

# **LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL WOMEN'S INTERPRETATIONS OF LESBIAN AND ERSATZ LESBIAN PORNOGRAPHY**

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The purpose of the current study was to examine non-heterosexual women's interpretations of "lesbian" material contained in pornography targeting male viewers and pornography made by and for lesbian women. Four focus groups were conducted ( $N = 17$ ) in which participants saw two pornographic sequences; one ostensibly for heterosexual males and the other for lesbian women. Participants then engaged in a semi-structured discussion for approximately 90 minutes. Conversations were tape-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes. Stated briefly, results indicated that participants differentiated between the two sequences on a variety of dimensions including performers' bodies, the emphasis on penetration, and the presence or absence of intimacy. The implications of these findings and ideas for subsequent research are outlined.

Weitzer (2000) provides a number of statistics underscoring the magnitude of the sex industry in North America. For example, he reports that, in 1996, Americans spent over nine billion dollars rent-

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ing or purchasing X-rated videos, adult magazines, commercial telephone sex, live sex shows, and computer pornography. Moreover, if one uses the number of consumers as an indicant of viability, the strength of the sex industry appears to be increasing. Ciclitira (2002) attributes this consumer growth to the emergence of specialized pornography genres (e.g., amateur, sadomasochistic, anal extremist, “hidden” camera, etc.) and, critically, the development of new technologies such as home video (in the 1980s) and, comparatively recently, DVDs and the Internet. With respect to the latter, Fisher and Barak (2001) summarize research suggesting that “3.8 million Canadians visited an Internet sex site in October of 2000 and ... [that] ... the average user visits Internet sex sites [approximately] 4 days per month” (p. 314).

Given the lucrative nature of the sex industry, the number of consumers and performers it involves, and the opprobrium to which it is subjected by many in mainstream society, it is not surprising that this industry has received considerable academic attention. Malamuth, Addison, and Koss (2000) report that research on pornography, which they define as any media aimed at sexually arousing the consumer, is typically guided by one of three perspectives: Moral Conservative, Liberal, and Radical Feminist. According to Thornton (1986), the Moral Conservative position regards sexuality as a potentially disruptive force which must be maintained within the “quasi-sacred” parameters of the traditional (read: patriarchal) nuclear family. Pornography embodies the existence of sex outside this restricted realm (and, more offensively, the use of sex for commercial purposes). Thus, it represents a “serious moral evil”—one whose suppression (and, ideally, extirpation) is a public duty. The Liberal perspective regards sexuality as a critical element of human expression and contends that the ability to exercise one’s erotic desires, in the absence of coercion, is vital to human freedom. Pornography is simply the commercial manifestation of sexuality. Thus, governmental regulation is unnecessary unless its production contravenes current legal standards (i.e., performers were coerced or assaulted; age of consent regulations were violated, etc.) and/or its use “spills over from the private into the public sphere” (Thornton, 1986: 27) causing offense to others.

The Radical Feminist perspective (more accurately known as anti-pornography feminism) constitutes the most influential analysis of pornography (Packard & Schraubman, 1993-1994). Its basic assumption is that pornography plays a central role in men’s subjugation of women; indeed, Dworkin (1997), one of the leading proponents of this position, asserts that:

Pornography incarnates male supremacy. It is the DNA of male dominance. Every rule of sexual abuse, every nuance of sexual sadism, every highway and byway of sexual exploitation, is encoded in it. It’s what men want us to be, think we are, make us into; how men use us; not because biologically they are men but because this is how their social power is organized (p. 99).

According to this framework, pornography contributes to, and maintains, a power differential between the sexes by depicting women as dehumanized objects; as mere conduits to male pleasure. Further, it not only socializes men to objectify, dominate, and (in many cases) brutalize women, but also socializes *women* into accepting their oppression by men (Segal, 1992). Thus, pornography is more than simply the sexist and offensive representation of women; it is a cultural product that actively contributes to gender inequality because “it causes men to injure and violate women both in its creation ... and in its consumption” (Segal, 1998: 48).

More recently, a fourth perspective has emerged, one which attempts to free itself from the polarized anti-pornography versus anti-anti-pornography factions. This “post-feminist” position asserts that the primary goals of second-wave feminism (which dominated from the late 1960s through to the late 1980s) have been accomplished and that, consequently, this form of feminist thinking is no longer relevant to young women (Sonnet, 1999). Post-feminism signifies a “going beyond” or moving from feminism, with the implicit assumption that its critiques and demands have been accommodated and absorbed far enough to permit “[a] ‘return’ to pre-feminist pleasures [such as cosmetics and fashion]” (Sonnet, 1999: 170). While one might assume that pursuit of such “pleasures” is regressive, post-feminists argue that this is not the case. They contend that such things have been reconfigured (and, thus, lost their purported oppressiveness) because they now exist within a social landscape that has been altered irrevocably by the feminist movement. This

perspective rejects the bifurcate view of male and female sexuality that is promulgated by anti-pornography feminists—a view which regards men’s sexuality as “predatory, genital, exploitative, and dominating” and women’s sexuality as “gentle, [erotically] diffuse, nurturing, and egalitarian” (Segal, 1998: 47). However, unlike some representatives from the anti-anti-pornography camp,<sup>1</sup> post-feminist inquiry does not issue apologies to explain or justify its rejection of the argument that, within contemporary Western culture, pornography is inherently damaging to women. Sonnet (1999), for example, investigated the ways in which “a new female heterosexual identity is articulated around the *active* [emphasis ours] consumption of erotica<sup>2</sup> (p. 170)—specifically, Virgin Publishing’s *Black Lace* series of erotic fiction for women by women.

