

Effects of Porn: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: *The impacts of pornography are varied and complex. Performers are often thought to be victims of abuse and exploitation, while viewers are regularly accused of becoming desensitised to sexual violence. Further, porn is held by some to perpetuate damaging racial and gender stereotypes. I contend that these accusations, though not entirely baseless, are undermined for two reasons: they rest on questionable empirical evidence and ignore many of the positive consequences porn may have. In this article, I organise my analysis from the screen outward, critically examining the effects porn has on performers, viewers, and wider society, and finding that in each domain it may have both positive and negative outcomes. Following this, I evaluate porn as a form of Bakhtinian carnival and discuss how online porn may offer a mode of resisting hegemonic cultural norms. On the whole, therefore, I argue that the harms attributed to porn have often been overgeneralised and exaggerated, and that porn has a range of effects unable to be captured by a mere pro/anti dichotomy.*

Research into porn has focussed heavily on the effects of pornographic texts (Paasonen, 2014, p. 136; Segal, 1993, p. 5; Smith & Attwood, 2014, p. 7). Though studying porn within the so-called ‘effects paradigm’ (McNair, 2014, p. 161) is somewhat limiting, it nonetheless informs a central topic of the pro-/anti-porn debate: whether pornographic texts are *harmful* (Attwood, 2002, p. 92; 2005, p. 67). It is difficult – if not impossible – to precisely define what porn is (Segal, 1998, p.

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45). However, as Julia Long (2012) notes, “most people...are able to recognise it without a consensus on a definition” (p. 58). This essay interrogates the effects of consensually produced and distributed pornographic videos on adults. I examine the harms and benefits of porn on performers, viewers, and wider society in §1, §2, and §3, respectively, before presenting a case for online porn as a form of Bakhtinian carnival in §4. I argue that the harms claimed by anti-porn theorists have often been overgeneralised and exaggerated, but should not be dismissed entirely. Moreover, pro-porn theorists have convincingly shown that in many cases, porn produces a variety of beneficial consequences for individuals and society at large. In §5, therefore, I conclude that the pro-/anti-porn dichotomy fails to capture the diverse effects of porn.

I. Performers

Many anti-porn theorists claim that female performers are frequently victims of exploitation and abuse. Catharine MacKinnon (1993) argues that the porn industry “forces, threatens, blackmails, pressures, tricks, and cajoles women” into producing degrading and violent content (p. 15). Women who have escaped abusive homes may be especially vulnerable to the financial enticements and emotional support offered by conniving porn producers (Russo, 1998, p. 24). The recent documentary *Hot Girls Wanted* found that some aspiring porn actresses felt exploited by the industry and struggled to reconcile their career with familial and romantic relationships (Bauer & Gradus, 2015). Material depicted in the more extreme porn videos often involves aggressive acts such as choking and slapping, though mainstream porn may also incorporate force, thereby harming actresses in a direct physical manner (Dworkin, 2000, p. 29; Jones, 2016, p. 297). Further, some scholars argue that porn performers are objectified and, therefore, stripped of their dignity (Jensen & Dines, 1998, p. 66). Ariel Levy (2005) goes so far as to call women who ‘degrade’ themselves in this way “female chauvinist pigs” (p. 93). Thus, actresses in porn may experience a range of harms on both physical and psychological levels.

These claims hold little water, however. Classic anti-porn writers often rely on emotive rhetoric over robust arguments when describing the harms experienced by performers. For instance, Andrea Dworkin (1989) concludes *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* with the passage:

The boys are betting that their penises and fists and knives and fucks and rapes will turn us into what they say we are—the compliant women of sex, the voracious cunts of pornography, the masochistic sluts who resist because we really want more. (p. 224)

