

## A COMPARISON OF MALE AND FEMALE DIRECTORS IN POPULAR PORNOGRAPHY: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WOMEN ARE AT THE HELM?

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Pornography is a lucrative business. Increasingly, women have participated in both its production, direction, and consumption. This study investigated how the content in popular pornographic videos created by female directors differs from that of their male counterparts. We conducted a quantitative analysis of 122 randomly selected scenes from 44 top-renting adult videos in 2005 (half male- and half female-directed). Findings revealed that all films shared similar depictions: Verbal and physical aggression was common, women were the primary targets of aggression, and negative responses to aggression were extremely rare. Compared to male-directed films, female-directed films were significantly more likely to portray women-only scenes and sexual acts. Even when controlling for main characters' gender, female-directed films showed significantly more female perpetrators aggressing against female targets and significantly more depictions of women as perpetrators of aggression. We highlight the importance of economic forces, rather than director gender, in dictating the content of popular pornography.

“If you are somebody’s sister, wife, or mother-in-law and picked us up by mistake, please pass us along to the man in your life and get back to the *Ladies’ Home Companion*,” Hugh Hefner announced in his first issue of *Playboy* published in 1953 (Johnson, 2003). Hefner was neither the first nor the last person to declare that pornography is a man’s exclusive “secret club,” but in the past two decades there have been signs of erosion of that club’s walls. During the so-called “porn wars” in the 1980s, pornography was

placed squarely and centrally as a feminist issue. Anti- and pro-pornography feminists engaged in heated ideological battles. The anti group argued that pornography is a form of violence against women (Dworkin, 1989; MacKinnon, 1984; Morgan, 1980) whereas the pro group stressed the dangers of censorship and/or pornography’s benefit for women’s sexual liberation (Berger, Searles, & Cottle, 1990; Duggan & Hunter, 1995; Strossen, 1993, 1995; Snitow, Stansell, & Thompson, 1983). Regardless of ideology, market forces have won: The pornography industry has grown from annual revenue of \$75 million in 1985, the period when the porn wars occurred, to \$12 billion in 2005, a 160-fold increase (AVN, 2006).

Even though women’s roles in pornography historically have been relegated to that of sexual objects, it is only in recent years that some women have become consumers, directors, and producers (Dominus, 2004) of these products that remain largely made by men, for men<sup>1</sup> (Dines, Jensen, & Russo, 1998). So far, the research on pornography primarily has focused on how pornography consumption affects men’s attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987; Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1987; Mulac, Jansma, & Linz, 2002), with a comparatively small number of studies focusing on the content of pornography. This study asks a question regarding pornography content that has not been investigated previously: Does the content

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in popular pornographic videos and films created by female directors differ from that of their male counterparts? In previous content analytic studies of pornography, researchers have highlighted pornography's overrepresentation of aggression and degradation against women. In the current study we ask whether, when women are put at the helm of the production and direction of pornographic films, the content shifts in terms of its depiction of gender dynamics, aggression, and degradation? This question was addressed by a quantitative analysis of popular, mainstream adult videos directed by both men and women.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

To our knowledge, no previous studies have directly addressed our research question regarding differences in media content between male and female pornography directors. Nonetheless, research from diverse disciplines informs our investigation. We broadly separate this research into two categories: (a) content analyses of pornography that examine gender-role depictions and aggression or degradation and (b) literature drawn from such areas as feminists' debates on pornography, the rise of female pornographers, and the relationship between media creators' gender (including those who create pornography) and the content created.

#### *Evidence From Prior Content Analyses of Pornography*

Previous content analytic studies have examined a variety of pornographic texts, including magazines (Malamuth & Spinner, 1980; Matacin & Burger, 1987; Scott & Cuvelier, 1993) and the Internet (Gossett & Byrne, 2002). Because the current study dealt only with videos, only studies that examined pornographic videos are reviewed. Furthermore, because the study at hand sampled the most frequently rented adult videos in the United States, to conduct an accurate comparison with previous studies, we do not review studies conducted outside of the United States or those utilizing videos of unknown origins (e.g., Palys's (1986) analysis of adult and XXX-rated tapes from Canada, and McKee's (2005) research on popular adult movies in Australia). U.S. pornographic video content analyses have been conducted with some regularity over the previous two decades. These are reviewed in chronological order, followed by a summary highlighting patterns and major themes.

Cowan, Lee, Levy, and Snyder (1988) compiled a list of 121 X-rated films from the catalogues of seven adult movie rental stores in Southern California, and the researchers randomly selected 45 films to analyze. The scene was the unit of analysis, and each scene was rated as dominant, reciprocal, exploitive, or autoerotic. Results showed that dominance and/or exploitation occurred in 54% of the sexually explicit scenes, with men often portrayed as dominant. Physical aggression appeared in 23% of the scenes, verbal aggression in 20%, submission in 14%, and status inequali-

ties in 39%. The coders paid close attention to the depiction of rape; this act occurred in 51% of the films and in 6% of the scenes.

Yang and Linz (1990) compared videos of various ratings containing sexual scenes. They analyzed 90 R-, X-, and XXX-rated videos from an adult video store to examine sexual, violent, sexually violent, and pro-social behaviors contained within the scenes. The unit of analysis was behavior. The authors found in all three types of videos that, although men were more likely to be recipients of sexual behaviors, they were also more likely to be the initiators of violent or sexually violent behaviors. Conversely, women were more likely to be the recipients of violent and sexually violent behaviors and were more likely to be the initiators of sexual behaviors. Furthermore, women were more likely to be the victims of violence and sexual violence in R-rated than in X-rated films. The authors suggested that R-rated movies may be even more harmful than more pornographic films.

