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### Lust, Love, and Life: A Qualitative Study of Swedish Adolescents' Perceptions and Experiences with Pornography

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## Lust, Love, and Life: A Qualitative Study of Swedish Adolescents' Perceptions and Experiences with Pornography

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*There is a widespread concern in Western society about the visibility of pornography in public places and on the Internet. What are the consequences for young men and women, and how do they think about gender, sexuality, and pornography? Data was collected, through 22 individual interviews and seven focus groups, from 51 participants (36 women and 37 men aged 14–20 years) in Sweden. The results indicated a process of both normalization and ambivalence. Pornography was used as a form of social intercourse, a source of information, and a stimulus for sexual arousal. Pornography consumption was more common among the young men than among the women. For both the young men and women, the pornographic script functioned as a frame of reference in relation to bodily ideals and sexual performances. Most of the participants had acquired the necessary skills of how to deal with the exposure to pornography in a sensible and reflective manner.*

Pornography has been a heated topic in Swedish society for several decades, especially concerning its relationship to gender roles and sexuality (Forsberg, 2007). The societal context includes principles about gender equality and compulsory sex education since 1955, which emphasizes unrestricted rights to sexuality for both men and women. As a consequence, views about pornography are generally negative, though opinions do differ (Forsberg, 2007; Hammarén & Johansson, 2007). Nevertheless, Sweden became the second country in the world, after Denmark, to legalize pornography in 1971 (Månsson, Löfgren-Mårtenson, & Knudsen, 2007). The content and dissemination of pornography has, however, changed considerably since that time (Månsson et al., 2007; Månsson & Söderlind, 2004). One way to describe this transformation is that boundaries have been stretched. Pictures and images that society defined as pornography some decades ago now appear in mainstream media (McNair, 1996, 2002; Sørensen, 2007). At the same time, it is clear that the visibility and accessibility of hardcore pornography in public space in the Nordic countries has increased dramatically over the last decade, not least due to the Internet (Hirdman, 2007; Kolbein, 2007; Månsson, Daneback, Tikkanen, & Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2003). Television programs, advertisements, and the music industry exploit and play with pornographic

codes and scenarios. The pornography industry also launches and promotes its products via youth channels and Web sites. In other words, relationships have been forged between pornography and youth culture, which is somewhat of a new development. Even if it is a general aspect of popular culture, the so-called “mainstreaming” of pornography (McNair, 2002) has special significance for young people (Sørensen, 2007).

### Experiences of Pornography

Research shows that the experiences of pornography among young Nordic people are extensive. The results from an Internet-based study carried out among Danish, Norwegian, and Fenno-Swedish youth in 2005 demonstrated that 92% of the respondents had seen pornography at least once (Sørensen & Kjørholt, 2007). These results are consistent with other recent findings in the Nordic countries (e.g., Häggström-Nordin, Hansson, & Tydén, 2005; Hammarén & Johansson, 2002; Svedin & Priebe, 2004). Gender differences have been documented in several studies, suggesting that women are more critical of pornography than men (Hald, 2007; Svedin & Priebe, 2004). A recent study including more than 4,000 Swedish high school students showed that, compared with male students, a much larger proportion of the young women described pornography in negative terms such as “disgusting” and “sexually off-putting” (Svedin & Priebe, 2004). Other findings suggest that young men view pornography more frequently compared to young women (Hald,

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2007). At the same time, research has shown that there is a certain amount of ambivalence toward pornography among young women. For example, Svedin and Priebe indicated that, while the majority of the young women in their sample felt negatively about pornography, approximately one-third thought that it was interesting and sexually exciting. This pattern of ambivalence was also very clear in Berg's (2000) qualitative interview study of Swedish 15-year-old young women. The female participants said that they could get turned on by pornography but, at the same time, they were very clear that this was not something that could be talked about openly if one wanted to be respected.

### Public Concern

Svedin and Priebe (2004) identified a group of high frequency consumers of pornography among the young men in their sample (10%), who used pornography more or less daily. In addition, these men had more experiences of buying or selling sexual services compared to other men their own age. According to the researchers, these experiences were mediated by factors such as home background, personality characteristics, alcohol consumption, and current emotional and mental health. In addition, several studies have shown that young people are increasingly reporting experiences of sexual intercourse on the first date and a greater acceptance of more occasional sexual contacts (Forsberg, 2005; Hammarén, 2003; Herlitz, 2004). This could be seen as a continuous disconnection of what Giddens (1995), among others, called the romantic love complex, where sexuality is legitimated by love. These and other research findings, such as reports that teenagers who watched pornography were more likely to engage in anal sex than those not exposed to pornography (Häggström-Nordin et al., 2005; Hammarén, 2003; Rogala & Tydén, 2003), have caused widespread concern and public debate in the Nordic countries about the implications and consequences of pornography.

