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Women Reporting on Their Use of Pornography: A Qualitative Study Exploring Women’s Perceived Precursors and Perceived Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore motivations women describe for using pornography. A qualitative online interview study was conducted with 30 women (*Mean* age 30.23, range 20–47; residing in the UK and in Greece; of varied sexual orientations and relationship status) about their pornography use, motivations for use, and preferences. Reflexive thematic analysis was used. Results were organized into four themes: Sexual Precursors, Non-sexual Precursors, Intended Outcomes, and Unintended Outcomes. The findings highlight that pornography use for women can have both positive and negative ramifications for women’s sexual lives. Implications for clinical practice and education are discussed.

In the last two decades digital technologies have increasingly provided people with fast and easy access to pornographic material (Daskalopoulou & Zanette, 2020; Galper & Tindage, 2023; Vaillancourt-Morel, Rosen, Willoughby, Leonhardt, & Bergeron, 2020), making it a normative sexual activity for most people, including women (Ashton, McDonald, & Kirkman, 2018). Pornography research has been increasing in the last decade, using both quantitative (Ashton, McDonald, & Kirkman, 2019; Fisher & Kohut, 2017; Kohut, Baer, & Watts, 2016, Kohut, Fisher, & Campbell, 2017, Kohut et al., 2020; Maas, Bray, & Noll, 2019; Maas, Vasilenko, & Willoughby, 2018) and qualitative (Ashton et al., 2019, Ashton, McDonald, & Kirkman, 2020; Attwood, Smith, & Barker, 2021; Brown, Schmidt, & Robertson, 2018; Daskalopoulou & Zanette, 2020; Galper & Tindage, 2023) approaches. However, historically, pornography research focused mostly on men. To date, little attention has been given to women’s experiences with their own pornography use (Ashton et al., 2019, 2020; Chadwick, Raisanen, Goldey, & van Anders, 2018; Galper & Tindage, 2023) and, in particular, to women’s reported motivations for pornography use. Below research is presented specifically on women’s reported pornography use in general, and then with a focus on women’s motivation for pornography use and reported outcomes.

Women’s pornography use

Research on pornography use has been conducted mostly using mixed-sex samples, apart from a few exceptions. Kohut, Balzarini, Fisher, and Campbell (2018) asked US heterosexual couples to complete online surveys to investigate their pornography use, either together or alone. They found that when partners were using pornography together, they experienced more open sexual

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communication and closeness; when partners did not use pornography together or when one partner did not use pornography at all and the other one did, sexual communication was inhibited, and the reported closeness was lower. The authors considered gender differences in their analyses, but they reported that gender did not play a role in this sample, probably because according to the authors' interpretations these were dyadic data that examined interactional effects of each partners' pornography use.

Vaillancourt-Morel et al. (2017) conducted an online survey with a North American sample of women and men (18 to 78 years old) with the aim of establishing whether individuals who watched online pornography fit one or more of three distinct profiles proposed by Cooper, Putnam, Planchon, and Boies (1999): recreational, highly distressed non-compulsive, and compulsive. Most women fit the recreational group profile, suggesting that pornography use might be part of an open and active sex life for them rather than being a source of stress and compulsion. On the contrary, men were more likely to belong in the compulsive profile.

In a systematic review of studies on pornography use and sexual pleasure, McKee, Litsou, Byron, and Ingham (2021) concluded that sometimes women might feel conflicted between the sexual pleasure they received from their pornography use and wider cultural discourses dictating they should not be watching pornography. Women and men are positioned differently with respect to pornography use, with women receiving more negative messages about their pornography use and masturbation than men, that is it not socially acceptable for women to use pornography. At the same time, it is considered acceptable and expected for men to masturbate and to be using pornography (McKee et al., 2021). Compared with the research on men, the limited research on women has focused more on their subjective experience and sexual agency. A meta-analysis of 50 studies concluded that pornography consumption did not play a role in women's sexual and relationship satisfaction, but it did play a negative role in men's sexual and relationship satisfaction (Wright, Tokunaga, Kraus, & Klann, 2017).

Ashton et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review of 22 qualitative articles that focused on women's experiences of pornography. Women accessed pornography mostly *via* electronic devices and they encountered pornography intentionally, accidentally, or indirectly through partners' use; pornography was accessed either alone, with partners, or in a social setting. Women expressed empathy mostly toward female actors, and less toward male actors. Women compared their bodies to the bodies of pornography female actors; they mentioned pornography use as a poor form of sex education, but also as a way to become sexually aroused. At the same time, women reported they believed that their use of pornography would be seen as inappropriate by society. In the context of relationships, some women mentioned that pornography use reduced intimacy, while others believed pornography use increased intimacy. Relationship length was not taken into consideration however, and thus the authors could not discuss whether pornography use was differentially related to intimacy depending on relationship length. Finally, some of the women in the studies reviewed believed that pornography use was an adult right and that it should not be censored, although any form of violence depicted in pornography, such as rape, murder, and women's degradation, was disliked.

Ashton et al. (2020) interviewed 27 young Australian women (18–30 years old) to explore how they understood what pornography meant for them. The participants' discourses revealed that they felt that men's sexual needs in relation to pornography were prioritized, men were the gatekeepers of intimacy, women needed to objectify themselves to compete with pornography for intimacy and, finally, that men have an inherent right to sexual fulfillment which does not always apply to women. Overall, women felt that their emotional, sexual, and relational needs were relatively disregarded in pornography.

Overall, previous research has shown that men in comparison to women, use pornography more. For example, the third NATSAL study in UK investigated young people's sex education needs and interviewed 3869 men and women, aged 16–24 years between 2010–2012. It was found that young men reported using pornography more (3.4%) in comparison to young women (0.2%) as an education source about sexual matters (Tanton et al., 2015). In Norway based on

a random sample of 10,000 men and women, aged 18–49 years, it was found that statistically significantly more men than women reported use of pornography, no matter their age and no matter their sexual orientation (Traeen et al., 2006). Similar results were reported from another study in Norway that used a random sample of 2381 persons, 18–59 years. According to the results, 94% of men reported pornography use in comparison to 68% of the women (Traeen & Daneback, 2013). Data from 10,044 Czechs, men and women, revealed that in the past six months from when the study took place, a total of 21.1% of men and 5.1% of women reported the use of pornography (Bártová, Androvičová, Krejčová, Weiss, & Klapilová, 2021). Finally, research conducted in five European countries, Bulgaria, Cyprus, England, Italy, and Norway, involving 4,564 young people aged 14–17, showed that in all of the five countries, young men used pornography considerably more than young women did (Stanley et al., 2018).

What motivates women's pornography use

There is some research that has focused on motivations for pornography use but mostly using mixed-gender samples. There are a few exceptions where women-only samples have been used (mainly qualitative studies), but these assessed opinions and experiences about partner's pornography use, as well as women's own use, but did not focus on women's reported motivations for pornography use.

Perse (1994), in a now rather dated study, conducted an in-person survey using female and male US college students (age range 18 to 23). Participants were provided with 32 reasons for pornography use and they had to rate "how close their reasons for watching or reading erotica matched" on a five-point scale (1 = not at all, 5 = exactly). Men's scores were higher than women's for each of these 32 reasons, they reported using pornography more often than women, and they were more likely to report using pornography for sexual release than women. Overall, four main motivations for pornography use were identified and were consistent across men and women: sexual enhancement, diversion, sexual release, and substitution (Perse, 1994). Sexual enhancement was about sexual arousal and learning; diversion about using pornography out of boredom, for entertainment and to relax; sexual release was about using pornography for fantasizing and masturbation; and finally, substitution was about using pornography as a replacement for a sexual partner.

A US online survey study with heterosexual couples (*Mean* age = 35.56, *SD* = 10.67) explored reasons for pornography use. Seventeen reasons for pornography use were provided and participants were asked to indicate for which of these reasons they chose to use pornography, as well as which one was the main reason for their pornography use. Men reported using pornography more than women and the main reasons were: for masturbation, as part of their sexual relationship with their partners, curiosity, boredom, stress reduction, and availability of materials. Women reported using pornography mainly as part of their partnered sexual relationships, for masturbation, for help when fantasizing, and because of curiosity (Bridges & Morokoff, 2011).

