

‘Can pornography ever be feminist?’

Pornography is defined as *‘printed or visual material containing the explicit description or display of sexual organs or activity, intended to stimulate sexual excitement’* (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). Reporting on 2014 activity, the self-acclaimed number one porn site named ‘Pornhub’ revealed that it had averaged about 5,800 visits per second (Pornhub, 2015a) throughout the year, making it one of the most globally popular websites and highlights how significantly dominant the online porn industry is. Those advocating for women’s equal footing in a patriarchal society, i.e. feminists, began occupying themselves with the porn industry in the 1970s (Ciclitira, 2004). Feminist literature is rife with anti-pornography stances focusing on male oppression of women, exploitation and violence (Russell, 1993) however it is also argued that pornography can be liberating and holds multiple benefits for women. Taking this in to consideration, the following assignment will explore whether or not pornography has the potential to ever give women an equal footing and satisfaction within digital society.

Whilst many anti-porn feminists such as Gail Dines (2010), claim that porn is damaging to the female’s ideology on her body and sexuality, other feminists, like Wendy McElroy (1995) argue that pornography is actually liberating to women, their bodies and sexualities. Dines (TED X Talks, 2015) maintains porn advocates a blonde, white, well-toned woman, neglecting to mention that mainstream porn sites such as Pornhub feature categories such as *‘BBW’*, which is an abbreviation for Big Beautiful Women (Rockson, 2009) and additional categories signify an interest in women of other races and with a range of hair colours. It is recognised this does objectify women down to specific characteristics, however these could equally be characteristics that women are particularly proud of and want to be defined by.

The diversity in categories is supportive of McElroy’s (1995) argument, most especially in digital society where porn is more affordable and accessible than ever before (TED x Talks, 2015), as it is expressive of celebrating women that may not have otherwise been seen as sexually attractive and advocates that women who do not fit into Dines’s super-refined ‘pornified women’ category are also of sexual interest to males and those of other sexualities. Additionally, porn categories such as *‘For Women’* (Pornhub, 2015b) indicate that there is definitely a digital move towards

promoting that pornography is not just for men, and that porn correspondingly serves a female audience (McElroy, 1995). Such categories that are also likely to feature on other porn sites, represent that women's preferences are being acknowledged, and their pleasures and desires are now coming to the forefront instead of being denied, as was historically evident in the ideologies surrounding sexuality in the Victorian era (Marsh, 2015). Whilst it can be argued this is only one category amongst many, and may only cater for a selection of women's sexual desires, it is however a step in the right direction for porn becoming more feminist, and less demeaning to women. In light of this, pro-porn¹ feminists are right to challenge that censoring porn is not the way forward (Long, 2012), despite how unachievable and impractical banning porn would be to begin with. As they intelligently argue, instead of trying to suppress this growing resource, the more progressive advancement would be to embrace pornography to strengthen ideologies on women's sexual desires and preferences that may otherwise remain repressed, for feminist advantage, thereby additionally liberating and empowering the sexual expression of women (Duggan and Hunter, 1995).

Strossen (1995: 166) emphasises that pornography facilitates education about women's bodies and their sexual pleasures which can otherwise be an undercurrent in a patriarchal society. The self-contradictory anti-porn feminist Andrea Dworkin (1981) can argue that porn glorifies dominance and violence and place a distinction on erotica advocating mutuality and reciprocity, however essentially erotica is still porn, and foundationally her claim backfires to synchronise with Strossen's argument in that erotica porn is aimed at showcasing how women can be sexually pleased, and therefore indicative of not all porn being demeaning to ideologies surrounding the representation of women. Further to this Jacobs (2004: 77-79) cites several pornography sites that are solely geared towards various 'fetishes' among female audiences, if pornography was solely for the male gaze, such sites would not be created or utilised, once again proving the porn industry is slowly moving in a more positive direction for women.

