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# It's common (but we don't talk about it) : how straight male use of gay male porn influences acts, identities, and desire

Solomon Z. Traurig

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solomon traurig  
It's Common (But We Don't Talk  
About It): How Straight Male Use of  
Gay Male Porn Influences Acts,  
Identities, and Desire

## **ABSTRACT**

This exploratory study was conducted to determine what potential pornography might hold as a productive space for exploring desire and identity, in addition to influencing sexual behaviors or preferences outside of pornography use. Specifically, this research set out to understand how and why individuals may watch pornography that represents identities or acts that are not considered to be in alignment with their stated or felt sexual orientation. In-person semi-structured interviews were conducted in the San Francisco Bay Area, with 11 straight- or formerly straight-identified men. From there, interview data was organized and coded with thematic analysis. Although the findings were not generalizable due to the small number of participants and limited racial diversity, some results indicate the need for future research. First, participants indicated that while use of gay porn had had made them think about their sexuality, it did not threaten an identification with straightness. Eight of the participants instead indicated that a primary motivation for watching was that gay porn and the sex acts portrayed therein seemed more authentic and less fake than straight porn. Additionally, interviewees found gay porn to be a site for learning about male sexuality and stereotypically gay sex acts such as anal penetration, which several had then practiced with female partners. Finally, 7 of 11 participants indicated that they felt identification with a non-monogamous lifestyle and/or childhood experiences had influenced both their interest in gay porn and their feelings about how use of gay porn impacted their own identities.

**IT'S COMMON (BUT WE DON'T TALK ABOUT IT): HOW STRAIGHT MALE USE  
OF GAY MALE PORN INFLUENCES ACTS, IDENTITIES, AND DESIRE**

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2014

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Joseph Gordon-Levitt's character Don Jon, in the 2014 film by the same name, plays a porn-obsessed young man who struggles to maintain relationships beyond one-night stands—because he likes porn more than he likes sex with real, live women. One of the things he likes most about porn is that it allows him to imagine sexual encounters that don't require him to reciprocate—the porn-viewing experience is all about meeting his own needs and fulfilling his own desires. In justifying what others call an addiction, he insists: "Every guy watches porn every day." While every day may be an overstatement, it seems fairly common, and even socially acceptable in America in 2014, for men to regularly use and even talk about their porn use—and more and more current pop culture references reinforce this idea. In fact, the ways that porn and porn use are talked about in popular culture, as represented by Don Jon's quandary, suggest that porn use continues to be an experience limited to feeding addiction and perpetuating isolation. This project arose out of both a personal interest in the potential productivity of porn for its viewers, coupled with the current research showing that most people—and especially men—watch porn regularly (Liew, 2009), and that the porn they watch is not necessarily representative of types of sex acts they would have access to, participate in or identify with once the computer or television was powered down (Kipnis, 1996). For these reasons, this project looks to learn more about straight men's experiences watching gay male pornography, and the ways that this seeming conflict of identity and object choice can produce increased awareness around the complexities of identities and their influences by and on desire and behaviors.

Porn studies is an emerging topic in academia and integrates disciplines including some of those which I employ here including gender and sexuality studies, queer theory, psychology and other empirical research, audience and media studies, and critical theory. Despite the increasing popularity of porn studies, there is limited research about how pornography use influences identity. In the preliminary research for this thesis, no research was found about the ways that desire perceived to be out of line with someone's lived experience might be realized in pornography. While this could include "kinky" porn watched by those who generally enjoy "vanilla" sex; straight porn watched by those with bi, gay, or queer orientations, or even portrayals of threesomes or bigger groups enjoyed by the monogamous status quo— all options suggest that pornography has the capacity to offer new or different, albeit vicarious experiences to its viewers. In thinking about porn as a site for potential exploration, straight men's use of non-straight porn seems to be full of productive possibility.

Research such as Liew's (2009) suggests that every man with access to porn watches or has watched it, as evidenced by his inability to find a man to interview who had never watched porn. Even research on a younger sample of 12 to 22-year-olds showed that 85.7% of male respondents claimed to have visited a sexually-explicit website at least one time in their life (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009). This high occurrence of porn use by American men and even boys, coupled with the understanding that threatened masculinity is a primary motivation for not talking about or exploring homosexual desire (Golom & Mohr, 2011), made me begin to wonder if I could locate men who would talk about if porn had served as a site for researching alternative sex acts or identities, regardless of if they would pursue them. I thought that even if engagement with gay pornography was ultimately a straight man's only location of imagining queer desire and never impacted his own sexual behaviors (i.e. acts or partners), his interest in watching could

have real world implications both for his own identity and acceptance of feelings and desires seemingly aberrant. Additionally, I wondered if gay male pornography could possibly hold important meaning for individuals who were actively questioning their identity, or were even gay-identified, due to its tendency to represent and normalize gay desire, gay sex, gay relationships, and gay bodies that were seemingly not as frequently or explicitly depicted as heterosexual counterparts in popular culture. In these instances, pornography could act as a site for teaching group norms, such as how to perform common gay sex acts in addition to normalizing relationships and desire (Fejes, 2002).

Due to the limited scope of research on this topic, it was necessary to consider contributions to pornography studies across disciplines and to consider how the impact of pornography on other identities may reflect or reject the idea that pornography acts as an important site for temporarily destabilizing the presumed static connection between desire and sexual orientation. This research sets out to start a conversation about what meaning gay pornography might hold as a productive space, pushing aside the more common— but yet answered— question of whether gayness is defined by acts, desire, or something else. Instead, this research adopts the conceptualization of pornography as a queer temporality (Halberstam, 2005), coupled with the belief that although production dictates much of what is represented in porn, viewers are also in control of what meaning this holds for them (Hall, 2001). In fact, it destabilizes the idea that identity, desire, and behaviors are bound up in each other, instead searching for incongruities between the three. Most importantly, the 11 individuals who were ultimately interviewed for this research had the opportunity to think about and explain how their current or former identities as straight men worked either in conflict or in concert with their previous or current use of gay male pornography.



This is somewhat of a departure from much of the academic writing about porn from the last 50 years, that has overwhelmingly situated porn as misogynist or otherwise oppressive, without considering the positive potential it may bring to its viewer and the ways this could further impact society at large. This research and the use of a qualitative approach allows participant input to problematize the presumed fixity of identity, desire, and behavior, while also working to open a dialogue about the productive or otherwise positive space that porn may serve as for engaging with questions about sexual orientation and other facets of identity, as well as complex feelings ranging from guilt and shame to hope and desire. While porn continues to receive largely negative portrayals in pop culture representations, it has simultaneously become more and more accessible. The ways this conflict influences individual opinions about porn use and its meaning will be further discussed in the following literature review, and reinforces the seeming timeliness of this research question. Next will be an evaluation of the methodology involved in setting up, conducting, and coding interviews and the data collected through them.

Finally, the discussion chapter will consider strengths and limitations of this research project as it was conceptualized and executed, and will include considerations for future research. With porn use both stigmatized but expected and with gay desire understood to be threatening to most iterations of American masculinity, the idea of gay male porn use by straight-identified men illuminates the need for continued research on issues ranging from porn use and access to identity formation and expression. Further, these questions— and their answers— are meaningful both within the field of social work and for other mental health professions. The implications for this research for the field of social work could be significant. Information about how desire, sexual orientation, and gender identity are considered through pornography use will expand on current conversations about how pornography can be oppressive or an important site

for meaning making, or both— and the ways in which it can inform how individual clinicians engage with their clients around pornography use and disclosure. Additionally, information gathered here may help to explain how desire, whether public or private, influences individual attitudes and behaviors towards the causes or rights associated with the desired object's perceived social group. While much of the current empirical literature reifies pornography as a production site of shame and anxiety, this research works to open up a new conversation about the potential of pornography as a space for exploring individual identity, and even learning to overcome feelings such as shame and anxiety.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

The literature necessary to review for this undertaking displays several overarching themes. Attitudes, identity, and the construction of difference are important for understanding how audience members who represent varied social positions experience pornography. Questions this type of literature addresses will include general attitudes about pornography, attitudes by straight men about gay men, and attitudes about gay pornography specifically. Additionally, they will help to determine how identity influences pornography use, and then, how pornography use influences identity. This cycle of influence can be studied to determine how pornography influences identities and ideas about difference. Queer theory, cultural theory, and film studies work together to address questions about the potential productive meaning of pornography as a site of performance, inverted values, and latent conversation between actor and consumer.

Some of the questions this paper sets out to answer are around how identity is constituted, for instance whether gayness is defined by acts, desire, or something else. From here, it will be helpful to think about what role media plays in identity construction, with specific attention paid to the ways that pornography—and especially gay pornography—might act as a site for exploring “gay” acts or desires. Due to the limited scope of research on the topic of how pornography might act as a site for exploring gay identity specifically, it has been necessary to consider contributions to pornography studies across disciplines, for instance considering how the impact of pornography on other identities may reflect or reject the idea that pornography acts as a site for temporarily destabilizing the presumed static connection between desire and sexual

orientation. Before addressing the confluent theories that work to define the meaning and potential of pornography, though, it will be necessary to briefly consider how pornography and its audiences have changed across time.

### **Porn Studies**

Porn studies draws from history and accounts of everyday use, while also integrating theory from many disciplines, including queer theory and media studies, that will be discussed more in depth in following sections. The inclusion of porn studies in this review begins the work of defining what porn is, before moving onto a discussion about the identities that porn produces, challenges, and supports. These arguments will work to make sense of porn as a space for meaning making. First, it is necessary to address the recent history of porn as an object of feminist disdain, and to address why this paper sets out to define porn outside of its historical role as a site of production of shame and misogyny.

Shame has been an ongoing dynamic associated with pornography, and this work intentionally avoids the 1970s feminist anti-pornography movement due to its exclusive understanding as pornography as a site for reifying misogyny. Jensen (2007) asserts that pornography is about both domination and the protection of a masculinity that can feel threatened by everyday assaults. In arguing that straight pornography is a site of reenacting masculinity through violent thoughts towards women, Jensen brings up questions about how gender and power-- and gendered relationships to power-- are expressed through pornography use. Ultimately, he identifies with anti-porn feminist ideologies that equate pornography use with violence. For Jensen, an anti-porn stance is a choice to opt out of one enactment of power dynamics that he feels to be problematic. Instead, he chooses to work to understand the complicated experience of masculinity— the intersection of his gender and privilege— directed by a brand of feminism that he identifies as most liberatory to women, which is a feminism that

defines porn as misogynist and violent.

However, heterosexual pornography, with images of women being dominated or otherwise mistreated by men, is not the only porn being criticized for its tendency towards violent or anti-female portrayals. Salmon and Diamond (2012) found that even the latent content present in pornography itself can influence who accesses it and what meaning it has to its viewers. They researched the similarities and differences they found between heterosexual-target and homosexual-target pornographies, operating under the belief that gay pornography was less likely to be misogynist and/or oppressive due to the lack of female participants. Their content analysis ultimately represented very similar percentages of what they deemed aggressive acts, presenting more questions about pornography's role in reifying social stratification such as male dominance. This study raises important questions about why people access pornography, and what meaning it may hold for them, in addition to making sense of essays discussed further into this review that grapple with feminist anti-pornography views that challenge that all porn—even exclusively gay male porn—is misogynist. This raises further questions about how porn can both influence individual identity and inform larger systems of power. If the hype is true and straight porn is misogynist with gay porn proving itself equally violent, is there any porn that holds the power to positively influence individual identities or greater social structures?

In *Ecstasy Unlimited*, Kipnis (1993) troubles Jensen's (2007) exact idea about porn as misogynist and anti-feminist, criticizing the work of 1970s feminists for finding “pornography [to be] defined as a discourse about male domination,” and “theorized as the determining instance in gender oppression...[and] confined to the male sphere of activity” (p. 220). She instead argues that “fantasy, identification, and pleasure don't necessarily immediately follow assigned gender” (Kipnis, 1996, p. 221), instead suggesting that straight women may get turned

on by gay male porn or “may identify with the male in a heterosexual coupling” (Kipnis, 1996, p. 222). Though a theoretical work, Kipnis begins to open up possibility for pornography to act as a site for disidentifying with everyday identity and trying something new—even if only temporarily. And as Kipnis (1996) questions the ability of women to perpetuate misogyny while identifying with males on-screen, Fejes (2002) questions how exclusively male acts—presumably witnessed by primarily male viewers—also take criticism for touting misogynist values. He finds feminist anti-porn criticism applies to most gay male pornography also, with anti-pornography activists finding “gay male identity and sexuality as a seemingly minor variation of heterosexual male identity and sexuality,” operating under the belief that “gay males and heterosexual men share a common masculine identity as men, express their sexuality in very similar ways” (Fejes, 2002, p. 97), and both exert significant power and privilege with the only difference being object choice.

In “Going On-line: Consuming Pornography in the Digital Era,” Patterson (2004) speaks about porn on the Internet as “importantly corporeal,” finding that “images become effective as porn to the extent that they elicit certain bodily sensations, almost involuntarily” (p.106). Patterson appears to be in agreement with Kipnis, suggesting that porn could, theoretically, provide an “emancipatory scenario allowing subjects to project their virtual selves into a variety of scenarios and environments” (Patterson, 2004, p. 106), where, for instance, a straight woman could sexually identify with a straight man; or a straight man could sexually identify with a gay man. As Patterson finds the Internet to function as a site to publicly access private experiences, Melendez (2004) wonders if pornography is as much about “technological reproduction as on the sexual spectacle made visible” (p.402). Further, he explains that the public/private collapse allows viewers to experience both “the acute pleasure of possessing (consuming) the image as an

object/commodity...and the passive pleasure of being moved by the image (the viewer as object)” (Melendez, 2004, p.414). Patterson and Melendez, operating with a porn studies lens, begin to offer insights into the value pornography could hold for transmitting information, and for broadening experiences. More importantly, each contributes to the larger question of how porn can serve as a space for identifying with acts, bodies, or perceived identities that are not explicitly held by the viewer. However, their writing is about a general pornography that is presumably created by and for straight men. What, then, is unique about gay male porn, specifically?

While writers previously mentioned have argued that one value of pornography is in the ability to identify with an “other,” authors such as Kendall (2004) have expressed concern that gay male porn offers a “how-to” that is exclusive or unobtainable to even gay male viewers. Although his concern is about the negative potential of porn, it also illuminates the unique power that porn holds to influence and educate its viewers. Whether the acts and identities portrayed in gay male porn are expressly available to viewers is not as important, Fejes (2002) argues, as the fact that “gay male pornography (gayporn) has been one of the few explicit forms of representation of gay sexual desire available to gay males” (p. 95). In fact, he argues that it is not just one of the only sites for learning about gay male bodies, but the most important—because while it shows that these bodies exist through showing how they enact sexual pleasure, it also challenges “the regime of heterosexual power and presents alternative visions of desire and formulations of identity” (Fejes, 2002, p. 112).

