

**Understanding and Researching Women’s Experiences of Pornography: The Living with Porn(ography) Project**

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Contents Page

**Acknowledgements …………………………………………………………………………………………………… 6**

**Abstract …………………………………………………………………………………………………………………….. 7**

**Chapter 1: Introduction ……………………………………………………………………………………………… 8**

1.1 Introduction **……………………………………………………………………………………………… 8**

1.2 Pornography, Society and Women **……………………………………………………………… 10**

1.3 A Divided Field of Research **………………………………………………………………………… 13**

1.4 The Research Aims and Objectives **……………………………………………………………… 16**

1.5 Conceptualising Pornography **……………………………………………………………………… 19**

1.6 Orientations of the Research **………………………………………………………………………. 22**

1.7 My Positionality and Role in the Project **……………………………………………………… 23**

1.8 The Scope of the Project **……………………………………………………………………………… 25**

1.9 Writing Style and Terminology **…………………………………………………………………….. 27**

1.10 Structure and Chapters **……………………………………………………………………………… 30**

**Chapter 2: Literature Review ………………………………………………………………………………………. 32**

2.1 Introduction **……………………………………………………………………………………………… 32**

2.2 A Contested Field of Research **…………………………………………………………………….. 33**

2.3 Feminist Perspectives on Pornography **………………………………………………………… 35**

2.4 The ‘Effects’ of Pornography **……………………………………………………………………….. 39**

2.5 The Growth of Pornography and ‘Pornification’ **……………………………………………. 43**

2.6 Pornographic Content **………………………………………………………………………………….. 46**

2.7 Who Engages With Pornography? **………………………………………………………………… 49**

2.8 How do Women Experience Pornography? **…………………………………………………… 52**

2.9 Conclusion**……………………………………………………………………………………………………. 58**

**Chapter 3: Methodology ………………………………………………………………………………………………. 60**

3.1 Introduction **………………………………………………………………………………………………… 60**

3.2 Research Foundations **…………………………………………………………………………………. 62**

3.3 Research Design and Methodology **………………………………………………………………. 68**

3.4 Recruitment Process and The Women Who Participated **……………………………. 71**

3.5 Ethical Strategy **………………………………………………………………………………………….. 74**

3.6 Doing Research and Data Production **…………………………………………………………… 77**

3.7 Analysis **……………………………………………………………………………………………………… 87**

3.8 Conclusion **…………………………………………………………………………………………………… 92**

**Chapter 4: Conceptualising ‘Pornography’…………………………………………………………………… 94**

4.1 Introduction **………………………………………………………………………………………………… 94**

4.2 Defining ‘Pornography’ **………………………………………………………………………………… 95**

4.3 Subjective Definitions of ‘Pornography’**……………………………………………………… 100**

4.4 Subjectivity and the ‘Pornographic’ **…………………………………………………………….. 104**

4.5 The Boundaries of Pornography **…………………………………………………………………. 106**

4.6 A Value Laden Word **…………………………………………………………………………………… 111**

4.7 Defaulting to ‘Mainstream’ Pornography **……………………………………………………. 113**

4.8 Conclusion **…………………………………………………………………………………………………. 114**

**Chapter 5: Interactions and Encounters with Pornography …………………………………………. 116**

5.1 Introduction **………………………………………………………………………………………………. 116**

5.2 The Women’s Self Defined Relationships to Pornography **……………………………. 117**

5.3 Initial Experiences with Pornography **………………………………………………………….. 118**

5.4 Interacting with Pornography: ‘Using’ Porn **…………………………………………………. 125**

5.5 Choosing Not to Use Pornography **……………………………………………………………… 131**

5.6 Engaging with Erotica and Fanfiction **………………………………………………………….. 135**

5.7 Pornography and Relationships **………………………………………………………………….. 137**

5.8 Pornography and Family **…………………………………………………………………………….. 143**

5.9 Conclusion **…………………………………………………………………………………………………. 145**

**Chapter 6: Perspectives and Positionality on Pornography …………………………………………. 147**

6.1 Introduction **……………………………………………………………………………………………… 147**

6.2 Potential Positives of Pornography**……………………………………………………………… 149**

6.2 Potential Negatives of Pornography **…………………………………………………………… 152**

6.4 Changing Pornography in Society **………………………………………………………………. 157**

6.5 Legislation and Policy on Pornography**………………………………………………………… 161**

6.6 Underlying Problems and Suggestions for Change **……………………………………….166**

6.7 Conclusions**………………………………………………………………………………………………… 173**

**Chapter 7: Discussion …………………………………………………………………………………………………. 174**

7.1 Introduction**…………………………………………………………………………………………………174**

7.2 How Do Women Experience Pornography? **…………………………………………………. 175**

7.3 Variations Across Women **…………………………………………………………………………… 177**

7.4 The ‘Pornography’ **……………………………………………………………………………………… 185**

7.5 The Encounter or Interaction between Pornography and the Individual **………. 190**

7.6 Paradoxical or Multiple? **………………………………………………………………………………193**

7.7 Group Perspectives **……………………………………………………………………………………. 194**

7.8 The Significance of Participatory Porn Conversations **………………………………….. 199**

7.9 Conclusion **…………………………………………………………………………………………………. 204**

**Chapter 8: Conclusion ………………………………………………………………………………………………… 206**

8.1 Introduction **………………………………………………………………………………………………. 206**

8.2 Summary of the Research Findings **……………………………………………………………… 209**

8.3 Conclusions on Pornography **………………………………………………………………………. 211**

8.4 Reflections on the Project and the Method **…………………………………………………. 223**

8.5 What Next for the Research? **……………………………………………………………………… 232**

8.6 Concluding Remarks **…………………………………………………………………………………… 234**

**Reference List ……………………………………………………………………………………………………………. 235**

**Appendices**

Appendix 1: Findings from the Project**………………………………………………………………** **265**

Appendix 2: Recruitment Advertisements**…………………………………………………………** **266**

Appendix 3: Research Profiles**…………………………………………………………………………..** **268**

Appendix 4: Information Sheet**………………………………………………………………………….** **273**

Appendix 5: Consent Form (Non- Anonymous) **………………………………………………….** **277**

Appendix 6: Consent Form (Anonymous) **………………………………………………………….** **279**

Appendix 7: Ground Rules**………………………………………………………………………………… 281**

Appendix 8: Zine**………………………………………………………………………………………………** **282**

Appendix 9: Schedule Group 1**…………………………………………………………………………..** **283**

Appendix 10: Group 3 Questions**……………………………………………………………………….** **285**

Appendix 11: Schedule Group 2**…………………………………………………………………………** **286**

Appendix 12: Schedule Group 3**…………………………………………………………………………** **288**

Appendix 13: Schedule Group 4**…………………………………………………………………………** **290**

Appendix 14: Schedule Group 5**…………………………………………………………………………** **291**

Appendix 15: Schedule Group 6**…………………………………………………………………………** **293**

Appendix 16: Schedule Group 7**…………………………………………………………………………** **295**

Appendix 17: Schedule Group 8**…………………………………………………………………………** **296**

Appendix 18: Table of Activities**…………………………………………………………………………** **297**

Appendix 19: Interview Schedule**………………………………………………………………………** **298**

Appendix 20: Research Group Analysis Document **……………………………………………..299**

Appendix 21: Project Document: Pornography Definitions**…………………………………. 303**

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Abstract

This thesis examines women’s lived experiences of pornography and pornography knowledge making processes. Historically, there has been much discussion about the impact of pornography on women but less research which asks women directly what they think. There are conflicting and polarised discussions around what pornography means for women. In this context making sense of how pornography is routinely experienced and managed in personal lives can be difficult. Additionally, there is no consensus on how to produce knowledge on pornography. There has been significant variation between the concepts and measures used to produce knowledge though this is not always acknowledged. There is a discrepancy between lived experience and empirical knowledge on pornography. This research proposed that if society is to better understand what women’s lived realities of pornography are, there is a necessity to ask women directly about their experiences and develop new methods for doing this.

Using an in-depth, small scale, participatory and collaborative research design, the Living with Porn(ography) Project sought to address this challenge. The research was framed through a feminist, participatory approach informed by Stanley and Wise’s (1993) ‘Fractured Foundationalism’. Working with eight women from the Sheffield area, together we produced knowledge on women’s experiences of pornography over a sustained period of fieldwork. The data we generated show that the women had had diverse experiences and there was no homogenous woman’s experience. A key finding was that this diversity in opinions and experiences was compatible with collective knowledge building, and empathy, understanding and common ground with one another. This highlights possibilities for understanding and reconciliation between the polarised pornography debates. Furthermore, this thesis offers methodological development as it demonstrated that the participatory approach enabled a much deeper understanding of the women’s experiences than would have been possible without a collaborative approach. The women’s experiential expertise was crucial in informing the questions and concepts through which their experiences were explored. The research highlighted the importance of addressing and reenvisaging the concepts, measures and frameworks upon which pornography knowledge is produced. The thesis concludes that this is essential in considering how to bridge the disconnect between lived experience and empirical knowledge.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

This thesis details a participatory research project into women’s lived experiences of pornography and pornography knowledge making processes. Pornography is one of the great social questions of our time. Long a controversial and taboo issue in the UK and beyond, its unprecedented availability and accessibility, facilitated by new technologies and changing attitudes towards sex, has sparked new debates on its position in society (Paasonen, 2011; Cawston, 2019). There are new fears and concerns about the potential ills of pornography alongside somewhat contradictory discussions about its positive potentials. Alongside this, there has been a strong legislative and policy response seeking to regulate and curtail internet pornography. During the course of this PhD, a policy to enforce age verification checks on pornography was announced, formulated and then delayed. This policy has been complex to actualise and met with both praise and critique (NSPCC, 2015; Burgess, 2016; York and Lust, 2018). Pornography has a more visible presence in society, yet how to make sense of it and how to negotiate it is debated.

Both historically and presently, a large focus of research and societal discussion on pornography has been on its perceived impact on women. There have long been concerns that pornography negatively influences attitudes and behaviours towards women and is pivotal in undermining sex and gender equality (Dines, 2010). Given the unprecedented accessibility of internet pornography, its role in sexually socialising young people and propagating sexist values has been the subject of intense academic, government and societal scrutiny (Papadoupolous, 2010; Bailey, 2011; Martellozzo et al, 2016). Conversely, there have been challenges to the emphasis placed on pornography in proliferating inequality (Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015). There is a growing body of research on its positive potentials and evidence to suggest it can be part of safe and pleasurable sexual practice (McNair, 2013; Tzankova, 2015; Chadwick et al, 2018). Despite the focus on women, there is only a small body of research which asks women about this directly for themselves. Trying to make sense of its meaning for women is difficult given the opposing discussions and limited evidence base.

There is a need for further research into women and pornography. However, when designing research on pornography there are several challenges beyond formulating which questions to ask. Tracing the historical debates on pornography reveals that there has been a conflict of research methodology as well as a clash of different opinion (Jensen, R., 1998; Manning, 2007; McKee, 2014; McNair, 2014). Disagreements have spawned from different viewpoints *and* different ideas about what robust pornography knowledge looks like. There are no universally agreed concepts, measures or tools through which to research pornography and as such there is a polarised and weighted evidence base. Doing research on pornography necessitates asking questions about what authoritative pornography knowledge looks like and considering what the foundations of the research are.

This thesis sets out my doctoral research, the Living with Porn(ography) Project. This research explored a group of women’s experiences of pornography using a participatory, qualitative research design. The women were a self-selecting sample and a mixed group of different social backgrounds, ages and sexualities. Together, we developed knowledge on our thoughts, feelings and interactions with pornography. The project sought to add to bodies of knowledge on how pornography is routinely encountered and experienced in women’s lives. It utilised a participatory approach, a method which has not often been used in pornography studies. Rather than pre-decide how to do the research, the women were engaged in shaping the design as well as sharing their experiences. The project aimed to go back to basics, stripping back our discussion so that the questions asked, topics discussed, and concepts used were informed by the women participating as well as myself. The aim was to produce more informative insights into the women’s experiences.

In this introduction I will set out a brief overview of what happened in this research project and what the background and framework of this research were. I will then outline how this thesis is written, what its key arguments are, and the structure and chapters that are included.

1.2 Pornography, Society and Women

Pornography has long been a contentious issue relating to societal fears over morality, sex and sexual behaviours (Attwood, 2005a), though concerns have varied historically, geographically and politically (Paasonen, 2009a). The expansion of the pornographic sphere has triggered new cultural, social and political implications for people and society (Attwood and Smith, 2014). Pornography is more readily available and accessible than ever before (Owens et al, 2012). Developments in technology and the rise of the internet has facilitated the growth and diversification of the pornographic industry (Attwood, 2002). In 2018 alone, Pornhub, a major pornography website, reported 33.5 billion visits, 92 million daily visits and the uploading of almost 4.8 million videos (Pornhub, 2018). It has been argued that with this growth internet pornography has expanded, diversified and proliferated into the mainstream (McNair, 2013). It is not only more widely available, it is increasingly referenced and parodied within mainstream culture. Our society is increasingly becoming sexualised (Attwood, 2009a; McNair, 1996, 2002, 2013). A sense of the mainstreaming of pornography was reported by the women in my previous research on pornography (Beresford, R., 2014). They felt pornography was having more influence on society which led me to conclude: “we are all consumers of pornography to one degree or another; we are frequently exposed to it even if we do not choose to access it.”

This proliferation and expansion of pornography has been met both with fear and concern and with hope and optimism. The concerns have centred on pornography’s capacity to shape sexual values and sexual practice. There is ample empirical evidence to suggest that pornographic consumption negatively influences people’s attitudes and behaviours towards sex, relationships and women (Manning, 2007; Horvath et al, 2013; Bridges et al, 2016; Martellozzo, 2016). The accessibility of internet pornography has meant it is increasingly viewed or encountered by young people (Institute for Public Policy Research [IPPR], 2014; Quadara et al, 2017). The NSPCC (©2019) advises that exposure to sexually explicit materials can increase children’s risk of developing “unrealistic attitudes about sex and consent, more negative attitudes towards roles and identities in relationships, more casual attitudes towards sex and sexual relationships, an increase in 'risky' sexual behaviour and unrealistic expectations of body image and performance”. There is increased feeling that pornography is changing the ways in which young people are learning about sex (Albury, 2014) or are “sexually socialised” (Stulhofer et al, 2009, p.13). These fears have been the subject of two government enquiries (Papadopolous, 2010; Bailey, 2011) and at the centre of legislation on age verification checks which would prevent children accessing pornography sites (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2016; 2019).

Much of the historical and contemporary concern about pornography has been focused on its impact on women. There has been a significant body of feminist theory and literature arguing from an anti-pornography perspective. Pornography has primarily been produced and consumed by a male audience (Senn and Radtke, 1990; Ciclitira, 2004). Feminist critics have argued that pornography routinely depicts the sexual submission of women for the pleasure of men (Dworkin, 1981; Dines et al, 1998; Dines, 2010). There have been concerns for the women who work in the industry and their potential lack of rights or poor treatment (Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1988; Moran, 2017). The consumption of pornography and its role in shaping sexual cultures is also argued to contribute to women’s disempowerment and sexual inequality (Brunskell-Evans, 2016; Cawston, 2019). Pornography is said to eroticise the mistreatment of women.

Concerns around the proliferation of internet pornography and its role in sexual socialisation are compelling. By contrast, however, there are concurrent discussions about the positive potentials of pornography. A body of feminist theory has emerged arguing that pornography could be appropriated by women and tailored towards their sexuality (Strossen, 1995; McElroy, 1995). There are growing academic discussions around the development of pornography that subverts heteronormative[[1]](#footnote-1) representations of sex (Taormino et al, 2013). McNair (2013) proposes that pornography has diversified and consequently challenges patriarchal depictions of sex and sexualities.

There is also a growing presence of pornography performers who write about their work and experiences of working in the pornographic industry. Jiz Lee, a porn performer, edited a collection of pornography performers experiences of ‘coming out’ as performers (Lee, 2015). It shares the experiences of a range of pornography performers in ‘coming out’ to their parents and family. These experiences were varied and diverse. More recently, self-titled pornographer Stoya (2018) has published a book of essays and blog posts about her experiences of working in the industry. There are a number of pornography performers who also work within academia. For example, Zahra Stardust performs in and directs pornography films, studied a PhD on legal regulation of pornography in Australia and publishes in academic forums (<http://zahrastardust.com>). Lee and Sullivan (2016, p.204) propose that pornography performers can have good and bad experiences: “Yes, the work can be enjoyable, it can also be challenging, and it can even be demeaning – but not because of the sex, or even because of the commercialization of the sex. Like all workers, issues of self-determination, autonomy, dignity, respect, and fair compensation are paramount.” There are polarised perspectives on the role of pornography in society.

Making sense of women’s experiences in and amongst these competing positions can be somewhat difficult. Historically, there has been a lack of research which asks women about their experiences of pornography for themselves (Juffer, 1998; Shaw, 1999; Ashton et al, 2018). Women have been positioned as ‘victims’ of pornography and as such their narratives and their agentic encounters with it have not always been explored (Boyle, 2000; Chadwick et al, 2018). Furthermore, the diversity of ‘women’ has not always been recognised (Shor and Golriz, 2019). Therefore, there is a lack of nuanced accounts about the ways in which individual women experience and encounter pornography. Where research has been conducted into women’s experiences of pornography, it has indicated that they have diverse experiences of, encounters with and thoughts on pornography (Attwood, 2005a; Ashton et al, 2018). There is empirical evidence to suggest that women do have concerns about pornography (Shaw, 1999; Dines, 2010) and also that they enjoy it (Hester et al, 2015; Tzankova, 2015). There is a gap in the literature about the ways pornography is routinely encountered in women’s lives (Vera-Gray, 2016), the ways in which they shape their experiences of it (Chadwick et al, 2018) and what sorts of interactions women have with it (Ashton et al, 2018).

Further research is needed to make sense of what women’s experiences are. This is particularly important as pornography is on the policy and legislative agenda and there is no consensus on how best to negotiate it in UK society. Compulsory Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is to be implemented in English schools from September 2020 and pornography is on the recommended curriculum (Department for Education, 2019a; 2019b). However, only limited guidance has been provided and there are concerns that teachers are not being adequately supported to deliver comprehensive RSE (Sex Education Forum, 2018; Froggatt et al, 2019). Within academic literature, discussions on how to cover pornography within RSE are dependent on different political stances (Albury, 2014; Rogers, 2017). More evidence is needed from those whom pornography concerns. This is further evident in regard to legislation proposing to implement age verification checks on pornography websites (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2019). This legislation would make it compulsory for pornography websites to ensure that only adults can access their websites. This legislation has been difficult to realise and delayed several times. It has been praised for protecting children from pornography (NSPCC, 2015) and criticised by others who propose it will not work (Blake, 2019; Girl on the Net, 2019). How to negotiate pornography in society is a fraught subject and needs to be informed by more empirical research.

1.3 A Divided Field of Research

This piece of research evolved from a small piece of undergraduate research, then to an MA dissertation and finally into a PhD thesis. In the course of conducting research into ‘women’s experiences’ of pornography, it has become clear that there is no single established approach to researching pornography. Pornographic research, ‘knowledge’ and ‘expertise’ has come from diverse political approaches, been interdisciplinary and used different methods (Attwood and Smith, 2014; McKee, 2014). Undertaking research into pornography presents methodological challenges. There is no consensual theoretical lens or methodological tools through which to frame and conduct pornography research. There is a polarised evidence base on pornography supporting contradicting stances on its societal impact. Dawson et al (2019, p.2) propose that “such inconsistencies within the research literature indicate that experiences of pornography are highly individualised”. I would also argue it is due to research on pornography being built on vastly different and often unacknowledged foundations. Different research positions have:

* different notions of what constitutes authoritative knowledge on pornography;
* different ideological and theoretical assumptions about pornography;
* different subjects of study;
* different research tools and methods for undertaking research.

The basis of robust pornography knowledge is disputed. There is a vast wealth of ‘effects’ research seeking to prove causation between pornographic use and harmful behaviour. This has been critiqued for its validity, applicability to real life situations and relevance to either those who use pornography or to the women who are perceived of as ‘at risk’ (Boyle, 2000; McNair, 2014; Barker, 2014). McKee (2018) argues this research has often uncritically been framed and operationalised through the dominant viewpoints of the researchers and their disciplines and not included the perspectives of actual pornography consumers. The appropriateness of a scientific approach to researching the social implications of pornography has widely been questioned (Jensen, 1998; McNair, 2014). Yet this body of research is hugely significant, often being cited as evidence in UK legislation, policy and reviews. Perhaps where the social, political, moral and economic stakes are so high, the power of hard ‘scientific’ fact to support one’s claims cannot be understated. Pornhub recently announced it had awarded a $25000 grant for two academics to investigate the potential positives of watching pornography as well as any negatives (Sputnik News, 2018). A scientific approach to pornography has therefore been wielded by both sides of the debate.

Polarised pro- and anti- pornography discourses have also been present in much pornographic theory, public discussion and research (Juffer, 1998; Smith and Attwood, 2014). Yet both have been criticised for not addressing the complexities of pornography itself, or the experiences and relationships people have of and with it (Ciclitira, 2004; Paasonen, 2010). Pornography is reduced to either being exploitative or empowering. Williams (2014) argues that these ideological positions have been responsible for stunting the growth of pornography research. Anti-pornography feminist discourses have been subject to methodological criticisms such as their reliance on ‘personal testimony’ or ‘personal emotion’ or ‘personal experience’ (Paasonen, 2014; McNair, 2014; Smith and Attwood, 2014) or their reliance on the ‘cause and effect’ research as evidence. Weitzer (2011) argues this deters from empirical research into pornography, and the emphasis on politics lacks objectivity. Again, this raises the question of what the basis of robust pornography research should be.

In addition to conflicting ideas about what the basis of pornography knowledge should be, different positions on pornography have had different assumptions about what ‘pornography’ is and what interactions can be had with it (Sullivan and McKee, 2015). Different ideological stances have researched different aspects of pornography. Williams (2014, p.29) explains that “the mainstream, heterosexual hard core … has been comparatively ignored by all but anti-pornography scholars”. Researchers from different political positions have investigated different pornographic industries and materials. Reviewing the literature on pornography reveals a deeply polarised field of research *and*a weighted evidence base. Comparing the empirical literature is difficult. When the methods for producing knowledge have been so different, it is not clear whether the same materials, interactions and behaviour are being discussed.

I noticed first-hand in my previous research that the understandings and perceptions of pornography of the women I spoke to were at odds with representations of pornography in much of the existing literature. The ways in which ‘pornography’ and the interactions people have with it have been defined and understood has been limited (Manning, 2007). As a researcher interested in the principles of participatory research, I felt the challenge for creating relevant research on pornography was a methodological one. This doctoral research sought to contribute towards ideas, understandings and theory on pornography through not only investigating a topic which has warranted less attention in the past, ‘women’s experiences’, but through using a participatory approach. Rather than pre-design the research and what types of ‘pornography’ or ‘interactions’ would be talked about, this was left open to the women in the project to decide. This enabled the participants to have an instrumental and collaborative role in guiding the research with the express aim of producing research which is relevant to them. The research was as much an experiment in democratic and collective research production as it was a study into pornography.

1.4 The Research Aims and Objectives

This research was an exploratory study into women’s experiences of pornography *and* pornography knowledge making. Despite the academic and societal focus on pornography’s impact on women, there is an impoverished body of research into women’s experiences of it. This research sought to contribute to this gap through exploring women’s lived experiences of pornography. Alongside this, it engaged with discussions around what constitutes trustworthy and robust knowledge on pornography. There is no consensus on how to produce knowledge on pornography or what constitutes authoritative and valid knowledge. I therefore consider it crucial when doing research on pornography to engage in reflexive discussions about knowledge making processes. This research sought to produce trustworthy knowledge on women’s experience through accountable and transparent research processes.

The theoretical framing for this research was built out of methodological theories. Given the divided field of pornography research, I did not adopt a singular theoretical position but have drawn on a range of sociological, participatory and feminist perspectives. In particular, the thesis has followed methodological theories on how to do research and produce knowledge on a topic. Specifically, I was guided by feminist theories, particularly Stanley and Wise’s (1993, pp.7-8) ‘Fractured Foundationalism’, an approach to doing ‘Feminist Sociology’, and participatory theories and methodologies. These will be discussed and explored in depth in Chapter 3. The participatory methodology was chosen, as I felt it would be instrumental in producing authoritative knowledge which was reflective of women’s lives and beneficial to them. The conceptual framework, that is what key ideas and ‘concepts’ the research was guided by, was developed in collaboration with the women as part of the research. No assumptions were made about what ‘pornography’ was or how the women’s interactions with it would be measured. This was developed with the women through drawing on their experiences, perspectives and stories. ‘Lived experience’, ‘experiential expertise’ and ‘experiential knowledge’ were key methodological concepts used in this research. These concepts refer to the value that is placed on direct, lived experience and the knowledge and expertise this confers (Beresford, P., 2003).

*1. To explore a group of women’s thoughts and feelings on, and experiences of pornography. What do this group of women say about pornography?*

The first aim of the project was to explore women’s experiences of pornography, and the ways in which pornography is encountered and interacted with in their lives. This research subscribed to the idea that ‘experiential knowledge’, knowledge derived from direct and lived experience, is an authoritative basis of expertise (Letherby, 2003; Brook, 2007). The women were understood to be experts in their own lives, and thus their narratives of their experiences with pornography were understood to be a form of pornography expertise. The project was understood to be a snapshot of what happens when a group of women work together and share their stories. The literature indicated that women’s experiences of pornography are diverse, complex and multi-layered (Ashton et al, 2018). However, there is little guidance on how to frame research so as to be receptive to all of the experiences that women can have.

Through asking ‘what are women’s lived experiences of pornography?’ I hoped to garner insights into the following areas: What can be learnt about pornography and *researching* pornography from women’s knowledges derived from their personal and everyday experiences? How do women experience pornography? What interactions and encounters do they have with it? Are these pleasant or unpleasant, positive or negative? What types of ‘pornography’ does this include? Who else is involved? What choices do they exercise in this? How do they think and feel about pornography? How does this vary in each woman’s life and between women? Does pornography impact on or influence their lives, and if so, how? Is this positive or negative?

*2. To use participatory methods as a means to talk to women about pornography and consider whether this method was conducive to developing relevant knowledge on women’s experience of pornography.*

I identified that a feminist and participatory methodological approach could offer a unique opportunity to do pornography research differently. This was born out of my own political and philosophical standpoint. Such an approach also felt particularly appropriate for and relevant to pornography studies. Attempts to be objective and value free in pornography research have not yielded knowledge which is respected as reflective of the social world. This research embraced subjectivity and adopted a research philosophy which contained the tools and mechanisms through which to be reflexive about any biases in the research process and enabled an open and receptive approach to research.

Participatory approaches radically reimagine the relationship between researcher and researched; research is done “on, for and with” those involved (Cameron et al, 2006). When conducting previous research on pornography, I realised that a commitment to reflexivity and identifying my positionality were not enough to mitigate my control over the research or to expose my implicit values framing the research (Beresford, R., 2018a). Krumer-Nevo (2009, p.290) drew similar conclusions from her experiences of researching poverty. She argues that feminist methods and documenting ‘voice’ are not enough in themselves. They are open to “superficial application”, “othering” and participant’s voices being second best to the researchers. Given the difficulty in hearing ‘authentic’ women’s voices in pornography research, I was determined to take a more democratic approach to knowledge production.

Participatory methodologies are action oriented; the process of doing research and knowledge building can lead to change. For O’Neill (2001, p.47) “renewed methodologies that aim to get at the reflexive nature of human thought and action, and the meanings given, both conscious and semi-conscious, could enable us to be understand people’s everyday experiences and, at the same time, enable us to better understand broader social institutions and work towards social change”. This presented an exciting opportunity for porn studies and I proposed that it could be a means to move beyond the current debates.

*3. To innovate discussion around pornography knowledge making processes. What does this research suggest about doing research with women on pornography?*

The research was premised on the necessity to engage with discussions around pornography knowledge making processes. Different processes for producing knowledge on pornography have been an important factor within the divisions and debates in pornography studies (Smith and Attwood, 2014). There is a growing body of literature exploring pornography methods and pornography knowledge making processes. McKee (2014, p.61) suggests that the field of pornography research would “benefit from conversations about methodology across disciplines, and from more creative mixes of research methods with objects of study”. Consequently, the third aim was to use this research, and the findings and methodological reflections, to inform and add to academic conversations on pornography knowledge making and research. I hoped to develop new conceptual understandings of ‘pornography’ and the ways it can be interacted with, and develop recommendations for doing research with women.

1.5 Conceptualising Pornography

It is important to consider how ‘pornography’ was conceptualised in this research and what specifically we were talking about. I sought not to impose any boundaries or restrictions on what materials might be included in our conversations. Reviewing the literature indicated that there is no consensus on how to define pornography and no clear classification system for what materials are ‘pornographic’ (Shaw, 1999; Rea, 2001; Andrews, 2012). The word ‘pornography’ derives from the Greek words *pornē* (prostitute) and *graphein* (write) and translates literally as writings about prostitutes (Oxford Dictionary, ©2019). Over time, the definition of the word and its uses have evolved with modern day common dictionary definitions being:

The depiction of erotic behaviour (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement. (Meriam Webster, ©2019)

Books, magazines, films, etc. with no artistic value that describe or show sexual acts or naked people in a way that is intended to be sexually exciting. (Cambridge Dictionary, ©2018)

Printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement. (Oxford Dictionary, ©2019).

However, these definitions have been critiqued for their inadequacy in encapsulating what pornography is. Andrews (2012, p.458-459) argues that dominant definitions have failed to cover the diversity of pornography’s form. He suggests:

Most often, these definitions assert that porn is explicit material; that it is material intended to arouse; and/or that it is material dependent on sexual representation. But none of these criteria is a necessary property of *all* pornography; nor is it even clear that pornography is always a material, artefactual reality.

It has been proposed that ‘pornography’ is more than a classification of materials. It is instead a concept or cultural category. How ‘pornography’ is conceptualised and understood varies according to different ideological positions on pornography (McKee et al, 2008). McKee et al (2008) advocate a historical analysis of Western understandings of ‘pornography’ and how the category emerged over time. The origins of the word have been traced back to the 19th century where it was used to describe art or literature featuring ‘obscene’ content or prostitutes (Online Etymology Dictionary, ©2018). Religious conservatives have defined pornography through its sin; feminists against pornography have defined it through gendered power relations and its violence to women; and for others it has been a symbol of free speech. Pornography has had different meanings throughout time and the definition itself confers political, moral or aesthetic value (McKee et al, 2008). As such, different definitions of pornography often exclude or are at odds with different moral and political standpoints or intuitive feelings about what pornography is (Shaw, 1999; Rea, 2001; McKee et al, 2008; Böhm et al, 2015).

In recognition of this complexity, this project focused on the subjective definitions of ‘pornography’ of the women who took part. This approach has been adopted by other researchers (Shaw, 1999). Böhm et al (2015, p.78) argue that through doing this “we have taken into account the fact that definitions of pornography are inconsistent, context dependent, disputed by society, and invariably imbued with moralistic evaluations”. Through enabling the women to define pornography themselves, I hoped to learn more about their views and experiences of it. For Paasonen et al (2015, p.400) this technique “would challenge given notions of what qualifies as porn, what it is, what it involves, means, or does—and possibly provide new insights into the role and meaning of porn in everyday life.” Asking the women for their subjective definitions could offer insight into their underlying values and feelings. Despite the complexity of defining pornography, it is important not to disregard the task. Rea (2001, p.119) articulates that doing so runs the risk of “public policies” being formulated or “moral debates” being had on definitions of pornography that do not account for common views and feelings. As such, I have sought to be clear throughout this thesis about what we were talking about when we talked about ‘pornography’. The first empirical findings’ chapter outlines our views on what ‘pornography’ and ‘the pornographic’ are. Primarily, we discussed materials that fit with the definition proposed by Ashton et al (2019, p.163):

Material deemed sexual, given the context, that has the primary intention of sexually arousing the consumer, and is produced and distributed with the consent of all persons involved.

Our conversations largely concerned consensually made, adult pornography including a range of different content, formats and modes of production. However, as will be discussed later, our discussions were about much more than just ‘pornography’ and pornography’s material form.

1.6 Orientations of the Research

This thesis will contribute to knowledge on women and pornography, and pornography knowledge making processes. Throughout I will draw upon the findings that were developed collaboratively with the women in the research group (see Appendix 1). Our findings indicated that women’s experiences of pornography are differing, diverse, positive, negative and everything in-between. This diversity was compatible with open discussion and learning from one another. Using the findings from the research project, analysed in relation to existing pornography research, government policy and other relevant sources, this thesis will put forward these central arguments:

* Women’s experiences of pornography are broad and diverse, and at present this broad range of experiences is under-represented in academic literature, societal discussions and government policy.
* Using a participatory design facilitated a much deeper understanding of the women’s perspectives on pornography through the bringing together of different expertise and the development of collaborative research relationships.
* If pornography is to be better understood, the basic concepts, values and knowledge relied on to understand it must be addressed. The unacknowledged biases or implicit frameworks that are in processes for producing knowledge must be unpacked.
* A holistic approach to researching pornography needs to be taken. This should focus not only on new topics or under-researched areas, but should fundamentally challenge the research methods used and consider the foundations upon which pornography research is produced.
* Through recognising the above, it is possible to reconcile some of the polarised views on pornography and consider how to work together despite such diverse opinions.

These arguments will be recurring themes throughout this thesis and will be analysed and developed in depth in Chapter 7 (Discussion) and Chapter 8 (Conclusion).

1.7 My Positionality and Role in the Project

As an adherent to a feminist, participatory approach I was committed to being reflexive throughout the research process. I will discuss this is in more detail in Chapter 3. However, given the political intensities of pornography research it is appropriate to introduce this here. Reflexivity “requires the researchers to be aware of themselves as the instrument of research” (Borg et al, 2012). I recognise that this research was conducted from my positionality and through my lens (Stanley and Wise, 1993). Therefore, I feel it is appropriate to begin this thesis by stating my position on pornography and how I shaped this research project.

As noted earlier, this research stems from two earlier projects I conducted on pornography: one for an undergraduate project and one for a Masters’ dissertation. Both explored women’s perceptions of the male consumption of pornography. These projects touched upon an interesting subject and yet were restricted by my narrow framing of the research questions. I implicitly shaped the research with my own experiences and only came to realise this through conversations with the women who took part (Beresford, 2018a). My choice to adopt a participatory methodology was born in part out of these initial research experiences. I felt this methodology could be a crucial mechanism through which to mitigate my control over the research process.

My doctoral research has grown from these early research projects, my political views and my own personal life experiences. Trying to identify my position on pornography is complex, particularly because it has already changed through doing this research. Previously, my feelings about pornography have been negative and I would not identify as somebody who actively seeks out or engages with porn. However, the more I have done research on pornography and the more life experiences I have had, the more my views on pornography have changed. My position is to be critical of how pornography is spoken about within society and how it is researched, rather than to take one specific political or personal stance on it. My own encounters with ‘pornography’ have been varied. I have heard positive stories about pornography and I can see its potential. I have heard negative stories about it and I worry about ignoring the contexts in which it can be produced and the problems this can cause. This is when I remind myself that pornography can be all these things at once. My positionality is that I do not believe pornography is homogenous. I therefore am not seeking to condemn or condone but rather I seek to understand the ways in which *pornographies* can be experienced, and how we can research it better so as to reflect the diversity of experience it generates. Research that does this can be used to challenge the negative issues relating to pornography and further the positives.

It is important to recognise that my position is different from the one with which I started. Doing the research and hearing the women’s perspectives has had a transformative impact on me, similar to my previous research on pornography. Looking back at the transcripts, I read things I have said that I no longer recognise. My positionality and political perspective have changed from design to completion.

My role in this research was a complicated one. I was both the PhD student leading it and a member of the research group. In order to develop non-exploitative research relationships, I sought to be as reciprocal as possible within the research process (Oakley, 1981). I invested myself in the research and shared my stories and experiences with the women. My membership of the group was not something that I had assumed. I had not anticipated the extent to which I would build rapport and comradery with the women, nor the depth of my experiences I would share with them. This was a joyful aspect of the project and was part of equalising our research relationships. However, when I analysed our research data, I realised that I had invalidated certain portions of the data by sharing my own views. As I could not be anonymous, I have redacted many of the stories I shared. I talked about people who had not consented to their data being shared and about intimate aspects of my personal life.

I am conflicted about the absence of my story from the empirical findings. All of our responses are embodied in the collective findings from the project, including my own. However, I have not provided my individual perspective to account for this. Rather I reflexively acknowledge this here. Little has been written about the dual role of being researcher and participant (Probst, 2016) and I would have benefitted from more guidance on how to negotiate this.

1.8 The Scope of the Project

In keeping with the feminist and participatory principles guiding this research, I wish to be clear about the specific context in which this research was conducted. This research is about ‘women’s experiences’ and it is important to consider which women this refers to. ‘Women’ are not a homogenous group and I recognise the importance of an intersectional analysis. Intersectionality is:

An analytical tool that rejects the separability of identity categories, as it recognizes the heterogeneity of various race-sex groups. Firmly rooted in an experience-based epistemology, it encompasses perspectives that maintain that such identity categories as gender, age, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are mutually constituted and cannot be added together. (Simien, 2007, p.265)

Feminist theory has not always acknowledged the diversity and differentiations of women or women’s experiences and has often excluded or marginalised voices that are not white and middle class (Hill-Collins, 2000; Erdmans, 2004; Nash, 2019). Pornography research needs to be attentive to the experiences of all women and address inclusion, diversity and equality.

In this project, a small sample of women were worked with and, as such, there were limits to how representative of wider society the women were. Initially, I had hoped to work with a broader cohort of women. However, the research design had to be adapted and changed. In Chapter 3, I will outline this in depth. This project is a snapshot into a group of women’s lives, and an exploratory study into developing participatory research on pornography. The purpose is to add to discussions on women’s experiences and to add to knowledge on researching women and pornography. It is not the intention of this research to speak for all women, and I consider it to be the starting point for further research. I acknowledge the diversity of women, social identities and backgrounds included in this research was limited. Moreover, this research does not include the voices of women who work in the pornographic industry. This absence is noted and acknowledged, in recognition of the ‘not about us without us’ philosophy underpinning sex work activism (ICRSE, 2015). I hope this project has meaning and relevance for a wide range of women but recognise that the reach of the findings has limitations. I will seek only to make recommendations and conclusions based on the contributions from the women in this project, and not over-extend the reach of the findings. I will be reflexive and transparent throughout to avoid generalisations. There are many voices and perspectives still to be heard and this will be reflected on in Chapter 8.

It was somewhat difficult to identify the national boundaries or transnational potential of this research. The research was conducted within the UK with women who lived in the Sheffield area, and so arguably it is framed within the British context. However, two of the women were of different nationalities and their experiences and opinions were shaped by this. In addition, it is hard to discern whether pornography has national boundaries given the ease with which it can now be accessed and shared across the internet (Mazières et al, 2014). I also draw upon literature and research from beyond the UK (though largely European, American and Australian). I tentatively suggest that this research does have reach and relevance beyond the UK, recognising what has informed the study, the women who participated and the transnational capacity of pornography. However, I acknowledge that pornography is experienced and regulated differently around the world (Paasonen, 2009a). Paasonen et al (2007a, p.16) argues that “debates on pornography – academic and not - have nevertheless been dominated by North American conceptions and political divisions”. While “global trends are recognisable”, global experiences should not be “generalised”. As such, I recognise that this research was bound by the geographical context within which it was conducted.

1.9 Writing Style and Terminology

Writing this thesis has been a difficult endeavour. While I am aware this is the case for all PhD students, a particular struggle emerged in relation to the participatory methodology. The research for this project was conducted collaboratively, the write up of the research was done alone. The difficulties of reconciling the two have been well acknowledged in the literature. The principles of participatory research can jar with academic processes and procedures (Southby, 2017). Reflecting on her PhD, Klocker (2012, p.155) identified the “delicate balance” that had to be taken in her write up “to ensure that the collaboration was not lost when put to paper”. I too have grappled with how to write up this research, given that I have the final say over how the women’s stories and contributions are represented (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2017). In order to be reflexive and ethical about this, I will outline the approach I took to negotiate this here.

One of my key considerations relates to voice and whose voice is being used in this thesis. Klocker (2012, p.155-6) identified that a particular difficulty emerged for her in what pronouns to use in her thesis. She argues “although this may seem a minor grammatical issue, referring to ‘our’ research, rather than ‘my’ research made a powerful statement. To claim that this research was purely about what I did would have been inaccurate, disrespectful and dishonest, and would have failed to tell the whole story.” I have similarly struggled over what pronouns to use. I want to acknowledge the women’s contributions but recognise where the analysis is mine alone. In parts of this thesis, some of the discussion is *my* thoughts formulated from *our*research. While I have sought to develop this analysis from *our*findings, I recognise that it will inevitably be interpreted through *my* lens and positionality (Stanley and Wise, 1993). This distinction is important as I do not want to wrongly attribute thoughts and perspectives to the women. Therefore, I will seek to be clear throughout the thesis when it is *me*talking and when it is *us*. I have also structured the thesis accordingly: the empirical findings chapters are for the women’s voices and the discussion chapter is for mine.

A second consideration regarding pronouns relates to our research findings. In the use of ‘our’, I want to be cautious not to invoke a ‘group voice’ that does not exist. Our project findings were that the women had diverse experiences of pornography which required a different kind of analysis, one that did not just group their responses into common themes (see Appendix 1). The use of ‘our’ might imply there was more consensus between us then there was. Furthermore, there was only one research group meeting in which all of the women who participated were present. Some women participated in the project more than others. As such, I will seek to be clear throughout this thesis about who’s voice is speaking and I recognise that there was much diversity and difference in and amongst the group.

In addition to pronouns, I have also deliberated over how to refer to the women who took part in this project. It feels inappropriate to call them ‘participants’ or ‘research participants’ as one of the methodological underpinnings of this research was to establish a different research relationship between myself and them. I have questioned whether to call the women ‘co-researchers’ as the relationship we tried to establish is one of co-researchers. My concern with this is that it exaggerates or is dishonest about the extent to which this research was participatory. While the research was conducted as collaboratively as possible given the confines of a PhD, much of this research was completed alone. I respect the women as co-researchers but wish to be clear about how the project was conducted. With these considerations in mind, the terminology I will use will be ‘the women’ or ‘the women who participated’, ‘the research group’ and, where appropriate, the women’s names.

A large component of this research were discussions around *epistemology.* That is, theories around what knowledge is and how humans can acquire it (Bryman, 2008). Specifically, this project was interested in *pornography epistemologies.* It asked questions around what is considered authoritative and trustworthy knowledge on pornography and what methods are best for producing this. I propose that the polarised evidence base on pornography has stemmed in part from inconsistent processes for producing knowledge. In recognition of the confusing and potentially excluding nature of the term ‘epistemology’ (Beresford, P., 2003), I have opted to leave it out of this thesis where possible. Rather, I will refer to ‘knowledge making’ and ‘knowledge making processes’ to refer to the ways in which this research engaged with discussions on making pornography knowledge.

A final consideration related to what I will call ‘pornography’ within this thesis. Williams (2014) identified that whether the word ‘porn’ or ‘pornography’ is used often denotes a particular stance on pornography. ‘Porn’ is often used by those sympathetic to or working in the industry whereas ‘pornography’ is often used academically or those whose views are more aligned to anti-pornography perspectives. When speaking about pornography academically, I tend to use the word ‘pornography’. When I am talking about pornography in a more casual way or to discuss my own opinions on it, I tend to call it ‘porn’. When we conducted the research in the project, we used a mixture of ‘porn’ and ‘pornography’. Therefore, in this thesis I will do the same to reflect how I used the word. For the more academic discussions (e.g. the literature review) I will use ‘pornography’ when referring to our discussions or the more emotional/ casual conversations I will use ‘porn’.

1.10 Structure and Chapters

This thesis is divided into eight chapters each of which discusses a distinct part of the research project. I have briefly summarised each chapter here to provide the reader with a touchstone of what will be discussed in each.

*Chapter 2: Literature Review*

The literature review will set out the key theoretical and empirical debates on pornography, and some of the different schools of thought on how to research it. It will be used to frame this research project and research design. It will draw attention to the contested nature of pornography research and scope out where the divisions in pornography studies lie. Pornography studies has been a polarised field of research with different positions on pornography yielding contrasting empirical evidence. Scoping this evidence indicated that women have diverse experiences of pornography, though it is difficult to discern the precise ways in they encounter it and what impact it has on their lives.

*Chapter 3: Methodology*

The methodology chapter introduces the foundations of this research. It will begin by outlining the feminist and participatory framework that underpinned the research design. I will explore how the research was conducted and analysed and evaluate the successes and limitations of the methodology. This chapter will provide the reader with a robust and transparent account of how the knowledge from this research was produced. In particular, I will explore the development of the participatory endeavour and how we developed new research relationships.

*Chapter 4: Conceptualising Pornography*

I will outline our conceptualisation of ‘pornography’ and how we defined, understood and imagined ‘pornography’ within this research. Doing so will draw attention to the subjective and multi-layered nature of pornography definitions. ‘Pornography’ was a contested concept within this research, and used to represent different materials, arguments and values. Interrogating our definitions and understandings of pornography was crucial to understanding our experiences and opinions of it. It became clear throughout this research that we were not always talking about the same thing.

*Chapter 5: Encounters and Interactions with Pornography*

In this second empirical findings’ chapters, I will present the women’s stories and narratives about their encounters and interactions with pornography. This chapter will provide the reader with the women’s biographies charting their changing experiences with pornography and other sexually explicit materials. It will draw attention to the diverse ways in which women can encounter pornography, relating to the type of interaction, the context in which it happens and the emotional significance of it. The women’s stories highlighted that pornography can have a positive, negative or non-significant role in the women’s lives.

*Chapter 6: Perspectives and Positionality on Pornography*

The final empirical findings chapter will present the women’s positions and perspectives on pornography. This chapter locates the women’s individual experiences within the wider societal context in which they exist. The findings indicated that the women have both positive and negative feelings about pornography. Despite their differences in opinion, there were mutual perspectives among the women. Problems around pornography were related to wider sex and gender-based inequality. The women had shared perspectives around the necessity to talk more about sex, sexuality and pornography in society.

*Chapter 7: Discussion*

The discussion chapter will analyse and evaluate the research findings and consider them in relation to the research aims. This chapter will be my interpretation of what the empirical findings chapters suggest about women’s experiences of pornography and doing pornography research. I will propose that recognising women’s diverse experiences of pornography is harmonious with developing collective knowledge on their experiences. Common and shared perspectives were visible in their responses. I will evaluate the research methodology and consider how it supported the development of the research findings.

*Chapter 8: Conclusion*

In this chapter, I will make final conclusions about the research project and about the thesis as a whole. I will summarise what the key research findings are and relate this back to the academic literature and societal discussions on pornography. This chapter will reflect on the successes and limitations of the research, and make final recommendations based on the research findings. I will also briefly identify future directions for this research and for this research area.

It is the wider controversies and existing research that I will consider next.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will review the research literature and academic debates on pornography *and*researching pornography. One of the starting premises of this research was to highlight the disconnect between lived experience of pornography and much of the academic, governances and public discourse on it. This is an observation I made while doing my MA dissertation research and one that I have found reflected in the literature. Rather than use this literature review to narrate what is ‘known’ about pornography. I will outline some of the competing bodies of thought and some of the different bases on which knowledge on pornography has been produced. I will use this to frame the design of my research and the choice of research topic and research methodology. Pornography has been subject to scrutiny in multiple forums and, as such, a variety of sources will be looked at in this review. Alongside academic theory and research, I will include government policy, media articles and other sources to reflect the scope of discussion, action and thought on pornography.

The key focus of this review will be to frame the decisions: (1) to research women’s experiences (RA 1), (2) to use participatory research methods (RA 2), and (3) to add to discussions on what robust ‘pornography knowledge’ looks like (RA 3). This review will demonstrate that ‘pornography’ is a complex social issue which reportedly both supports healthy sexual expression and damages it. There are contradictory reports about its role in society which highlights the need for more research. A considerable amount of pornography research has focused on its impact for women, yet the scope of research which asks women directly about this is limited and warrants further attention. The literature suggests that the basic concepts, measures and questions through which to research pornography and human interaction with it are disputed. This presents a challenge in how to frame pornography research so as to best capture the topic of study. This will be used to evidence the choice of a participatory methodology. Reviewing the debates on pornography indicates that differences stem from*both* different social, political and moral stances *and*different positions on what robust pornography knowledge is and what methods produce it. It is evident that when researching pornography and engaging with debates on it, there is a need to ask reflexive questions about what robust knowledge looks like.

This review will begin by highlighting the contested nature of the field of pornography studies. It will then explore two of the dominant schools of thought: feminist theory and debates, and psychology ‘cause and effect’ studies. I will then move on to contemporary literature on the scope and size of the pornographic industry and look at who engages with it and how. Finally, I will collate and pull together the research on women’s experiences and encounters with pornography.

2.2 A Contested Field of Research

Reviewing the literature indicates that there is a vast wealth of research on pornography spanning different disciplines with different theoretical underpinnings and different research methodologies. The study of pornography has no home discipline nor unified methodology through which it is researched. It has been a polarised field of research divided between different social, political and moral standpoints. While this has manifested along different grounds, some particularly distinctive schools of thought are visible. There has been a substantial body of feminist theory on the oppressive capacity of pornography which has formed the basis of much empirical research on it (Dines, 2010; Dworkin, 1981; 1988; MacKinnon, 1984). In response to this, a body of feminist theory emerged espousing the potential positive capacity of pornography for women (Rubin, 1984; Willis, [1992] 2012). These ‘sex-wars’ have been accused of limiting broader insights into women’s experiences through simplistic and universalising accounts of what pornography means for women (Ciclitira, 2004; Attwood and Smith, 2014; Williams, 2014).

There has also been a dominance of psychology and criminology studies seeking to research the negative effects of pornographic consumption (McCormack and Wignall, 2017). These have particularly focused on the links between pornography consumption and male perpetrated sexual violence and crime towards female victims (McKee, 2005). Manning (2007, p.132) argues “the pornography debate has traditionally been entrenched in: (a) linear, cause-and-effect assumptions; (b) a focus on the individual as the consumer or victim; (c) legal, feminist, or moral perspectives; and (d) dispute over the continuum between censorship and freedom of speech”.

Alongside the ‘sex-wars’ and different positionalities on pornography, there have been polarised perspectives on what constitutes robust evidence. The psychology and scientific research into pornography’s effect or influence on human behaviour and attitudes has been widely criticised for its real-life validity (King, 1993; Attwood et al, 2013). Criticisms of feminist perspectives on pornography have overlapped with methodological criticisms; anti-pornography feminist have been said to rely too heavily on psychology research or non-robust ‘personal testimony’ (Weitzer, 2011; McNair, 2014). Making sense of the evidence base on pornography is difficult as there is little consensus on how to meaningfully measure and research pornography. This raises the question of how to research women and pornography so as to contribute to the field.

