



OFFICE OF FILM  
& LITERATURE  
CLASSIFICATION

*Tē Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tubituhinga*

# A Guide to the Research into the Effects of Sexually Explicit Films and Videos

COMMISSIONED BY THE OFFICE OF FILM AND LITERATURE CLASSIFICATION

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## Foreword

Once again, I am pleased to introduce the Classification Office's annual research project.

For the past two years, the Classification Office has asked groups of New Zealanders to interpret and apply statutory censorship criteria to explicit sex videos. Many of these groups represented a cross-section of the New Zealand population; others were targeted at Maori and people between the ages of 18 and 23.

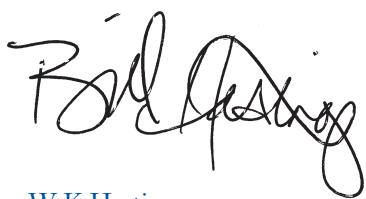
Although this research showed substantial agreement at a theoretical level about the power of moving images to influence attitudes and behaviour, at a practical level it showed that views diverge around the meaning of criteria such as "injury to the public good" and "degrading, dehumanising and demeaning" activity. The gender of participants did not appear to be as significant a factor in explaining this divergence as the age of each participant and how often each watched sexually explicit videos.

We decided this year to explore the extent to which overseas research might have already answered some of the questions raised by our focus groups. In particular, we were interested in knowing how frequent users of sexually explicit videos are affected, or not, by what they watch.

Readers of this report will soon realise that we had to change direction. Our researcher, Helena Barwick, found that surprisingly little research has been done on frequent users. There is a great, and rather obvious gap, which the Office's focus group research, uniquely and inadvertently, has begun to fill by asking participants how frequently they watched sexually explicit videos.

The Office decided that the absence of research on frequent users warranted commissioning a survey of exactly what research into the effects of sexually explicit material was currently being conducted and reported. This report does not explain why no research has been conducted on frequent users. Nevertheless, it becomes very clear that in this field of academic endeavour, the philosophical perspective of the researcher heavily influences both the way the research is designed, and the interpretation of the results that are obtained. Readers of this report will feel entitled to conclude, as I have, that the influence of these philosophical schools of thought go some way towards explaining the absence of research into frequent users.

I would like to thank Helena Barwick for displaying extraordinary patience when it appeared that there was nothing for her to survey, and for her dedication in suggesting a change of direction to produce this report. Information Unit manager Cathrine Austin oversaw the project in her usual expert manner. I would also like to thank our research advisor Virg Burns, not only for her unbridled enthusiasm, but for working with the team to ensure the Office received a report that censors and the general public can make use of, and which points the way to further research.



W K Hastings

Chief Censor of Film and Literature

14 August 2003

## Summary

### **INTRODUCTION**

This guide to the research into the effects of sexually explicit films and videos was commissioned by the Office of Film and Literature Classification to inform the classification process.

The focus of this review is on non-violent sexually explicit material. Section 3(2)(b) of the Act requires that a publication will be deemed objectionable if it promotes or supports the use of violence or coercion to compel any person to participate in or submit to sexual conduct (Appendix 1). The chief purpose of the report is to assist classification officers in making decisions about the classification of sexually explicit videos that fall outside Section 3(2).

This review is not an attempt to forge a consensus from very conflicting research; it endeavours to explain why there is conflict, and to provide a framework and some tools with which to evaluate research in this area.

This report has adopted an inclusive definition of sexually explicit material which includes both non-violent materials that may be widely perceived as degrading and those about which there is less agreement. This report uses the term sexually explicit material in preference to the word pornography.

### **THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

The effect of sexually explicit material is an issue which cannot be separated from moral values and beliefs about the place of sex in society. Views about sexually explicit material are also influenced by beliefs about the rights of individuals and understandings of human and social relations.

The attempt to make sense of the conflicting conclusions reached on the effects of sexually explicit material can be assisted by putting research findings into the context of the theoretical perspective of the researchers. Furthermore, different theoretical approaches lend themselves to different types of research, which in turn support different conclusions. Making explicit the beliefs underpinning the research can help explain why there is such apparent contradiction amongst the findings.

Leading commentators and researchers have identified three main perspectives – conservative moralist, feminist and liberal – which have dominated the debate, and the research, on the effects of sexually explicit material.

The basis of the conservative moralist perspective is that sexually explicit material is harmful because what it portrays flies in the face of morality and the accepted rules of social behaviour. Research that is derived from a conservative moralist theoretical background is likely to include an emphasis on sexual arousal as a driving mechanism, explore how viewer disgust with sexual depictions determines reactions to sexually explicit materials, and examine changes in attitudes towards the sexual availability of women, marriage and family.

The liberal perspective is derived from a belief that what is acceptable and unacceptable is culturally determined and will change over time. Liberals support the free flow of ideas and have a fundamental belief in individuals' abilities to make rational choices about what they watch, and about the extent to which they are influenced by what they watch. Researchers examining the effects of sexually explicit material within a liberal framework tend to look for evidence of direct and demonstrable harm following exposure to sexually explicit material. This is usually by way of exploring links between sexually explicit material and sexual offending.

The feminist view of sexually explicit material is not a completely homogenous one. While feminists by definition share an analysis of power structures, they differ in their views of the harm sexually explicit material can cause and the controls that should be put on it. From the feminist perspective, sexual relations between men and women reflect power relationships in society. Most feminists argue that the sexual subordination of women in sexually explicit material reflects, endorses and encourages the social and sexual subordination of women in society. However, one strand of feminist theory claims exposure to sexually explicit material can be an enjoyable, erotic and liberating experience for women. Research influenced by a feminist perspective is inclined to focus on the effects sexually explicit material has on attitudes about women that may promote sexually abusive and discriminatory behaviours, rather than limiting its concern to direct, specific, physical harms. Investigators are interested in subtle effects such as the endorsement of limited roles for women, beliefs in myths about rape, and desensitisation to violence against women.

Within those perspectives lie a number of theories which attempt to explain how viewing sexually explicit material might impact on individuals. Most of these have their origins in the discipline of psychology, but others have come from sociology and education.

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## ***METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES***

Establishing the effects of sexually explicit material on attitudes and behaviour is not straightforward. Many different research methods have been employed, all of which have strengths and weaknesses.

Perhaps because its theoretical origins are to be found in psychology, the research into the effects of sexually explicit material on human behaviour has been overwhelmingly laboratory research with experimental design, conducted within universities and usually with undergraduate psychology students as subjects. Laboratory research is favoured largely because many factors can be controlled within the laboratory setting, and studies can be easily replicated to confirm findings. The chief criticisms of it are that its relevance to the real world is limited largely because subjects are often university students, the laboratory setting itself has an effect on the process, causal relationships are oversimplified, a wide variety of measures are used, and the experience of watching sexually explicit material in a laboratory decontextualises the experience in important ways.

The research uncovered for this review included four main types of non-laboratory research design, each with its own advantages and methodological shortcomings. Population level correlational studies readily allow for the exploration of links between a wide range of variables, but are unable to prove conclusively that any association identified is a causal one. Naturalistic studies allow behaviour to be observed in natural setting, but frequently cannot throw light on motivation or causality. Qualitative research, frequently undertaken by women with women as subjects, can provide a depth of understanding and insight on a sensitive topic, but is criticised for being subjective and anecdotal and for problems with rigorous analysis and presentation of results. Content analysis can throw light on some of the subtle definitional issues in determining what is degrading and non-degrading sexually explicit material, but the subjectivity of the assessment of what is and is not degrading is perceived as a methodological weakness.

## ***FINDINGS FROM LABORATORY RESEARCH***

There is no consensus about effects of sexually explicit material on attitudes to women, to sex or to sexual violence. It is clear that there is more evidence linking sexually violent material with rape acceptance than there is linking non-violent sexually explicit material with rape acceptance. Many studies have drawn conclusions from research designs which have compared the attitudinal effects of watching sexually violent material with those of watching non-violent sexually explicit material. Less work has been done in the area of comparing how attitudes are affected by degrading and non-degrading non-violent sexually explicit material and on the effect on women's attitudes.

For methodological and ethical reasons laboratory research into the behavioural effects of sexually explicit material has been less common in the last 15 years than between the mid 1970s and the late 1980s. Reviewed in this report are meta-analyses of research, much of which was undertaken many years ago. Once again the results conflict, with some meta-analyses finding that non-violent sexually explicit material does affect behaviour and others concluding that it does not.

There has been strong research interest in the characteristics of men who are more likely than other men to be affected by sexually explicit material. This research has centred around the concept of sex-typing which differentiates men on the basis of whether they display solely masculine characteristics or a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. There is some evidence that men who are strongly masculine sex-typed are more likely to be affected by sexually explicit material than those who are less strongly sex-typed.

## ***FINDINGS FROM OTHER RESEARCH***

Other research into the effects of sexually explicit material includes population level studies, naturalistic research with frequent users of sexually explicit material, qualitative and survey research into women's perceptions of sexually explicit material and its effects, and content analyses.

Population level research, which tracks the availability of sexually explicit material against the rate of reported rape or sexual assault in a society over time, offers little support to the theory that sexually explicit material leads to sexual violence. In general, studies of sex offenders' use of sexually explicit material do not suggest that sex offenders are exposed to sexually explicit material earlier or use it more often than other men, but there are some indications that some sex offenders find sexually explicit material more arousing or might use it differently from non-offenders.

Scant research exists on users and use of sexually explicit material. What profiling has been done suggests that users are at least as affluent and well educated as the population at large, with a high proportion in stable relationships. More frequent users are less likely than other people to believe that sexually explicit material is harmful to adults.

There has been a wide range of research into the effects of sexually explicit material on women. Much of it has been designed to explore the nature of the effects rather than to establish the existence of the effects. Women report a sense of powerlessness over a partner's use of sexually explicit material, negative impacts on their self-esteem and body image, feelings of vulnerability and helplessness and a reluctance to speak against a man's use of sexually explicit material. Some abused women also report being asked to imitate acts seen in sexually explicit material more often than other women.

Content analysis seeks to determine what constitutes degradation in the context of sexually explicit material. Although there is no clear consensus on what degradation is, elements appear to include the public portrayal of objectification, subordination and inferiority. A few studies explored racial stereotypes, gender bias and changes in sexually explicit content over time.

The material retrieved for this review includes a small body of comment and research on the benefits of sexually explicit material. Benefits cited include the educational and instructive dimensions of sexually explicit material, sexually explicit material as a means of communication about sexual matters, and sexually explicit material as a form of challenge to conventional stereotypes about women's sexuality.

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## 1.0 Introduction

Under the [Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993](#), the Office of Film and Literature Classification is charged with determining whether publications are objectionable or should be given a classification other than objectionable.

Sexually explicit videos are one type of publication that the Office has to make decisions about, and in making the classification decision one of the key tests that has to be applied is whether the availability of the publication is likely to be injurious to the public good.

The Office commissioned this review of research into the impact of non-violent sexually explicit material following two years of public consultations on sexually explicit videos<sup>1</sup>. These public consultations provided valuable insight into what a cross-section of the New Zealand population thought about the sexually explicit videos they saw, and in particular, whether they considered that making such material available to adults over 18 was in any way harmful to individuals or to society.

The consultations explored what injury or harm could result from making non-violent sexually explicit videos available, and whether some groups or individuals were more at risk of harm than others. The findings showed that the audiences were discerning about the material that they were asked to watch, and that while few thought sexually explicit material was harmful of itself, many people did think that sexually explicit material which portrayed an imbalance of power between men and women could be harmful. The harm most frequently identified by members of the audience was that the material created or reinforced inaccurate stereotypes and gave men the wrong message about women.

This review seeks to place those findings into the context of existing research. The key questions for the review were:

1. What evidence is there of harm from the availability of non-violent sexually explicit videos?
2. What evidence, if any, is there between the use of sexually explicit videos and harmless release of sexual energy, which could otherwise be misdirected? (catharsis theory)
3. What is known about the users of sexually explicit videos, the attitudes they hold to the material they view, and how they use the videos.

The focus of this review is on non-violent sexually explicit material. Section 3(2)(b) of the Act requires that a publication will be deemed objectionable if it promotes or supports the use of violence or coercion to compel any

<sup>1</sup> *Barwick 2001, 2002.*

person to participate in or submit to sexual conduct (Appendix 1). The chief purpose of the report is to assist classification officers in making decisions about the classification of sexually explicit videos that fall outside Section 3(2).

Once research was identified, retrieved and read, it rapidly became clear that research ‘evidence’ on the effects of sexually explicit material is contradictory and conflicting. As a result, this review has become a guide to the research on the effects of non-violent sexually explicit material. While considering the weight of evidence, the focus of the report is not on reaching consensus about the effects of viewing sexually explicit material, but to introduce the reader of research in this area to some of the theoretical perspectives and methodological issues that help explain why research findings are so conflicting. The theoretical perspectives presented in this report are a device to help the reader. As with any taxonomy developed for ideas and attitudes, not every piece of research fits neatly into one or other of the perspectives, but that does not diminish its value as a tool to help make sense of a complex and conflicted area of study.

After extensive database searching it became clear that the research needed to answer the third question – about users of sexually explicit material, their attitudes and behaviour – does not exist in published form. Furthermore, remarkably little research of any kind has been undertaken with people who choose to use sexually explicit material. Almost all of it has been conducted with participants drawn from other natural groupings – for example university students – who have been asked to watch sexually explicit material and then tested for their views and responses. The implications of that, and for any future research programme the Office might choose to undertake, are discussed in Section 7.0.

### 1.1 The history of the report

The information gathered through the consultations conducted by the Office in 2001 and 2002 included how often participants had watched sexually explicit videos in the past three years. This revealed that while the majority of this cross-section of the population watched such material infrequently, a sizable minority were frequent viewers. This supported an already held belief that while most of the population have limited interest in sexually explicit videos, a small group are frequent users of this form of entertainment. The Office decided it would be helpful in making classification decisions to know more about the views of this groups of frequent users, and about their use of pornography. Accordingly, a review of existing research was commissioned in order to find out what is



currently known about this group of users. The key questions for the review were:

- How do users of sexually explicit videos actually use them?
- What attitudes do frequent viewers of these videos hold towards the material they view?
- What are viewers seeking from the videos?
- Do viewers incorporate what they see in the videos into their own sexual behaviour?

In light of the lack of research into frequent users of pornography this review of research was refocused to become a guide to the research on the effects of pornography. This review of research is not attempting to find consensus about the effects of viewing sexually explicit material, but rather is designed to alert the reader of research in this area to some of the theoretical perspectives and methodological issues that help explain why research findings are so conflicting.

## 1.2 The search strategy

A database search strategy was devised based on the following three key concepts, and all their synonyms, stems and variant spellings. The keywords were entered in different combinations depending on the syntax or language of the database:

- sexually explicit material / sexually explicit material
- users/ uses
- effects

The search was largely restricted to material published in English during or since 1990. Databases searched included:

- Medline
- Psych Info
- Psych Lit
- Ingenta
- Te Puna

In addition the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Courts, as well as the medical library were approached for relevant material.

The Office of Film and Literature Classification's Information Unit conducted the search. Research was selected for review by the author of this report from the abstracts provided from the databases.