Other authors, such as Cante and Restivo (2004) also argue the importance of specifically gay male pornography and the possibilities it holds. While they acknowledge recent gains in gay rights and gay visibility, they argue that “homosexual acts— as well as their witnessing— still

force the subject to situation itself in relation to publicity,” for instance by requiring that individuals be either “out” or in the closet; or somewhere in between with an excuse such as “I was drunk and horny...but I’m not gay,” (Cante & Restivo, 2004, p. 142). They suggest that the act of viewing gay porn publicizes and in some cases politicizes the viewer, and that gay porn is different than straight porn precisely because in this viewing process, there exists “the necessity of a passage through an imagined public gaze where what is at stake in the encounter is precisely one’s position within the greater socius” (Cante & Restivo, 2004, p. 162). Cante and Restivo (2004), like Fejes (2002), emphasize the uniqueness of gay pornography on what potential it holds for its audience, raising further questions about how it may operate as a productive space.

While this research is exploratory, it came out of the belief that pornography holds the possibility of being a positive force. This belief finds significant support in the work of Laura Kipnis (1996), author of *Bound and Gagged*, who finds it problematic that, “[t]here’s zero discussion of pornography as an expressive medium in the positive sense,” and that instead there largely exists “a certain intellectual prejudice against taking porn seriously at all” (p. 163). Just as in her earlier book, Kipnis (1996) makes a case for porn as a site for disidentification, only going so far as to suggest that identifications can take place across gender lines— and do. However, this emphasis on porn as an actual space for questioning and challenging identity raises further questions about how it might open up the potential to explore other classic binaries such as active/passive, top/bottom, or giver/receiver. Fejes (2002), along with Cante and Restivo (2004) finds pornography to be political and Kipnis (1996) agrees, finding that porn “can provide a home for those narratives exiled from sanctioned speech and mainstream political discourse” (p. 142). It is the space where these narratives grow freely that acts as “a realm of transgression that is, in effect, a counteraesthetics to dominant norms for bodies, sexualities, and desire itself”



(Kipnis, 1996, p. 165). If porn is the site where these transgressions occur but is also a site responsible for providing education to viewers, what implications does porn have for the bodies, sexualities, and desires— transgressive or not—of its audience? To make sense of this, a better understanding of the historical and social constructions of bodies and sexualities is necessary, because aberrations exist only in conflict with norms.

### **Defining Homosexuality**

Situating what I call “homosexual desire” scientifically and historically is necessary for understanding how today’s context informs identities. In *American Manhood*, Rotundo (1994) explains that as early as the 1880s, people seeking out homosexual erotic experiences began to flock to cities, causing interest by “scholars [who] began to shift the focus of attention from homosexual acts to the people who engaged in them” (p. 275). This is where, in American history, a distinction was made between “the event...as the core of same-sex eroticism” and the individual experiencing the desire, or practicing the act” (Rotundo, 1994, p. 278). Rotundo (1994) believes it was these scholars, other observers and prosecutors of these acts “who defined homosexual identity in the eyes of the larger society” (p. 278), mirroring their own preoccupations with gender and masculinity as they defined their heterosexuality not by lack of homosexual desire, but by lack of act. It was a century later, in 1993, when MIT professor Simon Levay stated that “people’s feelings do not always coincide with their behavior,” using his scientific findings to begin to challenge the belief cemented so long ago— that desire is threatening because it leads to the acts that become the determinants of identity (Levay, 1993, p. 105). It is this more contemporary argument that begins to make sense of the population being studied in this research— namely straight-identified men who are sexually or otherwise aroused by depictions of gay male sex. Others support this as well, and in a compendium on

homosexuality and mental health produced by the American Psychiatric Press, Michaels (1996) urges mental health professionals to understand that while there is significant overlap between behavior and feelings, it is inappropriate to detach them from each other, that the definition and word "homosexual" are more nuanced than currently thought. He names identity as "conceptually distinct from either desire or behavior," explaining further that "there are individuals who have either had homosexual sex or experienced some level of homosexual desire but who do not consider themselves homosexual or bisexual" (Michaels, 1996, p. 52). Similarly, Cass (1996) introduces the idea that social constructionist psychology explains that "human beings simultaneously influence and are influenced by their environments during continued interchanges" (p. 230), further arguing that this transmission of information is complicated for many because American culture so inextricably collapses the desires, behaviors, and identities that Michaels works to separate, instead suggesting that American culture prescribes "if we experience sexual or emotional attraction to someone of the same sex we must *be* a lesbian or gay man" (p. 232). Each of the preceding arguments confirms the importance of this research for social workers and other mental health clinicians, who may find themselves in the room with a client who is understandably distressed as they work to understand how to experience desire, behavior, or identity that seems to be in conflict due to the ongoing societal belief that they are inextricably bound together.

While the opinions of experts in the mental health field may seem as though they would align with the findings of social scientists, this is not entirely the case. For instance, many academic articles composed in the last ten years set out to answer basic questions about who uses pornography, and what meaning it is thought to hold in popular culture today. However, just as little research exists on the correlation between how feelings of desire or participation in acts

influence identity; there remains a question of if engagement with or interest in certain types of pornography directly correlates with identity. For instance, a survey of how marital status, sexual orientation and gender identity influence sex-seeking behavior and porn use was conducted by Albright (2008) and surveyed 15,246 people on MSNBC.com. The 33 questions included in the survey set out to learn about how pursuit of relationships online (i.e. personals sites) and sexual activities online (i.e. chat rooms, porn), impacted self-image. Although the respondents were primarily straight and male, some distinctions were noted in how sexual orientation and gender identity impact pornography use, with the author ultimately suggesting that further research was required to learn more about how identity influences pornography use (Albright, 2008). For the purposes of this research, most relevant are Albright's findings that gay and bisexual-identified people were only 20% to 25% as likely to download pornography as straight-identified people, and that 75% of all individuals downloading and viewing Internet porn are male (Albright, 2008). Albright's findings that straight men are most likely to download pornography reinforces the need to further research what benefits— besides the obvious— straight men receive from use of porn. Further, it suggests that more research on how porn use influences identity is important to pursue.

While there is no current empirical research about how pornography may influence or enhance the ability to imagine alternative sexual orientation and expressions of desire, some research has been done on attitudes towards pornography in light of other identity experiences. Instead of imagining a transformative power in porn, this research largely reifies ideas about who uses porn and what it means, with an underlying argument that pornography is inherently problematic, and a site that produces shame and difference rather than potential. Kendall (2004) echoes the findings of Salmon and Diamond (2012) that suggest that pornography is a site for

enacting violence and aggression that is then redirected back into actual spaces. He examines ideas about gay pornography, questioning if it is a violation of sexual equality and a moral threat, or a site for learning about sexuality and behaviors for and by gay men (Kendall, 2004). Ultimately, he determines that the limited diversity of body types and races portrayed in gay male pornography, coupled with the limited types of sex acts and impersonal nature of pornography consumption, mean pornography is a negative addition to gay male development. Wright (2013) similarly warns of the dangers of replicating behaviors seen in porn. Specifically, he gives examples of a man seeking out sex from a prostitute after watching a porn featuring a prostitute, or becoming promiscuous after watching a scene with multiple partners (Wright, 2013). He calls this an “activation effect,” explaining that it “occurs when media exposure cues a script that has already been acquired” (Wright, 2013, p.61). For these reasons, Wright (2013), like Kendall (2004), argues that pornography is a questionable site for learning about, exploring, or enacting sexuality.

While Kendall (2004) and Wright (2013) are arguing for healthy sexuality to be actualized outside of pornography, the ongoing discussion of pornography as problematic continues in Golom and Mohr’s (2011) “Turn It Off! The Effects of Exposure to Male–Male Erotic Imagery on Heterosexuals’ Attitudes toward Gay Men.” Here, straight individuals were interviewed to understand their feelings about gay pornography. In working with 198 undergraduate students who were recruited from their psychology classes at their Catholic college, these researchers determined that straight people experienced significant anxiety, and perpetuated stereotypes, when asked to engage with gay male pornography (Golom & Mohr, 2011). Anxiety about pornography in general was a common theme in the literature, which was largely limited to work with college age students at universities with religious affiliations. Most of these studies failed

to explicitly acknowledge the likelihood that taking a convenience sample at a school with Christianity as a tenet would likely produce skewed results— or they addressed the research with the understanding that a natural relationship between pornography and shame already existed. For instance, Nelson, Padilla-Walker, and Carroll (2010) found negative attitudes about pornography use in their research comparing religious young men who do versus do not use pornography. Their research included 192 men between the ages of 18 and 27 and determined that 87% of its participants accessed pornography in some way, despite 100% saying they felt porn was “wrong” (Nelson, Padilla-Walker, & Carroll, 2010). The researchers determined that religiosity impacts experience of and opinions about pornography, but failed to research an areligious or mixed sample to determine if religiosity influences a relationship with porn outside of the context of a religious institution (Nelson et al, 2010). However, their comparison of religious men who do and don’t regularly watch showed that regular viewers did feel that their use negatively impacted family relationships, religiosity, and personal identity (i.e. mental health, self esteem). Their findings suggest that pornography use was felt to be in conflict with religious ideals, and that this influenced both identity and behavior as it simultaneously failed to lower pornography use while it increased feelings of shame. However, this article, much like those discussed previously, fails to engage with the questions of how pre-existing identities (i.e. religious affiliation, heterosexuality) or aftereffects of pornography (i.e. shame, change in self-esteem) inform and further influence the desire people feel, and the acts they pursue to fulfill that desire.

### **Queer Theory**

Queer theory is a vector for ideas about identity, desire, and acts— sex and sexualities— and the meaning of space. If bodies and identities are thought to be stable, then how does

consumption of gay male porn by a straight male potentially work to destabilize that identity? Or, when a straight male watches straight porn, does this somehow work to reify his identity? Does participation as a viewer affect identity at all, really— especially when porn the product, in so many ways, is queer due to its lack of productive sex and existence outside of societal standards (Halberstam, 2005) regardless of if the acts portrayed are gay or straight? If most every man watches porn— and most every man watching porn does so in the walls of his own home— are his consumption practices so private and controlled that he can opt into and out of a fantasy space, appearing to be precisely the same as he was before his use? Finally, does the ability to visit, use, and leave influence the meaning of the space where this occurs? Before further discussing the capacity of pornography to operate as a queer space, it is necessary to first assess the participants who give porn meaning as both its producers and consumers.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler (1990) asks how bodies, especially queer bodies, are produced and reproduced. She determines that “performativity” explains how people become understood by themselves and others, and calls performativity the act that constitutes the identity. In her essay “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Butler (1993) explains that she is “permanently troubled by identity categories, consider[s] them to be invariable stumbling-blocks, and...promote[s] them, as sites of necessary trouble” (p. 308). She explains that her concerns with the instability of identities are many, and encourages her reader to think of identity as both unfixed and influenced by societal forces outside of individual control. In addition to her allegation that identity is largely bound up in repetition of what it appears to be when performed by others, she echoes concerns of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, finding it problematic that identity is so often defined by what it is not, explaining that, for queer people, the idea of being “out” reproduces the idea of being “in the

closet" or otherwise hidden (Butler, 1993, p. 309). Perhaps most troubling to her is the lack of clarity about the more basic issues of identification, acts and desire as portrayed in her question, and she asks "Is it not possible to maintain and pursue homosexual identifications and aims within homosexual practice, and homosexual identifications and aims within heterosexual practice?" (Butler, 1993, p. 308). Just as social scientists and mental health providers have expressed the complicated nature of the origin and influences on sexual orientation and identity, queer theorists wonder how much intention and control factor into behaviors that also seem compulsive and rooted in societal context.

Halperin (1993) also wonders how sexuality and identity are being defined— and what acts have to do with it. He challenges modern Western thinking that sexuality is directly correlated with "sexual acts, desires, and pleasures," explaining that his studies of sexuality in antiquity "call into question...the assumption that sexual behavior reflects or expresses an individual's sexuality," (Halperin, 1993, p. 417). Instead, he finds sexuality to be "one of those cultural factors which in every society give human beings access to themselves as meaningful actors in their world, and which are thereby objectivated" (Halperin, 1993, p. 424). Berlant (1997) echoes Halperin's assertion that in modern times, acts are more bound up in identity— and even citizenship— than ever before. While Halperin questions how "heterosexual" same-sex acts invalidate the presumed link between acts and sexuality, Berlant finds these acts to threaten modern citizenship, explaining that "heterosexuality has never left," but instead "has had to become newly explicit," and has demanded "that people...become aware of the institutions, narratives, pedagogies, and social practices that support it" (Berlant, 1997, p. 17). In the space between antiquity and today, Halperin (1993) and Berlant (1997) track ruptures in the ways that acts and power fail to reinforce each other. They contribute to what has now become a

multi-faceted conversation about how self-determination does or does not influence orientation in light of acts, wishes, or desires perceived to be incongruent with a stated identity, and demand further research into what identity means— how it is defined— by individuals where these appear to be in conflict with each other.

As several queer theorists have shown, time is one of the determinants of how identities and acts are understood. Another context responsible for coloring meaning is space. If same-sex encounters in antiquity were not considered gay, can same-sex desires and encounters hold different meanings depending on if they are inside or outside of queer spaces? And who, exactly, decides what a queer space is? For instance, Woodhead (1995) argues for the significance of queer spaces, explaining that space is not only constituted through meaning but constitutes meaning. While he finds the definition of material gay spaces to be simple, he does not delve into the more challenging task of naming what makes conceptual queer and gay spaces. However, he does argue that these “imagined spaces” are no “less significant, less real, than material, physically bonded spaces” (Woodhead, 1995, p. 235). Most importantly, Woodhead sets out to “disrupt any notion” of both real and conceptual gay spaces “as being exclusive” (p. 238), emphasizing that it is not only gay men who have access to these spaces making it impossible to be sure of who occupies them.

Where Woodhead (1995) discusses predetermined gay spaces, prolific queer theorist Halberstam (2005) instead raises questions about how queerness can be used to reimagine all spaces and their potentials. In the book *In a Queer Time and Place, Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Halberstam (2005) presents the idea of queer temporality, which is a different site of meanings and values than those commonly accepted in United States culture in the present day. Warner (2005), in *Publics and Counterpublics* also works to complicate ideas about time



and space. He asks what constitutes publicness or privacy, and uses feminist theory to navigate the ways that men have accomplished mastery of both public and private sites. The idea of mastery of the private realm suggests an ability to access something difficult such as non-hegemonic sexuality both secretly and safely (Warner, 2005).