Despite their differences, a limitation common to the perspectives outlined above, in particular the first three, is the minimal attention they accord to pornography that does not revolve around heterosexuality. For example, Thomas (2000) points out that, although “gay [male] porn makes up a disproportionately large segment of the pornography market ... it has generally been neglected in the fierce debate over pornography during the last two decades” (p. 49). This omission likely stems from the fact that pornographic representations of gay men do not lend themselves to anti-pornography feminist analysis—a mode of inquiry which presumes the male as subject, and the female as object.<sup>3</sup> However, when looking outside the parameters of this debate, it remains evident that marginal attention has been directed to gay male pornography (for notable exceptions see Burger, 1995; Thomas, 2000; and Waugh, 1996). The neglect of academic inquiry into this area is surprising given the ubiquity (and widespread acceptability) of the medium in gay male subculture and the role it likely plays in many gay men’s sexuality (Morrison, 2004).

Pornography that targets lesbian women as consumers has received even less attention than its gay male counterpart. The dearth of scholarly analysis on the topic of lesbian pornography<sup>4</sup> may stem from a number of factors. First, the mere act of examining this medium contravenes the pervasive stereotype of “asexual, lesbian high-mindedness” (Henderson, 1992:176); a stereotype that has been

fostered by (some) proponents of the anti-pornography movement. Second, as an industry, lesbian pornography “has little commercial currency or public profile” (Ross, 2000: 285). For example, Sender (2003) reports that *On Our Backs*,<sup>5</sup> one of the first pornographic magazines by and for lesbian women, has a small circulation (approximately 40,000 readers) and is a low-budget publication (i.e., it is printed in monochrome and on paper of poor quality). Ross (2000) indicates that, in North America, there are approximately 40 lesbian-produced pornographic videotapes and fewer than eight sexually explicit magazines targeting a lesbian readership. Echoing Sender’s (2003) comments about *On Our Backs*, Ross (2000) states that *Bad Attitude*, another pornographic magazine for lesbian women (published in Massachusetts), is “not glossy, the reproduction of images is poor, and the text is littered with typos and grammatical errors” (p. 285). However, if one considers this medium—not in terms of profitability—but, rather, in terms of the insight it provides into sexualities that are woman-centered, the importance of studying lesbian pornography becomes apparent.

Packard and Schraubman (1993-1994) contend that lesbian pornography is an important medium because it “can empower, educate, and foster communication about [lesbian] sexuality” (p. 303), both within and outside the lesbian community. Such dialogue may assist in dismantling (or, at least, challenging) predominant stereotypes about lesbian women’s sexuality; stereotypes which, according to these authors, have been forwarded by (some) feminists in an effort to make their movement more acceptable politically. These authors also suggest that the production and dissemination of lesbian pornography may result in heterosexual women finding “it easier to create their own non-patriarchal [sexualities] by borrowing lesbian [women’s] tools or by simply knowing that such creation is possible” (p. 310). In other words, by presenting sexualities that are not male-defined in terms of body size, ethnicity and age, for example, lesbian pornography may assist in liberating *all* women from androcentric models of sexuality. The existence of this medium also challenges core assumptions of feminist inquiry such as “the gaze,” in which it is presumed that females are objects scrutinized by men (Kipnis, 2000). Indeed, the mere exist-

ence of lesbian pornography may be seen as thwarting male spectatorial privilege.

While essays examining lesbian pornographic magazines (e.g., Henderson, 1992), literature (Henderson, 1992; Sonnet, 1999), and videotapes (e.g., Conway, 1997) are available, to date, there do not appear to be any published studies investigating how non-heterosexual women *perceive* this medium. Do they regard lesbian pornography as a source of liberation, re-invention, and de-stabilization of hegemonic (hetero)sexuality? Or do their interpretations concur with the anti-pornography feminist critique (i.e., *all* pornography is problematic because it is contaminated by a patriarchal view of sexuality)? Or perhaps they embrace some other means of interpreting this medium? Also of interest was their perception of ersatz lesbian pornography (i.e., “girl-on-girl” sexual episodes appearing in videos that presumably target heterosexual male consumers). Do they find such imagery offensive, erotic, boring? As well, what signifiers do they use to reach the conclusion that they are not the primary target for this imagery?

The purpose of this study was to investigate such questions using a small sample of lesbian and bisexual women. It should be noted that, due to its exploratory nature, no formal hypotheses were tested.

## Method

### *Participants*

Seventeen lesbian ( $n = 13$ ) or bisexual ( $n = 4$ ) women were recruited through personal contacts and chain referral sampling (i.e., those contacted by the researcher also were asked to contact others who would be interested in participating in a study on lesbian pornography). Participants were between 19 and 41 years of age, and all were Caucasian. Two of the women considered themselves to be “married,” three were “partnered,” one was in a long-term relationship with a man, five were “seeing someone,” and six were single. Five of the participants were undergraduate students (two

of whom also worked part-time). Of the remainder, eight worked full-time, three worked part-time, and one was currently unemployed.

### *Materials*

Each participant received a sheet outlining the questions that would be asked as part of the focus group. (The complete list of questions is given in the Appendix.) Pens and additional paper were provided so that participants could take notes while watching the pornographic sequences, which were shown on a large screen, using an LCD projector connected to a VCR console. All discussions were recorded using a standard tape recorder with a directional microphone.