## 1.3 This report

This report is intended for current and future staff of the Office of Film and Literature Classification, other interested readers and members of the public. It has been written for an intelligent and informed readership, but it is not an academic publication.

Where multiple references are discussed within a paragraph in this report, the authors of the research are cited at the end of that paragraph, in chronological order from the most recent, rather than immediately following a reference to their work. This is designed to enhance the readability of the report. All quotes are presented in italics.

This report is a guide to the body of research on the effects of viewing non-violent sexually explicit material. This report is not an attempt to forge a consensus from very conflicting research; it attempts to explain why there is conflict, and to provide a framework and some tools with which to evaluate research in this area.

In Section 2 some definitions are briefly discussed. Section 3 reviews theoretical perspectives, and Section 4 highlights issues of methodology. Sections 5 and 6 review some of the findings of research. Section 7 draws conclusions and discusses the implications of this work for the Office of Film and Literature Classification.



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## 2.0 Definitions

How those researching its effects define pornography is key to interpreting the findings of that research. Not only that, but whether it is synonymous with or can be distinguished from sexually explicit material, erotica, and obscenity must also be decided. The spectrum of opinion on what constitutes pornography is almost as wide as the range of opinion on its effects.

It is important for the reader of this report to know what is being discussed when the term sexually explicit material is used.

### 2.1 An inclusive definition

Much of the research reviewed for this report uses the terms pornography and sexually explicit material interchangeably. Much of it also adopts a broad and inclusive definition of those terms. This is an example of a broad definition:

*. . . . pornography is defined as media material used or intended to increase sexual arousal . . . this is a functional, receiver-oriented definition intended for scientific research purposes (Allen, D'Alessio, & Brezgel, 1995a, p.259).*

Some of those examining the effects of pornography distinguish it from sexually explicit material by asserting that pornography is demeaning or degrading to women. This definition, acknowledged as being derived from feminist writings, was that used in the [Report of the 1989 Ministerial Committee of Inquiry into Pornography](#):

*Pornography refers therefore to sexually explicit material which is demeaning and degrading to women (and sometimes to children or men). It eroticises the sexual subordination of women, perpetuating myths about women's sexuality and objectifying women for the pleasure of men (Morris, Haines, & Shallcrass, 1989, p.28).*

The Committee's report goes on to define sexually explicit materials as:

*. . . a non-judgemental phrase used to refer to materials in any media, visual or otherwise, which represent sexual activities in explicit detail . . . material in this category may or may not have the intention or effect of sexually arousing the viewer or reader. (p.29).*

Seto, Maric and Barbaree (2001) make a similar distinction between erotica and pornography:

*Erotica can be described as sexually explicit material that depicts adult men and women consensually involved in pleasurable, non-violent, non-degrading sexual interactions. In contrast, pornography can be described as depictions of sexual activity where one of the participants is objectified or portrayed as powerless or nonconsenting (p.37).*

This review has adopted an inclusive definition of sexually explicit material which includes both non-violent materials that may be widely perceived as degrading and those about which there is less agreement. This report uses the term sexually explicit material in preference to the word pornography. The issue of what themes lead to the perception that sexually explicit material is degrading are explored further in Section 6.5.

It is important to remember that each author and researcher referenced will have developed their own definition which may not be identical to that adopted by this report. The terms pornography or erotica are used in this report when those are the words used by the authors of the research being discussed.

### 2.2 Non-violent sexually explicit material

An important distinction is that made between sexually explicit images that contain violence or coercion, and those that do not. Malamuth and his colleagues (2000) highlight the distinction:

*. . . . In keeping with the literature we will use the terms non-violent pornography and consenting sexual depictions to refer to sexually explicit images that do not contain coercion. The terms violent pornography or sexually violent media will be used to refer to materials that do contain coercive material (p.28-29).*

In selecting research for this review, a concerted effort has been made to include only research into the effects of sexually explicit materials that do not contain violence or coercion. This is because a key purpose of this report is to inform and assist classification officers in making classification decisions, and as previously described, section 3(2)(b) of the Act requires publications promoting or supporting sexual violence to be classified as objectionable.

## 2.3 Medium

Consistent with the purpose of this review priority has been given to research into the effects of sexually explicit videos. The classification of video material poses particular challenges as video can be manipulated in ways print publications and film cannot. Videos can be fast forwarded, freeze-framed, replayed, and otherwise altered to enhance effects or to remove scenes and activities from their context.

This review is largely, but not exclusively concerned with sexually explicit film and video material. Where research is based on other than film or video material this will be made clear in the accompanying discussion.

No attempt has been made to give details of the titles of the films or videos used in the research as few of the reports identified the material used.

## 2.4 Summary

Following the lead of much of the research reviewed, this report adopts a broad and inclusive definition of non-violent sexually explicit material. The report uses the term sexually explicit material in preference to the word pornography. The focus is on sexually explicit video material.

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### 3.0 Theoretical perspectives

The effect of sexually explicit material is an issue which cannot be separated from moral values and beliefs about the place of sex in society. Views about sexually explicit material are also influenced by beliefs about the rights of individuals and understandings of human and social relations.

Any review of the research on sexually explicit material and its effects must accept this, and the attempt to make sense of the conflicting conclusions reached on the effects can be assisted by putting research findings into the context of the theoretical perspective of the researchers. Furthermore, different theoretical approaches lend themselves to different types of research, which in turn support different conclusions. Making explicit the beliefs underpinning the research can help explain why there is such apparent contradiction amongst the findings.

### 3.1 Three main perspectives

Leading commentators and researchers have identified three main perspectives – conservative moralist, feminist and liberal – which have dominated the debate, and the research, on the effects of sexually explicit material. To some extent these theoretical perspectives are products of their time, with a chronology which can be traced from conservative moralists in the early 70s, through the feminist movement of the 70s and 80s and on to a more liberal position in the 90s. (Linz & Malamuth, 1993; Segal, 1990; Paden, 1984)

This review starts with the three perspectives before moving on to identify and describe some of the theories underpinning different research designs.

#### **THE CONSERVATIVE MORALIST PERSPECTIVE**

The basis of the conservative moralist perspective is that sexually explicit material is harmful because what it portrays flies in the face of accepted rules of social behaviour. The perspective holds that adultery, promiscuity and homosexuality are inherently wrong because they undermine the enduring and inviolable values of heterosexual fidelity, marriage and the family. The moral conservative view finds support in traditional Christian teachings and, at the extreme, sees the danger of sexually explicit material as being a temptation into moral transgression, which in turn could undermine the authority and stability of other moral institutions. Moral conservatives believe that the State should act to prevent personal immorality when it offends the sense of decency of the majority. (Linz & Malamuth, 1993; Segal, 1990; Paden, 1984)

A key component of the conservative moralist perspective is the belief that public portrayals of sex are disgusting and offensive to many people. A conservative moralist would argue that displays of sex are arousing, and outside of monogamous relationships have the ability to undermine those relationships. A third tenet of the perspective is that by overemphasising sexual gratification and sexual permissiveness, sexually explicit material can cause viewers to behave in ways that undermine other traditional moral judgements about women and sex. Finally, undermining traditional moral judgements about women and sex could lead to the erosion of key social structures such as the family. (Linz & Malamuth, 1993; Morris et al., 1989).

Paden (1984) expands on the harm that conservative moralists consider pornography causes with these words:

*. . . on the conservative view what is immoral about pornography is not that it possesses a characteristic that is, in itself, immoral, nor even that it may cause the viewer to feel disgust, but that it can cause a fundamental, though perhaps unconscious, change in the character of the consumer; a change which these conservatives view as pernicious to both the consumer and to society. This change can best be thought of as a change of character, from what might be thought to be a civilized state to a pre-social natural state (p.19)*

One indication that research comes from a conservative moralist perspective is found in an examination of what constitutes degrading sexually explicit material. These definitions focus on availability and unbridled sexuality as itself constituting the degradation of women. (Cowan & Dunn 1994)

Zillman, arguably the leading exponent of the conservative moralist approach, described degrading pornography as:

*. . . messages that depict women as sexually insatiable, as socially nondiscriminating in the sense that they seem eager to accommodate the sexual desires of any man in the vicinity, and as hypereuphoric about any kind of sexual stimulation. (Zillman & Bryant, 1989, p.135).*

Donnerstein and his colleagues (1987) also defined degrading sexually explicit material as that which depicts women as:

*. . . willing recipients of any male sexual urge (excluding rape) or as oversexed highly promiscuous individuals with insatiable sexual urges. (p.4).*

Reisman (1990), another moral conservative makes her position clear in this critique of *Penthouse* magazine prepared for the New Zealand Indecent Publications Tribunal:

*The present findings locate Penthouse on a collision course with national heterosexual values of committed marital, private human love (unpaginated).*

Zillman further cements his position as a conservative moralist in these words:

*The values manifest in erotic entertainment are on a collision course with those pertaining to family as the most fundamental social institution in society. This should be clear to anyone who cares to compare the values in question (Zillman et al., 1994, p.199).*

Research that is derived from a conservative moralist theoretical background is likely to include an emphasis on sexual arousal as a driving mechanism, explore how viewer disgust with sexual depictions determines reactions to sexually explicit materials, and examine changes in attitudes towards the sexual availability of women, marriage and family. (Linz & Malamuth, 1993)

The clearest examples of research from a conservative moralist perspective is the widely cited work of Zillman and that of Donnerstein.

### **THE LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE**

The liberal perspective on sexually explicit material is derived from a belief that what is acceptable and unacceptable is culturally determined and will change over time. Liberals support the free flow of ideas and have a fundamental belief in individuals' abilities to make rational choices about what they watch, and about the extent to which they are influenced by what they watch. Openness of information is valued and should only be limited in the face of good evidence that such openness causes harm to others. (Linz & Malamuth, 1993; Segal, 1990)

Four assumptions underpin the liberal approach to sexually explicit material. They are that most sexual depictions trigger fantasies which are not acted out. These portrayals are exaggerations of sexual tendencies that provide stimulation to some people, and they hurt nobody. As long as any behaviour triggered by watching sexually explicit material is limited to private actions with consenting partners, the government should not restrict access to these ideas. Liberals are inclined to the belief that sexually explicit material can be beneficial and sexually liberating for the viewer. Finally, as what is acceptable will change over time, the most effective regulation of sexually explicit materials is the 'marketplace of ideas' where competing ideas about sex and sexually explicit material can be debated. (Linz & Malamuth, 1993)

Paden observes that both liberals and conservative moralists take their position on the basis of their beliefs about the effects of pornography on human nature, where they differ is in those beliefs. Liberals take a positive view of human nature and of sexual relationships. They are inclined to believe that openness of sexual information encourages healthy sexual relationships and that unhealthy sexual behaviour is the result of repression rather than of human nature itself. (Paden, 1984)

Researchers examining the effects of sexually explicit material within a liberal framework tend to look for evidence of direct and demonstrable harm following exposure to sexually explicit material. This is usually by way of exploring links between sexually explicit material and sexual offending. Changes to attitudes and beliefs, or to behaviour in the laboratory setting is not considered to provide conclusive evidence by those working within a liberal framework. (Morris et al., 1989)

Segal (1990) asserts that all psychological laboratory research comes from a liberal perspective, in that it is attempting to prove or disprove that sexually explicit material is harmful. Examples of research derived from a liberal perspective includes the work of Kutchinsky, Malamuth, Bauserman and Boeringer.

### **THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

As with the other perspectives, the feminist view of sexually explicit material is not a completely homogenous one. While feminists by definition share an analysis of power structures, they differ in their views of the harm sexually explicit material can cause and the controls that should be put on it.

From the feminist perspective sexual relations between men and women reflect power relationships in society. Most feminists argue that the sexual subordination of women in sexually explicit material reflects, endorses and encourages the social and sexual subordination of women in society. Feminist theory is more concerned for the welfare of society over the desires and pleasures of the individual. Feminists who support greater controls on the availability of sexually explicit material do so not because they fear it corrupts the moral fibre of society, but because controls would reduce harms to women, including sexual harassment, discrimination and sexual assault. For these feminists, sexually explicit material perpetuates a view of women as sex objects in ways that are demeaning and degrading. From this perspective, individual rights should be subordinate to the wider social interest of protecting women. (Linz & Malamuth, 1993; Seto et al., 2001)

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For feminist theorists the degradation of sexually explicit material lies not in unbridled sexuality, but in the inequality, domination and objectification of women that is inherent in sexually explicit material. Subordination, not mere availability, is the key aspect of degradation. (Cowan & Dunn, 1994)

From this feminist perspective the harms resulting from sexually explicit material are of three types. Firstly, there is the direct harm to women who work in the sex trade, including models and actors in the sexually explicit material industry. Second, sexually explicit material is seen as promoting sexual violence against and the sexual subordination of women through its effects on the attitudes and beliefs of those who watch. Thirdly, sexually explicit material is seen to result in ‘social harm’ by presenting and reinforcing power imbalances between men and women. (Seto et al., 2001; Kafka et al., 1997; Morris et al., 1989)

Early radical feminist writing by Brownmiller and Dworkin provide examples of the perspective from which pornography both reflects and reinforces hostility and violence towards women by men. McKinnon and others later express the same themes. (Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin, 1979; MacKinnon, 1995)

Brownmiller (1975) expresses the radical feminist view of pornography in these words:

*There can be no equality in porn, no female equivalent, no turning of the tables in the name of bawdy fun. Pornography, like rape, is a male invention, designed to dehumanise women, to reduce the female to an object of sexual access, not to free sensuality from moralistic or parental inhibition. (p.394)*

Later came other feminists from varying political positions, such as Strossen, McIlroy and Kipnis, who although very diverse in their views, are united by their opposition to the censorship of pornography. (Kipnis, 1996; Strossen, 1995a; McIlroy, 1995)

In her 1995 book Defending pornography: free speech: Sex and the fight for women’s rights, Strossen says this:

*More speech about sex – education, information and the development of critical viewing skills – not less, is the answer . . . pornography can serve as an important tool to galvanise public concern about the ongoing problems of anti-female discrimination and violence (p.273).*

McIlroy 1995 has a similar perspective:

*The message of this book is: there is nothing to be afraid of. Pornography is part of a healthy free flow of information about sex. This is information our society badly needs. It is a freedom women need (p.xi)*

Research influenced by a feminist perspective is inclined to focus on the effects sexually explicit material has on attitudes about women that may promote sexually abusive and discriminatory behaviours, rather than limiting its concern to direct, specific, physical harms. Investigators are interested in subtle effects such as the endorsement of limited roles for women, beliefs in myths about rape, and desensitisation to violence against women. Scales used are likely to measure things like attraction to sexual aggression, hostility to women and attitudes to rape. (Linz & Malamuth, 1993)

Another strand of research derived from the feminist perspective has been the effects of sexually explicit material on women themselves. This is both research on women as recipients of behaviours deemed to have been influenced by another’s use of sexually explicit material, and on women as viewers of sexually explicit material. Both of these strands test the feminist beliefs that sexually explicit material shapes men’s views of appropriate sexual relations, and can also shape how women perceive themselves. (Kafka et al., 1997; Linz & Malamuth, 1993; Senn, 1993)

It is important to note that one strand of feminist theory claims exposure to sexually explicit material can be an enjoyable, erotic and liberating experience for women. From this theoretical standpoint opposition to sexually explicit material is misguided and sexually explicit material should be welcomed as a way of encouraging women to understand and express their sexuality. (Segal, 1993, 1990; Wilnier, 1998; McNair, 1996)

Feminist research is frequently qualitative in nature, using women’s (and occasionally men’s) narratives to explore the effect of sexually explicit material in their lives. Examples of research of this type include Dines et al., (1998), Shaw (1999), Bergner and Bridges (2002) and Van Dyke (1997).

