

EDITORIAL

Media representations of sexuality in an era of pornification

Editorial to the Special Issue

Mediendarstellungen von Sexualität im

Zeitalter der Pornografisierung

Editorial zum Sonderheft

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Media representations of sexuality in an era of pornification Editorial to the Special Issue

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Abstract: As a result of digitalization, sexually explicit media content is now produced and distributed in much greater quantity and variety in private, public, and commercial contexts. Increased normalization of pornography, greater sexualization of media content, and the public debates associated with these developments are indicative of a trend towards pornification. At the same time, interdisciplinary pornography research has been evolving in recent decades, with communication science making important contributions to this area. However, in contrast to gaming research, pornography research is institutionalized to a much lesser extent. There is a “Game Studies” division within the International Communication Association (ICA), but no equivalent “Porn Studies” division. And to our knowledge, this Special Issue is the first Special Issue of an ICA-associated journal dedicated to pornography. The five empirical articles in this issue deal with different aspects of pornification, namely press coverage of OnlyFans.com, non-commercial production and distribution of pornographic images among gay, bisexual, and queer men, different preferences for pornographic content when viewed alone or in a partnership, computer-generated rough sex pornography, and an intervention to promote pornography literacy. This Special Issue aims to encourage communication science to devote more attention to sexually explicit communication and to help close existing gaps in research.

Keywords: Sexually explicit media content, media representations of sexuality, erotica, pornography, pornification, pornographization, media content analysis, pornography literacy.

Zusammenfassung: Sexuell explizite Medieninhalte werden im Zuge der Digitalisierung heute in deutlich größerer Menge und Vielfalt in privaten, öffentlichen und kommerziellen Kontexten produziert und verbreitet. Die zunehmende Normalisierung von Pornografie, die stärkere Sexualisierung von Medieninhalten und die diesbezüglichen öffentlichen Debatten lassen sich als Trend zur Pornografisierung beschreiben. Zeitgleich entwickelt sich in den letzten Dekaden eine interdisziplinäre Pornografieforschung, zu der auch die Kommunikationswissenschaft wichtige Beiträge leistet. Doch institutionalisiert ist die Pornografieforschung im Unterschied zur Gaming-Forschung innerhalb der Kommunikationswis-

senschaft in deutlich geringerem Maße. Es gibt innerhalb der International Communication Association (ICA) eine Division “Game Studies”, aber keine Division “Porn Studies”. Und das vorliegende Schwerpunktheft ist unseres Wissens das erste Special Issue einer ICA-assoziierten Fachzeitschrift, das sich der Pornografie widmet. Die fünf empirischen Beiträge dieses Heftes befassen sich mit verschiedenen Aspekten der Pornografisierung: Es geht um die Presseberichterstattung über OnlyFans.com, um die nicht-kommerzielle Produktion und Verbreitung von pornografischen Darstellungen unter schwulen, bisexuellen und queeren Männern, um unterschiedliche Präferenzen bei pornografischen Inhalten, die allein oder in der Partnerschaft rezipiert werden, um computergenerierte Rough-Sex-Pornografie und um eine Intervention zur Förderung der Pornografiekompetenz. Das Schwerpunktheft möchte die Kommunikationswissenschaft dazu anregen, sich der sexuell expliziten Kommunikation stärker zu widmen und daran mitzuwirken, bestehende Forschungslücken zu schließen.

Schlagwörter: Sexualität, sexuell explizite Medieninhalte, mediale Repräsentationen von Sexualität, Erotika, Pornografie, Pornografisierung, Medieninhaltsanalyse, Pornografiekompetenz.

1. Introduction

Media representations of sexuality are challenging and ambivalent for both media users and communication researchers: They can evoke curiosity, fascination, pleasure, and arousal as well as disgust, outrage, shame, and fear, sometimes simultaneously in the same person. At the interpersonal and societal levels, too, the outcomes of media portrayals of sexuality are evaluated in contradictory ways: Media representations of different sexual identities, lifestyles, and practices can be associated with inspiration, education, improved couple communication, destigmatization and empowerment, but also with performance pressure, unrealistic expectations, insecurity, conflict among couples, violence, sexism, racism, and disempowerment (e.g., Hakkim et al., 2022; Hoagland & Grubbs, 2021; Litsou et al., 2021a).