Presenting the ‘evidence’ on pornography is a complex task. The polarised field of research on pornography has spawned different research agendas. Williams (2014) argues that different political perspectives on pornography have tended to focus on different subjects of study. For example, it is anti-pornography feminists who have explored ‘mainstream pornography’ whereas pro-pornography perspectives have tended to ignore it. Comparing the evidence base is difficult because different theories have framed different aspects of pornography research. Therefore, the subject of study, the theoretical lens and the tools of data collection all vary according to different standpoints. There is an abundance of evidence, research and knowledge to support different claims about pornography. The evidence base is heavily weighted.

It is widely acknowledged that pornography can be a hostile field of research (Cadwalladr, 2013; Attwood et al, 2018). Presenting the ‘evidence’ can risk implicitly positioning oneself within a specific camp with certain assumptions about the moral worth of pornography and what is robust knowledge on it. As an emerging academic in the field formulating their own opinions and taking an inductive approach, this necessitates a delicate touch. The vast and polarised literature on pornography indicates that women’s lives have been a central focus. The literature also indicates that to assess the evidence on pornography, it is crucial to consider the underlying values andthe methodological basis upon which the research has been conducted. This as a starting point frames the choice to research women’s experiences and to explore pornography knowledge making. This review will next begin to explore different schools of thought on pornography to frame this in more depth.

2.3 Feminist Perspectives on Pornography

Pornography has long occupied a central focus within feminist politics and debate. Feminist perspectives have been hotly contested and identified as typically falling into an either / or approach, an anti-pornography stance or a pro-pornography stance (Juffer, 1998). These discourses have framed much of the theory, public discussion and research on pornography (Smith and Attwood, 2014). The helpfulness of this debate has been widely questioned and there have been calls to move beyond the ‘sex wars’ (Comella, 2015; Attwood et al, 2018). However, it is crucial to engage with this theory as it has been so prevalent and continues to inform research today. Analyses of sex have occupied an important position in feminist theory. Millett (1969 [1977], p.xi) argues that: "sex has a frequently neglected political aspect". Millet defines politics as “power structured relationships” and understands the relationship between the sexes as a political one shaped by patriarchy. One of the ways in which patriarchy is upheld is through ideology and the socialisation of men and women in regard to “temperament, role and status”. Men being socialised into the dominant role. The different feminist perspectives have positioned pornography as having the capacity to either reinforce this patriarchy or disrupt it (Russo, 1987).

Anti-pornography feminists’ critiques of pornography have focussed on the sexual acts depicted, the welfare of women within pornography and the role that pornography has in reinforcing patriarchal values. These feminists have argued that pornography routinely depicts the degradation and subordination of women, and violent and aggressive sexual acts being carried out on them (see Dines et al, 1998). Pornography is defined through the practice not the concept (Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1988) and they have therefore understood it as “the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women” (Cornwell, 2000, p.29). Within this understanding, pornography is defined as violence to women. Morgan (1980, p.139) encapsulates this understanding with her phrase: “pornography is the theory, and rape the practice”. These feminist positions have been divided on whether any form of sexually explicit material can be produced that does not oppress women. Steinem (1984) draws a distinction between ‘erotica’ and ‘pornography’, with erotica not being based on dominance and submission. However, Dworkin (1981) argues erotica is also produced in a patriarchal system and is just a higher class of pornography. The precise distinction being drawn here is confusing, ‘erotica’ is a concept as culturally and politically varied as ‘pornography’ (Paasonen, 2009b).

Anti-pornography feminists have thus criticised pornography as they argue that it propagates patriarchal values. It normalises male sexual domination and violence against women through depictions of the subordination of women (Lederer, 1980; Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997; Dines et al, 1998). Dworkin (1988, pp.264-265) argues: “pornography is the material means of sexualising inequality; and that is why pornography is a central practice in the subordination of women”. Some feminists have used the results from psychology ‘cause and effect’ studies as evidence for their theories (Boyle, 2000). Feminist theories have also informed the design of some of these psychology studies (Mercer and Perkins, 2014). The perceived harm of pornography to women is central to the feminist critique of it. For example, Russell (2000, p.62) argues that pornography “predisposes” some men to want to rape and weakens the inhibitions of men who want to do so.

These feminists have also been concerned with the welfare of the women who perform in pornography over fears that they may have been coerced or subject to harm (MacKinnon, 1984). A famous example of this is the case of Linda Boreman (a.k.a Linda Lovelace) who starred in the cult 1970s pornography film ‘Deep Throat’. In her 1980s memoir ‘Ordeal’ she alleged that she had been coerced into starring in the film by her husband, and had been subject to domestic violence (Boreman, 1980). The anti-pornography feminist and lawyer Catherine MacKinnon represented Linda Boreman, and together with Andrea Dworkin they went on to start a legal campaign against pornography (MacKinnon, 2013). They sought to ban pornography in the USA on the basis that it breached the civil rights of women (Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1988). Boreman was one of the contributors who gave evidence.

Alternatively, pro-pornography feminists have questioned the emphasis placed on pornography as a cause of women’s oppression, the assertion that pornography harms men and women, and the efforts by anti-pornography feminists to censor pornography (Assiter and Carol, 1993). These feminists have argued that appropriating pornography and claiming it for women is important for women’s sexual liberation (Strossen, 1995; McElroy, 1995). Pornography itself is not sexist, rather the industry has historically been dominated by sexist men (Rodgerson and Wilson, 1991). Censoring pornography does not address issues of sexism and denies women an opportunity to express themselves sexually (Rodgerson and Wilson, 1991). Rodgerson and Semple (1990) discuss how anti-pornography feminists found their interests aligning with moral, religious or political conservatives and at times worked with them. There were fears from pro-pornography feminists that with any censorship of pornography or sexually explicit materials it would be non-heterosexual or feminist pornography that would be legislated against.

There has been a number of pro-pornography feminists who are active or former workers in the pornographic industry who have sought to challenge exploitative pornography. For example, Candida Royalle set up ‘Femme Productions’, a company which produced films aimed at women and couples. Royalle (1993, p.32) argues: “you can have explicit adult films that are not sexist … It's not showing genitals that is exploitive; it is the philosophy behind it, and the acts and images that philosophy fosters.” Similarly, Annie Sprinkle has combined her own feminist political beliefs with her work as a pornography performer (Sprinkle, 1998; see <http://anniesprinkle.org)>. There is a growing industry for pornography which styles itself as feminist or queer and seeks to avoid the trappings of exploitation.

There are challenges in considering how best to engage with feminist perspectives on pornography. There are ample critiques of their usefulness for understanding pornography, yet these critiques are not neutral and are also aligned with particular standpoints. Those whose research is more sympathetic to porn tend to highlight the oversimplicity of an either / or approach. For example, Smith and Attwood (2014, p.4) argue that within feminist discourses sex is either conceived of as “liberating or empowering, or as dangerous or oppressive”. Similarly, Paasonen et al (2007a, p.17) argues:

“As the titles anti- and anti-antiporn already imply, these debates have been founded on the principle of writing against. Both camps have tended to regard the other as monolithic while short-circuiting some of the more difficult questions: Antiporn feminism has steered clear of issues of porn as site of self-expression, diverse representations or subcultural productions. Anti- antiporn feminism, again, has emphasised the radical potential and imagery of pornography while omitting potential problems involved in its production or representational conventions”.

On the other hand, Cawston (2019, p.624) argues the framing of anti-pornography feminist discourses have been weak but proposes an alternative for an anti-pornography approach. She argues there has been “a misguided focus on the pornographic object. Feminist critics are better served, I argue, by redirecting their critical gaze towards the consumers of pornography, and, in particular, to the attitudes such consumption reflects”. There are several contemporary examples of research stemming from feminist, anti-pornography positions (for example Dines, 2010; Tyler, 2011; Brunskell-Evans, 2016).

The debate about the relevance of feminist perspectives and what constitutes a ‘neutral’ position has political capital for competing perspectives. The *Porn Studies* journal established in 2014 was accused of being ‘pro-porn’ by anti-pornography perspectives. Gail Dines a prominent anti-pornography feminist accused Routledge the publisher of being “derelict in its duty to uphold academic impartiality" (cited in Cadwalladr, 2013). The editors Smith and Attwood (2014, p.20) retorted that this was an attempt to “impose a uniformity on academics” and argued that they accept diverse submissions. Yet the journal largely publishes articles that are sympathetic to pornography, these may differ from pro-pornography feminist discourses, but they are not ‘neutral’. For example, in a *Porn Studies* special edition guest editors Lee and Sullivan (2016) wrote: “we have porn to thank for much of our increased knowledge of consent awareness, sex positivity, and gender diversity”. However, in another *Porn Studies* special edition guest editors Mowlabocus and Wood (2015) write of their attempt to publish neither blindly pro-porn nor anti-porn pornography. Perhaps this essentially highlights that it is a complicated terrain and it is not possible to be ‘neutral’. It is a political topic.

Feminist theories have been influential in framing understandings of pornography, yet the extent to which these theories help make sense of women’s experiences is unclear. Senn (1993) found that women’s views of pornography did not align with pro-pornography feminism even when they did not object to it. Ciclitira (2004) found that women felt alienated by anti-pornography feminism and that it conflicted with their own enjoyment of pornography. Previously I found (Beresford, 2014) that women had complex feelings about pornography and experiences which echoed different aspects of the feminist debate, not simply one or the other. These debates indicate the need for further empirical research into women’s experiences. They also highlight deeply entrenched moral and political divisions on pornography. Williams (2014, p.36) argues that the feminist debates on pornography have stunted the growth of a dedicated field for pornography studies:

So what is the bare minimum needed to better cultivate this field? … Scholarly discussions need to move beyond that overarching divide that animated the interest in pornography in the first place—that is, the debates within feminism about the patriarchal evil or the relatively banal inevitability of this thing called pornography.

This would suggest that when considering how to research women’s experiences, there is also a need to be clear and reflexive about the theoretical underpinnings. As Berger et al (1990) highlight, the differing feminist perspectives are each framed by different ideologies, but ideologies which have not always been acknowledged. The feminist theories have different ideas about how female liberation is to be achieved. This indicates the need to be receptive to different ideologies and ideas when looking at women’s experiences of pornography.

2.4 The ‘Effects’ of Pornography

Much research has been dedicated to measuring the ‘influence’ or ‘effects’ of consuming pornography on people’s behaviours and attitudes. This distinct body of psychology research focusing on potential harms has been labelled the “negative effects paradigm” (McCormack and Wignall, 2017). Studies into the potential negative side effects of pornography use have been prevalent for forty years (Boyle, 2000) or, according to another estimate, sixty years (Attwood et al, 2013). McKee (2018, p.384) argues that the US President’s Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in 1970 was significant in placing “social-scientific research methods at the heart of understanding the people who consume pornography”. He explains that the report “suggested that psychology was the most suited academic discipline for addressing this concern”. These studies have been scientific and quantitative, using experimental research designs or surveys (McKee, 2005). Some ‘effects’ studies have sought to establish causal relationships between pornography use and particular behaviours, whereas others have investigated the influence that pornography can have. These typically focused on the link between pornographic consumption and sexual crimes, sexual violence and negative attitudes towards women (McKee, 2005).

There is ample evidence from amongst this field of research that pornography has detrimental effects on consumers. Malamuth and Check (1981) and Weisz and Earls (1995) found that men were more accepting of ‘rape myths’ and sexual violence after exposure to violent pornography. Positive correlation was found between self-perceived potential to rape and arousal from depictions of rape (Malamuth and Check, 1980; Malamuth et al, 1980). Malamuth et al (2012, p.437) suggest that repeated exposure to ‘violent’ or ‘aggressive’ scenes in pornography “may generally reinforce the acceptance of dominating, controlling and perhaps even violent acts of aggression against women”. In 2010, Hald et al (2010) found correlation between pornographic use and having attitudes which condone violence towards women. Hald et al (2013, p.638) found in a study of 200 Danish people, for the male participants “an increased past pornography consumption was significantly associated with less egalitarian attitudes toward women and more hostile sexism”. In another study of 200 Danish young people, it was found that “lower levels of agreeableness and higher levels of past pornography consumption significantly predicted ASV [attitudes supporting violence against women]” (Hald and Malamuth, 2015, p.99).

While the evidence from these studies is compelling, there have been many critics of this type of research. Many researchers agree that any evidence of ‘cause and effect’ is inconclusive (King, 1993). These criticisms have come both from ‘pro’ and ‘anti’ pornography perspectives (Jensen, R., 1998; McKee, 2018). Some of the limitations of these studies are openly acknowledged within them. For example, Malamuth et al (2012) note the difficulty in deciphering what is conceived of as a ‘violent’ or ‘aggressive’ act. Alternatively, some researchers have emphasised that it is violent pornography, in particular, that has adverse effects or influences on behaviour rather than all pornography (Davies, C. T., 1997; Donnerstein et al, 1987; Gossett and Byrne, 2002). With all of these studies there is no certainty whether it is pornography that influences these attitudes or whether people already hold these views. Malamuth et al (2012) conclude that men who access violent pornography are already likely to have displayed violent tendencies. Hald and Malamuth (2015, p.105) conclude in their study that the results support the idea that “pornography may prime ‘pre-existing’ sexually aggressive attitudes” among those who already hold those. Barker (2014, p.121) argues “such research provides an excellent example of the classic problem that correlation does not equal causation”.

Several pornography researchers have criticised the scientific approach to researching pornography. The researcher has a significant role in framing the research, and the underlying assumptions are usually that pornography is negative. Where studies have taken place in the laboratory, it has been questioned how applicable the findings can be to real world situations (Attwood et al, 2013). McKee (2018, p.385) argues that laboratory studies instead “tell us, rather, about the effects of pornography on people who may or may not be pornography consumers, who are exposed involuntarily to pornography that they may find upsetting, in unfamiliar, non-sexual surroundings.” Likewise, McKee highlights that surveys do not enable consumers to “explain the meanings that pornography consumption holds for them, or to draw attention to what, for them, are the most important aspects of the genre.” It is questionable how much these studies tell us about the experiences of pornography consumers.

Furthermore, the validity of these studies has been questioned in relation to how they are framed. Many researchers have highlighted the difficultly in operationalising terms such as ‘aggression’ or ‘violence’ (Barker, 2014; McKee, 2015). McKee (2015) found that in many content analyses of sexually explicit materials (SEM) the definition of aggression does not include consent. He argues that this has three problems: “it does not distinguish between aggression and some positive acts … it excludes a key element of healthy sexuality … it can lead to heteronormative definitions of healthy sexuality” (McKee, 2015, p.81). Hardy (2008, p.62-63) argues “this research was never really able to bridge the clear conceptual distinction between the pornographic representation of sex and real-world behaviour that its own epistemology insisted upon.”

Criticisms of these approaches have also been made from those from an anti-pornography perspective. It has been argued that these studies obscure the experiences or choices of those who are perpetrators or victims of violence. Jensen, R. (1998, p.101) argues (and is echoed by Boyle, 2000) that: “the search for causation demands ‘science’ while a concern for pornography’s role in rape leaves us more open to listening to stories”. Essentially this only serves to “obscure these stories and negates the individual abuser’s agency and accountability” (Boyle, 2000, p.193). Krafka et al (1997) argue these studies ignore “pornography’s broad impact on women … [and how it] shape[s] women’s perceptions of other women and themselves”. We do not gain nuanced understandings of the broader impact or influence of pornography on men and women nor their experiences of it.

The broad criticism of this research from across different political perspectives would suggest that it needs to be treated with caution. It has been argued that there has been a paradigm shift away from the negative effects research (Attwood, 2002; Attwood, 2011; McCormack and Wignall, 2017). However, this body of research cannot be easily dismissed. There continues to be a blossoming field of psychology research using scientific approaches. There are copious large quantitative studies looking at the influence of pornography consumption on sexual attitudes and behaviours. Pornography consumption has been linked to lack of support for affirmative action programmes for women (Wright and Funk, 2013), impaired marital and family relationships (Manning, 2007), infidelity (Lambert et al, 2012; Salmon et al, 2019), casual sex (Wright, 2012), unsafe sex (Braithwaite et al, 2015; Wright et al, 2016), shaping male expectations of sex with women (Chyng et al, 2014) and negative body image (Tylka, 2015) among other things. Again, there is a compelling body of research suggesting pornography has a negative influence. However, this research falls victim to the same criticisms as the “negative effects paradigm”. It relies on heteronormative ideas of good sexual practice, is heavily framed by the researcher and relies on quantitative, scientific methods to get at people’s experiences (McCormack and Wignall, 2017; McKee, 2015; 2018). While these may be more theoretically nuanced than the “negative effects paradigm”, it is questionable whether the use of a scientific approach produces the most robust knowledge on pornography.

Moreover, the negative effects research continues to be drawn from as an authoritative body of evidence. In the UK, this research has been used in government inquiries and reviews as evidence for policy. In 2009, the then Home Secretary Jacqui Smith commissioned a review into the sexualisation of young people. The report concluded that “the evidence gathered in the review suggests a clear link between consumption of sexualised images, a tendency to view women as objects and the acceptance of aggressive attitudes and behaviour as the norm.” (Papadopoulos, 2010, p.11). Much of the research cited in the review is taken from the psychology studies above (e.g. Malamuth and Donnerstein 1982; 1984). In 2010, the Department for Education commissioned an independent review into the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood (DfE, 2011). In the review, author Reg Bailey (p.37) acknowledges that opinions are split about whether “exposure of children to pornography directly causes harm” but ultimately concludes that: “many respondents advocate a common-sense approach to accept the potential for real harm to be caused to children”. The prevalence of this research, and its compelling draw as ‘objective’ evidence highlights the need for further qualitative research into women’s experiences of pornography. The research suggests pornographic consumption is harmful (and particularly for women) yet the validity of this research has been questioned.

2.5 The Growth of Pornography and ‘Pornification’

Thus far, this review has outlined two of the leading schools of thought which have shaped pornography research and theory. As highlighted, their usefulness for understanding women’s experiences of pornography has been questioned. Furthermore, both bodies of research largely pre-date the internet (Manning, 2007; Van Doorn and Van Zoonen, 2009). The literature indicates that the development of new technologies and the internet have rapidly altered the nature of pornography, the ways in which it is experienced and its cultural position in society. This growth in pornographic materials has triggered renewed academic interest in pornography and new societal debates about pornography’s role in society (Paasonen, 2011).

The production, distribution and consumption of pornography has proliferated in recent decades in Global North countries. This is a consensus visible in different schools of thought on pornography (McNair, 2013; Price et al, 2016; Martellozzo et al, 2016; Mecham et al, 2019). This has been attributed to the growth of the internet and the development of new technologies (Attwood, 2002; Paasonen, 2006; 2019). The digitalisation of pornography has radically transformed who produces pornography, how they produce it, how it is obtained, shared and accessed; and how it is engaged with, used and consumed (Waskul, 2004). The move from material forms of pornography to digital has rapidly changed the social practices around it.

A key development has been the ease of access to pornography. As technology has advanced from VCRs to personal computers to the internet, it has changed the way pornography can be obtained and accessed (Buzzell, 2005). With each technological development, there have been shifts in the use of and access to pornography with web content now more popular than DVDs (Tibbals, 2013). Each new technology has revolutionised the ease with which pornography can be obtained and consumed within the privacy of the home. The internet has offered greater availability and accessibility (Maddison, 2009), privacy and discretion (Coopersmith, 2000), and free or cheap access (Cooper et al, 2000). As internet access grows globally so too do the potential audiences of pornography (Owens et al, 2012). Pornography has a much wider reach than it did in the past.

With the emergence of the internet the pornographic industry is understood to have grown exponentially in size. The pornographic industry was one of the first to capitalise on the internet and has flourished ever since (Nathan, 2007; Van Doorn and Van Zoonen, 2009). Finding reliable statistics on the size of the pornographic industry is difficult though some have tried to estimate the revenue of the industry. For example, in 2006 pornography in the USA was estimated to be a billion-dollar industry (Edelman, 2009). Weitzer (2010) reported that in the USA rentals and sales of X-rated videos went from $76 million to $882 million from 1985 – 2006, and that in 2006 Americans spent $13.3 billion on pornography and other sexual services (e.g. live shows and telephone hotlines). In 2014 and 2015, the NBC News quoted an estimate that pornography is worth $97 billion globally (NBC News, 2014; NBC News, 2015). However, the same article pointed out that much internet pornography is free and has consequently put a lot of companies trading in pornographic DVDs out of business.

However, to give some indication of the breadth of pornography, Pornhub.com, which claims to be the world’s largest pornography site, reported in 2018 that they had had:

* 33.5 billion visits
* 92 million daily average visits
* 4,791,799 videos uploaded
* 207,405 videos viewed per minute
* 63,992 visitors per minute (Pornhub, 2018)

Pornhub also reported that the UK has the second highest daily traffic to Pornhub after the USA. The publishing of these statistics themselves highlight changing practices around pornography, with one commentator accusing Pornhub of using it as publicity to gain more traffic (Oremus, 2014). Pornography consumption has become more visible and mainstream.

Concurrent to the growth of pornography, there has been increased debate and discussion around the ‘sexualisation’ of culture. ‘Western culture’ is seen to be becoming more sexualised and the boundaries of the public and the private more blurred (Attwood, 2002; Attwood, 2009a; Bailey, 2011). Attwood (2009a) argues that sex is becoming more visible and is central to people’s sense of identity. It is a key part of how people express themselves as individuals (Giddens, 1992). This combined with a consumerist culture means that sex and sexual practice are increasingly commodified. Sex is both a product to be sold and a tool utilised to sell products (McNair, 2002; Tuck, 2009). As sex has become more commodified and profitable, new and diverse sexualities and sexual practices are catered to exposing once hidden practices (Bhattacharyya, 2002). Increasingly, ‘Western’ society is more exposed to different sexual practices and its people are consumers of sex.

This process of sexualisation has been related to pornography and it has been argued we are seeing a ‘pornification’ of society (McNair, 1996; Dines and Long, 2007; Paasonen et al, 2007b). This has been interpreted as both a positive and negative societal trend. McNair (1996) identifies it as the process through which pornography has had an increasing influence on mainstream culture through the parody, referencing and play of it in public spaces while simultaneously the volume and distribution of pornographic materials has grown. Paasonen et al (2007a) argues pornography has filtered down into mainstream media; there have been "transformations in the cultural position and status of both soft-core and hardcore pornographies”. ‘Pornification' can see the once illicit become mainstream: “acts that are traditionally illicit can be acquired and appropriated by particular identities to become ‘good’” (Mulholland, 2011, p.132). The ‘pornification’ of society is visible in more sexualised music videos, advertisements and mainstream media.

The literature on what ‘sexualisation’ and ‘pornification’ means for society is a contested field. Regarding ‘sexualisation’, Gill (2012, p.485-486) argues three broad positions have been visible: “the ‘public morals’ position, the ‘democratising sex’ position, and feminist approaches”. ‘Public morals’ approaches critique ‘sexualisation’ from a position of “standards, taste and ‘public decency’”. Sexualisation is seen as cheap, vulgar and inappropriate. The ‘democratising sex’ position has instead celebrated it as opening up opportunities for sexual expression, what McNair (2002) identifies as a “striptease culture” and a “democratisation of desire”. New and diverse sexualities are catered for. Gill (2012) argues that the feminist positions are divided: sexualisation has been envisaged as objectification, as empowering or as post-modern. Similarly, ‘pornification’ has been seen as positive and facilitating new sexual expression or negative and reinforcing standardised ideas of sexuality or female objectification (Mulholland, 2011). There is agreement that pornography has become part of daily life and everyday culture (Paasonen et al, 2007a; Bailey, 2011; Schuchardt, 2012) but not about how this is experienced.

2.6 Pornographic Content

The literature is divided on the material form that pornography takes, and what content is primarily available. It is widely agreed that with the advent of the internet print forms of pornography have declined (Tibbals, 2013). Internet videos are now the primary format of pornographic material available (Hald et al, 2013). However, research has only just begun to analyse internet pornography and as such little is known about the content of this material (Vannier et al, 2014). There is a long history of concern about the content of pornography and its role in shaping sexual behaviours and attitudes (Attwood, 2009b). Concerns have centred on pornography depicting violent, degrading or aggressive sexual acts, in particular male perpetrated against female (Jensen, R., 2007). Moreover, there have been concerns that non-violent pornography is also problematic as it depicts unrealistic portrayals of sex (Watson and Smith, 2012). However, opponents of this have argued that the pornographic industry is not homogenous and that there are different industries and contents (Penley et al, 2013).

Contemporary content analyses of mainstream internet pornography indicate that it contains images that portray women’s sexuality and pleasure less favourably. Gorman et al (2010) undertook a content analysis of free internet pornographic videos. They found that women were more likely to be naked than men and that fellatio was more likely to be included than cunnilingus. Not all videos contained ‘violent’ or ‘degrading’ material but they concluded that the material was more tailored toward a male gaze. Vannier et al (2014, p.19-20) undertook a content analysis of ‘Teen’ and ‘MILF’ pornographic videos[[2]](#footnote-2), two of the most popular themes in pornography. They found that “male actors were depicted more often as in control of the pace/direction of sexual activity and female actors were portrayed more often as the victims of exploitation”. However, it was more complex than this: “there were no gender differences in the portrayals of sexual experience, in professional status, or in the initiation of sexual activity and use of persuasion”.

There is evidence to both support and contradict the claim that internet pornography contains aggressive content. Shor and Seida (2019) tested 269 popular videos on Pornhub and found that aggressive content had not increased over the past decade. They reported that clips that contained aggressive acts were less favoured and had less views than other content. In a review of 172 videos on Pornhub Shor (2019) found that videos with female teenage performers contained the same level of aggression as female adult performers but that the titles were more aggressive. Furthermore, she found that: “videos featuring teenage performers were more likely to include practices that scholars often consider to be at the very least demeaning, if not aggressive or risky. These include anal penetration and ejaculation on the face and in the mouth” (Shor, 2019, p.1029). In a review of 172 free videos, Shor and Golriz (2019, p.748-749) found that depictions of aggression were racialised “Black and Latino men were more likely to use aggression compared with White men” and “videos featuring Latina and Asian performers did include a higher rate of aggression compared with those featuring White (or Black) female performers.” The literature indicates that different groups of women could be portrayed in different ways with some being depicted more negatively than others.

However, it has been argued that this pornography is not indicative of all pornography. Slayden (2010, p.58) argues the internet has enabled the growth of “specialist tastes and niche markets that would be impossible to sustain offline”. Tarrant (2016, p.28) distinguishes between ‘mainstream’ pornography and ‘independent’ pornography which vary according to “how the content is made and distributed” and “what kind of content is featured”. She argues that ‘indie’ pornography has often produced much more ethical forms of pornography. ‘Mainstream’ pornography is that produced by large corporations and usually aimed at heterosexual, male audiences. Tarrant (2016, pp.31-32) argues ‘mainstream’ pornography is often heteronormative, racist and transphobic.

There is evidence to suggest there is a growing market of pornographic materials depicting LGBT\* and queer sexualities and some of these performers have also written about their experiences (Lee, 2013; Angel, 2013; Noble, 2013). Penley et al (2013, pp.11-12) outline that since the 2000s there has been a growth of feminist pornography, materials made by women which depict female pleasure. These challenge traditional gendered scripts about women’s sexual performance and sexuality, and about the ideal female body. Maina (2014, p.42) argues “the idea of authenticity – intended as the realistic depiction of bodies, sexual practices and pleasures – seems to be particularly significant for performers and entrepreneurs engaged in the production of self-defined feminist pornography.” This literature would imply that there is a more diverse range of pornographic materials available. However, while the literature is divided on the extent to which pornography is a homogenous or heterogenous industry, the literature suggests that it is ‘mainstream’ pornography that is most readily available (Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015; Tarrant, 2016).

2.7 Who Engages With Pornography?

Much of the literature on pornography has tended to focus on the product and its consumption (Voss, 2012). However, little is known about the users of pornography (McKee et al, 2008). Compiling statistics on the users and use of pornography is difficult as people are not necessarily honest about such a personal practice (McNair, 2002; Paul, 2005). Historically, the consensus has been that pornography was an industry dominated by and tailored towards male audiences (Senn and Radtke, 1990; Shaw, 1999; Hardy, 2009). The male-centric nature of the industry has been the basis of much of the criticism of pornography. McNair (1996, p.vii) argues that the mainstreaming of pornography has broken its association with taboo and “dirty raincoatedness”; it has become more acceptable to use it and new audiences are accessing it. Subsequently, there has been a democratisation of the pornographic industry with more pornography being tailored towards different sexualities (McNair, 2013; Paasonen, 2019). For others, the mainstreaming of pornography has sparked concerns about young people accessing it (Beaver and Steven, 2011; Horvath et al, 2013). It has also renewed concerns about the impact of pornography on women (Dines, 2010; Cawston, 2019).

There are a number of contemporary studies which have sought to compile demographic information on the users of pornography. These generally indicate that it is men who are still the primary users of pornography. In America, Goodson et al (2001) found that, among 506 students (61.9% female, 38.1% male), the male participants were more likely to consume pornography (59.2% of men viewed it compared to 34.1% of females). Carroll et al (2008) also reported higher male use of pornography in their study of 813 students (61.5% female, 38.5% male), with 87% of males reported using pornography compared to 31% of women. These studies are somewhat limited by their sample, the demographics of a university are not representative of the broader population (Rothman et al, 2015).

More recently, Richters et al (2014) found in their study of 20,094 Australians (aged 16-69) that 63% of men had looked at pornography in the past year compared to 20% of women. Böhm et al (2015) found that amongst 2082 German university students (62% female, 38% male), males were more likely to consume pornography and do so more regularly than their female counterparts. When participants were asked if they had watched pornographic movies in the past four weeks, more than 80% of men answered yes compared to less than 25% of women. In Australia, Rissel et al (2016) reported that among 9,963 men and 10,131 women aged 16 - 69 years old, 84% of men had looked at pornography ever in their lifetime compared to 54% of women and in the past year 76% of men had watched pornography compared to 41% of women. Pornhub (2018) reported that in the year 2018 71% of their visitors globally were male. In all of the studies, males had looked at pornography considerably more than women.

These studies also indicated that men and women engage with pornography differently. Pornhub (2018) reported different pornography preferences for men and women with the top five viewed categories for women being “Lesbian, Threesome, Japanese, Big Dick, Popular With Women” compared to “Japanese, MILF, Mature, Lesbian, Ebony” for men. Carroll et al (2008) found than men were more likely to ‘binge’ on pornography and were more accepting about the use of it than were women. Goodson et al (2001) reported that men viewed pornography more frequently and were more likely to cite curiosity or sexual arousal as their motive. Cooper et al (2002) found that men engaged in online sexual activity more often, and that there were gendered differences in motive, with women being more likely to cite sexual education as their reason. Böhm et al (2015) found gendered differences in attitudes and use of pornography. For example, women were discerning and selective about content, particularly wanting that which showed both female and male pleasure. The male respondents typically picked what they considered to be ‘normal’ or appropriate content for heterosexual men. Not only did men view pornography more than women, there were gendered differences in how they used it. These findings collectively suggest that there are gendered differences in frequency of pornographic use and behaviours around it. More qualitative research is needed into the social implications of the gendered nature of pornography consumption.

This literature is helpful in providing an initial indication of who uses pornography. However, it does not suggest much about the contexts, feelings and experiences of pornography use (McKee, 2018; Miller et al, 2018). McKee (2005) argues that it is important to bring the lived experiences of consumers into discourses about pornography use. Where this has been done, there is evidence to suggest that pornography consumption can have a positive role in people’s sexual expression. Miller et al (2018) conducted research with heterosexual men who use pornography. There were a variety of responses, but many reported that it had a positive function in their lives and did not have negative consequences for their behaviours and attitudes. Paasonen et al (2015) conducted research into pornographic consumption with 45 participants using narrative and memory work. Many reported positive experiences and discussed how they had found materials that they liked. There were people who had had negative experiences of pornography, but these were in the minority.

Furthermore, there is a growing body of literature to suggest that the category of ‘consumer’ is evolving. It has been argued that new technologies and the internet have enabled new forms of interaction and engagement with pornography (Paasonen, 2006). Amateur pornography is becoming more prevalent, changing the ways that people can interact with, consume and produce pornography (Paasonen, 2010). Paasonen et al (2007a, p.4) argue that while “amateur porn is certainly not a new phenomenon, […] the distribution, participation and interaction possibilities of the Internet have given it unprecedented visibility since the 1990s.” It is possible for people to be both producers and consumers of pornography in an unprecedented way. Furthermore, new web platforms are enabling new forms of interaction with the pornographic. Paasonen (2007, p.163) argues “sexual experimentation and more or less playful interaction online- via chat, instant messaging, web cameras, etc. – similarly enable novel kinds of sexual experiences and relationships in which one is simultaneously performer and audience”. Mowlabocus (2010, p.73) similarly identifies that opportunities for consumers to join forums, post comments and share content enable them to interact with and control “their porn in ever more individual ways”. Mowlabocus and Wood (2015, p.120) caution that “the number of consumers of porn who are also producers of porn remains comparatively small.” However, this body of research indicates that looking at consumption alone would limit understandings of people’s interactions with pornography.

2.8 How do Women Experience Pornography?

Despite, a considerable focus of pornography research centring on its influence and impact on women, there has historically been little research exploring women’s experiences of it. Juffer (1998) highlighted the lack of research into women’s mundane encounters with pornography 21 years ago and this has remained a relevant critique. The body of literature exploring women’s experiences has begun to grow. However, there is still much that is not known about the ways in which women regularly encounter pornography (Vera-Gray, 2016). This section will provide some overview of the qualitative research that does exist on women’s experiences. The literature indicates that women can have diverse experiences of pornography and that it can be encountered in numerous ways. Much of the literature focuses on consumption or exposure to pornography.

Empirical research into women’s use and consumption of pornography indicates that it can be experienced both positively and negatively. Senn (1993) reported that the women she worked with often had negative feelings about pornography and were concerned about the impact it could have for women. They all, however, had differing reasons for feeling this. Shaw (1999) conducted research into the impact of pornographic consumption on women’s lives. She found that the majority of her participants were unhappy with their male partners using pornography and felt negative about it generally. Ciclitira (2004) found that women had both positive and negative experiences of pornography. Some of the women she worked with had contradictory feelings and simultaneously enjoyed pornography whilst feeling concerned about it. Tzankova (2015) found in her study of women that pornographic consumption was pleasurable, exciting, sexually educative, a break from routine, explorative of lesbian sexual practice, a chance to see passive male sexual behaviour; and, had personal and political implications.

In 2005, Attwood (2005a, p.81) undertook a review of the qualitative literature into people’s consumption of pornography and other sexually explicit materials. In this she reported that studies into women as users of pornography were scarce. Across the studies she could find, women had a range of responses to pornography:

Reactions to this kind of media are also intensely contradictory at the affective level; both men and women report being attracted and repulsed, often simultaneously.

Her systematic review indicated that feelings about pornography were highly contextual to the situation in which pornography or sexually explicit materials were viewed.

Making sense of these reactions requires a much broader focus than earlier approaches to sexually explicit media have suggested. As the studies reviewed here show, the significance of the sexually explicit depends very much on its place; for example, pornography functions differently for groups of adolescent boys, for single men, and for heterosexual couples, and acquires symbolic value even, or perhaps especially, for individuals who have no direct experience of it.

Pornography and sexually explicit materials could have different functions depending on who was present. Choosing not to engage with it did not exempt individuals from having thoughts and opinions on it.

In 2018, Ashton et al undertook a review into the qualitative literature on women’s experiences of pornography. They found 22 papers from nine different countries. Across this literature, women had had diverse experiences of pornography. Similar to Attwood (2005a) they reported that women identified pornography “as valuable, as detrimental, as a mix of the two, or as initiating dissonance” (Ashton et al, 2018, p.344). The review primarily addressed encounters with or consumption of pornography (rather than production or performance in pornography). However, these manifested in diverse ways. Ashton et al (2018) grouped the findings into four categories:

**Women encountering pornography.** Women were reported as explaining how they first encountered and continue to encounter pornography. (p.339)

**Pornography and the self.** Pornography was reported as relating to how women feel about their bodies, their understanding of sexual activity, their experience of arousal, and how they construct potential social attitudes to their use of pornography. (p.340)

**Pornography in the context of relationships.** Researchers described women’s strategies for navigating pornography in relationships. It was found that, when women encountered pornography in the context of their relationship, it could be assessed as either increasing or reducing intimacy. Researchers also reported women’s accounts of negotiating pornography use in a relationship and unwanted sexual contact after pornography use. (p.342)

**Making sense of pornography.** It is evident that pornography intersects with important, pivotal, and sensitive domains of women’s lives. (p.343)

Across these studies, pornography featured in women’s lives in diverse ways. It could be actively sought out, accidentally encountered, avoided or used with a partner. The women had different motivations, agency and choice within these interactions. Pornography could be an imposition, tolerated or actively welcomed. There was also a complex interplay between the women’s values and experiences of pornography, each informing and shaping the other.

Women can seek pornography for use as a means of arousal or education, or encounter it in the context of their relationships, in their social environment, or accidentally. Women’s internalized social messages, values, experiences in intimate relationships, and previous pornography use contribute to the lens through which they experience and find meaning in pornography.

This review by Ashton et al (2018) indicates that exploring women’s experiences must encompass a wide range of factors such as the type of interaction, who else was involved, the emotional significance and agency. Chadwick et al (2018, p.1860) also advocate the exploration of agency when looking at women’s consumption of pornography. In their study into women’s use of pornography, they found that women did have concerns about consuming pornography but found ways to do so that felt comfortable. They discuss that:

Generally, women corroborated that consuming pornography is risky; women stated that they are likely to encounter content that they find problematic and which evokes negative affect. Each of the strategies (i.e., searching for low-risk content, altering content, and choosing the medium) described a category comprised of many methods for negotiating with negative content. Additionally, some women described avoiding pornography entirely (even if they did not want to) because of past encounters with negative affective experiences. Almost all participants who described risks associated with watching pornography mentioned using at least one of the three strategies, highlighting how women are actively involved in creating their own pornography experiences.

Chadwick et al (2018) conclude that agency is a key component to understanding women’s interactions with and experiences of pornography. This could be a key determinant in their emotional experience.

The literature also indicates the necessity of looking beyond ‘consumption’ when exploring women’s experiences of pornography. There is a growing body of research exploring women’s experiences of working in the pornographic industry. White (2018, p.394) conducted research with women who perform in pornography and is a pornography performer herself. She found a theme within 6 women’s responses “that pornography offers possibilities for female performers to explore creative sexual expression, exploration, exhibitionism and same-sex sexual pleasures, and that performing in pornography has challenged these women’s understandings of their own sexual identities”. Conversely, Stardust (2015, p.68) reported from her interviews with erotic performers that there were experiences of exclusion and oppression. “[They] spoke to me about being ridiculed because of their age, exoticized or defined by their race, censored because they were ‘too lesbian’, refused work because of their size, or segregated to fetish spaces because they were differently abled”. These two studies suggest that as with other types of interactions that women can have with pornography, the types of experience they had vary.

There is also literature to suggest that women are engaging with other forms of sexually explicit materials or practices. Attwood (2005b) proposes that women are increasingly being targeted as sexual consumers, as visible in new sexual products and markets aimed at women. There is a growing body of literature on women’s engagement with other forms of sexual leisure activities such as erotica and sex toys (Attwood, 2009c; Wood, 2015). Roberts (2015, p.214) identifies that there is a burgeoning market of female-oriented pornography comics. She argues “In these comics, women’s sexual desires and pleasures are presented as central to the narrative and, through the use of the specific structures of comics as both legitimate and diverse.” Penley et al (2013) argues there has been a growth of women engaging in erotic materials as evident in the success of the 50 Shades of Grey series and the fan writing and communities that emerged alongside it.

There has been some qualitative research into women’s engagement with other sexual materials and performance. Sanders-McDonagh (2015, p.330) looked at women who visited public sex performances in Amsterdam. She argued that these offered women the space to enact “a gaze that is normally understood as definitively masculine”. She advocates taking a broader conceptualisation of ‘pornography’ to account for parallel sexual activities. Hester et al (2015) conducted research into pornographic GIFs (a short loop of film) and microporn. They found that this was a proactive way in which people engage with pornography, and that there is an “emerging female porn fandom” using this method. This enabled them to challenge some of the dominant discourses around young women’s engagement with pornography. They found that young women were using GIFs to create pornographic clips of their favourite porn actor, James Deen, to express the pleasure they received from looking at him. Hester et al (2015, p.364) concluded: “ignoring porn prosumers[[3]](#footnote-3) – or worse, dismissing them as fannish teenage girls – fails to take into account female pleasures and thus continues the subordination of women’s agency in relation to sex and sexuality”.

In the research on young people and pornography, there are renewed concerns about the impact of pornography on women. A number of studies have found that young men watching pornography encourages negative views of women (Häggström et al, 2006; Peter and Valkenburg, 2007; Brown and L’Engle, 2009). The IPPR (2014) reported that, in a study of 500 18-year olds, there was a concern about the negative influence of pornography on people’s perceptions of women and sex. The female respondents were also consistently more worried about the problems with pornography than the male respondents. There is a large body of empirical research to suggest that pornography use amongst young people reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, gives unrealistic expectations of sex and encourages the objectification of women (Quadara et al, 2017).

Despite the wealth of literature and discussion on problematizing the ‘dangers’ of young people accessing pornography, there is a surprising lack of research around young people’s experiences of pornography. Böhm et al (2015) note that there is no existing literature in Germany on student’s experiences of pornography. When they conducted this research themselves they reported that the participants showed a high level of “competency” regarding pornographic use. Both the men and women were selective about what they used, able to distinguish between fantasy and reality and were self-reflective about their concerns. Matthiesen and Schmidt (2013) conducted research with 160 young people (male and female) aged 16-19 years old. They found that all participants had complex experiences of pornography. It was viewed in different contexts (e.g. it was watched as a joke with friends or it was watched alone to masturbate to) and there were a range of views around it (e.g. indifference, positive, negative). The men felt very able to distinguish between reality and fantasy and did not feel they internalised negative views around pornography.

The literature indicates that research on women’s experiences must be carefully designed in order to be receptive to the full range of experiences that they can have. The research cautions against assumptions about ‘women’, ‘pornography’ and the ways in which the two interact. Shor and Golitz (2019, p.740) identify that much previous research “examined women as a monolithic group of victims, paying little attention to differences among women and among men and to the interactions among them.” They identify that race and ethnicity and how this can shape experiences has been neglected within pornography research. Furthermore, much of the research has focused on the experiences of heterosexual women. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that lesbian and bisexual women engage with pornography differently (Træen and Daneback, 2013). Vera-Gray (2016) argues that where women’s consumption of pornography is explored, the emphasis is often on ‘alternative pornographies’ and women who do not use pornography are ignored. Ashton et al (2018, p.346) recommend that:

The paradoxical experiences described by many women in their interactions with pornography have implications for researchers, health practitioners, and sex educators: They would be wise to challenge their personal biases, to avoid making assumptions about women’s experiences, and to ask each woman about what pornography means to her.

The research literature indicates the necessity to be open to different types of pornography, encounters and experiences, and not to assume there will be a homogenous woman’s experience.

2.9 Conclusion

The literature on pornography is not easily categorised. There is a vast breadth of research spanning many decades which has been international, interdisciplinary, focused on different topics and conducted using different methods. There were a number of ways this could have been collated, and I had the task of presenting both the evidence on pornography *and* the different perspectives on producing knowledge. I propose that these two aspects are inextricable and must both be analysed when trying to make sense of pornography.

However, they overlap and are distinct ways of organising the literature. Through considering the foundations of pornography research, I also questioned the validity of the evidence on pornography. Pornography research has been a deeply polarised field with different perspectives envisaging ‘pornography’ differently and choosing to focus on different subjects of study. This revealed that it is difficult to present the evidence on pornography without implicitly positioning oneself within a specific camp. There is a heavily weighted evidence base for pornography which is difficult to make sense of.

A central concern within pornography research has been the impact it has on women’s lives. There is evidence to suggest it can be experienced both positively and negatively. However, it is difficult to discern in what ways pornography features in women’s lives. Different schools of thought have chosen to focus on different aspects of pornography. As such it is unclear whether women are victims of pornography or agentic consumers and producers of it. The literature does indicate that it is necessary to ask women about their experiences in a different way. In the next chapter, I will outline the methodology for the research project. I will use this literature review to frame the research design and aims and objectives.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The Best Laid Plans of Mice and Women

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will outline the methodology and method for this research and engage in a critical analysis of the research design and process. The method was an integral part of this research. Rather than being understood as a way to get at knowledge, it was conceived of as being instrumental in producing it. The method was crucial in framing and shaping the findings that were developed on women’s experiences of pornography. Moreover, the methodology was an essential component of the overall research topic. This was crystallised in the research aims. The second aim asked whether participatory methods could be a means to produce more insightful knowledge on pornography. The research methodology was entwined with the research subject, and in some regards was a subject of study as well. The evaluation of the method in this chapter will document the research process, help to frame the empirical findings chapters and contribute to the overall project findings.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a robust and transparent account of how the research was designed and conducted. It will also reflect on the strengths and successes of the research methodology and the challenges and weaknesses. This will enable the reader to assess the claims to knowledge that this thesis will make. Crucially, I will evidence the choice to research this topic through a participatory methodology, and to use a small sample and group discussions and interviews. Reflecting on RA2, there is also a need to evaluate whether the use of participatory methods was conducive to building more robust knowledge on pornography. Initially, I had planned to dedicate a whole chapter to this conceived of as a ‘methodological findings chapter’. However, within the confines of this study, it was not possible to empirically test nor make conclusive statements about it. Instead, I will put forward an analysis evidenced with the research data and research literature. This will begin in this chapter and be elaborated on in the Discussion and Conclusion chapters. I will argue that a participatory methodology enabled a deeper insight into women’s lived experiences of pornography and was supportive of developing robust knowledge on pornography.

Like many doctoral (Naveed et al, 2017), participatory (Goodnough, 2008) and qualitative (Salovaara, 2018) researchers, this project was characterised by ‘messiness’. The research principles underpinning the research were constant foundations, but the research questions and research design evolved and changed as the project took on a life of its own. Flexibility was always built into the research design to be receptive to the needs and wants of the women who took part. My development as a participatory researcher also influenced the direction that the project took. This chapter will start by discussing the foundations of the project which were the guiding principles underpinning the whole endeavour. I will next address the research design and how it evolved from design to conduct. I will then outline the recruitment process and introduce the women who participated. The ethical strategy will be presented alongside the ethical considerations that emerged during the research process. A considerable portion of this chapter will discuss the data production. I will evaluate the success of the participatory endeavour and reflect on the method for producing data on the topic. Finally, the chapter will outline the method used to analyse the data.

Often while doing this research the phrase the ‘best laid place of mice and men’ would come to mind. Some of the greatest challenges during the research process were minor, yet rather significant, practical challenges such as finding a suitable room to hold the research group meetings in. These challenges ended up being an unanticipated source of humour and group bonding during the project. After each meeting I would learn from the previous mistake, only to be presented with increasingly absurd difficulties regarding room access at the next session. While trying to negotiate each situation, I would often think ‘the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry’. I decided to name this chapter in honour of this, with a slight amendment to ‘mice and women’ given that this was a project conducted by women.

3.2 Research Foundations

The premise of this research was to: (1) work with women to find out more about their lived experiences of pornography and to better understand the ways in which it routinely features in their lives; and (2) to add to conversations on pornography knowledge processes and consider how research could be done with women to better capture their realities of it. These research aims were developed in response to the literature on pornography (see Chapter 1 and 2) and shaped by my standpoint on knowledge making. The field of pornography research has been polarised, and divided theoretically, ideologically and methodologically. I proposed that in order to produce trustworthy knowledge it is crucial to be explicit about the foundations upon which pornography knowledge is produced. This research was shaped by methodological theories, these will next be explored in depth.

**Research Approach**

My approach was informed by feminist research philosophies and participatory principles. These both overlap and are distinct theoretical perspectives (Lykes and Hershberg, 2012). Neither feminist or participatory approaches have a uniform approach to knowledge making and have been undertaken in diverse ways (Wylie, 1995; Bourke, 2009). However, these strands have been characterised by radically challenging traditional theories on how we know about the social world. Feminist and participatory approaches are inherently political in their origin and emerged in challenge to traditional methods of research. Knowledge making is understood as a power-laden process from which marginalised, excluded and less powerful groups have often been excluded (Gaventa and Cornwell, 2008; Hawkesworth, 2012). Those who are powerful in society have been the gatekeepers of knowledge and the historical emphasis on ‘objectivity’ has reinforced this. It has enabled the dominant in society to construct their viewpoint as the ‘neutral’ universal world view (Barnes and Mercer, 1997; Letherby, 2003). Thus, the less powerful in society have been excluded from knowledge production.

Feminist and participatory approaches proposition that in order for knowledge to be reflective of those whom it concerns, the methods for producing it need to be radically transformed (Duelli Klein, 1983; Beresford, P., 2003; Oliver, 2009; Borg et al, 2012). This means reconfiguring theories of ‘what exists’, ‘what knowledge is’ and ‘who can know’ and doing research differently. The *purpose* of research and the *process* of doing it are understood as political and action oriented. Research should produce knowledge which is beneficial to those taking part in it; it should be reflective of their lives and have practical use to them (Duelli Klein, 1983; DeVault, 1991; O’Neill, 2001; Harding, 2018). The process of doing research should be a transformative process; an opportunity for both researcher and the researched to learn, ‘consciousness raise’ and develop their personal knowledges (Lather, 1986; Higginbottom and Liamputtong, 2015). This is actualised through transforming research relationships and seeking to develop mutually beneficial, non-exploitative relationships in research (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003; Faulkner, 2004; Nind, 2014; Wakeford and Sanchez Rodriguez, 2018). The method is judged as much as the outcome, and knowledge is produced through the method (Stanley and Wise, 1983; Bergold and Thomas, 2012).

Adopting this approach felt particularly appropriate to pornography research. ‘Knowledge’ on women and pornography has been polarised and disconnected from women’s lived experiences. There is an absence of their voice in the literature. New theory and research that is reflective of women’s experiences and supportive of their empowerment is needed. O’Neill (2008a) adopted a participatory methodology for research with sex workers, a field with parallel concerns about the inclusion of women’s voices. She proposes that “in collaborating, in sharing our differences and similarities, we can work together to develop knowledge that is interpretive, interventionist and action oriented, and that creates change and makes interventions in policy and practice” (O’Neill, 2008a, p.80). This research was underpinned by a commitment to do research with women that produced knowledge that was meaningful and beneficial to them. Rather than adopt a specific theoretical approach on pornography, the research was shaped by methodological theories.

**Knowledge Making Philosophy**

A feminist and participatory approach framed my ‘ontological’ and ‘epistemological’ position. An ontology is “a theory of ‘reality’ or being” (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p.194). It is a theoretical perspective on what exists. An epistemology is: “a framework or theory for specifying the constitution and generation of knowledge about the social world; that is, it concerns how to understand the nature of ‘reality’” (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p.188). It is a theory of what knowledge is, how it is generated and how best to understand the world. Furthermore, it concerns “who are ‘knowers’ and by what means someone becomes one, and also the means by which competing knowledge-claims are adjudicated and some rejected in favour of another/others.” It is also a theory of what ‘expertise’ is and who can ‘know’.