### **SUPPORT FOR THE THREE PERSPECTIVES**

Senn’s 1993 paper on women’s perspectives of pornography provides support for the notion that people approach pornography from a range of perspectives. Her detailed principal components analysis of interviews with women revealed four distinct perspectives held by the women in her sample. In addition to conservative and radical feminist perspectives, she identified what she called an *ambivalent but mildly propornography* perspective, and a *humanist child-centred* perspective characterised by a particular concern for the impact of pornography on children. (Senn, 1993)

The views of the public captured in research commissioned by the Office of Film and Literature Classification add weight to the theory that people approach viewing sexually explicit material from a moral or theoretical position. In the consultation meetings a small number of participants approached the material from



a conservative moralist perspective. These people frequently gave little or no detailed feedback on the material they were asked to watch, but indicated that the genre was offensive to them and contravened their moral code. The majority of participants had a liberal perspective from which sexually explicit material was not inherently offensive or harmful, but within which specific scenes or activities, often those where coercion was implied, had the potential to be harmful. Another group, smaller than the liberal group but larger than the conservative moralist, approached the material from an overtly feminist viewpoint. While members of the feminist group were inclined to find some of the material degrading and demeaning to women views on appropriate classification were mixed. (Barwick, 2002, 2001)

### **SUMMARY OF THE THREE MAIN PERSPECTIVES**

Linz and Malamuth (1993) summarise the three main perspectives on the effects of sexually explicit material thus:

*These theories stem from conceptual definitions that focus on different aspects of sexually explicit communication. The conservative moralist focuses on the obscene, that which is offensive, disgusting, shameful and contrary to an accepted standard for sexual behaviour. The feminist perspective views many sexual depictions as pornography: literally, descriptions of the acts of prostitutes, or the portrayal of women as such. The liberal holds that many sexually explicit depictions are erotic, referring to sexual expression between consenting adults. (p.56)*

There is immense value in understanding that researchers approach research into the effects of sexually explicit material from different perspectives. It allows those reviewing the research to stop seeking an objective truth about effects, and to accept that the answers will conflict because the questions are different, and the questions are different because the beliefs that underpin them are also quite different.

It is also useful to appreciate that in the debate over controls on the availability of sexually explicit material, arguments in favour of greater control are proposed from both the conservative moralist and feminist perspectives, albeit for very different reasons. Although not all feminists agree on what constitutes degradation, many find the inequality of the sexual relationships portrayed degrading. The conservative moralists on the other hand regard women's unrestrained sexuality as a key feature of degradation, and of itself a reason for the restriction of sexually explicit material. (Cowan & Dunn, 1994)

## **3.2 Theories of effect**

The three main perspectives on sexually explicit material are outlined above. Within those perspectives lie a number of theories which attempt to explain how viewing sexually explicit material might impact on individuals. Most of these have their origins in the discipline of psychology, but others have come from sociology and education. They are briefly described here in order that the reader might approach the research with an understanding of some of the theories being tested.

### **SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY**

Social learning theory, first described by Bandura, emphasises the importance of observing and modelling the behaviours, attitudes and emotional reactions of others. Social learning theory proposes that people learn appropriate and inappropriate forms of behaviour by seeing others model them. Television advertisements are commonly cited examples of social learning in that they often suggest that using particular products will bring popularity and admiration.

<http://tip.psychology.org/bandura.html>

From a social learning perspective, sexually explicit material serves not only as a source of information about sexual behaviour, but legitimises what it portrays. The theory operates at a cognitive, although not necessarily conscious, level. Social learning theory asserts that the viewer will identify with those in the material viewed. According to the theory, sexually explicit material should not result in harm to individuals, but the association of violence with sex could have an impact, particularly if the perpetrator of the violence was shown as having benefited in some way from the use of violence. (Seto et al., 2001; Allen et al., 1995)

Bauserman describes the ways in which social learning theory explains how behaviour can be affected. An individual may learn entirely new behaviours, or previously learned behaviours become more likely, if others are observed benefiting from those behaviours. Alternatively, inhibitions against previously unacceptable behaviours may be strengthened or weakened depending upon the observed consequences of those behaviours. (Bauserman, 1996)

Social learning theory says that viewers of sexually explicit material will be inclined to imitate what they see if that behaviour has brought positive consequences to the actor on the screen. Research based on social learning theory tends to be concerned with measuring the behavioural effects of watching sexually explicit material.

An example of research using social learning theory is that of Corne, Briere and Esses (1992).

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### **EXCITATION TRANSFER THEORY**

Following his early research, in 1979 Zillman proposed the excitation transfer theory, also known as the arousability model. Excitation transfer theory says that after exposure to physiologically arousing stimuli, residual arousal may intensify emotional and behavioural reactions to subsequent stimuli. An important element of the theory is that arousal is the precursor to aggression and may be transferred from one situation to another. The theory holds that the degree of subsequent emotional or behavioural response is determined both by the level of physiological arousal to the earlier stimuli, and by the predisposition of the subject to anger. (Seto et al., 2001; Bauserman, 1996; Allen et al., 1995a; Monk, 1994; Linz & Donnerstein, 1988)

Excitation transfer theory supports a conservative moralist approach in that it suggests that all explicit material which sexually arouses has the potential to cause harm.

Research derived from this theoretical approach is of two types. One type includes the research designs which show participants sexually explicit material and then measure their reported or actual sexual arousal. (Beggs, Calhoun & Wolchik, 1987)

The other type goes further and typically exposes participants to sexually explicit material before giving them an opportunity to aggress against others in a laboratory setting. In order to test the theory participants are unaware that the two apparently unlinked exercises are in fact part of the same research design. These designs have become less popular as concern for the informed consent of participants has increased. (Smeaton & Byrne 1987; Donnerstein, 1980)

### **SUBSTITUTION HYPOTHESIS OR CATHARSIS THEORY**

The substitution hypothesis is the theory that watching sexually explicit material meets sexual needs for the viewer that otherwise would be met in ways that could be harmful to other people. (Kutchinsky, 1985)

The theory that using sexually explicit materials allows harmless release of sexual urges, and therefore decreases the rate of arousal, is also described as the *catharsis* theory. Those who support catharsis theory believe that sexually explicit material serves as an outlet for those who need one, and can be a replacement for the use of aggression. Two authors who describe this theory are Harris and Scott, although their review of research also leads them to the conclusion that *research support for catharsis is weak to non-existent*. (Harris & Scott 2002; Cramer et al., 1998)

Cramer and her colleagues described the distinction between the social learning theory, which they describe as *the more you see, the more you do*, and the catharsis theory, under which they say, *the more you see the less you do*. (Cramer et al., 1998)

Linz and Malamuth cite public opinion surveys that show many Americans surveyed about the effects of sexually explicit material agreed with the substitution or catharsis theory. (Linz & Malamuth, 1993., p.37)

Limited research testing this theory was retrieved for this review. Those claiming that sexually explicit material does not have harmful effects usually cite the substitution hypothesis. The chief proponent reviewed here is Kutchinsky who says substitution hypothesis is the *most likely explanation* for the decrease in some sex crimes that accompanied the increase in the availability of sexually explicit material in the countries he studied. (Kutchinsky, 1991,1985)

### **ATTITUDE CHANGE THEORY**

As distinct from social learning theory which says visual images legitimise what they portray especially if the perpetrator is seen to benefit, attitudinal change theories propose a more subtle effect. A large body of research explores the effects of viewing sexually explicit material on viewers' attitudes towards women, specifically rape-supportive attitudes, sexual callousness and gender stereotypes. (Golde et al., 2000; Milburn et al., 2000; Bauserman, 1998; Frable et al., 1997; Krafka et al., 1997; Allen et al., 1995b; Pollard, 1995; Fukui & Westmore, 1994; Boeringer, 1994; Monk, 1994; Demare et al., 1993; Linz, 1989; Padgett et al., 1989)

Attitude change research presupposes a strong link between attitudes and subsequent behaviour. A typical research design testing the attitude change theory is that used by Bauserman in which viewers' attitudes were measured following exposure to three types of sexually explicit scenes described as egalitarian, sexist and sexually aggressive. (Bauserman, 1998)

### **PRIMING**

Another theory described and tested in the research literature is that of priming. Priming is a psychological term which describes the way some people are more alert to different stimuli because of prior experiences or preconditions. An example is the way a person who has purchased a new car is more likely to notice other similar vehicles than someone who has not been primed by such a purchase.



In relation to sexually explicit material, this hypothesis holds that the material is a priming stimulus which activates men's pre-existing gender role views. The theory is based on the belief that not all men will respond to sexually explicit material in the same way, and that men with pre-existing stereotypical views of women are those for whom it is likely to have the greatest effect because they are the individuals who tend to process their interactions with women in sexual terms. (Malamuth et al., 2000; Frable et al., 1997; Jansma et al., 1997; McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990)

The research designs which test for priming are those which examine the relation between men's exposure to sexually explicit material and their pre-existing beliefs about men and women. The most frequently cited example of this research is by McKenzie-Mohr and Zanna (1990).

### **CONDITIONING THEORY**

Classical conditioning is when a person (or other organism) learns through establishing associations between different events and stimuli. A well-known example of conditioning is Pavlov's dog which learnt to salivate at the sound of a bell, because of an earlier association between the bell and food.

In terms of the effects of sexually explicit material, conditioning theory says that if viewers achieve sexual satisfaction through masturbation while watching sexually explicit material, the sexual content of the material will be reinforced, and that individuals will seek out more intense content as they habituate to currently exciting material. Habituation is the theory that the explicitness and content of sexually explicit material will shift over time for habitual users. (Seto et al., 2001; Krafka et al., 1997)

Linz and Donnerstein test habituation to violent and sexually degrading films in their 1988 research.

### **EDUCATIONAL THEORIES**

Some researchers assert that sexually explicit material is an important source of sex information for its viewers, and that this outweighs any harmful effects. Studies conducted into the sources of sex information used by adolescents have consistently shown sexually explicit material as a frequently cited source. (Throstle, 1993)

Throstle's (1993) study retrieved for this review was the only one which explored whether sexually explicit material functioned as an important source of sex information for participants.

### **SUMMARY**

There is value in differentiating the theoretical perspectives from which researchers approach the task of trying to establish or refute a link between watching sexually explicit material and subsequent attitude or behaviour change. To have an understanding of the theories can help the reader navigate their way among an apparently contradictory and often confusing body of research.

It is also the case however, that a research design may draw on more than one theory. Furthermore, within any design there can be a range of methodological shortcomings that call into question the conclusions drawn. It is these methodological issues that we move onto now.

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## 4.0 Methodological issues

Only a handful of the studies retrieved for this review attempt to assess the impact of sexually explicit material on real world subjects in real world settings. Those that do – largely qualitative studies of the impact of sexually explicit material on the lives of women – are frequently dismissed as ‘anecdotal’, or regarded as in some way inconclusive because they lack an experimental design and a control group. Perhaps because its theoretical origins are to be found in psychology, the research into the effects of sexually explicit material on human behaviour has been overwhelmingly laboratory research with experimental design, conducted within universities and usually with undergraduate psychology students as subjects. The extent to which this research design has prevailed within the literature is striking.

This section of the report introduces the main types of research into the effects of sexually explicit material and discusses some of the methodological issues and assumptions associated with them.

### 4.1 Laboratory research designs

These research designs are those conducted in a laboratory setting with participants recruited for the purpose. They often involve an experimental and control group, matched on a range of variables; the experimental group is then exposed to a sexually explicit video, and the control group to a video without any sexual content. After viewing the material subjects are tested for a range of attitudes, beliefs or behaviours. Conclusions are drawn based on the comparison between the two groups.

There are several reasons that laboratory research has been so popular. Firstly, researchers can be completely confident of the nature of the sexually explicit material participants are exposed to. Secondly, laboratory experiments are considered to throw light on causality. That is, by matching experimental and control groups on a number of other characteristics, researchers believe they can say with more confidence that exposure to the sexually explicit stimulus was responsible for any differences revealed in tests subjects undertake after they have watched the material. Thirdly, measures of effect can be used which are not reliant on the self-report of the participants and which can therefore be quantified to a greater extent. Finally, an experiment that is controlled in a laboratory setting can usually be easily replicated, allowing findings to be tested for confirmation. These features together contribute to what is called high internal validity, a measure of confidence that the variable being measured – in this case exposure to sexually explicit material – brought about any changes identified.

However, laboratory research has a number of associated difficulties that call into question the conclusions that can be drawn from it.

#### *PARTICIPANTS*

Typically, subjects of laboratory research exploring the effects of sexually explicit material are undergraduate students, often psychology students. Researchers frequently offered inducements in the form of course credits or a small payment to recruit the students. They are exposed to sexually explicit material within the laboratory setting and then tested for a range of effects. This method of acquiring subjects results in what is called a convenience sample. Although convenient, this has some clear drawbacks such as the lack of randomness and the homogeneity of the sample.

A high proportion of the research studies retrieved for this review used samples of undergraduate student volunteers. (Amelang & Pielke, 1992; Bauserman, 1998; Boeringer, 1994; Bogaert et al., 1999; Bogaert, 2001; Brosius et al., 1993; Clark & Wiederman, 2000; Crossman, 1994; Demare et al., 1993; Dexter et al., 1997; Frable et al., 1997; Gardos & Mosher, 1999; Golde et al., 2000; Jansma et al., 1997; Krafska et al., 1997; Lopez & George, 1995; McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990; Milburn et al., 2000; Miller, 1999; Monk, 1994; Norris & Kerr, 1993; Padgett et al., 1989; Ritts & Engbretson, 1991; Senn & Radtke, 1990; Sinclair et al., 1995; Throstle, 1993; Wolchik et al., 1995).

Only a minority of these researchers refer to the unrepresentative nature of their subjects when discussing the results of their research.

The generalisability of results from studies using volunteer students needs to be questioned. Some argue that because the university population is largely between 18-24, and that this corresponds closely to the age group with the highest incidence of sexual offending, there is some potential to generalise findings, however this does not allow for other differences that may exist between the university student and sexual offender populations, such as IQ, socio-economic status, or life experiences. (Allen et al., 1995a; Donnerstein et al., 1987)

One example of questionable generalisation from a student sample is a study exploring the relationship between intellectual ability and reactions to sexually explicit material. The study tested the IQ of a sample of university students, who were then exposed to sexually explicit material and measured for the effects. Conclusions were drawn by the authors about the effects of sexually explicit material on ‘lower IQ men’ with scant reference to any possible differences between the IQ range of the sample and that of the population as a whole. (Bogaert et al., 1999)

Another disadvantage of a convenience sample is that it may not reflect actual consumers of sexually explicit material. Allen and his colleagues say that a student sample is likely to contain many people who have had limited exposure to sexually explicit material, and some for whom their first exposure to sexually explicit material may have occurred during the investigation. Few experimental studies seek to distinguish the views of those who are regular users of sexually explicit material from those who have previously viewed little. (Allen et al., 1995a).

