

From the effects to the verification of the uses of pornography by the audience

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Abstract

Pornography sites receive up to 75 million daily visits and digital technologies have made explicit sexual content more visible and accessible than ever before. Its intense consumption revived the interest of researchers in understanding what would justify the audience's demand for pornography, as well as its possible effects, because, conceiving such relationships have direct consequences in the regulation and standardization of their production and circulation. In this sense, we seek to understand the motivations, the uses of the pornography by the audience, through a literature review that privileged the approach of the theoretical tradition of *Uses and Gratifications*. It also sought to expose our main findings: (i) manipulation of physiological reactions; (ii) social interaction; and (iii) self-awareness. In the end, we theoretically established the relationships between the uses and the possible effects of pornography on its users.

Keywords: Pornography audience. Uses and Gratifications. Behavioral effects. Literature review.

Introduction

Without a doubt, the pornographic content industry has expanded and consolidated on digital platforms. According to Paranashop (NÚMEROS...,2022), this industry has more

revenue than Major League Baseball (MLB), the National Football League (NFL), and the National Basketball Association (NBA) combined. In addition, MindGeek, the company that controls Pornhub, Brazzers, YouPorn, and RealityKings, is in the “Top 3” of companies with the highest bandwidth consumption in the world, along with Google and Netflix. Xvideos, meanwhile, is bigger than CNN, Dropbox and the New York Times combined, while Pornhub has more monthly access than Netflix, Amazon and Twitter combined.

In the study produced by Qantas Pesquisas e Estudos de Mercado in 2016 and 2017, at the request of the cable channel Sexy Hot to draw a profile of those who consume pornography in the country, it was found that 22 million people consume pornography in Brazil (MURARO, 2020). Indeed, technologies have facilitated access to sexual content, with its privileged distribution through the internet and its wide consumption, pornographic content stands out and encourages us to uncover the reasons that drive the search behavior of this particular content.

At the outset, it is important to note the consensus on the characterization of the pornographic genre. It is generally taken as any material produced for the purpose of sexually stimulating the public (ASHTON; McDONALD; KIRKMAN, 2017), or provoking the sexual liberation of the consumer (LEVINSON, 2005). This notion of the effects produced on its users, resulting from the clear voluntary intention of its audience’s consumption, expands with the development of new research dedicated to the theme within the fields of Psychology, Psychosociology, Anthropology, Healthcare, and Social Communication, and eventually echoes in regulatory frameworks that regulate its production and circulation.

The topic has repercussions in many areas, but especially in public health. The maturation of its research in terms of numbers, sampling, metrics, and sophistication of analysis, begins to document the effect of pornography on individual development and its well and ill-being (CARROLL *et al.*, 2016). Studies have found that higher rates of pornography use are associated with depression levels among men (BRIDGES; MOROKOFF, 2011). There has also been some association of the content with the development of violent behavior, child abuse, compulsion, and objectification of women (ATTWOOD, 2005). Relational aggression, less positive communication, less interest in the partner, and less emotional stability are also evidenced (CARROLL *et al.*, 2016; SCHNEIDER, 2002; ZILLMANN; BRYANT, 1988).

In addition to a general dissatisfaction within the relationship (MADDOX; RHOADES; MARKMAN, 2009; YUCEL; GASSANOV, 2010), it is possible to have associations between pornography and extramarital sex, as well as higher rates of involvement in paid sex (STACK; WASSERMAN; KERN, 2004). To Sinkovic; Stulhofer; Bozic (2012), there is a greater engagement in risky sexual behaviors.

There are those who argue that pornography can increase the pressure women feel to participate and perform different represented sexual acts, as well as the development of lower body esteem (ALBRIGHT, 2008; CAVAGLION; RASHTY, 2010; BENJAMIN; TLUSTEN, 2010; MATTEBO *et al.*, 2012; ROTHMAN *et al.*, 2015; SHAW, 1999; PENNY; PARRY, 2016). This is because the sexualized images of female bodies are particularly selected, projecting

a sexually desirable beauty standardized by the media. Such expression supports a highly restrictive standard, negatively impacting women who feel comparatively unattractive and insecure about their own bodies.

