**Identifying the challenges of interdisciplinary research on pornography use**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores some the difficulties in undertaking a large-scale systematic review of pornography research literature. Its authors come from different disciplines across the humanities and social sciences, and work within an interdisciplinary team. The research project aims to understand pornography’s relationship with its audiences, particularly considering the relationship between pornography consumption and healthy sexual development. Offering a conversational account of research experiences on the project so far, the paper illustrates some key tensions and ongoing points of discussion in research committed to interdisciplinary scholarship, featuring disciplinary perspectives that do not easily correlate. We disagree on definitions, data gathering methods and modes of data analysis. This paper does not aim to deliver solutions to these problems but presents two different voices describing our experiences of interdisciplinary porn research so far. In order to challenge and extend our disciplinary thinking, we offer an example of dialogue, and highlight the potential of listening across disciplinary frameworks. We encourage scholars from different disciplines to work together as this generates broader research perspectives and offers challenging conditions that can usefully interrogate and extend upon traditional research practice and methods. We hope this paper can generate further reflection among research peers on how we can strengthen interdisciplinary research practice, including, but not limited to, porn research.

**Keywords:** interdisciplinarity; research; sexual health; pornography, challenges

**Introduction**

In his book *The Two Cultures* (1959), C. P. Snow discussed the split between the two cultures of humanities and social sciences, arguing that they had different attitudes, standards and forms of behaviours in relation to their work and research patterns. Snow suggests that humanities academics like to present themselves as intellectuals (Snow 1959). On the other hand, scientists, represented mostly by the physical scientists at that time, believed that “literacy intellectuals” were lacking foresight and intellectuality (Snow 1959). Misunderstanding and hostility existed between these two groups, as each had a distorted image of the other. According to Snow, these tensions led to an intellectual loss for everybody. As the two cultures did not ‘speak’ to each other, they could not work together and achieve results and breakthroughs across their fields. Thus they could not move forward and find solutions for global problems such as the inequalities among rich and poor (Snow 1959), which Snow considered as the most important social problem at that time. He argued that closing the gap between the two cultures was necessary and practical as it would enable them to productively work together and step towards solving the world’s inequality problems through education (Snow 1959).

Informed by the arguments of Snow and others, researchers are increasingly encouraged to engage in interdisciplinary work (Kenworthy and Parker 2014, Craig et al. 2016, Leahey, Beckman, and Stanko 2017). Interdisciplinary research has many advantages. It provides multiple perspectives and a wider abundance of theoretical approaches to researchers that they would otherwise be less likely to encounter and grasp (Bindler et al. 2012). According to McKee (2014) humanities-based researchers of pornography have tended to use different methods than researchers in social sciences and there has been little conversation between these groups. Humanities researchers more commonly deploy textual forms of analysis (McKee 2014), whereas social scientists have traditionally used quantitative methods that they consider to be more rigorous (McKee 2014). It could be said that large-scale surveys of pornography can provide a good overview of what populations have in common, while textual analysis and smaller scale qualitative studies can provide a better detail of porn use idiosyncrasies (McKee 2014, McKee and Ingham 2018). It is clear that research in pornography can benefit from interdisciplinary research that draws on a range of perspectives and methodologies, and that doing so will improve current understandings of pornography use.

Much interdisciplinary pornography research takes the form of what we would call ‘soft’ interdisciplinarity, where researchers are based in closely cognate disciplines which share epistemological assumptions, data-gathering methods and language (for example, Public Health and Health Psychology) (Leahey, Beckman, and Stanko 2017). By contrast, our study takes interdisciplinarity as a key aim of the project, and a central principle to all decisions made throughout the research process.

We are writing this paper to illustrate some of the tensions in interdisciplinary research involving scholars from humanities and the social sciences. Written by researchers involved in an interdisciplinary project on pornography, this paper is composed in a style that sits between commentary and a methods paper. This amalgamation is necessary to capture some of our experiences and the questions they raise, and we trust this is more useful to others than a presentation of methods and findings that fail to report on the difficulties of such interdisciplinary work.