There is also conflicting evidence to show that in some cases student volunteer samples may be biased in the other direction, with volunteers likely to be more sexually experienced, to report more exposure to erotic materials, and to be less worried about their sexual performance than non-volunteers. (Wolchik et al., 1985)

### **VALIDITY AND THE REAL WORLD**

A common reservation about the validity of the findings of laboratory research in the real world is the artificiality of the laboratory setting. The generalisability of research findings to the real world is termed the external validity of the research. It is a frequent criticism of laboratory research that its external validity is low.

Some studies expose participants (usually men) to the sexually explicit stimulus material and then give them the opportunity to be verbally or physically aggressive to a person (usually a woman) in an apparently unrelated experiment. An example of this is where, having watched sexually explicit material, a subject is asked to participate in an apparently unrelated *learning experiment* where he sits at a machine and has the opportunity to administer an electric shock to a subject whenever that subject makes a wrong response. (e.g. Sinclair et al., 1995)

Some commentators suggest that this is a flawed design as firstly, laboratory subjects do not really perceive themselves as inflicting harm when invited to perform artificial forms of aggression; and secondly, the laboratory lacks the sanctions against violence that exist in the real world. (Allen et al., 1995a; Donnerstein et al., 1987)

### **OVERSIMPLIFICATION**

Oversimplification is another criticism levelled at laboratory research. These research designs tend to ignore the extensive literature on the effects of the media which shows that the influence of the media can only be understood within a complex framework of other influences. Individual and cultural differences have been shown to be significant moderators of media influence, yet these are almost completely ignored in most laboratory research designs. Individual characteristics shown to moderate the effects of sexually explicit material include personality characteristics and home background; cultural

features of significance include attitudes to gender equality. (Malamuth et al., 2000)

### **DEMAND EFFECT**

A sample drawn from students who may already be familiar with the researchers' area of enquiry also runs the risk of a demand effect. This occurs when subjects are more likely to give particular responses because they are aware of the types of responses that are being sought, or they may try to guess the experimental hypothesis and attempt to confirm it. (Allen et al., 1995a; Seto et al., 2001)

Researchers' attitudes can be particularly important if experiments attempt to measure the extent of aggression that occurs after watching sexually explicit material. If research is designed to create opportunities to be aggressive, participants can logically see aggression as being condoned or even encouraged by the researcher. The converse has also proved to be true in some cases where subjects have been more inhibited about behaving aggressively when they have discerned that this is the behaviour being studied. (Donnerstein et al., 1987)

Laboratory research is not the only form of research subject to demand effects. (See Qualitative Research and Content Analysis under Section 4.3)

### **MEASURES**

#### ***Length of exposure to the sexually explicit material***

The length of exposure to the sexually explicit material in a laboratory research design is a matter which deserves attention. Some studies attempt to assess the effects of long-term exposure, but the way they define 'long-term' needs to be carefully examined.

Experimental research design, coming as it does from origins in scientific research, is attracted to the notion of dose and response, meaning that there is an interest in exploring the relationship of the response or effects to the 'dose' or the extent of exposure to sexually explicit material. Within the studies retrieved for this review there is a wide range of extent of exposure to sexually explicit material, and little discussion on how this 'dose' relates to use in the real world.

In a literature review on the effect of exposure to sexually explicit materials on attitudes toward rape, Linz, a leading researcher in the field, suggested that *short-term exposure* consisted of less than an hour, while *long-term exposure* was an hour or more. (Linz, 1989) In another study Padgett and his colleagues drew conclusions about *repeated exposure* based on a design where subjects watched an hour a day of sexually explicit material for four days. (Padgett et al., 1989)

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### *The nature of aggression measured*

For obvious ethical reasons real measures of aggression cannot be used in laboratory research. In their review of some of the methodological problems of research into the effects of sexually explicit material, Allen, D'Alessio and Brezgel question the nature of the aggression that is tested through these designs. They point out that subjects are given the opportunity to harm others, but it is not sexual harm. The subject does not rape, threaten rape or take any course of action of a sexual nature. The general design of these investigations is based on the untested assumption that there is no difference between non-sexual aggression and sexual aggression. (Allen et al., 1995a; Fukui & Westmore, 1994; Segal, 1990)

An example of a study that bases its conclusions on non-sexual measures of aggression is Sinclair, Lee, & Johnson (1995).

### **CONSTRAINTS AND ASSUMPTIONS**

Ciclitira (2002) shares many of the reservations about experimental research outlined here. In addition, she identifies two more methodological problems. The first is the assumption of heterosexuality that she says is a feature of most experimental designs, and the second is the lack of acknowledgement that the experience of watching pornography in a laboratory setting, with its inhibitions on masturbation, will differ significantly from the real world experience. She writes:

*Moreover, the experience of looking at an image in a laboratory without stimulating oneself sexually is bound to differ significantly from using the same image to achieve orgasm. Such a physical and emotional experience is usually central to an individual's use of pornography, but many factors, not least ethical, would prevent the replication of such an experience in the laboratory (p.2).*

### **ETHICAL ISSUES**

The increasing attention given to ethical issues since the 1980s has had significant implications for the methodology of research into the effects of sexually explicit material.

In many of the earlier experiments, subjects were kept completely in the dark about what was being tested, and were often deceived about the nature of the experiment (e.g. McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna 1990). With a new awareness of the need for experimental subjects to be fully informed, and questions being raised about the ethics of deliberately provoking human subjects, designs which test aggressive responses in the laboratory have become less common.

### **EDUCATIONAL BRIEFINGS**

Allen and his colleagues examined the effects of what they call educational briefings designed to give participants information about what they were about to see. The educational briefings they describe were designed to emphasise that the depictions provided in the sexually explicit material do not necessarily represent how women like to have sexual relations. They found that in all the cases they studied, the effects of educational briefings was to negate the impact of exposure to sexually explicit materials. This raises interesting questions about the effect of any pre-screening briefing, which may be indicated on ethical grounds, on the impact of subsequently viewed sexually explicit material. (Allen et al., 1996).

### **SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES IN EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH**

Experimental designs are prevalent in the research into the effects of sexually explicit material on human attitudes and behaviour. They are favoured largely because many factors can be controlled within the laboratory setting. The chief criticisms of the method are that its relevance to the real world is limited largely because subjects are often university students, the laboratory setting itself has an effect on the process, causal relationships are oversimplified, a wide variety of measures are used, and the experience of watching sexually explicit material in a laboratory decontextualises the experience in important ways.

## **4.2 Meta-analyses of experimental research**

Meta-analysis is a statistical technique that treats a number of methodologically sound studies of a particular phenomenon as a single grand experiment. Meta-analysis has a number of advantages. The small sample size of many studies means that they lack the statistical power needed to prove an effect. By combining the samples of several studies, meta-analysis can generate more statistically meaningful results. Meta-analysis can make generalisations to other populations more justifiable if effectiveness is demonstrable consistently across a range of studies. Results can be presented not as subjective discussions of association, trend and relationship, but as numerical values, with precise estimates of the intervention's effect. Meta-analysis includes certain protections that reduce opportunities for subjectivity. By introducing weighting, bigger and more methodologically sound studies can have more influence on the results than smaller weaker studies.

[www.shef.ac.uk/~scharr/ir/units/systrev/advdis.htm](http://www.shef.ac.uk/~scharr/ir/units/systrev/advdis.htm)



However, even meta-analyses of the same set of studies do not necessarily reach the same conclusions. One illustration of the extent of disagreement on the findings of the impact of sexually explicit material is found in two meta-analyses which examine the same set of research studies and reach different conclusions about what the set of studies says.

A widely-cited 1994 meta-analysis by Fisher and Grenier on the impact of violent pornography on men's fantasies, attitudes and behaviour towards women found no support for the harmful effects of violent sexually explicit material. Five years later leading researchers Malamuth and his colleagues conducted a meta-analysis on the same set of studies and disagreed with the findings of Fisher and Grenier. Although the effects of violent sexually explicit material are outside the scope of this review – the methodological issue is the same. Malamuth et al (2000) write:

*In our judgment, a careful examination of most of the studies listed by Fisher and Grenier (1994) as failing to confirm the effects of violent pornography actually reveals considerable evidence to the contrary (p.31).*

These authors went on to criticise the meta-analytic techniques used by Fisher and Grenier (1994).

Removing the issue from a dispute between different groups of researchers, Allen and his colleagues (1995a) suggest that differences in the methodology of meta-analyses explain such apparent contradictions, and will continue to do so unless rigour is applied to this statistical technique. They write:

*There is virtual unanimity amongst current methodologists that meta-analytic procedures should involve both some method of weighting by sample size and attempts to find homogenous averages (p.260).*

Even with methodological rigour, these authors say that the small sample size of many studies into the effects of pornography results in insufficient statistical power to distinguish small or medium sized effects. (Allen et al., 1995a; Fisher & Grenier, 1994)

Allen and his colleagues also point out that a consistent limitation of meta-analysis is that any limitations in the original data are carried through into the meta-analysis, that is to say that the conclusions are only as strong as the studies on which they are based. (Allen et al., 1995b)

Donnerstein and his colleagues (1987) caution that any assessment of the body of research evidence about the effects of pornography on attitudes and behaviour must also be undertaken in light of the fact that studies that obtain positive results are more likely to be published than those supporting the hypothesis that there is no difference

between the attitudes and behaviour of those exposed to pornography and those not exposed. In addition, any meta-analyst or reviewer of research is selective about the studies chosen for attention, and readers should be careful to critique the basis for inclusion of studies in the review. (Malamuth et al., 2000)

Meta-analysis has also become used in a less specific sense as an overview of research in a particular field.

### 4.3 Non-laboratory research designs

#### POPULATION LEVEL ANALYSES

Population level analysis is a form of what is known as correlational research. A correlation is a statistical index used to represent the strength of a relationship between two factors, how much and in what way those factors vary, and how well one factor can predict the other. Correlational research is popular as it can easily cope with a wide range of variables, it is relatively straightforward and an efficient use of resources, and it offers some predictive capability. The major disadvantages are that it can throw no light on causality, and even if a strong correlation between two variables is uncovered, the method can never completely rule out the possibility of a third variable being responsible for the effect. <http://trochim.human.cornell.edu/tutorial/lamar/ylamar.htm>

One method of trying to establish the effects of sexually explicit material is to track changes in sexual victimisation over time as patterns of availability or consumption of such material changes. This type of research can point to a pattern in changes between two variables. Examples of this type of population level analysis include Diamond and Uchiyama (1999), and Kutchinsky (1985, 1991).

The main methodological problem with correlational studies is that although the pattern may suggest that the variables are linked, this cannot in fact be proved conclusively by the research design. (Harris & Scott, 2002; Fukui & Westmore, 1994; Christensen, 1990) Christensen puts it this way:

*. . . there is a very strong correlation between lying down and dying, but there is hardly any evidence that the former produces the latter . . . even if it should ultimately become clear that rapists and other sex offenders do use more sexually explicit material, we would have no ground to believe that such use in any way causes their behaviour unless all other plausible explanations for the correlation could be ruled unlikely by the evidence (p.227).*

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A further criticism levelled at this research design in the area of sexually explicit material is that it ignores social changes which may lead to changes in patterns of reporting sex crimes, and therefore assumes that there will be a constant relationship between actual and reported sex crime. (Harris & Scott, 2002; Fukui & Westmore, 1994)

A second type of population level research is where a sample from a particular sub-group of the population – often convicted sex offenders – is taken and examined to see whether their use of sexually explicit material in childhood and adolescence differs from that of a sample of the non-offender population. These samples are often matched on demographic variables such as age and education.

Examples of this sort of research are Zgourides et al (1997), Bauserman (1996), Nutter and Kearns (1993).

### ***NATURALISTIC RESEARCH DESIGNS***

Naturalistic research designs attempt to describe or measure the behaviour of people as it occurs in their everyday lives. It frequently involves observation and systematic recording of behaviour. It is commonly used in sociology, anthropology, psychology and other social and biological sciences.

The advantages of naturalistic research are that it allows the behaviour of interest to be observed in a natural setting and may provide clues to future research. The disadvantages are that the researcher may never observe important behaviours, the observation may throw no light on motivation or causality, being observed may alter the behaviour, and that the recording of observations may be affected by the researcher's bias. <http://www.pitt.edu/~strauss/dev%20methods.htm>

Naturalistic designs reviewed in this report include the work of Nawy (1973) and Tewksbury (1990).

### ***QUALITATIVE RESEARCH***

Qualitative research is generally favoured by those who assert the importance of contextual, social and cultural factors in understanding sexual responses. One of the advantages of qualitative research is that it allows for in-depth exploration that is not limited to rigidly defined variables. It can address complex questions and is useful when effects or mechanisms of effect are not well understood. Qualitative research is often used for the exploratory phase of research, and quantitative methods can be used subsequently to confirm and test theories. Qualitative research is of particular value in the exploration of sensitive issues.

<http://www.okstate.edu/ag/agedcm4h/academic/aged5980a/5980/newpage21.htm>

Qualitative research techniques include individual interviews, focus group discussions, open-ended survey questions and the use of computer assisted self-interviewing. Qualitative research is often criticised by those favouring experimental research as being subjective and anecdotal, and with findings not able to be generalised to the population at large. Qualitative researchers themselves acknowledge drawbacks to the method, which include researchers having control over the interpretation of people's words; the potential for responses to be taken out of context; the difficulties of undertaking and demonstrating rigorous data analysis; and, such respect for individual expression that insufficient attention is paid to relevant underlying issues. (Ciclitira, 2001)

Examples of qualitative research included in this review include Shaw (1999) and Jensen (1998).

### ***CONTENT ANALYSES***

The last main type of non-laboratory research is content analysis. Initially developed to examine texts for the frequency with which identified terms occurred, this form of research developed into a more sophisticated analysis, focusing on concepts rather than simply on words. As it can be applied to examine any piece of writing or occurrence of recorded communication, content analysis is currently used in a wide array of fields, ranging from marketing and media studies, ethnography and cultural studies, sociology and political science, psychology and cognitive science, and many other fields of inquiry. Some of the advantages of content analysis are that it can provide insight into complex models of human thought and language use as well as valuable historical and cultural insights over time through analysis of texts or publications. <http://writing.colostate.edu/references/research/content/pop2a.cfm>

The interest in using content analysis in the study of the effects of sexually explicit material has arisen from definitional problems and the lack of a common agreement on which aspects of the material are degrading. In its different forms it attempts to throw light on some of the debates about whether it is sexual content per se or degrading sexual content that produces harmful effects, and what it is that constitutes degrading sexually explicit material. Examples of this type of research include Barron (2000) and Cowan and Dunn (1994).

The chief methodological criticism directed towards this type of research is to do with the subjectivity of the assessment of what is degrading in the absence of an empirical foundation for what is perceived as degrading.