All social research is underpinned by an ontological and epistemological perspective, so it is necessary to engage with these theories. However, framing this discussion through the words ‘ontology’ and ‘epistemology’ can be unnecessarily confusing and excluding (Beresford, P., 2003) and as such I will avoid the use of them in this chapter. To put simply, these theories are concerned with knowledge making processes: what exists? How can we find out about it? Who can know? To put this into the context of social research on pornography: what is pornography? What are human relationships to pornography? How can we know about pornography? Who can know about pornography?

My understanding of knowledge making processes, and the one that framed this research, aligned closely with Stanley and Wise’s (1993) ‘fractured foundationalism’. Stanley and Wise (1993) propose that the social world does not objectively exist, but that individuals have constructed ‘objective’ social realities:

Although traditional foundationalist views of ‘reality’ as single and unseamed, ‘out there’ and unproblematically available for experts, scientists, to discover the truth about are rejected, none the less it accepts that there *is* a social reality, one which members of society construct as having objective existence above and beyond competing constructions and interpretations of it; and it recognizes that social life is in good part composed of discussions, debates and controversies concerning precisely what this objective reality consists of. (Stanley and Wise, 1993, pp.8-9)

In regard to this research, this meant a belief that there is no objective reality of pornography but that there are constructed ‘realities’ of it for individuals. It positioned the research as looking at human interaction with pornography as opposed to pornography itself. I felt this accounted for the polarised evidence bases on pornography through recognising that it is subjectively understood and experienced. My theory of knowledge was that knowledge is constructed rather than unearthed. Stanley and Wise (1993, p.8) treat:

‘Knowledge’ as situated, indexical and competing knowledgeS, as versions, as small slices of reality confronting each other.

Knowledge is contextual to the individuals and social structures it is developed within; it is produced from the position of the researcher. It proceeds from:

The organizational and intellectual location of the feminist researcher, as the person who makes sense of ‘the world’ and produces generalized knowledge-claims on the basis of this.

In regard to this research, I understood knowledge to be constructed, contextual and developed from my positionality. This research was inevitably shaped by my values, identity and theoretical lens, and those of the women who participated. Embracing this felt an important step in doing pornography research; the ideological and theoretical perspective shaping the research were openly acknowledged. This was rigorously and critically engaged with through reflexive practice:

Reflexivity exposes the exercise of power throughout the *entire* research process. It questions the authority of knowledge and opens up the possibility for negotiating knowledge claims and introducing counter- hegemonic narratives, as well as holding researchers accountable to those with whom they research. (Hesse-Biber and Piatelli, 2012, p.4).

Therefore, while knowledge is considered subjective and contextual, it is also subject to rigorous processes to maximise the trust and authority that can be placed in it.

The methodological approach I felt was most harmonious with Stanley and Wise’s (1993) ‘Fractured Foundationalism’, and their understanding of knowledge making, was a collaborative, participatory approach. As outlined, participatory and feminist approaches are distinct, and yet in many ways are complimentary in their understanding of what knowledge is (Lykes and Hershberg, 2012). Central to both approaches is the need to renvisage ‘expertise’ and redefine what the basis of authoritative knowledge is (Letherby, 2003; Liamputtong, 2014). Knowledge can be produced from people’s everyday lived experiences (Stanley and Wise, 1993).

Feminism either directly states or implies that the personal is the political; that the personal and the everyday are important and interesting and must be the subject of feminist inquiry. (Stanley and Wise, 1983, p.194).

This approach recognises the expertise that can come from ‘lived experience’. Given the disputed nature of ‘pornography expertise’, I proposed that treating women as experts in their own lives and valuing their ‘experiential knowledge’ could be a means to garner new insights into pornography.

Moreover, I felt that only though using a participatory methodology, would it be possible to truly embody Stanley and Wise’s (1993) approach to doing Feminist Sociology and research. Participatory and inclusive approaches propose that only through equalising research relationships is it possible to truly develop robust knowledge (Boylorn, 2008). It is the equalising of research relationships and the collaborative production of knowledge that facilitates truer insights into people’s lives, and strong reflexive practice. Borg et al (2012) explain:

Knowledge is embedded in the lives and experiences of individuals and that knowledge is developed only through a cooperative process between researchers and experiencing individuals.

My previous experience of researching pornography informed my decision to use participatory methods (Beresford, R., 2018a). I felt that only through doing co-research would it be possible to minimise my shaping of and power over the research. Higginbottom and Liamputtong (2017, p.2) argue:

Participatory research emphasizes the notion of ‘voice’ in the study participants, acknowledging that the personal biases and orientations of the researchers can affect their work: we all have a tendency to filter and reinterpret data in the light of our own worldviews.

When I conducted research on pornography previously, I inadvertently and implicitly framed the research through my own personal and political perspectives. I asked questions which assumed the women I worked with had had the same experiences as me. Krumer-Nevo (2009, p.289) argues that it is the participatory approach which is best suited to actualising the goals of feminist research. While feminist research methods have always prioritised “‘giving voice’ to marginalized groups”, this inclusion of voice alone is not enough to ensure that the contributions of research participants are equally valued within research. Krumer-Nevo (2009, p.290) outlines that the risk of merely including ‘voices’ is that these can be:

…too easily dismissed as personal, subjective, emotional, ephemeral, or informal … Another risk lies in its superficial application … what people say is not fully validated as *knowledge,* and their voices might be used again them or elicit Othering … A third risk is embedded in a decontextualized and depoliticized use of ‘voice’, that is to say presenting participants’ voices without investigating the influence of social processes on shaping them.

It is the democratisation of the research process which moves from giving voice to women (which can be more easily controlled or shaped by the researcher), to co-producing knowledge with them (which enables richer insights, a more empowering research process, and more trust to be placed in the knowledge produced). A collaborative approach was chosen to maximise the women’s input into the research. Next, I will outline the research design and methodology.

3.3 Research Design and Methodology

In order to conduct research into women’s lived experiences and pornography knowledge making processes, I designed a participatory, qualitative research project. A methodology was sought that would enable in-depth sharing of lived experiences and the development of collaborative research relationships. The precise design, the research questions and the methods used evolved alongside the research. In keeping with participatory principles, the research design was flexible so as to be receptive to the women’s input (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). The project was also modified as it developed according to what worked and what was achievable. A group of women were recruited into a research group, and using group discussions and individual interviews, we developed knowledge into our experiences and opinions on pornography. Initially, I had intended to supplement the research group data with interviews from women outside of the group to enable a broader range of perspectives to be heard. However, once the project had started it became clear this was not necessary or appropriate (to be discussed below).

A qualitative research approach was the intuitive choice for this project. Qualitative approaches seek to research the social world through the experiences, interpretations and perception of those living within it (Braun and Clarke, 2013; Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). Emphasis is placed on people’s “experience and meaning”of the social phenomena being investigated (Daher et al, 2017). This was well-suited to the focus on ‘experience’ and ‘experiential knowledge’ within this research. Qualitative methodologies have often been the assumed choice for participatory researchers as the approach to knowledge making is similar and compatible (Bourke, 2009). Furthermore, qualitative methods offer space for closer working relationships with those involved in research (Aldridge, 2017). This was ideal for the development of inclusive and collaborative research relationships. There are various methods for doing qualitative research but all of which emphasise the collection of rich, in-depth data (Mason, 2002).

I was keen for the research project to gravitate around a core research group as a group method is ideal for the creation of the participatory space. Bergold and Thomas (2012) propose that “the focus group is one of the key instruments for the creation of a ‘communicative space’… This open dialog becomes the central starting point for the entire participatory research enterprise”. Furthermore, a group dynamic “inevitable reduce[s] the researcher’s power and control” (Wilkinson, 2004, p.279). Group discussions felt ideal for bringing together expertise and equalising research relationships. They are also fruitful for exploring in-depth meanings into people’s lives and finding out “collective views” (Gill et al, 2008). They are characterised by “the explicit use of group interaction to generate data” (Kitzinger and Barbour, 1991, p.4). This felt well suited to researching women and pornography. I hoped that through bringing a group of women together, it would be possible to see where there were shared perspectives or collective goals. The process of sharing and questioning one another also has the capacity to develop individual knowledge and opinions (Gibbs, 1997). This matched the ‘action’ and ‘consciousness raising’ principles of feminist and participatory approaches. In order to facilitate these goals, it was written into the design that the group would meet several times.

The research was interested in the lived experiences of all women, and no pre-conceptions were made about ‘women’, ‘pornography’ or the encounters between the two. As highlighted in the literature review, the very concepts and measures used to research pornography are disputed. Different positions have different assumptions about the form that pornography takes, the impact it has on women and the ways in which women interact with or encounter it. Subsequently, this research intended to build these concepts and measures collaboratively with the women who participated using their experiential expertise to inform this.

Initially, I had hoped to map the ways in which women *can* experience pornography and the multiple ways it can feature in their lives. As such, I wanted to speak to a broad cohort of women representative of different relationships to pornography (e.g. consumer or performer in) and with different social backgrounds and identities. Recognising that not all women could participate in a group, I intended to conduct interviews and accept written submissions from women outside of the group. I proposed that the women in the research group would share their experiences *and*act in an advisory capacity to other methods of data production (Beresford and Croft, 2012). However, once the project had started it became clear that this was not appropriate. The women were not representative of different expertise on pornography and did not constitute a steering group (NIHR Involve, ©2019). I did not initially give up on the hope of speaking to other women. I conducted one pilot interview with a woman outside of the research group. However, there was no connection between the two; the type of data produced was completely different and not comparable. Subsequently the research group became the sole space for data production and the participatory endeavour.

With the shift in research design, the research questions were refined and finessed. This project was envisaged as a snapshot or case study into the lives of a group of women. Through in-depth, collaborative conversations we explored our lived experiences of pornography and our perspectives on it more broadly. This study was an exploratory piece which developed rich insights into a group of women’s lives and used this process to add to discussions on designing research so as to be receptive to women’s experiences. While the focus was on a smaller group of women, the quality and scope of the research was not compromised. I will argue in this chapter that this shift in design developed rich insights and enabled action-oriented processes of learning and knowing.

The final research design for this project was a research group composed of eight women. Over the course of nine months, we held eight research group meetings and explored our experiences and views of pornography. Mid-way through the project, we had a field trip in which we painted ceramics. This was initially planned as an alternative source of data production but in practice was a fun activity which was part of thanking the women for their involvement (this will be reflected on more in Chapter 8). Each woman was offered an individual interview, and these were conducted mid-way through the project. These provided an opportunity to gain an in-depth view of each woman’s individual experience (Kvale, 1996). Feminist and participatory principles were written into the research design. The women were envisaged as ‘co-researchers’ and involved in decision-making about the project as well as sharing their experiences (Boylorn, 2012). In order to develop non-exploitative research relationships, I sought to be reciprocal and I shared my experiences with the women (Oakley, 1981). At the end of the project, we produced a zine[[4]](#footnote-4) which was a mode of research dissemination that the women had decided on.

To facilitate reflexive practice, I kept a research diary. Like Nadin and Cassell (2006), I used it to track methodological choices and record my feelings about the research process. Initially, I found the diary a helpful way to keep track. However, as time went on, I wrote in it less. When transcribing the data, I realised I had engaged in these reflexive discussions with the women instead. As Nadin and Cassell (2006, p. 214) note “the diary is a useful substitute when there is no-one to have a conversation with”. I was able to engage in both ‘epistemological reflexivity’ and ‘personal reflexivity’ with the women (Borg et al, 2012). We reflected on the research design and method and considered how our identities and values had shaped the research. I will next introduce the women who took part.

3.4 Recruitment Process and The Women Who Participated

The research was open to all self-defined women over the age of 18 living in the UK able to participate in Sheffield. Women under 18 were excluded due to the complexities of gaining ethical approval. I opted for a digital recruitment strategy and the project was advertised with a dedicated website, an advert on a Sheffield forum, a Twitter account and a Facebook account. I advertised for 10-12 women who lived in the Sheffield area to take part in a recurring research group exploring women’s experiences of pornography (see Appendix 2). The recruitment and adverts were carefully designed to appeal to a wide range of perspectives. The research was named the ‘Living with Porn(ography) Project’ which was chosen to avoid a particular political leaning; Williams (2014) argues that the word ‘porn’ has tended to be favoured by those within the industry and ‘pornography’ by those campaigning against it. In the adverts, I emphasised that the project was receptive to all experiences of pornography and all opinions.

Developing the method for recruitment was challenging. I wanted to reach a broad range of women but identifying appropriate forums was complex. I considered placing physical leaflets and adverts but there was no obvious medium or location which would be appropriate. I was also constrained by financial cost. I therefore opted for a digital recruitment strategy. The project received good visibility online: the website had over 550 views in the first two months and the Sheffield Forum advert received hundreds of views. However, I did not receive a high response rate. I received fifteen enquiries, eight of whom participated in the research group and one who took part in the individual interview. I was concerned as this fell short of the 10 -12 women I had hoped to recruit. However, as no-one dropped out of the project this was a good sample size.

The recruitment strategy that was most successful was ‘word of mouth’. Of the eight women who participated in the research group, five responded to adverts shared by friends or colleagues. In this regard, five of the eight women were not complete ‘strangers’, they were somehow connected to people I knew and one of these women I had already met myself. I recognise that this impacted on the diversity of the group. It is possible my friends and colleagues have contacts with similar demographics and political persuasions. However, as stated the research questions and design evolved, and the research did not require the women who participated to be representative of the broader population. We were also reflexive about how our identities shaped our viewpoints.

Eight women participated in the project. Each was asked to develop their own profile (see Appendix 3) to facilitate their self-representation (University of Sheffield, ©2019). This also supported the ethical strategy as it ensured their anonymity was protected (if anonymous). I also developed a profile as a member of the research group. There was a range of ages present in the group; the youngest woman, Honey, was 20 and the oldest, Minty, was in her mid-40s. We were all White, seven were White British, Sini was White Finnish and Elizabeth was White other (she chose to anonymise her nationality). None of the group identified as trans\*, though there were different gender identities among the group and variations in how we recorded our sex and gender. There was diversity in our sexualities: two women were pansexual, three were bisexual and four were heterosexual; Annette also identified as being kinky[[5]](#footnote-5). All of us were in some form of a relationship at points of the project, though Honey reported that she was single by the end.

**Table 1: Introducing the Women**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Annette Bonney | 33, White, Bisexual, Kinky, In long term relationship. |
| Elizabeth Dogwood | 40, married, mother, bisexual, lawyer, religious |
| Elyndys | Age: 36, Nationality: British, Sex: Female, Sexuality: Heterosexual, In a relationship with a man, Occupation: Café owner, Education: Postgrad |
| Kate | White British, Pansexual, Cisgendered female, 31, Married to a woman, Healthcare professional |
| Honey Oak | 20 years old, straight, student, female, white British, single! |
| Minty Lorna | White, Straight, Mid Forties, In a relationship with a man, Step mother, Female, British/ European, Job – administrator/ personal assistant |
| Psycho Grafton | Female, Married, Bisexual, Same – Sex Partner (wife), White, British, 34, university lecturer. |
| Sini | 28, White, Finnish, Pansexual, Gender queer, Currently in a “situationship” “there is a situation that is not a relationship”, Job: PhD student |
| Ruth | 25, PGR student, White British, Heterosexual (?), In a relationship, Sex = female |

In keeping with participatory principles, anonymity was optional in the research so that the women could take credit for their involvement (Beresford, 2018b). Of the eight women who participated, Sini chose to be non-anonymous and the other seven women were anonymous. These women all chose their own pseudonyms in recognition of the personal importance of names and the potential risk of me choosing an inappropriate one (Wiles et al, 2006; Allen and Wiles, 2016). Annette, Elizabeth, Honey, Minty and Psycho all chose their ‘porn names’; a combination of a pet’s name, family name or street name.

Attendance of the research group meetings varied between the women. Some participated much more frequently than others:

**Table 2: Overview of who attended each research group meeting**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | Field Trip | 8 | Zine |
| Annette |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Elizabeth |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Honey |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Kate |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Minty |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Elyndys |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Psycho |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Sini |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Regardless of attendance, each woman’s contribution was valued equally. Because I led the research and analysed it, I maintained contact with each ‘voice’ in a way that the women did not with each other. Additionally, all women were interviewed mid-way through the project, and this was a way for me to reconnect with those who had stopped attending group meetings. However, I recognise that the ‘group voice’ may embody certain voices more than others and that the group identity could be perceived differently by the women in the group. It is important to bear this is mind when reflecting on the success of the participatory endeavour.

3.5 Ethical Strategy

There were numerous ethical considerations for the project stemming from the subject of enquiry and the methodology used. The ethical procedures were designed both prior to the research starting and negotiated during the research with the women. Ethical approval was sought and granted from the University of Sheffield. The research adhered to sociological professional standards “to safeguard the proper interests of those involved in or affected by their work” (British Sociological Association, 2017, p.4). Participatory ethical commitments were also important, and I sought to maximise the women’s involvement in the “generation, ownership, and dissemination of knowledge” (Brydon-Miller, 2008, p. 202). Following participatory principles, the women were drawn into ethical conversations about the research (University of Sheffield, ©2019).

Prior to signing up, the women were provided with an information sheet (see Appendix 4) and given the opportunity to ask questions. Consent forms were signed in each woman’s first research group meeting with separate forms for being anonymous or non-anonymous (see Appendices 5 and 6). The ethical strategy was discussed in depth with each woman, and she was consulted on her participation and use of data. The project concerned a potentially sensitive topic (Dickson-Swift et al, 2008) and the women were asked to share only what they felt comfortable with. In case of distress, I compiled a list of information and advice that could be offered, and the women were provided with the contact details of my supervisors. Ground rules were negotiated with the women to guide our conduct in the research group meetings (see Appendix 7). This provided a mechanism for resolution in case conflict should arise and was a means to mutually negotiate group confidentiality (Sim and Waterfield, 2019; Olivier, 2009). We agreed to respect one another and each other’s privacy and for me to arbitrate this process. The women were asked only to share what they felt comfortable disclosing and reminded that there were limits to absolute confidentiality (for example, if something of a criminal nature was disclosed).

The research group meetings (except the two activities) and interviews were audio recorded. All files were kept secure on password protected USBs and on University of Sheffield computer systems. The women were given their interview transcripts and access on request to their quotes from the group meeting transcripts, and the opportunity to redact any part of their contribution. For Sini, who was non-anonymous, there was greater risk over what data was attributed to her (Wiles et al, 2006). For the anonymous women, I recognised that maintaining confidentiality can be difficult when such in-depth narratives have been shared (Kaiser, 2009). This strategy facilitated the women’s control over their self-representation and contribution. Throughout the project, I kept the women updated on how their data would be used in the research.

Ensuring that the research was mutually beneficial for the women was an important aspect of the ethical strategy (University of Sheffield, ©2019). They were involved in key decision making about the research process and the data analysis. The time and location of the meetings were negotiated together, and by mutual consent, the meetings took place in the evenings at The University of Sheffield. The field trip and zine making session were held to try and develop a more reciprocal research process. The field trip activity was decided upon together, and the women created a ceramic that they could take home and keep. Creating a zine was Minty’s suggestion and agreed upon as a form of research dissemination that could be led by the women. In the final session, we produced the zine together and the design was formulated by the women (see Appendix 8)[[6]](#footnote-6).

I sought to be considerate of the power dynamics within the research relationships (Hesse Biber and Piatelli, 2007) and reflexive about the research process. Like many participatory researchers, I found that being participatory clashed with academic convention and procedure (Southby, 2017). I was often anxious that I was not facilitating the women’s participation enough. I struggled with my dual role as the PhD researcher and a member of the group. I reflected in my research diary:

They highlighted to me that I am too self-critical. I said that I felt there was a difficult balance to strike. I want to do research in a new and different way, and share things with them and not be a cold, objective researcher, but the power of traditional research methods is so there that I cannot shake the feeling of being unprofessional or talking too much or hogging the attention. Elizabeth said she understood that was where it came from. She said every time I was self-critical I should hear her voice in my head. *Research Diary 23rd November 2017*

The women were kind to me about this and told me to stop worrying. Engaging in reflexive discussions with the women about power struggles in the research relationship facilitated the negotiation of power.

One unanticipated ethical issue that arose was the effect of doing the research on me. I struggled with the subject matter and the personal scrutiny it invited. It is well documented that doing research on sex can be traumatic or difficult for the researcher (Poole et al, 2004). However, I discussed this with the women and they very supportive to me. As well as being kind, they offered advice and guidance. While the research topic spawned this issue, the research method and participatory space helped to resolve it.

The dynamics of the research group were also an ethical consideration; it was sometimes difficult to ensure everyone could contribute equally. This will be explored in more depth later on in this chapter.

3.6 Doing Research and Data Production

In this next section, I will outline what we did in the research group meetings and how data was produced in the project. I will call this ‘data production’ rather than ‘data collection’ to reflect the methodological theories underpinning this research (see section 3.2). Drawing upon research literature and conversations with the women, I will evaluate the success of the methodology and engage in reflexive discussion.

**The Creation of the Participatory Space**

The first consideration of the research was the creation of a participatory space in which collaborative discussions could take place. Building rapport with the women was important for facilitating their contribution, particularly as the research concerned a particularly sensitive topic (Elmir et al, 2007). Food was provided at every meeting to support this and to thank the women for their involvement in the research (Gates and Waight, 2007). Each meeting would start with food and conversation which supported us getting to know one another. Establishing a good group dynamic and a safe space to talk was important for facilitating the participatory endeavour. Bergold and Thomas (2012) articulate that, participants in research must:

Be confident that their utterances will not be used against them, and that they will not suffer any disadvantages if they express critical or dissenting opinions. It is not a question of creating a conflict-free space, but rather of ensuring that the conflicts that are revealed can be jointly discussed; that they can either be solved or, at least, accepted as different positions; and that a certain level of conflict tolerance is achieved.

As outlined in section 3.5, we collectively developed ground rules to guide our participation (see Appendix 7). This established mutual agreement to respect one another and to contact me if there were any irreconcilable differences. These were brought to and displayed in every meeting. The ground rules were actively invoked only once in the project. After our second meeting, Annette told me she was struggling to speak as some people were dominating the conversation. In the next meeting, using the rules I said I would chair more efficiently to ensure equal participation. At the end of the project, I asked the women if they felt the rules had been useful and Elizabeth felt they had been a safety net to prevent conflict.

The tone of the research group meetings was always lively and chatty. Three of the women were already acquainted and their familiarity with each other helped set the tone of the meetings. This was initially intimidating, and I struggled to retain control over the conversation when introducing the project in our first meeting. However, on reflection this facilitated the women speaking to each other which was crucial in the focus group setting (Gibbs, 1997). This also contributed toward the equalising of power in the research; from the first meeting I was (kindly) teased and joked with.

Ruth: If you want to make a complaint about me, then you can contact my supervisor which the details are on the information sheet, so I’m you know if you have any problems with me, you can complain about me.

[Everyone laughs]

Minty: What do you do if you have any problems with us? Who do you contact?

Elizabeth: Oh my god.

Kate: She can ask us nicely to leave! It says that in the information sheet.

Honey: All of you! Out! *Research Group Meeting 1*

I sought to agree the research agenda with the women so that the topics discussed would be relevant and meaningful for them (Abma, 2018). I developed a schedule for our first meeting (see Appendix 9) and facilitated a discussion on the topics we wanted to talk about in the group. These were then used to structure the research group meetings. I tried a variety of exercises to stimulate discussion and enable the women’s input. In our second meeting we did a ‘show and tell’ in which the women brought in an ‘artefact’ relating to pornography. Similar to photo elicitation techniques, this was useful for sparking conversation and evoked “feelings, memories and information” (Glaw et al, 2017, p.2). Some of our most fruitful conversations about pornography emerged from the different artefacts that the women had brought in. For example, Elizabeth brought in a 1950s poster of a pin-up girl which was a springboard for conversations about what pornography is. The artefacts took our conversations from the hypothetical to real life.

A second exercise I tried was asking each woman to send a question in advance to pose to the rest of the group. For our third meeting, these questions were the substantive basis of our conversation (see Appendix 10). The questions were successful in stimulating discussion. However, the women reflected that it was difficult to formulate a question that was relevant for everyone.

Annette: I was trying to think of a question that like everyone in the group could answer but then I just couldn’t come up with one that…

Sini: Same, yeah, I was thinking like hmm yeah if there’s someone who doesn’t engage with pornography then how do you ask questions about pornography? It was difficult to come up with the question and then as the same time I was like I’m going to ask this anyway, whatever! *Research Group Meeting 3*

In some regards this difficulty was a helpful early indicator of our research findings; the women had varied experiences of and different familiarities with ‘pornography’. As such, questions relevant to each woman were not necessarily appropriate for the rest of the group. However, at the time it led to a chaotic, disorganised feeling with the group. While I developed a schedule for each meeting (see Appendices 11-17), I had initially sought the women’s input to each one. Several of the women reflected that it would have been easier if I had set questions or topics to discuss.

And ultimately it is your topic you know, it’s your work so you’ve got to think about what data it is that you actually want to get! [laughs] But that’s hard isn’t it? It’s hard to think how to get there. *Elyndys’ Interview*

I had been reluctant to do this in case I imposed the agenda and undermined the participatory principles. With time, I recognised that equalising research relationships is not reliant on having the same role in the research process. Within participatory focus groups, while the group may decide the agenda, it is common practice for the facilitator to provide direction (MacDonald, 2012). This was something I became more confident doing as the project progressed.

Over time, our relationships with each other developed and this supported the development of the participatory research agenda. There was a significant change in tone from our fourth research group meeting. We had been scheduled to talk about the law on pornography, but the mood was slow and sluggish. The conversation turned to music videos and we adapted our session. We watched different videos and commented on presentations of sex and sexuality in them. This both contributed to our research data and was a fun activity filled with laughter. In her interview, Sini reflected that the group had felt disorganised at first but had started to come together as time had went on.

Over time, the discussion in the group stemmed less from structured activities and was developed on the spot. For example, in our fifth research group meeting we discussed Honey’s relationship difficulties with her partner after she had found out he looked at pornography without her knowledge. Honey shared that she had wanted our opinions and advice on it. The building of rapport between us complimented the organic development of a research agenda. Each session’s discussion would inform the next; the more we met, the more we had to discuss. Appendix 18 sets out what was discussed in each research group meeting.

In each session, the women were also consulted on the research design. Together, it was decided that each of the women would be interviewed. These interviews took place after research group meeting 6 and 7. I developed a schedule with questions on each women’s individual experience of pornography and her thoughts on how the project was going (see Appendix 19). The interviews were semi-structured, and I asked each woman several additional questions. The interviews played a pivotal role in the project. They were a chance to hear each woman’s individual story in-depth. They facilitated ‘member checking’ and I clarified details with the women and obtained feedback about the research (Kornbluh, 2015; Thomas, 2017). The interviews were a helpful way to mitigate some of the issues that arose in the group. We were also able to tailor the final group discussions to address some of the topics that the women identified in their interviews had not being spoken about. A mixed method was a holistic approach to data production; the interviewed offered an intimate space and the group a collaborative space.

**Collaborative Data Production**

The group space was both a successful and challenging space in which to hear the women’s stories and perspectives. Creating a space in which ideas could be shared, questioned, challenged and developed was central to the participatory endeavour (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). As will become apparent in Chapters 4-6, the women shared many intimate and personal stories and I was able to develop deep insights into their lives. However, it was not always easy to hear these stories within the group setting. It was the interviews that enabled me to hear each woman’s individual contribution. Similar to Davies and Heaphy (2011), who used a workshop method among strangers, I found that the telling of personal stories tended to trigger emotions, memories and opinions in the group. However, unlike for them, there was not always patience and the women did speak over each other. Fostering conversation and rapport between the women was never difficult, but it could be a struggle to manage. Some of the women reflected in their interviews, that it had been difficult to have their voices heard.

I was a bit surprised that I am a bit more bashful than I thought, sometimes I’ve been a bit like ooh! Sort of holding back on taking part. Particularly, there’s some quite vocal people in the group, uhm, while I am a vocal person like trying to fight to say the things, it just surprised me, I am lot more bashful than I thought. *Annette’s Interview*

The dynamics of the group settled over time, but it could be quite chaotic. A common problem in group methods is negotiating equal participation (Smithson, 2000) and this research was no different. I was concerned that the group had not been a conducive environment for Elyndys to share her perspective. She only attended two meetings and was not present at the later sessions, in which the mood had started to relax. In her interview, I asked Elyndys if she felt there had been any problems, but she did not disclose any. However, as the lead researcher I felt I had a responsibility to better facilitate the discussions in the first few sessions and I regret that I did not do this.

The success of group-based methods gravitates around the use of group interaction to produce data. Stewart et al (2007, p.19) identify “the usefulness and validity of focus group data are affected by the extent to which participants feel comfortable about openly communicating their ideas, views, or opinions.” The women reported different feelings about the group discussions and there were flaws with the method. Sini reflected that the conversation could be governed by a majority viewpoint and this could inhibit what was talked about.

It’s very porn positive and if you’re not that, it can be a little bit hard to say well actually I don’t, I don’t feel that way. *Sini’s Interview*

Similarly, Minty shared that she was not always comfortable sharing opinions that she felt the group would not agree with. Furthermore, the identity of the group shaped what was spoken about. In her interview, Minty reflected that the group had not spoken about heterosexual relationships in much depth.

So there was a lot of discussion that I couldn’t take part in … uhm the young girl [Honey] who uhm, she’s heterosexual I believe and she didn’t know anything about porn so for her she was hearing a lot about gay porn I felt, and I, Iearnt loads and I found it interesting but it, I think it held me back a little in what I was saying because I wanted to talk about, I wanted to talk about attitudes towards pornography in relationships, heterosexual relationships. *Minty’s Interview*

There were times where I felt that an individual moulded their position to the group view. In particular, I felt Honey did this, she was very critical of porn but occasionally would say very positive things about it, seemingly at odds with her own feelings. Avocella (2012, p.1135) argues “the presence of other people can inhibit an individual and influence the way a judgment is formulated or an answer is given, thus pushing participants to express more socially desirable and stereotypical answers”. I asked Honey about this in research group meeting 6 after she had made a very positive statement about pornography:

Ruth: Are you just saying that because you think it’s what everyone wants to hear or because you think it’s what’s happened for everyone else in the group? Or do you really believe it?

Honey: I really don’t think I need to watch porn.

Ruth: You don’t, you don’t, I just mean as in do you now feel so much better about porn or do you just mean for the other women in the group you think that’s how it is for them?

Honey: I feel at peace with porn as in you know it’s okay if other people want to watch it, and I’m never, I don’t like the word never but I’m, it does not excite me. *Research Group Meeting 6*

Consequently, she changed and clarified what she was saying. Herein lay one of the successes of the group: while individual stories could be difficult to hear, collaborative discussion helped to interrogate, refine and develop opinions. The group meetings brought together different expertise and perspectives. The women reflected that through hearing each other’s opinions, they had been able to consider and develop their own.

Annette: Yeah I think having the group dynamic there’s more room to kick opinions about then in a one-to-one.

Honey: And even room for like opinions to change, because once it’s gone round the room I’m like oh yeah maybe.

Annette: Yeah get presented with new information and you can just kick it around the room. *Research Group Meeting 6*

This supported the action-oriented development of knowledge; our findings were developed through collaborative discussion. Using this to question one another, facilitated multi-layered reflection. We challenged the polarised perspectives on pornography through “recognising each other’s perspective, recognising the ‘other’, acknowledging the paradoxes and contradictions, the similarities and differences and the possibilities for consensus” (O’Neill, 2001, p.188). In doing so we produced new ways of knowing about porn. The development of a safe space and good working relationships enabled us to explore personal and intimate subjects. For example, Honey and Annette had some of the most opposing opinions on pornography and yet there was little conflict within the group. Elizabeth reflected in her interview:

And the conversations between Annette and Honey were super interesting. They were never like directly but you could like, it was like a dance and, and they were both being so respectful of each other and delicate about it. *Elizabeth’s Interview*

Honey and Annette’s interactions and their questioning of one another helped them to understand the other’s perspective. For example, Honey asked Annette about her use of amateur pornography, something that Honey did not like. This had the potential to be a risky subject, but the conversation was funny rather than judgemental.

Annette: Of the amateur stuff that I watch anyway tends to be like couples doing their own sort of homemade stuff and they pretty much, it’s mutually thingy, like aside from

Honey: But do you not-?

Annette: Do you want some links darling?

[laughter]

Honey: No! No! I would, see that, that probably turns me off more than anything else because that’s, that for me is I’ve just drilled a hole though the wall and I’m watching someone have sex with somebody else.

Annette: But they film it and upload and want you to see it and want you to share it with people

Honey: True

Annette: It’s not like I videoed it through a peephole! *Research Group Meeting 6*

The respect and delicacy of the conversations highlighted possibilities for empathy and understanding and moving beyond polarised positions on pornography.

The reciprocal relationship between the women and I also supported the creation of an environment in which intimate stories could be shared. The success of participatory knowledge production hinges on the development of collaborative research relationships. A participatory approach “permits interaction, social dynamics, and partnership in all aspects throughout the research process and recognizes that a relationship must exist between researcher and participants” (Barbera, 2008, p.143). Several of the women reflected that it was the conversational tone, the development of rapport between us, and my willingness to share my own intimate stories that enabled them to share their experiences. In research group meeting 8, Psycho, Annette and Minty reflected that the interviews had benefitted from this:

Psycho: I thought they were quite good, I thought they were more like a conversation than an interview.

Annette: It didn’t feel like 20 questions, while it was still an interview, it wasn’t like microscope analysis.

Minty: I think you did them at the right time, had you done them at the beginning, when we hadn’t got to know each other and we didn’t know you, they would have been a really different interview. *Research Group Meeting 8*

I was able to ask the women questions and challenge their perspectives without being confrontational and they likewise challenged mine. I realised this after conducting the interview with a woman not in the research group. As we did not have an established relationship, it was difficult for me to probe her perspective. I discussed this with the women in the research group. Minty and I reflected that we had been having a very different type of conversation.

Because it was an interview not a group you couldn’t contradict or say what about this, you were just taking her answers. Whereas when we have the group, and even now, you know you’re not just taking my answer you’re questioning it or whatever, because this is a conversation. *Minty’s Interview*

This contribution from Minty also evidences the ways in which the women were drawn into reflexive processes about the research. This strengthened the analysis of the methodology.

On reflection, I feel the negative aspects of the method could have been better negotiated if I had taken more control. Strong facilitation could have enhanced participation rather than undermined it. A more structured research agenda could have diverted the issue of there a being a majority viewpoint. A more confident approach to chairing the research group meetings could have enabled more of the women to speak. However, the participatory methodology somewhat mitigated these problems. The women were asked to assess the method and I have reported their opinions. Furthermore, as they were consulted about this in their interviews, the subsequent research meetings were tailored accordingly.

3.7 Analysis

Analytical and reflexive processes were built into the research design and were ongoing throughout the research. The repeat group discussion design meant there were ample opportunities for me to clarify my interpretations (Reinharz, 1992) and better understand the women’s perspectives (Vincent, 2013). Similar to Cahill (2007a, p.306), I found that:

Moments of analysis emerged organically at multiple and regular points as part of our reflective praxis rather than being a set ‘phase’ of research. Analysis also fed directly back into our project as part of a looped process of critical reflection.

Each group discussion would build upon the discussion the week before. Similar to Thorne (2000), I found that “data collection and analysis processes tend to be concurrent, with new analytic steps informing the process of additional data collection and new data informing the analytic processes”. At the start of each session I would clarify details about the previous meeting. At the end of each group, I would sum up the discussion and discuss what we would talk about next time. The women were interviewed mid-way through the project and this was an opportunity to solidify and analyse what they had shared in the group. Their answers and feedback were then used to inform the subsequent groups. Themes in the data began to emerge through these cycles of “critical reflection” (Cahill, 2007a, p.306). I echo Thorne’s conclusion, that the analysis is therefore “not entirely distinguishable from the actual data”.

The women were consulted on and contributed to the data analysis. I could find very little guidance on how to do a participatory analysis. Collaboration at this stage has sometimes been neglected in participatory research (Nind, 2011; Clarke et al, 2018). Initially, I had intended to do a full participatory analysis, but I realised this had been grossly optimistic and an unrealistic expectation of the women. Consequently, I revised this plan and undertook the bulk of the analysis alone. Research group meeting 7 held in September 2017 was the last group focused solely on data production. A group analysis session, research group meeting 8, was held in December 2017. In the intervening months, I transcribed the audio recordings and prepared an initial analysis to present to the women in December.

The women’s interviews were transcribed, and the group discussions were part transcribed. The group meetings were not transcribed in full as not all of our conversation was relevant to the topic (we chatted about pizza a lot). Transcribing the audio recordings was an opportunity to reacquaint myself with our data and I wrote notes on emergent themes. It was at this stage it became apparent that a novel approach to data analysis was necessary. Listening to the women’s contributions, it was evident that there was much diversity between their stories. I was wary of collating (and potentially warping) these into themes. In recognition of this, the following became one of our findings:

Trying to group these experiences into common themes runs the risk of warping or distorting them. This diversity requires a different kind of analysis. *Findings from the Group (Appendix 1)*

The women were given their interview transcripts and the opportunity to redact anything they did not want included. I asked the women if they wanted to do any analysis themselves. Annette wrote some notes on her interview transcript which were incorporated into the research findings. Annette and Sini also requested to see their quotes from the research group meetings and were given the opportunity to redact these as well.

In order to retain a connection to the whole research endeavour, and all the feelings and processes involved, I adopted a similar approach to Mason and Davies (2011). I consulted all of the research documents (such as my diary and schedules) during the analysis, not just the written transcripts. The analysis was informed by the principles of a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was taken so that the findings and themes emerged from the data and the women’s contributions (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This was completed through “identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes” within the data (Nowell et al, 2017). I had to be attentive to the finding above, and so I sought to identify themes in the data yet maintain the integrity of each woman’s individual narrative. The transcript data was coded using questions as codes (for example ‘what is pornography?’) rather than specific themes. This enabled me to collate their responses into topic areas without losing the nuances of their different views. A small list of common themes that cut across all of their responses was developed. I did not use analysis software as I wanted to stay connected to each woman’s overarching narrative. I coded the transcripts by hand and wrote notes in the margins.

This initial analysis was then presented to the women in research group meeting 8 (and shown separately to Elyndys who could not attend). I showed them quotes from the group transcripts and outlined how I intended to link their contributions to the themes. We went through each collective theme (the *Findings from the Projects*) and these were refined according to the women’s analysis. The final version of this was shared with the women after the group (Appendix 20). This group meeting was also transcribed and incorporated into the data. Again, this highlighted the overlap between analysis and data (Thorne, 2000). A final process of data coding and collation took place after meeting with the women.

There were two further layers of analysis. The first was the write up of the findings and the presentation of the women’s stories. The second was the evaluation of the overall research and the use of the women’s stories to construct my final arguments. These two phases were ones in which I felt there was the most tension with the participatory methodology. Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2017, p.224) highlight that:

Despite advances in researching ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ participants … the writing up of research remains primarily the responsibility of the academic researcher. We have presented a number of ways in which this can be problematic, owing to decisions made by the academic, independent of participants, which ultimately affects their representation.

I too was wary of ‘undoing’ the participatory and collaborative work that had been done in the fieldwork. I grappled with the solo write up of the research and my commitment to being participatory. I first wrote the findings chapters structured by the initial findings document (Appendix 20) to try and minimise the distance between the women’s stories and my interpretation and write up of them. However, I realised that the collective findings we had agreed together were a combination of themes, discussion points and conclusions. The common questions were codes for grouping our data but not subheadings for a chapter. The themes on the method were the women’s evaluation of the research process not an analysis of doing research on pornography. In order to write up the findings to a rigorous, academic standard, I had to make decisions without the women about how best to present our research. I sought to do this reflexively and in adherence with participatory values.

I took the collective points we agreed and conceptualised this as the *Findings from the Project.* I used thisas a guiding document to consult in the write up of the research and the thesis (see Appendix 1). I divided the empirical findings’ chapters into three sections: conceptualisations of pornography, encounters with pornography and positions on pornography. These three areas were devised in response to the research data and the research literature. I have presented the women’s individual contributions and draw upon the *Findings from the Project* when identifying collective themes. In order to mitigate my control over their narratives, I sought to present their contributions in their words and avoid interpretation or collation into themes that were not discussed in the group. It is inevitable that I framed the research and I recognise that it has been written from my positionality (Stanley and Wise, 1993). Therefore, I have sought to explicitly differentiate in the write up where it is my voice speaking and where it is the women’s. The empirical finding’s chapters primarily exhibit the women’s voices.

I realised I needed to take ownership of the evaluation of a participatory methodology (RA2) and of pornography knowledge making (RA3). I had sought to consult the women on all aspects of the research. However, while the women had been part of evaluating these, I confused asking the women about the research method with evaluating how to do research on pornography. These aspects of the research project were where my expertise lay and where I drew upon my academic knowledge and lived experience of doing participatory pornography research. I felt uncomfortable making this distinction in case I was undermining the participatory nature of the research. Yet, I realised that drawing on the data alone was stunting the robustness of the analysis. This area required my voice and my argument evidenced with relevant research methods literature.

After much redrafting and consulting of methodology literature and colleagues, I realised I had to conceptualise this final analysis and my role in the research differently. Seeking to equalise research relationships does not necessarily equate to having the same role in the project (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). I realised I needed to be more confident about the skills and knowledge that I had brought, and this was something the research group themselves had said to me.

Sometimes I think you should feel a bit more confidence in yourself and your like knowledge and ability to like synthesise knowledge and analyse things and bring in to the academic discussions into our group discussions because none of us, I don’t feel that we could do those things, we cannot say what other researchers have before said and how it reflects what we have experienced so then I think also like feel confident about that, like it is still your research project, you’re doing it, we’re just discussing porn because we think it’s fun! *Sini in Research Group Meeting 8*

Within the confines of a PhD there had been limits to how participatory the research had been. I put together the research proposal, devised the research aims, undertook certain research stages alone and was the sole author of this thesis. Consequently, there were aspects of the research I was best suited to evaluate and analyse. When undertaking this final analysis, I conceptualised this project in two parts: the fieldwork and the overall research. The fieldwork had been collaborative and participatory (minor some limitations); the overall doctoral research was led by me. My voice and my perspective needed to be included in the thesis.

In order to do this, I used our *Findings from the Project* and the women’s contributions in the research group meetings and interviews to inform my evaluation of RA2 and 3, and my argument about what the significance of the findings were. The women’s evaluation of the research process has also been drawn into this chapter. I developed my research conclusions through analysing our findings in relation to empirical research and literature. So that it is clear that this is my interpretation of our findings, I separated this analysis into the Discussion and Conclusion chapters rather than weave it into the empirical findings. I hope the integrity of the women’s narratives is maintained, and there is a rigorous account of how I made conclusions from our fieldwork. I have sought to stay true to our *Findings from the Project* and respect the women’s original contributions.

3.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the research foundations, methodology and method used to undertake this research. I have drawn attention to the evolving nature of the research design and the ‘messiness’ of managing this process and making decisions. The participatory process was at times difficult to facilitate, and I feel the method was more successful for some women than others. The mixed method was crucial for creating the different spaces in which to hear the women’s stories. The interview offered an intimate, quiet space. The group provided a forum in which ideas could be developed, challenged and shared. The group could also be very fun, and the laughter and jokes shared made the research an enjoyable process. A particular highlight for me was having to climb in and out of a window of our meeting room to get the pizza for research group meeting 5 because we had been locked in. When we received the call that the pizza had arrived, Honey was mid-sentence asking us for advice. Rather than this ruin the conversation, she joined me to get the pizza and carried on where she left off when we got back. It felt for me that we had done research differently.

The participatory process requires diligence and constant reflexive practice. While this process was mostly smooth, it could also evoke anxiety. However, the participatory process also contained the solution. The women were a constant source of knowledge, expertise, support and guidance, and helped steer the research in the right direction. In Chapter 7 and 8, I will further analyse the research methodology in relation to the research findings. In Chapter 8, I will also make recommendations for developing the methodology. In the next chapter, I will begin presenting the women’s perspectives on pornography by outlining our conceptual framework for ‘pornography’.

Chapter 4: Conceptualising ‘Pornography’

*“Porn is different things to different people…”* Psycho (Interview)

4.1 Introduction

In this first of the results’ chapters, I will outline the women’s understandings of what ‘pornography’ is and how they defined it. This research was conducted using the women’s subjective definitions of pornography and, as such, no assumptions were made about what materials this might include or what values might be attached. How pornography has been conceptualised and defined, and where the boundaries have been drawn around the ‘pornographic’ have been subject to intense debate. ‘Pornography’ is notoriously difficult to define and has often been defined poorly (Andrews, 2012). Not all research has been explicit about what ‘pornography’ specifically refers to or what assumptions are attached to this word (Rea, 2001). This chapter will explicitly engage in this discussion and outline how we conceptualised pornography and what the word ‘pornography’ represented in this research. This will both position the research and begin to offer insights into the women’s different experiences of pornography.

Conceptualising pornography was both an explicit conversation and something that emerged naturally through other conversations. A significant amount of our discussion was dedicated to defining pornography and considering what is classed as ‘pornographic’. I suspect this was due to the elusive and confusing nature of the term, rather than it necessarily being the most pressing concern or point of interest to the women. However, it highlighted the highly individualised understandings and experiences of pornography that the women could have. Differences between our conceptualisations of pornography were also apparent in conversations on other topics. Through comparing our thoughts and opinions with one another, it became clear we were not always imagining ‘pornography’ in the same way. This chapter will explore different aspects of the concept of pornography and draw on and evidence four of our *Findings from the Project* (see Appendix 1):

* Pornography is experienced, engaged with, thought and felt about in diverse ways by us. Positive, negative and everything in-between.
* Pornography was subjectively understood and meant different things to different people.
* ‘Pornography’ has multiple meanings: both for ourselves and across us.
* When we talked about pornography we were not always talking about the same thing, the word is used for many things. You cannot always therefore compare our experiences with ease. *Quoted from Findings from the Project*

Unpicking our conceptualisations of pornography facilitated a much deeper insight into the women’s experiences and enabled us to engage with some of the different debates on it. I will argue that if society is to better understand pornography it must engage with the basic concepts and frameworks used to research it.

4.2 Defining ‘Pornography’

Defining pornography was a complex task and we struggled to find an all-encompassing definition or a consensus between us about what it is. The diversity of opinion among us supported academic perspectives that pornography is not homogenous (Williams, 1989; Mulholland, 2013) and that it is a concept and a category imbued with different values and political underpinnings (McKee et al, 2008; Sullivan and McKee, 2015; Tarrant, 2016). It is not just one material phenomenon. Consequently, when we talked about pornography, we often used the word differently or meant different things. The more we tried to define pornography, the more we questioned how and why the boundaries around pornography are drawn. Despite these complexities, there was clearly something tangible we were talking about and something that all of us recognised as *porn.* Questioning the definition was helpful for recognising the nuanced and subjective nature of individual understandings which sit alongside collective and commonplace perspectives.

We differed in our opinions on how important it was to have a collective definition of pornography within the project. Our inability to mutually agree upon a definition caused some frustration at the start of the project. Elizabeth and Annette both felt that in regard to legislation and policy, it was ineffectual to have a vague notion of what pornography is. This

echoed Rea’s (2001) concern that a loose definition can result in law and policy being passed without consensus on what is being legislated on. However, not all of the women were concerned by this. Kate felt that not having a fixed definition reflected people’s individual subjectivity.

I feel that one person’s porn might not be someone else’s so it is a fluid subject. *Kate in Research Group Meeting 3*

Similar to the findings of Paasonen et al (2015), while we could not agree on an underlying definition, the research group were highly reflexive and analytical about different definitions of pornography and critically engaged with their own opinions on what it is. When trying to define pornography, the conversation would often turn instead to what essential characteristic makes something pornographic. For example, in the first research group meeting, Honey told us that she had recently heard a discussion on Radio 4 about a person who had been watching pornography on the train. She questioned how we distinguish what is considered appropriate to watch in public spaces and asked whether Game of Thrones[[7]](#footnote-7) would be acceptable. Minty responded by saying that when watching True Blood[[8]](#footnote-8) on the train somebody had asked her what she was watching. She joked to us “it’s vampire porn!”. This sparked a conversation about what differentiates pornography from other materials containing sex.

Honey: Is porn made for the purpose of the watcher or the purpose of the people who are doing it?”

…

Minty: Is porn because what is being made is about sex whereas True Blood, Game of Thrones has sex in it but it’s focus is not sex? *Research Group Meeting 1*

The women immediately tapped into debates around what the essential characteristic of pornography is, and whether it is defined through intention, content or purpose (Morris 1997; Rea, 2001). Minty and Elizabeth questioned whether it is ‘purpose’ that distinguished pornography from other media.

Minty: Are we talking about things that are made for people to wank to basically? That’s what I think as porn.

Elizabeth: I think the word use is really crucial, I watch a movie, I use porn, I think the using of it might be what changes it from just a movie with a sex scene or a naughty book with a sex scene. *Research Group Meeting 1*

However, these comments in themselves threw up complexity. While, Minty related it to being something *produced* for people to “wank” to, Elizabeth related it to the *consumer* choosing to “wank” to it. Minty proposed that pornography is a specifically produced genre, whereas Elizabeth suggested film could become pornography without that being the producer’s intention. The women also reflected that the intention to sexually arouse was present in other media forms, even if this was not the intention of the piece.

I suppose Nigella Lawson[[9]](#footnote-9) when she’s eating in the kitchen, that’s intended, now that’s porn because she’s intending to turn the viewer on. *Annette in Research Group Meeting 1*

While there was not a consensus within the group that this did constitute pornography, it highlighted the blurred boundary between pornography and other media forms. Their comparison of True Blood, Game of Thrones and Nigella Lawson with pornography seemed to reflect arguments that mainstream culture is becoming more sexualised and ‘pornified’ (McNair 1996; Mulholland, 2007).

We also discussed how ‘pornography’ may vary according to context. The material might be produced by one individual, have a different subject and be used by someone else; the intentions of these individuals and their purposes might all be different. In this regard, something could be pornography to one person and not to another.

Minty: I really do think this comes down to intent, intent of the person that took the photograph and intent of the person who received the photograph-

Elizabeth: What about the subject?

Minty: -and what they’re going to do with it. Well that’s what I mean.

Ruth: See like it’s difficult then isn’t it? Because then on that basis then it could be porn for the person who shared it online but if the person in it hasn’t consented they don’t necessarily think it’s porn but then the person watching it might not know that and I suppose it gets-

Kate: But something can be porn and not porn in different contexts

Minty: Yes, we’ve already had that discussion, somebody’s feet could be porn to some people. *Research Group Meeting 1*

We agreed that what is considered pornography depends on the intent of the viewer and the creator, though their intentions may differ. Elizabeth commented that she was unsure whether the subject of the material always gets a say over its use. ‘Revenge pornography’[[10]](#footnote-10) was something that we considered could be pornographic for someone watching it (who may or may not be aware of the circumstances in which it was made), but not necessarily pornography for the subject who might have produced the material with different intentions. As with Franks (2006) we felt that the creation of an image might not have had a pornographic intention but that the disclosure could. When considering whether the subject has a choice over how pornographic materials are used, Annette suggested:

I would say that sometimes the creator is also the person in the content. *Annette in Research Group 1.*

Annette shared with us that she liked to watch amateur and self-made pornography clips. In these the producer is often also the performer in the piece. This was helpful in highlighting that across different types of pornography, and within different modes of production, the intentions of those involved could be more or less explicit.

