



“It’s a Way to Let Go”: The Intersection of Pleasure and Pain in Pornography

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Received: 8 March 2025 / Revised: 2 June 2025 / Accepted: 14 June 2025 / Published online: 23 September 2025
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Abstract

The relationship between pleasure and pain has been a longstanding source of scholarly debate. While some view the two as antithetical, others argue that they are deeply intertwined. Scholars of sexuality have suggested that painful stimuli can be interpreted and experienced as pleasurable depending on their context, and that individuals are able to enjoy and take pleasure from acts involving pain. In the current study, I rely on 302 in-depth interviews to examine viewers’ perceptions and preferences regarding the intersection of pleasure and pain in pornography, particularly when female performers are the recipients of sexual aggression. Many viewers (particularly women) found some displays of pain in response to aggression arousing, especially when videos combined elements of pleasure and pain. Many of them also believed that pleasure and pain were closely intertwined, perhaps even inseparable. These findings are in line with emerging literature in the study of sexuality that rejects or problematizes traditional simplistic dichotomies between pleasure and pain.

Keywords Pornography · Pleasure · Pain · Viewer preferences · In-depth interviews

Introduction

The intricate relationship between pleasure and pain has long been a subject of interest for scholars from various academic disciplines. Early philosophers, such as Aristotle (2019 (circa 350 BCE)), envisioned pleasure and pain as antagonistic and occurring on a continuum. In this view, pleasure is the opposite of pain and occurs as one moves away from pain. This view, shared by other influential philosophers, such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Bentham, is also supported by some anatomical and neurobiological evidence. While physical pleasure and pain sensations activate similar areas of the brain, pain decreases pleasure, while pleasure increases analgesia, which is the relief from pain (Leknes & Tracey, 2008). The opioid and dopamine systems modulate pleasure or pain relief by temporarily blocking the release of pain neurotransmitters (Fields, 2007). Indeed, relief from physical pain can itself be experienced as pleasurable. Evolutionary models have also suggested that pain and pleasure may be viewed as antithetical, as both seeking pleasure and

avoiding pain are important for survival (Leknes, Brooks et al., 2008). Finally, from a phenomenological viewpoint, pleasure is often perceived as the absence of physical pain, or as Jolles (2015, p. 263) puts it: “Pleasure feels good and pain really hurts.”

Other scholars, however, have argued that pleasure and pain are in fact deeply intertwined and are not antithetical. First, various studies have shown that from a neurobiological viewpoint, physical pleasure and pain can certainly be experienced concurrently (Defrin et al., 2015; Sagarin et al., 2009; Wuyts & Morrens, 2022). Groundbreaking psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (1988 (1957)) further disputed the perception of a continuum between pleasure and pain. Instead, he turned his attention to the phenomenological experiences of pleasure and pain and how these are often shaped by circumstances, culture, and society in ways that extend far beyond neurological or biological sensations and are also far from obvious or strictly antithetical.

Indeed, certain kinds of pain, such as the muscle soreness felt following a rigorous physical exercise, an intense deep tissue massage, or even child labor, can be experienced as “good pain,” perhaps even as pleasurable, particularly when one learns to interpret these experiences as leading to desired outcomes. There is also a long tradition in various religious cultures of sustaining bodily pain—through fasting,

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flagellation, wearing garments designed to cause discomfort, and other practices—to achieve spiritual transcendence, which in turn is experienced as desired and gratifying. Body modification activities, such as piercing and tattooing, also often involve significant pain, and yet many engage in them, enjoying not only the final result but often also the process and the pain involved in it (Jolles, 2015; Pitts, 2003).

Several mechanisms may explain why such seemingly contrasting sensations arise concurrently. From a neurological standpoint, the brain responds to physical pain by producing a set of neurotransmitters that enable communication between neurons and activate protein receptors. These neurotransmitters include natural opioids—protein-like molecules such as enkephalins and endorphin—which are often associated with a pleasurable sensation, sometimes referred to as “endorphin rush” (Dietrich & McDaniel, 2004; Larva & Rantala, 2024). Neuropsychologically, Dunkley et al. (2020) suggested that the transformation of pain into pleasure likely occurs in the brain in the form of top-down processing, which regulates the degree of the pain experience through descending impulses that are mediated by endogenous endorphins (see also Ossipov et al., 2010). From a psychological viewpoint, if pain is experienced as self-controlled and voluntary, it may be experienced as positive and even pleasurable (Dunkley et al., 2020; Pitagora, 2013; Weisenberg, 1977). Moreover, from a socio-psychosocial perspective, the endurance of pain that is interpreted as “good” and personally or socially “beneficial” may promote pleasurable sensations of accomplishment, achievement, and pride (Silva, 2015). If pain is experienced in tandem with positive rather than negative emotions, due to the interpretation of the situation as benign or beneficial, the levels of pain experienced may be substantially reduced, allowing pleasure to emerge.

Finally, from a sociological perspective, it is important to recognize that pleasure and pain can be experienced both physically and emotionally. Indeed, the very experience of emotions and sensations is often social rather than just biological, neurological, or psychological. The experiences of pleasure and pain are heavily shaped by and embedded in social networks of meaning (Jones, 2020; Shor, 2025). We often find certain actions and experiences physically or emotionally painful or pleasing because those around us expect us to feel this way. Indeed, experiences are largely moderated through social acceptance, status, and belonging, and through meeting social expectations (Becker, 1953; Geertz, 1973; Goffman, 1968). It is therefore hard to fully understand the pleasure that some individuals derive from activities that involve various degrees of physical discomfort and pain, such as physically excruciating work, marathon running, mountain climbing, body modifications, or religious fasting, by focusing solely on the physical sensations associated with them. Instead, it is the social, cultural, and symbolic meanings associated with these activities and experiences that give

them their value and allow individuals to experience them as pleasurable.

Pleasure and Pain in Sex and in Pornography

In line with these sociological insights, scholars who explore sexual roleplaying dynamics, practices, desires, and identities, which include bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadomasochism, and more (commonly referred to with the umbrella term BDSM), have challenged the distinction between pleasure and pain. They note that such sensations largely depend on the context of the sexual interaction and its interpretation by participants. For example, Dunkley et al., (2020, p. 421) note that “a painful stimulus might be experienced as pleasure by someone practicing BDSM, but experienced as suffering by someone who does not engage in BDSM play.” The interpretation of pain as pleasure thus requires a set of factors, including sexual arousal, the release of neuromodulator molecules such as dopamine and oxytocin, and an emotional and interpersonal context that allows one to anticipate and interpret the experience as pleasurable. Similarly, Newmahr (2010) has suggested that within the context of BDSM, pain can be experienced as pleasurable (“transformed pain”) or as hurting, but in a way that feels enjoyable (“autotelic pain”). Silva (2015) further notes that pain may create a sensational contrast, which in turn intensifies and augments feelings of pleasure. Finally, consensual painful or humiliating experiences in the context of BDSM can provide a pleasurable temporary escape from the stress and burdens of daily life, especially given elements of submitting and relinquishing control (Baumeister, 1997; Dulcinea Pitagora, 2017; Langdridge, 2007).

Beyond the analysis of BDSM practices, some scholars of sexuality and pornography suggest that pleasure cannot be analyzed as a site outside of pain or injury (Nash, 2014). Nash (2017) contends that reading pornography, particularly aggressive pornography, for possibilities rather than pain is uncommon, yet essential. Earlier sex-positive feminists treated pleasure as an ethical good, one that is diametrically opposed to violence, where pleasure is present when violence and pain are absent. However, more recent feminist scholars, such as Scott (2010) and Hoang (2014), recognize the frequent ambivalence in pleasure experiences, exploring its potential to simultaneously electrify and wound, excite and harm, arouse and injure. Thus, according to Nash (2017), sexual pleasure “is never purely outside of structural violence, inequity, or humiliation.” Scott (2010, p. 163) suggested a complex conception of pleasure by deploying the term “black power” to describe the “transformation of the elements of humiliation and pain into a form of pleasure, the taking of pleasure out of humiliation and pain.” Nash (2014) similarly argued that Black women in pornography can take pleasure in viewing or participating in the production of pornography

(see also Miller-Young, 2014), even pornography that depicts violence, humiliation, and pain. Nash stresses that these forms of violence do not undercut or diminish the possibilities or experiences of pleasure, as what excites us might also shame us.