In earlier works, Warner writes with Berlant (1998) about the publicness of sex. Together, they work to destabilize the presumed fixity of sex acts with intimacy, instead explaining that queer narratives have often had to work overtime to be legible amidst the heterosexual success stories that are privileged in society today (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Like Halberstam (2005), they imagine a queer site that is dependent on “kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 558). While the spaces that Berlant, Warner, and Halberstam are referencing could very well be projected onto actual places like the bathhouses that Woodhead considers, they could just as easily be applied to the private space of gay pornography. Just as in Berlant’s (1997) earlier work referencing non-heterosexual acts as a threat to citizenship, she and Warner find in *Sex in Public* that “[p]eople feel that the price they must pay for social membership and a relation to the future is identification with the heterosexual life narrative...” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 557).

The question here, then, is if gay pornography has the capacity to function as a site that offers the temporary disidentification with the heterosexual life narrative. Whether this site is called a counterpublic, a queer temporality, or an enactment of desire outside of public convention, it works to undo the threat of Butler’s (1990) ideas— and concerns— about performativity. Specifically, it suggests that a person/body experiencing queer desire could potentially experience this desire within the frame of a queer space or temporality, where the

values associated with queer desire are not in direct conflict with outsider hegemonic values. Although participation in or enjoyment of the pornography may “queer” the body or destabilize the identity of the viewer temporarily, when the pornography was turned off or finished, the queer temporality where the desire was enacted would disappear. Could queer theory offer a way of thinking about how individuals can access pornography in a value-free realm? And what would this mean when measured up against the previously discussed shame and anxiety narratives present in current empirical literature about pornography use? Finally, does this presume too much agency on the part of the viewer, without enough consideration of the implicit and explicit messages that porn and its producers might claim responsibility over? Queer theory is one avenue for beginning to address the importance of, and possibly even locate some answers to these questions.

### **Audience Reception; Critical Theory**

Horkheimer and Adorno (2001) critique film and other forms of media, suggesting that audience members are practically forced to see what the producers intend with no ability to decide meaning for themselves. They assert that film is so basic that its message can be incorporated by a distracted, disinterested viewer— that “film denies its audience any dimension in which they might roam freely in imagination—contained by the film’s framework but unsupervised by its precise actualities—without losing the thread; thus it trains those exposed to it to identify film directly with reality” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2001, p. 45). If this sounds familiar, it’s because it is! The aforementioned slanted empiricism of Wright’s (2013) research about pornography’s capacity to influence viewers to seek out multiple sex partners or prostitutes is directly in line with this understanding of audience agency in cultural consumption.

In opposition to Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2001) pessimism about agency in consumption stand Hall (2001) and Baudrillard (2001). Each argue that viewers do, in fact, have control over

the meaning of cultural products they consume. In “Encoding/Decoding,” Hall (2001) explains that both production and consumption determine meaning of a cultural product like film or porn, and that while the “[p]roduction...constructs the message [and] is framed throughout by meanings and ideas [and] definitions and assumptions about the audience” (p. 164), the “decoding” done by viewers also controls final perceptions. Perhaps most importantly, he introduces the idea of “negotiated code,” which both acknowledges the intended meaning of and hegemonic reading of representations in film, “but makes its own sense of the meaning, too” (Hall, 2001, p. 172). This understanding of porn and its meaning could open up the possibility for straight-identified individuals to watch and enjoy it without understanding it as a threat to their identities, with their reading of the filmic text allowing them to integrate and appreciate what makes sense and/or is not overly threatening, while disregarding elements that do not meet these requirements.

Even earlier than Hall, Baudrillard (2001) in “The Precession of Simulacra,” contributed to this possibility also, arguing for a “hyperreal,” constituted by “models of a real without origin or reality” (p. 451). Baudrillard (2001) also believed in what Hall (2001) called “negotiated code,” finding that while hegemonic meanings were projected onto texts and internalized by viewers, these viewers were “always already on the other side” (p. 472), challenging the presumed fixity of the “equivalence of the sign and of the real” (p. 456). While Horkheimer and Adorno (2001) credit the work of the producer in limiting the work needing to be done by the consumer, Hall and Baudrillard’s arguments together implicate the producer in a relationship with the viewer, with the producer sending intentional messages, and the audience— the receiver of meaning— making sense of the meaning through a complex lens informed both by hegemonic values and personal preference. From here, it will make sense to consider the

usefulness of these hypotheses while reviewing interviewee responses about how they make sense of their straight identities and concurrent use of gay male pornography.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Purpose and Design**

This was an exploratory project to research the ways that straight-identified men might use access to gay male pornography (which I refer to as “gay porn”) to imagine potential desires, sexualities, and group identifications for themselves. The primary intent of the project was to determine if access to pornography that portrays sex acts and desires different than those explicitly shared by the people watching it opens up the potential for imagining those acts as desirable. My research interest was in determining how and why gay porn acts as an important site for imagining and understanding male desire and identity, especially as experienced by straight men. From there, I was able to consider what implications this may have for ideas such as queerness, which works to expand ideas about how concepts like desire do or do not influence identity. Ultimately, I set out to ask the question of how gay pornography acts, or might act, as a conceptual space where desire, sexual orientation, and gender expression can be explored outside of hegemonic values— especially by straight-identified men. Qualitative interviewing opened up the potential for learning a significant amount of information about how desire is realized, where quantitative research could have been limiting in the specificity of the data obtained. It was important, when pursuing information about this very specific subgroup, to open up potentials rather than shutting them down.

#### **Sample**

My ideal sample was 15 straight men who were marked as male at birth (i.e. due to male genitalia) and were consequently socialized as male. This identity had to continue to feel

accurate for them, as evidenced by genitalia that aligns with their current identity (this is called "cisgender"). These 15 straight men all had to affirm that they had watched, and be willing to talk about, their experiences watching gay male porn. I hoped that my sample would be diverse in areas of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, but I also knew that due to systems of oppression on the large-scale-- and the limitations of my own primarily white, middle-class, college-educated networks invoked in my snowball sampling-- on a smaller scale, that significant diversity was unlikely. However, I decided I would ask about participant's identities in these realms in the demographics component of the interview in order to determine how representative my sample actually was, and to reflect on this critically when recounting my findings. As I have noted previously, the largest delineation for the original plan was in deciding to include all cisgender men who have identified as straight at some point in their lives.

No sampling frame was available to me in list form, as it is essentially comprised of all straight or formerly straight men who meet the common requirements for male identity as described above, and who have watched or do watch gay porn. My study population was all straight or formerly straight-identified men who have watched gay porn and continue to self-identify as straight (or did while watching), live in the United States, are 18 and over, and opt to participate in my interview. I found it likely that the opting-in process occurred due to my relationship to the participant or their relationship to another participant, which is how snowball sampling works, and why I chose to use it. However, this was not overwhelmingly the case, and most of my respondents came from postings on the "Women for Men, Platonic" and "Volunteer" sections on the Personals and Community pages on Craigslist.

Opting in to participation was another indicator that my sample may not ultimately be representative of the sample frame, which, from the outset, was an anticipated risk of working

with a hidden population. For this population specifically, I knew that potential participants may feel that a perceived conflict between their stated identity and engagement with gay porn could be threatening to current relationships, feelings of safety, and even housing or work stability, if they were somehow "outed" about their desire despite the measures I took to maintain confidentiality in my work. While I only advertised that I was "ISO" (in search of) straight-identified men for my research, many of the respondents to my Craigslist postings also identified as "mostly straight" or even "bi" in practice, but still identified as "straight" enough to respond to my recruitment call. For the purposes of this study, identifying as currently or formerly straight meant participants met inclusion criteria— if they were able to speak to the experience of viewing gay male porn as a straight-identified man at some point— which everyone who contacted me had—then they were eligible to participate.

My sampling strategy was non-probability, or not random, which is what I thought would work best for the qualitative research I wanted to do. Seeking out random people would not yield the very unique group I was trying to reach. Specifically, I was hoping to find a more representative sample than those portrayed in other studies about men, masculinity, and pornography-- which primarily used non-probability and convenience sampling techniques. Nearly every study I found on attitudes about pornography-- especially of a genre not associated with an individual's stated sexual orientation-- was done by professors with students at the colleges where they teach, with many recent studies being done at Christian colleges.

The minimal existing studies resulted in limited examples to learn from, failing to provide guidance about how to find straight people to talk to about gay porn, outside of the context of potentially coercive or seemingly unintentional convenience matches. In other words, I was hoping to find straight people who had neutral or positive feelings or ideas about gay porn,

and who may even believe that using it could hold value. I thought, perhaps, there were men who would place the experience of watching gay male porn somewhere on a continuum that saw gay porn as visually stimulating, sexually arousing, or even validating or transformative, rather than expressing strictly negative feelings ranging from disinterest to disgust, and believed that if I was able to find men who had had these experiences, the addition of their voices would be especially meaningful in contrast with much of the preexisting literature on porn use.

To accrue my sample, I first submitted an application detailing my research plans to the Smith School of Social Work Human Subjects Review board, which was approved (see Appendix A). From there, I spoke to classmates, friends, and coworkers. I accessed places in my neighborhood (the Castro in San Francisco) and surrounding areas to post recruitment flyers. My use of snowball sampling allowed me to make connections to others in real life and on the Internet. On the Internet, I accessed sites where my personal presence was known (i.e. Facebook) and also where I was fairly anonymous (i.e. Craigslist) to make possible connections. Although I set out to access currently straight-identified participants with flyers posted at public sites in the San Francisco bay area, such as bulletin boards at coffee shops and libraries; a recruitment email originating from my Smith.edu email account; and through other Internet advertising on Facebook and Craigslist; I felt that a snowball sampling method-- word of mouth-- would be most likely to provide me access to potential participants, who could be difficult to find otherwise. While it is true that I found approximately 4 of my participants through word of mouth, and through friends or friends of friends, my respondents were overwhelmingly from the website Craigslist. By the nature of this topic and the state of masculinity in the United States today, I knew that even snowball sampling could fail to provide sufficient representation of this well-hidden population, and the reaching out to strangers on the Internet helped to combat that. I



also chose to expand my interviews to gay, queer, and bisexual-identified men who felt they had experienced pornography as a useful space for recognizing and even mirroring their own gay (or queer or bi) identity, prior to either realizing they were gay or coming out as gay. Broadening who I could include in interviews was a necessary decision because it increased the feasibility of the study. While my decision of seeking interviews with only currently or previously straight-identified men did limit the applicability of my findings to a larger population, I felt from the beginning that, because men and women are socialized to conceptualize identity and access desire differently, men's experiences are unique in that they are generally characterized by stigma-free pornography access, but tension around disclosing non-heterosexual desire.

My sampling plan required thinking about how potential participants could be impacted by participation in my research, and I was explicit with participants about this potential from the very beginning of contact. Participants all initially contacted me to express interest via email, and when they confirmed that they met basic inclusion criteria (i.e. were straight or had been straight, were male, and had viewed gay male porn), we briefly spoke on the phone about informed consent, and to schedule a meeting time and place. Upon meeting, I asked each participant to read over the informed consent paperwork, and asked him if he had any questions about consent or anything else about the research before signing to indicate consent. In addition to providing interviewees with a copy of the informed consent document, I also provided each with a two page document listing emergency telephone numbers and free and reduced cost therapy options for people seeking therapy around issues of sexuality or more general topics (Appendices C and D). I was certain to list a combination of phone numbers, websites, and physical addresses so that lack of access to a phone or computer, or mobility challenges, would not prevent any participants who experienced distress from accessing any of the San Francisco

Bay Area resources I had provided.

It was important, ethically, for me to be very transparent about the possible triggers associated with discussing this topic. Since discussing identity and desire— especially those that are not currently identified as normal/acceptable—can be very challenging, I knew I needed to provide information about how to receive services afterward in case any participants were triggered or wanted support around exploring their identities further. From the outset, I felt this could be true for participants regardless of their present identities. I also was intentional and careful about the ways I engaged with people I know personally, especially protecting their confidentiality in my research when they opted to participate. While the risks of speaking about pornography use seemed limited from my perspective, it was essential that I remained cognizant that this could be a very difficult conversation for many of my participants to have.

### **Data Collection Methods**

There were several questions I hoped to answer in this study. My overall research focus was to understand how gay male pornography may have the capacity to create a space for thinking about and imagining alternative gender identity, sexual orientation, and desires— especially for straight-identified men. I continued to wonder how entry into a viewership or audience role might allow the viewer to try on a temporary identity, perhaps defining pornography as some sort of queer site. Finally, I hoped to learn more about the conceptual space of gay pornography, which I thought might provide an alternative location for imagining relationship and identity potentiality outside of the hegemonic framework that informs most real-world encounters.

My study used qualitative data to support (and in some cases challenge) the combined queer and critical theories I was interested in exploring through thematic analysis. I collected

each type of information during one-on-one, in-person interviews in private spaces in public buildings, such as study rooms at libraries, across San Francisco and Oakland. After meeting with participants and gaining informed consent, I collected basic demographic information on age, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation so as to have an understanding of how diverse my sample was. From there, I allowed the interview process to be semi-structured, as it, like much qualitative research, was equally guided by the questions I had prepared and the respondent's answers. This worked best for my research because I did not want to be overly directive in the interview process, presuming that would be most helpful for maintaining feelings of comfort and safety for my participants and with the added benefit of creating a space where participants were most likely to share the information that felt most relevant to them. The questions I set out to ask each participant started out basic and were about how individuals defined "porn," how they differentiated between gay and straight porn and what influenced choices to use either. From there, individuals were questioned about specific experiences with using gay porn and any influence this had had on identity, with pointed questions about how gay porn use had influenced perceptions of sexual orientation, straight relationships, and general outlooks (Appendix B).

I was as clear as possible in my recruitment process to outline how I would maintain confidentiality during the data collection interview process, as well as the analysis process. From the beginning, I allowed my interviewees to be directive in where they choose to meet, although Smith College's Human Subjects Review board requested that meetings not occur in private residences, to maintain my own safety as well as that of my participants. Additionally, I encouraged participants to only answer the questions they felt were relevant to their experiences and that they felt comfortable answering. I assured participants that after the data was secured

and transcribed, it would be stored separately from any identifying information about them. In accordance with federal regulations, these audio recordings and notes, along with my transcriptions and interviewee consent forms, are now being stored securely, with digital files password-protected and paper documents in a lockbox that only I have access to— and all will be destroyed after 3 years.