### Objectives and Research Questions

Young people's own voices are, however, seldom being heard in this debate. Our study attempted to remedy this by asking normative middle-class teenagers about their experiences, views, and relationships to pornography. We were interested in deeper knowledge and in-depth descriptions of young women's and men's experiences of pornography and how they talked about the subject. In which situations do they use pornography and what functions does it serve? What do young women and men think about the physical images and ideals displayed in pornography? What effects does

pornography have on their views of sexuality and gender relations? What similarities and differences are there between young women's and men's discussions about these issues?

### Theoretical Framework

Guiding our analysis was an interactionist and social-constructionist perspective on sexualities, sexual expressions, and behaviors (Weeks, 1986). A basic assumption of this perspective is that it is through interaction with others that we learn how to think and act sexually in different situations. We employed Gagnon and Simon's (2005) sexual script theory, which suggests that through sexual socialization we learn our scripts the same way actors learn their part in a play. We learn why some things make us feel sexy and others do not. Put simply, the script is a manual for the when, where, how, with whom, and why of sexuality. However, the sexual scripts are never static, and they also differ from culture to culture. They can vary according to the situation, who is involved, and in relation to the previous experiences that an individual brings into a sexual situation. An interesting question is what role pornography plays in the development and content of these scripts for young men and young women.

The scripts occur on different levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts (Gagnon, 1990; Gagnon & Laumann, 1995; Simon & Gagnon, 1999). The increased exposure to pornography in society is an example of a cultural scenario that necessitates an increased reflexivity and strategic positioning both on an interpersonal and an intrapsychic level. But, at the same time, it seems unclear to which norms and values a person is expected to conform. On the one hand, the overall societal attitude in Sweden to pornography is negative; it is regarded as something dirty and distasteful, especially if you are a female user (Hammarén & Johansson, 2007). On the other hand, pornography is part of daily life nowadays (Månsson & Söderlind, 2004; Sørensen, 2007). Thus, it is something that one has to take a position on, to have an opinion about, even among those who choose not to use, or who consciously try to avoid, pornography. However, an individual's actual decision to use or not use pornography is rarely independent of the influence of others. On the contrary, in addition to more or less explicitly articulated cultural scenarios regarding pornography use, attitudes to it include relational aspects on different levels (Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson, 2006; Rogala & Tydén, 2003). Each individual belongs to, or moves within and between, different social worlds that consist of family life, friends, work, school, and leisure (Gagnon & Simon, 2005).

## Method

We chose a qualitative and phenomenological approach to elucidate our research questions that deal with the task of exploring meanings and consequences of pornography among young people. Bancroft (1997) pointed out the importance of understanding the cultural meaning and significance that is connected to sexuality, which we believe to be of special value when it comes to pornography as a research area. The ambition of qualitative studies is to explain and illuminate the character of a phenomenon and its meaning (Starrin & Renck, 1996; Widerberg, 2002), which is relevant to explore young people's experiences and opinions of pornography. We used both focus groups and qualitative interviews to obtain in-depth information from participants. We wanted to gain access both to the more detailed individual experiences and to the same-sex groups' values and experiences related to pornography. By using both of these research methods we were able to compare, triangulate, and validate the data that we collected (Morgan, 1998; Wibeck, 2000). Nevertheless, the aim was not to make generalizations about youth in general, but to gain comprehensive knowledge about this sample of young men and women. An advantage of using both methods is that because of the focus group discussions, we were motivated to ask more detailed questions in the individual interviews; the interview data also generated questions we incorporated into the focus groups (cf. Wibeck, 2000).

### Focus Groups

A focus group is commonly defined as "a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher" (Morgan, 1996, p. 130). The rationale behind using focus groups in our case was to gain access to young people's discussion about pornography and to explore the norms and values in relation to pornography among the group members. According to Morgan (1998), focus groups are suitable when the aim is to gain insight into how people think and talk. In this study, we were particularly interested in possible differences and similarities between the young men's and women's conversations about pornography (Wibeck, 2000). For this reason, we aimed for gender homogeneous groups. Finally, focus groups are also an appropriate approach when there is a need for a friendly and respectful research method and when the topic is sensitive (Morgan, 1998).

### Individual Interviews

The aim of the individual interviews was to explore, understand, and identify different properties and

meanings of pornography for the young men and women (Starrin & Renck, 1996). In the interviews, we wanted to get more detailed and unique information about how each individual female and male participant talked about their experiences. Also, we wanted to listen to how the young men and women expressed and described their experiences and opinions without being interrupted or influenced by other people in the room (cf. Wibeck, 2000).

### Site and Research Participants

We decided to recruit both male and female participants, ranging from 14 to 20 years of age, to understand how gender and age matter in young people's talk about pornography. Because some of the participants were under 15 years of age, we also needed parental consent, according to the ethical guidelines and rules developed by the Swedish Research Council in cooperation with the Centre for Research Ethics and Bioethics at Uppsala University (Eriksson, 2000). The study was conducted in accordance with four ethical principles related to information, consent, confidentiality, and usefulness.