Chadwick et al. (2018) extend these complexities and ambivalences beyond racially charged pornography. Building on the early work of Vance (1984), Chadwick et al. argue for a complex and nuanced understanding of women's relationship with pornography, where women can simultaneously enjoy pornography and experience negative affect. According to Chadwick et al., many women actively negotiate conflicting affective experiences with pornography to gain positive outcomes. They watch pornography in ways that incorporate both sexual pleasure and sexual danger, creating a powerful tension where sexuality combines restriction, repression, danger, and pain on the one hand with exploration, pleasure, and agency on the other.

Previous Work on Viewers' Approaches to Pleasure and Aggression in Pornography

Several recent studies have begun exploring viewers' preferences and perceptions of pleasure displays in pornographic videos (see Ashton et al., 2018 for a review of earlier literature). These studies have mostly focused on female viewers, utilizing focus groups and in-depth interviews with a select group of respondents (typically fewer than 30) in a single locale (Chadwick et al., 2018; Daskalopoulou & Zanette, 2020; Tillman & Wells, 2023). They found the coexistence of nuanced and conflicted experiences for female pornography consumers. While many female viewers believe that pornography prioritizes men's pleasure (Ashton et al., 2019; Ciclitira, 2004; Meehan, 2021), others report that pornography consumption helped them generate or increase pleasure and sexual gratification, explore sexual fantasies, learn how to give or achieve pleasure, and feel sexually empowered (Daskalopoulou & Zanette, 2020; Flory & Shor, 2025; Macleod, 2021; Tillman & Wells, 2023; Shor, 2023; Shor & Chen, 2025).

As for viewers' perceptions of aggression, Parvez (2006), who conducted in-depth interviews with a diverse sample of women, reported that some of them expressed attraction to what they called "extreme things" (p. 623). Hald and Štulhofer (2016), who conducted an online survey of more than 2,000 Croatian men and women who consume pornography online, found that heterosexual women were more likely than heterosexual men to consume pornography depicting violent sex (simulated rape, aggression, and coercion), sado-masochism, bondage, and dominance. More recently, Shor (2022) reported findings from 122 interviews with pornography viewers, which showed that while most viewers did not enjoy aggressive content, they did not consider acts that

they deemed as consensual, such as spanking, slapping, hair pulling, or consensual choking and gagging, to be aggressive. Furthermore, nearly half of the viewers (and more than half of the female viewers) reported that they enjoyed at least some forms of aggression in pornography and nearly a third of them (again, more women than men) said that they enjoy "harder" forms of aggression, such as gagging and choking.

Such findings are in line with recent reports by Pornhub, suggesting that women are more likely to view videos that include bondage and rough sex (Pornhub, 2023) and earlier reports that suggested they were also twice as likely to watch content featuring "Gangbang" and "Double Penetration" (Pornhub, 2018). Furthermore, these reports echo findings from decades of research on sexual fantasies, which shows that both women and men often fantasize about sexual domination, submission, and aggression (Bader, 2002; Bártošová et al., 2021; Friday, 1973; Kahr, 2007; Lehmiller, 2018; Maltz & Boss, 2001).

This important line of research provides a rich understanding of the role of aggression in fantasy and in pornography.¹ However, it leaves open intriguing questions about the intricate relationships between aggression, pain and pleasure in online pornographic content and about the preferences and perceptions of regular viewers who are exposed to this content and in some cases actively seek it. In this paper, I explore these questions by examining a large sample of interviews.

Method

Participants

I used a mix of voluntary and purposive sampling techniques. First, following approval by a university ethics committee, I posted recruitment ads inviting participants over the age of 18 who watched pornographic videos online at least once per month during the previous year to share their experiences and preferences. To encourage participation, participants were each offered \$20 compensation (from personal funds). Ads were posted to Craigslist, Kijiji, and to several Facebook groups, primarily those of current and former students in 11 public and private universities of varied sizes in Canada and the USA. Ads invited individuals to participate in a study on their experiences with online pornography, without providing specific details about the kinds of questions asked in the study. About 60% of eventual participants learned about the

¹ The issues of defining and measuring of aggression in pornography have often been contested and subject to many debates. Most notably, the role of consent in this definition has been contested, with different scholars suggesting different treatments of consent in the definition of aggression (notable examples for different sides of this debate include Bridges et al., 2010, McKee 2015, and Shor & Seida, 2021).

study through Kijiji or Craigslist, while the remaining 40% reached it primarily through various Facebook groups.

I also applied a complementary theoretically driven purposive sampling strategy, designed to increase variability in theoretically important factors, primarily gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and geographical location. For example, to reach a more balanced number of men and women, toward the end of the recruitment process, preference was given to the recruitment of men who agreed to participate. Similarly, in later stages of the recruitment process older individuals (over the age of 25) and non-North American participants were given preference to increase inclusion of these populations, which were harder to recruit. Potential participants were therefore asked to first answer several demographic questions before deciding whether they would be included in the study.

The final sample includes 302 interviewees, 149 who identified as women (two of them transgender), 148 who identified as men (one of them transgender), and five who identified as non-binary or gender fluid. Table 1 presents some of the key descriptive statistics of this sample of interviewees. Interviewees came from a wide variety of countries (55 different countries²) and geographical regions, including a substantial number of interviewees from Europe, South Asia, East Asia, and Latin America. Still, nearly half of the interviewees were raised in North America (Canada or the USA). The interviewee list also includes a relatively high share of younger participants. Nearly two-thirds of them were 25 or younger (the average age of the sample was just slightly over 24). Finally, students (about 60 percent of all interviewees) and individuals from relatively affluent socioeconomic backgrounds (86.8 percent) were also over-represented in the sample. Nevertheless, the sample includes a diverse group of interviewees, capturing some of the most theoretically relevant features and characteristics that could potentially influence viewers' preferences, including gender, ethnicity (about half of the interviewees identified as visible minorities according to North American standards), sexual orientation (nearly 30 percent sexual minorities), and relationship status (the sample is almost evenly distributed between those who are in a steady relationship and those who are not).

² The sample includes interviewees from Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Costa Rica, The Czech Republic, Denmark, The Dominican Republic, Ecuador, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, India, Indonesia, Iran, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Lebanon, Mauritius, Mexico, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, Nepal, The Netherlands, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, The Philippines, Romania, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Syria, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, the UK, the USA, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

Procedure and Measures

Following approval from a university research ethics board, all interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2022 in either French or English by two highly skilled and well-trained research assistants. These two languages are spoken by nearly one-quarter of the world's population and are official languages in nearly half of the world's nations. Both interviewers were graduate students in their twenties, a fact that helped in establishing rapport and a sense of comfort during interviews, as most interviewees were also in their twenties. One of the interviewers was a woman and the other a man, and both conducted interviews with both women and men. Both research assistants received thorough initial training and met with the project leader multiple times before beginning and while conducting the interviews.

Social desirability and acquiescence bias are always a possibility when conducting survey research and interviews, especially when speaking about sensitive issues, which often receive social censorship. To reduce this bias, both the interviewers and the interviewees were encouraged to avoid revealing their real names or any specific identifying details beyond general demographics. All interviews were conducted via Skype audio (without video), in an effort to increase interviewees' sense of confidentiality and encourage them to speak candidly about their preferences, experiences, and views. Indeed, most of the interviewees appeared to be open about their preferences and views, even when these did not seem to conform with social conventions, and they were willing to share them without noticeable reservations.

The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 min. The Online appendix provides the full interview guide, including the questions most relevant to the current study (see parts 4 and 5 of appendix). In addition to the specific questions regarding aggression and pleasure perceptions and preferences, interviewees were also encouraged to speak more broadly about other experiences with sexuality and their views and preferences regarding pornography. The interviews were recorded (with the consent of the interviewees) and subsequently transcribed by the two students.