More studies prove the association between pornography and a significant increase in erectile dysfunction and sexual performance in men under 40 (DISFUNÇÃO ERÉTIL..., 2019, online). This pathology would be established by the difficulty of developing romantic relationships, since the main source of “sex education” would come from a distorted scenario that does not represent reality. Individuals who use pornographic content to masturbate would be used to being in complete control of their own sexual experience, and thus would not be accustomed to the important conditions in the two-way sexual relationship, with the needs of a real partner and their role within the sexual relationship. “If young people believe that online pornography offers a realistic view of sexual relationships, it can lead to inappropriate expectations about women and real relationships” (DISFUNÇÃO ERÉTIL..., 2019, online).

As for the use of pornography within a relational context, we observed negative feelings among romantic partners such as jealousy, discomfort, feelings of betrayal and disloyalty (GROV *et al.*, 2011), and other negative associations concerning sexual satisfaction within a romantic relationship (MADDOX; RHOADES; MARKMAN, 2009; YUCEL; GASSANOV, 2010). However, these studies are partially contradicted by other researches that have found that the effects of pornography may be connected to an increase in sexual knowledge and to the opening of individuals to a fuller sex life (LOFGREN-MARTENSON; MÅNSSON, 2010; WEINBERG *et al.*, 2010; PALAC, 1998). In this sense, we have observed women gaining greater acceptance of their sexuality, their bodies, and their sexual desires by watching pornography (CHOWKHANI, 2016), as well as seeing men more aware of their interests and engaged in learning about the needs of the female sexual pleasure (LOFTUS, 2002).

The positive impact of pornography on couples’ dynamics is also established, such as increased sexual quality and frequency, provided by the more diverse erotic atmosphere of pornographic content (DANEBACK; TRAEN; MANSSON, 2009; HALD; MALUMUTH, 2008; GROV *et al.*, 2011). When watched together with partners, pornography is associated with lower rates of boredom in the couple’s sex life. Partners who view pornography together report that it is easier to discuss their sexuality, desires, and fantasies with each other (DANEBACK; TRAEN; MANSSON, 2009; BEJAMININ; TLUSTEN, 2010; WANG; DAVIDSON, 2006), having their sexual relationships improved because they discover what pleases themselves and each other the most (BENJAMIN; TLUSTEN, 2010; PARVEZ, 2006).

Therefore, as described, the initially determining *effect* of the pornographic genre is more diverse than initially hypothesized. The sexual arousal effect does not seem to be the only possibility delivered to its consumer, although it may be the only purpose in the mind of those who produce pornographic material. In this sense, we are interested in understanding the audience’s perspective, in their ability to seek or allow effects of the content brought into question here.

The audience's responsiveness is also a key concept, since the relationship between the audience and media content is a multi-semantic process, "whose syntax is extremely unpredictable and imprecise" (CASTELLS, 2006, p. 422). What we mean is that by emphasizing the complex possibility of audience intervention in pornography through their particular needs, motivations, predispositions for selection, interpretation, acceptance or rejection of content suggestions, reflection, and use – the effect of pornography will always be diverse, as research on the subject has shown us.

From this perspective, an interesting approach to thinking about the relationship established between the audience and pornography is the Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G). In this communication tradition, it is taken into account that the audience's background characteristics such as age, level of education, interest in socialization, and religion – among many others of social, circumstantial, and psychological origin – are fundamental factors for the viewing behavior and use of media contents. Such prerogatives are also precedent for any effect sought by the audience or suggested through the media.

