

# The Aesthetics of Pornography: the Insights of Consumers

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## Othering Consumers of Pornography

Many people have an opinion on pornography, its effects on individual consumers, and on society in general. In public debates in Australia we often hear from Church leaders, politicians and opinion columnists on this topic (Loane, 2004, p. 52; Pell, 2004, p. 83). But for some reason we routinely exclude one group of commentators who, one would think, have some expertise on this topic—the people who consume pornography as a part of their everyday lives.

The reason for this exclusion is simple enough to work out: although one part of the media (e.g. men's magazines and youth culture) sees pornography consumption as everyday and unproblematic, the general news media still tend to report the use of pornography only as a problem—the only voices of consumers that we commonly hear in the news are those of addicts, seeking to recover from their problem ('Logging on', 2004). Academics don't help this situation—research on pornography routinely refuses to study those who use pornography as part of their everyday lives, preferring to study the 'effects' of the genre on random college students, presented with unrepresentative material (especially violent pornography) in stress-inducing public settings—who are further misinformed as to the purpose of the study to ensure that their thoughts and beliefs about pornography do not form part of the study (see, for example, Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981). There is a general sense of distrust of pornography consumers in research: for example, reviewing a chapter based on comments made by pornography consumers, Michael Gilding describes the data as

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unreliable: ‘just because a self-selecting group of pornography consumers say that pornography is good for their mental health and marriages does not make it so’ (Gilding, 2004, n.p.). A few important studies have emerged, surveying consumers of pornography (Padgett *et al.*, 1989; Potter, 1996; Davies, 1997). But there is little research which actually presents us with the voices of pornography consumers, allowing us to benefit from their expertise on the genre (Smith, 2002, is valuable but only offers the voice of a single consumer; the most systematic piece of work is Loftus, 2002—but this is not an academic piece of research).

In short, there is a systematic ‘othering’ of pornography consumers in academic research and in public debate about the genre. They cannot know themselves; they cannot speak for themselves; they must be represented. But as far as I know, no research has been done to support the contention that users of pornography are less trustworthy, have less ability for insight or self-reflexiveness, or are more prone to misreporting themselves than members of other groups. We thus conducted detailed interviews with 46 consumers of pornography in Australia to see whether their expertise in the topic could provide useful information for ongoing public debates about the genre and its effects on individuals and society.

### Details of the Project

This article is one of a series emerging from a large-scale study of pornographic consumers in Australia. Owing to constraints of space, it is not possible here to discuss in detail the previous literature on pornography’s effects, or to expand on the methodology of this study (this is discussed elsewhere—see McKee, 2005). Forty-six consumers of pornography around Australia were interviewed, the sample being chosen to offer the most diverse range of voices from different demographic groups. The factors we paid attention to were those which previous work in the area had identified as having a relevance to the consumption of, and attitudes towards, sexual issues: gender; geographical location (including State/Territory and urban/rural); age; level of formal education; and sexuality (see Smith *et al.*, 2003, p. 103). Forty of the interviews were with individuals. Three were with couples where both partners consumed pornography. Twenty-six of the interviewees were male and twenty were female. Appendix B provides demographic details for each of the interviewees by age, income, formal educational level, gender, sexuality, area, State or Territory, and religion; this can be cross-referenced with the numbers given in the body of this article.

The sample does not aim for representativeness: rather, it attempts to recover the ‘available discourses’ (Muecke, 1982) employed by a number of pornography consumers as they discussed the genre and its place in society. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were designed for this project in order to raise a number of issues that previous public debate and academic research have identified as being of import: effects on consumers with particular attention to violent arousal and attitudes towards women; effects of the genre on children; distinctions between harmful and beneficent

pornography; the place of pornography in human relationships; and the issue of censorship.

The interviews were semi-structured, and subjected to the methodology of 'interview textual analysis' (McKee, 2004):

I did not take a naïve realist approach to this data. I did not attempt to measure the 'authenticity' or 'truth' of the speaking positions. On the other hand, I did not want to look for hidden deep meanings of which the interviewees themselves would be unaware. Rather, I treated the interview data as a text to be subjected to poststructural textual analysis, making an 'educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text'. (McKee, 2004, pp. 204–205)

The purpose of the analysis was to find out which issues concerned the consumers; and what they had to say about them. In doing this I employed two approaches within the broader methodology of textual analysis. The first was a more anthropological approach—mapping out the most common forms of responses within the broad discourses that framed them (such as the libertarian anti-censorship position). In this, I aimed for representativeness of interviewees' comments. The second was an exegetical approach, where I noticed the most insightful and useful points made by interviewees and discussed these.