According to a widely accepted definition, a depiction of sexuality falls under the broad umbrella category of *pornography*, if it is a) explicit enough to directly show sexual acts and genitals (*sexual content criterion*) and if it is b) produced and used primarily to elicit sexual arousal in the audience (*sexual intention or function criterion*, e.g., Hald & Malamuth, 2008, p. 616; McKee et al., 2020; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016, p. 510). However, it can be difficult for researchers, lawmakers, and laypeople to make a clear distinction between hardcore material such as pornographic films depicting real sex acts being performed and softcore depictions, such as erotic films, showing simulated intercourse. Some researchers therefore prefer the more inclusive term *sexually explicit material* (SEM) or *sexually explicit Internet material* (SEIM), both of which encompass pornography and erotica.

Increasingly, researchers are also adding a third criterion to the established definition of pornography, namely the *consent criterion* (Ashton et al., 2019, p. 144). According to this understanding, the term pornography is reserved to refer to the production, distribution, and use of sexually explicit material between adults, based on the informed consent of all individuals involved. Non-consensual pornography

(e.g., *child pornography*, *youth pornography*, *revenge pornography*, *unauthorized deepfake pornography*) would therefore not be referred to as *pornography* at all, but rather would be labelled as acts of consent violation and violence. Instead, terms such as *depictions of sexual violence* and/or *image-based sexual abuse* are used (e.g., Eaton & McGlynn, 2020). For example, research and media reports increasingly use the term *images of child sexual abuse*, *child abuse material*, or *child sexual exploitation material* in place of *child pornography*, recognizing that children who are victimized in front of a camera are in a very different position to consenting adult pornography performers.

Media and communication scholars have observed a trend towards *pornification* (also *pornographization*, *pornographication*). Three elements have been identified as characteristic of the current so-called era of pornification (e.g., Csányi et al., 2024; Mulholland, 2013; Nikunen et al., 2007; Paasonen, 2016; Sarracino & Scott, 2009; Smith, 2010; Tyler et al., 2016):

Normalization of pornography: Digitalization and the internet have made pornography more accessible, diverse, and widespread than ever before. Digital pornography platforms such as PornHub.com are among the top 30 most popular websites in the world (SimilarWeb, 2024). Subscription-based platforms such as OnlyFans.com allow content creators to market their self-produced sexually explicit material. Sexualized selfies and nudes are shared on social media platforms and via direct messaging (so-called *sexting* and *self-pornography*). With the advent of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) tools, so-called *synthetic pornography* (also *AI pornography*) has emerged as a new type of sexually explicit content (Döring et al., in press).

Sexualization of media content: In addition, the codes of pornography have been widely adopted in popular culture and media content, such as “porno chic” in the fashion and beauty industry and advertising, “gangsta and porno rap” in music, and explicit sex talk and sexual interactions in reality television (e.g., Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). For example, the reality TV dating show “Naked Attraction” has couples meet in the nude, and the TV dating format “Are You the One”, provides an official “Boom Boom Room” for couples to have sex on the show.

Expansion of public debates about pornography: Last but not least, the normalization of pornography and the sexualization of media content have led to widespread and sustained public debates about pornography and its effects. News media reports include topics such as today’s youth potentially being a “porn generation”, “the epidemic of porn addiction” and “the rise of ethical porn” (e.g., Montgomery Graham et al, 2015). As a result, public debates about the risks and legal regulation of digital and AI pornography, but also about the benefits of, for example, ethical text and audio pornography produced by and for women (e.g., Dipsea.com, Audiodesires.com), have intensified.