Prince (1990) examined 32 pornographic feature films that were released between 1972 and 1985, focusing not only on violence but also on pleasure. Prince employed three units of analysis: characters ( $N = 429$ ), sex scenes ( $N = 248$ ), and violent acts ( $N = 44$ ). Prince found that men were more likely to be the aggressors. Twenty-one percent of scenes contained violence. In these violent scenes, 67% featured a male abuser and 78% had a female victim. However, Prince also found signs of women having power in pornography: Men and women were equally likely to initiate sex, be naked, express what they liked sexually, and have similar numbers of sex partners, suggesting that men and women had equal sexual power. Using indicators of dehumanization, such as whether or not the characters were given names, occupational or social roles, or had speaking parts, Prince found 36% of the men and 19% of the women were "dehumanized."

Duncan (1991) randomly selected 10% of the videos in the adult section of a video store and used scene as the unit of analysis. Duncan found that 13.6% of the scenes contained violent acts, with rape depicted in a third of these scenes. Degrading acts constituted 18.2% of the scenes, depicting mostly verbal abuse. Furthermore, when aggression and degradation occurred, they were nearly always present during a sexual scene (with two exceptions). Duncan's results suggested that violence is often sexualized in pornography.

Cowan and Campbell (1994) examined the interaction of race and gender in 54 videos that contained sexual scenes between Black and White actors. Using character as the unit of analysis, the authors found that men were the primary perpetrators of violence whereas women were the victims. When gender and race were considered simultaneously, White men were found to be more aggressive, both physically and verbally, toward Black women than toward White women. In contrast, Black men were more aggressive toward White women than toward Black women.

Results suggested that interracial sex was a vehicle for male characters to inflict more intense aggression on women.

Monk-Turner and Purcell (1999) systematically selected a sample of 40 out of 3,375 X- and XXX-rated video tapes from the adult section of a national chain video rental store. Using vignettes as the unit of analysis, the authors coded 209 vignettes for their sexual violence, degradation or dehumanization, and intimacy. The authors found that 17% of the vignettes contained themes about violence against women, 39% contained subordination, and 85% depicted men ejaculating on women. Concurring with Cowan and Campbell's (1994) study, the authors found more violence appeared in interracial interactions.

Barron and Kimmel (2000) compared the depiction of sexual violence across different forms of media, including magazines, videos, and Usenet, an Internet newsgroup. Fifty cases were randomly sampled for each medium with the scene as the unit of analysis. The authors found that Usenet stories contained the most violent behavior (42.1% of the scenes) as well as the most coercive sex (26.4%), more so than those found in videos (violence, 26.9%; coercive sex, 4.9%) and magazines (violence, 24.8%; coercive sex, 4.8%). In terms of gender dynamics, both Usenet and videos depicted mostly male perpetrators of aggression (62.7% vs. 60.2%), whereas the magazines had mostly female perpetrators (65.4%). Furthermore, the violence depicted in both the videos and magazines occurred in consensual relationships.

Among the content analysis literature examined above, a few patterns emerge. In pornography, women are frequently degraded (performing unusual sex acts or are ejaculated upon) and both physically (e.g., spanked, hair pulled, hit) and verbally (e.g., insulted) aggressed against by men. When sex is depicted in an interracial relationship, the violence occurs even more intensely than that among same-race couples. However, there are contradictory findings. For example, Prince (1990) argued that more dehumanization occurred to male characters than to female characters, and some indications of female and male equality was observed; Monk-Turner and Purcell (1999) found more vignettes depicting intimacy than violence; and Barron and Kimmel (2000) observed that most violence in videos occurred in consensual relationships. Because the operational definitions of aggression used in these studies are quite similar, one of the reasons for the inconsistent findings may be differences in sampling. That is, we cannot be certain that the studies analyzed the same type of materials or whether these materials were representative of pornography as a whole.

Even though most studies attempted to capture samples that are popular and widespread, almost all studies used sample methods of convenience, such as asking the store clerks to recommend titles (Yang & Linz, 1990), selecting lists from adult sections of a local video store (Monk-Turner & Purcell, 1999), or sampling from local stores (Barron & Kimmel, 2000). The selection process generally appears to

be either subjective and unsystematic or lacking national representation, thus limiting the studies' generalizability. The selection process has become even more daunting in recent times. The pornography industry has gone through tremendous growth in the past decades and the number of videos produced yearly has increased from fewer than 2,000 titles in the early 1990s (most studies introduced in this section were conducted before or during this period) to 13,588 in 2005 (AVN, 2006). Thus, it is important to use a straightforward and reliable sampling process that can reflect the national trends. Such a process additionally can be repeated by other researchers so that we can trace the content change of pornography over time.

The current study is part of a larger study that analyzes the content of popular pornographic videos (Wosnitzer & Bridges, 2007) utilizing lists of the most frequently rented VHS and DVD titles from the leading trade journal *Adult Video News* (AVN, 2006) as the video material of interest. We randomly sampled a subset of titles from these lists for analysis. With a large, representative sample of most-consumed pornographic films, this current study can address not only the patterns of the representations in pornography but also the ideological constructions that may have the most impact on the audience. In the following section, we introduce another body of literature that will help us delineate issues concerning female pornographers and the content they create.

### *Women Pornographers*

Pro-pornography feminists have long argued that it is a mistake to assume that women are not as easily aroused by sexually explicit images as men (Caught Looking, 1986; McChesney, 2006). Such feminists have emphasized that pornography can be a vehicle for women's sexual liberation (Cody, 2001) and that women can and do enjoy pornography (Bower, 1986; Dunn, 1990; Strossen, 1993). At the same time, these pro-pornography feminists have acknowledged that male-dominated pornography ignores women's sexuality. As Williams (1989) observed, pornography has been a "myth of sexual pleasure told from the point of view of men with the power to exploit and objectify the sexuality of women" (p. 22). For many of these feminists, the solution is not to condemn or to abolish pornography, as advocated by anti-pornography feminists, but to have "better" pornography that addresses women's sexuality.

One of the most celebrated female pornographers is Candida Royalle, a former pornography performer. Royalle pioneered Femme Productions in 1984 to explore a potential female market for pornography (Cameron, 1990; Juffer, 1998; Williams, 1989). In addition to explicit sexual acts, Royalle claimed to emphasize "sexuality, caring and love" (Seeger, 1996, p. 204). This softer vision of pornography is consistent with the principles for feminist pornography laid out by Marielle Nitoslawska, the filmmaker of *Bad Girl*, a documentary about female pornographers. Nitoslawska

stated that degradation of another human being is unacceptable, regardless of his or her gender, race, and sexuality (West & West, 2002, p. 10). Instead, she advocates for an egalitarian sexual ideal.