Thus, according to U&G, the interaction between social/cultural structure and personal characteristics gives rise to needs, values, and dispositions that propel *motives* for pornography use. It also takes into account aspects such as perceptual evaluations of the content consumed, and media offer, among others, as intervening factors in the receiver's exposure process. In its presented scheme, there are no central performance elements. The elements closest to a prominent role in media exposure are the *gratifications sought* or *motives* as well as the *uses*, which would synthesize the antecedent variables incident to the audience phenomenon, and highlight the motivational nature of the Uses and Gratifications theory (FERREIRA, 2016).

It is noteworthy that gratifications are important variables for the broad spectrum of media effects, including the acquisition of knowledge; influence on attitudes and opinions; perceptions of social reality; established agendas; as well as other important relationships. To illustrate, we can cite Blumer and Katz (1974), who summarized three primary uses of media and proposed three hypotheses about the effects based on the identified gratifications: (i) the motivations to seek knowledge and understanding will facilitate obtaining information; (ii) the motives of fun or escapism will facilitate a more reliable perception of the exposed social portraits; and (iii) the motivation of personal identity (receivers who seek to emulate, equal, or differentiate themselves from the characters shown in the media) will promote the facilitation of effects that reinforce behavior.

Thus, given the establishment of the relevance of *uses and gratifications* to the *effects* promoted by the consumption of pornography, we set out to explore the subject initially¹ through a review of narrative literature, with the body of studies that have looked at the motives, uses and gratifications of pornography consumption. Compared to the systematic review, the narrative review does not require a rigid protocol for its preparation, nor does it apply sophisticated and

1 We are in progress with an empirical, inductive-qualitative study on the Uses and Gratifications of pornography consumption.

exhaustive search strategies. However, it is recommended for surveying the available scientific production and for reconstructing networks of thoughts and concepts that articulate knowledge from various sources, in order to investigate the phenomena the researchers aim to unveil (MENDES; SILVEIRA; GALVÃO, 2008).

To understand what the published studies point to, we searched for academic productions identified by an online search on the platforms *B-On*, *Portal de Periódicos Capes*, and *Google Scholar*. These platforms were chosen because they are the most comprehensive bases, providing access to diverse national and international content, in the format of academic and scientific papers, covering a wide intersection of the various areas of knowledge.

The search terms were operated in English – “uses”, “uses and gratifications”, crossed with “pornography” and “porn” – due to their absence in Portuguese and Spanish, with the intention of gathering scientific materials on the selected theme. The temporal delimitation applied for the constitution of the study corpus was from 1990 to 2020, a criterion established due to the period of popularization of the Internet in the domestic environment, and without geographical delimitations.

The search provided us with thirteen retrieved articles, but since not all of them corresponded in essence to our established selection criteria, we resorted to a filtering of proximity to our stated research object. Thus, we obtained six publications that were centrally focused on the subject, and that contributed in some way to the construction of the framework of the main motivational categories presented as a result of our efforts to understand the selection and consumption of pornography.

Uses and Gratifications

The theoretical framework of U&G focuses on the interest of the individual’s decision to select and consume media content such as pornography. Discovering the reasons and what the audience does with media messages is its center of interest.

This tradition points to an audience that consumes media content through its choices with the purpose of satisfying personal goals, such as having fun, understanding, or solving a problem. It is in the 1940s that this approach begins the descriptions of the reasons why the audience selected and consumed various media such as radio, newspaper, cinema, magazines, comics, etc. (BLUMER; KATZ, 1974; RUBIN, 1998; McQUAIL, 2003).

In the 1950s and early 1970s, research shifted to operationalizing multiple variables that resulted in an explanation of different patterns of media exposure. The relations between audience contexts, audience motives, and satisfactions gratified by the media, have provided a *more explanatory* strategy for a wide variety of communicative processes mediated by the various technological apparatuses of communication (WIMMER; DOMINICK, 1996).

Although focused on the media exposition, its diversification of methods and concerns expands in subsequent decades, as we can see in the studies devoted to (i) the social and

psychological origins of media gratifications; (ii) the value of expectation; (iii) audience activity; (iv) gratifications and media consumption; (v) gratifications sought and obtained; and (vi) gratifications and media effects (PALMGREEN; WENNER; ROSENGREN, 1985).