Some questions which had seemed of importance when the project was designed actually elicited little response from consumers, and did not seem to interest them. For example, in responding to the issue of whether they would like to see Australian-produced pornography, few respondents had a strong position, making comments such as: 'I don't think it would matter one way or the other' (44). Those who did take a position, either for or against, tended to use non-committal terminology such as: 'sure' (42). I have excluded these issues from the analysis, on the basis that the interviewees did not demonstrate that they were part of their everyday thinking about pornography in a natural setting. Other issues seemed to concern them more strongly; they had obviously thought about them before the interview, in the course of their everyday lives, and I focused more strongly on these in the analysis.

Given the fact that the voices of pornography consumers have not been heard in the public debate, I made the conscious decision to present this paper in a descriptive format, allowing the speaking voices of the consumers to be the dominant ones. Of course there is a strong analytical component involved—a quarter of a million words of interviews have been edited down to 5,000 words. I made the decisions about which comments were the most interesting, the limits of what would count as 'making the same point', the categories into which they should be organized and so on. But for those readers who are concerned that the article simply gives users of pornography the chance to present their position without critiquing them, or analysing them against external representations, I would simply say that that is the point of the article. This expertise has not previously been presented in the public debate, and this work is an attempt to do so.

Given the limitations of space, it is not possible to cover all the areas about which the interviewees wished to talk. In this paper I focus particularly on issues of

interviewees' judgements about pornographic texts themselves: what aesthetic judgements did they make about what was good and bad pornography? (For analysis of consumers' comments on public policy and censorship, see McKee, 2006.)

### **Distinguishing Good Pornography**

The question of how consumers of pornography distinguish between good and bad pornography is one about which we know very little. In experimental academic research, for example, the subjects who are being tested for pornographic 'exposure' are allowed no say in what pornography they get to see (see, for example, Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981), suggesting that any pornography is as good as any other in everyday consumption. Similarly, theories about how consumers move between different kinds of pornography—from soft to hard core, from vanilla to kink—rely on the assumption that consumers don't make active judgements beyond sexual explicitness about what they think is good and what is bad.

These interviews, however, made clear that this is not the case. Interviewees were asked: 'Is there anything that annoys you about the pornography that you buy?' and 'What do you think makes for the best pornography?' The answers to these questions show us that consumers of pornography have very clear ideas about what constitutes good pornography and what is bad—and that sexual explicitness is not an important criterion in making those distinctions. Those interviewees who like hardcore explicit material are still insistent that there is good hardcore and bad hardcore.

Many interviewees used the term 'quality' to describe what makes for good pornography (1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 15, 18, 24, 26, 27, 29, 31, 36, 37, 39, 41, 44, 45, 46). More specifically, one key issue that several interviewees mentioned spontaneously was that the best pornography is that where: 'you can see real enjoyment' (1). The word 'enjoyment', or people 'enjoying' themselves, was used by several interviewees (1, 5, 12, 14, 19, 29, 34, 37, 38, 41). Another looked for 'genuine interest' on the part of the actors (8); another said he liked amateur pornography because 'the people are there because they want to be there' (20); yet another said he wanted to see porn actors who 'like what they're doing' (23). One interviewee wanted to see: 'enthusiasm' (25); another that 'the actors are in to it' (27). One said he looks for genuine 'chemistry' (29) between the actors.

Interviewees emphasized that this made pornography attractive to them. One said: 'They're the scenes that on many occasion, now on reflection, I go back to' (1). Another says: 'First and foremost I like to see pornography actors that are enjoying themselves. Absolutely. And it doesn't matter how attractive they are if they look bored, it ruins it' (12). A male interviewee agreed: 'I think porn where the women aren't into it is a bit wrong' (25). A gay consumer claimed that 'You can just tell that they aren't into it. They are just waiting for their pay cheque, that's it. It's really important that the actors are into it' (27). Another man explained that in one film the actress: 'really obviously came and came a lot and I mean that wasn't just acting, and that was like, This is better—she was obviously happy to be there ... she was

obviously enjoying it and they both were and it was much more equal . . . and that was good' (41).

Another interviewee went further on this topic:

It makes for the best porn when the people who are performing genuinely want to be there. Whether it's for the purpose of themselves getting off or whether it's the purpose of them seeing other people getting off, or wanting other people to get off . . . those are the sort of things that I find most interesting because the people in it are happy and you're almost sucked into their world—you're brought into their world and you're enjoying their company . . . In watching porn I always tend to sort of look at the background and if you notice things that look like they're drug related, or someone may be dependent upon drugs, it sort of kills the ability to be able to enjoy it. (20)

Beyond the genuine enjoyment of the actors, an interesting dichotomy emerged between two dominant discourses about what makes for good pornography.