The participants were recruited from four different schools in Southern Sweden. We sent a letter with study information to the parents of the minors (<15 years old). All approved their children's participation. The remaining students were asked by their teachers and by invitations from the researchers during school visits to participate in the study. Two of the schools were situated in a mid-sized town, one in a suburb outside a major city, and one in a small village. The social composition of all four schools was characterized as lower middle class or middle class. Schools that were considered problematic, with high rates of truancy and other types of social limitations, were not included. This was in line with our ambition to capture the meaning of pornography among normative middle class young people. There was representation of students with an immigrant background, although the majority of the participants were ethnic Swedes.

There were 73 participants who volunteered and completed the study. We conducted seven focus groups, each comprising 6 to 10 participants (24 young women and 27 young men). There were four groups involving 14- to 16-year-olds, and three groups of 17- to 20-year-olds. With one exception, all of the groups were single-sex (one of the male 17-20 groups included one woman). In addition, we conducted 22 individual interviews with 10 young men and 12 young women, evenly distributed along the age continuum between 14 and 20 years.

### The Interview Process and the Analysis

An interview guide was employed as a checklist for the topics and issues to be covered. We used the same

guide in both the focus groups and in the individual interviews (see the Appendix). Themes were constructed according to the research questions: the participant's own experiences of using pornography, how and in which situations pornography was used, and the potential effects that pornography might have had on themselves and on others. We also included an introductory theme concerning conceptions and experiences of similarities and differences between sexuality, erotica, and pornography. This theme was primarily used as a gateway to the individual interviews and the focus group discussions and therefore these results are not presented in this article. All interviews and group sessions were conducted on the premises of the respective schools. Both the focus groups and the individual interviews took approximately one hour. The sessions were recorded on audiotape and thereafter transcribed verbatim. In anticipation of the processing and analysis of the interviews, a synopsis was developed for each informant and each group session. Thereafter, an initial structuring of the themes in the material was conducted, which was followed by more extensive and in-depth description and analysis made by both of the researchers. The patterns that gradually emerged in the various portions of the material were then positioned in relation to other elements and to the dataset as a whole. In the process of analysis we consistently worked in a reflective manner, where we thought it was an advantage to be researchers of both sexes. Several methods have been applied: categorizing the text along different themes, condensing the individuals' statements into meaning-concentrations, and interpreting the text against the background of previous research and theoretical concepts.

A fundamental ambition of the analysis was to identify patterns and common themes, while at the same time allocate space for ambiguity and complexity. However, there was one notable difference between analyzing the individual interviews compared with the focus groups. In the latter, the group as a unit was the focus of the analysis (Wibeck, 2000). Thus, the analysis primarily followed an inductive model, fluctuating between theoretical concepts and the emergent categorization of the data, and implied a move from the purely descriptive, to gradually analyze and develop categories at a higher level of abstraction. Validity in qualitative research is about credibility and describing the approach and the purpose of the study (Kvale, 1997). In this case, we have aimed for an open account of these, even though we are aware of the risk of obtaining results that agree with preconceived conceptions.

### The Researchers' Influence on the Results

As a researcher in the field of sexuality, it is important to review personal starting points and conceptions. Reflections concerning how sexuality is shaped

differently according to age, gender, and social class become important. The aim of the researchers, one male and one female, both of whom were middle-aged, was an open and non-judgmental attitude to attain a constructive and permissive atmosphere in the interviews and the group sessions. Nevertheless, we were aware that our age and gender status could potentially make the participants too embarrassed to discuss a topic seen as charged and sensitive. In addition, some of the participants may have felt more at ease with an interviewer of the same, or the opposite, sex. Thus, we listened with respect and carefully avoided any leading questions. We also maintained a more reserved stance in the focus groups than in the individual interviews to capture how the participants talked about the subject. In the focus groups and in the individual interviews, we used follow-up questions from our interview guide to clarify some of their comments, and to elicit more information.

### Presentation of the Results

The results are presented as themes, connected to the patterns that emerged during the process of analysis. Each theme starts with an overview of the results that were consistent across the focus groups and the individual interviews. Thereafter, the findings are presented separately for the focus groups and the individual interviews, even though they shared many characteristics. The focus group data contained, to a greater extent, opinions that mirrored or contradicted cultural norms negotiated among the participants. In the individual interviews, more detailed or unique personal experiences are described in the participants' own words, without influences from the group.

### Results

#### "Girls are Getting the Wrong Picture of Us Guys": Gendered Aspects of Pornography

All of the young participants reported that they had come into contact with pornography, voluntarily or involuntarily, primarily on the Internet. They had either gone looking for it themselves or had encountered pornographic textual messages or pictures without actively seeking these out. However, compared with young women, men were much more likely to actively seek out pornography, irrespective of age. The young women in our study who did consume pornography also stated that they did so infrequently.