***SUMMARY OF NON-LABORATORY RESEARCH  
DESIGNS***

The research uncovered for this review included four main types of non-laboratory research design, each with its own advantages and methodological shortcomings. Population level correlational studies readily allow for the exploration of links between a wide range of variables, but are unable to prove conclusively that any association identified is a causal one. Naturalistic studies allow behaviour to be observed in natural setting, but frequently cannot throw light on motivation or causality. Qualitative research, frequently undertaken by women with women as subjects, can provide a depth of understanding and insight on a sensitive topic, but is criticised for being subjective and anecdotal and for problems with rigorous analysis and presentation of results. Content analysis can throw light on some of the subtle definitional issues in determining what is degrading and non-degrading sexually explicit material, but the subjectivity of the assessment of what is and is not degrading is perceived as a methodological weakness.



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## 5.0 Findings from laboratory research

This section of the report discusses the findings of research undertaken in the laboratory setting. However, it also includes some findings from meta-analyses which base their conclusions heavily but not exclusively on research using students in laboratory settings.

### 5.1 Attitudes

The influence of sexually explicit material on men's attitudes has been of much interest to researchers. Surprisingly, within the body of research there has been little attention paid to the conflicting theories on if and how attitudes influence behaviour.

One of the early theories about the relationship of attitudes to behaviour was Fishbein and Ajzen's 1975 theory of reasoned action. The theory of reasoned action actually applies to the prediction of intentions, as opposed to behaviour itself. According to the theory, if behaviour is under conscious control, then the intention to perform an action will correlate very highly with the action itself. [http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/tfhrc/safety/pubs/96143/appa/body\\_appa\\_07.html](http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/tfhrc/safety/pubs/96143/appa/body_appa_07.html)

Although the theory of reasoned action has become less popular it does find support in the meta-analysis of Kim and Hunter (1993). This meta-analysis of attitude-behaviour research revealed that there appears to be a mediator between attitudes and behaviour, which the authors call behavioural intentions. Intentions are indications of how hard people are willing to try, and of how much effort they are willing to exert to perform the behaviour.

*... attitudes influence behaviour primarily through the influence of behavioural intention. Available evidence also supports the idea that intentions are close antecedents of overt actions. If intentions are indeed the immediate determinants of behaviour, the predictive validity of intentions should be greater than that of attitudes (p.332).*

A currently influential theory of the influence of attitudes on behaviour is Fazio's MODE model. This model suggests a dual process by which some attitudes automatically influence behaviour, and others do so only when the person makes a conscious decision to act in accordance with their attitudes. Fazio and his colleagues produced some evidence that stronger attitudes automatically influence behaviour. <http://www.psyc.abdn.ac.uk/homedir/amilne/Implicit%5Ccourse-overview.htm>

Another insight into whether and how sexually explicit material influences attitudes and or behaviour comes from research which shows that a substantial majority of adults in the United States see others as more adversely affected by such material than they are themselves. Known as the 'third-person effect', this tendency for people to think others are more influenced by mass media than they are themselves has received plenty of research support. (Gunther, 1995)

#### *ATTITUDES TO RAPE*

One hypothesis which has received a great deal of attention from researchers is that use of sexually explicit material can lead to rape. As it is not possible for this to be tested experimentally, a number of scales have been developed which claim to measure either men's acceptance of forced or coercive sex, or men's proclivity to rape. The most widely used of these is the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Burt, 1980).

As rape is a violent act, much of the research has examined the impact of violent sexually explicit material on rape proclivity or attitudes towards rape. Less attention has been paid to the impact of non-violent sexually explicit material on rape, although it is this material that is the focus of this review.

#### *Support for attitudinal effects*

Leading researchers Linz (1989), and Allen and colleagues (1995b), concluded on the basis of their meta-analyses that watching non-violent pornography affects attitudes to rape, but that the effects are of a much smaller magnitude than for violent pornography, or in some cases than for violent material that is not pornographic.

Linz reviewed some early work by Donnerstein and his colleagues which compared the effect of material that was violent and pornographic, violent but not pornographic, and pornographic but not violent. The results indicated that both the material that was violent and pornographic, and the material that was violent but not pornographic produced significantly higher scores on the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale than the material that was pornographic but not violent. (Donnerstein, cited in Linz, 1989)

Linz's (1989) own conclusion from his review of the research was that studies of short-term exposure – which he defines as less than one hour's viewing – find some effects, but they are limited. He writes:

*The studies that have compared subjects exposed to sexually aggressive communications with subjects exposed to non-aggressive sexually explicit communications are much less ambiguous. In each case, they clearly indicate that the non-violent material results in fewer antisocial attitudes and beliefs about rape than violent materials (p.63).*

Linz found more inconsistency among studies in which participants have *long-term* exposure – which he defines as longer than an hour (Linz, 1989). The issue around the definition of long and short-term exposure is examined under Measures in Section 4.1.

Similarly, a meta-analysis into exposure to pornography and acceptance of rape myths undertaken by Allen, and colleagues found that although violent pornography had more effect than non-violent pornography, they could still detect an effect for non-violent pornographic material on rape myth acceptance. (Allen, et al., 1995b)

One of the criticisms of the research that finds no effects from non-violent sexually explicit material is that conclusions are usually drawn based on a study which compares attitudes of participants who have watched either violent or non-violent sexually explicit material. Critics of this design say that what these researchers are looking for, and finding, is the effect that watching violence has on attitudes, and that such a design does not measure the effect of degradation on attitudes to sexual coercion and rape. Milburn undertook a study which compared the effects of viewing non-violent pornography which *objectified and degraded women*, and scenes with no sexual content. Using this comparison, those men who had watched the sexually objectifying video had attitudes that were much more rape accepting than the other group. (Milburn, 2000)

Frale and her colleagues approached the study of the effect of pornography's effect on attitudes rather differently. They surveyed 600 male university students about both pornography use and attitudes to women, and compared the attitudes of those who had used pornography more often with those of other students. They did note that in general the sample reported little experience with sexual materials, and that those men designated *high exposure* were still relatively infrequent users. However, they did detect differences in attitudes between the *high exposure* group and the others which led them to the conclusion that men with a relatively high exposure to sexually explicit material see a world filled with masculine men, sexy women and gender differences. (Frale, Johnson & Kellman, 1997)

In an attempt to differentiate between the effects of degrading material and the effects of sexually explicit material Golde and his colleagues showed one of four vignettes to a small group of college students and then rated them on a number of scales which tested rape supportive attitudes, examined their attitudes to women, and placed them on the hypermasculinity index. These researchers found that the videos in which women were

degraded appeared to foster rape supportive attitudes whereas sexual explicitness had no effect. From this they concluded that it was the degradation within sexually explicit material that affected men's attitudes rather than the sexual explicitness. (Golde et al., 2000)

#### *Lack of evidence for attitudinal effects*

There are studies which provide evidence to support the view that non-violent sexually explicit material is not associated with attitudes indicating acceptance of rape, or with rape proclivity. Meta-analyses by Pollard (1995), and by Fukui and Westmore (1994) reach this conclusion, as do the studies by Bauserman, Padgett, Boeringer, Linz and Donnerstein, and Demare outlined below.

Bauserman examined the effects three types of video material on men's sexual attitudes and beliefs. His three categories were egalitarian, sexist, and sexually aggressive video material. Against his expectations, Bauserman found that none of the three types of material had any impact on male participants' attitudes as measured by the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale or the Attitudes to Sexual Aggression scale. Bauserman also measured participants' evaluative and cognitive reactions, and found that these reactions were most negative following sexually aggressive scenes, and most positive following egalitarian scenes. Bauserman concluded that although attitude change did not occur negative reactions to sexist and aggressive scenes may lead to the rejection of the implicit antisocial messages in such portrayals. (Bauserman, 1998)

Padgett and his colleagues also could not detect any differences in the attitudes of men exposed to non-violent sexually explicit material from the attitudes of those who had watched a similar amount of video material with no sexual content. (Padgett, Brislin-Slutz & Neal, 1989)

Boeringer (1994) conducted a study with over 500 undergraduate male students which exposed them to three types of hard-core pornography: non-violent pornography, violent pornography, and rape pornography. On the measures he used, which included a measure of physical and nonphysical sexual aggression/coercion and the Likelihood of Rape or Force scale developed by Malamuth in 1981, he found strong associations between both violent pornography and rape pornography and attitudes indicating acceptance of rape and force in sex. Exposure to non-violent pornography was not predictive of any form of sexual coercion or rape proclivity. Boeringer writes:

*Material that presents even very explicit sexuality, but does not frame it in a violent or nonconsensual context was a benign factor when examined net of the other exposure variables (p.299).*

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Demare and his colleagues conducted a study with a similarly large group of students which through the use of structural equation modelling led to the conclusion that there was no evidence to link non-violent pornography with actual or potential sexual aggression, and that it is not merely exposure to sexually explicit material that encourages or facilitates sexual aggression, but the combination of sex and violence in pornography that has this effect. (Demare et al., 1993)

Krafka, working with Linz and Donnerstein, also exposed participants – in this case women – to material that was either sexually violent, sexually explicit but non-violent, or violent but only mildly sexually explicit, and then tested their attitudes to female victims of rape. Groups which had been exposed to violent images, either sexual or non-sexual were less sensitive to women rape victims than were other film subjects. From this she concluded that sexual explicitness does not affect attitudes to rape, but that violence does. (Krafka et al., 1997)

An older study by Linz and Donnerstein tested whether increased exposure to sexually degrading depictions of women affected subjects' beliefs about rape or sexual objectification of women. They found that, in contrast to the men who had watched a sexually violent film, those who had watched a non-violent sexually explicit film were no different in their beliefs about rape or attitudes to women from a comparable group of men who had not watched either film. (Linz & Donnerstein, 1988)

PhD student Monk also found, in a study of over 1200 undergraduate students that exposure to sexually explicit videos did not significantly affect either male or female participants' beliefs or acceptance of violence against women. (Monk, 1994)

#### **SUMMARY OF LABORATORY RESEARCH INTO ATTITUDINAL EFFECTS**

As with so many areas of research into the effects of sexually explicit material, there is no consensus about effects of sexually explicit material on attitudes to women, to sex or to sexual violence. It is clear that there is more evidence linking sexually violent material with rape acceptance than there is linking non-violent sexually explicit material with rape acceptance. Many studies have drawn conclusions from research designs which have compared the attitudinal effects of watching sexually violent material with those of watching non-violent sexually explicit material. Less work has been done in the area of comparing how attitudes are affected by degrading and non-degrading non-violent sexually explicit material and on the effect on women's attitudes.

## **5.2 Behaviour**

As discussed earlier, there has been increasing awareness that the laboratory studies testing for aggression after watching sexually explicit material have some serious methodological and ethical limitations. This type of study has largely gone out of favour in the last 15 years and for that reason few were retrieved in the search for this review which focused predominantly on research reported since 1990, despite a continuing interest in the links between sexually explicit material use and behaviour.

#### **SUPPORT FOR BEHAVIOURAL EFFECTS**

A meta-analysis undertaken by Allen, D'Alessio and Brezgel found 30 studies into the effects of pornography on aggression which met their exacting methodological requirements. From the studies they coded the pornographic content as either a) nudity, b) non-violent sexual behaviour, or c) violent sexual behaviour (behaviour with the intent to injure, including sadomasochism and bondage, or against a person's agreement). Although the meta-analysis contains no report of how behavioural aggression was measured in these studies, the authors concluded quite categorically that exposure to pornography increases behavioural aggression, and that while there were significant differences between the effects of the nudity material and the other types of content, no significant difference could be found between the effects of the non-violent sexual material and the violent sexual material. While affirming their findings, these authors do canvas the shortcomings of laboratory research quite thoroughly, in particular the sanctioned nature of laboratory aggression. (Allen et al., 1995a).

Malamuth, Addison and Koss (2000) reviewed several meta-analyses of research, effectively providing the reader with a meta-analysis of meta-analyses. These authors were much more convinced by the methodology of those meta-analyses that found both violent and non-violent pornography has an effect on attitudes and behaviour (Allen et al., 1995a; Allen et al., 1995b), than by those which did not (Fisher & Grenier, 1994). They wrote:

*Meta-analyses of the experimental literature show that exposure to both non-violent pornography and violent pornography affects both aggressive attitudes and behaviours, and that violent pornography does so to a greater degree (p.52).*

In a frequently cited meta-analysis, Oddone-Paolucci and her colleagues (2000) drew strong conclusions from the 46 studies they examined. They wrote:

*The results are clear and consistent: exposure to pornographic material puts one at increased risk for developing sexually deviant tendencies, committing sexual offences, experiencing difficulties in one's intimate relationship, and accepting the rape myth (p.52).*

PhD student Crossman investigated the relationship between sexual aggression and date rape. Crossman measured anger, hostility, psychopathology, impulsivity, peer pressure and pornography use. Her research design included administering a questionnaire to 480 male university students. From their self-reports she found that 37% of her sample reported using some sort of verbal pressure to obtain sexual activity, 2.4% admitted using force to obtain sexual intercourse, and 8 (1.6%) of the 480 men admitted to raping a woman. Those men who had used verbal or physical force were more likely to have difficulty expressing anger, to have used pornography and to experience pressure from their peers. (Crossman, 1994)

#### **EVIDENCE AGAINST BEHAVIOURAL EFFECTS**

Confusingly, the same author at times reaches different conclusions. Malamuth, this time in conjunction with Donnerstein, reviewed the effects of pornography on aggression. After completing a detailed analysis of different types of sexually explicit material, these authors concluded:

*First, it becomes obvious that there are many types of pornographic materials. Those that are devoid of aggressive images seem to have little or no effect upon observers. We feel that this is very important to emphasise (Donnerstein & Malamuth, 1997, p.45).*

Supporting Donnerstein and Malamuth's conclusions, Pollard's (1995) meta-analysis found that there have been no reports of laboratory aggression produced after exposure to pornography that is not specifically aggressive. He concluded that:

*. . . although several types of materials may produce behaviour orientation toward, and/or attitudinal support for, sexual aggression, this is a function of the aggression and dominance themes rather than the explicitness of the sexual cues (p.200).*

Although not using an experimental design, Monk, another PhD student, used a large group of students to test whether exposure to sexually explicit stimuli had any influence on coercion within dating relationships. She found little evidence that pornography use correlated with

behaviour in dating relationships, and somewhat more evidence that it influenced attitudes and beliefs about sex roles and sex interactions. (Monk, 1994)

#### **SUMMARY OF LABORATORY RESEARCH INTO BEHAVIOURAL EFFECTS**

For methodological and ethical reasons laboratory research into the behavioural effects of sexually explicit material has been less common in the last 15 years than between the mid 1970s and the late 1980s. Reviewed here are meta-analyses of research, much of which was undertaken many years ago. Once again the results conflict, with some meta-analyses finding that non-violent sexually explicit material does affect behaviour and others concluding that it does not.

### **5.3 Those most likely to be affected**

A group of studies retrieved for this review work from the premise that some people are more likely to be affected by the use of sexually explicit material than others.

Malamuth, Addison and Koss integrated the findings of several large meta-analytic summaries of experimental and naturalistic research, as well as conducting their own statistical analysis on a large representative sample of the research and found evidence of characteristics which mediate the effect of pornography use. These characteristics include: cultural background, particularly cultures that emphasise or de-emphasise gender equality; home background, particularly an open or restricted approach to sexuality; personality characteristics and predispositions, particularly levels of hostility and intelligence; the content of the sexually explicit material, particularly whether it is violent or not; the current temporary emotional state of the person, specifically whether they are angry or not; and the environment in which exposure occurs, particularly whether or not it permits or inhibits aggression. The authors found that the most powerful of these mediators are men's personality characteristics and predispositions. (Malamuth, Addison & Koss, 2000)

#### **CHARACTERISTICS OF MEN LIKELY TO BE AFFECTED**

The next two laboratory studies described are those which examine the impact of men's characteristics on their responses to sexually explicit material.