Data Analysis

I used a hybrid of quantitative content analysis and a qualitative thematic analysis to code and analyze the results. First Excel spreadsheets were used to code the answers to most interview questions that had a limited number of potential answers. This coding was completed by a single research assistant, who read all the interview transcripts and coded the responses into the Excel spreadsheet. For example, the question regarding interviewees' sexual orientation was coded into one of four categories: (1) heterosexual, (2) homosexual (lesbian or gay), (3) bisexual, and (4) sexually fluid/queer/

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of the interviewees' sample (n = 302)

| | Women (n = 149) | Men (n = 148) | Non-binary / gender fluid (n = 5) | All (n = 302) |
|--|-----------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| Mean number of views per month | 6.6 (5.8) | 14.3 (12.9) | 13.8 (25.8) | 10.5 (11.1) |
| Mean age | 23.5 (4.2) | 24.9 (5.2) | 22.4 (1.8) | 24.2 (4.7) |
| Mean age of first watching pornographic videos | 13.4 (3.4) | 12.3 (2.9) | 11.6 (2.4) | 12.8 (3.2) |
| <i>Age categories</i> | | | | |
| 18–19.9 | 8.7% | 3.4% | 0.0% | 5.9% |
| 20–24.9 | 61.3% | 53.4% | 80.0% | 57.8% |
| 25–29.9 | 22.0% | 31.1% | 20.0% | 26.4% |
| 30–34.9 | 4.0% | 9.5% | 0.0% | 6.6% |
| 35–39.9 | 2.7% | 1.4% | 0.0% | 2.0% |
| 40 + | 1.3% | 1.4% | 0.0% | 1.3% |
| <i>Region of residence (at least until age 18)</i> | | | | |
| North America | 53.3% | 45.3% | 60.0% | 49.5% |
| South and Central America | 6.0% | 6.8% | 0.0% | 6.3% |
| Europe | 12.7% | 12.8% | 20.0% | 12.7% |
| Middle East | 0.7% | 5.4% | 0.0% | 3.0% |
| South Asia | 10.7% | 16.2% | 0.0% | 13.2% |
| East Asia | 12.7% | 11.5% | 20.0% | 12.2% |
| Africa | 4.0% | 2.0% | 0.0% | 3.0% |
| <i>Ethnicity</i> | | | | |
| Caucasian | 53.3% | 48.0% | 40.0% | 50.5% |
| Latin American | 8.0% | 7.4% | 0.0% | 7.6% |
| Middle Eastern | 2.0% | 6.7% | 20.0% | 4.6% |
| East Asian | 16.7% | 18.9% | 40.0% | 18.2% |
| Southwest Asian | 13.3% | 14.9% | 0.0% | 13.9% |
| Indigenous American/Canadian | 0.7% | 1.4% | 0.0% | 1.0% |
| Black | 6.0% | 2.7% | 0.0% | 4.3% |
| <i>Sexual orientation</i> | | | | |
| Heterosexual | 66.7% | 80.4% | 0.0% | 72.3% |
| Homosexual | 2.0% | 7.4% | 40.0% | 5.3% |
| Bisexual | 22.7% | 10.1% | 20.0% | 16.5% |
| Queer/Pansexual/Sexually fluid | 8.7% | 2.0% | 40.0% | 5.9% |
| <i>Relationship status</i> | | | | |
| Single | 52.0% | 52.7% | 60.0% | 52.5% |
| In a relationship | 48.0% | 47.3% | 40.0% | 47.5% |
| <i>Education</i> | | | | |
| High school graduate | 4.0% | 4.7% | 20.0% | 4.6% |
| Undergraduate degree (completed or in process) | 70.7% | 73.0% | 60.0% | 71.6% |
| Advanced degree (completed or in process) | 25.3% | 22.3% | 20.0% | 23.8% |
| <i>Occupation</i> | | | | |
| Student | 63.3% | 58.8% | 20.0% | 60.4% |
| Manager | 2.7% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1.3% |
| Clerical support | 11.3% | 7.4% | 0.0% | 9.2% |
| Service and sales | 7.3% | 18.2% | 40.0% | 13.2% |
| Independent/business owner | 4.7% | 4.7% | 0.0% | 4.6% |
| Teacher | 2.0% | 4.1% | 20.0% | 2.3% |
| Medical professional | 2.7% | 1.4% | 0.0% | 2.0% |
| Unemployed/not working | 6.0% | 5.4% | 20.0% | 5.9% |

pansexual. Answers to questions on climax that had a clear dichotomous answer (e.g., “Is it arousing to see them express pain/suffering in response to aggression?”) were coded as 0 or 1. The project leader then re-read the responses for the variables with a clear dichotomous answer (those related to pleasure and climax) and coded these responses independently. Inter-coder agreement between the research assistant and the project leader regarding the dichotomous responses to such questions was high, ranging from 87.1% to 98.7% for all relevant questions. Kappa statistic scores ranged from 0.73 to 0.84, indicating a substantial to excellent degree of agreement. Disagreements in coding were resolved through a discussion between the project leader and the research assistant coder.

The thematic qualitative analysis was performed by the author and then reviewed and commented on by the research assistants. For questions with multiple possible answers (e.g., “Why do you enjoy depictions of both pleasure and pain?”), I first registered in the spreadsheet the answer as it was given by the interviewee (e.g., “Can’t have one [pleasure] without the other [pain]. If it looks like she’s in pain but wants the pain, it’s okay”) and then combined these answers into common themes (e.g., “enjoying the mix of pleasure and pain”) using inductive thematic analysis (Proudfoot 2023, Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Upon second examination, I revised some of this initial coding scheme by combining, renaming, and re-categorizing certain themes.

Results

Figure 1 presents results for male and female interviewees regarding aggression and performers’ responses in the videos they watch. More than half of the interviewees (54.7%) in the sample reported that they enjoyed at least some levels of visible aggression in pornography. However, as shown in the figure, while only about 39.9% of the men reported enjoying some forms of aggression, more than two-thirds of the women (69.3%) said that they enjoyed aggression ($\chi^2 = 26.10$; $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, while only 13.5% of the men declared that they sometimes enjoyed “harder” aggression, this figure was significantly higher (35.3%) among women ($\chi^2 = 19.17$; $p < 0.001$). Only 10.1% of the interviewees stated that they would like to see more aggression in mainstream pornography. However, the share of women who expressed this preference was significantly higher—16.8% of all women interviewed—compared with only 6.7% of the men expressing this preference ($\chi^2 = 14.68$; $p < 0.001$). Finally, women were also significantly more likely to declare that they actively searched for aggression in pornographic videos, with 38.0% of them saying that they sought aggressive pornography, compared with 27.0% of the men ($\chi^2 = 4.08$; $p = 0.043$).

Perhaps most revealing in the context of the current study was the high share of interviewees (69.8%) who at least sometimes enjoyed seeing performers respond with pleasure to aggression (there was no clear difference between male and female interviewees in this regard). Furthermore, about one-quarter of the interviewees (26.2%)

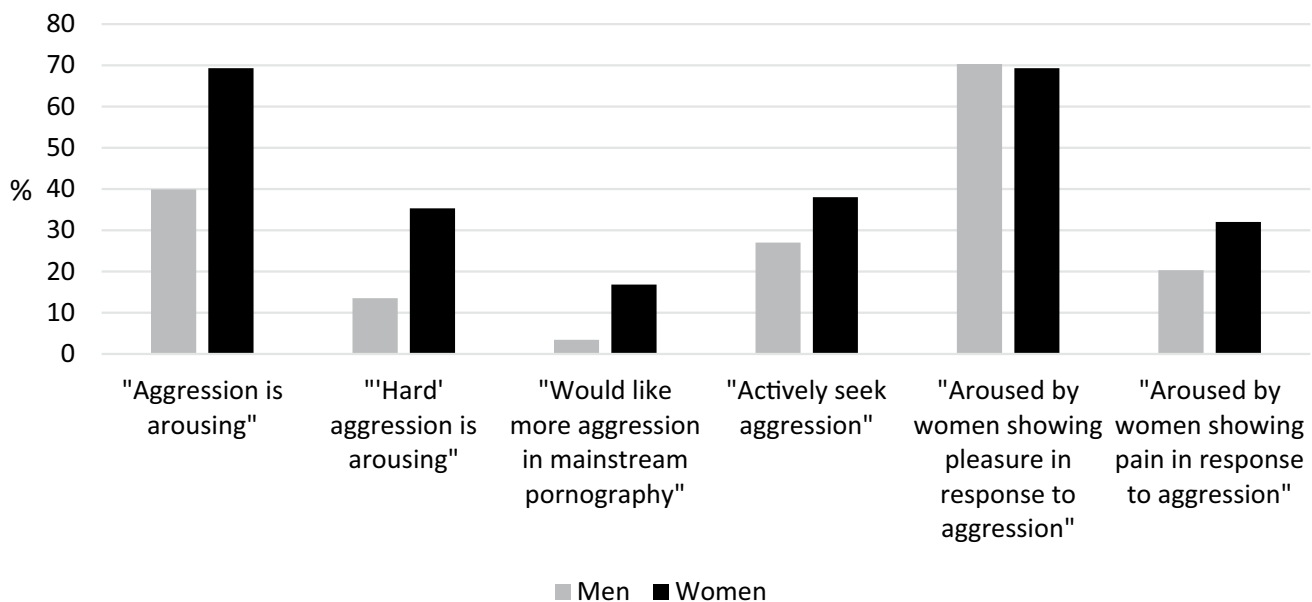


Fig. 1 Preferences related to aggression, pleasure, and pain in pornography among male (n = 148) and female (n = 149) interviewees

at least sometimes found expressions of pain in response to aggression arousing. Women were significantly more likely to express this view (32.0%) than were men (20.3%) ($\chi^2 = 5.30$; $p = 0.021$).

