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18 Queering porn audiences

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Introduction

A small but important niche, queer porn has grown out of initiatives like the Porn Film Festival Berlin in Europe, the Canadian Feminist Porn Awards and productions by American-based filmmakers such as Shine Louise Houston, Courtney Trouble and Madison Young, who have all attempted ‘to playfully affirm sexuality and reinvent new representations of desire and pleasure’ (Ryberg 2013: 142). Queer pornography is, for many commentators, not just representation but an *expression* of politics struggling against stereotyping and conventional, normative sexual identities and practices (Attwood 2010; Jacobs 2007; Moorman 2010). One of the ways in which queer porn might have particular political valence is in its promotion as a form of collaboration and, as Florian Cramer writes, the ‘replace[ment] of the rhetoric of artificiality in mainstream pornography ... with a rhetoric of the authentic: instead of mask-like bodies normalized using make-up, wigs, and implants, the authentic person is exposed’ (Cramer 2007: 174). What then do viewers make of these representations?

Hill-Meyer recently suggested that the queer audience ‘values diversity over cookie-cutter scenes, pleasure over fluids, and authenticity over façade’ (Hill-Meyer 2013: 157). In the virtual absence of systematic research on queer pornographies and their consumers, this chapter draws on a major online survey of porn consumers undertaken at pornresearch.org.¹ A wide range of respondents, across all ages, completed the questionnaire. What do these tell us about queer pornographies and about queer orientations, identities, readers and readings?

Motives and methods

Our project proceeded from interest in the ways in which people might describe pornography as significant and important to their everyday lives and to their sense of themselves, their sexual experiences and relationships; it was not premised on assumptions about harmfulness or morality. Over 5,000 people trusted us sufficiently to tell us their stories, responses, pleasures and preferences, in ways which enabled identification of patterns, distinct groupings, connections and separations.² With so many responses we were able to do

quantitative analyses alongside hearing the accounts people gave us, in their own words, of their involvements and engagements with online pornography. Of course, such accounts are not transparent, but their value lies in enabling us to understand the ways people are able to talk about themselves, the kinds of interests they have in sex, how pornography might fit (or not) into their intimate relationships, and how it might contribute (or not) to explorations of what it means to be sexual. How pornography might actually *matter* to people.

Methodological issues

Our quantitative questions were of three kinds: self-allocation multiple-choice questions (for example, how important is pornography to you?); some personal and demographic information; and questions about possible orientations (reasons for looking at porn; kinds viewed; and meanings of sex in your life). With these came a series of qualitative questions. Some linked directly to a multiple-choice question (for example, having asked people how important they felt pornography was to them, we asked why they had answered so); other questions derived from our desire to get people to think about their experiences in distinctive ways (for example, we were interested in the idea of a *personal career* with pornography so we requested a ‘history of their engagement with pornography in ten sentences’).

We also asked them to tell us things that might be difficult because they are self-revelatory, for example, what kinds of sexual stories most attract them, and about a pornographic moment or scenario they found especially arousing. We make no claim for the representativeness of the responses collected. This is not a sample: a sample is only possible where there is a known population from which a representative subset might be taken. We had no way of knowing what kinds and ranges of people choose to engage with internet pornography – indeed, uncovering that was one of our research aims.

One issue that brought particular commentary from respondents identifying as queer, was our use of the self-allocation option: ‘male’ or ‘female’. Before launching the questionnaire, we discussed, at some length, the possible limitations of a gender question. We were acutely aware that, as Amy Lind observes, ‘heteronormativity itself underscores ... research conclusions about sexual consumption and identities’ (Lind 2010, cited in Smith, this volume). Given that much academic (and populist) discussion of pornography claims such representations are *only* directed to and predominantly used by heterosexual men, using the ‘essential (if not biologically determined) gender’ options of male/female might, we felt, reinforce heteronormative gender logics (Smith 2012: 590; this volume). However, we were also aware that for our research to intervene in current debates (academic and more broadly), we would need to be able to make some definitive statements about gender differences and similarities in regard to consumption of pornography as well as being mindful of what institutional audiences would regard as ‘proper’ evidence. As Kath Browne observes, ‘while I wish to contest the boundaries of gender and sex, I also seek to be intelligible’ (Browne 2004, cited in Smith 2012: 600).