I recorded all responses on an audio recorder, as all 11 participants consented to this. Additionally, I took supplementary notes during the interview. All interviews took place in relatively quiet and anonymous or confidential spaces, such as a meeting room with a closed door in a public library. Although I had interest in expanding my interviews to people outside of the San Francisco bay area, I did not expand my research to in-person, telephone, or Internet interviews with individuals elsewhere. While I initially intended to make this an option with the belief that it may mean participants were more willing to disclose information about their pornography use, I ultimately realized that it would significantly decrease my ability to be constantly assessing participants for signs of distress. Due to the sensitivity some participants may have felt during disclosing personal information about the porn use and sexual orientation identities, it was necessary to prioritize my ability to make sure participants were not distressed over my desire to expand my participant pool.

However, due to the sensitive nature of this topic, I wondered if the quality or amount of data I was able to collect would be influenced by participant nervousness or hesitance to disclose. Additionally, my choice to allow my participants to self-identify as straight and male could prevent some of my data from being entirely valid, and was especially complicated since gender and sexuality are both exceptionally fluid and dependent on context. Some individuals challenged the definitions of these constructs by speaking to the identity of straightness, citing

experiences that seemed to challenge that very identity. For instance, I knew it was entirely possible, and maybe even likely that I would interview a straight-identified man who ultimately disclosed to me that he enjoyed watching gay pornography because he also enjoyed having sex with other men. While my personal criteria for straightness has not historically allowed for same-sex sexual encounters (but has included the potential for same-sex desire), it was important for me to thoughtfully question and learn more about each of my participants to better understand how his desire and actions worked to inform his self-identification.

Discussion of this desire was a potential ethical issue for this research. Specifically, I anticipated that straight-identified individuals may experience negative impacts when disclosing sexual interest or desire, especially when it fell outside of their current realm of experience and self-identification, i.e. they may feel discomfort or shame around feelings they were having or even the disclosure itself. Additionally, I realized formerly straight-identified men may be reminded of challenging or otherwise emotional experiences they had during their coming out processes. Throughout the screening process; the consent process, and the interview I was forthcoming about the possibility of feeling triggered or otherwise emotional prior to, during, or after the interview. For this reason, I provided information about how to access supportive resources such as several emergency hotlines or support groups. Additionally, participants were provided with information on how to access mental health services and support through therapy, regardless of their income.

### **Data Analysis**

I used an interpretivist approach for both my data collection and the consequent analysis to allow for findings that I believed, from the beginning, would be significantly dependent on the nuanced nature of human experiences. I analyzed my qualitative data by using thematic analysis, which allowed me to note patterns in participant responses and use these patterns to identify

overarching themes with which I could analyze data. This was a useful method of analysis joined with the data collected in the 11 semi-structured interviews, as it allowed participant voices, even more than my research and interview questions, to truly illuminate the most important findings.

I began by transcribing my interviews and notes, and looked for themes in participant responses. From there, I thought about the themes I found and why they were important, and I coded them. From there I was able to draw conclusions about how the information I gathered from participants did or did not work to support the theories that I had initially found to be helpful for understanding why men—especially straight men—may benefit from experiences with gay pornography. In addition to patterns that did or did not support the theories I had initially planned to engage with, I was intentional about keeping track of information that seemed particularly different from the norms that I found, so I could also critically consider what meaning that held for my research. Most importantly, the participants gave me ideas about new themes and theories that could be used for understanding why straight-identified men engage with gay male pornography. Although thematic analysis ultimately meant that some interesting but uncommon findings had to be neglected to instead prioritize the most common themes and the most significant outliers, this was ultimately a useful means of analysis as it presented the possibility of creating new theories based off of participant data.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

The findings chapter begins with data collected by asking questions about participant demographics, followed by data collected primarily through participant answers to questions, which were constructed intentionally to answer the research question about how gay porn may offer access to different ways of thinking about identity, desire, and pursuit of acts and/or behaviors related to gay desire. These questions set out to answer what participants considered to be porn, why and how participants watched porn, and why they choose gay porn instead of straight— with further discussion around the differences interviewees perceived between gay porn and straight porn. The following questions were meant to ask about how using gay porn had or had not influenced participants to think about sexual orientation, identity, or anything else in their lives differently. Participants struggled to answer some of these questions and data collected from responses to other, less structured questions, ultimately contributed to the idea that gay porn could, in fact, open up new ways of thinking about identity and desire for straight men. Finally, some unexpected findings around the ways that childhood experiences, geographical location, and identifying as non-monogamous all influence participant use of gay porn—call for further research, and will be discussed.

### Demographics

The average age of participants was nearly 50 years, with a mean age of 49.64. Participants ranged from 28 years to 71 years old, with 3 participants in their 40s and 3 participants in their 60s. Of the 11 participants, 1 identified as Hispanic, 1 identified as Black, and 6 identified as white with 3 identifying as primarily white with qualifiers such as “mutt with

a little bit of Native American,” “American mutt,” and “mostly white but 1/4 Lebanese.” All 11 interviewees identified as male. Sexual orientation of the participants was the final demographic collected. Of the interviewees, 4 identified as completely straight or heterosexual, while 3 identified as “straight” with some hesitation reporting they were “straight, question mark, maybe”, “mostly straight”, and “heteroflexible.” Finally, 4 participants identified on the bi/queer spectrum with 2 stating they were bi(sexual), 1 stating he was queer, and 1 explaining “bi but it doesn't fit perfectly, maybe queer but it feels a little trendy.” Although occupation or former occupation was not a data point collected on all participants, 4 of the 11 explained that they either worked in the porn industry currently or had helped to produce porn in the past. In future research, collecting other demographics in addition to interviewing a more diverse sample especially in terms of race and age, may offer the researcher the opportunity to draw more conclusions about identity and gay male porn usage.

### **Defining Porn**

The first research question was about how participants defined “porn.” Nine out of 11 participants agreed on a basic definition of porn that explains it as private, personal, and sexual, explaining that pornography is constituted by depictions of sexual behaviors that are usually only experienced behind closed doors— and that it is meant to inspire sexual feelings in what is usually an individual viewer. Deference to outside powers, with interest in legal definitions, was another facet of how porn was defined, with 3 participants referring to a story they had heard where either the “Supreme Court” or “a judge” determined that despite being difficult to define porn, “You know it when you see it...” (Participants 3, 8, and 9). And while one participant expressed he felt there should be better regulation with less access for people under the age of 18 (Participant 4), 3 participants felt that porn access should be less regulated, with it currently



having a stigmatized place in culture because America is “prudish” and “moralistic” (Participants 3, 7, and 8). Additionally, two participants who felt that porn could be artistic or that art could be porn (Participants 1 and 9). Meanwhile, Participant 2, a porn editor, expressed that he felt porn fell outside of the realm of art, because Hollywood says “we’re not going to take you seriously as a film maker,” setting a double standard because “If Stanley Kubrick has people fucking in his movie, it’s okay. Because he’s in the club.”

One participant felt that intention played a role in determining what constituted porn—specifically that calling something “porn” or recording sex acts to be viewed by others was what made something “porn.” He wondered if this definition of porn might be too narrow, wondering “if somebody’s idea of a sexual act is turning the pages of a telephone book,” if “a picture of them turning the pages of a telephone book could be pornography” (Participant 5). Both intention and format influenced the definition of porn, and was an ongoing theme amongst some participants, with Participant 3 explaining, “Different kinds of porn are better at different times. Sometimes I want to read something, and sometimes I want to watch something. Sometimes I want to look at some pictures,” while Participant 11 felt that porn was “Primarily photographs [and] movies that show explicit sex acts, but could also be written material.” Each agreed that the content mattered, harkening back to the overwhelming agreement that porn’s depictions of sex acts were generally “beyond what you could do on the street or maybe experience in person” (Participant 5). How these different formats encourage or foreclose access was also discussed, with Participant 3 explaining that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, he had not accessed as much porn as he can now because “most of the porn...was video tapes that you had inherited from somebody or gone out and rented and made a copy of...unless you were willing to go spend a lot because video tapes still cost about 50 dollars” (Participant 3). Most participants explained that

the Internet was their primary means of accessing porn, specifically listing the video sites of “YouPorn,” “XTube,” “RedTube,” and “XHamster” and the variety of options these sites offered (Participants 5 and 7). One participant worried that “nowadays [when] you’re talking about access to adult materials, that’s everywhere,” explaining that he, along with anyone else with a computer “can go to [the] computer” and find endless definitions and formats portraying sex acts, because “the Internet was made for porn” (Participant 4).

Many participants initially struggled to define what “porn” meant to them, but common themes arose as each grappled with finding the right definition. In addition to the most common beliefs that porn was generally a visual portrayal of sexual acts meant to invoke sexual feelings in viewers, subjectivity became an important pivot. Each participant had a different definition of what is considered a sex act, what is sexually arousing, and how perceptions of regulation or other barriers or supports to access influence individual definitions, but explained that just as they had input into how to define porn, that porn and its producers— and their intentions— also helped to shape the definition of porn.

### **Reasons for Watching Porn**

Just as most participants defined porn by its potential to arouse, 8 participants explained that they watch porn for “sexual stimulation,” with 5 explaining they watch for “sexual gratification.” The distinction between the two is that “stimulation” entailed getting “aroused” or “excited,” or that it prepared the participant to masturbate, climax, and/or ejaculate. Sexual gratification meant that the participant did use the pornography for purposes of masturbation, “to relieve myself” (Participant 7) or as “a means to an end,” as another interviewee explained—

Porn is like sexual stimulation really distilled. You drink a beer because you want to have a nice time and enjoy a drink, you know, you have sex with somebody because you want to

share something with them physically. Porn is that shot of 100 proof whiskey, you know, you're drinking that to get drunk. So you know, porn is very much a means to an end for me (Participant 9).

Others watched to relieve stress (Participant 9), because of artistic or political reasons (Participants 1 and 8), to learn new positions— “oh, that's interesting, I want to try that” (Participant 8) or gain confidence around trying new sex acts or sexual relationships (Participant 7) and “to appreciate the anatomy”, with one participant explaining he enjoys porn because “I just like cocks” (Participant 7). However, the overall purpose of watching porn was due to its “functionality” in obtaining sexual stimulation and/or gratification, and especially because accessing these experiences was available independent of having a sex partner.

Participants explained that they enjoyed porn both because it eliminated the stress of finding a sexual partner; and/or decreased the trouble around engaging with sex with a partner who was disinterested. Two participants noted that being divorced (Participant 11) or being HIV+ (Participant 4) made finding sexual partners complicated at times. Other participants— even those with regular romantic and/or sexual partners— explained that “being physical with another person requires a lot more effort physically and mentally...sometimes you're just stressed out and you want to rub one out and you're done” (Participant 9). For Participant 7, porn and having sexual relationships with people outside of his marriage was the natural response when his “wife became disinterested...[s]he went into menopause and it was very hard on her, she lost her libido and dried up so intercourse was painful...it wasn't fun for her so it wasn't fun for me.”

### **Reasons for Watching Gay Porn**

Three interviewees explained that they watched gay porn either primarily or exclusively

due to their work in the porn industry as editors, producers, and/or distributors, with others explaining that affiliations, such as with the Bondage Domination Sadism Masochism (BDSM) community, had led to exposure (Participants 2, 3, and 8). Others explained that they did not intentionally seek out gay male porn regularly, and that instead it was “wrapped into whatever else [was] going on in the scene...mere happenstance” (Participant 11). However, it was not uncommon for these participants to share that they watched porn featuring transgender or transsexual (trans) women, expressing ambivalence or confusion about if this type of porn was “gay.” Participants 3, 7, 8, and 9 explained that one of the reasons they watched “gay” porn was because of an attraction to trans people and/or trans bodies— specifically MtF, or male-to-female trans people. Participant 3 wondered how “watching a guy with a dick even if he looks like a woman having sex with another guy with a dick,” should be categorized, when it “doesn’t fall easily or neatly into the category of straight porn.” Participant 7 expressed the feeling that “tranny porn,” featuring “chicks with dicks,” was more like gay porn than straight porn due to the presence of more than one penis in the shot. Participants held a variety of opinions about what constituted gay porn, and equally complicated reasons for choosing to watch it instead of straight porn.

The 3 participants who worked directly in the porn industry explained that they watched gay porn for different reasons than they watched straight porn, with Participant 2 explaining that he did not watch gay porn to masturbate or “to jerk off to,” but instead because he had to complete editing tasks such as “photoshop[ping] zits off people’s butts.” While the interviewees who worked in the porn industry did not offer any reasons beyond their employment for watching gay porn, the other 8 participants expressed intentionally watching, primarily due to the access it allowed to new learning experiences, especially around the different portrayals of sex

acts and masculinity in gay porn versus in straight porn. Participant 10 had intentionally sought out gay porn to “acclimate” himself to “male sexuality in general,” including his own. Others found gay porn to be just one type of porn outside of the realm of vanilla and straight portrayals of sexuality, with 2 participants watching gay porn as only one type amongst “couples on couples to women to bisexual and gay” (Participant 6); and “group play, tranny play, straight play, gay play...and group” (Participant 7). Variety allowed access to increased understanding, with 3 participants explaining that their pursuit of gay porn was due to “curiosity” about questions such as “Do I want to do that? *To* people, or do I want that done to *me*?” (Participants 10 and 8). Participant 1 explained his first experience with gay porn as “kind of this mind blowing mind altering...mind expanding experience...I had no idea people did these things.”

Finally, three interviewees chose to interact with gay porn because of either its artistic or political implications. More often than not, those participants involved in the porn industry explained that they liked porn “for the art aspect” and because “it’s about following the energy and building a soundtrack” (Participants 1, 2, and 3). Watching gay porn expanded their ideas about how sex acts could be portrayed and produced. Participant 8 explained “I don’t think the erotic part ever goes away, but I definitely think it gets reduced the more you push further toward creation and not just enjoying it for what it is,” somewhat different from Participant 2’s experience of losing interest in porn as it became a job for him. Even those working outside of the industry could “appreciate it as art” (Participant 9). One participant found that art could imitate porn, complicating the relationship between each as he recounted the experience of attending a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit and finding the “SM gay imagery” to be “mind-blowing” (Participant 1). The political potential for porn, regardless of its artistry, was one of the reasons he attended this show, explaining that he was “making a political statement by

supporting this art show...in a conservative city...” in addition to supporting his belief that explicit portrayals of sex acts could be both artistic and mind-opening (Participant 1).