Dworkin creates a stark division between “the boys” and “us” to seduce readers onto her side, a strategy complemented by the various arousing expletives. Elsewhere, she writes of pornography: “It is women turned into subhumans, beaver, pussy, body parts, genitals exposed, buttocks, breasts, mouths opened and throats penetrated, covered in semen, pissed on, shitted on, hung from light fixtures, tortured, maimed, bleeding, disembowelled, killed” (Dworkin, 2000, p. 26). This quote is followed by another 20 statements all beginning with “It is” (pp. 26–27). Such repetition bombards readers with forceful rhetoric yet presents no justification for perceiving porn in this way. Dworkin merely thrusts her points into her readers’ faces. MacKinnon (1993) employs similar pathos, asking her audience to:

Imagine... your father holding you down and covering your mouth so another man can make a horrible searing pain between your legs. When you are older, your husband ties you to the bed and drips hot wax on your nipples and brings in other men to watch and makes you smile through it. Your doctor will not give you drugs he has addicted you to unless you suck his penis... In this thousand years of silence, the camera is invented and pictures are made of you while these things are being done. (pp. 3–4)

MacKinnon derives these “facts” from “years of confidential consultations” and two court cases (p. 113), which provides little verifiable evidence for why such experiences typify women’s involvement in the porn industry. Lynne Segal (1998) astutely observes that such descriptions are themselves somewhat pornographic (p. 56), and Drucilla Cornell (1991, as cited in Segal, 1998) even suggests that MacKinnon “fucks her audiences” (p. 56). Other scholars argue that anti-porn analyses often view female experiences through an ‘oppression paradigm’, seeing women as inherently victimised and thus ignoring aspects which complicate this notion (DeVoss, 2002, p. 76; Paasonen, 2014, p. 137; Weitzer, 2011, p. 666). The personal accounts described in Ann Russo’s (1998) qualitative research (pp. 22–29)

and *Hot Girls Wanted* fail to demonstrate widespread abuse in the industry; the plural of anecdote is not data. Until more representative empirical research is conducted, the claim that porn performers are frequently harmed is unwarranted.

Further complicating the anti-porn position, many performers express satisfaction with their involvement in the industry. Though several actresses in *Hot Girls Wanted* draw attention to negative aspects of their profession, others claim making porn gives them “a boost of confidence” (37:35) and has other beneficial effects on their social and emotional wellbeing (Bauer & Gradus, 2015). Additionally, the proliferation of not-for-profit amateur porn suggests many women enjoy displaying themselves performing sexual acts. This particular genre allows body types often excluded from professional porn to gain representation alongside traditional videos (van Doorn, 2010, pp. 422–423) and the ranging aesthetics of amateur performers undermines the critique that “supernatural beauty” is central to porn (Klein, 2006, p. 255). This does not negate the fact that many porn actresses do experience harm, as some poignant narratives in *Hot Girls Wanted* demonstrate. The assertion that porn is predominantly harmful to performers, however, remains unsubstantiated since we do not have precise estimates for levels of maltreatment. Most probably, as Dànielle DeVoss (2002) argues, work in the porn industry can include both liberatory *and* exploitative elements (p. 76). But amateur porn, especially, may allow women to take control of their representations and demonstrate sexual agency.

Bonnie Ruberg (2014) problematises the “utopian fantasy” that free amateur porn is more ethical than paid productions, arguing that its reliance on unpaid labour makes it morally suspect (p. 147). People often struggle to recognise digital sexual labour as a legitimate form of labour due to its virtual nature and the widespread misconception that it is too enjoyable to be regarded as work (p. 152). But, Ruberg argues, the production of amateur porn is labour in a very real sense, since “the currency that viewers trade in...is their time” (p. 149). Far from being “sexy, subversive anti-capitalists”, the women who have sufficient time and disposable income to make free porn are reliant on the very economic system many see them as challenging (pp. 154–155). Ruberg contends that individuals who view free amateur porn due to an unease with paying for videos from an industry perceived as exploitative fail to recognise that many other performers are reliant on financial compensation for their labour (p. 154). Amateur porn, then, may limit discussions

regarding fair compensation for performers by promoting the view that sex work done for pleasure rather than profit is somehow ethically superior.