It is important to note that “pornification” – as a trend towards greater cultural visibility of, and debates about, pornography – is a broad and descriptive umbrella term that covers different and sometimes contradictory media developments that deserve nuanced analyses (Paasonen, 2016). Consequently, the term does not imply a single overall assessment of these developments as positive or negative.

2. State of research

Together with scholars from related disciplines – such as psychology, sociology, education, medicine, queer and gender studies – media and communication researchers have been addressing the uses and effects of sexual and pornographic media content for decades.

Most often, the focus is on *negative and harmful effects*. Negative effects have been considered to be most severe and prevalent among heterosexual boys and men, who seem to be prone to excessive use, the adoption of biased and harmful views of sexuality, sexual dysfunction, and dissatisfaction (e.g., Bennett-Brown & Wright, 2022; Sniewski et al., 2018). In contrast, self-determined sexual and pornographic media use among sexual minorities, girls and women is more often empirically associated with positive outcomes such as self-validation, pleasure, and empowerment (e.g., Böthe et al., 2019; Litsou et al., 2021b; McCormack & Wignall, 2017). However, women can be particularly conflicted and divided about pornography. Research reviews report women's ambivalent experiences with pornographic material (Ashton et al., 2018). Within feminist scholarship, debates about the meaning and effects of pornography have been so heated that the literature refers to the “feminist porn wars of the 1980s”: debates between feminists who rejected the whole genre as inherently sexist and dehumanizing and feminists who produced and promoted some of the first examples of feminist pornography featuring agentic female sexuality (Williams, 1999).

But pornography is also a subject of controversy outside of feminist scholarship, for example with regard to the question of working conditions in the pornography industry (e.g., McKee, 2016), the risk of “pornography addiction” (also *problematic pornography use*, *pornography use disorder*; e.g., Brand et al., 2019), and the extent to which pornography use promotes sexual violence (e.g., Ferguson & Hartley, 2022; Mellor & Duff, 2019; Wright et al., 2016) or disorients young people (e.g., Massey et al., 2020). Individual governments (e.g., the US state of Utah) have already declared pornography a “public health crisis”, to which researchers have responded with critical comments in scientific journals (e.g., McKay et al., 2020).

The normalization of pornography use has not only increased public concern and research about its harmful effects but also interest in its potential positive effects. A growing body of research among single and partnered people of different genders, sexual orientations, and nationalities shows that the majority of people do not believe that pornography has had any effect on their sexual lives. Those who have observed effects are much more likely to report positive than negative effects (Döring & Mohseni, 2018; Koletić et al., 2021; Štulhofer et al., 2022). The negative effects of pornography are often assumed to be presented in others rather than oneself (e.g., Lee & Tamborini, 2005), an example of the *third-person effect* (Davison, 1983). However, subjective self-reports of pornography effects are limited and could be biased, so additional data from experimental studies are needed to test causal hypotheses.

In contrast to the proliferation of sexually explicit media use and media effects studies, *media content research* has received considerably less attention (Miller &

McBain, 2022). Not infrequently, sexually explicit or pornographic media content is treated as a homogenous media genre without clarifying its characteristics or distinguishing between different types and subgenres (e.g., mainstream pornography versus feminist pornography; Fritz & Paul, 2017) as well as national peculiarities. In an era of pornification, there is a growing need for sound analyses of sexual and pornographic media content in order to avoid speculation and overgeneralization about the media material in question. Media content research is also needed to better understand the extent to which contemporary public debates and news coverage of pornography focus on the risks and/or benefits of open and explicit sexual communication.