While we did not agree on a conclusive definition of pornography, these conversations around what is pornographic somewhat acted as a working definition for the project. What is classed as pornographic is subjective and contextual. It can overlap with other media but is distinct as well. In our fourth research group meeting after struggling to find a consensual definition, I showed the women a list of different definitions of pornography that I had compiled ranging from different sources (see Appendix 21). The women present were more receptive to definitions of pornography that opened up the discussion rather than put pornography into a box. For example, Annette responded to Sullivan and McKee’s (2015) quote in which they question “what is pornography? What is it produced for, and what sort of sexualities does it help to produce?”

That’s my favourite quote … because it’s asking questions, it’s asking what – how do we frame this, what do we sort of make it better, make it not be problematic and exploitative, it’s just asking what we can do as individuals … encouraging us to think, not just it’s awful! It’s trash, it’s end of the world, it’s like asking the questions instead of pushing an agenda. *Annette in Research Group Meeting 4*

In considering how this mapped onto our conceptual framework, ‘pornography’ was something we recognised but that needed to be interrogated. The term had a slippery nature to it, we identified properties of what we felt made something pornographic but also felt an objective definition was elusive.

4.3 Subjective Definitions of ‘Pornography’

While there were difficulties in developing an objective, consensual or overarching definition for the project, each of the women had their own definitions and understandings of pornography. The way in which they each defined pornography varied between them and led us to conclude that “pornography was subjectively understood and meant different things to different people” (*Findings from the Project)*. The subjective nature of defining and understanding pornography has been reported elsewhere (Shaw, 1999; Böhm et al, 2015; Paasonen et al, 2015).

There were similarities between the ways in which the women defined pornography, however no one definition was the same. Elyndys, Psycho and Kate defined pornography through considering the overarching concept; their definitions related to it being material designed for sexual pleasure.

I think if I was to say like straight to the point of what I really, really think. I think it’s uhm sexual imagery that’s used to stimulate, do you know what I mean like? But that could be like pictures that could be uhm video, that could be like you creating your own visual… so it’s kind of fantasy, imaginary that’s linked to sex I guess. *Psycho’s Interview*

I think of it as being uhm yeah sexually explicit material for the, produced for the purposes of sexual gratification, I suppose uhm so I, maybe that’s a bit narrow as in other people would, would define it uhm but yeah I think in the group we sort of talked about you know the idea of there being an industry and people making this as a, as a business, for you know, for this purpose for marketing it like that and I think that’s how I see it really. *Elyndys’ Interview*

I did say before that it was sort of intended for profit from the makers point of view, but I, I think that’s a bit too narrow minded now. So I just think it’s, there’s probably an umbrella term that I just can’t think of, yeah imagery or audio, imagery including text, uhm intended for pleasure. *Kate’s Interview*

In this regard, their definitions were similar to the common dictionary definition of pornography: “printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement” (Oxford Dictionary, ©2019). However, their definitions were more nuanced than this. Psycho defined pornography as fantasy and likened creating your own fantasies in your imagination as something that could be pornographic. Elyndys related pornography to the industry in which it is produced, a definition that Kate had initially agreed with though this had changed over the course of participating in the project. With all their definitions, they likened pornography to its purpose: “stimulate”, “sexual gratification” and “pleasure” but discussed other contexts to it such as the media form it takes or the industry it is produced in.

Sini, Honey and Annette all defined pornography through its subjective context for themselves. The context it had for each of them varied. When talking to Sini about her definition in her interview, she initially defined it in a similar fashion to Psycho, Elyndys and Kate. However, she articulated that when using the word, she would be using it to refer to the mainstream context in which it currently exists.

When I say porn I always mean the mainstream, I always, that’s what I mean when I talk about porn. But if I should have to define it then I would say anything that makes you aroused. So if you use something to look at or to use something to in a way masturbate to, I would think that’s, that’s in a way is erotic to you, so that is then somehow pornographic, or it’s erotic … but if that’s actually how I use the word, no that’s not true. *Sini’s Interview*

While she identified an underpinning definition of what ‘pornography’ is, for her the word denoted the particular content and style of pornography that is currently widely available. Sini’s discussion here about how the definition of the word was separate to her use of the word was significant in highlighting the multiple meanings that pornography can have.

Honey and Annette defined ‘pornography’ through consideration of what it meant for themselves. Honey identified that for her pornography was something that had scared her, and while she felt less scared as the project had gone on, she was not interested in having anything to do with it. Honey’s way of defining pornography echoed some of the feminist perspectives on pornography that define it through patriarchy and exploitation (for example, Cornwell, 2000).

Uhm, to begin with like it was a life ruiner, a relationship ruiner … But it was like, it’s like, it’s less of something that I fear now, but it’s still not something that I would go near. *Honey’s Interview*

Alternatively, Annette defined it through the type of pornography that she liked, distinguishing it from mainstream pornography available.

Well for me, it’s uh, it’s kink. Yeah, it’s like and more and more it’s sort of clips for sale and self-made content rather than the big studios. *Annette’s Interview*

Their way of defining pornography was significant in showcasing the personalised way in which pornography could be defined and understood. Honey and Annette defined it not through an overarching definition but what it meant to them. The personalised nature of their definitions was helpful in understanding their very different opinions on pornography, in part they were not talking about the same thing (linking to our *Findings from the Project* about the complexity of comparing experience)*.* Honey was frequently talking about what might be classed as ‘mainstream’ pornography[[11]](#footnote-11) whereas Annette was not.

Alternatively, Minty and Elizabeth sought to define pornography through considering what makes something pornographic. Elizabeth defined it in relation to the intent of the user, whereas Minty considered it in relation to the ‘act of doing’.

I still think that it is less about the intention of the maker and more about the intention of the user. Uhm, because I don’t, because there’s so much sex, like there are probably people who get off to the M&S commercials legitimately, and we joke about it being a form of porn but that said like everyone has, like there’s so many different things. *Elizabeth’s Interview*

When I think about porn, I think of sex. Intercourse or getting there if you see what I mean, the preamble before. Uhm, I don’t tend to think of mainstream media … I might use the word though I tend not to especially since coming to your groups, I tend not to use oh that’s pornographic coz it isn’t. Pornographic is explicit in my opinion. *Minty’s Interview*

Paasonen et al (2015, p.401) similarly reported that the participants in their study defined pornography in a multitude of ways ranging from the media or format, to different styles of sexual display, to highly personalised definitions relating to personal preference, which highlights the “elasticity of the pornographic”. The women’s responses supported the notion that pornography is a multi-faceted concept (Sullivan and McKee, 2015); some of the women chose to consider a broad definition for it, others talked about specific aspects of pornography or specific contexts and others chose to consider what makes something pornographic. The benefit of our research was the ability to compare and contrast our different perspectives. Our findings also indicated the possibility for definitions or understandings of pornography to change. Both Kate and Minty reflected that their use of the word had changed while participating in the project. Asking the women for their definitions was helpful in confirming the highly subjective and contested nature of the word ‘pornography’.

4.4 Subjectivity and the ‘Pornographic’

Our discussions also highlighted that what we considered to be pornographic or sexual had a subjective element to it. As Morris (1997, p.93) argues ‘pornography, like beauty, may be in the eye of the beholder”. The subjective nature of how a material might be interpreted was evident in our discussion on music videos in research group meeting 4. Together we watched different music videos chosen by members of the group present and discussed the representations of people in them. The first video we watched was *Fade* by Kanye West[[12]](#footnote-12) which features a solo dance by Teyana Taylor and a scene of her taking a shower with her husband. The video has been cited as featuring a ‘Flashdance’ style dance and taking inspiration from 1980’s pornographic movies (Hooton, 2016; Vincent, 2016). Psycho suggested that she felt the intention was for it to be pornographic due to Taylor’s movements, her clothing, her grinding, and she joked that she might get too excited by it. We played the video and our initial responses were very different. The video made me feel uncomfortable whereas Kate enjoyed the dance and the skill involved in the performance. Kate saw agility rather than objectification.

Kate: I’m just seeing it from like a sports point of view and I just think that’s incredible-

Psycho: Nobody does that in the gym!

Kate: No but do you know what I mean? Like the control of her body, that, like the skill, like she’s just worked so hard for that.

Elizabeth: Which is great, which is why I am trying so hard not to objectify her, like I feel like I’ve got the angel and the devil on my shoulder, where I’m like I don’t want to objectify, I don’t want to objectify but oh my god

Psycho: You can’t help it, well I can’t.

Elizabeth: I can’t.

Ruth: I feel like there should be a sign saying insert cock here. *Research Group Meeting 4*

We all watched and interpreted the video differently. There was some agreement between us that the scene in the shower felt more like it was emulating pornography, but our interpretations of the solo dance were different. Psycho and I reflected on this in her interview:

And I was thinking about it the other day, and I was thinking that it’s kind of demonstrated what we’ve been trying to get off that porn is different things to different people. So, one of the videos that’s like, proper dirty [laughs] sort of thing and perhaps that’s because that’s what stimulates me whereas another member of the group was like no that’s just dancing. *Psycho’s Interview*

I chose the video *You & Me* by Disclosure featuring Eliza Doolittle (Flume Remix)[[13]](#footnote-13) to show the research group. The video shows a man and a woman who appear naked (but are only visible from the shoulders up) kissing passionately. I explained I found the video sensual and almost embarrassed to watch it as I felt like I was intruding on a personal moment. In the research group meeting, I giggled when I showed it because I had the same reaction watching it with the research group. Psycho found this funny. In her interview she discussed:

Yeah, that was really sensual to you and I was like yeah it kinda is but I’m a bit bored with it now so it’s like what, and that’s the same in what will stimulate us and what would turn on different people would be different. *Psycho’s Interview*

The conversation illuminated that what is considered sexual or sexualised is personal and subject to interpretation; not all of us viewed the same material in the same way. Our individual thresholds for how sexual we found something varied, as did how erotic we considered it. Our reaction to these different media correspondingly varied between us.

As Morris (1997, p.97) puts it: “some individuals find any depiction of the nude body as pornographic, whereas others can withstand hours of video portrayals of unbridled sexual escapes without breaking into a sweat”. This was helpful in understanding how something could be pornographic for one person but not another based on their reaction to the content. Again, this affirmed the highly subjective nature of pornography.

4.5 The Boundaries of Pornography

Our conversations also highlighted the subjective and differing ways in which the boundaries of pornography are drawn. We did not consider all materials depicting sexual activity to be pornographic. One small example of this was some of the women’s views on whether they considered sharing a sexually explicit photo of themselves with a partner to be pornographic. Annette shared that her and her partner had made images together of themselves, but she did not consider this to be pornography.

Ruth: Does that feel for you like pornography?

Annette: No, it’s just me and my *partner*, like we’ll watch it together sometimes or I’ll watch it, watch it by myself sometimes. I’ll like, let *my partner* have a look at some of them but never interested me to star in pornography. *Annette’s Interview*

Whereas when I asked Sini whether she would class sending a sexual picture as pornographic, she felt yes.

Ruth: What about? Uhm I’m curious, what about sending someone a picture of yourself? Would you count that as pornographic?

Sini: Yeah, yeah, I would. Yeah, I would. Uhm. Because it is produced with an intent to make someone be like oooh! [laugh] uhm, why not? *Sini’s Interview*

This indicated that the classification of something as ‘pornographic’ is not just about displays of sex but can confer other values and meaning.

The complexity of pinpointing what is pornographic and what is not has led some to argue that the boundaries are social and political rather than material. Kendrick (1997, p.xiii) proposes that ‘pornography’ refers to “a concept” and one that has been used to demarcate that which is seen as acceptable or unacceptable. When we tried to consider what the boundaries of pornography were, the question arose of *why* these boundaries are drawn. In particular, we questioned how pornography is distinguished from art and erotica. When we did so, our thoughts somewhat resonated with Kendrick’s argument, there seemed to be particular values attached to ‘pornography’. In our second group meeting the women brought in artefacts relating to pornography. Kate brought in some examples of Victorian erotic photographs. She posed the question to the group:

What’s the difference between beauty and porn? And cyber and porn? And is it just my brain that wants to differentiate them? Because like last week, when we were sort of going over what we felt about porn and things, and to me it’s sort of bleugh. I’ve only ever really seen it as an industry that sells sex and I differentiate that from beauty and romance and art and these gorgeous naked ladies. *Kate in Research Group Meeting 2*

When Kate had talked about pornography in the previous group meeting, she had been very critical of the pornographic industry and felt that it produced functional displays of sexuality.

To me though … porn is an industry taking either photo or film of unrealistic scenes that are designed to just make money and if you watch it there’s nothing erotic about it, it’s a functional activity that has no romance. *Kate in Research Group Meeting 1*

However, she reflected when showing us the art that she was distinguishing between erotic imagery and pornography. Kate explained the origins of the photos to us: they were sold under the pretence of being for art and as models for artists to draw. When I asked her why she was interested in them she responded:

Mainly that I had it in my head that they were not porn even though they fit in to the criteria of uhm you know originally being sold to make money out of these sexual things, but they just look so pretty, I can’t see them as porn in my head. *Kate in Research Group Meeting 2*

Kate’s perspective highlights the complex boundaries between pornography and other types of material. While she disliked ‘pornography’, it became apparent this was not a dislike of all forms of sexual imagery. She was unwilling to label the photos as pornographic precisely because of the negative values she attached to porn, values she did not attribute to the photos. When we discussed art and pornography further in research group meeting 4, Elizabeth and Annette both felt that pornography could be artistic and vice versa, so views on this varied within the group. In research group meeting 2, leading on from Kate’s discussion around the photos, Sini also discussed her questions about how the boundaries of pornography are drawn.

That’s actually something really interesting because I also have been thinking about that a lot, like why do we separate a lot of things and also like what I brought my item, I feel is very in-between and it’s like, it’s the same idea where does the line go? And does there need to be a line? Why do we think there needs to be a line? And saying somehow it’s sexual, can everything sexual be categorised as porn? And what’s the problem with that? And what’s the problem with saying for example that erotic pictures are not porn but why do we make that distinction. *Sini in Research Group Meeting 2*

Sini’s question of “does there need to be a line?”, built on Kate’s discussion around the societal motivation for creating a boundary around pornography. Questioning the distinction, touched upon the implicit values that may be attached to calling something ‘pornographic’. Paasonen et al (2007a, p.1) argues that the word ‘pornography’ is used “when marking the boundaries of high and low culture, [the] acceptable and obscene”. The women’s conversations very much evidenced the value laden nature of the term ‘pornography’.

In addition to art, conversations also emerged about how erotica has been distinguished from pornography. It has been suggested that the distinction between the two is cultural rather than material. Frederick (2011, p.84) argues “artists and writers are perhaps less disdainful but seem keen to make a distinction between erotica (acceptable) and pornography (unacceptable).” I talked about the difference between pornography and erotic writing in detail with Elyndys in her interview. She distinguished between them in two different ways here. She felt the ways in which sex is presented are different within pornography and erotica, suggesting they are different types of material.

Ruth: So there is, is there then, there is quite a big distinction for you between the pornography and erotica? Or at least do you see it differently in your head or?

Elyndys: I don’t, well, I don’t think there necessarily is, uhm I think there is in terms of my preferences because yeah that’s what I like to read is uh, yeah I don’t like watching films and stuff like that but uhm, I also wouldn’t like to read things that were just like the written equivalent of that. If it was just like oh you know, a random sexual encounter with no reasoning behind that it’s like well I’m not really that interested in it. *Elyndys’ Interview*

When we explored this further, she also shared that she struggled to use the word ‘pornography’. She felt that ‘erotica’ was more socially acceptable, as can be seen in this part of her interview:

Ruth: Okay, so it’s different styles then?

Elyndys: Exactly, yeah but I would still, yeah it’s just calling it pornography that’s the hard part for me because even though it blatantly is, it’s like because it’s written down, it’s like yeah that’s different, I don’t know why, I don’t know why I’m hanging on to that distinction really. [laugh]

Ruth: I, I, I know what you mean though because there’s, there’s something, I just think pornography is such a loaded term.

Elyndys: It really is, isn’t it? That’s it, and I think that yeah maybe uhm calling it erotica does make it sound more high brow, doesn’t it? It makes it sound like oh I’m reading a book! A real book! Nobody knows what I’m doing sort of thing. *Elyndys’ Interview*

In the case of ‘erotica’ Elyndys’ felt it was distinguished from pornography through content, form and attached values. In thinking about our conceptual framework for the research, these discussions were helpful in highlighting that conversations about pornography blur with conversations about other sexual media. It was important to consider a wide range of materials as not everyone classified pornography in the same way. This feeds into one of our *Findings from the Project*, it was difficult to compare the women’s experiences as they were not necessarily talking about the same thing. ‘Pornography’ is a classification of materials but can also imbue cultural values and meaning.

4.6 A Value Laden Word

We also talked about other ways in which the word ‘pornography’ might be used. It could be a descriptor for other things, an adjective or a metaphor. In research group meeting 1, when we were discussing *True Blood* (see above), Minty said she would call it porn but that she was “just referring to it” as opposed to thinking it was actually pornographic. Elizabeth related this to how the word ‘porn’ is used in many contexts such as ‘food porn’. The use of the word ‘porn’ to confer meaning on depictions of other phenomena in our society is noticeable, for example ‘food porn’ (McBride, 2002) or ‘poverty porn’ (Jensen, T., 2014). Honey articulated that for her ‘porn’ can be used to describe something that is “excessive” or “over the top”:

Honey: Coming from someone that doesn’t watch porn, for me it’s like, like we spoke about food porn earlier, like it’s just like excessive like way over the top, so like I’m probably completely wrong here but like if someone, like if one of my friends wears something that’s like bright blue or bright pink, I’m like that’s really porno, that’s really over the top, I use that like…

Ruth: Like an adjective?

Honey: Yeah. *Honey in Research Group Meeting 1*

In Minty’s interview, when we discussed the definition of pornography, we reflected that the word ‘pornography’ is often used as a metaphor. Minty shared that since she had been coming to the research group she had been trying to use it less in this way:

It’s used as a metaphor a lot and so I’m trying to stop doing that because I realise that’s not helpful. It’s not helpful. Pornography is a thing that is different to somebody in a bikini on television, that’s not pornography that’s somebody in a bikini. *Minty’s Interview*

The ways in which the word ‘pornography’ was used were again interesting for considering what values might be attached to the idea of ‘porn’. It raises the question of what values are being ascribed to something else when describing something as pornographic. Some of the women discussed that they felt the word ‘pornography’ itself had negative connotations. This did not mean they necessarily felt that the display of sexuality or sex were in themselves negative. Kate articulated:

I guess for me porn is a negative, I have no negative against the people who use it uhm for whatever reason, it’s just the word porn is a negative. Sex and all that stuff is all a positive. *Kate in Research Group Meeting 1*

In her interview, Psycho discussed that she felt ‘pornography’ has negative connotations and that the word is something subject to censorship.

Psycho: …I feel like the word porn and the word pornography has been, like it’s got real negative connotations.

Ruth: Yeah, yeah, so much so maybe that certain things we’re kind of reluctant to call pornography but I’ve being thinking about that, there are certain things where I think is that not really using porn, but why don’t we call it that?

Psycho: And it’s almost a word that you feel like you can’t use, you know like if you were, if you were to, say you’re on an internet that’s filtered, it’s a word that you couldn’t put in. Do you know what I mean? Like, will this show up if I, if I email you.

*Psycho’s Interview*

These discussions resonated with arguments that the boundaries of pornography are demarcated by specific meanings and values as well as material form (Kendrick, 1997; Sullivan and McKee, 2015). The word ‘pornography’ could be used to confer a particular status or value to non-pornographic materials. Defining something as ‘pornography’ could be used to demarcate negative or inappropriate content. Talking about ‘pornography’ is not necessarily a conversation about sexual materials but about specific types of sexual materials. It can be a judgement about the intentions or purposes of non-pornographic materials. When we talked about ‘pornography’ in the group, we were talking about a concept as well as specific materials.

4.7 Defaulting to ‘Mainstream’ Pornography

Having discussed the ways we defined pornography throughout the project and having identified that the woman defined it differently, a question emerges as to what we were actually talking about. While we varied in our definitions and subjective understandings, we all recognised ‘porn’. While we sought to define the overarching concept, I would argue that we were often speaking about specific contexts and material forms. We did not exhaustively talk about all pornography. When we were trying to define pornography in our first research group meeting, Kate suggested:

I think a lot of the stuff we’ve mentioned is assuming there’s women or a woman involved, most of the porn I’m thinking of is gay men … a lot of the discussion is as women as the more vulnerable one and I don’t necessarily think the people, the subjects in it have to be vulnerable at all. *Kate in Research Group Meeting 1*

In her interview, Sini reflected on the research thus far and felt that we often talked about pornography in its mainstream context:

However we try to define it, it always comes down to the fact that we are talking about YouPorn and Redtube, and the mainstream porn that’s out there, that people watch and masturbate to, because it’s easy, easier to access and its easily available. That’s what we talk about. But none of us says that out loud in the group, we uhm, whenever we talk about porn, I feel that in the group discussions, we try to be open minded, we try to define it differently, we try to – but eventually it always somehow goes back to the mainstream. *Sini’s Interview*

Corsianos (2007, p.882) outlines that ‘mainstream pornography’ is the pornography most readily available on the market and which is produced for profit. She argues it “continuously portray similar gender and sexuality scripts (which includes the overwhelming repetition of similar if not identical verbal and physical sexual performances, and similar, if not identical body images)”. Largely it was ‘mainstream’ pornography we talked about in the group. We talked about pornography in its current context and the ways it is contemporarily produced and shared. The stronghold of ‘mainstream pornography’ within my own definition became clear to me when analysing the research. I noticed I often asked questions about ‘porn’ with mainstream pornography in mind as opposed to the overarching concept. I did not always ask the same questions about erotica as I did about pornography. Within the group I would argue we were often talking about internet, video pornography.

4.8 Conclusion

Echoing debates within academia, we found ‘pornography’ complex to define and struggled to pinpoint the essential characteristic of what it is. When trying to work out what the boundaries between pornography and other media were, we felt that what is considered pornographic is value laden, subjective and contextual. I would conclude that we were talking about a concept. As Sullivan and McKee (2015, p.1) discuss, pornography is a label for “a sexual practice, a media form, and a social issue”. We were able to make some collective sense of this concept, and we each had our own subjective definitions and understandings of what it was. This feeds into several points from our *Findings from the Project;* pornography was subjectively understood and had multiple meanings, consequently we were not always talking about the same thing.

Like the participants in Paasonen et al’s study (2015), our group was very reflexive when considering our definitions, articulating the complexities of doing so and questioning and analysing why this was the case. With every suggestion of how to define pornography, a flaw was found. A consensual, group definition of pornography was never reached despite us revisiting the discussion several times. In this regard, I would argue our findings fit with pornography being an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Gallie, 1956). As Garver (1978, p.168) explains “there is a variety of meanings employed for key terms in an argument”, this was very much the case for us when we tried to define pornography. We found ‘pornography’ to be a complex word with more than one meaning. Embracing both a discussion on what pornography is and discussing its subjective and slippery nature was as close to coming to an ‘objective’ or ‘definitive’ definition as possible.

In thinking about our conceptual framework for the research, in many cases, we were talking about pornography through our own subjective definitions and thus were not always talking about the same thing. We were not talking about completely different phenomena, but different aspects, contexts or parts of the concept that is ‘pornography’. On other occasions, we relied on notions of ‘mainstream pornography’. Given the complexity of defining pornography and what it is classed as pornographic, our conversations often included other materials and phenomena that might not typically be classed as pornography such as erotica, music videos and TV programmes. Finally, given the value imbued nature of the word ‘pornography’, our conversations were naturally steeped in political and social considerations. Through considering how and why the boundaries of pornography are drawn, we were able to make collective sense of our individual perspectives and so despite the philosophical quandary that can come with defining pornography, the research was able to progress.

Shifting the focal point to what is classed as pornographic was helping in coming closer to an understanding of how pornography was conceptualised in our research. As outlined in the thesis introduction, the problem with definitions of pornography is that they are often flawed and short-lived (Paasonen et al, 2007a); or do they do not adequately address what differentiates pornography from other sexually explicit materials (Andrews, 2012); or address why this differentiation is drawn (McKee et al, 2008). While we struggled to identify what essential quality makes something pornographic, we were able to consider why perceptions of pornography and the pornographic vary between people. Next, this thesis will explore the women’s encounters with ‘pornography’.

Chapter 5: Interactions and Encounters with Pornography

*“The women’s experiences are so diverse…”* Ruth (Extract from Research Diary)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the women’s encounters and interactions with pornography and presents their stories and narratives. Historically, there has been much conversation about the impact of pornography on women but less research which asks women about this for themselves (Attwood, 2005a; Ashton et al, 2018). The evidence base on women and pornography is both limited and heavily polarised. Pornography has been positioned as something that oppresses women (Dworkin, 1981) and as something that could sexually liberate them (Strossen, 1995). There are concerns that it negatively influences behaviours and attitudes towards women and that it gives men and women alike unrealistic expectations of how women should be and behave (Dines, 2010; IPPR, 2014). It is unclear what types of relationships women might have with pornography; historical research paradigms on pornography have positioned people as “consumer or victim” (Manning, 2006, p.132). Yet, there is some evidence to suggest that there are new ways to interact with pornography and that women are capitalising in on these as well (Hester et al, 2015). In the face of these conflicting debates, it is unclear what women’s relationships with pornography are and how they approach it or how it encroaches on them.

In this chapter, I will look at the ways in which pornography featured in the women’s lives and how it was routinely come across or engaged with. This chapter will examine the women’s stories and narratives, and how pornography has or has not featured in this. Vera-Gray (2016) observed that research on women’s consumption of pornography has little attempted to “look at both relationships to pornography – users, refusers, and their myriad combinations over a woman's sexual biography – together”. This chapter will seek to address this and explore the women’s biographies, looking at the types of interactions the women had and have. This chapter will explore emotion, agency and choice, and who else was involved in these interactions. This will be interrogated and analysed alongside contemporary debates and literature.

As outlined in the methodology, the women were part of setting the research agenda and the topic was discussed from the women’s subjective understandings. There were no standardised measures for ‘pornography’ or for the different types of interaction with it. This confirmed the “highly individualised” nature of pornography experiences (Dawson et al, 2019, p.2) and indicated how to develop more responsive research questions in the future. This chapter will also begin to evidence one of our project findings (see Appendix 1):

Pornography is experienced, engaged with, thought and felt about in diverse ways by us. Positive, negative and everything in-between. *Findings from the Project*

The women’s stories indicate that there are diverse ways to encounter and interact with pornography. This was visible in each woman’s account and when comparing the women to one another. I will begin by outlining the women’s self-defined relationships to pornography and use this to structure the chapter.

5.2 The Women’s Self Defined Relationships to Pornography

As discussed in Chapter 3, each of the women were asked to write in their research profiles what their relationship with pornography was, so that it was self-defined and based on what they considered to be the most important factors. These were helpful in providing some initial grounding for their positionality and perspective. As a starting point, these also highlight the complexity of what a relationship with pornography can be. The women’s responses were:

I don’t use ‘traditional’ (i.e. visual) pornography, e.g. films/ images, but I do both read and write erotic fiction (esp. male/ male fan fiction). I don’t find visual pornography at all appealing – in fact I feel physically squeamish about it. *Elyndys*

Rarely consider it, happy for others to use it (including my partner). *Minty*

Used to hate it and now I’m more comfortable with it![[14]](#footnote-14) Complicated – especially with partner(s) and friends. *Honey*

PRO PORN But conscious that it has its problems which we can work towards mitigating through being sex positive and ethical in consumption. *Annette*

Open to individual preferences and interested in keeping an open mind. I didn’t watch it before[[15]](#footnote-15) and I still don’t. *Kate*

Read and write a lot of erotic fiction. *Sini*

First exposed – Brother found a video of my dad’s – thought it was gross. Watched with partner aged about 22. Currently watch mostly alone – partner has low sex drive – I have a higher one. We openly discuss porn as a couple. *Psycho*

V[ery] occasional user. *Elizabeth*

These initial accounts highlighted the different bases of their relationships with pornography. These included: their interaction with it (the type of interaction and their choice of whether to interact with it and how to), their opinion of it or emotional response to it, the type of pornography or sexual materials they engaged with, their feelings of it in regard to other people and references to changes in relationship over time. This chapter will subsequently address each of these aspects, with their broader perspectives to be addressed in more depth in Chapter 6.

5.3 Initial Experiences with Pornography

I asked the women about their initial experiences of pornography to gain insight into the biography of their relationship with pornography, and to understand their formative experiences of it. Within the literature, the contemporary focus on initial experiences of pornography tends to be young people’s first exposure to pornography particularly in regard to the proliferation of internet pornography (Horvath et al, 2013; Martellozzo et al, 2016). There have been concerns about the detrimental effects of this for young people (Bailey, 2011). However, there has been some qualitative evidence that young people have positive initial experiences with pornography or the agency to manage their experiences with it (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2009; Böhm et al, 2014). There are few studies which look specifically at adults recalling their initial experiences. Paasonen et al (2015) conducted one such study in Finland with people born from 1925 - 1994, their study reported largely positive initiative experiences of pornography.

The women in the project had had different initial experiences of pornography including stumbling across it accidentally, actively seeking it out, being shown it, watching it together with a partner and indirectly encountering it. Some of these encounters were had alone and others were with partners or other people. The emotional experience of these interactions varied, and for some of the women the emotion at the time was different to the one that they had now.

Psycho and Elizabeth both shared that the first times they had seen pornography was through discovering a video that belonged to a parent. Elizabeth recalled the story with humour, explaining she had found her father’s pornography VHS tape with a friend and they had watched it several times as it was funny.

That was the first time, VHS, everyone gone and I remember we used to go back and watch it because we thought it was hilarious and we once accidentally left it in the tape player because someone was coming home too quick. My mum found it and got so mad at my dad for having it out, poor dad! *Elizabeth’s Interview*

Psycho also recounted her story with laughter, recalling her brother and her finding her dad’s pornography video. While Psycho remembered thinking the video was “gross” at the time, she laughed when she told us, and it was a story she shared both in her interview and in the research group and included in her profile. It was not an experience that distressed her now.

I can remember my brother finding a video in my dad’s sock drawer and we were like what’s this video? And my brother putting it on, and I must have been really young and I remember being like why are they weeing on each other?! And then running out, I don’t know what my dad was watching! [laughs] And then that was like uh this is naughty because this is in dad’s sock drawer. *Psycho in Research Group Meeting 3*

Some of the experiences shared were ones in which the women had actively sought out pornography. Sini, Elizabeth and Annette all recounted exploring pornography for themselves. Sini sought out pornography herself at around 12 years old when she began to be more sexually curious. Sini also recalled her story with humour and we laughed as she reminisced about using dial-up internet to access it.

Well obviously like first, like first, when you’re a teenager and you realise oh god somethings feel really good. Of course you start to look for it, and you, because you know it’s out there … I actually have no idea how it started, how I decided to do it, but I know it’s around 12, and then firstly obviously you just write something, naked men or naked women on the google, and then you [inaudible] and then you look at the pictures and oh okay! And then it evolves from there I guess. *Sini’s Interview*

In addition to finding her father’s pornographic tape, Elizabeth also recounted several experiences of actively seeking out pornography. She stole a Playboy magazine from her cousin, had read pornographic literature and then had discovered the internet while a university student.

I remember being in *name’s* dorm room after having some fairly unfulfilling sex and leaving off his loft, and he’s asleep and I got on his computer and he had an internet connection and it was like oh my god! And this was when you could google something and get one page of results, like this was a long time ago. And I remember just being like, porn! And finding a couple, not great you know, enough to wank off to but nothing interesting. *Elizabeth’s Interview*

In Annette’s interview, when we discussed her relationship with pornography, she told me about how her use of pornography had changed over the years. Again, her story reflected an exploratory initial engagement with it.

Uhm, well, it was sort of almost rebelling against the content I found when I was a bit younger. Like, it was all very much man in charge type of stuff. Uhm, like very young I found a lot of literary porn and I sought out sort of stories with power dynamics stuff in it, like just and then watching like live pornography … and it was [pause] like not my kind of thing. *Annette’s Interview*

She had eventually discovered the kind of content she liked best. She also talked about reading the accompanying blogs.

I sort of rejected all of that and then I stumbled upon a website called kink.com and I met, well got not met, got introduced to people like Lorelei Lee, like profession dominatrix women who also like had blogs and were quite articulate and expressive about their sexuality that they weren’t there by coercion or force, it was very much what they wanted to do. They were exploring their sexuality through pornography and like they did this kind of stuff in their personal life as well, it wasn’t like catering to an audience it was more sort of, they were putting out what the audience wanted to see just anyway. *Annette’s Interview*

Similar exploratory stories were shared by the women who were interested in erotic literature. Sini was a writer of erotic stories and had found erotica through her searches for pornography.

I guess the first like erotic novel or whatever I read happened to be a fantasy novel, there were a demons involved and there was like one sexual scene and I was like wakened, oh my god they can do this on paper, through like text? Like, this thing is, it exists? I guess it was one of the first adult novels I ever read. *Sini’s Interview*

She shared that after finding erotic novels she realised that she preferred written word to visual materials. Elyndys’ identified as having come from a fanfiction and fandom background.[[16]](#footnote-16) She was a writer of erotic stories and enjoyed reading fanfiction. She discussed her early experiences of fanfiction in which she had discovered fanzines. Prior to the internet fanfiction stories were distributed through fanzines which she would purchase from Ceefax and Teletext.

I mean before then they had fanzines and things like that. In fact, I think one of the first sort of, I think it was erotic or just kind of risqué I can’t remember, a fanzine in 90, in the 90’s, uhm and yeah but, again it was kind of like one of those things where I was like oh wow you know, people are doing this and I like it you know, it was a Manic Street Preachers fanzine in fact [laughs] *Elyndys’ Interview*

Watching pornography with a partner was also mentioned by three women as being their initial experiences of pornography. Psycho shared in her interview that as a university student she had watched a pornographic DVD with a partner, and had later tried internet pornography with a different partner. Neither Kate nor Minty considered themselves to have had much experience of pornography. Both of their experiences related to their previous partners using pornography or watching it with them. Kate said of her experience:

Not much to be honest, uhm apart from boyfriends back in the day if you want me to go down that route [laughs] uhm, you know just crap stuff on laptops, or you know the odd mag under their bed, with just a load of page 3 model type girls. *Kate’s Interview*

Kate discussed that on a trip to Japan aged 18 with her then partner, they had discovered a vast range of pornographic videos, some of which they had watched together including a clip of a woman masturbating.

I was like [pause] where’s like the emotion, where’s the [pause]. You know like if you’re in a room and someone’s jacking off, if you’re part of that experience then it’s good or it can be good but just watching a film of, I don’t think I’ve got the imagination to place myself in that scenario or imagine that it’s real or happening in front of me. *Kate’s Interview*

Kate recalled the video in depth and her feelings at the time. The experience seemed to reflect her overall lack of interest in pornography. There was a similar indifference and dismissive attitude about pornography from Minty. She had looked at magazines, read stories and watched films, sometimes alone and at other times with friends or a boyfriend. She shared that she used to enjoy reading stories and had watched films though she said in comparison to now they were very light: “now they wouldn’t even be classed as pornography they’d be an 18”. She shared:

I don’t feel the need for it but then I never did. I did it with friends, we watched that kind of thing with friends, magazines, my boyfriend at the time liked magazines, he would look at the pictures, I would read the stories. As a bit of foreplay I guess. *Minty’s Interview*

Honey’s first experience of pornography was a negative one, in which she was shown a video by a friend’s older brother. Honey felt very negatively about pornography, and this first experience seemed formative (among other experiences which will be discussed later) in shaping her feelings about pornography.

I’m so scared [of pornography], when we were little my friend who was like, had an older brother, put on Two Girls, One Cup.[[17]](#footnote-17) *Honey in Research Group Meeting 1*

She shared this story when we first talked about what pornography is in our first research group meeting. She said she associated it with being for men and unrealistic and Annette asked her whether she watched pornography herself. She told us it scared her and that this had been her first encounter with it. Of all the initial experiences that were shared, this was the most negative one that was discussed.

The women had had varied initial experiences of pornography. Given the diversity of experiences, their stories both echo and contradict contemporary research on young people and pornography. Similar to Paasonen et al (2015) some of the women spoke of their initial experiences positively with humour and fun. However, whereas Paasonen et al found that their participants who disliked pornography did not base this on early traumatic experiences, Honey did. Honey had had a negative experience of pornography and it was something that had been imposed on her against her will. In comparison, many of the other women had had positive experiences where they had sought out pornography or other sexual materials in an exploratory and curious way.

Overall, the women had a variety of feelings about their initial experiences. Lavender-Stott and Allen (2017) conducted a large-scale study of young women’s (18 – 23 years old) first viewing of a sexual image (including pornography and non-pornography) in the US, they found that the women’s experiences of it grouped into the themes of “unwanted” (51.01%), “intrigued” (18.88%), “ambivalent” (26.07%) and “neutral” (4.04%). There were similar themes in this project though the quantitative split was different. There was excitement and intrigue at the discovery of new things, the unwanted and unpleasant encounter, and neutral acknowledgment of indirect contact with pornography. Minty and Kate’s feelings were not ambivalent so much as perhaps disinterested. Pornography seemed to lack appeal for them. Aside from Honey, the women did not report their initial experiences having had any long-lasting negative impact on their lives. However, all of the women could recall their first experiences with pornography and other sexually explicit materials, and these memories had a staying power. The women’s narratives indicate the importance of tracing first encounters and people’s biographies. These experiences were relevant for understanding their later choices and opinions on pornography.

5.4 Interacting with Pornography: ‘Using’ Porn

There were different degrees to which pornography currently featured in the women’s lives. Of the women who chose to interact with pornography, typically this related to the use or consumption of it. None of the women identified as working in the pornographic industry, or being a producer, performer or distributor of pornographic materials. While there have been discussions around the blurring of ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ boundaries, among the women who used video or ‘mainstream’ pornography in this group, they were either consumers or non-consumers. As Mowlabocus and Wood (2015, p.120) argue “for every instance of a boundary that bleeds, we argue that there are countless others where such boundaries remain firmly entrenched.” However, what it meant to be a ‘user’ or ‘consumer’ of pornography varied between the women.

Historically, there has been a lack of research into consumers’ experiences of using porn (Attwood, 2018). McKee (2005, p.72) argues “consumers of pornography are most commonly constructed as subjects in the sense of being subjected to experiments and rarely presented as subjects in the sense of being thinking agents who could offer an insight into the reasons for consuming pornography and the effects it could have on them.” Where this research has been conducted, the empirical evidence indicates that people use pornography for different reasons and in different ways (Löfgren-Mårtenson and Månsson, 2009; Paasonen et al, 2015). It has been reported that motivations for using pornography vary. For example, it is used for sexual arousal (solo and with other people), information or sexual education, out of curiosity or for entertainment (Böhm et al, 2015). Within the research group, four of the women (Elizabeth, Psycho, Sini and Annette) currently used pornography. Similar to the above findings, the ways in which they did, the content that they looked at and the reasons for doing so varied.

Psycho and Elizabeth both used pornography on their own. Elizabeth estimated that she used it every six months and was something she used occasionally when she felt she needed it. When I asked her when this was, she was unsure, she responded: “if I feel like I’m not having enough sex and I’m having a duvet day. And I’m gonna have a nap.” When I asked her to elaborate she explained:

Well, if I, if I’ve wanked off well I will sleep after so, I mean I have a vibrator it’s just sometimes I will use porn and sometimes I won’t. I would say every 6 months I’ll google something, lesbian porn usually because it’s just the easiest and I don’t. I’ve got the cock I want in my life, I don’t need more of that.

*Elizabeth’s Interview*

For Elizabeth, masturbating and using pornography were not synonymous but at specific times she liked to masturbate with pornography. Her preference was lesbian pornography, she explained that this was part of expressing her bisexuality as her partner was a man. In a similar fashion, Psycho liked to look at heterosexual porn as part of expressing her bisexuality.

Because I’m married [to a woman] but I identify as bisexual so there’s still that part of me that still not craves that but is stimulated by that. *Psycho in Research Group Meeting 3*

Psycho shared that she liked to use pornography by herself and it was something that she did as her partner has a lower sex drive than her. When talking about different preferences around pornography, Psycho shared that for her it is the sounds that are arousing. She laughed as she told me of how this could lead to a more flustered use of it.

I would never care about my wife knowing because I’m honest about when I’m going to go and watch some porn [laughs], neighbours, completely freaks me out, in that I have to go and shut the window, and I’ll even go in the spare room because it doesn’t border their house, so I’ll turn the sound off or right down, and for me that’s, it’s not worth doing it almost. *Psycho’s Interview*

Both of their stories highlighted the differences in what it means to ‘use’ pornography. There were different situations in which it arose, different motivations and different aspects of what was arousing. For Annette, pornography was an important part of expressing her sexuality and learning how to practise it in a safe way. Annette identified as being ‘kinky’ and into ‘kink’ and told us that when growing up there had been few positive representations of her sexuality. Using pornography to explore kink sexualities has been similarly reported elsewhere, pornography can be a source of new ideas for sexual practice (McCormack and Wignall, 2017). For Annette, it went further, she explained:

Growing up there weren’t positive role models in my life that had the same sexuality as me … So, basically, pornography and porn bloggers sort of became that for me, taught me how to negotiate, taught me how to get better at communication, partner safety, just a whole load of things that weren’t, weren’t discussed with me. *Annette’s Interview*

Annette shared that she liked the website kink.com as they include interviews before and after discussing what sexual acts they are going to try and debriefing about it afterwards. The interviews were an important part of the pornography for her.

Yeah, that’s part of it, that’s like, just the negotiation and consent, that’s, particularly with kink because you know, it’s inflicting pain on somebody. You’ve got to be sure that it, it’s like consensual coz you just can’t do it any other way. *Annette’s Interview*

Pornography as a source of sex education for young people is often cited as a concern (Wallmyr and Wellin, 2006; Crabbe and Corlett, 2011), in Annette’s case this sexual education was not available elsewhere. Several times she shared with us that historically she found few positive representations of her sexuality. This perhaps reflects McNair’s (2013, p.15) argument that pornography has facilitated a “democratisation of desire” in which once excluded sexualities are more accepted. Furthermore, this was an example of where subjective meanings behind ‘pornography’ were relevant. Annette was talking about a very specific type of pornography rather than all forms of pornography.

Sini used pornography in a different fashion to the other women, she used it as a reference point for writing erotica. She explained that when writing erotic stories, it could be difficult to work out how bodies should look when engaging in sexual acts.

When you write a piece of porn or erotica or whatever you want to call it, you look at porn and you’re like okay that’s how it works, the limbs go over there, the hand goes over there and you describe the action! [laughs] *Sini’s Interview*

Similarly, Wood (2015) reported from her study of women’s experiences with sex shopping that two participants who wrote erotic literature would try out sexual acts or toys before writing about them to achieve “authenticity” in their writing. Sini similarly engaged in such a practice here, however she used pornography to authentically describe anatomy in her writing. This again highlighted the multiple ways in which pornography could be ‘used’.

For the women who used pornography for sexual arousal, they had different selection criteria. The women who used pornography all made choices about how to do so and what content to engage with, supporting arguments that consumers actively engage with pornography rather than passively watch it (Chadwick et al, 2018). In some regards, Elizabeth and Psycho discussed being fairly unselective in their choices, not pursuing a specific fantasy nor taking time to search for specific content nor feeling motivated to pay for it.

Oh yeah! Yeah. No I’m not paying for that shit. I have a really good imagination, if I really needed something then I’m sure I could figure it out in my head. *Elizabeth’s Interview*

I’d say, I’m not that complex in terms of, I could watch anything and probably get off on it, you know what I mean, you go on like a website, yeah like first one that comes up, I’ve only got 10 minutes and that’ll, I’m very easy, that’s not a problem [laughs] *Psycho’s Interview*

For Elizabeth, paying for pornography seemed to be going an extra step, suggesting she was more interested or committed than she was. In contrast, Annette felt very firmly that it was important to buy pornography:

Yeah, like, you’ve got to buy the content because you know, they’ve done it, if you wanna watch it, you’ve got to pay for it. *Annette’s Interview*

She felt it was important to support the performers and recognised their pornography as their work. Annette felt that if people did not pay for pornography than it would stop being made. While there were differences in feeling about paying for pornography, all of the women had selection criteria in regard to the content they felt happy watching. For example, Psycho did not like lesbian pornography as she felt it was unrealistic, and Elizabeth stated that she would not watch heterosexual pornography. Elizabeth and Psycho also discussed that they wanted to ensure that pornography was not exploitative.

My guidelines for myself, I won’t watch lesbian porn that doesn’t have a female director, because it feels exploitative to me somehow. *Elizabeth in Research Group Meeting 1.*

So, I guess it’s that, in terms of choosing what to watch, I think it’s like convenience, it’s not feeling anyone’s being abused or taken advantage of, but I don’t know how you decide that, and that’s when you get the moral dilemma I think. *Psycho’s Interview*

For Annette, considering how to use pornography ethically was something that was important for her. She discussed the importance of performers having control over their performance and engaging in acts that were “a genuine expression of human sexuality”. For Annette, an important part of using pornography in a fair way was to purchase it.

Similar to Chadwick et al (2018), the women actively engaged with pornography finding content they liked. In this regard they were “agentic co-determinants of their experiences” not passive (p.1864). They had identified strategies and developed knowledge for finding pornographic content they were happy with. Similar to Chadwick et al (2018), Psycho’s perspective indicated encounters with pornography could involve ‘risk’. She shared she would like more information to facilitate informed choices:

It was really interesting having one of the group talking about oh they [pornography performers] have agency and representation, if would be really good if, you know if there were clearer guidelines out there but because you know it’s such a taboo subject it’s almost like self-discovery on a, you’re making this judgement call that’s not informed and I don’t like that. *Psycho’s Interview*

The women presented their encounters with pornography as self-determined and positive. In contrast to Ciclitira (2004) the women did not report feeling particularly conflicted about their pornography use or felt it contradicted their values. Annette, Elizabeth and Psycho were not passive consumers and they had all established guidelines and criteria to find content they were comfortable engaging with. All of them cared about the welfare of the performers in the pornographic materials. Psycho shared that there could be difficulty in verifying the source of pornography and this made her uncomfortable. Nevertheless, she tried to avoid content such as this and as such was an active consumer. None of the women reported any concern about the effects of pornographic consumption on themselves or their behaviours, attitudes and outlook. However, this did not necessarily mean pornography was considered empowering. In comparison to Annette, Elizabeth and Psycho spoke of their use of pornography in quite casual terms. In this regard, similar to Ciclitira (2004), the women’s experiences of using pornography did not neatly fit into contrasting feminist positions on pornography.

Comparing the women’s stories with one another, it was clear that there was no ubiquitous way to ‘use’ pornography. Their use varied according to frequency, content, purpose and motivations. Again, this reiterates the need to bring the consumer’s voice into pornography research (McKee, 2005; Attwood, 2018). The different ways of ‘consuming’ pornography indicate that pornography has different roles in people’s lives. As such, this would suggest research on consumption needs to be responsive to this.

5.5 Choosing Not to Use Pornography

What was very clear during the project was that not everyone in the research group chose to engage with pornography in its material form. Honey, Kate, Minty and Elyndys did not use or consume porn. For some of them this had changed over time; Kate and Minty both shared that they had tried it in the past, whereas Elyndys and Honey did not disclose ever trying it. Among these women, their reasons for avoiding pornography varied. Some of their motivations were mirrored in the research literature, such as pornography being non-representative of their sexuality or displaying concerning representations of sex and women (Ashton et al, 2018; Chadwick et al, 2018). However, it was also clear that their choice was shaped by their own sexual preferences.

Honey was the member of the research group who appeared most concerned with pornography. She was very clear that she did not want it in her life. She articulated different reasons for this: she disliked the way her male friends used pornography, she felt it was exploitative of women and she was uncomfortable with the ‘public’ display of sex.

I really dislike porn as what it stands for as like an industry and also like how my guy friends watch porn, like it, like. For me sex is something that’s to do with 2 people, maybe more if you want more, but it’s like a private thing and to have it like so, I don’t wanna watch that like I’d rather have my own sex thanks, like I don’t want to see anything else, or like it’s mine, it’s my intimate thing and like when I was talking to my friends about how much I hate porn, like one of them was showing me like videos of porn, like I don’t, I don’t not watch porn because I’m scared of it, I don’t watch porn because I don’t watch porn. *Honey’s Interview*

Within this quote, Honey articulated a sense of imposition, sharing unwanted incidences of being shown pornography, similar to her first experience of it. Honey’s feelings and experiences echoed some of the contemporary concerns around pornography, such as its role in socialising young people and influencing societal views on women and sex (Dines, 2010). While Honey chose not to engage with pornography, she did feel it encroached on her life as she explains here:

It’s everywhere and it affects, it probably affects me without me knowing about it but now I know about it. You know where it’s like, when you really want a piece of clothing or you’ve just bought a piece of clothing and it’s like this is so unique and then you walk down the street and everyone’s got it on? Like once you start thinking about it, you realise oh no it’s, porn’s ruining my life, [laughs] there’s porn everywhere. Uhm, so yeah, it’s just, it’s just so much, so, more around you than you think it is. *Honey’s Interview.*

In this regard, Honey seemed to feel that pornography was a powerful cultural influencer shaping social and cultural values. This contributed to her discomfort and unease with it.

Kate articulated that she had tried to use pornography but that she had not found content that she liked. She felt that there were false representations of sex within pornography.

Uhm there’s a couple of times as an adult I’ve gone and you know wanted to have a wank and think oh I’ll try this, genuinely could not find anything, there was just, you type in lesbian porn or whatever [inaudible] and it is so far away from the truth that I can’t even like extrapolate. *Kate’s Interview*

Kate’s comments echoed discussions on the pervasiveness of lesbian pornography being designed for a heterosexual male gaze rather than lesbian or bisexual women (Morrison and Tallack, 2005). In addition to the content not suiting Kate, she was not particularly interested in using pornography as a medium for sexual expression. When we discussed pornography within her relationship, she articulated both that she would rather do than watch, and that she was not interested in visual media.

if we wanted to experience a threesome, we’d have a threesome we wouldn’t necessarily just like watch it, I think, I don’t know, I don’t really like TV anyway so that kinda ruins it! [laughs] *Kate’s Interview*

In this regard, pornography did not match her own personal sexual preferences. Kate explained:

I only get off from doing something which is why I don’t watch porn. *Kate in Research Group Meeting 6*

Minty shared that she had look at pornography in the past with ex-partners but did not look at pornography anymore. When I asked her directly why she shared “I don’t feel the need for it but then I never did” and when I reflected that perhaps choices on pornography reflect sexual preference, she responded: “I’m not interested in it particularly.” Choosing not to watch pornography for personal reasons rather than political reasons was an interesting discussion as this is a motivation not well represented in the literature. The women did not just spurn pornography because the content was not tailored to them or their sexuality.