Nitoslawska's vision is not shared by all female pornography consumers, directors, and advocates. Some pro-pornography feminists emphasize that not all women prefer "candles, lace, sunsets, and Harlequin romance" (West & West, 2002, p. 11) and argue that women may find that representation of sexuality to be too soft or "politically correct" (Agrell, 2006). A female consumer stated that women like her may prefer "low-brow, hard-core porn to feminine erotica" (Tisdale, 1992, para. 40) and a reviewer for pornographic videos claimed that women may like to watch depiction of male domination (Blue, 2005). These sentiments are echoed by some female pornographers who asserted that women may enjoy being dominated and may feel liberated when being degraded sexually (Mason, 2006). Joanna Angel, who is both a director and performer, gives feminist pornography this definition:

You could do a porn where a girl is getting choked and hit and spit on, the guy's calling her a dirty slut and stuff and that's ok, that can still be feminist as long as everybody there is in control of what they're doing.<sup>2</sup>

Although there are wide disagreements over what constitutes feminist porn or what type of pornography women would enjoy, even among pro-pornography feminists and female pornographers, few have actually investigated women's responses to pornography. Nonetheless, the limited research that is available suggests that female viewers respond positively to sexually explicit images that depict egalitarian sex roles but respond negatively when women are dominated or degraded (Laan, Everaerd, van Bellen, & Hanewald, 1994; Senn, 1993; Mosher & MacIan, 1994). These findings and the debates over what type of pornography women may enjoy have significant relevance to our research questions regarding what type of content female directors may produce. First, the lack of consensus among the pro-pornography feminists and female pornographers regarding the appropriate content for women indicates that female-directed pornography may not represent sexuality in a way that is different from that already being expressed in popular, mainstream male-directed pornography. Second, although the research has shown that women viewers prefer egalitarian sex over aggression against women, the consumer base for pornography is not women, but remains dominated by men (Dines et al., 1998). Thus, we may ask if it is financially viable for female pornographers to produce content geared toward a small minority of consumers that may prefer intimacy over aggression. Taken together, the assertion that "what women need is women pornographers who can help create new images that will build a liberating feminist sexuality" (Berger, Searles, & Cottle, 1990, p. 33) has not been established.

Given the lack of previous studies in our area of inquiry, we now examine how and why women, when placed in decision-making positions, may affect stereotypical representations of gender roles and relationships in media other than pornography. Some researchers assert that women may try to produce more powerful images of women once they become the creators of media content (Seger, 1996). For example, Steenland (1995) describes how female mid-level managers in television production consciously create better representations, despite their lack of decision-making power, by reducing violence, verbal abuse, and offensive camera angles (Lauzen & Dozier, 1999). However, Lauzen and Dozier (1999) failed to find a consistent pattern of stronger female characters in their analysis of the top 65 prime-time series in the first 14 weeks of the 1995–96 television season. Lauzen and Dozier compared speech patterns of female characters portrayed in television series employing women working behind the scenes with those of male workers. They compared two possible theories to investigate the issue: (a) the auteur approach, favored by film scholars, which emphasizes the role of the directors and their personal vision, and (b) the structural approach, utilized mostly by sociologists, which stresses that, although directors may have a certain influence, business imperatives and market forces ultimately decide the content of a media product. The findings suggested that the structural approach received greater support: Despite higher numbers of female writers, creators, and producers of television shows, gender inequities continued to abound.

Lauzen and Dozier's (1999) research helps contextualize the experience of Tristan Taormino, a self-described feminist director and star of "The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women," featuring a 10-person "anal orgy." The film was financed by John Stagliano, a male director and producer who is credited with popularizing a type of pornography that contains nonstop explicit sex with minimal plot and set ("gonzo porn"). Even though Taormino did not want to include male actors' external ejaculation, she conceded to John Stagliano and to market forces: "John's loyal audience is primarily straight men," Taormino stated. Said differently, despite her own wish to avoid filming visible external ejaculation, she adhered to what "sells tapes" (Taormino, 2005, p. 91). Taormino's example illustrates how a female director's vision may be compromised by requiring the close following of a formula that the industry finds profitable.

Women directors of pornographic videos who seek to make profits may suffer social isolation and stereotyping in a male-dominated world (Yoder, 2002). Yoder argues that one way women can effectively overcome their lower status in such token conditions is by increasing their status in other ways, such as by adopting more masculine qualities. Examples of such adaptation are found in the case of women in the military (Timmons, 1992). When women displayed qualities that were conventionally classified as masculine, they had greater opportunities for career advancement (Wong, Kettlewell, & Sproule, 1985).

Therefore, if a female pornographer wants to profit in the pornography industry, an industry where the majority of producers and consumers are men, would she adhere to the content or formula that has been well-established in that field so as to succeed? Or would she diverge from the formula, as some pro-pornography feminists have argued? If women do diverge from a traditional pornographic formula, how is this divergence exhibited? These questions were addressed in the present study.

## METHOD

### *Population and Sample*

The sample of titles for this research was drawn from a list of 250 of the most rented VHS and DVD titles as reported monthly by *Adult Video News* (AVN, 2006). A total of 44 videos were coded: all 11 female-directed films from the top 250 list and an additional 33 randomly selected male-directed films. The 11 female-directed films resulted in a final sample of 61 pornographic scenes for analysis. The 33 male-directed films resulted in a total of 193 scenes. From these 193 male-directed scenes, a random sample of 61 scenes was selected for this current study. The final sample, therefore, included 122 scenes from 44 best-renting adult videos for 2004 and 2005.