**Focus groups.** The young men spoke openly in the groups about their experiences of pornography. Their statements were without shame, embarrassment, or hesitancy, and the atmosphere was playful and humorous.

The general opinion was that everyone, especially young men, was in contact with pornography from a very young age. However, they sometimes disagreed about the age young men usually first experienced pornography:

- R: How old were you when you first got in contact with porn?  
 M1<sup>1</sup>: I don't remember. Seven years or something [laughing]!  
 (Everyone starts laughing)  
 M2: No, but 13–14 maybe...  
 M3: I was 10–11.  
 M8: It depends if you had it [porn] at home or not.  
 M1: Or when you discovered your "dick"!  
 R: When did you do that then?  
 M4: He has not done it yet [laughing]! (Male focus group, aged 17–20 years)

The male participants agreed that young men today do consume pornography. However, opinions differed regarding the extent of pornography use. The atmosphere was more charged and uncertain in the younger male groups, including questions such as, "Do all young men really consume porn everyday? And for several hours?" This was a topic of some interest. Some of the male group participants were anxious to provide a balanced picture of their consumption:

- M4: Girls are getting the wrong picture of us guys. They think that we are looking at porn all the time.  
 M3: Well, some of us might look...  
 M4: Yes, some think it is *macho*... Those who don't commit themselves to school work... (Male focus group, aged 14–16 years)

The discussion in the female focus groups was more hesitant and negative toward pornography consumption. However, if a participant expressed a contrary opinion, the general view might shift and new, different statements surfaced in the groups. Some argued that women do not like pornography because "it is not allowed in society" for women to do so. Others claimed that it is because pornography is produced in a way that does not attract women (e.g., porn is made by men, for men). Many ambivalent feelings and opinions were expressed:

- F1: I think that a lot of girls do get turned on by porn...  
 F2: But I have never felt that! Actually, I have never seen a porn movie. I saw the movie *Language of Love*, but I didn't like it. (Female focus group, aged 14–16 years)

In addition, some of the female participants maintained that pornography consumption among young women depended on the context. For example, when

in the company of somebody they liked and felt secure with, most often a boyfriend or a girlfriend, some of them would consider viewing pornography. Among our participants, only a minority of those between 17 and 20 years of age said that they had watched pornography together with a partner. No participants in the 14- to 16-year-old groups reported this experience. Nevertheless, this was discussed in the female focus groups. Some pointed out that they thought that love and sexuality belong together and that this was a reason they did not like pornography. Pornography was perceived as sexuality without emotions and too "rough":

- F2: It [porn] should be nicer, kind of.  
 F1: With lit candles.  
 F3: Yes, less hard, quite simply!  
 F2: Yes, they almost hit the girls in the porn movies. (Female focus group, aged 17–20 years)

**Individual interviews.** There was considerable hesitancy and ambivalence in the individual reflections of the young women, as well as in the groups. Again, if the situation was right, which means if they were together with a partner or someone they like, some of the young women said they might consider viewing pornography. This pattern may also explain why some of the positive views expressed about pornography were more conditional. One young woman reflected:

- I don't know, but actually I think I would do it. I haven't done it, but maybe. (Female interview, aged 18 years)

On the other hand, feelings of doubts and insecurity were expressed among the young women. Looking at pornography together with a partner, when one was lacking in sexual experience, might lead to unfulfilled expectations. Some of the participants were also afraid that their potential partner would be disappointed:

- You might be a virgin, and then having sex together after watching porn. It might be better in the porn movie then... (Female interview, aged 15 years)

The young men who did consume pornography stated that they regarded these experiences as something completely different from sexuality experienced in more conventional situations and relationships. They discussed the subject more thoughtfully in the individual interviews than in the focus groups. In addition, several of the young men stated that they were tired of pornography and also of the portrayals of the stereotypical female body. This was confirmed by experiences reported by the young women:

- There are guys that are sick and tired of silicone breasts and do get tired of all this plastic (in porn movies). (Female interview, aged 18 years)

<sup>1</sup>M = male participant, F = female participant, and R = researcher. The numbers indicate different participants in the focus groups.

### “You Might Learn a New Way of Having Sex”: Reasons for Pornography Consumption

In our study, we identified three main functions of pornography in young people's lives. These were pornography as (a) a form of social intercourse, (b) a source of information, and (c) a stimulus for sexual arousal. Pornography as a form of social intercourse was primarily focused on the interaction between the viewers.