Two pornographic sequences were shown. The first was taken from *Lesbian Cheerleader Squad 2* (2000, Jim Gunn Productions, 117 minutes, starring Paige Shagwell, Robyn Foster, and Jessica Ryder) and the second from *Simply Sex: How to Find Pleasure without a Man* (2001, SEMG Video and Film Productions, 70 minutes, starring Christi Lake, Nancy Lee, and Tamara). It should be noted that neither title was chosen randomly. *Cheerleader* was selected because it was identified by the owner of a local sex shop as the store’s most popular “girl-on-girl” rental whereas *Simply Sex* was chosen because it was one of the few titles available in the small city where the study was conducted that didn’t seem designed for heterosexual male viewers.

The *Cheerleader* clip took place outdoors on what appeared to be a deck or patio. Both of the performers were Caucasian and looked fairly young (i.e., appeared to be between 18 to 25 years of age). All sexual activity, which included cunnilingus and penetration with a dildo, took place outside, and there was some sexual dialogue between the actresses (e.g., “You like that?”; “Did I make you cum?”). The sequence from *Simply Sex* took place in a bedroom. Both actresses were Caucasian and, in terms of age, appeared to be between 25 and 35 years. There was no dialogue and the sequence was set entirely to music. In terms of sexual activity, cunnilingus and “petting” were depicted.

### *Data Collection Methodology*

Given the absence of social scientific research on lesbian pornography, the exploratory nature of this study, and the practical difficulties involved in recruiting members of sexual minorities,<sup>6</sup> a qualitative approach (specifically, focus groups) was adopted. Frith (2000) contends that focus groups are advantageous because they enable discussants to set their own agenda in terms of participation and the disclosure of information and may illuminate themes and concerns that were not considered by the researcher. The former advantage is especially important when the topic is controversial (i.e., even among those wishing to participate in research examining reactions to pornography, there may be greater comfort when discussing this topic in a group setting rather than in one-on-one interviews). Indeed, in a recent study investigating gay men's perceptions of gay male pornography, Morrison (2004) used the rationale of greater discussant comfortableness in selecting a focus group approach. Finally, Asher and Asher (1999) contend that qualitative methodologies are particularly suited to studies in which the objective is to better understand how individuals perceive an aspect of themselves such as their values and beliefs—dimensions that can be difficult to quantify.

### *Procedure*

Those who expressed interest in this study were told that they would be watching two pornographic sequences: one that was made for heterosexual male viewers and one that was designed for lesbian women. [It should be noted that those participating in the focus groups were not informed *which* sequence targeted heterosexual men versus lesbian women.] Prospective discussants then were told they would be watching and talking about these sequences in small groups consisting of three to five people, and that each session would be approximately 90 minutes in duration. They also were told that conversations would be tape-recorded and transcribed, but that no identifying details would appear in the transcripts and that tapes would only be available to, and heard by, the focus group

facilitator. Finally, individuals were informed that the Human Research Ethics Committee at the facilitator’s institution had approved this study. Those still wishing to participate in the study then were given the location and time for their focus group.

Four focus groups were conducted (*ns*, excluding the facilitator, = 3, 5, 4, and 5). The focus groups were conducted in a small room at the facilitator’s institution. The room contained a table, number of chairs, a projection screen, and an LCD projector connected to a VCR console. Question sheets, pens, and refreshments also were provided on the table.

Each focus group adhered to the same protocol. Upon arrival, the participants were told to take a seat and to help themselves to the refreshments provided (pizza, soft drinks, and bottled water). After they had made themselves comfortable, the facilitator reiterated the purpose and procedure of the study. Participants also were reminded that their conversations would be tape-recorded and transcribed, but that all information would be anonymous and confidential.

The two sequences then were shown to participants. Following this, the facilitator lead the group through the questions listed on the sheet, using each question as a starting point for discussion. Conversation surrounding a given question was allowed to “run out of steam” on its own accord upon which time the next question was raised. It should be noted that, although key questions were explored in all focus groups, variations in the topics addressed did occur. Such variation was anticipated, as the content of each group’s conversation was determined largely by the discussants. It was believed that such flexibility would permit disclosure of information most important to those involved in the study.

### *Data Analysis*

The conversations from the four focus groups were transcribed verbatim resulting in 63 pages of single-spaced text (12-point font). The text then was reviewed to identify common ways that discussants thought about lesbian and pseudo-lesbian pornographies. Thus, while acknowledging individual differences, the goal was to

pinpoint commonalities in interpretation—assuming, of course, that such commonalities would emerge. The two authors reviewed the text separately and then compared the themes that they identified. Given the exploratory nature of this study, discrepancies in textual analysis were not resolved (i.e., no attempt was made to “prove” that one author’s interpretation was more “correct” than the other’s); rather, the authors’ assessments were combined, which resulted in a more detailed interpretation of discussants’ data.

## Results

Discussants’ analysis of the male-created, pseudo-lesbian pornographic sequence (*Lesbian Cheerleader Squad 2*) is presented first, followed by the sequence made for lesbian women (*Simply Sex: How to Find Pleasure without a Man*).

### Male-Created Pseudo-Lesbian Pornography

Four themes emerged from discussants’ conversations about the *Cheerleader* sequence. These are: (1) performers’ bodies were characteristic of the societal ideal for heterosexual women; (2) the portrayal of lesbian sexuality lacked verisimilitude; (3) performers did not evince intimacy or emotion; and (4) the pornographic sequence catered to the erotic interests and expectations of male viewers. Each of these themes will be discussed briefly using illustrative pieces of dialogue from the focus groups. Exchanges that occurred among participants within a specific focus group are denoted by (a), (b), and so forth.