Not only did we share that determination to be ‘intelligible’, but there was the possibility that offering a wide range of gender options in the questionnaire might present an obstacle to collecting a large number of responses. For potential respondents adhering to traditional male/female identifications, terms such as cis-man, cis-woman, etc., could prove off-putting and/or confusing and, while not wanting to privilege their responses, those supposedly ‘ordinary’ consumers were probably very important to demonstrating that we had not ‘just’ accumulated responses from what critics would term ‘deviant’, or what more supportive assessors would see as ‘non-normative’, respondents. Thus, our broader ambitions for the project meant that we had to make compromises: offering a wide range of gender options would mean the statistical information (while nuanced in ways we would prefer) would then be diluted such that we could not challenge the assumptions that pornography ‘only’ speaks to men; thus, we acknowledged the fluidity of gender identifications but felt it ‘necessary to use these sexed terms’ (Browne 2004, cited in Smith 2012: 600). Despite this compromise, our research findings show the very particular contributions pornography can make in creating the spaces in which queer identities can be affirmed, celebrated, critiqued, explored and shared. We hope our findings here, which only begin to scratch the surface of queer porn identities, will provide a basis for further projects and analyses that take those aspects as their central concerns. As Halberstam (2003: 315) has persuasively written, ‘queer subculture ... needs to be reckoned with on its own terms’.

In order that there was space for transgender and gender-queer respondents to make that information known to us, we included a final ‘wildcard’ question: ‘is there something you would consider important to our understanding of the responses you’ve given here?’ Answers ranged from ‘No’ or ‘Nothing’, to lengthy stories – important counter-balances to our search for patterns and tendencies. People may share many characteristics, but this is an area of very individual qualities as well, and we wanted to illustrate patterns alongside portraits of complex individuals. Respondents’ motivations for ticking ‘queer’ as their orientation are not self-evident: hidden within that umbrella term are many different possibilities. Some respondents told us they were trans men, trans women, gender-queers, or that they embraced a particularly *political* sense of queer, while others suggested they simply preferred not to describe themselves within what they saw as more limited and limiting categorisations: we cannot make assumptions about individual degrees of ‘queerness’ or delineate queer identity as singular.

Some basic indicators

We received 5,490 completed responses, of which 3,743 identified as male (68.4%) and 1,726 as female (31.6%). Table 18.1 displays the figures for sexual orientation.

Those figures probably do not contain many surprises, aligning as they do with popular understandings of pornography as predominantly a heterosexual

Table 18.1 Number of responses by age, gender and identifying as queer

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>No answer</i>
Under 18	3	1	0
18–25	32	93	4
26–35	29	89	2
36–45	0	38	2
46–55	5	1	1
56–	2	1	0

male pastime, and yet it is significant that almost a third of our respondents identified as female. Ratings for importance are higher among men, and women give a lower frequency for visiting pornography. More interesting is the fact that cross-tabulating age with gender reveals that younger women (18–25) engage with pornography much more than older women, indicating a possible generational shift (see Figure 18.1).

The highest number of respondents identifying as queer were in the two age ranges 18–25 and 26–35, of whom almost two thirds ticked female as their gender option; in the range 36–45 we had no respondents ticking male; responses in the youngest and oldest ranges were very small (see Figure 18.2).

More than a third of queer respondents rated porn as being ‘quite’ important (36.3%), followed by ‘only a little’ important (32.7%). One fifth rated porn as ‘very’ important (19.5%), but there was considerable wariness of the particularly pathologising discourses about pornography consumption:

I hesitated to say that porn was ‘very’ or ‘extremely’ important only because those adjectives make it feel like I’m reliant on or even addicted to it.