Some interviewees said that in their pornography they like the actors to have idealized bodies. As one woman put it, in pornography: 'we're talking fantasy so we're talking the ideal body. Yeah' (1). Another woman explained that 'I like the style, like the *Playboy* style with all the big done up hair and breasts and everything and the good looking guys . . . I like the glossy, glitzy glamour style, not the dirty sort of old people stuff . . . [a] classy feel with good looking people, just like you want to see good looking people in the movies. And you can have your fantasies' (10). A male interviewee explained the appeal of this fantasy material: 'I would like more *stylish* porn if that makes sense . . . you want some kind of imagination with great lighting and everything like that . . . The more unrealistic and incredibly romanticized basically it is, the better . . . There should be more of that' (23). Another woman argued that 'what I absolutely *hate* is *ugly men*!! Like, hello people! No, it doesn't work like that' (11; also 44). One woman noted the importance of 'pretty men' (12); another wanted 'good-looking men and women' (19). A gay man wanted: 'good looking' actors: 'I like the guys to be pretty buffed and with good bodies. They have to have big cocks of course' (27). He argued that 'it's not totally realistic but then again maybe the point of porn is not to be realistic' (27). Another man said he didn't like bodies that were 'too hairy, too fat . . .' (31); one said that he liked 'good looking actors . . . good bodies . . . I like good looking, healthy looking people' (32).

But other interviewees said exactly the opposite, arguing that what they wanted to see in pornography was actors with 'realistic' bodies (3, 8, 12); with a particular emphasis that they don't like breast implants (3, 4, 6, 8, 22, 40, 45, 46). One woman mentioned that she didn't like shaved bodies (9). These people argued that 'real people are sexy and they're all so different and they're all beautiful in different ways' (8). One woman said of her sexual partners: 'I've found that the kind of pornography that my partners like to watch is the kind of pornography that contains women that look like *me*; they don't want to watch some skinny blonde tart, they want a *real* woman who's older . . . [and] got a bit of sexual nous' (12). Another woman noted: 'I like the Home Girls . . . I think it's nice because otherwise you start thinking that everyone's perfect

... And you get the Home Girls and you think yeah ... it's nice to see real people' (13). Some interviewees said that they liked amateur pornography best for this reason (21). One man explained that fake breasts are unattractive: 'There's too much silicone ... there's no naturalness left on them' (40). Another man explained that he liked: 'more natural looking bodies' (42).

Some of the interviewees were concerned about the technical and production quality of pornography—mentioning poor picture and sound quality (3, 4, 10, 24, 32, 44, 45) and the quality of the acting (3, 38). Some mentioned other technical issues like editing (23, 32, 44), camerawork (14, 36, 37) or directing (34, 44). Several also mentioned the fact that the tapes have been reproduced so many times that the sound and picture quality suffers (18; also 3, 4). Some brought up the issue of the music on pornographic videos, saying it wasn't good enough (3, 4, 22, 32). Others mentioned that they like pornography which is a bit 'creative' (1), and doesn't just have the 'same thing, same people, same thing, same positions, same thing' (7; also 8, 28, 32, 37, 39). One man said he simply wants 'value for money'—a lot of running time for his money (35). One woman said she doesn't like too much swearing in pornography (17).

A final surprising issue that has not been raised in previous discussions of pornography was that some women mentioned the importance of clothing in the genre: 'That's what I really love about porn models, they always have the *best* shoes! It's true! ... if you don't have great shoes, you can't have great sex!' (11). Another said: 'I like the clothes [laughs], love the clothes, love the shoes and one of the great things about there being more porn with storylines and a plot is that now you don't just get sexy clothes you get costuming, and you get people having sex in either normal everyday clothing, or you get people having sex in costumes that are appropriate to the set, and I think that's great, it looks fun' (12). None of the male interviewees mentioned clothing or shoes in their assessments of good pornography.

### **Pornography and Plot**

One issue that interviewees kept raising spontaneously in relation to the quality of pornography was that of storylines. As with the question of whether bodies should be idealized or naturalistic, we found two dominant and contradictory discourses employed by consumers of pornography.