Another US online survey recruited female and male undergraduate students (*Mean* age = 20, *SD* = 1.81) to identify specific motivations for pornography use (Paul & Shim, 2008). Participants were provided with 23 different reasons for pornography use and were asked to indicate how many different times they used pornography for each reason during the last year. A factor analysis revealed four main reasons for use: relationship, mood management, habitual use, and fantasy. *Relationship* was about using pornography to maintain sexual partnerships and friendships. *Mood management* was about use for entertainment and as help when masturbating. *Habitual use* was about use out of habit or because of compulsiveness. Finally, *fantasy* was about using pornography to enhance fantasizing about having sexual activities. Across all factors men showed stronger motivations than women. The authors concluded that women were probably consuming less pornography than men because they were less motivated to do so.

In an online survey involving a mixed-gender Hungarian sample, specific reasons for pornography use were provided (e.g., "I watch porn to/because..."), and participants rated the

frequency these applied to them on a seven-point scale (1 = never, 7 = all the time). The most common pornography motivations were sexual pleasure, sexual curiosity, fantasy, self-exploration, lack of sexual satisfaction, boredom avoidance, emotional distraction/suppression, and stress reduction. In comparison to women, men demonstrated higher scores on all motivations, apart from sexual curiosity and self-exploration (Bóthe, Tóth-Király, et al., 2021).

Burtăverde, Jonason, Giosan, and Ene (2021) conducted a qualitative study using an open-ended questionnaire and two quantitative online studies, among a mixed-gender sample of undergraduate Romanian students. The most common reasons reported for pornography use were increased sex drive, enhancing sexual performance, social and instrumental reasons, and lack of relational and emotional skills. Men had higher scores on all reasons for pornography use than women, except for enhancement of sexual performance.

Hempel (2012) conducted an online survey with 612 US women and qualitative interviews with 29 women who volunteered from the original sample about their experiences with pornography and the degree of alignment with their religious/spiritual beliefs. Women had overall positive experiences with pornography and used it in order to increase arousal, as a form of entertainment, and to increase their sexual knowledge.

In a study of US college students, women used pornography less than men did and they reported use due to curiosity, for sexual pleasure, and for sexual excitement (Brown, Conner, & Vennum, 2017). Similar results were reported by another mixed-gender US online survey which provided participants with 15 motivations for pornography use, "I view pornography when...", which participants rated on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Men and women had similar motivations for using pornography, which were sexually based reasons, all well as because of tiredness, and because of boredom (Esplin, Hatch, Hatch, Deichman, & Braithwaite, 2021). Moynihan, Igou, and van Tilburg (2022) examined the role pornography played in alleviating boredom in a mixed-gender sample of UK and Irish participants. Participants were provided with different reasons for pornography use, "I use pornography to..." which they had to rate on a five-point scale (1 = never like me, 5 = very often like me). Results revealed that women and men used pornography to alleviate boredom. A qualitative interview US study with 30 women of diverse social backgrounds described that the main reasons women reported pornography use were for boosting sexual arousal and for masturbation (Parvez, 2006).

Grubbs, Wright, Braden, Wilt, and Kraus (2019) conducted a large systematic review of more than 130 studies and found that women used pornography less than men but both women and men used pornography for sexual pleasure. Another systematic review and thematic synthesis focused on what motivated women (of varied sexual orientations, all in committed relationships) to watch pornography (Litsou, Graham, & Ingham, 2021). Women used pornography to communicate with their partners about sexual issues, to negotiate sexual likes and dislikes, and to increase intimacy but, at the same time, reported they sometimes felt pressure to perform specific sexual acts they did not necessarily want to engage in.

Outcomes from women's pornography use

Pornography use can influence women in different ways. Some previous research has presented outcomes from women's pornography use. A Canadian study with mixed-sex and same-sex couples involved participants, both the women and their partners, keeping daily diaries of their pornography use and of their relationship satisfaction, partnered sexual desire, and partnered sexual activity (Vaillancourt-Morel et al., 2020). For women, regardless of their partner's gender, pornography use was positively associated with their own and their partner's sexual desire and with the likelihood of partnered sexual activity, whilst for men, regardless of their partner's gender, using pornography was associated with their partner's lower sexual desire. Online surveys that investigated heterosexual US couples' shared pornography use and sexual and relationship satisfaction showed that partners who used pornography together reported higher sexual and

relationship satisfaction than partners who did not use pornography together, and this finding was not moderated by gender (Kohut et al., 2021).

Another US online survey that used dyadic data from heterosexual couples reported an association between pornography use and relationship satisfaction for both women and men. This association differed by levels of anxious attachment and pornography acceptance (Maas et al., 2018). For women who were high in pornography acceptance, pornography use was not associated with relationship satisfaction whereas, for women who were low in pornography acceptance, use was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. In addition, for women with anxious attachment, greater pornography use was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. Men with high pornography acceptance, more pornography use was associated with higher relationship satisfaction, for men with low pornography acceptance, more pornography use was associated with less relationship satisfaction. Men with anxious attachment style, greater pornography use was associated with lower relationship satisfaction. These findings help explain how an anxious attachment style might moderate relationship satisfaction along with pornography use.

In a dyadic study conducted in North America, mixed-sex and same-sex couples who had been together for at least 6 months completed an online survey (Bóthe, Vaillancourt-Morel, & Bergeron, 2021). Men's pornography use was unrelated to their own and to their partner's sexual wellbeing. Women's pornography use (either solo or with their partner) was associated with their own greater sexual wellbeing, with more frequent partnered sexual activities, and with lower sexual distress. These results suggest that women's pornography use might promote openness in sexual communication because its use could provide opportunities for discussing sexual preferences, which might in turn enhance the couple's, as well as, the women's, own wellbeing.

Ashton et al. (2019) conducted interviews with 27 young Australian women (18 to 30 years), all of whom had had sex with men, to better understand women's pornography use and sexual pleasure. Women reported that pornography enhanced pleasure through solo pleasure, shared viewing with partners, discovering new sexual preferences, and getting reassurance about their body by watching different genres of pornography that included different body types. At the same time, pornography impeded some women's pleasure *via* its misrepresentation of bodies and sexual acts, both because of women's concern for the actors' wellbeing and because it disrupted intimacy. Daskalopoulou and Zanette (2020) conducted interviews with 27 women (20 to 48 years old, of mixed sexual orientation and relationship status) who resided in the UK, Greece, France, Italy, Switzerland, Brazil, USA, and Australia, to understand the role of pornography in the construction of female sexuality. Women reported that watching pornography helped them enact their sexual fantasies, learn, and experiment with their bodies and their sexual partners, as well as better understand their sexuality and express themselves in ways they preferred. At the same time, women understood that pornography reproduced and promoted patriarchal discourses of sexuality. These findings indicate that, although women can feel empowered when they consume pornography, at the same time they can feel "controlled" by patriarchy.

Aims of the current study

Overall, it appears that some women choose to use pornography either by themselves or with their partners because they believe they derive some benefit from it, even if they do not like the way women are presented in the pornography they view. Some previous research, qualitative and quantitative, has explored women's pornography use, without focusing specifically on what motivates women to use pornography, and what might be the consequent outcomes of that use. Rather, women's motivations for their pornography use and possible outcomes of that use have been generally studied alongside other issues. Therefore, the aims of this qualitative study were to gain rich information about women's subjective experiences and understanding the meanings and interpretations women have regarding their motivations to use pornography, and possible

outcomes women obtain from that use, using a sample of adult women from countries where little previous research has been conducted, without focusing on other aspects of women's pornography use. To achieve that, we wanted to hear directly from the women themselves.

Method

We used a qualitative research design utilizing semi-structured interviews. A qualitative method was chosen because it can be used “to explore substantive areas about which little is known” and also “to obtain intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 11). The guidance in the journal article reporting standards for qualitative primary research in psychology (JARS-Qual) by Levitt et al. (2018) was followed.

The research received ethics approval from the University of Southampton.

