (Denzin and Lincoln 2002, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis 2005), important facets to consider when researching sensitive subject matters.

### *Using Focus Groups to Address Sex and Sexuality*

Wutich et al. (2010: 89) argue that “focus group methods have gained a reputation for facilitating data collection about sensitive topics,” a reputation that has emerged given the types of studies in which focus groups have been employed as a data collection method, particularly with respect to health research (Saint-Germain et al. 1993), as well as sex research, such as sexual decision-making with respect to AIDS (Klein et al. 1992), sexual communication between parents and children (Motley and Reeder 1995), between women and their sexual partners (Frith and Kitzinger 1997), and attitudes of medical professionals to sexual conduct with their clients (White et al. 1994). It appears from a scan of the literature employing focus groups on sensitive issues, the majority has been framed within a ‘health’ paradigm.

Given that sex is often conceptualized as residing within the private rather than the public sphere, it may appear improbable that women would be willing to speak about matters of sexual pleasure and their use of sexual materials in a group setting, particularly when the other members of the group are strangers and the conversations taking place are recording and subsequently transcribed by a researcher. However, Morgan (1997) indicates that the “myth [that] people will not talk about sensitive topics in focus groups...seems to be based on commonsense imaginings of what people might be willing to discuss in groups,” and that in actuality “people readily talk about a wide range of personal and emotional topics” (6).



The idea that sexual experiences are any more personal or sensitive than other experiences that form the basis of academic study, should also be interrogated. In our society the sexual, as deeply intimate and sacred, is constructed as above any other realm of human experience. This conforms to the statement Foucault made in 1977 during a round-table discussion, when speaking about desexualizing the crime of rape to destabilizing patriarchy: “Sexuality as such, in the body, has a preponderant place, the sexual organ isn’t like a hand, hair or a nose. It is therefore protected, surrounded, invested in any case with legislation that isn’t pertaining to the rest of the body” (1988*b*: 201-202). These concepts, of the sacredness and intimateness of sex and of the differentiation of the genitalia from other body parts, have been challenged (Foucault 1988*b*, Nussbaum 1998), and should be seriously considered within the academic study of pornography. Foucault (1988*b*, 1978) suggests that because sex and sexuality are constructed as the core of one’s being and foundational to the ‘self’, that our genitals are saturated with social meaning – meanings that are not attributed to other body parts. Furthermore, within the current social climate variously described as pornified (Paul 2005) or the pornosphere (Ciclitira 2004), one can also question the extent to which sex and sexuality is still considered to be a sensitive topic, and if so, if this is true for all individuals.

In their review and synthesis of research on topics of a sensitive nature, Lee and Renzetti (1990) identify four categories: (a) private or personal experiences; (b) socially unacceptable attitudes or actions; (c) power, politics and privilege; and (d) sacred beliefs, stating that one of the ‘hallmarks’ of sensitive topics are threats and costs to participants, such as stigmatized behaviours, social sanctioning and humiliation. While there may exist individual differences with respect to the belief that sex and sexuality are sensitive areas of

discussion, by virtue of asking about women's personal experiences, this research was framed around the notion of sensitivity, particularly with respect to ethical considerations. This, however, does not belie the fact that studies of a sensitive nature are important and that focus groups may be a useful tool to elicit rich narratives, particularly considering that many people do not want to feel that they are alone in their experiences or beliefs. Engaging in a group setting may prove cathartic for many participants, as they are able to share their knowledge within a group of like-minded people. Furthermore, being interviewed in a focus group may provide a sense of anonymity for some individuals, as they may feel that (a) their non-responsiveness to certain questions will be hidden by the participation of others; or (b) focus groups offer a less intimidating manner to participate in research of this nature. Both of these were sentiments expressed to me by several focus group participants.

Frith (2000: 277) outlines three key advantages of using focus groups in sexuality research, including: (a) their usefulness in exploratory research into under-researched topics and for speedy policy analysis; (b) enabling the researcher to learn the argot typically used by respondents in talking about their sexual activities; and (c) providing conditions under which people feel comfortable discussing sexual experiences and which encourage people to talk about sex. Aimed at understanding women's engagement with sexually explicit materials, this study was exploratory in nature, therefore focus groups proved useful. Additionally, I found that while my research area may be considered a sensitive topic to some, most of the women who participated in the focus group indicated that they *wanted* to talk about sex and pornography because it is never spoken about, and that they had something to say. Thus, I would add that another advantage of using focus groups in sexuality research is their ability to elicit participants who are likely to have formulated an

opinion or viewpoint of the topic and have a vested interest, whether for social education, personal liberation or some other reason.

### *Question Development*

The focus group discussions were centered on open-ended questions pertaining to the participants' general opinions of sexually explicit materials, as well as issues surrounding the meanings attributed to these materials, the benefits and/or limitations of these materials and details regarding what materials are used and how. In addition to a guided set of questions, conversation was allowed to enter into new domains, following Rubin and Rubin (1995: 140) who explain that:

In focus groups, the goal is to let people spark off one another, suggesting dimensions and nuances of the original problem that any one individual might not have thought of. Sometimes a totally different understanding of a problem emerges from the group discussion.

An exploratory study, the purpose of the focus groups was to create new knowledge(s), to guide the individual interviews. As there is little empirical research on this area, many seemingly 'basic' questions had to be answered in order to frame the second stage of data collection, such as:

- What do women consider to be sexually explicit materials?
- What do women think of the term 'sexually explicit materials'?
- What constitutes 'regular' use of sexually explicit materials for women?

As a feminist researcher, I was not anticipating an absolute 'truth' to these questions, nor was I attempting to essentialize women with this line of questioning, but rather the purpose was to elicit discussion on individual experiences and opinions to uncover the breadth and diversity among the participants (see Appendix C for Interview Guides).

Focus group questions were intentionally designed to be broad and non-intrusive. The purpose of the focus group was to provide data that would serve as the foundation of the individual interviews. Given the lack of empirical research in this area, it is virtually an open field with many avenues of inquiry, thus I needed somewhere to start. For instance, when initially conceptualizing my dissertation proposal I could not find answers to questions such as what constitutes ‘regular’ use of these materials, or even what these ‘materials’ even consist of. Not knowing what to ask of women in my individual interviews, I decided that in accordance with the literature (Coyle 2006, Stewart et al. 2007) focus groups would be an essential component in obtaining background information. This is not to minimize the importance of this research stage, as the data obtained was not only immensely interesting, but the group dynamic allowed for various issues and topics to emerge, that would not have occurred if the interplay between women in conversation was not present.

### ***The Focus Group in Practice***

Two focus groups were conducted – one in the National Capital region (n = 5) and one in the Greater Toronto region (n = 4), in April and May 2010 respectively. Individually emailing each participant, I proposed three different dates and times and asked the participants to reply back. Prior to doing this, however, I had communicated with the women asking them to indicate which days of the week would absolutely not work for them. With these days in mind, I selected three options that could work for each group. This appeared to be an effective approach as there was little issue in scheduling. In the National Capital region, I arranged an available room at the University of Ottawa. In the Greater Toronto region, location selection was more problematic, given the larger geographic area. Focus groups were conducted in a private meeting room at a public library located in central

Toronto. Due to inquiries by the Greater Toronto region focus group participants, I offered to provide small compensation (\$5.00) to offset either parking or public transportation fare, which was accepted by all of the Toronto region participants, but none from the National Capital region. No other compensation was provided to study participants.

Moderating the focus group, my aim was to provide a receptive environment free from judgment. Prior to commencing each focus group I reiterated this aim, indicating that while opinions, ideas and experiences may differ, all were important for the research project and were valued. As previously outlined, a semi-structured interview guide with some introductory remarks was developed for the focus groups, commencing with very general questions dealing with the participants' opinions about the meaning of the sexually explicit materials and what these materials constitute. Both focus groups commenced very formally, with participants responding to questions in the order they were sitting, but because the topic was very relevant to these women, they easily became willing participants in the discussion as their comfort levels grew. On many occasions the participants' narratives strayed from the interview guide, which I encouraged, tapping into areas previously unconsidered and not found in the literature. There was congenial laughter; women were asking questions of each other, even an exchange of information regarding best websites, books and actors. This process added a wealth of information to my research and gave me insights into the topic that would later be used in the development of the individual interview guides.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

A guiding presupposition of in-depth interviewing is to reveal how participants construct meanings of themselves and the social worlds they inhabit (Emerson et al. 1995, Prus 1996, Spradley 1979). The interview attempts to gain an understanding of the social

situations in which individuals (or meanings) exist and how participants perceive and understand those situations (or meanings). For Prus (1996: 20), “by inquiring extensively into the experiences of others, interviewers may learn a great deal about the life-worlds of the other.” The central goal of in-depth interviewing is the elicitation of vivid descriptions of participants’ life experiences, using their own words rather than those of the researcher. To achieve this goal, the interview guide must be designed in a manner as to elicit such responses.

In accordance with feminist approaches to knowledge construction, a semi-structured interview method was employed, as this is not only the method most widely used in feminist research (Reinharz 1992), but it is considered a beneficial approach for obtaining detailed narratives as well as allows for the opportunity to build rapport with interview participants (Berg 2009, Fontana and Frey 2000, Olesen 2000, Reinharz 1992). This was considered of particular importance due to the exploratory nature of this research. Traditionally, women’s narratives have been excluded or ignored in research as well as in the processes that seek to govern and mediate their lives (Reinharz 1992, Smith 1999). This is especially true for research that focuses on positive portrayals of female use of pornography and other sexually explicit materials, as evidenced by the literature. Furthermore, Fontana and Frey (2000) also note that “there is a growing reluctance among female researchers to continue interviewing women as *objects* with little or no regards for them as *individuals*” (658). As a researcher, I am interested in the fluidity and complexities of meanings, women’s active construction of self/identities through language, and perceptions of identity as indicative of processes.

### *Question Development*

Unlike the questions asked in the focus group, the individual interview questions permitted a more detailed pursuit of information (Berg 2009). Thus, while the individual interviews contained the same broad questions as presented in the focus groups, they were structured so as to transition into more specific narratives regarding women's personal experiences, practices and meaning-making surrounding these materials. As such, the questions were as non-directive as possible, allowing the respondents with the space required to articulate their position (see Appendix C for Interview Guides).

Individual interviews commenced with two broad and open-ended questions, serving both as an invitation to speak as well as to allow the respondent to guide the interview by providing the areas on which they wanted to speak. These two introductory questions were:

- Describe to me what the term 'sexually explicit materials' means to you?
- Tell me about your use of sexually explicit materials.

The manner in which respondents answered these questions directed the tone of the interview, although I did ask additional questions in order to fully exhaust all areas. While the interview guide was semi-structured, that is, there was a set list of questions that I wanted to ask of each participant, they were generally worded in an open-ended manner to elicit more than single word responses and allow for additional probing.

Influenced by the data collected within the focus groups, several questions were added to the interview guide. These questions included:

- When using sexually explicit materials what is your relationship to the sexual act portrayed? (Probe: Do you envision yourself as part of the sexual scenario?)

- How do you feel when you come into contact with these materials when you are not a consumer of them?

Allowing for the creation of new questions and avenues of inquiry based on women's speech is inherently a feminist project. According to Reinharz (1992: 44):

By listening to women speak, understanding women's membership in particular social systems, and establishing the distribution of phenomena accessible only through sensitive interviewing, feminist interview researchers have uncovered previously neglected or misunderstood worlds of experience.

Rather than constructing an interview guide based on existing research obtained on men's engagement with sexually explicit materials or on ideological accounts of the individual and social impacts of these materials, the proverbial 'add women and stir' approach, I commenced using women's voices.

### ***The Individual Interview in Practice***

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with 20 women, from the National Capital (n = 13) and Greater Toronto (n = 7) regions. The interviews themselves lasted anywhere from one to three hours and took place in locations ranging from the respondent's own home, an office at the University of Ottawa, restaurants, coffee shops and food courts, with a disproportionate amount occurring in public locations rather than private ones. The fact that the majority of participants requested to be interviewed in public locations is itself an interesting finding, which will be examined in the following chapter.

Prior to commencing each interview I would engage in casual conversation with the participant, for instance, asking about their day, in order to build rapport. This process, which I light-heartedly termed 'fore-play' given the nature of the study, and one which led to decreasing participants' initial tensions, allowed the interviews to have a more intimate feel which created an atmosphere of openness and trust that yielded such textured narratives.



During this ‘fore-play’ I situated myself within the research – describing my interest in this area as well as affirming that I was not there to judge responses but rather to uncover the voices and experiences of the women with whom I spoke.

Similar to the focus groups, many interviews commenced quite formally, with the respondents initially providing brief answers to the questions I posed. Many were unsure of themselves asking: ‘Is that what you want me to talk about/say?’ once they provided a response. As the interviews progressed, they began to feel more comfortable about their role as research participant, actively responding to questions and telling stories. Once I noted their increasing comfort levels, I would revisit previous questions in which the responses provided were brief, asking them to elaborate on particular aspects of their narratives.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In line with the commitment to conduct female-focused, feminist research, ethical concerns must be attended to throughout all stages of the research process, from the research design to the final written dissertation, particularly given the research topic. Issues of voice and representation (Olesen 2000) were taken into consideration in the research design, for instance, by not imposing the language of ‘pornography’ but instead using the term ‘sexually explicit materials’ to account for the myriad of activities/images/genres women may engage with for their own sexual pleasure, as well as allowing the women to define for themselves what sexually explicit materials means in their lives.

The research was bound by the ethical guidelines set by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa for Studies Involving Human Participants in the Social Sciences (see Appendix D for Ethics Approval Notice). Once responding to the Call for Research Participants, all interested women received a Recruitment Text outlining the scope of the

study and the nature of their participation. Participants were provided with two copies of the Consent Form (see Appendix E for Letters of Informed Consent) prior to participating in either the focus group or individual interview, which they signed to indicate informed consent on all aspects of the research, including the use of a digital device to record the interview.

Any risks that participants may have incurred would be largely a result of their volunteering of personal opinions, thoughts or practices regarding sexually explicit materials. As such, participants were informed that they may experience some emotional discomfort or regret about disclosing this information or that they may fear judgment either by the researcher, or in the case of the focus groups, by other participants. Furthermore, taking time to participate in this study may have caused an inconvenience to participants with respect to time lost or costs incurred travelling to the interview site.

Research participants were not members of a vulnerable group, nor were they randomly selected by the researcher. Women actively chose to participate in this study following the Call for Focus Group or Individual Interview Participants, and the subsequent Recruitment text. The women who chose to participate in this research were willing to discuss their use of sexually explicit materials for their own pleasure with a stranger (the researcher) or strangers (in the case of focus groups, the other participants). However, as ethical issues are particularly heightened in feminist research (Montell 1999, Reinharz 1992), in order to mitigate any potential risks, discomforts and inconvenience of those participating in this study, several measures were taken.

Interviews were conducted at a time and location that considered the specific availabilities of all research participants. With respect to the individual interviews, each

woman was encouraged to select a date, time and location of their choosing, as I would accommodate them. This differed slightly for the focus groups, as I selected a date, time and location after considering each woman's availability and time constraints.

Anticipating the various needs of participants and reflecting on how women might benefit from engaging in this type of research is another way to further lessen any exploitation between researcher and researched and mitigate risks (Montell 1999). Throughout both the focus group and individual interviews, participants were allowed the opportunity to decline answering any questions that they felt were too personal and/or that they did not want to answer, without fear of reprisal. Furthermore, interviews were paused at the request of participants when they were uncomfortable or when they had realized they veered away from the question and began speaking about unrelated topics, enabling them to change the direction of the interview, if they so chose, and return back to the focus of inquiry. This can be viewed as a technique to lessen the hierarchal, or top-down, approach of traditional interviewing, making the research process more egalitarian. Participants were also told that they had the right to stop the interview at any time and terminate their participation.

Anonymity and confidentiality were particularly important ethical concepts to attend to given the nature of the research area and the methods used. Confidentiality refers to the "active attempt to remove from the research records any elements that might indicate the subject's identity" (Berg 2009: 90), whereas anonymity literally speaks to the state of being anonymous or nameless. While individual interview participants were assured, but not guaranteed, confidentiality and anonymity, this posed a significant challenge for the focus group participants (Gibbs 1997). During the course of both interview processes, participants were encouraged to select their own pseudonyms. Where they chose to be interviewed using

their actual names, I randomly selected a female name when transcribing the interviews. Any identifying information (i.e., names of locations or people) was also removed from the transcripts. Such protections were afforded to both the focus group and individual interview participants.

Despite all efforts to keep anonymous the identities of the focus group participants, and private and confidential the information shared in the focus group sessions, I informed each participant, both individually and as a collective, that I could not guarantee confidentiality or anonymity as it relates to the other participants. This point was also indicated in the Recruitment Text and the Informed Consent forms given to each woman participating in the focus groups. Berg (2009: 181) notes that “ensuring confidentiality is critical if the researcher expects to get truthful and free-flowing discussions during the course of the focus group interview,” as such, he recommends that every focus group participant sign a confidentiality agreement. I did not require the participants to sign such an agreement. However, prior to commencing each focus group as everyone was seated together, I obtained a verbal acknowledgement from all the women indicating that confidentiality and anonymity, in this instance, is a collective task and that everyone was responsible for ensuring that any identifying information would not be disclosed outside of the group. Similarly, prior to commencing each focus group session, participants were reminded that they were not required to disclose personal information, as the questions were constructed broadly, focusing on opinion rather than experience.

In order to maintain transparency of the research process all participants were offered the opportunity to receive a password-protected transcript of their interview, and allowed the option to remove any part of their narrative that they felt, after the fact, was too personal to

disclose. In order to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of all the women who participated in the focus groups, participants were offered an abridged version of the focus group transcript including only their speech in response to the questions posed. Although transcripts were offered to all 26 participants, women from both the individual and focus group interviews specified that they did not want their transcripts, opting instead to receive an annotated (and for some women, the entire) version of my completed dissertation – even though I indicated that receiving one document did not preclude access to the other.

Having detailed the procedure through which data was collected, the following section of this chapter describes the process through which the interviews were coded and analyzed.

## **ANALYZING THE TEXTS**

### **Coding**

The objectives of data analysis are two-fold. First, although this research was exploratory in scope, it had to encompass more than mere descriptions, but rather worked towards a theoretical framework to make sense of the narratives provided by the women participants with respect to their experiences engaging with sexually explicit materials and to the meanings attributed to this engagement. Secondly, to present the data in a way that yields the richest and most authentic understanding of women's experiences. Silverman (1997: 10) captures this goal, stating: "Authenticity, rather than reliability, is often the issue in qualitative research." The focus group and individual interview both provided a significant amount of descriptive detail to accomplish these ends. As such, data analysis was conducted in a dialectical fashion, in which theory was developed and shaped by constant back-and-

forth between the collected data, personal reflections of the researcher, emergent themes, available literature and the theoretical framework.

Following guidelines outlined by Patton (2002) all focus groups and individual interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim. There is considerable debate on transcription in qualitative research, which focus on what, and whose voice, is (re)produced in the interview transcript (Lapadat and Lindsay 1999). As a feminist scholar, questioning whether the transcript is an accurate representation of the interview, or a text that is in itself produced through my own interpretive framework, enables me to be reflexive of the research process and of myself as a researcher. For example, if the focus is on the ways in which the interview conversation functions as an interaction, the transcription protocol would need to incorporate timed pauses and intonations. If, as in this instance, the transcripts are to serve the purpose of providing discursively rich data, transcription with an emphasis on readability, rather than conversation-analytic accuracy, would be employed. Having said this, transcripts included both pauses and moments of laughter, and also retained the uncorrected speech of the participants.

Coding of the transcribed interviews was facilitated through the use of QSR NVIVO 9, a qualitative analysis software package. Coding involves the use of concepts and categories which serve to label themes and ideas, combining similar passages of texts so they can be easily retrieved for further comparison and analysis (Blaikie 2000). For the purposes of this research, some codes were delineated *a priori*, that is based on the research questions, literature and theoretical framework, while others emerged from the narratives themselves (see Appendix F for List of NVIVO codes). For instance, categories such as demographic information (i.e., age, marital status, sexual orientation, occupation field), those relating to

Simon and Gagnon's (1999) sexual script theory (i.e., cultural interpersonal, and intrapsychic scripts), theoretically operationalized concepts (i.e., identity and subjectivity), were identified prior to coding the actual interviews. Codes emerging from the interviews were descriptive, nuancing the *a priori* categories and accounting for what was actually said, as well as explanatory, expanding on the theoretical/analytical concepts (i.e., resistance and transgression).

### **Conceptualization of Terms**

As outlined in Chapter Three, meanings are created through the interaction between selves and society. This research is fundamentally concerned with how women engage with sexually explicit materials, what meanings they assign to this engagement and how these meanings serve to shape their sense of self. This engagement, and the resultant meanings, however, do not occur in a vacuum and must be situated within broader social and cultural scripts/discourses that serve to both delimit their interactions or add to their interpretative frame. As a researcher, I must first give meaning to the key concepts used in this study in order to uncover the meanings attributed to these concepts by the women I spoke with. These theoretical concepts include: sexually explicit materials, identity (which is further nuanced by focusing on social and sexual identity(ies), and scripts (cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic).

### ***Sexually Explicit Materials***

As discussed in Chapter One, rather than using the identifier 'pornography', the term sexually explicit materials was used in this research. However, throughout the course of data analysis, the language used by the women I spoke with will be retained. It is my contention that focusing only on 'pornography', a term with narrow definition, would not allow for the

broader exploration and usage patterns of a variety of materials and genres used by women for sexual pleasure. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, sexually explicit materials will be defined as any medium, broadly defined, that women use for the purposes/intentions of sexual arousal, pleasure and release.

### ***Identity***

In sociology, identity is a multi-layered concept relating to the groups one belongs to (social identity), to the way we portray ourselves to the outside world (personal identity) and to our own subjective sense of knowing who we are (ego identity). Identity is constructed using self-perceptions. However, we are all a product, not only of our inherited dispositions, but of our social environments. Individuals develop self-understandings, or knowledge of themselves, via evaluations (comparisons or contrasts) conducted between their Selves and those Others, that they encounter in their social lives (Mead 1962). According to Giddens (1992: 52), “self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography.” Identity is the result of a relationship between knowledge contained within an individual’s self-concept and the social context in which they exist.

For this study, I understand identity to refer to the process whereby an individual develops and maintains a set of self-understandings which relate to particular dimensions in her (or his) life. In accordance with the theoretical frame of this research, I maintain that individuals contain a multitude of identities, some of which are likely to be regarded as diametrically opposed to each other. In order to understand identity, the concept of identity is further nuanced by speaking towards the social and sexual elements of identity.



## *Social Identity*

It is through the process of evaluating one's own Self and "taking the attitude of the Other, that the individual is able to realize himself [or herself] as a self" (Mead 1962: 194). It is also through this evaluation, that one's social identity can be attained. Mead (1962: 156) states that it is only through the "taking by individuals of the attitude or attitudes of the generalized Other toward themselves, is the existence of universe of discourse, as a system of common or social meanings...rendered possible." Identities are established, sustained and often altered through communication with others. Much like the establishment of meanings in general, the meanings we attribute to our personal and social selves are grounded in interaction. We are at once many things, in many places, with many people – contextualized selves, each with a set of distinctive and/or overlapping features (Tafarodi et al. 1999). While this can be attributed to social roles (i.e., I am at once a daughter, sister, girlfriend, graduate student, lecturer), social identity speaks to more than that. It attends to how we perceive ourselves in relation to our many selves, how we perform these selves and how we internalize the meanings attributed to these selves, in order to develop a self-understanding.

The definition of social identity is inextricably linked to that of identity, thus I will conceptualize social identity as referring to the process whereby an individual develops and maintains a set of self-understandings which relate to the social dimensions of her (or his) life, focusing on how she (or he) performs these identity(ies) in their social environments. Conceptualized in this manner, the following dimensions can be understood: how the research participant presents herself as a social being in her everyday life to other people and how she views herself in relation to social and structural ideologies (i.e., the various feminisms, patriarchy, gender socialization). It can serve to shed light on questions such as

whether or not engaging with sexually explicit materials offers the participants additional- or counter- discourses that are able to maintain, transform or alter existing social meanings/discourses.

### ***Sexual Identity***

Sexual identity is frequently discussed as either an issue of biology, identified via chromosomes, genes and genitals (cf. Mansfield 2000); gender, those coordinated sets of acts and gestures that link a subject to defined and normalized parameters of masculinity or femininity (cf. Butler 2004); or sexual orientation, neatly categorized as homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual (cf. Crawley et al. 2008, Mansfield 2000). These categories are socially defined and socially policed, as self-identifying with biology, gender and sexual orientation that are considered outside the parameters of normalcy may often result in stigmatization and discrimination (Crawley et al. 2008). As socially constructed, these categories each espouse an arbitrary set of rules which must be followed, as deviations were historically considered pathological and deviant. Foucault (1978: 58) speaks of *scientia sexualis* (the science of sex), which contrived “procedures for telling the truth of sex...geared to a form of knowledge-power.” Sexuality was invented as a way of making “subjectivity always and everywhere pathological” (Mansfield 2000: 111), through classifications of human sexual practices and categories that were used to define individual subjectivities and intervene in them. As highlighted in Chapter Two, women expressing sexual desires or even acknowledging that they enjoy sexually explicit materials were historically considered deviant. Sexually explicit materials themselves were, and through some discursive constructions still are, considered deviant, degrading and pathological.

Although social and sexual mores have changed, there are few empirical studies documenting women's feelings of, and experiences engaging with, these materials.

For the purposes of this research, sexual identity is understood as the manner whereby an individual develops, maintains and performs a set of self-understandings which relate to the sexual dimensions in her (or his) life, focusing on how she (or he) understands herself (or himself) as a sexual being, and how an individual presents herself (or himself) as sexual beings in their everyday lives. This definition of sexual identity addresses dimensions such as: the meaning(s) participants attribute to 'sexual' and 'being' sexual, how participants have practiced and continue to practice their sexuality, and how their engagement with sexually explicit materials influence, shapes and/or reifies the existing social/cultural discourses.

### *Scripts*

Implied in all of these definitions of identity is the relation to broader societal and cultural discourses. According to Simon and Gagnon (1986) individuals, in their everyday conduct, draw upon societal cultural scenarios for guidance in interpreting stereotypes and how to enact social roles. In this sense, scripts, which serve as a "metaphor for understanding how people conduct themselves within social life," (Escoffier 2007: 62) are important to the development of identities. As outlined in Chapter Three, sexual scripting is said to occur at three levels: cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic. It is important here to clarify what these concepts mean in order to highlight their importance to data analysis.

As highlighted by Maticka-Tyndale et al. (2005: 28), "sexual activities are understood as constructed from the interplay between cultural messages about sexuality, identification of situations as sexual, and interpersonal negotiation." Likened to the script of

a play (Frith and Kitzinger 2001, Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]), it would appear possible the existence of an infinite number of sexual scripts; however only a limited number of scripts are followed with any regularity (Maticka-Tyndale et al. 2005). Within each culture are sexual scripts, that pre-dominate and that are recognized as norms and normative. These cultural scripts, or scenarios, guide an individual's behaviour as a social participant in that specific culture/society.

Escoffier (2007: 62) outlines that cultural scenarios provide “prescriptions for various social, gender, or occupational roles; class and racial identities, sexual beliefs, popular cultural ideals and symbols; and broad social values and norms.” In this sense, cultural scripts are those broader discourses that exist in society that serve to guide how sex, sexuality and sexually explicit materials are spoken about. For instance, while cultural scripts for men have been identified as “including elements such as: actively seeking out sexual partners; endorsement of sexual exploits by peers; uncontrollable sexuality once aroused; and seeking sex as a source of pleasure for its own sake” (Frith and Kitzinger 2001: 214), for women, they have been defined as the opposite. Colloquialisms such as ‘men are more visual’ or ‘women are more emotionally stimulated’, which were highlighted throughout Chapter Two in the Literature Review, serve as a gendered cultural script that delimits women's engagement with sexually explicit materials. For this research, cultural scripts were identified by utterances that evoked ‘society’, ‘norm’ or ‘normal’ or that were identified as constraining or shaping how the women I spoke to understood their engagement with sexually explicit materials.

Interpersonal scripts represent the individual's “response to the external world and draw heavily on cultural scenarios” (Simon and Gagnon 1987: 365). Drawing on cultural

scenarios “for normative and symbolic materials” (Escoffier 2007: 62), interpersonal scripts represent what an individual perceived as the full range of expectations placed on him or her by the outside world. It is also the level where an individual, as an active actor, embodies his or her desires, planning and anticipating responses, and where these combine to create social exchanges (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). Interpersonal scripts are “those improvised by social participants to guide everyday patterns of interactions” (Escoffier 2007: 62). Given these definitions, for the purpose of this research I have defined interpersonal scripts to include those narratives in which exchanges, which include not only reiterations of cultural scripts but also their negotiation, between the participant and others are the focus. Interpersonal scripts are reflected in utterances such as: ‘women like me’, ‘my friends and I’, ‘my family and I’ (Jones and Hostler 2002). For instance, interpersonal scripts are evident in narratives detailing how perspectives on sexually explicit materials were attributed to, or shaped by, familial sexual openness or how women negotiate the use of sexually explicit materials within the context of current relationships.

Intrapsychic scripts provide a view into an individual’s inner world as they construct themselves as sexual beings. As the most individual and unique level of scripting, “fantasies, desires, expectations and ambitions are articulated through an individual’s intrapsychic scripts” (Escoffier 2007: 62). They represent the private conversations an individual has with themselves, as they contemplate, or when they are engaged in, sexual engagement. It is at this level of scripting that the “private world of wishes and desires is linked to social meaning and action” (Escoffier 2007: 62), and that contradictions and tensions arise (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). Intrapsychic scripts are reflected in introspective utterances such as: ‘I feel’, ‘I believe’ or ‘For me’ (Jones and Hostler 2002). As will be

evidenced throughout the analysis chapters, the women I spoke to engaged in much self-reflection regarding their experiences with sexually explicit materials, both positive and negative, and how these served to confirm or contradict lived interpersonal experiences and/or broader cultural scripts/scenarios.

Having presented the theoretical framework for this dissertation in Chapter Three, namely an analytic comprising Foucault's writings on discourse, power, and technologies of the self, and Gagnon and Simon's sexual scripting theory, as well as in this chapter, the methods by which narratives were generated for analysis; I now turn to a discussion of the processes through which the interviews were analyzed.

### **Analytic Method**

Power and discourse are inextricably linked, where discourse is conceptualized as both "an instrument and an effect of power" (Foucault 1991: 101). Thus, it is important to not only highlight and describe discursive practices, but also the power relations in which they are enmeshed. Foucault (1972: 49) defines discourses as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak." Given this definition, sexually explicit materials and the individuals (women) who engage with them are understood to be systematically formed as objects and subjects that are constituted by, and in turn constitute the discursive field of this socially problematic space. An analysis of discourse entails describing statements "in the field of discourse and the relations of which they are capable" (Foucault 1972: 27), where statements can be usefully defined as "[t]hose utterances and texts which make some form of truth-claim...and which are ratified as knowledge" (Mills 1997: 61). The discursive field, then, is made up of the totality of all statements which are used to describe events or occurrences, which Foucault (1972) terms a discursive formation. Fairclough (1992: 40)

describes discursive formations as “systems of rules which make it possible for certain statements but not others to occur at particular times, places and institutional locations.” It is these discursive formations, or the totality of all the statements which describe and define, that create the fields of knowledge and regimes of truth by which a society governs itself (Danaher et al. 2000, Fairclough 1992).

### ***Critical Discourse Analysis***

Interested in the relationship between meanings, language and society, this research employed a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to describe, interpret, interrogate and explain these relationships, and their link to self-governance strategies. There are many different approaches to CDA including French discourse analysis (e.g., Foucault 1972) and socio-cognitive studies (van Dijk 1993). Linking linguistic and social analysis, Fairclough’s (1992) analytic strategy falls within the sociocultural change and change in discourse approach (Wood and Kroger 2000). While an explanation of the various CDA approaches would be beyond the scope required for this dissertation, it is important to outline why, although I will rely on various elements inherent across the discipline of CDA, I follow Fairclough’s (1992) textually-oriented discourse analytic approach, in order to maintain continuity with the theoretical frame of this research.

As this research is concerned with analyzing meanings attributed to sexually explicit materials, identity negotiation and constructions of gender, sexual desire and their link to broader institutional discourses and regulatory techniques, Fairclough’s (1992) discourse analysis effectively links the aims of the research with its theoretical underpinning. This approach unites three traditions: (a) detailed textual analysis relying on the field of linguistics, (b) macro-sociological analysis of social practices and discourses, and (c) micro-

sociological analysis of how everyday life is produced through actions and interpretations (Fairclough 1992, Wood and Kroger 2000).

Fairclough (1992) devised a three-dimensional model of discourse analysis. The first stage consists of analyzing the linguistic features of the text, where texts are broadly defined to include speech, written or visual images. The second stage focuses on the processes related to the production and consumption of texts as discourses. These first stages are essential to gain insight into how discourse operates, but alone, Fairclough (1992) argues, they are insufficient for discourse analysis. Therefore, the third stage links the text to the societal and cultural processes through which gave rise to them, considering how the discursive practice reproduces or restructures existing discourses and the implications of this reproduction and/or restructuring. Data analysis was conducted via in-depth readings of the narratives elicited by the female interview participants. Outlined below is a sketch of the analytic method used, which corresponds to Fairclough's three analytic stages.

*First Reading: Linguistic Features, Argument Sentiment*

The first reading of the interview transcripts documented the main content of the narratives collected. The principle focus of this initial reading was to document what the respondents had to say on the variety of questions asked during the interviews. Questions such as: 'What types of language are used?' and 'What are the connotations/sentiments of particular words and phrases used?' emerge from this initial reading. It is also in this reading of text that assessments of what appear 'natural', that is, what is taken as 'common-sense knowledge' because it is familiar, occur (Valverde 1991). Barthes (1975) argues that it is in these common-sense discourses that ideology conceals itself, therefore, rendering it



important to trace the possible meanings, or interpretations of such taken-for-granted terms or phrases across language/talk in order to make them unfamiliar.

This reading of the data was done after all of the interviews had been transcribed, but before I had uploaded the transcripts into NVIVO. It was through reading the transcripts this first time that overlapping themes in the narratives began to be identified, leading to the creation of broad coding categories such as, but not limited to: ‘why SEM is used,’ ‘first use of SEM’, ‘positive impacts’, ‘purchasing SEM’ and ‘SEM and relationships’. These broad coding categories were then further nuanced in the second analytic stage.

### *Second Reading: Content, Construction, Consumption*

The goal of discourse analysis is to “trace explanatory connections between ways in which texts are put together and interpreted, how texts are produced, distributed and consumed in a wider sense, and the nature of the social practice in terms of its relation to social structures and struggles” (Fairclough 1992: 72). Thus, the next stage of analysis focused on how narratives/talk surrounding concepts such as identity, sexually explicit materials, spectatorship and engagement are constructed. In this manner, the second reading of the texts evokes the question: How do the linguistic features, metaphors, allegories and markers<sup>28</sup> used in the narrative/talk produce discourses and/or demonstrate a reliance on existing discourses? According to Valverde (1991: 40), metaphors and allegories communicate far beyond that which is explicit in the text; they “organize social universes.”

The second reading was more in-depth than the first. In this stage, I uploaded the transcripts to NVIVO as well as created the broad codes which emerged out of the first reading of the texts as well as from the literature. It was at this stage that I carefully re-read

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<sup>28</sup> Markers, used in pragmatic analysis, are words or phrases that do not contribute to the meaning of a statement, but serve as a function in the statement, for example the word ‘unfortunately’. For full treatment on pragmatic markers see Wood and Kroger (2000: 208-211).

the transcripts and coded them, creating new nodes to nuance or further specify the broader coded created. For instance, while the use of sexually explicit materials for one's own sexual pleasure, was the main recruitment criterion for participation in this study, it was found that the women I spoke with used these materials for more than just sexual pleasure. In this sense the code 'why SEM is used' was further divided into: 'education', 'sexual pleasure/enjoyment', 'in lieu of sex', 'for male pleasure' and 'entertainment'. The identification and interpretation of patterns in the content and construction of meaning/discourses that the participants attributed to their engagement with sexually explicit materials, and the variability of discourses across the narratives became evident at this stage. In this sense, new codes accounting for these contradictions were also created, such as reference to the 'virgin v. whore complex', incompatibility with 'religious upbringing' and views of sexually explicit materials as both 'degrading' and 'pleasurable'.

### *Third Reading: Identifying Links to Social, Cultural, Structural Ideologies/Discourses*

The identification of how the female participant's talk/narratives reiterated, relied upon or modified dominant structural, institutional and social discourses, enabled me to theoretically and conceptually bridge the micro-macro divide when analyzing the relationship between individual interaction, discourse and modes of governance. Fairclough (1992: 65) states that discourse does not merely reproduce society, social identities and systems of knowledge and beliefs, discourse also "contributes to transforming society." The discursive (discourse) and the non-discursive (the material world) exist in a dialectical relationship, each mutually defining and re-defining the other. Language and meaning also always relies upon existing discursive structures and builds on already established meanings (Fairclough 1992, Phillips and Jørgensen 2002). This is linked to Foucault's (1972) assertion

that “there can be no statement that in one way or another does not reactualize others.” Using the concept of intertextuality, the condition whereby all communicative events draw on earlier communicative events (Phillips and Jørgensen 2002), both the construction and reproduction of discourses, as well as resistance to discourses and discursive changes, can be examined. Analysis at this stage pays attention to the ways in which individual bodies have been constituted and organized under varying regimes of power and knowledge (Foucault 1978), and incorporates feminist concerns for the ways social groups are organized and which social groups are seen as capable of possessing and producing knowledge (Harding 2004, Valverde 1991).

This third reading of the texts served to (a) identify institutional/structural discourses, or those cultural scripts, that were reinforced and/or challenged by the individual talk/discourses of the interview respondents; (b) interrogate the power relations at play within the construction of particular discourses; and (c) describe how the individual narratives/discourses served to reinforce/manipulate/resist those institutional/structural discourses. It was in this reading that connections were made to social constructs such as gender and that narratives were situated within the patriarchal and heteronormative system in which they arise. Analysis at this stage served to nuance the theoretical framework and the findings. For instance, emerging out of the data coded under the nodes ‘how SEM is used’ and ‘specific SEM preferences’ was an interesting narrative surrounding how these specific women engaged in the process of spectatorship, and which concerned ideas such as legality, consent, pleasure of the actresses and ‘authenticity’ of the sexual performance being viewed. In the following chapter, this narrative is theorized this as *the ethical use of pornography*,

and is situated in contrast to broader radical feminist discourses that frame pornography, and its users, as misogynistic and morally bankrupt.

#### *Final Note Regarding Analytic Method*

While the analytic method is described here as a linear sequence of events, qualitative analysis necessarily entails some fluidity and back-and-forth between the data and analysis (Berg 2009). Thus, while codes were made during the first reading of the texts, these codes were either modified or aggregated, during subsequent readings. Both the interview transcripts as well as the observational notes made during and after the interviews themselves were used as data sources for this study. While the process of transcribing the interviews served to stimulate initial analytic thoughts and reflections, the use of NVIVO served to highlight and link themes and ideas within, and across, the interviews. It is important to note that the point of qualitative analysis was not to count how many times ideas, or discourses, were mentioned, but rather to interrogate the actual narratives of the women I spoke to, with respect to their engagement with sexually explicit materials.