Some consumers suggested that they disliked the 'lack of plot' (2) or 'lousy story' (3) in pornography. One woman argued that 'good pornography has to have a decent storyline' (4). Female interviewees kept using the word 'storyline' (5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 43). These consumers described bad pornography as that in which: 'it's just like someone comes over to have sex' (8). (One consumer used the interesting term 'abstract' to describe pornography which is largely non-narrative in presentation—9.) They listed a number of stereotypical scenarios: 'there's always like the rich person and the poor boy. The person breaking into a house and "ooh I tripped over" ... on somebody [laughter]. They're really ridiculous. Then there's the office one with either the female boss or the male boss, and what else is there ... the broken down car' (8);

or “Hi, I’m the pool boy”, he strips off and they go for it right on the front porch’ (11). Another male interviewee employed the same stereotype, commenting on plots about the appearance of ‘the pool guy’, who turns up and says: ‘I’m here for no apparent reason’ (20).

The consumers who argued for more plot sometimes linked this with emotion and intimacy: that having more story meant that you have ‘characterisation’ (3) and feel more connected to the characters. As one woman explained: ‘knowing people and about peoples’ histories and feelings and all this sort of stuff makes it a lot more engaging. You engage with these people and identify with them if you know more about them ... So this is why I think the story is really important’ (9).

Other interviewees suggested that an interest in plot was gendered: that women are more interested in story and characterization than men, and that female consumers of pornography like to be emotionally involved whereas male viewers don’t. One woman noted: ‘you know there’s comments about women not really being ... turned on by visual stuff ... but I think for me, like visual stuff ... can be exciting, but it’s about ... context, whether there’s something else that goes with it as well’ (16). Another female consumer talked about a female director who: ‘was making this pornography for women and they had real stories, and I guess they were like you know a Mills and Boon, you had drama and romance and the mystery and then you had the sex ... I’d probably be more interested in watching something with a bit of storyline to it as well’ (5; also 12). Another suggested that ‘as a girl I’d probably like a better story line and better lead up to sex ... whereas guys I suppose just like it then and there’ (10). This interviewee did go on to emphasize that this didn’t mean she didn’t want to see the sex as well: ‘you also don’t want to take too long—you want a lead in but you don’t want it to go on forever’ (10).

Three men in the sample stated that they like storylines. Two were gay and one was straight. One gay man noted: ‘I would look for something ... substance, let’s say ... as in a novel. A story. Not just two handsome men fucking each other ... A build-up to something’ (30). Another gay interviewee said: ‘the people who sit down and think and write a proper story line are a lot better because they think about the viewer and put more thought into what they’re doing’ (35). One straight man stated that what makes good pornography is ‘a plot’ (39).

Although few heterosexual male consumers nominated storyline as being important in pornography, several women challenged the stereotype by saying that they were not interested in plot. One woman insisted that ‘storyline’s irrelevant’ (1); another said that ‘a storyline is OK [but] if it’s a very fake looking storyline, then I am not that interested and I might fast forward that bit’ (6). A third woman said: ‘a lot of people say you need a storyline, but no, no storyline’ (7). A fourth said: ‘get rid of the crappy story lines and just get down to it’ (15). A fifth didn’t mind storylines, but didn’t look for them in pornographic videos: ‘If I want a story line I’ll tend to read porn rather than watch a film because I don’t expect films to have one, I guess’ (8). This was the position taken by most of the male interviewees who made comments on the issue of plot in pornography, tending to make comments such as: ‘Fuck that! I fast-forward

through that. Once you've got an idea about it I just go to the good bits' (40; also 28, 29, 32, 34, 44).

### **Pornography and Gender**

Gender is a key issue in public and academic discussions about pornography. It is often assumed that one's gender will determine one's attitude towards pornography. Although I did not ask any specific questions about their thoughts on pornography and gender, nevertheless, several respondents raised the issue. In the survey that was used to recruit these interviewees we asked the respondents questions about their attitudes towards feminist issues such as equal pay. Because of this, it may be that they were already primed to think about the issue.

Some of the interviewees argued that there is a difference between a male perspective and a 'female perspective' in pornography (1). A male perspective comes through in: 'pornography [which] is very focused on men and men's desire' (2); and, as one woman put it: 'a lot of porn is made specifically angled at guys' (20). One woman said: 'You always see the male being pleased, orgasming, but quite often it's not obvious that the woman is coming, so you assume that she's not ... it's quite male focused, cock focused ... vaginal intercourse focused' (6; also 41). Another woman said that a lot of porn is:

men's fantasies, so they can be slobs with tummies and whatever, and the women tend to be perfect, just kind of caricatures of women ... big boobs and tanned and have everything shaved and huge amounts of make up on, because that's the male fantasy, that they're fulfilling ... it's really weird as a woman watching it—you have to sort of identify with the woman, but the woman's not really like you ... Whereas it is acceptable for a guy to have this fantasy of being the plumber or being the ordinary bloke and just scoring with this young sexy thing, but it still doesn't diminish you as a normal human being. But it does diminish you as a woman. (9)