### *Defining Aggression*

We adopted Mustonen and Pulkkinen's (1993) definition of violence/aggression for this study. Aggression was defined as any action causing or attempting to cause physical or psychological harm to oneself, another person, animal, or inanimate object, intentionally or accidentally, whereby harm is understood as resulting from verbal or nonverbal assault. There are a few important aspects to note about these definitions. First, aggression constitutes any action that attempts to or results in harm. Therefore, one need not actually be injured for an aggressive act to have occurred. Second, the harm can be either physical or psychological. According to this definition, insults or other harassing remarks that could result in psychological harm constitute aggression. Third, the aggression can be perpetrated regardless of the characters' intention or the target's consent. This is particularly important in the context of pornography where women are often depicted as inviting, consenting to, or enjoying aggression. Finally, the definition allows for the coding of self-harm.

### *Variables*

Two units of analyses were employed in the current study. First, analyses were conducted at the *scene* level. For the purposes of this study, a scene is defined through the demarcation of the DVD menu, taken from the "Scene Selections" option available on the main menu of most adult DVDs. Second, analyses were conducted for each act of

aggression. Specifics on how aggressive acts were coded are outlined below.

*Scene-level variables.* For each film or video coded, the following variables were noted. First, director's gender was ascertained using several methods. If the DVD contained a behind-the-scenes segment interview with the director, gender was distinguished through visual cues. In the event that such footage was not included, an Internet search for visual images was performed, using director name. In cases where it was not possible to code gender (e.g., compilation DVDs utilizing several directors), the film was excluded from the analysis and replaced with the next film on our randomly generated sample list.

Second, primary characters' information was recorded. Primary characters were defined as only those characters engaged in explicit sexual interactions. Onlookers or other people appearing in the scene but not engaging with the actors sexually were not considered primary characters (e.g., one scene contained two actors engaging in sexual activity while a classroom of students looked on—this scene was coded as containing only two primary characters). Character gender and race were recorded using visual cues. Third, scene characteristics such as presence of condoms, discussions of safe sex, presence and use of sexual objects (such as dildos), and presence of weapons were recorded.

The fourth and fifth variables recorded at the scene level included specific sex acts and the location of male ejaculation. The types of sexual acts present within the scene were recorded. Coders were instructed to use the obvious visual cues to determine the presence of the following sexual acts: male-to-female oral sex, female-to-male oral sex, woman-to-woman oral sex, male-to-male oral sex, vaginal penetration with penis, vaginal double-penetration (simultaneous vaginal intercourse between one woman and two men), simultaneous vaginal and anal penetration (one woman being penetrated simultaneously, anally and vaginally, by two men), group sex (where numerous characters simultaneously engaged in various sexual acts), anal penetration with penis, anal double-penetration (one woman being anally penetrated by two men simultaneously), and an anal-to-mouth sequence (where a man anally penetrates a woman, immediately followed by the woman performing oral sex on the man). Finally, coders were instructed to mark the location of the female character's body where the ejaculation occurred, using the following choices: mouth, face, breast, stomach, buttocks, internal, vagina (external), multiple, or other.

Sixth, the presence of positive behaviors in the scene were recorded. Positive behaviors were defined as representations of display of concern for the other, use of first names or endearments, caressing, embracing, and kissing. When such behaviors were present, coders were asked to qualitatively describe the behaviors with as much detail as possible.

Finally, coders were instructed to record the total number of physically and verbally aggressive acts present in the scene and to determine, on the whole, whether aggression in the scene was rewarded or punished.

*Aggressive act-level variables.* Each instance of aggression within each scene was recorded using the PAT technique. The PAT technique was employed in the National Television Violence Study (1998) and is a widely used and accepted method of quantifying aggression and violence in media texts. According to the PAT technique, a unique act of aggression occurs each time the perpetrator, target, or action (i.e., aggressive act) changes during the course of the scene.

Aggressive acts were recorded according to specific subtype: verbal or physical. Physically aggressive acts included pushing or shoving, biting, pinching, hair pulling, spanking, open-hand slapping, gagging,<sup>3</sup> choking, threatening with a weapon, kicking, closed-fist punching, bondage or confining, using weapons, and/or torturing. Verbally aggressive acts included name calling or insulting, threatening, and/or using coercive language.

For each aggressive act, perpetrator and target genders were recorded. Perpetrator gender was recorded as either male, female, or unknown if the perpetrator was not readily visible. Target gender used the same scheme, also adding "self" to record those aggressive acts that were perpetrated on the self (e.g., calling oneself a "slut").

Target responses to aggression were recorded as follows. First, the target could express pleasure or respond neutrally to the aggressive act. In this instance, the target, verbally or physically, expressed pleasure or did not appear affected in any manner by the aggressive act and the scene continued without interruption. Second, the target could express displeasure. When the target expressed displeasure in response to aggression, the perpetrator of the aggression could respond in myriad ways, such as by (a) ignoring the displeasure, (b) stopping the aggression

or expressing remorse, or (c) increasing the frequency or severity of the aggression. The target response to aggression (pleasure/neutral or displeasure) and subsequent perpetrator response (ignore target's displeasure, stop aggression, increase aggression) were recorded.

#### *Interrater Reliability*

The sample was coded by three female coders of differing ages, races, and educational backgrounds, highly trained in the method and coding scheme. After three rounds of pilot testing, using Scott's Pi coefficient of reliability for all variables, it was determined that the overall composite level of agreement across all variables and all pairs of coder comparisons was 0.958. Agreement among pairs ranged from 0.836 to 0.888, with an average Scott's Pi coefficient of 0.859. Having established an acceptable rate of agreement in the pilot data, the three coders coded the remainder of sample films using the same techniques and operational definitions found to be reliable in the pilot phase.

## RESULTS

### *Comparisons of Scene Features*

Due to the high number of comparisons made, a Bonferroni correction was used to evaluate results; *p* values of .001 or lower were considered significant. For chi-square analyses, if any cell had an expected frequency of less than 5, the results were not considered reliable and are not reported.