#### **THE PARTICIPANTS**

Twenty-six women were interviewed for this research, nine participating in the focus group sessions and twenty in individual interviews. Three women participated in both the focus group and individual interviews. In total, nine women participated in the focus groups and twenty. Respondents were recruited from the Greater Toronto region and the National Capital region. Each interview averaged approximately two hours (including the focus groups), with one individual interview only lasting fifty minutes, and two individual interviews running almost three hours. Demographic characteristics of each participant are depicted in the tables that follow. Note that the names listed are pseudonyms. Names with

asterisks denote those women that participated in both the focus groups and the individual interviews.

**Table 4.1. Focus Group Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Ethnic Background</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Children</b>
Angelina*	28	National Capital	“Native and White”	Graduate Student	Bisexual	Dating	no
Tania	32	National Capital	Caucasian	Public Servant	Heterosexual	Single	no
Laura	28	National Capital	Caucasian	Arts/ Communication	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Stacy	29	National Capital	Caucasian	Public Servant	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Rowan	29	National Capital	Caucasian	Arts/ Communication	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Mona*	36	Greater Toronto	Caucasian	Arts/ Communication	Heterosexual	Single	no
Catherine*	30	Greater Toronto	Caucasian	Law	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Callie	36	Greater Toronto	Caucasian	Education	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Jayde	26	Greater Toronto	Caucasian	Arts/ Communication	Queer	Dating	no

**Table 4.2. Individual Interview Participants**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Ethnic Background</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>	<b>Children</b>
Kayla	25	National Capital	Caucasian	Public Servant	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Wendy	26	National Capital	Caucasian	Law Enforcement	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Madison	25	National Capital	Caucasian	Health Care	Heterosexual	Single	yes (1)
Lena	27	National Capital	Caucasian	Retail	Heterosexual	Divorced	no
Sadie	26	National Capital	Caucasian	Graduate Student	Heterosexual	Common Law	no
Fontayne	28	National Capital	“half Black, quarter Indian, quarter White”	Education	Heterosexual	Single	no
Sheridan	35	National Capital	Caucasian	Health Care	Heterosexual	Single	no
Charlotte	25	National Capital	Caucasian	Graduate Student	Heterosexual	Common Law	no
Jordan	28	National Capital	Caucasian	Hairstylist	Heterosexual	Single	yes (2)
Miranda	30	National Capital	Caucasian	Public Servant	Heterosexual	Married	yes (1)
Paris	28	National Capital	Caucasian	Retail	Bisexual	Married	yes (2)
Nicky	25	National Capital	Caucasian	Public Servant	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Amanda	29	Greater Toronto	Caucasian	Graduate Student	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Ella	30	Greater Toronto	Caucasian	Administrative	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Courtney	29	Greater Toronto	Caucasian	Arts/ Communication	Heterosexual	Dating	no
Heidi	28	Greater Toronto	Caucasian	Law	Heterosexual	Married	no
Mindy	25	Greater Toronto	Caucasian	Retail	Heterosexual	Single	no

As depicted in the charts above, following the recruitment criteria all of the women who participated in this study were between the ages of 25-35. The ages were distributed as such: 25 (five), 26 (three), 27 (one), 28 (six), 29 (four), 30 (three), 32 (one), 35 (one). Two women were 36 years old at the time of their interviews, as they had celebrated birthdays

between the time of recruitment and their scheduled interview. The majority of the women were Caucasian, some referring to European ancestry; only two women self-identified as something other than Caucasian: one as “*Native and White*” the other as “*half Black, quarter Indian, quarter White.*” All of the interviews were conducted in English.

An opposite-sex sexual preference (heterosexuality) was cited by 23 women. One woman identified herself as being queer, two women as bisexual. As we will see, sexual identification does not necessarily correlate to a specific genre preference for sexually explicit materials. That is, women who identified as heterosexual, as will be later discussed, were not averse to watching gay, lesbian or even TS/TG pornographic videos.

The majority of participants (19) had significant others. Half of the women (13) were in dating relationships at the time of their interviews. Two women were currently married, three indicated that they were in common-law relationships, and one woman was engaged. Six women were single, and one woman was going through divorce proceedings. Four women had children.

A range of professional employment was represented by the participants: federal public servants (five), communications/arts/writing (five), law (two), health care (two), education (two), retail (two), administrative (one), hair stylist (one) and law enforcement (one). Of the 26 women interviewed, five were currently students at the post-graduate level. Interestingly, two women were previously employed in the adult entertainment sector, the former as an illustrator for a pornographic cartoon website, the latter in a video and sex toy retail store.

## **Research Limitations**

While I have made sure that I include in this dissertation all the women who agreed to contribute to this research with their time and effort, some interviews invariably appear more often than others, based on, among other things, my own assessment of their readability and applicability. In each case, I have tried to be true to the experiences of these women individually and as a group generally, rather than privileging some stories over others. Despite the specific demographic characteristics of the women I spoke with, these women's experiences offer some insight into sociological understandings of female sexual subjectivity and, in turn, how we socially frame and understand sexual desire and the use of sexually explicit materials.

While this study contributes to the sparse, but emerging literature on women's use of sexually explicit materials as active and engaged spectators, there were several limitations particularly as they related to the women who participated in this study. First, the recruitment of prospective participants via online sources necessitated that women had access to computers, the Internet, and to either be members of social media sites or readers of the websites Calls for Participants were posted to. This requirement of Internet access may have skewed the education level and socioeconomic positioning of the participants (Gosling et al.2004). That recruitment was largely Internet-based, although some participants indicated that they were recruited through word-of-mouth by peers, may have contributed to the fact that the majority of the women who participated in this study were professionally employed and highly educated. Secondly, although the women had varied occupations and familial backgrounds, they represented a fairly homogenous population. Only two of the twenty-six women self-identified as something other than Caucasian (i.e., white or European



background). The participants were also overwhelmingly heterosexual, with one woman self-identifying as queer and two as bisexual. Although, as we will see throughout the analysis chapters, it was found that sexual orientation does not necessarily correspond to the types of sexually explicit materials that were engaged with, many of the narratives produced were heteronormative.

The limitations I have outlined here include: the participants' class commonalities, education, a limited articulation of how racialization affects these women's lives and a predominantly heterosexual focus. I also want to acknowledge that my positioning as a relatively young graduate student with similar educational, class, sexual orientation and racial privileges, might have also posed as a limitation, as may have my stereotypically feminine presentation (i.e., the wearing of make-up, skirts and wedge heels). While it allowed the interviews to have an informal feel that facilitated the intimacy, playfulness, disclosure and trust that yielded such textured transcripts, it may have served to limit the types of information that was disclosed to me. For example, Nicky (25) admitted that she initially thought the study would be about 'alternative' sexually explicit materials such as bondage or S&M, but then (erroneously) came to the conclusion, upon meeting me and verbally noting my lack of visible tattoos and piercings, that I was only seeking to elicit narratives on mainstream pornography.

Another limitation of this study, if it could be defined as a limitation, was the all-encompassing nature of the term sexually explicit materials over pornography. As outlined in Chapter One, this was done to account for all of the materials that the women may use in the pursuit of sexual pleasure. The convention that pornographic depictions of sex acts represent the epitome of sexual explicitness, arousal and desirability is decidedly male-

centered. As will be highlighted in the following chapter, the women I spoke with identified various materials as sexually explicit and that were used for sexual fulfillment: strategically placed mirrors, popular magazines, television programs and films, sex toys, lingerie, strip clubs, sexually charged music and literature. While these revelations serve to nuance, and gender, definitions of the pornographic it also served as a point of confusion in this research. Do women equally consider these other materials to be as sexually explicit as traditional pornographic representations? Can meanings attributed to these other materials be compared to those meanings attributed to ‘pornography’ as socially/culturally defined? Throughout my data analysis I spoke to all narratives related to sexually explicit, giving equal weight to each. However, given that current definitions of sex, sexual explicitness and the pornographic are created within a heteronormative and patriarchal society, as theorized in Chapter Three, can discussions of pornography and sexually explicit materials be treated as synonymous?

### **Looking Forward**

Both in my theoretical framework and methodological approach, I focus on language use, discourse and the creation of meaning. I asked the participants questions regarding their use of, and meanings attributed to, sexually explicit materials. The aim was not to apply an unwarranted label of ‘truth’ to their words, as the research findings only speak to the experiences of the women I spoke with and cannot be generalized to all women, but rather to see their words as manifestations of the available and competing discourses of gender, sexual pleasure and sexually explicit materials that they are negotiating. The goal of data analysis was to uncover how the women articulate and understand their sexual subjectivities in relation to their use of sexually explicit materials, and how this use is framed within

broader socio-cultural processes. Following Weedon (1997 [1987]), I remain cognizant of the fact that:

Language, in the form of socially and historically specific discourses, cannot have any social and political effectivity in and through the actions of individuals who became its bearers by taking up the forms of subjectivity and the meanings and values which it proposes and acting upon them (34).

In this way, I approach the language used by my participants as a window into how various discourses delimit and enable different courses of action, choices, understandings and experiences. Understood in this way, discursively articulated meaning is a great ally to feminist efforts to rework gendered discourses surrounding the use of sexually explicit materials.

Having reviewed relevant scholarly literature, articulated a theoretical framework that puts in conversation interactionist sociology with Foucault's writings on discourse and technologies of the self, and outlined the methodological framework of this research, the rest of this dissertation analyzes the narratives collected via the focus groups and individual interviews. Rather than presenting data sequentially, that is, analyzing the focus groups and individual interviews in turn; narratives will be presented as part of the totality of the research process.

The following chapter, Chapter Five, serves as a bridge between research methods and analysis. Having referred to this research, and myself, as feminist in this chapter, the following chapter interrogates what this means in the context of this study. It also looks at how the interviews themselves functioned as part of the sexual scripting narrative for the women I spoke with, for example via the public spaces many women chose for their interview sites.

## V. SITUATING WOMAN-CENTERED RESEARCH AS SCRIPT

In fulfilling the aim of bridging the gap between methodology and analysis, in this chapter I attend to some conceptual and epistemological issues of what it means to be a feminist scholar producing female-centered texts. Consistent with the broader feminist epistemological frame of this research, and through which this chapter is structured, I attempt, in a small way, to ‘flesh out’, the oftentimes disembodied voices of the 26 women who participated in this research. Appearing as quotes strategically placed throughout written reports, research participants are often relegated to snippets of their accounts without any reference to them as complex individuals. While I cannot provide a complete account of any one participant, as I too am only privileged to a small fragment of their life story, I feel it important to situate each woman’s account within the broader context of their participation in this research. Using Gagnon and Simon’s (2005 [1973]) notation, these women are viewed as writers of their own (sexual) identities and subjectivities, collating scripts available at the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic levels, and rendering them meaningful and productive in their own lives. In this aspect, participating in this research, in which participants were asked to speak of their experiences, also served as a part of the cultural context which had to be negotiated with in the scripting of their overall engagement with sexually explicit materials. For instance, that the majority of participants elected to be interviewed in public spaces, is both a methodological and thematic issue through which concerns over private vs. public identities and sexualities can be addressed. As a feminist researcher, my aim for this dissertation is to weave each woman’s narrative into a cohesive (but not essentializing) whole, to tell the larger story of the diversity of experiences and the

complexities of meaning-making that emerged from the data collected. This chapter serves as the starting point of this process.

In discussing this research with various people one question kept arising: what types of women volunteered to participate in this type of study? They wondered if there was something unique about these women (that is, those who are willing to discuss their sexuality and use of sexually explicit materials with a stranger) that make this research somehow specific to a limited group. Reflecting upon this, I came to appreciate those cultural silences surrounding (female) sexuality that may limit some women's comfort speaking about their sex experiences and, in turn, limit all sexuality research. Indeed, Boynton (2003) highlights that with respect to sociological research on sex, there is a lack of empirical study on the issue of who consents to participate. This is particularly salient if we consider that women are now gaining more attention from sex researchers, especially in the fields of sexual functioning and pharmaceutical interventions (Tiefer 2000). However, as Boynton (2003: 24) notes that "just because women are being included in such research does not mean that the research will be automatically beneficial for women," or that the research design itself is necessarily "women centered." As discussed in Chapter Three, psychoanalytic or pharmaceutical theories of female sexuality and (dys)function neglect to account for the myriad of ways that our understandings of, and experiences with, the sexual are constructed via gendered scripts that serve to prescribe normative boundaries. In doing so, such theorizations serve to create an essentialized, or singular, vision of female sexuality that appears to exist independent of culture.

The primacy of a singular voice, a singular version and a singular truth is a concept that silences. It silences<sup>29</sup> the participants whose words are rewritten and analyzed by an ‘expert’ researcher that is given authority over someone else’s accounts (Fonow and Cook 2005). It also silences engagement by the audience who read the research as though it is indicative of scientific ‘truth’, written by an ‘expert’, validated with objectivity, thus without room for debate. Feminist critical methodologies call for a movement away from this type of study, appealing for research with accountability and recognition of relationships of power (Alcoff 2006). Positioning this research within a feminist framework necessarily entails that several important tenets are attended to, including issues such as: the universality of the category ‘woman’ and who is able to speak for women, self-reflexivity, and the researcher-participant relationship. It is to these conceptual issues that I now attend.

### **Feminist Research and the Production of Woman-Centered Texts**

Contemporary feminist and postmodernist researchers have challenged the universality of the category ‘woman’, asking: Which women? Which women’s experiences? Who can legitimately speak for women? (Fine 1992, Flax 1990, Olesen 2000). The rejection of essentialism in favour of the notion of difference and multivocality prove useful in designing research focused on women that attends to these questions (Nicholson 1990, Flax 1990, Lather 1991). The 26 women who participated in this study did not speak for *all* women, but only for themselves. The narratives elicited and presented in this dissertation are their own – culturally located, socially contextualized and non-generalizable to the entire female population. While the dominant discourses that regulate gender, sexuality and

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<sup>29</sup> Silencing here refers to the process of rendering the speech of others meaningless or unintelligible, whereby certain privileged voices are used to create knowledge of, and about, the ‘other’. Generally speaking, those voices that are silenced, or dismissed, usually belong to individuals or groups existing outside of normative boundaries.

sexually explicit materials may exist in society (as will be made evident throughout), each woman differentially positions herself and experiences these discourses in multifarious ways.

Schwartz and Rutter (1998: 3) remind us that as researchers we “must rely on what people say they want and do sexually, and these reports, as much as the desire and behaviour itself, are influenced by what people believe they are supposed to feel and say.” In this sense, my focus on identities and sexual subjectivities and how my research participants came to understand themselves through their engagement with sexually explicit materials is particularly relevant. As a researcher I have limited access to the ‘truth’ of their sexual narratives (i.e., what ‘real’ly did, or did not, occur). In this respect Schwartz and Rutter (1998: 36) caution:

To recognize the challenge of collecting and interpreting self-report data, particularly on the enigmatic topic of sexuality. Respondents may not tell the truth or remember the truth or even be sure that what they thought happened really did happen. For the healthy skeptic of sexual self-reporting...survey data remain records of norms or values, if not precise accounts of deeds.

As a qualitative researcher, however, the ‘truth’ or “precise accounts of deeds” is not what I am seeking. As a feminist researcher ensconced within a theoretical framework that reconciles the works of interactionist sociology, in particular sexual scripting theory, with Foucault’s writings on discourse, power and subject(ivity), I question whether a ‘truth’ independent of, or unmediated by, culture actually exists. Instead, of seeking ‘truth’, I was/am interested in gaining access to the beliefs, understandings, normative influences and strategies of resistance that framed how my participants engaged with sexually explicit materials. Throughout the interviews, I did not interrogate the veracity of their narratives, but understood these women as legitimate speakers of, and witnesses to, their own

experiences. I explored how they positioned and understood themselves within variously available streams of discourse. Therefore, how these women are able to understand themselves and the language they used to reflect upon this understanding has insight to offer into what discourses are generally available and in the process of being contested.

Being reflexive as a researcher and presenting myself as a situated woman, is another tenet of feminist research, as “the researcher, too, has attributes, characteristics, a history, and gender, class and race, and social attributes that enter the research interaction” (Olesen 2000: 226). As such, my positioning as a heterosexual, relatively young, white female of European descent, raised by working-class parents, and who has engaged with sexually explicit materials, enabled me to forge a bond with the participants quickly allowing for rapport to establish. I was careful to dress in a casual manner. While I problematized this as a limitation in Chapter Four, I chose to present myself in this manner so that my clothing would not serve as a visual reminder throughout the interview process of my position of academic authority or ‘expertise’ over the narratives that were being told to me. The women I spoke to indicated that they were able to confide more in me once they realized I had some shared semblance to them. Rather than acting as a barrier, the fact that I am completing my Ph.D. functioned as a meeting point, as the vast majority of the participants were employed in professional fields, or pursuing post-secondary education themselves. As a result many interviews turned into discussions regarding consciousness, feminisms and discourses, language brought forth by the participants themselves.

Finally, feminist researchers advocate a researcher-participant relationship which is transparent, honest, non-exploitive and reciprocal (Montell 1999, Oakley 1981, Reinharz 1992); treating “the knowledge-building process as one of creation versus the traditional



science model of discovery” (Leavy 2007: 91). In this manner, data becomes, in principle, ‘multi-voiced’ and narratives are woven together, as opposed to putting forth a singular authoritative voice (Lather 1991). Under the view that realities and experiences are socially constructed, so too are feminist interviews seen as interactive processes, whereby the input of the participant and the researcher combines to form a finished product. Feminist methodologies recognize that the researcher’s voice is always present, whether the researcher acknowledges it or not, whether the research explicitly shows this or not. It must be acknowledged that this methodological tenet is subject to much critique. While data is produced in collaboration, and under feminist ideations of the collective construction of knowledge(s), in practice, researchers, however feminist in approach, continue to have authority over the text(s) that are produced.

Nicholson (1990) argues that a researcher who is explicit about situating herself in the research less easily invites the danger of false generalizations than does one theorizing under the guise of objectivity. Throughout this entire research process I have been open with participants about the nature of the study, the methodology and my positioning within this research. It appeared that participants felt able to approach me with concerns, questions and information, evidenced by the phone calls and e-mails received. Many also provided me with recommendations for different avenues of continued research. For instance, both Catherine and Mona suggested that I expand my research to contain a quantitative component by creating an extensive list detailing various sexual practices so that participants can mark those that they either physically engage in or have viewed in pornographic film. For the women who spoke to me, participation meant a platform through which to voice their

opinions and experiences. The benefits accrued to me, the researcher, by their participation stem beyond merely writing a dissertation, but feminist (political?) self-actualization.

Self-reflexivity is pivotal in feminist research, requiring that we question the underlying values and biases of theories, our research and ourselves. One area of questioning relates to the essentially male bias which informs traditional epistemology and scientific inquiry (Reinharz 1992). This forms the foundation of feminist research. Although feminist methodologies present a differing approach to inquiry, one that is subjective and located within the positioning of the participants themselves, Lather (1991: xiii) argues that this commitment often does not transcend the entire research project, stating that “feminist academics themselves suffer from a tendency to do theory *for* instead of *with* people.” Perhaps with the exception of action research, relatively few researchers are able to escape their role as ‘researcher’ and as purveyors of knowledge. The writing-up process necessarily requires that the researcher(s), as an expert, synthesize many voices, understanding them through a theoretical frame. As Montell (1999: 50) notes: “One problem with treating each woman as an ‘expert’ in this way is that this assumes that each woman is conscious of the forces that have acted upon her and can articulate her reactions to these forces.” It is here, in the analysis, that the role of the researcher as expert remains evident. This is perhaps the reason why I found it important to bridge the gap between methodology and analysis by including within this chapter an examination of how the interviews themselves became part of my participant’s sexual scripting process.

### **The Interview as Confessional**

Considering the complex issues surrounding interviewing and the researcher-participant relationship evokes a parallel between the modern day interview with the expert

and Foucault's (1978) understanding of the confessional. Incorporated into the operation of disciplinary power over the body of individuals, particularly within medical, religious and juridical examination, the confessional functions as part of the mechanisms of hierarchal observation and normalizing judgment (Foucault 1978). This concept is of importance to understanding the incitement to discourse surrounding sex(uality), as Foucault (1978: 61) suggests:

The transformation of sex into discourse, which I spoke of earlier, the dissemination and reinforcement of heterogeneous sexualities, are perhaps two elements of the same deployment: they are linked together with the help of the central element of a confession that compels individuals to articulate their sexual peculiarity – no matter how extreme. [...] it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret.

The confession functions as a means of normalizing the individual through the translation of 'secrets' into scientific terms of expert knowledge, thus forming important technologies for producing the 'truth' of individuals (Foucault 1978). In producing these truths, the confessional operates as a contact point between disciplinary technology and technologies of the self.

Using this imagery, and given the topic of inquiry, participants can be viewed to some extent as confessing their 'deviancy' to me.<sup>30</sup> Through this process, they are also exposing their sexual subjectivity to governance, as the expert (the interviewer) will invariably have to categorize responses and theorize their importance and relevance to the research itself. Although somewhat troubling, considering that even a truly feminist research will succumb to this outcome, this is an invaluable insight. Upon immersing myself into the works of Foucault, particularly *The History of Sexuality, volume 1*, I found myself questioning how I,

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<sup>30</sup> Although this analogy is incomplete, as unlike the confessional, I am not seeking to uncover the "truth" about my participants in an effort at uncovering their "true" identities.

through the process of conducting this research, have served in this incitement of sexual discourse. Furthermore, it is important to understand how participating in this study, as a result of the research questions and research design, served to incite particular discourse surrounding sexuality, rendering participants to speak of sexuality and their engagement with sexually explicit materials, as the truth about themselves.

For Tania, contemplating her use of sexually explicit materials, and what they meant to her sense of self and identity, led her to much self-questioning:

*I'm like, 'Am I actually a lesbian?' I really was like, I know it sounds weird, but like, 'Am I just repressing? Wouldn't I know if I was a lesbian? I know it's kind of, but you know what I mean? Why was I watching it so much, shouldn't that actually make me a lesbian? And then I'm like, no, I don't want to kiss girls. So I don't know...there's always a question it made me ask. Why do I do this? Is this something I want to do? Or is this something I like watching as fantasy? I've had these sorts of thoughts too.*

That pornographic engagement is thought to speak as the truth of one's sexual identity can be seen as one of the outcomes of the anti-pornography discourses of pornography as associated with dehumanization, pathology and criminality (Dines 2010, Paul 2005). We look with suspicion on individuals who derive sexual pleasure from certain taboo pornographic depictions that includes, for example, violence, force, incest and youth. This is not to say that such wariness is necessarily unjustified, as Valverde (1987) indicates that we attribute negative meanings to these representations, and to those who seek them out, because these acts exist in society and serve to victimize. However, as Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]: 197) remind us, it is simplistic to assume that "sexual fantasy and its objective correlative – pornography – have a magical capacity to push humans (especially men) into overt sexual action." It also neglects to account for the role of voyeurism and vicarious spectatorship. Pornography is arousing because we have created it as a category separate

from the everyday, one that deals with sex that has been constructed as taboo and illicit (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). What is considered pornographic serves to tell us as much about the society that has restricted certain representations and acts to this category, as the individuals who watch it and derive from it pleasure.

The need to discover the ‘truth’ of one’s sexual identity, from where it emerged and why it is thus constituted, often leads to much introspection, as evidenced by Tania’s quote above. However, other women also took the time to ‘confess’ to me lived experiences that they felt were central in framing the ‘truth’ of their sexual engagement. Courtney disclosed that *“up until a certain age we were a naked household,”* which served to create an environment that was both (visually) tolerant of the natural bodily form but in which sex and sexuality was rarely spoken about. Similarly, Heidi recounted stories of waking up in the middle of the night to watch sexually charged programs forbidden by her parents. Although Heidi indicated that her family was open to discussions surrounding natural sexual practices and bodies, her parents firmly entrenched in her a belief that pornography and the commodification of sex was wrong, effectively silencing discussion of the topic. She acknowledged this upbringing as shaping her opinions, stating: *“I actually have a problem with a lot of porn.”* That she was still reserved about speaking of her engagement with sexually explicit materials was evident throughout her interview. Amanda indicated that she had been sexually pleasuring herself since she was *“in grade seven or eight”* when she *“discovered the wonders of the removable shower head.”* She stated that was aware of her sexual self at a young age, admitting:

*I know I was interested in sex, or at least I knew about it when I was really young. I would make Barbie and Ken have sex all the time. And not just naked bodies on top of each other, but like Ken would rub Barbie down there, and*

*Barbie would put her face to Ken's crotch. I have no idea where I learned this, but I was playing this way with my dolls for as early as I can remember.*

Nicky also 'confessed' to playing with her dolls in this manner, adding "*I think little girls are more sexual than grown-ups give them credit for being.*" Not only do these quotes serve to trouble the contention that sexual innocence is an innate property of childhood (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]), but the fact that many of these women framed these as secrets to be disclosed, reiterating that they have "*never told anyone this before*" (Amanda), highlights the extent to which the interviews were structured, at least in a small way, as confessional.

One thing that I did not expect was that I would be caught up in this incitement to discourse. For instance, when asked to describe her vision of the ideal sexually explicit material, a question asked of all focus group and individual interview participants, Tania responded "*a video of you.*" I was taken aback by this response, as it caught me off guard and took me out of the mindset of researcher/'expert'. In a state of surprise I questioned: "me?" to which Tania continued "*yes, you.*" This unexpected exchange served to render the other focus group participants silent. I was able to turn this declaration back to the question at hand by asking the participants to reflect upon the specific actions, characters, scenarios and the physical form that these materials would take (e.g., film, book, article of clothing, etc.), rather than name a specific person without a description of their qualities.

Questioning this parallel between interview and confessional, Attwood (2006) asserts that while an incitement to discourse about sexuality, particularly by medico-scientific experts, persists, "the contemporary tone of these confessions may modify their cultural significance and impact" (84). Thus cultural shifts have served to change the connotation of this incitement to discourse. Attwood (2006) further remarks that "the remaking of confession as entertainment" is symptomatic of a "culture in which sex signifies both the

truth of the self *and* its performance; authenticity and artifice” (84, emphasis in original). The observation that the confessional serves now as entertainment is a particularly evocative point considering that a number of women expressed after their interviews that it was a fun experience for them. Miranda, for instance, indicated that taking part in this study was a way to add excitement to the routinization of her everyday life, having given birth only a couple of months prior. That three women (Catherine, Mona and Angelina) choose to participate in both the focus group and the individual interview, because it was both an enjoyable experience and they wanted another opportunity to explore their engagement and voice their opinions, suggests that this reconceptualization of confession as entertainment has some salience. While I was initially concerned about potential ramifications with respect to data collection and analysis, what I found was that, at least for Mona and Angelina, their individual interviews were greatly nuanced by the fact that they were able to reflect upon their previous responses and were subsequently more able to clearly articulate their experiences and feelings.

While Catherine’s narrative remained consistent between her participation in the focus group and her individual interview, Angelina and Mona provided additional and more-detailed accounts, punctuated by the telling of personal stories, about their sexual experiences and engagement with sexually explicit materials. Although to the best of my knowledge these two women did not know each other, there were many similarities in their accounts, from the secrecy surrounding sex and sexuality characterizing their upbringing, to the opposite extremes by which they experience their sexuality and their engagement with sexually explicit materials as adults. A significant component of Angelina’s sexual identity was framed by the fact that she was “*sexually open,*” subscribing to adult magazines and

collecting pornographic videos. She recounted several stories from wallpapering her university dorm room with pictures of nude men to being asked by a professional photographer to pose nude. Writing sexually charged fiction under a pseudonym, Mona candidly disclosed many of her sexual fantasies, many of which, as she indicated, are considered to be *“on the extreme and maybe dangerous side,”* including acts of exhibitionism and voyeurism. While Mona felt herself to be an extremely sexual person, and open to varied sexual practices and behaviours, she expressed tension in reconciling her perceptions of her own self and how she presented herself to others. For instance, in speaking to owning sex toys, she indicated that she frequently *“wonders if anything happens to me, I don’t want my mom going through my stuff and finding all my toys.”* She also revealed her desire to publically work in the field of sexuality studies or sexology, indicating that she *“would love to be doing a project like you,”* in reference to the fact that my area of academic interest is ‘deviant’ sex(uality). When I asked her why she does not pursue this avenue she indicated that she *“wouldn’t want to embarrass my family,”* adding *“I wish I didn’t give a shit.”* This discontinuity between her public and private biographies (Goffman 1963) served for Mona as a way to manage the perceived stigma she felt would be the consequence of confessing the truth of her sexual fantasizing and pleasures.

What became apparent throughout conducting the interviews, was that for many of the women I spoke to, the opportunity to speak about their use of sexually explicit materials extended beyond accounting for “the notions of error or sin, excess or transgression” (Foucault 1978: 67) but was an act of political and/or feminist self-actualization. Catherine, who self-identified as a feminist, indicated that her participation in this research was politically motivated, asserting *“nobody’s talking about it and we want it talked about”*



evoking the repression hypothesis. Like Catherine, some women explicitly self-identified as feminist. Nicky frequently referred to “*coming into my feminist consciousness,*” elaborating that as she “*took some women’s studies classes, I started studying more and realizing that the ideas and concepts that I believe in are feminist. I just never made that connection before.*” Her feminist consciousness, gleaned from this revelation, served to inform her opinions on sex, sexuality as well as her engagement with sexually explicit materials. For Amanda, her decidedly feminist stance meant that she was knowledgeable about the various debates on pornography, which structured much of her interview. She expressed concern that incorrect terminology for female genitalia is used in everyday speak, stating that “*it’s sad that people don’t know that the whole thing is not called a vagina. It’s a vulva. You don’t shave your vagina.*” She also opined, reflecting on conversations she has had with female peers: “*It irritates me that so many women my age do not have a clue about what turns them on.*” Stacy similarly expressed the sentiment that she wanted women’s sexual experiences to be the subject of intellectual and everyday talk. Throughout her participation in the Eastern Ontario (National Capital Region) Focus Group, Stacy gave her opinions in a matter-of-fact and reflective manner, and did not appear intimidated or embarrassed by the subject matter, even as other participants giggled at certain topics or imagery described. Thus for these respondents, participating in this research was part of their broader motivation to reveal the ‘truth’ of sex – a truth that, for them, is different than that available through cultural discourse.

Having already reflected upon the interview process as constitutive of the processes of telling the truth, or confessing, of oneself through sex, I turn to the second component of Attwood’s (2006) statement regarding sex as a performance. To declare that sex and

sexuality is performative is not to mean that we are always consciously (re)enacting the same mundane and routinized roles every day, as much of what we do is unconscious, but that our every piece of clothing, utterance and movement both articulates and reiterates various discursive and embodied positions (Butler 1999 [1990], Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). Beyond framing sex as performative, it might be important to question how the interviews, especially interviews about sex(uality), themselves act as performances (cf. Goffman 1959), through which participants ‘performing’ their sexual openness, knowledges and proficiencies for me, the ‘expert’. That the majority of the individual interviews were conducted in public places, and that some participants expressed pleasure from the fact that their interviews had the potential to be overheard, merits some discussion.

### **Blurring the Private-Public Divide**

While some women chose to be individually interviewed in private locations (e.g., their home or a private office), the majority selected public locations (e.g., coffee shops, shopping centres, restaurants). Madison decided that she wanted to be interviewed sitting on one of benches in a glass overpass hallway of a shopping centre. Although I initially expressed concern over conducting the interview in this location, citing issues of privacy, Madison expressed that she did not mind. Upon noticing two teenage males, who continuously kept slowly walking by us, in, what we presumed was a veiled attempt to overhear our conversation, Madison started laughing. She spoke very candidly about her use of sexually explicit materials, as well as about the sexual stigma she believes women face. In light of this stigma, Madison reiterated that she “*didn’t care*” about what others thought. Wendy disclosed at the end of the interview that she noticed that a woman sitting at a table near us in the coffee shop, seemingly reading, had not flipped a page of her book throughout

the duration of the interview. Wendy was not concerned with this, but rather expressed it as pleasurable that someone might have overheard the conversation, giving her a sense of deviancy. Lena's interview was conducted on the outdoor patio of a local pub, at her request, and while the noise level ensured that the interview was mostly inaudible to nearby customers, she insisted that she did not mind if people overheard what she had to say. As she smoked a cigarette and drank coffee, Lena frequently mused about the differences between Western and European culture, stating: "*European society in my mind, I find, that it's a lot about indulgence. Living, like working so you can live, not living so you can work kind of idea. And, with that, it's all the pleasures in life. You have food, you have wine, like alcohol, and you have sex.*" Possessing an almost bohemian-like quality, Lena's responses reflected this free-spiritedness, stating: "*That's what we're actually here for, the whole evolution, is to procreate, and procreation is sex.*" Although conducted at her home, Kayla spoke of the sense of exhibitionism she felt when considering that her male roommates could potentially overhear the interview from their rooms.

Perhaps the largest concern surrounding conducting interviews in public settings relates to research ethics.<sup>31</sup> In Chapter Four, I detailed the ethical considerations taken into account in the process of conducting this research. This research was not only approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, but as a feminist researcher I have, as outlined above, endeavored to conduct this study in a manner most conducive to the minimization of power differentials. Public locations do not necessarily preclude privacy, although they do present as a barrier. Despite being conducted in public locations, ethical considerations were still attended to. For instance, Madison's interview took place on a

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<sup>31</sup> Emerging research conducted in online spaces, such as individual interviews and focus groups conducted entirely online, are serving to redefine the notion the dichotomy of public v. private and what that means for research ethics (cf. Berg 2009, Elwood and Martin 2000).

Sunday near closing hours, therefore the shopping centre was not particularly busy, and other than the occasional passersby, of whom the two teen males described above were the only ones who appeared to visibly notice what we were doing, the location chosen was not populated. Sheridan's interview was conducted in a nearly empty restaurant where we shared a private booth. When participants selected a coffee shop for their interview site, tables the furthest away from other customers were selected. If any concerns were expressed, the interview was paused; for example when Fontayne thought she saw her neighbor walk into the coffee shop where we were conducting the interview. In all cases, the overhead music being played or the audible noises of other customers ensured that, for the most part, privacy was retained. The fact that it was the participants themselves (except those in the focus groups) who decided where they wanted their interviews to take place merits some further exploration.

Elwood and Martin (2000) highlight that there exists minimal guidance in qualitative methods textbooks related to the selection of interview sites. For instance, Berg (2009: 46) offers that "the research question is generally regarded as the primary guide to the appropriate site or setting selection," for instance, advising that research with battered women must be conducted in "a safe place related to battered women, such as a shelter" (47). In accounts that do discuss interview sites, Elwood and Martin (2000: 651) argue that, for the most part, "these texts either ignore the power dynamics constituted by the interactions among interview participants in particular interview sites or assume that power is somehow absent in certain locations, as in [the] advice that researchers should seek a 'neutral' place to conduct interviews." How interview participants relate to, and are situated in, different interview sites imbued with shifting power dynamics remains largely

unexamined (Elwood and Martin 2000), as does how the selection of the interview sites themselves become part of the participants sexual scripting process. Elwood and Martin (2000: 655) argue that “different sites may serve to define a participant as having valuable knowledge to contribute, or, conversely can constitute the researcher as holding expert knowledge.” Thus, it is important to examine the environments in which participants choose (if they have the ability to) to narrate their accounts.

As outlined in Chapter Four, the Methodological Framework, participants were able to select the location where they wanted their interview to take place. I obliged with requests for interviews to be conducted in both public and private sites, including going to the homes of some or arranging for a private office at the local university. Not to serve as a generalization, but in reviewing my notes post-interview, I realized that I frequently remarked that participants requesting their interviews be conducted in private locations required more consistent probing in order to have their responses elaborated; these interviews were, on the whole, also much shorter than those conducted in public. While I will not engage in conjecture as to the reasons why, it is interesting to note that several women who requested their interviews be conducted in public locations noted, in selecting these sites, that for them, this was a conversation topic like any other. Had I forced the participants that chose a public location into a private one, would it have changed the quality of the interview? Would I be forcing their talk of sex into secrecy, secrecy that they felt was unwarranted?

It is for these reasons that researchers, particularly feminist qualitative researchers, have to attend more closely to what it means to conduct ‘ethical’ research. Whose ‘ethics’ are we speaking to? Whose voices should have prominence in how and where data is

collected? If we accord participants with the ability to read and sign forms indicating their voluntary and informed consent, how can we then strip them of the ability to make an informed decision of where they want their interview to take place? Especially if the goal of qualitative research is to conduct research in naturalistic settings (Berg 2009), what are the (ethical) consequences of removing the ability of participants to decide what is, in fact, a ‘natural’ setting for the topic at hand? While I have asked more questions than I can, or have the space here to answer, these are nonetheless important methodological concerns to grapple with.

### **Anonymization and Obscuring Identities**

This concern with privacy in research has led to the ‘ethical’ practice of anonymizing every detail – from the participants to the research site – through the use of pseudonyms, a practice, argued by Nespor (2000) that has gone largely unquestioned and untheorized. Although it is an accepted practice, Nespor (2000) highlights that there has been no empirical research to substantiate the presumed harms or benefits of anonymizing practices, contrasting this against journalistic accounts to not only name names, but precise locations. While one might concede of research in which using pseudonyms to protect the identity of participants is required, Nespor (2000: 549) argues that “it is much harder to think of good reasons to use pseudonyms for regions, cities, or communities.” Social location, whether literally with respect to geography, or with respect to broader positioning within that geography, is central to our conceptualization of selves. Cultural and interpersonal scripts are negotiated in these locations. For Nespor (2000) anonymizing people, organizations or locations serves to dislodge them and their accounts from their histories and geographies.

Many participants framed their identities through the geographic spaces which they occupy, particularly through employment. Working in the education field, Callie frequently had to reconcile the enjoyment she derived from sexually explicit materials with how she perceived these materials affected the “*sexualized*” behaviours of youth. She spoke of events she had personally dealt with in the context of her profession, such as sexual harassment (i.e., boys “*grabbing that girl’s ass*”), the frequency within which she overhears that sexual acts are not reciprocated by boys, as well as the sexual expectation placed on girls. Similarly, in a health care profession, Sheridan’s narratives centered on the first-hand effects she has witnessed of the lack of comprehensive sexual health education, as well as the persisting stigma surrounding sexuality and pornography. With respect to the controversy over Ontario’s proposed plan for an inclusive sexual education curriculum,<sup>32</sup> she lamented, “*Yeah we could’ve made some headway and people would’ve talked about it. But yeah, it’s unfortunate.*” These quotes show the centrality of their social/geographic location, in this case their spaces of employment, to their identity. Would the meaning or importance of these narratives be adequately captured if we did not know that Callie was employed in the education field or Sheridan in health care (although given the generalness of these categories we do not actually know in which position they are employed)? That these women shared many stories, based on their work experiences, and through which served to shape how they engage in the domain of the sexual and with sexually explicit materials, that I could not detail here because I could not adequately remove all of the identifying information that would link the stories either to their specific professions, specific geographic locations or

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<sup>32</sup> CBS News (23 April 2010). “Sex Ed Opponents Claim Victory in Ontario.” Accessed online at: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/story/2010/04/23/ontario-education.html>

specific individuals<sup>33</sup> is a limitation of a strict adherence to anonymizing practices. Nespor (2000: 552) asserts that:

The idea of the particular institution where the research is conducted being a place we might visit or to which we might somehow be already linked, the idea of the people in that institution as real biographical entities such as ourselves rather than descriptive fragments illustrating constructs of sociological discourse, and finally the idea that public institutions are politically and culturally contested arenas in a public sphere are part of what we give up for the theoretical boost that comes with anonymization.