We identify and discuss some of the challenges that emerge for academics who do not share many basic assumptions about the conduct of research as they attempt to design and carry out a project together. No simple solutions to the ongoing difficulties of interdisciplinary research will be offered because we recognise that interdisciplinarity is an ongoing project for many researchers, and there is no single map for successfully doing this. We write this paper from within the research process rather than reporting back on a completed study, and as such, we are still refining our methodological approaches. As we are still encountering issues and challenges, we are not yet in a position to write thoroughly about this. We chose to write in a conversational style to both reflect the mode of such research, and to meet ‘in the middle’ with a style that neither of us are particularly comfortable with, yet which lends itself to offering commentary and reflection (Bertero 2016). This will be useful to researchers from different scientific backgrounds who have opportunities to collaborate, in ways that are useful to the pornography research field.

By writing *within* the execution of our study, we offer a situated account of some of the difficulties, discomfort, and ongoing issues of translation encountered in doing this kind of interdisciplinary work which may resemble other researchers’ experiences of interdisciplinary research. We are aware, however, that the differences presented here might not be reflective of all approaches within the disciplines we reference. Because of this, our conversation that follows was made more general than the specificities of our research project, as this will be more useful to people engaging in a range of interdisciplinary projects.

The first author KL is trained in psychology and sexology. Her postgraduate degree involved studying aspects of sexual and reproductive health, sexual health education and sex therapy. Her research interests lay in all aspects of human sexuality and more specifically in female sexual arousal and pleasure and people’s experiences with pornography. Her research is situated in the social sciences.

The second author PB is trained in cultural studies and sociology. His doctoral study considered young people’s experience-based knowledge of sexual health and wellbeing, foregrounding how sexual safeties are mediated through young people’s everyday intimacies including friendships. His current research engages with young people, social media and digital cultures of care and peer support. His research is more situated in humanities than the social sciences.

The two authors work on opposite sides of what Alan McKee has described as a fundamental epistemological divide in studies of human behaviour and culture. This divide can be determined not only by two sets of ‘cultural logic’ (to return to Snow) but is also evident by a common distinction in written research structures. On the one hand, those ‘disciplines that publish academic articles that are structured using the subheadings Background, Methods, Results and Discussion’ and, on the other hand, those ‘disciplines whose academic articles do not follow a standard structure but instead are structured around an argument’ (Alan McKee personal communication, June 25, 2018). We are working on a project funded by the Australian Research Council entitled Pornography's relationship with audiences: synthesising an innovative interdisciplinary approach, led by Alan McKee (media studies) and Roger Ingham (social psychology).

This project aims to improve our understanding of pornography’s relationship with its audiences. Academic knowledge on this topic is siloed and often contradictory across a range of humanities and social sciences disciplines (McKee 2014). Surprisingly there has been little interdisciplinary conversation regarding pornography, its relationship with audiences and our understanding of it as a phenomenon (McKee 2014), as humanities and social sciences conceptualise research and knowledge in different ways (McKee 2014, McKee and Ingham 2018). With this project we are trying to move beyond that as we believe that pornography research can benefit from conversations across disciplines (McKee 2014, McKee and Ingham 2018). We highlight some of the difficulties of this work because we looked for these discussions as guidance but found very little. The research team is trying to synthesise these discrete traditions to produce a shared paradigm, vocabulary and evidence base, to allow these disciplines to communicate their findings to each other in meaningful ways. This paper contributes to research discussions about the benefit of researchers from different epistemological positions working together. We hope this will improve public debate and policy outcomes about pornography by making this knowledge comprehensible to policymakers, educators and parents. The project also aims to benefit academic researchers in providing a replicable case study of translation between humanities and social sciences data archives.

The project has been interdisciplinary from its conception onwards. It takes the epistemological differences between disciplines as its starting point and primary object of study. Its conceptual paradigm – anti-heteronormativity (Allen 2010, Warner 1993) – emerges from the humanities while its data gathering and analysis – a large-scale systematic literature review of published data in all disciplines on the relationship between the consumption of pornography and ‘healthy sexual development’ (McKee et al. 2010) – emerges from social sciences. In this context, we joined the project team precisely because of our distinct disciplinary differences.

In the process of designing a search and analysis protocol for a systematic literature review, the research team identified a number of unexpected issues as we realised, we disagreed about research methods, data gathering, analysis and reporting. For example, we disagreed about what kind of articles to include, we had different definitions of some core concepts, and we disagreed on the best way to develop a coding structure prior to or during the initial reading of articles and how detailed and static our initial coding system needed to be. We disagreed about whether we would use inductive or deductive textual analysis. We disagreed about whether certain findings should be quantified or not, and where qualitative engagement would be more beneficial. We had opposing opinions on how to present our results. We also realised that there are personal human challenges involved in working on a project where one’s whole paradigm for understanding what counts as research and knowledge is tested.