Female-directed films had an average of 6.48 scenes whereas male directors averaged 5.79 scenes per film (see Table 1). There were no significant differences between male and female directors in the average number of main characters portrayed in each scene, but female directors had significantly fewer male main characters than male directors did. In male-directed pornography scenes, there was an approximately equal ratio of male and female characters, on average. In contrast, female-directed pornography

**Table 1**  
Comparisons of Male and Female Directors on Scene Continuous Variables

	Male directors <sup>a</sup> Mean (SD)	Female directors <sup>a</sup> Mean (SD)	<i>t</i> test results <sup>b</sup>
Average # of scenes in video	5.79 (1.31)	6.48 (2.21)	-2.10
Average # of main characters in scene	3.03 (1.75)	2.61 (1.05)	1.63
# female main characters	1.38 (0.73)	1.74 (0.73)	-2.73
# male main characters	1.64 (1.34)	0.87 (0.70)	3.98*
# Caucasian main characters	2.46 (1.65)	2.15 (0.89)	1.30
# Black main characters	0.28 (0.69)	0.07 (0.31)	2.21
# Asian main characters	0.11 (0.41)	0.10 (0.30)	0.25
# Latino main characters	0.08 (0.28)	0.10 (0.35)	-0.29
# Other ethnic minority characters	0.07 (0.25)	0.00 (0.00)	2.05

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 61. <sup>b</sup>*df* = 120.

\**p* ≤ .001.

**Table 2**  
Comparisons of Male and Female Directors on Scene Categorical Variables

	<i>Male directors<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>Female directors<sup>a</sup></i>		$\chi^2$ results <sup>b</sup>
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	
Condoms present	4	6.6%	3	4.9%	
Sex toy used	10	16.4%	27	44.3%	11.21*
Discuss safe sex	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	
Weapon present	1	1.6%	2	3.3%	
Ejaculation position					
Mouth	38	62.3%	29	47.5%	2.68
Face	3	4.9%	0	0.0%	
Breasts	5	8.2%	0	0.0%	
Stomach	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	
Buttocks	2	3.3%	0	0.0%	
Internal	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	
Vagina (external)	1	1.6%	1	1.6%	
Other (e.g., anus)	6	9.8%	22	36.1%	11.87*
Multiple locations	3	4.9%	8	13.1%	
Sex acts					
Male-to-female oral	34	55.7%	26	42.6%	2.10
Female-to-male oral	57	93.4%	41	67.2%	13.28*
Woman-to-woman oral	9	14.8%	25	41.0%	10.44*
Male-to-male oral	0	0.0%	1	1.6%	
Vaginal penetration with penis	49	80.3%	40	65.6%	3.37
Vaginal double penetration	2	3.3%	0	0.0%	
Simultaneous vaginal/anal penetration	12	19.7%	6	9.8%	2.35
Group sex	9	14.8%	0	0.0%	
Anal penetration with penis	33	54.1%	28	45.9%	0.82
Anal double penetration	2	3.3%	0	0.0%	
Ass-to-mouth sequence	27	44.3%	25	41.0%	0.13
Presence of positive behaviors	5	8.2%	19	31.1%	10.17*

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 61. <sup>b</sup>*df* = 1.

\**p* ≤ .001.

showed a female-to-male ratio of approximately 2 to 1. Only 4 of the 61 scenes directed by men contained women only (6.6% of male-directed scenes). In contrast, 18 of the women-directed scenes were woman-to-woman (29.5% of female-directed scenes),  $\chi^2(1) = 10.87, p = .001$ .

A total of 38 scenes (31.1% of all scenes) contained at least one ethnic minority main character. From the 157 total main characters coded in the 122 scenes, 40 (25.5%) were visually recognizable ethnic minorities. On the whole, there was no significant difference between male- and female-directed films in their inclusion of ethnic minority main characters (39.3% of male-directed scenes versus 23.0% of female-directed scenes),  $\chi^2(1) = 3.82, p = .051$ .

#### *Positive Behavior*

Positive behaviors occurred in 24 of the 122 scenes (19.7% of all scenes; see Table 2). Notably, women were significantly more likely to direct scenes containing positive behaviors than were male directors  $\chi^2(1) = 10.17, p = .001$ . Positive behaviors were not significantly more likely to oc-

cur in woman-to-woman scenes: 31.8% of scenes with female characters only contained positive behaviors, compared to 17.0% of scenes with male and female characters,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.51, p = .113$ .

#### *Comparisons of Sexual Practices*

There were significant differences among male and female directors in types of sexual acts portrayed in pornography (see Table 2). Female directors were significantly more likely to portray women performing oral sex on other women compared to male directors. In contrast, women performing oral sex on men was present in the vast majority of male-directed scenes but significantly less so in female-directed scenes. Female-directed scenes were also significantly more likely to contain objects designed for genital stimulation, such as dildos or vibrators, than scenes that were male-directed. No other differences for particular sexual acts were observed.

In coding for ejaculation position, we found that female directors showed ejaculation occurring on the anus, thighs,

**Table 3**  
Comparisons of Male and Female Directors on Aggression Categorical Variables

	Male directed scenes <sup>a</sup>		Female directed scenes <sup>a</sup>		$\chi^2$ results <sup>b</sup>
	N	%	N	%	
Aggression present in scene	52	85.2%	47	77.0%	1.34
Verbal aggression present in scene	30	49.2%	31	50.8%	0.03
Physical aggression present in scene	51	83.6%	46	75.4%	1.26
Type of verbal aggression					
Name calling/insults	30	49.2%	31	50.8%	0.03
Threat of physical harm	1	1.6%	2	3.3%	
Coercive language	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	
Type of physical aggression					
Push/shove	2	3.3%	5	8.2%	
Bite	2	3.3%	4	6.6%	
Pinch	7	11.5%	8	13.1%	0.08
Pull hair	21	34.4%	19	31.1%	0.15
Spank	43	70.5%	44	72.1%	0.04
Open hand slap	29	47.5%	21	34.4%	2.17
Gag	33	54.1%	36	59.0%	0.30
Choke	14	23.0%	13	21.3%	0.05
Kick	1	1.6%	0	0.0%	
Bondage/confine	3	4.9%	9	14.8%	
Use of weapon	1	1.6%	2	3.3%	
Other (e.g., smothering, whipping)	0	0.0%	11	18.0%	12.09*
Overall consequences of aggression					
Rewarded/Paid off	42	68.9%	45	73.8%	0.36
Punished	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 61. <sup>b</sup>*df* = 1.