For these women, though, the problem is not pornography itself: 'it doesn't mean that porn in itself couldn't be a positive thing' (9). Some of the female interviewees said that they: 'would like porn that's made by women that's for women' (2, also 9); arguing that female directors have a 'female perspective' that 'is less "wham bam thank you mam"' (1) and 'not just focused on ... men coming' (2; also 5, 13). Some of the female consumers were already using pornography produced by women, and preferred it to that made by men (3, 12).

Several of the interviewees also spontaneously raised the issue of feminism's attitude towards pornography; and whether the genre represents women badly. One woman, thinking about what makes good pornography, noted:

it depends on whether you see porn as being intrinsically degrading to women, and I don't think it necessarily is—although can be. You can also see porn as being empowering for women, so its sort of ... a murky area. I mean I am not a feminist in the way Andrea Dworkin is a feminist, but I guess I'm ambivalent about the intersection of pornography and feminism. (2)

Another woman said: 'I think a lot of it [feminism's attitude towards pornography] comes from ignorance, not interested in viewing the other side of the story ... I would hope that the majority of feminists nowadays are a little bit more liberal about it' (14). Another woman noted that 'a lot of feminists absolutely abhor pornography ... [but] there's this whole other generation of feminists, women who like sex, porn, that stuff, simulated rape' (45).

One woman told her own story of reconciling her feminism with her use of pornography:

until recently [I] felt like, 'Oh no, not porn, that's exploitative and anti-feminist' ... And only in the last five years [have I] gone, well actually, hang on a minute you know, it can be more open and it can be different things within it ... I'd just been brought up to think that it's totally anti-feminist and it's wrong ... [by] my mum and uni probably as well ... the two together. So then me kind of thinking, 'Well is that actually the case?' ... I'm ... thinking about it as well as enjoying it. (41)

Another woman argued:

I've never actually seen any porn where women look like they haven't chosen to participate. I think the whole idea that women are innocent things that need to be protected from the big bad world is the ultimate in sexism and absolutely ridiculous. So I think that expressions of female and male sexuality aren't oppressing anybody ... unless they're rape or obviously non-consensual things. I think it's just a misconstrued view of what women are. (8)

Another woman said:

They say that pornography and that is degrading to women but again I don't agree because if the women choose to do it then they're not being degraded ... to me saying that they're degrading themselves isn't giving them ... the intelligence to make their own choices, it's almost like they're trying to baby-sit some women and what they say is right for you ... how can they know what you are better than you do? (13)

Yet another woman argued:

We talk about a lot of equality and freedom and so on ... if you [a woman] can choose to be a dentist or a doctor or a lawyer ... [but] I don't think you can go, as a modern professional woman, well, I choose to be a porn star. Why do you have to be made to feel guilty and made to feel like a dirty person or slut, and made to feel like you were forced into it simply because you want to be a sex industry worker? And I don't like that, I really don't like that. I think if you enjoy it you should be allowed to. You're allowed to stay home and have kids, and you're allowed to go and work for twenty years, why can't you go and have sex on camera? (12)

One woman argued, in terms familiar from feminism, that the fact that women are not supposed to be interested in pornography—or in sex more generally—is sexist:

you're told if you're male ... you can go sow your seed and you can live it up to the max ... and part of that manly thing is that you have the God-given right to masturbate as much as you like and watch as much porn as you like. Whereas as a girl you're told ... don't have sex, put your thoughts onto something else like stitchcraft, or go play hockey! (11)

Another woman said:

women don't often look at pornography, because we're all told that's not what nice women do ... it's always been such a taboo subject really, hasn't it, especially concerning women, about what they like and what they want. It's not something that you often hear about. I'm one of these [who say] 'Power to the women! We want something too!' (45; also 12)

Yet another woman discussed whether it was a problem if pornography showed idealized body types:

You see women with big breasts and they always have to be the best looking girls, but you also see models in magazines and you know you're not a model when you walk down the street in the clothes you wear so there's no reason why you have to be a big breasted beautiful model to have sex because you're not having sex with a guy off the tv either. You choose normal people. (10)

Others addressed the same question and argued that the general media are more sexist in their portrayal of women than pornography is:

not long after I had my daughter there was an article in *Women's Day* or something about how terrible it is that all these women in the media are perfect and how that's not really so, particularly after you've just had a baby. And no kidding, on the very next page, was this woman, it was an ad for baby food, and she was in a pool in a bikini throwing up this three-month-old baby and she was perfect and it was on the back of this story! It's so contradictory. Like can't you see, we've just had this article about you know, women in media not being realistic and following it by an ad of a woman who's totally just had a baby and she was perfect. (13)

Another woman agreed: 'there's lots of stuff that you see on TV that's probably more damaging than porn, in lots of ways' (16).