#### Pornography as a form of social intercourse.

*Focus groups.* Looking at pornography together with friends, either on the computer or in movies on television, was a common experience, according to the focus group discussions. Sometimes these situations occurred during meetings for computer games, a so-called local area network:

- M1: Half of the guys were playing games... half were looking at porn.  
M7: I have never seen as much porn as then! (Male focus group, aged 17–20 years)

These situations were, for the most part, not discussed as involving sexual arousal. Instead, the young men described these shared experiences as a way of testing one's own and others' reactions to the actors' and actresses' behaviors, appearances, and bodies. The jokes, laughs, and sighs became a normative guideline for the young and perhaps sexually inexperienced viewer. This phenomenon was recognized and discussed in the female focus groups as well:

- F1: They probably sit on the sofa, making fun of the women in the porn movie.  
F2: Yes, (say the other girl) even if the guy hits the woman they say: “well, she likes it!” (Female focus group, aged 17–20 years)

#### Pornography as a source of information.

*Focus groups.* The content of the pornography was usually described in both the male and female focus groups as rather violent and rough. Nevertheless, some of its substance also functioned as a source of information for the young people. The discussions illustrated that pornography as a source of information was critically reviewed by the young people. Sometimes it was perceived as a reliable source; more often, it was judged as exaggerated, distorted, or downright false:

Sure, you can get some tip-offs by pornography... But, they do it completely brutally! Ok, you can do it fast, kind of... But in the porn-movie they do it ten times faster! (Female focus group, aged 17–20 years)

*Individual interviews.* Information on sexuality is acquired in different ways, depending on access to sources

and consideration of what is reliable and useful, which, in turn, depends on one's previous experience. Some of the participants explained that behaviors could be depicted in pornographic movies that they did not know about beforehand—for example, different sexual positions and techniques about how to satisfy a partner sexually:

We didn't learn that much in school about sex education, so one has to look in porn magayyyyyzines. But the only good thing is that you might learn a new way of having sex, kind of... (Male interview, aged 18 years)

#### Pornography as a stimulus for sexual arousal.

*Focus groups.* The third function of pornography was as a stimulus for sexual arousal, either alone or in the company of someone else. This was primarily described as a private activity but, all the same, a subject that was permissible to talk about in the focus groups. Overall, the young men described becoming sexually aroused by pornography more often than the young women did, and they also said that they used it for this reason. Sexuality was often described by the men as a frustrating need that had to be satisfied. In addition, the general opinion was that young men are more interested in sex (and, therefore, in pornography) than women:

- M1: Well, you know... we as guys are horny all the time... [...]  
R: Is it really that way, or is it something that guys just are saying?  
M1: Not all the time...  
M6: No, but it is not an awkward thing to say if you're a guy... compared to if you were a girl  
M2: It is a funny thing to say! (Male focus group, aged 14–16 years)

*Individual interviews.* The male participants were more taciturn and reserved in the individual interviews. They still talked about pornography consumption without expressions of shame or guilt, however, and often described it as an easy way of getting sexually satisfied:

Sometimes I just want to get rid of the energy in my body... And then it [porn] is a fast way of doing that! Afterwards I can do other things... go to school, exercise and so on. (Male interview, aged 15 years)

As mentioned earlier, the women in our study were generally more ambivalent regarding pornography than the men. It is important to point out that some of the young men also told us that they were not sexually excited by pornographic pictures or films but, concurrently, said that this was expected of them as men. Thus, just as the women felt that they were

expected to react to pornography in a negative way, some of the men articulated the opposite:

It is humiliating... that is the way I see it. And when you see a porn movie with six guys and one woman... How fun can that be? (Male interview, aged 18 years)

### “I Save a Little Tuft to Show That I Am a Woman”: Ideal Bodies and Perfect Performances

Our participants described what we called a “pornographic script” for physical appearances and sexual performances. Participants of both sexes agreed that women and men in porn were portrayed unequally in sexualized images in the media, particularly in pornography.

**Focus groups.** The task of women in pornographic movies was described by both the female and male participants as “to satisfy the men’s sexual needs.” The image of the woman was that she is less valued than the man. This opinion was criticized by both the young women and the men, across the different age groups:

- M1: It is kind of weird...  
 M2: Girls are inferior.  
 M3: It doesn’t have to be like that, but it is often that way... Well, the guy says to the girl: “Do that and that!” Most of the times the girl does everything for the guy! (Male focus group, aged 17–20 years)

In particular, the young women reacted negatively to what they perceived as a lack of sexual pleasure portrayed by the women acting in pornographic films. They were also critical of the physical ideals displayed in pornography. Some of our participants, again mostly the young women, encouraged active involvement against pornography. They encouraged each other in the groups to stand up against men’s persistent demands about how to look and act sexually. However, the young men stated that they do not always perceive the female physical ideals portrayed in pornography as attractive, even if these are supposed to be sexually arousing for the average male:

- M1: I mean some of the women in porn videos are totally shabby... with wave permanents and bodies destroyed by too much plastic surgery! They are neither attractive nor good looking girls! (Male focus group, aged 14–16 years)

A topic of heated discussion in the male focus groups was that in pornographic movies, it seemed as if men were always sexually willing and able to perform sexually for hours. How was this possible? How can

one stay aroused and erect for so long? The explanations put forward varied:

- M1: Usually the male porn actors are gay.  
 R: So?  
 M1: That is why they can go on for hours. They don’t feel horny with women. (Male focus group, aged 17–20 years)

We were confronted with two parallel, intersecting discourses in the interviews: one that critically described the physical ideals in pornography and one that highlighted the impact that these ideals have on young people. One example cited by the participants was the importance of having not only shaved axillae and legs, but also shaved genitals.