Elyndys did not use pornography, but she did read and write erotic stories. For her there was an important distinction between the two, and she associated different types of sexual practice with each. One of the reasons she disliked pornography was because it lacked a storyline or a love and relationship angle.

It’s not just about sort of the sex that it’s about the relationship and the love! And you know you’ve got to have the vested interest in it beforehand otherwise you wouldn’t be interested, you know, certainly I wouldn’t … you know that’s why pornography doesn’t appeal to me for a lot of reasons and that’s one of them. I’m just why would I care? … Yeah definitely because that’s definitely how I am in my life as well, like I couldn’t ever have casual sex or anything like that, that’s just not something I could do. *Elyndys’ Interview*

Elyndys’ questioned whether the appeal of fanfiction was that it was “mainly written by women, for women” and both her and Sini shared that erotica is more of a feminine space. However, she also expressed a dislike of visual pornography. There were multiple factors guiding what materials she engaged with.

Despite some of the women choosing not to engage with pornography, all of the women had an awareness of it. One way in which this was discussed was indirectly encountering it through other forms of media. In Elyndys’ interview, I asked her how she had formulated her views on pornography if she did not watch it, she responded:

Well I’ve encountered pornography you know, uhm you see it through other media don’t you? I’ve seen bits of it in you know if you’re watching a film or you’re watching a TV programme it does crop up. *Elyndys’ Interview*

Similarly, when Honey talked about the current ways that pornography featured in her life, she reflected on the indirect encounters she had had with pornography through her friends and relationships.

It’s just like the conversations that I have with my friends and kind of, the conversations that I’ve had in relationships quite recently as well about like. *Honey’s Interview*

Reflecting on Chapter 4 and our conceptualisation of pornography, Honey’s comments indicated that interactions with pornography are not just encounters with pornographic materials. An encounter with ‘pornography’ could also be negotiating the debates and issues (positive or negative) that are attached. These ‘indirect’ encounters with pornography were perhaps indicative of mainstream culture becoming more ‘pornified’ (McNair, 1996; 2002; 2013). Pornography is increasingly referenced and discussed in mainstream culture and society.

The women chose not to engage with pornography for a variety of reasons. Some of these were reflective of contemporary concerns around pornography such as it being oppressive towards women or not tailored towards women’s sexualities. However, there was also a theme of disinterest. Some of the women disliked the use of pornography as a form of sexual practice regardless of the content. The women *chose* not to use pornography as opposed to it not being for them. Sexual preference was also an important dimension of their narratives. Extending the work of Chadwick et al (2018), this highlights the importance of exploring women’s agentic choices to avoid or not use pornography. These were not passive choices, but decisions taken based on personal or political preferences. A choice to not use pornography, did not necessarily mean a choice to avoid sexually explicit materials, which will be discussed in the next section.

5.6 Engaging with Erotica and Fanfiction

Two of the women in the group engaged with other forms of sexual materials such as erotic writing and fanfiction, mediums that have also proliferated with the growth of the internet. There are new ways to produce, share and access content and new communities forming around this (Pearson, 2010). Both Sini and Elyndys wrote erotic materials and read them; in this regard there was a visible blurring of the traditional ‘producer’ and ‘consumer’ roles. Sini and Elyndys both preferred the written word over visual forms of pornography. Sini explained that erotic stories allow the “ultimate fantasy” as you are free to imagine the people depicted however you want:

You can imagine the people exactly how you want them or so there’s, it’s like the ultimate fantasy because there’s nothing restricting you, because when you look at it there’s always something wrong, there’s no I don’t like that or okay I’ll just ignore it whatever. *Sini’s Interview*

Sini explained that she would masturbate to her own written stories or would go to an erotic site to find written work. Sini’s practice of erotic writing is seemingly an example of ‘prosumption’, the interplay between production and consumption of pornography (Hester et al, 2015). Sini explained that for her erotic stories were a fantasy and that what she wrote about was not necessarily something she would want to engage in in real life.

I’ve googled some really weird shit when it comes to porn, just to see what it looks like, and then go oh okay, that might work, okay, and I know that I’m taking a completely like fantasy and representation of sex and putting it in the text which even, because that it’s never going to be what sex normally is, so to me what I write is not, it’s complete fantasy, it’s porn, it’s not, it’s not the sex and reality that we engage in or with people. *Sini’s Interview*

When I interviewed Elyndys I tried to get a sense from her of how she engaged with fanfiction and erotic stories, asking whether it was something she just enjoyed reading or whether she read for sexual reasons. Elyndys articulated that she liked to read it for both reasons as this extract from her interview shows:

It’s a difficult question to answer, yeah [laughs] It’s a difficult question for me to answer because I think there’s an element of both because you do get, say I, I mean other people might be different and they might not have that sort of relationship requirement and they might not have that idea that they want the, you know the true love and the true romance and all that but that’s what I want but at the same time I do enjoy reading like the sexual side of it as well, and yeah, it is, I do read it for like the you know pornographic purposes if you like but it’s both really because yeah you can enjoy a story for the same reasons whether it has the sex or not. Yeah and if it has a badly written sex scene you’d just be like ahh that’s ruined it! You know? So yeah, yeah it’s difficult. *Elyndys’ Interview*

When we were having this discussion, I realised that I was implying that the only way for something to have a sexual use is if you can masturbate or have sex to it. I reflected this to Elyndys and suggested that it can also be nice to get a sexual thrill from something. Elyndys agreed: “exactly, yeah and I think that’s probably more of it actually”. Elyndys shared that there were fanfiction communities and that she had found friends and met people through their shared interest of it. There was a social aspect to the fanfiction community.

My current sort of circle of fandom friends are people who I know through Twitter really, uhm I know people on Twitter uhm and yeah you know we’re all fans of the same thing and you know you, we have met up quite a few times uhm and yeah you know, it’s really good you know, we often talk about how nice it is that you can meet people from all over all the country and even all over the world and have really sort of lasting friendships. *Elyndys’ Interview*

Sini and Elyndys did not consider erotica to be the same as pornography. However, their stories suggested that erotica is an overlapping, if distinct, type of sexual practice. Erotica has often been associated with being female friendly or a feminised sexual practice (Sonnet, 1999; Wood, 2015). However, their interest in erotica transcended it being ‘for women’. While Elyndys acknowledged this was part of it, both of them shared that they preferred the written word.

Sini and Elyndys’ narratives drew attention to a parallel yet distinctive sexual practice, one in which they were both creators of materials as well as consumers. There is a growing body of research exploring women’s exploration of and engagement with erotic writing and fandom / fanfiction (Hellekson and Busse, 2006; Larsen and Zubernis, 2012; Wood 2015). Fanfiction has been identified as a space for exploring new sexualities and transgressing traditional heteronormative representations of sex (Garner, 2016). The women’s contributions highlight the need for more research in this area. They identified that both erotica and fanfiction were feminised spaces and so a broader conceptualisation of ‘pornography’ could indicate that women are more engaged with sexual materials than is thought. Both Sini and Elyndys were creators and this terrain could be one in which women have more control and agency.

5.7 Pornography and Relationships

A key focus of discussion was the ways in which pornography featured in and was negotiated in the women’s romantic relationships. At the time of the research, all of the women were in a relationship though Honey’s ended during the course of the project. There is much discussion and empirical research into the negative impact of pornography on women’s relationships (Manning, 2007; IPPR, 2014). The research has predominantly focused on heterosexual relationships and as such much of this is framed within the context of male and female gendered relationships. Within the research group, there was a much more varied response about how pornography is negotiated in relationships.

Among the women who used pornography, their partners were aware of this and none of the women discussed this being a cause of contention. Rather, Psycho and Elizabeth both shared that their partners were aware and happy with it. Psycho articulated that within her relationship, she watched pornography because she had a higher sex drive then her wife. Her use of pornography was something that they openly talked about.

I think I’ve said before in one of the groups, that my wife has really low sex drive, she has to take medication that has made it that way, so and, so I’ll use porn basically so I’m not a pest! [laughs] That’s what we call it anyway! So we’re very open about it and we talk about it and stuff. *Psycho’s Interview*

She shared that over the years her own sex drive had changed and so between them they had met in a comfortable place.

Uhm, and it works for us, like you know uhm, and it’s funny because as you get, as I’ve got older, my sex drive isn’t as high as it was when I was younger, so my use of porn has been less and actually we’ve met in the middle almost. *Psycho’s Interview*

Elizabeth shared that her partner did not watch pornography himself, and that she was the one in the relationship who watched it. When she talked about watching lesbian pornography as part of expressing her bisexuality, Elizabeth articulated that her husband knew about this and advocated her doing that.

He knows that I am bisexual and he’s like you keep that vibrator in your bedside table and you go watch some porn. *Elizabeth’s Interview*

In her interview, Annette shared that when her and her partner had started their relationship, they had shared pornographic videos with one another. A lot of the content that she looked at was with her partner:

Annette: A lot of the porn that I watch is like with my partner … no-one else watches porn with their partner?

Elizabeth: My partner feels on a feminist level that he really does not like porn and there’s no sort of convincing him … he just feels the patriarchy started this shit …

Annette: I guess not always porn videos but we both subscribe to Reddit and like we’ll be looking at pictures of girls and I’ll be like oh look she’s really lovely… *Research Group Meeting 7*

This conversation was also helpful in seeing the different ways that pornography was negotiated in the women’s relationships. Elizabeth and her husband kept things separate whereas Annette and her partner liked to look together. Sini discussed pornography in her relationship in the context of writing erotic stories. She said her erotic stories were something she shared with an anonymous audience and the thought of sharing them with people that she knew was uncomfortable.

Like, I know I’m, this girl I’m currently dating uhm, she knows that I write porn and she’s pushing me to like to share with her what I write but I just, I’m just not comfortable with that, so it’s like, it’s some kind of quandary. I feel like it becomes contaminated by reality or something, I don’t know! *Sini’s Interview*

Sini explained that the type of sex that she liked to write about and the type of sex she liked to engage in were different, and so she was reluctant for her partner to read the stories in case there was any confusion about this.

So then someone to read that and be like oh you’re this kind of person and it’s like no I’m not, it’s just a fantasy, it’s just an idea. *Sini’s Interview*

In Kate’s relationship, her wife watched pornography but Kate had only found out because of their conversations about this research project. Kate was indifferent about it:

When I did mention it she was like oh yeah I watch porn all the time which I hadn’t realised but it doesn’t have any effect on my life I generally couldn’t care less, as long as it isn’t taking time away from me [laughs] but we’ve both got quite busy lives so if she can find you know a spare half an hour to [inaudible] then go for it. *Kate’s Interview*

I expressed some surprise that Kate did not know her partner watched pornography; however, she explained they had not talked about it as she did not have a problem with it.

Ruth: I think that, the thing I find interesting is like, is what people do and don’t talk to their partners about because I can’t imagine not just bringing up that conversation with *my partner* about porn very early on but that’s because I like research it, it’s not exactly, it’s always in my head [laughs]

Kate: It’s a thing in your life. Yeah, it doesn’t play any, any role in my life but I don’t have a problem with it at all. *Kate’s Interview*

This was again indicative of the women’s different personalities and preferences. For some it was something to be talked about and for others it was not. This implies that pornography has different personal and political significance for the women. As outlined in Chapter 2, the debates and research can present pornography as having a central role in shaping women’s lives and relationships. For the women in this research, this was not necessarily the case.

Honey, Elyndys’ and Minty all expressed some concerns or reservations about pornography within their relationships. How this was negotiated varied between them. Elyndys’ articulated that she did not know whether her partner watched pornography and would prefer not to know.

I don’t want to know because yeah I don’t like it myself either and so … but also I don’t want to say no you can’t do that because like I say we’ve got our own separate things that we enjoy and I don’t want likewise him to say to me no you can’t do that because I don’t like it, so I prefer to just be like you know I don’t want to know. *Elyndys’ Interview*

Avoidance of discussing pornography with male partners has been reported in other studies (Shaw, 1999; Benjamin and Tlusten, 2010). Shaw (1999, p.208) outlined that among the women she worked with: “In some cases, the use of pornography was accepted by the women as long as it was ‘hidden’, so that they did not have to confront it directly. In other cases, the women seemed to have become resigned to the belief that they could not, or should not, influence their husbands’ interests or behaviours.” However, Elyndys’ differed in that she did not want to be restricted from engaging in her own sexual practices. She *chose* not to ask rather than feeling she could not.

Minty’s feelings about pornography within her relationship was something that she actively wanted to discuss in the project and bought up on several occasions. She shared that her partner felt he was addicted to pornography. Minty was accepting of her partner’s use but did have concerns over how it could spill into their relationship. She articulated:

So my relationship to porn as a woman is through my partner, and how he uses porn, and how it affects our relationship because it does. *Minty’s Interview*

She discussed her concerns that her partner had obtained unrealistic ideas about sex from pornography. She felt concerned that this could be worse for young people with less sexual experience. When I asked her whether this was an issue within her own relationship, or she was more worried about younger people she said:

Both. When we were first together, there were discussions of why do you do that? Because I thought you’d like it. Well what gave you that idea? Because I’ve seen it. Yeah. I mean nothing, nothing, nothing extreme or anything, just little things but he’s an experienced, he’s not an experienced man, he’s a reasonable experienced man! [laughs] *Minty’s Interview*

Minty did not want to restrict her partner’s use of pornography and was accepting of him wanting to use it. Her concerns were that it should not spill over into their life together. She shared that she had spoken to him about it and that had sorted things out.

Honey was resistant to the presence of pornography within her relationship. She did not want her partner to watch pornography nor for it to affect her life through her partner. In research group meeting 5, we had a long discussion when Honey found out that her then partner had been looking at pornography and speaking to women online without her knowledge. She was very upset when she discovered this, and when she had broached it with him, he had been defensive and unwilling to discuss it.

I was like you know what I’ve seen and he was like well if you have seen what I think you’ve seen, you’ve seen nothing. It went a bit, I wish I could have had an open conversation about it but he was so defensive. *Honey in Research Group Meeting 5.*

When we discussed it in the group, several of us reassured her about wanting to talk about it and set boundaries. I asked Honey in her interview whether she had spoken to him and she said:

We had a really, really frank conversation and I was like, it’s my, this is something that I feel very, very strongly about, if you’re not going to change than fuck you. And then, he changed I guess, it’s gone really well, the conversation worked. Uhm, and I think it is about communication as well, me being like, I want you to hide porn from me probably isn’t very communicative but it’s about negotiating because I will never ever like porn, even if I started watching porn I wouldn’t like it. *Honey’s Interview*

She shared that she had asked him to keep his use of pornography away from her. She did not feel she could impose on people’s use of pornography, but she felt adamant it should not impact on how women are viewed, nor should it affect her sex life. In some regards this mirrored the findings of Shaw (1999) (quoted above) but she had been able to set some boundaries with him.

The role of pornography within the women’s relationships varied. This became very apparent when we talked about it in the group. Looking at the role of pornography in relationships was helpful for exploring the ways in which women encountered pornography, and how they actively managed its role in their lives. For some, it was something negotiated with partners and a way to express their sexuality that fit comfortably within that relationship. Elizabeth’s story also disrupted the dominant narrative of negotiating *male use* of pornography; it was her who used pornography in her relationship. For Elyndys and Kate it played little role at all. Minty and Honey were concerned at their partner’s use of pornography and they had indirectly encountered it through their partners’ actions. However, the women had established boundaries and asserted their concerns at this, they were not just acted upon.

Some of the experiences and management strategies that the women shared are not reflected in the literature. The broad focus on women’s experiences of pornography has largely been on heterosexual women (Chadwick et al, 2018). There is less documentation in the literature around women not in heterosexual relationships and pornography, or discussions around women using pornography in relationships. There has been a tendency to look at women and heterosexual relationships or the impact of male consumption of pornography on women. This research indicated the need to speak to women of different sexualities, and to map the different ways in which women encounter and negotiate pornography in their lives.

5.8 Pornography and Family

Pornography was also something that needed to be negotiated in and was encountered through familial relationships. Elizabeth and Minty both had children; Elizabeth was mother to three daughters and Minty was step-mother to two sons and two daughters. Both of the women had concerns around their children and pornography and had had to advise their daughters on this. In her interview, Minty told me of a concern regarding her step-daughter’s sexual relationship with her boyfriend. She questioned whether her step-daughter was engaging in certain sexual acts because her boyfriend thought that’s what they should do.

So a teenager I know 17, just has started in a sexual relationship and is covered in love bites and I had to say something because it looked awful and she thought that’s what you did because her boyfriend thinks that’s what you do. *Minty’s Interview*

She questioned whether her step-daughter’s boyfriend had learned this from pornography. Minty felt that the context of pornography for a young person varied from her own experience.

it’s really difficult as somebody in my 40s to imagine what it’s like to be a 17 year old now. Because when I was 17 porn was a magazine that you bought in the newsagent or a video that you hired, you couldn’t watch it on TV, you couldn’t download it off the internet. So for me the world is so different, it’s like another universe. *Minty’s Interview*

This highlighted the multiple ways in which pornography needed to be negotiated, through direct and indirect encounters. Elizabeth had similar concerns around young women and pornography. Both women’s main concern was that pornography is not discussed enough and so young women are not necessarily equipped or empowered to negotiate it within their lives.

Elizabeth: My daughterand I were talking about this, she’s 18 and her boyfriend was like, ex boyfriend, twat of an ex boyfriend, I stopped watching porn now so we should have sex, and she was like mmm no! That’s not how this work. So I’ve started talking to her about porn, so you watch porn and you know there’s if you want to, there’s porn out there and it’s not a dirty thing, it’s not a bad thing but to her it was like, she was like, the fear, it’s just like, because it’s so taboo, they don’t spend time sort of researching the right porn for them, as a teenager they just find the first porn that you google, porn, and like God forbid what comes up.

Minty: What you were saying earlier about David Cameron cracking down and the government having this real thing about porn, that really scares me, that really scares me because we’re taking porn and going to hide it, teenagers aren’t allowed to see porn. What are we doing? What we’re saying to them is all porn is scary, all porn is fear and therefore you don’t know what’s out there, we need to have conversations about this. *Research Group Meeting 1*

While Elizabeth and Minty’s opinions touched upon some of the documented concerns around young people and pornography, this extract shows how their concerns differed significantly. Elizabeth felt that by making pornography taboo, society does not acknowledge that there are choices around pornography. The problem was not pornography *per se*, but how it is discussed within society. Elizabeth and Minty did have concerns around their daughters but wanted them to be empowered to make choices about it. Their stories touched upon a further experience of pornography, they indirectly encountered it through their relationships with their children.

5.9 Conclusion

Through exploring the women’s rich and personal narratives, it has been possible to develop deeper understandings into their biography with pornography and the ways in which it has been encountered and interacted with in their lives. Doing so revealed their relationships with pornography were not static, for some of the women their relationships had changed over time. There were a multitude of ways to encounter pornography. This varied according to the type of interaction, their motivations and choice and agency, who else was involved and the emotional experience. Their intimate stories highlighted that women can have diverse experiences of pornography; this was visible in their lives and when comparing them with each other. Pornography could be both pleasurable and painful, sought after and avoided, and oppressive and empowering. The context in which encounters with pornography had happened were important for understanding the role pornography had had in the women’s lives.

The women’s narratives both aligned and deviated from the research literature on pornography. There were elements of the polarised feminist debates in the women’s stories yet neither side could be said to encapsulate any one woman’s experience. The women’s relationships to pornography reflected a range of different academic arguments. There were women who were engaged in prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010) while for others consumption remained an entrenched boundary (Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015). Similar to Chadwick et al (2018), who observed that women’s agentic choices were crucial to understanding women’s consumption of pornography, I would argue that ‘agency’ was a key component of understanding the women’s experiences more broadly. The women made choices around pornography and actively negotiated its presence in their lives, both for those seeking it out and for those avoiding it. However, there was not always control over interactions, and Honey in particular shared stories of unwanted imposition and contact. In these examples, her agency was denied.

The women’s narratives also indicated the importance of relationships and family dimensions. Encounters with pornography were not necessarily a personal or intimate experience, and it was something that needed to be negotiated with others. Reflecting on Chapter 4, this reaffirms that ‘pornography’ represents more than its material form. Interactions with ‘pornography’ did not necessarily mean direct contact with pornographic materials.

Given the broad range of experiences shared it is important to consider how the women made sense of each other’s experiences. Much of the research was conducted in group meetings and as such the women did not talk about their experiences in isolation from one another; often perspectives were shared in response to contributions offered in the group meetings. In the next empirical findings chapter, I will explore the women’s perspectives and positions on pornography.

Chapter 6: Perspectives and Positionality on Pornography

“*I think that if you can talk about it openly, it’s not such a taboo to talk about it with your partner, you can get what you goddamn want*” Annette (Research Group Meeting 8)

6.1 Introduction

In this final empirical findings chapters, I will explore the women’s positionalities and perspectives on pornography. The previous chapter looked at the women’s personal encounters with pornography and how it featured (or did not) in their lives. This chapter will locate these experiences within their broader personal and political perspectives on pornography within society. As highlighted in Chapter 2, there is an abundance of research suggesting that pornography can be damaging for people’s wellbeing and can negatively influence their attitudes and behaviours towards women. Pornography has been positioned as central to sexual and gendered forms of inequality. Conversely, the emphasis placed on pornography as being the key determinant in this inequality has been questioned (Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015). The literature is split on whether pornography is inherently problematic (Dines, 2010) or whether it is just certain content that is negative (Tarrant, 2015). As discussed in Chapter 1, how to negotiate pornography in society is highly contested and there have been significant and extensive attempts to control and censor its reach (NSPCC, 2015). However, recent legislative and policy changes enacted have been accused of threatening the production of more ethical forms of pornography (Blake, 2019).

Throughout the project, I sought to hear and listen to the women’s opinions about the role of pornography in society. All of the women thought about it beyond their own experiences and were interested in what it meant for other women and other people. This chapter will outline some of their hopes and concerns, and their political views about its regulation in society. A range of different opinions on pornography were shared. This was visible within each woman’s response and across the women. I will explore and discuss five of our *Findings from the Project* (see Appendix 1):

* Pornography is experienced, engaged with, thought and felt about in diverse ways by us. Positive, negative and everything in-between.
* We believe that women are still not fully able to exercise autonomy over their sexuality. Women face control and regulation of their sexualities and are often subject to unwanted attention.
* We believe that there aren’t enough spaces to talk about women and pornography.
* We felt that how society understands pornography, and how society talks about it is gendered.
* We believe that sex, sexuality and pornography all need to be more openly discussed in our society, particularly in the media but in other spaces too. These conversations need to be broad and not just focused on negative issues. *Findings from the Project*

While the women’s opinions varied, there were common concerns about the difficulties women face expressing their sexuality autonomously, and the lack of space to talk about pornography. The way that pornography was positioned in relation to these concerns varied. However, these common themes indicated that there were mutual focal points around which strategies for change could be developed.

This chapter brings together the women’s contributions from their interviews and the research group meetings. Some of their responses were direct answers to questions about specific aspects of their opinions on pornography, other answers emerged during other conversations. Given the vast volume of data we produced, this chapter in no way covers all of the women’s opinions. This is a showcase of their perspectives to build a picture of some of the different positions on pornography. This will include their views on the potential positives and negatives of pornography; their ideas for negotiating it in society; their views on policy and legislation; and finally, the ways in which pornography was located within broader social and cultural issues.

6.2 Potential Positives of Pornography

Each woman was asked in her interview if she felt there were positives to pornography, and this was discussed more broadly throughout the research project. This was to garner their views on the social value of pornography and whether they felt it could be a positive source of sexual practice, sexual expression and sexual pleasure. All of the women identified some positive aspects to it, though the extent to which they had positive feelings about it overall varied. Positive factors included: its function, its educative capacity, the social networks around it and that it could be a safe avenue to explore sexual acts.

Elizabeth and Minty shared similar feelings about the potential positive capacity of pornography. They felt it could be a tool and aid to help people express their sexuality.

I think it’s a tool and you can use it to explore areas that you might not be comfortable with. So I think you, you know, there are so many reasons. There are people who physically can’t do certain things, porn might be a tool for that. There’s people who want to try something but they’re not sure, it’s can be a tool for that. There are people who are lonely, and there’s a tool for that. *Elizabeth’s Interview*

I think there are good things about it, I think people need it, I think it can be educational not that I think it should be educational, it’s entertainment. Uhm [pause] if you’re not in a relationship pornography can give you something that perhaps you wouldn’t have. If you are in a relationship it can add to it. *Minty’s Interview*

This aspect of pornography was visible in the experiences of the women who used pornography; it could be a pleasurable tool for sexual practice. Psycho echoed Elizabeth and Minty’s position. She found pornography to be stimulating and convenient and she enjoyed the ‘naughtiness’ of it.

It’s almost like a little bit naughty and it’s quite a nice feeling like you’re doing something a little bit [naughty] *Psycho’s Interview*

In this regard, being able to access and engage with pornography was seen as acceptable and potentially positive. Drawing on all the women’s data more broadly, all of them seem to accept this on some level. None of the women suggested that it was fundamentally wrong to engage with materials that depict sex, though there were different levels of comfort and discomfort around this. Honey exhibited the least acceptance of pornography and was very critical of it. When, I asked Honey whether there was anything she liked about it, she articulated that she liked that there was choice and that anyone could watch it.

I like the idea that you … that you can shop around, that there’s choice, I like that there’s choice. Uhm, I like that it’s not like, I want to say it’s not elitist, do you know I mean? Like anyone can watch porn. *Honey’s Interview*

When asked in their interview, Elyndys, Kate and Annette all discussed pornography’s positive capacity in relation to the range of materials available for all people. They felt that pornography could be an important avenue for people to explore their sexuality, particularly if their sexuality was niche or had been marginalised. This reflected McNair’s (2013) argument that pornography has been important in bringing recognition to once excluded sexualities. Elyndys and Kate both articulated the importance of people being able to access sexual communities.

Like I was saying earlier when it comes to the more niche things and the more uhm yeah even extreme things, things that people might think ah I’m the only person who likes that, I must be a freak or whatever, uhm but for people to think actually no I’m not there’s a lot of other people who also have this interest so it’s not just me. *Elyndys’ Interview*

I like there to be opportunities for people to experience and have communities around their sexualities, preferences uhm like just being in the LGBT scene you know if you like a bit of kink then I think it’s good that you can access that, and in particularly if in a safe environment. *Kate’s Interview*

This perspective was reflected in Annette’s experience of pornography. Throughout the group she shared with us that pornography had enabled her to explore her sexuality safely and to access information about it. She shared:

Well for me, a lot of it is just growing up there weren’t positive role models in my life that had the same sexuality as me. *Annette’s Interview*

She explained that kink and BDSM sexualities are often portrayed as a joke and something to be laughed at, or as deviant and something to be scared of. Pornography was an avenue for seeing positive representations of her sexuality and for learning how to practise it in a safe and consensual way.

There weren’t intelligent, sex-positive people for me to like, to be like right okay so that’s how you do it without being irresponsible or a joke. So, basically, pornography and porn bloggers sort of became that for me, taught me how to negotiate, taught me how to get better at communication, partner safety, just a whole load of things that weren’t, weren’t discussed with me. *Annette’s Interview*

Psycho and Sini also proposed that pornography could be a safe way through which to explore certain sexual acts.

I think that like uhm, it like, like if people didn’t want it then the industry wouldn’t exist, so and if it is people that are producing things in a controlled environment rather than acting those scenes out then I think that’s perhaps like safer and better. *Psycho’s Interview*

As long as it’s like consensual and no one’s getting harmed, then why are certain things that’s decided a no like, that makes very little sense to me. *Sini’s Interview*

They distinguished between people accessing depictions of an act and acting it out themselves. Much of the contention around pornography has focused on whether there is such a distinction or whether the content reflects and influences people’s attitudes and behaviours (McNair, 2014). A fuller conversation emerged about this in research group meeting 6 and was an example of where there was a difference in opinion (this will be explored further in Chapter 7).

The women’s opinions captured many of the views represented in the literature on pornography. The women liked that there were choices around pornography and that it could cater to different people’s sexualities, or they discussed that it had a sexual purpose which could support people’s sexual expression or education. These mirrored the arguments of advocates of pornography (McNair, 1999; 2002; 2013). Some of these positive aspects were experienced in the women’s own lives or they felt it could have positive potential for others. Alongside these opinions, all of the women felt there could be negative aspects to pornography which will be explored next.

6.3 Potential Negatives of Pornography

I asked the women their opinions on the potential negatives of pornography to explore whether they related to any of the concerns highlighted in the literature. The concerns that arose revolved around the welfare of those working in the industry, the degree to which pornographic materials were consensually made, the impact of pornography on people’s views of women and sex, and pornography being used non-consensually. Kate was concerned by the possibility of an exploitative industry in which performers were treated poorly, though she was unsure how prevalent this was:

The sort of sex trafficking side of things, like it being made by the producer for personal gains and the stars not necessarily getting their right amount of money. I don’t know if that’s still a current thing or, I don’t really know much about it, but it used to be I think, more so at least. *Kate’s Interview*

Psycho and Annette both discussed their concerns at non-consensual material and both disliking the idea of hidden cameras or people being filmed without their consent. This reflected contemporary concerns around ‘revenge pornography’ and ‘upskirting’ (McGlynn et al, 2017; McGlynn and Rackley, 2017a). Psycho discussed the importance for her of informed consent and fair pay for those performing in pornography. She also mentioned her concerns at ‘revenge pornography’, something that she had witnessed when at university. Similarly, Annette was concerned at the prospect of non-consensual images being made.

Yeah, knowing that the people are consenting and they know what they’re signing up to, uhm, and that they’re getting paid if that’s what they want or you know, if it’s like hidden cameras, like I have a real thing with like hidden cameras and I don’t like any of that, or like where it says amateur because you just think has someone made that with their partner and then this is a revenge thing, like that I thinks horrible and like a real cruel violation of somebody. *Psycho’s Interview*

I mean, uhm, up-skirt videos, people like celebrities, like when you know it’s not consensual, it’s just like somebodies taking a picture and its sort of some girl walking down the street, someone’s shoved a camera up her skirt. *Annette’s Interview*

Several of the women touched upon concerns around the impact of pornography on women. Elyndys discussed her worry about the pressure pornography can put on women’s body image and what they feel they should be doing sexually.

I think my thing is probably body image and like expectation of women … because again you read news articles of young women who are saying you know boys in school would talk about such a thing and that’s how I got the idea that I had to look like this or I had to do that. *Elyndys’ Interview*

Minty similarly discussed her concerns that pornography gives men and women unrealistic expectations about sex in relationships. I asked her whether she was particularly concerned for women or for both men and women, to which she replied both. However, she specifically framed her response around the impact that pornography might have on male expectations of themselves or women.

I think it makes, from what I understand, it makes men think that women should behave in a certain way or that they should behave in a particular way. I think it makes everybody think that unrealistic things are normal or are realistic. *Minty’s Interview*

As discussed in Chapter 5, some of these concerns were rooted in Minty’s own experiences. She shared that her partner had learnt some unwanted things from pornography and she had also seen this happen to her step-daughter with her step-daughter’s partner. For Honey, pornography was a big concern. She related it to issues around body image and to everyday sexism. She also felt it had the capacity to socialise men and women’s behaviour.

I can’t talk about porn without talking about body image, and I can’t talk about body image without talking about anything. It’s in everything that we do, it’s in the clothes we wear, like everything that we consume is porn and uhm it’s almost like, as a feminist as well like it’s a massive part, is it liberating for women is it not? And it’s like yeah it is sort of like everyday sexism and how it translates to the world. *Honey’s Interview*

These concerns around pornography were similar to those highlighted in contemporary research about pornography’s role in shaping or influencing attitudes and behaviours towards women and sex (IPPR, 2014). Annette was concerned that pornography could be used to shape young women’s sexuality denying them the opportunity to shape it themselves. She reflected on research she had read and on Honey’s experiences. She felt concerned at the prospect of young women doing only what men wanted.

You should have your own sexual awakening and your own sort of discovery in your sexuality, in your own time not have it like be pushed on you, like girls saying oh well I guess I better do this because it’s what boys want. It’s like no, think about also what you want to do sexually and sort of have the discussion with your partner or prospective partner. *Annette’s Interview*

Annette’s concerns did not necessarily lie with pornography itself, but with individuals and their behaviours, and the use of pornography in a detrimental and non-consensual way.

I mean even younger boys, if all you see is like, this is what sex is and you don’t think for yourself about how you wanna experience your own sex life, you just mimic the videos, it just seems a little bit hollow and sad to me. Like, you’re just performing things like a blooming monkey, you’re not thinking about what you actually want in bed or you’re just doing it because you think this is what boys are supposed to like or this is what girls are supposed to like, instead of having the kinda relationship that I have. *Annette’s Interview*

Elizabeth also framed her concerns about pornography within wider societal attitudes and behaviours. She disliked the ways in which women were stereotyped and portrayed but felt this was visible in media beyond pornography.

I mean my concerns are the same concerns I have about anything in the world that I think that we have a very narrow body image uhm you know I think how females in general are portrayed. My views about porn are no different than my views about Cosmo. *Elizabeth’s Interview*

In this regard, the problems associated with pornography transcended pornography. Sini expressed a similar sentiment; she felt concerned at ‘mainstream pornography’ being the most overt representation of sex with society, in the absence of wider representations of sex.

Like I feel like the entire modern society is so focussed on it somehow, and I feel like sex and sexuality is everywhere. Like porn is everywhere. But like, I’ve said this before and I’m not saying it very well, like right now, like sex and sexuality is everywhere else except in sex and sexuality … This society is not willing to engage with actual conversation about sex and sexuality in a more wider sense. *Sini’s Interview*

Sini felt there was a difference between the fantasy portrayed in pornography and the reality of sex in life. She felt concerned at pornography being the main portrayal of sex in society but framed this within a context of societal reluctance to discuss sex in other ways. The lack of wider societal discussions around sex in society was a recurring theme within the project and will be explored further later in this chapter.

Reflecting on all of the responses given, there were diverse potential concerns with pornography relating to how it can be produced, used and engaged with more broadly. The key concerns related to where pornography was produced or used exploitatively or non-consensually, or where pornography was a negative source of information or influence on attitudes towards women, sex and sexuality. This mirrored concerns present in pornography critiques, government policy and media discussions (for example, Dines, 2010; Bailey 2010; Papadoupolous, 2011). Some of these negative aspects of pornography had been experienced by the women themselves or they were concerned that it could happen to others.

Evaluating the women’s like and dislikes of pornography more broadly, their opinions captured many of the views represented in the literature on pornography. These views were interesting as they mirrored both anti-pornography and pro-pornography arguments and existed simultaneously. It was not either/ or. Having concerns around pornography did not necessarily translate to wanting to censor it and enjoying pornography did not mean the women had no concerns. It is important not to simplify the women’s feelings. Through making the above analysis I do not wish to construe the women’s opinions as equally occupying the centre ground. As evident in each findings chapter some of the women felt it had the capacity or likelihood to be more positive or more negative, and their own experiences could be reflective of this. However, with this recognition, it was noticeable that the women’s opinions (though to different extents) could contain elements of both sides of the ‘polarised’ pornography debates. The women did not have just one viewpoint or stance on pornography, their views were much more complex.

6.4 Changing Pornography in Society

In each woman’s interview, she was asked whether there were any changes or developments she would like to see around pornography in society. I wanted to get a sense of how each woman felt pornography could be better negotiated in society, and what their opinions were on current policy on pornography. The women talked about the importance of having better sex education, wider societal conversations on sex and pornography, and trying to break the taboo around pornography.

Minty argued that better sex education was important and would enable people to critically engage with pornography.

Well some people would say pornography is realistic, wouldn’t they? [laugh] I would imagine that there is realistic pornography, I believe. Uhm, I, I don’t have a problem with that, the problem is education. The problem is educating people to know what they’re looking at, but like I said that goes for all forms of media. People believe what they see on the telly and what they read in the newspaper these days. I don’t think people are taught to question. *Minty’s Interview*

Honey felt it was important that pornography was talked about more, she did not feel that hiding it away would solve the problems that could arise from it.

I think like everything, like this whole push on mental health at the moment, just talk about it, because like you drive it underground if you don’t talk about it, like mothers and fathers understand that your kids will be watching porn, even if they don’t know they’re watching porn they’re probably watching a bit of porn … there’s porn everywhere and yeah, just yeah you’ve got to talk about it because it’s, it’s never going to go away even if you ban porn, it’ll go underground or it will just be more resonate on what we see on the television or music videos. *Honey’s Interview*

While Honey was the most critical of pornography, she still argued for much more openness around it. Annette and Psycho also felt that pornography could be shown to young people as part of the conversation on sex and pornography. This could provide them with context and explain the types of pornography available. Annette linked this to the wider provision of sex education:

The government should uh, there should be like a pack distributed as part of PSE lessons I think and teachers not necessarily sort of going through the material in class but there should be links to the kind of blogs that I read that talked about the kind of issues that arise in adult human relationships and you can sort of think over it. It doesn’t necessarily have to be depictions of the activities but like just serious consideration of what you want from a relationship and partner care and all the sorts of things like, safe sex, informed consent and just like your own wishes and what you want before you start fucking. *Annette’s Interview*

Both Annette and Psycho felt that pornography shown with explanation would enable young people to make more informed choices about it. This could enable them to take greater control over their sexuality and have a more informed understanding of sex. Both of them discussed doing this in a safe, considered way, tailored to age:

Kids are obviously aware of it and they’re seeking to see it, but it’s what they’re watching not that they’re watching porn that bothers me … So, if you know based on our definition that we had of porn, if it was people or young kids watching sex that was like almost like a gradual like introduction into developing as they develop, then I think that would be a real positive thing … So I just think, if you could somehow like you know it’d never happen, but if you could have like an age restriction, like development of what they could watch, I don’t think that would be a bad thing. *Psycho’s Interview*

This perspective was interesting as it positioned pornography as being part of sexual education to improve sexual agency, as opposed to using sexual education to deter young people from pornography (such as Laws, 2013). The problem was not pornography itself, but rather people’s difficulties in making informed choices around it.

Kate, Elizabeth and Psycho all articulated that they would like it if there was less of a taboo status around pornography. Kate likened it to being a swear word (or a dirty word but felt that was too much of a pun!) and Elizabeth said she would like to get “rid of the fear”. Psycho articulated that she would like there to be more openness around pornography but was also aware that some people do not want to talk about. She felt it was important that everyone was free to make their own choices free of judgement.

I think some people don’t want to talk about it, uh some people don’t want anything to do with it and that’s their choice isn’t it and I do think like it kind of comes back to uh the music video thing, that porn is different things to different people. Uhm, and but uhm that’s okay, I don’t think, I don’t like this people’s judginess of anything either way. Uh, if I could change anything it would be perceptions that if you watch porn you’re a perv, do you know what I mean? Or if you don’t, you’re a prude. *Psycho’s Interview*

This resonated with the conversation had between Elizabeth and Minty about negotiating pornography with their children (outlined in Chapter 4). They felt concerned that the fear around it prevented engagement with it in a more informed, self-directed way. When Sini and Psycho discussed changes to pornography, they both considered this in regard to wider societal values. Sini felt the reluctance to talk about sex and sexuality more broadly filtered down into the types of pornographic content available. She articulated:

I just feel like, that there should be more openness to different kinds of relationships but we just don’t see that, we don’t see that in porn or we don’t see that in society, we don’t see that in sex or sexuality. *Sini’s Interview*

When we related this to pornography, Sini, who was polyamorous, shared that mainstream pornography was very unrepresentative of her sexuality. She did not feel that polyamorous relationships were depicted realistically in pornography and instead were portrayed through stereotypes.

Ruth: Uh, so you mean as in, you mean there isn’t just for example a threesome as in because this in a polyamorous couple? Not because they’re like ooh shall we have a threesome, yeah?

Sini: Yeah, exactly its always like the bisexual girl invited over… [laughs]

Ruth: Yeah, yeah

Sini: …kind of dynamic, it’s also like sometimes when you look at like bisexual porn they do, it always like somehow involves, using the woman in someway, even if it’s like two women and one guy, it is always this power dynamic that’s going on, which is interesting. Or that it’s like an orgy where yeah… It’s mostly a lot of penises involved, in all kinds of places. [laughs] *Sini’s Interview*

Similarly, Elyndys felt the issues within pornography transcended pornography. When I asked her the change she would like to see, she suggested that the issue lay with broader societal values and gendered inequalities.

I think, it’s more than about pornography in a way isn’t it? Because it’s like about the general idea of you know, patriarchal idea of like oh men are more sexual and men can’t control themselves or men have got urges that need to be catered to and women don’t necessarily have those urges and I think there’s an element of saying well actually you know women do you know have, you know, just an element of being more knowledgeable about female sexuality. But also yeah women’s rights to say actually that’s you know we’re maybe not on the same page all the time but you’ve got to accept that and you’ve gotta you know, it’s got to be equal … I think it’s a power imbalance I suppose but that’s just in general terms still in society isn’t it? *Elyndys’ Interview*

Reflecting on all of the women’s responses, regardless of their differing opinions and experiences of pornography, they all proposed changes not to pornography itself but to broader society. There was an emphasis on finding ways to support people to make informed and empowered choices. Issues around pornography were located in wider societal issues. This was one example of a site of consensus among the women’s responses.

6.5 Legislation and Policy on Pornography

We also discussed the women’s opinions on legislation and policy on pornography. We explored their perspectives on how pornography is currently regulated in UK society. These conversations were focussed on the regulation of adult, consensually made materials. The legal regulation of pornography has been subject to intense debate within pornography studies (across different countries) and it has been disputed whether pornography should be censored (Manning, 2007). This debate is particularly pertinent in the UK at present, as the government is introducing new legislation. While the women had varying views about pornography, they were all largely critical of government policy.

We discussed the introduction of age verification checks in which pornography websites in the UK will have to have rigorous checks to ensure viewers are 18 and over (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019). There was concern at this policy; Honey and Annette both questioned the likelihood that the government would be able to regulate all websites. Rather, they felt it will still be possible to access pornography whether it be through ‘underground’ videos (Honey) or the dark web (Annette). At the time of the research, it was unclear what documentation would be needed to verify age; the current guidance suggests it could be different documents including a credit card or passport (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, 2019). There was distrust of the efficiency of this in verifying ages, Annette shared:

You could buy a credit card number [laughs] It’s not very effective again, still, I mean you could just buy a credit card number off of the dark web and use it. Or you could be part of a large network that share pornography, not on the internet but on a private network. It’s not going to stop young people looking at pornography. *Annette’s Interview*

Similarly, Minty felt it likely that people would be able to circumvent the requirement to have a credit card. She also felt this could place a restriction on adults legally accessing pornography if they were ineligible for a credit card. Psycho shared that it would restrict her from looking at pornography as she would be wary of privacy issues and fraud.

But I don’t think, surely with like the kind of sites, if they’re asking for credit card details, then that’s, I, I wouldn’t go on any of them, mainly because of, well that’s going to be massively open to fraud. *Psycho’s Interview*

Of the women who spoke about the age verification checks there was little faith in the government to protect privacy. Honey also questioned the efficacy of the policy in preventing young people from seeing pornography. She highlighted the blurred boundaries between pornography and other media:

But when does it stop because we’re talking again, we’re talking about porn like it’s a video on Pornhub and Redtube, what about the stuff that goes on Facebook? What about Game of Thrones? I keep saying Game of Thrones, what about sex scenes in films? Are you going to be watching a film and half way through it, it’s going to be hang on a minute this is a bit porny, enter your credit card details! *Honey’s Interview*

Honey’s opinion touched on the blurred boundaries of pornography and the difficulty of monitoring all pornography on the internet. Critics have pointed out that the policy will still enable young people to see pornography. It has been proposed that the checks will apply to websites where more than a third of the content is pornographic, therefore websites such as Twitter (which contain pornography but to a lesser degree) will not be regulated (Girl on the Net, 2019). The women’s concerns around the age verification checks mirrored some of the most prominent criticisms of it, they felt it was unlikely to work, would impact on adults looking at it legally and that there was a risk of fraud (Adam Smith Institute, 2019; Blake, 2019). There was a lack of trust of this policy.

There were also some reservations about the regulation of pornography under the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 (in which ‘Extreme Pornography’ was banned[[18]](#footnote-18)) (House of Commons, 2016) and the 2014 Amendment to the 2003 Communications Act (which restricted the types of sexual acts that could be displayed in video-on-demand online pornography) (Hooton, 2014). The women questioned the ways in which the government had regulated what types of consensual sex were allowed to be displayed in pornography. For example, Honey questioned the sexual acts that had been restricted from video-on-demand pornography; she was concerned that acts of female pleasure were excluded:

Honey: even those rules, do you remember one of those rules that you read out? Like can’t sit on someone’s face coz of suffocation, like can’t have an orgasm or like what is it? Squirt, because they might wee and that’s-

Ruth: Yeah female ejaculation.

Honey: Yeah like that’s, that’s actual black and white, how woman are fucked over by porn. Literally! [laughs] *Honey’s Interview*

Honey felt that the legislation could reinforce some of the negative aspects of pornography as it restricted pleasurable depictions of female sexuality. Several of the women felt uncomfortable with the government regulating the type of consensual sex that features in pornography. Sini questioned the ways in which sexual acts were distinguished in pornography legislation.

Like, is it, if it’s, as long as it’s like consensual and no one’s getting harmed, then why are certain things that’s decided a no like, that makes very little sense to me. *Sini’s* *Interview*

Sini questioned the government legislating against sexual acts in pornography, if it was consensual produced. Similarly, in regard to the 2014 Amendment to the 2003 Communications Act, Kate questioned:

What’s wrong with golden showers if that’s what you’re into? *Kate in Research Group Meeting 4.*

Annette shared that the law restricting Extreme Pornography was something that she had had to think about it in regard to her own sexuality. Annette highlighted that for her the law was unclear.

I guess I have sort of thought about the law and pornography because of obviously being kinky when the Extreme Porn Law came out I was a bit like oh fuck, is that going to affect me because you know spanking is quite mild to be honest and uh it was a bit vague that law so I was a bit like hmm… *Annette in Research Group Meeting 3.*

This resonated with Jones (2016) discussion around the ambiguity of the label ‘extreme’ and the ambiguity of the legal definition of ‘extreme pornography’. There have been campaigners who have argued that this legislation is unclear and that ‘extreme pornography’ is not properly defined in the legislation (Jackman, no date).

In Elyndys interview she discussed the law when talking about definitions of pornography. She questioned how distinguishing types of pornography could simultaneously reinforce what is considered ‘good’ pornography:

I mean especially because like the legality and things like that, I mean that’s, that’s sort of being approved if you know the law changes and they say no we can’t have extreme pornography anymore, you’ve just gotta have the [laughs] you know the normal stuff! The regular kind, so yeah I think it’s quite important because that’s the kind that people are going to have access to and that’s the kind I think is more difficult to separate from reality … I think with what you know we consider mainstream pornography is maybe people think oh well that’s normal, it’s what it’s meant to be like. *Elyndys’ Interview*

She reflected that the government deciding what is considered ‘mainstream’ could be a tacit endorsement of ‘mainstream’ content as ‘acceptable’ or ‘normal’ representations of sex. The women felt that some of the current legislation did not adequately respond to or deal with the problems that can emerge from pornography. This is not to say that the women did not agree with the legislation at all. We did not have the opportunity to discuss in full if they felt any adult, consensually made content should be censored. Moreover, we did not do a full legal analysis of each piece of legislation. Often, there was a scepticism that censorship and curtailment of pornography (adult, consensual pornography) could prevent the problems that arise from it. Minty’s reflections on the age verification checks summarised this:

That is in a way a symptom of how this country operates in my opinion, now we’re getting into my political views, this country reacts to things, it doesn’t deal with the cause of things. So we’re reacting to the fact that pornography is ubiquitous, and that people are, it’s damaging people potentially, so what do we do? We try and put a block on it, we don’t educate the people, we just try and stop them from looking at it. That’s not going to work, coz you say to people you can’t look at that, what’s the first thing they wanna, they’re gonna want to do? Well, what is it? I can’t see it, I want to see it! *Minty’s Interview*

Minty felt the policies were reactive rather than proactive. She did not feel government policy addressed the underlying problems adequately. These underlying issues will be discussed next.

6.6 Underlying Problems and Suggestions for Change

Thus far, this chapter has presented the women’s individual thoughts and opinions on pornography. There were a wide range of views. All of the women could think of positives and negatives about pornography, but there were different extents to which they celebrated, condoned or criticised it overall. All of the women located issues around pornography within wider gendered inequalities and sexual inequalities. Throughout the project, we also talked about wider issues, such as how society and culture could be restrictive of women’s sexualities, only representative of a narrow vision of heterosexuality, and unwilling to talk about sex and sexuality.

One of our *Findings from the Project* was: “we believe that women are still not fully able to exercise autonomy over their sexuality. Women face control and regulation of their sexualities and are often subject to unwanted attention.” During the course of the project, concerns were shared about women experiencing sexism or being unable to have autonomy over their sexuality. Some of these stories were shared specifically in relation to our thoughts on pornography, and some of these emerged because of broader discussions about women in society. The women felt there were a broad range of sources pressuring women into looking and behaving in a specific way, pornography was just one of the mediums that could do this. For example, Elizabeth talked about this in relation to the fashion industry.

I don’t like that we portray women, that we stereotype them, that we stick them in a box, that we say you should look this way and you should like this kinda thing and you should have these opinions. That bothers me. But I don’t think it’s [pornography] any different from an Abercombie and Fitch ad. Uhm, the models, again the modelling industry also really fucks with women, really works them in a way that is sometimes inappropriate, people are mistreated. *Elizabeth’s Interview*

Minty particularly worried about the expectations there are on women to behave in a certain way, and she felt that women are not encouraged to make choices about how they want to present themselves.

I don’t like the way women are not allowed to express themselves, they have to be such and such but that’s just me. That’s just how I feel. *Minty’s Interview*

While Minty felt this pressure could come from pornography, she also felt it was part of a much wider problem.

I think it’s part of the problem, I don’t think, I don’t know about the biggest but it’s certainly part of the problem. I mean media, is the problem and I put pornography in media, I don’t take it, it’s not, it’s no, it’s probably bigger but it’s no different to lad mags, girly mags, TV programmes, films, how women are presented in advertising it’s all part of it, it’s all wrapped up in the same thing. *Minty’s Interview*

The women were similarly concerned with the impact of magazines, social media, advertising and other materials on shaping young women’s views of themselves (Perloff, 2014; Burns, 2016; Wise, 2016). Honey talked about the pressures she felt from watching Love Island and likened it to the pressure she felt from pornography:

But it’s embarrassing because I was talking about it [Love Island] in the office today and like pitching to people and like, this is okay, this is okay to watch like having to justify myself, and this woman was like but how does it actually make you feel when you see like these girls? Like one of thems 20 years old and she won it and she’s tiny and she was like how does that make you feel? Like, do you not feel like you’ve got to be that person? And I was like yeah probably, because I use to sit watching Love Island and doing like all sit ups and stuff, and I think that’s how I think that how porn affects me, in that like I don’t watch it and I’m not like all oh that’s how I’ve got to perform in bed but it’s like that’s how I’ve got to look. *Honey’s Interview*

Within the group, we talked about a range of materials in which women might be objectified. Elyndys and Psycho both talked about the ways in which women were objectified in sport. Elyndys enjoyed race car driving but disliked the portrayal of women within the sport.