\**p* ≤ .001.

or feet (36.1% of female-directed scenes) significantly more often than male directors (9.8% of male-directed scenes). Director gender was not significantly related to other features of the scene, including (a) presence of condoms, (b) discussion of sexual protection, and (c) presence of weapons.

#### Comparisons of Aggression

A total of 1,486 acts of aggression were recorded in these 122 pornographic scenes. Male-directed scenes contained a total of 666 aggressive acts, whereas female-directed scenes contained a total of 820 aggressive acts. There were no significant differences between director gender and average number of aggressive acts. Female-directed scenes contained, on average, just as many aggressive acts ( $M = 13.44$ ,  $SD = 15.10$ ) as male-directed scenes ( $M = 10.92$ ,  $SD = 14.16$ ). Physical aggression rates were comparable between both director groups ( $M = 10.03$ ,  $SD = 11.45$  for female-directed scenes and  $M = 8.93$ ,  $SD = 11.71$  for male-directed scenes). Verbal aggression rates were also comparable between groups ( $M = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 4.84$  for female-directed scenes and  $M = 1.97$ ,  $SD = 2.97$  for male-directed scenes).

Male and female directors did not differ significantly in most of the aggressive act variables (see Table 3). Approximately half of all scenes directed by both men and women portrayed verbal aggression. No significant differences were found between male and female directors on types of verbal aggression: Nearly all verbally aggressive acts were insults or name calling. No significant differences between male and female directors were found for most physically aggressive acts. Although rare, severely aggressive acts such as smothering or whipping someone with an object were present significantly more often in women-directed scenes (18.0% versus 0.0% in male-directed scenes).

When examining who were the perpetrators and the targets of aggression, there were significant differences between male and female directors (see Table 4). Male directors were twice as likely to show men perpetrating aggression. Conversely, 60.6% of all aggressive acts in female-directed scenes were perpetrated by women versus 21.3% of all aggressive acts in male-directed scenes. In both male- and female-directed scenes, targets of aggression were nearly always women. When men were the perpetrators of aggression, both male and female directors showed the targets of aggression to be almost always women. Male-directed aggressive acts perpetrated by men had women as

**Table 4**  
Comparisons of Male and Female Directors on Aggressive Act Variables

	<i>Male directed aggressive acts<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>Female directed aggressive acts<sup>b</sup></i>		$\chi^2$ results <sup>c</sup>
	N	%	N	%	
Male perpetrator					
Any target	516	77.5%	318	38.8%	223.49*
Female target	509	76.4%	318	38.8%	211.03*
Male target	5	0.8%	0	0.0%	
Self target	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	
Female perpetrator					
Any target	142	21.3%	497	60.6%	231.45*
Female target	56	8.4%	403	49.1%	285.71*
Male target	41	6.2%	26	3.2%	7.61
Self target	42	6.3%	67	8.2%	1.88
Male target					
Any perpetrator	46	6.9%	26	3.2%	11.13*
Female target					
Any perpetrator	607	91.1%	788	96.1%	15.71*
Victim response to aggression					
Expresses pleasure/neutral	646	97.0%	798	97.3%	0.14
Expresses displeasure	18	2.7%	9	1.1%	5.31

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 666. <sup>b</sup>*n* = 820. <sup>c</sup>*df* = 1.

\**p* ≤ .001.

the target 98.6% of the time (509 out of 516 acts), whereas 100% of the 318 female-directed aggressive acts perpetrated by men had female targets. None of the aggressive acts coded for either female or male directors involved men engaging in self-harm. Significant differences emerged between male- and female-directed aggressive acts when the perpetrator was a woman. Of the 142 aggressive acts perpetrated by women in male-directed scenes, 56 were directed at another woman and an additional 42 involved self-harm. Of the 497 aggressive acts perpetrated by women in female-directed scenes, 403 were directed at another woman and an additional 67 involved self-harm. Thus, 81.1% of female-directed aggressive acts with female perpetrators involved a female target.

#### *Comparisons of Target Responses*

We examined whether male and female directors differed in how they portrayed male and female victims' responses when aggressed (see Table 4). For both male- and female-directed aggressive acts, the targets of aggression overwhelmingly displayed pleasure or responded neutrally to the aggression. We further analyzed target responses to aggression by target gender. When the target of aggression was male and the scene director was male, 17.4% of aggressive acts were responded to with displeasure. In contrast, 0% of male targets in female-directed films responded with displeasure when aggressed. When the target of aggression was female, female directors showed female targets responding pleasurably or neutrally to 97.5% of aggressive

acts committed against them; for male directors, this figure was 98.3%,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.03$ , *p* = .311. In total, only 27 of the 1,486 acts of aggression across all scenes resulted in the target of aggression responding with displeasure. Of these 27 instances, only 2 then portrayed the perpetrator as remorseful. Eight of these 27 instances resulted in the perpetrator actually increasing aggression toward the target. In the remaining 17 instances, the target's expressions of displeasure at being aggressed were simply ignored by the perpetrator.

#### *Controlling for Disparities Due to Character Gender*

One of the questions that arose when we first analyzed these data was whether differences between female and male directors could be attributed to the types of scenes most frequently being filmed, rather than to qualitative differences in how male and female directors portray aggression in popular pornography. As previously reported, female directors were significantly more likely to show woman-to-woman scenes than male directors. Therefore, data were reanalyzed for a subset of the sample, matching male- and female-directed scenes on main characters' gender composition. The resulting sample comprised 32 female-directed and 32 male-directed scenes.

Comparisons for both scene and aggressive act-level variables were conducted. To control for the number of comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was used such that *p* values of .001 or less were considered to be significant. All but one of the comparisons was nonsignificant.