The benefits accrued to anonymization as a practice, and its limitations, that is, what voices and stories are made visible or invisible, is a topic worth further investigation as well as methodological justification.

For Jayde, participating in this research was viewed as an extension of her personal, social and professional life. She disclosed:

*I wonder a lot. I'm queer and I live in a world where I sometimes wonder if it's a bubble. Like I have friends who do sex work, friends who are active in the kink communities around town, I'm active in that stuff to a degree myself. How much of that is us living in this bubble of friends and lovers who are in that community and ok with community? If after a while of being sex positive or doing safer sex outreach or whatever, everyone has the same language sex around you, it seems like you forget, oh yeah, people don't fuck with condoms. Or, oh yeah, people don't talk about porn all the time.*

Is the power of these words lessened by the absence of knowing from where it was positioned? For instance, would this quote be rendered more meaningful if we know what “world” or what “town” Jayde was located in? Would the substance of this narrative be different if we knew that she was positioned, for instance, in a small village in the Greater Toronto Area (i.e., Kleinburg), a large suburb (i.e. Scarborough) or the downtown core? Nespor (2000: 557) suggests that “anonymizing a place suggests that the identities and events that happen there float, so to speak, above or outside of specific historical and

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<sup>33</sup> Not to mention the lack of space allotted in the writing of a dissertation.



geographical moments.” This serves to detach participants from the environments through which their speech arises, and rendering them into “useable example” through which anyone can “stand in” (Nespor 2000: 550). Thus without knowing the specific places through this narrative emerged, Jayde can be anyone, in any place in the Greater Toronto Region, neglecting that the particular reality espoused in her account could not realistically occur in all geographic locations.

This is not to suggest that I do not find merit in anonymizing practices or that I did not abide by this ethical convention in the writing of this dissertation. Rather than creating false names for the geographic areas in which this research was conducted, I referred to them broadly as Southern Ontario (Greater Toronto Region) and Eastern Ontario (National Capital Region), rendering them specific, yet general enough that the reader cannot entirely identify specific participants. Furthermore, I enabled my participants to choose their pseudonym of choice - in this manner, they retain some connection to their accounts. As I noted above, there exist salient examples, particularly for criminology researchers, in which such strategies are a necessity to protect participants from any negative ramifications. There is also the understood belief that scholarly research is different than journalism, as it engages with knowledge creation, critical assessment and theorization, rather than just information dissemination and entertainment. However, as research looks more to online sites and online methodologies (i.e., conducting interviews online rather than in person) (Berg 2009), and as the cultural boundaries of the public and private sphere become renegotiated, where CCTV, social media and other surveillance technologies allow “private dramas [to be] staged, put on public display and publicly watched” (Bauman 2000: 70), researchers will have to engage in critical reflection about the purposes and benefits of anonymizing practices. That researchers

acknowledge that knowledge is always socially, culturally, geographically and temporally contingent, should be motivation to accord some attention to how research practices too are socially, culturally, geographically and temporally shaped and therefore render them amenable to change.

This insight to the need of examining research practices, particularly surrounding privacy and the requirement of anonymity, is not new, nor is it my own. Dorst (1989: 2) writes:

...the culture of advanced consumer capitalism or, less acceptable but more fashionable, postmodernity, consists largely in the processes of self-inscription, indigenous self-documentation and endlessly reflexive simulation. Theorists of ethnographic representation have for some time now acknowledged that all cultures generate texts about themselves, but postmodernity virtually consists of this activity. It 'spontaneously' does for itself, and massively so, the sort of thing ethnographers and other species of documentarist claim to do. [...] If the task of ethnography can be described as the inscription and interpretation of culture, then postmodernity seems to render the professional ethnographer superfluous.

Of course, this does not mean that researchers do not have a role in examining and theorizing society, but that in a cultural climate where individuals willingly make public the private, detailing (in words, pictures and video) their lives, opinions and experiences in blogs and in posts on Twitter, Facebook, Vimeo, Instagram and the like, empirical research on benefits and limitations of anonymizing practices would provide much insight.

### **From Introspection to Analysis**

Having outlined the processes that frame the creation of woman-centered texts, as well as how the interviews themselves functioned as part of the larger scripts that the women I spoke to negotiated with in the understanding of their engagement with sexually explicit materials, the following chapter explores what this engagement looked like. First, specific narratives will be examined as they related to what the participants defined as

sexually explicit materials, the types of materials they engaged with and with what frequency. This is information that is not readily available in current academic literature on the topic. The chapter then turns to understanding what women's pornographic spectatorship looks like, as revealed by the data collected.

## **VI. SCRIPTING “THE GAZE”: PORNOGRAPHIC SPECTATORSHIP**

This chapter is organized into two sections. First it provides a foundation by which to understand the narratives presented throughout the rest of this dissertation. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, there exist few empirical studies of women’s use of sexually explicit materials. Furthermore, even fewer studies identifying what exactly constitutes sexually explicit materials from the perspective of women have been conducted. Thus, in attempt to provide some context, the first section outlines how the women I interviewed conceptualized and operationalized the term ‘sexually explicit materials’. As such, it may appear incomplete at points, and read more as descriptive than analytic. This is intentional, as given the lack of empirical research on women’s engagement with sexually explicit materials, it is important to first lay out the conditions of this engagement – what it looks at, what materials are used and its frequency. While pornography was found to be the linguistic signifier and specific material most frequently used for sexual exploration and pleasure, research participants spoke of their engagement with other materials (e.g., sex toys, lingerie, popular magazines, music and television programs), that are not usually subsumed within the category of ‘the pornographic’.

Secondly, this chapter provides a framework by which to understand and position my participant’s engagement with sexually explicit materials. If, as has been presented in Chapter Two, women are not imagined as the intended recipients of these materials, how then do women make sense of what they are seeing? To explore this question, Boorstin’s (1990) conceptualization of the three levels of viewing experience – visceral, voyeuristic, vicarious – is used to inform the narratives in which the women I interviewed spoke to their pornographic spectatorship. In this manner, this chapter starts on the project of articulating

what the/a ‘female gaze’, according to my research participants, looks like. The notion of female spectatorship is returned to in Chapter Nine, where it is further analyzed and theorized as subversive.

The central theme reverberating throughout the narratives collected was the diversity of experiences and meanings that the women I interviewed attributed to sexually explicit materials as well as to their engagement. In this chapter, I situate the tensions in these accounts to broader theorizations of shifts in identity. Each participant’s account will become more complex in subsequent chapters as different layers of analysis are added onto their narratives of their engagement with sexually explicit materials and the meanings attributed to this engagement.

### **WHAT ENGAGING WITH SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIALS LOOKS LIKE**

As an exploratory study, both the focus groups and the individual interviews commenced by asking the women who participated to define what the term ‘sexually explicit materials’ means to them, the specific types of materials they engage with and with what frequency/regularity. The rationale for posing these three questions at the outset was two-fold: (a) to ensure that the interviews were tailored to the specific experiences and realities of the participants in question, and (b) to fill in gaps within the literature with respect to women’s use of pornographic content. Although the narratives elicited are not generalizable to women as a whole, what emerged from the responses to these questions was a diversity of individual understandings and experiences. As will be identified in this section, for the women who participated in this research, conceptualizing ‘sexually explicit materials’ and defining regular and active engagement was a difficult task, especially as these women

situated their engagement within the broader context of their lives (i.e., career, relationship status, children, etc).

### **Conceptualizing ‘Sexually Explicit Materials’**

While the term sexually explicit materials was intentionally selected for the purposes of this study, as outlined in Chapter One, as a researcher I must be cognizant of the fact that ‘pornography’ is the term popularly used to designate an array of materials (i.e., magazines, videos, photographs) that depict overt sexual conduct. As such, and in the absence of other designations, the familiarity with, and use of, the term ‘pornography’, is unsurprising. For the majority of participants, when asked to define ‘sexually explicit materials’ the initial response was “pornography,” however this was met with a request to expand on what this meant. For instance, Sadie simply stated: “*Porn, I guess that’s about it.*” Upon additional questioning she further elucidated that as “*magazines, videos.*” Similar responses were provided by Ella who thought of “*pornography and incredibly x-rated sexual enhancement devices,*” and Heidi who would “*first think of pornography. So anything like pornographic movies, pornography magazines, websites, literature.*” Stacy indicated that “*the first thing that came to my mind was internet porn actually.*” That the majority of participants initially read the term ‘sexually explicit materials’ as coterminous with pornography is an interesting finding in and of itself, and one which evokes the discussion in Chapter Three surrounding ‘the pornographic’ as a regulatory discourse (cf. Escoffier 2007), that constrains what can, and should, be subsumed within its conceptualization. With additional probing to reflect on what other materials, if any, they considered as sexually explicit, the women I interviewed came to speak of a variety of materials that could be subsumed within the category.

Upon broadening the definitional scope, various genres in mainstream media were cited as being sexually explicit. After defining the term sexually explicit as part of “*a broader scheme of sexuality as a whole,*” Kayla admitted that she first “*assumed porn.*” After additional questioning, she went on to explain:

*I mean there’s obviously different sexually explicit things, like I mean, if you talk about strippers or that kind of stuff, or toys or gadgets or whatever you want to do. But materials, yeah porn, whether it be in like magazines, books or videos. Or radio back in the day.*

For Sheridan these entail “*videos or magazines, or um, even books that depict sex. Like it doesn’t necessarily have to be that act itself, or whatever, but it could be anything from the cover of Rolling Stone to like a Harlequin romance.*” This comparison with mainstream media was also cited by Lena who stated that for her sexually explicit materials constitute “*anything where a man and a woman get undressed.*” While this could only encompass those materials considered to be pornographic, Lena added: “*I find even the media, some commercial, scantily clad women with a bit of a provocative stare on their face, anything like that.*” Mona also pointed towards “*music videos,*” opining that “*anything on TV can be considered sexually explicit, but not necessarily pornographic.*” Pornography, delivered through various mediums (i.e., literature, film, websites, pictures), was the main identifier used throughout the interviews by participants. However, as will be illustrated throughout the rest of this section, throughout the course of the interviews, pornography, as a genre, became both subsumed under, as well as differentiated from, the broader rubric of ‘sexually explicit’, as the women who participated in this research detailed the various materials they personally engaged with.

Generally speaking, most women stated that for material to be sexually explicit there must be a deliberate intent to evoke sexual arousal. Catherine argued that for a material to be

considered sexually explicit, it must be *“overtly seeking to elicit a sexual response.”* She continued on to say that she *“would not consider a painting of a nude man or woman reclining as sexually explicit, but if they were shown engaging in a sexual act, I would.”* Although *“sex is obviously the intent evoked,”* Callie’s conceptualization of sexually explicit materials did not have to necessarily depict the act of sexual intercourse: *“It’s something that’s sexually titillating. So someone is not necessarily having sex but there’s something that’s encouraging that person or others to engage in some kind of sexual relation.”* Similarly, Mindy stated that *“sexually explicit materials are any mode of media with sexually explicit themes as their main focus. Be it pictures, or movies, or stories, or anything else that I am not artistic enough to recognize.”* For Wendy, the term meant that societal boundaries were being pushed, explaining *“it gives the intention, the sexual intention, but a little more than society can take it.”* The intent behind the material was also essential to Miranda’s conceptualization: *“to me it means any materials such as movies, toys or other sexual paraphernalia that are geared to making someone sexually aroused.”* As is demonstrated throughout these quotes, there exists a diversity of opinions of what constitutes as sexual explicitness and what forms the sexually explicit can take, including items such as sex toys.

In addition to film, music videos, mainstream television programs, or “sexual paraphernalia,” some participants identified other materials, including performances, that could be conceptualized under the broader rubric of sexually explicit. For instance, Mona opined that *“it can be anything from still pictures [...] to videos, to stories, to um, toys, to anything that you can find in a sex store. To even experiences, like maybe going to a strip club or something like that.”* Courtney also regarded erotic performances *“like burlesque”*



as sexually explicit. Music itself, as opposed to music videos, was brought up by the women who participated in the National Capital Region focus group. The conversation played out as follows:

Tania: *I don't know if this is outside of the scope of this, but like even just lyrics, musical lyrics and stuff too, they're quite sexually explicit. [...] Some stuff is quite hot and I like it. But other stuff, it's a bit degrading. [...]*

Stacy: *I like how you said that actually. That's something that I wouldn't have thought of is music, but it can be very sexually explicit. And I find that, you know, the right set-list can really enhance the mood of any sexual behaviour that you're engaging in. Especially if you find it really, you know, to be a turn-on. I guess that could be classified as sexually explicit material too.*

Angelina: *I do have some songs on my IPOD that I downloaded specifically to get me horny. And I do listen to them. So it's interesting that your brought that up.*

Stacy: *I think I have a set-list that's called 'songs to fuck to'.*

This conversational exchange not only demonstrates the benefits of a focus group – one participant brings up a topic that others had not considered, but is of relevance and encourages interesting and insightful discussion; but also how these three women routinely engaged in a material for their sexual pleasure, without considering that it could in fact be considered, in a different context or to another individual, sexually explicit.

Other materials that were identified when participants were asked to define and identify what constituted sexually explicit materials, and what types of materials they used for sexual pleasure included: “*Harlequin type romance novels*” (Charlotte), “*S&M*” (Jordan), “*sex toys like cock rings*” (Angelina) and “*cookbooks*” (Jayde), which can evoke sensual imagery to the reader with its depictions of manipulating food. Although Miranda, Charlotte, Wendy and Jordan all indicated that they use lingerie to feel sexual, they did not incorporate it under the broader rubric of sexually explicit. Charlotte explained that “*I definitely do get pleasure out of dressing up and stuff like that, but I never [...] I always just*

kind of thought of it [sexually explicit materials/pornography] as an external thing. Where toys and lingerie, that's me." Towards the middle of the interview, however, after being asked to reflect on her engagement and what this engagement means to her, Charlotte's thoughts began to shift. She reflected:

*Well now I'm rethinking that and yeah, I think I would [consider them sexually explicit]. Because I mean they kind of bring about the same level of excitement and fun that the other material does. I mean they're pretty much, they're geared towards sexual activities, so yeah I think I would now. But I never thought about them in that regard. [...] But it makes sense. Because even with lingerie, I will get excited when putting something on, and when I think about the stuff that my boyfriend likes, it's always little outfits and stuff like that. So he sees it as sexually explicit, and I'm obviously putting it on for those reasons. So it makes sense.*

This narrative serves as a reminder of how the interview process itself serves as part of the scripts that women negotiate with in the understanding of, and meaning-making surrounding, their use of sexually explicit materials. It also shows the interpersonal nature through which meanings are created. If Charlotte assumed that her partner viewed lingerie as arousing, then her wearing these garments for him (as well as for herself) constituted them as sexually explicit.

While strip clubs, sex toys and lingerie were conceptualized within the broader rubric of modes available to express sexuality and elicit sexual arousal, two women challenged the normative boundaries of what constitutes sexual explicitness. Reflecting on how she previously conceptualized the term sexually explicit and how her lived experiences served to broaden this definition, Jayde stated:

*Initially I think my understanding of sexually explicit, when I was younger, which sounds really silly because I'm only 26, were limited to porn, explicitly kind of penetrative, more heteronormative porn stuff. And then becoming more interested in fetish things, beginning to realize that people can do a lot of things that aren't explicitly fucking as sexually explicit, right? So like, you know,*

*dressing up in a latex suit and walking down the street can be sexually explicit. Or like, you know, stuffed animals can be sexually explicit.*

Jayde further admitted that she finds “*it difficult to kind of pin it down,*” as there is a diversity of materials that can be incorporated under the label of sexually explicit. She laughed, “*I know I sound all ‘everything is sexually explicit’ but I think really, in a perv’s paradise it can be.*” Based on her experiences working at an adult novelty store, Fontayne had an alternate perspective of what constitutes sexual explicitness. She opined: “*Sexually explicit? I would say pornography is not sexually explicit. Sexually explicit is more, you know, people who are adventurous...like people who do it outside in public.*” She further went on to explain that she did not find “*toys and vibrators and that, explicit,*” having been accustomed to seeing and selling them. Since many materials were unexceptional to her, I asked Fontayne to further elaborate on what, to her, is sexually explicit. She responded by stating: “*things that are not ‘normal’, like coke cans and stuff like that used in a sexual manner, that’s what I find explicit.*” Both Jayde and Fontayne identified a gamut of materials which transgress normative boundaries of ‘the pornographic’ and sexually explicit, as highlighted by their own words (i.e., ‘heteronormative’ and ‘normal’). That notion that meaning is not inherent in specific materials, particularly those identified as pornographic (Soble 2002), is illustrated by these two quotes. For both Jayde and Fontayne the meanings attributed to certain materials were situation within their own identities, which included their occupations (Goffman 1963)

Taken as a whole, these narratives serve to trouble Ciclitira’s (2002) conceptualization that the difference between pornography and sexually explicit materials is that the latter is meant to portray sexual content without deliberately obscuring or hiding it, while the former portrays sexual content with the express intent to arouse. While this

dichotomy proves useful in legal context to determine obscenity (Smart 1989), that the majority of my participants did not neatly categorize ‘the pornographic’ or ‘the sexually explicit’ suggests that definitional boundaries are not only porous, but difficult to determine. This follows from Smart (1989: 125) who argues that “because it is impossible to ensure that a representation will only be read in one way, most especially when certain images are not so heavily encoded with a specific meaning, it is impossible to differentiate between the ‘intrinsically’ erotic and pornographic.” It is as a result that much effort has been historically and currently placed trying to legally define pornography, to attempt to subsequently regulate and/or censor it (Jochelson and Kramar 2011, Smart 1989).<sup>34</sup> The notion that one can derive sexual pleasure from materials that are not defined as sexually explicit also points to the depth and nuances of one’s sexual identity. That is, as a sexual being, anything can be rendered erotic, and some things that are purportedly erotic, fail to be erotic.

### ***Regular and Active Use of Sexually Explicit Materials***

Diversity in responses was also found when the participants were asked what, according to their experiences, constituted regular and active use of sexually explicit materials. For Courtney, Sheridan and Rowan, engaging with sexually explicit materials once a month was regular, while Paris and Sadie indicated that this meant a couple of times per month. Other women, however, used sexually explicit materials more often. For instance, Lena and Kayla indicated they used pornography twice a week, for Madison it was three times a week, while Tania stated: “*I do watch a lot, I guess. At least two, three, four times a week.*” Similarly, length of time spent engaging with sexually explicit materials also

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<sup>34</sup> For instance, in July 2013, David Cameron, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom proposed plans to be put in place by the end of 2014, that would effectively serve to censor internet pornography, requiring individuals who want to view pornography to have to ‘opt-in’, that is declare to their internet service provider that they want to be able to access pornography. Concerns for the protection of women and children have been cited behind the impetus behind this proposal.

varied. While Paris stated “*ten minutes,*” for Lena it “*totally depends. Like sometimes it’ll be like five to ten minutes, and other times longer because I start searching for things,*” adding, “*I can’t really actually put a timetable to it.*” In responding to the question regarding time spent engaging with sexually explicit materials, Kayla laughed: “*How much time do I have?*” In elaborating her response she explained: “*If I’m at home and have a lot of free time maybe 15 minutes to an hour. I’d rather it not consume most of my day. But if I’m like ‘hey, I’ve got some free time tonight, what am I going to do’.*” This idea of engaging with sexually explicit materials when there is available time was also expressed by Amanda:

*Sometimes I look at porn when I am procrastinating. Sometimes I look at it when I am bored. Every time I look at it using my vibrator. Sometimes I do it two or three times a day. Other times it has gone weeks without me looking at it. I would say on average every week. But again, I go through phases. Sometimes it’s everyday and I can’t stop. Other times I could care less and totally forget that aspect of me.*

These quotes highlight two interesting points. First, as both Kayla and Amanda suggest, the feeling of sexual urgency does not necessarily have to precede the use of pornography - in fact for these women, seeking out these materials was sometimes the result of “*being bored,*” “*procrastinating,*” or having “*some free time.*” Secondly, there is no uniform experience or understanding of ‘regular’ or ‘frequent’ pornographic use.

For the women who participated in this research, defining what regular and frequent engagement with sexually explicit materials meant was a difficult task complicated by many factors. Variance in use was attributed, by some participants, to the materials being engaged with. Catherine noted: “*I find it really fluctuates for me. Maybe I won’t be looking at any porn, but I’m reading a lot of it. Or I’m not doing either of those things, but I’m seeking out very sensual other things.*” Previously engaging with pornographic videos “*rather frequently, like a couple times per week,*” Charlotte indicated that she had not “*been looking*

*at the videos for about a year.*” Instead, she admitted to engaging more recently with other types of sexually explicit materials, explaining: *“The books, I always have one on the go [...] sex toys I would say definitely very regularly. Like pretty much every time I masturbate [...] lingerie, it’s more like a special occasion type of thing.”* Similarly Mona could not *“remember the last time that I went to strip club,”* an activity that she enjoyed and derived sexual pleasure from, but indicated that her use of Internet pornography was *“on average probably daily. But there may be times where I go for a week or two where it might be nothing at all. And sometimes I go through a period where it might be several times a day.”* As we see in these quotes, engagement with the sexually explicit was not tied to one type of material (i.e., pornographic film), but rather, they used a variety of materials ranging from film, books, lingerie, toys and even sexual performances, in order to derive sexual pleasure.

Three women tried to explain these intermittent patterns of use as a result of personal changes in their dispositions. For instance, Sheridan indicated that she would often:

*...go like six or seven months without going there. I won’t seek anything out. If it’s there, it’s there. If it’s not, it’s not. And sometimes I’ll go on spurts where I’m just like, no, I kind of want to.*

Fontayne similarly indicated that *“it depends on my mood. Like there can be like a month where I don’t think about it at all. And there can be a week where I use it every day.”* Also experiencing fluctuations in her sexual desire and use of these materials, Angelina referred to these periods as *“horny spells,”* explaining:

*So once a month I might be horny, horny, horny, watching porn every day. Masturbating every day. Then I’m like, oh, that’s over. And then I’ll go like two or three months without really needing to. Then I go through a horny spell again.*

Other women explained fluctuations in use as a response to changes in relationship status.

Tania noted that her use of pornography *“is definitely more frequent when I’m actually*

*dating somebody. [...] Porn goes up, masturbation goes up, even though you're with someone, because you're thinking about sex a lot of the time.*" Stacy acknowledged a similar experience:

*I find that I actually watch more porn when I'm in a relationship than out of a relationship. Usually if I just leave a relationship I'll watch a lot of porn for a while and then I probably won't watch it for a long time. But when I'm in a relationship, like I could, I could watch it daily, and my sex drive will actually increase.*

Heidi, on the other hand, found that being in a relationship decreased her use of sexually explicit materials. She stated: *"I would say more frequently when single, once a week. Now just randomly, you know, when you want to spice things up and that type of thing."* Mindy similarly expressed that *"I don't so much feel the need when I am in a satisfying relationship,"* whereas when single she would seek out *"erotic fiction or movies, maybe once every month or sometimes as often as twice a week."* These quotes speak to some of the reasons why the women I spoke to engage with sexually explicit materials. Other than sexual pleasure, these materials can be, and are used, either to augment, or in lieu of a relationship.

The stressors of daily life, including trying to maintain balance between work, a relationship and children, was also used to explain variations in usage patterns. Callie indicated that the demands of her career played a role in how frequently she can engage with sexually explicit materials:

*Depending on your lifestyle and what's going on in your life and how busy you are, if you have free time, or time enough. Whether it's four hours or five minutes, but you're like 'oh I shouldn't watch porn, I have to do this [...] email, or I have to do this' blah, blah, blah versus where you're just like 'I can't be bothered'.*

A lack of time was also cited by Paris who stated that she *"very rarely [has] the opportunity to be by myself, 'cause there's the kids and the husband and work, and whatever."* Having

children also impacted Jordan who explained: “*before I had kids it was like on a daily basis, you know. Now it’s whenever I just need that release.*” Frequently referring to herself as a “*new mom,*” much of Miranda’s narrative not only focused on how her experiences engaging sexually with these materials differed between her pre- and post-marriage selves, but also between pre- and post-having children.

The discussion of active and regular use of sexually explicit materials raises the possibility that broader notions of shifts in identity are significant. As noted by the above quotes, use of sexually explicit materials was, for some women, contingent upon shifts in their social roles or selves, from single to partnered to mother. Described as how we present ourselves to the outside world, and how the outside world perceives us (Goffman 1963), Rose (1999: 46) argues that identities are collective and relational. As such, Goffman (1959: 28), conceptualizes identity as performative, stating:

When an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possess the attributes he appears to possess, that the tasks that he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be.

To use Gagnon and Simon’s (2005 [1973]) terminology, identities are scripted at the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic level. At the cultural level, we have scripts for ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘middle-age’, ‘parent’, ‘wife’, that frame normative behaviour. For instance, in describing extra-marital affairs, Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]) note that men can manage guilt “by conceiving the act as insulated from the life of the family,” as their identities, unlike women, have not been shaped by scripts that “associated the sexual with a romantic commitment” (70-71). Such scripts serve to shape not only our behavior, but our interactions with others. As our individual roles change throughout the life course, what



Goffman (1959) terms situated identities, and come under the influence of different cultural scripts, the impressions that we give off, in order to render these roles believable to others, come to match these scripts. As Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]: 25) explain, parenthood is culturally scripted as nonsexual, or if sexual, it is for reproduction only, noting that children “consciously conceiv[ing] of their parents as sexual creatures,” often results in general expressions of disgust. The extent to which these cultural scripts served to underscore the fluctuations in the use of sexually explicit materials, in these women, in line with their shifting identities, is an interesting question that merits future investigation.

Given our current culture of advanced consumer capitalism (Dorst 1989, Rose 1999), Rose (1999: 178) argues that we are now witnessing “new practices of identity formation [that] fuse the aim of manufacturers to sell products and increase market share with the identity experiments of consumers.” Identities are now tied to consumerism (Bauman 2000), and as a result we have seen an increasing dedication to our work to prove that we make entrepreneurial our own lives (Rose 1999). This shift in how identity is conceptualized, has served to place increasing demands on individuals, resulting in some of the women I interviewed to note that one’s sexual pleasure no longer (if it ever did) takes precedence. Stacy opined that “*we’re all busy. We can’t take an hour out of our day to pleasure ourselves.*” Mona also lamented: “*you know how we’re all, everything’s so quick. We have hardly any time any more, even for our porn.*” Interestingly, even though our identities have become bounded to consumerism, and individual freedom is “grounded in consumer choice, notably consumers’ freedom of self-identification through the use of mass-produced and merchandized commodities,” (Bauman 2000: 84), the act of buying sexually explicit materials was contentious for some of the women I spoke to.

## Buying Sexually Explicit Materials

An array of opinions emerged throughout the narratives with respect to the purchase of sexually explicit materials, with many of the women I spoke with indicating that they would not, for various reasons, purchase pornography. While Madison indicated that she simply did not “*want to invest in it*” because it “*seems silly when I can just have sex, um, or use a toy,*” other women were put off by the idea of paying for pornography. After the above statement, Madison stated, “*I would never actually pay for porn.*” When viewing pornographic films, Fontayne noted that she only searches “*free sites,*” adding “*I don’t pay for sex.*” Lena’s comment incorporated both of these sentiments, stating: “*I’m not going to pay for that [...] I just couldn’t. I don’t know. I wouldn’t want to invest any money. I support it in viewing it, but like financially wise, I wouldn’t want to be paying for sex in any way.*” For Courtney the problem was more pragmatic, as she is “*so particular about my tastes that I would need to sample it first. And they’re so expensive! You might spend 70 bucks on something and be like ‘I didn’t like it at all’*” A combination of factors, including accessibility, cost and feelings of discomfort were part of Mindy’s decision not to purchase sexually explicit materials. She stated:

*The internet is the main mode to seek out any sexually explicit materials because it’s the easiest and these particular materials are made easily accessible and free. There is no way I would buy a porno movie or an erotic novel because I feel it would be a waste of money and partly because I feel I would feel embarrassed to go into a store in search of these items.*

Much of this discussion is likely the result of dominant stereotypes surrounding sexual commerce and the types of people that need to purchase sex, as well as “false dichotomies that distinguish commercial and non-commercial sexual relationships as dissonant” (Sanders 2008: 408). Addressing these stereotypes, although to bolster the claim that the cultural

pervasiveness of pornography should trouble everyone, Paul (2005) highlights that there is “no profile of the pornography user [...] because pornography cuts across all swathes of society” (11) and that “contrary to expectation or myth, not every man who uses pornography is lonely or depressed” (27).

Some women noted that they had either bought pornographic films or been with someone who had. Both experiences elicited initial feelings of discomfort. Recounting her first experience buying pornography on her own, Ella stated that *“I was a little uncomfortable. But it was easier because I went to the cheap bin. I went to the cheap bin and just found the cheap stuff and I just got that.”* Heidi also relayed an experience where the (unintentional) purchase of a pornographic film caused her embarrassment: *“...for a joke I put on the porn preview because [friend] was doing something but I accidentally ordered it and her parents were paying for it. So we had to go downstairs and like cancel it, and it was really embarrassing.”* While Sheridan wished that she could *“just get over myself and buy some,”* Kayla asserted that the *“weird feeling walking into a rental”* might be mitigated *“if you’re a couple.”* As women have been traditionally seen as not visually stimulated (Abramson and Pinkerton 1995), and ‘the pornographic’ rendered a male domain (Härmä and Stolpe 2009, Williams 1999 [1989]), it is easy to understand the context through which, for these women, feelings of discomfort in purchasing these materials arise. However, troubling these narratives is that while “society encouraged women to frown upon porn and to berate – albeit futilely – their men for using it,” as a result of its conceptualization as “low class, uncouth, dirty” (Paul 2005: 108), it simultaneously rendered the use of these materials as acceptable if within a monogamous heterosexual relationship (Paul 2005), thus mitigating any attached stigma.

These feelings of embarrassment or discomfort resulted in finding alternate ways to procure sexually explicit materials, primarily purchasing these materials through online retail establishments. Charlotte, whose preference is erotic novels, explained that *“the books I always order off Amazon ‘cause I’m embarrassed to buy them at the store. [OM: Why?] I don’t know. I just don’t know. ‘Cause you have the idea that they’re like trashy romance novels and I don’t want to be judged by the cashiers.”* For Heidi, the manner in which sexually explicit materials were purchased depended on the type of material being sought. She responded:

*Why online? Because it’s anonymous. Um, that’s for the literature. I have bought a DVD at a sex store which was ok because they’re used to selling that kind of thing. And I think a friend of mine and I went into a regular used bookstore to try and find them but we weren’t comfortable enough to buy them, so we left.*

That women’s lives, particularly sexual lives, has been constrained to the private sphere (Juffer 1998, Lacey 1993), serves as a point of explanation here. While the internet has served as a democratizing mechanism by bringing pornography into the home (Juffer 1998), this development, it can be argued, serves to maintain the stigma surrounding sexually explicit materials, including their purchase. While women are encouraged, or culturally required, to purchase sexual accoutrements to be able to experience their sexuality (Attwood 2005c, Storr 2002), the materials being purchased must still be appropriately feminine, for fear of judgment of the normalizing gaze.

Alternately, two women indicated no discomfort in purchasing, or being with someone who was purchasing, such items. Mona indicated that she does not *“buy them, but I have been with people when they rented it, and all of my guy friends will have their collections and we’ll watch it together.”* Amanda initially indicated that she has never

purchased sexually explicit materials, she recanted the statement, nuancing it by highlighting the array of materials in her repertoire: *“I have never bought porn for myself. Ok that is a lie. With my first boyfriend that I mentioned before, we would rent porn movies all the time. I’ve bought my own sex toys and gone to a sex store to buy costumes and videos too. It’s not a big deal.”* Given that the pornographic is culturally scripted as a male domain, as highlighted in Chapter Two, it is unsurprising that the inclusion of a male partner in the purchase of sexually explicit materials served to normalize the transaction.

### **SPECTATORSHIP AND THE VIEWING EXPERIENCE**

While the women I interviewed spoke of the different types of sexually explicit materials they engaged with for the purposes of sexual pleasure, discussions surrounding engagement generally focused on pornographic film. The relationship between the displayed bodies on the pornographic screen and their own bodies was raised by many participants. Paris indicated that no one (other than me) knew about her solitary use of these materials for her own sexual pleasure. When asked why, she responded: *“because that would make me a hypocrite to begin with.”* On the one hand, Paris disclosed that she enjoys using these materials individually and with her partner, but on the other hand, she was very adamant that her husband not use these materials alone, as she believed they would expose him to unrealistic sexual expectations and *“felt insecure”* about his desire for a female body that she did not possess. This comparison between the bodies being screened and one’s own body was also found by Boynton (1999).

Other participants spoke of how they found women’s nude bodies more aesthetically and sexually pleasing than men’s. Kayla stated, *“I can see where guys are coming from*

*though. Girls are just prettier.*” Speaking about her preference for strip clubs with female performers as opposed to those featuring male erotic dancers, Stacy asserted:

*If I were to see people taking off their clothes I would prefer to see women taking off their clothes. And I think it's just maybe because, I don't know, they're more elegant about it or the female form is just in general nicer looking than the male form.*

She later caused the other National Capital Region focus group participants to laugh and nod in agreement when she added, *“you have to kind of admit, this is horrible and don't ever tell anyone I said this, men look kind of funny with boners.”* To the discussion Angelina opined, *“Women are much, I find, are much more attractive naked than a man. And I prefer to look at women.”* Although these three women were not the only participants to make these assertions, several did throughout their interviews, an examination of these statements, and their placement within theorizing on pornographic spectatorship, is required.

The women's look, or female gaze, is often denied, as was demonstrated in Chapter Two, and illustrated in this oft-repeated passage:

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves, The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight (Berger 1972: 47).

It is argued that through the process of (heteronormative) gender socialization, girls and women are taught to see themselves through the “evaluative eye” of men (Eck 2003).

Mulvey (1988 [1975]) suggests that cinematic spectatorship invites two types pleasure, both predicated upon the male viewer: “The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the construction of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen” (187). Scopophilic pleasure, which involves seeing others as objects, as well as

deriving gratification from this objectification, is predicated upon the male gaze (man as the subject looking at the female object), which women come to identify with. Narcissistic pleasure comes from recognizing and identifying with the images and individuals we are screening, seeing them as surrogates for oneself. These two types of pleasures are contradictory (i.e., scopophilia views the ‘other’ as separate, while narcissism enables us to identify with them), however Mulvey (1988 [1975]) argues that while the spectator oscillates between these two forms of pleasurable looking, a masculine reading position is always invoked. That the quotations I have presented above would be appropriated, within this conceptualization, as constitutive of the male gaze necessitates some troubling, as will be articulated throughout the rest of this chapter, as it serves to always render women as passive and non-agentic.

### **Rendering Possible The/A ‘Female Gaze’**

Although gendered cultural messages/discourses abound, and are used in our interpretations of ourselves and the world (Crawley et al. 2008, Eck 2003), it is simplistic to imply that these messages are always unconsciously and uncritically absorbed. In their conceptualization of the gender feedback loop, Crawley, Foley and Shehan (2008) indicate that such messages are in a perpetual cyclical state of acceptance and rejection, facing everyday confirmations and disruptions. Indeed, as Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]) argue, they become part of the scripts that individuals negotiate with in the framing, or shaping, of their interactions and self-reflections. In this respect, conceptualizing a unitary vision and version of spectatorship, one that does not account for the specific ways that women view and engage with ‘the pornographic’ does not reflect the interactive processes through which meanings are produced.

In Chapter Two we saw that pornography is conceptualized in dominant culture as a male domain. How then can we account for the fact that women are engaging with the pornographic? Why is this engagement framed by anti-pornography and post-feminists as women “colluding in their own oppression” (McLaren 2002: 97) or acting as “female chauvinist pigs” (Levy 2005)? The following narratives serve to trouble the notion that a female gaze, independent of the male gaze, cannot exist.

Although Wendy indicated that she did not frequently use pornography, she spoke of deriving sexual pleasure through the strategic placement of mirrors during sexual encounters and her use of lingerie. She also described finding sexual pleasure from viewing the athletic bodies depicted in mainstream fitness magazines – bodies that reflected her own. She asserted: *“for my sexual pleasure I like to feel sexy. It’s that narcissistic side.”* While this quote suggests the female gaze on the female body, the following narratives elucidate the reasons why some of my participants preferred to view female bodies. Nicky indicated that *“I’m not gay, but I do tend to enjoy girl-on-girl type of stuff,”* explaining that *“the reason why I’m more into that kind of stuff is it honestly seems to me a little less humiliating to the female participant in the films.”* Although she noted that she does not frequently engage with pornographic videos, Charlotte described that when she does it is *“just only women that I prefer to watch.”* When asked to elaborate why, she explained:

*Apart from the fact that it really doesn’t teach guys how to be good in bed, um, I don’t know. I guess I kind of also don’t watch it much because of all the discourses around it. It’s negative towards women, and it sexualizes them as sexual objects and stuff [...] Maybe that’s why I don’t really like the videos with the guys and when they play out that role. Maybe that’s why I only like the women aspect of it.*

These statements appear to be in opposition to the notion that women pornographic viewers merely absorb the “male dominance and sadistic male desires [encoded] into the very



structure of looking” (Williams 1999 [1989]: 204), or that women prefer to view female bodies because they have been taught to objectify themselves (Berger 1972). It does not appear that neither Nicky nor Charlotte are interested in colluding with oppression or in objectifying women, in fact, they both purport to purposely seeks out those films that, in their perspectives, do not do this.

Mulvey’s (1988 [1975]) conceptualization of the male gaze is the subject of considerable debate, particularly for her failure to account for the female spectator and the tacit alignment of passivity with femininity and activity with masculinity (de Lauretis 1984). Indeed, one can question why ‘the gaze’ is always conceptualized as male, and do accounts of women looking at women, as described above, always indicate an appropriation of the male gaze? As a result, de Lauretis (1984) argues, the female spectator does not simply adopt a masculine reading position but is always involved in a ‘double-identification’ with both the passive and active subject positions. What does female spectatorship look like? How is this ‘double identification’ as passive and active invoked? While I cannot speak to broad generalizations, I can attempt to detail the/a female gaze, in a small way, through the perspectives of the 26 women that participated in this research.

### **Three Levels of (Pornographic) Viewing Experience**

Although Boorstin (1990) envisioned the three levels of spectator experience as working in conjunction to create a total viewing experience, with respect to film pornography, all three levels rarely appeared to manifest in unison according to the women I interviewed for this research. While not appearing as a cohesive account of spectatorship, narratives speaking to each level of viewing experience (visceral, vicarious, voyeuristic) emerged throughout the data.

*(a) Visceral*

Referring to sensory feelings and reactions derived from a film, what became evident was that for some of the participants, the use of sexually explicit materials stemmed beyond physical pleasure and arousal. Engaging with sexually explicit materials for entertainment purposes, to derive visceral sensation without necessarily experiencing sexual pleasure, was noted by several women. For instance, Rowan stated: *“Sometimes I look at it, not to get turned on, but only like to watch a freak show pretty much.”* Explaining her use of pornographic magazines, such as Playboy, Angelina explained: *“the magazines aren’t really, for me, what gets me going or anything [...] I just like looking at the girls.”* Although these publications were not, for Angelina, sexually arousing, she derived feelings of visual pleasure from them. For Jordan, pleasure was derived solely from the visceral evocation of emotion. Jordan outlined that *“it’s all about feelings. So me, I just want the feelings, so my eyes are closed, you know, and that’s what I’m looking for.”* Although the majority of participants did not refer to sensory experiences, outside of sexual arousal, visceral reactions, such as those expressed in the quotes above, are central to the success of a film – especially a pornographic film.