The men who were interviewed also made comments about gender and pornography. Several of the men argued that in pornography, far from being objectified, it's the women who hold the power: 'in porn generally it's the woman that has the right, she's the one that controls the act ... she tells him what to do' (21). Similarly, one man argued that 'it's the guys that are actually used as the tools. You know the women get paid a lot more to do it, they're the centre of attention' (32); another pointed out that 'The people with the big pay-packets are women' (44). Another man agreed that pornography shows women as sexual subjects rather than sexual objects: 'it's okay for the woman to be the sexual protagonist ... So in terms of gender politics, that's where I'm coming from. I think women should also be able to be sexual protagonists. I think porn has gone some way toward making that more acceptable' (29).

The men also made comments about body image. One man suggested that in pornography 'the women are often a fair bit bigger than in magazines and other fashion model ads. But I guess most guys get off on big boobs and round arses' (25). Another said: 'in some ways the anti-porn voice has a point but I think mostly they miss the real issue ... that porn is so diverse. There are so many different types of porn with all different body types. It's impossible to generalise I reckon' (27).

### **Pornography in Relationships**

We know surprisingly little about the social context of everyday pornography use. As mentioned above, several respondents mentioned that their early exposure to pornography was a group practice and a rite of passage. We also asked our respondents whether they ever used pornography in their relationships.

None of our interviewees kept their use of pornography secret from their partner. As one interviewee stated explicitly, he thinks the most important thing is to talk about it: 'I go, yeah, I have a vast collection [of pornography], I enjoy watching and as long as they [partners] don't clam up and . . . try not to talk about it, you talk about it openly with them. They respond a lot better if you have a discussion with them, whether they like [pornography] or not' (34; also 12).

Some of the interviewees only consumed pornography by themselves: 'I think it's an individual thing. And also, why watch porn when you've got each other?' (18; also 21, 28, 31, 36, 40). But more said that they tended to use pornography with their partners. One woman noted that a shared interest in pornography was one part of the basis for her relationship with her partner: 'Its one of the things that actually got us together, finding out that we had similar interests and tastes, and we're both quite willing to look at stuff online' (3). Another noted that it's something she looks for in a man: '[it's] the kind of thing that, at least for me, comes up quite early in a sexual relationship with someone, and the kind of person who is going to be shocked by the fact that I like pornography is probably not the kind of person who would be sexually compatible with me' (12; also 14, 20, 22, 23).

Several respondents argued that using pornography together made their relationships stronger:

I think he was quite happy that he could share with me and we could go to sex shops together and have a look at . . . which magazines we like and which videotapes we like and we could discuss a bit more openly our fantasies, I guess. And then it could be a together thing rather than something that would separate us, so I think in that, it's good. (9)

Another suggested: 'I think it's great and I really appreciate when a partner feels comfortable enough to show me what their sexual interests are' (12). In relationships, couples used pornography as 'a kick-off launch for foreplay' (12; also 43, 44). One respondent commented: 'it can add positive things and help spark it . . . you can perhaps find other ways of doing things as well. So, it can be a tool that's used for enhancing a relationship's sex life . . . to add a bit of spice, for something different' (19; also 10, 34). One man in the 46–55 age group suggested that pornography allows older people to maintain an active sex life: 'I watch it to—especially my age now, it takes a lot for me to get [pause] stimulated' (22; also 44).