This commentary takes the form of a dialogue between us as we map some of these challenges. We have chosen to present the data in the form of a dialogue to acknowledge some of the fundamental paradigmatic differences between us, rather than trying to paper over the cracks; and also to demonstrate that these differences do not mean we cannot work together (Bertero 2016). We actively chose to be open and respectful to each other’s differences as a way to endure the tensions in our project. This form of conversation models how people from different backgrounds can work together productively, not subsuming differences into a single voice, but allowing different voices to speak and be heard, so as to find points of agreement and ways to work together (Golde and Gallagher 1999, Hurtado 2001 , McKee 2014). This can be very valuable approach as it has not been explored in pornography research.

Following the model proposed by Snow (1959), we present our disciplines as coming from two different cultures and we use our experiences of undertaking a systematic review of pornography to reflect upon our differences. We decided to adopt these separate positions as a style used to exaggerate our differences although we know that this divide is no longer very pronounced, and that the reality may be more subtle than what we present. Interdisciplinary research has existed for a long time, it takes on many forms and has resulted in the formation of new disciplines and the shifting of disciplinary norms over time (McKee 2014). We do not wish to suggest that disciplines are unchanging and fixed, however we do argue that disciplinary norms are difficult to shift, and this can be seen in pornography research itself. We hope that this discussion proves useful for other researchers by pointing towards the possibilities of interdisciplinary pornography research, as well as research on other topics that could gain from having an interdisciplinary design and approach (McKee 2014). The scope is not to debate the history of differences and collaborations between social sciences and humanities researchers. This paper aims to inspire academics from different disciplines to work collaboratively and be willing to overcome difficulties encountered in projects like this one.

**Doing interdisciplinary work**

**[KL]**: Pornography is an elusive concept. There is a lot of pornography research happening around the world, but what is pornography and what does it include? For this project we decided that we will not rely on a single definition of pornography on the basis that 38 leading pornography scholars we surveyed gave varied definitions.[[1]](#footnote-1) The lack of a specific definition was a struggle for me at the beginning. Psychologists are used to having things clearly defined in order to be researched. Psychology researchers, usually at the beginning of their articles, clearly define their variables or the issues they will be researching (Hayes 2012, Sell 2018). If there are no definitions, they cannot be certain they are searching and finding exactly what they plan to research. Also, psychologists aim to have a specific research methodology in order to reduce possible contaminants that might affect the relation between the independent and the dependent variables (McHugh 2012).

**[PB]**: I think this is a key difference in our disciplinary training and approaches. I tend to research things to consider and foreground their complexity, and I am trained to question and challenge truth statements and strict definitions. I would point to Foucault’s work here, pivotal to my doctoral research, that questioned the very concept of ‘young people’s sexual health’ and did so by asking what discourses of sexual health are available, how knowledge of this concept is imagined and performed among health promoters and researchers, and how young interviewees’ accounts of their sex and relationship experiences challenge this sanctioned knowledge. Put more simply, what we assume to be good and correct knowledge often comes from above (from knowledge-building institutions, including universities) and often this forecloses deep engagement with our research participants’ everyday practices of knowing and experiencing the things we research. The same approach can be taken to understanding what porn is, and while definitions are likely to differ between users, educators, and health professionals, these will also differ within each of those groups, given people’s different experiences and contacts with pornography.

**[KL]:** Please use a reference when you talk about Foucault. We psychologists are used to referencing everything that we write!

**[PB]:** Sure, here’s a couple (Foucault 1972, 1991), although this feels strange because my understanding of knowledge and discourse is informed by much of Foucault’s writing, and particularly also Michel de Certeau’s extension and critique of his work (1988). Mostly I like his exposition of the politics of knowledge. He argues that at any place, in any point in time, there are certain rules about what can be said and who can say it (Foucault 1991), and he asks useful questions like: ‘Which utterances are put into circulation, and among what groups?... Which utterances does everyone recognise as valid?... [and] How is the relationship institutionalised between the discourse, speakers and its destined audience?’ (Foucault 1991, 60).