We can here draw some parallels between visceral spectatorship and Foucault’s (1977) commentary surrounding the spectacle. Through its public visibility, the spectacle of the scaffold ensured viewers had evidence that punishment was being exerted through public executions and the “public exhibition of prisoners” (Foucault 1977: 8). As Foucault (1977: 44) outlines, “A successful public execution justified justice, in that it published the truth of the crime in the very body of the man to be executed.” Similarly, pornography is the public display of sex, through which it must give evidence of arousal. This is done through the

visual and graphic depiction of erection, penetration and ejaculation. The sole aim of pornography is to render evident the ‘truth’ of sex and the “concrete pleasures it purports to display so directly and naturally” (Williams 1999 [1989]: 275). It is, however, “precisely in film and video that the visual aspect of looking at and speculating about pleasure in sex [...] encounters its limits” (Williams 1999 [1989]: 275). As highlighted by the above quotes, pornographic spectatorship does not always result in its purported intended effects. Sometimes, as is true for Rowan, Angelina and Jordan, physical sexual arousal is not why pornography is engaged with. It is these ‘limits’ that trouble notions that meanings are intrinsic to representations, and that specific outcomes are not always the effect (Williams 1999 [1989]). It is also in these limits that resistance is rendered possible.

**(b) Vicarious**

The majority of women interviewed indicated that they preferred that the female porn actress not only resemble them, but that her sexual response and the scenarios being presented appeared realistic. These three components relate to the ability to engage with a film on a vicarious level, that is, being able to imagine oneself within the film being viewed.

For several women the ability to relate to the pornographic actress was central to deriving pleasure from a particular pornographic film. Speaking about her favourite adult actress, Tania stated that she “*like[s] Katie Morgan because it’s obvious that she’s not faking it. You can tell, as a girl, you can tell when they are faking it and ones that are actually like getting off on it.*” Tania later added, “*you kinda feel like you are the girl, like imagining what it feels like.*” For Heidi, the ability to visualize herself in the scenario is what characterizes her viewing experience. She explained: “*I guess probably when I’m watching it, I’m probably imagining what it feels like. So if it’s something that I think would feel good*

*I probably would want to watch it more.*” Although she enjoys watching what she defined as hard-core pornography with her partner, Sadie preferred soft-core pornographic videos when engaging with these materials by herself, stating that she found “*no emotion or appeal in the [hard-core] graphic.*” Through additional questioning, Sadie affirmed that when engaging with sexually explicit materials alone she wanted to emotionally connect with both the female porn actress as well as with the scenario she was watching.

This ability to situate oneself in the sexual depiction and to understand, and relate to, the context, not only serves to facilitate viewing and subsequently arousal, but also to impede it. Speaking of her experiences attending strip clubs, Mona elucidated on the reasons why she is not able to derive pleasure from attending those that feature male erotic dancers:

*In a male strip club this was my impression, both times that I went, here’s a bunch of really annoying women of all ages going ape-shit over guys who are clearly gay and they weren’t aroused [...] But the disconnect with the guy not being aroused, the disconnect with the women going totally crazy over these guys, it didn’t, none of it made sense to me.*

As suggested by these narratives, emotional connectedness, or emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) is a key component to understanding vicarious spectatorship, as outlined by Boorstin (1990). According to Hochschild (1983) emotional labour refers to the display of socially desired and accurate emotions that employees must engage in, or enact, throughout performing their work. For the women I interviewed, the extent that the pornographic actress was able to ‘authentically’ or genuinely display sexual arousal in the scene ensured that they too found the scenario sexually arousing. This interpretation is consistent with Parvez’s (2006) findings that perceptions of emotional labour as exemplified by the pornographic actress, explains the ambivalence some women feel towards pornography.

Furthermore, as is demonstrated by the quotes above, this emotional labour is perceived through the lens of their own sexual identities, experiences and interactions (Parvez 2006)

Other than emotional connectedness to the scenario, for the majority of participants, being able to identify with the pornographic actress on an aesthetic level was central to their vicarious experience. The comment *“I guess I can put myself in the role a little easier of the girl looks like me,”* (Angelina) succinctly outlines the importance of visual similarity. On why she seeks out porn actresses who look like her, Lena explained that *“it makes it more, not of a fantasy but a reality that you can create in your mind and get off on, if you can envision more of yourself and connect with the person that’s in there.”* This quote demonstrates the ability to transgress the boundary between an observed and embodied fantasy, treating the images on screen as a mental reality that leads to the corporeal experience of *“getting off”*. Being able to *“envision myself with it”* and place herself within the erotic stories she was reading, was also central to Jordan’s experience.

While some women indicated that they preferred to watch pornographic videos in which the female actresses resembled them, as it facilitated their ability to empathize with the character, for Sheridan this was not desired. She stated: *“I’m a big girl, I don’t want to watch it,”* adding that *“you put yourself in that situation and so it’s much nicer to put yourself in a situation where you look fantastic.”* Seeing a *“big girl”* would serve, for Sheridan, to disrupt the fantasy that pornography serves to create. Although she still envisioned herself within the film, physical similarities between herself and the pornographic actress on screen was not a requirement. Rather, the pornographic viewing experience presented as an opportunity for Sheridan to inhabit another body, one that was closer to the current social ideal.

*(c) Voyeuristic*

Rather than vicariously placing oneself into the scenario or the position of the female actress, some of the women I interviewed indicated that they derived pleasure from sexually explicit materials if they positioned themselves as voyeurs of the sexual exchanges taking place. For instance, when asked what her relationship was to the images she was screening, Fontayne replied: *“Just watching it.”* For Jordan, the moving images of a pornographic video were *“just a visual.”* Similarly, Rowan identified that she does not pleasure herself while watching pornography, but rather, she watches it as an observer, reflects upon them and stores them in her *“minds-eye”* for later use: *“Like I watch it and I don’t masturbate in front of porn. I think about it and then I go to the other room and do what I need to do.”* This statement serves to challenge Mulvey’s (1988 [1975]) notion that a decidedly female gaze does not, and cannot exist, as it demonstrates how Rowan negotiated with the images that she was viewing. Even if we concede that such images are always produced for the male gaze, the notion of *“think[ing] about it,”* disrupts the image as it was intended to be viewed and consumed – at the moment of pleasure, while at the same time making it more amenable to delivering pleasure more palatable to Rowan.

Voyeuristic engagement with pornography was not only a function of being visually stimulated as a result of the imagery, but for some of my participants, intellectually as well. In this manner, being able to relate with the language used was cited as important, as it often served to distract from the sexual nature of the imagery being screened. Catherine focused much on this aspect stating:

*It’s [the dialogue] always badly written, or has been, in my experience, and that makes my brain ask: ‘why are you watching these idiots?’ I mean, I’m not watching them because I thought they had anything to offer me intellectually in the first place, but when they start having these cheesy, predictable dialogues, it*

*pulls me out of the reason why I was watching in the first place. I can't get around my brain. Also, the cheesy predictable dialogue draws attention to the fact that it is cheesy predictable dialogue in a situation where people are doing what they're doing because they're paid to do it. It destroys the illusion of being a voyeur for me.*

Interestingly, what rendered difficult sexual pleasure for Catherine, was not the language used *per se*, but what the language represented: that she was viewing commercialized and stereotyped sexual exchanges. It disrupted the fantasy for her of viewing, as a voyeur, actual sexual interactions.

Reconciling the fact that pornographic actresses have complete - and to the observer, unknowable - identities outside of the sexual beings they were being solely portrayed as, proved challenging for Callie, who also focused on poor acting and stereotypical dialogue:

*I do have my moments where I'm like: 'How could you possibly like that! She's such an idiot, she can't even speak properly!' Yeah, because she needs to be articulate at this moment and present about art, literature and politics. No, it's not really what this is about. But that's just my own hang-up."*

The argument that pornography, as well as other types of sex work, serves to portray women solely in a sexual capacity to the detriment of other aspects of her identity is an interesting one. While Callie acknowledged the nonsensical nature of the requirement that the actor(s) she is viewing be knowledgeable about other cultural arenas, it is prudent to note that in no other profession are women, or men, expected to be (or perform) all aspects of their identity all at once. In no other occupational field, argues Nussbaum (1998) are women required to give evidence of all facets of their being (i.e., emotional, sexual, spiritual, physical, intellectual) or are they lambasted for commodifying one facet. For instance, it is rarely argued that we objectify female scholars for their minds, that we elevate their intellect above all other aspects of their identity, or that their students come to learn to objectify/commodify all women for how much knowledge they can produce (although this sort of objectification

is regarded as positive). However, this argument, that women (and the focus is usually only on women) employed in the sex/pornography industry are only valued for their bodies, that the sexual is elevated above all other aspects of their identity which in turns teaches viewers to objectify/commodify all women for their sexual appeal, appears to reverberate through certain feminist debates of the sex industry (cf. Dines et al. 1997). While such line of questioning is outside the scope of this research, one must wonder what is it about sex that renders its spectatorship more unique and more influential, than spectatorship of any other film?

### **Towards Spectatorial Engagement as Scripted**

This chapter has sought to provide the framework through which the rest of the analysis chapters are situated. In outlining the specific characteristics that characterized engagement with sexually explicit materials, the diversity of experiences represented by the 26 women I interviewed for the research, was demonstrated. This chapter also started the project of revealing what the/a female pornographic gaze, according to my participants, looks like – a project which will be taken up again in Chapter Nine. Amidst the consensus that pornography is male-centric and created for the male gaze, is the reality that women do engage with these materials. The following chapter starts the analysis of how women engage with sexually explicit materials, looking specifically to the various cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts that frame this engagement and shape the meaning-making process surrounding these experiences.



## VII. MAKING MEANINGS: SCRIPTING SEXUAL SELVES

The central purpose of this research was to explore the meanings that women attribute to sexually explicit materials as well to their engagement of these materials, and the significance of these meanings to understandings of women's identities and sense of self, or subjectivities. For the women who participated in this research, as Chapter Six outlined, defining what regular and frequent engagement with sexually explicit materials meant was a difficult task. Not only did there exist a diversity of experiences, thus rendering impossible any 'truth' of female pornographic engagement (although as exploratory qualitative research this was never the goal), but narratives were complicated by the presence of external factors such as children, relationship status, and career demands which all speak to the shifting nature of identities and the impact of these shifts on the sexual. While the previous chapter explored the intersection between identity and pornographic spectatorship as part of the broader goal of scripting the 'female gaze', this chapter seeks to underscore the sexual scripts and social discourses that my participants negotiated with in the construction of their sexual selves.

Throughout the process of coding, reading and re-reading the data, it became evident that the narratives produced coalesced around the same three levels of scripting that Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]) identified. While never meant to be prescriptive, that is dictating how it should be or actually is, scripting theory serves as an analytic device to describe "how people go about doing sex socially and to demonstrate the importance of social elements in doing of the sexual" (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]: 312). This theoretical framework was developed to nuance accounts of individuals and identities as "simple replicates of the social order" (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]: 313). Rather than being wholly determined by

culture, sexual selves are produced by individuals in interaction with their cultural context. This understanding of selves as a process, leads to a particular line of inquiry: How did the women I interviewed come to construct their pornographic spectatorship or their relationship to this spectatorship, as discussed in the previous chapter? What cultural messages and interpersonal scripts did they negotiate with in the construction of their identities and sexual subjectivities? This chapter aims to shed some light on these questions.

Building on the narratives discussed in Chapter Six surrounding shifts in identity construction and the relationship to their pornographic viewing experience, this chapter explores the various levels of scripting (cultural, interpersonal, intrapsychic) that surrounded each woman's account, and understanding of, their engagement with sexually explicit materials. It is important to note that one level of scripting does not privilege another; all three levels interact to inform an individual's meaning-making process, often resulting in tensions and contradictions, particularly at the intrapsychic level, as will be elucidated.

### **Cultural Scenarios**

Underscoring Gagnon and Simon's work (2005 [1973], 1977) is the position that individuals learn sex and sexual conduct from external culturally available messages found in a broad range of societal institutions (i.e., home, church, schools, politics, mass media, folklore). With raced, classed and gendered iterations of patriarchy and heteronormativity in place as the universal, cultural/social order, particular scripts which support, maintain and reiterate this order are produced and disseminated by a variety of institutional and regulatory bodies (e.g., legal, political, medical, juridical, religion). This is in accordance with Foucault's (1978: 27) history of sexuality, positing that when sex became a concern in the relationship between the state and the individual, a whole range of discourses and knowledge

was affected, fostering an insistence on effective means for controlling deviant acts and actors, both overtly and in a more subtle fashion through the production of a collective ‘knowledge’, by various interconnected social structures. In this manner, ‘the pornographic’ serves as a regulatory discourse dictating particular normative visions and versions of sex, desire and fantasy (Escoffier 2007).

Two broad categories of cultural scripts were evident in the narratives elicited by the 26 research participants. These include: (a) the assertion that pornography as a genre is made for, and by, men; and (b) articulations of the ‘good girl’- ‘bad girl’ dichotomy tied to women’s errant sexuality, which includes the use of sexually explicit materials. Each category will be spoken about in turn.

### ***Pornography as Male-Centric***

Although indicating that they engaged with sexually explicit materials for their own sexual pleasure, the main recruitment criteria for participation, all of the women interviewed opined that mainstream/*malestream* pornography was male-centric, that is, made for the benefit of the male gaze and male sexual desire. Charlotte found that *“in porn it’s always very much for the guy’s pleasure and it can have those raunchy aspects that I don’t like.”* On this topic, Charlotte further reflected, *“I really do see the porn industry as a male oriented industry. Maybe that part of it isn’t good, because sexuality is a male domain, but women are sexual objects in it.”* As a result of its male-centeredness, Heidi asserted that *“you would be hard pressed to find women who enjoy it.”* This statement was particularly telling of the tensions inherent in Heidi’s understandings of her own engagement with these materials, which she admitted were sexually pleasing.

When I questioned each participant about how they came to the assessment that mainstream, and therefore readily accessible, pornographic films were *malestream* (that is, geared to men), all of the women made references to the actions and behaviours depicted. For instance, Kayla responded that *“a lot of porn is girls giving blow jobs and so I, like, that doesn’t turn me on. Well a little bit, but it’s for the guy.”* Again here we see the tension between the cultural script that pornography, and the depiction of a particular act, is geared predominantly for male pleasure, but the admittance of also deriving sexual pleasure from it. The depiction of fellatio was, for some participants, the key indicator that pornography was solely focused on male pleasure. Angelina stated that she *“always forward[s] through blowjobs. I think it’s sick. I don’t like that.”* Stacy opined that she has *“nothing against blowjobs. But I think when, if they’re really geared towards men you can tell because it’s really, it’s all deep-throat and there’s choking. That’s disgusting. And if my boyfriend ever did that to me I’d kick him in the balls.”* While the majority of participants noted that they did not mind the occasional fellatio scene, it became problematic when the video was *“all about the blow jobs like for 20 minutes straight. What about her?”* (Amanda), denoting that, at least for these women, the act of fellatio was one of women pleasuring men and its excessive depiction pointed to the centrality and normality of (heterosexual) male sexual pleasure (Attwood 2005b).

Although the actions depicted were one way that the women interviewed were able to ascertain the male-centeredness of pornographic films, another way was via the videographic focus. In this respect, Paris opined:

*I think it’s geared for men mostly because of just the way it’s shot. You know, the way it’s edited or whatever. It’s all about the man being this tough big man or something like that, helping a poor female type of thing. So it’s putting the man in the dominant role.*

While male actors may, according to this participant, be placed in positions of dominance or authority over the sexual encounter, they are not the bodies that are prominently featured. Madison explains that “*we never really focus on men ‘cause porn is generally, I find, made for men, and so, you know, there’s not a lot of focus put onto the male actors.*” Interestingly, this quotation highlights a contradiction in Madison’s narrative, as she had previously indicated a preference for solely viewing the female pornographic body, while here she expresses the lack of attention on the male body. There was also discussion surrounding the actions that warrant particular camera vantage points. To this, Tania questioned: “*whenever there’s a really close-up like showing penetration, do women need to see that or is it men that need to see that? [...] Again it shows that it’s geared towards men ‘cause that’s something you [women] wouldn’t normally see.*” Depicting particular scenarios, behaviours and bodies that privilege the male viewer all serve to reify, for my participants, scripts that pornographic films are created for men.

As argued in Chapter Three, cultural scripts arise from particular ideologies, or discourses, which are propagated through social institutions. Escoffier (2007) theorizes pornography as a regulatory discourse. Viewing the pornographic as discursive, enables an understanding of how pornography is productive of a particular version of sex and sexuality, one that is heterosexual, in its portrayal of stereotypical gender roles not necessarily of the acts depicted, and male-centric. As Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]: 202) state, “this reinforcement of heterosexuality is reflected in the way the films portray the obsessive myths of masculine sexual fantasy.” Male-centric and heteronormative definitions and visions of sex are not created by pornography, rather they are produced in patriarchal society (Williams

1999 [1989]). In this manner, the pornographic simultaneously serves to reflect and inform our attitudes towards sexual pleasure, gender and the use of these materials.

Subjects are produced within discourses and simultaneously subjected to discourses, and all of the meanings, power and regulations they inscribe (Foucault 1972, McLaren 2002). Heteronormative and male-centric sexual scripts brings with it a particular lexicon which individuals draw from in the scripting of their sexual subjectivities. In responding to questions about their engagement with sexually explicit materials, many of the women I spoke to referred to, and reified, sexual scripts that denote the naturalness of men's use of pornographic content. Reiterating a common idiom, Kayla stated "*guys are a lot more visually focused.*" Ella, after indicating that women should not discuss or disclose their engagement with these materials to others, explained that "*men can talk about it because they are men.*" Heidi spoke about the normality surrounding men's consumption of pornographic videos highlighting: "*it's typically something that most people would say it would be weird if a guy didn't look at porn.*" Catherine placed such scripts within dominant cultural discourses, stating "*the traditional, patriarchal view of masculinity includes the inherent acceptance of the male sexual drive, and moreover, that this drive is not only worthy, but necessary to be a considered a real man.*" As suggested by these quotes, watching pornographic films and engaging in explicitly sexual spaces is indicative, within our broader socio-cultural conceptualizations, of a masculine sexuality, not a feminine one (cf. Levant et al. 2012). This active masculine sexuality wants to experience pleasure and uses porn to achieve it. That my participants came to script their sexual subjectivities within this particular discursive frame, served to complicate their relationship with sexually explicit

materials, particularly with respect to reconciling this engagement with cultural scripts of female sexual respectability.

### ***Maintaining Female Sexual Respectability***

In contrast to discussions surrounding the tacit social acceptance of men's use of pornography, the women I interviewed noted that, in comparison, they were not as 'free' to speak about their use of sexually explicit materials, or about sex in general. In discussing her experiences, Jordan stated:

*Women cannot go around saying how many men they've been with or that, you know, they're totally into the erotic. Or like say, I'm the type of woman, just fucking bend me over, you know? And like, all of a sudden people are like 'Gasp. Oh my gosh! What!' and it's like, 'What the hell?' Like no, it shouldn't be that way. So for women, yes, absolutely it is definitely more hush hush.*

It was highlighted that there are social ramifications for transgressing this gendered sexual boundary. Sadie indicated that she does not frequently speak about sex or sexually explicit materials because "you don't want anyone to see you like, I don't know, what's a good word for that? *Nympho?*"<sup>35</sup> Although she used sexually explicit materials for sexual pleasure, Heidi believed that the practice was not common among women, opining: "*I might be wrong, but you would think that maybe 25 per cent of women might look at it, so it kind of makes you like a deviant or nymphomaniac.*" Similarly, Courtney explained that "*women who embrace their sexuality and enjoy sexually explicit materials may be afraid of being called sluts. And it goes back to that whole double standard where guys are macho and women become sluts. And I think that's really ingrained in us unfortunately.*" These quotations suggest that for the women I interviewed, female sexuality is culturally constructed in a different manner than is men's. While cultural scripts of hegemonic

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<sup>35</sup> Nymphomania is a specific term used to denote errant female hypersexuality. Popularized in the Victoria Era it was categorized as a female mental illness in the DSM-I in 1951, but subsequently removed and replaced in the DSM-III in 1980 with 'psychosexual disorders'.

masculinity centres on the ways in which men ‘accomplish’ their manhood through sexual conquest and actualizing their sexual potential (Lorber 1994), female sexuality is defined in contrast to “the natural sexual aggression and prowess of a man. Her body and sexuality are passive objects” (Conrad 2006: 310). As noted above, labels denoting sexual deviancy or promiscuity are the consequence of veering from this script of passivity, even if the transgression is the result of simply talking about sex. These labels not only serve to shape a particular vision of female bodies and sexual subjectivities, but through the inscription of social norms on the body, figuratively marking certain bodies as errant, are used to regulate.

Although, as Foucault (1978) reminds us, sexuality was never simply repressed, the Victorian era witnessed an “intensification and deepening of the disciplinary regime as the state built for itself new institutionalized power, at the same time holstering the power of the Catholic Church and heads of family to regulate subjects” (Crowley and Kitchin 2008: 355). Subjectivities are always embodied, that is, they are produced by the investment of power on bodies (McLaren 2002). Crowley and Kitchin (2008 :367) argue that “the pressure to produce ‘decent girls’ – honest, chaste, virtuous, homely – meant that women became particular targets and a calculated administration of feelings of shame and guilt about the body and sexuality, designed to link the ethical capacities of women to the ends of government, were set in train.” That labels such as ‘nymphomaniac’ or ‘slut’ are leveled at women who express sexuality contrary to social norms, illuminate how discourse serves as disciplinary practices through which patriarchal society transforms women into properly feminine (Bartky 1990). Sexual guilt and shame, which are reinforced by deviant labeling, are part of how individuals, particularly women, come to learn how to manage their



sexuality (Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]) as well as how they come to constitute understandings of their sexual subjectivities.

Within the interviews, disciplinary practices of shame and guilt manifested themselves through conceptualizations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ girls, where ‘good girls’ were those that maintained proper sexual respectability. Miranda indicated that she “*was shy even looking at a sex toy or going to buy myself some lingerie. I think I had a hard time trying to please myself because that wasn’t something good girls would do.*” Consistent with this sentiment Ella indicated that when she uses sexually explicit materials she feels:

*Like a dirty girl like that, jerking off by herself, you know what I mean? Like, if I was more virginal, why would I be doing that? And like I want to be more virginal. And when I do that stuff it takes away from my desire to be more virginal, so I consider myself slutty when I do.*

These quotations speak to a point that is central to Bartky (1990) and Foucault (1978) – social norms are not simply innocuous guidelines, but they serve to actively constitute/constrain bodies and subjectivities. That Miranda was unable to sexually please herself as a result of the deployment of sexual guilt and shame, suggests “the ways that disciplinary practices...are not simply imposed upon, but are taken up by women reveal[ing] the ways in which women collude in their own oppression” (McLaren 2002: 97). Normative discourses are not only inscribed onto bodies, but they also serve to produce and shape bodies. Speaking of the useful (docile) body as the product of disciplinary power, Foucault (1977: 136) says it is “manipulated, shaped, trained [it] obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces.” This is not to say that women are merely passive recipients of power, indeed even Foucault’s (1977) conceptualization conjures up notions of both a passive (e.g., manipulated, shaped, obeying) and active (e.g., becoming skilful) body. For instance, Ella indicated that these feelings of being “*a dirty girl*” or “*slutty*” did not stop her from seeking

out these materials, as she still derived pleasure from them. It did, however, result in her feeling that she was unable and unwilling to disclose this engagement to others.

This is not to say that cultural scripts of sexual respectability, and discourses of shame and guilt, were uncritically appropriated by the women who participated in this research. Catherine understood that this rhetoric stemmed from “*the traditional, patriarchal view of femininity that includes ideas of innocence, chasteness, submission.*” Reference was also made to gender differences of sexual standards. For instance, Sadie opined that:

*Women are always told they have to be in control, you know. Men have no control over their bodies and they just want to have sex with everything. And then the woman has to be like ‘no this is wrong’. All the time, you know? I guess that’s what we’re taught through our lives.*

Being cognizant of the constructed nature of sexual norms, does not mean that these women remain untouched by cultural scripts, as sexual subjectivities are “invested with cultural meanings and cultural meanings inscribed on the body have real physical and political effects” (McLaren 2002: 108). This point is made salient by Charlotte who expressed, “*Not that I’m embarrassed that I use porn, but there is definitely still that kind of like deviant aspect to it that I’ve internalized.*” It also does not mean that these women necessarily viewed dichotomous representations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ female sexuality as entirely distinct categorizations. Kayla, for instance, asserted: “*you don’t want to take home Pamela Anderson, you know, you want to take home like Jennifer Garner, who’s, you know, a minx in bed but can still, you know, make an apple pie.*” Thus a woman, according to my participants, need not be completely void of sexual agency, but her sexuality must be coupled with traditional markers of appropriately feminine to be considered desirable.

## **Interpersonal Scripts**

Relying heavily on the enactment of cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts can be seen as forming the practicalities of the social exchange (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]) and guiding everyday interactions (Escoffier 2007). In assessing the narratives, understandings of, and meaning-making surrounding, ‘the pornographic’, the sexual and engagement with sexually explicit materials coalesced around two categories of interaction: (a) family sexual openness and upbringing; and (b) negotiating the use of these materials with romantic and/or sexual partners.

### ***Family Background and Sexual Openness***

All of the participants had much to say regarding their upbringing with respect to sexual openness and how this served to shape their perspectives of the sexually explicit. Not surprisingly, women’s familial backgrounds varied from being raised in “*a very conservative family, and we never talked about sex. I mean, I am not even allowed to kiss my boyfriend in front of my parents*” (Amanda), to “*like when I was four and I asked how babies are made my mom made me watch National Geographic and see [...] Yeah, very open*” (Lena). Much research on family sexual communication has sought to explore how what parents tell children about sex and sexuality shapes how children come to understand these topics (cf. Elliot 2010). Charged with being sex educators, parents are often deeply invested and concerned about their children’s sexual behaviours and attitudes, which are simultaneously culturally depicted as both non-existing (through rhetoric of sexual innocence and naiveté) and perilous (Elliot 2010). As such, parents are the first source of sexual moral regulation. It is through interaction with parents, commencing from the first

iteration of gender, that renders available particular sexual scripts which change and grow more complex throughout the life course (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]).

Sadie indicated that she did not experience her mother's sexual candidness positively, stating *"I remember the first time my mom showed me, I think I was too young 'cause it kind of scarred me. But she showed me how to put a condom on a banana and I was like 12. I didn't even know what a penis looks like, you know?"* Madison, whose parents were divorced, recalled different and contradictory experiences of sexual openness between her mother and father:

*Well I had two different home environments. So my parents divorced when I was two and my dad, so it's kind of unfair, but my, my dad was a little bit of a circus dad. So, and he played more of a friend role. And that was a very open environment. We talked about everything, you know, as I gave a blow job, he knew it. As soon as I did anything, we talked about it. And, you know, he was just as open with me about his sexuality to try and make me understand better and know what was normal and what wasn't, you know, normal, and all sorts of things. And that was one side. Now the other side, it was my mom's side, and sex was not a topic of conversation. The birds and the bees was about as good as it got and she didn't even want to talk about it. When I was 14 or 15 she found one of my first dildos and vibrator and was horrified and threw it out.*

Although Madison had much to say about the differences between her parents, she also noted that it was the individual interactions she had with her mother and father, and not sexual openness *per se* that had an effect on how she understands the sexuality and positions herself as a sexual being. She explained:

*The prude side that my mom showed me helped me to understand better the stigma that is attached to these sexually explicit materials, especially as a woman, because men all they do is masturbate and watch porn and yadda yadda yadda, and so, so in that respect my mom showed shaped my understanding of the privacy aspect [...] ...my dad shaped the opposite side, the openness, the understanding that everybody is sexual, it is normal and some people are willing to talk about it. [...] I guess they totally did shape that about me, uh, how in terms of how sexually expressive I am? I don't think that, that would change into anything, um, based on how they brought me up. More just shaped my use and my experience with the outside.*

These quotes suggest that the construction of sexual subjectivities is complex and involves the negotiation of cultural norms and interpersonal exchanges. Giddens (1992: 15) highlights that “somehow, in a way that has to be investigated, sexuality functions as a malleable feature of self, a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms.” The public/private dichotomy, which is both contradictory and complimentary, is woven in cultural scripts of sexuality, which then come to structure how we understand and create meanings about our sexual subjectivities. It serves to regulate and constrain action – you can be sexual, but not too much for fear of stigma.

Although most women indicated that they had not connected their upbringing to the meanings they attributed to their engagement with sexually explicit materials prior to partaking in this study, they began to make such connections throughout their interviews. Speaking to this Kayla responded: *“Your parents kind of shape who you are, where it’s nature and nurture. My parents aren’t super sexual. They don’t act super sexual. I’m from them, they raised me, and my friends weren’t super sexual, so I’m probably more of a sexual person.”* This quote serves to reiterate Gagnon and Simon’s (2005 [1973]) contention that sexuality is not only learned, but it is also an interactive process, as “we do not become sexual all at once at puberty” (21). Individuals come to create their selves in constant collaboration with others. Such collaboration is seen when parents name certain child behaviours, or react to certain acts deemed as sexual. For instance, Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]: 25) question: “In what sense can a young child fondling his or her genitalia be described as engaging in masturbation?” It is adults who come to label these acts as sexual and provide the vocabulary, with its cluster of meanings and implied judgments (e.g., the initial expression of shock or disapproving stares), to children. Much of this collaboration,

however, is unseen, or done without thought, by parents, such as the effects of the first iteration of gender as identified by external genitalia, which lead to differences in vigor of play or tolerance of aggression or emotionality. These two experiences – the naming of behaviours as sexual and continued building of gender identities based on genitalia are influential in how individuals come to develop their sexual identities as masculine and feminine, (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]), as well as sexual subjectivities. How we come to explore and understand ourselves as sexual is shaped, at least initially, by these early interpersonal experiences.

For some of the women I spoke with, their sexual upbringing was a source of confusion and tension, serving to negatively shape how they came to view themselves as sexual. Ella mused: *“that’s why part of me, I think, is torn. Possibly the shame I feel is a result of my father’s disapproval of the subject. My mother’s openness at such a young age led me to explore things earlier than I would have liked.”* Mindy indicated that she *“used to feel very ashamed of myself for seeking out materials,”* which was not only related to her mother’s lack of communication surrounding sexuality but also by virtue of the fact that throughout her adolescence she never had her own private room. For Fontayne, the lack of sexual openness in her family *“made me really shy about the whole matter. And like, my first few sexual experiences were horrible, absolutely horrible.”* Similarly, Catherine spoke of the negative ramifications she experienced as a result of her religious upbringing. She reflected: *“I used to pray to God to help me not masturbate. I felt like it was wrong when I was young and I felt even worse that I would engage in sexual acts with my girlfriends. So much guilt. Now I feel the opposite, but at the time, it was difficult. I felt like a horrible person.”* Here we see the link to the regulation of sexual conduct through discourses of guilt

and shame, outlined earlier in the discussion about female sexual respectability. Not only did these cultural scripts come to shape the meanings that structured interpersonal interaction, but they served to frame how Catherine thought of herself.

In a similar manner, participants who were raised in sexually open familial environments indicated that this served to render absent any negativity surrounding sexuality and their use of sexually explicit materials. For instance, Courtney noted that it was *“probably because I experienced such a, like, a sexually open household, that led to not having shame around it, and this could be part of healthy sexuality.”* She hypothesized, *“I think if I lived in a more stringent household where I was told ‘this is bad, this is wrong’ definitely I would have had a hard time with those feelings.”* While the association between parental upbringing and adult engagement with sexually explicit materials appears positively associated, this link was not straightforward for Amanda who reflected:

*If my family was like this and they raised me like this [sexually conservative], how come I was making my Barbie’s have pornographic sex? How come I am into costumes and role-play and all that stuff? I have no clue, I honestly don’t know. I don’t think their conservative views had any effect, unless this is all a form of rebelling against them. But if it is, it is totally unconscious rebelling.*

What all of these narratives suggest is that cultural messages, or scripts, are so normalized that parents, through child-rearing, consciously or unconsciously reiterate these scripts through their interactions with their children, further entrenching cultural norms.

### ***Current Relationships and Negotiating SEM Use***

While this study focused on women’s use of sexually explicit materials for their own sexual pleasure, many women spoke of how they negotiated the use of these materials within the context of their romantic and/or sexual relationships. These interactions, or interpersonal negotiations (Whittier and Melendez 2004), serve to foster shared meaning-making

surrounding these materials and their place within the relationship. They also served, for some women, as an enjoyable, and arguably, gender appropriate way to explore sexual pleasure. For Heidi, using sexually explicit materials in conjunction with her partner was a way of *“exploring and having fun and learning things that maybe you want to try on each other.”* For Miranda, the types of materials she used with her husband to *“change things up and have a bit of fun”* differed from those she used while alone. She elucidated, *“I almost always watch movies with my partner. I don’t usually have an urge to watch movies by myself. [...] However, I’ve used sex toys by myself as well as with my partner.”* For Courtney, watching pornographic films together encouraged conversation about sexual preferences. She explained that these conversations would form *“part of the viewing experience,”* stating *“we’ll stop something and we’ll both watch it for a bit and see if it’s working for us and if it’s not, we’ll talk about why. Like he’ll say ‘do you like this? Why? Why not?’”* This quote aptly illustrates the process of shared sexual meaning-making and mutual dependence involved in interpersonal scripting. Such sexual communication also facilitates intimacy which was found to be important for sexual satisfaction among males (Štulhofer et al. 2010). This finding coincides with Giddens (1992) who states that *“intimacy is above all a matter of emotional communication, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality.”*

While some women indicated that they engaged in discussion surrounding the shared use of sexually explicit materials, the partner initiating such conversations differed. Mona indicated that *“I will have a hard time bringing it up, but my partner will have an easier time.”* For Mona, part of alleviating her discomfort was having a sexual partner who was receptive to her uneasiness with a particular pornographic scene, that is, who could correctly



read the scripts/cues within that particular interaction. She stated that, *“if we clear the air about my discomforts, suddenly it becomes less of a problem for me.”* Other women, such as Angelina, indicated that they were the first to initiate the use of sexually explicit materials with their partners. She relayed: *“When we first started dating it was more like to test him to see if he was into it. I was like ‘you wanna watch a porno video I have?’ And he was like ‘yeah sure’.”* The “test”, according to Angelina, was to assess his comfort level with the fact that she engages extensively with sexually explicit materials, including owning several pornographic videos and previously subscribing to Playboy magazine. Angelina also added that throughout the relationship she would suggest watching a pornographic video as a couple *“if I really wasn’t in the mood but I really wanted to do it [have sex].”* This statement is interesting as it troubles the assertion that for women sex is emotionally, rather than physically motivated.

Oftentimes the negotiation process was not straightforward, neither were the meanings that emerged out the interaction, as we see in this account:

*...in a past relationship, my ex-boyfriend and I used to go to strip clubs together at least once a month. Again, it started off as something I was doing for him, but it turned out it was really for me. It really turned me on, and just made me think about sex and want sex. It was always great sex afterwards. Actually, we stopped going because he was getting concerned about the fact that I was getting so turned on by the strippers and it made him think I couldn’t get turned on by him (Amanda).*

This narrative elucidates the different meanings such interactions might elicit. What commenced as a shared experience between romantic partners, initially identified as being for the male partner, shifted towards an understanding of this engagement as being for the female partner. This served to effectively change the meaning of this shared engagement, particularly for the male partner. The mutually agreed upon negotiations became problematic

when the sexual activity was no longer about, and for, him and his pleasure, and therefore disrupted culturally and socially scripted sexual norms. Women are taught, it is argued, to view sex and the sexual through the heterosexual male gaze; to reiterate and confirm phallocracy (Mulvey 1988 [1975]). That this gaze was disrupted, for instance that Amanda began to achieve pleasure from viewing, as opposed to deriving pleasure from her male partner's pleasure (Diamond 1988), served to threaten the gendered interpersonal script of this interaction.

Although many women spoke of engaging with sexually explicit materials as a couple, a few women recounted that such shared experiences were uncomfortable for several reasons including the fear of judgment. Catherine spoke of an incident involving a previous romantic partner: *"I once was looking at some of my ex-boyfriend's magazines in front of him and he was extremely uncomfortable and embarrassed and asked me to put them away. I can understand that. I don't want someone else looking at what turns me on and potentially judging me either."* Similarly, Stacy indicated that she *"rarely watches porn when I'm with my partner,"* because it *"kind of feels awkward,"* and she fears that if she was to *"pay too much attention to the porn, then he'll feel like 'what the hell are you doing, I'm right here'."* For other women, the discomfort was not related to possible criticism or questioning of the types of materials being used, but rather due to the personal meanings attached to their engagement with these materials. Speaking to her current relationship, Amanda stated that *"he and I don't watch porn together. For him, it makes him feel uncomfortable. And I guess I have gotten used to porn being my own personal time with myself, so that's fine. We do sometimes talk about what we watch and things we have seen."* This idea that engaging with sexually explicit materials was a way to have *"personal"* time with oneself was also

reiterated by Callie who indicated that her engagement *“is a private experience. It’s almost too distracting if it’s with someone else I find.”* Similarly, using sexually explicit materials is, for Catherine, *“your own special time with yourself,”* later indicated that she *“wouldn’t want to give that up under any circumstances.”* These narratives serve to affirm scripts of the sexual as private or as confined to the personal. Feelings of discomfort not only arise because scripts of privacy are disturbed, but also as the result of the possibility of rendering public the personal meanings inscribed to the sexual, making one amenable to judgment. These narratives also speak to the extent to which sexual agency is tied, for these particular women, to their use of these materials.

Having examined some of the cultural and interpersonal scripts which framed the participants meaning-making surrounding their use of sexually explicit materials, this chapter now turns to the level of intrapsychic scripts. Both cultural scenarios and interpersonal scripts are enacted in the public domain (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]), however viewing cultural and social norms as directly affecting individual behaviour is rather simplistic, and ignores the complex interactions between culture, interpersonal encounters and the individual (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973], Whittier and Melendez 2004). Although individuals draw upon cultural meanings through intrapsychic scripting, Whittier and Melendez (2004: 193) note that *“these meanings are altered, combined, and translated into individual-level meanings – which, as such, are not completely synonymous with cultural scenarios as culture is carried and developed, in part, in the everyday activities and uses of individuals.”* What this is to say, is that although cultural sexual norms exist and inform sexual practice, or interpersonal sexual scripting, these practices cannot be wholly reduced to culturally *“preordained categories”* (Whittier and Melendez 2004: 193).

Neither individuals, nor the interpersonal and cultural worlds they inhabit, are passive. As Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]: 315) outline:

The task of the actor is to continually link and adjust and transform and stabilize the interpersonal and the cultural while maintaining the plausibility of the self. At the same time...other individuals and social institutions are always trying to constrain or change the individual.

Thus in this view, individuals do not merely internalize cultural scripts and enact them in interpersonal situations, but rather sexuality is a “moving and ever-changing target” (Whittier and Melendez 2004: 205), influentially contextualized by each level of scripting. It is as a result of analysis of intrapsychic scripting, which explores “what went on in people’s heads” (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]: 313), that individuals can be conceptualized as active and embodied.