Another reason Participant 1 attended the Mapplethorpe art exhibit was to show support to his gay friends in the area, with solidarity being another reason mentioned by other interviewees as a reason for engaging with gay porn. Participant 2 recounted the story of how he found his job editing gay porn, planning “to move right on past it” on his job search. When he told his girlfriend, she said “What are you, a homophobe?” and he applied for the job to show that he was not. Another participant felt that watching gay porn eliminated his need to worry about coercion and mistreatment in the porn industry, explaining, “I know that some men are controlled by other men too but I feel like women are more likely to be controlled by men” (Participant 6). In the most extreme instance, an interviewee explained that he not only watched gay porn for political reasons, but had decided he would like to have penetrative sex with another man for reasons of solidarity—

I don’t know if you’ve ever read any of the literature on prison rape...Donny the Punk?

Steven Donaldson. He first went to jail as the result of a demonstration, had no idea of being a criminal and thought he would just spend the weekend in jail and then bail out with everybody else on Monday morning. The jail guards decided to have some cruel fun at his expense and threw him in the tank with a bunch of very violent guys who raped him repeatedly and beat him up. Then he spent more time over the years in prison, quite a lot. And he wrote very eloquently about prison rape. What he said in fact is there is a gender binary in male prisons and the population is divided between men and punks. Men penetrate, punks are penetrated. And it’s like the one-drop rule with race. You get

penetrated once; you're a punk forever. You never reclaim the status of being a man. I think in a very harsh way, that has a lot of applications to gender in the outside world. And so one of the things I wanted to do as...kind of a gesture of rejecting that...am I a man? No, I'm a punk, come on, fuck me. I might not have liked it. I wasn't actually expecting to like it...it would have been nice if I had. But I wanted to...to a certain extent it's an act of solidarity, an act of defiance. If being a man means that, then I'm a punk...although a lot of my old left ideas have not stood the test of time, that impulse of solidarity has remained with me. So to the extent that there are men and punks, my solidarity is with the punks. And if I have to get fucked up the ass to demonstrate it, okay. (Participant 5)

With the reasons for watching porn in general varying from participant reasons for watching gay porn specifically, it becomes necessary to explore participants' perceived differences between gay and straight pornography.

### **Perceived Differences between Gay and Straight Pornography**

When asked about the difference between why interviewees chose gay porn over straight porn, the most common reasons pointed to a sense of authenticity in the porn, with participants explaining that gay porn seemed “visceral,” “immediate,” “less contrived” “less staged” “less fake,” and “more genuine” (than straight porn) (Participants 4, 5, and 10). This was in contrast to the criticism of straight porn—that women seem interested in sex in an unrealistic way, that in real life “the wildest, craziest girls, maybe they'll come close but they'll never be quite porny—

it's always cheesy" (Participant 2). Overall, 8 participants expressed the feeling that gay porn "justif[ied] itself less," skipping the "elaborate plots...quality of acting, quality of special effects, the set design, the costuming..." to instead "get right to it and get to fucking" (Participants 3 and 8). The resistance to following a script and emphasis instead on mutual, authentic enjoyment by all participants was recounted by one interviewee, who explained:

It looks as though the people are actually having fun rather than just following the script. More often, but not all the time, it seems to me...to have less cruelty and more mutuality of pleasure...going back to the thing of it seeming less fake, everybody knows how to fake a climax but it's impossible to fake an ejaculation...with the gay porn I think it might just be because it's physiologically harder to fake [an orgasm]— not impossible, but harder. (Participant 5)

While a perception of authenticity seemed to be the primary difference between how participants thought of gay porn differently than straight porn, gender dynamics and the actual bodies being represented were two other differences mentioned by many interviewees, and used, again, to explain how gay porn seemed more authentic than straight.

Five participants found gender dynamics to be different in gay male porn for reasons aside from the obvious— that only male-bodied people were participating. While one participant felt that female pleasure was overemphasized in straight porn, another participant felt that straight porn "depend[ed] on depicting cruelty toward women as a way of being hot for men," and yet another found women to be used as a means to an end in "really vanilla straight porn, [where] there's blow job, sex, money shot, done" (Participants 4, 5, and 9). Despite the difference of



opinion about women's treatment in straight porn, each felt that gay male porn eliminated power disparities in its elimination of women and the historical context of power differentials between men and women, with gay porn instead presenting a more "egalitarian," albeit "aggressive" and "soaked in testosterone" representation of sex acts (Participants 5 and 9).

As gay porn featured more male anatomy—especially penises, along with the likelihood of more scenes showing ejaculation—participants found gay male pornography to be ideal because it had more of what they were looking for in their porn-viewing experiences. One participant explained his interest in seeing penises, which he explained had been a preoccupation since he was a child and had sexual encounters with several other neighborhood boys—

When I watch gay porn I do really focus on the tools. How big and thick they are how well they spurt. Do they have foreskin or not? I really like watching men who have foreskin intact. Do you know most American women have never seen an intact foreskin? ...I'm a foreskin freak, I like big, I've seen pretty big. (Participant 7)

Other interviewees expressed the increase in "coming," "money," or ejaculation shots in gay porn was an appeal for them, as well. One participant explained his "two most memorable gay porn depictions" as including ejaculation "that struck [him] as unusually powerful and explosive and hot" (Participant 5). Another was not able to explain exactly what it was that drew him to gay porn and male bodies, but expressed "There's something about seeing a male come. And in the gay porn it happens more often than in straight porn" (Participant 11). While the increased presence of penises and heightened chances of witnessing ejaculate were certainly the draw for most participants, other common answers about the physical depictions in gay porn included lack of diversity in body types represented, although interviewees expressed somewhat neutrally — "It's more imagine-conscious" (Participant 3) and "Typically it's pretty built guys" (Participant

9). The perhaps unrealistic standards of male beauty and physique represented in gay porn seemed to be enjoyable to participants, and not deterrent. Finally, some interviewees expressed interest in anal penetration such as anal sex and fisting, showing curiosity and concern as they remembered instances where, “I saw a fisting photo and I was just blown away that a) you could even do that and b) that it was enjoyable,” and wondered, “How much lube did it require to get *that in there?*” (Participants 1 and 8).

### **Sexual Orientation and Straight Identity**

Just as interviewees had differing opinions about the differences between gay and straight porn, they had different experiences with how much watching porn influenced their feelings about their own sexual orientation, whether that was straight or something else. Three participants found that gay porn had definitely caused them to question their sexuality, with statements such as “I do wonder what’s really going through my mind and the different things I would be open to trying now that I wouldn’t consider in the past,” (Participants 6, 1, and 8).

Others explained that porn use had certainly made them think about their sexuality— particularly their perceived straightness— differently, but had not necessarily challenged identity, especially since many already identified as “queer,” “bi,” or “heteroflexible,” (Participants 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11). One participant explained—

There’s not much to threaten because I don’t have a lot bound up in any particular [sexuality]...I mean if somebody said “does this threaten your long-held feelings about where you are,” I’d say “I don’t really have any long-held feelings...I do what I do, I kind of think ...you can want to go and shoot cans with a BB gun and not be a gun nut, you can engage in things that are characteristic of some stereotype of some identity without

being locked into that identity and I don't see why sexuality should really be any different. (Participant 3)

Although nearly every participant was recruited from a Craigslist advertisement requesting interviews with currently straight-identified men, this is the question where many participants explained that they were not currently straight-identified— “I realized that my partners had been both genders over a span of time. Over the span of my life...’Oh guess what, I guess I’m bi!” (Participant 4), and “I knew I was bi from day one so there was no stigma. It was an accepted thing” (Participant 7). While 3 participants explicitly identified as bisexual, others expressed a less defined sense of sexuality influenced by gay porn, explaining “it does sort of illuminate some corners of my sexuality that wouldn’t see daylight otherwise” (Participant 9), and “I think gay porn has given me permission to consider the possibility as opposed to making me do it...” (Participant 11). The final participant who felt his sexuality had been influenced by encounters with gay porn explained an uncommon experience, and was an outlier, sharing that his unenthusiastic foray into gay porn editing had influenced his straight sexuality because it “...caused [him] to just be turned off to all sex... it [hadn’t] made him think about men, [it’d] just made [him] think about women less” (Participant 2).

Other straight-identified participants did not feel that use of gay porn had impacted their straight identities much, if at all. Most curiously, some experienced desire or participated in acts that they considered to be “gay” when thinking about sexual orientation, but that did not seem to threaten their personal definitions of straightness. Participant 3 explained “I like playing with guys now and then, I like strap-ons, I like transsexuals. I feel like a straight person.” Another interviewee explained that his acts were contextualized by his relationships, explaining, “With my wife, I have to be straight. There’s some guys who are very disturbed that I’m bi and

married” (Participant 6). Finally, some participants maintained that they were straight, expressing that viewing gay porn had been helpful in making this determination. Participant 8 explained, “because there is no erotic interest in traditional gay porn, and I have no interest in men in that sense, yeah...I questioned and answered it as well,” while Participant 10 shared, “now that I’ve had some more time to think about it I do think that I’m pretty much straight.” Overall, straight participants did not find that the choice to watch gay porn or the content depicted had influenced their straight identities beyond confirming their straightness.

### **Gay Porn as a Site of Education and Experience**

Gay porn proved to be an important site for thinking about more than just sexual orientation, with many participants sharing that gay porn had both provided them with a sexual education, and created a space where they could experience and work through feelings including desire, shame, and identification or disidentification with the individuals on screen. These feelings, sometimes coupled with newfound confidence due to the education received, occasionally led to interest in or pursuit of activities or behaviors off screen. Despite the utility of gay porn as explained by most participants at some point in the interview process, most interviewees struggled to answer— or were even resistant to answering— the pointed question of “Has gay porn helped you to think about anything in your life differently?” One participant responded affirmatively while 2 said it did not, and 2 others said they were not sure. Participants echoed earlier reasons for watching gay porn including its capacity to show “different people, definitely different positions and different acts” (Participant 10), explaining that portrayals of sex acts and bodies not seen as often, if at all in straight porn “gives you an idea about preferences, likes, dislikes” (Participant 4). While participants overwhelmingly did not see a direct relationship between porn use and thinking about their lives differently, they very intentionally

sought it out for education and access to something different than straight porn.

Other latent responses to gay porn included the belief that it influences feelings including desire, shame, and sameness with others. Additionally, it influences interest in or acceptance of behaviors and sex acts such as pegging— anal penetration generally done by a woman to a man, with a strap-on dildo. Although interviewees struggled to answer this question more commonly than any other question, their answers elsewhere suggest that use of gay male porn has, in fact, influenced their understandings of their own feelings, behaviors, and identities. Watching gay porn helped 3 participants think about desire, with one participant explaining that he realized he did not feel desire towards men— which he had been unclear about— until watching, when he attempted to differentiate “am comfortable in this?” or “am I interested in this?” and realized “I don’t feel that much desire in that respect” (Participant 10). Another participant found that after becoming comfortable watching gay porn and feeling desire or excitement that he would “catch [himself] sometimes at the gym or even at the beach...look[ing] at, or kind of check[ing] out the guys” (Participant 6). A third participant and one of the interviewees who worked for the porn industry explained his decision-making process around when he would choose to engage with gay male porn over other types, elaborating on his somewhat casual approach—

For me it kind of happens, the truth is I have access to a lot of porn. In the same way you might wander into a supermarket and think to yourself, “Man, I really want some marshmallows,” even though you weren’t thinking about marshmallows 5 minutes ago, sometimes I’ll be looking at something on my computer and think, “That’s really hot, I want to look at it some more.” Sometimes I go looking for it but I couldn’t really say

there's a particular impetus for it. I do every now and then when I'm reading literotica—that's reader written erotica—now and then I'll go looking for the gay male category and go read some of that. It's another case where I'll think "Oh, I haven't thought about that for a while, maybe I'll see if I like something in that vein." (Participant 3)

Similarly, gay porn— or engagement with it— has initiated some feelings of shame for one participant, with 4 others realizing that challenging sexuality and feeling desire did not cause shame. While Participant 2 explained feeling like telling people who judged his choice to work as an editor of gay porn "Fuck you asshole I pay my rent doing this shit!" explaining that although he felt shame, he also felt proud to have been able to help his parents when they nearly lost their home due to economic hardship. Other participants had a more forgiving approach—

I think it helped me find my identity and know whatever I did was okay. Cause it's me, and it's okay. It's me and it's what I want to do, then it's okay...I've learned a lot about not caring what anybody thinks. You know I don't take what anybody says seriously.

And if I was at a place...a gay bar or a straight bar it wouldn't bother me if somebody saw me coming out of it. (Participant 6)

Interestingly, participants across sexual orientation identities ranging from straight to heteroflexible to bisexual explained that gay desire and even gay sex could be experienced without shame if they were approached with openness and curiosity instead. One hoped other men would accept the message to "Treat it as an experience and don't be afraid to experience it

and you don't need to tell the world and you don't need to go to confession," (Participant 8). Others cited feeling no "feelings of shame or remorse about my interest in gay porn or my interest in men, for that matter" (Participant 5), and instead feeling comfortable communicating with others— even their families— about their "fluid sexuality" (Participant 4).

Finally, gay porn acted as a site for viewers to identify or disidentify— to see sameness and difference— between themselves and the porn actors. This manifested as viewers imaging themselves in porn scenarios, thinking about what this meant for their own identities, and thinking about what this meant for their partnerships. Two interviewees explained that they used porn to imagine themselves in scenarios they might not otherwise experience, with one participant recounting an ejaculation scene and remembering that he felt "excited" and was thinking about what it would be like to deliver oral sex and taste the on-screen ejaculate (Participant 5). Another interviewee intentionally sought gay and trans porn out to identify with the acts portrayed, knowing he might never pursue such acts otherwise—

It was really cool for me to see all of these different things in various flavors of porn, mentally the idea of being with a transsexual in a sexual situation is interesting to me but at sort of a gut level I don't know if I would ever follow through with it. So porn, you know, is a good way for me to vicariously live out that fantasy without worrying about rejection or things getting weird otherwise, involving someone else. (Participant 9)

However, one participant, a straight-identified gay porn editor, explained that he felt detached from porn and wondered how others were able to see likeness between themselves and the porn actors, even when straight-identified and watching straight porn—

Most men can't put themselves in the mindset of a guy with a 12 inch dick, on average

it's 6, 7 inches tops, so you're watching but you're not thinking about being him. It's weird...I just think they're looking at the women...I don't know what people think about when they look at porn. I just know that I've always looked at it like I can't picture myself being that guy. (Participant 2)

As previously discussed, it was not uncommon for viewing gay porn to raise questions about sexual orientation and gender identity for viewers, and other interviewees explained that being a viewer had offered "possibility" to think about alternate sexual orientation and desires (Participant 11); had contributed to the "existential quandary" of "I watched a gay porn, what does this mean for myself?" (Participant 10), and even helped viewers to think about their significant relationships differently, with one interviewee realizing that "most guys only talk about a fantasy with two girls but I guess with women, they could, you know, have a fantasy of two guys together...[my girlfriend] was pretty turned on by it" (Participant 6). When most participants watched gay porn, they not only thought about what it meant for them outside of the viewing experience, but also tended to think about how they were similar or dissimilar to the men on the screen.

