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Aggression and Pleasure in Opposite-Sex and Same-Sex Mainstream Online Pornography: A Comparative Content Analysis of Dyadic Scenes

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ABSTRACT
Existing research on aggression in online pornography is almost exclusively based on pornography featuring heterosexual sex. Pornography featuring sex between two men or between two women has received comparatively little scholarly attention, despite its growing industry presence and revenue. To our knowledge, no study has focused on comparing the aggressive content of different-sex and same-sex mainstream online pornography. To address this gap, we utilized a sample of 210 popular videos uploaded to Pornhub over the last decade. This sample consisted of three major categories: “gay” (male/male; n = 70), “lesbian” (female/female; n = 70), and “most-watched of all time” (male/female; n = 70). Our findings show that there are both more displays of aggression and more displays of affection and pleasure in same-sex online pornographic videos, relative to different-sex videos. We discuss the relevance and limits of dominant sexual and gender scripts when analyzing across subgenres of mainstream online pornography.

KEYWORDS
Pornography; online; aggression; pleasure; content analysis; heterosexual; same-sex

Introduction
Online pornography has a tremendous social and cultural presence (Burke, 2016) and is worth $97 billion globally (Wosick, 2015). “Mainstream” online pornography includes sexually explicit, easily accessible content created for mass consumption and usually catered toward heterosexual men (Downing, Schrimshaw, Scheinmann, Antebi-Gruszka, & Hirshfield, 2017). Mainstream online pornography has been shown to both reflect and shape attitudes, patterns of desire, and expectations concerning sexuality and gender (Webber, 2012) at individual, interactional, and societal levels.

Most studies of mainstream online pornography have focused on “heterosexual” or “male/female” (m/f) pornography. Pornography featuring same-sex sexual interactions has received comparably little scholarly attention (Burke, 2016). To our knowledge, no previous study has systematically compared the contents of m/f and same-sex mainstream pornography. To address this gap, we analyzed data from a purposively retrieved sample of 210 videos on Pornhub: 70 m/f videos from the site’s “most-viewed videos of all time” category; 70 male/male (m/m) videos from the “gay” category, and 70 female/female (f/f) videos from the “lesbian” category. We compared the contents of these three subgenres with attention to visible and non-consensual aggression as well as affection and pleasure displays. Our study follows calls among sociologists of media and sexuality to adopt a careful, evidence-based approach to studying pornography, its contents, and its potential effects (Lim, Carrotte, & Hellard, 2016; McKee, 2015). It also serves as an important contribution to research on same-sex mainstream pornography.

Sexual Script Theory and Same-sex Scripts
Simon and Gagnon’s (1986) sexual script theory, which frames sexuality as a scripted practice emerging from interacting biological and sociocultural conditions, is useful in analyzing online pornographic content. Applying script theory to pornography reveals the normative expectations that pornographic scripts create for sexual reality, behaviors, and preferences (Séguin, Rodrigue, & Lavigne, 2018). Pornographic scripts are influential in determining what is considered a sexual situation, what event(s) should be included, who should participate, and how people should respond (Zhou & Paul, 2016).

Mainstream heterosexual scripts proscribe a set of complementary but unequal sexual norms and roles. These include the assertion that men want sex and women set sexual limits (Seabrook et al., 2016), and the assumption that men are physically, and women are emotionally, motivated for sexual interaction (Sakaluk, Todd, Milhausen, & Lachowsky, 2014). Mainstream heterosexual scripts mimic normative gender expectations and create two opposing sexual roles: woman-as-submit and man-as-dominant (Courtice & Shaughnessy, 2018). Less is known about intragender sexual scripts (Wiederman, 2015), either beyond or within the context of pornography. One study found that gay men report using different sexual scripts than heterosexual men, including...
greater reciprocity of partner pleasure (Barrios & Lundquist, 2012). Extant research on lesbian sexual scripts indicates that sexual encounters between women mostly follow, but also revise and manipulate, heteronormative scripts (Bolsø, 2008; Butler, 2004; Wasley, 2013). Bolsø (2008) contended that power dynamics are reworked in sex between women, since partners can exchange power as sexual subjects and objects.