**[KL]**: As our project has gone on, and after discussions among the group, I can see that maybe not having a specific pornography definition could be a positive thing as it allowed us to be more flexible regarding which articles to include and which to exclude. Another challenge for me is the fact that there is no consensus in the existing research about pornography for us to build on (Willoughby, Young-Petersen, and Leonhardt 2017). A lot of research literature implies that watching pornography can have negative effects on audiences. Some say that, by watching pornography, people are more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behaviours such as having multiple sex partners which elevates the risk of attracting sexually transmitted infections (Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009), having less progressive gender role attitudes (Brown and L’Engle 2009) …

**[PB]**: … is having multiple sex partners a negative effect though? This seems like moral judgement masquerading as health concern – a familiar scene if we look through a long history of sexualities research that demonstrates how ‘science’ has always attempted to normalise bodies and what they do.

**[KL]**: Not in my opinion but this is how it is commonly presented. Other reported negative effects include engaging in ‘friends with benefits’ sexual relationships where people are considered to be less inclined to use protection because of the familiarity with the partner (Braithwaite et al. 2015) …

**[PB]**: … interesting. I’m sure that a careful rationale is provided as to why ‘friends with benefits’ should feature as a ‘risk’ of pornography use, but I struggle with this based on my research regarding young people’s sexually intimate friendships (Byron 2017). I suspect it has something to do with worries about ‘permissive sexual attitudes’ (McKee, Bragg, and Taormino 2015). Sorry to interrupt - please continue with this list of pornographic ‘harms’.

**[KL]**: Okay, sure. I am only mentioning them, I do not necessarily agree with them! Other reported effects include users of pornography being less willing to intervene as a bystander in a possible rape situation (Foubert, Brosi, and Bannon 2011) and being more violent against women (Hald, Malamuth, and Yuen 2010) and greater acceptance and engagement in sexual permissive behaviours (even when authors fail to define what these are) (Ven-Hwei and Ran 2005). Also, watching pornography has been positively correlated with stress in everyday life and reduced sexual arousal (Laier and Brand 2017), time spent watching pornography has been positively associated with unprotected insertive anal sex (which entails HIV infection risk), substance use and decreased perception of risk of HIV infection (Eaton et al. 2012). In addition, watching sexually explicit material predicted less sexual satisfaction for Dutch adolescents (Doornwaard et al. 2014). At the same time, there is research showing that watching pornography is not associated with negative effects (Štulhofer, Buško, and Schmidt 2012), that pornography can be used for sexual education purposes (Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009, Rothman et al. 2015) and as a form of entertainment (McCormack and Wignall 2017). There is no significant association between early exposure (fourteen years of age or less) to pornography and high sexual compulsivity for men and women (Štulhofer, Jelovica, and Ružić 2008); further, more egalitarian attitudes towards women have been associated with consumption of pornography (Kohut, Baer, and Watts 2016).

Apart from the disagreements about how things are presented in porn research and how they are interpreted, our different disciplinary backgrounds make things even more complicated. As noted above, this project consists of four researchers. Two of them come from humanities fields and two have psychology backgrounds.

**[PB]**: This is an interesting way to position us. With the metaphors of ‘field’ and ‘background’ I cannot help but imagine me and Alan grazing in the field. A field suggests a large and open space, whereas a background suggests something more structured and supporting, like a foundation. I know I’m reading more into it than you implied – though arguably that’s a humanities lens. Also, Alan and I have quite different backgrounds, as do you and Roger, so perhaps that further complicates our tendency to divide and categorise the team.

**[KL]**: We can use whatever word you like then! Roger and I have different backgrounds but we have a similar approach to understanding things. I could talk about our different qualifications although if feels a little bit like ‘exposing’ myself. Psychologists do not write about themselves and how they view things, they only write about their data and their results. They are interested in doing research that is valid and reliable and they aim to present their results in such a way that other fellow researchers will be able to replicate if they want to. It is uncommon for psychologists to talk about who they are and what their personal beliefs are when they are doing research.

**[PB]:** I like the idea of doing research that’s transparent and available to other researchers should they want to replicate a study and its approach. It makes me feel like much work in humanities and cultural studies is too far in the other direction, where we heavily guard our fortress of ideas and arguments and would call it plagiarism if somebody undertook a study that was too similar to ours. In this example, psychologists and their research seem more cohesive and somewhat communal.