In some instances, men used porn as practice to become comfortable with new sex acts and behaviors off-screen, whether this meant participating in them personally or just feeling comfortable with the idea of the acts. Four interviewees mentioned pegging, which is traditionally the act of a woman wearing a strap-on dildo to penetrate someone— usually a man— anally. Two participants explained that although they were not particularly interested in experiencing pegging as the recipients of anal sex, they were not disturbed by the idea when their friends talked about enjoying it; or they occasionally chose to watch it depicted in straight porn



(Participants 9 and 1). Another had a real-life voyeur experience, reminiscing about a time when he participated in a threesome “where the girlfriend pegged him while I watched...it was pretty exciting. I had never seen it done outside of a video, and then I was watching it live”

(Participant 7). Finally, one queer-identified participant explained that pegging, as a somewhat gay sex act that could be enacted by a straight couple, acted as a gateway to other sex acts—

I would say what it started with is what they now call pegging. So I started doing that with my girlfriend....once I was open to that, it was more of an understanding that these folks are doing these things. It got me experimenting in that way, and the more I learned the cruiser I got about it. (Participant 1)

Gay porn was an important site for identifying and redefining desire; for thinking about personal identity, and for learning about acts that could contribute to pleasurable experiences. For those who pursued their interest in specific sexual experiences such as anal penetration, pornographic material was a starting off point for thinking about what was or was not desired in in-person sexual encounters, whether straight or not.

### **Influences on Opinions about Porn**

Many themes came out in interviews that were either not explicitly addressed in interview questions, or became prominent across questions even where they were not meant to be the focus. While interviewees were asked how they talked about or used gay pornography in former or current straight partnerships, significant relationships were a common discussion point, with alternative relationship structures or values including polyamory, ethical non-monogamy, and cheating being discussed. Participants also frequently mentioned that childhood experiences were influential in their understandings of what porn was and what was or was not compelling in certain portrayals.

## **Relationship Structures and Expectations**

One significant finding was around the tendency of interviewees to identify as non-monogamous or polyamorous (i.e. openly pursuing sexual or otherwise romantic relationships outside of their primary partnerships and discussing this with their primary partner or partners), or monogamous and cheating (i.e. secretly pursuing sexual or otherwise romantic relationships outside of their primary partnerships, and not discussing this with their partner). Five participants expressed affiliation with polyamory or ethical non-monogamy, with some sharing this information from the beginning of or during the interview, and 2 waiting until the last question— “Is there anything else I should know?” (Participants 9 and 10). It was a commonly held belief that polyamory opened up opportunities for experiencing non-heterosexual desire both by watching gay porn and even by pursuing non-heterosexual relationships. As one participant explained—

It’s the power of poly— you don’t have to be everything to everyone. But I am a firm believer that if you can’t talk with your partner about the entirety of your sexuality, you are in for a lot of trouble. And they don’t have to participate. I can’t emphasize to people enough— if you’re thinking about exploring something, sit down with your partner and talk about it...We’re all train wrecks in the alternative sexual communities as well, but at least we’re trying to talk about it. (Participant 8)

While for many it felt necessary to discuss desires and obtain approval from their partners before exploring areas of curiosity (whether this meant merely watching porn, or pursuing sexual or

romantic relationships with others), 2 participants disclosed that they had a history of cheating on their female partners— with both men and other women. One participant had recently ended a sexual and romantic relationship with a woman—

I found that I'm not able to handle multiple relationships, one of which had to be kept secret. And since I was not prepared to have it known I thought the best thing was to end it. It was really hard and she knew it going in and to a certain extent she accepted it but she very recently decided she felt like she was being put in second place. Not that I wanted her to be in second place but that was sort of the structure of how I organized my life. And the tension between us...just the other day I decided okay, cut the knot...I love my long-term partner. I love the girlfriend I just broke up with a lot. I'm very sad about it. And no, it doesn't get simpler, I don't think. Or maybe it gets simpler at the cost of amputating yourself from what you know. No, I don't know all that. I don't think anybody is free of illusions. (Participant 5)

While the above quotation suggests feelings of love and obligation to both the interviewee's partner and the woman he was cheating on her with, Participant 7 seemed to have a more strained relationship with his wife of many years due to his tendency towards having secret sexual relationships with other men and women, explaining "I think she kinda knows I'm stepping out," citing an instance of when she confronted him and said "You're thinking about sex and who you're going to fuck next." and he "admitted nothing" (Participant 7). While each of these participants disclosed that they were actively pursuing romantic and/or sexual relationships outside of their partnerships, the polyamorous and ethically non-monogamous

identified participants actively discussed these tendencies with their partners, and the cheating participants did not. It will be necessary to further consider, in the following section, how 7 out of 11 participants leaning towards some type of non-monogamous relationship style influenced the overall findings in this research.

### **Childhood Influences on Adult Opinion**

Finally, childhood was a commonly mentioned element to interviewee understandings of their own identities, and seemed to contribute to how permissive non-heterosexual desire was to interviewees. Three participants explained at length how images they had seen or behaviors they had participated in had influenced their understanding of what they found to be sexually exciting as adults. One participant, at 11 or 12 years old, began to watch gay porn on VHS that belonged to an older male renter who lived with his mother and him— “he was gay, he had the VHS tapes in the house, so that was the porn that was available at the time” (Participant 9). This was highly influential for the interviewee as it “normalized the idea of anal penetration in men,” and he did not realize that anal penetration was a more common sexual practice for gay men than straight until he was older (Participant 9). Similarly, another straight-identified interviewee explained his “imprinted sexual moment” when he was around 5 years old and would watch detective shows because “damsel in distress BDSM-type stuff” made him “hot” even though he “didn’t have the verbiage or the understanding of what that actually meant” (Participant 8). For this participant, this translated into action later into his childhood as he wondered, “Do I want to do that? To people or do I want that done to me?” He experimented with “the neighborhood girls” and “sometimes when the neighborhood girls [weren’t] around...on the neighborhood boys” (Participant 8). Another participant explained that he, too, had had his earliest sexual experiences with other children—

Playing with boys in the neighborhood growing up, I've been involved with some classical circle jerks. And at that age, it's sort of a competitive thing. You know, how do we compare in size and oh by the way who can shoot further? Men and boys love to be competitive, this was a really fun thing to do, teenage boys in the neighborhood. I didn't start really until i was 13, ejaculating...of course before that I had nocturnal emissions but boy when I hit 13, with the help of a neighbor boy...got me gushing. And I said, "damn this feels good, I've got to do this every day." But I was nothing compared to some other boys in the neighborhood who had to get off 3 to 5 times a day with their hand. I was never that bad but once a day was good, preferably with a schoolmate, helping each other. So there's where it all started. (Participant 7)

Even those participants who did not talk explicitly about childhood sexual experiences made connections between how their childhood experiences informed their understandings of their sexuality then and now. Three participants besides the aforementioned explained that they had been sexually active and/or come out as bisexual "at a very young age" (Participants 6 and 4). Participant 3 explained that when he was 13 or 14 he started to have sexual experiences with more boys than girls, but "it never made me wonder where I was going. I just thought 'Well, I will end up where I end up.' I started becoming aware of my sexuality when I was very young but I never worried about it" (Participant 3). Overall, 6 interviewees mentioned that their experiences as children or their childhood understandings of their sexuality had influenced their current beliefs about connections between use of gay male porn, desire, and sexual orientation.

These findings are not generalizable due to their limited quantity, in addition to the lack of diversity across participant race— and likely other categories that were not analyzed, such as class. Additionally, it is possible that the location and timing of these interviews, in San Francisco, California, in 2014, influenced the general attitudes expressed by all participants to some degree. It is possible, also, that interviewee disclosure was influenced by the researcher’s identity as an openly queer female, though unknown if this expanded or foreclosed on participant reports on various topics. Regardless of if interviewee responses were impacted by the researcher’s identity, it is likely that her identity has informed her organization and analysis of participant data. Despite the limitations of these findings, further discussion about possible implications for future research is warranted, and will take place in the following chapter. Discussion will particularly focus on the unexpected information acquired in the interview process around participants’ opinions about gay porn’s tendency to look or feel more authentic; in addition the further consideration of how childhood experiences influence opinions about porn. Finally, it will be important to further consider how the limited diversity of participants limited study results, especially in regards to the unexpectedly large number of interviewees who were involved with the pornography industry in some way, and/or who were in some form of open relationship.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

#### **Findings and Themes**

The purpose of this research was to learn more about how gay male pornography might function as a productive space, particularly for straight-identified men, to engage with content seemingly in conflict with their felt sexual orientation. From here, it seemed possible to continue to learn about definitions of identity and how desire and behaviors do or do not influence definitions of self generally thought to be predicated on acts and feelings. The primary findings from this qualitative research helped shed light on individuals' reasons for watching porn and especially the choice to watch gay male, rather than straight porn; and the ways that this impacted or did not influence identity. Specifically, interviewees overwhelmingly reported that they watched gay male porn because it seemed more authentic and represented bodies and acts that were interesting to them, regardless of if these were acts they hoped or planned to replicate, or had experienced previously. Additionally, individuals explained that while they had thought about or even questioned their sexuality while feeling arousal during viewing of gay porn, enjoyment of gay male porn or even participation in male-male sex acts generally did not impact individual identity, especially around sexual orientation. Finally, interviewees explained that gay male porn frequently acted as a site where complicated feelings including shame, desire, and sameness or difference could be explored.

Less expected themes also arose and indicated a need for future research in the field of porn studies, in addition to work around what defines masculinity and sexual orientation. First

of all, participants unanimously struggled to define what pornography is, and additionally experienced difficulty differentiating between gay porn and straight porn besides the obvious difference in gender identities represented and sexual orientation perceived based off of sex acts displayed. While this research problematized these concepts further by introducing more voices to the conversations of what constitutes porn and what constitutes gayness, it did not intentionally set out to answer either of these questions, instead existing in a realm where these concepts remained amorphous, contextual, and individual. Other noteworthy though unanticipated findings included frequent references to how childhood experiences had helped to inform desire and even orientation, as well as the tendency of current beliefs about the relationship between desire and orientation. Specifically, 6 of 11 participants explained that they had either had sexual encounters with other children and/or seen pornography or other media that had influenced their sense of what was attractive, interesting, or socially acceptable, and that these experiences continued to influence their porn use and choices about sexual partners in the present. Finally, an overwhelming tendency towards polyamory, non-monogamy, or adultery was noted with 7 of the 11 interviewees reporting one of these relationship structures at time of interview. Further consideration must be given to how identification with a minority subculture, especially one that influences romantic and sexual relationships, may have influenced the data collected in this research.

### **Findings and Existing Literature**

Many of the findings in this research were surprising given current literature on porn use, masculinity, and identity. Specifically, much of the current empirical research on gay porn use by men was skewed by the research taking place at religious institutions (Golom and Mohr, 2011) (Nelson et al., 2010), while this research was arguably skewed by the tendency towards



liberalism in the San Francisco Bay Area, and further by the high occurrence of polyamorous and non-monogamous interviewees (7 out of 11 participants) and men formerly or currently involved in the porn industry (4 out of 11 participants). However, this research still produced significantly different results than previous studies, showing that pornography was more often thought of as a productive space for thinking about identity and desire, and less commonly a site for experiences of guilt or shame than indicted by previous and religion-influenced work. While other studies also illuminated the negative potential for gay porn to act as a teaching mechanism (Kendall, 2004; Wilson et al, 2010), this qualitative data overwhelmingly showed the use of gay male porn by straight men to be either value-neutral or positive, echoing the 2002 work of Fejes, who found gay male porn to be one of the only easily accessible representations of gay male sexuality to straight, gay, and questioning individuals.

Despite extensive searching, no research was found in concert with or opposition to perhaps the most significant finding— that even men who consider themselves to be straight often found gay male porn to be more interesting or satisfying due to the overwhelming opinion that men’s participation in gay or queer porn seemed more authentic and enjoyable to the interviewees, making porn featuring only men overall more fulfilling. If anything, this complicates the historically feminist belief that porn is misogynist and harmful to women (Jensen, 2007), both removing women, temporarily, from the screen and allowing male viewers the opportunity to witness common porn dynamics within the context of a power differential enacted by men only. This raises further questions about what purpose individuals find in porn outside of those reported by participants involving arousal, orgasm, and exposure to experiences outside of those generally or currently available to them. Finally, this research reiterates much of the research on audience receptivity to visual work (Hall, 2002), confirming that like any other

video clip or television show, porn is a production— a text— and its meaning is both constituted by the intention of who is making it, but also the experience of the viewer. Not only is the experience of the viewer largely responsible for creating the meaning of the text, but the use of queer theory to imagine porn as a space for experiencing unconventional but productive (i.e. not reproductive) sexual pleasure (Halberstam, 2005; Warner, 2005) is also fortified by this research. Specifically, these findings show that straight men can use gay male porn for a variety of reasons ranging from sexual to educational to escapist.

Overall, the research showed inconsistencies with the standing literature as the interviews were with a somewhat overlooked population of straight or formerly straight-identified men who generally did not experience the conflict of experiencing interest in gay porn and a religious affiliation that indicated that this interest was shameful. Instead, the findings suggested that even porn that represented sex acts that were unlikely to be pursued by the viewers offered vicarious opportunities to explore and engage with questions about identity, and that this was generally experienced positively as proffered by Kipnis (1996) rather than negatively or harmfully, as imagined by Kendall (2004). Additionally, there was no indication that viewing gay pornography would correlate with participation in gay sex acts or even prolonged gay desire. Again, how porn use influenced identity was curiously found to be positive or neutral in this research, despite the beliefs of many researchers and theorists who espoused porn use to in fact lead to negative values and bad behaviors as represented by misogyny (Jensen, 2007), promiscuity (Braun-Courville & Rojas, 2009), and low self-esteem (Kendall, 2004). The inconsistencies between the current literature and this research project indicate that there is a gap in research— specifically on the populations represented by the 11 interviewees including West coast American, liberal-leaning, polyamorous or non-monogamous, and porn industry-affiliated

straight or formerly straight-identified men. Work with more diverse selections of porn viewers, and straight-identified men in particular, has the capacity to further entertain questions about how porn use influences desire and serves as a site for challenging currently held perceptions of misogyny and homophobia as intrinsic to straight male iterations of masculinity.

