Women and Pornography: A Voyeuristic Perspective With Special Reference to Coimbatore

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Abstract
Tamil Nadu is an Indian state with different cultural trends in marriage, including endogamy, post-marital residence, spousal differences in age and education, and the extent of women's say in the timing of marriage and choosing a partner, and disbursal of dowries. Even today, sex remains a topic of controversy, linked to immoral and voyeuristic values, especially in a patriarchal heteronormative society. With limited research available on the experiences of women watching porn, the researchers attempted to know and understand how the women of Coimbatore viewed pornography, simply from a voyeuristic perspective. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 women (natives and residents of Coimbatore), from diversified backgrounds. Discussions related to porn consumption, meanings, risks, dangers, experiences, and pleasures associated with it were initiated. The findings of the study offered basic insights into the topics discussed, which may be helpful in normalizing women's experiences, thus promoting a healthier and more open discourse about pornography consumption among Coimbatore women.

Keywords
Women, pornography, voyeurism, internet, pleasures, risks

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Introduction
With sex remaining a controversial subject even today in the Indian society, especially in a conservative and traditional social setup, pornography has flawlessly blended into popular culture, so well that embarrassment or furtiveness is no longer part of the equation. A concern with pornography as a cultural product and content along with sexual cultures and practices, and with the reception of pornographic content, marks a paradigm shift in research.1 Studying pornography consumption may include various realms related to it, such as paraphiliac behavior, addiction, aggression, gender differences in pornography consumption, influence on behavior, related patterns, sexuality, extramarital sexual behavior, cultural changes, etc. Watching pornography also presents a probable therapeutic or recreational use as well as an excitement of engaging in what is forbidden. Orthodox homes bring up women with the belief that they should be ashamed for wanting sex and experience pleasure. It is important to understand what it means for women to watch porn and what importance it holds in their lives. Viewing pornography has always been tied up in the structural inequalities of a patriarchal and heteronormative society, such as India, especially down south. It is important to identify the very individual personal histories that are interwoven with the sense-making and pleasures of watching pornography.1

A study in 2015 reports India coming close to the second position with 30% women watching online porn, slowly bridging the gap, and despite bans, India became the third largest porn watcher in 2018. Where sex education lacks, pornography can become a means of self-education, and viewing pornography for the first time can be a shocking and/or intensely pleasurable and/or exciting experience, both for women and men. Adolescents who are sexually active tend to more likely be self-exposed to sex in the media and relatively

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are more likely to progress in their sexual activity.2 Men hold the reins in the realm of pornography, whereas women are depicted sexually as sex objects in explicit texts. With men dominating the industry of pornography with regard to production as well as consumption, it becomes necessary to know and understand how women view pornography, how they accept it, and their personal-level attitudes, behavior, and experiences, relatively.

Objective of the Study
The objective of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding on when and how the respondents started watching porn, what they saw, their experiences and pleasures, risks and dangers, and different meanings porn viewing had in them.

Review of Literature
In response to controversies, with regard to the balance between nature and culture in determining human sexuality, the female sex drive is more pliable compared to that of males in response to sociocultural and situational factors.3 In the pornography debate, the issue at stake is nothing but the age-old conflict between an individual’s freedom and the social control.4 Voyeurism is a popular genre of pornography. Pornography sexualizes women’s inequality, and harm of it begins with the women in it.5 The current patriarchal and heterosexual social landscape inundates with mainstream pornographic material and promotes very specific socially constructed female sexual performances.6 Effects of exposure to pornography include the trivialization and objectification of women, increased acceptance of rape fantasy generation.7 Female consumers of pornography are constantly persisted with questions of subordination, harm, objectification, and authenticity and the need to consider women’s well-being before their own pleasures in watching or reading pornography—but this may be as much to do with the questions and approaches researchers take.8 Compared to women, men reported greater sexual arousal and enjoyment to pornography and found them more accepting and less degrading, and sexual arousal and enjoyment were positively related to ratings of acceptability.9 Sexually explicit texts frequently consumed by females relatively reflect the long-term orientation of their mating strategy.10 Evolutionary processes designed men to be more visually attracted to and aroused by sexual stimuli.11 In men, visual stimulation can occur frequently in response to seeing strangers as well as acquaintances, even from a distance, and such arousal is unlikely to evoke the negative effect to generate caution. Women, in contrast, are relatively more attracted to tactile and auditory stimuli, more likely a means of communicating a feeling that occurs only with familiar persons.5 When sexual arousal levels of men and women are compared, men are more likely to participate in a similar experiment in response to a porn film than women.12 Motivations behind internet pornography consumption can be broken down into 4 factors—relationship, mood management, habitual use, and fantasy.13 Ever since the internet made it so easy to access, there is no longer any stigma attached to porn.13