To further investigate these themes and the ways in which viewers think about the combination of pleasure, affection, aggression, and pain in pornography, I explored viewers' narratives through a thematic analysis of the interview data.

“Pleasure in Response to Aggression Can Be Arousing”: Reflections on Aggression and Pleasure

As noted above, most interviewees felt that expressions of pleasure in response to aggression were at least sometimes arousing. Interestingly, this view was also shared by some interviewees who said that they generally did not enjoy watching aggression in videos. For example, Gabriel, 34, a Latino heterosexual student from Chile, said that he generally does not look for aggression in videos, but: “if girl expresses pleasure in response to aggression, then yes, I enjoy it. whatever works.” Paul, 24, a Caucasian heterosexual army officer from the USA, similarly said that “it’s just arousing to see pleasure, period,” and Adonis, 22, a Caucasian heterosexual student from Greece, agreed that “pleasure in response to aggression can be arousing.”

Madeline, 19, a Caucasian heterosexual student from the USA, explained that although she did not generally enjoy watching aggression, she sometimes felt that it was okay if the female performer was clearly enjoying it, as this clarified that the aggression was consensual and pleasurable: “I mean yeah, kind of. Pleasure adds to vibe of it being consensual and she’s willing.” Marina 21, a Caucasian bisexual student from Russia, felt similarly about aggression, but also was able to sometimes enjoy it when clear pleasure was present: “When they show pleasure in response to spanking or choking, it can be hot. Other acts, no. I don’t kink shame though.” This last comment suggests that Mariana acknowledges that while she herself does not usually enjoy aggression in pornography, others might, and she believes that this is a legitimate sexual preference that should neither be censured nor condemned.

Other interviewees said that they did often enjoy aggression in pornography. However, they made it clear that they much preferred it if all participants clearly enjoyed this aggression and that they did not want to see any painful expressions. Kabir, 20, a Middle Eastern bisexual student from Bahrain, explained that “if facial is enthusiastic, I enjoy it. I enjoy pleasure responses to aggression.” Daria, 23, a Caucasian sexually questioning student from Romania, felt that pleasure expressions gave the acts a different meaning: “It won’t feel aggressive if they’re enjoying it. If its BDSM and she enjoys it, it’s ok for me. I will sometimes look for such BDSM videos.” Similarly, Phil, 21, a Caucasian heterosexual student from Canada, believed that “pleasure in

response to aggression is arousing, but only if it’s stated that it’s what they’re going for.”

For Alexia, 23, a Caucasian heterosexual student from Canada, pleasure responses to aggression were arousing because they allowed her to put herself in the performers’ shoes and imagine that she was the recipient of the aggression: “I like to imagine myself as her [receiving aggression and enjoying it]. It’s what gets me off.” Viktoria, 36, a Caucasian heterosexual student from Germany, similarly sometimes enjoyed aggression and acknowledged that some people enjoy it because it produces a painful experience. However, she stressed that she only enjoyed aggression when it clearly induced pleasure:

Part of aggressive sex is looking like you’re in pain. It seems to turn some people on. I used to watch aggressive porn myself. But it was something I’d never do. If it’s aggressive, then yes, I’d prefer to see pleasure and not pain.

“There’s No Pleasure Without Pain”: Reflections on the Mix of Pleasure and Pain

As Viktoria notes, it was not uncommon for viewers to enjoy a degree of pain mixed with pleasure, either in response to aggression, or just generally during sexual interactions. As shown in Fig. 1, this was true for more than one-quarter of all interviewees in the sample, including about one-third of the female interviewees.

Several interviewees even suggested that pleasure and pain in sex are inherently intermixed and cannot be separated. For example, Sherya, 22, a Caucasian heterosexual health company worker from India, said that she “liked it when they show pain during climax. There’s no pleasure without pain.” Igor, 32, a Caucasian heterosexual music teacher from Canada, also thought that “pain is part of pleasure. So, if it’s obviously just pain, I’ll close [the video]. But if she’s uncomfortable and likes it, I like it.” Raj, 25, a Southwest Asian heterosexual unemployed man from India, concluded that “it’s [pornographic videos] mostly an act, but at the end of the day, you have some pleasure and some pain. That’s life.” Ishan, 24, another Southwest Asian heterosexual PhD student from India, believed that “sexuality is very complicated. There’s a thin line between pain and pleasure.”

Many interviewees noted that they sometimes enjoyed watching performers in mild pain, but only when it was short and fleeting. Brandon, 24, a Caucasian heterosexual student from Canada, said that “a little wince to a spank is great, especially if she also shows pleasure. But saying ‘ouch’ when being smacked is too far.” Harmeet, 21, a Southwest Asian heterosexual student from India, also thought that “a little bit [of pain] can be pleasurable,” and Claudia, 22, a Middle Eastern non-binary gay student from Saudi Arabia, similarly

felt that “sometimes I like to see a mix of pleasure and pain from hairpulling or biting. But if that [the pain] is the focus for more than 5 s, it’s too much.” Celia, 23, a Caucasian sexually fluid hospital researcher from the USA, agreed:

If it’s a moment [of pain] and then pleasure, then it’s ok. Like at the beginning of sex sometimes, when penetration starts, it can hurt at first, and then it feels good. There’s also like taking someone passionately, which is hot. And then there’s like bondage, which can also be arousing.

Others stressed that they were okay with pain, sometimes even for longer stretches, as long as it remained mild, and pleasure was clearly also present. Arash, 24, a Southwest Asian heterosexual student from India, thought that “if she feels a little bit of pain, in response to fucking, forcing her to do blowjob, or anal insertion, that’s okay, as long as there’s also pleasure. But not a lot of pain.” This was also the case for Mariana, 27, a Hispanic heterosexual student from the USA: “If aggression is within my acceptance zone, I like it when they show pleasure in response. I also like it when they show some pain. I guess like a little bit where you can still tell it’s good pain.” For Nathan, 40, a Caucasian heterosexual administrative coordinator from Canada, pain without pleasure was unattractive: “If it hurts without being sexually pleasing, it has no interest.” Ariana, 24, a Latina heterosexual tutor from Venezuela, summarized this sentiment:

Yes, I mean, I guess I don’t like anything crazy painful; nothing with blood. But I guess I like maybe the feeling of, in a way, the woman is not into it at first but then that might change, and she also feels pleasure, not just pain.

This desire to see a mix of pleasure and pain was common to many interviewees (e.g., Ari, 23, a heterosexual student from Israel; Jane, 22, an East Asian bisexual finance worker from Japan; Christian, 24, a Caucasian heterosexual student from the USA; Amina, 27, an East Asian bisexual uniform company employer from Vietnam; and Andre, 37, a Caucasian heterosexual archivist from Canada). Echoing the notion that “pain is pleasure,” some of them differentiated between what they considered “good/desired/enjoyable” pain and “bad/unpleasant/unwelcome” pain. Abby, 24, a Caucasian heterosexual student from Canada, said that she found “pleasure in response to aggression very arousing. Pain I also sometimes enjoy. It depends on the mood I’m in; if it looks like it’s good pain, enjoyable.” Claire, 22, a Caucasian bisexual unemployed woman from Canada, agreed: “I like it when they enjoy aggressive acts. If they show like good pain, if they are enjoying the pain.”