Interestingly, Ruberg neglects to mention the many thousands of amateur actresses who upload videos to sites such as Clips4Sale or ManyVids, where viewers pay for content at a price determined by the performers. Moreover, the problems of digital labour identified are not unique to the porn industry: many musicians upload songs to free venues such as SoundCloud and aspiring photographers regularly showcase their work on blogs and image hosting sites. Ruberg notes that companies which manage amateur tube sites profit significantly through advertising (p. 156). Perhaps a fairer way to distribute this revenue would be to allow performers the option of monetising their videos, much in the way YouTube has done. At present, though, it is not obvious that women who produce porn for free are harmed by their lack of financial compensation. Ruberg herself acknowledges such a question cannot be answered definitively “without first polling the DIY-ers who make DIY porn: do they feel exploited?” (p. 153). For many performers – though by no means all – making and sharing free porn videos may be a mode of sexual expression which is rewarding in and of itself.

II. Viewers

Viewers of porn and their romantic partners also claim a number of sexually liberating effects. Martin Weinberg and colleagues (2010) found that for both men and women, viewing porn was associated with feeling empowered and confident in their intimate relationships (p. 1394). The authors discovered a positive correlation between the frequency of watching porn and the breadth of people’s sexual repertoires in terms of what they found appealing (p. 1395). As one woman remarked, “I have become more open, accepting, and interested in most sexual acts because of porn” (p. 1395). This finding parallels Rachel Liberman’s (2015) observation that feminist porn viewers often claim they watch porn “to explore and expose themselves to diverse sexual behaviour” (p. 184). Furthermore, Gert Hald and Neil Malamuth (2008) asked a sample of Danish young adults about self-perceived effects of porn consumption. Both male and female participants claimed more positive outcomes than negative ones in various areas of their lives, including sexual knowledge, feelings about sexual activity, and perceptions of the opposite

gender (p. 620). Many consumers, it seems, believe that porn has widened their knowledge of sexual activities and improved aspects of their intimate relationships.

Critics argue that such a perspective is overly optimistic, however, and that many viewers interact negatively with their romantic partners due to porn. Russo (1998) contends that men may use porn as a means of “sexual intimidation and abuse in their heterosexual relationships” (p. 29), a claim echoed by anti-porn theorists in the present decade (Mowlabocus & Wood, 2015, p. 118). Susan Shaw (1999) interviewed several women who found their partner’s porn habits detrimental to their self-esteem and feelings of intimacy (p. 207), and a 2012 literature review confirmed that internet porn was a source of relationship distress for many (Short et al., 2012, p. 13). More recent research indicates that due to their porn habits, many teenage males are unaware how to avoid discomfort to their partner during anal intercourse; this may plausibly extrapolate to adult porn viewers who lack sufficient sex education (Marston, 2018, p. 200). Porn use, then, may lead to both psychological and physical health risks within romantic relationships.

According to numerous anti-porn theorists, porn has effects far beyond relationship difficulties; it directly contributes to misogynistic beliefs and aggressive sexual behaviour. Experimental studies have found that following porn exposure, many viewers exhibit attitudes showing increased sexual callousness and acceptance of violence against women (Flood & Hamilton, 2003, pp. 42–43; Flood & Pease, 2009, p. 135). Porn may also lead to increased behavioural aggression, with male undergraduates being more likely to administer electric shocks to a female confederate after viewing violent porn compared to a neutral stimulus (Meg Barker, 2014, p. 120). Two main frameworks have been proposed to account for the relationship between porn and antisocial behaviour: the copycat model, where viewers simply mimic what they see in porn, and the addiction model, which holds that the arousing effect of porn requires stronger stimuli over time until eventually representation alone is insufficient (Baumeister, 1996, p. 207; Cameron & Frazer, 2000, p. 242). Several researchers claim that porn has become increasingly violent over the years (Bridges, 2000, p. 47; Russell, 2000, p. 61; Whisnant, 2010, p. 115). The antisocial effects attributed to violent porn are significantly greater than for less violent erotica (Meg Barker, 2014, p. 121). Hence, contemporary porn may pose an unprecedented risk of inciting aggressive sexual behaviour and even, as Diane

Russell (2000) argues, rape (p. 88). In Robin Morgan's (1980) apt summary of the anti-porn stance: "Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice" (p. 139).