#### *Performers’ Bodies Were Characteristic of the Societal Ideal for Heterosexual Women*

Discussants clearly perceived these bodies as reflecting society’s expectations for women (more specifically, heterosexual women) in terms of youth, femininity, and size. For example:

[I]n [the first movie] they looked like they were 12.... (Session 1—Discussant A).

a) [T]he bodies in the first [video clip] were more for men. The [performers] were both really young ... [and] they were both really fem (Session 2—Discussant C).

b) [A]nd the girls in the first [video clip] were really skinny too. Like really skinny (Session 2—Discussant A).

a) Okay. Well, you have the 12-year-olds at the start—that didn’t do a thing [for me] (Session 3—Discussant A).

b) They’re always like that. You can’t buy [pornography] without some anorexic, big-boobed chick in it. It’s like ... there [are] no real bodies in there (Session 3—Discussant C).

### *Portrayal of Lesbian Sexuality Lacked Verisimilitude*

Discussants identified a number of ways in which *Cheerleader’s* depictions of women’s sexual behavior, in general, and sexual activity among lesbian women, in particular, were factitious. For example:

[S]he [one of the performers] didn’t groan in time with the action that was being done ... I don’t even think she lifted her butt cheek up to [pause], you know, meet what was coming at her (Session 2—Discussant C).

[T]here was absolutely no clitoral stimulation when the women got off in the first [video clip]. It was all about the dick [the strap-on] right? (Session 2—Discussant E).

[T]here’s no way that any lesbian could really get off on what just happened there. Because, it’s really, like, boring (Session 2—Discussant C).

I can’t believe the blonde actually got off! ... if she got off that easy, oh my God, that’s frightening (Session 3—Discussant C).

[S]he was standing on one leg. She had one foot up on a rope, and she came. Hello? She was still standing! (Session 2—Discussant A).

a) There was really no, like, rubbing or even gripping at all (Session 2—Discussant B).

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b) You know like in *Bound* [non-pornographic motion picture released in 1996], where she's fingering her and all of a sudden her fingernails are gripping into the mattress pulling the sheet up (Session 2—Discussant C).

c) Mmmm—that's a good detail (Session 2—Discussant D).

d) Yeah, this didn't look very physical [laughter] ... She could have been reading the paper while the girl was banging her (Session 2—Discussant B).

a) [S]he says, "Did you cum?" and [the other performer is] like, "Yeah, I did," so she keep thrusting [laughter] with the strap-on. I don't know how many women enjoy continuing long after you're done (Session 2—Discussant C).

b) Cuddle time (Session 2—Discussant E).

c) Yeah. Cuddle time or give me a break in between. Otherwise, it's just irritating and you're taking away from what just happened (Session 2—Discussant C).

[T]he strap-on dildo ... bothers me. Because [laughing] it doesn't always happen and why would a lesbian suck ... a strap-on? How is that visually or even sexually appealing? If you're a lesbian, you are a lesbian for a reason. Yes, use toys. I'm not saying don't use toys. I use toys. But I don't suck on them after [laughing] (Session 1—Discussant B).

And the brunette didn't get excited by the blonde getting off at all. She was just, like, "Oh, you got off" (Session 3—Discussant D).

### *Performers Did Not Evince Intimacy or Emotion*

Discussants commented on the absence of sensuality in the *Cheerleader* sequence. Moreover, the robotic nature of this sequence appeared to reduce its erotic value to the participants in this study.<sup>7</sup> For example:

[I]t wasn't romantic at all. It was just ... there was nothing there whatsoever. Just let's have sex (Session 1—Discussant B).

[I]t was just tits, ass, and pussy (Session 2—Discussant C).

a) [I]t was void of any emotion.... The brunette was obviously paid enough to be there, but had no interest whatsoever.... There was no sensuality ... there was no nothing. It was: okay, get your hair out of the way. I’m supposed to go down on you. Oh yeah, get up, you’re supposed to suck my nipple. Oh, I gotta fuck you. Put your foot on the rope (Session 3—Discussant C).

b) Lean over. No a little farther, a little farther.... (Session 3—Discussant A).

c) Okay, I’m tired of humping you. Just back into it.... (Session 3—Discussant C).

d) I’m just going to stand here.... (Session 3—Discussant A).

e) Cause, I’ve lost my rhythm, and I’m bored out of my mind (Session 3—Discussant C).

[I]n the first one, they weren’t putting any effort into it. They were just, like, doing their job (Session 4—Discussant E).

### *Sequence Catered to the Erotic Interests and Expectations of Male Viewers*

Discussants believed that the imagery and actions presented in the *Cheerleader* sequence were clearly designed to gratify heterosexual males. They identified a number of factors which they felt suggested that lesbian women were not targeted as potential viewers of this pornographic film. Each factor is outlined below in alphabetical order.

#### *1) Absence of Butch Lesbians*

For the guys, it’s, like, “oh, make them both cute and femme” because they don’t want to have this masculine dyke in there. That’s not going to turn them on (Session 3—Discussant C).

No one’s gonna rent some porno with some guy and two girls ... where one’s a dyke. It would be like, “Oh my God. She’s taking up my job [laughter]. She has a bigger strap-on than I do a dick.” You know, they are very intimi-

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dated that a woman can have a hard-on for hours and hours and hours that's bigger than theirs (Session 3—Discussant C).

But guys don't want to see butch girls. I think they would feel ... that they would be threatened by that (Session 2—Discussant B).

Can I stress the sexy femmes? Where's our butches? [laughter] (Session 2—Discussant B).

*2) Emphasis on Penetration*

a) Also the imagery ... um, just seeing the strap-on there. You know that's [so] ... men could imagine themselves doing that (Session 1—Discussant B).

b) Yeah, they can identify (Session 1—Discussant A).