Alongside its diversification, its basic assumption is that through the audience's experiences and reflections on media content, they are able to determine which materials are satisfying or useful to them, and choose which materials to consume. Thus, the (i) social and psychological origins of (ii) needs, that generate (iii) expectations of satisfaction from (iv) the media or other sources, lead the audience to (v) different patterns of exposure, resulting in (vi) gratifications of needs and (vii) other consequences (BLUMER; KATZ, 1974). In other words, we can imagine that the pornography user seeks in the contents information or advice about the act and sexual relations. The gratification sought in *knowledge* is only satisfied when the subject in question conquers the information in the selected contents, establishing a certain pattern of exposure and consumption.

For the review proposed here, we are interested in knowing the state of the art of Uses and Gratifications already identified for the consumption of pornographic content, because, what the investigations have evidenced is the existence of *multivariable motivational schemes* that can partially contribute to the understanding of the consumption of pornography.

Presentation of results

The six articles analyzed in this review were considered in order to not only account for the empirical results presented, but also for the references from the literature that supported the research. Of the six articles, only one made objective references to the U&G theory (PAUL; SHIM, 2008), which shows us that, in fact, little research addresses the fundamental question of why people expose themselves to pornographic material. The examination of pornography from the perspective of its user is clearly little explored, especially when we take into account its gratifications. Even given this particularity, all the selected materials presented fundamental concepts for the selection and use of pornography, even if they did not exactly depart from the U&G approach.

As for the method of the publications analyzed, half had qualitative empirical emphasis, as seen in McKeown, Parry and Penny (2017), which assesses the impact of smartphone use on women's pornography consumption, Attwood (2005) who conducts a literature review of qualitative empirical studies on the topic, as well as Ashton, McDonald and Kirkman (2017), who work on pornography also through a literature review. These last two materials were salutary in bringing us into contact with a much wider range of empirical studies initially investigated.

Carroll *et al.* (2016) use quantitative research techniques such as factor analyses to assess the impact of couples' stages of commitment and rates of pornography use, a method also adopted by Busby, Poulsen and Galovan (2013), who study how pornography use relates to couples' sexual quality, and Paul and Shim (2008), who focus their studies on the motivations for use.

We observed each article from the perspective of *motivations for use* with the aid of the constant comparison technique, used widely in the content analysis method, so that we could identify, firstly, the consistency of the presence of motivational concepts, through the frequency of their appearance; and, secondly, the conceptual character of the terms that were to be reorganized since numerous terms used represented the same or similar concepts, as well as distinct terms that were found illustrating unique or very similar concepts. Although most studies have dealt with the consumption of pornographic material according to different antecedents such as gender, age, religiosity, etc., these data have been suppressed from our analysis efforts for being outside our investigative scope.

Our analytical work privileged the synthesis of the results of the observed studies (Chart 1), with their validation in the discussion areas, which further enhanced the description of our analysis categories.

Chart 1 - Selected and analyzed articles

Title	Authors/Year	Methodology	Motivation
Women’s experiences of pornography: A systematic review of research using qualitative methods	Sarah Ashton, Karalyn McDonald e Maggie Kirkman (2017)	Systematic review of qualitative studies	Information; meeting the sexual needs of their partners; self-awareness; arousal.
“My iPhone changed my life”: How digital technologies can enable women’s consumption of online sexually explicit materials	Janet K. L. McKeown, Diana C. Parry e Tracy Penny Light (2017)	Qualitative study using in-depth interviews	Relief from stress and anxiety; mood improvement; relaxation; escape; understanding one’s body and sexual interests; information about sexual acts and new sexual positions; normalization of sex in relationships; masturbation.
The porn gap: Differences in men’s and women’s pornography patterns in couple relationships	Jason S. Carroll, Dean M. Busby, Brian J. Willoughby e Cameron C. Brown (2016)	Factor Analysis	Spice up the relationship; arousal.