Thankfully, however, evidence for such adverse effects on porn viewers is less than clear-cut. Critics argue that much of the empirical data cited by anti-porn theorists relies on experiments using analogue models with poor external validity and unrepresentative volunteer participants (Attwood, 2005, p. 67; McNair, 2014, p. 163; Segal, 1993, p. 14; Weitzer, 2011, p. 672). For instance, undergraduate students' increased propensity to give electric shocks to a woman following exposure to porn has minimal relevance to most real-life scenarios in which sexual aggression may manifest (Flood & Hamilton, 2003, p. 42). Similarly, many studies measure attitude changes immediately after viewing porn (e.g., Hald & Malamuth, 2015, p. 101), which may illustrate a priming effect rather than any persistent change in thought processes. Correlational studies detecting an association between porn use and acceptance of violence against women or other antisocial attitudes are inherently tainted by the third variable problem: men who seek out violent porn may already be predisposed to sexual violence (Weitzer, 2011, p. 673). Other correlational research has found that increased availability of pornography in a country does not predict greater rates of sex crime (Diamond, Jozifkova, & Weiss, 2011, p. 1037) and that convicted sex offenders tend to have slightly *lower* exposure to porn than non-criminals (Allen, D'Alessio, & Emmers-Sommer, 1995, pp. 153–154). The research suggesting porn has damaging impacts on viewers is, therefore, largely ambiguous and at times even contradictory.

A plethora of individual and cultural variables are likely to contribute to the effects of viewing porn (Hald & Malamuth, 2015, p. 105). In particular, quality sex education may significantly improve the outcomes of porn on attitudes and behaviour. Anthony Bogaert and colleagues (1999) found that lower IQ males were more sexually suggestive towards a female confederate after watching violent porn compared to non-violent porn, whereas higher IQ men showed no such effect (p. 290). The authors concluded that sex education programs ought to encourage critical and thoughtful analysis of pornographic media (p. 291), a point seconded by recent researchers (Albury, 2014, p. 173). Though viewing porn may lead to detrimental effects on individuals' attitudes and behaviour in some cases, the severity and scope

of such outcomes – as well as the mediating influence of personality and educational variables – remains unclear.

The widespread presumption that porn is becoming increasingly violent can also be called into question. Anna Bridges (2010) reviewed data from two studies conducted in 2000 and 2007 which looked into the content of porn videos, and found an increase only in “mild and playful” acts of aggression such as pinching, biting, and spanking; there was no change in serious violence (p. 47). Bridges suggests this is still troublesome since performing such acts “may result in greater intimacy difficulties” (p. 47). However, as Ronald Weitzer (2011) notes, this argument rests on a value judgement regarding appropriate sexual behaviour (p. 668). These activities might well be pleasurable for many people and it is unclear why Bridges considers them problematic. More importantly, the results of Bridges’ analysis challenge the notion that porn is becoming ever more extreme. Other research also indicates that contemporary porn is, on the whole, no more violent than in previous decades (McNair, 2014, p. 163; Segal, 1998; p. 51). An Australian study found that among the 50 best-selling porn videos, just two percent of scenes depicted violent behaviour (Lumby, 2008, p. 11). Although these studies are by no means comprehensive, they nonetheless present conflicting evidence to the claim that modern porn is more violent than in the past.