Participants and recruitment

Adult individuals, 18 years and older, who identified as women, of any sexual orientation, were consumers of pornography, and resided either in the UK or in Greece were recruited. Participants living in the UK and Greece were chosen because the first author (who conducted all interviews) is fluent in English and in Greek. Recruitment was conducted *via* advertising on various social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit. The two first authors' Twitter accounts were used; all of the sub-Reddits used were related to sexuality with some specifically targeted to women (such as: r/TwoXSex and r/askwomenadvice); the Center for Sexual Health Research Facebook page was also used for advertising. Where moderator approval was needed before any advertising was carried out, such as on Reddit, such approval was always obtained in advance. Snowball sampling through the participants' social networks was also utilized. There were no prior or existing relationships between the authors and the participants.

Many factors play an important role when determining sample size in qualitative studies such as the quality of the data, study scope, the amount of useful information obtained from each participant, number of interviews per participant, the use of shadowed data, the qualitative method, and study design used (Morse, 2000). The initial intention was to interview approximately 30 participants, with scope to increase the sample if the collected data were not felt to be sufficient to address the research aims. This decision to target 30 participants was also based on time constraints, on the fact that previous qualitative researchers have utilized a similar number of participants (Ashton et al., 2019, 2020; Daskalopoulou & Zanette, 2020), as well as a leading sexuality journal's policy about what sample size is required for qualitative studies (Dworkin, 2012). The researchers made the pragmatic decision to stop data collection after 30 interviews, because it was considered that the data collected would be sufficient (rich and complex enough) to address the research aims (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Dworkin, 2012; Liamputtong, 2009). As this is a relatively new area, the researchers did not anticipate that data saturation would necessarily be attained. In addition, the concept of data saturation is not relevant to reflexive thematic analysis, which was the data analysis method used, as it cannot be determined in advance of analysis how many participants will be needed to generate meaning or exhaust new insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Sim, Saunders, Waterfield, & Kingstone, 2018).

Procedure

In-depth, semi-structured individual interviews were deemed the most appropriate method to collect rich data regarding the participants' lived experiences and perspectives (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016; Liamputtong, 2009). Interested participants contacted the first author *via* the email provided on the advertisement and were then sent the participant information

sheet and consent form *via* SafeSend, a secure online system. Participants did not send any signed forms back to the researcher as consent was obtained verbally (and recorded) before the start of each interview. The women who agreed to participate were then invited to an online Microsoft Teams video call at a mutually convenient time¹. Participants were given an option of either a video call or a voice call; six opted for a voice call. The interviews lasted approximately 45 min (range: 42 mins to 82 mins) and were recorded with the participants' permission. Participants were informed that their data would be kept strictly confidential and anonymized and that they could take a break or stop completely at any time. A day after the interview the participants were emailed a debriefing form and a £15 (roughly 18 USD) Amazon voucher as compensation for their time and effort.

The recordings of the interviews were stored on a password-protected laptop and were only accessed by the first author, who transcribed the interviews verbatim, anonymized them by allocating random numbers and removed any references to content that could enable identification; the recordings were then deleted. The transcripts were uploaded to and analyzed *via* NVivo 12 software (QSR International, 2021) in order to facilitate coding and organizing the results.

Interview process

The interview started with demographic questions such as age, residence, and relationship status (see Table 1 for demographic information) as a way to build rapport, followed by questions about their sexual preferences and behaviors. Following this, more in-depth questions about pornography use, pornography genre preferences and any other relevant topics that came up during the session were asked. Interviews were conducted between November 2020 and February 2021 with 30 participants, all of whom self-identified as women. The full interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

Definitions

Acknowledging that there are many different genres and styles of pornography and that it is highly likely that these appeal differently to different women (Maas, Cary, et al., 2019), for this study the term pornography was defined for the participants as follows: "pornography or sexually explicit material² is any kind of material intended to create or enhance sexual feelings or thoughts in the recipient and at the same time containing explicit exposure and/or descriptions of genitals and sexual acts" (Hald & Malamuth, 2008, p. 616).

Analysis

Because thematic analysis (TA) is not a singular approach but rather a group of approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020, 2021a; Braun, Clarke, & Hayfield, 2019), Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021a) reflexive TA was used. The first part of the data analysis was done deductively, meaning looking specifically for reasons women mentioned that motivated them to use pornography; this is how the themes Sexual Precursors and Non-sexual Precursors were constructed. Then, the rest of the analysis was conducted inductively, meaning that the authors did not have set ideas in mind and the analysis was exploratory; this is how the themes Intended Outcomes and Unintended Outcomes were constructed. This method was deemed appropriate because the study's aim was to understand participants' experiences of pornography use and extract suitable themes (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021a). Further, TA is not linked to a specific theoretical framework, but is rather influenced by the researchers' assumptions and perspectives about what the data represent and what constitutes meaningful knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Braun et al., 2019). Researchers need to be aware of that and reflect on it (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun,

Table 1. Participants' details.

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Place of Residency	Type of Call	Recruitment	Mode of Occupation	Relationship Status	Sexual Orientation	Status of Religiosity ⁵
Participant 1	44	British White	UK	Video	Twitter	Working	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 2	39	British White	UK	Video	Snowballing	Working	Dating	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 3	45	British White	UK	Video	Snowballing	Working	Married	Bisexual	Spiritual
Participant 4	42	British White	UK	Video	Snowballing	Working	Married	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 5	31	British White	UK	Video	Twitter	Working	Dating	Pansexual	Not Religious
Participant 6	22	British White	UK	Video	Twitter	Student	Committed Relationship	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 7	41	British White	UK	Video	Snowballing	Working	Single	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 8	24	Indian	UK	Video	Twitter	Student	Dating	Heterosexual	Spiritual
Participant 9	47	Dutch White	UK	Video	Twitter	Working	Single	Heterosexual	Spiritual
Participant 10	26	British Indian	UK	Video	Facebook	Working	Single	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 11	22	British Polish	UK	Video	Facebook	Working	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 12	26	USA White	UK	Video	Twitter	Student	Committed Relationship	Queer	Not Religious
Participant 13	30	Italian White	UK	Video	Twitter	Student	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 14	29	British White	UK	Video	Snowballing	Student	Dating	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 15	25	British White	UK	Video	Snowballing	Student	Committed Relationship	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 16	35	Greek White	Greece	Voice	Facebook	Working	Married	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 17	29	Greek White	Greece	Video	Snowballing	Working	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 18	26	British White	UK	Video	Snowballing	Working	Single	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 19	33	British White	UK	Voice	Reddit	Student	Married	Bisexual	Religious
Participant 20	22	British White	UK	Video	Reddit	Unemployed	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual	Religious
Participant 21	28	British White	UK	Voice	Snowballing	Working	Committed Relationship	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 22	29	British Chinese	UK	Video	Reddit	Working	Single	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 23	22	Greek White	UK	Video	Snowballing	Student	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 24	34	British White	UK	Video	Reddit	Working	Committed Relationship	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 25	27	British White	UK	Voice	Reddit	Student	Committed Relationship	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 26	26	British Indian	UK	Voice	Snowballing	Working	Single	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 27	28	British White	UK	Video	Reddit	Unemployed	Single	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 28	20	Trinidad & Tobago	UK	Voice	Reddit	Student	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual	Not Religious
Participant 29	24	British Thai	UK	Video	Reddit	Working	Committed Relationship	Bisexual	Not Religious
Participant 30	31	British White	UK	Video	Reddit	Working	Committed Relationship	Heterosexual	Not Religious

2017). The inductive method was used because the goal was for the themes to be strongly linked to the data themselves and not be driven by the researchers' preconceptions or interests or by trying to fit the data into preexisting themes or ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

The six steps of reflexive TA were followed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, familiarization with the data was achieved by transcribing the data, reading and re-reading the transcripts. The automatic transcriptions produced by Microsoft Teams were used, but they were checked line by line, which helped with the familiarization of the data. Second, initial codes were generated during the data collection process (while still conducting further interviews) and during reading and re-reading the data and coding terms and phrases that appeared relevant to the research question. Third, initial themes³ were generated by combining similar codes into preliminary themes. Fourth, the initial themes were reviewed and updated. Fifth, the themes were finalized and given a clear definition. In the sixth and final step the final report was written, which included the selection of the most prevalent themes along with illustrative quotes from the data. The analysis was not a linear process but was rather an iterative process involving the researchers going back and forth through the different steps. In addition, the researchers, who differ in terms of age and gender, played an active role throughout the whole analysis process as they brought in their research values, skills, experiences, and training (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020, 2021a).