Title	Authors/Year	Methodology	Motivation
Pornography use: Who uses it and how it is associated with couple outcomes	Franklin O. Poulsen, Dean M. Busby e Adam M. Galovan (2013)	Factor Analysis	Masturbation; search for information about new sexual positions and acts to please the partner; normalization of sex in relationships; self-awareness.
Gender, sexual affect, and motivations for Internet pornography use	Bryant Paul e Jae Woong Shim (2008)	Factor Analysis	Entertainment; masturbation; knowledge; social interaction; frustration, tension, and stress relief; curiosity; habit/hobby; fantasy; making sex interesting; mood management.
What do people do with porn? Qualitative research into the consumption, use, and experience of pornography and other sexually explicit media	Feona Attwood (2005)	Literature review	Information, learning; fantasy; social comparison; excitement; meeting the sexual needs of partners.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

The initial analysis of the reasons described for the consumption of pornography brought us 34 distinct terms of motivations or categories of use. After further refined analyses of the concepts of the terms, we produced a reorientation of the labels with groupings of similar concepts, as well as the distinction of distant terms conceptually, and thus identified the 18 described reasons for pornography consumption.

We also dedicated ourselves, based on the concepts described, to make a new systematization of the categories for the purpose of “generalization of the concepts found” (Chart 2), thus reducing the categories to three motivational groups for the consumption of pornography: (i) Manipulation of physiological reactions, (ii) Social interaction, and (iii) Self-awareness.

The choice of the final nomenclature of the categories is based both on the results of the analyzed studies and on supplementary studies on the motivational categories of U&G so that these would illustrate their central concepts as accurately as possible.

Chart 2 – Main motivational categories for pornography consumption

Conceptual categories	Related Terms
Manipulation of physiological reactions (ritual audience)	Sexual tension relief, masturbation, arousal, escape from boredom, relaxation, stress relief, anxiety relief, hobby, mood enhancement, entertainment, fantasy, escape.
Social interaction (instrumental audience)	Meeting your partner’s sexual needs, normalizing sex in relationships, having fun with your partner, spicing up your relationship, and social interaction.
Self-awareness (instrumental audience)	Personal identity, knowledge, understanding about your body and sexual interests, learning, education, information about new sexual acts and positions, social comparison, curiosity, information.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Manipulation of physiological reactions

Zillmann (1985, p. 228), in his study of the “experimental exploration of gratifications from media entertainment”, says that media materials enable arousal, manifesting in the “sympathetic nervous system”, producing “affective reactions”. Arousal is a unitary force that energizes or intensifies cortical and autonomic manifestations, (prominently stimulating affective reactions, that is, emotional ones) by initiating, neutralizing, or altering the initial mood (or affective disposition) states of the receiver (ZILLMANN, 1991). In particular, for pornographic content, we should consider arousal not only as cortical and autonomic stimulation but also sexual, when the individual is ready for the sexual act.

In this way, recipients select pornographic content basing their choice on their evaluations of the stimuli that would bring them into (i) internal balance, or even into (ii) preparation for sexual practice. This is because the content connects with the possibility of making recipients emotionally escape from their respective states of undesirable arousal or put them in the state of sexual arousal.

For the first (i) variant of the reported motivation, we can illustrate bored and depressed recipients who use pornography to stimulate their initial mood to a more intense state (prominently of autonomic activities). The escape from their initial mood state is reported as a need for entertainment, distraction, and mood enhancement, and has as its purpose, an internal rebalancing, mainly, as a result of “experiencing emotional reactions” to pass the boring time, (PAUL; SHIM, 2008), and to get entertainment for upset or depressed people (McKEOWN; PARRY; PENNY, 2017).

Conversely, the reciprocal is also true, pornography can provide the stressed ones with neutralizing stimuli for their stress states and reduction of their level of disturbance. According to Zillmann (1991), a person returning home after a tense day at work ends up maintaining a high level of inappropriate arousal. The driving condition of such a state is psychological and can be identified as a continuous cognitive preoccupation about the events responsible for the stress experience. The interruption of such a process can be driven by any form of recreational stimulation (other than necessarily consuming pornography), causing a beneficial effect of reducing and relieving the recipient's stress levels.