[Men] think it's more about penetration—so they want to see chicks penetrate each other (Session 4—Discussant B).

a) [Men] want to be able to see themselves in the scene and that ... is easier if there is a dildo involved because that is like having a man there really. They don't want to think that we can get along just fine without them because if we could [then] it wouldn't be so much of a turn-on right? (Session 2—Discussant B).

b) Exactly! They need to be able to picture themselves in the role.

I was half expecting a guy to come out and say something cheesy like "You just need a real man to finish you off" [laughter] (Session 2—Discussant C).

a) [T]hey didn't really explore any positions with [the strap-on] either (Session 2—Discussant B).

b) No, they were doing what guys like to do (Session 2—Discussant A).

c) Doggy-style (Session 2—Discussant D).

3) *Explicit Close-Ups of Genitalia*

a) Some of those close-up shots in the first one were just gross (Session 2—Discussant D).

b) I never want to see something like that on the big screen again [laughter] (Session 2—Discussant B).

c) Me neither (Session 2—Discussant A).

[T]hose close-up shots were really [pause] not appealing (Session 1—Discussant A).

It’s such a turn-off in porn when they just show, like, a crotch just out there ... I don’t like the cunt shots (Session 4—Discussant E).

4) *Lesbian Sex as Experimentation*

[I]t was the male stereotype. Of what they think [lesbian sex] is. They like to imagine that every teenage girl is out “dykeing” with her friends (Session 1—Discussant A).

a) I’m sure they would like to think that we all experimented and dyked out after cheerleading practice, right? (Session 2—Discussant D).

b) More like hockey practice [laughter] (Session 2—Discussant A).

Like it is just experimentation, you know? Not like it’s real and these girls will never touch another man (Session 2—Discussant C).

## Lesbian-Created Lesbian Pornography

Discussants’ evaluation of *Simply Sex* illuminated a variety of differences between ersatz lesbian pornography that targets heterosexual males and sexually explicit material that is designed for lesbian viewers. Three themes, obverse to those noted for male-created pornography, were identified: (1) performers’ bodies were less characteristic of the societal ideal for heterosexual women; (2) an at-

tempt was made to convey intimacy and emotion; and (3) the pornographic sequence did not cater to the erotic interests and expectations of male viewers. Each of these themes will be explored using illustrative quotes from the focus groups.

*Performers' Bodies Were Less Characteristic of the Societal Ideal for Heterosexual Women*

Discussants saw the bodies in the *Simply Sex* sequence as more realistic. For example:

[I]n [the second movie] they looked like they were women—not like they had pubic hair a week ago (Session 1—Discussant A).

At least in the second one they looked like real people. Still really feminine and everything ... but they had stretch marks and you could tell they were older (Session 2—Discussant A).

a) [T]hey had marks on their bodies, like stretch marks and stuff. They weren't perfect (Session 2—Discussant D).

b) And the fact that they were older, too, makes ... a difference, I think (Session 2—Discussant B).

The girls in the second one were older and not as perfect too (Session 2—Discussant C).

[The performers in *Cheerleader*] were very young and the other ones were, like, middle-aged (Session 3—Discussant A).

However, discussants also observed that, while the bodies in *Simply Sex* were more realistic, they still adhered to a traditional pornographic aesthetic in terms of breast size and use of cosmetics.<sup>8</sup>

[T]heir implants, their nails, their make-up, their hair extensions.... (Session 4—Discussant E).

It's all stereotypes ... they should have fingernails because they're in porn (Session 3—Discussant C).

That’s the thing I don’t get about the second [sequence]. It was made by lesbians for lesbians. Why the hell were their nails so long? (Session 3—Discussant D).

Her make-up was perfect, her hair was perfect; she was wearing beautiful earrings.... (Session 2—Discussant A).

*An Attempt Was Made to Convey Intimacy and Emotion*

Many discussants acknowledged that the sequence from *Simply Sex* established greater intimacy between its performers than the ersatz lesbian scene. For example:

Well, in [*Simply Sex*] there was a lot more intimacy ... I think you could tell more so that one [performer] was interested in the other (Session 4—Discussant B).

They seemed a lot more into each other in [*Simply Sex*] (Session 2—Discussant D).

a) In [*Simply Sex*] they seemed more like they were playing together instead of, you know, “Here, I’m going to wear the strap-on now” (Session 1—Discussant A).

b) They seemed more like they were making love ... than just having sex (Session 1—Discussant B).

I really prefer the second [sequence] ... because of the intimacy. They spent their time fifty-fifty, um ... it was, like, give and take whereas the [first] one was, like, let’s get this done (Session 4—Discussant B).

a) I think the second one was better. At least it seemed like there was some chemistry (Session 2—Discussant E).

b) Yeah, and no one was bored (Session 2—Discussant C).

I found the second [sequence] to be way more erotic ... It seemed way more sensual, you know? Like they actually wanted to be touching each other (Session 2—Discussant C).

However, it should be noted that not all discussants viewed this attempt at intimacy in a favourable manner. Some saw it as perpetuating the stereotype that sexually explicit material targeting women must be romantic, sensual, and less explicit than its male counterpart. For example:

[In reference to *Simply Sex*] ... it's, like, come on. Let's get it really raunchy sometime. Sometimes it's all about the nookie (Session 4—Discussant C).

You're going to kiss like you're being really sensual and just barely touching and just feather like. It's, like, oh my God, just get it on already. Take out the whips [laughter]. Where's the fun? (Session 3 – Discussant C).

I think they [were] trying to make it romantic ... with the satin sheets and the corny Cirque du Soleil music ... and it didn't work (Session 3—Discussant D).

I've seen stampede wrestling that had more sexual action (Session 3—Discussant A).