Pornography and Voyeurism
Pornography is any related material that aims to create or enhance sexual thoughts or feelings in the beneficiary. It contains explicit exposure of the genitals and sexual acts, such as masturbation, vaginal and/or anal intercourse, oral sex, rape, etc. Voyeurism is derived from the French “voir,” which comes from the Latin “videre,” and both mean “to see.” In general, voyeurism involves the behavior of a voyeur or a voyeuse, a secret spectator experiencing satisfaction from viewing the sexual activity of others. The terms “voyeuristic” and “voyeurism,” in this study, do not indicate any pathology or medical diagnosis of either the respondents involved in this study or the porn consumers in general. The literature on voyeurism describes its incidence among the general public also, where it can be seen in activities that include viewing of pornographic magazines, the internet, and movies that are not illegal.14

Pornography serves not only as a means of sexual arousal and stimulation but also as an entertainment and information source about sex and sexuality. Distinct lines are drawn between propornography—to be for pornography and to stand in favor of civil liberties, sexual liberation, and science—and antipornography—opposition to pornography was considered repressive, reactionary, and antisex.15 It is often socially unacceptable, considered deviant or shameful, and censored. With pornography having seeped into mainstream culture, the confined images of porn world have become progressively intense, making it a billion-dollar industry. Internet pornography usage is a motivated behavior meant to obtain what one wants to see. Internet has made anything available to everyone with just a click away.

Women and Pornography in India
Being the world’s most popular porn site, Pornhub gave an insight into the world of porn with a series of statistics for 2018 by releasing the review of the previous year. According to the report, India stands the third in porn consumption, hungry for free-to-access porn, and the USA taking the lead, followed by the United Kingdom. Even with the ban in place, Pornhub states that India’s average time spent has increased by 2 seconds and an average Indian spends 8 minutes 23 seconds on the website (per session). The average age of Indians exploring porn was 29. Of the total traffic from India, 30% were women. Globally, 29% of 33.5 billion were women. Most of the traffic was from Android on mobiles and Windows on desktops.
A study among 40 million Pornhub users, by Pornhub along with New York-based news website, The Daily Beast, revealed that women across the globe are also watching more hardcore acts than men, while lesbian porn was found to be the runaway hit among women.

Erudition on pornography has examined pornography, footpath pornography,\(^{14}\) the relationship between erotics and the internet,\(^{15}\) and pornography and modernity.\(^{16}\) Researchers have explored how the exercise of sexual rights and expression of sexualities, especially of women from diverse social, political, economic, and cultural contexts, are facilitated by the internet.

**Methodology**

Research with regard to how women view pornography is sparse. This study examines how women view pornography, in general, from a voyeuristic perspective. It also includes discussions related to female porn consumption, such as when they started viewing, how and why they view it, different meanings, risks and dangers, and experiences and pleasures associated with it. This study focuses on the women of urban Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Nonprobability purposive sampling technique was used, and 10 women were chosen. In this type of sampling, the sample sizes depend on the resources and time available as well as the study’s objectives, and the sampling is most successful when data review and analysis are done in conjunction with data collection. While purposive sampling is often used to include participants representing a broad range of perspectives, it may also be used when a researcher wishes to include only people who meet very narrow or specific criteria. A heterogenous sample of 10 respondents was chosen with the primary criteria of watching porn regularly, also from the urban regions of Coimbatore. In-depth interview method is used in qualitative research and best suited to projects that are more sensitive in nature. The method of in-depth interview was carried out with the 10 women of ages between 21 and 30 years, located in the city of Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India from diverse occupational backgrounds such as education, finance, management, health, and housewives. All of them well-educated, English-speaking, proficient in using technology, nates and residents of urban Coimbatore and most of them in respectable professions such as educational sector (respondents no. 1, academician; nos. 2 and 3, college students), financial sector (respondent no. 4), management sector (respondent no. 5), health sector (respondents nos. 6 and 7), private employee (respondent no. 8), and housewives (respondents nos. 9 and 10). Out of the 10, 5 are married, 3 are unmarried, 1 is divorced, and 1 is a widow. 2 among the 10 identified themselves as bisexual while 7 as heterosexual and other is yet to discover herself. 6 of them live in their homes and 4 away from home. The goal was to gain an understanding in as much depth as possible with exposure to knowledge about pornography as well as accessibility through technology.