For Rachel, 25, a Caucasian pansexual student from Canada, desire for aggression was key: “If she’s saying ‘yeah, hit me’ or ‘do it!’, I enjoy seeing her moaning in pain. It has to seem genuine.” Josh, 25, a Caucasian heterosexual performer

from Canada, also emphasized this expressed desire: “If it’s pain as a direct result of wanting it, then yes [I enjoy it]. If it’s a kink for them. Anything to do with having been asked to: spank, choke, etc.” Mariana, 27, a Latin American heterosexual student, added that videos that include pleasure and pain can “spice things up,” and make the sexual interaction more interesting and less “vanilla”: “If they have hairpulling and spanking, I like if they’re [the female performers in the video] aroused and suffering. I enjoy it. If not, it’s boring.”

Several of the gay men who interviewed for the study also found aggression and a mix of pain and pleasure to be arousing. Elijah, 22, a gay East Asian student from Canada, thought that it was arousing “if maybe the person is in discomfort, but you assume they’re still interested in it. They’re not like not enjoying it. if the person seems to not enjoy it at all, I don’t like it.” Silas, 23, a gay Black student from Kenya, was cognizant of power relations in the sexual interaction: “I guess it depends. If it’s a ripped man, it’s arousing to watch him in pain. but if it’s a small boy, it’s disturbing.” Benjamin, 31, an unemployed Asian Canadian, similarly spoke about aspects unique to gay men’s sexuality and the power relations within them: “I guess the idea during anal sex that there’s some pain, I enjoy it. Especially if top has a large penis and [the bottom] finds it painful.”

For some interviewees, the fascination with pornography featuring aggression and the combination of pleasure and pain was driven by their personal sexual experiences, where certain degrees of pain were experienced as enjoyable. For examples, Mehri, 22, a Caucasian heterosexual Canadian student, said that she liked “choking, facials, [and] pulling hair. I also like it when guy says, ‘you want it’ and she says, ‘yes, I do’.” She added that for her to really enjoy the video, she needed to “see myself in her shoes, to identify with the woman. So yes, it’s important [for the female performer to appear like she is enjoying the aggression]. I watch things I want to see myself in.” Natalie, 20, a Caucasian heterosexual student from Canada, said that “sometimes gagging is okay. I can watch more intense ones [videos], because I’ve tried them [the practices depicted] and know it’s okay. Facials, spanking, I search for these things sometimes.” Natalie added her reflections on the intersection of pleasure and pain: If the guy is spanking her, I want her to show some pain. But it needs to be coupled with pleasure. I look for a mix of the two.”

Liana, 20, a Caucasian sexually fluid student from Canada, also drew on her firsthand experiences in describing how she felt about aggression, pleasure, and pain. But in her case, these feelings were based on traumatic experiences, as she was raped several times as a teenager:

Because my first encounter with sex was a rape at 14, I thought sex was rape. Later on, I was raped two or three more times. [So,] I thought it [sex] was violent; there were no emotions. ... Porn reinforces this. When I see

women react to aggression with pleasure or pain, I feel it's rewarding. Pain is also pleasure, so it empowers my past. It's a way to cope, don't know... In my sexual life, I was always aroused by very violent sex and non-consensual sex, and when I saw videos of men and women, it confirmed this. I didn't feel alone. It made fantasies for me okay, like all my imagination seemed okay, not alone.

Liana describes a complex set of feelings and experiences. Her attraction to seeing aggression and pain in pornography was clearly at least partly shaped by her multiple early life experiences of sexual assaults, as she felt that these depictions reenacted her early experiences with sex. On the one hand, she found these videos validating, as watching them made her feel that her desires were not entirely abnormal and reassured her that others share her fantasies. On the other hand, as Davis et al. (2006) have suggested, exposure to violent pornography may lead some women to believe that they should accept sexual victimization as part of normal sexuality, which appears to be the case for Liana.

While no other interviewee explicitly described being sexually assaulted (of note, interviewees were not asked about such experiences), several previous studies have suggested that sexual trauma and violence among women could be associated with violent sexual fantasies, attraction to BDSM practices, and affinity toward violent pornography (Hempel, 2012; Romito & Beltrami, 2011; Shulman & Home, 2006). Some have even suggested that BDSM activities and consumption may sometimes be helpful in reworking trauma and healing from sexual assault (Benhamou, 2020; Hammers, 2019; Rubinsky et al., 2023; Sprott, 2020). It is therefore possible that some of the other interviewees also developed their attraction toward videos that showed pain and suffering following traumatic sexual experiences.

"It's a Way to Let Go": Aggression, Pain, and Pleasure in BDSM Videos

Not surprisingly, many of the interviewees who mentioned an affinity to both pleasure and pain talked about it in the context of BDSM pornography. For many of them, aspects of intense dominance were particularly appealing in these videos. For example, Lucy, 20, a heterosexual student of East Asian ethnicity from Montenegro, told us: "I feel like when the guy is very dominant, it can be hot if she shows some pain, as long as there's also pleasure." Donia, 19, an East Asian heterosexual student from Hong Kong, concurred: "I think acts of aggression that show possession are arousing and I like to see both pleasure and pain responses mixed together." Maria, 20, a Caucasian heterosexual student from the UK of Hispanic origin, had similar preferences: "I'd say that every time I watch porn, I look for BDSM or dominance... I like

spanking, things that wouldn't hurt too much. Extreme pain isn't something I'd like [to see]" Francesca, 20, a Latin Canadian bisexual student, similarly said: "I like the mix of pain and pleasure in disciplinarian [videos]. The DD/LG [Daddy Dominant/Little Girl] thing. It's under those types of environments [that I enjoy this mix of pleasure and pain]."

Stephanie, 41, a Caucasian heterosexual university administrator from Canada, also stressed her enjoyment in watching themes of aggressive dominance, even if some might find them painful or humiliating: "I love the submission! I find it liberating... It's a way to let go... I like to be held forcibly in positions. I like when [the] man is aggressive and dominating and when the woman has to perform stuff." Dylan, 21, an East Asian heterosexual student from Canada, similarly enjoyed scenes containing domination and submission:

Anything BDSM related, dominance over them [female performers], where she is submissive, I like it. I like to see the combination of pain and pleasure... But I need to know at end of day that woman wants it and isn't being forced. She needs to enjoy and ask for it... I need them to enjoy it for me to [enjoy it too]. Sometimes it's in between fake and real, like it's a mix. Those aren't as exciting to me. But crazy hot ones are when both are enjoying it as much as each other in BDSM. She wants to get fucked and be submissive.

Other interviewees emphasized that they enjoyed the mix of pleasure and pain in the context of BDSM, but not in other contexts (e.g., Lily, 28, an East Asian heterosexual translator from China; Briana, 22, a Caucasian heterosexual business owner from Canada; Annie, 22, an East Asian heterosexual student from China; and Jason, 21, a Caucasian bisexual student from the USA). Some especially liked watching "forced/torture orgasm scenarios" (e.g., Alanna, 21, a Caucasian sexually fluid student from Canada; Kaylie, 21, a Caucasian queer student from the USA). Others stressed the consensual dimension of BDSM videos. For example, Cassandra, 20, an East Asian heterosexual student from Vietnam, noted that "when the scenario is to intentionally degrade, I like to see both pain and pleasure in response to aggression, but with the idea in my head that it's wanted and consented to." Chloe, 26, a bisexual entrepreneur and business owner from France of Middle Eastern origin, similarly liked this blend: "My ideal video would include aggression and pain, but pleasure would be in the center of the video. I think [it would include] hair-pulling, choking, and for sure some slapping."

Naomi, 27, a Caucasian heterosexual student from Canada, clarified that there is a fine line between aggression and dominance, pleasure and pain: "Can't have one without the other. If it looks like she's in pain but wants the pain, it's okay. She has to be into it." She went on to detail the practices in which she found pleasure/pain responses attractive: "Like, in response to spanking, nipple clamps or any sort of like

nipple play, electro stimulation, wax play, any sort of like struggle, predicament, or bondage. Also caging, anal hooks, instruments, butt plugs, ball gags, and collaring.” Lisa, 18, a heterosexual American student of Chinese descent, also liked BDSM videos, especially those that “use painful toys, a lot of pain inducing toys that I like... I get aroused when I see aggression toward a submissive woman. I like it when she shows both pleasure and pain in response to this aggression.”