A reason often proposed for the alleged increase in violent material is that porn is addictive, so users desire more intense content over time; however, the notion of ‘porn addiction’ is itself dubious. Screening tests for such a diagnosis typically consist of self-report questionnaires: if a person’s responses fall above a certain threshold, their use of porn is deemed pathological (Voros, 2009, p. 244). Critics suggest that the standardising property of these measures may function to impose hegemonic norms of sexual behaviour onto others through medical discourse (Voros, 2009, p. 245). Michel Foucault (1990) argues that institutions of biopower have long played a role in regulating sexuality, with one strategy employed being the “psychiatrization of perverse pleasure” (p. 105). Labelling frequent porn users as ‘addicted’ and therefore at risk of committing violent sex crimes does nothing to clarify the nature of their habits or the likely harms thereof; it merely imposes a disparaging value judgement via seemingly authoritative language (Voros, 2009, p. 245). Gayle Rubin (1993) even suggests that the pathologisation of porn users as

being prone to criminal behaviour parallels the damaging stereotypes often attributed to homosexuals in the 1950s (p. 23). Given that neurological research into porn addiction is heavily disputed (Webber & Sullivan, 2018, p. 193), the addiction model proposed to account for the apparent negative effects of porn has little explanatory power and rests on questionable medical foundations.

The copycat model fares only somewhat better since it depends on a behaviourist conception of the mind and thus ignores the psychic complexity which psychoanalytic theories may account for. Empirical studies which expose participants to pornographic content and then measure attitudinal or behavioural changes typically fail to consider the vast array of cognitive processes which mediate the relationships between stimuli and responses (Smith & Attwood, 2014, p. 11). Psychoanalytic frameworks, however, can elucidate the roles played by fantasy, projection, identification, catharsis, and other mechanisms which may alter the effects of watching porn (Lubey, 2006, p. 119; Segal, 1998, p. 56). If included more widely in academic discussions, these approaches may generate fruitful insights into the multitude of ways that people incorporate pornographic fantasies into their sexual life and psychic identities (Martin Barker, 2014, p. 155). Though empirical research into porn has demonstrated a mixture of positive and negative outcomes, such findings offer only a small glimpse into porn's effects on viewers when interpreted through the reductive copycat model.

III. Wider society

According to several researchers, the broader societal effects of porn are cause for serious concern. Porn, they argue, is rife with sexist and racist stereotypes (Bernardi, 2006, p. 224; Capino, 2006, p. 208; Williams, 2004, p. 277), an attribute even pro-porn theorists acknowledge (Segal, 1998, p. 48). Asian porn, for example, draws on clichéd notions of 'Oriental' women being submissive (Capino, 2006, p. 208). Interracial content tends to emphasise the size of male African-American performers' large penises if acting alongside a Caucasian female; inversely, African-American women are often described as "ghetto" when they appear with a Caucasian actor (Bernardi, 2006, pp. 230–231). Such reductions of non-white bodies to their physical characteristics may perpetuate harmful social ideas and even racist beliefs (Bernardi, 2006, pp. 223, 234). Numerous scholars detect a 'pornographication' of popular

culture in recent years, with mainstream media becoming increasingly sexualised (Attwood, 2006, p. 78; Flood, 2009, p. 385; McNair, 2014, p. 163). If their observations are valid, such a far-ranging influence of porn might amplify the risk of it reinforcing negative stereotypes against certain groups.