The first author translated the Greek interviews into English. A linguistics expert who was fluent both in English and in Greek checked the translations and also back translated the English versions into Greek, as a way to check for potential misunderstandings; no problems were encountered. Data analysis was conducted by all three authors in close collaboration, with the first author taking the lead in the analysis. Coding and analysis were discussed in regular meetings between the coauthors.

Reflexive statement before conducting the interviews

The first author is a cisgender woman. She took care to make the participants feel comfortable and relaxed in order to share their stories and to use the vocabulary and terminology used by the participants. They also tried to maintain a non-judgmental, exploratory outlook so as not to appear either in favor of, or against, pornography and to respect the women's accounts and understand their experiences from their own perspectives. The coauthors helped the first author prepare for the interviews by discussing the interview process and by having a mock interview for practice.

Post interview reflections

The one-to-one online interviews between the first author and the participants enabled rapport to be built and encouraged the participants to share detailed information about their experiences and thoughts related to their sexual lives and pornography consumption (Hammarberg et al., 2016; Liamputtong, 2009). Conducting the interviews online did not seem to hamper participants' openness and willingness to share personal details.

The first author, who took the lead on data analysis, recognizes that reality is relative to the experiences of the participants and thus took at face value what the participants reported. Also, she acknowledges that her attitudes about pornography use are liberal, given that she was raised and has lived in countries that have few formal restrictions regarding pornography access.

Overall, most of the participants were very talkative and eager to share their experiences in the interviews. All of them said that they were very happy to be able to talk to someone about their pornography use as they did not have the chance to do so very often. At the end of the interview all the participants spontaneously said that the interview was a positive experience and that they were happy they took part. A few of the participants expressed an interest to see the published results in the future and gave permission to keep their contact details for this purpose.

Results

Participant characteristics

Participants' age range was 20 to 47 years old (Mean age = 30.23). Two of the participants resided in Greece and the rest in the UK. Fifteen of the participants identified as heterosexual, thirteen as bisexual, one as queer and one as pansexual. Fifteen of the participants stated they were in committed relationships, seven were single, four were married, and four said they were dating. No comparisons were made across different sexual orientations and relationship status because the numbers were small, and we did not feel confident about making meaningful comparisons. Eleven of the participants were introduced to the study through other people (snowballing). Four of the participants who were recruited *via* snowballing had friends who also participated to the study. Further details about the participants are provided in [Table 1](#).

Overview of themes

Detailed analysis of the transcripts led to the identification of four themes: Sexual Precursors, Non-sexual Precursors, Intended Outcomes, and Unintended Outcomes. We deemed these to be the main themes because these were discussed by all the participants in detail, because they shared meaning and, finally, because each of them was united by a singular idea (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

Precursors, sexual and non-sexual, include the reasons and intended motivations reported by the women preceding their pornography consumption. Outcomes, intended and unintended, describe the results, both positive and negative, of using pornography.

Sexual precursors

Sexual precursors refer to the sexual reasons and motivations that women reported for actively using pornography. Those were: to learn new sexual techniques, learn about same-sex relationships, to enhance sexual arousal, to masturbate, to help focus while masturbating, as an alternative to fantasy, to orgasm, to watch other people having sex, and to connect with other people. Women mentioned various different sexual reasons that encouraged them choose to access pornography, with the most frequently mentioned being the need to learn new sexual techniques or get new ideas for sexual things to do. Some examples were:

P1(44, CR, H)⁴: Sometimes I watch for ideas for things and to keep a fresh perspective on my relationship.

P17(29, CR, H): Not about how sex is done but about how to give a good blowjob, so I would go and watch that. I didn't know before and so I was wondering whether it was simple or not. So, I watched the technical details and moves, and I watched what this can cause to a body. This is what I mean by technical bits.

P18 (26, S, B): Finding new things. And yeah, just having a bit more, bit of a kind of library (laugh) in my head of fun things to do, or new ways to come.

Learning from pornography also included learning about issues that were not included in sex education provided in schools, such as same-sex sexual relationships:

P14 (29, D, B): When I started dating women and stuff, I was like watching that for like tips really... sexual acts really like just, like different stuff to do, I suppose, because like. I guess like in you know, in like gay sex you're not really taught what to do and such. Whereas like you know, like sex education, growing up you're taught about straight male straight female so it's kind of like I learned that through porn I suppose.

Another frequently mentioned reason that women reported for using pornography was because they wanted to enhance their sexual arousal, for example:

P2 (39, D, H): I think I think first and foremost it's having sexual arousal in the first place and using it as a tool. to. yeah, I, I feel that way inclined and, and then I go naturally to that as a source of you know, as a way to elevate that feeling.

P5 (31, D, P): I, I guess I use it as a way to up the arousal, level with my partner and that.

P16 (35, M, H): I do not need pornography to make me more sexually aroused. Usually, I am already aroused... and so I might want to watch something to get me even more in the mood. So, I usually watch because I already feel aroused, and I want to get on with that feeling.

Another sexual precursor that was mentioned by the participants is that they chose to consume pornography while they were masturbating and that they would not use it if they did not want to masturbate:

P10 (26, S, H): To be honest, it's always to do with masturbation. I would never go and just watch a plot. It tends to be very focused... I wouldn't watch pornography for entertainment...I wouldn't watch for the plot." P12 (26, CR, Q): "So, when I'm watching it... it's usually masturbation by myself.

Using pornography acted as a visual aid for when women wanted to masturbate and needed help focusing:

P14 (29, D, B): I usually like when I'm masturbating or whatever, I need like visual stuff. I don't really like get off if it's just you know thoughts and things like that. I find it difficult to like shut-off in that way. So, it's more like the visual side of it.

P21 (28, CR, B): Sometimes it just, it takes me ages to come because I get in my own way...I start thinking about the day while masturbating. I'm like I can see I'm not gonna get off like this (laugh) and it's like nice to have something to focus on that's just got me like, just thinking about sex and kind of gets me to that point.

P6 (22, CR, B): So, if I like, do want to masturbate, then sometimes it's just like nicer when I've like, when I watch porn, just because like I said, like I just find it easier to get aroused than when I'm on my own. So that's the main reason. Even though I know it's not real, it's still like enjoyable for me to engage in.

Pornography was also used by the participants as an alternative to fantasy because sometimes it was difficult to rely on their own imagination. Participant 23 (22, CR, H) said she could never use her own imagination:

I've never been really good at, like masturbating on my own. Like it's not something I understood. I know there are people out there like they can do it on their own, in their own imagination, but I just never could. So, I get frustrated, and I end up just, like looking, like using pornography because it just makes things a bit easier. It provides the base where I built my fantasy on basically.

Similarly, Participant 26 (26, S, B) said that she found it difficult to fantasize because:

When you've been sort of masturbating for several years, I think there comes a point where you can't use your imagination anymore and you, if you've tried a lot of things during sex and you can't think about things that you haven't done anyway because you feel like you've explored all the territories that you want to explore sexually.

Achieving orgasm was another sexual precursor that women reported. P10 (26, S, H) used pornography when she wanted to have an orgasm and was struggling to achieve it for whatever reason. P16 (35, M, H) said she used pornography because:

I usually watch because I already feel aroused, and I want to get on with that feeling... My aim is to orgasm usually because I feel intrigued inside, either in my mind or in my genitals, and the aim is to continue to have this pleasant feeling and focus on myself and reach orgasm.

Finally, two women mentioned being in the mood to watch other people having sex as a precursor that made them choose to use pornography. P26 (26, S, B), for example, reported: "Sometimes it's nice to watch other people do stuff that you've done. You know just purely from a sort of voyeuristic perspective."

Finally, P4 (42, M, B) mentioned she accessed pornography because she found it was a way to connect with other people: “If somebody sends me a link or I want to send somebody a link about something specific so that, that’s building a sexual connection with somebody else.”

These are the sexual precursors or reasons that made women actively choose to access pornography, but women also reported consuming pornography for non-sexual reasons.

Non-sexual precursors

This theme referred to all the non-sexual motivations that women reported using pornography for. Those were: to relax, to combat boredom, as a form of entertainment, out of curiosity, to feel sexy and liberated, to process negative past experiences, to distract themselves, to procrastinate, and out of habit. The non-sexual precursor most often mentioned was that women chose to access pornography as a way to relax. For example:

P16 (35, M, H): It is definitely a way to relax. I might have it in my mind and I might know that my husband won’t be home for a while and so I put a video on.