A small group was chosen to gain a deeper understanding on how women view porn. Names of respondents have been omitted to ensure the assured respondent confidentiality. A qualitative approach has been adopted to unveil how women experience viewing pornography with concentration on the pleasures women experience in viewing it and how they surmount sexually explicit material. This is with regard to delineating the idea that sexually explicit media texts are experienced and understood in a variety of ways and evoke strong and often contradictory reactions, not all of which are represented in public debates about pornography.\(^{17}\)

The consumption of porn by women can be seen as a tension and entanglement between pleasure and risk where the search for pleasure is shadowed by the specter of virtue.\(^{18}\) The discussions were based on when and how the women started watching porn, what they saw, their experiences and pleasures, risks and dangers, and different meanings porn viewing had in them.

**Discussions and Findings**

**What Porn?**

While discussing the porn consumption of women, it is also imperative to look what porn they consume. Most of the interviewees hesitated in the beginning, but opened up to the categories they watched. Lesbian porn, romantic, and young white couple were the most preferred categories among others such as threesome, virgin, workplace, amateurs, and hardcore. **Only 1 of the respondents liked watching bondage, rape, and violent sex porn.**

Lesbian porn was the most watched and favorite category even among the strictly straight respondents. They felt a sense of pride, dominance, more connected with the bodies, and the sexuality of women on screen as well as independence from men. “Lesbian seduces straight girl” was a hit among women. Respondents just wanted to explore, look at, and learn things that they did not actually want in real life. An important fact is that lesbian porn need not end when the man ejaculates, which happens in hetero porn.

**Porn Consumption and Coimbatore Women**

The impossible demand for women to be sexually desirable as well as sexually virtuous\(^{19}\) describes the consumption of porn by women in a context where urban modernity appears to provide new possibilities of self-expression as well as articulate older concerns about morality and Indianness.\(^{20}\) Respondent 1, a 27-year-old teacher, separated from her husband for the past 2 years, often feels guilty watching pornography. As a teacher, she is responsible for molding children who are the future of a society and hence feels immoral about her habit. Respondents 2 and 3, college friends
pursuing postgraduation, are in a homosexual relationship, staying together in a rental apartment. One of them is engaged to a cousin and soon to be married. They watched porn together on mobile phones, laptops, and sometimes connected it to their TV. They were in their own space and were happy about it. Respondent 4, a 27-year-old finance manager, a widow, currently in a live-in relationship with her boyfriend who had introduced her to pornography. She simply watches porn with him to make him feel comfortable and happy. She has always been indifferent about watching it. Respondent 5, a 24-year-old married manager, mother of one, in a joint family, watches porn as an entertainment. She feels relaxed after watching porn amongst her busy work-life balance. She developed a craving for porn during her pregnancy, when she started watching it. Respondent 6, a 22-year-old unmarried nurse, employed in a private hospital, enjoys watching porn with her colleague on mobile phones, especially during night shifts when there is nothing much to be done. Respondent 7, a 26-year-old married doctor, started watching porn in her early twenties when studying medicine. She started watching porn out of curiosity, with her classmates, as a source of education and information. She rarely watches porn as she rarely finds alone time and never when on-duty, as she feels disoriented for some time after watching it. Respondent 8, a married private employee, very hesitantly told that she watches porn from her husband’s compulsion. She was coerced into watching it to avoid fights, rants, and sometimes physical and/or sexual violence following the refusal. Respondent 9, a 30-year-old housewife, started watching porn when she was 25. She was surfing through her husband’s phone one day, when she stumbled upon a folder with pornographic videos. Her husband was more than willing to share the content with her. She started viewing porn at home, when alone and sometimes locked in bedroom or bathroom if her children were playing at home. Respondent 10, a 26-year-old housewife, had been watching porn after her college days. Her friends insisted it as a way to take the upper hand in the relationship after marriage. She watches porn, at home, on her mobile phone using earphones after ensuring that her in-laws are not around. She sometimes feels guilty about hiding this from her husband but is neutral about it mostly. Most of the respondents preferred mobile phones to desktops or laptops, with the advantages of small, personal screen, proximity, easy access, and control to hide when someone suddenly appears nearby.

Meanings

Most of the respondents keenly observed the facial expressions and feelings of porn stars. They reported feeling less pleasure and enjoyment when they perceived the sexual activity on screen to be unrealistic and vice versa. A few of the respondents enjoyed porn, but still felt that it was socially inappropriate, believing that women should not watch porn. They felt conflicted with something they enjoyed doing and considering the same to be socially unacceptable. Most women reported evaluating the bodies of the performers. This also reflected on how they felt about their own bodies when compared to the porn star’s physique. However, some respondents felt less insecure about their bodies after watching porn, though their ways of comparison considerably varied from each other’s. All the respondents connected with the screen content and imagined themselves in the position of the woman on screen. They only wanted the women on screen to go through what made them happy and they enjoyed.