These worries are for the most part reasonable, but somewhat too narrow in their focus. Given that damaging racist and sexist stereotypes manifest in many forms of media (Marston, 2018, p. 202), it may be that porn primarily *reflects* existing undesirable aspects of modern society rather than expanding them. Segal (1998) suggests porn is frequently a scapegoat for rage which would be more appropriately directed at contemporary culture in general (p. 49). Further, porn can also challenge patriarchal and heteronormative concepts by presenting acts outside conventional sexual behaviour (Paasonen, 2010, p. 75; 2014, pp. 136–137; Weinberg et al., 2010, p. 1391). As such, porn may offer “a window into the spectrum of gender and sexual diversity” (Webber & Sullivan, 2018, p. 195). Homosexual and queer porn, especially, may function as a form of empowerment for minority sexualities (Champagne, 1995, p. 30). Many lesbian pornographers explicitly aim to resist the containment of female sexual agency and thus imbue their content with a distinct political focus (Collins, 1998, pp. 33, 52). Similarly, viewers of feminist porn often navigate to the genre due to their dislike of formulaic mainstream depictions of sexuality (Lieberman, 2015, p. 178). Even regular heterosexual porn can challenge dominant paradigms surrounding sexuality by revealing truths usually suppressed in everyday life concerning arousal and fantasy (Klein, 2006, p. 253). Though porn can, at times, reinforce harmful social constructs about race and gender, the ‘pornosphere’ also offers a unique venue for challenging naturalised ideas regarding the corporeal body and sexuality more generally.

IV. Porn qua Bakhtinian carnival

Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival provides a suitable framework for examining the subversive potential of porn. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin (1984) discusses how during the Renaissance, folk carnivals undermined social regulatory mechanisms through demonstrations of laughter, parody, billingsgate, and corporeal grotesqueness, among other features (pp. 4–5, 317). Despite the prevalence of these elements in many pornographic texts, little attention has been paid towards Bakhtin

in existing porn studies scholarship. Lauren Langman (2008) notes that the carnivalesque fashion trend ‘porn chic’ resists traditional notions of modesty and sexual asceticism by displaying genital adornments and piercings (p. 670). Moreover, DeVoss (2002) interprets female amateur porn performers as showing themselves to have open and penetrable bodies, consistent with Bakhtinian grotesque logic (p. 88). No researchers have yet specifically explored how porn communities may function as a modern form of carnival where participants effectively challenge hegemonic norms; this section makes an initial attempt.

Laughter and parody are both elements within porn which may critique a number of common ideas about sexuality (Paasonen, 2011, p. 138). Bakhtin (1998) posits that carnivalistic laughter, which often occurs during instances of parody, is uniquely able to mock authority via the fusion of ridicule with rejoicing (pp. 254–255). Porn film titles frequently parody respected cultural texts through linguistic allusions, examples being *Finding Nympho*, *Hairy Pooper and the Sorcerer’s Bone*, and *Austin Prowler* (Martin, 2006, pp. 193, 196). The content of porn is often intentionally comedic too, such as the practical jokes and hyperbolic methods of seducing women shown on certain porn sites, which Susanna Paasonen (2011) describes as “extensive” (p. 146). In one example she cites, a man affects various identities – including paralysed, blind, and intellectually disabled – to elicit sympathetic sexual acts from unsuspecting women (p. 146). Furthermore, physiological responses to arousal and humour share similarities, with orgasm and laughter both requiring a build-up of tension before the body convulses in delight (Martin, 2006, p. 190). Popular pleasures may offer subordinate people a means of resisting social power (Fiske, 2011, p. 232). Parodic titles, for instance, highlight the arbitrary division between high(er) and lower culture such that viewers question the legitimacy of the value afforded to mainstream films, which typically shy away from showing explicit sexual content. Porn videos that exaggerate pickup culture make fun of the absurd lengths to which many men go when attempting to woo potential romantic partners, sometimes by assuming false personas. More generally, comedic parodies in porn encourage viewers to reflect on the unnecessary seriousness which pervades much of romantic and sexual behaviour and restricts the enjoyment that amorous interactions may bring. As Nina Martin (2006) suggests, “taking sex less seriously could be a positive move for all genders, and perhaps it is time to let in a little laughter” (p. 204).

