

IN THE NAME OF LUST: A STUDY ON HOW PORNOGRAPHY OBJECTIFIES WOMEN

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Abstract: Recent studies show that India ranks third in consumption of pornography. With easy internet access and android device, porn consumption is no more a forbidden fruit. The question of concern here is the adverse effects pornography can have on its consumers. Psychology says that it creates a desire to desire more and there is never a stage of satisfaction as more pornographic consumption creates a void in the mind of the consumers, to always seek something new and something more. Pornographic images and videos are filmed for the sake of satisfying lust and sexual fantasies, which are devoid of good and healthy sex. Women in these videos are mostly found to be submissive to men and as objects of lust satisfaction. This objectification of women can turn men to sexual predators leading to sexual violence against women even by their own life partner. This research paper aims to find out how women are objectified in porn videos using various measures of objectification. The videos are compared for male and female objectification with the objective of demonstrating what the porn viewers are actually consuming. Ten popular / most watched porn websites are taken for the study and the content is analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively to measure objectification of women. The parameters for coding are drawn from the existing review of literature on pornography. Videos were segregated to violent and non violent and coded using the parameters of objectification. Objectification is thus the key indicator of this research.

Key Words: Pornography, Objectification, Gender Stereotyping, Dehumanising women, Sexual Violence.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have revealed that India is the third most porn watching country in the world. This gives rise to a question of concern about the type of pornographic content people are consuming. Clive Hamilton (2004) mentions that seeing pornographic videos are totally devoid of intimacy or affection. Women are shown as mere sex objects who are present to satisfy the sexual urges of men (Hamilton, 2004). There are many harmful effects of pornography has on its consumers, like turning men into sexual predators and behave more violently to women and in some cases even turning them to murderers (Coffman, 2004). Hence it is an important study which can add to the existing discourse on the harmful effects of porn consumption. The study was designed to measure objectification of women in these videos.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

- To demonstrate the connotation behind porn viewing and what the viewers are actually consuming
- To understand objectification of women in Porn videos
- To understand how men are objectified in pornography
- To contribute to existing review of literature in objectification of women.

1.3 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research studies in pornography have coded porn materials into violent and non violent based on the content (Gossett & Byrne, 2002). The violent videos are also sometimes degrading. Both violence and degrading codes do not have a concrete literature on what is actually meant by violence and degrading and how it has to be coded for social science research. Few researchers felt that degradation is also part of violence (Dines et al, 1998) and violence itself is a kind of degradation (Cowan et.al). Hence existing conclusions on previous researches does not give any guidance to develop codes on porn videos. After extensive reading the term 'objectification' seemed more appropriate than the term degradation to bring forth how porn videos have treated women in a demeaning way. Studies also indicate that porn videos do not show violence directly but rather present the characters in unpleasant ways. There are also other research studies which indicate both the presence and absence of negative impacts of violence in pornography (Donnertstein et al., 1987, Padgett et al., 1989, Scott & Cuvelier). Pornography was coded for degrading women if it shows sex acts that are not normal, like casual sex for example (Zillmann, 1989) or shows status inequalities between partners in age, or dress or power etc (Donnerstein, 1984). In most of the experimental researches held, the term

'degrading' has been used to describe undesirable and violent actions. It is important to note that it is necessary to have a clear distinction between non-degrading and degrading pornography which can help in understanding the objectification of women in porn videos rather than to understand the effects of pornography.

Content analysis of pornographic text was done usually by coding normal and violent sexual acts to measure objectification. The static method of research usually lists the acts which are considered to be degrading and the presence or absence of such sexual acts is analysed (Dietz and Sears, 1988). In a relativist approach the presence or absence of these acts are given less importance and it looks for measures which present the characters differentially. It analyses whether the sex between the partners on screen is mutual or balanced or solitary (Palys, 1986). Cowan et al (1988) looked for codes like dominant, reciprocal and exploitative. They also argue that violence is also a part of objectifying women and objectifying is part of inequality. They also looked for status indicators in the videos and defined that objectification is treating one partner as an object or a plaything. So the term objectification acts like an umbrella which covers various other behaviours as subsets. It has to be agreed that physical violence can be seen as a dehumanising and degrading factor as it is denying their role as a human being itself. The research on pornography also helps in understanding much behaviour beyond violence and the data can help further in future research on porn.

Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975) is considered to be the key point in understanding how objectification is done in the visual medium. The theory of male gaze is used extensively in this research in identifying codes and analysing them. A similar idea was proposed by John Berger in 1972 in which he argued that 'Men act and Women appear' and in most of the audio visual medium, the men look at women and the women see themselves being looked at. It makes a woman conscious of her body parts. This consciousness not only shows the relationship between a man and a woman but also indicates how a woman sees herself first. The women see themselves from the point of view of men. This constant consciousness of seeing herself from a man's point of view makes her believe that she is an object to be looked at (Berger, 1972).

An extension of Berger's study was done by Laura Mulvey where she analysed the presence of male gaze present in the mainstream visual medium. She argued that woman is looked at as an 'image' and man is portrayed as 'bearer of the look'. She analysed that the subjects in the films had a central role to play in taking the narrative forward whereas the women in most of the films were portrayed as mere objects to be looked at. The male gaze present in movies was measured by Laura Mulvey based on various parameters such as camera angle, body parts shown, the central character in the frame, following actions, who is focused, the direction of gaze and point of view of the camera angles and many more.

Earlier research on pornography suggests that the videos have a severe impact in the mind of its users in believing that women start to enjoy the act of rape after some time. They believe that a woman enjoys being forced into non consensual sexual activity. They believe that women enjoy her own rape. She is depicted as someone who is enjoying her own assault (Fisher and Grenier, 1994). The BDSM genre of porn acts to support this assumption that women enjoy being tortured and being forced to submission and bondage, as not many have the clarity of the psychology behind such consensual acts. All these assumptions strongly support rape myth and are a question of concern (Burt, 1990).

1.4 METHODOLOGY

Ten popular and most watched porn websites are taken for the study and the content is analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively to measure objectification of women. Maximum viewership and duration of the video were also considered as parameters for selecting the videos. Videos which had minimum 30 minutes duration with maximum viewership were taken for analysis. The parameters for coding are drawn from the existing review of literature on pornography. Videos were segregated to violent and non violent and coded using the parameters of objectification. The videos are compared for male and female objectification with the objective of demonstrating what the porn viewers are actually consuming.

This research suggests that to measure objectification, the way a central character is shown in a video or objectified in a video has to be measured. Videos were coded for lack of reciprocity, which means ignoring the desire or wishes of the other person and treating them like a sex toy. This act objectifies a woman contrary to the attention she gets when she is treated as a sexual subject. Previous researchers have studied what pornography shows, but Cowan et al (1998) suggests that it is important to study how pornography is shown. Based on Cowan and Dunn's suggestions a number of detailed measures were taken for coding each scene in a video.

They were

- i. Instigating sex
- ii. Orgasms and gender
- iii. Dominant Characters
- iv. Naming
- v. Camera Angle and Perspective of Speech
- vi. Violence

Based on the above mentioned parameters the videos were coded and analysed for the presence of objectification of women in porn videos.

1.5 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

1.5.1 Instigating sex

The videos were looked analysed scene by scene and the gender of the initiator of the sexual activity was noted. This is considered to be important because a sexual object cannot be shown as initiating a move towards sex. The subject of sexual objectification can only be used as an object of sexual pleasure for others. Hence the person who first communicates the desire to have sex, wither verbally or non verbally was considered as the initiator of sex in this study.

1.5.2 Orgasms and Gender:

Videos were coded to find out which gender had maximum number of orgasms as orgasm was considered to be the basic unit of measuring pleasure in sexual activity. The codes were generated based on whose orgasm is being shown or given importance to in a scene. It has to be understood that when a person in the video is objectified, their sexual pleasure or desire is never addressed to. The person objectified will not be considered as important in the video. To help in understanding objectification in the videos, the theories of gaze from visual pleasure and narrative cinema by Laura Mulvey was also used. It gives a good understanding about how films show some characters as objects and few others as subjects based on camera angles and other important elements. This study thus offers a new approach to understand how objectification is done in the narratives of pornography. Textual analyses of the visuals in pornography are considered very important as they can be used to identify the style and content and compare it with other visual representations (Wicke, 2002). Hence using the theory of visual gaze which is an important element of film studies, the present research tries to measure how the characters shown in pornography are either subjectified or objectified. When looked at this perspective the visuals in pornography were also analysed for the camera angles and more precisely the point of view shots that are used in the videos. In any art form, like film or story, the narrative is always structured from a particular person's point of view. It is with that character's perception we see the story. Hence using the same point of view technique, the visuals were coded for identifying the central characters in the porn videos. That is from whose view point the video is given to the consumers as having maximum pleasure in the end.