**Individual interviews.** In the individual interviews, we obtained more detailed information on feelings and experiences of shaving one’s body, particularly before a potential sexual encounter. It is important to mention that it was not only young women who shaved their genitals. Young men also shaved their entire bodies, even though masculinity was ultimately measured by performance. However, it was the young women who expressed concerns regarding this topic:

- If I meet a guy for a one-night-stand... then I am afraid that he will say “no” because I have hair between my legs! But, I save a little tuft to show that I actually am a woman and not a ten year old girl! (Female interview, aged 18 years)

Overall, it was the young women that admitted being influenced by the physical ideals displayed in pornography. They expressed some insecurity about their own bodies and about whether they would be considered adequate in the eyes of their sexual partners. They worried that they would be compared against the physical standards of the women in pornography and that they would be found lacking. A young woman recalled a situation when she was watching a pornographic movie together with male friends:

- Q: How did you feel then?  
 F: Well, like very unattractive... you can say that you aren’t influenced by this, but no one can resist. You do want to have these ideal bodies.  
 Q: Why does one think like that?  
 F: Well, even though I don’t think it is good looking to have huge silicone breasts, but... everyone in the movies have those and they all have shaved bodies... so, well... they have what is regarded as gorgeous bodies. (Female interview, aged 15 years)

The young men stated that they were not affected by these physical ideals. The young women, however,

thought that the men were not willing to admit this and maintained that “nobody can resist the influence of these ideals.” Apart from being compared in appearance, the women were also concerned that young men would expect them to act in a similar way to the women in pornographic movies. Engaging in anal sex was cited as one example of this, clearly influenced by porn, the female participants argued. A young woman related an episode when her boyfriend wanted to try anal sex:

Well, I told him that neither I nor my girl friends want to do that [anal sex]. But because I knew that the boyfriend to one of my girlfriends also wanted to try it, I told my boyfriend to do it with him! (Female interview, aged 19 years)

However, most of the male participants in our study did not agree with the views of the female participants. They fervently denied, both in the focus groups and in the individual interviews, that they wanted to do everything that is shown in pornographic movies. Furthermore, they asserted that sex in real life is something completely different and they can keep the two things apart from each other. Once more, we see how pornography differs from the participants’ experiences of sexuality in more conventional relationships.

### “Self-Esteem is Important”: Navigation in the Pornographic Landscape

We use the metaphor of navigation to describe the participants’ accounts of having to sail upwind between contradictory norms and values regarding sexuality in the pornographic landscape. Even though most of the participants declared that pornography does affect everyone to some degree, especially when it comes to physical appearance and sexual performance, they argued that the majority managed to avoid becoming psychologically harmed. In other words, they navigated successfully and the older they became, the easier this was to do.

**Focus groups.** With increasing age, the curiosity about pornography diminished, and its role was downplayed in the young participants’ lives; they reported that life experiences, rather than specific sexual experiences, contributed to experiences with pornography becoming more nuanced and defused. Most of our participants, regardless of gender, said that young people’s interest in pornography decreased with age:

M2: I do pornography myself instead of looking at it nowadays (laughing)!

M4: Yes, that is pretty common when you get older.

Q: So you don’t look that much if you have a partner of your own?

M4: That is the way it is. (Male focus group, aged 17–20 years)

Our participants also pointed out the importance of including pornography in sex education in schools to reach those who do not have anyone else to discuss the subject with, as well as those who believe the subject is important and interesting to discuss.

**Individual interviews.** Our participants reported that their self-confidence and self-esteem increased as they grew older. In addition, they found it easier to assert their own sexual preferences and sexual desire:

It is important to be able to say that I don’t want to do that! And if you don’t respect my wishes, so . . . well, drop off! But, also it’s important to sometimes stretch your borders and try . . . because then you know more about what you like and dislike. (Female interview, aged 19 years)

Our participants also described anxiety that pornography consumption could lead to abuse for some people, even though none of them declared that they were at risk of this. They told us about a small group of young people, young men in particular, who were at risk. According to descriptions from our participants, these individuals suffered from social isolation and loneliness, which, in turn, may lead to vulnerable situations:

If you have poor self esteem . . . and don’t dare to date girls in real life. . . . Then, if you are drinking beer and looking at porn instead . . . and get the idea that you just can go out and fuck a girl. Then you will end up with a thick ear! (Male interview, aged 18 years)