We have observed many testimonials that consolidate how pornography improves the porn user's mood, whether it is to relieve stress and anxiety, relax, or escape from daily problems. For example, "I personally need to use it several times a week, otherwise, I turn into a fussy bitch (sic)". Regarding stress relief, we can cite "it's good for releasing tension" or "I use porn as anxiety relief". Also to ratify the relaxation goal: "Today I'm not working, and I just want to relax, so this is what I do" or even "it kind of takes my mind off reality" (McKEOWN; PARRY; PENNY, 2017, p. 346 -347; PAUL; SHIM, 2008, p. 192).

One of the reasons for the affective reactions to occur, providing an internal emotional rebalancing, is found in pornography's ability to provide stimuli that involve and absorb its recipient, removing the user, even momentarily, from the source of the situations or worries that were keeping his level of boredom or stress high.

The second variant of justification that contributes to the elaboration of this motivational category for pornography use is (ii) "sexual arousal" or the search for a "state of preparation for the practice of the sexual act", also a form of physiological manipulation. Many accounts support the category as seen in Paul and Shim (2008, p. 193), who have found pornography "to be an exciting visual aid to masturbating." As the authors state, "this factor reflects that people use pornography to have fun, balance mood, and assist in masturbation." This association is also supported by Döring's (2009, p. 1091) research, which states that "used competently, the Internet offers users the opportunity to satisfy their sexual needs." Similarly, Albright, (2008), McCutcheon and Bishop (2014), McKeown, Parry and Penny (2017), Parvez (2006) and Smith (2013), among others, ratify the use of pornography for the purpose of sexual arousal.

One of the strategies for manipulating the user's sexual arousal is the use of the pornographic storyline as a fantasy scenario in which "I imagine the porn model wants me" (ATTWOOD, 2005, p. 70). "Fantasizing that you are the person having sex with actors or actresses in pornography" and "fantasizing that you are one of the individuals in pornography" are commonly used methods for manipulating sexual excitement (PAUL; SHIM, 2018, p. 194; ATTWOOD, 2005, p. 70).

In a study published by the Kinsey Institute and the Public Broadcasting Service, the main reasons for using pornography were: "to masturbate/for physical release", "to sexually arouse oneself and/or other people", "because one can fantasize about things they wouldn't necessarily want in real life", and "to distract oneself" (PAUL; SHIM, 2008). This result

implies that pornography use is related to the purposes of manipulating physiological reactions, a designation that characterizes this motivational category.

Social interaction

Using pornography to socialize with one's sexual partner, to create a connection with one's partner, to discuss their and their partner's sexual desires and interests, to introduce new ideas for sexual intercourse, in short, integration based on key sexual interests for the couple is what consolidates this motivational category. Here, the couple or group has to consume the pornographic material together.

This motivation is observed by couples who consume the content thinking about satisfying their partners or improving their relationship. Couples who explicitly used pornography together seeking to improve their sexual relationship tended to report finding it a tool to facilitate communication about their sexual tastes and preferences (DANEBAK; TRAEN; MANSSON, 2009). Thus, one of the goals of engaging in joint consumption is also to build and preserve the relationship, since this practice would consolidate the knowledge of the pair's preferences.

Such practice also aims to provide a more interesting erotic climate, which would facilitate the sexual expression of those involved. In order to connect with a sexual partner, women in one study talked about using online pornography to start conversations about sexual desires and interests and introduce new ideas into their sexual relationships (McKEOWN; PARRY; PENNY, 2017, p. 347-348): "when I'm in a relationship, we start talking about, well, you show me your favorite clip and I'll show you mine"; "I think it's just kind of an open conversation, you feel more comfortable with the person you're with"; another quote states that "it's just a lot easier to look at someone outside your relationship and say 'see that person's doing something I don't think is attractive,' instead of saying 'you're doing something'"; "It's a tool".