Through somewhat different means, billingsgate and grotesqueness within porn may also undermine naturalised assumptions about sexuality. Many porn videos substitute coarse language for more polite expressions: to have sex with is to ‘fuck’, a woman’s vagina becomes her ‘cunt’ (Flood & Hamilton, 2003, p. 32). Hegemonic language which discourages expletives is thereby resisted, with speech motivated by hedonistic impulsivity promoted instead. Additionally, the idea of bodily confinement is also challenged, with many porn videos showing vaginal secretions and the inside of orifices, illustrating what Bakhtin (1984) calls a “grotesque realism” (p. 29) and contradicting the dominant imaginary of closed and sanitised bodies. On the more extreme end, scatological fetish videos specifically emphasise coprophilic pleasure. The infamous clip *2girls1cup* shows two women defecating into a cup before consuming the faecal matter, kissing one another through the excrement, and then vomiting profusely (Paasonen, 2017, p. 463). Although reaction videos shared on YouTube tend to emphasise disgust responses, there are no doubt a minority of individuals genuinely aroused by such material (Jones, 2017, p. 473). Pertinently, Bakhtin (1998) recognises that “the behavior, gesture, and discourse of a person [during carnival] are...from the vantage point of noncarnival life...eccentric and inappropriate” (p. 251). Porn in both mainstream and niche genres involving unsanctioned language and excessive bodily displays offers a mechanism to resist societal pressures on speech and behaviour: to escape the discipline and punishment which typifies noncarnival reality.

The pornosphere can, therefore, be interpreted as a modern-day carnival where individuals may temporarily escape the seriousness and hegemony of regular life. Bakhtin (1998) contends that Medieval people had two lives: an official life subject to “strict hierarchical order” and a carnival life which was “free and unrestricted” (p. 256). In the internet age, porn sites offer a venue for exploration of this ‘second’ life. The virtual carnival square showcases behaviour transgressing the boundaries of everyday interactions, presenting diverse sexual activity and a wide range of bodies. Online porn, like Renaissance carnivals, exists to some degree “without a division into performers and spectators” (Bakhtin, 1998, p. 250). Performers are often themselves porn viewers; audience members contribute by posting comments on videos; viewers masturbate simultaneously with the sexual activity displayed on screen. It would be naïve to ignore the bigoted ideas which, as scholars have shown,

are depicted in some pornographic material (Bernardi, 2006, p. 224; Capino, 2006, p. 208). However, it would be equally foolish to overlook the positive elements that representation in porn may have for minority sexualities (Champagne, 1995, p. 30; Webber & Sullivan, 2018, p. 195). Like any carnival, there are dangerous side streets and alleyways, but the overall environment of online porn is exciting and celebratory. For many people, porn offers a carnivalistic liberation from the confines of accepted sexual expression and a means of exploring their sexualities outside hegemonic boundaries.

V. Conclusion

Weinberg and colleagues (2010) remark that “the effects of viewing pornography can be seen as wholly absent, wholly negative, wholly positive, or a mixture of positive and negative” (p. 1390). None but the last of these seems plausible. Classic anti-porn writers such as Dworkin and MacKinnon fail to demonstrate widespread harm against porn performers, despite their cunning linguistics. The variety of narratives given by actresses as well as their heterogeneous involvement in the industry suggests that performing in porn may be simultaneously liberating and exploiting. The wide range of effects claimed to occur for viewers and their romantic partners also include both positive and negative elements. For some, porn may be a contributing factor to violent behaviour and sexist attitudes, but the evidence for this is problematic and appropriate sex education may significantly reduce such impacts. Porn may also increase sexual knowledge and confidence, as well as simply being a source of pleasure. The wider social effects of porn, too, may include detrimental outcomes such as reinforcing racial stereotypes, but porn can also provide a platform for the expression of minority sexualities. Further, porn may function as a mode of resistance to social norms by providing a venue where discouraged sexual behaviour is celebrated, therefore challenging the assumed superiority of noncarnival life. Linda Williams (2014) describes the pro-/anti-porn split as a “false dichotomy” (p. 27). Given the extensive range of effects porn can have, this judgement appears reasonable: the complex impacts of porn on performers, viewers, and society cannot be adequately categorised using binary terms.

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