Stephaine, 19, a Caucasian heterosexual student from the USA, noted that watching BDSM pornography helped her realize what practices she would like to adopt in her own sex life:

I usually avoid pain that isn't inherently sexual, such as beating someone up just for sake of it... I think a lot of the BDSM stuff that I enjoy [in my own sex life] comes from porn. And also, just the levels of pain that people can safely handle... I'd say I enjoy a mix of pain and pleasure reactions, mostly in intense penetration of like the vagina, the anus or orally. Especially oral for me. I also enjoy getting slapped or spit on and being tied up.

Of note, it is not surprising that BDSM videos are of particular interest for many viewers who enjoy the mix of aggression, pleasure, and pain. These videos (and BDSM practices more generally) have a clear set of rules, which include expressed consent, the ability to halt interactions that become too intense or painful, and a degree of control over the situation and the level of pain inflicted. They also have clear safety regulations, which allow for the exploration of fantasies while feeling secure and knowing that no actual harm is done. And although aggression and pain are clearly an integral part of BDSM practices, these videos also often show commitment to partners' pleasure and wellbeing.

“I Guess I’m a Sadist”: Pain Without Pleasure and Guilty Feelings

A final preference found among viewers, one that was quite rare (only four of the interviewees, two women and two men, talked about it), was the enjoyment of seeing only pain in response to aggression, without any clear displays of pleasure. Felix, 27, a heterosexual Asian American student was one of them: “I guess I’m a sadist; can’t explain it otherwise. When you want someone to get wrecked, you want to see it. It’s about dominance, almost like the degree of suffering it’s causing. Like sex slaves; bondage situations.” Alani, 34, a Southwest Asian heterosexual government administrator, who moved from Guyana to Canada at an early age, also preferred to see pain without pleasure. Like Felix, she explained it with her attraction to what she called “extreme dominance”:

I really like the aggressive stuff. I’ve never wondered about it to be honest. It’s not like I want to be raped. I just like extreme dominance. As long as it’s fantasy, it’s ok. But yeah, it’s a weird [thing] to be attracted to... I like the choking or forcefulness of any act, even if in real life I don’t like that. I don’t like it when it’s supposed to be forced but they are enjoying themselves... Usually, I watch and am aroused. Unless it’s too much, or it feels too real. I prefer like punishment style... It’s a turn on while I see it. It’s not real to me so there’s a wall there, but after, I feel mild guilt and discomfort.

Like Alani, Maria, 20, a heterosexual Hispanic Canadian student, said that “every time I watch porn, I look for BDSM, or domination.” Maria declared that she did not feel aroused when female performers expressed pleasure in response to aggression. However, when asked if she likes to see pain and suffering in response to aggression she said: “Maybe a little. Certainly, more than pleasure.” She went on to explain this preference.

It’s a fantasy. Extreme pain isn’t something I’d like in life vs porn... While I’m seeing it, I like it; I’m aroused. But after I see it, I feel sometimes guilt about myself for watching it. I can think it’s not right. The aggression isn’t a good reason to be aroused.

Both Alani and Maria see aggression and pain in pornography as a fantasy and emphasize that they would not want to experience these acts in their own sex lives. Both also feel a degree of shame and discomfort about their viewing preferences. Similar feelings were also expressed by other interviewees who enjoyed aggression and pain. Floriane, 22, a Caucasian heterosexual Canadian student, said that she enjoyed BDSM videos, including ones that portrayed “dominance, facials, hair pulling, spanking, gagging, [and] binding.” However, she added that after watching these videos, she “sometimes feel a bit bad... I reflect on it and find it problematic... I think it’s fucked up, but I like to see both pleasure and pain in response to aggression.” Similarly, Melissa, 22, a Caucasian heterosexual Canadian student, shared her enjoyment of videos showing BDSM practices, humiliation, and verbal aggression toward women. However, she too felt somewhat conflicted and embarrassed about these preferences: “After [watching], it’s kind of... I like gender equality, so it’s a moral struggle between values and [my] aroused brain... I keep watching and I finish. Then, after, I think it’s probably really bad.”

Several male interviewees also expressed some confusion and remorse about watching pornography that included aggression. Kendrick, 21, a heterosexual Black Canadian student, who said he liked to watch both pain and pleasure, reflected on this preference: “I mean, like, yes, I like it, but it’s warped. I’m like, ‘Why am I liking this?’” Angelo, 28, a

Latin heterosexual student from Bolivia, had similar mixed emotions: “When I find a scene aggressive, it disturbs me. So, it’s just confusing. It arouses me too. It’s weird.” Nathan, 40, a Caucasian heterosexual administrative coordinator from Canada, said that if the aggression in the videos is “too much, I skip it. Otherwise, I get into it. I have to admit though that I feel guilty at the end.”

Still, many of the interviewees also stressed the fantasy element of the interaction and the clear separation between the world of pornography, their own sex lives, and their non-sexual interactions in the real world. Alani demonstrated this separation, saying that while she would not want to be raped, she likes to see the fantasy portrayed in pornographic videos. She added:

[In pornographic videos] I look for more submissive stuff, more like dominant males. Not in whips ways, more in forceful ways. I don’t like it when [the] woman is more dominant; that’s not my thing... With my partner, I do enjoy those things where I’m being taken or used. But in [the] context of my work, how people talk to me and men being superior to me, I don’t believe that. I have no tolerance for men who treat women like that. It [should] stay in [the] fantasy world.”

Alani’s words clearly delineate the boundaries between fantasy and reality and between the bedroom and other social domains. While many of the women in the study expressed some affinity toward watching aggression and pain in pornographic videos, most of them clarified that this was a way to explore fantasies, and they did not wish to experience such practices in their own sex lives. Furthermore, even those women who said that they enjoyed experiences of aggression and pain in their sex lives did not mention wanting to extend their fantasies of being dominated or humiliated beyond the sexual realm and into other domains of their daily lives, such as the family, their interactions with peers, or the workplace.

Discussion

In this article, I explored the interaction between pleasure and pain in pornography through more than 300 in-depth interviews with regular viewers. More than half of the study participants said that they at least sometimes enjoyed watching aggression in pornography, a preference that was significantly more prevalent among women (who were also more likely to enjoy “hard” aggression and actively search for aggression). Furthermore, more than two-thirds of the interviewees (including some who declared that they do not enjoy aggression in videos) said that they at least sometimes found pleasure displays in response to aggression arousing. Finally, more than one-quarter of the interviewees (mostly women)

said that they sometimes found displays of pain arousing, mostly when combined with pleasure displays.

Exploring these tendencies further through a thematic analysis of the interviews, I showed that a sizable portion of the interviewees believed that pleasure and pain were frequently intertwined (“there’s no pleasure without pain”) and that the two naturally occur side by side. Many of these interviewees enjoyed watching the combination of pleasure and pain expressions and found this combination to be arousing, as long as the performers showed desire for painful experiences and the pain could be defined as “good pain.” For some, the combination of pleasure and pain reflected their own sexual experiences and was therefore attractive. Others enjoyed such displays only within the clear context of BDSM pornographic videos, where consent was more clearly presumed and the rules regarding safety, boundaries, limitations on aggression, and aftercare were more often formalized and clearly defined.

Of note, nearly all interviewees who expressed an affinity to seeing aggression and pain stressed four key elements that moderate or qualify this preference. First, nearly all of them wanted to see that the pain was intermixed with pleasure and was in fact enjoyed by the performers. Videos that depicted merely pain in response to aggression were thus only enjoyed by four out of the 302 interviewees. Second, for most interviewees, videos that integrated aggression and pain were seen strictly as fantasy rather than as practices that they wanted to emulate or experience in their own sex lives. This perception of fantasy allowed them to distance themselves from the acts and explore hidden passions while remaining safe. Third, for most of the interviewees who were attracted to aggressive practices, the most important elements were dominance and submission—either dominating another person or being dominated by them—with pain being either a byproduct of this dominance or part of a complex interplay between pleasure and pain that was experienced as eventually enjoyable. Finally, assumed or explicit consent was key to viewers’ ability to derive pleasure from these interactions. Many of them stressed that without the perception of enthusiastic consent they were unable to enjoy interactions that involved a degree of aggression and pain even if pleasure was also performed.