McKenzie-Mohr and Zanna (1990) selected 60 male university students from a group of 300 who had been pretested with the Bem Sex Role Inventory. Thirty of the students were masculine sex-typed, the rest were



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designated *androgynous* as they displayed *both masculine and feminine attributes*. Subjects were then randomly assigned to watch a pornographic video clip or a video clip of equal length with no sexual content. In a second, apparently unrelated, experiment the subjects had to answer questions from a female interviewer who was not aware of either their sex-typing or the video clip they had seen. Following the interview, the female interviewer assessed the extent to which the subjects had shown sexual interest or related to her in a sexual manner. The subjects proceeded to a third apparently unconnected experiment related to memory in which they were asked to recall physical details about the woman who had previously interviewed them.

The female interviewer rated the masculine sex-typed men who had viewed the pornographic video as significantly more sexually motivated than the other subjects. The masculine sex-typed men who had viewed the pornographic video recalled more about the physical features of the interviewer, and less about the subject of the interview than the other subjects. The authors of this much-cited study concluded that the group of masculine sex-typed males who had watched the pornographic video behaved in a way that was both cognitively and behaviourally sexist. (McKenzie-Mohr & Zanna, 1990)

Jansma, working in conjunction with Linz and other colleagues conducted very similar research which also exposed men to either a film with no sexual content or to a sexually explicit but non-violent film, and then put them in a situation where they interacted with women. After the interaction the male participants were asked to rate the women's intellectual competence, sexual interest, sexual attractiveness and sexual permissiveness. The women, in turn, were asked to rate the men's sexual interest, dominance and their own feelings of degradation during the interaction. Exposure to the different types of films did not have any impact on men's rating or on the assessment women made of their responses. However, when the researchers examined the findings in light of the men's sex role orientation, they found that men they designated sex-typed (in this case men who rated higher on masculine traits as measured by the Bem Sex Role Inventory) judged women's interest in them to be higher than the non sex-typed men did after watching film with no sexual content; but the sex-typed men who had watched a sexually explicit film subsequently rated women's sexual interest in them lower than did the non sex-typed men. The same pattern appeared in male participants' assessment of the women's intellectual competence – sex-typed men viewed women as more intellectually competent after viewing a non-sexual film, and less competent after they had viewed a sexually explicit film. Unlike the McKenzie-Mohr study, the women in this study recorded no differences in their evaluations of the men regardless of whether or not they were sex-typed, and irrespective of the film they had seen.

These authors concluded that the results showed more attention should be paid to the interaction between film content and individual characteristics. (Jansma et al., 1997)

The studies below yield some evidence of a two-way interaction between personal characteristics and sexually explicit material; not only does sexually explicit material affect some people more than others, but some people or types or people may be more attracted to sexually explicit material, or to some kinds of sexually explicit material, than others. This is of direct interest to the Office of Film and Literature Classification.

In a study of personality, individual differences and preferences for sexual media Bogaert and his colleagues, sampled male university students, found that men of lower intelligence and who were higher in aggressive and anti-social tendencies had a greater preference for violent sexual stimuli than men who were higher in intelligence and lower in aggressive and anti-social tendencies. A later study using a sample of male university students assessed participants' IQ before assigning them to view one of a number of films. Bogaert then put them into an apparently unrelated situation where they had to work with a female confederate. Lower IQ men who had watched a sexually violent film were more sexually suggestive to the woman, and moved physically closer to her than those who had watched a non-violent erotic film. Men of higher IQ who had watched the two different types of film did not display the same variability in behaviour. (Bogaert, 2001; Bogaert, Woodward & Hafer, 1999)

Sinclair and his colleagues examined the effect of contextual factors on men's responses to sexually explicit material. These researchers designed an experiment that required men to watch sexually explicit videos, and then used a male confederate to either indicate or not indicate that the video degraded women. Participants were then asked to take part in an apparently unrelated experiment where they were provided with the opportunity to act aggressively towards a female confederate. The results indicated that the interpretation provided by the male confederate strongly affected viewers responses to the sexually explicit video. (Sinclair, Lee & Johnson, 1995)

### **THE EFFECTS ON WOMEN**

In a study of the effects of sexually explicit material on women, Senn and Radtke, collected extensive data on the personal characteristics and sexual histories of almost 100 female university students before randomly assigning them to watch either violent pornography, sexist non-violent pornography, non-sexist, non-violent erotic or nonsexual material. The results clearly showed that women evaluated some types of sexually explicit materials positively and that their negative evaluations were reserved for material that

was sexist or violent in nature. Differences in women's attitudes appeared to be best explained by past sexual experiences and past experiences of pornography. The greater the number of forceful sexual experiences reported by the women, the more negative their assessment of the violent pornography, and the more positive their assessment of the sexual images which contained no sexism or violence, compared to other women in the study. (Senn & Radtke, 1990)

In another laboratory based study of the effects of pornography on both men and women, Clark tested responses to a hypothetical scenario about a partner's use of sexually explicit material. Although there were gender differences, in that men were more accepting of a partner's hypothetical use of sexually explicit material than were women, overall, both genders indicated acceptance of use of sexually explicit material. (Clark & Wiederman, 2000)

#### ***SUMMARY OF RESEARCH INTO THOSE MOST LIKELY TO BE AFFECTED***

There has been strong research interest in the characteristics of men who are more likely than other men to be affected by sexually explicit material. This research has centred around the concept of sex-typing which differentiates men on the basis of whether they display solely masculine characteristics, or a combination of masculine and feminine characteristics, on a sex-typing index. There is some evidence that men who are strongly masculine sex-typed are more likely to be affected by sexually explicit material than those who are less strongly sex-typed. One study suggested that men are likely to be cued in their responses to sexually explicit material by the responses of those watching with them. A study of the effects on women of watching sexually explicit material found an association between women's negative or forceful sexual experience and their negative assessment of violent pornography.

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## 6.0 Findings from other types of research

As discussed in the methodology section, research into the effects of sexually explicit material has been dominated by studies undertaken in laboratory conditions with groups of university students. These have been reviewed in section 5.0 of this report.

Other research into the effects of sexually explicit material includes population level studies, naturalistic research with frequent users of sexually explicit material, qualitative and survey research into women's perceptions of sexually explicit material and its effects, and content analyses. This section also reviews a small body of literature on the benefits of sexually explicit material.

### 6.1 Population level correlational studies

#### GENERAL POPULATION STUDIES

Population level studies explore the effect the availability or use of sexually explicit material can have on society or groups within it. Comparing the availability of sexually explicit material with the incidence of rape in a society over time, some researchers believe can throw light on the association between sexually explicit material and sexual violence. Kutchinsky, a Danish professor of criminology, is the most widely cited proponent of this type of research. (Kutchinsky, 1991, 1985)

Much of Kutchinsky's work is based on a comparison between the availability of sexually explicit material and reported sex crimes in Denmark, Sweden, West Germany and the United States from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. Denmark, Sweden, and West Germany legalised sexually explicit material in the late 1960s or early 1970s, and Kutchinsky reports that although not legalised, sexually explicit material was also freely available in the United States during that time. He reports that the volume of hard-core pictorial sexually explicit material available increased in all four countries from the late 1960s to the mid 1970s, after which video rapidly became the favourite medium. Kutchinsky's theory is that if sexually explicit material leads to sexually violent behaviour, there should be an increase in reported sex crimes in countries where sexually explicit material became more readily available. Examination of rape statistics in all four countries revealed that none of the countries saw an increase in reported rape that was any greater than the increase in non-sexual assaults, and in fact, in the three European countries, the rate of increase in reported rape was less than the increase in non-sexual assault. He concludes:

*In sum, the aggregate data on rape and other violent or sexual offences from four countries where sexually explicit material has become widely and easily available during the period we have dealt with would seem to exclude, beyond any reasonable doubt, that this availability has had any detrimental effects in the form of increased sexual violence (Kutchinsky, 1991, p.62).*

Diamond and Uchiyama followed a similar method in their study of the relationship between the availability of pornography and reported sex crimes in Japan. They found that not only was there no increase in reported sex crime in Japan between 1972 and 1995, a period during which they are able to document an increase in the availability of pornography, but that there was in fact a decrease in reported sex crime in this period. These authors report a dramatic drop in the incidence of rape, from 4,677 reported cases in 1972, to 1,500 reported cases in 1995. The rate of other sexual assaults also declined. They conclude that while it cannot be claimed that the drop in sexual offending was a result of the increased availability of pornography, the study does make it difficult to make a case for the availability of pornography leading to an increase in sexual violence. (Diamond & Uchiyama, 1999)

In an article entitled Does censorship make a difference? Kimmel and Linders tracked the decline in circulation of nine pornographic magazines in six North American cities from 1979 to 1989, and matched it with trends in reported rape rates in those cities. These found that as the circulation of the magazines decreased, and indeed a number of them went out of publication, rape rates climbed. These findings led them to conclude that reducing the availability of sexually explicit material is unlikely to reduce the rate of reported sex crime. The authors acknowledged that the study does not take account of the increasing availability of other forms of pornographic media, which is much more difficult to measure. (Kimmel & Linders, 1996)

In a study which reached similar conclusions, Winick and Evans examined rates of reported sex crimes during times when state pornography laws were not being enforced in four states of the United States. They too found no evidence that sex offences increased during the period of greater availability of sexually explicit material. (Winick & Evans, 1996)

On the basis of their review of the work of Kutchinsky and several other researchers, Bauserman, and Murrin and Laws concluded that there is evidence that the free availability of pornography, even violent pornography does not lead inevitably to higher rates, however they do caution that these correlations do not prove that sex crime rates are affected by the availability of pornography. (Bauserman, 1996; Murrin & Laws, 1990)



## SEX OFFENDERS

Another approach to investigating possible links between sexually explicit material and sexual aggression is to examine the backgrounds of people convicted of sexual offences to see whether they have used sexually explicit material to any greater extent than non-offenders.

Three reviews of research failed to find evidence that sex offenders used sexually explicit material differently from other comparable groups. Bauserman reviewed this type of research and concluded that sex offenders typically do not have earlier or more unusual exposure to pornography in childhood or adolescence compared to non-offenders. Nutter and Kearns also looked at pornography use in the background of sex offenders. Although they found that sex offenders began masturbating earlier, and used sexually explicit material more frequently in their first masturbatory experience, they found no differences between adult sex offenders' use of pornography, and that of non-sex offenders in their study. Seto and colleagues also found no evidence that pornography played a larger or different role in the lives of sex offenders than of other groups. (Seto et al., 2001; Bauserman, 1996; Nutter & Kearns, 1993)

Zgourides, Monto and Harris reached a somewhat different conclusion when studying juvenile sex offenders. Although they found that juvenile offenders did not differ from other adolescent males in their frequency of watching pornographic videos, the offenders reported looking at pornographic magazines more frequently than non-offenders. (Zgourides, Monto & Harris, 1997)

Murrin and Laws reviewed a number of research studies on the role of pornography in the life of sex offenders and found some evidence that their use of the material differed from that of non-offenders in their sample, and furthermore, that patterns of use differed between types of sex offenders. Evidence suggests, they say, that pornography plays a much more important role in the life of the paedophile than of the rapist. (Murrin & Laws, 1990)

Support for this is to be found in a study by leading researchers Allen, D'Alessio and Emmers-Sommers who found that although convicted sex offenders did not use pornography more often than non-offenders, they were more aroused by it and more likely to commit some form of sexual act afterwards. (Allen, D'Alessio & Emmers-Sommers, 2000, cited in Harris & Scott, 2002)

Although not strictly a study of sex offenders, Busch and her colleagues undertook research on the male customers of female prostitutes. With the argument that most female prostitutes report having experienced sexual violence at the hands of their customers, these researchers claim that prostitutes' customers are likely to be a group that contains

an over-representation of men who have used sexual violence against women. The study examined a range of characteristics of a sample of over 1300 men arrested for trying to hire prostitutes on the street. The study found that lower levels of education, conservative attitudes to sexuality, more frequent pornography use, and traumatic life experiences may be related to some men's ability to justify violence against women. (Busch et al., 2002)

## SUMMARY OF POPULATION LEVEL RESEARCH

Population level research, which tracks the availability of sexually explicit material against the rate of reported rape or sexual assault in a society over time, offers little support to the theory that sexually explicit material leads to sexual violence. In general, studies of sex offenders' use of sexually explicit material do not suggest that sex offenders are exposed to sexually explicit material earlier or use it more often than other men, but there are some indications that some sex offenders find sexually explicit material more arousing or might use it differently from non-offenders.

## 6.2 Naturalistic studies and other research with frequent users

We know little about who regularly uses sexually explicit material, and the impact of such material on them. Use and users was a key area of interest for this literature review, because, as one writer puts it:

*For every piece of evidence 'proving' an effect of some kind there is a counter-argument disputing it on methodological or other grounds. The study of how people use sexually explicit material, on the other hand, the gratifications they derive from that consumption, and the meanings which sexual representations have for them, allows us to cut through the mystifications of behavioural psychology and statistical social science to reach the level of individual experience and to ask: what does mediated sex mean to people in the context of their actual lives and experiences? (McNair, 1996, p.89).*

However, surprisingly little research was available for this review on users, or on the use of sexually explicit material in their lives. One of the reasons for this may lie in the difficulty of identifying frequent users of sexually explicit material, a problem some researchers have tried to address by designing research around points of distribution.

Australian sociologist Potter (1996) conducted a nationwide survey of a sample of 380 mail order and adult shop purchasers of X-rated videos. The sample was drawn from those who had purchased X-rated videos from a nationwide distributor in 1992. The stated purpose of the research was to compare information about 'real world' consumers of X-rated videos against the 18 to 21 year-old

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North American male student populations used in most laboratory research. A summary of the responses showed that 90% were male, and that the mean age for men was 39, and for women 34. Forty-one percent of the sample reported being in intact marriages, 33% had never married, 8% were in gay relationships. In all, 56% were currently in some form of live-in relationship. Nearly a third of respondents had children under 18 living with them. The survey respondents reported higher educational attainment than the Australian general population, with almost half reporting some form of tertiary educational achievement. Just over half reported no religious affiliation.