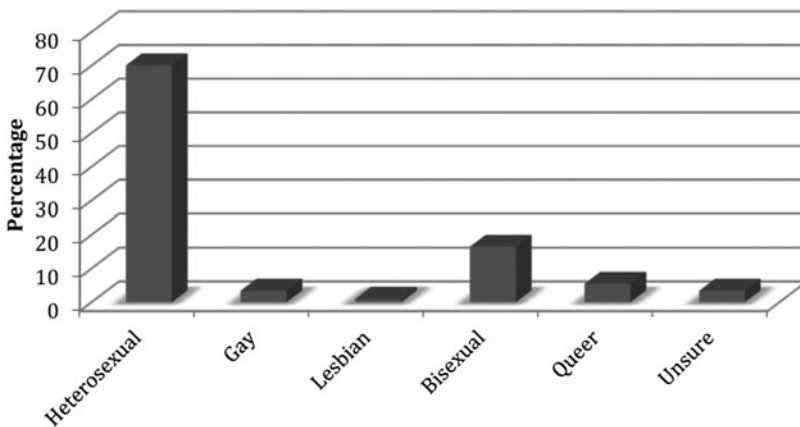


Figure 18.1 Responses by sexual orientation

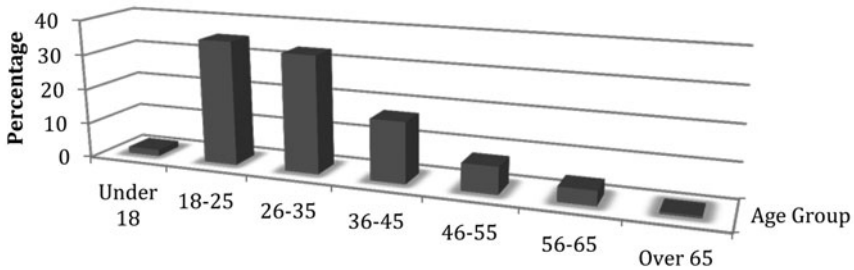


Figure 18.2 Responses by age

The difficulties of admitting to pornography's importance in one's life was something we found across all sexual orientations. The tendency to see pornography as, at best, a 'waste of time' and, at worst, a means of 'fuelling problematic fantasies' means there is little space for individuals to articulate 'importance'. One of our questions asked why individuals look at pornography, offering a range of possibilities and asking respondents to check up to three. Although 'when I feel horny' came out as a top answer across the survey, queer respondents were more likely to cite 'to feel involved in a world of sex out there' (26.1%), 'to reconnect with my body' (16.2%), 'for recognition of my sexual interests' (52.5%), 'to see things I wouldn't do' (11.2%) than other respondents. They were also least likely to cite 'sometimes I've nothing better to do' or 'when bored/can't relax/can't sleep'. These choices suggest that queer viewers accord pornography a very specific significance as a means of coming to terms with and understanding their bodies, their responses and their sexual pleasures – a possibility borne out in many discursive answers from queer respondents where porn's value was explained:

Being queer, porn was also very important in developing my sexual identity, allowing me to decide which sexes, genders, body types, and so on that I found attractive.

Pornography has existed as both a fuel for fantasies and an affirmation of my own sexual desires. If I no longer had the opportunity to view it, I feel my fantasies and sexual imagination would suffer for it. Pornography displays a more adventurous side of sex, a wider spectrum beyond that which I usually participate in.

What makes queer pornography queer?

Ward has suggested that 'The beauty of queer desire is precisely that it is unpredictable, potentially unhinged from biological sex or even gender, and as such, difficult to commodify' (Ward 2013: 135). Queer porn attempts to move

beyond the idea of the fixity of lesbian, gay, same-sex couplings or the simple presence of trans bodies: these are, after all, also visible in ‘mainstream’ pornography where novelty and ‘freakishness’ can have particular purchase. ‘Queerness’ in queer pornography is also an aesthetic quality drawing upon the particular subcultural productions of queer – from hairstyles, clothing, music to sensibilities and practices. Aesthetic choices also set queer porn apart from the mainstream – for example, use of hand-held camera, blog-style presentations, films accompanied by interviews and statements by performers which emphasise their willingness to be involved in porn productions (often explicitly politically defined against the ‘mainstream’), and which ‘face down’ moral objections to pornography or claims of its inherent abusiveness.

As Jiz Lee’s memoir outlines, ‘A queer porn movie can have various porn scenes that include people who might be trans, femme, boi, fag, cisgender, queer and more ... in queer works, you’ll find performers of all sizes, a higher percentage of people of color, and different displays of gender expression. There’s too much to categorize. Boxes fly out the window’ (Lee 2013: 277). Thus, for performers, queer porn offers generative spaces where specifically queer identities, feelings, experiences, eroticism and politics are expressed, made visible, debated and negotiated in sexual and aesthetic terms, confirmed in some of our responses:

Sexual stories involving young people, especially when it involves discovering sex or being initiated sexually. Straight guys having gay sex (especially getting a handjob), but not the cliché broke str8 boys stuff. Sex stories involving werewolves, and sometimes other fantasy stuff. Queer gang stories, pack situations – not necessarily gangbangs, but the whole ‘gang of queers’ or ‘queer tribes’ concept. Bisexual porn on occasion – I like male/male/female combinations.

More especially, respondents highlighted the importance of ‘authenticity’ and ‘realness’:

I think what excites me the most in porn is when the connection between the two people is evident. There is no end to the porn that simply consists of people engaging in erotic activities, but it is rarer and exhilarating to see people have an actual connection through their performance. Even something as simple as getting a contagious fit of giggles during a scene can show that they are sharing a moment in that performance rather than simply acting something out.

The ones where one can easily move from one perspective to another – where the experiences of all involved feel genuine and are well documented (i.e. filmed so that it does not focus on the experience or appearance of only one or part of the participant(s)).