3. Contributions in the Special Issue

Against this background, the current Special Issue of SCM explores sexual and pornographic media content in the contemporary media landscape. The five empirical studies presented contribute to a better understanding of media representations of sexuality in an era of pornification. They complement research articles in previous SCM issues that have addressed different aspects of sexuality-related media content, such as the types of symbolic images used in media coverage of child sexual abuse (Döring & Walter, 2021), audience quality assessments of news coverage of child sexual abuse (Döring & Walter, 2024), fear effects of news coverage of a serial sexual offender and killer (Custers & van der Bulck, 2024), the victimization of female and male YouTube and YouNow content creators resulting from aggressively sexual online comments (Döring & Mohseni, 2020), the effectiveness of different radio and television public service announcements aimed at promoting sexual health through condom use (Ort & Fahr, 2020), and the impact of ethical as well as non-consensual deepfake pornography (Godulla et al., 2021).

This Special Issue begins with an article on media coverage of OnlyFans.com and the predominantly female adult performers on the platform. While many popular social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok prohibit sexually explicit content, OnlyFans.com allows content creators to monetize their self-produced erotica and pornography and engage directly with their audience. Top creators, including many young women, are reported to earn up to \$100,000 US per month (Fitzgerald, 2024). Since its launch in 2016, OnlyFans.com has amassed 210 million active users worldwide as of 2024 (Fitzgerald, 2024). In their research article, Antonia Wurm and Jeffrey Wimmer (2024) use a qualitative content analysis of $N = 65$ newspaper articles published between 2020 and 2023 to investigate how the success of OnlyFans.com has been portrayed in the German press. Their findings reveal contradictory narrative patterns familiar from broader discussions around the pornification of society: concerns about the commodification of interpersonal intimacy, but also recognition of the potential for empowerment when women create new sources of income and control how they present themselves sexually. The article highlights changes in the media coverage of OnlyFans.com over the four-year period and identifies differences between quality newspapers and tabloid media in how the website is discussed.

The second article focuses on the production of pornographic photos and videos by gay, bisexual and queer (GBQ+) men in the context of social media. Paul Byron, James D. A. Newton, Olivia Hansen, Oscar Oviedo-Trespalacios, Bernard Saliba, and Daniel Demant (2024) conducted an online survey in early 2023 among $N = 596$ GBQ+ men in Australia (mean age 36 years). The self-selected sample was recruited through online queer communities and included only men who had consumed pornography in the past 12 months. Based on their data, the authors show that the vast majority of respondents had shared self-produced pornographic photos and videos with others, typically without commercial intent, via private channels such as WhatsApp and Snapchat, dating apps such as Grindr, or publicly via X (formerly Twitter). In response to an open-ended question about their motivations, three main themes emerged: sexual arousal, social connection, and self-validation. The findings suggest a noteworthy normalization of so-called self-pornography among GBQ+ men and point to subjectively experienced gratifications. This article contributes to discussions about the pornification of society by suggesting that in the current era, not only has the consumption of digital pornography become more widespread, but so too has the production and distribution of self-produced digital pornographic content.

The third article examines the types of pornography content users consume in different contexts. Taylor Kohut, Kiara Fernandez, William A. Fisher, and Lorne Campbell (2024) surveyed a sample of $N = 367$ partnered women and men in Canada (mean age 32 years) in 2013 to investigate their preferences for different types of pornographic content. Participants were asked to describe, in open-ended responses, the typical content of the pornographic media they consume a) alone or b) with their partner. The results showed that respondents described content primarily according to the gender of protagonists, number of participants, and sexual practices performed. Typically, women and men in mixed-gender relationships reported choosing pornographic content featuring mixed-gender couples engaged in oral, vaginal, or anal sex. The authors interpret these findings as consumers having a predominant preference for conventional content. They offer a critical perspective on public and academic discourses on pornification, which often emphasize and problematize the supposedly growing extremity, violence, and perversity of currently available pornographic content. In addition, the data suggest that both women and men are somewhat more likely to engage with pornographic content beyond conventional mixed-gender couple sexuality when consuming pornography alone. For example, women were more likely to report selecting content involving gay or lesbian sex, group sex, BDSM, and rough sex themes when using pornography alone.