### *Sequence Did Not Cater to the Erotic Interests and Expectations of Male Viewers*

Discussants believed that: (a) the absence of penetration; (b) a body, rather than genital, focus; and, as discussed previously, (c) the “intimacy” of the lesbian pornography sequence signified that it was not targeting male viewers. Quotations illustrative of the first two signifiers are provided.

#### *1. Absence of Penetration*

Guys ... would probably be bored with the second [sequence] because they'd be like “Where's the dick?” “Where's the strap-on?”...”Why doesn't she bang herself?” (Session 1—Discussant A).

[Men] see the male role kind of occupied with the strap-on whereas ... in the second [sequence] ... it's just two women pleasuring themselves. So, they kind of feel left out ... not useful (which they're not for the record) [laughter] (Session 1—Discussant B).

a) I don't think heterosexual men would have gotten much out of [*Simply Sex*]. [It] has two women ... a little more mature ... that's not so much fun for them? [pause] Their whole thing is.... (Session 3—Discussant A).

b) I want to see the real strap-on and the girl who has long hair and long fingernails (Session 3—Discussant C).

The first one (*Cheerleader*) is all about penetration ... where[as] the second one (*Simply Sex*) just seems [to be] about intimacy (Session 4—Discussant E).

[In reference to *Cheerleader*] ... so, [men] like the strap-on in place of them because then they can fill the role even if there really aren't any men in the scene. They can still be like “Yeah, it was two chicks but they still needed a penis.” Can't do it without one (Session 2—Discussant B).

## 2. *Body, Rather Than Genital, Focus*

The [scene from *Simply Sex*] seemed to focus more on the entire body whereas the first one was, well, it was just tits, ass, and pussy (Session 2—Discussant C).

[The performers in *Simply Sex*] paid more attention to detail, like the whole body, rather than one thing.... (Session 4—Discussant C).

[*Simply Sex* was] more involved with the body as compared to just tits, pussy, tits, pussy, you know? (Session 1—Discussant A).

[*Simply Sex*] ... didn't have any real money shots, you know? Like [it was] a lot more tasteful in the presentation (Session 2—Discussant B).

## Discussion

The findings from this qualitative study reveal that participants clearly differentiated between the pornography sequence designed for heterosexual men and the one targeting lesbian women. They perceived the former as “being completely stereotypical of [male] heterosexual fantasy” (Session 3—Discussant D) in terms of its

emphasis on penetration and “ideal” bodies, the absence of intimacy or sensuality, and the misrepresentation of lesbian sexuality. The latter was perceived by most, but not all, as more appealing because it made efforts to acknowledge a lesbian audience through its avoidance of explicitness and the sensual nature of the performers’ interactions.

However, problematic elements common to *both* male-created pseudo-lesbian pornography and lesbian pornography were identified. First, discussants commented on the absence of butch (or more masculine) performers in both categories of pornography. They felt this omission was understandable in sexually explicit material directed at heterosexual males, as they believed the presence of masculine women might prove threatening. However, they could not account for the absence of such women in video pornography that was designed for them by them nor could they easily identify other lesbian pornographic titles, outside of the S&M genre, that contained this category of lesbian woman. Assuming that pornography, akin to other forms of mass media, is consumer-driven then the absence of “hot looking dyke[s]” (Session 3—Discussant C) is surprising.

Second, although discussants acknowledged that performers’ bodies in the lesbian pornography sequence were less perfect than those appearing in the one for heterosexual men, they *still* found the bodies to be unrealistic in terms of weight and breast size. In addition, when talking about the lesbian pornography sequence, most discussants commented on the performers’ make-up and long fingernails, which they felt hindered the believability of the scene.

Oh my God. Nice little painted nails, sure, no problem. But not artificial, jelled on, caked on, one inch long spikes. Hello? Not realistic. ... Like keep those nails away from my clit (Session 3—Discussant C).

Third, some of the discussants believed that both sequences were stereotypic of sexuality albeit in diametric ways. The one targeting heterosexual male viewers was explicit, impersonal, and characterised by dominance (which many discussants saw embodied by one performer’s non-reciprocal penetration of the other using a strap-on). The sequence targeting lesbian female viewers,

however, was “mushy” (Session 3—Discussant C); its creators operating in accordance with the assumption that women want sexually explicit material that is romantic, sensual, and loving. Discussants’ erotic interest in these sequences, however, did not map onto this polarity. They did not uniformly see the lesbian pornographic scene as more sexually appealing than the ersatz one for heterosexual males. The diversity of discussants’ reactions is illustrated by the following quotations:

This is the first time I’ve seen specific lesbian porn, and I gotta say that’s [in reference to *Simply Sex*] a lot hotter than most of the men porn (Session 1—Discussant A).

The [*Simply Sex* sequence] was completely ... boring in every way. The music was boring, the women were boring, the scene was boring, the colors were boring, the film was boring, the camera stayed stationary for Christ’s sake. It was boring (Session 3—Discussant C).

I liked the [*Cheerleader*] sequence better because of the penetration. Um, you guys are going to think I’m a bad lesbian, but I really like the penetration. It’s hot (Session 4—Discussant C).

Further, as outlined earlier, some of the discussants felt that avoidance of explicitness in the lesbian sequence served to reduce rather than increase its erotic power.