### **Research Strengths and Limitations**

The uniqueness of the population studied was one strength of this project, and while the location where the study took place and snowball sampling method ultimately appeared to influence the results significantly, it also seemed that these factors yielded participants who were very willing to speak in-depth about experiences that have gone understudied in academia. This was seemingly due to the participants' tendency towards identification with being "out" members of other sexual subcultures and/or affiliation with the porn industry, in addition to a general sex-positive attitude perceived to be the norm in Northern California. Additionally, this may have been influenced by the interviewer's openness about being sex- and porn-positive, which may have made participants more likely to consider the positive impacts of porn use. While the sample was not particularly diverse in terms of group affiliations, general feelings about porn, or other demographics collected such as race, there was a 43 year difference between the youngest and oldest participants, which reflects diversity of ages represented. In future research, a mixed methods approach including a paper or online survey may influence increased diversity of participants, as even for this study, more than 20 potential participants ultimately did not pursue being interviewed due to time or location constraints, or the feeling that an in-person interview would be uncomfortable.

While the broadness of the research question and the amorphous nature of some of the terms, such as "porn," meant that participants were generally unable to speak directly to the

research question, a semi-structured interview format allowed participants and researcher alike to engage with the smaller questions embedded in the research question around what meanings gay porn held for them before, during, and after accessing it. However, this type of data collection also allowed flexibility of responses that was not always desirable to the researcher, including a glut of data that was tangential to the research question as many participants tended to be not only willing— but excited— to share explicit details about personal experiences with gay porn, even when these details were not solicited. While the Human Subjects Review Board at the Smith School for Social Work actively participated in the creation of this research project and were initially hesitant to approve it due to a commitment to ensuring that all interviewees would not experience distress, a weakness of this project was the predilection towards gendered enactments by nature of the genders of the interviewer and interviewees. Specifically, future researchers— especially those administering in-person interviews— in porn studies may find that a woman interviewing straight men may experience her own discomfort or even distress during this part of the process. It seems likely that additional interviews facilitated by a male interviewer could impact overall results as significantly as a change in location, and that a change in either would impact the reliability of the current findings. However, as an exploratory study meant to engage interested individuals in further conversation about how straight identity and gay porn use coexist and do or do not challenge the presumed connectedness of identity and behavior, this project showed no major challenges in terms of validity, although a survey could be an even more valid measure of participant responses in future studies.

### **Further Implications**

These potential future studies hold great potential for the field of social work and for mental health practitioners on a larger scale, especially if further measures are designed for

increased reliability and generalizability. As this study shows, even the definition of what “porn” is is inconsistent depending on each individual’s experience of what invokes desire or arousal— and the struggle to find a shared definition of “porn” complicates all further arguments built on what “porn” can mean or do for individuals or society. Research with a different starting point— for instance among individuals with a shared conception of what constitutes pornography— might yield more consistent insight into what impact porn use might have on individual definitions of identity, and whether behaviors or feelings hold the potential to define or destabilize identity. For clinical social work particularly, questions about porn use— and the finding that even straight men may openly use porn that seems inconsistent with their sexual orientation without finding it threatening to their straightness or masculinity— might encourage clinicians to feel less bashful about bringing conversations about desire, attraction, porn use, and masturbation, as appropriate, into the treatment room. At the most basic level, this research indicates that porn use can be not only enjoyable and purposeful, but educational and comforting as it teaches new skills, allows for identification with another person or people, and normalizes acts and bodies that have historically been inaccessible in other forms of media (Fejes, 2002).

While the 11 participants interviewed for this research shared an assortment of reasons for watching gay male pornography, these findings, as a starting point, raise further questions. For instance, what value or challenges might porn use hold for sexual trauma survivors? Also, how does gay male porn use meld with and challenge the particular brand of American masculinity that has historically correlated with homophobia, especially directed towards gay men? While preliminary answers were collected on how men make sense of their gay porn use in relationship to their straight identities, what is the difference for men who watch while actively questioning, and those who feel secure in their straightness, but are able to watch and enjoy regardless?

Finally, how does the ever-changing landscape of the Internet afford access to different types of acts, identities, and bodies—and what implications does the increasing availability have for identities across the board?

In conclusion, pornography use is a complex part of most—if not all (Liew, 2009)—of straight American men’s sexualities in 2014. One queer woman’s interviews with only 11 of these men in the San Francisco Bay Area cannot speak to the diversity of experience being had, but it can open up conversation about what questions men— and straight men especially— are asking about what porn use, especially gay male porn use, might mean for them. Participants in this research overwhelmingly reported positive experiences with gay male porn use, necessitating further conversation about how perceptions of authenticity, childhood experiences, group affiliations, and a stable sense of self—or at least sexual orientation—inform straight men’s use of porn. Current empirical studies are lacking due to their largely porn-negative orientations, while theoretical approaches such as queer theory and media studies see potential for porn, but lack hard data to support these claims. As porn studies continues its emergence in academia, it is likely that its interdisciplinary nature will lead to the continued use of these various lenses in hopes of better understanding sexuality, identity, behavior, and desire. In the meantime, the data collected in this research reminds that the presumed fixity of these various constructs must be challenged to make room for the actual, reported human experiences collected here—and for those to come.

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**Appendix A.  
HSR Application and Approval**

Smith College School for Social Work

Human Subjects Review Application

Project title: Understanding Desire and Identity Formation through Straight Men's Use of Gay Male Pornography

Name of researcher: solomon traurig

Check one:  MSW     PhD

Home phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX Email: straurig@smith.edu

Research advisor: Kristin Evans, LCSW

As the signature below testifies that I, as the researcher, pledge to conform to the following: As one engaged in research utilizing human subjects, I acknowledge the rights and welfare of the participants involved. I acknowledge my responsibility as a researcher to secure the informed consent of the participants by explaining the procedures and by describing the risks and benefits of the study. I assure the Committee that all procedures performed under the study will be conducted in accordance with those federal regulations and Smith School for Social Work policies that govern research involving human subjects.

**Any deviation from the study (e.g. change in researcher, research methodology, participant recruitment procedures, data collection procedures, etc.) will be submitted to the Committee in the form of a change of the study protocol for its approval *prior* to implementation. I agree to report all deviations to the study protocol or adverse events IMMEDIATELY to the Committee.**

**Researcher: solomon traurig**

**Research Advisor/Committee Chair: Kristin Evans, LCSW**

**DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH PROJECT INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS**

Briefly summarize the purpose of the study and planned use of human participants in terms understandable to a lay person:

This study will involve interviews of 12-15 straight or formerly straight-identified males about their experiences with viewing gay male (also referred to as male on male or all male) pornography, or "porn." The study intends to determine if the viewing of/engagement with gay male pornography has an impact on the ways that straight-identified men think about sex, sexuality, desire, and past experiences. This will be an exploratory project to research the ways that straight-identified men use or have used access to gay male pornography to imagine potential desires, sexualities, and group identifications for themselves that are largely non-threatening, due to the anonymity of the pornography consumption experience. The primary intent of the project will be to determine if access to pornography that portrays sex acts and

desires different than those explicitly shared by the people watching it opens up the potential for imagining those acts as desirable in some way. My research interest is in determining how and why gay male porn acts as an important site for imagining and understanding straight male desire and identity. From there, I can consider what implications this may have for an idea like queerness, which works to expand ideas about how concepts like desire do or do not influence identity. Ultimately, I ask how gay male pornography acts as a conceptual space where desire, sexual orientation, and gender expression can be explored outside of hegemonic values, especially by straight-identified men.

In addition to research about patterns of pornography consumption by gay men and straight men, a small amount of research about how pornography use influences identity has been done. However, no research exists about the ways that desire perceived to be out of line with someone's lived experience can be realized in pornography. Even if engagement with gay pornography is ultimately a straight man's only location of imagining queer desire and does not impact his own sexual behaviors (i.e. acts or partners), his interest in watching may have real world implications. For instance, an interest in witnessing gay sex may correlate with increased support of the gay rights movement. Gay male pornography could also hold important meaning for individuals who are actively questioning their identity, or are even gay-identified. In these instances, pornography could act as a site for teaching group norms, such as how to perform common gay sex acts.

Some research exists on how identity (such as sexual orientation, marriage status, and gender identity) impacts pornography use (Albright, 2008); while there is also a small amount of research on how the content of pornography may impact who views it and what meaning the viewer gleans from the consumption experience (Salmon & Diamond 2012). Unfortunately, both types of research reify ideas about who uses porn and what it means, with an underlying argument that pornography is inherently problematic, and a site that produces shame and difference rather than potential. Much current research about gay and straight pornography questions if it is a violation of sexual equality and a moral threat, or a site for learning about sexuality and behaviors for and by individuals (Fejes, 2002), (Kendall, 2004), (Nelson & Padilla-Walker 2010). The research that finds pornography to be misogynist and corrupt complicates the actual existence of and high levels of engagement with pornography reported by participants in much of this research including J. Liew's *Telegraph* article aptly titled "All men watch porn, scientists find" (Braun-Courville & Rojas 2009); (Golom & Mohr 2011); (Jensen, 2007), (Liew, 2011). The mixed messages here suggest that more work must be done to determine latent reasons that pornography matters.

Due to the limited scope of research on this topic, it has been necessary to consider contributions to pornography studies across disciplines, and to consider how the impact of pornography on other identities may reflect or reject the idea that pornography acts as an important site for temporarily destabilizing the presumed static connection between desire and sexual orientation. Queer theory, cultural theory, film theory, and psychodynamic theory will all be used to address questions about the potential productive meaning of pornography as a site of performance, inverted values, and latent conversation between actor and consumer. Questions that theoretical approaches will help answer ask what is enacted in gay pornography, what meaning gay pornography holds, and whether gayness is defined by acts, desire, or something else. However, *the most important information will come from speaking with individuals who*

have or are currently using gay pornography to think about their own identities, or those of others.

The implications for this research for the field of social work could be significant. Information about how desire, sexual orientation, and gender identity are considered through pornography use will add to current debates on whether pornography is oppressive or an important site for meaning making, and can inform the ways that individual clinicians engage with their clients around pornography use and disclosure. Additionally, information gathered here may help to explain how desire, whether public or private, influences individual attitudes and behaviors towards the causes or rights associated with the desired object's perceived social group. While much of the current empirical literature reifies pornography as a production site of shame and anxiety, my research will open up a new conversation about pornography as a space for exploring individual identity, and even learning to overcome feelings such as shame and anxiety.

**Participants:** if you are only observing public behavior, skip to question d in this section.

a). How many participants will be involved in the study?

X  12-15   N=50   +50   Other (how many do you anticipate)

b). List specific eligibility requirements for participants (or describe screening procedures), including exclusionary and inclusionary criteria. For example, if including only male participants, explain why. If using data from a secondary de-identified source, skip to question e in this section.

Interviews will only be conducted with English speaking men who are 18 years of age or older, and who were assigned the sex marker “male” at birth, i.e. were socialized as male. It is not uncommon for trans\*-identified men (i.e. individuals who were assigned the sex marker “female” at birth) to experience maleness differently due to socialization as female prior to beginning the transition process. As this research intends to determine how straight-identified men engage with and learn from the use of gay male porn, all participants will have identified with a “straight” sexual orientation at some point in their lives. If I am unable to find enough straight-identified participants for my research, I will interview men who do not identify as “straight” (i.e. gay, queer, bisexual, curious, questioning, same-sex loving) but who have identified as such at one time. To be eligible for my study, participants must be available to participate in an in-person interview in the San Francisco bay area. Additionally, they must have had experiences with viewing gay male (male on male or all male) pornography prior to the interview, and be willing to speak with a researcher about those experiences.

c). Describe how participants will be recruited? (Attach all flyers, letters, announcement, email messages etc. that will be used to recruit).

Participants will be recruited through flyers posted at public sites in the San Francisco bay area, such as bulletin boards at coffee shops and libraries; a recruitment email originating from my Smith.edu email account; through other internet advertising on Facebook and Craigslist; and by word of mouth. Please see the end of this document to read my email and print recruitment materials. When a participant expresses interest by contacting me by either emailing me, calling

me, or speaking to me in person, I will provide them with more information about my research and answer any questions they may have. If they are interested in participating and meet my aforementioned eligibility requirements, I will schedule an interview with them. Upon meeting, I will once again give a brief overview of my research goals and offer to answer any questions. From there, I will ask each participant to review and sign the informed consent form before beginning the interview.

Please see Attachment A: Recruitment Flyer and Attachment B: Internet/Email Recruitment Letter

d). Is there any formal relationship between researcher and participant (e.g. teacher/student, superintendent/principal/teacher; supervisor/clinician; clinician/client, etc.) that might lead to the appearance of coercion? If so, what steps will the researcher take to avoid this situation. For example: "The researcher will not interview individuals who have been direct clients."

There will be no intended relationship between researcher and participants. The researcher will not interview individuals who have been clients.

e). Does the study include accessing participants who are from "vulnerable populations"? If so, please check the appropriate: n/a

- minors (under 18 years of age)
- prisoners
- pregnant women
- persons with physical disabilities
- persons with mental disabilities
- economically disadvantaged
- educationally disadvantaged
- other, please specify

None of these "vulnerable populations" are intentionally being sought out for my research. However, I will not be screening out potential participants who are economically or educationally disadvantaged, so it is possible that some participants may identify with one of both of these categories. The demographic information I hope to collect on each participant only includes age, race, gender, and sexual orientation. While access to the internet and the pornography available there is certainly an economic privilege (i.e. it is not appropriate to watch pornography on a publicly available computer at the library-- a personal computer and private space is generally required for this experience)-- this is not the focus of this research project.

## **RESEARCH METHODS:**

(Check which applies)

Interview, focus group, non-anonymous questionnaire

Anonymous questionnaire/survey

Observation of public behavior

Analysis of de-identified data collected elsewhere

Where did these data come from originally?

Did this original research get IRB approval?  Yes  No

a). Please describe the procedure/plan to be followed in your research.

Participants who have expressed interest via phone call, email, or in-person conversation, and who appear to meet screening needs for this study, will be invited to meet with me to complete the interview. First, we will review the consent form together and I will answer any questions or speak to any concerns the participant shares. Next, the participant will be asked to provide basic demographic information as this will be important for my study and will also help with building rapport. From here, I will ask them to answer open-ended questions about pornography use and identity during a semi-structured 60-90 minute interview.

Describe the nature of the interaction between you and the participants. Additionally, if applicable, include a description of the ways in which different subjects or groups of participants will receive different treatment (e.g., control group vs comparison group, etc.).