Debates concerning whether different-sex and same-sex scripts diverge or dovetail are pertinent to comparing subgenres of online mainstream pornography. Arguments for diverging sexual scripts are often rooted in cultural stereotypes that gay men are more – and lesbian women are less – interested in sex than their heterosexual counterparts (Felmlee, Orzechowicz, & Fortes, 2010). Those arguing for the revisionist quality of same-sex sexual scripts noted that m/m pornography has its own esthetic ideals (e.g. greater emphasis on muscularity, repertoire of sexual acts (e.g.rimming), and narrative conventions (e.g. tops/bottoms) (Escoffier, 2003). The socio-cultural eroticization of sex between women (Hermans, 2012) and the fluidity ascribed to female sexuality (Diamond, 2005) make it more difficult to determine scripts unique to f/f pornography. However, some scholars argue that lesbian-made pornography offers very different scripts than mainstream “girl-on-girl” pornography, which is presumably produced by and for men (Beirne, 2008; Fritz & Paul, 2017). Markers of authenticity in lesbian pornography include prioritizing consent (Fritz & Paul, 2017), featuring diverse bodies and esthetics (Lipton, 2012), and possessing a pedagogical orientation (Rhyne, 2007).

Other scholars maintain that different- and same-sex pornographic scripts are highly similar, pointing to the salience of mainstream “heteroscripts” in same-sex interactions (Grova, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger, & Bauermeister, 2014). In m/m pornography, scripts that associate sexual activeness (“topping”) with masculinity and sexual passivity (“bottoming”) with femininity (Brennan, 2018) reproduce traditional heterosexual scripts. Scholars critical of this script reproduction highlight the radical dichotomy between tops and bottoms, which objectifies the bottom (Brennan, 2018; Young, 2017) and subordinates feminized men (Burke, 2016). Research on f/f pornography similarly illustrates the influence of an androcentric, heterosexist paradigm and accompanying scripts. These scripts often frame lesbian sex as a fleeting performance (Diamond, 2005), coopting it for male arousal (Randazzo, Farmer, & Lamb, 2015) and applying narrative formats of heterosexual pornography (Rhyne, 2007).

Unique Study Contributions

Former studies on aggression in either m/f or m/m pornography (no studies were conducted on aggression in f/f pornography) serve as important landmarks in our understanding of the role of traditional gender and sexual scripts in shaping expressions of aggression. However, these studies share a few notable shortcomings. First, they all defined aggression quite broadly and without considering the issue of consent. Second, previous studies focused on audience reception and pornography’s potential social impact. However, in the context of a growing and ever-evolving pornography industry, there is a need to balance reception studies with systematic analyses that shed light on the content itself (Klaassen & Peter, 2015). Third, beyond concerns about the performative nature of women’s pleasure in mainstream pornography (Butler, 2004), the presence of affection or pleasure displays of non-dominant partners remains under-researched. Finally, extant work lacks a comparative aspect; there is a noted gap in systematic comparisons of pornography subgenres (Fritz & Paul, 2017) and no known studies have directly compared the content of online, mainstream pornography featuring same- and different-sex dyads. Since sexual scripts are ascribed according to gender (Wasley, 2013), a comparison of pornographic subgenres featuring different dyadic gender combinations is important, as these may contain substantially different sexual scripts (Fritz & Paul, 2017). Inattention to the patterning of sexual scripts across subgenres can lead to monolithic understandings of pornography (Mercer, 2004) and an overly simplistic distinction between “oppressive” and “empowering” pornography (Corneau & van der Meulen, 2014). Interrogating the divergences and overlaps in sexual scripts of subgenres of mainstream pornography helps in dispelling such reductive arguments. We offer the first empirical comparative analysis of dyadic interactions in three subgenres of mainstream online pornography. Our comparison focuses on aggression and degradation as well as expressions of affection and pleasure.