In an unpublished study examining women’s reactions to sexually explicit material, Ciclitira (2002) found that participants’ “views, experiences, and feelings about pornography [were] variegated, individual, and complex” (p. 194). Similarly, Boynton (1999) reported that women’s reactions to pornographic (“top-shelf”) magazines were “complex and varied” (p. 459). They were not centered upon the anti-pornography harm-based discourse characterised by Andrea Dworkin and Diana E. Russell but, rather, encompassed diverse issues such as body image, censorship, sexuality, and relationships. Findings from the current study also reflect this complexity. Discussants did not uniformly perceive one sequence as “better” than the other nor did they view these films as threatening or offensive. In critiquing the anti-pornography perspective, Kipnis (2000) asks:

Why is pornography more offensive to women than to the men who buy it or display it? If displaying pornography is considered a hostile act to women at large, what guarantees its success in achieving that aim? In other words, why don't women have the *choice* of being indifferent to pornography? (p. 151—emphasis ours).

Results from the current study suggest that some participants felt indifferent, even bored, by the materials shown. For example, one discussant remarked:

You know what the most interesting thing was about the entire [focus group]? Our comments (Session 3—Discussant D).

However, the transcripts also suggest that women's response options *vis-à-vis* pornography should be expanded to include not only offense and indifference, but amusement. Many of the discussants found the representation of female sexuality evident in these sequences (especially *Cheerleader*) to be quite humorous.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, much of the laughter that was generated stemmed from recognition of the fragility and predictability of male heterosexual fantasy. Far from representing sources of androcentric dominance, the archetypal male was regarded, in this context, as a source of comedic fodder. For example, when asked whether heterosexual men would find the *Cheerleader* or *Simply Sex* sequence to be more erotic, one discussant stated:

Oh, the first one, heterosexual men would have been squirting all over [loud laughter from the group]. That's every little heterosexual man's wet fantasy right there (Session 3—Discussant A).

Words like “squirt” and “little” are not denotative of sexual power. Similarly, in another focus group, discussants reported that seeing two women engage in fist-fucking would be “shocking” to most men. This observation led to a comic exchange in which men's purported inability to understand women's bodies was explored.

a) Yeah, but then you'd get ... [some guy] trying it [fist-fucking], and he wouldn't know what to do.... (Session 2—Discussant A).

b) All those women with punched holes in their uteruses (Session 2—Discussant C).

c) [Imitating a male voice] “Feels good, doesn’t it?” [Imitating a female voice] “Well, it’s a little tight.” [Male voice] “Used that motion for when I came in off the tractor. Scrape, scrape, scrape. By the way, I really like that pointy ring you got me, yeah [high-pitched shriek] (Session 2—Discussant A).

d) Shred up that kitty<sup>10</sup> (Session 2—Discussant B).

Such findings underscore the importance of investigating pornography from a multifaceted perspective; one which permits, among other things, offense, indifference, excitement, and amusement.

It is important to acknowledge that this study was not without its limitations. The sample size was small (although comparable to other research using lesbian women as participants—see Asher and Asher [1999]) and consisted of women who were comfortable enough with pornography (and, likely, sexual matters in general) to view and discuss it in a public forum. This level of comfort may have contributed to the relative absence of a traditional harm-based discourse (i.e., those perceiving pornography in a negative manner may have been unwilling to participate in this type of research). In addition, as the pornographic titles used in this study were selected on the basis of availability, the degree to which they are representative of pseudo-lesbian and lesbian pornographies is unknown. Finally, when conducting focus groups, it is certainly possible that one or two individuals may dominate the proceedings and in so doing reduce the likelihood that other group members will express divergent views. Although this did not appear to be problematic in the current study (i.e., all discussants contributed to the focus groups; they readily disagreed with one another and there were few examples of group consensus), supplemental research using one-on-one interviews may be informative.

In terms of directions of future research, it would be interesting to examine whether lesbian *and* heterosexual women perceive disparate types of pornography as reinforcing or destabilizing traditional models of sexuality. One discussant alluded to the liberating power of lesbian pornography. Specifically,

If I were a heterosexual woman watching the [*Cheerleader* sequence] wouldn’t be so bad because, once again, you saw the male in there. But [the

*Simply Sex* sequence] ... it would be like, “Oh ... I can do that?” or “What’s this?” (Session 1—Discussant B).

However, this topic was not addressed explicitly in the current study.

While the non-heterosexual participants examined a pornographic sequence that was not designed for them (*Cheerleader*), their “subversive readings” (see Jenefsky & Miller, 1998) of this type of pornography warrant additional study. For example, Caloz (1995 as cited in Ross, 2000) reports:

It might seem a trifle odd that the pussy-down set would go hard for nine-inch males dicking it out. But it makes sense. Off-the-rack lezzie smut comes in two varieties—and little of it has to do with the real thing. Either you get islands of silicon implant bobbing in a sea of coiffed peroxide blondes, spreading it for the straight guy who can hardly believe his luck, or it’s the kind of porn dykes tend to put out for themselves: an epic lifetime of foreplay riding on a tide of meaningful Bergmanesque glances and Hallmark card sentiment. When you finally get to the main event, the credits roll. The wet factor rating is definitely sub-Saharan (pp. 307-308).

How do non-heterosexual women perceive gay male pornography? What differences emerge between those who find such material erotic versus those who do not? In what ways is this form of subversion seen as tantamount to being a “bad lesbian”? Finally, the issue of cross-gender identification warrants examination. This concept maintains that when viewing a film, for example, individuals may identify with the other gender. Kipnis (2000) reports that: “cross-gender identification offers male viewers a chance to experience a range of emotions, fears, and conflicts, with female characters functioning as ‘fronts’ for those more culturally forbidden affects” (p. 152). In the current study, discussants appeared to ignore the possibility of cross-gender identification. When examining the sequence from *Cheerleader*, they perceived the woman using the strap-on as occupying the “male” role, and believed that the use of a dildo permitted men to see themselves in the scene. None of the discussants spontaneously mentioned that male viewers may have identified with the ostensibly submissive blonde (i.e., the one who was penetrated). It would be illuminating to devote greater

attention to this concept in terms of its possible linkages with butch-femme role-play in lesbian pornography.