P25 (27, CR, B): It’s like sort of an indulgence, it’s something kind of to do by myself that’s just for myself... It’s like taking a bath instead of a shower. It’s the kind of bit more relax, a bit more relaxing and sort of indulgent, I suppose.

P2 (39, D, H) said that, for her, using pornography to relax somehow felt like meditation: Sometimes it’s, it’s feeling a sense of, of numbness and wanting to stimulate my mind in some way to feel something, you know that I’m under an awful lot of stress which you know I won’t, you know, are not relevant to this, but you know sometimes I just do feel like I need to put my head somewhere else. Umm, and it does provide, you know, a bit of almost meditation. In a way you know, it’s a different experience.

Consuming pornography also served to combat boredom and to pass the time, as P24 (34, CR, B) said:

If I’m really, really bored or I feel a little bit like, you know, in a naughty mood I’ll just open some porn up and watch it then.

Pornography was consumed as a form of entertainment by some of the participants. As P19 (33, M, B) commented:

Like you get pornography of people dressed up as cartoon characters like The Simpsons or something like that and it’s quite funny so me and my friends do, you know, when we stumble upon something like that, we will share it with each other for like the comedy effect.

Curiosity was also mentioned as a non-sexual precursor that led some women to access pornography. Women were curious about the mechanics of certain sexual acts and about specific sexual interests, even if they were not interested in trying these themselves. P12 (26, CR, Q) said:

Just I find in general sex and sexuality very interesting. So, I’ll sometimes find myself going down these weird rabbit holes of very specific kind of sexual interests that I’m not interested in, in terms of it doesn’t arouse me, but sometimes I just kind of wind up, ending up in a real, kind of like how I did when I was younger, I’d just end up in a really weird place on the Internet where I’m like ‘Wow I didn’t know that existed!’

Other non-sexual precursors that women mentioned were because they wanted to escape the notion that women do not enjoy sex and to feel sexy and liberated. As P1 (44, CR, H) said:

I mean just by like watching porn, porn from like. it just made me realize that women can, can be... free of this. And what’s the word? I don’t know what the word is, free of this notion that you that you can’t enjoy sex.

One participant [P8 (24, D, H)] revealed that she was using pornography as a way to process bad sexual experiences she had experienced in the past:

With my new relationship, the person I've been dating now, I've been feeling a lot of anxiety around the physical aspect of our relationship, and I was confiding in in that to my counselor and she was she was talking about the need to process bad experiences in the past and we were thinking that perhaps a way of alleviating that anxiety or figuring out more healthy ways to think about these things was to, was to try seeing positive images on line. So that was I guess was the goal, but I haven't really felt that I found that helpful.

Consuming pornography was also a form of distraction for P4 (42, M, B), and a way to procrastinate and to avoid doing work, according to P5 (31, D, P).

Finally, pornography was used as a mode of habit, according to P30 (31, CR, H): "Because that, there would be time and umm it's been a couple of weeks then because it's a habit for me like every couple of weeks to do that."

It is clear from the above that there was a wide range of sexual and non-sexual precursors women cited that motivated them to use pornography.

Intended outcomes

This theme relates to the expected outcomes women had related to consuming pornography; in other words, what women intended to gain by opting to use pornography. Those were: to enhance sexual experiences, to explore sexual interests, and to enable sexual conversations. Women expressed that when accessing pornography intentionally, they expected to obtain sexual outcomes. For example, some women mentioned that using pornography helped enhance their sexual arousal and their orgasms, which subsequently enhanced their sexual experiences overall. As

P1 (44, CR, H) said: I think it's a turn on like if you watch porn and then you, you know go, go out to meet your partner. You feel really like turned on, more horny than normal.

P11 (22, CR, H) mentioned: So, say if I'm on my own and I'm watching it and masturbating and I see it, I'm probably more likely to wanna have sex with my boyfriend when he comes home. Like I'm quite excited for it.

P13 (30, CR, H) stated that using pornography while masturbating meant that she was able to orgasm more quickly.

In addition, some women said that pornography worked as an enabler to help them explore sexual interests and feel more confident to try different sexual experiences. As P2 (39, D, H) said:

It's helped me feel more confident. And helped me feel a little bit bolder to try different things.

For P12 (26, CR, Q), pornography use enabled conversations about what she wanted to happen in sexual situations:

I definitely do think that talking about the porn that you like or how you use it allows for some more conversations about what you do want to happen when you're in sexual scenarios.

Unintended outcomes

This theme comprised all the unintended outcomes—both sexual and non-sexual—from accessing pornography (i.e., the outcomes women experienced after using pornography that they had not expected to obtain). Those were: positive and negative body image ideas, realizing that it is part of the porn actors' job to look good, nonrealistic depictions, getting sexual ideas from pornography, ideas for things to buy, the intention not to reenact certain behaviors presented in pornography such as pretending to have an orgasm, ideas about specific things they would not like to do, gaining sexual empowerment, normalization of body functions, realizing that sexual relationships are not supposed to look or be the same for everyone, desensitization, and losing interest in having sex with partner.

Women talked about body image issues in both positive and negative ways. Some women mentioned that pornography helped them realize that all bodies, of whatever shape and size, are beautiful and accept the way they look. According to P16 (35, M, H), pornography helped her to not feel ashamed about her body: “I believe that the pornographic films I have watched, have helped me a lot not to be ashamed about my naked body.”

P18 (26, S, B) said that pornography made her feel more accepting of her body and more self-confident:

The other day I watched porn video with a really big lady in and she was beautiful and I am (big), and that made me feel more accepting of my body and just being, and just thinking yeah if she can be like that then, and she looks great, then you know I should I shouldn't, I should feel happy in my body.

P2 (39, D, H) talked specifically about how pornography helped her accept her breast size:

I've spent my, all my 20s and my teens feeling soooo flat chested and embarrassed about my tit size and it's really nice to watch porn and see that there's loads of small titted women and it's fine! And they're still massively sexy! And men really like them! ... So yeah, I I do think porn is, particularly how stuff is, made me feel much more comfortable, particularly with having small boobs! I love my boobs now!

P3 (45, M, B) talked about how using pornography helped her to accept the way her vulva looked:

Because I was a...the very typical story, like very ashamed of my vulva. Like I can't remember ever looking at it in a mirror or you know, just feeling like what is that? You know, like how could anyone even look at that? To now 'Oh, they're beautiful and they're so, they're all different! ... And especially the porn that I've been watching, there's women with all different cut types of vulvas It's like every, there's all sorts of beautiful, diverse vulvas and they're all like having a great time with them, and I think that's, like really helped me to be much more happy and, what's the word? Umm joyful and not ashamed of a part of my body which is wonderful, you know. And the porn has, visual watching women's porn has really helped with that actually.

Alongside the positive outcomes that were mentioned, some women also stated that pornography had negative influences on their sex lives, something that highlights the variability in women's responses in relation to their pornography use. For example, P10 (26, S, H) said that a lot of mainstream pornography portrayed blonde, white people and that this was not representative of herself; P11 (22, CR, H), P13 (30, CR, H), P14 (29, D, B), and P21 (28, CR, B) said that sometimes consuming pornography made them feel less confident about their bodies. As P6 (22, CR, B) said:

There have been times when it's sort of like had a negative impact just in terms of like how it makes me feel about myself. Umm so like there's definitely been times where I feel like I should like look more like the people that I'm looking at or that I should be like acting in the way that they are.

In contrast to what P3 (45, M, B) (above) said, P12 (26, CR, Q) reported that using pornography made her feel negative about her vulva specifically:

When I was a teenager/young adult when they were kind of, you know they would make a lot of comments about, you know, just in general vulvas being gross. So, what I saw in porn would end up being echoed in real life.

Three participants also said they realized that people in pornography have to look good because it is their job to look good and that it should not be an expectation for everyday people to look that good. For example, P28 (20, CR, H) said:

I do like try to remind myself that acting like on professionally recorded videos, when you see the actors and they are being paid, they probably exercise a lot or do things like that. Like I try to remind myself that it's OK that I don't look like that or I don't experience that.