These preferences echo reports on the growing mainstreaming of BDSM both in general society (Turley, 2022; van der Beek & Thomas, 2023) and in pornography (Langdridge & Barker, 2013; Saunders, 2018). Indeed, BDSM practitioners emphasize voluntary and consensual exchanges of dominance and submission between consenting participants (Barker, 2013; Ogas & Gaddam, 2011), as well as the experiences of pain that are meant to be enjoyable and intermixed with pleasure. According to Pegg (2018), both demand for and supply of BDSM pornography has increased substantially, particularly following the success of the *Fifty Shades* enterprise, suggesting a global cultural shift toward

the normalization of BDSM. Westlake et al. (2023) have similarly suggested that the rise in people seeking out information on BDSM has led to greater knowledge acquisition and exposure to BDSM activities via pornography. The voices of the viewers in this study echo the growing demand for and normalization of BDSM pornographic videos.

Another major set of findings coming from this study was that women were more likely to find aggression arousing, more likely to seek aggression, and more likely to be aroused by displays of pain in response to aggression. These findings are in line with those of earlier studies on men and women's fantasies, which reported that most women fantasize about sexual domination, submission, and aggression, and that they are often more likely than men to fantasize about these themes (Bader, 2002; Bártoová et al., 2021; Kahr, 2007; Lehmiller, 2018). The findings also echo recent studies on the preferences of pornography viewers. These studies have problematized the notion that women are passive recipients/victims of pornographic content, who invariably find aggression in pornography objectionable and injurious, as well as the notion that men are necessarily more likely to consume aggressive pornography (Chadwick et al., 2018; Hald & Štulhofer, 2016; Shor, 2022). Some may argue that these gender differences could be an artifact resulting from men's tendency to underreport their true wishes due to social desirability, trying to say what they think the interviewers would want to hear. While this is possible, it is likely that some women also underreported their true wishes, as many of them reported shame and embarrassment about enjoying aggressions and female performer's displays of pain. I discuss this issue further below.

The various reasons behind this attraction among women to aggressive pornography and to the visualization of pain intertwined with pleasure are beyond the scope of the current study. Some research has suggested that former experiences of sexual trauma and violence among women could be associated with violent sexual fantasies, attraction to BDSM practices, and affinity toward violent pornography (Hempel, 2012; Romito & Beltramini, 2011; Shulman & Home, 2006). Others have further suggested that consuming aggressive pornography may sometimes be helpful in reworking trauma and healing from sexual assault (Benhamou, 2020; Hammers, 2019; Rubinsky et al., 2023; Sprott, 2020). One of the participants in the current study related experiences and feelings that are somewhat in line with this line of research, discussing traumatic experiences of sexual assault that led her to believe aggression and lack of consent may be natural. However, no other interviewee brought up such experiences.

Furthermore, even if a history of trauma and sexual abuse indeed plays a role in the attraction of some women (or men) to aggression in pornography or in their own sex lives, it is important to exercise caution and not conclude that this is the primary motive for all or most women who express an affinity

for such practices. At least one other major factor emerged in many of the interviews—the desire for watching women being dominated by their partners. Such domination is attractive to many viewers both because it is often associated with enthusiastic and all-consuming desire by both parties and because it allows the dominated party to relinquish control, or “let go,” not having to initiate or take charge of the sexual interaction.

Other critical scholars of pornography have suggested that such gendered preferences may be the result of sexual conditioning, cultural learning, and constructionist frameworks, including those promoted by pornography itself. These frameworks teach women to be submissive, in life and in their sexuality, to cater to men's needs and desires, and even to adopt misogynistic worldviews (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2015; Dines, 2010; Dworkin, 1989). Others have further argued that the normalization and rising consumption of pornographic aggression foster attitudes that support violence against women, rape myths, and sexual coercion (Hald et al., 2010; Wright et al., 2016), as well as actual sexual coercion, violence, and assault (Mestre-Bach et al., 2024; Wright, 2021). Again, examining the veracity of such claims is beyond the scope of this paper.

Regardless of the reasons for and potential ramifications of such gendered preferences, the findings that women are more likely to enjoy and seek aggression and pain stand in contrast with radical feminist anti-porn claims that the spread of aggression in pornography is the direct result of male viewers who seek and enjoy it (DeKeseredy & Corsianos, 2015; Dines, 2010; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Russell, 2000). Furthermore, the findings that women are more likely than men to seek and enjoy aggression are particularly noteworthy given recent estimates of women's growing share among pornography viewers. Reports suggest that pornography use among women has been on the rise (Chesser et al., 2018; Fradd, 2017), with women representing one of the fastest-growing demographic groups among online pornography consumers (Attwood et al., 2018; Chowkhani, 2016). Data released by Pornhub, the world's largest pornography website, show that 36% of the visits to the website in 2023 were by women (PornHub, 2023), up from 26% in 2017 (PornHub 2019).

From a theoretical standpoint, this study joins an emerging literature that rejects or problematize traditional simplistic dichotomies between pleasure and pain in sexuality and more specifically in pornography (Chadwick et al., 2018; Dunkley et al., 2020; Nash, 2014, 2017; Scott, 2010). Instead, this literature suggests more nuanced accounts of how pleasure and pain interact and are being experienced, noting that aggression, danger, inequity, restriction, and repression often exist alongside agency, exploration, passion, arousal, and desire. Indeed, a sizable portion of the interviewees in this study emphasized that they often felt such seemingly contrasting

emotions concurrently, and that in fact they often find them complementary rather than contradictory. However, several interviewees also noted that while such contradictions can feel exciting and sexually arousing, they also often lead to feelings of unease, discomfort, embarrassment, guilt, and shame.

Such feelings of guilt and shame, it appears, are largely the result of viewers' awareness of the larger cultural and political context of their viewing preferences, as well as of feminist critiques of pornography, particularly pornography that includes aggression and pain. Indeed, as Rosenberg (2022) argues, our culture is obsessed with feelings of guilt about pleasure, and "wherever there is pleasure, guilt is surely just around the corner" (p. 27). She adds that we have been taught that pleasure is always verging on corruption, making us guarded of pleasure, concealing and protecting it, as we are consumed by feelings of guilt. While this is true for pleasure in general, "deviant pleasures," such as the ones offered by BDSM and other pornography containing aggression arouse even greater guilt and shame, as they appear to collide with feminist ideas and values. Some women (as well as some men) in our study felt that such fantasies and preferences stand in contrast with "real" feminist principles and hurt feminist causes. They therefore often preferred to keep them private, while also sensing that they might be doing something wrong by watching such videos or by desiring to include some of these practices in their sex lives.

However, beyond their seeming contrast with feminist values, the tendency to feel shame and guilt about fantasies that mix pleasure and pain or the desire to include these experiences in one's sex life is also driven by social conventions about proper sexuality. Indeed, scholars, journalists, and public thinkers often ignore, belittle, problematize, stigmatize, criticize, police, and sanction such preferences, particularly when women express them. Many of them explicitly argue or implicitly suggest that these preferences are rare or otherwise that they are unnatural, deviant, or immoral. Such policing and stigmatization trivialize what many women (and men) share about their fantasies and preferences, preventing them from fully exploring their sexuality without judgment and guilt. In the tradition of feminist thought and research, it is important for scholars of sexuality to instead carefully listen to what women and men tell us and respect their framing of and knowledge about their experiences, rather than merely rely on one's own preconceptions and prejudgments.

Strengths, Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The 302 interviewees who volunteered to participate in the study came from a large variety of countries and geographical locations. They include a broad swath of gender identities, ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and relationship

statuses. Still, like any study relying on a non-representative sample of volunteers, caution must be exercised when generalizing the findings. Indeed, it is possible that those who volunteer to participate in a study such as this do not represent the more general population of pornography viewers. They may, for example, be more likely to hold or at least willing to share unorthodox preferences or have different viewing habits than the wider population. I would especially caution against drawing firm conclusions and generalizations regarding the gender differences in preferences found in this study, as the men and women who volunteer to participate in a study like this may not represent the wider distribution of views among men and women. Future studies may employ probability sampling to examine whether these gender differences remain significant.

Moreover, despite my efforts, the representation of certain demographics in the sample remained lacking. First, while this was one of the first studies to engage deeply with the sexual views and desires related to pornography of people residing in low-income countries in Africa and in Asia, the number of interviewees from these countries was modest when compared to interviewees from high-income countries. While I did not find significant differences in the preferences of viewers from different locales, future studies should continue to explore this cultural and geographical diversity and bring more of the voices of viewers who are often neglected in sociological and psychological research.