**[KL]**: These disciplinary differences also mean that we cannot be confident when we introduce a concept that it means the same thing to all of us. It takes some time to be sure that we are talking about the same matters, that we are speaking the same language. For example, at the beginning of this long process, the two psychologists wanted to map exactly what we will be looking for in the articles we would collect, so as to be organised for when we will have to analyse the dataset. Collecting loads of data and having to review and categorise them can be overwhelming and it is time consuming. The two humanities researchers were not happy with that approach; they were worried that we would be entering the analysis process with preconceived ideas and without an open mind.

**[PB]**: That is partly how I felt, but not the part about needing an open mind. I don’t think there’s such a thing and would argue that our thinking is always muddied by our disciplinary backgrounds, research experiences, and personal experiences – these things filter how we understand the world. So, with or without a map (i.e. a very long list of codes), we would still have different ideas about what the data suggests. Just like if we were both given the same map to a city – we would still navigate that city differently. My main concern was that we were trying to nominate and list everything we imagined could be in the data, and I wasn’t convinced that that was a good use of our time. I also suspected that our analytical skills will kick in as soon as we start reading the articles, after which we will generate other ideas about themes to code. That fits with how I typically analyse data.

**[KL]**: It required a lot of discussion and time for the team to come to the realisation that this pre-selection of things to look for in our articles was intended as a way to get the process started before proceeding to subsequent refinement, and that psychologists critique and evaluate research articles on specific concepts such as validity and reliability, which would make our work rigorous. This leads to another issue between disciplines that have standard structures and headings for articles versus disciplines that do not. In psychology – a discipline that has a standard structure and headings for articles – quantitative and qualitative research is done in specific ways. Quantitative research in psychology (the same applies to other sciences but we use psychology as an example) uses validity and reliability in order to evaluate research rigour and make sure that another external researcher can perform the same research and come up with the same results (Howitt and Cramer 2011). Reliability is about the consistency of the results, and validity is whether the measure actually measures what it is intended to measure (Howitt and Cramer 2011). Similar requirements that check rigour exist for when conducting qualitative research in psychology. These are credibility and authenticity, transferability and applicability, dependability and finally confirmability (Liamputtong 2009). Credibility and authenticity are terms used to determine whether the research is genuine and whether the research findings can be trusted (Liamputtong 2009).

**[PB]**: I always struggle with frameworks such as these, though I know it shouldn’t be too difficult to accept them as simple measuring concepts. But I can’t help feeling cynical about these tools for being used as building blocks that sustain a limited mode of enquiry, thereby ensuring the continuation of particular research methods and paradigms. As well as the continued expertise of ‘experts’ – those with the language, tools and institutional support to uphold the idea of sound knowledge that is demonstrably objective and scientific. My scepticism is informed by my disciplinary background/field, of course, and key discussions that include Thomas Kuhn’s critical engagement with scientific paradigms (1962), John Law’s critique of social science research methods that seek to tame the mess of life (2004), and Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledge (1988) where she argues for a feminist objectivity in which knowledge is always understood as partial, never fixed. Not only do existing research paradigms, methods and frameworks uphold certain systems of power, but these also work to limit the possibilities of experimental research that can offer new ways of seeing and understanding (and participating in) the world...

**[KL]**: To continue about rigour in psychological research, transferability and applicability are used to determine whether the research results can be applied to other similar situations or people (Liamputtong 2009). Dependability is used to define whether the findings fit the data from which they have been derived and that the process of research is traceable and clearly documented (Liamputtong 2009). Finally, confirmability is about showing that the findings derive from the data and not from the imagination of the researcher, no matter how vivid (Liamputtong 2009).

**[PB]**: Your point about confirmability seems to suggest that the perspective/imagination/sensibilities/cultural biases of researchers are divorced from the practice of research? This seems dangerous to believe. (See eugenics, phrenology, and a history of other rigorous ‘scientific’ approaches).

**[KL]**: I see what you are saying, and it is relevant to conducting qualitative research. There are many different ways to do qualitative research, and researchers say that the best qualitative analyses are made when the analyst/researcher/coder allows for their insights, interests, understandings and creativity to come forward (Hopwood 2018, Braun and Clarke 2006). This does not mean there is no rigour in the process but that the best analysis happens when there is a strong interaction between the data and the researcher and when the researcher creates links among the data rather than just reporting them (Braun and Clarke 2006, Hopwood 2018).