Overall scenarios where desire becomes uncontrollable still appeal to me now.

Ones that seem as real as possible, with real awkwardness, pacing, etc. For instance, I love people getting undressed as much as the sex – porn that cuts it out I generally skip! Same for switching positions, etc.

The idea of queer pornography as ‘alternative’ is, of course, a form of mythologising: as Paasonen argues, the mainstream has never been quite as uni-dimensional as critics claim: the ‘logic of differentiation means that “the mainstream” is far from being something stable or unified but is instead constantly divided into endless categories, choices and preferences that online users need to navigate’ (Paasonen 2011: 428). Nor should we ‘forget that even the most politically dissident texts can be co-opted into dominant paradigms’ (Albury 2009: 650). A further problem lies in insisting that queer porn must be measured for qualitatively and absolute differences from mainstream porn (Smith 2014). As Ryberg suggests, the importance of queer porn may lie not in the ‘ultimate transformation of gender and sexual hierarchies, or a construction of an alternative world beyond these hierarchies, but the force of a continuous resistance in the face of these hierarchies’ (Ryberg 2013: 151); resistances that may be personally, as well as communally, felt and understood. Thus queer porn could be understood as part of ‘a recreational sexual ethic’ (Bernstein 2007: 6), emphasising self-expression and sexual exploration akin to forms of community bonding.

Consuming queer porn

More than 5,000 completed questionnaires means a lot of material to work with and, even if our focus here is on a small group within the larger whole, it is difficult to give proper attention to the complexities of individual accounts. One thing that stands out in the responses from queer-identified respondents is their willingness to name the particular sites, productions or scenes most enjoyed. Almost all queer respondents named favourite sites – compared to the frequency with which other respondents replied with ‘too many to mention’ or ‘can’t think of anything right now’. Many reference names that are familiar:

My current favorites are ‘authentic’ sites such as *Crash Pad Series*, and queer sites like *QueerPorn.TV*. I enjoy the authenticity of these sites, which feature models who have negotiated their scenes beforehand, and are participating in the types of sex that they personally enjoy, rather than a more forced or artificial setting that has been common in some types of porn.

Others referenced discussions of sexuality as important to their understandings of their interests in pornography, for example, citing Dan Savage, Tristan Taormino and Charlie Glickman as important sex educators. Queer respondents also highlighted particular interests – some of which would, on

the surface, appear to be staples of ‘mainstream’ pornography, for example ‘cream-pies’, ‘domination’, ‘submission’ – pointing to the likelihood that queer porn is often in the ‘eye of the beholder’ and that ‘mainstream’ pornography can also provide ‘queer imaginaries’ for some. Ward’s discussion of pleasures in the heterosexual college reality porn series *Shane’s World: College Invasion* illustrates ‘a unique erotic domain’ (Ward 2013: 137), offering a curious mixture of spectacular humiliation and reward as college boys engage in hazing rituals before achieving a place in ‘pro-am’ sex scenes. This ‘heterosexual creativity’ to avoid ‘homosexual meaning’ ‘speaks to [Ward’s] queerness, even as it is arguably motivated by heteronormativity, or a seemingly compulsive need to repudiate gayness’ (ibid.).

Thus, genesis from within queer community or ethics is not an absolute prerequisite for queer pleasures, and indeed within our responses we found evidence of what Ward calls ‘the *art* of spectatorship’ (Ward 2013: 139), whereby individuals detailed processes of searching and filtering content, seeking out images and stories that have particular resonances, whether self-declaredly queer or not, and coming to particular pornographic genres as offering specific pleasures:

I first used online erotic literature and looked for more soft images online (for example topless women) when I was eighteen. I moved on to buy books of erotica because I found it difficult to find good quality stories online, and started to develop a taste for bondage. Because of this I started to look for video clips on free sites of things I thought I would like, though written stuff is still predominant. I’ve got a lot more picky with video clips over time because I found I don’t really like a lot of what’s out there. Most recently I’ve discovered there are porn movies that parody real movies and enjoy them more than the clips because of the characters involved.

Responses like this point to the ways in which queer respondents can be comfortable in their interests in pornography – their highly positive constructions of sexual representations are often offered in the context of the underlying politics of queer productions and the ways in which these have carved out a niche and an accepting environment for experimentation and exploration.

... some magazines a friend owned, found some kinky porn there, matched my phantasies I couldn’t name before, felt quite lucky then. Feel quite sure with my sexuality, since adolescence. I enjoy my sexuality, and of course porn is part of that. Most recently sometimes shared with my partner, often used on my own. Regularly shared with friends.