Even when controlling for gender composition of main characters, female-directed scenes continued to show significantly more woman-to-woman aggression (27.9% of female-directed scenes) than male-directed scenes (12.6% of male-directed scenes);  $\chi^2(1) = 17.43, p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

The pornographic world constructed by popular mainstream female directors is not made up of “candles, lace, sunsets” (West & West, 2002, p. 11) or egalitarian gender relationships, as some have advocated (West & West, 2002). Instead, it is a world of violence and aggression, no different from the world portrayed by male directors, except that they portray significantly more woman-to-woman violence. In a typical scene, the female director’s pornography comprises a variety of male and female oral sex acts as well as female vaginal and anal penetration. It has a high prevalence of nonnormative sexual acts such as anal sex and anal-to-mouth, and frequently portrays men ejaculating into women’s mouths.

More than three quarters of scenes directed by both men and women contained either verbal or physical aggression: In an average segment, there were between 11 and 13 acts of aggression, with three times as many physical as verbal acts. This finding contradicts prior studies finding that pornographic films are generally more degrading than physically aggressive (Monk-Turner & Purcell, 1999; Cowan et al., 1988). The targets of aggression were overwhelmingly female and were aggressed by both men and women; they were often called “slut,” “whore,” or “bitch” and were frequently spanked and gagged. Furthermore, the female targets almost always exhibited pleasure or indifference toward the aggression inflicted on them. Thus, the world produced by female pornography directors portrayed sex as intertwined with violence: Frequently, sexual pleasure was contingent upon and derived from aggression. For both the perpetrators and the targets, aggression was intrinsic and integral for sexual excitement. In this regard, female-directed films did not offer an alternative construction of sexuality and gender roles from their male counterparts.

A major benefit of the current study was its revelation of the pornographic content created by female directors of top-renting films, a topic that had never been systematically researched before. To highlight the significance of the content created by female directors, we compared the films that they created with both the results from previous content analyses as well as with top-renting male-directed pornography films within our sample. Previous content analyses of pornography films have focused primarily on depictions of aggression and degradation, with an estimated 13.6% to 27.9% of all scenes containing aggression (Barron & Kimmel, 2000; Cowan et al., 1988; Duncan, 1991; Monk-Turner & Purcell, 1999). Our study found that best-renting pornography films, on the whole, contained nearly

three times the rates of aggression than rates previously reported.

The significantly higher aggression rates in videos documented in this study, compared to aggression rates reported in previous studies, could be due to a number of factors. First, prior studies used different sampling methods. Video selection was often subjective, unsystematic, and unrepresentative of national trends. We argue for the usage of the industry’s trade journal, *Adult Video News’s* monthly *Top 250 Rented VHS & DVDs*, as a publication from which to compile the study sample (Wosnitzer & Bridges, 2007). If future studies on the content of pornography employ similar methodology, content changes over time can be tracked in a much more precise way.

The increase in aggression levels documented in the present study also may have been due, in part, to the detailed coding scheme used. For example, this study was the first, to our knowledge, that coded gagging as an aggressive act. Given that gagging appeared in 59% of female-directed and 54.1% of male-directed scenes, this coding category contributed to the high aggression levels in the current study compared to prior content analyses. It is possible that gagging was not a common sexual act in popular pornographic videos a decade ago, when most of the reviewed content analysis studies of pornography were conducted. Nevertheless, even without the inclusion of gagging, a full 77.9% of the films selected for this study contained physically aggressive acts such as hair pulling, choking, slapping, and other behaviors that have been coded in prior studies.

Taken together, we contend that the frequency of aggression in top-renting videos in 2005 that constituted our sample is, across-the-board, much higher than that of pornography produced a decade ago, despite differences in sampling techniques and coding schemes. Jensen’s (2004, 2006) qualitative analyses of the current trends of pornographic content also suggest an escalation of aggression in recent years and a rise in the popularity of gonzo porn, characterized by the rough and brutal treatment of women.

The present study sought to examine how popular pornographic films differed regarding both sexual and aggressive content when directors were women versus men. In general, few gender differences were found. One important finding was that female directors were significantly more likely to direct woman-to-woman scenes. Therefore, female-directed scenes showed more woman-to-woman oral sex and less female-to-male oral sex compared to male-directed scenes. Female-directed scenes were also significantly more likely to portray positive behaviors, such as kissing, embracing, and verbal compliments.

An important analysis in the study at hand was that of female directors’ depictions of sexual acts, particularly as they related to gender roles portrayed by the female characters. Sexual acts that suggest degradation were just as common in female-directed films as male-directed films. For example, ejaculation in a woman’s mouth—a practice suggesting degradation (Cowan & Campbell, 1994)—was particularly

prevalent (47.5% of female-directed scenes). Anal penetration was high (46.9% of female-directed scenes), as was anal to mouth (41.0% of female-directed scenes). (Anal to mouth is a sexual sequence comprising a penis or dildo being inserted into a woman's mouth immediately after it is penetrated in the anus of a woman. Male actors have jokingly referred to it as "eating her own shit"; Dines, 2006.)

When examining aggression in female- and male-directed scenes, verbal and physical aggression rates were similar, except that female directors were significantly more likely to show women as perpetrators of aggression. Regardless of director or perpetrator gender, women overwhelmingly were the targets of aggressive acts and almost always showed pleasure or indifference toward aggression. We suspected that the differences between female and male directors' depictions of sexual acts and aggression were due to female directors including significantly more female characters in each scene, so we repeated our analyses with a subsample of the original 122 coded scenes, but held the ratio of female to male characters constant across director gender. Even when matching for main character gender composition, female directors continued to depict significantly more woman-to-woman violence than did male directors.