Respondents 2 and 3 indicated that it was arousing to watch together as an inspiration for different ideas of sexual activities. They were able to connect with the woman on screen as well as identify their sexuality and preferences. However, respondent 8 always felt threatened with her partner’s porn use, indicating that she did not like to engage in similar activities from screen. She reported to have always held a perspective that watching porn would never align with her character. Respondent 9 still had to deal with the nagging fact that her partner was experiencing arousal for someone else, though they shared porn material. Respondent 4 felt that a person had a right to watch porn and she was okay with accompanying her boyfriend as each of them engaged in the other’s interests. They also enjoyed trying something new from what they watched. Some of the respondents were sexually aroused while watching porn, while some were not. Some respondents did not want sex to be confined in a bedroom. They wanted to explore potential erotic places, such as foreign beach, glasshouse, mountain top, terrace, balcony, or living room simply to break the convention. Respondents who were married, and in heterosexual monogamous relationships, preferred pleasure outside of genitals. They were more particular with the love, care, and trust involving each other. They felt pornography empowering as well as offering a learning space.

Pleasures

The respondents had erotic responses when probed on desires, appeals, and pleasure points. Most of them wished to be the woman on screen, able to moan or scream with pleasure while having an orgasm. 2 of the respondents enjoyed the sounds more, while the others the visuals. 3 respondents were exhilarated and aroused watching the man enter the woman on screen. Respondent 10 enjoyed seeing the woman on top, feeling a sense of control and dominance. Most of the respondents preferred long foreplays including intimate, soft touches, caresses with fingers and tongue, and trust rather than violent or hard sex.

The respondents indicated various erogenous zones, such as wrists, nape of the neck, hip, stomach, back of the knee, ears, lips, breasts, thighs, and clearly genitals were the last. Penetrative sex was secondary to them. A respondent came to terms with her own sexuality and body after watching porn. She realized that she could take control of, understand, and
express her feelings. Another respondent learnt that sex had no limitations or definitions. She realized she had control over deciding to touch or being touched, even if it was her husband. One of the respondents revealed her attraction toward genitals of the woman on screen. Respondents preferred women with thin or medium bodies, long fingernails, and long or short hair let loose.

Women’s viewership of the naked male body can be read in a number of ways: as resistant reading, as a popular feminist expression, as an act of pleasure, or as merely reinstating patriarchal structures of inequality. A respondent fantasized painful, hard, violent sex, and rape, but never actually wanted them in her real life.

Most respondents viewed the male body on screen as a source of pleasure for the woman. Only 1 of all the respondents watched the male bodies keenly, and others observed that men did not have much to show, except their penis. None of the respondents were turned on by watching penis, except for when it entered the woman on screen.

Pleasure in the body part, such as the neckline or the curve of an arm, as a celebration of its constituent elements, gives a sense of the scope and complexity of sensual pleasure that breaks the specific sexual associations with genitals and describes the necessity of overdetermining phallic substitution in the representation of the female form.

**Risks and Dangers**

Women view porn as something that is produced by men, with women, for men and strongly believe that they might get a bad reputation or be called a “bad girl” when caught for watching it, especially in a traditionally conservative society. Women grow up with a conventional understanding that when you are married to a person, sex is all about getting into bed and sleeping with him. There is a lack of related education, when everyone around hesitates speaking about it. Pleasure has never been considered the fore end of sex. Women who watch porn could easily be labeled a prostitute or slut, easily available.

Most of the respondents seemed to be aware of the risks involved in accessing pornography. Respondent 6, a nurse in a hospital, was scared about her family judging her, when at home, if they knew what she was watching. Her concerns were more related to respectability. At hostel, where she shared her room with a friend, she usually locked herself in the room when alone and watched porn on her mobile phone or laptop, using earphones. 6 out of 10 respondents could not discuss the topic openly with their family, friends, or colleagues, whereas 4 of them could discuss with their partners. Respondent 5 sometimes watched it while at office, during breaks and always used headphones. Most of the respondents used mobile phones and internet to access pornography. The internet offers a “new public space” which possibly raises the tensions of risk and danger. These women usually kept multiple windows open, ready to switch between, in case someone comes near. They practiced the habit of using headphones or muting the phone, irrespective of whether they were alone or not. 3 of the respondents on occasions used their personal laptops and always deleted the browser history. Setting aside of time is a symptom of our cultural shame around viewing pornography, but is also a requisite of engaging properly with the text. The respondents were reluctant to use public internet access, such as in malls or cafes for the fear of being discovered, if someone tracked the sites visited by the users.