Apart from body image issues, many of the women talked about how they realized, after accessing pornography, that what was depicted in pornography was not realistic, and that it was

not an actual representation of what really happens. This realization was not something women had thought of before and it was not an outcome they expected when they started using pornography. They noted that pornography actors are acting because this is their job, and the sex scenes are choreographed and reshot again and again in order to make everything look perfect.

A few participants added that they found amateur pornography to be more realistic in terms of sexual acts and how bodies look, but again they could not be certain that the material they were consuming was not edited. For example, P30 (31, CR, H) said:

I think pornography is not, you got to, when you're watching it you've got to have the mind that it's not a very realistic experience. That the couples, more often than not are acting, it's a performance... sometimes I will watch, I will watch amateur porn which is porn submitted by real people in their own homes. So that is a bit more realistic, but but again, they're only showing, they're only showing what they want to share, so it could be edited.

P11 (22, CR, H) said that when she used pornography for sexual purposes, she kept in mind that it is not an actual representation of what sex is about.

Some women mentioned that they ended up being educated by pornography, even though they were not initially using it for that purpose. Consuming pornography gave them ideas for sexual positions and sexual techniques to try. For example, P1 (44, CR, H) said:

I do get ideas, quite a lot actually ... Things to do sexually, like situations to make me like, games like role play type situation sometimes.

P19 (33, M, B) commented:

It definitely gives me ideas as to what I would like to try in my sexual life. I'd love to have a threesome, or I'd love to be tied up.

More specifically, some of the participants mentioned that they realized they had an interest in BDSM after accessing BDSM scenes in pornography. P29 (24, CR, B) noted:

So, I think through porn it's probably like awakened my interest in say like BDSM or female domination type things because like before, like watching that sort of stuff I wouldn't really be into it. But then when I found out I was like 'oh, this is quite appealing' and then I watched more and more. And then I explored that sexually with partners and then it became like a thing that I was into.

Consuming pornography also had other unintended outcome: it gave some women ideas for things to buy [P1 (44, CR, H)], such as sex cushions and vibrators, the intention not to reenact certain behaviors presented in pornography such as pretending to have an orgasm [P7 (41, S, H)], and ideas about specific things they would not like to do. As P28 (20, CR, H) mentioned:

I would just say from watching it I have learnt things that like I definitely would not like. Watching it like, I am, I can be. Yeah, I'm able to like say like, oh, I definitely don't want to do this. Because I've seen, yeah, and I just wasn't, I didn't like how it looks so I didn't, I don't think I would like that.

Another outcome that the participants discussed was that by using pornography, they felt more sexually empowered because they were able to enjoy themselves, without the need to have a partner, according to P26 (26, S, B):

So, it's quite nice sometimes if I'm watching porn on my own and watching things that turn me on that I'm being super comfortable and being quite at peace with my sexuality and it's just me on my own and it's like that rush of endorphins. It's not come from anyone else, a bloke or anyone else. I'm not doing it for anyone but me. So, I think in that respect I feel quite happy that I can be comfortable with what I watch... You do feel a sense of release afterwards and that's quite empowering, it is a good effect on your body.

P27 (28, S, B) and P29 (24, CR, B) highlighted that pornography helped them feel sexually empowered because they were able to explore what they liked and disliked sexually. P3 (45, M, B) and P27 (28, S, B) said they felt more confident to explain what they liked to their sexual partners. As P27 expressed:

So, I'm able to go out into the world and when I have sexual intercourse go 'I like it like this. I've learned it through my research for example, this position. I like this position.' This is how I'm doing it, so I'm able to say to a sexual partner 'I want it like this'. So, it helps me feel more sexually empowered because I've been able to say what I like and what I don't like.

Moreover, P24 (34, CR, B) mentioned she enjoyed seeing other women enjoying themselves sexually:

I love seeing a woman enjoying herself, so I can find it empowering for that reason...I do watch porn and you know, sometimes if I watch a woman like really enjoy getting pounded, I'm like 'yes! Keep going' (laugh). So yeah, that can be empowering.

P25 (27, CR, B) differentiated amateur from professional pornography and said that when consuming amateur pornography, she felt sexually empowered because it was an actual couple enjoying having sex, whereas professional pornography depicted sexual relationships that were not achievable in their everyday sex life.

P30 (31, CR, H) felt sexually empowered by accessing pornography because, according to her, it was a taboo for women but not men to access pornography. Thus, she felt sexually empowered by using a medium that was supposedly aimed at men only:

"I think it's empowering because I suppose it's, it should have been that only men can access it, and it's ... it's fine. It's not taboo for a man to access porn. It is sort of expected that men access it."

Finally, P28 (20, CR, H) stated that because she belonged to an ethnic minority group, she felt empowered by using pornography because it provided sexual freedom for her as sexual matters were not usually talked about in her community.

Included in the theme of unintended outcomes were two additional positive outcomes and two additional negative outcomes. The first positive outcome is that pornography normalized body functions. As P3 (45, M, B) said:

All the things that your body does used to embarrass me, so I was quite inhibited, but through watching porn and like the sexual language around porn and you know 'you make me so wet' and things like that, like to change it from an embarrassing thing to a positive sexy, sexy thing has really changed my sex life and I'm much more confident.

The other positive outcome is that pornography use made clear that sexual relationships are not supposed to look or be the same for everyone and that not everyone has the same sexual preferences. For example, P28 (20, CR, H) said that by using pornography she realized that sex does not necessarily have to be rough or violent, despite the fact that the majority of the pornography videos she was able to find depicted rough and violent sex.

Included in the Unintended Outcomes theme were two negative outcomes. Firstly, P21 (28, CR, B) and P26 (26, S, B) talked about how using pornography made them feel desensitized by it and that they needed to access more extreme pornography in order to achieve the desired sexual arousal. P21 said that she did enjoy consuming pornography, but:

On the flip side, if I use it a lot, I also become more desensitized and have to kind of, find more and more extreme stuff to watch. Like not ... not super extreme, but like kind of more like, more rough or like try kinks that I'm not usually into just to try it like because I've started to become desensitized, so it's kind of like it's good in moderation.

Similarly, P26 mentioned:

When you start quite early, you can watch sort of, I don't know common types of porn like normal heterosexual porn or whatever, and you get bored of that and you need something more and more, like different or weird to get yourself off. And then you go to like things that don't turn you on in real life, but you just watch it. So, I think maybe in a weird way, just through more sexual activity and more porn you watch, you get desensitized to it, but you're still going back to it to get more.

The second negative outcome was mentioned by P29 (24, CR, B) who faced a different problem. By using pornography, she was able to masturbate and achieve orgasm and after that

she felt that she was not interested in having sex with her partner. She felt as if her sexual desire for her own partner had decreased because she had used pornography:

I think I've had to like, relieve, like any sexual frustration through watching porn and which my, I think my partner also does the same. So, through doing that, I feel like less, not attraction but less sexual desire towards my partner, because like once I've already finished myself off like orgasm, then that's kind of done. I don't really like look at my partner in that way anymore, if that makes sense.

Discussion

The aims of this exploratory qualitative study were to obtain information regarding factors that motivated women to access pornography, as well as the functions of pornography use reported by women and possible outcomes of pornography use. Results were organized into four themes: Sexual Precursors, Non-sexual Precursors, Intended Outcomes, and Unintended Outcomes; the discussion presents the study's results in that order. Previous research has shown that women's pornography use can have both positive and negative roles in women's sexual lives (Litsou, Graham, et al., 2021). Early in the data analysis process it became clear that women's pornography use is a complex issue, as has been reported in previous studies (Ashton et al., 2019, 2020; Ciclitira, 2004; Litsou, Graham, et al., 2021). This was not only because women intentionally used pornography for both sexual and non-sexual reasons, but also because there were some precursors and outcomes women reported that have not been identified in previous research. It should be highlighted that the results came from women who were pornography consumers, almost all of them (apart from one) had a positive opinion about pornography, and finally, the participants were very likely sex positive as they felt comfortable enough to share their experiences with pornography and intimate details about their sexual lives.