Contrary to the hope and idealism expressed by some pro-pornography scholars and activists, who assumed and predicted that female directors would produce more sensual, egalitarian, and "women-centered" pornography, the present study found that directors of top-renting videos depicted a pornographic world in which some of the women, like most of the men in such films, were aggressive and dominant. Moreover, the majority of women were portrayed as masochists who enjoyed the degradation and violence that was inflicted upon them. Evidently, the ideals of some female pornographers, such as Candida Royalle, who are celebrated by pro-pornography scholars and are awarded for making feminist pornography (Agrell, 2006), have not been effective in changing popular mainstream pornography to be less misogynist. Female pornographers whose help compose top-rented video lists, such as Belladonna, appear to have learned the conventions of commercially successful adult films from male pornographers. Perhaps confined by the industry's formulas and market pressures (Taormino, 2006) and informed by their own sexual proclivity (Angel, 2006), these female directors have created a pornographic world that is remarkably similar to that of their male counterparts. Our findings are consistent with prior studies that have supported the structural approach to media development (Lauzen & Dozier, 1999): Money, rather than gender, dictates vision.

Even more alarming, it may be that female directors of top-renting pornographic videos were more willing to show extreme degradation and aggression. This is also consistent with studies of women who find success in male-dominated fields: While working in such jobs, some women

display hyper-masculine traits to earn respect and gain favor from their male supervisors and peers (Wong et al., 1985). In total, female-directed films comprised only 4.4% of all best-renting films in the population of study. Such a small minority indicates that only a very small percentage of women have succeeded in this male-dominated profession. This phenomenon may help explain why female directors depicted significantly more woman-to-woman aggression. How best to demonstrate one's allegiance to patriarchy, thereby increasing one's status, than to exhibit one's masculinity by severely violating another woman?

### *Limitations*

The current study, although providing a quantitative analysis of the world constructed by popular female pornographers, has its limitations. First, although this study presents a systematic method for mapping the content of popular pornographic films, by selecting only best-selling, best-renting videos it may not adequately describe the general patterns of most of female directors' work. It is possible that women who direct sexually explicit films are, in fact, more likely to produce materials that portray egalitarian sex than male directors. In fact, the variability seen in female-directed films, even in this best-renting sample, was greater than that of male-directed films. That is, women directors appeared to follow less of a rigid formula by both displaying more positive behaviors and more aggression among women. If combining sex and violence is the formula for market success, then egalitarian depictions of sex would not be represented in best-selling lists of pornography. Thus, our method of video selection can find only those female directors who appeal to the male-dominated consumer base and cannot offer insights into the content of female-directed films that aim to appeal to female audiences. What this study has done, however, is to provide support to the contention that in a capitalist economy where pornography is primarily consumed by men with specific sexual scripts and desires, if one wants to maximize profits, the gender of the pornography director may be irrelevant. Future studies may seek to compare the content of female-directed pornographic videos with varying levels of commercial success so as to better explore the relationship between director gender and market forces.

Even though there are conflicting results regarding whether gender affects how people code pornographic images (Cowan & Dunn, 1994; Glascock, 2005), the use of only female coders, trained by a male researcher, presents a second potential limitation to our study. Therefore, future studies may consider using both male and female coders. Additionally, inter-coder reliability was calculated only at the beginning of the analysis. It would have been beneficial to check reliability again as the analysis progressed.

There are limitations to how much a quantitative analysis that decontextualizes sexual and aggressive acts can help us understand images and decode meaning (Hall, 1989).

Even though we found a great deal of woman-to-woman aggression in the videos of female pornographers, qualitative analyses can provide far more vivid and descriptive accounts of pornography than simple numbers can convey. Therefore, future studies may seek to examine best-selling and best-renting pornography using qualitative analyses as a complement to these findings. Similarly, understanding how female pornography directors view and manage the balance between artistic vision and market forces would enhance these quantitative findings. It would be immensely informative to interview female pornographers in order to understand the factors and considerations that went into their productions.

### Conclusions

Despite its limitations, we believe that this study provides numerous important contributions to and furthering of our understanding of popular pornographic films directed by both men and women.<sup>4</sup> First, by grounding this analysis within feminist theoretical debates, it provides a model for future research wherein theoretical differences and points of contention are examined empirically. This analysis concerned itself with whether having more women make pornography would result in more egalitarian depictions of sexuality. We suggest that such simple directives miss important, complex structural constraints that guide pornography's production and consumption.

Second, by exploring the content of popular pornography, we take seriously the socio-economic forces that shape pornography's production. Prior analyses of pornography have generally ignored economic dictates, essential considerations given that pornography is primarily produced and consumed in a capitalist society. Although much attention has been paid to the patriarchal ideology manifested in pornography's production and consumption (e.g., Jensen & Dines, 1998), less frequently have economic forces been explored to examine how they shape the nature of the product. This study, therefore, brings an important, multidisciplinary, socio-political perspective to the discussion of the content of pornography directed by men and women.

Finally, this study provides an important update to the content of contemporary pornography. Because the industry has grown exponentially in the last two decades, much of our knowledge about its content is insufficient and outdated. Although pornographic products have increased significantly, in large part due to technological advances with the Internet, direct television, and home digital video equipment (Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, & Boies, 1999), scholarly work charting its content has declined. New themes and genres (such as gonzo porn) are not described in current academic texts. By utilizing an industry publication to select samples for investigation, this study and future research can chart changes in content among what is most representative of consumed pornography.

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### NOTES

1. In an interview conducted by two of the authors of this article, *Adult Video News* senior editor Mark Kernes stated, "Our statistics show that 78% of the people that go into adult stores are men. They may have women with them, but it's men, and 22%, conversely, is women or women with other women or women alone." The interview took place at the Adult Entertainment Expo in Las Vegas, January 7, 2005.
2. After her pornography Web site "Burning Angel" ([www.burningangel.com](http://www.burningangel.com)) became widely known and popular, Joanna Angel was hired by Hustler to perform and produce pornography videos for their distribution companies (VCA, Hustler Video). This quotation was based on an interview by two of the authors with Joanna Angel at the New York Erotica Expo on May 21, 2005.
3. Gagging was coded positively if a penis or prosthetic was used to penetrate the actor's throat deep enough to induce the gag reflex.
4. The authors wish to thank an anonymous reviewer's insightful suggestions regarding the contributions of this research to the field of psychology.

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