Dines (TED x Talks, 2015) cites pornography as a primary source of sexual education for pubescent or adolescent boys and girls, which is a very valid debate. However, Dines casts a negative spin on the educational properties of pornography by making it seem that all pornography displays demeaning and violent acts towards

women during sex, suggesting that arousal from these depictions confuses these young and easily influenced minds into believing that this what they sexually desire. Her contention could be considered offensive to many individuals, in that as humans, although such concentration of these negative messages could take a toll on an individual's ideologies surrounding sex, she ignores that both men and women possess their own reflexive thinking whereby they can detach roleplay and fantasy from the real world (Strossen, 1995), and separate their unharnessed thoughts from their behaviour. Dines also fails to mention the masses of individuals who are actually repulsed by sexually aggressive pornography (McElroy, 1995) and that in contemporary porn it is not unusual to find porn that advocates safe-sex practices, by the usage of condoms (Strossen, 1995), which is essentially a sex-positive and sex-friendly message being delivered by the porn industry; especially when it is expressive of consciously preventing sexually transmitted infections/diseases and/or unwanted pregnancies, which can only be considered to be encouraging for feminist ideologies. Further to this, eroticised porn and other 'for women' porn supports the move away from sexualised violence and what Jensen (1998) writes is more mainstream porn, providing an alternative and a less patriarchal representation of female sexuality, which is essentially a progressive move in the direction of making digital pornography more feminist.

Moreover, a strong debate presented by anti-porn feminists is that porn is for male leisure and pleasure (Shaw, 1999), and whilst this may be true, pornography can be equally satisfying to women. As Strossen (1995: 200) questions, '*who decides what women want?*', some women may enjoy sexually violent/aggressive acts, or other sexual acts some consider to be anti-feminist, therefore censoring these would conversely prevent the liberation of women by transmitting the message that there are normative sexual practices women should desire or prefer. Further to this, anti-porn feminists additionally argue that pornography is degrading to women (Long, 2012), however it is the woman that holds the power to both build and destroy the male's potential to pleasure. Regardless of the type of pornography in which women feature, the woman often affirms that she is being pleased by the experience, in essence confirming to the male that he is doing something right and boosting his ego. In this context, if a woman's satisfaction was not also key to the male's pleasure, the exaggerated sound effects that are prominent in pornography would

not be necessary. It could therefore be reasoned that pornography would be controversially demoralising to men if the woman withheld encouragement that the man was sexually pleasing her.

Anti-porn feminists also make the grave error in ignoring that men can similarly be victims of abuse, be it domestic, violent or sexual (RAINN, 2015), and that in contemporary society women are well equip with the ability to easily use their sexuality against men. It should also be noted, that men can be feminists too, and instead of assuming that men have no moral integrity when consuming digital pornography (MacKinnon, 2000), there could be men who would very much like to be educated in how they could fulfil a woman's sexual desires and correspondingly pleasure her too. Pornography in all its forms can be a delight to both men and women (Strossen, 1995) and this is what anti-porn feminists should make a more conscious effort to recognise. Women are now more sexually liberated than they previously have been (Collins, 2013), and whether women prefer other women, men, both sexes and/or multiple sexual partners monogamously or polygamously, digital pornography has never been more prepared to accommodate, advocate and celebrate these diversities and individual sexual preferences. As such, accepting these differences and facilitating them to a greater extent could be considered the more sincere approach to making pornography more feminist, and in this context anti-porn feminists should stop trying to hinder their own liberation.

In conclusion, as consistently expressed throughout this assignment, the digital pornography industry has already started to become more feminist and continues to adjust to the increasing demand of a more prominent and growing female audience (Jacobs, 2004). Pro-porn feminists rightfully identify that this vast industry should be utilised to create a greater social change in how women express their sexuality, bodies and desires. Like men, women should not be ashamed to advocate and educate on what sexually pleases them, nor should anti-porn feminists try to dictate what the sexual preferences of women should be. As Russo (1998) nicely clarifies, the feminist fight in pornography is to combat the eroticised inequalities and sexist misrepresentations within it, and with the introduction of 'for women' categories it is evident that feminists have begun conquering this battle.

1. The term 'pro-porn' feminists has been purposefully used in replacement of 'sex-positive' feminists, as the latter implies that anti-porn feminists take a negative stance on sex which is not inherently true and is believed to be misrepresentative of anti-porn arguments.

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