Previous Research on Aggression and Pleasure in Online Mainstream Pornography

The bulk of scholarly research on pornography engages with the debate regarding the harmful effects that pornography may have on users. Since the early 1970s, some scholars have argued that pornography is strongly linked to misogyny, as well as condoning or enacting violence and sexual aggression (Brownmiller, 1975; Jensen, 2007; Short, Black, Smith, Wetterneck, & Wells, 2012). Other scholars are more skeptical concerning the relationship between pornography, misogyny, and violence against women. These researchers argue that pornography is diverse, contradictory, and does not necessarily cause harm (McKee, 2014; Watson & Smith, 2012). Empirical research examining the relationship between pornography use and violence has produced inconclusive findings. Some studies suggest a relationship between pornography consumption and attitudes supporting violence against women (Hald, Malamuth, & Yuen, 2010) or sexually aggressive behaviors (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Others have reported that pornography use is not associated with negative views toward women (McKee, 2014) and argue that the relationship between porn viewing and real-life violence is not necessarily causal (Lim et al., 2016). Still others have aimed to nuance the singular focus on women’s subordination by examining how mainstream pornography may objectify both men and women, albeit in differing ways (Klaassen & Peter, 2015). The impacts of pornography use, particularly concerning real-life aggression and violence toward women, remain disputed. Nevertheless, given its ubiquity, mainstream online pornography both reflects and creates sexual scripts, as well as beliefs regarding gender, sexuality, aggression, and power (Layden, 2010).

Extant research often focuses on aggression (see Bridges, Wosnitser, Scharrer, Sun, & Liberman, 2010), yet affection
and pleasure displays in mainstream online pornography are equally important to address. Pleasure and aggression framed the “feminist sex wars” and continue to shape scholarly debates between feminist scholars, with some arguing for porn’s possibilities as a domain of pleasure and agency (Lipton, 2012; Vance, 1984), and others contending that compulsory pleasure performances in pornography contribute to women’s subordination and exploitation (Butler, 2004; Dines, 2010). More broadly, pornography research addressing women’s pleasure is largely framed by discourses of authenticity (Frith, 2015) or by concerns regarding women’s compulsory or “peak” pleasure displays (Gurevich et al., 2017).

Considering that pornography has become the preferred form of sexual information, especially among adolescents and youth (Ashton, McDonald, & Kirkman, 2019), it is critical to not only explore what messages it sends about aggression but also about affection and pleasure displays. In a social context that subordinates women’s pleasure (Ashton et al., 2019), it is important to “read” women’s pleasure displays, and affection between and toward women, as part of pornographic scripts. Similarly, if the dominant sexual script involves expectations of privileging men’s pleasure (Seabrook et al., 2016) and positioning women as the means through which men achieve sexual pleasure (Brown, Schmidt, & Robertson, 2018), it is important to comparatively analyze women’s pleasure displays in intra- and inter-gender sexual interactions.

### Aggression in male/female (m/f) Pornography

Previous research has examined aggressive content in pornographic print media, movies, and Internet videos. Estimates of the amount of aggression in these media vary widely, ranging from 1.9% (McKee, 2005) to 88.8% (Bridges et al., 2010). Until 2010, research had almost exclusively focused on magazines and books (Barron & Kimmel, 2000; Malamuth & Spinner, 1980), rented videos (Barron & Kimmel, 2000; Bridges et al., 2010; McKee, 2005; Monk-Turner & Purcell, 1999), or on Usenet message boards (Mehta & Plaza, 1997). However, these media are substantially different from free online pornography in terms of accessibility, anonymity, and affordability (Cooper, 2000), which may affect both content and the demographics of potential users. Only during the last seven years have studies begun to examine more systematically the content of free online pornographic videos and the prevalence of aggression in them (Gorman, Monk-Turner, & Fish, 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Zhou & Paul, 2016). We therefore still know relatively little about the content of these videos (Vannier, Currie, & O’Sullivan, 2014).