Second, the representation of less-educated working-class individuals in the sample was also lacking. While this limitation is not unique to this study (indeed, studies on sexuality that rely on young educated respondents are very common), the reliance on university students and other relatively highly educated professionals could obscure important differences in views and preferences. Future studies should make greater efforts to explore the preferences and perspectives of individuals with less education and lower socioeconomic status. This may involve adopting different recruitment methods, which may include targeting workplaces where working-class individuals are more likely to be employed or online groups in which they are more likely to participate.

A final demographic that was not well represented in this study is that of people over the age of 30 and even more those over the age of 40. Despite efforts to increase the representation of this demographic, we were not able to recruit and speak to many of them. And while the analyses did not point to a substantial divide in the ways younger and older interviewees thought about issues of aggression, pleasure, and pain, further research is needed to better understand the unique perceptions and preferences of older individuals. Similarly to recruiting working-class individuals, such future research efforts will need to adopt creative recruitment techniques that specifically target older audiences and provide sufficient incentives for them to participate in the research.

Beyond representation for wider demographics, another interesting direction for future research could be to try exploring the interaction of pleasure and pain in pornography more deeply and thoroughly, through questions that would try to get at the core of viewers experiences and preferences. While the current study gives important glimpses into the scale of certain preferences and the narratives used to explain these preferences, future studies could dive even deeper into the meanings ascribed to them. Researchers could ask pornography viewers (or other individuals who are attracted to the interaction of aggression, pain, and pleasure) to self-reflect on what it is that arouses them about the intersection of pleasure and pain, how it makes their bodies feel, how they make sense of these emotions and desires, and what stories they tell themselves about these desires and experiences. In particular, future interviews with women may try to further investigate their attraction to interactions of pleasure and pain given that the recipients of these interactions are mostly other women. This research can examine, for example, whether the attraction primarily reflects an identification with the bodily sensations of the female performers or whether it also stems from the satisfaction of being able to cater to men's desires.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-025-03229-9>.

Funding There is no external funding for this research.

Availability of data and material The interview data cannot be made available due to confidentiality considerations.

Code availability The syntax for the statistical analyses will be made available upon publication of the paper.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest There is no conflict of interest or competing interests.

Ethical Approval This research received ethics approval from McGill University's Research Ethics Board.

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ONLINE APPENDIX: Interview Guide

Part 1 - Demographics

1. Obtain individual's:
 - a. Age
 - b. gender identification
 - c. ethnicity
 - d. Country of residence
 - e. sexual orientation/identity
 - f. relationship status
 - g. habituation status (e.g. with parents, alone, with a friend)
 - h. occupation
 - i. education/income (if working)
 - j. and parents' occupation/income/education
2. Where did you see ad for this study?

Part 2 - Past/early experiences with pornography

1. Could you tell me about your first (or the earliest that you can remember) time you *watched* porn? What age were you? (With whom did you watch it? What were your thoughts before, during, and after? What did you think and feel about the experience, overall?)
 - a. *Note for interviewer: Differences/contradictions or overlaps between thoughts about porn and emotional reactions to porn?*
2. Thinking about your earliest experiences with porn, did anything stand out for you? (probe: was anything exciting? Invigorating? Gross? Humiliating? Arousing? Boring?)

Part 3 - Current experiences with pornography & COVID19

1. How frequently do you watch pornographic materials? When was the last time you watched pornography? Where do you typically watch it?
2. Since the pandemic, have your viewing habits increased or decreased?
 - a. (if in relationship/cohabiting, ask if they are watching more porn together as a result of covid19 measures).
3. What is/are your main source(s) for pornography? Has covid19 impacted where/how you go about looking for porn?
 - i. Which websites?
4. Could you describe the "process" of how you navigate the website(s) you visit?
5. Has covid19 and social distancing changed your fantasies? Are there certain things you now tend to avoid OR actively search for more than before?
 - a. Has covid19 and quarantine changed preferences in terms of positions/scenarios?
 - b. Pro vs amateur?
6. What type of pornography do you prefer to watch?
 - a. Are there certain aspects that you look for? That you avoid? (Probe: categories, tags, scenarios)
 - b. Do you alter pornography in some way while you watch? (e.g. fast-forwarding, rewinding, stopping, skipping, muting)
 - c. Do you watch it by yourself?

Part 4 -Aggression in pornography: *[remind interviewee of confidentiality and the option to skip questions if feeling uncomfortable]*

1. How do you define aggression in the context of pornography?
2. Have you encountered pornography that features some sort of physical or verbal aggression? How frequently do you encounter these materials?
3. Do you sometimes enjoy watching aggressive porn? If so, which acts do you enjoy?
4. More specifically:
 - a. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching spanking?
 - b. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching biting?
 - c. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching pinching?
 - d. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching forced gagging?
 - e. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching choking?
 - f. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching kicking?
 - g. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching hitting face of body?
 - h. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching rough handling (e.g. pushing, shoving, tossing, shaking)?
 - i. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching facials?
 - j. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching slapping on face?
 - k. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching hair pulling?
 - l. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by watching BDSM?
 - m. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused watching *non-consensual* aggression?
 - n. Do you sometimes enjoy/feel aroused by forceful penetration (vaginal or anal) with penis, hand, or another object, with an apparent intent to cause pain/discomfort?
5. Do you actively seek aggressive materials?
 - a. If so, how often? What kinds? And how? (e.g., titles that convey aggression; categories that might feature aggression)
6. How do you respond when you encounter aggression in pornography? *(Note for interviewer: Differences/contradictions or overlaps between thoughts about porn and emotional reactions to porn.)*
 - a. What do you do/**think/feel** when encountering aggression or “humiliation” in a pornographic video (e.g. skip; still watch; curious; aroused)?
7. What types of aggressive acts do you find “acceptable” or “arousing”, if at all?
8. Do you think that the aggression you see (if any) in pornography impacts your life?
 - a. *(If YES)* How?
 - b. *(If NO)* Why not?
9. In what ways, if at all, do you think that the aggression you see (if any) in pornography impacts your intimate relationship(s) or sexual encounters?
10. What are things you enjoy seeing in porn that you don’t enjoy in real life and vice versa?
11. If you could design/direct your own “ideal” video, would it include any aggressive/hard sex acts? If so, which ones?
12. Would you like to see more/less/the same amount of videos containing aggressive or arguably “humiliating” acts on your favorite porn site?
13. What type of acts would you like to see more/less of?

Part 5 – Pleasure and pain in pornography *[remind interviewee of confidentiality and the option to skip questions if feeling uncomfortable]*

14. Is it important for you to see the woman in the video enjoying herself?
15. Is it important for you to see the man in the video enjoying himself?
16. Do you prefer to watch videos where women express clear pleasure at the acts they are performing?
17. Is it important whether this pleasure seems genuine or not?
18. Is it important for you to see the women reach orgasm?
 - a. Do you prefer such videos? Why?
19. Is it important whether this orgasm seems genuine or not?
20. Is it important for you to see the men reach an orgasm?
 - a. Do you prefer such videos? Why?
21. Is it important whether this orgasm seems genuine or not?
22. Where would you prefer men to ejaculate, if at all (e.g. in the vagina; on the face; in the mouth; on a particular body part)?
23. Do you like to watch anal penetration?
24. If so, do you prefer it to vaginal penetration? Why?
25. Who do you prefer the camera to focus on?
 - a. The woman?
 - b. The man
 - c. Both?
26. Is it arousing for you to see women express pleasure in response to aggression?
27. Is it arousing to see them express pain/suffering in response to aggression? If so, in which situations/acts/scenarios/categories?
28. Which expressions of pleasure do you prefer to see from female performers?
29. Which expressions of pleasure do you prefer to see from male performers?
30. How can you tell if performers are truly enjoying themselves during the video? What are the cues?
31. Do you believe that the participants are at least sometimes enjoying what they are doing, or is it all "an act"?
32. Does it matter to you if performers are really enjoying or if they are just acting? Why?
33. Whose pleasure do you care more about when watching videos -- men's or women's? Why?
34. Do you like it when women take charge of the situation or do you prefer them to play a submissive role?
35. What are things you enjoy seeing in porn that you don't enjoy in real life and vice versa?

Part 6 - Consent and pornography

1. Did porn play a role in your conceptualization of sexual consent?
2. Do you think porn helped/ hindered understanding of sexual consent?
3. Do you think porn offers realistic portrayals of consent being given?

Part 7 - Wrap-up

Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to discuss?