The majority of our participants stated that they could handle the exposure to pornography satisfactorily because they have friends and close relationships with family members. In addition, they had positive life experiences that made it possible to develop good self-esteem:

It is important to have someone to talk with . . . and to have a family as a support and someone in the same situation. And of the same age. . . . And not being alone. Friends are very important! (Male interview, aged 20 years)

## Discussion

Overall, the young participants seemed to enjoy talking about this subject, both in the individual interviews and in the focus groups. Initially, we believed that the interviews would provide an opportunity to talk more openly and freely about the subject. However, the topic seemed easy for participants to discuss both in the focus groups and in the interviews. Indeed, we noted a tendency for participants to speak more unreservedly in the focus groups and also for individuals to sometimes change perspective on a subject in response to comments

from others in the group. This has also been reported by other researchers using focus groups (e.g., Wibeck, 2000). The openness in both the focus groups and in the individual interviews could also be a consequence of the research situation. The participants were expected to discuss pornography in front of the researchers. Furthermore, they seemed to appreciate the opportunity to talk about a subject that they valued as important and absorbing. Similar observations have been made in previous sexuality studies (e.g., Lewin, 1998; Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2005). The interview situation can become an occasion to systematize and organize experiences and to create a context and overview about one's own sexual conduct.

### Normalization and Ambivalence

The results from this study illustrate that the cultural script concerning pornography seems to have changed from having been regarded as shameful and morally reprehensible to something socially accepted. Primarily due to the Internet, pornography has become an integral part of the everyday life of young people, which is supported by other research (e.g., Häggström-Nördin et al., 2005; Hammarén & Johansson, 2002; Sørensen, 2007). Consistent with several studies (Häggström-Nördin et al., 2005; Hald, 2007; Svedin & Priebe, 2004), actively seeking out pornography was significantly more common among the young men than among the women, irrespective of age. One reason for this could be the cultural context (Gagnon & Simon, 2005), where it is more socially accepted in Western society for men to consume pornography than it is for women (Hammarén & Johansson, 2002). Historically, consuming pornography is a male act and seldom done by women; this may reflect Gagnon and Simon's "homosocial reinforcement of masculinity" (p. 201). Heterosexual masculinity is then a central part of the ethnography of pornography and also illustrates the connection to the social world of roles, values, and social structure in society.

On the whole, the young women in our study expressed a restrictive, hesitant, or critical stance in relation to pornography. However, they also expressed ambivalent feelings similar to the female participants in Berg's (2000) qualitative study, who described physiological reactions associated with sexual arousal concurrent with negative feelings toward pornography. This could be a consequence of the current cultural script, which makes it more difficult for women to acknowledge a positive attitude toward pornography (cf. Berg, 2002; Hammarén & Johansson, 2007). However, some of the young men in our sample were also ambivalent, which may, in part, be a response to the societal context, which has generally negative attitudes to pornography (cf. Hammarén & Johansson, 2007). On the other hand, the young participants' ambivalence could also be understood as a substantial critique of the content of

pornography that usually is produced by men, with men as potential consumers (Månsson & Soderlind, 2004).

Our study indicated that the so-called love ideology (Giddens, 1995), where love legitimates sexuality, still seems to have a rather firm grip on our participants, especially on the young women. Pornography was perceived by the female participants as sexuality without emotions, whereas the male participants seemed far more open to pure sex or to sex just for the sake of it. This pattern may also explain why some of the women's positive views on pornography were more conditional. If the situation was right, which meant if they were together with someone they liked, they might consider viewing pornography. In the spirit of Gagnon and Simon (2005), the sexual potential in pornography is defined as appropriate for women if consumed in a socially accepted environment or with a socially accepted co-consumer. Another way of understanding our participants' different reactions and descriptions of their experiences of pornography is to see how they defined situations as "sexual." According to Gagnon and Simon, the basic question in the integration of sexual elements in the social script is about "who does what to whom in what kind of relationship, and to what consequence" (p. 206). Among our participants, it seemed that their individual scripts differed in varying degrees, regardless of age and gender, depending on how much they related to the cultural level, where violent or unequal sex is not socially accepted in Swedish society.

### The Pornographic Script

This study highlighted the functions of the pornographic script as a frame of reference for young people in relation to physical ideals and sexual performances. The participants agreed that women and men in pornography are portrayed in an unequal manner. They were also critical of the physical ideals displayed in pornography, foremost for women who are supposed to be thin with large, surgically enhanced breasts. According to their reports, these ideals do influence young people. One example of the impact of physical ideals was the importance of shaving one's genitals. Even though men were seen as also measured by these ideals, they were primarily influenced by performance ideals of the actors' performances in pornographic movies. Consistent with previous studies (Häggström-Nördin et al., 2005; Hammarén, 2003; Rogala & Tydén, 2003), anal sex was cited as one example of this. Even though our participants agreed about pornography's influence on young people, other studies have suggested that young people usually think that this is something that concerns others and not themselves (Häggström-Nördin et al., 2005; Rogala & Tydén, 2003). More detailed knowledge about how and to what degree these ideals influence young people in the long term would be interesting research questions to pursue.