Furthermore, when it comes to the analysis of qualitative research data, there are instances where a deductive approach is more appropriate and there are other instances where an inductive approach is better fitted. With the deductive approach, themes and codes are pre-selected before having the researchers read the existing literature (Braun and Clarke 2006, Gale et al. 2013). With the inductive approach, themes and codes are considered from the data that have been collected (Braun and Clarke 2006, Gale et al. 2013). Having said that, there are multiple qualitative research projects where a combination of these two approaches is better fitted, especially when a research project has specific issues to explore but, at the same time, wants to leave free space for other unexpected themes that might come up as the data analysis progresses (Gale et al. 2013, Braun and Clarke 2006). As Braun and Clarke (2006) have noted, the researcher plays an active role in the process, and themes do not just emerge passively.

For our systematic review, articles are only included if they offer original qualitative or quantitative data about the relationship between consumption of pornography and McKee et al.’s 15 domains of healthy sexual development (2010). I found it difficult to apply these criteria to humanities research. It seems to me that in the disciplines whose academic articles do not follow a standard social sciences structure but instead are structured around an argument, empirical research which leads to new data is not always required. In a lot of their papers, humanities researchers express their opinions comparing them with other writers’ opinions.

**[PB]**: Although it’s a common misconception that humanities and other ‘less scientific’ research is little more than *opinion*, this claim is still difficult for *my people* to encounter. Unless it’s flagged as ‘commentary’, opinion would not be published in any peer-reviewed media or cultural studies journal that I know of. Published material without empirical research methods and findings doesn’t reduce that to opinion – as though flimsy, baseless or little more than an exercise in creative writing. When teaching, I always warn students against offering opinions, and if this is the stuff of an essay, that essay is graded as a fail. Perhaps some students also mistake critically and theoretically engaged writing as opinion, but it’s not. What I think you might mean to say is ‘informed discussion’. There is an art (and a lot of time) involved in crafting discussion that engages with relevant literature to demonstrate knowledge that is involved, entangled, and referential to ‘the field’. Much like social sciences research, this, to me, is about building and contributing to knowledge, and always engaging with what has happened before, and sometimes drawing from a range of disciplines beyond one’s own. Opinions and personal choices and interests may inform the discussion, but this would be the same for social sciences discussions.

Through engaging with the pornography research literature in this project (most belonging to your disciplines), it seems obvious that we’re facing difficulties in grappling with unfamiliar genres. From my work in sexual health, I’m already somewhat familiar with the ‘typical structure’ of social sciences research, though admittedly I don’t find that this literature offers much to discussions of sexual cultures, gender, and media, nor the complexities of how people understand and practice health and wellbeing. This is the literature I turn to for simple facts, or sometimes to point to examples of where everyday practices are abstracted by discussions of ‘risk factors’, for example.

**[KL]**: In my first review of the literature I found it difficult to identify humanities papers that have a solid research core because the concepts of validity and reliability are not usually used, as highlighted by (McKee and Ingham 2018).

**[PB]**: This feels a little harsh. And it also takes me back to some of my earlier comments regarding validity and a belief (I want to say *delusion*) that research can and should be rigorous. As well as discounting knowledge from research participants and other non-experts, a lot of social sciences research also subjugates other disciplinary approaches (Foucault reference, sorry) (Foucault 1980). It’s like saying “we have scientific rigour and you do not, therefore we can do knowledge while you just play with words and opinion”. This could take us down a Foucauldian power/knowledge (Foucault 1980, 1972) rabbit hole, but let’s not go there.

Most of the pornography research articles I’ve enjoyed reading come from humanities scholars. These offer narrative, argument, and observations that open spaces for new ways of looking at things; an expansion (rather than reduction) of thought and understanding. Although there’s no ‘social sciences structure’ in these articles, yet there’s still structure. Being trained, familiar and perhaps culturally embedded in this style of research and writing, I feel much more comfortable within these texts. I feel uncomfortable coding them however, since the coding structure we are using is a scientific framework that doesn’t map well onto these articles. It’s tempting to reduce the comparison to Maths vs. English – both compulsory throughout our secondary schooling, both important to everyday life, yet not very easy to correlate or compare their value. Also, I was never good at maths.