The issue of the prevalence and impact of violent themes in pornography has been a focus of both research and production practice for decades. Aggressive depictions of sexuality can be perceived as arousing, are favored by significant user groups, and are marketed as distinct subgenres (e.g., rough sex, BDSM). At the same time, they are considered ethically problematic and dangerous because of their potential harm to both performers and consumers. The fourth paper by Jessica M. Szczuka and Natalia Szymczyk (2024) addresses media representations of rough sex – sexual practices that include aggressive behaviors such as spanking,

hair-pulling, or choking in the context of intercourse. In a pre-registered experimental study conducted in the summer of 2022 with $N = 274$ heterosexual participants recruited through Prolific (mean age 34 years), the authors examined whether people prefer depictions of rough sex when they are purely computer-generated, thereby eliminating concerns about the well-being of human performers during the production of such intense scenes. This study makes a valuable contribution to the current discourse on pornification, which is increasingly focused on the opportunities and risks of computer- and AI-generated pornography.

Possible effects of pornography depend not only on who consumes what kind of pornographic content, in what amounts, and in what contexts, but also on how people assess the degree of realism of pornographic depictions of sexuality. *Pornography literacy* can be considered a genre-specific *media literacy*. Proponents of pornography literacy posit that the possible negative effects of pornographic depictions can be countered by understanding the differences between staged sexual acts performed by professional porn actors in front of the camera and real-life sexual encounters. In particular, this includes a critical understanding of the fact that body features (e.g., breast and penis size) and sexual practices (e.g., duration and number of positions during sexual intercourse, frequency of unusual and rough sexual practices) are exaggerated in visual pornography in order to increase the show value of the media material. The fifth and final article in this Special Issue by Marina F. Thomas and Moniek Buijzen (*in press*) is dedicated to the promotion of pornography literacy. A minimal intervention in the form of a three-minute educational video on the making of pornography was developed and tested in a pre-registered experimental study with $N = 80$ students in the Netherlands (mean age 23 years) in the spring of 2019. The intended effects of the intervention could not be demonstrated. Possible reasons for this are discussed in detail, providing valuable lessons for researchers planning similar studies. All materials, data, and analysis scripts are shared via osf.io. This contribution will be published in the next issue of SCM.

4. Outlook on future research

If you look through the current issues of the International Communication Association's (ICA) journals, you will find various articles on sexual and pornographic media content, its meaning, use, and impact. For example, there is an article on pornography use, alcohol consumption and condomless sex in the *Journal of Communication* (Wright et al., 2024); an article on pornography and religiosity in *Human Communication Research* (Wright et al., 2023); an article on media literacy in *Communication Theory* (Austin & Domgaard, 2024), which can be applied to pornography literacy; an article on the online strategies of transgender sex workers in Singapore in the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (Chib et al., 2021); in *Communication, Culture & Critique* an article on the erotic bestseller "Fifty Shades of Grey" (Och, 2019); and in the *Annals of the International Communication Association* a systematic research review on internet pornography (Grubbs et al., 2019). However, we were unable to find another Special

Issue on the topic of pornography in any other ICA-associated communication journal.

Private and public sexual communication has not yet been established as a separate field within communication research; instead, issues related to the handling of sexually explicit media content would be accommodated as a cross-cutting theme within ICA divisions such as “Children, Youth and Media”, “Communication and Technology”, “Communication Law and Policy”, “Feminist Studies”, “Health Communication”, “Popular Media and Culture” and “Visual Communication Studies”. While digital games, which are often criticized for their potentially negative effects and are also associated with the dangers of violence and addiction, have had their own “Game Studies” division within the ICA since 2012, this is still not the case for “Porn Studies”. It might be interesting to take a closer look at the content-related and institutional reasons for this difference in treating a popular media phenomenon. The multidisciplinary journal *Porn Studies* (Routledge), founded in 2014, is primarily anchored in cultural and media studies and publishes mainly theoretical and qualitative work, rarely empirical-quantitative studies.