I like sex – I think it’s a very important human need, but it’s also really fun, and porn is a way of tapping into that. But I really like depictions of real-life sex (and werewolves!) as opposed to what appears in most mainstream porn. Part of my interest in being involved in a post-porn

collective is to create more porn that shows real people having real-life sex, but it's also a way of exploring the boundaries of where taboos still exist around sex in my society.

As far as I'm concerned, porn is not only a way for people to jerk off, but also – specially when it comes to every kind of non-normative porn and post-porn, I can see it as a kind of technology, practices and behaviours that challenge the way we have sex and relate. It can also represent a way of resistance.

Thus many queer respondents talk of the ways in which they have reached an accommodation with pornography, comfortable with the idea of looking to it to provide new interests and surprises:

Everyone has different tastes, but I've come to be a fan of certain performers (stamina/genuine enjoyment/chemistry/charisma, etc) and now seek them out. Most recently I was surprised to find I find gay (mm) porn hot, which is new for me.

Even moving beyond consumption into production of more 'authentic' and 'diverse' representations:

Like many people involved in the burgeoning world of queer porn, I looked around and didn't see my personal brand of sexuality being represented in pornography. Going beyond the role of a dissatisfied consumer of pornographic material, I decided to become involved in pornography as a performer in order to diversify the representations of sexuality within pornography.

A key finding has been the ways in which queer audiences talk of their choices to watch and engage in pornography (as consumers, amateur producers and activists) as part of the affirmation of their sexual identities, however fluid and complex those might be. Affirmation ranges from acceptance of one's own body presentation ('They make a fat boy feel pretty'), through to:

It's one more of my interests, it's part of who I am, as much as the clothes I wear; it might not be as visible as my favourite red shirt, but it's part of the favourite image of myself. I would miss looking at and enjoying so many men and so many cocks without leaving my bedroom.

Thus, we suggest that the idea of becoming, of understanding one's own sexuality is also a form of imagining oneself as desirable, that others will find our bodies attractive and want to please and be pleased by those bodies. We believe this seriously complicates the standard ideas of fantasy as simply a desire to exceed the bounds of reality; rather, our research here in relation to queer audiences (but also in the entirety of the responses we gathered; see

Barker 2014) brings into view a whole range of ways in which people see meaning in the idea of fantasy.

Fantasy provides the means for supporting relationships with others:

As someone in a poly couple, I think it's important for me and my partner to look at other hot people/photos/videos to stay in touch with your identity.

I first came to porn when I was a teenager, thanks to the power of the internet. Typical young boy, simple fantasies. As I've gotten older, I've used porn, in addition to educational resources, to expand my knowledge of different expressions of sexuality. And most recently, I'm using pornography to expand intimate relations with my spouse, if for nothing more than a shared understanding of what we both like or do not like.

And maintaining a sense of self articulated through fantasy:

I just feel that porn is very important to me. It is a way through which I visualise my fantasies.

Queer stories that focus on internal narratives. Scenarios that involve trans people in non-exploitative ways. It makes me feel validated.

With a history of marginalisation, queer audiences can claim particular significances for their engagements with sexual representations, especially where it is possible to point to ethical production practices or authentic representations.

Concluding remarks

The success or otherwise of queer porn, as a space in which alternative, non-normative desires can be articulated, is not the focus of this chapter, but for many of our respondents who identified as queer, the importance of queer porn lies in its ability to make visible those identities, bodies and sexualities of people/individuals/communities that are marginalised by more mainstream representations. As we might expect (from the ways in which queer porn seems to operate within networks, and particular formations of queer community), for many of our respondents, porn plays a vital role in their expression of sexuality, cultural allegiances and politics; these are not separable. Queer porn appears as sites of self-making and (in contradiction to those accounts that see pornography as ultimately individualistic and/or lonely), as sites for collective identification. Certainly there are elements of subcultural opposition in the ways in which respondents (and producers of queer porn) talk of their rejection of mainstream tropes, practices, tastes and body styles – by these means respondents indicate their antipathy to the 'authority' of heteronormative mainstream representations. All of this perhaps points to the ways in which we need to understand queer porn as both representations and practices on their own terms: that while they might be defined against the

mainstream, they also have their unique place in queer people's everyday lives and their histories.

Notes

- 1 The questionnaire ran between February and June 2011 on the pornresearch.org website and was publicised opportunistically in as wide and open a way as possible via social media – Facebook and Twitter (pretty much replicating traditional snowball techniques) – on various sexuality blogs, and via radio and print media in Australia, the UK and USA.
- 2 The research underwent rigorous scrutiny by the University of Sunderland Ethics Committee.

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