I will contact each prospective participant and determine that they are appropriate through preliminary screening questions related to their identity (i.e. straight or previously straight male identity) and their past or current use, defined as watching or having watched gay male pornography on the internet. Each approved participant will be interviewed individually in a private location in a neighborhood of their choosing to protect confidentiality, such as a small group meeting or study room at a public library or university. After introducing myself and explaining my credentials and research goals, I will review the informed consent form describing potential risks and benefits. I will inform the participant of possible risks, remind them that their information will be confidential, and encourage them to ask for a break or to stop if they feel they need to at any time, or for any reason. I will verbally explain that I am providing written contact information for the participant to keep with numbers and addresses for a local support group and a national hotline for individuals experiencing confusion, anxiety, or shame about gay (i.e. "same sex") desire and/or pornography use. Next, I will describe the format of the interview, then begin asking questions. As a semi-structured interview, I will be using a few central questions to guide the discussion(see Attachment C: Interview Questions), but will have flexibility to follow the natural flow of conversation. At the end of the interview, I will ask the participant if they have any questions or if they are feeling any distress.

b). How many times will you meet/interact with participants? (*If you are only observing public behavior, SKIP to question d in this section.*)

I will conduct one 60-90 minute interview with each participant.

c). How much total time will be required of each participant?



One to two hours (between 60 and 120 minutes) total will be required for each participant, depending on how they initially contact me and how many initial questions/concerns they voice; and how long they choose to speak in the actual interview.

d). Where will the data collection occur?

Data collection will occur in the 60-90 minute interview with each participant, at the location they have chosen for the interview to take place.

e). If you are conducting surveys, attach a copy of the survey instrument to this application. If you are conducting individual interviews or focus groups, including ethnographies or oral histories, attach a list of the interview questions as an “Attachment”. Label attachments alphabetically, with descriptive titles (e.g.: *Attachment A: Interview Questions*).

Please see Attachment C: Interview Questions, at the end of this document.

**INFORMED CONSENT: (*If you are only observing public behavior, SKIP to next section*)**

a). What categories of consent documentation will you be obtaining from your participants? (Check all that apply)

written participant consent

written parent/guardian consent

Child assent 14-17

Child assent, assent 6-13

b). Attach original consent documents. \*note: be advised that, once the study begins, ALL consents/assents will require [wet] signatures – no faxed or email/electronically signed copies.

Please see Attachment D: Participant Informed Consent Document

**COLLECTION /RETENTION OF INFORMATION:**

a). Describe the method(s) of recording participant responses (e.g., audiotape, videotape, written notes, surveys, etc.)

Audiotape and written notes will be used to collect information during participant interviews. Participants will be informed that they are being audiotaped prior to the process beginning. If they choose not to be audiotaped but would still like to participate, I will take detailed notes during the interview process. I will lock notes, tapes, and any other identifying documents into a lockbox or cabinet behind a locked door immediately after my data has been entered, to insure confidentiality of participants for three [3] years after completion. Additionally, I will store all audio and written materials on my computer in files that only I can access with a password. After three years, the physical and electronic materials from my research will be destroyed. I will inform participants of these procedures.

b). Include the following statement to describe where and for how long will these materials will be stored and the precautions being taken to ensure the security and safety of the materials.

“All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period.”

c). Will the recordings of participant responses be coded for subsequent analysis? *If you are only observing public behavior, SKIP to next section.*

Yes

No

**CONFIDENTIALITY:**

a). What assurances about maintaining privacy will be given to participants about the information collected?

1. Anonymity is assured (data cannot be linked to participant identities)

2. Confidentiality is assured (names and identifying information are protected, i.e., stored separately from data).

3. Neither anonymity nor confidentiality is assured

b). If you checked (2) above, describe methods to protect confidentiality.

Audio recorded and notes taken during interviews will be transcribed and stored together on a computer with a password, separately from any identifying information about the person who participated in the interview. Any information disclosed during the interview that threatens a participant’s anonymity (i.e. mention of school, neighborhood, other group affiliations) will be anonymized to protect the participant’s confidentiality, and all participants will only be referred to by a number in findings.

c). If you checked (3) above, explain why confidentiality is not assured.

d). If you checked (3) above, describe measures you will take to assure participants understand how their information will be used. Describe and attach any permissions/releases that will be requested from participants.

**RISKS:**

a). Could participation in this study cause participants to feel uncomfortable or distressed?

Yes

No

If yes, describe what steps you will take to protect them.

At the beginning of the interview, participants will be provided an information sheet on how to

seek further mental health support in addition to information on how to access a hotline where they can talk about gender identity, sexual orientation and/or pornography use for free. Also at the beginning, participants will be informed that they are allowed to skip any questions they do not feel comfortable answering and are also able to end the interview at any time. For the duration of the interview, I will be assessing participants for signs of distress and if distress is apparent, I will offer the opportunity to take a break, move to the next question, or stop the interview entirely. I will remind the interviewee that there is no penalty for stopping at any time.

b). Are there any other risks associated with participation (e.g. financial, social, legal, etc.)?

Yes

No

If yes, describe measures you will take to mitigate these additional risks.

It is possible that outsiders may perceive my participants to be LGBTQ due to their willingness to disclose use of pornography that is targeted for use by gay men. Despite conducting interviews in San Francisco in 2014, it is still possible that a perceived gay sexual orientation could be harmful for participants. Therefore, participants will be encouraged to choose a neighborhood for the interview location where they feel safest, whether that be because they are unlikely to see anyone they know, or for other reasons. I will choose a neutral setting such as a meeting room at a public library, where our conversation will not be overheard and no outsiders will have grounds for drawing conclusions about what the content of the interview is.

**COMPENSATION: (If you are only observing public behavior, SKIP to the next section)**

Describe any cash or in-kind payments that participants will receive for participating in this research (see guidance about payments/in-kind compensation in the Smith School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Guideline, at the HSR site in the SSW website).

All participants, regardless of if they complete the entire interview, will be given a \$5.00 gift card for a local cafe chain with many locations in the San Francisco bay area.

**BENEFITS:**

a). Describe the potential benefits for the researcher (you).

Benefits I will experience include fulfilling my curiosity about how and why straight-identified men use gay porn, and how this use may impact their feelings about their gender, sexual orientation, desire, and relational identities to others. Additionally, as a queer-identified person, I may find solidarity or comfort in the idea that straight-identified men are willing to engage with gay sexuality in a way that is not talked about in mainstream culture, and which may be indicative of a greater culture shift that has gone unexamined at this time.

b). Describe the potential or guaranteed benefits for participants, EXCLUDING in-kind compensations.

Participants may benefit from talking about pornography use, gender identity, sexual orientation, desire, and how these experiences influence each other. Each of these categories can be difficult

for anyone-- especially those in traditionally powerful/privileged positions-- to talk about-- and my interview will set out to offer a safe space for exploring identity and imagining potential for people who may not have had that opportunity before. Further, some participants may watch gay male pornography (male on male or male only) but feel uncertain about their motivations for doing so. Speaking about their use of/engagement with gay male pornography may bring feelings of relief or clarity to these individuals.

c). What are the potential benefits to social work/society from this research?

Potential benefits for social work and society include an increased understanding of how gender and sexual orientation identities are formed, and how or why these identities are not always influenced by experiences of sexual or romantic desire. Additionally, work with people who have historically held power (i.e. straight men) around their interest in people who have historically not (i.e. gay sex workers) may help expand ideas about unspoken connections between communities that have been understood as distinct, and the transactions of power that have occurred between each. Further, it is possible that some participants will disclose that they view gay male porn as a way of increasing their self-esteem by appreciating bodies they perceive to be like their own. It is even possible that this research will uncover pornography as a site for reviewing and gaining control over prior sexual experiences that may have been disturbing to the participant, for reasons ranging from discord with identity (i.e. a consensual same-sex encounter that was not defined as “gay” by straight-identified participant/s) to a way to process coercive, abusive, or otherwise traumatic prior experiences with same-sex sexual encounters. As porn consumers may not have made these connections and may continue to feel guilt, shame, or confusion about their use of porn rather than thinking about it as a site to process prior experiences, it could be liberating to have porn use reframed as a way to master a traumatic relationship or experience.

d). Include the following boiler plate statement to describe the intended uses of the data:

“The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master’s in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations.”

Co-RESEARCHERS, COOPERATING DEPARTMENTS, COOPERATING INSTITUTIONS:

If you are working with/conducting your research at another institution or organization, include a letter of approval from that institution’s IRB or agency administrator. If there are multiple researchers, indicate only one person on the Documentation of Review and Approval as the researcher; others should be designated as “Co-Researcher(s)” here.

**TRAINING:** Include the following statement to describe training:

“I have completed the CITI on line training course prior to HSR approval. The certificate of completion is on file at the SSW.

RESEARCHER: solomon traurig DATE: 10/19/2013



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**School for Social Work**  
Smith College  
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063  
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

February 10, 2014

Solomon Traurig

Dear Solomon,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elaine Kersten".

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.  
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Kristin Evans, Research Advisor

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Questions**

1. I am trying to understand the reasons why some straight men watch gay pornography, and why. Can you tell me what you consider to be pornography?
2. Can you tell me the reasons you usually watch any type of pornography?
3. Could you tell me what makes you choose if you will watch gay pornography instead of straight pornography in certain instances?
4. Can you think of a particularly memorable experience you had watching gay male pornography, and tell me about it? How did you feel before, during, and after you watched it?
5. How does watching gay pornography seem different than watching straight pornography for you?
6. Are there things you wish were different in your life, that watching gay porn helps you to think about or understand differently?
7. Does watching gay pornography or enjoying it ever make you think or wonder if you might be gay?
8. How do you understand your use of gay pornography in relationship to your straight identity?
9. If you are in a straight relationship, how does your consumption of gay pornography impact your female partner/girlfriend/wife/etc.?
10. Do you talk with (your partner, if relevant) or anyone else in your life about your use of/enjoyment of gay pornography? Why or why not?
11. Is there anything else you would like me to know?
12. Will you please tell me your age, race, gender, and sexual orientation?

**Appendix C.  
Informed Consent**

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

**Smith College • Northampton, MA**

**Title of Study:** Understanding Desire and Identity Formation through Straight Men's Use of Gay Male Pornography

**Investigator(s):** solomon traurig, MA and MSW candidate at Smith College School for Social Work. Available via phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX or email [straurig@smith.edu](mailto:straurig@smith.edu).

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**Introduction**

You are being asked to be in a research study on the use of gay male pornography by straight or previously straight-identified men. Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of the study is to determine if watching gay pornography helps straight men to think about sex, gender and sexuality differently than they usually do. This study is being conducted as a thesis requirement for my master's degree in social work, and it is possible that my research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

**Description of the Study Procedures**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in one 60-90 minute interview about your experiences watching gay male pornography.

**Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study**

The study has the following risks. First, pornography use is often an indication of sexual desire, which some people believe is related to sexual identity or orientation. It is possible that participation in this study may cause you to question your sexual identity or orientation, which could feel uncomfortable or frightening. Second, pornography use is not commonly talked about, especially with strangers. It is possible that speaking about pornography use will make you feel negatively about yourself, or as though your experience is abnormal. If you want to talk about any of these feelings after your interview, you can find a list of potential supports, including free hotlines and a list of low-cost therapy options, on the "Resources and Supports" document attached to this form.

**Benefits of Being in the Study**

The benefits of participation in this study include increased insight into how pornography use impacts your identity and desire. Additionally, you may consider the opportunity to speak to someone else about your pornography use as a benefit.

**Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a

locked file in a locked room, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password protected file. Only the researcher and her faculty advisor will have access to the audio recordings made during interviews, and these will be assigned a participant number to maintain your confidentiality. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you. All physical and electronic information collected in your interview will be protected as required by law for 3 years, and then will be destroyed.

**Payments**

You will receive the following payment/reimbursement: A \$5.00 gift card for Peet’s Coffee & Tea. You will receive the gift card before our interview begins and will keep it regardless of if you finish the interview in its entirety.

**Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the researcher of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely at any point during the study. If you choose to withdraw, the researcher will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify the researcher of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by March 31, 2014. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis it was obtained to inform.

**Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns**

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, solomon traurig at [straurig@smith.edu](mailto:straurig@smith.edu) or by telephone at (XXX) XXX-XXXX. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

**Consent**

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study researcher.

Name of Participant (print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



**Appendix D.  
List of Referral/Support Sources**

**Resources and Supports**

Help on the phone and Internet:

If you feel that you need **immediate assistance with your mental health** following this interview, you can access services by calling:

**San Francisco Department of Public Health's 24 Hour Access helpline:**

Telephone: **415-255-3737** (local) or **888-246-3333** (toll free)

If you feel like you **need help talking about your sexual orientation** (who you are romantically or sexually attracted to) right now (you can call from anywhere), you can contact:

**GLBT National Help Center**

Telephone: **1-888-843-4564**

Website: <http://www.glnh.org>

If talking about or thinking about pornography, sex, or other subject matter in the interview reminds you of a **coercive or nonconsensual sexual experience** you have previously had and you would like support immediately, you can contact:

**Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN)**

Telephone: **1-800-656-HOPE (4673)**

Website: <http://www.rainn.org/>

Help in person, in San Francisco and the East Bay:

If you would rather talk to someone in person or hope to develop an ongoing relationship with a therapist or peer counselor, but have no or low income, or need help but do not have access to a phone/computer:

**Westside Crisis Clinic & Adult Outpatient Services — a voluntary drop-in service for low-income adults in need of emergency psychiatric care**

Address: **245 11th Street**  
**San Francisco, CA 94103**

**Drop-in hours** to meet with a case manager and be referred for follow-up services are **Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday between 9am and 10:30am.**

Telephone: 415-355-0311

**Berkeley Free Clinic — a voluntary drop-in service that is free for everyone**

Address: **2339 Durant Ave**  
**Berkeley, CA 94704**

**Drop-in hours** to meet with a peer counselor begin at **6:30pm Monday-Friday.** After you have attended a drop-in counseling session, you and your counselor can decide if you would like to meet again; or you can come back on a different night to have a session with a new counselor.

Telephone: 510-548-2570 (local) or 1-800-6-CLINIC (toll free)

If you are interested in talking about your experiences with porn, attraction, and identity further, you can **find a therapist who specializes in working with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Questioning clients on Gaylesta.** The website can match you with a therapist who takes your insurance or offers therapy on a sliding scale, which may even be free based on your income.

**Gaylesta — the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Psychotherapist Association of the Greater San Francisco Bay Area**

Telephone: **415-729-3996**

Mailing address: Gaylesta, Inc.  
584 Castro Street, #230  
San Francisco, CA  
94114-2594

Website: <https://www.gaylesta.org/>