In conclusion, the results of this study underscore the complexity of women’s reactions to pornography. Although the discussants distinguished between male-created pseudo-lesbian pornography and pornography made by and for lesbian women, they did not necessarily perceive the former as inferior to the latter. Rather they felt that both examples possessed limitations that hindered their ability to be sexually arousing. These findings challenge the harm-based discourse promoted by many radical feminists and highlight the need to investigate pornography that is not designed for heterosexual viewers.

## Appendix

Each discussant received a sheet containing the following questions:

1. How is an attractive lesbian body signified (or represented) in each scene? Are there similarities? Are there differences?
2. Do the “lesbian” women depicted in each scene occupy specific sexual roles? Do these roles vary in accordance with the presumed consumer of the film (heterosexual versus lesbian)?
3. If an individual—never having encountered a lesbian woman before—were to watch the film sequences, how might the clips influence his/her perception of this sexual minority?
4. What place, if any, do you feel love and romance have in these scenes? Is there a difference between them?
5. Do you think the clips’ representation of lesbian women uses (or plays on) any stereotypes about this group? If so, what are these stereotypes?
6. Do you think there are important differences between the clips? If so, what are they?
7. Do you think heterosexual men would find the clips equally arousing? Why or why not?
8. Do you find both scenes equally arousing? Why or why not?
9. Are there any other observations that you would like to make about the films?

*Note:* For the findings outlined in this study, relevant questions were 1, 4, and 6-9.

## Notes

1. For example, Henderson (1992) examines the ways in which lesbian pornography (specifically, the magazine *On Our Backs* and a collection of stories entitled *Macho Sluts*) “transgresses anti-porn feminist orthodoxy and the heterosexual mainstream” (p. 187). [Indeed, these sorts of publications are reviled by most proponents of the anti-pornography movement.] Yet, she maintains that she is “uncertain” about her position in the anti-pornography and anti-anti-pornography debate because she believes that “inclusiveness is essential for sexual critique and transformation” (p. 174) and wishes to avoid “pre-emptive certainty about good and bad” (p. 174).
2. No distinction among terms such as pornography, sexually explicit material, and erotica is intended. As Packard and Schraubman (1993/94) remark, trying to establish a meaningful difference among such terms is impossible and simply amounts to: “What I like is erotica and is acceptable, what you like is pornography and is prohibited” (p. 302—footnote 16).
3. It should be noted, however, that some individuals (e.g., Kendall, 1993; Stoltenberg, 1989) argue that gay male pornography reproduces the male/female power differential depicted in heterosexual pornography. Specifically, it is believed that one of the individuals, usually the “bottom” (or receptive partner during anal intercourse), is regarded as the “stand-in for a woman” (Thomas, 2000: 63) and, thus, perceived as inferior to the “top,” who (purportedly) embodies hegemonic masculinity.
4. When used without quotation marks, this term does not include ersatz lesbian pornography in which women have sex with other women for the titillation of the (presumably) male viewer. Henderson (1992) contends that such pseudo-lesbian sequences often occur “as [a] conventional preamble to otherwise heterosexual narratives” (p. 175) and are devoid of signifiers of lesbian identity in terms of physical appearance and sexual verisimilitude.
5. Conway (1997) reports that *On Our Backs* contains sexually explicit photographs and writings, which span a gamut of lesbian sexual roles. However, she reports that the magazine devotes considerable attention to “non-vanilla” forms of sexuality, which are often dismissed as “patriarchal parroting” (p. 64) such as sadomasochism, fisting, and penetration by dildos.
6. The current study was conducted in a small city located in what is jokingly referred to as the “Bible Belt of Canada.” This center does not possess any of the typical representations of a gay community (e.g., gay and lesbian bars, bookstores, coffee houses, etc.). Thus, the cultural invisibility of lesbian women and gay men in this area, coupled with its conservatism, exacerbated recruitment concerns.
7. One discussant observed that, perhaps, the performers’ “detachment” was designed to maintain the male viewer’s fantasy that, even when women interact sexually, men remain an integral part of their sexual fulfillment (I think maybe they detached themselves so that the man could see himself

- in that scene. ... [The performers] were bored without him there [Session 3—Discussant C]).
8. Paradoxically, the obvious efforts by *Simply Sex* to deviate from the hegemonic aesthetic found in mainstream heterosexual pornography were criticised by some discussants.
    - I think it was trying to look all natural too. They’re not shaved, you know. I think it was just too put on (Session 4—Discussant B).
    - a) Trim’em down, just a little bit (Session 2—Discussant D).
    - b) [She had] a porcupine between her legs [laughter] (Session 2—Discussant A).

...they had no nail polish on their toes (Session 3—Discussant A).
  9. Another indicant of amusement was discussants’ extemporaneous production of “pornographic dialogue” such as “Are you going to cum? I already did? Really? When was that?” (Session 2—Discussant A).
  10. An alternate reading of this quote is that it denotes heterosexual men’s aggression toward women. As this statement was uttered within the context of a humorous vignette detailing a man’s efforts to emulate lesbian pornography (specifically, fist-fucking) and failing miserably, we find this interpretation less compelling. However, further research is needed to particularise how non-heterosexual women perceive heterosexual men within the sexual arena. For example, do they believe that the “average” man exercises andrarchal domination through his sexual interactions with women (the phenomenon of so-called “hate fucking”)? Or do they view him as sexually prosaic; the possessor of harmless fantasies? Or do they possess more multifaceted perceptions of straight men?

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