Other female respondents suggested that their partner was more interested in pornography than they were—but they were happy to go along with it:

we both have different interests and read different literature and that's just one of them really. I mean I have a flick through them sometimes, he points this out

something funny . . . [I] had a bit of a giggle, flicked through it, had a bit of a laugh, and that was it, it wasn't really an issue for me. He has magazines and videos, he doesn't watch them all the time. (5; also 7, 12, 14, 20)

Some commentators have suggested that pornography gets in the way of relationships: in discussing the possible negative effects of pornography, they point to the harm done to women who are upset by the fact that their partner uses pornography (see Hamilton, 2004). None of the women interviewed for this study denied that some women could feel like this. They were aware of their own specificity and didn't try to generalize from it to how all people should behave: 'I might be a more sexual person than another girl might be. You know other people might be shocked by their partners asking them, but I wasn't. It's not shocking to me' (10). The women interviewed explicitly made the point that, for them, consumption of pornography in the relationship wasn't a problem:

the other thing that I've heard of from women who don't like their husbands watching porn or watching porn with them is that they think their husbands want to be making love to the girls on the video. They'll actually say that's not the case, but it's this insecurity of the woman that feels that that's the case. See, I'm secure enough in my relationship to know that's not the case, that it's just an extra thing that's there that makes our lovemaking fun. (7)

As another woman put it:

I found that I had to say, look it's OK if you do masturbate and you do look at porn sometimes. I know it's going to happen anyway. To let him know that I don't have this expectation that just because he's with me he's not going to look at anybody else and he's not going to have any kind of fantasies. Because I know that from my own experience, it doesn't work like that. (9)

One male consumer made the following comment on this issue when asked whether he compares his wife to the porn stars he watched: 'I got my own star. She's my star and that's all there is to it' (22).

Most of the women interviewed were in relationships, and used pornography with their partners; however, they had mostly discovered pornography for themselves, earlier in life, rather than being introduced to it by their partners. Two of the women were the active ones in raising the issue of pornography in the relationship (11, 14).

## Conclusion

This paper is modest in its scope. Ongoing public debates about pornography and its place in society tend to hear mostly from those commentators whose expertise is based on not being familiar with the genre. This work aims to present the voices of pornography consumers and to benefit from their expertise about the genre.

Listening to the voices of some of these consumers—men and women from a variety of educational backgrounds and age groups, in all different States and Territories in Australia—provides us with valuable information for these ongoing debates. The first

piece of information might simply be that users of pornography are able to be as articulate, intelligent and self-reflexive as other citizens. We also find out that they don't think that all pornography is equal. In this paper I have focused on issues about their judgements about pornography, and its uses in their lives. There was absolute agreement that these users of pornography wanted to see actors genuinely enjoying themselves. There was no discourse available for celebrating pornography which was non-consensual. There was no suggestion that 'anything goes'. Some interviewees went further and noted that financial inducements or drugs might place limits on genuine consent—and they had little interest in watching such material.

Beyond this desire to see genuine pleasure, the existence of two distinct evaluative paradigms—celebrating fantasy and celebrating realism—is interesting. This provides a useful corrective to those public voices which want to condemn pornography as though all of it showed unrealistic body images. There is a demand for both types of pornography; and each has its own internal logic. Those viewers who like 'fantasy' bodies do not simplistically equate those with everyday life.

Interviewees were also able to go further with these debates, and link them into wider social structures, thinking self-consciously about feminism and the claims that have been made on its behalf against pornography. Finally, interviewees were able to tell us about the ways in which pornography is integrated into their everyday lives—an area about which previous academic research, focusing on decontextualized exposure to pornography, has been remarkably silent.

These are only the voices of 46 self-selected consumers of pornography. We cannot claim that they are representative of all pornography users. But they give us at least the opportunity to hear the voices of people who consume these materials on a regular basis—the experts on the genre from whom we so rarely hear in public debates.

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## Appendix A: Questions for the Semi-structured Interviews

1. How did you find out about the survey?
2. Were you embarrassed to fill it in?
3. Look at survey answer about how much porn they use & quote it ... do you think you use a lot of pornography?  
Look at survey answer as to whether partnered/single. Are you still single/in a relationship?  
If partnered ... does your partner know that you use/use as much pornography?  
If they answer no ... why do you feel like you should keep this from her?  
Do you use pornography together?
4. Do your friends know that you use pornography?  
If the answer is yes ... do you exchange porn with them?  
Do you download/recommend movies for your friends?
5. Tell me about the first time you saw something pornographic ... let them answer & if you don't have the information ...

- Were you alone or with friends/girlfriend?  
How old do you think you were?  
Do you think that seeing porn at that age harmed you in any way?  
Do you think that it shaped your expectations of what women want, or how they should behave sexually?  
Do you think that it shaped your expectations about sex and love-making generally?
6. If a woman initiated watching/looking at pornographic texts together would you be shocked?  
If yes, why?
7. Do you think that pornography is a problem in our society?  
If so, why, and how?  
Do you think that it should be restricted?
8. What do you think about the way pornography is discussed in the media?
9. With regard to censorship, are you aware that it is illegal to sell (but not to buy) pornography outside of the ACT?  
Are you happy with that?  
Where do you buy yours?  
Do you think people should go to prison for selling porn, bearing in mind that it is illegal?  
It is also illegal to produce pornographic texts in this country . . . do you agree with that?  
Would you like to see more Australian pornography?  
If you had the choice, would you buy Australian or foreign-produced texts?  
Do you think that Australia should be allowed to produce its own movies?  
Why/not?  
Do you think the censorship system in Australia works well?
10. Is there anything that annoys you about the pornography that you buy?
11. What do you think makes for the best pornography?