But yeah it’s little things like that where yeah you see women as being the decoration you know and the women are just there to clap when the drivers go on the podium and it’s like nobody needs to do that, you know you don’t need to have women there just as like window dressing, you know you don’t have to be there just looking pretty.*Elyndys’ Interview*

Psycho discussed this in relation to the treatment of female football players and how they are objectified in the sport:

Psycho: Yeah, I think it’s still more taboo women’s sexuality, and even you hear it, it’s funny like, women are objectified more, so you see it like uhm political or sport-

Ruth: Kanye West music videos?!

Psycho: Yeah, yeah! Everything it’s like you know, they’ll like comment on a women’s appearance like I’ve just watched all the women’s European football championships and they comment on it in a way they’d never comment on it on a man. *Psycho’s Interview*

Throughout the research group, we identified the difficulty in talking about female sexuality in society more widely. The women felt that the conversation on pornography was gendered and this in part reflected the denial of women’s sexuality.

Minty: The other thing is, how often do you hear about the discussion about porn, is it about women using porn? Or is men? And it’s always about men. It’s always about the men, about how men use porn, the idea that women actually watch and enjoy pornography.

Elizabeth: But women and sex at all-

Minty: Yeah!

Elizabeth: I remember being like to my daughter, you know it’s okay if you wanna have sex. You’re 18, and she was like uh! Yeah, it’s not. I remember feeling like I was not supposed to want it, the guys were supposed to want it and I was supposed to hold it, I didn’t want to be the cow that got milked. I was super slutty and got rid of that feeling quickly! *Research Group Meeting 1*

They touched upon the idea that women are not supposed to talk about sex or are not considered as interested in pornography.

Honey: like the media doesn’t overtly say this but it basically says porn isn’t for you girls, this is what boys want and you’re gonna have to say no to it or you’re gonna have to say yes to it but it’s not for you

Elyndys: That’s what I was thinking actually after the group last time and I made a note of it, because I was like I must remember to say that, but yeah it was like porn isn’t for women. *Research Group Meeting 2*

This gendered approach to pornography and women’s sexuality was reflected in some of the women’s personal experiences. In research group meeting 2, we shared stories about how our parent’s conversations (or lack thereof) about porn with us were gendered. Honey shared that her mother had had a conversation about porn with her brother but not her, whereas Elizabeth shared that her mum had been very angry with her when she had found porn in her room (Elizabeth felt she would not have minded if she were a boy). Elyndys told us her mum was angry when she found some of Elyndys’ erotic writing. Her mum felt it was inappropriate for Elyndys as she was female. These discussions shaped our *Findings from the Project* that conversations on pornography are gendered and that there are not enough spaces to talk about women and pornography. In our analysis session, Annette reflected:

Annette: Yeah I agree with you like, I can’t believe that it’s still shocking that women engage with pornography to anybody, like I find that mind blowing that anyone, anywhere is like oh women don’t watch porn coz, even people who are like oh yeah women have sex, it’s just like, mind blowing to me that people don’t think we do.

Honey: But every time we talk about it, it’s reproduced, or every time society talks about it it’s reproduced. *Research Group Meeting 8.*

There was also a feeling that discussions around sex, sexuality and pornography all needed to be had much more frequently in society. Another of our collective *Findings from the Project* was: “We believe that sex, sexuality and pornography all need to be more openly discussed in our society, particularly in the media but in other spaces too. These conversations need to be broad and not just focused on negative issues.” A conversation that emerged repeatedly within the group and interviews was the need to talk more about sex, sexuality and pornography. There was a sense that broader discussion facilitates greater autonomy, as people can make more informed choices about sex.

The women talked about the limited ways in which sex and sexuality are talked about. It was felt that where sex is discussed or represented it can often be through a narrow heteronormative lens. Annette felt that ‘kink’ sexualities were stigmatised:

I think there’s a lot more information available more readily but mainstream society, there’s still a sort of a bit of a stigma, that like it’s naughty and dirty, more than regular sex. *Annette’s Interview*

Sini similarly felt that only a narrow range of sexualities were represented in society, within pornography and outside of it.

But like, I just feel like, that there should be more openness to different kinds of relationships but we just don’t see that, we don’t see that in porn or we don’t see that in society, we don’t see that in sex or sexuality, [pause] I don’t know, I don’t even know why, I guess people are scared and it’s not like something what you’re socialised to believe are normal, and everyone wants to be normal because everyone wants to be part of the group, no-one wants to be the freak. *Sini’s Interview*

When we discussed the theme of talking about sexuality more in our analysis session, Minty suggested we add that the conversation particularly needs to be had in the media, and that the conversation should not just be negative:

One thing I would say about that one you just said, we need to be more open about sex in society, I think we need to add to that and media, although media is part of society, I really think media needs to be, and not just in a negative way. *Minty in Research Group Meeting 8*

These suggestions particularly resonated with the women present at that meeting. There was a strong feeling that mainstream media has a large influence over the ideas we receive. The women felt it important that conversations around sex were not just had in a negative way, as this can reinforce people’s fear around sex and sexual practice.

Minty: Yeah and not just negatively

Sini: Exactly

Annette: And like the media has got more, it’s more far reaching than just a conversation on the bus, there’s going to be a lot more exposure generated by it, so it’s a negative idea that just puts forward the fucking bullshit ideas about sex negativity, it’s gonna have more of an affect because people are going to read it and internalise it and take it as a given, like in a conversation it’s more likely a shit idea’s going to be challenged whereas if you just read it and go oh yeah, blow jobs are gross, okay blow jobs are gross.

Sini: That’s exactly what I mean because the media has such a huge influence on us it’s ridiculous. *Research Group Meeting 8*

Negative discussions around pornography and sexuality did not necessarily reflect lived experience. For example, we reflected on the argument that pornography pressures young people to remove their pubic hair (Stone et al, 2017; MK, 2018). However, none of the women had ever encountered hostility to having pubic hair.

Elyndys: My male friends say the same thing, it’s like who gives a shit about that?

Minty: I’ve had male friends who say why would you want to have sex with a child?!

Someone: It’s all spikey!

Annette: In my experience most men or women that I’ve had sex with are just happy to see me naked.

Everyone laughs.

Elizabeth: I have had a lot of sex! And I’ve never had someone say you should lose weight, your boobs are saggy, you should shave, like I’ve never had complaints and I feel like I’ve slept with a range. I just think most people are happy to get laid. *Research Group Meeting 2.*

The women’s thoughts on the underpinning issues within society around sex, sexuality and pornography, and their suggestions about opening up the conversation on it highlighted the possibility for mutual and collective positions on pornography. Their diversity of experience was also compatible with shared ideas and thoughts on how to formulate policy and action on pornography. When considering how to reconcile the polarised debates on pornography, going beyond pornography and looking at wider issues could be a means for collective action and change. The research group was an example of how to engage people with different positions on pornography, and find shared goals and concerns.

6.7 Conclusions

Exploring the women’s opinions on pornography revealed myriad complex political positions on pornography, sexually explicit materials, and sex and sexuality in society. The whole spectrum of debate was present in their perspectives. The women differed in the extent to which they felt pornography was overall positive or negative, yet they could all identify good and bad aspects of it. Their perspectives indicated that ‘pornography’ is not a homogenous entity and that it can manifest in different ways. The women were all largely critical of ‘mainstream’ pornography and were more positive about alternative forms of pornography.

While there were diverse opinions on pornography, there were mutually shared perspectives. All of the women located issues around pornography within wider societal values, and they were concerned with the broader ways in which women’s sexualities are controlled and restricted. Furthermore, there was some distrust of the ways in which pornography is currently regulated on and negotiated within society. A society which talks about sex, sexuality and pornography was felt to be a positive step in mediating pornography.

The women’s positions straddled the divisions in the pornography debates; they could favour porn freedoms and be concerned about harm and gendered impacts. The women’s positions do not neatly fit into feminist discourses on pornography. However, this does not mean there were no sex and gender-based analyses to their opinions on pornography. This indicates the need for new feminist theory on pornography. In the next chapter, I will analyse the significance of the research findings. I will propose that the women’s opinions highlighted that there is common ground among different perspectives on pornography. As such there are ways to move forward from the polarised debates on porn.

Chapter 7: Discussion

“Extremes never get us anywhere, like being totally against, being totally for, it doesn’t open up anything, it’s just two stances” *Sini in Research Group Meeting 8*

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will engage in a critical discussion in which I will analyse the research findings and evaluate them in relation to the research aim. The empirical findings have been presented in three chapters covering the conceptualisation of pornography, encounters and interactions, and positionalities and perspectives. In Chapter 4, I outlined our conceptual framework for the word ‘pornography’ and the different ways in which we defined and understood it in the project. I concluded that ‘pornography’ is a concept used to describe a range of different phenomena and practices, and is laden with different social, political and moral assumptions. It is a disputed concept owing to its multiple and subjective meanings. In Chapter 5, I outlined the women’s individual encounters with pornography. I concluded that women can and do have diverse experiences of pornography; this was visible within each woman’s life and when comparing the women. The chapter highlighted that women’s relationships with pornography are contingent on multiple factors and are subject to change throughout the life course. Chapter 6 explored the women’s positions on pornography and their views beyond their own experiences. The women’s opinions were complex and contained elements of the whole spectrum of debate on pornography. There were shared perspectives around the inadequacies of how pornography is negotiated in society and a desire for there to be more open conversations about it. They also located their opinions on pornography within wider conversations on sex and sexuality.

This chapter will bring together these discussions on concepts, encounters and opinions and analyse them in relation to one another, returning to the initial aims and agenda set out in Chapter 1. I will critically consider what the findings tell us and what the implications of them are for broader societal understandings of pornography. Furthermore, I will highlight where this project has garnered fresh insights and where the results align and diverge from contemporary perspectives. The premise of this research has always been to find out more about pornography *and* about researching pornography. The research will add to bodies of knowledge on pornography, researching pornography and ideas of what robust pornography knowledge looks like. The doing of the research was also of empirical significance. The process of producing and collecting data was a form of data in itself, distinct from the opinions and experiences of pornography shared. Therefore, this chapter will analyse both what the empirical findings say about women’s experiences of pornography more broadly, and what they say about producing knowledge on pornography and engaging with the wider pornography research community. Throughout, I will begin to explore the validity, strengths and limitations of the research findings, and signpost significant factors in evaluating this in preparation for a larger discussion in the conclusion chapter.

7.2 How Do Women Experience Pornography?

The first aim of this research was to find out about women’s lived realities of pornography, and how it features in their lives. I wanted to understand more about the relationships that women can have with pornography, and the ways in which it is routinely experienced, interacted with and encountered. The research findings indicated that women can have diverse experiences of pornography and that this diversity is visible within individual women’s lives and when comparing women. ‘Experience’ could refer to the type of encounter, interaction or exposure to pornography and the emotional context and whether it was positive or negative. While seemingly a broad conclusion to draw, the absence of research into women’s experiences makes this a significant finding particularly when considered against the backdrop of the polarised debates on pornography. This research found that the anti- vs pro- pornography debates were inadequate in understanding the ways that pornography features in women’s lives as has been argued elsewhere (Juffer, 1998; Ciclitira, 2004). There were elements of the polarised debates that were visible in each individual woman’s response. However, given the multiplicity of experiences that they had pro- and anti- pornography discourses neither encapsulated each woman’s response nor could be said to be representative of all women.

Reviewing the qualitative literature available on women’s experiences of pornography indicates that the findings of this study both align and differ from existing research. Ashton et al (2018) undertook a comparative review of all of the qualitative literature on women’s experiences published up to April 2016 in English language peer-reviewed journals in order to better understand women’s experiences in the context of pornography’s proliferation. In total, they found 22 papers: United States (6), Canada (5), Sweden (4), the United Kingdom (2), Australia (1), China (1), Czech Republic (1), Israel (1), and South Africa (1). They concluded that “it was evident that women’s experiences of pornography are complex and nuanced, often paradoxical, varying among and within individuals” (Ashton et al, 2018, p. 334). A similar conclusion has been put forward in this research, however I will shortly argue that this diversity is not necessarily paradoxical. Among the papers reviewed by Ashton et al, there were some in which women reported more negative experiences of pornography and others which reported more positive. Furthermore, each paper focuses on different aspects of women’s experiences (for example, pornography specifically within relationships) and so they are not directly researching the same research problem. Therefore, while a review yields a similar result to this research, the individual papers do not necessarily do so in the same way.

My overall research findings broadly resonate with Ashton et al (2018) and when comparing the women their experiences were diverse. There were a multitude of different encounters and interactions with pornography and feelings and opinions on it. However, the spectrum of diversity within each woman’s individual life varied. For some of the women, there was more of one type of experience than another and/ or the emotional significance of pornography was aligned to a more positive, negative or indifferent position. Each woman’s story was complex, and I would argue ‘anti’ and ‘pro’ pornography perspectives did not fully represent any one woman’s experience. However, to just assert that the *women’s* perspectives and experiences were diverse does not necessarily account for the singular experience of each *woman.* As one of our project findings states (see Appendix 1):

Trying to group these experiences into common themes runs the risk of warping or distorting them. This diversity requires a different kind of analysis. *Findings from the Project.*

In order to better understand women’s experiences and perspectives and what shapes these, I would argue further interrogation is necessary. Research on pornography needs to consider why women might have different experiences and what factors are relevant in defining these experiences. Furthermore, I will explore how this relates to researching pornography. I will look at how these factors shape how pornography and experiences of it are talked about, interpreted and analysed, and why research on pornography yields such different results. Reviewing the empirical findings from this study and drawing on the analytical conversations with the women involved, I will now consider this. I will also reflect further on what this suggests for how we should talk to women about pornography.

7.3 Variations Across Women

When comparing the women’s experiences to one another, different aspects of their identity seemed pertinent in having shaped their experiences of pornography. The sample for this project was small and as such was neither representative of the broader population nor inclusive of all the ways in which women might interact with pornography. However, there was some diversity among our group and certain factors stood out as being relevant to how pornography was experienced or felt about.

**Age and Life Stages**

One of the factors that shaped the women’s experiences was their age. The women’s ages varied between 20 – mid 40s; our ages were: 20 (Honey), 25 (Myself), 28 (Sini), 31 (Kate), 33 (Annette), 34 (Psycho), 36 (Elyndys), 40 (Elizabeth) and Mid 40s (Minty). There were generational differences between the women and different experiences that came from being at different stages of the life course. Among the women there was a recognition that pornography has changed over time, and their opinions and experiences reflected arguments that the internet and new technologies having changed the format of pornography and proliferated its availability (Attwood, 2002; Maddison, 2009; Paasonen, 2010). There were generational differences according to what types of pornography had been available when the women were growing up and consequently there were differences in what they had first encountered.

There were different opinions in the group of the extent to which different generations had different experiences of pornography. The unprecedented availability of pornography has sparked concerns around its access by young people and its ubiquitous presence in their lives (Horvath et al, 2013; Martellozzo et al, 2016). Theperception of the ‘millennial’ generation as living in a porn saturated society is reflected in contemporary societal discussions and debate (Olcott, 2016; Olivarius, 2017; Rogers, 2017). Honey, who was the youngest member of the group, felt this to be the case for herself and when first meeting everyone in research group meeting 1 introduced herself as being part of ‘generation porn’:

“And I am probably generation porn, like everyone that I grew up with watched porn” *Honey in Research Group Meeting 1*

I was the second youngest member of the group at 25, and I felt similarly:

“Coz I suppose I consider myself to be generation porn too, and when I was growing up it seemed to me that all blokes were using it.” *Myself in Research Group Meeting 1*

However, this was challenged by some of the other women in the group and there was a fascination that young people should consider things much worse than for previous generations.

Minty: Can I ask you a question?

Ruth: Yeah please do.

Minty: About something you have both said. Generation porn?

Ruth: Yeah I mean

Elizabeth: Yeah that has blown my mind.

Minty: That has blown my mind. Okay, so I’m 20 years older than you. What is different about your generation to my generation? And I don’t actually think there is that much of a difference.

Honey: I think it’s the internet.

Elizabeth: I think it’s because of phones.

Minty: Yes, exactly that’s what I’m saying. You’re saying it’s ‘generation porn’ and that men are looking at porn a lot. They did when I was 19! They just didn’t in the same way.

Elizabeth [same time]: They did but it was harder to get like the VHS.

Minty: It was harder to get. Hide it from your mum.

Elizabeth: You had to hide it under your mattress.

Annette: Was it though? I mean, I think you could get porn but perhaps necessarily the kind of porn you’d be into…

Minty: Yeah *Research Group Meeting 1*

Elizabeth and Minty agreed that the formats of pornography and the ease of accessing it had changed, however they questioned whether that translated into younger generations being *porn generations*.

Honey’s experiences of pornography were often understood by the rest of the group as being shaped by her youth. There was sympathy for Honey’s experiences but also a feeling that with age would come greater confidence about how to navigate pornography in her life. Psycho reflected in her interview, that her views had been similar to Honey’s at that age but had changed over time.

It’s funny because you know the girl that’s in the group that’s younger? And I’m thinking, and I was really wracking my brains, I hadn’t watched porn at her age and I’d probably be of the view that she is at that. *Psycho’s Interview*

The women’s stories highlighted that experience can differ according to age and position in the life course. Ashton et al (2018, p.355) propose that “pornography is likely to be experienced differently depending on a woman’s stage of psychosexual development. Adolescent women are navigating changes in their bodies and their sexual desires” whereas “adult sexual development is marked by the formation of sexual identity, the experience of romantic relationships, and parenthood”. This was visible in the women’s experiences; Minty and Elizabeth were the oldest members of the group and were parents, part of their experience of pornography was negotiating it with their children. Honey, the youngest member of the group, was working out how to negotiate it for herself and was often advised by the other members in the group.

In regard to researching pornography, this highlights the need to consider women’s experiences at different ages. As highlighted in Chapter 5, there has been a tendency to focus on pornography and young people. There is less research on older women and research which looks at changing experience over time. Subsequently, “further research is necessary to understand the role of pornography in the construction of identity during the trajectory from adolescence to adulthood, and specifically among older women” (Ashton et al, 2018, p.345). This research indicates the importance of looking at people’s biographies of pornography, and how experience can change at different life stages. It also indicates why certain experiences might be captured when speaking to specific age groups.

**Sexuality, Sexual Orientation and Sexual Preferences**

A second factor that was significant in shaping the women’s experiences was sexuality and sexual preference. There was a diverse mix of sexualities in the group: four women identified as heterosexual (Minty, Honey, Elyndys and I), three women identified as bisexual (Elizabeth, Psycho and Annette) and two women identified as pansexual (Kate and Sini); Annette also identified as being “kinky” and Sini was polyamorous. As outlined in Chapter 5, there is a lack of pornography research into the experiences of LBT\* women and an overwhelming focus has been on the experiences of heterosexual women. Much pornography research has been concerned with heterosexual pornography (Morrison, 2004a) and concerns around pornography are often framed through a heteronormative lens (Stoops, 2017). Within the group there were conversations around pornography and its impact on relationships between men and women. However, the most concerns around this tended to be from the heterosexual women. Minty reflected that she would have liked to talk about this but it did not feel as relevant among the women in the group.

But there’s a difference, because what you’re talking about here, especially because it’s a group of women, what you’re talking about is, very different pornography, because heterosexual and gay pornography is different, you’re also talking about two women viewing something and not a male and a female, do you know what I mean? Because my partnerand I have different feelings about pornography because we’re different genders, of course we do, I don’t think you get away from that, we are different genders. But when you have two females, I don’t know. *Minty’s Interview*

Minty felt that had there been more heterosexual women in the group there would have been more concern around the male use of pornography. Honey shared some of the most concerns around the impact of pornography on women but when I asked her whether she had the same concerns for LGBT\* people, she said her framing of things was very heteronormative. In this regard, Honey was recognising that her lens for viewing things was from a heterosexual perspective.

Ruth: Does this, if this is so much a concern for you, do you think the same issues are there for like gay people or lesbian or bisexual or whatever? Do you think this is something particularly worrying in relation to sort of heterosexual males?

Honey: I think everything that I see and the things that I experience are very, do I, heteronormative? *Honey’s Interview*

In Research Group Meeting 6, when we reflected back on the project this was discussed. Sini, Kate and Annette reflected that their sexuality shaped their perspective on things.

Sini: I wonder how different this group would have been because I was surprised how gay the group is in a way or queer or whatever you want to say.

Ruth: Yeah I don’t think I realised that until recently.

Annette: Who’s actually straight here?

[everyone laughs]

…

Kate: Is it just because LGBT are just used to talking about it?

Sini: I think so because you go a different kind of process of finding your sexuality, we’re so in that sense maybe a little bit more open of talking about this.

Kate: It’s normal to be thinking about it in the academic sense as well.

Honey: The most vanilla one’s in the group!

Annette: Because it’s part, not because being straight isn’t a massive part of your identity but I think if you’re a-

Sini: I guess you don’t-

Kate: You can grow up and plod along and not really think about your sexuality if you’re straight

Ruth: I think it is in a different way, like in the way you don’t have to think about it all the time *Research Group Meeting 6*

Having a range of sexualities in the group meant experiences were shared that are not as well represented in the literature. For example, there were conversations around how pornography is negotiated in same sex relationships and how bisexual people use it in their relationships. There has been research about pornography in relationships, but it is often focused on heterosexual relationships and the negotiation of male use of pornography. For some of the women, their experiences did not include men and were not negotiated with them. Furthermore, other aspects of the women’s sexualities shaped their opinions on and experiences of pornography. For example, one of Sini’s dislikes of mainstream pornography was its unrealistic portrayal of polyamorous relationships. Similarly, Sheff (2005, p.252) argues: “these highly sexualized images fail to capture the lived experiences of the people, especially the women, who actually engage in multiple partner relationships.” Sheff identifies that polyamory is an under-theorised area, and likewise I could find little empirical research into polyamory and pornography.

This research indicates that experiences of pornography can vary according to sexual preference, sexual orientation and sexual identity. In regard to researching pornography, it highlights the importance of including the views of those with different sexualities and moving beyond a heteronormative framework for analysing experiences. This was similarly reported by Morrison (2004b, p.181) when conducting focus groups with gay men about their perceptions of gay pornography. He concluded that “the predominant discourse on heterosexual pornography (i.e., a harm-based feminist analysis) may not serve as a suitable analytic framework for sexually explicit materials targeting gay men … Although they could articulate potentially beneficial and negative aspects of gay male pornography, they did not appear to conceptualize it in those terms.” There is a need to develop analyses on pornography beyond male/female and heterosexual frameworks.

**Geography, National Context and Culture**

Another factor relevant in shaping the women’s experiences was their national context. We did not explore this in depth and as such this section is relatively short, however it did arise multiple times in the project. Of the nine of us who took part, seven were White British (Honey, Annette, Elyndys, Psycho, Minty, Kate and I) and two were White, other nationality (Sini - Finnish and Elizabeth – Anonymised, Western, English speaking country). Paasonen et al (2007a) and Paasonen (2009a) have argued that the context of pornography varies regionally, nationally and internationally and there are geographical variations in how it is experienced. Paasonen (2009a, p.586) highlights that within pornography research “local histories are under studied, as are the variations in public sexual discourses and regulatory practices concerning sexually explicit representation”. Different national contexts were evident when the women talked about societal attitudes towards sex and pornography and their experiences of sexual education growing up. When we compared our sex education, Elizabeth’s had been limited, her teacher had shown her class a book and been fired. Those of us in the UK had had some limited sexual education. Comparatively, Sini had had a comprehensive sex education which had covered pornography:

Yeah we had uhm so in Finland you do something that’s called like Health Sciences so you have a one hour, I think it starts when you’re 13 up to 16 and you have one hour a week of health stuff so you go through all kinds of things, one of them is gender, trans issues, binary issues, you go through what is porn, what it is, why do people watch it, they teach you how to put a condom on. *Sini in Research Group Meeting 5*

Sini also shared that her engagement with pornography varied according to where she was in the world. She originated from Finland, had lived and studied in South Korea and was currently living in the UK.

Yes and it’s interesting that I think my own engagement with pornography and my sexuality changes based on where in the world I am. … so for example who am I as a person is limited in a way, I’m very, very different who I am when I’m in South Korea then when I am here or when I go back to Finland. *Sini in Research Group Meeting 3*

In thinking about developing knowledge on pornography, there is a need to recognise cultural and geographical variations. Experiences and opinions may vary according to local, regional and national contexts. Research on women’s experiences of pornography has largely been dominated by European and American studies (see Ashton et al, 2018). This brings into question whether the frameworks for analysing women’s experiences have been suitable for all women. Paasonen (2009a) argues that the feminist ‘sex wars’ is not a debate that particularly resonates in the Finnish context. In Tzankova’s (2015, p.219) study of Turkish women’s engagement with pornography, she found that there was a “political significance of mainstreaming porn especially in the context of what may be considered a ‘conservative’ social setting.” Women were using pornography to express themselves, to learn about sex and to explore lesbian fantasies. She highlights the inadequacy of ‘objectification’ analyses of pornography to this specific social and political context. When researching pornography, the social and political frameworks through which experiences are had and subsequently interpreted need to be acknowledged.

7.4 The ‘Pornography’

This study indicated that opinions on and experiences of pornography can vary according to the type of ‘pornography’. This refers both to different forms of the product, and to the different ways it is defined, conceptualised and understood. ‘Pornography’ has increasingly been recognised as a heterogenous entity, able to manifest in multiple and different ways in everyday life and media environments (Sullivan and McKee, 2015). I concluded in Chapter 4 that pornography is a contested concept and has various manifestations, it is not a homogenous entity. When talking about their opinions and experiences, the women talked about a range of different types of pornography varying according to the format, type of material, content and conditions in which it was produced. These different types of pornography meant different forms of engagement and interaction, and different choices around how and why to do this. Furthermore, some of its potential positives and negatives related to the different ways and contexts in which pornography can manifest. Given the contested boundaries of ‘pornography’, conversations around it overlapped with other forms of media such as music videos.

When comparing the women’s experiences, it was evident that different forms of ‘pornography’ enabled different types of interactions. This was notable in Elyndys’ and Sini’s engagements with fanfiction and erotica; with this type of material they were both producers and users of content. Sini shared that erotic literature enabled a different form of engagement compared to visual pornography.

You can imagine the people exactly how you want them or so there’s, it’s like the ultimate fantasy because there’s nothing restricting you. *Sini’s Interview*

When choosing BDSM pornography, Annette was very selective about the type of pornography she watched. She told me of her preference for kink.com specifically because of the inclusion of before and after interviews. She explained that this was not included in mainstream pornography and for her that hindered her ability to enjoy it:

Annette: I always go back to kink.com because of their before and after interviews.

Ruth: And that’s not so much there in [mainstream pornography]?

Annette: Not really, like it’s sort of, they kind of emulate kink.com but it just doesn’t feel as ethical because they’re not having the discussions with the performers. They might do it off camera, I don’t know but for me it’s important that it’s like as consensual and ethical as possible, just because, it’s just make me feel creepy otherwise, it’s just I can’t deal with the fact that somebody might not be having a good time and due consideration hasn’t been given to like their health, safety and wellbeing. Like, it’s not enough to just get your rocks off, you’ve got to think about the people who are in it yeah. *Annette’s Interview*

Annette’s contribution was an example in practice of an ongoing debate within pornography research. Concerns on pornography have often focused on the portrayal of violent or aggressive behaviour and the impact this can have on users of it (for example Malamuth and Check, 1981; Malamuth et al, 2012). However, it has been conversely argued that within this research ‘aggression’ and ‘violence’ are not adequately defined nor does it account for consensual portrayals of BDSM. McKee (2015) argues that content analyses of ‘aggression’ in pornography have often ignored context and thus do not recognise potentially positive depictions of sex. He proposes that this falsely gives evidence to ‘cause and effect’ discourses and reinforces heteronormative ideas of healthy sexual practice. Annette distinguished between different types of portrayals of BDSM within pornography and felt the type she watched was ethical. Within pornography research, this highlights the importance of considering different types of pornographies and the different contexts in which they are produced when evaluating people’s experiences of it.

Teasing out thoughts on different types of ‘pornography’ was also important for better understanding the women’s broad opinions on it, and helpful in identifying where there were commonalities and differences between them. In thinking about the potential positives and negatives of pornography, not all pornographies were necessarily considered equal. In research group meeting 2, Honey presented us with a newspaper article around the problems of what pornography teaches young people. Elyndys’ commented that perhaps these issues related to a specific type of pornography, rather than the concept of pornography.

Elyndys: When we look at this I was sort of thinking the exact same thing, I was thinking yeah it’s not about sort of pornography as you know as an idea it’s about you know uhm yeah the bad pornography-

Elizabeth: Yes!

Elyndys: The sort of things that’s like yeah, I kinda feel like young women think you have to do that or boys won’t like you because boys have seen it in porn from a young age. *Research Group Meeting 2*

During the course of the research, it was crucial to examine each woman’s individual definition of pornography and to understand the framework through which they talked about their experiences. One of our *Findings from the Project* was that it was difficult to compare our experiences with ease because we were not always talking about the same thing. The word pornography represented different media, material, opinions and practice (see Appendix 1). One such example was when comparing Elyndys and Honey, both were quite critical of pornography and had concerns around its impact on women but felt quite differently about how significant an issue it was for them:

I think it’s, I think it’s a massive issue to me in general, like it’s hard to think from a time when we weren’t in this focus group, it feels like it’s been going on for ages doesn’t it? But, I think without thinking about it, it’s everywhere, it’s in, I can’t talk about porn without talking about body image, and I can’t talk about body image without talking about anything. It’s in everything that we do, it’s in the clothes we wear, like everything that we consume is porn and uhm it’s almost like, as a feminist as well like it’s a massive part, is it liberating for women is it not? And it’s like yeah it is sort of like everyday sexism and how it translates to the world it’s yeah. *Honey’s Interview*

What I think of as traditional pornography you know as opposed to the written kind doesn’t really, doesn’t really feature in my life, no not at all, like I say it’s one of those things so when it does come up, when you are surrounded by people who don’t talk about it and don’t, it’s not part of you know, your group consciousness if you like, it’s always a bit of a shock when you do come across people talking about it in the mainstream media and people joking about it and you know, you’re like oh there are still people who think like that? *Elyndys’ Interview*

In part, the significance of pornography to them differed according to their definitions of it. Elyndys was talking about visual, ‘mainstream’ pornography whereas Honey framed pornography within broader discussions on sex, sexuality and sexism.

As highlighted in Chapter 3, the default understanding of pornography that was often implicitly discussed in the research was ‘mainstream pornography’; the pornography most common and readily available on the internet. It was this type of pornography that was most criticised by the women in the research group. Annette was very pro-pornography in her outlook but was open in her disdain for ‘mainstream’ pornography:

Annette: I think one of the thing that grosses me out the most is a lot of the mainstream studios, it’s always, always anal sex, DP which –

Ruth: Double penetration?

Annette: Yeah. I don’t think it’s necessarily what the girls want to do, it’s just what pays the most money per shoot whereas if you’re deciding for yourself what content you film… *Annette’s Interview*

Through contextualising the type of pornography being talked about, it was possible to better understand the women’s experiences of it and to identify where the similarities and differences in the women’s opinions lay. Despite having very different experiences of pornography, both Annette and Honey shared a dislike of *mainstream pornography*. The types of pornography (the content, material form and modes of production) they had encountered and experienced were different, and this could be part of the reason why their emotional experiences of it were different too.

In this section, I have examined how different types of pornography enable different types of interaction, engagement and experiences of pornography. Furthermore, it can shape the emotions underpinning these experiences. When doing pornography research, it is crucial to identify what is included when talking about ‘pornography’, and to examine the subjective understandings of it which frame how people understand their experiences. When these were considered, it was possible to better understand how the women experienced pornography and how different types of pornography may shape this. Moreover, it was possible to see where the women’s opinions were similar in regard to some pornographies and different in regard to others.

7.5 The Encounter or Interaction between Pornography and the Individual

This study indicated that experiences of pornography vary according to the type of encounter had with pornography. Variation was visible in the type of relationship (e.g. using pornography or producing pornography), the choices and motivations (e.g. how and why you use it), who was involved (e.g. was it a direct or indirect experience) and the agency had in the interaction (e.g. was it self-directed or imposed). Historically, research on pornography has only addressed a limited scope of interactions. For example, psychology ‘cause and effect’ studies have focussed on the impact of using pornography on people’s behaviour. This has meant ignoring individualised experiences of using pornography (McKee, 2018) and obscuring understandings of how choices are made in regard to pornography consumption (Boyle, 2000). There is, however, a growing move to research the experiences of pornography users and pornography performers (see Paasonen et al, 2015; Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015; White, 2018). This research highlights the need to build on this; types of interaction were talked about that are not as documented in the literature. Furthermore, given the diverse ways of interacting with or encountering pornography, relationships to it were not static within each woman’s life.

This research highlighted the complexity of different categories of interaction. For example, for the women who ‘used’ pornography, there were different ways of doing so and different motivations. Sini ‘used’ pornography to write erotic literature whereas Elizabeth occasionally ‘used’ pornography to masturbate to. In addition to active forms of engagement with pornography (e.g. choosing to use it), indirect forms of exposure to pornography and experience of it were also shared. These experiences were significant as they were formative in how the women’s opinions were formed. In Elyndys’ interview, I questioned her on how she had formed her opinions on pornography given that she chose not to watch it:

So I’m still stuck on this idea like, yeah me as not being a person who watches pornography but how can I have ideas of what it’s about but you do have ideas obviously coz yeah like we said you do see bits of it, I’m still really stuck on it. Coz I’m like oh you know I feel so hypocritical being like I don’t like it because of the messages it sends out and whatever but it’s like I don’t really know, but I feel like if that’s what everybody says about it then it must be you know kind of what people’s impressions are. *Elyndys’ Interview*

She shared that hearing about it and seeing fragments of it in other media had been formative in shaping her views on it. ‘Indirect’ encounters with pornography have only been addressed in a limited way in pornography literature. There has been an increased focus on young people’s accidental ‘exposure’ to pornography (for example Flood, 2009; Bailey, 2011) but not necessarily the routine and mundane encounters in adult lives. There has been an abundance of research on the impact of consumption on women, but this has not necessarily explored the broad experiences of this that women then have (Krafka et al, 1997). Through considering different aspects of the interaction, such as choices, agency and who was involved, it was possible to gain a deeper insight into the women’s experiences. Minty shared that her current experience of pornography was through negotiating her partner’s pornography use in their relationship:

Okay, so you know as a heterosexual female in a relationship, I don’t use porn but my partner does … So my relationship to porn as a woman is through my partner, and how he uses porn, and how it affects our relationship because it does. *Minty’s Interview*

The impact of the male consumption of pornography on women has been a pinnacle focus of anti-pornography discourses. However, Minty did not frame herself as a victim of pornography. She talked about how she negotiated it with her partner and was an active agent in the situation; they spoke about the issue:

When we were first together, there were discussions of why do you do that? Because I thought you’d like it. Well what gave you that idea? Because I’ve seen it. Yeah. I mean nothing, nothing, nothing extreme or anything, just little things but he’s an experienced, he’s not an experienced man, he’s a reasonable experienced man! [laughs] … For us it was a conversation and that was fine. *Minty’s Interview*

This was part of highlighting that experiences of pornography varied according to the level of choice, freedom and agency involved in that experience. Minty’s story contrasted with Honey’s, whose partner was angry when she asked about his pornography use. The experience varied according to how much the pornography was imposed and how much it could be negotiated. As highlighted in Chapter 6, the women located issues around pornography within a wider framework of sex, sexuality and gender relations. The women’s experiences could be shaped not just by their own choices and behaviours, but by the choices and behaviours of others. Pornography could be inflicted or imposed or it could be sought after and engaged with. Chadwick et al (2018, p.1855) highlight that research into women and pornography has looked at whether it is experienced positively or negatively but not how women actively negotiate it. They propose:

Understanding the ways that women interact with sexual media has potentially far-reaching implications both for understanding pornography (what is it that is negative for women and that might be changed) and for women’s relationship to pornography more generally; that is, it draws attention to women’s agency as an important determinant of women’s experiences with sexuality, framing women as active participants in their own pornography consumption.

Analysing ‘agency’ in the context of women’s experiences could highlight where problems lie and indicate how to support women in overcoming them. In this section, I have argued that the type of interaction and engagement with pornography is critical in understanding how women experience it. When analysing interactions, it is crucial to consider multiple factors such as the type of engagement with pornography and how this is done; the choices and motivations; who is involved; and the levels of choice and agency. When comparing the women’s experiences, it was clear that these different factors could shape how positively or negatively the women had experienced and felt about pornography. When researching pornography, it is similarly important to identify the frameworks through which interactions are measured and experiences are understood.

7.6 Paradoxical or Multiple?

Thus far, I have outlined how variations between the women, the ‘pornography’ and the interaction between the two were part of shaping how the women experienced pornography and their political positions on it. Given the numerous ways in which these three different factors could interact and interplay, it is clear to see how women can have diverse experiences of pornography. Furthermore, it is important to consider these factors when researching pornography so as to understand the frameworks through which people understand, interpret and talk about their experiences. This enables a broader understanding of experiences, and can identify where there are shared experiences as well as diverse ones.

On this basis, I would argue that women’s experiences of pornography are more than “paradoxical” (Ashton et al, 2018) or contradictory. There was an element on this in our research project, Honey and I discussed this regarding her opinions. She both condemned pornography and felt it fundamentally oppressed women yet also believed the women in the group who said they enjoyed it. Yet, I would argue that the women were often talking about different things or different aspects of pornography. At the end of the fieldwork, we reflected on the possibility to contradict oneself when talking about pornography, to advocate and to criticise at the same time. Honey identified that she had noticed doing that when reading through her transcript:

Honey: I thought that when I was reading through my transcript that I’ll say something like I’m okay with porn and then a question later I’m like I hate it, you’re kind of yeah, in conflict with yourself as well coz it’s such like a moral thing isn’t it? It seems to be a moral thing that we do like…

Kate: It’s also such a broad thing, I can’t like uhm, something that big you can’t like everything.

Honey: Exactly it’s like being do you like air? *Research Group Meeting 8*

She reflected that pornography is a complex moral issue, and both her and Kate also reflected that pornography is a very broad concept. There was a broad spectrum of opinions and experiences in the group because we were talking about different materials, interactions, encounters, experiences and contexts. Pornography incites complex social, political and moral questions, and it manifests in multiple ways. It is therefore possible to have multiple perspectives on it simultaneously. Sullivan and McKee (2015, p.177) argue:

It is no longer a question of either/ or, but more like both/ and. Pornography has offered up some of the most exploitative images of gender and sexual identity, and also some of the most inspiring. It can reinforce structures of oppression, but it can also reveal new ways of organising bodies, desires, pleasures, and politics.

The empirical findings of this study were supportive of their argument. However, I would argue that further investigation is necessary into what the most dominant manifestations of pornography are. I will revisit this discussion in the conclusion chapter.

7.7 Group Perspectives

One of our collective findings was that our ‘diversity [of experience, interaction and opinion] was compatible with open conversation, discussion and learning from one another’.There was much diversity among the women’s experiences. When comparing the women to each other some of them were more aligned with ‘pro-pornography’ perspectives and some with ‘anti-pornography’ perspectives. Despite this it was not a polarised and hostile discussion between them. Despite at times having opposing opinions, there was potential for the women to empathise with and understand each other’s perspectives. This emphasises the need for collective forums for discussion, and a space which is receptive to different positions on and feelings about pornography.

There were at times fundamental differences in opinion and the women did challenge each other’s perspectives. Not all opinions were necessarily considered equal or were agreed with by each woman. For example, some of the women questioned the validity of opinions of pornography based on indirect experiences as opposed to first-hand. An example of this was shared by Sini:

No but I think that was really good for me because it made me realise that you can talk about it, you can have an opinion about something that you don’t have an experience of … how much I respect that opinion of someone who doesn’t have an experience is a completely different thing but it makes me more tolerant as a person. *Sini’s Interview*

There were opinions on pornography in which there was variation dependent on more deeply entrenched individual preference and values. For example, in research group meeting 6, we discussed our thoughts on pornography which depicts simulations of rape (made consensually). There were different perspectives on whether this should be legal or not. Honey and I felt uncomfortable with it; Honey reflected on a previous personal experience and articulated that she disliked the idea of people wanting to watch rape.

Kate, Annette and Sini felt differently about it and were uncomfortable with censorship. Annette questioned whether it could be a good thing if it opened up discussions around consent, and Kate questioned whether it could prevent people behaving that way in real life. They distinguished between the fantasy of pornography and reality of real-life actions.

Kate: Coz like being strangled or tied up, it’s good in a way, it used to be when I was younger, I wouldn’t want that in real life you know.

Sini: Yeah exactly, it’s like constructing a fantasy and keeping that separate, like we discussed, like what you want to do in bed and what you want to watch can be completely different. *Research Group Meeting 6*

This was one such example where there was a more deeply entrenched personal variation in how we felt about pornography, shaped by different life experiences and different opinions. While this conversation challenged each other’s perspectives, it was also a conversation had respectfully. It was noticeable that within this there were also shared values. All of the women emphasised consent and everyone was explicit that they were only comfortable with consensually made pornography.

One area where empathy was particularly visible, was when the group were commenting on Honey’s experiences and perspectives. Honey in particular had the most concerns about pornography. Within the group she shared her negative experiences of it and her thoughts and concerns. While the other women did not always have the same experiences or concerns with pornography, they were supportive of her position. In Chapter 5, I outlined the women’s different experiences of how pornography was negotiated in relationships. The women’s decisions on this varied with some openly discussing it with their partners, to some not talking about it and some feeling uncomfortable with it. We talked about our different opinions on this in several of the research group meetings. Honey felt uncomfortable with pornography in her relationships and in the first ever group meeting she asked the other women if they considered it to be ‘cheating’. While neither Kate nor Elizabeth felt it was in their own personal lives, they felt that the decision was for Honey to make:

Honey: If I was with someone, I don’t know, I don’t watch porn so, say I watch porn and I was with someone, do I stop watching porn because I’m with one person, like if I watch porn am I cheating on that person?

Kate: It’s up to you

Elizabeth: Well I believe that everyone has their own definition of cheating. *Research Group Meeting 1*

The emphasis on supporting Honey’s choices and wellbeing, and recognising that different people feel differently, emerged more than once in the group. In group meeting 5, Honey shared with us that she had just discovered her then partner had been looking at pornography without her knowledge. She had confronted him about it, and they had had an argument. She had then discussed this with a male friend who had laughed at her and was unsympathetic. The incident had upset her, and she told the story to the group seeking our perspectives on it. Again, the group was sympathetic to her perspective:

Honey: As soon as it happened, I was like I need to talk to everyone about this because like the epitome of why I don’t like porn, because it’s caused this massive argument! [laughs] and it wasn’t worth it.

Elizabeth: And it’s made you feel uncomfortable and your feelings are valid, that’s the thing that upsets me about your friend and your boyfriend, your feelings are valid.

Honey: He’s not quite boyfriend yet though.

Elizabeth: I don’t think he should be, he sounds like a fuckboy. I, your feelings are completely valid, just because they might be somewhat irrational to him, that doesn’t mean they’re not valid, they’re your feelings. *Research Group Meeting 5*

In the group we advised that it was important for relationships to be based on communication, and that it was good to have boundaries around what you are comfortable with. Another example of empathy within the group, was Annette’s concern in response to Honey sharing her stories of being non-consensually shown pornography:

I think, some of the people in the group have said that pornography seems to be something that’s sort of inflicted on them by people and like things that they don’t like and they don’t want to take part in but they sort of have to deal with it which, that’s kind of not the ideal way to have pornography to be part of your life, to have it inflicted on you. It’s kind of gross, really, like it’s just, I suppose everyone’s different and not everyone’s got the same sexuality as me and not everyone is interested in like embracing their sexuality or exploring it for themselves but I just think it’s, rude of the boys to be like inflicting it on the girls when they don’t want it. It’s a consent issue, I think, if like girls wanna be saucy then fine go for the saucy girls but don’t inflict it on girls that don’t want to watch your gross videos. *Annette’s Interview*

Despite their vastly different opinions on pornography, Annette and Honey shared fundamental values around consent. Their different viewpoints were not incompatible, there was common ground between them. I would argue that when the women heard each other’s experiences, they too considered the different factors listed above when forming their opinions on each other. We reflected on the women’s experience and identity, the type of pornography in question and the interaction between the two. Through sharing our experiences and unpicking what had shaped them, we were able to empathise with one another even if our outward opinions were completely different. In regard to reconciling the pornography debates, I would argue it is crucial for different perspectives to listen to one another.

I would argue that empathy and understanding was also possible because there were some fundamental, underpinning values shared by us. Reflecting back on all the opinions shared in Chapter 6, it was noticeable that there were some common threads running through each of the woman’s responses. There was an emphasis on supporting sexual expression and supporting sexual agency, choice and consent. Looking at the feminist debates on pornography, Russo (1989) argues the polarised positions have envisaged sexual liberation in different ways. Anti-pornography feminists have emphasised sexual autonomy (from males) whereas pro-pornography feminists have emphasised sexual expression. Part of the divide comes from ideological differences in conceptualising sexual liberation. In considering how the women empathised with one another, shared values of the importance of sexual autonomy, sexual expression and sexual liberation were visible in all of their responses. There were variations in where they positioned pornography in relation to this.

7.8 The Significance of Participatory Porn Conversations

This research has examined how women can have diverse experiences of pornography and how it is possible for both positive and negative encounters to happen concurrently. I have also set out that this diversity was compatible with open conversation, empathy and learning from one another. I will next argue that this analysis was nurtured through the in-depth, participatory methodology. A participatory approach facilitated the bringing together of different expertise, the development of more equitable research relationships, a safe space to share ideas and the development of knowledge through praxis.

The women’s experiential expertise was crucial in building the concepts, measures and questions through which their experiences could be explored. Participatory approaches promote collaborative research practices and the melding of different expertise to develop more robust knowledge (Wakefield and Sanchez Rodriguez, 2018). Zamenopoulos and Alexiou (2018, p.19) argue “complex problems can be understood and addressed by connecting the skills and expertise of different people”. Without the women’s expertise and knowledge, it would not have been possible to see the different ways in which pornography manifests or the types of interactions that the women had with pornography. It is widely recognised that how ‘pornography’ is understood is subjective (Shaw, 1999; Böhm et al 2015). It has been argued that the ways in which interactions with pornography have been conceptualised (e.g. ‘user’ or ‘victim’) have been too narrow (Manning, 2007). Yet this does not then indicate what questions to ask or how to frame research. Through drawing on the women’s expertise, types of sexually explicit materials were talked about that have not been as heavily researched (e.g. fanfiction and kink) and interactions were explored that have not been significantly documented (e.g. ‘using’ porn to write erotica and ‘indirect’ encounters).

Any process of research and knowledge production must be subject to scrutiny and take active steps to ensure robust and accountable practice. In Chapter 2 (methodology), I outlined how I would practice reflexivity in order to maximise this. I had not anticipated the extent to which the women would also actively engage in reflexive practices. Yang (2015, p.447) identifies the importance of ‘participant reflexivity’: “the process in which participants use insights gained through self-reflection for data analysis and group discussion”. The women critically considered how their opinions were formed. Earlier in this chapter, I discussed how our experiences varied according to our sexuality. The strength of this analysis derives from the women having also come to this analysis themselves. It was interpreted through several ‘lenses’, not just my heterosexual lens.

Moreover, the women helped me to recognise my biases and implicit positionality. As a feminist researcher, I acknowledged that research will invariably be conducted through my lens and my own subjective viewpoint (Stanley and Wise, 1993). Collaboratively working with the women was a means to mitigate this and to challenge my understanding of things much more successfully than I would have been able to do through personal reflexivity alone. An example of this was when we were watching the music video ‘Fade’ by Kanye West; Kate challenged my interpretation of the video. I realised that my framework for analysing the video was shaped by my own politics and being heterosexual. It was not a universal interpretation for all women.

Participatory approaches to research are underpinned by a commitment to the development of new research relationships. In her discussion on feminist participatory research methods Reinharz (1992, p.181) argues that in order “to achieve an egalitarian relation, the researcher abandons control and adopts an approach of openness, reciprocity, mutual disclosure, and shared risk”. As such, I shared my opinions in the group and sought to encourage open and active dialogue. Our research group meetings and interviews were conversational in style rather than utilising a traditional interview or focus group format. Similar to Oakley (1981), I found that reciprocal conversation and rapport building created a more open space for discussion. Rather than imposing on the research or biasing the women’s opinions, it facilitated conversation. When feeding back on the research, the women shared this had enabled them to speak about pornography in a more open way.

But I’ll be honest if it was too structured or if you were someone that was removed from the group, I wouldn’t talk as openly I don’t think. So like I obviously didn’t know what you’d be like before I met you, and before I agreed to participate but you’ve always got that, you know if I come along and I feel like I’m being judged or if everyone’s like too one way of the discussion I can just say I can’t make it or not engage but I think because you’ve almost felt like one of us, it’s made it a lot easier to have those discussions. *Psycho’s Interview*

I’ve enjoyed you sharing, I think it made it less clinical for me that you were willing to share stuff, because it took you a few sessions until you were willing to share things and I think that changed the dynamic but for the positive. *Elizabeth in Research Group Meeting 7*

I feel this was particularly complimentary to doing pornography research given the contested and polarised nature of pornography debates. A methodology was needed that enabled the sharing of views in a non-judgemental environment. The women’s role in setting the research agenda was a crucial component in better understanding their lived experiences of pornography. Two of our most fruitful group discussions were conversations that emerged organically; our views on different music videos (group 4) and Honey asking for advice on her then partner’s use on pornography (group 5). The women shared that being open with one another had also enabled them to speak more freely:

Minty: And you got better, you got better discussion and better answers out of us, because we’d had a chance to talk as a group and we’d got to know each other and got to know you, if it had been right at the beginning I don’t think we’d have been quite as open. I know I wouldn’t.

Psycho: Yeah, it was more like chatting to a friend about a group of friends meeting up talking about things, rather than some like, I’ve done interviews about other things before and it’s like really clinical almost, it didn’t feel like that.

Minty: And also when I’ve done interviews for research projects before, I don’t know if it’s conscious, it probably was conscious in a way, but I thought what do they want me to say? What is the answer they really want? But when I was talking to you, I was able to say what I really thought rather than what does she need for her research.

Ruth: Ahh okay.