**[KL]**: As a psychologist, I find it difficult to see how I would use such papers in a systematic literature review.

**[PB]**: I guess we agree on this. Though maybe there’s more than one way to do a systematic literature review.

**[KL]**: There is no expectation that humanities researchers will write methods or limitations sections in their articles. I do not see how I can judge and compare the research rigour a humanities paper holds if there is not a specific basis on which to evaluate it. That being said, of course I realise that this does not mean that humanities papers are ‘bad’ or ‘invalid’. Further, even though humanities outputs are hard to assess, they do make people think (Holm, Jarrick, and Scott 2015). For psychologists, though, it is hard to include papers that do not have a research core when doing a systematic review.

**[PB]**: I want to know what a ‘research core’ is. Do social scientists always look for a centre?

**[KL]**: They do look for valid data! An interesting example of this came up when we were talking about inclusion and exclusion criteria for the systematic literature review. For me, as a psychologist and a social scientist, articles where a humanities researcher has read history texts about sexual pleasure and satisfaction and has come up with conclusions should be excluded as not offering original data. But, according to Alan, these are new data and such articles should be included. Initially, it was very hard to accept that and to work with that in mind. This different way of thinking, however, and the differences on which researchers from different disciplines make decisions, is what this project is all about. Deciding which articles fulfil our inclusion criteria and which articles to exclude is a painful process. We initially specified certain criteria but, as expected, it was not easy to come to an agreement. It takes time, effort and a lot of debating to reach consensus as each member has different ideas, opinions and different backgrounds which really define the way each one thinks and judges research; this process is ongoing.

**[PB]**: While it is time-consuming and perhaps frustrating, it could also be argued that this strengthens the research because we’ve had our judgements checked and challenged, as would not happen so much in single-discipline research.

**[KL]**: True.

**Conclusion**

Even though this project has been challenging for everyone involved, we have learned a lot and we continue learning. So far, we have learned that projects such as this one require a lot of conversation, a lot of time, and some flexibility in the project’s timeline and structure. A sense of humour is also very useful. Despite some ongoing struggles, frequent bouts of miscommunication and the need to move things more slowly than either of us are used to, we still think this endeavour of interdisciplinary pornography research is worthwhile. We wrote this paper as we believe it adds to the field of interdisciplinary studies and it is more useful to readers and peer researchers than a presentation of methods and findings that fail to report on the difficulties of such interdisciplinary work. Similar to what Snow said (1959), it is crucial for different disciplines to try to work together in order to achieve better results and better solutions in their struggles and this is what we are trying to do in this project. As this type of work has not been conducted before, there is no specific way of successfully conducting such research.

Usually when academics talk about research translation, they refer to translating their work to sites beyond academia. Our experiences within this project tell us that research translation needs to be lateral too, across and among various disciplines, to ensure that ideas and methods are tested. We are aware that there are many academics who try to navigate among different disciplines in their careers, both within and across ‘disciplines that publish academic articles that are structured using the subheadings Background, Methods, Results and Discussion’ and ‘disciplines whose academic articles do not follow a standard structure but instead are structured around an argument’.

This article is reflective of our experiences and was found to be relatable to colleagues we have shared and discussed our experiences with. By writing within the process, we offer a live account of all the challenges encountered. It also demonstrates a need for academic discussion on this matter, and we hope it will be useful to other researchers grappling with aspects of interdisciplinary research such as this. Hopefully this is also useful for readers beyond the study of pornography, in other similar interdisciplinary projects, which might be facing similar challenges, and also that this will improve public debate and policy outcomes about pornography by making this knowledge comprehensible to policymakers, educators and parents.

As our discussion seeks to demonstrate, we will likely never convince each other that our disciplines have greater merit, but we can work towards developing an understanding of other disciplinary frameworks and processes and where these might or might not connect. If nothing else, it helps us to better understand what we are reading when we engage with other disciplines. Most importantly, it means we can broaden conversations, such as the conversation about pornography and its relationship with audiences.

**Disclaimer**

All the opinions expressed above have to do with this project so far and only with that. We cannot know what the future will bring. The researchers’ goal, apart from conducting research, is to work towards uniting humanities and social sciences rather than dividing.

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1. A Delphi Panel was set up to inform the parameters of our systematic literature review, and members came from a range of disciplines across the humanities and social sciences. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)