Violence in pornography is typically conceptualized as comprising both physically violent acts (e.g. gagging) and sexually violent behavior (e.g. coercion) (McKee, 2005). A recent content analysis found that 31% of mainstream pornographic scenes depicted some form of physical aggression (Fritz & Paul, 2017) while another recent study found that most acts of violence (with the exception of spanking and gagging) and non-consensual sex were relatively rare, despite an overwhelming portrayal of traditional sexual scripts of male dominance and female submissiveness (Klaassen & Peter, 2015).

### Aggression in male/male (m/m) Pornography

The small body of research studying aggression in the sub-genre of same-sex pornography overwhelmingly focuses on m/m pornography (Brennan, 2018; Kendall, 2004; Young, 2017). Some authors situated within the harms-based paradigm call for paying attention to the overlap between m/f and m/m pornography, articulating a gendered power differential in which the penetrative partner dominates the receptive partner (Kendall, 2004). Young (2017) provided a brief history of m/m pornographic series in France and the U.S. and traces an increase in aggression over time, arguing that in its early days, the genre was largely defined by egalitarian modes of sexual relations, with active and receiving partners switching roles during sex scenes. In the 1980s, polarized roles of masculine tops and feminine bottoms became more common. These dichotomized and gendered divisions of power have persisted and have become the genre’s main pornographic script, despite the occasional appearance of the “power bottom”, who avoids being wholly objectified (Young, 2017). Notably, these previous studies have all relied on anecdotal evidence or theoretical arguments. None of them have systematically analyzed the content of free, online m/m pornography, nor have they focused on aggression.

Existing research has not yielded concrete predictions about the prevalence of aggression in m/m pornography relative to m/f pornography. However, “gay affirmative” frameworks tend to present m/m pornography in somewhat utopic terms, arguing that it serves as an educational tool for same-sex desire (Escoffier, 2003) or safer sex practices (Watney, 1997). In addition, some claims about aggression in mainstream m/f pornography provide a potential prediction for the relative presence of aggression in same-sex pornography. According to scholars who are concerned about pornography’s pernicious effects, media representations of (hetero) sexuality through pornography are a site of violence by men against women. For these scholars, m/f pornography serves as a major site for enforcing patriarchal norms and women’s subordination through depictions of aggression or humiliation (Jensen, 2007; MacKinnon, 2018; Whisnant & Stark, 2004). Accordingly, we might expect pornography featuring interactions between two men to exhibit a relatively lower degree of aggression than pornography featuring a man and a woman:

\[ H1: \text{“Gay” (m/m) pornography will include fewer portrayals of aggression compared to “heterosexual” (m/f) pornography.} \]

### Aggression in female/female (f/f) Pornography

Despite a brief period of scholarly interest during the so-called feminist sex wars (see Rubin, 1993), both “authentic” and “ersatz” (i.e. simulated) f/f pornography have since been largely neglected. In the case of the former, this neglect may be a result of its relatively small size. In the case of the ersatz subgenre, which likely characterizes a significant portion of mainstream f/f pornography (Stark, 2004) and perhaps our sample, the lack of scholarly engagement may be due to the
assumption that it is simply an extension of m/f pornography (Morrison & Tallack, 2005) and therefore does not merit separate analysis. Still, the paucity of empirical work (although see Hermans, 2012; Wasley, 2013) examining this subtype of mainstream online pornography is surprising, given the great international popularity of "lesbian" scenes among male and female consumers alike (Pornhub, 2019).

To our knowledge, no study has either specifically examined or systematically analyzed aggression in online, mainstream f/f pornography. Literature on lesbian pornography, girl-on-girl pornography, and comparisons between the two has focused largely on the authenticity of representations (e.g., women's pleasure) but has not addressed physical or verbal aggression (see Hermans, 2012; Jenefsky & Miller, 1998; Morrison & Tallack, 2005; Swedberg, 1989). Notably, determining the authenticity of f/f scenes – or, for that matter, any depictions of sexuality – may be a futile effort, given the impossibility of a fully authentic sexuality (Webber, 2012) and the artificiality of representational systems such as pornography (Chow, 2001). However, to the extent that pornography featuring sex between two women adheres to traditional expectations of feminine behavior, this subgenre would presumably feature less aggression than either m/m or m/f pornography. Indeed, dominant sexual scripts often frame women's sexuality as passive and receptive (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012). In work highlighting pornography's negative impacts, men's sexuality is regarded as "predatory, exploitative, and dominating", while women's sexuality is portrayed as "gentle, nurturing, and egalitarian" (Segal, 1998, p. 47). Together with the argument mentioned above (pornography as a site where men commit violence against women and humiliate them in order to enforce patriarchal norms), we might therefore predict the following:

H2: "Lesbian" (f/f) pornography will include fewer portrayals of aggression compared to both "gay" (m/m) and "heterosexual" (m/f) pornography.

Research Design

Sample and Data

We coded mainstream videos from Pornhub, the world's largest adult website according to Alexa Internet Inc. (van der Linde, 2016). In 2018, the website reported 33.5 billion visits (Pornhub, 2019). This figure reflects a steady decrease in the number of people who pay for porn, who according to recent estimates make up only about 10% of porn viewers (Downing et al., 2017). In 2018, the average age of Pornhub users was 35, with 29% of users being women (Pornhub, 2018). Pornhub serves as a video-sharing hub, hosting videos from and links to other sites, such as RedTube, XTube, and YouPorn. It therefore serves as the largest base of freely available and easily accessible online pornography. Pornhub is also "user-friendly" and keeps track of the number of views per video, much like YouTube (Klaassen & Peter, 2015).

In line with recent studies (Bridges et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015), we sought to analyze the most watched videos from each of our predefined categories, rather than employing convenience or random sampling methods. This strategy is designed to explore the content that is most likely to be widely watched, and therefore have a potentially larger social impact. Hence, all the videos in our sample were watched at least 1.75 million times.

Purposive Sampling for Sexual Diversity

Most previous content analyses of aggression in pornography were not able to reach substantial variation in gender combinations (e.g., m/f, f/f, m/m), either because they targeted the most watched or rented videos (Bridges et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015), or because they used convenience or random sampling techniques (Gorman et al., 2010; Monk-Turner & Purcell, 1999). We therefore chose to employ a purposive sampling technique. We first sampled 70 most-watched videos from Pornhub’s "all-time most-viewed" list (henceforth "heterosexual" or m/f), which included sexual interactions between a man and a woman (we excluded from the analysis 2 videos with more than two participants and 1 with only one participant). Next, we purposively sampled the all-time most-watched videos from two menu categories of Pornhub: 70 videos from the "Gay" (m/m) category and 70 videos from the "Lesbian" (f/f) category. This sampling strategy resulted in a pool of 210 videos. All videos were uploaded to Pornhub between 2008 and 2016. More than 90% of the videos were produced professionally, and their length ranged from 2.7 minutes to 51.5 minutes.

When coding the dominant and submissive partners roles in m/f videos we assigned “M1” to the male, and “F1” to the female, since all clips employed a heteronormative script that cast women in a submissive and men in a dominant position. In clips containing aggression, the dominant (male) partner was the aggressor (importantly, none of the m/f clips featured female aggression), while in clips without aggression, the dominant (male) partner was the initiator and penetrator. All videos in the same-sex samples also had a clear initiator, and most mirrored a dominant/submissive dichotomy found in the heterosexual videos. For the f/f clips, the woman who initiated sexual activity, expressed aggression (in clips containing aggression), penetrated the other woman (in clips featuring sex toys), or possessed some form of social or economic power (e.g. employer, teacher, or step-mother), was coded as dominant. For the m/m clips, the man who initiated sexual activity, expressed aggression (in clips containing aggression), or possessed some form of social or embodied power (e.g. larger size) was coded as dominant. Still, we coded and analyzed any instances of reverse aggression and dominating behavior in all videos: three of the f/f clips featured mutual sex toy penetration, and three of the m/m clips featured mutual anal penetration. To maximize intercoder reliability (Tinsley & Weiss, 2000), the same coding strategy of assigning “M1” to the dominant partner was applied to each clip.