Honey: But that’s about how you frame the research I think, because it’s always been about what we want to do as a group rather than what’s your…

Annette: …Agenda *Research Group Meeting 8*

In this regard, the participatory approach helped to create an environment where opinions could be shared. We reflected that through talking about our different experiences, it was possible to understand better why certain perspectives were held, even if these were not agreed with. There was a recognition that different experiences of pornography are had, and some of these can be more positive or negative. Additionally, we learned new perspectives from each other which allowed us to develop our opinions. We reflected on this in research group meeting 8:

Sini: No but I think it’s a really good point because extremes never get us anywhere, like being totally against, being totally for, it doesn’t open up anything, it’s just two stances … I think the second point is really good because I think we do, I at least have a better understanding of people who have different views than me now after this so I think it’s good.

Annette: And while I’m like very, very pro-porn, I get some people might not like it because they’ve had a shit experience of it.

Psycho: Yeah and I think it’s good that people have been like honest and open and stuff, so that they can then change your perceptions, you know by sharing their experience or what it means to them, it can then change what you perceive it to be used for or yeah.

Ruth: I mean I will honestly say I’ve learnt quite a lot … there were certain things that I just didn’t really know about til actually. *Research Group Meeting 8*

The participatory approach not only enabled women to hear other perspectives, but also shaped and developed the knowledge for this project. It was in part the conversations between the women which enabled our opinions to develop and grow and were critical in shaping the findings of this project. Participatory research methods are action-oriented; knowledge is developed through cycles of collaborative discussion, analysis and evaluation (Cahill, 2007b; Chevalier and Buckles, 2019). Through bringing our opinions together, we were able to find in practice that there was empathy and understanding between us. Had I used interviews and the women not spoken to each other, their opinions would have remained in silos. It was only through doing this research, that we could develop the knowledge that we did.

In this regard, I hope we somewhat achieved what Friere calls ‘praxis’. Friere ([1970] 2005, p.72) argues that knowledge “emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” Praxis is action-oriented processes of learning with the goal of challenging the dominant structures in society. Friere ([1970] 2005, p.79) outlines: “liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it.” I tentatively propose that through doing this research and coming together, we were able to transform our own views and somewhat our social realities. We were able to challenge the polarised nature of pornography debates and offer an alternative to this. In our analysis session, Sini reflected that the research had captured how views on pornography can change but also had been part of making that change:

What I feel about this research is in a way, it highlights that it’s a process for everyone so like what we might have thought right now this year in this room might not be equally objective true in two years because I feel all of us have somehow shifted and changed, maybe we know each other better but my favourite thing was like in the first ever meeting I met you [referring to me], I think you said something on the lines of like you’re heterosexual and you don’t engage with porn or watch porn or something like that, and then when you were filling out the data stuff uhm you were more open about considering the idea of pornography for yourself as well and then you put heterosexual and a question mark. I don’t think that like, I think that everybody has gone through some kind of questioning process when we were doing this so like it doesn’t end here, these are not like solid facts that now are in existence for the rest of our lives, I think it’s like a process that’s gonna keep changing. *Sini in Research Group Meeting 8.*

The combination of Stanley and Wise’s (1993) ‘Fractured Foundationalism’ with a participatory methodology, and the combination of feminist and participatory approaches, was conducive to producing knowledge which examined and explored women’s everyday lives and lived experiences. I propose that the use of participatory methods supported the development of new knowledge on pornography, and knowledge that was more robust as it brought together different expertise. Furthermore, the process of producing this knowledge was action-oriented and transformative in that through doing the research we were able to develop our knowledge and understand each other’s perspective. I acknowledge that there were limitations to the method which were discussed in Chapter 3 and will be explored further in Chapter 8. I would nevertheless argue there is an exciting possibility for the further use of participatory methods in pornography research. These methods could be one such means to unite a divided field.

7.9 Conclusion

This chapter has presented an evaluation of the research findings in regard to the research aims. It has sought to develop our understandings of how women experience pornography and to add to discussions on how research on pornography should be conducted. I have argued that women have diverse experiences of pornography and these can be shaped by the individual, the ‘pornography’ and the interaction between the two. Simultaneously, understandings and interpretations of women’s experiences are shaped and mediated by how these different factors are included and operationalised in pornography research. I propose that understanding women’s experiences is inseparable from methodological questions about how to research women’s experiences. When taking this into account, it is possible to both recognise the diversity and difference among women’s experiences, and the opportunities for shared and collective experiences. Consequently, it is possible to identify opportunities for reconciling the pornography debates; collective goals and objectives are identifiable, and the women were sympathetic to different opinions and experiences. In the final chapter, I will make further recommendations based on this research and this analysis around how to research women’s experiences of pornography. In order to be reflexive and accountable about how this research was produced, I will also engage in an evaluation of how the methodology shaped the research and consider the limitations and weaknesses of the project.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Let’s Talk About Porn(ography)

8.1 Introduction

*The Living with Porn(ography) Project* set out to learn about women’s experiences of pornography and to contribute to discussions on developing knowledge on pornography. Working with eight women in Sheffield, this research explored their opinions on, feelings about and experiences of pornography using a participatory and collaborative research design. The key finding of this project was that women can have diverse experiences of pornography and that this diversity is underrepresented in academic literature and societal discussions. In order to better understand women’s experiences, it is necessary to interrogate the concepts, measures and implicit values that frame how pornography is talked about and how experiences are interpreted in research. Through deeper critical engagement, it was possible to see commonalities among the women’s responses as well as diversity. This is a crucial opportunity for reconciling the polarised pornography debates and considering what shared objectives and goals there are among women. Furthermore, the process of doing research fostered empathy and understanding among one another emphasising the need to talk about pornography. This research indicated that hopes and concerns around pornography are located within wider social understandings of sex, sexuality and gendered relationships. The issues transcend pornography. This chapter will summarise these key arguments and present the final conclusions drawn from this project.

This PhD began in October 2015 and concluded four years later in September 2019. In the space of these four years, there have been significant legislative changes relevant to pornography. Sex and Relationship Education (SRE) has been made compulsory in schools and age verification checks are on the verge of being introduced. New discussions and debates are being had on pornography, and it remains as contentious and polarised as ever. There are new concerns about pornographic production and consumption. For example, Mia Khalifa a former pornography performer, has recently spoken out about the exploitative practices of pornography corporations (Agedoke, 2019). There are now worries that male consumption of pornography is related to poor self-esteem and “performance anxiety” (Ellen, 2018). There are also new hopes about modes of pornographic production and consumption. Channel 4 recently ran a documentary ‘Mums Made Porn’ in which mothers directed porn to develop content they would be comfortable for their children to watch (Frizzell, 2019). Some are arguing that technological developments will offer new types of pornography and the more ethical, self-directed production of it (Drillinger, 2018). Pornography and the debates around it continue to evolve.

The project, and I as a pornography researcher, have grown and evolved over the course of this research. In this time, my life has changed. I am older and I have more life experience. My relationship with my partner Alex has blossomed from being six months old at the start of the project to four and a half years long now. I argued in Chapter 7, that views on pornography develop with age, and I have noticed this in my own life. My outlook on sex, sexuality and pornography have changed as I have learnt more and journeyed through my life course. The process of doing this research (and doing a PhD!) has been a transformative process for myself and I have learnt much about pornography, sexuality, the research process and participatory methods. I have had the pleasure of working with eight women that I may otherwise never have met. Each one kindly shared her stories and opinions with me and enabled me to look at pornography in a wholly different way. This transformative process has been beneficial to me as an individual, as a researcher on this project and as a researcher going forward. I hope my experience serves as an example of the benefits of research practices which champion political and empowering processes to those who participate in them.

This research has enabled me to reflect deeply on my own views on pornography. I continue to be struck by the contradictory nature of discussions about it in society, and the difficulty this poses in making sense of it. On the one hand, it is not talked about and on the other it is frequently referenced. I have become desensitised to talking about pornography and it has given me a distorted worldview. I realise (particularly when I get a strange look) that it is not commonplace to constantly discuss the personal, political and social aspects of pornography. I have to monitor and be careful about how I speak about it in public. It can invite disgust, embarrassment, surprise or sadly in some cases unwanted sexist commentary. Yet simultaneously, pornography is frequently joked about and made reference to in books, TV programmes and films. Once you start to notice it, you see it everywhere. Here lies another contradiction, there is ample discussion about its corrupting nature and then playful references to it on TV. Is pornography damaging young men’s sexuality irrevocably (Kelly, 2017)? Or, like in the The Inbetweeners, is it something that growing teenage boys play around with as part of their sexual development (Fogg, 2011)? There is a need for a much more overt and nuanced conversation on pornography, perhaps ‘pornography’ is all these things at once. Perhaps we need to revisit what is meant by ‘pornography’.

Over the course of doing this research, I have become more aware of the deeply entrenched values attached to pornography, sex and sexuality. At times, these are deeply moralistic and judgemental without being acknowledged as such. In 2016, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport published their concerns about the rise of anal sex amongst heterosexual couples which they argued was precipitated by pornography consumption:

“There is also a question about the effect of pornography on ‘unwanted sex’ – for instance more young people are engaging in anal intercourse than ever before despite research which suggests that it is often not seen as a pleasurable activity for young women.” *Department for Culture, Media and Sport cited in Stone, 2016.*

Rather than question more broadly why people might have anal sex,why young women might feel pressured to perform certain sexual acts and why young men might feel it is appropriate to coerce sexual acts, there is a value-laden judgement of anal sex. There is an assumption about the causal relationship between pornography consumption and sexual behaviour. My concern is that these implicit value judgements obscure broader understandings of sex and pornography and keep the debates on pornography polarised.

This project has been about much more than just pornography. This research has been about better understanding women’s experiences and thinking more deeply about how we should talk to them about pornography. It has involved questioning sex, sexuality, intimacy and relationships, gendered relationships, sexism and inequality. It has had deeply political and philosophical ramifications, interrogating our society and the foundations upon which pornography research rests. Methodologically, this research brought together a feminist and participatory framework for producing knowledge, and created a complimentary method to undertake this. It has contributed towards ideas on the successes and challenges of participatory methods. I have presented the opportunity that bringing together collaborative research practices and pornography studies can offer. Finally, this project was a practical example of the fun, excitement and positive capacity that research and bringing together a group of people can have. In this final chapter, I will put forward my final conclusions on all of these areas and present the key contributions of the project.

This chapter will bring to a close and summarise the thesis. First, I will revisit each of the research aims and present the key findings for each. I will then engage in further analytical discussion, considering what broader conclusions can be drawn from all of the research findings. I will also make final methodological reflections about the strengths and limitations of this research. I will indicate possible future directions for this research and locate the research within broader discussions on policy and legislation.

8.2 Summary of the Research Findings

This chapter will now provide a key summary of the findings. I will revisit each research aim and outline the corresponding conclusion and key arguments. This section will serve as a map for the project and a more detailed discussion will follow afterwards.

**Research Aim 1: To explore a group of women’s thoughts and feelings on, and experiences of pornography. What do this group of women say about pornography?**

Key argument: Women’s experiences of pornography are broad and diverse, and at present this broad range of experiences is under-represented in academic literature, societal discussions and government policy.

The women in this research had a diverse range of experiences of pornography. This related to the type of interaction with or exposure to pornography;the emotional significance of the experience and whether it felt positive or negative; the motivations, choice and agency exercised; and, who else was involved. This diversity was visible within each woman’s individual life and when comparing the women. Variations in the women’s experiences were noticeable according to different factors: the woman and her identity, the type of ‘pornography’ and the relationship or interaction between the two. When these factors were considered, it was possible to identify where there were similarities and differences in the women’s experiences. We found that our diversity was compatible with empathy and understanding among one another, and collective knowledge building. While there were different opinions on pornography, there were shared underpinning values about how to maximise women’s sexual agency and how to support their sexual expression.

**Research Aim 2: To use participatory methods as a means to talk to women about pornography and consider whether this method was conducive to developing relevant knowledge on women’s experience of pornography.**

Key argument: Using a participatory research design facilitated a much deeper understanding of the women’s perspectives due to the collaborative working relationship and the sharing of expertise.

A participatory approach was critical in further understanding the women’s experiences as they used their experiential expertise to inform the concepts, measures and questions through which we explored the topic. We spoke about types of pornography and types of experience that I would not have thought to ask them about. The collaborative research process and development of new research relationships was conducive to creating an environment in which pornography could be talked about. Our opinions developed through our interactions with one another and the self-reflection this encouraged. The research was made stronger and the knowledge more robust through reflexive practices, and the reflexive considerations we all brought to the project. Collaborative working and the combination of different perspectives enabled us to recognise and challenge our own standpoint or bias. The participatory process was a cycle of research and action; the process of doing the research was an essential aspect of developing the research findings. In this regard, we achieved praxis within the research process. Through doing the research we were able to practically demonstrate that there can be commonalities in and among diverse perspectives and experiences.

**Research Aim 3: To innovate discussion around pornography knowledge making processes. What does this research suggest about doing research with women on pornography?**

Key arguments: If pornography is to be better understood, the basic concepts, values and knowledge relied on to understand it must be addressed. The unacknowledged biases or implicit frameworks that are in processes for producing knowledge must be unpacked.

A holistic approach to researching pornography needs to be taken. This should focus not only on new topics or under-researched areas, but should fundamentally challenge the research methods used and consider the foundations upon which pornography research is produced.

This research indicated the necessity of addressing the concepts and measures used as foundations for pornography research. Research should take account of the blurred boundaries of ‘pornography’, the multiple ways that it can be engaged with, and the personalised, subjective ways it is understood and experienced. This research recommends that the people involved in research on pornography are part of developing the concepts, measures and topics used to explore their experiences. Knowledge is needed that helps people make sense of pornography rather than further entrenches division.

8.3 Conclusions on Pornography

The next task of this chapter is to locate this study within broader research, literature and societal discussions on pornography. I will propose what the significance of this study is and what it suggests about understanding pornography in society and doing research on it.

**Researching ‘Pornography’**

A conclusion of this thesis is the importance of engaging with debates and questions about what ‘pornography’ is. In Chapter 3, I concluded that pornography is an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Gallie, 1956) used to represent a different array of materials, practices, values and arguments (McKee et al, 2018). In its material form the medium and content of pornography greatly varies. Consequently, when talking about pornography in the project, we were not necessarily talking about the same thing. Understandings and experiences of pornography were interpreted and framed through different conceptual ideas of what ‘pornography’ is. These differences somewhat explain why opinions on and experiences of pornography can vary. This research highlighted the problematic nature of the concept ‘pornography’; it has multiple and subjective meanings. Analysing these were central to better understanding the women’s experiences of it and their opinions. It also indicates why empirical research can yield such different results on ‘pornography’. This research recommends that within research and discussions on pornography there needs to be continued interrogation of what the label ‘pornography’ means. As Minty argued:

I think one of the headline findings for me, I think this is a bit naïve probably but the realisation that there is different types of porn out there, does that make sense? And you cannot just say porn and everybody knows what you’re talking about because everybody thinks of something else because everybody has an individual experience with it. *Minty in* *Research Group Meeting 8*

It is possible to get unnecessarily tangled in a philosophical and academic conversation about what porn is. The women had their own understandings, yet we all recognised the concept enough to know what we were talking about. Also, as outlined in Chapter 4, we often defaulted to talking about ‘mainstream pornography’. There was familiarity with the most dominant modes of production and content. Ultimately, we never came to a mutual definition of pornography, but this accommodated our subjective viewpoints on it. Definitions of pornography are subject to change, and they vary over time and across different contexts (Ashton et al, 2019). However, it is possible to recognise this *and* refine the concept.

First, I propose that it could be helpful to stop labelling illegal, non-consensual acts or materials as ‘pornography’. Acknowledging the subjectivity and complexity of ‘pornography’ is not incompatible with developing clarity over what materials are being talked about. It is a word used for both consensual materials and for illegal, non-consensual forms of abuse. There have been recent calls to reclassify ‘revenge pornography’ as image-based abuse (McGlynn et al, 2017; McGlynn and Rackley, 2017b). Likewise, academics have questioned the appropriateness of the word ‘pornography’ for abusive acts to children (MacGregor, 2013; Liddell and Powell, 2015). In Chapter 4, I discussed how the some of the women felt the word ‘pornography’ could have negative connotations attached. In Chapter 6, I explored how some of the women would like there to be less taboo and fear around pornography. I would suggest that this could be supported through a clearer differentiation of what ‘pornography’ is. Ashton et al (2019) propose the definition:

Pornography: ‘Material deemed sexual, given the context, that has the primary intention of sexually arousing the consumer, and is produced and distributed with the consent of all persons involved’.

I would echo this and propose that the concept of ‘pornography’ be narrowed to exclude non-consensual materials. Thus, conversations about legal forms of adult, sexual practice could be distinguished from conversations about illegal, non-consensual abuse.

Simultaneously, I would argue that research on ‘pornography’ needs to be attentive to other forms of sexually explicit materials, and the complex categorisations between them. Pornography is a cultural and value-laden classification as well as a label for sexually explicit materials (Paasonen et al, 2007a; Sullivan and McKee, 2015). In Chapters 4 and 5, I explored how the women distinguished between ‘pornography’ and ‘erotica’. Elyndys and Sini both shared their experiences of producing and consuming erotic writing. This was a distinct form of sexual practice, yet in some regards shared similarities with engaging with pornography. In Chapter 6, I drew attention to the gendered nature of the word ‘pornography’ and how some of the women felt it was more associated with men. Comparatively, Sini and Elyndys felt that erotica was a medium more commonly engaged with by women. I propose that considering sexually explicit materials more broadly, could give greater insight into the sexual practices that women are engaged in. I do not suggest conflating ‘erotica’ and ‘pornography’. However, the distinctions between the two are based on both format and content *and* cultural values. Categories of sexually explicit materials confer political and social values, rather than just representing a form of sexual practice. Research that seeks to investigate women’s sexual practices needs to recognise the complex boundaries of sexually explicit materials.

**Researching Women**

This research evidenced that there is no homogenous woman’s experience of pornography. Research and theory on pornography must account for this. In Chapter 7, I analysed the ways in which the women’s experiences varied between them. Simultaneously, I explored how different factors can inform and frame understandings of women’s experiences in pornography research. Among this group age, sexuality and nationality were important factors when comparing the women’s experiences with one another. Within a larger sample, other demographics or social characteristics could be relevant for understanding women’s relationships to pornography. While there was some diversity in this project, there were many groups and populations not represented. Consequently, I would argue that had different women participated, it is likely that different experiences would have been shared.

This research advocates an intersectional approach to researching women and pornography. This facilitated a deeper insight into each woman’s experience, and a more complex comparison of the women’s experiences. It was possible to see shared experience relating to some aspects of their identities and different experience relating to others. For example, Minty and Honey were heterosexual, and both talked about negotiating their male partners use of pornography. However, when comparing their ages, they were at different stages of the life course and had different concerns. As Ciclitica (2004, p.298) argues:

Pornography affects women of diverse sexual orientations, colour, and class – women who may be consumers and/or workers in the industry. Feminists have recognized the importance of considering differences and not just commonalities, addressing the interests of all women across class, race, age, and sexual orientation.

There is a need to incorporate the lives and experiences of a diverse range of women within pornography research. In Chapter 2, I presented the literature on pornography and drew attention to the universalised discourses of ‘woman’s experience’. There is a lack of diversity in pornography research, and there has been an assumption that there is a “monolithic” experience (Shor and Golitz (2019, p.740). Addressing inclusion, diversity and equality within pornography research could strengthen knowledge on pornography. Feminist theor**ies** responsive to the needs of *all* women could develop more nuanced accounts of empowerment and exploitation, recognising that sexual empowerment is different for different women.

This research particularly highlighted the importance of including the voices of women with different sexualities and sexual preferences. In Chapter 7, I explored the ways in which the women’s perspectives and experiences could differ according to their sexuality. Different political standpoints on pornography have focussed on different types of pornographic materials, and different types of sexual relationships. Anti-pornography feminist perspectives have been concerned with mainstream, heterosexual pornography (Cawston, 2019). Whereas, those sympathetic to pornography have focused more on niche markets, and LGBT\*, queer, feminist and ethical pornographies (Williams, 2014). Theory on pornography is needed, which addresses both the hopes and concerns of women of all sexualities. Different political positions can lack relevance for women when different sexual relationships and different sexual materials are not accounted for.

This research recommends further exploration of how women’s experiences vary according to their individual personalities and preferences. The debate on women’s interactions with pornography has been highly politicised. The feminist debates have framed the discussion around female liberation and exploitation (Russo, 1989). This research highlighted that choices around pornography were personal as well as political. For example, Minty was happy for her partner to use pornography but was not interested in it herself. This was a choice informed by personal sexual preference. Similarly, Elyndys had concerns about the representation of women in pornography but also disliked it because she did not enjoy image-based forms of sexually explicit materials. This analysis of personal preference shaping women’s choices is somewhat absent in the literature. Choices are framed as avoiding exploitation or seeking empowerment as opposed to sexual preference.

I also echo Chadwick et al (2018) and recommend that women’s agentic choices are considered.

Understanding the ways that women interact with sexual media has potentially far-reaching implications both for understanding pornography (what is it that is negative for women and that might be changed) and for women’s relationship to pornography more generally; that is, it draws attention to women’s agency as an important determinant of women’s experiences with sexuality, framing women as active participants in their own pornography consumption.

Framing women as victims of pornography can unwittingly deny them their agency. Chadwick et al (2018) reported that for women who consumed pornography, it could be ‘risky’ but that they negotiated strategies to use it safely and pleasurably. Likewise, in Chapter 5 and 7, I drew attention to the choices the women made to negotiate pornography in their lives. This supported their pleasurable engagement with it, or their avoidance of it. This is not inconsistent with recognising when and where women’s agency is denied. Crucially, this research concludes that research on women’s experiences should account for the context in which they happen (Attwood, 2005). Women’s personalities, identities and agency should all be considered.

Our research also indicated that ‘pornography’ is something to be considered, thought about and negotiated, regardless of whether pornographic materials are encountered. ‘Pornography’ is a debate about representations of sex and sexuality, as much as it is a material product. Regardless of their preferences on pornography, all of the women chose to participate in this project. Whether they liked or disliked it, sought it or avoided it, they all had opinions about porn. In essence they all chose to engage with debates about ‘pornography’ whether they engaged with pornographic materials or not. This indicates the diverse ways in which ‘pornography’ can touch women’s lives and indicates the importance of consulting all women not just those with direct contact with it.

**Bridging Division**

Throughout this thesis, I have questioned how to make sense of pornography when there are such contradictory messages about it. This research has found that women’s experiences of pornography are diverse and argued that research must account for this. However, the question of why there are such contradictory and polarised evidence bases remains. In Chapter 3, I set out the foundations of this research. My position on knowledge making aligned with Stanley and Wise’s (1993, p.8) approach ‘Fractured Foundationalism’; a feminist approach to doing sociology. They propose that “there *is* a social reality, one which members of society construct as having objective existence above and beyond competing constructions and interpretations of it”. This research sought to question, using a feminist participatory methodology, what women’s social realities of pornography were. The research indicates that philosophically there are multiples ‘objective’ realities of pornography and research needs to account for this.

In Chapter 7, when analysing the factors that could shape the women’s perspectives and experiences, it was possible to see how such diverse experience was possible. Pornography could be a positive or a negative presence within the women’s lives. As outlined in Chapter 6, the women were interested in pornography beyond their own experiences of it. Their opinions were also shaped by their relationships, the media and different information sources. As Chapter 2 set out, there is ample evidence to suggest that pornography is positive and empowering, and that it is negative and exploitative. Within the group, Annette recommended a list of blogs by pornography performers who talk about their positive experiences of working in the industry. On the other hand, Honey brought an article to our research group about the negative impact of male consumption of pornography on women. Opinions were informed by a complex interplay of different life experiences, interactions, sources of information and feelings and values.

There have been criticisms of anti-pornography feminist viewpoints on the basis that they rely on testimony and emotional responses rather than empirical research (Weitzer, 2011; Paasonen, 2014; McNair, 2014; Smith and Attwood, 2014). However, this research would indicate that personal experience and opinion can be informed by a range of sources. Different standpoints on pornography can be justified by the vast array of research and knowledge on pornography that exists. There are multiple ways to experience pornography, all of which are supported by knowledge, evidence and ideology. Consequently, I would argue that ‘pornography’ has multiple ‘objective’ realities for people. It can be ‘objectively’ exploitative, and it can be ‘objectively’ empowering. I am not a relativist or a solipsist, I do not believe that only individual, subjective experience exists. Rather, this is an analysis of why such contradictory positions can exist simultaneously. Pornography research must account for this. It must acknowledge how this polarisation has developed and recognise that different stances on pornography are based upon more than just opinion.

This research offers a contribution to reconciling the polarised views on pornography. It considered how women’s different views have emerged and emphasised the importance of listening to one another. Through sharing our stories and asking questions, we were able to better understand each other and develop our own opinions. Through doing this we identified commonalities in our views, and also sympathised with how differences in opinion had formed. The participatory methodology facilitated this, and enabled action-oriented forms of learning from one another. The field of pornography research is notoriously divided and argumentative (Cadwalladr, 2013). This research concludes that there needs to be more receptiveness to different perspectives in pornography studies, which has been lacking in the polarised debates. Taking new methodological approaches in research would be one step in achieving this.

The debate on pornography needs to be reframed. McKee (2005) draws attention to the heteronormative nature of some of the concerns about pornography. Eaton (2007, p.714) argues that anti-pornography feminists have spoken unambiguously about the ‘harm’ of pornography which is non-specific and unhelpful in rectifying problems around pornography or doing research on it. On the other hand, pro-pornography perspectives have adopted the label of ‘sex positive’ (Comella, 2015). For Vera-Gray (2018) this can have the undesired effect of positioning women who complain about pornography as ‘anti-sex’. Moving forward, participatory research approaches and creating spaces to listen to one another, could be a means to bridge the divide and change the debate. For O’Neill (2001, p.184):

Seeing things as they are and cutting through ideology and ideological effects involves connecting lived experience, feeling, meaning with theory and practice.

I feel this was achieved in this project. Collaborative conversations and empathetic listening allowed us to learn from one another, consider our own opinions and develop new knowledge based on our newfound thoughts and reflections. This action-oriented form of knowledge building, this praxis, allowed us to see the porn debates in a different way. I was able to reflect on the ideological components of the different positions on pornography in a way I was unable to at the start of the project. Through bringing women together to share their lived experiences, we were able to learn in practice that women are empathetic to different perspectives. This highlights the opportunity to create new ways of knowing about pornography. I recommend going forward, that the challenge is to consider how to develop new ideologies, debates and research frameworks *together* that are receptive to all experiences. I endorse participatory approaches and praxis-oriented knowledge making to support this.

**Developing Nuanced Discussion on Pornography**

Reflecting on the empirical findings, this research indicated that ‘pornography’ had the capacity to be both positive and negative. In Chapter 7, I argued that the women’s experiences and opinions of ‘pornography’ were contingent on multiple factors. I drew attention to how the emotional experience of pornography was linked to the women’s agency and control over the interaction. Some of the most negative experiences shared in this project were ones in which pornography was imposed. Some of the most positive were ones in which pornography was actively sought after. The feminist debates positioned pornography as exploitative *or* empowering whereas this research would suggest pornography can be exploitative *and* empowering. It was not necessarily the pornography that dictated this but the specific context in which it was encountered. Research on pornography needs to account for the ways in which pornography is produced, used and interacted with. Sini argued this in our second group meeting, when we looked at an erotic image:

It’s not only about the representation or [inaudible] like in that picture, if that picture is shot and done with the right values and the ideology then I think reads differently so you just need to know what is the background, so you have to be an informed consumer. *Sini in Research Group Meeting 2.*

This argument is not intended to deny any problems associated with pornography. There is ample empirical research and evidence to suggest that pornography can have a negative role in people’s lives (Dines, 2011; IPPR, 2014; Ashton et al, 2018). Rather, I am highlighting the necessity of analysing the context in which this occurs and identifying the specific actions and behaviours which shape this. A problem with ‘cause and effect’ research for example, which has sought to test the negative influence of pornography consumption, is that it absolves “the individual abuser’s agency and accountability” (Boyle, 2000, p.193).

Pornography is blamed rather than an individual’s choice of action. When negotiating pornography in society, a more nuanced discussion is needed about which contexts are ‘good’ and ‘bad’. As a society, we need to engage with discussions around what types of production, use, behaviour and interaction we feel is supportive of healthy, safe and consensual sexual practice.

In Chapter 7, I quoted Sullivan and McKee (2015, p.177) who argue that pornography “can reinforce structures of oppression, but it can also reveal new ways of organising bodies, desires, pleasures, and politics.” Going forward, pornography research needs to acknowledge this. I also invite discussion and debate around which context is most prevalent. The women felt that ‘mainstream pornography’, which is the most readily available, was the type of pornography most likely to be exploitative. ‘Mainstream pornography’ is under-researched within academic perspectives that are sympathetic to pornography (Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015). Honey, who was most concerned, was not convinced that pornography produced ethically was the pornography being engaged with by the young men that she knew.

Honey: I don’t care how many times the girls say there’s ethical porn, no-one watches that shit, people [laughs] people watch what they think is aesthetically pleasing like, well what they think the world has told them to think is aesthetically pleasing.

Ruth: So is it like then that notion of mainstream porn? Is that, do you know what I mean?

Honey: Yeah and I don’t, like, I really honestly don’t think your typically teenage guy even older than that looks at things that are ethical. *Honey’s Interview*

This research advocates an approach that recognises that pornography can be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ dependent on how people produce, use and interact with it. In order, to maximise ‘good’ interactions with pornography, pornography needs to be located within conversations on sex and sexuality, consent, equality and power, employment rights and working conditions, among other things. To do this, researchers must consult different stakeholders and include the voices of all in society.

**Policy and Pornography: Let’s Talk About Porn(ography)**

Over the course of this PhD, there have been significant developments in legislation and policy on pornography and related issues. Age verification checks have been announced yet delayed several times. These checks have been criticised for their inadequacy at dealing with the issues around pornography. It has been highlighted that they will not stop all pornographic content being looked at (Girl on the Net, 2019). There are serious concerns around privacy and data breaches (Adam Smith Institute, 2019). Furthermore, it has been argued this will further concentrate power in the hands of big pornography corporations weakening independent and ethical producers (Gulla, 2019). In Chapter 6, I presented the women’s scepticism of the policy regardless of their political persuasion on pornography. The women advocated talking about pornography, not simply censoring it. Blake (2019, p.233) argues:

Young people deserve our protection and support, but, as a harm reduction policy, age verification is weakly supported by the evidence. Meanwhile, the Conservative Government has decimated funding for sex education, schools, libraries and youth clubs; an incoherent approach if their aim is truly to help young people.

One of our *Findings from the Project* was that sex, sexuality and pornography all need to be talked about more. These conversations need to broad and wide reaching and not just focused on negative issues. A welcome policy development has been the introduction of statutory SRE, to be rolled out in September 2020. This is new legislation and it remains to be seen how it will be implemented. However, there is evidence to suggest that schools are not ready to teach it and that teachers are not been supported to do so (Sex Education Forum, 2018; Froggatt et al, 2019). In this project, we concluded that young people need to be supported to negotiate and navigate pornography, not just to fear it. However, looking at the Department for Education (2019b, p.28) curriculum guidance, the only recommended provision on pornography is to include it and to teach:

That specifically sexually explicit material e.g. pornography presents a distorted picture of sexual behaviours, can damage the way people see themselves in relation to others and negatively affect how they behave towards sexual partners.

Reflecting on the experiences and opinions of the women in this research, this is disappointing. This research recommends that education on pornography should recognise diversity of experience and seek to target criticisms more specifically. Our research highlighted the need for more spaces to talk about sex, sexuality and pornography. In Chapter 6, I shared the women’s perspectives on how this could negotiate the issues that emerge from pornography. Elizabeth and Minty were particularly concerned with fear-based narratives on pornography within sexual education; they did not feel this empowered young people to make choices. Hirst (2012, p.5) sets out a model of SRE provision which includes conversations about pleasure and “support(s) the development of young people’s skills and competencies for having and maintaining positive sexual health and equality within relationships.”. This includes discussion and critical debate on pornography. Pleasure based paradigms of SRE do not equate to only speaking positively about pornography, but could help young people to better question and negotiate it. This research recommends future considerations on how to develop more spaces in which pornography can be talked about.

8.4 Reflections on the Project and the Method

I will next make final reflections on the research methodology. I will consider the scope of the project and how wide reaching it is. The strengths and weaknesses of the project will be presented, and recommendations made for further research.

**Building on the Research**

This research has highlighted the diverse experiences of pornography that women can have. This was possible working with just eight women. As outlined in Chapter 3, I initially intended to work with a much larger sample of women in order to map the ways in which women can experience pornography. Instead, I worked in-depth with a small group to develop deep insights into their biographies and narratives. This research cannot be said to speak for all women, and it is a conclusion of this thesis that no research on pornography should seek to do that. I argue this research has relevance for women beyond the research group, as it indicated the types of questions that could be asked. This research recommends accounting for women’s identities, the type of ‘pornography’ being discussed and the interaction between the two, when researching women’s experiences of pornography. Chapters 4 – 6 also indicate shared topics of discussion.

Going forward, this research would be strengthened through working with a broader cohort of women. There were populations not represented in this research. Earlier in this chapter, I recommended taking an intersectional approach. There is limited research into how women’s experiences of pornography intersect with race and ethnicity (Shor and Golitz, 2019). There is empirical research, including this research, to suggest that LGBT\* women’s encounters and experiences with pornography can be different to heterosexual women’s (Ashton et al, 2018; Ryberg, 2018). Yet their voices are not as included in the literature. There have been debates about whether pornography fetishizes disabled women (Elman, 1997) or whether “sexual modes through which disabled people can erotically play with disability – in ways that do not reproduce them as an object – can be progressive.” (Liddiard, 2016). The lives of women with different identities, cultures and backgrounds needs to be incorporated into research in order to understand the ways in which pornography is experienced.

In this project, a wide range of different pornographies and related media were talked about including (but not limited to): mainstream pornography, ethical pornography, self-made content, fanfiction, erotica, music videos and television programmes. New technologies and the internet have meant new types of pornography are available such as interactive forms of pornography, virtual reality pornography and pornographic games (Ashton et al, 2019). These could all result in different interactions with and relationships to the pornographic. This would suggest that had other women participated in this project, we could have heard different experiences relating to different pornographic content, media and platforms.

Additionally, there were types of pornographic interaction, encounter and relationship that were not talked about in this research. I did not speak to anyone who performs in pornography or works in the pornographic industry. The research was open to all women but largely we spoke about pornographic consumption. In particular, I recognise the absence of the voices of women who work in the industry. ‘Nothing about us without us’ is an important philosophy underpinning studies into sex work (Lee and Sullivan, 2016, p.105). Hearing from women who work in the industry would enable a more holistic approach to researching pornography. Bringing together women who perform in the industry with those who do not could be supportive of formulating better policy. Campbell and O’Neill (2006) outline the use of participatory research to consult residents and sex workers about managing sex work in residential areas. This collaboration enabled new dialogue and understanding. O’Neill et al (2008, p.90) outline:

For instance, in Walsall, participatory action research led to greater awareness and understanding for residents, bridging the gap between residents and street sex workers, and creating a platform for new policy and practice in the local area. In one anonymous locale, we also noted that hostility turned to empathetic understanding through greater awareness via increased dialogue between projects, residents and sex workers.

This is particularly relevant in thinking about the formulation of pornography policy. Age verification laws have been welcomed for protecting children (NSPCC, 2015). Yet pornography performers are concerned it will not work and will have the consequence of restricting privacy and will harm independent pornography producers (York and Lust, 2018; Blake, 2019). A collaborative space between these two perspectives could support the development of useful policy and legislation.

The scope of this study is somewhat limited to the women who participated and this highlights the importance of expanding this research and seeing it as a work in progress. One of the challenges this presents is considering how to reach different groups of women. In Chapter 3, I set out the recruitment strategy for this project. Fifteen women expressed an interest and eight participated in the research group. Five of these women were connected in some way to people I already knew. It was perhaps no surprise that we were all quite open to talking about sex and politically left / centre-left leaning. I can only speculate about what the barriers to participating in the project were. In the two previous studies I conducted on pornography, I did not find it difficult to recruit women to take part. I have always found that women are interested in and willing to talk about pornography in the research setting. Methodologically this project differed in that it had a group-oriented method and involved more meetings. I would therefore tentatively suggest that discussing pornography in a group setting or having to commit to a long-term research project may have been off-putting. Of those that did participate, some women attended more than others and some of them shared with me that this was due to other commitments. I recognise that the methodology may have impacted on who participated.

Davies, K. (2011) has written about how the recruitment process can be a form of data. The conversations she had while door-knocking enriched and supplemented her data collection. In some way, I feel my recruitment process was data too, but I cannot work out how. I believe the silence I was met with spoke volumes, but without being able to speak to those silent people I cannot interpret why. Going forward, if this research is to address intersectionality, diversity and inclusion, robust recruitment strategies will need to be developed. This was a weakness of the project but something that I hope can be rectified.

**Strengths of a Participatory Approach**

For this project, I brought together a feminist research framework, ‘Fractured Foundationalism’ (Stanley and Wise, 1993) with a participatory theoretical and methodological approach. This thesis concludes that using feminist and participatory research methods offered an unrivalled opportunity to researching pornography in a different way. These methods have scarcely been utilised in the field of pornography studies. At the time of research design, I could find only two examples of research using participatory methods, both of which focused on developing educational interventions with young people (Ruškus and Sujeta, 2014; Cheney et al, 2017). An issue of the *Porn Studies* journal was put together collaboratively by an academic and a porn performer. Editors Jiz Lee and Rebecca Sullivan (2016, p.105) explain:

One of our goals was to encourage and invite industry professionals to contribute. This model of collaboration fits with the ‘nothing about us without us’ philosophy that insists any kind of research or policy initiatives on sex work include the workers themselves.

This research advocates furthering the use of collaborative approaches within pornography studies. In Chapters 3 and 7, I analysed how a participatory approach facilitated a much deeper insights into the women’s experiences. This was achieved through bringing together our different expertise and working together collaboratively. Constructing the conceptual framework for the research together, that is using our lived experiences to inform the concepts used to ask questions and discuss topics, enabled us to engage with the topic in a more nuanced way. Moreover, it facilitated a different way of approaching and understanding the divided porn studies debates. In Chapter 2, I outlined the ways in which the field of pornography research has been divided. I proposed that the foundations of pornography research have not always been explicitly acknowledged. Through working together, we could more rigorously address our standpoint, positionality and ideology.

Participatory approaches are underpinned by a commitment to being reciprocal in the research process (Walmsley and Johnson, 2003). Research should be beneficial for those who take part. In thinking about what the research offered the women who participated, one success was providing a space in which to bring women together. We met regularly and produced knowledge on pornography, but also shared food and drinks, and chatted about our lives. The project was a free social activity taking part in the local community. I acknowledge I have obtained a PhD from this ‘free activity’ and so I do not want to exaggerate the gesture of the research. However, through collaborative relationships this was not an extractive process. For O’Neill (2010, p.231), creating the participatory space can be a political activity:

Given the closing down of spaces for public resistance under the auspices of the Thatcher, Major, Blair, and Brown governments, PAR provides a potentially powerful tool for resistance and a platform for civic participation - a critical theory in practice.

Doing this research was political, it provided a space to talk about porn in the absence of there being enough spaces to talk about it. I cannot make bold statements about how empowering it was to participate in the project. However, several of the women reflected that they had learnt new things from the project and had enjoyed sharing their views. Honey reflected in her interview:

It’s been a nice project, it’s been a positive project, we’ve never knocked each other down, none of the women have been like “you’re weird because you don’t like porn”, and I’ve not been like “you’re weird because of the type of porn you watch is weird”. But it’s been quite good to, almost like liberating to talk about it and to learn what other people think. *Honey’s Interview*

I do not know if the project was as successful as this for all the women, but I am proud that it was at least for one.

The group could be a reminder that there is more that unites us than divides us. Listening back to our small talk when transcribing, I realised the irrelevant conversation was relevant. In one group, Honey told us about getting dressed up for a night out. She needed cheering up and so she told us she had dressed to impress. While out, a woman came over to speak to her, Honey waited for the compliment but instead the woman told her that her label was sticking out. We all laughed when she told us, but we could also all relate to it and had similar stories. While we all came from different walks of life and had different opinions, we could all relate to each other in some way. The groups were an example of feminist organisation and activity, made possible by a participatory approach. As I reflected in Chapter 3, some women participated in the project more than others. Therefore, going forward this research could be strengthened by considering how to develop safe spaces in which to participate which work for everyone. This could mean a mix of different research methods.

The participatory approach also supported my role as the researcher. It facilitated much better reflexive practice as I was able to check in with the women and tell them my concerns about the methodology. The research method was evaluated with the women in their interviews and subsequently I was able to tweak the project to accommodate their suggestions. Moreover, their analysis of the method was built into this thesis. The participatory approach helped me to navigate the emotional challenges of researching pornography. The positive impact that participatory research can have on the researcher has been reported elsewhere. Cancian (1989) conducted feminist participatory action research with fellow female academics on balancing work life and family. She reported the positive impact of sharing her experiences in her group and how it improved her confidence when talking with senior male colleagues. In this regard, I feel doing participatory research was supportive to my wellbeing in a way that a non-participatory project might not have been. It is well documented that doing research on sex can be difficult for the researcher (Poole et al, 2004) and while this was the case, participatory research was also a mechanism to support me through this. The reciprocal relationship meant I was supported as well. A participatory methodology was complimentary to adhering to Stanley and Wise’s (1993) ‘Fractured Foundationalism’. The equalising of our research relationships facilitated stronger reflexive practice; it enabled me to reflect more closely on where the knowledge produced stemmed from my worldview; and, our co-productive conversations enabled each of us to interrogate our own ‘objective realities’ more closely. For example, this was evident when comparing how we viewed and interpreted music videos, or when we discussed our different understandings of pornography’s material form and reflected on how this had shaped our views of it.

**Strengthening the Participatory Approach**

It is important to be reflexive and to consider what my role in the project was. I think the project was at times undermined by my own lack of confidence. I frequently worried about not being ‘participatory enough’ and I wanted to ensure that the women had control over the research. Therefore, I sometimes lacked the confidence to take control and provide structure in the research groups. Several of the women reflected that more structure would have facilitated better discussion. In hindsight, I recognise that being participatory does not necessarily rely on having the same research roles and decision-making power as the participants in the research (Bergold and Thomas, 2010). Taking some of the burden of decision-making and labour of doing the research can be more inclusive than not. The women in this group wanted me to make decisions, as evident when I asked them if they would like to be involved in designing the questions for their interviews:

Honey: Do you want me to ask my own interview questions for myself?

Ruth: Yeah

Elizabeth: No

Ruth: If you wanted to

Honey: I’m not doing it all Ruth god, you’ve got to do something!

[Everyone laughs]

Sini: Next she’s going to ask us to transcribe!

Elizabeth: While you guys are here, could you just write a couple chapters?

Ruth: My supervisors are going to fucking love this!

Honey: When you write about it in your methodology.

Elizabeth: When you get us to write about it in your methodology. *Research Group Meeting 5.*

In the future, I would be more confident to develop a structure. However, I think this is something that will develop with experience and has been developed by this experience.

I also recognise that the lack of facilitation could impair the group space being one in which everyone could speak. As outlined in Chapter 3, the women felt the group could sometimes be governed by a majority view or was judgemental about certain perspectives. It was sometimes difficult to ensure that everyone had an equal opportunity to speak. On reflection, I feel I had a responsibility to chair and facilitate the discussions better. I feel this research has developed my confidence and skills to do this better in the future.

Similar to other participatory researchers, I felt there could be a tension between doing participatory research and the academic confines of a PhD (Klocker, 2012; Southby, 2017). The PhD is not designed to be a fully participatory process. Several parts of the research process, such as the research proposal, the ethics application, and the write up and award of the PhD, were completed solely by me. I was able to discuss this with the women and they reassured me they had consented to this. However, there can be a lack of guidance for researchers about how to negotiate this tension. Going forward, I suggest there should be more conversation to help researchers develop participatory practices within the confines of academic convention. Simultaneously, I support academic activism which challenges convention and opens up participatory space.

One reflection I have from using participatory methods, is that it would be helpful to have more guidance about how to be participatory. As Nind (2011, p.350) highlights “researchers have embarked on research using participatory approaches or methods with various groups for different reasons.” Bourke (2009, p.458) highlights that there are “no strict rules” of what makes research participatory nor is there an “essential ingredient”. Participatory researchers have disagreed about what stages of the research participants should be included in. As outlined in Chapter 3, participatory research has sometimes neglected to include people in the analysis of research (Nind, 2011). As an emerging researcher, this presented difficulties in designing the research. I recognise there needs to be flexibility in participatory approaches to be responsive to the needs of different communities. However, going forward I hope to contribute, in collaboration with academics and non-academics, to conversations which offer practical guidance on doing this.

As with any theoretical and methodological approach, participatory research methodologies have been subject to criticisms. In this section, and throughout the methodology and discussion chapter, I have reflected on the difficulties I encountered in using this approach. I would always have taken a participatory approach as it is more than a methodology; it reflects my fundamental political and philosophical views on what knowledge is and how research should be conducted. I do however recognise that there can be difficulties encountered or limitations to the methodology. Bergold and Thomas (2012) highlight that there can be academic resistance to participatory methodologies as: they are time and resource intensive, do not necessarily comply with academic structures for funding or research, nor do they fit with traditional quality assessment criteria of research (such as objectivity). They discuss that criticisms of the approach will vary according to each researcher’s philosophical worldview. However, they acknowledge, “it cannot be disputed that it is sometimes very difficult to assess the quality and rigor of participatory projects” and advocate the development of clearer quality assessment of participatory research. I also experienced how time intensive the participatory approach was, and recognise this is not always possible within the confines of academic research and funding. Here, I echo Klocker’s (2012, p.131) position that:

Participatory approaches should instead be conceptualised as being on a continuum of varying degrees of involvement and control for participants.

Taking this approach is helpful in thinking about how embodying some of the principles of participatory approach may be possible where undertaking a full participatory methodology is not. Key to methodological rigour are transparent and reflexive accounts of the fieldwork and research methodology.

8.5 What Next for the Research?

I feel it would be remiss to let the momentum of the project dissipate. I am reluctant for the dissemination of the project to be solely academic as this would undermine the original intentions of the project. Therefore, I hope to continue with this research area and speak to more women. I intend to present the findings at an event at which I hope I can distribute the zine. I also intend to apply for post-doctoral funding to expand upon and develop the research in the ways mentioned above.

One way in which I would like to develop the research, is through the combination of participatory methodologies and creative art. O’Neill (2001) promotes the use of ‘ethno-mimesis’. This approach is:

A methodological and performative praxis – [which] involves the combination or interweaving of ethnographic and participatory methods and the subsequent production of art forms to represent experience. (O’Neill and Hubbard, 2010, p.47).

In our final session, we created a zine together as a mode of research dissemination. This included our different thoughts on pornography and the research. We included a story, advice and guidance, and political opinions. While we all had very different views, we were able to negotiate and create a document that we were all happy with. We developed an artistic and creative format for our research findings. For O’Neill (2008b):

Art makes visible experiences, hopes, ideas; it is a reflective space and socially it brings something new into the world—it contributes to knowledge and understanding. In so doing it is intrinsically political.

We respectfully negotiated the inclusion of a pornographic story into the zine. It was decided that it would be on the inside such that, when the zine is folded into a book, the story can only be accessed by unfolding it. In this way we were accommodating to people who want to the read the story and to those who do not. This was a creative representation of our respect for one another and what we had achieved. Moving forward, I would like to incorporate this method further into my research.

I intend to continue using and developing creative forms of data production. Our conversations were brought alive through using more than just a traditional question and answer format. Using elicitation techniques, that is photos, videos and artefacts through which to spark discussion (Glaw et al, 2017), our thinking became more focussed and less hypothetical. It also enabled the women to question each other, through a medium that was more relatable. As highlighted in Chapter 3, it was difficult to pose questions to each other, particularly as our experiences were so different. However, a music video or a newspaper article could be a conduit through which to express our ideas in a way more understandable to one other. These techniques were also fun and brought different emotions to the project. This made the experience more joyful which cemented the participatory nature of the research. It was not just an extractive process of data collection. The outing in which we made ceramics was a means to get to know each other without the recorder on and build our research relationships, and to thank the women for their involvement in the project. The zine was also a collaborative form of research dissemination which moved beyond traditional academic outputs. Moving forward, I intend to develop the use of creative methods within my own academic research, both as a way to do participatory research and as a way to do sexualities research.

8.6 Concluding Remarks

The final note on which I wish to end this thesis is optimistic. I want to emphasise the importance of facilitating people’s sexual agency and expression when thinking about pornography. Throughout the research, we reflected on the contradictory messages about women’s sexuality in our society. On the one hand society does not acknowledge that women are sexual beings and on the other they are expected to be sexually available. The extent of sexual violence and oppression towards women is not always acknowledged, yet simultaneously women are represented as victims and denied their agency. What felt so positive about the group was the fun, playful and agentic stories the women told about their sexual encounters, their intimate relationships and their lives. There were stories of hardship, which I have acknowledged and discussed. These were shared on the women’s terms. There were also stories of fun. Therefore, I would like to refer to our final statement from the *Findings from the Project* (Appendix 1).

We want to say, that while not always talked about, women do have sex lives and are having sex.

In her interview, Psycho shared:

I honestly think that for women, well recent political changes might throw this off a little bit but we’re at the best point in time that you could ever be a woman, especially for me, this is the best point of time that you could ever be a gay woman because I’m married and all those kinds of things, so I think it is getting more representation, it could always be better. *Psycho’s Interview*

This feels like a good note to end things on. This research has showcased women’s experiences and women’s lives, and how great these can be. It also makes a contribution to and builds on that which could be better.

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Appendix 1

Findings from the Project

1. Pornography is experienced, engaged with, thought and felt about in diverse ways by us. Positive, negative and everything in-between.
2. This diversity was compatible with open conversation, discussion and learning from one another.
3. Trying to group these experiences into common themes runs the risk of warping or distorting them. This diversity requires a different kind of analysis.
4. It is possible to build collective knowledge from these diverse positions, knowledge that recognises individual difference and diversity.
5. Pornography was subjectively understood and meant different things to different people.
6. ‘Pornography’ has multiple meanings; both for ourselves and across us.
7. When we talked about pornography we weren’t always talking about the same thing, the word is used for many things. You cannot always therefore compare our experiences with ease.
8. We believe that sex, sexuality and pornography all need to be more openly discussed in our society, particularly in the media but in other spaces too. These conversations need to be broad and not just focused on negative issues.
9. We believe that women are still not fully able to exercise autonomy over their sexuality. Women face control and regulation of their sexualities, and are often subject to unwanted attention.
10. We believe that there aren’t enough spaces to talk about women and pornography.
11. We felt that how society understands pornography, and how society talks about it is gendered.
12. We want to say, that while not always talked about, women do have sex lives and are having sex.