### **Intrapsychic Scripts**

It is at the level of the intrapsychic that individuals create personal sexual cultures (Whittier and Simon 2001), as it is here that individuals manage the tension between the public (cultural and interpersonal) and private (intrapsychic) domains. It is through the self management of these contradictions that individuals are said to script or create their sexual selves. This aligns with Plummer (1995: 172) who notes that “we tell stories about ourselves in order to constitute ourselves.” These internal narratives, or self-reflections (i.e., the stories we tell ourselves) serve to guide our social interactions (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973], Whittier and Simon 2001). While these internal narratives may never be acted out in interpersonally, they do influence the ways in which individuals seek out, and understand their use of, sexually explicit materials. Rather than viewing individual sexuality and sexual preferences as over-, or wholly-, determined by social structure and culture, taking into account the processes through which individuals think about ‘the pornographic’, enables a

nuanced account of the interplay between the three levels of scripting and the meaning-making processes that give rise to particular sexual subjectivities. Throughout the transcripts, narratives dealing with intrapsychic scripts, which I have conceptualized as self-reflections of pornographic engagement, coalesced around three themes: (a) negotiating cultural scripts of shame and guilt with interpersonal and individual feelings of pleasure; (b) self-questioning surrounding how one comes to know what their sexual preferences are, and if these are culturally shaped or individually dictated; and (c) notions of desensitization and over-saturation to describe feelings of pornographic excess.

### ***Reflections on Shame, Guilt and Pleasure***

Cultural scripts of female sexual respectability, deployed historically through religious discourses, and interpersonal familial environments and upbringing, served, for many participants, to frame and shape their engagement with sexually explicit materials. However, the disjuncture between these public scripts and the private enjoyment derived from sexually explicit materials also served to complicate this engagement. For Sheridan, trying to resolve internalized<sup>36</sup> religious beliefs with her use of sexually explicit materials was an on-going struggle. She relayed that she was:

*A good little Catholic girl. And then I was a really conservative Christian and so, sometimes it has been really vanilla for a while. And then I'll be like, I feel a little bolder, and then I'll be fine and then I'll watch more stuff and I'll do more stuff, and then I'll back it off again and I don't, you know, then I'll be like 'oh no, I shouldn't be watching this.' And it's all the stuff that I impose on myself. I don't have a partner and nobody else lives in my house. Nobody gives a shit what I watch on the Internet or what I watch on TV. But I'll feel like I shouldn't do that. Or I shouldn't be watching this, right? [...] I think it's just my own sense of guilt and the things that I think should be considered wrong.*

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<sup>36</sup> McLaren (2002) notes that while Foucault avoided the use of the term 'internalization', likely as a result of its psychological overtones, she believes the concept captures how Foucault conceptualized the effects of the exercise of power on the body. She argues: "In general, his descriptions of discipline and training rely on the body's internalization. Internalization occurs through repeated actions that result in habituation" (2002: 106).

These feelings of guilt and shame appears to be a consistent theme not only in this study, but in empirical research on women's use of pornography (cf. Ciclitira 2004), as highlighted in Chapter Two. However, as we previously saw, they are not inherent features of the pornographic, that is, the pornographic itself is not what renders these feelings possible, rather guilt and shame are calculated technologies deployed in the aims of rendering bodies docile, productive and self-governing (Crowley and Kitchin 2008, Rose 1999). Shame and guilt are disciplinary technologies to the extent that each individual is compelled "to care for oneself in the name of the public manifestation of the moral character" (Rose 1999: 73). However, this is not to say that individuals are powerless against these modes of moral (and gendered) responsabilization. Calls for a public ethic of social order, civility and morality are often troubled by private understandings of well-being, and in this instance, pleasure. When I asked Sheridan why, in the face of this on-going tension, she continues to engage with sexually explicit materials, she responded: "*when it comes right down to it, it doesn't make me feel guilty enough that I actually feel bad about myself. If that makes any sense. [...] It's not like self-flagellation, beat yourself, need to go say five Hail Mary's kind of stuff.*" Although feelings of guilt, stemming from the cultural and interpersonal domains, frame her engagement with sexually explicit materials, she made the self (intrapsychic) assessment that the pleasure derived from these materials supersedes these feelings that she was, in her words, imposing on herself.

Catherine also reflected much on her upbringing and how normative religious scripts of sin served to complicate how she understood the interactions in which she engaged. She explained: "*when I was young, I was very religious and was under the impression that masturbation and same-sex anything were a sin, even though I enjoyed participating in both*

*and didn't actually understand why they might be wrong.*" Although she indicated that she has "carried no guilty over these things since I was 15 years old," Catherine rationalized: "I don't think it's a coincidence that a lot of the porn I watch is somewhat degrading, since that degradation is a reflection, in some ways, of the guilt and shame that I perhaps internalized from my home environment." Catherine's narrative surrounding the guilt and shame she felt and the association with her religious upbringing were thought-provoking, particularly when she also added that her self-identification as a feminist also served to add complexity. She acknowledged:

*The degradation that kind of excites me but makes me feel like a horrible person afterwards includes deep-throat oral sex that had the women choking and tearing up, and other videos were a woman had her head held in a toilet while she was being fucked from behind. That video was absolutely wrong, but part of me liked it, and that makes me feel guilty and awful and seriously conflicts with my feminist views. Actually, a lot of what I look for in sexually explicit materials conflicts with how I feel human beings should actually treat one another. I don't know how to resolve that.*

Such tensions surrounding both experiencing sexual arousal while simultaneously having political reservations surrounding the representations, and treatment of women in pornographic depictions, was also found by Ciclitira (2004). It is in fact through the experiencing of feelings of shame and guilt, as Catherine's narrative demonstrates, that individuals come to know that they are engaging with the pornographic and with the obscene. It sets the pornographic apart from the everyday; both pornography and prurience is surrounded by shame (Williams 2008). As much as guilt and shame serve to regulate and constrain, it also enables arousal and physical excitement. Williams (2008) argues that, following from Bataille (1962), it is through this complex tension between prohibition/regulation and its transgression that the erotic and eroticism emerges. Evoking the discussion in Chapter Three surrounding how thoroughly regulated are our spectatorial

experiences, sexual pleasure also emerges from the secrecy surrounding the erotic and the search for the sensual through the process of confessional (Foucault 1978).

For many of my participants, engagement with sexually explicit materials was a complex negotiation between conflicting cultural scripts of female sexual passivity/innocence and pornographic scripts of commoditized female sexual prowess. This served to complicate understandings of one's own sexual subjectivity. For instance, Ella indicated that she *"feel[s] pressure to act like a porn star when I see these materials, when in reality I want to act like a virgin. I am torn between the two [...] between acceptance and rejection."* Tania also admitted that she was *"kind of a little bit torn."* Amanda commented, in relation to this tension between receiving pleasure from these materials and their place within broader society that *"it's weird that I feel this way, because I think I am very sexually open and I am fine with expressing myself sexually. But I really hate the commercialization of sexuality, especially female sexuality."* These quotations serve to highlight that the tensions which arise from the act of spectatorship requires the viewer to both identify and disidentify with the images they are screening (Ward 2013).

Through film, audiences are called to view both voyeuristically, through objectification, and vicariously, through subjectification (Boorstin 1990, Mulvey 1988 [1975]). As a result, Diamond (1988: 398) argues that "for women, watching porn draws us into a complex knot of pleasure and discomfort," as women's experiences with pornography are complicated by cultural scripts (Boynton 1999). Women's sexual subjectivities emerge from conflicting accounts of appropriate femininity. On the one hand, as noted earlier in this chapter, women's sexuality is tied with discourses of respectability, restraint and passivity (Conrad 2006, Crowley and Kitchin 2008), on the other, "our culture equates women's



sexuality with sexual availability; we learn from an early age to be coy, to flirt, to move seductively to make men respond to us. We learn to feel pleasure at the other's pleasure, to project sexuality in response to men's desire" (Diamond 1988: 398). While women, as demonstrated in the quotes above, may be aroused by the images they are screening, this pleasure is complicated by the notion that women are taught to screen these images through the male gaze (Diamond 1988, Mulvey 1988 [1975]). Thus, women spectators are simultaneously objectifiers and objectified, resulting in tensions and feelings of being 'torn', as noted by my participants. Diamond (1988: 398) explains that "whatever pleasure we experience is often mixed with anxiety about our own sexuality being so different from that shown and anger at being forced into a role that does not represent who we are and what we need sexually." These feelings of anxiety or tension are not the result of the pornography images *per se*, but how these images contradict the visions we have created of our sexual selves.

### ***Reflections on How You Know You Like What You Really Like***

In addition to highlighting the internal, and often contradictory, scripts that they engaged with in understanding their engagement with sexually explicit materials, some of the women I spoke with also engaged in introspection surrounding how they came to prefer certain sexual representations over others. For instance, Charlotte stated that she was "*sometimes...a little surprised about what would get me excited. Like just, you know, specifically the online porn and stuff in relation to the machines with dildos or sex toys on them.*" Mona wondered "*to what extent what's easily available, like how much that informed my preferences now, because it's easily available maybe I've accustomed myself to using that as the easiest thing.*" The idea that one is not fully cognizant of where their

preferences for certain sexual behaviours came from was also brought up by Laura, who participated in the focus group taking place in the National Capital Region. She reflected:

*I always wonder, like, people that watch a lot of video porn how much they're acting, like in the bedroom. Like how much of this is actually natural and how much is like that you have seen and re-enacting it. You know? I don't know. That's kind of why I kind of stopped. Like, am I just being her? Like I just want to be myself, you know. [...] For me, I started to, I recognized it. So I was like, just stopped. It was kind of ruining it for me. But maybe it doesn't. Maybe people could just like to act like that, like somebody else. But for me, I wanted to be me.*

This insight led to brief silence among the other focus group participants, as well as some seemingly uncomfortable discussion. In response, Stacy commented that *“it's not something that I think about. And now I'm thinking about it.”* Rowan surmised, *“I've just been watching porn or consuming it in different ways for so long now that I don't really know.”*

Such introspection leads us back to the line of questioning posed by Ward (2013), and highlighted in Chapter Three – is there such a thing as a self unmediated by culture and untouched by interaction?

Butler (1999 [1990]) challenges the notion that there exists a self that is pre-existing and socially unmarked. Sex, and by extension gender, is imposed on individuals at the first utterance of ‘it's a boy’ or ‘it's a girl’ (Butler 1999 [1990], Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). This is often done while the child's physical body is still in-utero – as decisions parents make are based on genitals: what colour to paint its room, what toys are acceptable, the selection of a suitable masculine or feminine name. We are gendered before we are born. Gender is not inscribed in genitalia; rather it is bestowed onto us as a result of genitals (Crawley et al. 2008). Thus the unsexed and ungendered subject is an impossibility (Butler 1999 [1990]). How we come to know our role in the sex (i.e., pursuer or pursued, active or passive, penetrated or penetrator) and our sexual preferences are the result of interactions

and meanings layered upon sexed and gendered selves. It relates to how we come to reconcile and negotiate the various cultural scripts surrounding the sexual, with the interpersonal and intrapsychic.

That pornography shapes sexual subjectivities is no more alarming than the realization that law and religion also shapes sexual subjectivities. Subjectivities are produced (Butler 1999 [1990]). They are the effect of discourse and the outcome of scripting. The concern with knowing a 'real' sexual self outside of cultural influences is likely the result of calls (sexual panics?) that pornography alters how men come to view women only as sexual objects (despite that to a certain extent objectification is what renders successful all films; it is a property of spectatorship (Boorstin 1990)), that it reduces sex merely to carnal pleasure and removes it from the private domains of the intimate, reproductive and emotional (Dines 2010). However, who is to say that the latter vision of the sexual is any more 'real' or unharmful than the pornographic vision? Juffer (1998: 4) highlights that

So much of the history of women and sexuality has been one of containment to a private sphere of procreation. Furthermore, that history is still with us; the continued attempts to regulate pornography are just one example of how women get connected to a private sphere that needs to be protected from explicit sexual representations, where we are positioned as victims or moral regulators.

Perhaps the important question is not whether or not pornography comes to shape the sexual, or how much, because, as like all regulatory cultural discourses, it does, but rather why do we ascribe to pornography so much power in this shaping and its ability to inscribe? Why are we more concerned with the effects of 'the pornographic' on sexuality, than the religious or the medical? Attention to the supposed negative effects of pornography, such as sexual overstimulation and desensitization can shed some light here.

### ***Reflections on Desensitization and Over-Saturation***

A particularly interesting script that some of the women I interviewed negotiated with in the framing of their sexual selves was that of desensitization and over-saturation. Calling for its censorship and/or abolishment, pornography as degradation feminists have argued that the use of pornography results in an increased need for more explicit, violent, degrading and misogynistic imagery as a result of a purported desensitization process (cf. Dines 2010, Paul 2005). Cline (1994) outlines desensitization process through which sexually explicit materials that were once found to be simultaneously shocking, deviant, repulsive and sexually arousing, become, for the spectator, commonplace, boring and acceptable, leading to a diminishment of sexual arousal derived from pornographic spectatorship. This alleged association between increased pornography and decreased sexual sensitivity is not only popularized in feminist discourse, but also in popular media.<sup>37</sup> The notion that sexual excess is a fundamental characteristic of pornography is so embedded in cultural discourse that it is not surprising that some participants identified it as particularly troubling.

Of the five women who reflected on their feelings desensitization and pornographic over-saturation, three women attributed this to their involvement in the sex industry. Working at an adult store, in which pornographic videos played on television screens throughout the day, Fontayne admitted that she *“got really desensitized really quick [...] Yeah, you do it for so long, it’s like doing math after a certain while.”* Similarly, Laura indicated that by virtue of her previous employment as a pornographic cartoonist, such

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<sup>37</sup> For instance, *Psychology Today* published an article entitled “As Porn Goes Up, Performance Goes Down?” (2010) features men’s confessions of pornographic excess and subsequent erectile dysfunction. The author explains this phenomenon as a product of brain chemistry desensitization to heavy stimulation, and discounts theorizations that shame, rather than pornography, may serve as an explanation for erectile difficulties. The solution offered is for men to stop masturbating entirely to “unwire” the brain and encourage recovery.

imagery does not evoke feelings of sexual titillation or arousal. She stated: *“I think I’ve been desensitized to it honestly. ‘Cause like I used to make porn sites. I wasn’t on them, but I made cartoon porn, whatever, all kinds of stupid stuff. So I don’t really...like when I watch it, it’s sort of like an image and it doesn’t really mean anything.”* Both of these quotes are interesting as they speak to the notion that meanings are not inherent in pornographic representations, but rather meanings are inscribed into these images by viewers (Miller 2008, Soble 2002). As outlined in Chapter Three, disciplinary practices surrounding sexual spectatorship serve to construct ‘the pornographic’. Prohibitions around ‘the pornographic’ (i.e., where, when and by whom it can be seen) work to restrict, as well as generate, obscenity (Butler 2000). It is the investment of ‘sexual truths’ onto pornography, as well as its concealment, that allows for feelings of arousal and titillation upon its revelation (Williams 2008). However, when pornography becomes mundane, or every day, as it did for both Fontayne and Laura by virtue of their previous employment, prohibitions that constrain and sustain sexual fantasizing and arousal (Butler 2000) are lifted. Without such prohibitions to dictate what is ‘pornographic’, and therefore obscene and literally off/screen (Williams 2008), these representations become no different than others which are culturally available.

Being involved in various aspects of the sex-positive community also caused Jayde to experience what she described as “sex-positive burnout,” not only with respect to her engagement with sexually explicit materials, but with sexual realm as a whole. She described:

*There were a couple of years of my life where it sort of became, because I really plunged in the midst of being in a really sex-positive community, porn became like daily affair, it was always around. And then after a couple of years I just sort of hit the wall of like sexual saturation and sex positive. I know it sounds fucked-up to be sex-positive burnout, but like I don’t want every event I got to,*

*everything I do at home and you know, everything I'm making in terms of my art, and whatever, to be revolving around sex. I just sort of killed it for myself.*

Jayde's realization that all of her interpersonal interactions not only involved sex, but also an identification as sex-positive, served to trouble the perception of having a self not bound to the sexual. There is a point of sexual excess, as this quote suggests, that must be broken away from if we seek "through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality – to counter the grips of power" (Foucault 1978: 157).

While all three of these women indicated that they felt the excesses of pornography as a result of their employment or engagement within sexualized communities, this did not result in the need to obtain more graphic sexual depictions, contrary to Cline's (1994) assertion that desensitization leads viewers to seek out new and more repugnant materials. Instead, it encouraged these particular women to engage in other sexually explicit genres. For Laura this meant "*call people up, like 'let's have phone sex,'*" while Fontayne turned to engaging with sex toys without the aid of pornographic videos. Jayde, on the other hand, sought to foster clearer boundaries between her public and private sexual self, by finding other social outlets to divest her time.

This is not to indicate that the anti-pornography feminist concern that oversaturation leads to difficulties achieving sexual arousal without repeated and heightened pornographic imagery is without merit. Rather, it is without nuance. For instance, Paul (2005) suggests that "it's not as if most men intend to get into bestiality, child pornography or rape re-enactments," but that this is the outcome of becoming indifferent to certain sexual representations, which leads to men seeking out different types of 'extreme' materials to satisfy sexual urges. What this account of desensitization and oversaturation fails to account for, however, is the thought-process invoked by individual viewers as they engage in the

spectatorial experience. For instance, Stacy spoke of the self-reflection she engages in: *“Like you can only watch the same thing over and over again so many times before you think great, I’m getting me off, what else is there. I don’t know if that’s good or bad because you can get into a territory where you’re like ‘is this wrong’ or, like, ‘is this still ok?’.”*

Although this self-questioning did not prevent Stacy from engaging with sexually explicit materials, this quote challenges the assertion that pornographic spectators do not critically reflect upon the images that they are consuming.

Angelina was the only participant that indicated that her continuous engagement with pornographic videos resulted in a cycle of dependency. She reflected:

*Sometimes you get bored ‘cause it’s like, I want something new. I want something more. I want something different. And then, so the only thing is like you get a little too desensitized. [...] it can be like, you get so desensitized to seeing all these videos, it’s like, sometimes it’s not enough to be with him. So I really have to put myself in those porn scenarios, which, that could be a little negative, because I can’t be one-on-one with him. I feel like it’s not enough sexually. I literally have to go to the porn to have an orgasm.*

Angelina expressed that she was unsure of whether she should have relayed this to me, as she believed that it demonstrated the potentially detrimental effects of engaging with pornography. However, I indicated to her that the purpose of this research to gain an understanding of women’s engagement with sexually explicit materials – whether seemingly positive or negative. While this quote does appear, on the surface, to substantiate assertions that repeated exposure to sexually explicit imagery leads to the seeking out of materials that are increasingly more explicit and more obscene to achieve sexual arousal, a closer reading suggests that Angelina did not alter the materials she engaged with, by seeking out materials with greater degrees of explicitness, but rather altered how she engaged with the materials in order to derive pleasure. As demonstrated by the assertion that she *“really [has] to put*

*[her]self in those porn scenarios,*” to achieve sexual pleasure, Angelina speaks to the shift between voyeuristic and vicarious spectatorship, from simply viewing the images we are screening to actively identifying with them and treating them as surrogates for ourselves. Indeed, oversaturation and desensitization to visceral sensations of arousal, disgust, horror or delight is the reason why films are built to include vicarious and voyeuristic identifications with the characters or scenarios (Boorstin 1990). Without these identifications the film would fail to captivate its audience.

This requirement of identifying with the characters or sexual depictions being screened brings up an interesting observation with respect to the interrelatedness of, and contradictions inherent within, the three levels of scripting. As a cultural artifact, pornographic scripts emphasize particular standards of beauty, constant sexual availability, sexual insatiability, excitement of sexual novelty and sex for recreation (Brosius et al. 1993, Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]). This is in contrast to normative cultural scripts that inscribe the act of sex with feelings of affection, intimacy and expressions of love, which are rarely depicted in pornography (Brosius et al. 1993). In this manner, ‘the pornographic’ can be viewed, using Bakhtin’s (1984 [1965]) conceptualization of the carnivalesque, where all of the rules, inhibitions, restrictions and regulations which structure the everyday are suspended; it is “a world inside out” (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 11). Of course, as outlined in Chapter Three, ‘the pornographic’ is not void of regulation, it is in fact regulatory and penetrated by a myriad of conventions that not only constrain sexual explicitness, but render it possible (Escoffier 2007, Sobchack 2002). It is in this contradiction of cultural scripts that fantasy is made possible (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]).



Fantasy, which is “articulated through an individual’s intrapsychic scripts” is intrinsically self-centered, “represent[ing] the *private* world of wishes and desires...linked to social meanings and actions” (Escoffier 2007: 62). Cultural and intrapsychic scripts converge in sexual interactions with a partner, giving rise to interpersonal scripts, where they are often misaligned, leading to miscommunication and misinterpretations (Seal et al. 2007). Sexual interactions are relational; it is the shared process of intimate meaning-making that gives rise to sexual satisfaction (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973], Štulhofer et al. 2010). Gagnon and Simon (2005 [1973]: 207-208) argue that the “rapid onset of boredom with stag films when they are viewed without other persons present probably derives from the absence of sufficient cues internal to the film for integrating the presented materials and motivating arousal.” In this manner, it can be argued that it is sexual self-centeredness, or the over-identification with the intrapsychic as a consequence of neo-liberal hyper-individualism (Rose 1999), that results in difficulties “developing or sustaining intimate sexual relations...rather than the much maligned exposure to pornography” (Štulhofer et al. 2010: 176). If we have come to socially construct all that is sexually arousing with ‘the pornographic’, and sexual fantasizing is the outcome of the disjuncture between cultural scripts of the sexual and intrapsychic scripts, it is unsurprising that for some individuals, the meanings created out of sexual interactions would be the source of contention and frustration.

### **Sexual Scripts and Subjectivities**

Sexuality has been variously conceptualized as a source of victimization or empowerment for women. It is simultaneously an arena in which women experience physical and symbolic violence and disempowerment (Bourdieu 2001, Rubin 1975), and one

in which can potentially provide empowerment, as a source of pleasure and self-knowledge (Lorde 1984). It is also a site of regulation and surveillance (Bartky 1990, Foucault 1978). Female sexuality, under this conceptualization, has been framed as located at the nexus of pleasure and danger (Shalet et al. 2003, Tolman 1994, Vance 1984). Nowhere is this pleasure/danger nexus more salient than within cultural scripts of female sexual passivity and respectability, which, tied to contemporary understandings of gender and interactions at the interpersonal and intrapsychic levels, shapes perceptions and understandings of one's sexual nature (Conrad 2006).

Along with sociocultural variables, both sexual subjectivity, an individual's sense of self as an agentic sexual being, and identity, the ways people view, and position themselves as sexual beings in the social sphere, are implicated in the construction of a sexual self (Plante 2007). According to Daniluk (1998: 15):

The sexual self is a fluid, complex entity consisting of various forms of self-relevant knowledge...beliefs and perceptions that a woman holds about the sexual aspects of herself...It is a product of the private and the public, the personal and the political, the individual and her context."

This combination of the private and the public, or the individual and context, is evocative of Gagnon and Simon's (2005 [1973]) sexual scripting theory which proposes that sexual conduct and understanding is organized via the interplay between the cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic. While the previous chapter placed how the women I interviewed spoke of their experiences engaging with sexually explicit materials in theorizations of identity, including the myriad of identity shifts occurring through the life course, this chapter works to trouble simplified understandings of identity through connections with the meaning-making process that gives rise to particular sexual subjectivities.

Holloway and Jefferson (1998: 418) highlight that “in the historical absence of positions which construct women as active sexual subjects, practices attempting to forge such a position...are constantly in conflict with dominant discursive constructions of female (and therefore also of male) sexuality.” The conditions that make possible feminist discourse wherein women are able to position themselves as subjects of sexual desire rather than objects, argue Holloway and Jefferson (1998) have been met, given the rise of neo-liberal rationalities which give rise to independent individualism, and a cultural environment defined as *hypersexualized*. We are now charged with becoming active agents responsabilized to make choices among the myriad of sexual discourses available. The choices we make motivate action (interpersonal) and guide thoughts (intrapsychic). Framing the meaning-making process within the theoretical framework of sexual scripts facilitates the opening of a discursive space for understanding women’s sexual agency as one that is not simply passive to cultural scripts and dominant discourses, but is responsive to it. As was demonstrated throughout this chapter, the women I interviewed actively negotiated with the cultural scripts available to them, using them to understand and to trouble, their engagement with sexually explicit materials. It is through the embodiment, negotiation and self-reflection of both cultural and interpersonal scripts that women came to understand their sexual selves, that is, their feelings about their engagement with sexually explicit materials, the place of these materials within the context of their relationships, and the extent to which these materials serve to shape sexual desire.

While I have called this chapter ‘Making Meaning’, traces of resistance are evident throughout, as the narratives selected demonstrate how my participants worked through tensions and contradictions to create meanings significant to them. This is evocative of

Foucault's insistence that "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (1978: 95). Power does not operate from above on captive individuals, rather it is relational. Similarly it is simplistic to assert that individual action and thought is wholly determined by cultural scripts. Rather, individuals engage with these scripts, breathe life into them and render them situationally and personally meaningful. The following chapter seeks to explore this notion of resistance more fully, by outlining the ways the women I spoke to not only outright rejected scripts, and visual representations of, 'the pornographic', but also questioned and/or avoided them.

## VIII. MAKING CHANGE: AGENCY, RESISTANCE and TRANSGRESSION

Throughout the course of conducting this research an important question kept resurfacing: in my participants' engagement with the potentially problematic space of the sexually explicit, where does agency fit in and where lies the possibility for resistance? In the previous chapter I detailed the various cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts that framed and constrained how the women I interviewed understood sexually explicit materials as well as their engagement with these materials. While these scripts served to shape sexual subjectivities, they were not uncritically absorbed, or internalized. What emerged from the narratives were discussions surrounding how these 26 women negotiated, reflected on and troubled cultural scripts and dominant discourses. It is in these problematizations, or "minor engagements [that] do not have the arrogance of programmatic politics" (Rose 1999: 279) that resistance is rendered visible. It is through the conflicting and intertwining trajectories of cultural scripts and dominant discourses that spaces of introspection, negotiation and modification emerge.

In this chapter I seek to trouble the conceptualization of resistance as something that requires a revolutionary and radical plan to completely overthrow that which it is trying to resist (Thomas and Davis 2005). Instead, evident throughout the narratives of the 26 women who participated in this research, were accounts of everyday acts of resistance by women who actively and regularly engaged with sexually explicit materials – an act that can be, and for some of the women I interviewed was, constitutive of an act of resistance in and of itself (cf. Scott 1985). Power and resistance are intertwined (Foucault 1978) – they cannot be separated. As argued in Chapter Three, and following from Escoffier (2007), pornography functions as a regulatory discourse (i.e., as power). Thus, the pornographic images on

display, and/or being screened, are always challenged, flexible and in flux, as it is the spectator/viewer who inscribes meaning to these images (Soble 2002). As such, the focus of this chapter is mainly on discursive resistance, that is, resistance to the various messages and/or discourses surrounding ‘the pornographic’. However, narratives of physical resistance were also present, as will also be elucidated in this chapter. In connecting these accounts to existing literature on agency and resistance, stale gendered assumptions about women’s sexual passivity can be complicated. In other words, resistance, whether discursive or physical, is one way we can render visible agency.

This chapter commences where the previous chapter concluded – with an examination of the normative discourses surrounding women’s sexual desire, gendered sexual pleasure and women’s engagement with male-centric materials – this time attending to how these discourses were contested. The quotes herein presented, serve to challenge assumptions that pornographic spectators passively absorb the images that they are screening, by highlighting the various ways sexually explicit representations and meanings, whether discursively or physically, were problematized and contested. After exploring how the participants modified, resisted or rejected dominant discourses which served to constrain their understandings of their engagement with sexually explicit materials, this chapter then turns to how, resisting scripts of pornography as wholly degrading (cf. Dines 2010), the women I spoke to were able to find validation and empowerment, an act of transgression.

### **Troubling Versions of Women’s Sexual Desire as Depicted by ‘Women’s Porn’**

Although feminist pornography is a genre that depicts hard-core sexual imagery, ‘women’s porn’ was largely understood by many of my participants as being about romance and soft-core displays of nude women. When I asked if they had used, or sought out,

pornography identified as for women, Paris indicated that she “*never thinks about it really,*” while Stacy noted previously seeking it out, but that “*it usually takes you to websites that have stories like erotica, sometimes it’s got pictures of guys. But to be quite frank, I don’t want to see naked pictures of guys, that’s not what turns me on.*” Other women who had sought out women-centered sexually explicit materials echoed similar sentiments, that what they found was not representative of what they experienced as sexually pleasurable.

The common impression the women I interviewed had of ‘women’s porn’ was that it ‘soft’ and focused on romance. Speaking to her experiences viewing these materials, Catherine asserted that she does *not* “*like so-called women’s erotic which seems to be all flowing satin, long-stem roses and gentle caresses. I think it would fair to say that don’t like anything that hints of lovemaking in my porn, whether in textual or image form.*” Although Callie indicated that she sought out sexually explicit materials with “*some sort of creative element,*” she still wanted to “*see the action [...] something a little more animalistic, bestial, penetration or whatever it happens to be about, sex, sexually explicit where you see them engaging in sexual acts. It’s not through a lens or under a blanked or whatever, from the neck down.*” For Jayde, the issue with ‘women’s porn’ was not that it depicted romantic notions of sex, but that this representation was classed and racialized, highlighting that, “*yeah, there’s silk and satin going on and like the Fabio-type character. It’s a very, like, white, middle-class version of pornography for women, in my opinion.*” Interestingly, it is mainstream/malestream pornography that is frequently accused of ignoring, or alternately capitalizing on the stereotypical representations of class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and age (cf. Bronstein 2011). That pornography glorifies white, middle class heterosexuality

as the only ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ expression of human sexuality is consistent with those characteristics in Western society that serve as markers of privilege.

For other participants, the concept of ‘porn for women’ evoked ideations of romance novels. This is unsurprising as romantic and erotic literature is subsumed under the rubric of sexually explicit materials geared for women (cf. Hazen 1983, Smith 2007). Although, as highlighted in Chapter Six some participants preferred romance and erotic novels, others thought of them as *“the age old way of it”* (Rowan). Catherine understood that there was a market for romance novels, but found problematic the overall *“misconceptions on what women find sexy,”* indicating that *“there are a group of women that enjoy this, but I don’t think they’re representative.”* Acknowledging the social acceptability of women’s use of romantic and/or erotic fiction, Mona surmised: *“The traditional image of that is these, you know, housewives reading Harlequin romance or something like that. And maybe they still do.”* Although Mona acknowledges that some women may engage with these materials, she added, *“I think it’s also become slightly more acceptable to look at, you know, outright visually stimulating material.”* This social acceptability of women’s use of more visually explicit sexually explicit materials was not universally supported by the research participants, with many of them noting that normative gendered discourses of women’s sexual arousal contrasted with those that viewed men as ‘naturally’ more visually stimulated.

### **Challenging Gendered Discourses That Women Are Not Visually Inclined**

Rejecting normative gendered conceptualizations surrounding the use of sexually explicit materials, Catherine explained:

*Well it’s not normalized, right? And I think this is one of the most important things about women using porn. Why is it acceptable for us to ‘oh guys are just like that’ or ‘we expect that from men’? I’m sorry, but when I hear all of these expectations for men I don’t feel any different from this. I don’t feel there is any*



*difference from a man doing this and what is going on in my own head. So I hate that there is such a thing in society that well 'that's ok for them' and then we build up a whole bunch of other rules around it. [...] You know, I just think that's really messed up and the more women are using pornography or just talking about sex or being open about it, the more that starts to equalize.*

Challenging the gender dichotomy, this quote serves to elucidate the ways in which women's engagement with sexually is potentially transformative. By providing women spaces of transgression, and spaces to speak about their transgression of normative boundaries or gendered 'rules', sexually explicit materials can be re-envisioned, changing the ways in which they are thought of and spoken of, normalizing and rendering everyday women's use (Juffer 1998, Ward 2013).

Being aware of the historical context surrounding gendered and "old school" rhetoric that women should not be sexually pleasuring themselves, "because you're not even having sex to procreate and that's the only reason for it," was important for Madison, who rejected these ideals. Even though she could "understand where it comes from," and took certain precautions to ensure that "those stigmas don't come back to haunt you," such as keeping private her engagement with sexually explicit materials, Madison indicated that "in my world, that's bullshit." Mona also spoke to the context surrounding the cultural script that women are not sexually aroused by, or interested in, sexually explicit materials, arguing that:

*It's not that I don't think women are capable of it, I think they're conditioned not to be. They're conditioned to, maybe not so much these days [...] they are supposed to not like this stuff because it's objectifying to women, because it's supposed to be all about men and all of this bullshit. I don't really agree with that.*

As highlighted in Chapter One, there exists a corpus of research on female sexual arousal which contends that women are 'naturally' aurally aroused whereas men are more visually stimulated (cf. Abramson and Pinkerton 1995). Although such assertions have been recently

contradicted by scientific and experimental research (Kukkonen et al. 2007, Polan et al. 2003), they remain normative regulatory discourses that serve to shape how the women I spoke with viewed their engagement with sexually explicit materials. For instance, during her interview, Paris reiterated these discourses as ‘true’, however, through additional probing, recognized a contradiction between her adherence to these beliefs and her lived experience. The exchange occurred as follows:

Paris: *I think based on research, yeah, men are more visual and women are more imaginatory...*

O.M.: *But based in your real life? Like in your life, is this applicable?*

Paris: *No. I prefer videos to reading. I prefer not having to think about it. I guess I'm lazy (laughs) [...] Yeah, I think it's true for, for like other facets of life. Like women are more auditory and men are more visual. When it comes to porn I think everybody's pretty much equal.*

While Paris conceded that these discourses did not accurately represent her experiences, she maintained that there was some merit to it, suggesting how effective they are in serving to regulating and constrain understandings of gendered sexual arousal.

Other women, however, outright rejected discourses that women were not as visually stimulated. Angelina asserted: *“I like porn. I'm visual. I want to see it. Like reading? I don't know. I don't know if I've done that. I just need to see things. In the magazines and, like, um in videos. Mostly I just need to see videos. I need to see action.”* For Sheridan, visual stimulation was not only achieved through watching pornographic films, but could also be realized through imagining an erotic story: *“Everybody says that men are visual creatures. Well women are just as bad, I'm sorry. So I can sit there and read about it and it's just as visual to me as watching it on the screen.”* The notion that sexual arousal necessarily relied on the display of explicitly nude bodies were problematized by Jayde who stated:

*Well I mean, you can think of the display, but you can also think of the anti-display as well. As much as 'tits on a tray' are attractive to some people, as well*

*that idea of restraint and the buttoned-up collar, or that kind of thing can be just as titillating to people. And the absence of revelation can be just as titillating as the 'here it is'.*

This narrative not only challenges the discourse that women are not visually stimulated, but also that introduces the notion that visual stimulation can occur in the absence of pornographic norms.

### **Problematizing Gendered Discourses of Women as Sexually Passive**

Several of the women I interviewed also spoke against discourses of a constrained and subdued female sexuality. Angelina asserted:

*As a collective in North America, women still, the ideas that are currently put forward in today's society that we're living in, is that women don't own their bodies and that men own our bodies. But I feel, personally that, no, I'm not just going along with that. I'm rejecting that and saying 'No. No man owns my body. I own my own body.' I do whatever I want in the bedroom, if this is what I say goes, this is what goes. I still take the man into consideration of course, and what he wants, you know, but it's a compromise and we're equal in the bedroom.*

Angelina not only actively resists this discourse of passive female sexuality, but also asserted corporeal ownership, becoming an active participant in her sexual life. However, coming to this realization is not without challenge, particularly since, as Miranda suggested, these boundaries have been part of one's socialization since childhood. She disclosed:

*"Growing up in a very strict family, I thought it was not socially acceptable to be a sexual woman, especially to sexually please yourself." It was only after Miranda left home to pursue university education that she "became aware of my own sexuality, [and] slowly started to experiment with sexually explicit material." In this respect Miranda indicated that she began purchasing lingerie as it "seemed more socially acceptable to wear lingerie than to buy toys. As if it wasn't so risky and it is appropriate for women to wear sexy things for themselves and for their partners." Although contesting those norms instilled by her family,*

she challenged them within the confines of those boundaries, using only those sexually explicit materials that were appropriately feminine (Attwood 2005c, Storr 2003), and that could simultaneously be used to enhance their male partner's sexual arousal.

When asked why they believed such normative gendered discourses surrounding female sexuality still exist, Callie responded that *"they're trying to protect women and their delicate sensibilities."* This response served to initiate much discussion within the Greater Toronto Region focus group. Catherine asserted that *"in certain ways it's ok for women to like these materials if these materials are more about the romance or its more about the relationship [...] Rather than just no apologies, this is how I'm turned on, this is how I'm going to get off."* Jayde associated the continued iteration of these discourses, as well as the tacit acceptance of women's use of romantically inclined 'women's porn' with maintaining the heteronormative, procreative, family unit. She stated:

*You're allowed to like sex, just as long as you don't like it too much. This is just sort of that. I feel like the women's only porn, or the satin and feathers porn, is what I think of, in that rhetoric. It's sort of, like you say, sort of a doorway, a foot into pornography, so it's safe because, you know, it's not that raunchy and it's not, you know, 'oh people who are also married and in couple's counseling watch this stuff too, so it's ok,' right. We're not, you know, a dominatrix. I don't want to lash my husband with a cat-o-nine tails. I don't want to put a butt plug in his ass, so it's ok for me to, you know, want to watch two people making love, as opposed to somebody calling their partner 'daddy', you know.*

This narrative evokes the argument that the use of sexually explicit materials by women is deemed socially acceptable so long as it does not serve to disrupt patriarchal discourses of female sexuality and pleasure, which limit it to social sanctioned heterosexual marriage, motherhood and reproduction (Kipnis 1996, Lacey 1993).

Some of the participants noted that being candid about their use of sexually explicit materials, and with transgressing normative sexual boundaries, had negative implications in

their interactions with male colleagues and partners. Not being able to freely discuss her use of sexually explicit materials with some of her male friends without being accused of *“talking like a truck driver or something,”* made Mona feel as if she was *“trapped inside a prude’s body.”* Although in her experience, some men *“find it a turn-on if you watch porn and are sexually open,”* Tania conceded that *“a lot of guys find that to be intimidating too,”* indicating that there still exists *“a stigma with women that are too sexually open.”* Indeed, that words such as ‘slut’ or ‘whore’ continue to carry with them negative connotations which serve to equate women’s identity with the sexual acts they engage in (Pheterson 1993), render stigma as regulatory. This coincides with Oerton and Phoenix (2001: 387) who argue that *“for women, sex is problematic. Embodied, potentially erotic, intimate, physical encounters are perilous because if women are seen to be doing them outside a narrowly circumscribed set of context (namely with one man, in private and as an expression of desire), then they risk imputations of disreputability and immorality.”*

That power and resistance exist in a symbiotic relationship (Foucault 1978), does not mean that everyday acts of resistance (Scott 1985) that frame relations of power will not be met with further contestation, as these quotes suggest. Individuals consistently make gendered choices in a context inscribed with continual confirmations (reward) and disruptions (punishment) of those choices (Crawley et al. 2008). Although most women conceded that this stigma exists, many actively spoke about their engagement as an act of resistance, challenging the discourse of a ‘correct’ or ‘appropriate’ female sexuality. As Stacy put it *“I think it’s more kind of trying to break down that barrier,”* not acquiesce to it entirely.