In terms of sexual acts, however, we had to adopt a more sophisticated coding strategy. Certain acts (e.g. cunnilingus)
were not relevant for clips featuring two men, and while penetration for m/f videos always referred to a flesh penis, in f/f clips, penetration referred to a sex toy and/or digits and could have been initiated by either performer. We also thematically coded the “tags” associated with each clip, dividing them into categories such as “descriptions of body parts” (e.g. breasts, penis size), “location” (e.g. couch), or “sexual acts” (e.g. oral sex).

Our main goal throughout coding was to compare aggression against and pleasure displays among women in m/f videos to aggression against and pleasure displays of more submissive (non-dominant) individuals in the m/m and f/f videos. We should note that although none of the analyzed clips indicated the involvement of trans* performers, we can neither assume nor ascertain that all performers were cisgender.

Conceptual Definitions and Operational Measurements

1. Aggression/Violence – McKee (2005, 2015) has discussed at length various methodological and conceptual issues related to defining aggression in content analyses of sexually explicit materials (SEM). He argued that although most former analyses of SEM have dismissed consent in their definition of aggression, this omission leads to problems in understanding the relationship between SEM and healthy sexual development. He therefore advocated for a careful inspection of the interactions in SEM, treating consent as an ongoing process, which considers the entirety of the sexual interaction and considers both physical and verbal expressions of consent.

While McKee’s insights are important for our understanding and treatment of aggression in pornography, the majority of former content analyses in this field have used a much broader definition of aggression that does not focus on consent (Barron & Kimmel, 2000; Bridges et al., 2010; Gorman et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015; Malamuth & Spinner, 1980). Bridges et al. (2010) summarized the rationale for employing a broader and more inclusive definition, claiming that the pornography genre often requires performers to express consent and enjoyment following virtually any act or situation. Considering these powerful expectations, they argued, almost no act would be coded as aggressive under a definition that requires a target to clearly show displeasure, rendering sexual aggression invisible. Bridges et al. (2010) therefore defined aggression as “any purposeful action causing physical or psychological harm to oneself or another person, whereby psychological harm is understood as assaulting another verbally or nonverbally” (p. 1072).

Recognizing the merits of both approaches, in the present study we adopted two different operational measurements of aggression. The first, in line with Bridges et al. (2010) and most previous studies, focuses on the acts themselves and on the apparent intent to cause harm. Following this definition (henceforth: “Physical aggression: Visible”), we coded the following acts as physically aggressive: (1) biting; (2) pinching; (3) kicking; (4) pulling hair; (5) hitting of the face; (6) hitting of the body; (7) choking; (8) forced gagging; (9) spanking; (10) sadomasochism; (11) rough handling (e.g. pushing, shoving, shaking); and (12) forceful penetration (vaginal or anal) with penis, hand, or another object, with an apparent intent to cause pain/discomfort. We also noted the duration of each of these acts relative to the duration of the entire video. Next, in line with McKee’s (2015) conceptualization of aggression (henceforth: “Physical aggression: Nonconsensual”), we monitored both verbal and physical cues for lack of consent. These could include explicit verbal requests or attempts to stop or avoid an act, non-verbal signs of resistance, or evident unhappiness at being in the situation or performing a certain act. We coded videos featuring such cues as containing nonconsensual aggression.

In addition to physical aggression, we also coded for verbal aggression. Verbal aggression was measured by noting any instances and duration of yelling, name-calling, threatening, and swearing. Since swearing is a “language of emotion” and is common during sex (Byrne, 2017), we coded swearing only when curses were used to describe an individual and directed at them, rather than undirected utterances of pleasure such as “fuck, yeah” or “shit, that feels good”.

Given the connections between degradation, humiliation, and aggression (see Schauer, 2005) and in line with previous content analyses (e.g. Bridges et al., 2010), we analyzed both aggressive and potentially degrading sexual acts. Based on previous work (see Cowan & Dunn, 1994; Jensen, 1998), we coded two behaviors (ejaculation in the mouth and ejaculation on the face) as humiliating.