Appendix 2

Recruitment Advertisements

Sheffield Forum Advert

My name is Ruth Beresford and I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. My research concerns women’s experiences of pornography, and how women feel about pornography, and the role / impact/ effect (or not) is has in their lives

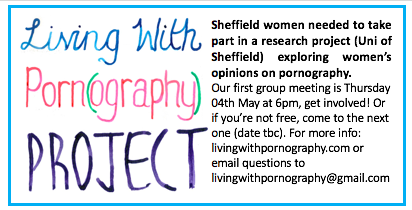
I am posting on this forum as I am looking to recruit 10-12 women local to the Sheffield area to take part a research group for this project. All women (self-defining) over the age of 18 living in Britain are eligible to take part. I hope that this group will meet several times to discuss different areas of the topic and analyse some of the findings together. However, how often the group meets can be agreed as to what is convenient for everyone who takes part. At each group, we will discuss different aspects of the research topic\*and as the projects develop we will analyse the findings together.

If you are interested, have any questions or would like any information my contact details are below.

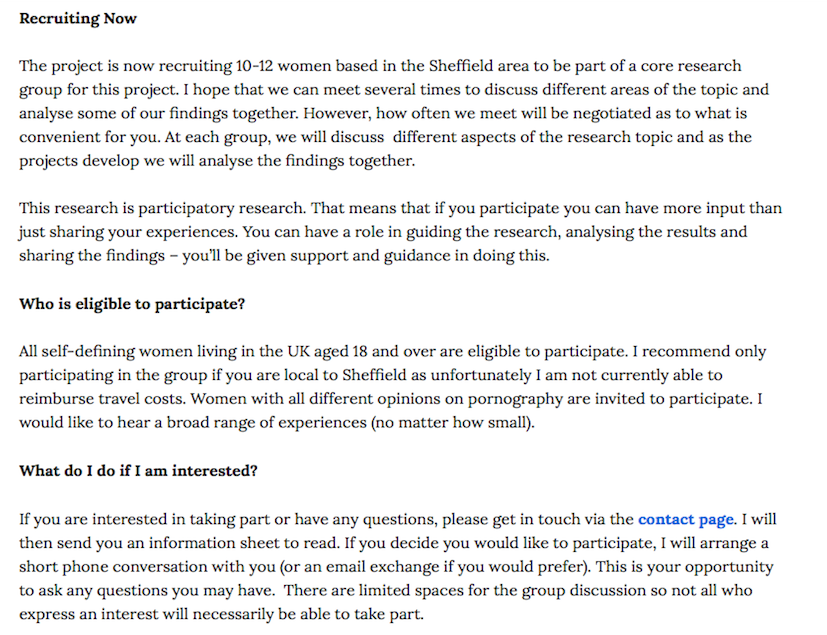
Email: [livingwithpornography@gmail.com](mailto:)

Twitter: @LivingWithPorn

 Thank you

Twitter Advert

Website Advert



Appendix 3

Research Profiles

|  |
| --- |
| **Name:**  Elyndys  **Basic Information / Demographics:**  Age: 36  Nationality: British  Sex: Female  Sexuality: Heterosexual  In a relationship with a man  Occupation: Café owner  Education: Postgrad  **Who are you? Your personality?**  I’m quite an independent person who likes a lot of freedom, including freedom of thought. I’m also quite an analytical person and enjoy theorising and considering theoretical topics + how they relate to experience in the world. I’m mildly creative in that I enjoy writing + coming up with stories.  **Your relationship to pornography:**  I don’t use ‘traditional’ (i.e. visual) pornography, eg films/ images, but I do both read and write erotic fiction (esp. male/ male fan fiction). I don’t find visual pornography at all appealing – in fact I feel physically squeamish about it.  **How do you think you were in the group?**  I did not attend many of the sessions but I guess I was one of the quieter members! I think perhaps others had a lot more experience of pornography and so had more to offer to the discussion from that point of view. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Name:**  Psycho Grafton  **Basic Information / Demographics:**  Female, Married, Bisexual, Same – Sex Partner (wife), White, British, 34, university lecturer.  **Who are you? Your personality?**  Confident, friendly, open-minded, liberal, love sport, friends are important, caring, loyal, ambitious  **Your relationship to pornography:**  First exposed – Brother found a video of my dad’s – thought it was gross.  Watched with partner aged about 22.  Currently watch mostly alone – partner has low sex drive – I have a higher one. We openly discuss porn as a couple.  **How do you think you were in the group?**  Open to others views, contributor, hope a positive member. Had to miss some groups (work). |

|  |
| --- |
| **Name:**  Minty Lorna  **Basic Information / Demographics:**  White  Straight  Mid Forties  In a relationship with a man  Step mother  Female  British/ European  Job – administrator/ personal assistant  **Who are you? Your personality?**  Vivacious  Self Conscious  Open  Assertive  Listen  Butterfly Mind  Outspoken  Missable  Pay attention  Caring  **Your relationship to pornography:**  Rarely consider it  Happy for others to use it  (including my partner)  **How do you think you were in the group?**  Too outspoken but unsure I contributed helpfully. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Name:**  Elizabeth Dogwood  **Basic Information / Demographics:**  40, married, mother, bisexual, lawyer, religious  **Who are you? Your personality?**  Body positive, sweary, distractable, loud, honest, lots of anecdotes  **Your relationship to pornography:**  V occasional user  **How do you think you were in the group?**  Too much talking not enough listening. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Name:**  “Honey Oak”  Porn name.  **Basic Information / Demographics:**   * 20 years old * straight * student * female * white British * single!   **Who are you? Your personality?**   * Student experiences * Bubbly * Cheerful * Impressionable – play up to it * Smile maker * Articulate * Corrupted   **Your relationship to pornography:**  Used to hate it and now I’m more comfortable with it!  Complicated – especially with partners and friends  **How do you think you were in the group?**  Shy, naïve, quiet, open to ideas  Young! (hide behind my age)  Relaxed! |

|  |
| --- |
| **Name:**  Annette Bonny  **Basic Information / Demographics:**  33, White, Bisexual, Kinky. In long term relationship.  **Who are you? Your personality?**  Measured words, though sometimes abrupt / crass Open about varied sexual history and kink. Getting on for encyclopaedic knowledge of pornography.  Daring, confident, good taste in music.  **Your relationship to pornography:**  PRO PORN But conscious that it has its problems which we can work towards mitigating through being sex positive and ethical in consumption.  **How do you think you were in the group?**  Interested in other peoples experience.  Outspoken about being pro- pornography but understanding that not everybody is. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Name:**  Kate  **Basic Information / Demographics:**  White British  Pansexual  Cisgendered female  31  Married to a woman  Healthcare professional  **Who are you? Your personality?**  Quiet, pensive, empathetic, open minded  Supportive. Kind  Intelligent loving.  Not a fan of boxes.  **Your relationship to pornography:**  Open to individual preferences and interested in keeping an open mind. I didn’t watch it before and I still don’t.  **How do you think you were in the group?**  I think I withheld when I hadn’t anything ‘important’ to say but I felt I said everything that I wanted to contribute. |

|  |
| --- |
| **Name:**  Sini  **Basic Information / Demographics:**   * 28 * White, Finnish * Pansexual * Gender queer * Currently in a “situationship” “there is a situation that is not a relationship” * Job: PhD student   **Who are you? Your personality?**   * “good laugh” * “häilyvä” – sometimes very engaged and fun, sometimes little more serious and quiet * Likes to make / keep people comfortable   **Your relationship to pornography:**   * Read and write a lot of erotic fiction   **How do you think you were in the group?**  Others said:   * Very open * Well travelled * Perspectives Ruth hadn’t heard before, like being different ppl at different spaces/ times * Intelligent * Plays the devil’s advocate |

|  |
| --- |
| **Name:**  Ruth  **Basic Information / Demographics:**  25, PGR student  White British  Heterosexual (?)  In a relationship  Sex = female  **Who are you? Your personality?**  Anxious, a worrier!  “politely outspoken”  “Guarded”, “hesitant”, “cautious”  Giddy  Mumbles under breath  Swears a lot when stressed  Confessional  **Your relationship to pornography:**  “Critical”  **How do you think you were in the group?**  Guarded at first and then relaxed  Got more confident  Open  Very protective of everyone  Intimidated by emotion  Self – deprecating wants to be funny, people laugh not sure if at or with  Brooklyn 99 Rosa DS |

Note: For those of us who created these profiles in a group session (Sini, Honey, Minty, Elizabeth, Kate, Annette and myself), the ways in which we described our personalities and how we were in the group were a combination of everyone’s suggestions. This explains the eclectic choice of descriptions included(!).

**Information Sheet**

**Research Group**

**Living with Porn(ography): Women’s Experience of Pornography**

Researcher: Ruth Beresford

Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield

You are invited to take part in a research project being undertaken as part of a PhD (a postgraduate degree) on women’s experiences of pornography. To decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you read this information sheet which will outline the aims of the project and what taking part will entail. If you would like any additional information please get in touch, my contact details are provided at the end.

**What is the project?**

This aim of this project is to find out about how women feel about pornography, through discussing what their experiences of it are. Pornography has become a pertinent issue within society. The media, academic research and government policy all tell us contradictory messages about the positives and negative of it, particularly for women. Making sense of these debates can be difficult; this research will ask women directly how they experience pornography for themselves.

**Am I eligible to take part?**

All women (self-defining) over the age of 18 living in Britain are eligible to take part. The research group is being held in the Sheffield area so you’ll need to be local to, or able to travel to Sheffield. I am interested in hearing from a diverse range of women: women from different backgrounds; women at different stages of their lives; and women with different experiences of pornography (no matter how small). This project is receptive towards different opinions on and feelings around pornography: positive, negative, indifferent and everything in between.

**What will my participation entail?**

I am recruiting 10-12 women to be part of a research group for this project. I hope that we can meet several times to discuss different areas of the topic and analyse some of our findings together. However, how often we meet will be negotiated as to what is convenient for you. What we discuss will be up to us to decide together, we will start from the question “how do women experience pornography” and continue from there. I will also seek your guidance and feedback on how the project is working. You’ll be given support and guidance in this process.

**Do I need to look at pornography to participate?**

No, you do not need to look pornography to participate in this project.

**Where will the research be held?**

The research will take place in Sheffield. I will arrange for the initial meeting to be in/ close to Sheffield city centre but we can rotate the location depending on what’s easiest for everyone in the group.

**How do I sign up to participate?**

If after reading this you would like to take part, I will arrange a short phone conversation with you. This is your opportunity to ask any questions you may have. I will also ask you some details about yourself such as why you want to get involved and some background information. There are limited spaces for the group discussion so not all who express an interest will necessarily be able to take part.

**Do I have to take part?**

Taking part is entirely voluntary, if you decide to take part you will be asked to speak briefly

to me on the phone and if selected to sign a written consent form. You are free to

withdraw from the research at any time without giving any reason. If you do withdraw, all data collected to that point will be used as it will be too complicated to remove your contributions from group discussions.

**Are there any advantages to take part?**

There are no immediate advantages to taking part. I am unable to offer payment, material incentive or travel expenses to take part. The knowledge we produce together will form the basis of my PhD of which I will have sole authorship and ownership.

However, I will strive to make participation more interesting, relevant and reciprocal for you. It is an opportunity for you to share your opinions and experiences of pornography, and at the end of the project we can share our findings together in a way which acknowledges your involvement (e.g. an event/a publication). I will also provide refreshments at the research group meetings.

**Are there any disadvantages to taking part?**

Pornography, sex and sexuality are potentially sensitive topics and talking about them could upset or distress you. If this should happen during a group discussion, we can pause or stop the conversation. I can also give you contact details for sources of information and support.

Taking part in the group discussions does mean committing to a regular meeting. At this stage I am unable to offer travel expenses so I recommend only taking part if you are local to the Sheffield area.

**Will my participation be anonymous?**

Everyone who participates in this project will be offered anonymity. This means that in my PhD thesis, and in any subsequent presentations or publications there will be no attributable references to you. You can choose a pseudonym for yourself. Alternatively, you can choose not to be anonymous. This means that your real name will be used in my PhD thesis and any subsequent presentations or publications. You may wish to take this option to receive credit and acknowledgment for your involvement in the project. There are potential risks and benefits to not being anonymous in this research. Prior to you choosing whether or not to be anonymous we will have a lengthy conversation about the reasons for being anonymous or not, and what the possible benefits or risks are so that you can make an informed choice. You will be given the opportunity to read through any chapters that contain findings from your participation.

**Will my participation be confidential?**

Your participation in the group is confidential but there are limits to this, particularly if you decide not to be anonymous. As our discussions are within a group setting I cannot guarantee confidentiality, I recommend only sharing with the group what you feel comfortable sharing within a wider setting. Additionally, if anything were to be disclosed that related to an offence of a criminal nature or the restriction of someone’s rights I would need to bring this to the attention of my supervisor.

While you have the choice or not to be anonymous, I can offer some confidentiality in the group discussions as together we can decide what data is used in my PhD thesis and any subsequent outputs. I will not use any attributable data without your direct consent. If you wish to share something in confidence within the group, we can agree it is not used or referenced in my PhD thesis or any publications. We will discuss confidentiality in detail before you consent to taking part.

**Will the interviews and group discussions be audio recorded?**

The interviews and group discussions will be audio recorded, and then transcribed. Only myself or a professional transcriber will have access to the recordings which will be kept securely. These recordings will be destroyed within two years of the research completion. I will destroy the transcriptions within 5 years of the research being completed. Comments may be quoted in the final report but these will be non-attributable back to you (unless you wish not to be anonymous).

**What will happen to the results of the research?**

The results of the research will be used in a PhD. The results will also be used in articles to be submitted to a peer-reviewed journal and presented at academic conferences. Together we can also share the results of the research in other ways to acknowledge your involvement and participation.

**Has the research been given ethical approval?**

The research has been granted ethical approval by the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield.

**What if I have any further questions?**

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to get in touch:

Ruth Beresford, Researcher: Email: [livingwithpornography@gmail.com](mailto:hia10rb@shef.ac.uk)

Jadwiga Leigh, Research Supervisor: Email: [j.t.leigh@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:j.t.leigh@sheffield.ac.uk)

**Complaints:**

If you have any complaints, you can contact me or my supervisor (contact details are listed above). If this is not handled to your satisfaction, then you can contact the head of the Department of Sociological Studies Kate Morris, [kate.morris@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:kate.morris@sheffield.ac.uk) who will escalate the complaint appropriately.

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and expressing an interest in participating.**

**Consent Form**

**Group discussion**

**Living with Porn(ography): Women’s Experience of Pornography**

Researcher: Ruth Beresford

Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield

**Name:**

I confirm that I have read the information sheet and had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.

I understand that if I do withdraw from the study that my contributions to this date

will be kept.

I understand that I do not have to answer any questions I do not want to.

**Audio Recordings and Transcripts**

I consent to being audio recorded.

I understand that the audio recordings will be deleted within two years of the

research completion and the transcriptions will be destroyed within five years of the

research completion.

**Anonymity and Confidentiality**

I understand that I am offered anonymity and that it is my decision whether to be anonymised or not.

I consent to being anonymised. My pseudonym will be: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

I understand that I will have the opportunity to negotiate with the researcher what

attributable data is used from my interview.

I understand that the researcher will keep my responses confidential but that there is not absolute confidentiality in this research. I understand that if I disclose information relating to an offence of a criminal nature or the restriction of someone’s rights that the researcher would bring this to the attention of their supervisor.

I understand that there are limits to my confidentiality by participating in a group discussion. I should only share with the group what I am comfortable sharing in a wider setting.

I understand that I need to respect the confidentiality and integrity of the other women in the group and that I may be asked to leave the group if I fail to do this.

**Use of My Data**

I understand I will be given the opportunity to read through any chapters that contain

findings from my participation.

I consent to the research findings and transcripts being used in the PhD thesis, future research, publications and presentations.

It has been explained to me that the ESRC (the funders of this research) ask for

anonymised interview transcripts to be saved on their digital archive that other researchers can access.

I consent to having an anonymised copy of my interview transcript in the digital archive.

I consent to taking part in this project.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature Researcher Signature

Date: Date:

**Consent Form**

**Group discussion**

**Living with Porn(ography): Women’s Experience of Pornography**

Researcher: Ruth Beresford

Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield

**Name:**

I confirm that I have read the information sheet and had the opportunity to ask questions.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason.

I understand that if I do withdraw from the study that my contributions to this date

will be kept.

I understand that I do not have to answer any questions I do not want to.

**Audio Recordings and Transcripts**

I consent to being audio recorded.

I understand that the audio recordings will be deleted within two years of the

research completion and the transcriptions will be destroyed within five years of the

research completion.

**Anonymity and Confidentiality**

I understand that I am offered anonymity and that it is my decision whether to be anonymised or not.

I consent to not being anonymous.

I understand that I will have the opportunity to negotiate with the researcher what

attributable data is used from my interview.

I understand that the researcher will keep my responses confidential but that there is not absolute confidentiality in this research. I understand that if I disclose information relating to an offence of a criminal nature or the restriction of someone’s rights that the researcher would bring this to the attention of their supervisor.

I understand that there are limits to my confidentiality by participating in a group discussion. I should only share with the group what I am comfortable sharing in a wider setting.

I understand that I need to respect the confidentiality and integrity of the other women in the group and that I may be asked to leave the group if I fail to do this.

**Use of My Data**

I understand I will be given the opportunity to read through any chapters that contain

findings from my participation.

I consent to the research findings and transcripts being used in the PhD thesis, future research, publications and presentations.

It has been explained to me that the ESRC (the funders of this research) ask for

anonymised interview transcripts to be saved on their digital archive that other researchers can access.

I consent to having an anonymised copy of my interview transcript in the digital archive.

I consent to taking part in this project.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Signature Researcher Signature

Date: Date:

Appendix 7

Ground Rules

Ruth will chair discussions and keep everyone on topic.

What we say in the room, stays in the room.

Be mindful of other people’s opinions.

No name calling, it can’t get personal.

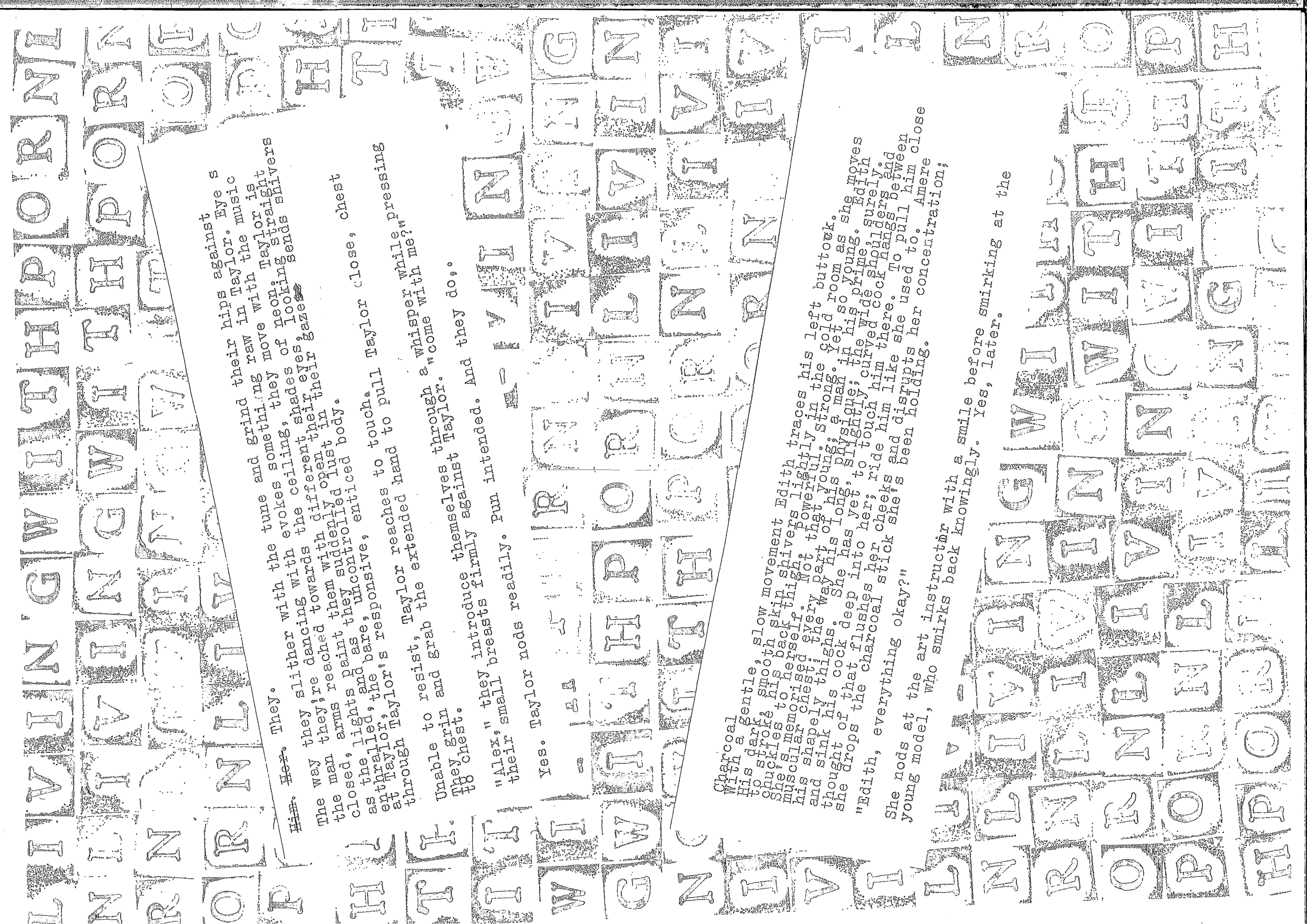
If things get too heated, our safe word is *Gibraltar.*

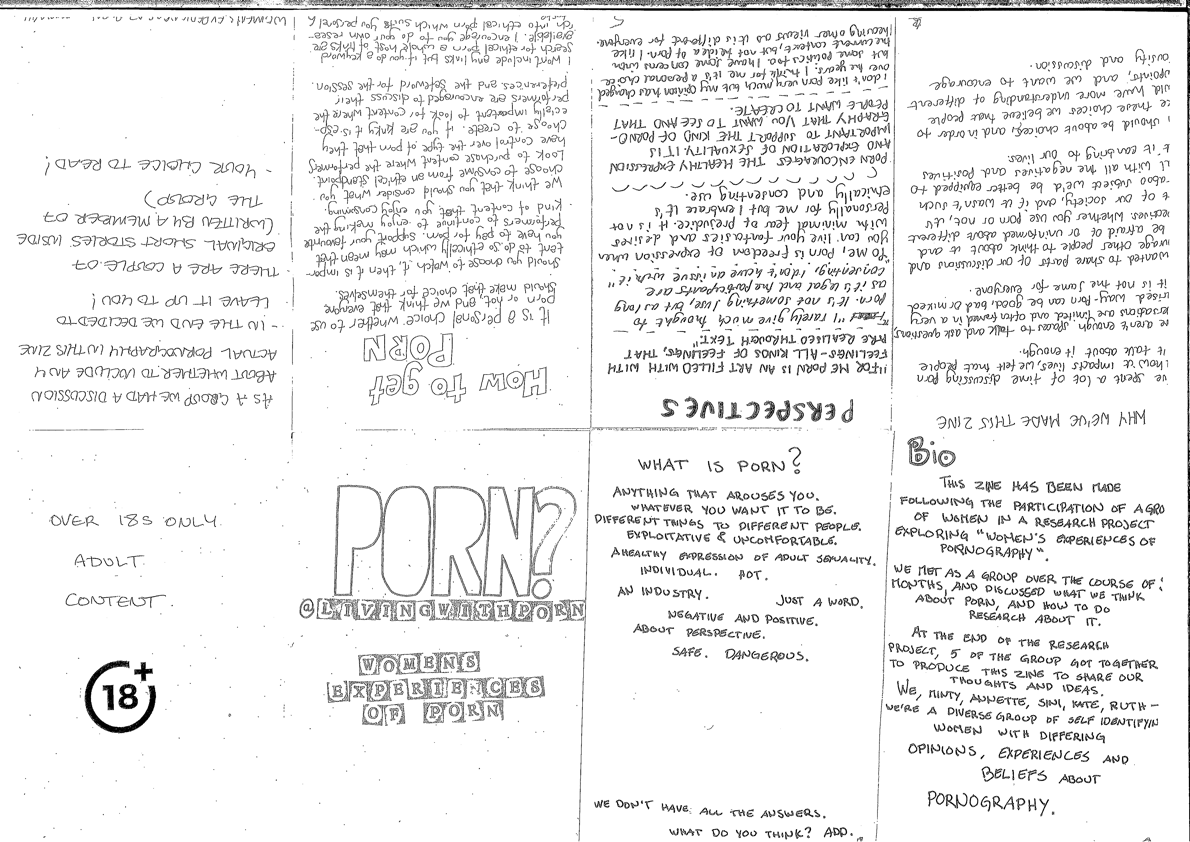
Contact Ruth if there are irreconcilable differences or if you’re feeling uncomfortable about anything.

You can be asked to leave if you don’t respect the other women in the group.

Appendix 8

Zine





Appendix 9

Living With Porn(ography) Project – Group Meeting 1 Schedule

Thursday 4th May 2017 18:00-20:00

**Coffee and Tea – 10 Minutes**

**Introductions – 5 Minutes**

Welcome to the first project meeting and thank you all for coming.

- Introduce myself

- State what the purpose of the research is

To find out more about how women feel about pornography

To use experience as a basis of understanding, and subjective understandings

To try and find a different way of researching pornography.

- Why I am interested in pornography

Just a bit of my background – first researched how women felt about men using pornography, was a feminist and disliked pornography myself, then did my research and realised how much diversity there was for women. I think that research doesn’t capture this diversity, and there is such a difference in opinion of what pornography is, a lot of research on it isn’t comparable. Commonality and diversity?

- The aim of today’s session is to introduce you to the research and start the discussion

**Group Introductions – 5 Minutes**

Can you say your name and why you wanted to get involved in this project?

**The Research Process – 10 Minutes**

- discuss method- group research supplemented by interviews. I would like your advice and input on how we do this research as well as answers to the topic. I can guide things but I’d like your input on what we discuss as well.

- Participatory research.

-Where is the research used?

- Confidentiality and anonymity. Benefits and risks.

- Consent forms

**Ground Rules – 15 Minutes**

**-** We need to establish some ground rules we all abide by, particular as this is a sensitive topic and there are likely to be areas that we don’t agree on. The ground rules will be the code we abide by when working together, and what we turn to if any issues of conflict arise.

It’s up the group but I suggest we need to include confidentiality, conflict…, asking someone to leave

**Group Exercise – 15 Minutes**

Write down the first 3 words that come in to your head when you think of pornography.

**Question 1 – What is Pornography? How do you define it, what counts as pornography?**

**Question 2 – Where is Pornography?**

**Question 3 – How Widespread is Pornography?**

**Question 4 – What are the most important issues for you regarding pornography? What shall we discuss in this research?**

**Closing Discussion**

- Summarise what we have talked about in the session.

- When we meeting again?

- For next time, can everyone bring an artefact (e.g. newspaper article, book) relating to their thoughts on pornography.

Appendix 10

Research Group Meeting 3 Questions

How do you define 'sexuality' and does this definition have an impact on the role pornography plays in your life?

What do the group think about the relationship between porn and sexual preferences and if the two influence each other?

Beyond personal use of pornography, do you think there are other ways in which pornography influences your sexuality? In what ways?

Is porn representative of all genders and sexuality?

Considering the changes in porn content seen in the last decade, how do you each think porn content will change in the next five years?

Is the porn you engage with different to what kind of other sexual behaviours you have/engage in? Do you think they affect each other or are they completely separate for you?

Is this article bullshit? <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/fightthenewdrug.org/true-story-how-porn-twisted-my-sexuality/amp/>

Appendix 11

Living With Porn(ography) Project – Group Meeting 2 Schedule

Wednesday 17th May 2017 18:30

**Introductions – 18:30**

**Introductions – 5 Minutes**

Welcome to the first project meeting and thank you all for coming.

- Introduce myself

- State what the purpose of the research is

To find out more about how women feel about pornography

To use experience as a basis of understanding, and subjective understandings

To try and find a different way of researching pornography.

Last week we started with some background to what pornography is, we identified some of the areas that we would all like to talk about.

**Group Introductions – 5 Minutes**

Can you say your name and why you wanted to get involved in this project?

- Why I am interested in pornography

Just a bit of my background – first researched how women felt about men using pornography, was a feminist and disliked pornography myself, then did my research and realised how much diversity there was for women. I think that research doesn’t capture this diversity, and there is such a difference in opinion of what pornography is, a lot of research on it isn’t comparable. Commonality and diversity?

**The Research Process – 10 Minutes**

- discuss method- group research supplemented by interviews. I would like your advice and input on how we do this research as well as answers to the topic. I can guide things but I’d like your input on what we discuss as well.

- Participatory research.

-Where is the research used?

- Confidentiality and anonymity. Benefits and risks.

- Consent forms

**Ground Rules – 10 Minutes**

**-** We need to establish some ground rules we all abide by, particular as this is a sensitive topic and there are likely to be areas that we don’t agree on. The ground rules will be the code we abide by when working together, and what we turn to if any issues of conflict arise.

It’s up the group but I suggest we need to include confidentiality, conflict…, asking someone to leave

**Group Arrival – 19:00 – 19:15**

Pizza and food

Can everyone introduce themselves?

**Show and Tell – 19:15 – 20:15**

Can everyone tell us about their show and tell item? Explain what it is, and why it represents something interesting for you about pornography.

**Closing Down – 20:15 – 20:30**

What are we going to discuss next time?

Young people?

Legislation?

Real/ fake sex?

Taboo / fear

Choice/ Consent

Female / male imbalance

Does porn influence sexuality or vice versa?

Appendix 12

Living With Porn(ography) Project – Group Meeting 3 Schedule

Wednesday 7th June 2017 18:30

**Project Intro – 18:15- 18:30**

Aim of the project

Consent form and anonymity

**Meeting Open and Introductions – 18:30- 18:45**

Pizza and food

Catch up and chat

Introductions

**Introduction to the meeting – 18:45- 18:50**

Today the theme of our session is going to be “pornography and sexuality”, I have asked all of you to come up with a question and that is going to be what we discuss.

Before we do this, we’re going to briefly go over what we discussed last week and clarify some of the points of our discussion.

We also need to discuss, and begin to shape how the project is going to look.

**Ground rules – 18:50- 19:00**

So before we begin discussions, I want us to go over the ground rules.

I had a listen back to the recordings from last week, and I noticed that not everyone is talking as much as each other, and that we all from time to time talk over each other. I realise, in keeping with our ground rule about me being the chair, I need to take a much more active role in chairing the discussions and ensuring everyone gets a chance to speak.

Additionally, one of you has said she’d like to not be anonymous so I think we need to reiterate issues of confidentiality.

If we could briefly reflect on the ground rules, does anyone have any comments? Is there anything we’d like to add?

**What do we want from the project? 19:00- 19:15**

So, I think the first two sessions have been good in introducing the project and allowing us to get to know each other better. From now, I think we need to start developing a clearer structure. This is flexible and open to change, as we might think of things later down the line that we want to include but I think we need to have an idea of where this is going.

Realistically, we need to have concluded the group sessions by the end of September, with one possible further meeting in November to analyse some of the findings.

There are some areas that I am going to recommend we talk about:

What are our experiences of pornography?

In what ways can women experience pornography?

How do we know / learn about pornography?

How should we learn/ research pornography?

How does the group work as a form of learning about pornography?

What do we want? What areas of hope/ concern need to be addressed? What action do we want to see?

**Bringing together the discussion from last week – 19:15- 19:30**

Last week, I think a large part of our discussion focused on the nature of what pornography is, how it is defined and how it is identified. This seemed of interest to all of you but also seemed to cause some frustrations. It is well identified in academic discussions that the definition of pornography is unclear, so I wanted to establish what the significance of this is for you.

Does anyone have any reflections on taking part in the project so far? About this actual process? Or what it means for you individually?

**Scheduled questions: 19:30 – 20:30**

How do you define 'sexuality' and does this definition have an impact on the role pornography plays in your life?

What do the group think about the relationship between porn and sexual preferences and if the two influence each other?

Beyond personal use of pornography, do you think there are other ways in which pornography influences your sexuality? In what ways?

Is porn representative of all genders and sexuality?

Considering the changes in porn content seen in the last decade, how do you each think porn content will change in the next five years?

Is the porn you engage with different to what kind of other sexual behaviours you have/engage in? Do you think they affect each other or are they completely separate for you?

Is this article bullshit? <https://www.google.co.uk/amp/fightthenewdrug.org/true-story-how-porn-twisted-my-sexuality/amp/>

Appendix 13

Living With Porn(ography) Project – Group Meeting 4 Schedule

Wednesday 21st June 2017 18:30

**Meeting Open and Introductions – 18:30- 18:45**

Pizza and food

Catch up and chat

Introductions

**Introduction to the meeting – 18:45- 18:50**

Today’s theme is going to be the law and pornography.

Before we do this, we’re going to briefly go over what we discussed last week and clarify some of the points of our discussion.

Funny story from yesterday

Pass round the ground rules.

**Bringing together the discussion from last week – Any reflections from last week?**

I listened back to the recording, it seemed to work better.

Any points over our discussion about sexuality?

**Read this in the Independent today- what do people think?**

**What do we want to talk about next time?**

* Ideas for field trip
* Ideas for output

**How do we define pornography?**

Pass round the handout.

**The Law and Pornography**

Appendix 14

Living With Porn(ography) Project – Group Meeting 5 Schedule

Wednesday 12th July 2017 18:30

**Meeting Open and Introductions – 18:30- 18:45**

Pizza and food

Catch up and chat

**Introduction to the meeting – 18:45- 18:50**

Today’s agenda:

* Pornography and the Law
* SRE
* The interviews

I thought we could try something different today. I’ve created a few exercises to get the discussion going and try and focus it. Obviously though I’d like you all to have input on this too so if you’d like to take the conversation in a different direction then we can work that out.

Pass round the ground rules.

I have applied for funding for an event, I’ll keep you posted.

**The Law:**

I have made a fact sheet about the law on pornography- which I thought we could go through and discuss.

How aware are you all of what the law on pornography is?

What do we think of censorship? Should any pornography be censored?

What do we think of age verification checks?

What issues do we want to see legislated on?

What are their thoughts about the potential for porn legislation as a backdoor shoehorn for wider censorship?

How should pornography be legislated on?

How should we gather evidence for legislation?

What sort of experts would we be interested in?

**The Articles:**

Revenge Pornography:

What do we think about revenge pornography?

What do we think about the name “revenge pornography”?

What would you call it?

**Sex and Relationship Education:**

SRE has now been made compulsory in the UK.

What was your sex education?

What would you like to see talked about in SRE regarding pornography?

Are there things that need to be addressed in SRE more broadly which would help issues around pornography?

5 things you would include about pornography in SRE.

**The Interviews:**

What questions are we going to ask?

**What do we want from the project?**

Future Groups:

2nd August, 15th August and 6th September

Different options for the future-

6th September- Wrap things up

November – Analysis Session

Interviews and then a group.

Two more groups.

An activity in the group?

Ways of disseminating the findings.

Appendix 15

Living With Porn(ography) Project – Group Meeting 6 Schedule

Tuesday 15th August 2017 18:30

**Catch up and Pizza**

**Introduction:**

Ground Rules

Today is our penultimate session, today we’re going to be talking about the interviews and about rounding up the project.

I am not going to interview any other women.

**Funding for a Field Trip:**

So if we want funding for a field trip we need a much tighter application and it needs to be completed in the next few days. So we need to discuss this.

1. We find an event or exhibition – slight drawback, I can’t find anything so far. Most of the events are in London and travel is very expensive.
2. We go to an art class/ pottery class and make a memento for the project. I could photograph it and include pictures. You could keep the memento. Downsides: confidentiality? You might hate pottery.
3. I ask for funding instead to create our own event where we make t-shirts/ create art in the privacy of our own room. I could provide food and drink.

Any other ideas?

**The Interviews:**

How did everyone find the interviews?

I realise that I am quite self critical and self deprecating…

Themes to have emerged:

I am not sure what themes emerged, everyone was very different! A few points stand out:

* Everyone was quite pleased to meet people with different experiences, in some regards we are quite diverse.
* Quite a few of you said you haven’t changed your opinion but you have learned something new or met people you otherwise wouldn’t have.
* Pornography is a word used for a range of different experiences, practices and media, it is an umbrella term that we recognise but is overused?
* Porn is not something too pressing in your lives?
* Conversations about sexuality, women’s sexuality?
* The group works for everyone differently, perhaps a personality thing?

**Identities:**

I think we should develop our profiles to put into the research, to give a real feel of who we are but also to ensure I only include aspects of your identity that fit with keeping confidentiality / anonymity. I am going to give you the sheet today so that everyone gets one and we have time to think about it but I think we should focus on filling them out more in next session. We don’t all need to include the same things but have a think about what to go on there. Things that inform your opinion/ experiences, and who you are.

Demographics: Gender/ Sex, Occupation, Sexuality/ Sexual Preference, Nationality/ Ethnicity, Age, Parent?

Political beliefs, favourite things, interests, things that represent you.

I think it would be good to have some demographical information so that the readers can get a sense of what experiences are and aren’t represented here. But I also don’t want anyone feel boiled down to a list of demographics so only include what you feel pertinent and feel free to express your response in the way that feels most comfortable to you.

**Next Time:**

Final session of answering the questions.

I’ll put some questions to you and we’ll do a final exercise.

We’ll also finish off the profiles.

We’ll talk about the transcripts.

Appendix 16

Living With Porn(ography) Project – Group Meeting 7 Schedule

2017 18:30

**Catch up and Pizza**

**Introduction:**

Ground Rules

**Reflections on the Group and Interview**

How have you felt about the project?

Have you learnt anything?

Have you changed your mind on anything?

What could have been done differently?

What future research would you like on porn?

**Exercise – Who Are We?**

We need to develop our profiles so that we get a sense of who each of you are and ensure that we only use details you’ve agreed upon to respect your anonymity/ confidentiality.

Different Areas:

1. Basic Information: age, occupation, family status
2. Demographics
3. Your relationship to pornography
4. Your personality: e.g. things you like, dislike
5. How you feel you were in the group. E.g. Loud, quiet etc

**Final Exercise**

Five things that we want to share from the group.

**The Future of the Project, What’s Next and Ground Rules**

Ground Rules around Data

We need to make an agreement on what constitutes the ‘data’ for this project, and the terms of me using it. So that I am free to use our research findings for use in research publications, conferences, my thesis etc but you feel comfortable with what is said.

**Field Trip:**

Should we tell the venue what we’re doing?!

Confidentiality and anonymity.

Photographing of our creations.

Appendix 17

Living With Porn(ography) Project – Group Meeting 8 Schedule

Monday 11th December 2017 18:00

Catch up and Pizza

Introduction

Show the initial analysis and get comments.

Discuss how I will use their quotes in the research, show example quotes.

Round the project off.

Discuss research dissemination.

Appendix 18 - Table of Activities

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Activities |
| RGM 1 | * Introduction, ground rules and the research process. * Discussion on ‘what is pornography?’ * Discussion on ‘what does everyone want to discuss?’ |
| RGM 2 | * Introduction, ground rules and the research process for the women who were coming for the first time. * Show and tell, everyone brought an artefact relating to pornography. * Discussion on ‘what shall we talk about next week?’ |
| RGM 3 | * Bringing together the conversation from the previous two weeks, ‘what is pornography?’ * Discussion on ‘pornography and sexuality’, everyone in the group contributed a question. |
| RGM 4 | * We briefly discussed Sex and Relationship Education and definitions of pornography. * We were scheduled to talk about the law on pornography but instead watched music videos and talked about how sex and sexuality were represented. |
| RGM 5 | * We had agreed to talk about the law and pornography but again the session naturally evolved. * We talked about Honey’s relationships. * We also planned the future of the project and how the interviews would work. |
| RGM 6 | * In this session we reflected on the interviews and discussed some of the themes that came up, and also some topics that the women felt had not been addressed and would like to discuss. |
| RGM 7 | * In this session we rounded up the project and reflected on how we thought it had gone. * We also discussed the data strategy moving forward. * We developed our profiles of how we wanted to be presented in the project. |
| Field Trip | * This session was not recorded or included as data. * We painted ceramics, everyone came up with their own design relating to their thoughts on pornography. |
| RGM 8 | * We discussed a list of themes that I had pulled together during the preliminary analysis. * The women added any themes they felt were missing. * We looked at some of the quotes from the groups. |
| Zine Making | * This session was not recorded or included as data. * We closed the project and discussed the final data strategy. * We made a zine, led by the women present, about our thoughts on pornography. |

Appendix 19

Interview Schedule

Can you remind me why you wanted to get involved in the project?

How do you feel that taking part is going so far?

Does anything we’ve discussed in the group particularly stand out for you?

How do you find speaking in the group setting?

What is your definition of pornography?

What have your experiences of pornography been?

Do you have any positive feelings about pornography?

Do you have any concerns about pornography?

Are there any changes you would like to see in society around pornography?

Is there anything you want to add?

Appendix 20: Research Group

Analysis Document

**What do women think about pornography?**

**Headline Findings**

* Pornography is experienced, engaged with, thought and felt about in diverse ways by us. Positive, negative and everything in-between.
* This diversity was compatible with open conversation, discussion and learning from one another.
* Trying to group these experiences into common themes runs the risk of warping or distorting them. This diversity requires a different kind of analysis.
* It is possible to build collective knowledge from these diverse positions, knowledge that recognises individual difference and diversity.
* Pornography was subjectively understood and meant different things to different people.
* ‘Pornography’ has multiple meanings; both for ourselves and across us.
* When we talked about pornography we weren’t always talking about the same thing, the word is used for many things. You cannot always therefore compare our experiences with ease.
* We believe that sex, sexuality and pornography all need to be more openly discussed in our society, particularly in the media but in other spaces too. These conversations need to be broad and not just focused on negative issues.
* We believe that women are still not fully able to exercise autonomy over their sexuality. Women face control and regulation of their sexualities, and are often subject to unwanted attention.
* We believe that there aren’t enough spaces to talk about women and pornography.
* We felt that how society understands pornography, and how society talks about it is gendered.
* We want to say, that while not always talked about, women do have sex lives and are having sex.

**The Findings**

**Pornography**

Why did the women want to participate/ talk about pornography?

What is ‘pornography’?

How do we identify what is ‘pornographic’?

What were we talking about when we talked about ‘pornography’ in the research?

What did the women broadly think about pornography?

Do the women use pornography?

What other types of sexually explicit materials do the women engage with?

What types of pornographic content do the women engage with?

In what ways do the women use pornography?

What influences the women’s choices on pornography? (Whether to use it or not)

What influences the women’s choices on pornography? (Which porn to use)

Is pornography for women?

What were the women’s initial experiences of pornography?

How do the women know / learn about pornography?

In what ways, do the women have experiences of pornography?

How significant is pornography within the women’s lives?

How is pornography negotiated in their relationships?

Do they talk about pornography with other people?

What do the women think is good about ‘pornography’?

* For themselves
* Within society

What do the women think is bad about ‘pornography’?

* For themselves
* Within society

How do the women feel pornography is talked about in society?

What did the women think about the law/ legal regulation of pornography?

What changes would the women like to see around pornography in our society?

**Sexuality**

What conversations did we have about sex and sexuality?

What changes would the women like to see around sex and sexuality in our society?

**Variation Across the Group**

What factors impacted opinion across the group?

What did the group agree on / disagree on?

**What is the relationship between porn and sexuality?**

**How to Talk to Women about Pornography?**

**What works about participatory research to discuss pornography?**

The discussions were tailored to stem from everyone’s individual position allowing for a deeper understanding of what pornography means to people.

Collaborative working negates researcher bias, we can have a broader conversation on pornography and bring together our different expertise.

**What works about a group to discuss pornography?**

It is a conversation, not an interview. The research relationships change.

Conversations between different people teases out opinions and reflections, more than could be achieved doing individual interviews.

The group was a safe space.

The group was fun to participate in.

A supportive environment.

A place to ask questions about what you don’t know, and test ideas to formulate your opinion.

It brought people together who:

* You might otherwise not have met.
* Who have different perspectives.

Group researching allows us to find collective knowledge while recognising individual difference. In relation to pornography this is important given that it can be a divided discussion.

Irrelevant conversation isn’t irrelevant, we learnt lots of different things about each other (not related to pornography)

**What doesn’t work about the group to discuss pornography?**

Are we all talking about the same thing? It can be hard to track this.

Feeling judged in the group or unable to say things

Majority effect, sometimes individual perspectives are lost, or an individual moulds their view to the group view.

We didn’t talk about everything relevant to some individuals, as it wasn’t necessarily relevant to the whole group. It took a while for the conversation to be relevant to everyone.

It can be hard to hear individual perspectives, as there are many people speaking.

It is important to recognise that a group works in different ways for different people.

**What works about the interview to research pornography?**

Opportunity to hear individual perspectives

**Did the women gain anything from taking part?**

**Did this type of research facilitate new conversations on pornography?**

Appendix 21

Project Document: Definitions of Pornography

“The depiction of erotic behaviour (as in pictures or writing) intended to cause sexual excitement.” (Meriam Webster, 2016)

“Books, magazine, films, etc. with no artistic value that describe or show sexual acts or naked people in a way that is intended to be sexually exciting.” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2016)

**“**Origin Mid 19th century: from Greek pornographos ‘writing about prostitutes’, from pornē ‘prostitute’ + graphein ‘write’.” (Oxford Dictionary, 2017)

The graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women. (Cornwell, 2000)

“What is pornography? Who is it produced for, and what sorts of sexualities does it help produce? Why should we study it, and what should be the most urgent issues when we do? These are the questions that frame our analysis of how pornography is conceptualized as a sexual practice, a media form, and a social issue. This is a book about pornography as a concept, one that is charged with numerous political, social, and cultural concerns about gender roles and sexual relationships more generally.” (Sullivan and McKee, 2015)

“I know it when I see it.” (United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, 1964)

“[Pornography] names an argument, not a thing.” (Kendrick, 1997)

“Since then the field has seen a number of books and articles with some form of this familiar abbreviation [porn] … all of which have signaled, one way or another, a certain acceptance, or at least a lack of objection to the very fact of the existence of pornography ‘on/scene.’ … The very use of the more formal full word pornography has thus inclined towards anti-pornography and pro-censorship positions.” (Williams, 2014)

“Definitions of pornography are inconsistent, context dependent, disputed by society, and invariably imbued with moralistic evaluations.” (Böhm et al, 2015)

“A number of other factors also confound the problem of definition. For example, does the term pornography necessarily have a negative connotation? If it is defined in terms of actions or images, how does it differ from art or education? To what extent is the intent of the product to be taken into account? Related to this is the issue of distinguishing pornography from mainstream media productions. Is there an overlap between pornography and other media forms, or is pornography a distinct and separate type of product?” (Shaw, 1999)

“Pornography is also a subjective manner from at least two viewpoints: the creator of the pornography and the consumer of the material. It is impossible to determine with some material if the creator intended to arouse his or her consumer sexually. Some creators of pornographic material may admit that sexual arousal was part of the goals in producing the items, but other nonsexual goals were also strong motivational elements. On the other hand, some materials have strong arousal potential, but the creator denies that prurience was his or her primary purpose for presenting the items. From the consumer’s standpoint, pornography, like beauty, may be in the eye of the beholder. That is, some individuals find any depiction of the nude human body as pornographic, whereas others can withstand hours of video portrayals of unbridled sexual escapades without breaking into a sweat.” (Morris, 1997)

1. Heteronormativity “refers to the Western social norm, or assumption, that the overwhelming majority of sexual relationships in society are heterosexual. Further, heteronormativity is the dominant sexual model of social, cultural, political, and economic organization, including the way it organizes identities, experiences, regimes of truth and knowledge, and ideologies of gender and sex.” (Jeppensen, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Teen’ porn: “on legitimate porn sites “teen” is generally used to refer to legal teen pornography, so pornography featuring performers aged 18, 19, or older, who can pass for teenagers.” (Pegg, 2015).

   ‘MILF’ porn: MILF is an acronym for ‘Mother I’d like to fuck’ and depicts older women (Vannier et al, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010, p.13) explain: “prosumption involves both production and consumption rather than focusing on either one (production) or the other (consumption)”. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Zines “are noncommercial, non-professional, small-circulation magazines that their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves” (Duncombe, 1998, p.427). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Regrettably, I did not ask Annette to define ‘kinky’ in her own words. I have included a definition from a book by Clarisse Thorn that Annette gave me. Thorn (2012, p.350) outlines: “A lot of BDSMers use ‘kinky’ to mean ‘into BDSM.’ However, there are some practices who use the term more broadly and include practices that aren’t usually considered BDSM, such as *polyamory* or *swing.*” Thorn outlines “BDSM is a 6-for-4 acronym that encompasses a host of related activities, including bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism and masochism” (p.70). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A note to the reader: the zine includes a pornographic story. When the zine is folded into a book, the story can only be seen if the reader chooses to unfold it. Due to the format of a thesis, the zine is in its template form and the story can be seen. This note is included so that the reader can decide whether to read it or not. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A successful HBO television series known for its sexual content. For example see: <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/670599/Game-of-Thrones-sex-nudity-Daenerys-Cersei-Melisandre-Emilia-Clarke-Carice-van-Houten> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. An American fantasy horror drama television series based on a fantasy romance book series: <https://www.hbo.com/true-blood> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nigella Lawson is a popular television chef who is often described as having a flirtatious style. (See for example: https://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/nigella-lawsons-10-sauciest-moments-2996846) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The UK Ministry of Justice (2015) defines ‘revenge porn’ as “the sharing of private, sexual materials, either photos or videos, of another person, without their consent and with the purpose of causing embarrassment or distress.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Mainstream pornography is “commercially successful pornography often produced by major studios and displaying a number of familiar tropes (emphasis on heterosexual penetrative sex, male and female performers featuring specific body types etc.)” (Dutilh Novaes, 2018, p.1418) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IxGvm6btP1A> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_zPlr-o-YEQ> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I believe Honey means post-project. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I believe Kate means pre-project. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Disappointingly, I did not ask Elyndys for her definition of this and so I have included an academic definition instead. Pande (2015) outlines: “fanfiction is a genre of amateur fiction writing that takes as its basis a ‘canon’ of ‘original’ material. This original material is most often popular books, television shows and movies – but can expand to almost anything”. Anisimowicz and O’Sullivan (2016, p. 823) define ‘Fandom’ as “the realm of fans sharing a common interest”. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Two Girls, One Cup* was a shock video which went viral in 2007 showing two women defecating and vomiting and then eating both. <https://metro.co.uk/2017/02/28/its-been-10-years-since-2-girls-1-cup-and-its-still-as-shocking-as-ever-6478673/> [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Extreme pornography is “is pornographic material that is grossly offensive, disgusting or otherwise obscene, and that explicitly and realistically depicts: life threatening injury, serious injury to a person’s anus, breasts or genitals, bestiality or necrophilia” (House of Commons, 2016). The legislation was later amended to include “images depicting non-consensual penetration and rape” (Crown Prosecution Service, ©2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)