The sexual precursors that motivated women to access pornography have been noted in previous studies involving women and men, although the methods used have not been the same as in this current study; the in-depth interviews provided a greater insight into some of the issues that were known already. Women described choosing to use pornography in order to learn new sexual techniques, to enhance arousal, to masturbate, as an alternative to fantasy, and to orgasm, which has been reported by previous research (Brown et al., 2017; Daskalopoulou & Zanette, 2020; Esplin et al., 2021; Grubbs, Wright, et al., 2019; Gurevich et al., 2017; Hempel, 2012; Prause, 2019; Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, & Irizarry, 2010). Kohut et al. (2017) conducted an international qualitative "bottom-up" analysis with 430 men and women participants and they also found that participants used pornography as a source of information and experimentation, just as our participants said that they used pornography to learn new sexual techniques and get new ideas for sexual things to do. Similarly, Weinberg et al. (2010) found that the more pornography heterosexual and non-heterosexual women used, the more motivated they were to experiment sexually. A mixed methods systematic review (Litsou, Byron, McKee, & Ingham, 2021) on pornography use and sexual learning showed that pornography was intentionally used as a source of education, such as learning about sexual identities and about sexual techniques. The current findings are in accordance with this review's findings. Less commonly reported in previous research was the finding that one of the reasons women were using pornography was to view other people having sex (Burtäverde et al., 2021).

Previous research that has focused specifically on women's pornography use has elucidated the role that pornography plays in women's sexual lives. For example, Ashton et al. (2018), on the basis of their systematic review, reported that women's intentional pornography use enhanced their sexual arousal and also that they used pornography as a source of sex education, in order to obtain information about sexual acts. In Ashton et al. (2019, 2020) reports, it was also evident that pornography was used by women for sexual pleasure, sexual arousal, and for education purposes, which are similar findings to this study.

There are also several non-sexual reasons that motivate women to use pornography. Some of the non-sexual precursors identified in the current study were consistent with previous studies but other precursors our participants reported have not been identified in previous research. Two specific non-sexual precursors that have not been reported in previous research were, first, using pornography in order to process bad sexual experiences from a past relationship. This finding suggests that pornography, and especially pornography that is in accordance with an individual's sexual preferences, might be used in clinical settings as a therapeutic tool. The second non-sexual precursor that has not been reported in previous research was that women were using pornography in order to escape the notion that women do not enjoy sex in general and to feel sexy and liberated. In other words, pornography was used as a tool by the participants to go against specific ingrained ideas regarding how they should feel and act about sex and during sex. These two non-sexual precursors extend what has been reported by previous research and add to our knowledge regarding the role that pornography plays in women's sexual lives.

Some of the non-sexual reasons that motivate women to use pornography reported in this study have also been reported by previous research. For example, Paul and Shim (2008) found that a sample of women and men in the US used pornography to relax, as a form of entertainment, out of habit, because they were bored and because they wanted to procrastinate. Using pornography as a way to relax and relieve stress was also discussed by a mixed-gender sample in Kohut et al. (2017) study. Using pornography as a way of relaxing, passing the time, combating boredom, as a form of entertainment, out of curiosity, as a distraction, as a way to procrastinate and out of habit has also been previously reported (Böthe, Tóth-Király, et al., 2021; Bridges & Morokoff, 2011; Brown et al., 2017; Burtäverde et al., 2021; Grubbs, Wright, et al., 2019; Hempel, 2012; Parvez, 2006; Paul & Shim, 2008; Perse, 1994). To summarize, some of the non-sexual precursors have been reported by previous research, but others are reported for the first time by this study, such as using pornography as a tool to help process past bad sexual relationships, and using pornography as a way to enforce the idea that women enjoy sex.

The outcomes women reported were divided into intended and unintended. The intended outcomes refer to what women expected (and/or hoped for) and what they obtained from their pornography use. For example, they used pornography because they wanted to orgasm, and they did indeed experience an orgasm by using it, which is consistent with previous research (Ashton et al., 2019; Litsou, Graham, et al., 2021; McNabney, Hevesi, & Rowland, 2020). One of the intended outcomes noted by our participants - using pornography as an enabler to help them explore - has to the authors' knowledge, seldom if at all, previously been reported. This was about realizing potential new sexual interests through pornography use and feeling confident to try them. This exploratory role of pornography is something that could be considered in clinical settings for women seeking to improve their sex lives. Furthermore, intended sexual outcomes for pornography use have been previously reported.

The unintended outcomes highlight that even when women used pornography without expecting to get something out of it, its use did influence, for example, the way they viewed their bodies, their sexual empowerment, and the sexual ideas or sexual practices they might learn. Some women also said that pornography use helped them feel sexually empowered because they were able to enjoy themselves without the need of a partner and because they felt free to explore what they liked and what they disliked sexually; similar results have been previously reported (Daskalopoulou & Zanette, 2020). In previous research sexual empowerment has been associated with more frequent pornography use for heterosexual and non-heterosexual women (Weinberg et al., 2010). Our results are contrary to those reported by Ashton et al. (2020), who described how women felt that men's needs (rather than their own) were prioritized through the use of pornography. Our participants discussed how pornography helped them realize that sexual relationships are not supposed to be the same for everyone and that not everyone has the same sexual preferences.

Overall, the participants appeared to enjoy using pornography and used it regularly. Despite some women mentioning that pornography could have a negative influence on them - for example, on the way they viewed their bodies - women mainly talked positively about its use. Additionally, participants expressed that they felt that what was depicted in pornography was unrealistic and not an actual representation of what happens in real life sexual situations. Similar criticism about lesbian pornography being unrealistic and targeted to male viewers has been reported by lesbian and bisexual women (Morrison & Tallack, 2005).

Another unintended outcome that was reported by one of our participants was that using pornography made them less interested in having sex with their partners, which has been observed in some previous studies (Kohut et al., 2017; Wright, Sun, Steffen, & Tokunaga, 2019). A possible explanation could be that as women were receiving sexual pleasure through pornography, they did not feel the need to engage sexually with their partners. Feeling desensitized by pornography use was also reported as an unintended outcome by some of our participants. Previous research has reported that an early start to pornography use could mean that, subsequently, users, men and women, would require more aggressive content (Seigfried-Spellar & Rogers, 2013). Further research is needed on this topic.

Two further unintended outcomes that were reported by our participants have not, as far as the authors are aware, been reported in previous research. The first one was that pornography use had inspirational purposes, meaning that regardless of the reasons women initially used pornography, they ended up being inspired by it to try different sexual activities they had not tried before, or even realizing that they had specific sexual interests. The second one was that pornography use normalized body functions for participants. By being exposed to women's bodies in pornography, women got better accustomed to the normality of, for example, getting wet and that helped them feel more confident about their bodies. Some of the participants discussed that they were not aware how female bodies function, and that pornography helped them feel more certain they functioned "normally." Again, these two findings extend the existing literature and add to our current knowledge regarding the role that pornography can play in women's sexual lives. In short, the unintended outcomes theme consists of many issues, with some of them supporting results from previous research, and others being reported for the first time.

Issues of guilt or shame due to pornography use were not discussed by our participants, which is in contrast with some previous studies (Floyd et al., 2022; Kohut et al., 2017). This may have been because the participants seemed quite "sex positive" and able to have active sex lives, without thinking that enjoying sex is immoral and possibly allowing this to disrupt their sexual experiences. Previous research has shown that religious people who use pornography tend to experience distress about it because they believe that using pornography is morally wrong, because it is against the values that they have been socialized into, and because there will be extensive societal consequences for them if they do not follow those values (Grubbs, Kraus, Perry, Lewczuk, & Gola, 2020; Grubbs, Lee, Hoagland, Kraus, & Perry, 2020; Grubbs, Perry, Wilt, & Reld, 2019; Perry, 2017; Perry & Schleifer, 2019). Our findings suggest that our participants had liberal ideas regarding their sexuality and their pornography use, as in this group of participants religion did not seem to play a role in their pornography use and their sexual lives. Five of the participants stated they were spiritual, meaning being good to one another, appreciating relationships, practicing mindfulness etc. That did not appear to play a role in their pornography use and sexual lives either. It is likely that women can obtain the most positive outcomes from pornography use if they do not allow moral and religious values to interfere with their experiences. Additionally, in this sample of women who were users of pornography a motivation to use pornography with their sexual partners specifically was not reported. It was expected, based on previous research (Kohut et al., 2021) that this would be relatively common for women, to use pornography because their sexual partners asked them to. One possible reason that this did not occur in the interviews could be because it did not happen in their sex lives. Another reason could be because all the women preferred to talk about their own pornography

experiences, and what role pornography plays in their lives, rather than discussing their experiences with shared pornography use.