Just over a third of the sample reported watching an X-rated video at least once a week, 17% watched three or more such videos a week, and 4% reported watching X-rated videos on a daily basis. In total, just over half the sample reported watching X-rated videos at least once a week. The average age at which women first viewed an X-rated video was 23, the median age was 20. For men, the average age of first viewing was 24, and the median age was also 20. Potter's (1996) research included four questions designed to gauge how widely the use of X-rated material was known to others. In most cases few of the respondent's family, co-workers or friends knew about the activity. Potter summarises his findings thus:

*In sum, the sociodemographic profile of purchasers of X-rated videos in Australia participating in this research does not fit the 'rain coat brigade' image often encountered in the popular and/or academic literature. The picture which emerges here is of working- and middle-class persons who enjoy a high attainment in education, occupation, and income in Australian society . . . . It cannot be said that these people are representative of all those who regularly purchase or consume X-rated videos. But it is certainly different than the general population of North American university students and community volunteers upon whom most of our social science data are based, or what might be expected from some feminist, popular and social science literature (p.241).*

Davies reported on a telephone survey of almost 200 men who rented X-rated videos from a single outlet during a three week period in 1988 in a large metropolitan county in the southern United States. The number of X-rated videos the men rented ranged from one to 59, although the most common number rented in the three week period was three videos. Those who had rented three or more videos were defined as regular users. As well as being asked about how frequently they rented X-rated videos, participants were asked for their views on: legislation promoting equal rights for women; the appropriate punishment for marital rape; and, appropriate sanctions for date rape. Davies found that

men who rented greater numbers of sexually explicit videos were not any more likely to have negative attitudes to equal rights for women, or to condone sexual violence than those who rented fewer such videos. (Davies, 1997)

An older study which took a similar approach managed to collect 250 completed questionnaires from patrons of adult movie theatres in San Francisco. The demographic characteristics of the viewers who completed the survey were quite similar to those in Potter's research, described above. Ninety-five percent were male, 82% were white, and 58% were married. These patrons were also well-educated, comparatively highly paid, and employed in white collar occupations. The study included questions about the use of pornography which revealed that just over a third of respondents reported increased sexual activity with viewing erotic material, and 42% reported enjoying sexual relations more since viewing erotic material. 20% said they attended adult theatres to become 'primed' before having sex with regular partners. Only 16% of this sample reported masturbating after viewing erotic material. (Nawy, 1973)

Barwick's research identified a group of frequent users of sexually explicit videos as those who had watched sexually explicit videos 20 times or more in the last three years. Compared with the rest of the sample of 140 adults, the frequent viewers found fewer activities in sexually explicit videos degrading, favoured less restrictive classifications, and were less likely to consider that watching sexually explicit material would result in harm to individuals or to society. Sharp and Joslyn, in their analysis of data from a national opinion survey, also found that those who had more experience of sexually explicit material were less concerned about its negative effects. (Barwick, 2002; Sharp & Joslyn, 2001)

In an attempt to create a typology of frequent users of sexually explicit material, Tewksbury used the sociological concept of social identities to categorise users. Tewksbury, observed the clientele of an adult bookstore video peepshow which was equipped in such a way as to make it apparent that sexual activity took place there. On the basis of his observations Tewksbury identified five categories of clients of the store. The first category he identified as *porno watchers*, who arrived alone for the express purpose of watching the sexually explicit material, and who had little interaction with others during their visit. *Masturbators*, he said had the primary goal of seeking sexual gratification through masturbation. They tended to stay on the premises for a much shorter time, and a subset of them selected booths in high traffic areas of the store where there was a greater chance that they would be observed. *Sex seekers* were men seeking others to satisfy their sexual

desires and use the bookstore as a means of meeting potential sexual partners. *Sex doers* were the men *sex seekers* were seeking, they were responsive to the verbal and non-verbal cues of the *sex seekers*. The final group he called the *naïve*. These were patrons unaware of the activities, purposes and norms of the bookstore, and whose lack of awareness of the norms often created difficulties for them. Tewksbury's report contains details of the observational data from which he developed the typology and allocated patrons to one of the five groups. (Tewksbury, 1990)

In a study challenging the hypothesis that frequent viewing of pornographic material leads to negative attitudes to women, the views of a sample of male and female university students were compared with those of a small sample of patrons at an adult theatre. Despite far greater exposure to sexually explicit material, the patrons of the adult theatre expressed more positive attitudes towards women and women's issues than the university students. The authors suggest that the results were more likely to be explained by the age of the respective samples than with the amount of sexually explicit material they had viewed. (Padgett, Brislin-Slutz & Neal, 1989)

Jensen (1998) conducted interviews with men about their use of sexually explicit material. He interviewed a group of residents in a sex offender treatment programme in Minneapolis, and another group who had responded to a classified advertisement seeking male interview subjects who *read or view any sexually explicit material*. Of the narratives he presented Jensen writes:

*Again, it is important to be clear about what the narratives can tell us. Such accounts do not prove that sexually explicit material causes sexual violence. They do however show how sexually explicit material is implicated in the abusive behaviour of some men . . . . For these men, pornography was an important factor in shaping a male dominant view of sexuality and in several cases the material contributed to the men's difficulty in separating fantasy and reality. Pornography was also used by at least one of the men to initiate a victim and break down a young girl's resistance to sexual activity. For several others it was used as a training manual for abuse, as sexual acts and ideas from sexually explicit material were incorporated into their sex lives, (p.134).*

### SUMMARY OF RESEARCH WITH FREQUENT USERS

Scant research exists on users and use of sexually explicit material. What profiling has been done suggests that users are at least as affluent and well educated as the population at large, with a high proportion in stable relationships. More frequent users are less likely to believe that sexually explicit material is harmful to adults.

## 6.3 Qualitative and survey research into the effects on women

In general, feminist researchers are less concerned with attempting to prove that sexually explicit material causes harm to women, and more interested in exploring the sorts of harms that women experience as a result of men's use of sexually explicit material.

Russell is a good example. In her paper [Pornography causes harm to women](#), she reviews research which contributes to an understanding of how, not whether, pornography is a causal factor for rape. Much of her paper concerns violent pornography in which rape is portrayed, but she also includes the effects of non-violent pornography. Russell identifies seven ways in which pornography helps to undermine men's inhibitions to acting out the desire to rape, which she says, has been documented. The seven ways are by: objectifying women; supporting the rape myth; supporting the acceptance of interpersonal violence; trivialising rape; supporting callous attitudes towards female sexuality; supporting the acceptance of male dominance in intimate relationships; and, desensitisation to rape. Russell draws heavily on the work of Zillman and Bryant suggesting that, at times, the radical feminist and conservative moralist theoretical perspectives on pornography are not far apart. (Russell, 1997)

### QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Senn's 1993 paper reports on her interviews with 30 women recruited for their varying views on and experiences with pornography. Using the method of principal components analysis she discussed four perspectives held by the women in the sample. In addition to the conservative and radical feminist perspectives identified by other theorists, she found a humanist – child-centred perspective and an ambivalent but mildly pro-pornography perspective. She concludes:

*It is clear from the perspectives discussed here that women's experiences and attitudes towards pornography cannot easily be collapsed into a unitary category of female. All women do not think about pornography in the same way nor have they had the same or similar experiences. . . . The harm women experienced ranged from negative effects on their body image to negative effects on an entire relationship . . . . Very few women in the entire sample felt that pornography had a positive impact on their lives (p.337).*

Shaw conducted interviews with 32 women and analysed them to explore the impact of men's use of pornography on women's lives. The interviews were in three parts. First, the women were asked about *sexually explicit material* or *adult entertainment*, with examples such as [Playboy](#), [Playgirl](#) and [Penthouse](#) magazines used as examples. Women were encouraged to talk about their feelings and

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reactions to the images portrayed, including whether they found them pleasant or stimulating. The second part of the interview focused on definitions and meanings of pornography. A series of 12 pictures was chosen to represent a range of different types of pornography including consensual sex, sexual violence and sexual abuse. The women were asked to look at the pictures, sort them into categories which made sense to them, and then talk about the groups of pictures, their reasons for sorting them as they did and how the pictures made them feel. Finally, women were invited to talk about whether pornography had an impact on a current or past relationship, and how they thought such materials might impact on heterosexual relationships in general.

All the women were familiar with material with sexual content although only nine reported that they had used, bought or rented such material, or that they had been exposed to it with any frequency. There was remarkable consistency in the way the women grouped the magazine pictures. The first group included images of pain, dominance and sexual coercion as well as images where violence was implied rather than explicit; the second group was of non-violent images. Women expressed very different reactions to the two groups of pictures. The violent images were described by all the women as *pornography*, and they used words like *scared*, *terrified* or *disgusted* to describe their feelings when looking at them. The reactions of the women to the second group of pictures was quite different. Frequently, women expressed embarrassment or discomfort and explained this by saying that they thought such activities should be *private*. The women's reactions were not nearly so negative although several expressed unhappiness with the lack of *warmth* in the images.

The impacts of pornography the women identified included feelings of dissatisfaction or self-consciousness with their own bodies after viewing the images, and the part the images played in creating or maintaining men's unrealistic expectations of how women should look. Some of the women also thought that pornography led to increased pressure on women from men to participate in particular sexual acts.

Shaw reported that women's dislike of their partners' use of pornography was apparent from the interviews, as was their reluctance to speak to their partners about their views. They chose words such as *prudish*, *old fashioned* or *anti-sex* to describe how they thought they might be seen if they voiced their negative views of pornography. (Shaw, 1999)

In another study a sample of 100 personal letters posted on an Internet message board by partners of men who were frequent users of pornography was analysed for recurring themes. Letters indicating that a male partner had gone beyond use of pornography to making live, phone or chat

room contacts with other women were excluded from the analysis. Typically, the authors of these letters reported a level of pornography use that averaged several hours viewing a day. Recurring themes in the letters included the impact of the use of pornography on the relationship, with the user typically becoming sexually disinterested and emotionally withdrawn within the partnership; an unwillingness on the part of the user to cease or reduce use; and the detrimental impact on the women's self-concept and self esteem. (Bergner & Bridges, 2002)

A survey of 187 female university students investigated childhood exposure to pornography, current sexual fantasies and endorsement of rape supportive attitudes. The researchers, Corne and her colleagues, found that early exposure to pornography was related to subsequent rape fantasies and attitudes supportive of sexual violence against women. The authors suggest two possible explanations for their findings, the first being that pornographic stimuli may model sexual aggression or dominance in male-female relationships, potentially teaching girls that submission is the correct and appropriate sexual role of women. Second, pornography may support rape fantasies by *encouraging the eroticisation, via romance, of violence* (p458), that is, it may create confusion between sexual gratification and submission to sexual aggression for some young women. (Corne, Briere & Esses, 1992)

Jensen (1998) drew together a number of women's narratives about sexual violence published in academic journals or presented to political hearings. Collecting the narratives in one place he claimed helps to refute the criticism that they are anecdotal and of limited value. He sums up the narratives with these words:

*These are excerpts from the narratives of women who have been hurt by pornography. To acknowledge and believe them does not mean we have to pretend there aren't women who see pornography as a positive force in their lives. . . . To point out that some women have pornography forced on them is not to argue that no woman ever chose to look at pornography. There is no need to pretend the women speak with one voice. We desperately need however, to listen to these women, to acknowledge that their experiences are real, to acknowledge that they are real, and that they matter (p.118-119).*

Van Dyke's analysis of detailed interviews with 12 women about their experiences of pornography led her to three prevailing themes. The first was vulnerability, feelings of helplessness, depression, objectification and self-blame when women are exposed to pornography. This was especially striking when pornographic material was encountered unintentionally, or against a woman's will. The second theme was that of power, with pornography causing women to reflect on their own power or lack of power, and the power balance in their sexual relationships.



The third theme was the contribution of pornography to their development as adult women and the significance of the point of exposure in their development towards adulthood. (Van Dyke, 1997)

### **SURVEY RESEARCH**

In a survey of 100 women at a rape crisis centre about their experiences of sexual violence and their abusers' use of pornography, more than a quarter of them reported that their abuser used pornography, and 12% said that pornography was imitated during their experiences of abuse. (Bergen & Bogle, 2000) This study supported others discussed under the title Sex Offenders in Section 6.1.

A similar study which included a comparison group of women who had not been abused, found that the abused women reported that their partners used pornography (including pornographic magazines and videos) much more frequently than the women in the comparison group. In addition, 39% of the abused women reported that a partner had tried to get them to do what he had seen in pornographic pictures, movies or books, whereas only 3% of the comparison group had had a similar experience. (Sommers & Check, 1987)

A survey of 45 African-American women's attitudes to experiences of pornography conducted as part of a doctoral thesis had interesting results. All of the women in the sample – drawn from community organisations to which African-American women belonged – had been exposed to pornography, and well over half had been exposed before the age of 18. The women reported a range of experiences with pornography within their current relationships, and most of them expressed neutral or positive feelings about pornography in that context. Close to half the sample had been asked to pose for pornographic pictures, although it was not stated whether these pictures were for personal or commercial use. A small number indicated they had had coercive experiences with pornography yet few of them defined those experiences as *abuse with pornography*. (White, 1998)

### **SUMMARY OF RESEARCH INTO THE IMPACT ON WOMEN**

There has been a wide range of research into the effects of sexually explicit material on women. Much of it has been designed to explore the nature of the effects rather than to establish the existence of the effects. Women report a sense of powerlessness over a partner's use of sexually explicit material, negative impacts on their self-esteem and body image, feelings of vulnerability and helplessness and a reluctance to speak against a man's use of sexually explicit material. Some abused women also report being asked to imitate acts seen in sexually explicit material more often than other women.

## **6.4 Content analyses**

Although there may be argument about where to draw the line, there is broad consensus that it is possible to have sexually explicit material which does not degrade or objectify women. One of the difficulties in weighing the evidence about the harmful effects of sexually explicit material that falls outside this description is the lack of an empirical foundation for what aspects of sexually explicit materials are perceived as degrading.

### **WHAT IS DEGRADING?**

Assessments of what constitutes degradation have generally been made by the researchers themselves and the grounds for the decision is frequently unclear. However, some research has attempted to explore viewers' perceptions of degradation.