## Engaging With Sexually Explicit Materials as an Act of Resistance

While many of the narratives elicited from the interviews spoke in some manner to resistance against normative sexed boundaries, either at the discursive or non-discursive level, some women spoke to how the act of engaging with sexually explicit materials was itself a physical act of resistance and transgression. As a result of societal norms which frame, and regulate, the pornographic as *“kind of one of those taboo things,”* Kayla indicated that *“you feel kind of rebellious but you’re not actually doing anything wrong.”* Even the act of participating in this research made Mona *“feel slightly deviant,”* particularly around the realization that *“there are other women in here who are wanting to talk about sex, so I’m not just the only one, and I know that’s the case right. But it still surprises me sometimes, and I hate that I’m surprised that most women like sex.”* The notion that women do want to talk about their sexual experiences was also identified by Stacy who opined *“that may be part of the reason that some women talk about it, because they know there’s a stigma, and they realize that they’re stepping out of the boundaries of what’s accepted.”* Similarly, Sheridan noted the stigma that she felt she was expected to feel, stating: *“you knew you weren’t supposed to be [talking about it]. You knew, you thought you were supposed to be embarrassed about it.”* That these women believed that they should experience feelings of deviancy or stigma surrounding their use of sexually explicit materials is part of how ‘the pornographic’ serves to regulate and constrain behaviour. It is through these feelings that we know we are engaging in the illicit (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]), and as such are stepping outside normative boundaries of the ‘everyday’. That these women were not only able to acknowledge that they ‘should be’ experiencing these feelings, but to

deny they felt them, serves as an act of transgression blurring, or troubling, the public/private dichotomy (Lacey 1993).

While engaging with sexually explicit materials themselves can be viewed, as suggested by these quotes, as an act of resistance, the women I spoke with also described strategies they used while engaging with these materials that could also be framed as resistive or transgressive of normative boundaries. That the women I spoke with engaged in such strategies of resistance does not mean that they did not continue to trouble, or find problematic, the images they were screening. Mona reconciled this tension by accepting the function of sexually explicit materials stating, *“even stuff in the real world that I might be offended by, in the context of pornography I might not be, because I understand that it fuels people’s fantasies. I might be mortified momentarily but then I’ll just move on.”* Courtney noted that she believes that *“some of it [pornography] is demeaning to women,”* but that when she encounters these representations, *“those are the ones I skip through really fast,”* further explaining, *“but it [pornography] also has, serves a legitimate purpose. It’s enjoyable. It’s fun.”* Similarly, speaking to how she engages with pornographic depictions she finds contentious, Tania explained that *“you just kind of skip over anything stupid if you don’t want to watch it. Like for example, if a blowjob continues for half an hour. Not gonna watch it.”* As these quotes suggest, female viewers can, and do, alter the spectacle on display by screening only the images they want to see and find pleasurable, omitting some or even completely terminating the viewing experience. In this manner, the male gaze, which is believed to underscore pornographic spectatorship becomes, in a sense, distorted.

Other than actively manipulating sexually explicit materials, some women spoke of how they disrupted normative boundaries of public/private through their engagement with

sexually explicit materials. For instance, Angelina listened to sexually charged music, or music that she found arousing, while working out at the gym to “*get horny for the day.*”

Speaking to her use of erotic novels, Sheridan admitted:

*There’s something completely naughty about sitting on a bus or sitting in a public place and reading a book and feeling like I should not be reading this book right here, right now. This is not ok. Everybody knows what I am reading right now. They must.*

Pornographic engagement is scripted as an intensely private endeavor, not only occurring in the privacy of one’s home, but also in isolated and solitary interactions between the user and the screen or book (Juffer 1998, Williams 2005). Yet, functioning as a regulatory discourse, ‘the pornographic’ is also “intensely public, in that information proliferates and spreads to numerous sites, transgressing physical boundaries that make other kinds of porn outlets, such as bookstores and theatres much more easily identifiable and regulatable” (Juffer 1998: 51). The processes which render this possible were discussed in Chapter Three, the Theoretical Framework. That women’s sexuality has been constrained to the private domain, and tied to relationship, intimacy and procreation, the act of bringing one’s engagement with sexually explicit materials out of these confines can be viewed as the “reclamation of public space” (Ryberg 2013: 144), a strategy important for emerging queer, feminist and lesbian pornographic discourse.

As noted, many women critically reflected upon the sexually explicit materials they engaged with, avoiding, or skipping scenes that they found conflicted with their own personal values. Indeed that my participants spoke of employing such tactics demonstrates that they are not merely passive consumers of the messages imparted, or said to be imparted, by writers of pornography. These quotes suggest these women can, in fact, be viewed as active spectators who ‘edit’ pornography, changing it to suit their own needs and sexual



fulfillment. On this point, Barker (2000: 650) turns to the notion of feminist subjectivity, stating “to consider women as *ethical* agents of our own sexuality, is, in and of itself, a way of ‘jamming the machinery’ of phallographic pornography.” It is, in and of itself, an act of resistance.

The notion that degradation is a fundamental characteristic of pornography is so embedded in cultural discourse that it is not surprising that some participants identified it as particularly troubling. While the majority of the participants did not enjoy aspects of sexually explicit materials that they found humiliating and demeaning towards women, as gleaned throughout various junctures in this dissertation, women avoided, or resisted, these depictions by physically disrupting the film sequence through the act of fast-forwarding or skipping through scenes. While this spectatorial experience of viewing and interacting with sexually explicit materials is not unique to women, as Williams (1999 [1989]) wrote of this universal practice in the updated epilogue to her book, she laments: “I find it just a little depressing to see the extent to which, for all its exalted ‘interaction’, this pornography consists primarily of men doing things to women and women, for all their verbal aggressiveness, having things done to them” (311). It remains, that despite the efforts of feminist pornographers that the types of pornographic materials most readily accessible (i.e., free) and available to women, is of the mainstream/*malestream* variety.

Even those women who preferred to read erotic novels noted that the women are still the main sexual focus as well as the overarching theme of men *doing sex to* women. For instance, Charlotte opined that “*in the book[s] it’s very much centered on the woman, so it’s the male seduction of her, and it’s always the prototypical, perfect man,*” reflecting that, “*I guess it does seem contradictory, but it really plays into the same storyline.*” Charlotte,

however, did recognize a difference between pornography and the erotic novels that she prefers to read, explaining that “*in the books it’s not about him, it’s always about her.*” Thus suggesting that, for Charlotte, in erotic novels, unlike pornographic films, the assumed spectator is a female, not a male.

### **Finding Validation and Empowerment**

It is despite, or perhaps on account of, these contradictions that the women I interviewed crafted alternative and discursively transgressive understandings of the sexually explicit materials they engaged with. Rather than viewing mainstream/*malestream* pornographic materials as always degrading, participants disrupted these normative meanings attributed to these representations and viewed them as sexually ‘empowering’, a term that the participants themselves used, not one that I imposed. It is somewhat paradoxical that ‘empowerment’ can be achieved through engaging with sexually explicit materials, a statement which merits some critical reflection. On the one hand, we can view empowerment, as will be seen in this section, through the use of participants’ narratives, as a means through which anti-pornography discourses of pornography as exploitative, objectifying and ‘degrading’ are resisted and transgressed to find positive and self-affirming meanings. On the other, however, we must also consider that at the same time claims of empowerment also affirm discourses that pornography is educational – that it has something to tell us about what is sexual and sexually desiring (Williams 1999 [1989]).

Understood within the context of the gender feedback loop (Crawley et al. 2008), as we accept and confirm external messages, even those that were initially contested, they become part of the dominant gendered discourses that individuals must contest with.<sup>38</sup> For

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<sup>38</sup> Breast augmentation, according to Crawley et al. (2008) proves to be a salient example through which this cyclical process can be explained. If dominant cultural messages indicate that the ‘ideal’ female figure includes

instance, speaking about lesbian pornography, Ryberg (2013: 142) asserts that while this genre “challenged [the] framing of female sexuality as intimate, nurturing, and reciprocal, and celebrated sex acts considered antifeminist and patriarchal (in the antiporn discourse) such as butch/femme, rough sex and penetration with dildos,” it also “appropriated mainstream hardcore conventions like the money shot, the meat shot, and the principle of maximum visibility.” Thus, while engaging in certain sexual acts, especially those that are seemingly positioned outside of the ‘norm’, may appear as resistance, they can simply be reiterating those very messages/imagery/discourses that we seek to challenge. As a qualitative feminist researcher, however, I cannot dictate that what my participants experienced was or was not ‘empowerment’. Sexuality is a fundamental component of one’s identity (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]), and it is, in fact, how we have come to see the ‘truth’ of our selves (Foucault 1978). As the narratives in this section demonstrate, there was much contention and diversity in how the women I interviewed spoke of the empowerment and/or validation they experienced through their engagement with sexually explicit materials.

Just the act of seeking out these materials, was, for Heidi, “*liberating*,” who found it a “*way of not being like a conventional, not very sexual woman*.” Buying sex toys and other sexual aids also served this effect for Fontayne who stated that, “*I just felt different [afterwards], almost liberated*.” For Nicky, purchasing sex toys and learning how to use

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large breasts, the available options for women can be to either accept this message or reject it. Acceptance can entail either being naturally endowed with this bodily characteristic or acquiring it through cosmetic procedures. While those women who undergo breast augmentation now conform to dominant cultural messaging surrounding the female form, such surgery is often framed as a ‘choice’ that has (a) little to do with patriarchy, or (b) that resists not only patriarchal narratives of natural(v. bought) idealized female bodies but feminist narratives of patriarchal collusion. However, as more women commit to these cosmetic procedures, the more normalized and entrenched it becomes. Thus, what was once (arguably) deemed as resistant, becomes part of how we affirm or subscribe to dominant cultural messages – becoming a message that also undergoes the process of everyday confirmation or disruption.

them for her own sexual pleasure “*gave me a different perspective on it. Like it was a whole different way I feel,*” referring to the fact that these materials opened up new avenues by which to sexually explore herself.

Using sexually explicit materials as a tool to discover what one finds sexually pleasurable was also identified as a source of empowerment for several other women. Madison admitted that “*part of me feels good taking charge of my sexuality, knowing that no one touches me like I touch me, you know.*” Catherine echoes this sentiment and argued that “*for a woman to admit she uses sexually explicit materials she shows herself to be knowing of her own sexual needs and how to fulfill them, and to actively achieve that.*” Having “*control over how you get off, when you get off and, you know, what environment you do it*” was, for Tania, essential to the empowering potential of engaging with sexually explicit materials. Courtney took a more pragmatic approach to the exploration of sexual pleasure through using these materials, she opined: “*I think more people need to just kind of look at themselves and say: What do I like? What turns me on? What do I enjoy? And is there anything wrong with that? And most of the time, unless its smashing kittens, I think you’re probably ok.*” Kayla felt that the empowering potential of engaging with sexually explicit materials was the fact that it helped women identify answers to the types of questions posted by Courtney’s narrative. Kayla asserted that: “*I think it’s important for women not to feel ... ‘cause I know girls who are like ‘I’ve never had an orgasm.’ Like really, honey? Like it’s empowering and it helps me be a better person.*” Kayla later added that she found attending to her sexual pleasure “*a very healthy womanly thing to, you know, have release of the stress the day.*” Here empowerment through engagement with sexually explicit materials was gained by the fact that Kayla was able to not only interact with her own body in personally

meaningful ways, but was also able to independently determine what they personally found pleasurable.

As suggested above, the term ‘empowerment’ had different connotations for the women who participated in this study. Upon being asked with empowerment feels like, Wendy responded: *“When I leave feeling good about myself and very, you know, highly motivated and sexually satisfied, and all that, like your day is better. You feel stronger about yourself.”* For Angelina, empowerment meant *“mak[ing] me a little more confident.”* Whereas Lena indicated that her engagement with sexually explicit materials *“just makes me more comfortable with my own sexuality.”* Taken together with the narratives presented throughout this section, empowerment can be taken as less about “an issue of individual agency,” and more about the “ongoing and collective process of negotiating the norms that both surround and incorporate us” (Ryberg 2013: 141).

That the women I spoke with were able to derive empowerment from contesting and challenging the dominant discourses and scripts that framed their engagement with sexually explicit materials, serves to disrupt critiques that women’s empowerment with pornography is simply the result of the post-feminist edict that it is “cool” for women to “join the frat part of pop culture where men had been enjoying themselves all along ... regard[ing] women as pieces of meat” (Levy 2005: 4). This is not to say that pornographic representations of sex and sexed bodies are not problematic, or that they do not merit scholarly feminist attention, but that spectatorship of these images are complicated particularly since the pornographic imagery available is so varied.

Kayla thought it *“was awesome”* when she saw women with different physiques, stating that, contrary to public perception, such variety is evident in *“strip club[s] where*

*there's girls that are not 100 pounds and beautiful. They're different sizes and well that's great!*" For Jordan, viewing the physical differences between adult film actresses allowed her to come to terms with her own body. She reflected:

*When I was growing up I was never skinny. Like I was never a fat girl, but I always had a friggen ass, you know. So I was never comfortable in that area or anything. Once I did finally start, you know, masturbating on my own to this stuff [pornography], you learn 'I am a beautiful woman'.*

Similarly, Nicky felt that her engagement with sexually explicit materials was *"important in helping me figure out my body a little bit more, and helping me figure out ways and different places that can be accessed."* For many women, the engagement with sexually explicit materials not only served as a means by which to explore and derive sexual pleasure, but as these quotes suggests, also served to validate feelings of sexual desirability.

As a result of negative interpersonal sexual encounters in which male partners critiqued aspects of their bodies, two participants admitted that pornography served to validate feelings of corporeal acceptance, which was related to sexual desirability. For instance, Angelina recounted: *"My guy told me, oh, my nipples are too big. Well I started looking up porn and I'm like, oh well, shoot, this beautiful porn actress has big nipples like me. It made me feel better. Yes, it made me feel a little better and like, I'm not the only one."* Amanda similarly indicated that a previous partner *"made me feel bad about gaining some weight and not being sexually attractive."* However, through her engagement with pornographic videos she found that *"in porn, not everyone is skinny. Oh look, that girl has a little fat roll when he's holding her legs up to have sex. Oh look, that girl's thighs rub when she's walking in that thong and she still looks hot."* While such negative interpersonal experiences of being subjected to the critiques of a partner were not common (or not verbalized) among the women I interviewed, the majority did note how their engagement

with sexually explicit materials allowed them the opportunity to view a variety of different female bodies, something that they would likely not have the chance to do outside of this context. As Wolf (1991) highlights, the images culturally available of women's bodies serve to render invisible those bodies that do not conform to constructed iterations of perfection and beauty. This point was summarized by Jayde who spoke to the corporeally validating and empowering potential of pornography:

*That validation of seeing yourself reflected in porn can be interesting too, right. Like seeing people who are fat, seeing people who aren't white and aren't portrayed in cartooned, racialized capacities, seeing people who are lesbians and don't have incredibly long fingernails or whatever. Like seeking those types of people in your porn can validate your sexual experiences as well. Like fat people can get fucked too. Fat people can be desired as well, so can queer people, butches, trans-folks, and all that kind of stuff, right. That as much as those qualifiers can be used in mainstream porn to objectify, for sure lots of stuff can be used and make people feel shitty, lots of stuff can be, it can also be empowering too. I mean depending on the day, depending on the weather, depending on how you feel, all that shit as well. But I feel that it can be empowering to see yourself.*

That the imagery depicted in pornography, which is characterized as representing a monolithic, degrading and male-centric vision of sex and female sexed bodies, can be potentially modified by spectators who are able to find validation and empowerment, is an important finding of this research. This follows from Williams (2008: 17), who explains that engagement with the pornographic is not simply mimetic, that is, "we do not simply imitate what we see, we play with it too."

That pornography may enable women, as suggested by the quotes presented, to transgress internalized constraints of bodily confidence is infrequently addressed. In fact, dominant ideological accounts of pornography argue that these materials serve to make women feel more ashamed and insecure about their bodies (cf. Dines 2010, Paul 2005), although why and how pornography is more successful in accomplishing this than

mainstream media imagery is never explained in these descriptions. While pornographic videos are often critiqued as representing only a narrow vision of sexual desirability, this assessment does not account for the varied bodily displays available, and depicted by, hard-core and amateur pornography. Although positioned in popular culture as ‘not pornographic’, soft-core pornographic and mainstream magazines can be viewed as objectifying and more representative of a monolithic sexual ideal that corresponds with the ‘beauty myth’ (Wolf 1991). This reading of sexually explicit imagery is substantiated by Carol and Pollard (1993: 55) who write: “hard core does not adhere to these same [corporeal and beauty] standards, and in many respects it is unfairly taking the rap for sins that are really more common to soft core (and to ordinary television and general-release films).” In this respect, some of the women I interviewed found that the diversity of bodily displays in pornographic films served to trouble cultural and interpersonal scripts that resulted in negative self-perceptions by depicting a variety of female bodies as the object and subject of sexually desirability.

This is not to mean that my participants found sexually explicit materials to be at all times empowering and validating. As has been demonstrated throughout this dissertation, there is much ambivalence surrounding their engagement with these materials, which can be attributed, as outlined in Chapter Seven, to the confluence of cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts. For instance, Mona indicated that sexually explicit materials “*can be positive and they can be negative. And I think that depends on so many things. It’s not a homogenous thing. They can be used in a degrading way, right, and they can be used in an empowering way.*” Miranda echoed the sentiment that degradation and empowerment stems



from the spectator's viewpoint, which is not divorced from the broader experiential context.

She argued:

*It depends on how you view it [...] The feeling that you are in control of your own sexual experiences is very empowering. However, that being said, if you don't have control of your sexual experience, the feeling of vulnerability and disempowerment is more than likely to occur. When women feel like they are being used as a sexy toy, then sex can be very disempowering.*

Although Angelina indicated that she found corporeal validation through her engagement with sexually explicit materials, this was still mired in the fact that the majority of these materials depict one dominant aesthetic: *"Even if you do see Black, Chinese, you know, Indian [...] I still think it's primarily white females. It doesn't ever have someone who's overweight,"* later adding that *"all of those women are like in their twenties, you know, maybe 18 to 28. And I feel like, wow, I can never age."*

Other women found that the narrative of empowerment was tempered by the perceived societal effects of sexually explicit materials. Madison asserted that as a result of increasing societal demands of these materials:

*You wind up with girls who don't want to be doing it. You wind up with immigrants who have no other choice. You, you know, wind up with a natured criminal industry behind it because a lot of those people like, do need to use drugs or want to use drugs to get through the day.*

The *"way that it emotionally or physically affects some of those women and men"* (Amanda) who work in the pornography industry was also cited as a barrier to the emancipatory potential of these materials. For Charlotte, her use of sexually explicit materials, and the sexual pleasure gained from this engagement, was assuaged by what she outlined as its societal effects and her adherence to feminist discourses:

*I think it's difficult because you look at how sex pervades society to a certain degree. You know, just how young girls dress and stuff like that. Like that aspect really bugs me, but I don't know if that's just me having, you know, adapted*

*several feminist discourses on it, or that's how I actually feel. Because I feel, to a certain degree, very much a contradiction to my sexuality. Because I really like certain aspects. I really like certain things in porn. But then I also don't like the impact I see to a certain regard in society. I don't know. I've muddled myself up.*

For Charlotte, as for many of the women I spoke to, any pleasure and empowerment that they felt was gained by engaging with sexually explicit materials was not straightforward. As Ryberg (2013: 146) notes, “the meanings of pornography need to be located in relation to specific contexts of production, distribution and consumption.” Meaning-making surrounding sexually explicit materials, whether of acceptance or resistance, is not an isolated practice, but rather it is predicated upon conditions of access that enable and constrict women’s movement cross, and within, pornographic spaces (Juffer 1998). In line with the theoretical frame of this research, the interaction between cultural scripts (i.e., varying feminist discourses surrounding pornography), interpersonal scripts (i.e., the messages gleaned from participating in the social world) and intrapsychic scripts (i.e., the reflection of one’s own engagement with these materials) are often at odds with each other, causing contradictions in experience.

That some women noted this apparent tension in their feelings of degradation versus empowerment/validation, however, did not translate into calls for censoring sexually explicit materials. For instance, Mona reflected: *“Do I think it's objectifying to women? Maybe, yeah. But do I really care? Maybe, yeah. But I don't know, right. What's the option? To like completely censor and ban it? I don't think that's realistic, and then, where would I get my porn?”* Similarly, Catherine commented: *“Many of these materials are degrading, particularly to women. That said, I wouldn't censor them.”* The tension for Amanda surrounding censorship was compounded by notions of female sexual agency, particularly

the social context in which the choice to partake in pornography is mired. She asserted that *“as much as they [women] say ‘I want to, I made a choice,’ it’s really a tricky situation, because it’s not a choice made solely for them. It’s because in our society women are valued as commodities before anything else.”* To this, Amanda added: *“But what can we do? Take away that choice?”* Although definitive solutions to reconcile these contradictions could not be identified, the fact that these women reflected upon these tensions demonstrates that they are not merely passive consumers; uncritically absorbing the degrading message pornography is alleged to display (Dines 2010) and being complicit with patriarchy (Levy 2005). Rather, these quotes suggest that these women are active and agentic spectators, of not only their own sexual subjectivities, desires and behaviours, but of how they take in and understand normative discourses.

### ***Can the Degradation/Validation Dichotomy Be Reconciled?***

The pornography as degradation stance is the most visible feminist discourse (Lacey 1993). However, for the women I interviewed, experiences engaging with sexually explicit materials, and the meanings attributed to these experiences and materials, are far from degrading, and, in fact, have served to provide pleasure and even corporeal validation and control in many of their lives. This is not to say, however, that these experiences have been wholly liberating, as McElroy (1995) would purport. As Diamond (1988: 398) asserts, as a result of contradictory discourses and scripts surrounding female sexuality, pornography and spectatorship, *“for women, watching porn can draw us into a complex knot of pleasure and discomfort.”* The difficulty with dichotomous conceptualizations of sexually explicit materials, pornography in particular, that they are either always degrading or always liberating, is two-fold. Not only does it tend to leave unquestioned women’s engagement

with these materials, but the extent to which women have crafted new and transgressive understandings of this engagement remains largely under-examined.

For the women who participated in this research, their engagement with these materials was complicated and contradictory, a finding consistent with other empirical research on women's pornographic engagement (Boynton 1999, Juffer 1998, Parvez 2006, Smith 2007). As highlighted throughout this, and the previous chapter, there is much that these women found problematic in mainstream/*malestream* pornography. However, in the absence of other graphic images depicting sexed bodies and sexual acts, many of the women I spoke to indicated that they also found empowerment and validation in these depictions. Although radical feminists deny that women should want to be 'fuckable' (cf. Levy 2005), we need to remain cognizant that some women, like men, want to be viewed as sexually desirable and desiring. While mainstream media images depict one specific female (and male) idealized body (Wolf 1991), within pornography, as demonstrated above, one can find a gamut of bodies, both racialized and classed, ranging from the thin to the overweight, the differently abled, the conventionally attractive to those with visible imperfections (Carol and Pollard 1993). Furthermore, feminist pornographers seek to expand this aim of rendering desirable bodies that do not conform to normative boundaries (Penley et al. 2013). While these images, and the stereotypes they serve reify are problematic, they are often the only ones culturally and readily accessible to men and women, as pornography is the only source of explicit information on sex culturally available (Diamond 1988).

### **From Transgression to Subversion**

The type of resistance conceptualized in this chapter is largely discursive - imparting new meanings and new visions, by troubling dominant normative conceptions surrounding

women's engagement with sexually explicit materials. According to Miller (2008: 711), meaning is a negotiable process because "the image does not pre-exist its apprehension by the viewer and thus has no truth prior to that encounter." Therefore, the spectator interacts with visual culture in the production of meaning, as a collaborative process, and not in a predetermined, controlled or uniform manner (Miller 2008).

Consistent with the theoretical frame guiding this research, meanings are not inherent to a particular material (Soble 2002), but rather arise out of the interpretations, experiences and engagement of the viewer. It is within this conceptualization that the possibility for agency in the audience arises. If meanings are not fixed, the way a woman interprets sexually explicit materials, including specific spectatorial strategies, is also variable. In this manner, techniques such as textual poaching (Jenkins 1992) are used by spectators, where various aspects of the text are retrieved in order to create new meanings and even new images, through, for example, the fast-forwarding of particular scenes. For some of the women I spoke with this also included a re-appropriation and re-imagining of images seen on the screen, at the intrapsychic level, for future use as part of how they constructed pleasure, fantasy or engaged in sex. For these reasons, conceiving of sexually explicit materials solely as an object of patriarchal sexism and exploitation is simplistic and limiting, as is the framing of women who engage with, and enjoy, the pornographic as 'female chauvinist pigs' (Levy 2005) complicit in patriarchy.

Normative cultural scripts surrounding sexually explicit materials, pornography in particular, which are heavily based on anti-pornography ideology, frame pornography as inherently oppressive and degrading towards women, debasing the essence of the feminine into close-up shots of genitals and breasts (cf. Dines 2010). Although alternate scripts exist,

such as that of sexual liberation and pleasure, Smith and Attwood (2013) argue that these are not given as much social credence and legitimation. If the script that is consistently being leveled about the pornographic is one of victimization, re-visioning and re-interpreting this imagery to find not only personal and corporeal validation, but also empowerment, could be considered not only resistant and transgressive, but also subversive, the focus of next chapter.

This chapter detailed such instances whereby the women interviewed contested, deconstructed and rejected dominant scripts surrounding female sexuality and pleasure and ‘the pornographic’ through their experiences finding validation and empowerment. The following chapter, Chapter Nine, concludes the analysis of the collected data by examining the subversive potential of sexually explicit materials. Relying on ideas of spectatorial positioning and sexual agency, as envisioned by the participants, the following chapter considers of how sexually explicit materials can function as a potentially subversive tool to create space where the representation and exploration of women’s sexual pleasure would be equal to, rather than subsumed by, the pleasure of men (Attwood 2009).

## **IX. ENVISIONING WOMEN-CENTERED SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIALS**

In this chapter I return the discussion to female pornographic spectatorship, which was started in Chapter Five, *Situating as Script Women-Centered Research*. Having in previous chapters outlined the various sexual scripts and normative discourses that the women I interviewed negotiated, both through their reiteration and transgression, in their engagement with sexually explicit materials, this chapter seeks to explore how women-centered notions of spectatorship and engagement serves as acts of subversion towards dominant, patriarchal sexual scripts and discourses that frame notions of ‘the pornographic’. To do this, this chapter examines collected data subsumed under the categories of ‘ethical use of pornography’ and ‘visions of woman-centered sexually explicit materials’, analyzing them within the theoretical frame of subversion as outlined by Butler (1999 [1990]) – an act of shifting or undermining hegemonic meanings and codes.

### **The Ethical Use of Pornography**

‘Ethics’ has assumed prominence in the neo-liberal iteration of responsabilized and self-governing individuals (Dean 1999, Rose 1999). So too, in conceptualizing spectatorship as a disciplinary practice, ethics and ethical conduct comes to the fore (Rose 1999). As outlined in Chapter Three, the Theoretical Framework, ethics, used in this context, is not about morality *per se*, but the obligation of individuals to make (personally, socially, politically) useful bodily resources (Rose 1999) and formulating oneself as a citizen/subject with proper concern for the self (McLaren 2002). We are responsabilized in neo-liberal consumeristic society to make an enterprise of our lives (Rose 1999). Under the guise of ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’, individuals are charged with making individual decisions, that are fundamentally in the interests of the State, in order to avoid State intrusion into the private

sphere (Rose 1999). As outlined by Williams (1999 [1989]), and discussed in Chapter Three, the viewing experience is not outside the bounds of self-regulation, but rather, the confines of spectatorship is itself shaped by regulation.

Although not previously spoken about in the literature, the notion of ‘ethics’ in the context of pornographic spectatorship (as opposed to ethical pornographic production) was significant theme that underscored participants’ understandings of their engagement with sexually explicit materials. I highlight these discussions in this chapter as they can be situated more broadly into narratives elucidating how situating women in the pornographic audience serves to not only trouble, but subvert, male-centric pornographic scripts of sex and the sexual.

The notion of the ‘ethical use’ of pornography emerged from both the National Capital and Greater Toronto Region focus groups, when the participants engaged in discussion surrounding how they came to make decisions on the types of pornographic video clips they wanted to view, focusing on notions of degradation. The following conversation, held by the women who participated in the National Capital Region Focus Group, highlights how the discussion of ethical pornographic engagement took place:

*Tania: Yeah sometimes too I think it depends on the dialogue too. Like if it sounds...I don't know, I find that a bit degrading. Or scenes where it's like a guy has some sort of control over the girl, like the dialogue says the context and he has control over her – the boss, or some sort of thing that way. I find that a bit degrading 'cause it makes it sound like, I don't know, it just makes it feel like a girl would use sex to get what they want out of life. I hate that. That kind of bothers me.*

*Stacy: I think you're thinking way too much about porn when you watch it Tania.*

*Tania: Yeah, fair enough. My point is that my own background, I have an academic background in like content analysis and analyzing messages in media and stuff, I guess maybe that's why I'm always doing that.*

*Laura: Again, it's just a show. They're just role playing.*

*Tania: But I always wonder what the message is, like, I don't know, that you can make someone do whatever you want because you got the power and that kind of stuff.*



Laura: *Yeah it's true. There's like the back part. Like, why did they choose this narrative?*

This passage not only demonstrates how identity, and personal identification, plays a role in the meaning-making process, for instance, through Tania's revelation of her academic background which served almost as an apology to the charge that she is overly reflective about pornography, but also the level of active reflection of the materials engaged with. In this respect, this passage is particularly interesting as it highlights how meanings are not intrinsic to pornographic imagery, but are attributed by individual viewers (Soble 2002). While other women regarded role-play scenarios of power differentials as "*playing up a societal taboo*" (Amanda), for Tania they were constitutive of broader societal messages regarding women's (and men's) place and space within patriarchal order.

Making spectatorial, or viewing, decisions based on assessments of gendered societal messages being depicted, is iterative of the types of considerations the women I spoke with made with respect to the pornography they were consuming. In the absence of notification at the outset of a pornographic video, that it was produced in an 'ethical' manner (i.e., fairness in labour practices, consensual partners, and equitable treatment of performers), the women interviewed spoke to the various ways in which they were able to deduce its ethicality. I frame these considerations surrounding spectatorial boundaries as ethical, as they spoke to the broader consequences and contexts surrounding pornographic production. Discussions coded within this category included: the legality of the actions depicted, the age of the female actors; consent; the use of condoms in the film (or lack thereof); the realistic portrayal of sexual pleasure and whether the scenario served to degrade or humiliate women. Although not framed as such throughout the interviews, the responses are conceptualized

here as a series of questions, or tests, which the women I spoke to indicated that they reflected upon when assessing particular pornographic videos.

***(a) Is it Depicting (Whether Actual or Perceived) Criminal Acts?***

For the majority of participants, legal boundaries served as the marker of the types of pornographic videos they would consider viewing. While Mona stated that she would “*seriously look at anything, even if it’s gory,*” she identified the two boundaries that would curtail her use of certain materials as being “*anything that looks extremely painful or illegal.*” Themes subsumed under the rubric of illegality included “*movies with sex with animals*” (Mindy), “*children, animals, stuff like that*” (Paris), and “*cruelty and rape*” (Amanda). Tania indicated that she paid particular attention to the video “*file name*”. If a video was described as a “*‘rape scene’ or something like that, that fucking offends the shit out of me. I won’t even watch it.*” Similarly she indicated that if it “*talks about young girls, or like ‘under 18’, I don’t even want to go there.*” She stated that this was true whether or not the depictions of sexual assault or underage girls were actual or simulated.

***(b) Are the Performers Underage?***

Highlighted by Tania’s quote above, age was an important ethical consideration for many women. For Madison, this was related to being cognizant of young girls and teenagers “*being pressured into doing these things.*” Just like other aspects of the spectatorial experience, there was convergence of opinion surrounding the depiction of women as ‘underage’. When speaking about ubiquitous ‘barely legal’ pornography, Amanda maintained “*everyone knows they are over age,*” whereas Mona questioned, “*who knows how old those girls are?*” Overall, all of the women who expressed concerns over the age of the female performers indicated that if they had any doubt, they would simply not watch the

video. For instance, Madison noted: “*When I pick out videos I try my best to estimate the age of the people in the video [...] I always make sure if the woman looks even remotely young I’ll go to another video.*” Thus, reiterating the sentiment of Tania’s quote above, that she was not only concerned with the actual age of the female performer, but whether she was stylized to represent an underage girl.

**(c) *Have the Performers Consented?***

Associated with the previous two considerations of actual/perceived depictions of criminal activity and age of performers, is the notion of informed consent. This was the most significant concern for Charlotte who explained:

*I don’t think children can consent to that kind of stuff. And if there’s other porn that exists that has other kinds of non-consenting actors in it, that’s to me, bad. I mean, I’ve definitely watched some S&M stuff and it’s not really to my taste. It’s interesting and I understand that they really are consenting. So even though it seems like outright violence, it’s not, I guess. I think that’s another area that often gets criticized. But yeah, to me, it always hinges on the issue of consent.*

Even though consent is framed in popular discourse negatively, as in, the ability to say ‘no’ to sex (cf. Friedman and Valenti 2008), Charlotte’s quote highlights that tensions also arise when conceptualizing what consent means, especially as it relates to images being screened, when it involves situations that do not appear on the surface to be consenting. This point was further elucidated by Paris who argued that “*like, if there’s pain, as long as the person receiving the pain is willing and saying ‘yeah I want more pain’ kind of thing.*” If the “pain”, such as consensual S&M, was something that the female spectator was likely to engage in herself, as was true for Paris, she found the particular video acceptable to watch.

As shown by the quotes presented above, the meaning of consent is complex, particularly in role-playing scenarios where one, or some, of the performers are playing the role of a teenage or a partner in a couple with a marked power differential. Mona indicated

that for her the line of acceptability is drawn when she becomes aware that the scenario is not just playing on societal taboos. Speaking about her own experiences, she discloses: *“I’m huge on consenting adults, right. I might play the game sometimes about pretending to be innocent and not knowing what I’m doing in the role-play, right, but that’s completely different because there’s still the consenting adults behind it playing.”* She stated, however, that discerning whether participants are actually consenting is difficult as it is part of the character’s role to simulate consent and enjoyment, adding that, *“most of the time when I see these women smiling, in like a Penthouse magazines, they want to be there.”* Although the viewer will likely never see the negotiations which occur prior to the filming of mainstream/malestream pornography, feminist pornographers such as Tristan Taormino, include consent within the broader pornographic scenario (Taormino 2013).

***(d) Is Safe Sex Being Practiced?***

Two respondents were concerned with safer sex practices, especially the use of condoms by male performers, as part of the ethical production of pornographic videos. Empathizing with the performers, Tania stated that she does *“notice if there’s a condom involved or not,”* and often found herself questioning *“what kind of risks are they taking so I can watch this?”* Jayde was particularly passionate about this issue as a result of her experiences within the queer and sex worker advocacy communities, as well as a sexual health educator.

*I feel like the type of thing that makes me recoil from a lot of porn is the absence of safer sex being practiced in it. I find it to be, I actually look at, watch porn and then end up seeing ok, well no one is wearing a condom, no one is using lube, nothing is happening, bodily fluids are everywhere, right. And then I just recoil and I can’t, I stop watching it. Can’t get into it. Can’t get off on it. Like it just becomes this ‘holy fuck this is dangerous!’ thing and I can’t process it.*

It is notable that in both women's responses the notion of risk and danger is addressed, a consequence of the heightened awareness surrounding sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s. In this sense risk operates as a technology of governance, whose management, as highlighted by these quotes, is the responsibility of individuals (Rose 1999). Through discourses of risk, individuals are rendered as self-governing, that is, as responsible managers of risk. As Petersen (1996: 53) points out, the "individual whose conduct is deemed contrary to the pursuit of a 'risk-free' existence is likely to be seen, and to see themselves as lacking self-control, and as therefore not fulfilling their duties as a fully autonomous, responsible citizen." Identifying themselves as either concerned with ensuring that their spectatorial practices are not inadvertently exposing others to risk (Tania) or as someone who cannot derive pleasure from risky practices (Jayde), is consistent with the self-discipline that is required of ethical self-governance (Petersen 1996, Rose 1999).

The question of whether or not condom use makes pornography more ethical was also addressed by Amanda, who focused instead not on whether pornography should depict safer sex practices, but on whether it should be considered an educational tool. Commenting on the nature of sexual activity engaged in by youth, she stated that they are having sex *"how they see in porn. Like no preparation, no lube, just push it in with full force [...] I mean, porn is not meant as an educational tool. And for some reason so many people think it is. It is actually quite sad."* She later added that she specifically avoids videos if condom use is visible, as it *"ruins the fantasy,"* and *"is not meant to be real."* This served to create contradictions in how she understood pornography as a genre – on the one hand, she attributed the performance of actual sex practices to how they are depicted in pornography,

on the other, she noted that such depictions are not meant to be instructive but rather for entertainment.

***(e) Are the Performers Enjoying Themselves?***

Several women were concerned with whether or not the female performer was legitimately enjoying the sexual behaviours in which she was engaging. For instance, Stacy commented that *“you can tell if the person’s not enjoying it. If the person is enjoying it, I think the video is more appealing.”* When asked how one gauges whether the sexual performers are gaining pleasure from any given sexual act, Paris responded: *“when you think about it, you’re, like, not asking: ‘How’s that enjoyable?’ ‘How could she be receiving any pleasure?’”* Heidi also engaged in similar assessments of the sexual performers. She explained:

*If there’s like a movie, let’s say, where it’s like a man and a woman, it helps if the woman is actually enjoying herself. I wouldn’t like to watch something if she wasn’t, because then I’m just distracted with ‘oh that can’t be comfortable’ or ‘oh she’s faking it’ or whatever. So obviously if they’re doing something and there’s toys involved, she’s probably having a good time.*

As highlighted in Chapter Six, vicarious viewing, that is the ability to imagine oneself within the materials (Boorstin 1990), was a central concern for many of the women I interviewed, with respect to how they came to choose which pornographic videos to view. For the women who participated in this study, female spectatorship, or the female gaze, involved engagement with the pornographic at various levels including emotional connectedness between the performers, as well as aesthetic similarities with the pornographic actresses involved. Similarly here, we see how vicariousness serves to limit, or draw ethical boundaries surrounding what these women chose not to view. For some viewers, as these quotes illustrate, if they cannot imagine themselves deriving pleasure from the act being

portrayed, it served to disrupt the spectatorial experience. As Kayla reiterated, “*you don’t want to see porn where the girl is crying on the inside.*” Thus, for these women, it was up to them to decide, based on how much they were able to place themselves within the scene, if the female pornographic performer was actually enjoying the acts she was engaging in.

***(f) Do the Scenarios Serve To ‘Degrade’ or ‘Humiliate’ Women?***

As illustrated by the quote that commenced this section on the ethical use of pornography, questions surrounding potential degradation served as a point of contention as these women reflected upon the pornographic imagery they were viewing. There was some consensus among the women interviewed as to what constituted ‘sexually degrading’ or ‘humiliating’, particularly surrounding behaviours such as “*cumming on the face, [and] degrading terminology, like calling people sluts and whores and stuff*” (Nicky). For other women, however, the distinction resided in whether “*the woman looks like she is actually not faking it and enjoying herself*” (Tania), echoing the concern as noted above regarding assessments of performer enjoyment. While most women indicated that they avoided these types of depictions, by skipping through the scenes, which can be conceptualized as strategies of spectatorial resistance as was shown in Chapter Eight, other women indicated that they avoided these videos altogether. For instance, the inclination towards women-only pornography was cited by several women as a means to avoid the “*humiliating parts, like deep throating*” (Amanda).