Previous research, mostly quantitative and using mixed-gender samples, has shown that men, in comparison to women, usually report higher frequency of pornography use, as well higher motivation to use pornography (Bóthe, Tóth-Király, et al., 2021; Bóthe, Vaillancourt-Morel, et al., 2021; Burtäverde et al., 2021; Hald & Malamuth, 2008; Paul & Shim, 2008). In many studies, results were not reported separately for men and women, making it difficult to disentangle what findings applied specifically to women's pornography use. Finally, previous research has often used student samples, making the findings not generalizable to non-students' pornography use. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first qualitative study to focus specifically on women's motivations to use pornography and the outcomes women obtain from their pornography use, without focusing on other aspects of women's pornography use. This qualitative study extends the current knowledge regarding the role pornography plays on women's sexual lives.

Implications

The findings have possible useful implications for clinical practice. Issues of low sexual desire and arousal are multifaceted and have been over-medicalised in the past (Graham, Boynton, & Gould, 2017; Tiefer, 2002). Knowing what might motivate women to access pornography may be valuable in clinical settings to help women who face sexual difficulties, such as low sexual desire and sexual arousal, improve their sexual satisfaction and sexual intimacy (Lehmiller, 2014; Maddox, Rhoades, & Markman, 2011). This could be done by providing clients with self-help books that normalize pornography, and then the clients access them in their own time. One potential such book could be "Better sex through mindfulness: How women can cultivate desire" by Brotto (2018), and "The elusive orgasm: A woman's guide to why she can't and how she can orgasm" by Cass (2007). However, clinicians should always try to be mindful and sensitive to their clients' values when recommending pornography use, as well as asking their clients about potential pornography use when taking their sexual histories. Knowing what motivates women to use pornography can also be useful in non-clinical settings where women expect to get support and approval to feel sexually empowered and have joyful sexual lives (Annon, 1976; Miller & McBain, 2022).

Understanding the outcomes women experience from consuming pornography can also be used to inform relationships and sex education (RSE) in schools. Exploring the ways that pornography may influence how young women feel and look about their bodies can be incorporated into RSE discussions in the curriculum, as has been discussed in previous research (Byron, McKee, Watson, Litsou, & Ingham, 2020; Dawson, Nic Gabhainn, & MacNeela, 2019a, 2019b; Litsou, Byron, et al., 2021). In addition, knowing about women's sexual likes and dislikes can inform RSE programs to focus more on sexual pleasure and how to achieve it, on sexual communication and sexual consent issues, and to stimulate culturally informed discussions on guilt and shame.

Limitations and Strengths

One limitation of this study was that the sample likely consisted of sex-positive women, that is women who felt relaxed and were open to discussing their pornography use and related issues regarding their sexuality. All but one of the participants had positive views about pornography. However, the study would not have been possible with a sample of women who were unwilling to discuss their pornography use but the findings would almost certainly have been different if more women with negative opinions about pornography use had been interviewed (if any had volunteered for the study).

All the women interviewed resided either in the UK or in Greece, where there are few formal restrictions to accessing pornography. Results would likely have been different if women from other countries with different broader contexts around pornography access had been included;

this applies to both formal restrictions - such as legal constraints - as well as the impact of strong religious taboos. It is also important to note that the use of snowball sampling might have impacted the results. Four of the participants were referred by a friend who had also participated in the study, so they might have had similar experiences, similar demographics and social contexts. Lastly, the sample contained a higher proportion of bisexual women than would be expected in the population generally.

In addition, the authors recognize that although they tried to minimize biases in the research process through extensive discussion of possible codes, themes, and subthemes in regular meetings, before any final decisions were made, and also through comparing their results with similar research in the area, they recognize that research cannot be without drawbacks and that it is likely that different researchers might have interpreted results slightly differently. Additionally, the reflexive thematic analysis used to analyze data in this study does not involve reporting frequencies or counts of themes and subthemes.

Despite these limitations, this study was one of the few first to explore what motivates women to access pornography using one-to-one qualitative interviews. These interviews provided the opportunity for women to discuss their personal experiences and their opinions in-depth and to enable a rich understanding of the issues involved to be obtained. Another strength of this study was that it included women with different sexual orientations, rather than only heterosexual women. In addition, a pornography definition was provided to the participants before the interviews, which ensured that pornography meant the same thing to all participants in the context of the questions asked.

Conclusion and future research

This study explored women's sexual and non-sexual motivations for their pornography use, as well as intended outcomes and unintended outcomes women obtain from their pornography use. Pornography use had both positive and negative ramifications for women's sexual lives, which makes pornography a complicated issue. Some of the participants felt sexually empowered by their use of pornography.

The findings of this study can be used to develop further research around women's pornography use. Future research could compare participants from different countries with different policies regarding pornography as well as different religious and cultural contexts. It would also be informative to study the relative frequency of some of the motivations and the outcomes of women's pornography use identified in large-scale surveys. Similar research could be conducted with nonbinary and transgender individuals as there has been very little research involving these populations. Furthermore, it would be interesting for future research to examine whether women who report feeling better about their bodies after viewing pornography are specifically seeking out pornography that contains actors whose bodies are more similar to the participants.

Notes

1. Initially the intention was to conduct in-person interviews but due to COVID-19 restrictions all interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams.
2. Regarding the "use" of pornography the words: use, consume, view, engage, expose to and access are also used interchangeably, although we recognise that these may have somewhat different meanings.
3. For the sake of clarity, a code is an analytic unit, used to develop themes and it captures one observation (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). By contrast, a theme captures multiple observations, is richer and more complex than a code and it usually contains multiple codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020). A sub-theme is a theme-within-a-theme and can be used to provide structure to a large and complex theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It shares the same main concept of a theme but it captures just a certain aspect of it so it cannot stand alone as a separate theme (Terry et al., 2017).
4. Letter P and a number refer to specific participants. For example, Participant 1 is P1. Then follows participant's age in years; their relationship status: CR=committed relationship, D=dating, M=married, S=single; and sexual orientation: H=heterosexual, B=bisexual, Q=queer, P=pansexual.
5. In this group of participants religion did not seem to play a role for their pornography use and their sexual lives. Five of the participants stated they are spiritual meaning being good to one another, appreciating relationships, practicing mindfulness etc. That did not appear to play a role to their pornography use and sexual lives either.

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Appendix A. Interview guide

1.

This is a list of the topics discussed in the interviews. The list is not exhaustive, and the questions were not asked in this specific order.

1. How you think of yourself/describe yourself?
2. How old are you?
3. Where do you currently reside/live?
4. How did you hear about this study?
5. How would you describe your relationship status at the moment?
6. Apart from special occasions such as weddings, funerals and baptisms, how often do you attend services or religious meetings?
7. How important would you say that religion is in your everyday life?
8. Can you please describe to me who do you usually feel sexually attracted to?
9. Would you like to tell me about your past sexual experiences a bit? Who have you mostly dated?
10. Women mention different sources they have used to learn about sexual matters. Can you explain how you learnt about sexual matters?
11. Would you like to tell me how often in the past 12 months, have you viewed pornography?
12. Women might choose to use pornography by themselves or with their partners. Could you please describe to me how do you use pornography, when you have a partner?

13. Women use pornography for many different reasons. Would you like to explain to me what motivates you to use pornography?
14. What do you believe are the functions of pornography use for you personally?
15. How do you think pornography use influences your sexual life?
16. Some women believe that pornography affects their sexual behaviors. Is this an experience that you had? Can you talk about this?
17. Some women mention that pornography somehow affects their sexual expectations. Is this an experience that you had? Can you talk about this?
18. Based on the fact that there are many different types/genres of pornography, what do you usually choose to use?
19. How has the use of pornography affected your communication about sexual issues with sexual partners?
20. Some women say they feel pressured by societal norms dictating that it is not acceptable for women to access pornography and talk openly about it. What is your opinion on that, regarding your pornography use?
21. How has the lockdown, 1, 2 and 3, played a role in your pornography using habits? Can you please explain?
22. Why did you decide to participate in my study?