1.5.3 Dominant Characters:

The dominant character in a video was also identified and coded using the same principles of film theory. That is from whose perspective the video is given. The characters were analysed as being either subjective or objective based on camera angles and the narrative structure. Here it does not mean that if the narrative is structured in such a way that the central character is found to be submissive. Dominant characters mean from whose point of view the narrative is structured irrespective of whether the person was dominant or submissive in the video. It talks about who's pleasure is actually highlighted.

1.5.4 Assigning Names to Characters:

Giving name to a person is an important way of identification of the person. Not naming a person is like treating them as an inanimate object. The idea of looking for names in coding was derived from the concept that names are important signs of human culture. To give a person a name is to treat him with an identity and not naming him can mean being an object. When looking for the characters in the porn videos, the names of the characters were also checked for the purpose of coding. It was examined whether the characters have names or just remained as nameless

sex objects in the scenes in which they appear. The concept of film theory was also applied in involving 'naming' as an important parameter in coding because films always encourage us to identify ourselves with the character that is named and not with any object in the movie.

1.5.6 Camera Angle and Perspective of Speech

Dyer (1982) an important writer on pornographic film studies has constructed a narrative of who gets to look at the camera in porn videos. He pointed out that the look in a porn film is not associated with power of the character. However returning a gaze by looking at the camera is considered to be a way of drawing attention from objectivity to subjectivity in film studies which indicates that the characters are given some power in the scene. This was the first important element that was looked in while coding in this research.

The second important aspect was looking for the presence of speech in the porn videos. Postcolonial theories strongly suggest that a character has to speak for himself or herself if they want to be represented. This concept was then developed in other research studies that were based on caste or race. It is argued that speech of a character reflects their personality. Gayatri Chakravorty (1998) argues that members of a non dominant group are not allowed to speak. From this perspective the videos were coded for the presence of speech and in who's perspective it is shown. Thus if porn videos focused only on the speech of the male characters which voice out their pleasure or opinion or likes and dislikes, then it can be concluded that men are assigned more power in these videos. While measuring this code, the tone of the voice and how they speak are not taken into consideration to avoid complexity. the time spent talking to other characters were also analysed.

1.5.7 Violence

As discussed in the review of literature, the researcher is left to decide at a suitable definition of violence since it differs from each person's perspective in pornography research. This study follows the model presented by Cowan et al, which measures violence as a part of objectification. The study has clearly excluded BDSM (Bondage, Dominance, Submission, Machoism) since it is done with consent. Videos which clearly showed the character suffering because of the action and clear indication of trying to avoid or escape from harm was coded as violence in this study. The concept of violence in pornography has been a subject of study for many years. There are numerous studies which analysed pornography, violence and effects on users. Experiments were conducted on sex offenders' through intensive interviews and experimental researches to find out whether the violence show in pornography was a major cause for them to commit a sexual crime against a woman. The results were then compared with non offenders of sex who acted as a control group. So far this methodology was considered to be the best in analysing the effects of porn videos for sexual crimes. The findings have shown that porn videos have escalated rape myths where men believe that women enjoy rape after some time.

1.6 FINDINGS

Out of the 968 scenes, 16% of the scenes did not contain sex in physical form. It involved only talking or general discussion about sex and personal preferences. Out of the 805 scenes that had sex, women were found to take the initiative in sex in (48%) 389 scenes and men were found to initiate sex in 117 scenes (15%) in the porn videos. In 63 scenes both men and women were seen to initiate sex and in the rest of the 236 scenes (29%) it was not known who initiated the sex, as the scene directly showed sexual activity. This clearly indicates that women are shown to initiate sex more when compared to men in pornography videos which is contrary to the culture that is believed in a traditional set up. The codes indicate that women initiate sex more than men in porn videos, which is of serious concern as it provides an unrealistic view of women's sexuality. This topic has been under debate and discussion by many feminist groups which argue both for and against the statement. It is argued that in pornography women are not indicated as sexual object but sexual subjects. But when the number of scene which show importance to female sexual pleasure is counted then it indicates that only less importance is given to a woman's sexual orientations. Again women are objectified even if they are shown subjectively. There is dominance and inequality present in pornographic films and it is clearly indicated in this study.