Representations identified as degrading or humiliating, however, were not conceptualized as solely the purview of the pornography industry. Other media sources, such as product advertisements were also said to depict “*images that are highly pornographic,*” and “*reiterate the powerless position of women*” (Charlotte). Charlotte lamented that the

existence of these representations in popular culture “*makes me feel bad sometimes about my consumption of porn.*” In noting the tension between her own sense of ethics and the pleasure she receives from these representations, Charlotte expressed feeling that she was, in some way, condoning or promoting the cultural reification of sexist gendered imager.

### ***Difficulty in Determining “Ethical” Pornography***

Pornography has been subsumed under broader discussions of free speech, allotting producers the freedom to create pornographic depictions, within legal confines, and allowing consumers the choice of which materials they want to view. However, the programmatic rationality of neo-liberalism, and thus of self-governance strategies, draws not only these concepts of freedom and choice, but also of responsibility (Rose 1999). We are governed through our freedoms, that is the extent to which this mode of governance “invent[s] the conditions in which subjects themselves would enact the responsibilities that composed their liberties” (Rose 1999: 72). As we saw throughout this section, the majority of women attempted to discern, in some manner, whether or not the pornographic media they were engaging with was ethical, that is, if all of the performers were of age, freely consent and found pleasurable the behaviours they were engaging in. Their narratives speak to how spectators have come to be responsibilized for ensuring that they are viewing has been produced in a responsible and ethical manner (Rose 1999). It is up to the ‘free’ individual to exercise autonomy in making choices about the risks associated with consuming various pornographic depictions. Individuals are also expected to take individual responsibility for these choices. If they choose wrong, they will be subjected to “calculated administration of shame” (Rose 1999:73), that we have come to internalize as part of our self-governance, through feelings of guilt as in Charlotte’s quote above. The balance of power and the



negotiation between actors are rarely, if ever, depicted in mainstream/*malestream* pornography. Therefore the best a viewer can do, if they are to be self-governing and responsible citizens, is engage in rational assessments using the above noted questions as a guide, if the materials they want to view are ethical.

As explained in Chapter Three, the Theoretical Framework, this concept of individual responsibility functions, within current neo-liberal society, as a form of moral self-regulation by which certain behaviours that are deemed responsible are identified as ‘good’, while irresponsible behaviour is seen as ‘bad’ (Rhodes and Cusick 2002). The moral regulation of sexuality and sexual depictions, both historically in present society, falls neatly within this dichotomization of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (Smart 1998). For instance, Smart (1998: 15) outlines how in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, women who either sold sex for money or engaged in behaviour deemed promiscuous were constructed as a “danger to the health of the nation.” Perhaps this explains the importance accorded to knowing that the female sex performers are actually enjoying the sex they are engaging in, as opposed to working in pornography for financial reasons – as it is a dominant cultural script that sex should involve intimacy and commitment (Sanders 2008). It is “bad” to sell sex, thus it is morally irresponsible to watch someone selling sex without deriving intimacy or pleasure from it. Similarly, there exist responsible choices relating to safe sex (i.e., condom use, limiting the amount of sexual partners, non-painful erotic practices), while unsafe sex, that is, sex that deviates from these prescriptive notions of ‘good’ and ‘safe’, is considered irresponsible and therefore immoral to engage in (Rhodes and Cusick 2002) and watch.

For Callie, this call to make moral choices extended to other areas of consumption:

*Well it's hard to figure out while you're watching. Is she on drugs? Is she being exploited? Is she underage? Is she, you know, all of these different things. Is she*

*being forced into it? Was she sexually abused? You're not, it might be at some point in the back of your mind wishing you had a better product. Like I wish all my clothing was organic and not made by small children in a 3<sup>rd</sup> world country, and so I may seek some of those things out. But I know that not everything I'm wearing...and so it's the same thing with porn.*

She later added, in a group conversation regarding the age and mental health status of female performers that she would require *“their psych profile so I can determine if I can watch this in an ethical manner.”* It is important to highlight, however, that although the women I interviewed found it difficult to determine whether or not a certain pornographic video was produced in an ethical manner, calls for censorship were deemed as unwarranted. As Catherine indicated, all sorts of sexual representations should be available, *“except obviously underage,”* again reiterating the notion that it is up to the consumer to decide.

There was also a racial/cultural component to the ability, or lack therefore, to discern whether or not a particular film was ethically produced or if the female actor was deriving pleasure from the sex acts. Rowan, for instance, found particularly confusing *“Asian porn,”* as *“the girls don't look like they're enjoying it at all [...] They're like 'no, no, no' and then 'yes, yes, yes'. And it's very confusing to me.”* In order to offset any misinterpretations, Madison avoided scenarios that featured *“extremely foreign [performers] to the point where they maybe don't speak English,”* because she would not be able to determine whether it *“could be a dominating, a forceful, not by choice sort of thing.”* Interestingly this discussion surrounding the potential victim-status of foreign pornographic actors, mirrors broader discourses/scripts that conceptualize women of colour as always lacking sexual agency, and therefore perpetually victims of the global sex trade (Kempadoo 2001).

Ethical consumption of pornography was, for the women I interviewed, part of their spectatorial experience. While it cannot be claimed, given the nature of the data collected,

that this concern with ethics is what differentiates women-centered spectatorship from men's, it is interesting that the genre of feminist and women-made pornography has at its core a concern for ethics in both its production and treatment of performers (Bakehorn 2010, Penley et al. 2013), something that is said to be lacking in mainstream/*malestream* pornography. Not only do these concerns highlight how spectatorship is rendered a disciplinary and regulatory practice, but it leads to questions regarding the gendered nature of cultural scripts and discourses that serve to construct identities. Is the concern, as highlighted in both the narratives produced from this study and the nature of feminist pornography as a genre, for the ethical production and empathy/compassion for pornographic actors something that differentiates female and male spectatorship, or are these traits socialized into women as part of the broader construction of women as 'naturally' nurturing (Crawley et al. 2008)? Are these concerns merely part of the gendered cultural scripts through which women come to understand their identities and sexual selves, their positioning in the world, and their sexual experiences (i.e., sex is focused from start to completion on the male orgasm, of which women must ensure)? To shed some light on these questions, it is important to consider what the women I interviewed conceptualized as the ideal pornographic and/or sexually explicit material.

### **If You Could Create Sexually Explicit Materials for Women...**

Throughout the interviews, the women I spoke with outlined why they use sexually explicit materials, what types of materials they engage with as well as what they liked and did not like about the materials accessible to them. Although, as noted in the previous chapter, these women found ways to resist, or avoid, content they did not deem enjoyable and were able to find validation and empowerment in these materials, it was not without

contention. While the 26 women interviewed found sexual pleasure in a myriad of sexually explicit materials, they problematized various characteristics of these materials, aspects of their engagement and as outlined above, came up with various ‘tests’ to ensure that the content they were viewing conformed to the ethical boundaries that they had put in place. Although these can all be taken to create a narrative of women-centered spectatorship, at least according to the research participants, it was important to discern what types of materials these women envisioned would best display or portray their sexual fantasizing. The final interview question asked of all research participants was: If you could create sexually explicit materials solely for women, what would it look like?

In assessing the responses to this question, a similar sentiment became evident: these women craved sexually explicit materials that focused on expressions of female sexuality that they could relate to. As will be shown in this section, realistic dialogue, situational context, bodily diversity and varied sexual activity were themes cited, although specific examples of what these meant differed. Generally, the women interviewed for this study indicated that they wanted sexually explicit materials that focused less on men and more on women’s experiences of sex, not as an object that is have sex performed on her, but as an active participant in the sexual act. Although not speaking on behalf of all of the women who participated in this study, Heidi’s response best encompassed this overall sentiment, incorporating various themes:

*Well first of all, anything that were to happen in it would be stuff that’s realistically pleasurable for women. It would not be this sort of double penetration, slapping a woman around. I would probably, if I had a plot, I would probably have more stronger female characters. Maybe more sexually aggressive, rather than just kind of lying there doing whatever the pornstar man wants. I would have more attractive men and average looking women without fake breasts and dyed blond hair. Attractive little outfits. Soft lighting and like a*

*good plot. Maybe better acting skills. And good music. Like less cheesy. Some of it is quite cheesy.*

While the specific details differed, overall the women interviewed expressed similar opinions, envisioning sexually explicit materials where women were portrayed as active sexual partners having sex. Most significantly, all of the women I spoke with expressed that they wanted to see sexual activities that they deemed to be pleasurable for the female actors, (predicated by the criteria of ethical engagement suggested above) and by extension, which they vicariously envisioned as being pleasurable for themselves.

Several common themes were evident across the responses in which the women participants envisioned what they considered to be ‘ideal’ characteristics of sexually explicit materials. These included: increased attention to character and plot development to situate the sexual encounter, a variety of sex acts ranging from the sensual to explicit, and female pornographic actresses that resemble the ‘average’ female consumer. Each of these themes will be elucidated in turn.

***(a) Depth of Character and Sexual Encounter***

Depth of character, ‘chemistry’ between actors and an understanding of why the actors are engaging in the sexual encounter via the creation of a realistic plot was cited by many participants, although diversity in responses existed in how these specific facets would manifest themselves in pornography. Mindy stated that her ideal pornographic material “*would be more classy. Maybe a porno movie with more storyline, more character involvement, more believable. Maybe more love.*” Character involvement, or the appearance of character involvement, was also cited by Rowan, who indicated that in her ideal pornographic film there would be a “*connection between the couple, well couple, quotation marks. When they, when they actually, you know, they are looking at each other and there’s*

*something other than just having sex. That's the good stuff and it's really hard to find."*

Courtney reiterated this sentiment, indicating that she prefers sexually explicit materials to be "*respectful*" and depict "*real chemistry between the actors and actresses.*" The unconvincing portrayal of the actors' relationship to each other led these women to call for pornographers to create more realistic and convincing sexual interactions.

Complexity, or depth, of the sexual encounter was also cited as an important component. Catherine indicated that if she were to create her own sexually explicit films, they would feature "*either no dialogue or dialogue that wasn't written by a total idiot. Great costumes and realistic sets where every detail has been attending to.*" Not only focusing on the setting, but also the substance of the sexual interaction itself, was also highlighted by other women, even though considerations of the plot and sexual acts varied among each participant's account. Nicky added that she "*would want to see more of a focus on pleasure, or on mutual pleasure.*" Unlike the current focus of mainstream/malestream pornographic films, which the participants identified as commencing from the viewpoint of men, narratives coded under this category indicated that the focus of woman-centered pornography should be on pleasure, not the act of intercourse. For instance, Kayla details the pleasure practices which she would enjoy seeing pornographically depicted:

*Like the men, you know, foreplay with the women and oral with the woman and touching the women. Whether it's two people or three people or four people or whatever. I mean, it's sensual, I think. Instead of being like, yeah bitch, slap. Good looking men there. Brushing my hair. Brushing their hair.*

This quote shows the centrality of sensuality, as defined by Kayla, as opposed to a focus solely on penetration. It also shows the range of acts that can be identified as pleasurable – from oral sex to hair brushing.

***(b) Variety of Sexual Acts and Varying Degrees of Explicitness***

Rather than identifying one vision for women-centered pornography, what emerged from the responses was a diversity of visions. The women I interviewed spoke of finding enjoyment through viewing a variety of sexual acts with varying degrees of emotionality and explicitness. Ella indicated that she would prefer if pornography depicted *“more love-making instead of fucking.”* The focus on ‘making love’, or the emotion of the sexual act was also mentioned by Lena whose ideal pornography *“would show a romantic side of the way of being touched and held and kissed. Very much embraced.”* Amanda too indicated that while she wanted to see more sensuality, this did not necessarily correlate with romance, stating *“more caressing of bodies, more oral sex on her. I like more playful stuff. Party stuff.”* Similarly, Mona indicated that ideally pornographic videos would not be *“straight up intercourse. I think it would have to involve the peripheral stuff too.”* This point was reiterated by Stacy who indicated that she found herself questioning pornographic content that was intercourse-focused, wondering: *“ok, what’s going on with the hands? The hands, where are they located?”* The desire to see bodies being fully utilized in the sexual encounter, is indicative that, for at least some women, sex and sexuality is conceptualized as the integration of entire bodies, not just genitals.

While some women highlighted the importance of incorporating sensuality, romance and seduction into pornographic videos, confirming theories that for women pleasure is more emotionally than physically experienced (Abramson and Pinkerton 1995), other women cautioned that they *“don’t want too much scenario because obviously sometimes, like, I think that, you know...ok let’s get to it”* (Angelina). Kayla indicated that *“women don’t want this romance. I don’t want to be kissed, you know, like all gentle. And I don’t want to be*

*having sex with a teddy bear. Like, I mean, you still want to have wild, crazy passionate love.*” Several women noted that they did not want a plot or contextualization of the scene at all. Stacy stated that she does not *“like the story line [...] Just get right to the sex. I don’t want a story.”* A similar sentiment was expressed by Rowan: *“I want to get to it. I want to see it.”* Callie also disliked any romantic undertones, highlighting that *“I’m not having a relationship with this porn. I just want to get off.”* This attitude was also expressed by Catherine, who opined: *“this is purely my preference, but I don’t want to be looking at somebody being made love to. Right? If I want to look at porn, that’s what I want to get.”* However, this is not to say that all of the responses were polarized between these two extremes (i.e., ‘love-making’ or ‘fucking’). Sadie, for instance, envisioned *“porn that was in between.”* She summarized existing pornography as *“either like this terrible love story and you don’t really see anything and it’s really bad, and then the other side’s like, I’m seeing his penis being rammed in there and balls and [laughs].”*

For all of the women I interviewed, when they sought out pornographic videos it was largely for the purposes of attaining sexual pleasure. While some women indicated that they preferred the more romantic aspects of sexual interactions, the majority of women interviewed wanted to see sex.<sup>39</sup> Although the preferred level of explicitness, and how it played out visually or linguistically varied between respondents, all the women indicated that their engagement with sexually explicit materials for their own sexual pleasure necessitated that they see the sexual act. There is diversity in what these women want to see in sexually explicit materials.

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<sup>39</sup> This realization echoes the sentiment expressed in an xkcd web comic created in response to the book *Porn for Women* (2007). The comic reads: “To the authors of *Porn for Women*: Your book features pictures of hot, clothed guys cooking, doing laundry and vacuuming. The idea seems to be that my deepest fantasies, like the rest of my life, likely revolve around housework. So I wanted to write it to clarify: In my porn, people fuck.” Accessed online at: <http://xkcd.com/714/>



***(c) Realistic Portrayals of Women's Sexual Fantasizing and Bodies***

Most significantly, all of the women interviewed reiterated the importance of seeing realistic portrayals of women attaining sexual pleasure. Many women discussed that much pornography focused on close-up depictions of female genitalia and the penetrative act, imagery that was aimed for, according to these participants, for the male spectator. For instance, the following exchange occurred during the Focus Group occurring in the National Capital region.

Laura: *You can't get that in real life, right? You can't like set up a mirror [laughs]*

Stacy: *Boys can see that, right? So I think that's why the camera goes there 'cause guys can see that when they're having sex, but we can't. That's why I like that angle, 'cause I don't see that.*

Tania: *Again, it shows that it's geared towards men 'cause that's something you wouldn't normally see. Maybe that's why you like it, 'cause it's something you haven't seen before.*

Stacy: *It is. But I think I would also like to see other aspects. I don't always want to see just that. I think guys are used to that, so they can watch it for five minutes.*

This conversation illustrates that while it is possible to derive sexual pleasure from viewing close camera shots of genitalia and penetration, these depictions are believed to benefit the male viewer who is accustomed to this particular vantage point.<sup>40</sup> This focus on camera angles and spectatorial vantage point was also highlighted by Amanda who explained that ideally she wanted “*less extreme close-up shots of gaping vaginas or assholes [...] They are so gross and I have no idea who likes them*” She later added that “*only men see women's bodies look that way after sex. I don't think any woman has looked at her vag or butt in the*

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<sup>40</sup> This is not to deny the sexual experiences of lesbian women or to negate that some heterosexual women engage in activities that allow them this view of female genitalia (i.e., through the use of mirrors, cameras, etc.).

*mirror after having sex to see what it looks like.*” Ideal pornography, for Amanda, would not include such imagery.

While I recognize that these are all heteronormative statements which presumes heterosexual (male penis- female vaginal/anal) intercourse and sexual activities (e.g., a man performing cunnilingus on a woman), they must be situated within the demographic context of the participants who made them. While at various times throughout their interviews, Amanda, Stacy, Tania and Laura spoke to finding sexual pleasure in pornography that featured only women. This was interesting given that these four particular women self-identified as heterosexual in their private lives, engaging only in heterosexual sex. The difficulty in deriving enjoyment from close-up imagery of genitalia and penetration, is suggestive of the failure of a particular pornographic film to engage the spectator in all three levels of the viewing experience (i.e., visceral, vicarious, voyeuristic) (Boorstin 1990). While these quotes demonstrate the experiencing of both visceral feelings (i.e., disgust) and voyeuristic thrill of experiencing the unknown), these types of depictions did not easily translate into vicarious engagement, that is, the ability to identify with the characters, actions and/or scenarios taking place.

Another aspect related to ‘realistic’ portrayals of what women find sexually pleasurable includes the types of female bodies portrayed in pornographic films. Interestingly, every single woman interviewed noted that they disliked pornographic actresses with surgically augmented breasts. Again, this may be related to the capacity of vicariously placing oneself in the position of the actress. This was best exemplified by Angelina, who in speaking about how she selected films based on her physical semblance with the actress, stated: *“Like my own girl who’s my favourite, her background is [...]*

*descent. So she's got the dark skin and the dark hair. And I really, really liked her too because she had real boobs. Unfortunately she got implants.*" Porn performers with natural bodies, as well as diverse body types, were the most frequently cited changes the women I interviewed would make to ensure pornography was woman-centered. For Madison, this not only related to being able to vicariously relate to the imagery, but would serve to shift male perceptions of what women's bodies look like. She argued:

*It [woman-centered pornography] wouldn't be that different except that the women would be real and I think that goes into the fact that, you know, we can end up with men who aren't stimulated by the real thing, or have these, um, perceptions of what a healthy beautiful woman should look like. Um, so I would have them from all walks of life and all sizes and legal ages.*

Nicky also made it a point to indicate that in her conceptualization of ideal pornographic films, *"the women involved would be diverse in their body type. I mean skinny women sure, great, but bigger women also. Different sizes of breasts and things."* These quotes highlight how, in envisioning woman-centred porn, the normative discourse of the pornographic female aesthetic is challenged.

While existing empirical research on women's consumption with pornography found that for many women sexual pleasure intersected with feelings of body dysmorphia and comparison to the images being screened (Boynton 1999, Parvez 2006), as we saw in Chapter Eight, the women who participated in this study indicated that they found corporeal validation through their engagement with sexually explicit materials. However, as the quotes presented in this section illustrate, there exists concern over the bodies depicted in mainstream/malestream pornography as the ideal. This concern surfaced as the one component that all the women I spoke with indicated that they would change if they could create woman-centred pornography. While these discussions were mired in language such as

‘real’ and/or ‘authentic’ bodies, it is clear throughout this dissertation that these women were looking for ‘authentic’ images of themselves. Even in discussions surrounding sexual acts that spoke to what women find sexually pleasurable, ‘realism’ was defined by the ability to vicariously situate oneself within the scenario. While the concept of ‘authenticity’ was problematized in Chapter Two, the Literature Review, perhaps feminist pornographers concern with the ‘authentic’ is less about essentialized notions of ‘woman’, and more about the ability to portray a multiplicity of embodied actors, sexual communities and representations (Miller-Young 2013). It appears, given the narratives highlighted in this chapter, that the women I spoke with just want the opportunity to see themselves and their sexual desires transposed in film. These desires, however, are diverse – the common theme running through this dissertation.

#### ***(d) Something Other Than Pornographic Film***

Focusing on sexually explicit materials as a broad genre, this research sought to understand the sexually explicit materials, broadly defined, that women used for their own sexual pleasure. This extended as well to how some women responded to the question of what characteristics their ideal sexually explicit material would encompass. While the majority of participants, as highlighted above, focused on pornographic videos, others indicated that ideally, they would seek to create something other than pornography. Materials conceptualized ranged from clothing to literature.

Miranda stated that she “*would lean towards developing lingerie or shoes since clothing for many women makes them feel sexy and powerful.*” For Jordan, “*it would probably be a novel. Like an erotic novel sort of thing. Not a huge one obviously,*” that would incorporate “*different positions, different places and what not.*” Creating “*a series of*

*book,*” which resulted “*in a movie and then a website you can go to after, that you could just basically change some of the scenes,*” was Sheridan’s ideation of what she was looking for in a sexually explicit material. The idea of personalization, linking back to the notion that ‘authentic’ refers to ‘authentic to themselves’ and not for women as a whole, Sheridan equated her vision to “*a choose-your-own adventure book. Like something that you could go to and it could feel safe.*” For Charlotte, the ideal sexually explicit material would be an erotic novel with a “*heavy focus on the seduction aspect of it.*” Whether in video or other forms, genuineness of both the actors/characters and actions portrayed took precedence in these women’s accounts of what the ideal woman-centered sexually explicit material would look like.

### **Subversive Potential of a Woman-Centered Pornographic Vision**

While the previous chapter focused on the myriad of instances in which the women I interviewed resisted, or avoided, normative constructions surrounding their engagement with sexually explicit materials, within this chapter, they are seen to be doing more than resisting normalized regimes of truth/knowledge, by actively describing new meanings and understandings of their spectatorship and the pornographic genre. Taken together, these narratives can be understood as a means of inverting (subverting?) hegemonic discourses or scripts of degradation into empowerment and validation, disrupting normative imagery and representations by imparting their own women-centered visions guided by ethical spectatorship.

Often associated within the realm of politics, and synonymous with pejorative terms such as sabotage, conspiracy or revolution, in contemporary cultural discourse subversion has “come to be seen as an inevitable and much welcomed means of contesting the existing

status quo and eroding predominant cultural forces” (Cieślak and Rasmus 2012: 1). While the lexical meaning of subversion is of undermining or overthrowing, this definition does not accurately portray the types of change-making activities that are done at a discursive level. It is at this point where attention to Butler’s (1999 [1990]) conceptualization of subversion, as an act of shifting hegemonic meanings and codes, becomes useful. Subversion necessarily heralds an alternative philosophy, a philosophy which is different from the dominant discourses and instructional scripts already in place. Thus subversion, by view of this definition, does not mean innovation through the physical act of overthrowing and commencing anew, but rather, a more subtle form of action which serves to shift or transform meaning (Butler 1999 [1990]). Subversion is necessarily a political act, although it may not be identified as such by those who engage in it, which serves to denaturalize and redefine normative discourses.

If subversion is, as Butler (1999 [1990]) argues, more than merely being oppositional, that is, simply using mainstream/*malestream* pornography, how might these materials be subverted by women? What characterizes women’s use of sexually explicit materials, which may be viewed by radical feminist and anti-pornography proponents as “acts of apparent complicity” (Chapkis 1997: 26) with dominant patriarchal and misogynistic social forces, as powerful and potentially subversive?

In previous chapters, we saw that many women critically engage with sexually explicit materials, discursively and actively resisting normative constructions of female sexual passivity and assertions that women are not visually stimulated or interested in sexually explicit materials. Moving beyond instances of specific resistance, and commencing on the project of subversion, it can be argued that by simply engaging with sexually explicit

materials women are serving to trouble hegemonic assumptions of the male gaze, by inserting themselves as active female spectators.

It is a lofty proposition to suggest that espousing alternative discourses can itself be constitutive of an act of subversion. Indeed we tend to conceptualize subversion on grand political scales (Cieślak and Rasmus 2012). Weedon (1997 [1987]), however, suggests that the possibility of change emanates from the level of the individual, and more specifically, at the level of the individual's production of discourse/knowledge. She writes:

Resistance to the dominant at the level of the individual subject is the first stage in the production of alternative forms of knowledge or where such alternatives already exist of winning individuals over to these discourses and gradually increasing their social power (Weedon 1997 [1987]: 111).

With respect to the engagement with sexually explicit materials, the mere fact that women not only admit to engaging with these materials, but to deriving sexual pleasure from them, can in this instance be an act creating alternate forms of reality/truths. That participants spoke of how they ethically engage with mainstream/*mainstream* pornography demonstrates how they trouble the sexual scripts perceived as emanating from the pornographic. Although viewing such materials can be framed as an act of patriarchal complicity, a position which serves to negate the agency involved in spectatorship, they can be restated as acts of “subversive resistance” (Chapkis 1997: 26). In this framing, women spectators of the pornographic are seen as subverting normative discourses and cultural scripts that dictate: (a) that these materials are made for the benefit of male sexual pleasure; (b) that women are not visually stimulated; and (c) that women are more interested in love and romance than outright explicit sexual imagery.

At its most basic level, it is possible to conceive of the process of resignification, that is, telling new stories about and ascribing new meanings to sexually explicit materials and to

its consumption (cf. Butler 2004, Olson and Worsham 2000), as one technique of subversion.<sup>41</sup> Investigating sexual storytelling, Plummer (1995) emphasizes the importance of such stories in changing not only individual subjectivities, but communities. Using the term “intimate citizenship,” Plummer (1995: 17) speaks of a “cluster of emerging concerns over the rights to choose what we do with our bodies, our feelings, our identities, our relationships, our gender, our eroticism and our representations.” For Goffman (1959), any subversion and its antecedents, including resignification, involves interpretation and interactive meaning-making, and requires the negotiation or contestation over situational definitions. It is this choice over representation and the contestation of meaning, that grounds the resignification of sexually explicit materials, that is, that can denaturalize the gendered and sexed normative constructions indicative of, and represented by, these materials.

Likened to Butler’s (1993: 79) notion of drag as “subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality,” the women interviewed for this research also challenged the representational (and male-centric) claims of sex and sexual arousal made by the ‘pornographic’, which functions, as outlined in Chapter Three, as a regulatory discourse. In this instance, the narratives produced in this chapter can be considered subversive to the extent that not only do they reflect upon and interrogate the discourses surrounding the use of, and that are produced by, sexually explicit materials which claim to speak the ‘truth’ of sex, but they also dispute this (patriarchal) ‘truth’, imparting their own women-centric accounts of sex. Providing a space for women’s voices

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<sup>41</sup> It is important to highlight here that while Butler (1990) indicates that parody, displacement and resignification are related to subversion, subversion is not necessarily reducible to these effects. Brickell (2005: 34) notes that while “subversion is somehow related here to repetition, parody, proliferation, replication, displacement and resignification, their relational specificities and the mechanisms by which these might occur are not fleshed out” by Judith Butler.



and allowing experiential knowledges of sex and sexual pleasure to become visible, becomes a subversive act that serves to denaturalize the discrete and oppositionary posturing of sexed/gendered bodies, challenging male sexuality as the normative regulator.

### ***Can Social Change Be Enacted Through Discourse?***

Some theorists question whether such transgressive stylizations can actually lead to meaningful social change when the significance of these discursive transgressions are often overlooked. According to Weitz (2001), who examined the subversive potential of women adopting alternative presentations of beauty, even if read accurately, radical performances provide only temporary modes of social change. When subversive acts become mainstream, and are thus subject to capitalism's strategic capacity to commodify such acts of dissent, they lose their provocative capacity and become devoid of political meaning (Weitz 2001). This is true of feminist pornography – as much as it seeks to dismantle exploitation and oppression, it is a “for-profit enterprise” that is “not external to or untouched by hegemonic systems of domination” (Miller-Young 2013: 107).

Throughout the course of completing this dissertation I have had the opportunity to meet and converse with several women for whom creating, selling, labeling and marketing feminist pornography is not only an act of labour, but one of activism.<sup>42</sup> In personal communication with Carlyle Jansen, founder of the feminist sex store Good For Her and one of the curators of the Feminist Porn Awards, it was reiterated that the most significant challenge was of imparting a new pornographic vision of sexually explicit materials into popular discourse, one that was decidedly feminist and decidedly authentic to the lived

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<sup>42</sup> At the 2012 Playground Sexuality Conference in Toronto, I presented on a ‘Pornography Panel’ with two notable women in the feminist pornography field: Carlyle Jansen, as well as Sophie Delancey, Public Relations and Marketing Coordinator for several feminist pornographic websites. I was also a guest on CIUT 89.5FM radio program ‘Sex City’ in November 2012, and an attendee of the 2013 Feminist Porn Awards.

sexual experiences of the participants performing them. That the aim of such a project is to render this alternative sexual imagery part of the (capitalist) mainstream, and by extension less rebellious, does not discount the fact that such acts of subversion serve a function to disrupt normative 'truths', imparting fragments of new knowledges. As Williams (1999 [1989]: 283) argues, "it is thus strategically preferable to be on the side of more, rather than less, sexual speech," as the less that is spoken about sex the "more monolithic that speech is likely to be and the more that speech will tend to repress sexual minorities." Women as active participants in their own sexual lives and as legitimate speakers of their own truths, must, then, speak more about sex, make visible what they find sexually pleasurable and of their engagement with sexually explicit materials. It is in this speech, and the new discourses and imagery that it imparts, that serves to facilitate change. In this regard the goal is for subversion to become mainstream and part of the everyday, or as Juffer (1998: 1) puts it, "from the profane to the mundane." Women's use of pornography and other sexually explicit materials has been considered 'provocative' and outside of normative gendered boundaries for far too long, and it is now time, given the current attention both academically and in popular culture to feminist pornography, to acknowledge its presence.

The following chapter, Chapter Ten concludes this dissertation. First providing an overview of the main aims and findings of this study, the chapter then turns to a discussion of potential avenues of research inquiry.

## X. CONCLUSION

This research resulted in two interesting outcomes: (a) the redefinition of ‘gaze’ to account for active female spectatorship, or the female gaze, as described by the twenty-six women who participated in this study; and (b) the discussion surrounding the ethical use of pornographic materials and the on-going self-reflection and self-questioning that these women engage with, albeit sometimes subconsciously, while using these materials. However, the revelation of these findings did not emerge all at once, but where the product of analysis that occurred over several chapters revolving around specific themes.

That there existed a diversity of experiences with, and meanings attributed to, sexually explicit materials was the underlying theme of this dissertation. As demonstrated in Chapter Six, Scripting the ‘Gaze’: Pornographic Spectatorship, how these women came to define sexually explicit materials, what materials they used to derive sexual pleasure and with what frequency was complicated by various shifts in identity or social roles. While Boorstin (1990) identified that the three levels of spectatorship – visceral, vicarious, voyeuristic – must be present to ensure the success of a film, it was found that for the majority of the participants, spectatorship practices coalesced only around one level. That is, while some women identified primarily vicarious pornographic spectatorship, others indicated that when engaging with sexually explicit materials they envisioned themselves as voyeurs.

This diversity of experiences was also evident in how my participants came to situate their sexual subjectivities at the juncture of cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts, as highlighted in Chapter Seven, Making Meaning: Scripting Sexual Selves. These scripts served to frame how these women came to understand the meanings and importance they

attributed to sexually explicit materials. Not only did these scripts come to shape meanings, but as outlined in Chapter Eight, *Making Change: Recognizing Resistance and Transgression*, their conflicting and intertwining trajectories served to open up spaces for the negotiation, contestation and resistance of these scripts.

The narratives that spoke to creating a new vision for female pornographic spectatorship, as presented by the women I spoke to, were detailed in Chapter Nine, *Envisioning Women-Centered Sexually Explicit Materials*. Challenging the participants to think about what they would create if they could produce sexually explicit materials, considered here as an act of subversion, served to not only contest, but also to slowly erode, existing mainstream/*malestream* pornographic discourses and imagery. Cornell (2000) argues that “without new images and new words in which to express our sexuality, we will be unable to create a new world for women” (564). The aim here was not to restrict or reject imagery related to male sexual fantasizing, but rather to acknowledge my participants’ engagement with this genre and to add competing woman-centered fantasies and imagery. The aim was also “not transgression for the sake of transgression,” although this too is a worthy exercise, “but rather the expansion of access to materials and practices that have previously been denied to women because of work and roles deemed antithetical to sex” (Juffer 1998: 172). Allowing the women who participated in this study the opportunity to express their own visions for sexually explicit materials serves to fulfill the overarching feminist agenda of this research, as conceptualized in the Introduction: to ‘gender’ pornography. That is, to create space within ‘the pornographic’ for pornography and sexually explicit materials *for* women not merely *of* women.

## **Yes, (These) Women Actually Use Sexually Explicit Materials**

I began this study interested in how women connected their use of sexually explicit materials to their sexual biographies in the on-going process of (re)presenting their sexual identities. I wanted to not only explore what women conceptualize as sexually explicit materials, but how they use these materials for sexual pleasure and the meanings that women attributed to these materials and the pleasure derived from them. I interviewed twenty-six women between the ages of 25 and 35, looking for stories about their engagement with, and understanding of, these materials. Methodologically, I approached these issues by conducting semi-structured, open-ended focus group and individual interviews covering a variety of topics, while allow the interviews to flow in line with the participant's narratives. Critical discourse analysis, informed by Foucauldian understandings of discourse, was used as the data analytic method. A focus on discursive practices, "analyz[es] how they are structured, what power relations they produce and reproduce, where there are resistances and where we might look for weak points open to challenge and transformation" (Weedon 1997 [1987]: 136). This approach in data analysis lent itself well with the theoretical frame of this research, which sought to bridge interactionist accounts of meaning-making and Foucauldian accounts of discourse, discipline and docile bodies, to account for a how pornographic spectatorship, is created, maintained and regulated. Regulation and resistance were situated within broader understandings of sexual scripts, focusing on the construction (meaning-making) and deconstruction (resistance) of understandings of mainstream/*malestream* pornography.

I began the interviewing process aware of some of the social pressures and discourses that women negotiate with in the construction and maintenance of their sexual identities, not

only as a result of the extensive review of literature undertaken, but also because I am a woman who falls within my sample population. I intended to focus on pornography and the use of sexually explicit materials as a means for women organize the ways in which their engagement, and the meanings attributed to this engagement, abides by particular gendered scripts/discourses surrounding female sexuality and the pornographic. During the process of data analysis, I began to see connections outside of pornography, particularly connections to the discourses that women seemed to be negotiating. Their narratives, simultaneously referring to regulation and resistance, demonstrated that post-feminist pressures to prove their empowerment through overt sexuality are often troubled with patriarchal constructions of women as sexually passive. While engagement with sexually explicit materials, in all its diversity, is the theme running throughout this dissertation, this research broadly speaks to processes of negotiating with social/sexual scripts and the strategies that the women I interviewed used to align, contest and avoid simplified (re)presentations of their sexual desires and identities.

This research sought to trouble the continued perception that women do not engage with pornography and other sexually explicit materials by interviewing women who do. It was not my intention to critique *what* these women engaged with, or thought of, these materials, as I believe that the discussion surrounding their sexual decision making is productive and useful overall. I was more concerned with *why* and *how* they thought about their engagement in the manner they did, and how this might shape a larger theoretical foundation for future research. What I found throughout this process was that the use of sexually explicit materials was mired in conscious and subconscious reflections on sexual arousal, desirability and degradation. The narratives that comprised this dissertation

demonstrate the tensions and places of contradictions in these women's negotiations of scripting their engagement with these materials. It is in these spaces that the possibility for complicating simplified understandings of agency, women's sexuality and identity resides.

Although the reality that women use pornography is hardly innovative, the manner in which women do so is under-examined. As outlined throughout this dissertation, the women who participated in this research not only accepted and enacted sexualized scripts/discourses that they received through these materials, but also actively worked to manipulate, challenge and resist them. The key component of this research was the focus on *active* use, as very little attention is accorded to the processes that women use in order to engage with this pre-defined masculine space. While mainstream/*malestream* pornography, the most accessible and available, portrays women as the primary object with an uncomplicated "female sexual willingness as the premise of pornographic scenarios" (Ciclitira 2004: 285), the women I spoke to actively engaged and negotiated with this space, as has been demonstrated throughout this dissertation.

Levy (2005: 4) critiques current post-feminist discourses that tell women that we/they have "earned the right to look at Playboy; we [are] empowered enough to get Brazilian bikini waxes. Women have come so far...we no longer need to worry about objectification or misogyny," and that it is time for women to "join the frat party of pop culture, where men have been enjoying themselves all along." Women, according to Levy (2005), have become "female chauvinist pigs" embodying and celebrating patriarchal conceptualizations of womanhood and femininity. Levy (2005) argues that in current post-feminist theorizing, women have been taught that to view themselves, and other women, as sex objects is liberating, and to engage in male-centric definitions of sexuality and female

aesthetic is empowering. Engaging with pornography is said to be the epitome of ‘raunch culture’ and women’s collusion with their own objectification. While this analysis points to how feminism, as an ideology, has shifted and been appropriated by (and to some extent, with respect to sexuality, has always been aligned with) patriarchal ideology, conceptualizing women’s use of sexually explicit materials solely within this post-feminist sensibility is reductionist and too simplistic. In doing so, women’s reflexivity and active strategies for negotiating with discourses, such as those outlined throughout this dissertation, are lost. Furthermore, a reading of women’s engagement with sexually explicit materials that connects it directly to post-feminism does not facilitate considerations of the complex ways in which women actually use, consume or view these materials.

The most significant conclusion emerging from this research is that for these women, the use of sexually explicit materials was an embodied activity. Not only are pornographic meanings contemplated and reflected upon, by they are experienced through sexual arousal and satisfaction, and actively engaged with. Participants spoke of fast-forwarding through scenes, spending time sorting through pornographic video clips seeking out particular bodies, actions and scenarios. They spoke of purposely bringing the pornographic into the everyday, transgressing normative sexual boundaries, through playing sexually suggestive music while doing mundane activities such as exercising at the gym, wearing sexy lingerie underneath work attire or reading erotic literature in public spaces. For these women, engaging with sexually explicit materials was not a passive experience. They did not merely absorb pornographic representations unquestioningly; they interrogated them, both subconsciously and consciously, brought new meanings to them and understood them through a decidedly female gaze – their own. Their narratives demonstrate a disruption to the



assumption of female sexual passivity that has been reverberated throughout patriarchal society.

This is not to say that these women did not draw from hegemonic patriarchal gendered discourses in the scripting of their relationship to sexually explicit materials. Many of the narratives illustrated the tensions that women experienced when making sense of the various cultural scripts surrounding, and embedded within, these materials. The women themselves highlighted contradictions between what they believe on an intellectual (for some, feminist) level, what they experience in their everyday interactions and what they seek out when engaging with sexually explicit materials. These tensions and contradictions, although cited by many women as a source of confusion and frustration, serve as an indicator that women are active, agentic spectators of the pornographic. Without agency, the possibilities for resistance and subversion are gone. It is the highlighting of these possibilities for resistance, transgression and subversion, even when engaging in problematic spaces like mainstream/*malestream* pornography, that this research contributes to academic literature.