Respondent 8 was compelled to watch a variety of porn, including violence and rape, by her husband. She developed an aversion toward sex and porn, as her partner wanted to try out new positions and hardcore sex which was violent and painful for her, both mentally and physically. Unless women are physically attacked outside home, no violence is seen to have been committed whereas in a common setting, the context of women’s access to public spaces are the everyday negotiations as to how, when, and with whom to commute, where to be, when to be or not be out, what to wear, where and how to walk, how to modify and understand one’s gaze, and other such strategies that women employ in public spaces is what constitutes ‘normal’ violence. Women viewing porn have another side to it, as to what violence is in general as well as in relation to pornography. Almost all the respondents had a kind of constant fear of being caught by others. Women demonstrated a constant self-surveillance in relation to the arguments about harm. Respondent 1 had tried to stop watching porn feeling guilty of doing something wrong as a teacher and what her colleagues and students would think of her, but then she resorted back to watching porn after 2 months. The respondents felt that they could not concentrate fully due to all the consciousness and efforts to ensure safety from being caught. They always had the feeling of doing something wrong. The fear of losing respectability, where a woman may become considered sexually available is a violence in itself.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of the Study**

Though a good heterogeneous sample was chosen, the study comprises a small sample size of 10 women from urban Coimbatore who view porn. A quantitative study with a larger sample size could carry a broader scope and wider insights. The research area chosen has not been explored much, especially given the setting of Tamil Nadu or Coimbatore, to be specific. The study opens a new window with the perspective of women and pornography instead of women in pornography. The doors are now open for further research to be carried out for a better understanding with a possibility for other perspectives.

**Recommendations**

A new discourse has been developed by a large number of people involving in research concerning the positive aspects
of sexuality, in the recent years. Overall well-being including physical health, mental health, and sexual health is positively associated with sexual pleasure, sexual satisfaction as well as sexual self-esteem. With the development of information and communication technology, everything has been made available to anyone from anywhere. As such, pornography has also been made easily available and accessible. Such exposures and its acceptance could pave a way for a society with sex-positive attitudes wherein one would be comfortable with one’s own sexuality as well as with the sexual behaviors of others, a society wherein people would be open to learn more about sex and sexual activities, and discuss sexual histories, and physically and psychologically safe sex, a society wherein people would consider enjoying sexual activities including pornography as a healthy part of life, and most of all a society wherein people accept others’ sexual lifestyles and orientations without judgment irrespective of their cultural and religious values as long as these activities involve the consent of all the participants.

Conclusions

The questions and assumptions related to porn, censorship, legality, bans and blocks, crime, and its effects when kept aside, women of Coimbatore have been progressively consuming online porn, with increased prevalence and usage of internet and mobile phones, despite public discourse and attitudes related to pornography remaining a taboo in a social context. Women have actively viewed pornography as a means to pleasure that is accompanied with guilt and disappointment. Respondents not only indicated their pleasures of pornography consumption and viewing female bodies, but also their displeasure in representing violence. Respondents spoke of violence having to do more with dangers and risks, in terms of accessing porn, fear of being discovered, seen as sexually available, losing respectability, feeling ashamed, and guilty to face friends and family, with one of the respondents experiencing violence and abuse in all fronts. Sexual imagery descriptions also point to a non-heteronormative idea of penetrative sex, and to intimacy in an eros of touch, caress, and sharing.27 The women consistently and clearly expressed their needs and pleasures in viewing pornography, taking on the non-penetrative-sex front. Most of the respondents preferred lesbian porn though it had nothing to do with performance, but by women for women and the screen entirely being about female bodies, centered only with clitoral stimulation and vaginas and nothing about penis. Most of the women felt morally guilty for doing something wrong and socially unacceptable, from the setting they grew up in. Coimbatore, on a cultural and religious front, offers a wide range of conservational traditions, norms, and practices as to how a homely, desirable, and good woman should be, with stress on the good name of the family that brings her up. The level of exposure she had from when she was a child must also to be considered. Women prefer smartphones more than laptops, muted or with earphones plugged-in for porn consumption, irrespective of family, friends, or colleagues around them. Internet and mobile phones have taken virtual voyeurism or online pornography to new heights offering easy accessibility to explicit sexual materials to everyone, not excluding women.

Ethical Statement

Appropriate informed consent was sought from the participants.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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