This perspective consolidates the belief that the roles of husband/wife or boyfriend/girlfriend require them to deepen the relationship by sexually pleasing their partner, including accepting pornography and watching pornography with him/her (BENJAMIN; TLUSTEN, 2010; PARVEZ, 2006). In this way, mutual consumption of pornography facilitates dialogue and introduces new sexual practices into a relationship. "Pornography can play a valuable role as an opportunity for intimacy, sexual exploration, mutual pleasure, and shared sexual communication" (ASHTON; MCDONALD; KIRKMAN, 2017, p. 345).

Self-awareness

The motivation to search for self-awareness is explained by the need to learn about one's own sexuality, in general, referred to the sexuality of others: "Once I discovered how to use

pornography and certain experiences to transform desire into a self-generated orgasm”. “For the first time in my life, I felt sexually autonomous” (PALAC, 1998, p. 34-35). For its users, pornography is a valuable means to be educated about sex (BOIES, 2002; CHOI; NICOLSON, 1994). Chowkhani (2016), in her study on how women consume pornography in urban India, found that women seek understanding about their sexuality, their bodies, and their sexual desires.

Teenagers have described pornography as a useful form of *education*. They reported seeking pornography as a way to understand more about their bodies and sexual acts in a non-judgmental context (HARE *et al.*, 2014; RAMLAGUN, 2012; ROTHMAN *et al.*, 2015; SMITH, 2013; WANG; DAVIDSON, 2006).

There are not a few studies that ratify this perspective: “it gives me ideas, like a position that I would like to try”; “Everything I learned that was new certainly came from there. I think in previous generations people learned most of it from their friends gossiping or talking, but everything I learned came from there”; “Definitely my consumption helped me understand what I want and deserve” (McKEOWN; PARRY; PENNY, 2017, p. 347).

Pornography is taken as a possibility for understanding sexual activity and relationships, physical and affective conceptions, the experience of arousal, and potential attitudes to be adopted, refuted, and adapted toward sex and sexual partners. One of the main strategies for adopting an attitude toward one’s own sexuality is social comparison. Studies show accounts of women making various judgments, comparing their own bodies to the bodies of porn performers. “Comparisons were made on weight, body shape, facial features, and pubic hair, resulting in idealization and subsequent feelings of adequacy and inadequacy, normalization, or criticism of these bodies and figures.” (ASHTON; MCDONALD; KIRKMAN, 2017, p. 9).

Participants in numerous studies have reported, for example, “I wish I had a body like that” (ECK, 2003, p. 697) and “I don’t have a perfect body like those porn stars” (CAVAGLION; RASHTY, 2010, p. 280). The comparison for understanding one’s own sexuality has numerous biases, not only about what is beautiful or ugly, right or wrong but above all, possible and socially acceptable: “I didn’t have access to BBW [big beautiful women] which you know, really shows that a lot of different bodies can be pleasing and enjoyable. They’re sexy and fuckable, so I kind of use that to boost my self-esteem” (McKEOWN; PARRY; PENNY, 2017, p. 349).

The idea is that physical beauty, sexual interests, and attitudes are socially validated in a kind of social standardization of sexuality: “If it’s out there, it means someone likes it”. “Seeing that other people share my interests is cool”; “It’s some things that I like to find that other women like too, it makes my idea something normal”; “It definitely gave me a much more liberal and open mindset. Porn showed me alternative lifestyles that I couldn’t have been exposed to because of the family I grew up in and the area I come from. It made me much more receptive and interested in exploring things that I don’t understand, I guess”. (McKEOWN, PARRY; PENNY, 2017, p. 349).