Cowan and Dunn used almost 200 male and female university students to rate nine brief excerpts of sexually explicit material. Seven of the nine excerpts depicted either active subordination or status inequality, one showed indiscriminate female availability and the last one depicted equal sex. Participants viewed the excerpts either with or without accompanying definitions. Both male and female participants rated active subordination more degrading than status inequalities and both types of inequalities more degrading than sexually explicit material with equality. (Cowan & Dunn, 1994)

On the basis that the ejaculation scene or cum shot (which frequently involves ejaculating on a woman's face) is commonly offered as an example of degradation, Gardos and Mosher showed 375 male and female university students one of four video tapes – five vignettes showing the cum shot as originally filmed; the same five vignettes with the cum shot removed; the original vignettes with a soundtrack modified to *accentuate degradation*; and, the original vignettes with the soundtrack modified to *accentuate an accepting interpretation* of the videos. The findings supported the researchers' hypotheses that no matter what modifications were made, men would rate the material less degrading and more enjoyable than did the women. (Gardos & Mosher, 1999)

Barwick's research asked a representative audience to watch sexually explicit video material and to assess whether any people or group of people portrayed in it were represented as inferior. In general, women were more likely than men to say that the female characters in the sexually explicit videos they were asked to watch were represented as inferior. (Barwick, 2001, 2002)

Acknowledging her feminist perspective, Hill (1991) examined the meaning of the word *degrade*, which she defines as to *lower in worth*, or to *devalue*. A key concept here she says is that degradation can entail either a real loss

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of worth, or an imputed loss of worth. She goes on to say that fundamental to the meaning of degradation is a loss of moral worth, and that one is not degraded by losing status as the president of a company or by failing to retain a sports trophy. She writes:

*Degradation is not to be confused with decline or defeat. It is not a matter of losing power or prestige or privilege, but of losing something considerably more central to one's personhood (p.64).*

She goes on to say that another necessary condition of degradation is that a person is *perceived* – by themselves or others – as being treated as something less than a person. In other words, degradation is a public phenomenon, and the making public implies a moral justification on the part of the agent of the degradation. (Hill, 1991)

Jarvie argues that degradation works somewhat differently. He agrees that to degrade is to lower in status and says that in male dominated societies the status women have is at least in part a function of their control over sexual access. Sex, he says, is classified as private and protected from public scrutiny, and that because sexually explicit material graphically confronts us with what is normally private, secret and intimate, this public disclosure degrades sex. Furthermore, Jarvie says, since sex is the woman's domain of power, the degradation of public sex smears over onto women. (Jarvie, 1991)

Cowan and Dunn distinguish between the feminist perspective on degradation and that of the conservative moralists. Although not all feminists agree on what constitutes degradation, the central issue is that of equality. That women apparently willingly participate in their own subordination in sexually explicit material does not remove the degradation. The conservative moralists on the other hand regard women's unbridled sexuality as the key feature of degradation, that is to say, their degradation is associated primarily with their display of sexuality rather than by their subordination. (Cowan & Dunn, 1994)

#### ***RACIAL STEREOTYPES, GENDER BIAS AND CHANGES IN CONTENT OVER TIME***

Another content analysis undertaken by Cowan and Campbell explored racism and sexism in interracial sex scenes in X-rated videos. They found that African-American women were subjected to a greater number of different acts of physical and non-physical aggression than were white women. Furthermore African-American women were subject to more physical aggression from white men, and white women were subject to more physical aggression from African-American men. Both men and women were more verbally aggressive to partners of the other race than of the same race. African-

American women performed fellatio on their knees more often than white women, in contrast white women were ejaculated on the face more than African-American women. African-American women were more often portrayed initially resisting sexual activity than were white women. African-American men were less often portrayed as intimate or affectionate (kissing, caressing talking or using the other person's name) than white men. African-American men were more often portrayed as having a large penis than were white men. (Cowan & Campbell, cited in Russell, 1998)

Brosius, Weaver and Staab (1993) analysed 50 pornographic videos targeted at heterosexual consumers between 1979 and 1988. They found that there was a shift in themes over time in the pornographic videos they studied. There was a notable increase in the portrayal of sexual encounters between casual acquaintances; in the portrayal of men having sex with their female bosses; in women persuading men to sexual activity; and, in fellatio as the initial sexual act between heterosexual partners. Over this time there was a significant decrease in depictions of sex between colleagues in the workplace and in client-prostitute sex. However, despite these changes, the researchers say that throughout the period pornographic videos continued to emphasise the sexual desires and prowess of men while persistently portraying women as sexually available.

In addition to these general themes the researchers made a range of other observations about the content of the videos. Women were shown as far more sexually active with a greater variety of partners than were men. A strong age bias was apparent for women, with only young women portrayed, but not for men. All sexual scenes involved at least one woman with almost a quarter of the scenes portraying women only. Women were far more expressive than men during sexual interactions. Women typically initiated sexual interactions through penile fondling or fellatio. Fellatio was usually performed with the woman in a subordinate position. The experience of orgasm was the preserve of the male and typically involved ejaculation onto the body or face of the female. (Brosius, Weaver & Staab, 1993)

Malamuth attempted to explain why men and women respond differently to the content of pornography by proposing a theory with an evolutionary basis. He purports that both men and women are attracted to sexually explicit media that reflects elements of their *mating strategy*. According to Malamuth's theory, men are more likely to become aroused by physical appearance, the display of a sexually available mate, and by sexual acts because, throughout many stages of evolution, a man's reproductive success would have been enhanced by responding sexually to the display of a fertile, available woman. Women, on the

other hand are more likely to respond to the inclusion of interactive elements of sexuality because the emotional nuances give more clues as to the likelihood of a more than fleeting encounter, or in an evolutionary sense, of continued protection after mating. (Malamuth, 1996)

### **SUMMARY OF CONTENT ANALYSES**

A key area of focus for content analysis has been to determine what constitutes degradation in the context of sexually explicit material. Although there is no clear consensus on what degradation is, elements appear to include the public portrayal of objectification, subordination and inferiority. A few studies explored racial stereotypes, gender bias and changes in sexually explicit content over time.

## **6.5 Benefits of sexually explicit material**

Malamuth and Billings reviewed a small body of research and opinion pieces on the benefits of pornography. Included among the benefits they identify is the role pornography plays in providing helpful information often lacking in many people's sex education. The authors cite research provided to the 1980 Presidential Commission on Pornography and Obscenity which showed that close to half of North American couples have significant sexual problems and that among the key causes of those problems are lack of information about sex, an inability to communicate about sex and general anxiety about sex. Surveys have indicated that some men and women have found sexually explicit material a useful source of information and a way of reducing sexual inhibition. They also report that it has increased their willingness to discuss sex with others and try *new things*. A second set of benefits lies in the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of sexually explicit material. From this perspective sexually explicit material is a harmless or even socially beneficial form of artistic self-expression that creates a fantasy world built around sexual interest. From a psychoanalytic perspective pornography provides a repertoire of scripts to help the individual resolve developmental conflicts left over from childhood. Debasing and unconventional behaviour can be explored and challenged through use of sexually explicit material. A final set of benefits identified through this review lies in the use of sexually explicit material as a tool to analyse and address unequal power relations between dominant and subordinate groups. (Malamuth & Billings, 1984)

McNair similarly identified a range of views on pornography which place it within wider cultural, theoretical or political perspectives. Amongst these is the view of some feminists that pornography can be a means of expression of an authentic female sexuality, and women

should be free to use pornography to explore their own and their partners' sexual identities and preferences. (McNair, 1996)

Frequently cited feminist writers Strossen and Segal present the feminist perspective from which sexually explicit material is seen as positive for women. Strossen, in her article [Pornography can benefit society](#), says that rather than only presenting images of subordination, pornography as often presents women as initiating and directing sexual activity. As such, she says, it has the potential to liberate the viewer from conventional stereotypes, as well as being a source of pleasure. Segal also argues that feminists who oppose pornography are misguided and that censoring pornography discourages women from understanding and expressing their sexuality. Neither is convinced by the research purporting to link pornography with violence against women. (Strossen, 1995b, 1995c; Segal, 1993)

Ciclitira (2002) conducted interviews with 34 heterosexual, lesbian and bisexual women about their earliest experiences with pornography, their current use, and their views on the effects of pornography on body image, sexual fantasies and behaviour. She writes:

*These women's accounts (unlike much of the theory) showed how women's views, experiences and feelings about pornography are variegated, individual and complex. The study explored how pornography is seen as a factor in the social construction of women's sexuality and the way they view their bodies. For example, more than half of the participants claimed that viewing porn had affected their sexual behaviour, fantasies and how they felt about their bodies. It also showed that pornography can serve to increase as well as to limit options for women's sexuality (p.94).*

A doctoral thesis examining women's attitudes to and positive experiences with pornography took a random sample of 133 women from the San Francisco area and applied the Women's Experience of Pornography questionnaire, on the basis of which the women were allocated to either a *pornography positive* or a *pornography negative* group. She found that a *pornography positive* group member was likely to be younger, not have a religious affiliation, have had more exposure to pornography and a higher frequency of pornography use. She also noted that many women in the sample had had a combination of positive and negative experiences with pornography. (Wilnier, 1998)



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***SUMMARY OF BENEFITS OF SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL***

The material retrieved for this review includes a small body of comment and research on the benefits of sexually explicit material. Benefits cited include the educational and instructive dimensions of sexually explicit material; sexually explicit material as a means of communication about sexual matters and sexually explicit material as a form of challenge to conventional stereotypes about women's sexuality.

## 7.0 Conclusions and implications for further research

This review of research was commissioned to find out what is known about the harmful effects of using sexually explicit videos, the users, and their use of the material. However, among the huge body of research into the effects of sexually explicit material there appears to have been very little study of those who choose to use it, or of the part it plays in their lives.

What researchers claim to know about the effects of sexually explicit material is drawn largely from testing the responses of young adult university students in laboratory settings. Yet, even with this remarkably homogenous research design, the results are in conflict to such an extent that two groups of reviewers examining the same set of apparently rigorous research studies can reach different conclusions about what the studies tell us.

For over 30 years researchers have been trying to establish whether use of sexually explicit material affects men's attitudes to or behaviour towards women, and yet we are no closer to having a definitive answer. There is some consensus that the effects of non-violent sexually explicit material – if such effects exist at all – are less pronounced than the effects of sexually violent material. There is some agreement that not all people are affected by sexually explicit material in the same way, and that men who are of a more characteristically masculine sex-type may be more susceptible to the effects of sexually explicit material than others. There is growing understanding that it may be the degradation within some sexually explicit material that has the effect, rather than the explicitness of the sexual content.

There appears to be no evidence that the availability of sexually explicit material leads to an increase in reported sex crimes, and any differences between sex-offenders' use of sexually explicit material and that of other men are hard to find. Yet, against that we have moving narratives from women who have been damaged by a man's use of sexually explicit material, and who in more extreme cases have been forced to replicate sexual acts men have seen in sexually explicit material they have used. These findings are difficult to reconcile.

The defining components of sexually explicit material are sex and media. Our views about sex, and the proper conduct of sexual relationships are often among the strongest views we hold. They are an integral part of our beliefs about relationships, families and morality. Our opinions about people's entitlement to information and the legitimate role of the state as censor are also derived from our fundamental beliefs about people's rights and freedoms. This is as true for researchers as for other people. Although researchers may claim scientific neutrality, they come to the study of the effects of sexually

explicit material with views and beliefs like the rest of us. They may be very knowledgeable about human psychology or the power of the media, but their approach is influenced, at least in part, by their beliefs about sex and the power of the media.

Recognising that research into the effects of sexually explicit material comes from a range of different theoretical perspectives helps us to understand why there is such disagreement amongst researchers. It gives us a framework within which to make an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the wide range of research designs, and to contextualise the findings. The influence of the conservative moralists may be less powerful in setting the research agenda now, than once it was, but the conclusions reached by the conservative moralists have now found support from some of those working from a feminist perspective. The liberal perspective has been in the ascendancy in recent years, but has been increasingly challenged by feminist research. The challenge has come from two directions, one which argues all sexually explicit material by its very nature is harmful to women, and another which supports the free availability of sexually explicit materials as a means of liberating women's sexuality.

Appreciating that research comes from a range of perspectives all of which are valid, and that definitive answers are hard to find, helps to explain why a consensus about the existence or extent of harmful effects of sexually explicit material has yet to be reached. There no doubt already exists, and certainly will in the future, other pieces of research which claim to have the answer, but it is only by examining those within the context of the whole body of research that their true contribution can be assessed. Similarly, the readers of this report will include people from all three main perspectives and the test for them is to remain open to what the other viewpoints have to offer.

The challenge for the Office of Film and Literature Classification is that it is mandated to make decisions about what sexually explicit material is made available and to whom, without the benefit of certainty about the effects of such availability. Furthermore, the research the Office does have to draw on is predominantly North American and laboratory based, which raises questions about its relevance to the real world use of sexually explicit material in New Zealand.

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## 7.1 Directions for further research

At the end of this review we know little more about the users and the uses of sexually explicit material than we did before. However, a better understanding of New Zealanders' use of this material would enhance the ability of the Office to make decisions that both minimise harm and respect legislated rights and freedoms.

What can be said with more confidence at the end of this process than at the beginning, is that the public consultation research commissioned by the Office of Film and Literature Classification over the past two years has made a significant contribution to the body of knowledge about ordinary New Zealanders' views of the harms or potential harms of sexually explicit material, and of its impact on them. The research was not based on a random sample of people drawn from the population. Apart from the logistical difficulties, ethical considerations precluded inviting an unprepared random sample to view highly sexually explicit material. The 300 people involved in the research were of both genders and represented a cross-section of ages, ethnicities and income groups. Amongst them were some frequent users of sexually explicit material. As such, the research was more successful in capturing the views of a range of members of society, including frequent users of sexually explicit material, than almost all the research studies reviewed for this report.

The Office would like to know more about the views of those who use sexually explicit video material frequently. A small number of studies reviewed for this report have shown that people who regularly hire sexually explicit videos, attend adult movie theatres or otherwise regularly use sexually explicit material are prepared to give their views about themselves or their use of the material.

This should be taken as an encouraging sign that research which leads to a better understanding of who regularly watches sexually explicit videos, the attitudes they hold, and their views about what impact the material has on their behaviour can be undertaken in New Zealand.

Such research could make an important contribution to the body of knowledge about the effects of sexually explicit material, as well as better informing the work of the Office in making its decisions.

## Appendix 1

Section 3 of the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 094

3. Meaning of “objectionable”—(1) For the purposes of this Act, a publication is objectionable if it describes, depicts, expresses, or otherwise deals with matters such as sex, horror, crime, cruelty, or violence in such a manner that the availability of the publication is likely to be injurious to the public good.
- (2) A publication shall be deemed to be objectionable for the purposes of this Act if the publication promotes or supports, or tends to promote or support,—
- (a) The exploitation of children, or young persons, or both, for sexual purposes; or
  - (b) The use of violence or coercion to compel any person to participate in, or submit to, sexual conduct; or
  - (c) Sexual conduct with or upon the body of a dead person; or
  - (d) The use of urine or excrement in association with degrading or dehumanising conduct or sexual conduct; or
  - (e) Bestiality; or
  - (f) Acts of torture or the infliction of extreme violence or extreme cruelty.
- (3) In determining, for the purposes of this Act, whether or not any publication (other than a publication to which subsection (2) of this section applies) is objectionable or should be given a classification other than objectionable, particular weight shall be given to the extent and degree to which, and the manner in which, the publication—
- (a) Describes, depicts, or otherwise deals with—
    - (i) Acts of torture, the infliction of serious physical harm, or acts of significant cruelty;
    - (ii) Sexual violence or sexual coercion, or violence or coercion in association with sexual conduct;
    - (iii) Other sexual or physical conduct of a degrading or dehumanising or demeaning nature;
    - (iv) Sexual conduct with or by children, or young persons, or both;
    - (v) Physical conduct in which sexual satisfaction is derived from inflicting or suffering cruelty or pain;
  - (b) Exploits the nudity of children, or young persons, or both;
  - (c) Degrades or dehumanises or demeans any person:
  - (d) Promotes or encourages criminal acts or acts of terrorism;
  - (e) Represents (whether directly or by implication) that members of any particular class of the public are inherently inferior to other members of the public by reason of any characteristic of members of that class, being a characteristic that is a prohibited ground of discrimination specified in section 21(1) of the Human Rights Act 1993.
- (4) In determining, for the purposes of this Act, whether or not any publication (other than a publication to which subsection (2) of this section applies) is objectionable or should be given a classification other than objectionable, the following matters shall also be considered:
- (a) The dominant effect of the publication as a whole;
  - (b) The impact of the medium in which the publication is presented;
  - (c) The character of the publication, including any merit, value, or importance that the publication has in relation to literary, artistic, social, cultural, educational, scientific, or other matters;
  - (d) The persons, classes of persons, or age groups of the persons to whom the publication is intended or is likely to be made available;
  - (e) The purpose for which the publication is intended to be used;
  - (f) Any other relevant circumstances relating to the intended or likely use of the publication.

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