Which open research questions on the individual and social handling of pornography could communication research devote itself to in the future in order to show academic and practical relevance in this subject area in the age of pornification? In conclusion, we would like to make a few suggestions:

Production of sexually explicit media content: Pornographic media content is nowadays produced and shared by amateurs in non-commercial contexts (Byron et al., 2024, part of this Special Issue) and is also created and marketed by entrepreneurial individuals (for example, via OnlyFans.com; see Wurm & Wimmer, 2024, part of this Special Issue). In addition, the majority of productions take place in professional studios. Relatively little is known about the production conditions in the pornography industries of different countries (e.g., Voss, 2012). It is also unclear how the tools of generative AI will affect the production of pornographic texts, images, and videos, both in private and commercial contexts. For example, sex workers have started to use AI technology to create virtual clones of themselves so that the AI can fulfil online performances on their behalf and make contact with customers (Döring et al., in press); the economic and psychosocial implications of such developments are still unclear.

Characteristics of sexually explicit media content: In the course of the normalization of pornography, the genre has become highly differentiated. Generalized statements about “pornography” are therefore questionable. However, there is still no consensus among researchers as to how sexually explicit content can be meaningfully divided into subgenres, as researchers, content providers, and users sometimes use different categorizations (Kohut et al., 2024, part of this Special Issue). There are also major discrepancies as to how pornographic content should be coded, for example, how to recognize a female orgasm or the use of violence in a pornographic film (Miller & McBain, 2022). Conceptual clarifications, as well as a standardization of codebooks, are necessary here, such as those promoted by the *DOCA – Database of Variables for Content Analysis* (<https://www.hope.uzh.ch/doca>), which contains several contributions to the measurement of pornography content (Döring & Miller, 2022).

Sexually explicit media use: Current and, in particular, representative data on the use of different types of sexually explicit media content in the general population of different countries is often lacking. Researchers complain about inconsistent measurement methods (e.g., Marshall & Miller, 2019) – a methodological problem that is to be solved by cross-culturally validated psychometric scales (e.g., Koós et al., 2024). Comprehensive inventories that cover different media forms (e.g., text, audio, image, video, computer-/AI-generated) and also different content categories (e.g., gender constellations, number of people, sexual practices) of pornography are still lacking. Appropriately differentiated and standardized measures would be useful for describing the consumption of sexually explicit materials, especially as there are indications that there are also interactions between preferences for different sexual content and media forms (Szczuka & Szymczyk, 2024, part of this Special Issue).

Sexually explicit media effects: Public and academic debates on the effects of sexually explicit media are often polarized between assumptions of lack of effects versus strong effects, as well as between predominantly negative versus positive effects. In order to further develop the field of research, it is necessary to work out causal paths for different content, users, and contexts more precisely, both theoretically and empirically. Correlative data is still often interpreted prematurely and one-sidedly in a causal manner. And there is often no theoretical justification for which variables are treated as predictors, mediators, moderators, or control variables in the context of pornography effects research (Wright, 2021). Conceptualizations of online pornography effects should be seen in the context of different, potentially sexually arousing online activities (Döring et al., 2021). A better understanding of cause-and-effect relationships would also ultimately help to develop effective interventions to prevent negative effects (Thomas & Buizjen, part of this Special Issue).

As the first unintentional, but also intentional, confrontations with digital pornography now take place in early puberty, research into its use and effects with children is becoming increasingly important. In the *EU Kids Online Study*, for example, up to 20% of 9–11-year-olds in various European countries reported that they had already seen sexual images on the Internet (Smahel et al., 2020, p. 90). Pornography use and effect research with children is relevant but raises many unresolved ethical and methodological questions. In view of technological change, pornography research is called upon to explore computer- and AI-generated pornography as an object and to use computational methods to investigate pornographic material and public debates about pornography on a large scale (Döring et al., in press). Last but not least, it may be useful for communication research to understand what specific theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches it can bring to the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary field of pornography research and what it can learn from other disciplines about sexual communication and its scientific investigation. It would be desirable to create a platform for such research collaborations, for example in the context of the ICA.

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