### **There Exists No ‘One’ Type of Engagement: Problematizing Feminist Divides**

As evidenced within Chapter Two, the Literature Review, ideology surrounding pornography is often bifurcated into ‘anti-’ or ‘pro-’ pornography. Even utilizing Smart’s (1989) ternary of pornography of degradation, representation or liberation, suggests that such positions are neatly categorized, rigid and defined. However, as this research and other similar studies (cf. Ciclitira 2004, Parvez 2006) have found, there exists much nuance in women’s lived experiences of pornographic engagement and spectatorship. Too often are feminist debates polarized within bifurcated camps, when neither position owns, or can fully

account for, women's experiences. Such debates are unproductive, and as feminist scholars interested in pornography, we need to move beyond rigid conceptualizations, and account for the complexities that emerge from empirical data. Unfortunately, many feminist spaces are still hesitant to acknowledge the nuances of pornographic engagement and spectatorship, as has been my experience.

In May 2012, I attended a talk by Dr. Gail Dines, an anti-pornography, radical feminist scholar, hosted by the Sexual Assault Support Centre of Waterloo Region (SASCWR), entitled "Sex(ism), Identity and Intimacy in a Pornographic Culture." Although I found problematic that this talk was the main event for SASCWR's Sexual Assault Awareness Month – implicitly linking the cause of sexual assaults with pornography usage in the minds of the audience – I attended the event in order to better familiarize myself with potential critiques that I may receive against my research findings, and my position on pornography, and other sexually explicit materials as a whole. I also believed it to be a good opportunity to personally familiarize myself with a comprehensive overview of all facets of the feminist pornography debate.

And so I listened. I listened as our current society was described as hypersexualized, without any contextualizing or critiquing of the term. I listened as it was explained how images, and therefore pornography, shapes reality, and how girls are increasingly forced to become more sexualized and pornographic themselves. I listened to how Dines called women who dared to have sex outside of the confines of a loving, monogamous relationship, sluts, and to how *normal* sex for women is about "looking into your partner's eyes and feeling the intimacy." I listened to how different types of pornography were categorized, and how the category of 'feminist pornography' was purposely excluded because "no

pornography is feminist.” I also listened to how research findings on men in prison for sexual offences against children were generalized to the entire male porn-viewing population. I viewed countless photos of fetish, not mainstream, sexual practices, and noted how they were used to construct a moral panic surrounding what “children as young as six” are viewing online when they type the word ‘porn’ into a search engine. I listened to all of this while taking notes. I also went online and searched for the keyword ‘porn’ to view these (non-mainstream) fetish photos and videos that unassuming children were supposedly being exposed to.

And then I spoke. I prefaced my comments with the fact that my dissertation focused on women who use sexually explicit materials for their own sexual pleasure. I offered that I did agree with some of what was said: of course I have contentions with gender constructions and the problematic representations of women (and men) in the media. However, I noted that I took issue with, among other things, the rhetoric used surrounding choice, the use of the word ‘slut’, the causal link made between pornography and pedophilia and rape, and the discourse surrounding what constitutes a ‘real’ woman – to say that some women are not ‘real’ simply because they conform to socially constructed Western ideals of beauty (i.e., tall, thin, large-busted, blonde) is as anti-woman as saying that all women should strive to look like that. I added that I searched the word porn, and the images that came up were mostly of nearly-nude or nude women and men, of fellatio and of white heterosexual couples engaging in vaginal intercourse. Despite all of this, however, the point that I had the greatest contention with was the fact that the only manner identified to solve societal sexual ills was to wish porn away and censor it, rather than encourage open and honest discussion surrounding sex and pornography, and to come up with alternative voices

that challenge existing problematic discourses and representations. Further, I added that it *is* possible for individuals, including women, to simultaneously use pornographic and sexually explicit materials, while being critical of the images being consumed; that women are not merely hapless dupes of the pornography industry. Indeed, the scant empirical research that does exist on women's use of pornography cautions against a straightforward reading of women's opinions on the genre, as "a woman can be clear that she is anti-pornography and that she does not enjoy viewing it, and yet she can still be sexually aroused by it" (Ciclitira 2004: 293), thus continue to seek it out.

Not only was I misquoted to make a point – instead of addressing my comments, Dines spoke about how "the other side" always portrays radical feminists as being anti-sex (a comment, I indicated, that I did not make) – I was silenced, as were the voices of the twenty-six women I interviewed. I was told that women, especially those that consider themselves feminist, could not possibly find enjoyment in such images, only self-hatred, and that such discussion would not be engaged in. Dines informed me that I was not a feminist, and that I was in fact anti-woman and pro-pornography – not even recognizing that the attempt to define someone else's feminism is problematic in and of itself.

The notion that the pornography industry requires the "demeaning silence" of women has been identified by Sigel (2002: 253), what has been less recognized, however, is how anti-pornography feminist accounts function in a similar manner. In examining the introductory passage of Catherine MacKinnon's book *Only Words* (1993), in which MacKinnon asks the reader to imagine herself "held down, tied up, sucking off doctors [and] dripping with melted wax" (Sigel 2002: 253),<sup>43</sup> Sigel notes that this (using vivid imagery to

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<sup>43</sup> The direct quotation from *Only Words*, is as follows: "Image for hundreds of years your most formative traumas, your daily suffering and pain, the abuse you live through, the terror you live with, are unspeakable –

engage the reader to place themselves in the narrative) is the same process deployed by pornography. “MacKinnon’s feminism,” Sigel (2002) continues, “works very much like pornography in this respect, manipulating and violating my readerly body, drowning out my story, as a feminist historian, with hers” (253). Anti-pornography feminists counter critiques with the use of testimony and appeals to “emotional truths” of women who have been hurt as a result of pornography (Smith and Attwood 2013: 54). Pornography is to blame for the pains experienced, not the (oftentimes male) perpetrators themselves, as they too are unable to exercise free will and succumb to pornography’s seductive lure (Dodson 2013). However, the use of such testimony is problematic, and this is not to discredit the women who feel this way, in that it never questions whose ‘truths’ are privileged by anti-pornography feminists. As Smith and Attwood (2013: 54) outline, “those who testify to porn’s pleasures or sense of liberation don’t count in the same way as those who present themselves as addicts, victims or rescuers.”

The fact that I was not only discredited (i.e., I cannot be a feminist if I advocate for women’s use of pornography) but dismissed, reifies the paternalistic viewpoint that women’s delicate sensibilities need to be cherished and that women, unable to make decisions on their own, need to be protected not only from societal vices but from themselves. It also serves to further entrench bifurcations within feminist understandings of pornography and pornographic spectatorship. While purporting to speak for all women, all experiences and all pornographic representations, anti-pornography radical feminists fail to recognize how their own speech “implicates [them] as part of the cultural disciplining of women’s bodies” (Sigel

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not the basis of literature. You grow up with your father holding you down and covering your mouth so that another man can make a horrible searing pain between your legs. When you are older, your husband ties you to the bed and drips hot wax on your nipples and brings in other men to watch and makes you smile through it. Your doctor will not give you the drugs he has addicted you to unless you suck his penis” (MacKinnon 1993: 3).

2002: 254). The extent to which anti-pornography radical feminists claim to speak for all women, as did Dines during her talk, while (a) ignoring the complexities of social markers such as class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identification and age; (b) glorifying white middle-class heterosexuality as the only ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ expression of human sexuality; and (c) castigating all pornography as unequivocally evil, runs the risk of closing down any possible exploration of female sexual desire, agency, pleasure and power both within and outside the realm of pornography. Ideally there should not exist a pornography ‘debate’, as this adversarial nature of feminist discourse is unproductive. Rather, feminist scholars interested in pornography should seek to equally acknowledge and privilege all voices and experiences of those who engage with sexually explicit materials, in order to create complex, interactional (not monologic) and nuanced accounts of pornographic spectatorship.

### **Future Research Directions**

As was suggested in Chapter Two, the Literature Review, while there exists extant literature on pornography, few studies have empirically explored women’s use of pornographic materials for their own sexual pleasure.<sup>44</sup> Fewer studies have empirically explored the how black women engage with pornography, particularly racialized pornographic depictions that are “tied up with brutal legacies of sexual expropriation and sexual myth” (Miller-Young 2013: 115). While female sexuality is culturally bound to discourses of virginity, purity and submission, black female sexuality is underscored with notions of presumed hypersexuality and exoticism, rendering these bodies as “simultaneously desirable and undesirable objects” (Miller-Young 2013: 108). While feminist literature examining pornography as a genre abound, the majority focuses on its

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<sup>44</sup> Notable exceptions include Smith (2007), Parvez (2006) and Ciclitira (2004).

alleged negative societal ramifications or is ideologically, rather than empirically based. Future research should continue the examination of women's use of pornography and sexually explicit materials more broadly. This exploratory study provides a contribution to this endeavor, and commenced discussion surrounding the meanings that these particular 26 women attributed to, and derived from, their engagement. Furthermore, researchers should make a concerted effort to include women of various socioeconomic positioning, sexual orientations and races/ethnicities, in order to better reflect the Canadian population.

The aim of gendering pornography should not be limited to analysis of women. By conducting this research I have, in a small way, provided a platform for (some) women's (self-selected) voices to be heard. Through this platform, women were afforded the opportunity to not only reflect upon their use of pornographic materials, but to examine what other materials they use for sexual pleasure, how they use/manipulate these materials, what they find contentious and identify what characteristics their ideal sexually explicit materials would encompass. But what of men, intersex or transgendered individuals? Do they experience these materials in similar manners (i.e., engage in negotiations surrounding the ethical use of pornography)? Do they engage in similar intrapsychic conversations as was found in this study?

Gendering pornography does not only entail accounting for, and commencing from, the lived experiences of women, but bringing back the voices of men. Collinson and Hearn (2005: 144) highlight that "the categories of men and masculinity are frequently central to analysis, yet they remain taken for granted, hidden and unexamined. Men are both talked about and ignored, rendered simultaneously explicit and implicit." Within a heteronormative and patriarchal society, men are taken as the norm. This is particularly true about

pornography and pornography studies, which assume a male viewer and represent sexual pleasure from a male-centric position. It is my contention, given the various conversations I have engaged in throughout the course of conducting this research, that it is not that men do not ever consider or reflect upon what these materials mean to them, what other materials they use for sexual pleasure or the ethics surrounding pornographic production, but that they have never been asked. Future research must continue in the feminist agenda to gender pornography. It must look to bringing men and masculinity back into the analysis – to make research *about* men, not *of* them.

While I have detailed these research directions, it is not without the awareness that such approaches serve to reify notions of gendered differences – where such differences may or may not exist. As noted above, conversations with men have indicated that pornographic preferences and spectatorial decision-making cannot simply be explained by sex (male or female). Future research needs to move beyond rigid gender binaries. Instead of focusing research on what sexually explicit materials mean to men and/or to women, which serves to essentialize gender categories, we should be focusing on what sexually explicit materials mean to ‘porn positive’ and/or ‘porn negative’ individuals.

### **Final Thoughts**

In conducting research on sexual practices, particularly sexual practices viewed as deviant such as the use of sexually explicit materials, the attention invariably shifts to focus on the researcher rather than the researched. Throughout my experience working on this dissertation, I have often provoked a myriad of responses when I am asked what I research, ranging from quizzical or intrigued looks to uncomfortable silences or incredulous laughter. One male colleague believed that I was conducting this type of “frivolous” research to



“amuse myself.” It was only after I erupted (pun intended) into academic dialogue regarding the historical regulation of women’s bodies and sexualities, and the manner in which regulatory discourses are manifested in present society, that he realized the academic and social merit of this research.

As a whole, sex and sexuality have been given a female face and form, but the desires depicted are not female, they are male. As consumers we are watching women enact male sexual pleasure and male sexual fantasizing (Williams 1999 [1989]). This is not to say that women cannot derive sexual pleasure from these depictions, as this research has demonstrated. While the Internet has served to domestic and normalize, or make ‘everyday’, pornography (Juffer 1998), by bringing it into the home and making it readily accessible, women’s sexuality is still bound to a large extent by the whore stigma (Pheterson 1993). Bronstein (2011: 6) notes that “although the sexual revolution did enlarge women’s right to engage freely in sexual behaviour, it provided little support for women to define their sexuality free of male standards and expectations.” As women, is our sexual agency taken as seriously as men’s? Will women ever be able to say: ‘I am a sexual being’ publicly without that being considered self-degradation? Without being slut-shamed or stigmatized? Or without being accused of colluding with patriarchy via patriarchal bargaining?<sup>45</sup> In light of these concerns, I find myself agreeing with a statement made by Catherine: *“I do think things are slowly changing, but I don’t know if we’ll ever see the day that we shed these stereotypes of acceptability entirely.”*

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<sup>45</sup> Kandiyoti (1988) first conceptualized ‘patriarchal bargain’ as the existence of a set of rules and/or scripts regulating gender to which both genders accommodate or acquiesce, but which may nonetheless be contested, redefined and renegotiated. It has since been used in feminist discourse to describe women’s decision to accept gender roles that disadvantage women in exchange for whatever power one can gain from this acceptance. Although women indicated that it is their ‘choice’ to use patriarchy to their advantage, this ‘choice’ has been critiqued as patriarchal bargaining, as it does little to change, or resist, the ‘system’, rendering patriarchy intact.

## APPENDICIES

**APPENDIX A**

**Calls for Research Participants**

## Call for Focus Group Interview Participants

Do you, or a friend, *enjoy* Pornography or other Sexually Explicit Materials?

Do you have an opinion on Pornography or other Sexually Explicit Materials that you would like to share in a group of like-minded women?

I am a graduate student at the University of Ottawa's Department of Criminology doing research on women who actively use pornography, or other sexually explicit materials, for their own sexual pleasure.

This study aims to discover women's thoughts and opinions on the issue of pornography/sexually explicit materials and the role they perceive these materials may contribute to the lives of women who use them.

To be eligible, you must be:

- A woman between the ages of 25-35,
- Regularly access and engage with pornography or other sexually explicit materials at least 1 time per week, for your own sexual arousal and pleasure, and
- Have a good working ability in English, the language the focus group interview will be conducted

For more information, or to schedule an interview, please contact:

**Olga Marques**

Ph.D.Candidate  
Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

# Call for Individual Interview Participants

Do you, or a friend, *enjoy* Pornography or other Sexually Explicit Materials?

Would you like to share your opinions about, and experiences with Pornography or other Sexually Explicit Materials?

I am a graduate student at the University of Ottawa's Department of Criminology doing research on women who actively use pornography, or other sexually explicit materials, for their own sexual pleasure.

This study aims to better understand women's use of sexually explicit materials and how these materials may contribute to their lives.

To be eligible, you must be:

- A woman between the ages of 25-35,
- Regularly access and engage with pornography or other sexually explicit materials for your own sexual pleasure at least 1 time per week, and
- Have a good working ability in English, the language the interview will be conducted.

For more information, or to schedule an interview, please contact:

**Olga Marques**

Ph.D.Candidate  
Department of Criminology  
University of Ottawa

**APPENDIX B**  
**Letters of Information**

### **Letter of Information to Focus Group Participants:**

Hello, my name is Olga Marques and I am a PhD student in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting research for my PhD dissertation on women's thoughts about sexually explicit materials, which include any materials that women may use for the purposes/intent of sexual arousal and/or release.

This research is entitled "Women's Engagement with Sexually Explicit Materials: Attributing Meanings and Negotiating Identity(ies)." As stated above, the goal of this dissertation is to discover, describe and understand what women identify as sexually explicit materials, how women perceive that they are used, and how women feel about these materials. There exists a lack of research that focuses on women's thoughts and opinions about pornography/sexually explicit materials, therefore this exploratory study aims to present a comprehensive account of women's opinions and experiences. For the purposes of my research, I am specifically seeking women between the ages of 25-35, who regularly engage with sexually explicit materials for their own sexual pleasure, and who have good reading, aural and oral communication skills in English, the language the study will be conducted.

This study will use focus group interviews, which is more like a group discussion, than a traditional one-on-one interview. The focus group interviews will last approximately 2 hours and will be conducted in a group of 5 women. I will be facilitating the focus group interviewing session. The focus group interviews will take place at a date and time that has been mutually agreed upon by all 5 participants, and will be conducted at the University of Ottawa campus in a private room or office. The questions asked during the focus group interviews will not be personal questions, but will instead be broad questions about your thoughts or opinions about sexually explicit materials. You will not be required to give personal information about your experiences engaging with sexually explicit materials. Furthermore, you may choose to use a pseudonym during the course of the focus group interview.

If you would like to participate, it would be greatly appreciated and extremely beneficial to my study. I am planning on conducting 2 focus group interview sessions with 5 female participants each. Participants will be selected on a first come/first serve basis, provided that you meet the recruitment criteria. However, I can keep your contact information, if you so desire, so that I may contact you if one of the participants decides, in advance, that they no longer wish to participate in this research.

If you are interested in participating in the focus groups, please let me know. Furthermore, if you know of any peers that you feel may be interested in participating in this study, feel free to pass this text to them. You may contact me if you have any additional questions or inquiries.

Thank you very much for your interest in this research.  
I look forward to hearing from you,

Olga Marques

### **Letter of Information to Individual Interview Participants:**

Hello, my name is Olga Marques and I am a PhD student in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. I am conducting research for my PhD dissertation on women's experiences with, and their thoughts about, sexually explicit materials. If you are interested in participating in this study, I would like to set up an interview to discuss your opinions on the issue of pornography/sexually explicit materials, your engagement with these materials, and how you perceive these materials shape your sense of self.

This research is entitled "Women's Engagement with Sexually Explicit Materials: Attributing Meanings and Negotiating Identity(ies)." As stated above, the goal of this dissertation is to discover, describe and understand what sexually explicit materials women seek out for their own sexual pleasure, how these materials are used and how women feel about these materials. An additional goal of this study is to provide insight into the role that sexually explicit materials plays on a woman's sense of her social and sexual identity, in other words, how she sees and portrays herself. There exists a lack of research that focuses on women who use sexually explicit materials, therefore this exploratory study aims to present a comprehensive account of women's opinions and experiences.

For the purposes of this study, I will be conducting individual interviews. Your interview will last approximately 2 hours, and will be conducted at a time, date and location of your preference or I can arrange for a private room at the University of Ottawa campus. I will be asking personal information during the individual interviews related to your specific engagement with sexually explicit materials, however you are not required to answer any question that you are uncomfortable with. Specifically I am seeking female interview participants that are between 25-35 years of age, regularly engage with sexually explicit materials for their own sexual pleasure, and have good reading, oral and aural English comprehension skills.

If you are interested in participating, it would be greatly appreciated and extremely beneficial to my study. If you know any peers that you feel would be interested in participating in this study, feel free to pass this text along to them. I am seeking between 20-30 women who are interested in being interview respondents from the Ottawa and Toronto/GTA region. Participants will be selected on a first come/first serve basis. However, I can keep your contact information, if you so desire, and contact you if a participant decides that they no longer wish to participate in this research.

Feel free to contact me if you have any additional questions or inquiries.

Thank you very much for your interest in this research.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Olga Marques



**APPENDIX C**  
**Interview Guides**

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS**

*Before starting, conduct the informed consent process with each participant. The digital recorder will be turned on to record the introduction, including the statement of confidentiality of information disclosed during the focus group interview.*

### **PART I**

#### **Introduction**

- Welcome all participants, introduce myself and thank them for their participation.
- Explain the presence and purpose of recording equipment.
- Address the issue of confidentiality to the focus group.
- Ensure participants are aware that they are free to leave at any time and that the interview can be paused if they begin to feel uncomfortable.
- Discuss with participants that there are no 'wrong' answers and that everyone's input is a valuable contribution to the study.
- Indicate that the focus group is not an opportunity to judge participants responses. The focus group is a forum to discuss varying thoughts and opinions.
- Invite participants to introduce themselves using a pseudonym of their choice as well as their age (for general demographic purposes).
- Read a protocol summary to the group of participants:

The purpose of the focus group interview is to discover, describe and understand women's thoughts about sexually explicit materials and their opinions on how and why such materials may be used by women. An additional goal of this study is to provide insight into the role that women perceive sexually explicit materials to play on a woman's sense of her social and sexual identity, in other words, how she sees and portrays herself. The focus group will last approximately 2 hours. Please note that I will be taking notes during the discussion to assist me when I am listening to the taped interview recording.

If nobody has any questions, we can now start the focus group interview.

### **PART II**

#### **Interview**

*A semi-structured focus group interview will be conducted. The following questions should be asked to maintain reliability of the data-set, while allowing room for participants to guide the discussion.*

*Begin by eliciting participants initial thoughts on the subject of sexually explicit materials. This may bring forth their opinions that they have been waiting to share knowing that this session was upcoming. If so, allow for this path to be exhausted. Explore the themes that participants bring up with the group, asking participants for their opinions or thoughts. End with a catch-all, open-ended question that may yield glaring omissions, new avenues of inquiry for the individual interviews and helpful insights.*

*When I feel an area/question has been explored adequately and that no other participant has anything to add, move on to the next item, probing for connections between items.*

1. What do you consider to be sexually explicit materials?
2. What are your opinions about sexually explicit materials?
3. How do you feel about the availability of sexually explicit materials?
4. Do you feel that there is a difference between the types of sexually explicit materials that women seek out as opposed to those that men seek?
5. Do you believe that these materials have an effect on women who use them?
6. Do you believe that these materials have an effect on a woman's sense of her sexual self/identity?
7. What do you perceive to be the role that these materials play on the women who seek them?
8. What are your thoughts about why women engage with sexually explicit materials?
9. What are your thoughts about how women engage with sexually explicit materials?
10. Imagine that you were able to create sexually explicit materials solely for women, what elements would these materials include?

### **PART III**

#### **Closing**

*Closing remarks: Those are all of the questions that I had for the focus group. Thank you for participating in this discussion. Your input is valuable to this study.*

- Thank all participants for their valuable contribution to this research.
- Explain the follow-up process with respect to when and how they will receive interview transcripts, if they so choose, and their ability to amend their speech in the transcript.
- Provide participants with my contact information, so that they can contact me if they have any additional questions or concerns.
- Ask participants if they have any additional questions or comments that they would like to address that were not addressed throughout the focus group discussions.

#### **End of Interview**

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

*Before starting, conduct the informed consent process with each participant. The digital recorder will be turned on to record the introduction.*

### **PART I**

#### **Introduction**

- Welcome participant, introduce myself and thank her for participating
- Explain the presence and purpose of recording equipment.
- Address the issue of confidentiality to the participant
- Ensure participant is aware that she is free to leave at any time and that the interview can be paused if she begins to feel uncomfortable.
- Read a protocol summary to the interview participant:

The purpose of the study is to discover, describe and understand what sexually explicit materials women seek out for their own sexual pleasure, how these materials are used and how women feel about these materials. An additional goal of this study is to provide insight into the role that sexually explicit materials plays on a woman's sense of her social and sexual identity, in other words, how she sees and portrays herself. The interview will last approximately 2 hours. Please note that I will be taking notes during the interview to assist me when I am listening to the taped interview recording.

If you don't have any questions, we can now start the interview.

### **PART II**

#### **Interview**

*A semi-structured, in-depth interview will be conducted. The following questions should be asked to maintain reliability of the data-set, while allowing room for respondents to guide the discussion.*

*Begin by eliciting participant's initial thoughts on the subject of sexually explicit materials. This may bring forth thoughts that she may have been waiting to share knowing that this session was upcoming. If so, allow for this path to be exhausted or until about 10-15 minutes go by and then steer her to the prepared themes. Explore the themes that were brought up in the focus group. Ask the respondent to comment on her experience, why, and how it has an impact/affect. Ask for examples to allow for more depth to responses.*

*When I feel an area/question has been explored adequately, move on to the next item, probing for connections between items.*

11. Describe to me what the term 'sexually explicit materials' means to you.
12. Tell me about your use of sexually explicit materials.
13. How often do you actively seek out these materials?

14. What types of sexually explicit materials do you engage with?
15. Why do you seek out these particular sexually explicit materials?
16. Where do you seek out these materials?
17. What importance do sexually explicit materials have on your sexual life?
18. Does your experience using sexually explicit materials shape how you see yourself as a person?
19. Does your experience using these materials shape how you see yourself as a sexual person?
20. Are other people aware of your engagement with sexually explicit materials?
  - 9.(a) Who do you disclose this to? Why?
  - 9.(b) Who do you not disclose this to? Why?
21. Do you think that your engagement with these materials shape how others see you?

**Personal History with Sexually Explicit Materials**

22. What was your first contact with sexually explicit materials?
23. When did you start using these materials for your own sexual pleasure?
  13. (a) What types of materials did you seek out initially?
24. How sexually open was your home environment growing up?
  14. (a) Do you think this had any effect in how you view sexually explicit materials?
  14. (b) Do you think this had any effect in your engagement with sexually explicit materials?

**Sexually Explicit Materials and Society**

25. What do you think is the role of these materials in society?
26. How do you feel when you come into contact with these materials when you are not a consumer of them?
27. Imagine that you were able to create sexually explicit materials solely for women, what elements would these materials include?

**General Demographic Questions:**

28. How old are you?
29. Are you single, dating, married or common-law?
30. Do you consider yourself to be heterosexual? Homosexual? Bisexual? Transexual?

31. How do you describe your ethnic background?

32. Under what pseudonym would you like to be identified in the research?

### **PART III**

#### **Closing**

*Closing remarks: Those are all of the questions that I had for you. Thank you for participating in this interview. Your input is valuable to this study.*

- Explain the follow-up process with respect to when and how participant will receive interview transcripts, if they so choose, and their ability to amend their speech in the transcript.
- Provide participant with my contact information, so that they can contact me if they have any additional questions or concerns.
- Ask participant if she has any additional questions or comments that they would like to address that were not addressed throughout the interview.

#### **End of Interview**

**APPENDIX D**

**University of Ottawa Ethics Approval Notice**



## Ethics Approval Notice

### Social Science and Humanities REB

#### Principal Investigator / Supervisor / Co-investigator(s) / Student(s)

<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Christine	Bruckert	Social Sciences / Criminology	Supervisor
Olga	Marques	Social Sciences / Criminology	Student Researcher

**File Number:** 01-10-06

**Type of Project:** PhD Thesis

**Title:** Women's Engagement with Sexually Explicit Materials: Attributing Meanings and Negotiating Identity

<b>Approval Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Expiry Date (mm/dd/yyyy)</b>	<b>Approval Type</b>
02/11/2010	02/10/2011	Ia

(Ia: Approval, Ib: Approval for initial stage only)

**Special Conditions / Comments:**

N/A





Université d'Ottawa    University of Ottawa  
Service de subventions de recherche et déontologie    Research Grants and Ethics Services

This is to confirm that the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board identified above, which operates in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and other applicable laws and regulations in Ontario, has examined and approved the application for ethical approval for the above named research project as of the Ethics Approval Date indicated for the period above and subject to the conditions listed the section above entitled "Special Conditions / Comments".

During the course of the study the protocol may not be modified without prior written approval from the REB except when necessary to remove subjects from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) pertain to only administrative or logistical components of the study (e.g. change of telephone number). Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes which increase the risk to participant(s), any changes which considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project and safety of the participant(s). Modifications to the project, information/consent documentation, and/or recruitment documentation, should be submitted to this office for approval using the "Modification to research project" form available at:

[http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application\\_dwn.asp](http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application_dwn.asp)

Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer 4 weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval. This document can be found at:

[http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application\\_dwn.asp](http://www.rges.uottawa.ca/ethics/application_dwn.asp)

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Ethics Office at extension 5841 or by e-mail at: [ethics@uOttawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uOttawa.ca).

**Signature:**

Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research  
For Barbara Graves, Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB

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**APPENDIX E**

**Consent Forms**



uOttawa

Université d'Ottawa  
Faculté des sciences sociales

Criminologie

University of Ottawa  
Faculty of Social Sciences

Criminology

## Consent Form for Focus Group Interviews

**Title of the study:** **Negotiating Sexual and Social Identity(ies): Women's Engagement with Sexually Explicit Materials.**

This research is being conducted by Olga Marques, Ph.D. Candidate in Criminology at the University of Ottawa, under the direction of Dr. Christine Bruckert, Associate Professor, in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Olga Marques can be contacted via email at: \_\_\_\_\_, or by phone at:

Dr. Christine Bruckert can be contacted by phone: \_\_\_\_\_, or via email:

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Please take your time to review this consent form and discuss any questions you may have, or words you do not clearly understand, with the research study team, as indicated above.

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Olga Marques, Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Criminology, under the direction of Dr. Christine Bruckert, Associate Professor, Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to discover, describe and understand what women define as sexually explicit materials, as well as their opinions and thoughts on these materials. An additional goal of this study is to provide insight into the role that women perceive sexually explicit materials plays on a woman's sense of her social and sexual identity, in other words, how she sees and portrays herself.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially of participating in one (1) focus group interview that will last approximately two (2) hours. During the interview I will be asked a series of questions, in a group setting, about what I consider as sexually explicit materials, why I think women may engage with these materials, and what I believe these materials may mean to women's personal, social and sexual life. Each focus group interview will be conducted in a group of five (5) women, in addition to the interviewer, Olga Marques. The interview has been scheduled for time, date and location that accommodates the schedules of the other focus group participants, and that has been agreed upon by myself, the other group participants and Olga Marques.

I understand that the focus group interview will be recorded on audio tape. I am comfortable with the interview being recorded and the interview tapes being transcribed. Upon request an abridged transcript will be forwarded to me. This abridged transcript will only include my speech as well as the speech of the researcher, Olga Marques, in order to protect the confidentiality of the other focus group participants. I also understand that detailed notes will be taken throughout the interview. I understand that due to risks to the confidentiality of the other focus group participants that these notes cannot be made available to me.

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**Risks:** My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer information by discussing my opinions about sexually explicit materials, and what these materials may mean to other women. This may cause me to experience some emotional discomfort about discussing my opinions of sexually explicit materials in a group of women that I do not previously know, and I may fear that my responses may be judged by the other focus group participants. Furthermore, taking time to participate in this study may cause an inconvenience to me. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks by:

- Ensuring that all identifying information will be removed in the written transcripts, publications and/or public presentations.
- Allowing me to not answer questions that I do not want to answer, without fear of reprisal or ill treatment.
- Pausing the interview if it appears that a participant is uncomfortable, and allowing participants to 'take breaks' if they need to.
- Reiterating that the purpose of this study is to explore and understand women's use of sexually explicit materials, and not to stigmatize women's behaviour.
- Conducting the focus group interview at a time that caters to the specific availabilities of all the participants, to minimize any inconvenience of participating in this study.
- Ensuring that the questions asked of me during the focus group have been designed to focus on my thoughts and opinions, and not on the disclosure of personal experiences I have had with sexually explicit materials.

**Benefits:** My participation in this study may or may not directly benefit me personally. I may appreciate the fact that my thoughts and opinions will be voiced in a forum that will enable me to contribute academic research. When the research is completed, it will contribute to the advancement of knowledge surrounding the use of sexually explicit materials by women, a topic in which there exists a lack of empirical research.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that while absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, the researcher, Olga Marques, will attempt to minimize any risks of information disclosure. I understand that the contents will be only used for the purposes of Olga Marques' Ph.D. dissertation, as well as for any publications and/or public presentations regarding this study, and that my confidentiality will be protected through the use of a pseudonym to conceal my real name, as well as through the removal of all identifying information.

Despite all efforts to keep the information shared in the focus group confidential, there is a chance that a focus group participant may share the information they have heard. Therefore, I understand that Olga Marques cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality for focus group participants. However, I have received assurance from the researcher that that actions will be taken to reiterate the importance of confidentiality during and after the focus group interview, through the following measures:

- Focus group participants will be invited and encouraged to use a pseudonym.
- Prior to commencing the focus group interviews, all group participants will be reminded of the importance of confidentiality particularly within a group interviewing session. This will be tape recorded.
- Prior to commencing the focus group interviews, participants will be verbally reminded that they do not need to reveal any personal information, and that disclosure of personal information is not the aim of the focus group interviews.
- The questions to be asked of the focus group have been constructed to be broad general questions. No questions relating to the personal use of, or experiences with, sexually explicit materials will be asked. For example, a sample question is "What do you consider to be sexually explicit materials?"

**Anonymity** will be assured by keeping the personal information collected to a minimum; immediately upon transcription changing any personal or potentially identifiable information including names, agencies, towns/cities, or events/stories; and altering any atypical (and therefore potentially identifiable) speech patterns or idiosyncratic use of words/phrases. However, as the interviews are conducted in a group setting, I understand that full anonymity is not possible. The researcher has assured me that any identifying information disclosed will be removed, so as not to reveal the identity of participants.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected via tape-recorded interviews, notes taken during the interview, and written transcripts of the interview will be kept in a secure manner and conserved for a period of five (5) years. Tapes and original notes will be destroyed five (5) years after the project is completed. Transcripts will be retained for five additional years. Access to data will be restricted to Olga Marques and her supervisor Dr. Christine Bruckert, and will be secured electronically and physically in a locked safe and office away from public access.

**Voluntary Participation:** I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be included, unless I indicate that I do not want any of my responses to be included in the research data.

The interview will be transcribed by Olga Marques, once the focus group interview is completed. I will be offered an abridged version of the focus group interview transcript, via email, and I have the option of changing or appending any information that I gave during the focus group interview, if I so choose. I will then email the revised email to Olga Marques within five (5) working days from the date that I received it. I understand that any transcripts sent via email will be subject to the everyday risks associated with this form of communication.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_ (*Name of participant*), agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Olga Marques of the Department of Criminology, which research is under the supervision of Dr. Christine Bruckert.



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I, \_\_\_\_\_, understand that the focus group interview will be tape recorded.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 159, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5  
Tel.: (613) 562-5841  
Email: [ethics@uottawa.ca](mailto:ethics@uottawa.ca)

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



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### Consent Form for Individual Interviews

**Title of the study:** **Negotiating Sexual and Social Identity(ies):  
Women's Engagement with Sexually Explicit Materials.**

This research is being conducted by Olga Marques, Ph.D. Candidate in Criminology at the University of Ottawa, under the direction of Dr. Christine Bruckert, Associate Professor, in the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. Olga Marques can be contacted via email at: \_\_\_\_\_ or by phone at: ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Christine Bruckert can be contacted by phone: ( \_\_\_\_\_ ) \_\_\_\_\_ or via email: \_\_\_\_\_

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Please take your time to review this consent form and discuss any questions you may have, or words you do not clearly understand, with the research study team, as indicated above.

**Invitation to Participate:** I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Olga Marques, Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Criminology, under the direction of Dr. Christine Bruckert, Associate Professor, Department of Criminology.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of the study is to discover, describe and understand what sexually explicit materials women seek out for their own sexual pleasure, how these materials are used and how women feel about these materials. An additional goal of this study is to provide insight into the role that sexually explicit materials plays on a woman's sense of her social and sexual identity, in other words, how she sees and portrays herself.

**Participation:** My participation will consist essentially of participating in one (1) semi-structured in-depth interview lasting approximately two (2) hours. During the interview I will be asked a series of questions about what I consider as sexually explicit materials, my engagement with these materials, and what these materials mean to me in my personal, social and sexual life. The interview has been scheduled for time, date and location that I have selected to fit with my schedule, and that has been agreed upon by myself and Olga Marques.

I have been asked if I am comfortable having the interview recorded on audio tape. If I agree the interview will be recorded and the interview tapes will be transcribed. Upon request the full transcript will be forwarded to me. If I agree to participate but do not wish for the interview to be recorded on audio tape, detailed notes will be taken throughout the interview. In this case the processed notes will be made available to me as soon as possible.

**Risks:** My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer personal information by discussing my feelings about sexually explicit materials, and what these materials mean to me. This may cause me to experience some emotional discomfort about disclosing personal information and the fear of my responses being judged. Furthermore, taking time to participate in this study may cause an

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inconvenience to me. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks by:

- Ensuring that all identifying information will be removed in the written transcripts, publications and/or public presentations.
- Allowing me to not answer questions that I feel are too personal and that I do not want to answer, without fear of reprisal or ill treatment.
- Pausing or stopping the interview if I am uncomfortable.
- Reiterating that the purpose of this study is to explore and understand women's use of sexually explicit materials, and not to stigmatize women's behaviour.
- Conducting the interview at a time and location that caters to my specific availability, to minimize any inconvenience of participating in this study.

**Benefits:** My participation in this study may or may not directly benefit me personally. I may appreciate the fact that my thoughts and opinions will be voiced in a forum that will enable me to contribute academic research. When the research is completed, it will contribute to the advancement of knowledge surrounding the use of sexually explicit materials by women, a topic in which there exists a lack of empirical research.

**Confidentiality and anonymity:** I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be only used for the purposes of Olga Marques' Ph.D. dissertation, as well as for any publications and/or public presentations regarding this study, and that my confidentiality will be protected through the use of a pseudonym to conceal my real name, as well as through the removal of all identifying information. **Anonymity** will be assured by keeping the personal information collected to a minimum; immediately upon transcription changing any personal or potentially identifiable information including names, agencies, towns/cities, or events/stories; and altering any atypical (and therefore potentially identifiable) speech patterns or idiosyncratic use of words/phrases.

**Conservation of data:** The data collected via tape-recorded interviews, notes taken during the interview, and written transcripts of the interview will be kept in a secure manner and conserved for a period of five (5) years. Tapes and original notes will be destroyed five (5) years after the project is completed. Transcripts will be retained for five additional years. Access to data will be restricted to Olga Marques and her supervisor Dr. Christine Bruckert, and will be secured electronically and physically in a locked safe and office away from public access

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the revised email to Olga Marques within five (5) working days from the date that I received it. I understand that any transcripts sent via email will be subject to the everyday risks associated with this form of communication.

**Acceptance:** I, \_\_\_\_\_ (*Name of participant*), agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Olga Marques of the Department of Criminology, which research is under the supervision of Dr. Christine Bruckert.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (*Name of participant*), agree to having my interview tape recorded.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or her supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 159, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5  
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There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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**APPENDIX F**  
**List of NVIVO Codes**

## LIST OF NVIVO CODES

### Demographics

- Age
- Sexual Orientation
- Occupation
- Marital Status
- Children
- Ethnic Background

### General Opinion of SEM

- SEM Terminology
- Types of SEM
- Availability of SEM Broadly
- Societal Effects of SEM
- SEM Role in Society
- Porn for Women
- Soft Core v. Hard Core

### Engaging with SEM

- Types of SEM Used
- Specific Preferences of SEM Used
- How SEM is Used
- Why SEM is Used
  1. Education
  2. Pleasure/Enjoyment
  3. Entertainment
  4. In Lieu of Sex
  5. For Male Pleasure
- Frequency
- First Contact with SEM
- First Use of SEM
  1. For Own Sexual Pleasure
  2. Type of SEM First Used
- Positive Impacts of SEM Use
  1. SEM as Empowerment
- Feelings While Using SEM
- Feelings After Using SEM
  1. Shame
- Purchasing SEM
  1. Feelings While Purchasing
- SEM Outside of Sexual Context
- SEM Dislikes
- Vicarious or Spectatoring Viewing

## SEM and Identity

- Sexual Identity or Sexual Self
  1. Act Out What is in Porn
- Social Self
- Personal Identity

## Contradictions with SEM

- Self Reflection on SEM Use
- SEM Use and Personal Values
  1. Religion
- Negative Implications of SEM Use
- Virgin v. Whore Complex
- SEM as Degrading

## SEM and Women

- Women Non-SEM Users
- SEM Effects on Women

## SEM and Men

- SEM Effects on Men
- SEM is for Men

## SEM and Relationships

- Negotiating SEM Use
- Distinction between Sex and SEM
- Family Sexual Openness
  1. Family Effects on SEM Use

## SEM Disclosure

- Who Doesn't Know
- Disclosure Influence on Other's Perceptions

## Taboo and Stigma

- Societal Taboo
- Deviance
- Taboo for Women

## What Women Want in SEM

- Love Making v. Fucking

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