### Navigation in the Pornographic Landscape

Our findings indicate that young men and women nowadays have to cope with different parallel norms regarding sexuality. Forsberg (2005) discussed the task of acting in congruence with what is seen as appropriate behavior as influenced by different factors (e.g., gender, age, family culture, and religion). Several of our participants emphasized the connection between sexuality and love and argued that sexuality in real life was more exciting than pornography; some of the male participants also stated that they were tired of pornography. Possible consequences of early extensive consumption of pornography in relation to interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts are important to investigate. Further research including young adults who have grown up in the pornographic landscape might contribute to our understanding in this area.

Our findings suggest that most of our participants had acquired the necessary skills of how to navigate in the pornographic landscape in a sensible and reflective manner. The way they reasoned about the exposure and impact of pornography indicated that most of them had the ability to distinguish between pornographic fantasies and narratives, on the one hand, and real sexual interaction and relationships, on the other. To validate these results might require another research method, such as field observations or interviews with other people (e.g., parents and teachers).

The participants described a small group of individuals that they judged as being at risk for abuse of pornography, even though none considered themselves in this group. To admit problems in a focus group or in an individual interview might be difficult, and those who are at risk might not volunteer to participate in a study such as this. This “at-risk” group, however, warrants attention and further research. Notwithstanding this, daily consumption of pornography is not automatically problematic or risky. Research indicates that the potential problems of high-frequency porn consumption depend on the situation and the circumstances in which it is consumed (Svedin & Priebe, 2004).

### Limitations

This qualitative study has several limitations. First and foremost, it is not possible to generalize from the results since the sample was not random and, in addition, recruitment was restricted to schools in lower middle-class or middle-class areas. The young men and women volunteered for the study and we do not know the views of those who did not want to talk about the subject. However, through using a combination of focus groups and interviews, we obtained a rather varied and multifaceted sample that provided us with the opportunity to explore and analyze the different navigational strategies in relation to pornography used by the

participants. Nevertheless, it would be of interest to conduct further research with more diverse samples. Another limitation is that we did not collect demographic data from the participants. If we had done so, we might have highlighted other factors of importance such as social class or ethnocultural background. Also, an initial choice of a different theory might have highlighted other aspects of the interviews concerning sexuality, gender, and pornography. As Gagnon (1990) pointed out, “theory remains a map that is not to be believed, or held on too fiercely, or forced on anyone else. It is a way of constructing or inventing a world rather than discovering it” (p. 2).

Finally, it is not possible to know how the young people would have talked about pornography without the researchers present. We have tried to link the young participants’ voices about pornography to the social context in which they live and act. However, it is hard to say if the map of the pornographic landscape that we have constructed is the same as the one the young people used and responded to. Clearly, the picture of the young participants’ experiences of pornography is both complex and far from unambiguous and needs further research.

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## Appendix

### Interview Guide

*Theme: Similarities and differences between sexuality, erotica and pornography*

- Is it possible to distinguish between sexuality, erotica and pornography? If so, how would you define the differences?
- Have you ever come in contact with pornography and/or erotica? Where and how, in that case (e.g., on the Internet, on the television, in magazines, at movies)? If not, how come?
- Do you talk with friends, family or others about pornography, erotica and/or sexuality? Why or why not, and how do you talk, in that case? Is there a gender and/or age difference?
- Other comments

*Theme: Experiences of using pornography, how and in which situations*

- Do you think that it is common or unusual for young people to consume pornography? Is there a gender and/or age difference? Why and how, in that case?
- How would you describe young people’s feelings toward pornography in general and toward consuming pornography more specifically (e.g., excitement, curiosity, shame, embarrassment or acceptance)?
- What do your own experiences of pornography look like? How would you describe your own attitude towards pornography?

- Do you consume pornography? Why or why not? What function(s) does it fill (if answered yes)?
- In what situations do you consume pornography (e.g., not at all, alone, together with friends, together with a partner) (if answered yes)?
- Other comments

*Theme: The effects and influences of pornography*

- Are there differences in the ways that young men and young women are described and pictured in pornography, and how in that case (bodily ideals,

performances etc.)? Does this affect you and/or your friends, partners etc.? Why or why not?

- Do you think that pornography and/or erotica have influences on your own sexuality? How, for instance (e.g., positive, not at all, negative)? Why not, otherwise? Are there gender and/or age differences?
- Have you been together with a partner or friend(s) who is consuming pornography? Does it affect you, and how in that case? If not, how come?
- Is it necessary to have strategies to handle the effects of pornography? Can you describe these, in that case?
- Other comments