We saw in our review, the use of pornography to seek permission or endorsement for women to be more sexually active (ATTWOOD, 2005). In this sense, Ciclitira (2002) shows

us how pornography can increase or limit the options for these women's sexuality to "normal, healthy, fun, and valued" (ATTWOOD, 2005, p. 75) behavior. Such behaviors of pornography use and reflection, motivated by self-awareness, are nonetheless a way of constructing their sexual identities (BRICKELL, 2012; ALBURY, 2009). This finding echoes the work of Penley *et al.* (2013), who noted how online pornography consumption creates "a space for noticing the contradictory ways in which our fantasies do not always align with politics or the ideas of whom we think we are".

In Durham's study (2016), for example, media references became part of the girls' conversations about a range of issues such as sexuality or body image, as a way of reinforcing a particular view of femininity and heterosexuality. Young girls would use media portrayals of sex to reflect on it, take a stand, and build an emotional and sexual personality (ATTWOOD, 2005). The repertoires of practices and behaviors would be the references for creating and maintaining individual and group identities and would support the performance and display of gender and sexuality.

The choice of pornography even is based on the view of sexuality as a form of *cultivated choice* developed through preferences and lifestyle. Thus, the contexts of pornography consumption, with its framings, are understood, accepted or refuted, policed, and eventually incorporated into new behavior. This concerns issues of peer group functioning, the construction of moral, political, regulatory, and practical structures, and sexual expression or oppression.

Final considerations

To consider pornography only as a mechanism to arouse and release the sexual desire of its consumer is still a very reductionist view of the universe that is the exposure, production of nexus, and use of pornography today. We saw in our literature review the consolidation of three conceptually distinct motivational categories relevant to the variable range of goals sought, namely: (i) manipulation of physiological reactions; (ii) social interaction; and (iii) self-awareness.

The first, with the use of pornography as an internal mood rebalancing mechanism, to relax and relieve everyday tensions, as well as arousing, either sexually speaking, or arousing cognitive processing and emotions. The second category, social interaction, highlights the use of pornography to gain a better quality of intimacy with the sexual partner. The third is self-awareness, with the use of the material to define the user's personality or sexual identity.

These categories show us an important link between the objectives sought and the possible effects produced. This does not mean that every planned effect is, most of the time, realized. Nor are media materials always able to provide the satisfaction of the gratifications sought by their users, but the motivations behind the selection of the media material consumed are indeed revealing for any and all effects that may occur in the exposure and consumption behavior of media materials.

Moreover, the categories described here have very particular characteristics. While the desire to manipulate physiological reactions is presented as a ritualistic audience, social interaction and self-awareness are characterized by an instrumental audience. This means knowing that the recipient of pornographic material, when motivated by the first category, is satisfied and ceases his particular search, that is, the exposure to the chosen material ends. While, motivated by the last two categories, obtaining *learning* is operated in the day-to-day of the receiver, thus demonstrating the relevance of these variants in the consumption process.

In other words, when the subject obtains a state of relaxation or sexual arousal, the pornographic material will have fulfilled its role as a provider of the stimuli sought. For those motivated by obtaining information to explore their sexuality and the sexuality of the other or the partner, such stimuli will have fulfilled their function in being reflected upon, adopted, refuted, modified, adapted, and incorporated into the practices and ways of being of the pornography consumer.

Compared to the findings of studies that are dedicated to other genres of media content such as *telenovelas* (FERREIRA, 2015), advertising (FERREIRA, 2018), and diverse platforms such as new and old, that is, digital and analog platforms (FERREIRA; SPAIN, 2019), the reasons found are very similar. This indicates to us that, rather than looking at the media material in a biased way, we should dedicate ourselves to understanding the consumption process from the perspective of its receiver. Furthermore, future research will need to focus more on specific study approaches. Pornography works differently for different groups of people, and its context is particularly biased by gender relations, stage of life development, ideologies, and more. Such aspects should be privileged in terms of their role in the construction of needs and desires, symbolisms and meanings for the consumption of pornography with specific public health goals in mind. They could, for example, focus on motivations for the use and the development of unwanted effects, such as risky sexual behavior (unsafe sex), depression, and low body esteem.

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Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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