Table B1 Details of Interviewees

No.	Age	Income (\$)	Education	Gender	Sexuality	Area	State	Religion
1	46–55	30,001–40,000	Tertiary	Female	Bisexual	Town	NSW	Methodist
2	26–35	40,001–60,000	Postgraduate	Female	Straight	City, urban	NSW	Other
3	36–45	Under 12,000	Still studying	Female	Bisexual	Small town	NSW	Anglican
4	36–45	60,001–80,000	Tertiary	Female	Bisexual	City, urban	NSW	Anglican
5	26–35	40,001–60,000	Secondary	Female	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Atheist
6	26–35	40,001–60,000	Postgraduate	Female	Bisexual	City, suburban	VIC	Other Christian
7	36–45	40,001–60,000	Secondary	Female	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Other
8	26–35	30,001–40,000	Tertiary	Female	Bisexual	Rural	VIC	Atheist
9	19–25	20,001–30,000	Still studying	Female	Straight	City, urban	VIC	Atheist
10	Under 18	12,001–20,000	Secondary	Female	Straight	Rural	VIC	Anglican
11	19–25	Under 12,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	City, suburban	QLD	Other
12	19–25	30,001–40,000	Postgraduate	Female	Bisexual	City, urban	QLD	Atheist
13	36–45	Under 12,000	Tertiary	Female	BDSM	Town	QLD	Other
14	26–35	80,001–100,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	City, urban	QLD	Atheist
15	46–55	20,001–30,000	Tertiary	Female	BDSM	City, suburban	WA	Atheist
16	36–45	20,001–30,000	Postgraduate	Female	Straight	City, suburban	WA	Atheist
17	26–35	Under 12,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	Remote	TAS	Catholic
18	56–65	40,001–60,000	Secondary	Male	Gay/lesbian	City, urban	NSW	Atheist
19	36–45	40,001–60,000	Postgraduate	Male	Straight	City, urban	NSW	Atheist
20	19–25	30,001–40,000	Still studying	Male	BDSM	City, urban	NSW	Other
21	66 +	20,001–30,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Anglican
22	46–55	60,001–80,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Catholic
23	Under 18	20,001–30,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Other
24	19–25	Under 12,000	Still studying	Male	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Atheist
25	19–25	12,001–20,000	Tertiary	Male	Bisexual	City, suburban	VIC	Anglican
26	66 +	12,001–20,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Atheist
27	26–35	12,001–20,000	Still studying	Male	Gay/lesbian	City, urban	VIC	Anglican

*(continued)*

28	26–35	30,001–40,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Anglican
29	46–55	60,001–80,000	Postgraduate	Male	Gay/lesbian	City, suburban	QLD	Atheist
30	66 +	12,001–20,000	Postgraduate	Male	Gay/lesbian	City, suburban	QLD	Atheist
31	46–55	40,001–60,000	Secondary	Male	Gay/lesbian	City, suburban	QLD	Other
32	19–25	12,001–20,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	WA	No answer
33	56–65	20,001–30,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, urban	TAS	Other Christian
34	19–25	40,001–60,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	TAS	Catholic
35	26–35	30,001–40,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	TAS	Atheist
36	66 +	12,001–20,000	Tertiary	Male	Bisexual	City, suburban	SA	Other
37	26–35	12,001–20,000	Still studying	Male	Celibate	City, suburban	SA	Atheist
38	26–35	40,001–60,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	ACT	Other
39	26–35	20,001–30,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	ACT	Other
40	36–45	80,001–100,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NT	Other
41	26–35	12,001–20,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	Rural	SA	Other
42	26–35	12,001–20,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	Rural	SA	Other
43	36–45	60,001–80,000	Secondary	Female	Bisexual	City, suburban	VIC	Catholic
44	36–45	60,001–80,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	VIC	Catholic
45	36–45	20,001–30,000	Tertiary	Female	BDSM	Rural	VIC	Other
46	36–45	20,001–30,000	Tertiary	Male	BDSM	Rural	VIC	Other