It was also found that only 3% of the total videos analysed showed women having orgasm. The rest of the videos focused on the pleasure of men while completely ignoring the woman or showing her as an object that can cause sexual excitement for a man. There were 532 scenes which involved multiple or more than one partners and in such cases too only the male characters were shown to have orgasm. The homosexual scenes were not coded for orgasm based on gender and the results indicate that the male characters were shown to have maximum number of orgasms

compared to female and thus we can arrive at a conclusion that the porn videos which are directed to both male and female consumers have strong male sexual orientations.

1.6.1 Central Characters and Naming

According to the codes generated for the study using visual pleasure and film studies, 48% of the videos had no central character. The videos were not told from anyone's point of view and had a third person narrative. It mostly had objective camera angle where the viewer was seen as an unseen observer. 32% of videos had male point of view in the narrative and 12% had female point of view in the narrative. 3% were structured around both the characters. When the videos were coded for naming in the porn videos, it appeared that most of the characters did not have names. But it was found that the titles that were given to the videos had dirty names or names that were demeaning women. The titles also mentioned relationship status that were usually used in the Indian context like 'Bhabhi' or 'Devar' meaning sister in law and brother in law. There were also names assigned to roles in society and personal family relations like 'Secretary', 'Boss', 'Mother in law', 'father in law', 'teacher', 'student', 'step mother', 'step father', 'brother', 'sister' 'Step brother', 'step mom' etc. The titles were sexually suggestive and had a different connotation or perspective to relationships that are considered to be important in a society. The analysis of the impact of the titles and the truth in the videos show itself can be a good study in the future.

1.6.2 Camera angle and perspective of speech

It was found that the women looked at camera more than the men. They also spoke more than men in the porn videos. The talks were usually about finding the sexual preference of their partner and they spoke slightly longer than the male characters in the videos. Though the women spoke more in the videos and frequently looked at the camera, the angles shown were subjective. A subjective camera angle gives the feeling to the viewers that they are caught suddenly while being an unseen observer. So long the characters in the scene had been unaware that they are being watched and suddenly looks into the camera giving the feeling that they know that they are being watched. In such instances, the actions performed by the female characters were mostly inviting for sexual pleasure. In some other cases, the male character in the video tries to avoid the female character from looking at the camera and directing her look back again on to what she was doing in a dominant way. The women in the videos were also shown to obediently do as directed by the male characters. So the point of view here doesn't necessarily mean that the sexual desires of women were given priority in porn videos. Rather they were used only as objects of pleasure.

1.6.3 Violence

The number of scenes which showed violence in pornographic videos selected for the study was found to be very less compared to other research studies of violence in pornography. The results show that only 6% of scenes showing violence against the female characters in the video. One of the reasons for this low percentage might be the way violence was coded. There are different ways through which violence was interpreted by different researchers and as discussed earlier coding on such parameters are left to the discretion of the individual researcher. The BDSM videos were not coded under violence as it clearly indicates that the violence is accepted by the receiver and is willing to go through it. The effects of this are not studied as it is not the objective of the research. So anything that was violent which can cause physical harm to the person in the video and clear indication of him or her denying or trying to escape from the violence. Even the rough play scenes were not clear about consensual sex or violence and it was difficult in coding that as violence. This may be another reason for low number of violence scenes indicated in this study. Though the number of violent scenes in pornography in this study is less, the degree of violence shown was severe in all the videos in which violence was shown. Apart from physical violence, there were also verbal abuses of the female characters in the videos by the male characters. As mentioned above, the titles of the videos also had very demeaning and offensive words like 'slut', 'bitch' etc. There were many forms of non consensual sexual activities

1.7 CONCLUSION

By choosing to study about how pornography objectifies women, this research has presented a new approach to the way pornography can be studied in social science research. The measure of undesirable representation of women which includes violence can help in further understanding of rape myths and sexual assault on women and also help in further study of pornography. It can help in understanding the accepted social definition of sexual discourse. Future research might study on how pornography is consumed across cultures based on the approaches used in this research. It can be used to compare how objectification in pornography is different from mainstream visual media like films, advertisements and fashion etc. It can be also used to study how pornography varies at objectification in different levels depending on the genre. It was understood from the research that the violence in porn videos are majorly targeted towards women and the effects of these in marital rape and sexual violence against women can also

be a studied using the codes in this research. The objectification of women in different nations can also be studied with reference to the present study.

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