2. Affection/pleasure – While much of the previous research on pornography focused mainly on aggression and degradation, it is important to also examine whether and to what extent Internet pornography depicts displays of mutual affection, pleasure, and satisfaction by both partners. We therefore coded the presence and relative length of affectionate acts, including kissing, hugging, caressing, praising, and sweet-talking. In addition, we noted pleasure responses and displays (e.g. moaning, screaming in pleasure, or clearly showing a climax), particularly by the non-dominant partner. Critics of mainstream pornography often charge that it is focused on men’s pleasure while completely neglecting women’s pleasure. We examine this claim, as well as whether same-sex videos present a more egalitarian picture of sexual pleasure and satisfaction, as suggested by Lamont’s (2017) study on same-sex sexual scripts and norms. Although pleasure responses/displays are probably often staged, we believe that they are nevertheless important, because they signal that everyone involved in the sexual act is entitled to enjoy it.

3. Covariates – We coded information for six theoretically important covariates. Elsewhere (Shor & Golriz, 2019), we have detailed the coding procedures of the following covariates: (1) the racial combination of partners in the video; (2) the approximate age of the partners; (3) whether the video is amateur or professional; (4) the duration of the video; (5) the average number of views; and (6) the year in which the video was uploaded to Pornhub. Our previous analyses suggested that sexual interactions between racial minority individuals tend to include more aggression, while the effect of age on aggression remains unclear (Shor & Golriz, 2019). Amateur videos are expected to contain less aggressive and degrading acts (and more affectionate acts), as less-dominant performers may have more control. Next, longer
videos should have a higher likelihood of presenting both aggressive and affectionate acts, simply because they contain more sexual content. Finally, we controlled for the year in which the video was uploaded to Pornhub to account for potential temporal changes in the content of pornographic videos.

**Coding**

All videos were coded by a female graduate student familiar with sexually explicit materials from previous research projects. The coder first met several times with the project leader, who trained her in the method and coding scheme. Before coding the actual sample, she coded five trial videos and then met with the project leader to discuss the coding and resolve unclear issues before proceeding to code all 210 videos. Next, the project leader watched all videos to ascertain coding accuracy and independently coded the main variables of interest. Inter-coder agreement was generally good, with 86% agreement for visible aggression and 96.67% agreement for non-consensual aggression. Kappa statistic scores for these measures were 0.79, and 0.82, respectively. In the very few disputable cases, the coder and the project leader discussed the issue until they reached an agreement. While previous studies often used “scene” or “character” as their unit of analysis (Bridges et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2015), we chose to use the entire video as our unit of analysis to prevent over-representation for longer videos. We should note, however, that most of the videos in our sample only consisted of one sex scene.

**Analysis**

We conducted both bivariate and multivariate analyses to examine the relationship between the type of dyad (m/f, m/m, and f/f) and various measures of aggression and affection/pleasure. We first compared the mean frequency of aggressive and affectionate acts in videos from both the “Gay” (m/m) and “Lesbian” (f/f) categories to their frequency in videos from the “Heterosexual” (m/f) category, conducting t-tests to evaluate whether differences in frequency were significant. Next, we conducted a multivariate analysis for the most important dependent variables: visual aggression, nonconsensual aggression, affection, and pleasure response by the non-dominant partner, and the performance of climax by the non-dominant partner. We conducted both bivariate and multivariate analyses, controlling for the covariates described above.

**Findings**

**Overall Aggression and Pleasure Responses**

In Table 1 we present comparisons for measures of aggression/humiliation and affection/pleasure. In contrast to our predictions, m/m (t = 2.314; p = .027) and f/f (t = 2.01; p = .042) videos were more likely to include aggression than m/f ones. Visible aggression (not considering consent) was present in about one quarter of all m/m and f/f videos (25.7% and 24.3%, respectively), compared with 12.9% of m/f videos. Nonconsensual aggression was most common in “Gay” videos (14.3%), followed by “Lesbian” videos (5.7%), while only one video (1.4%) in the “Heterosexual” sample portrayed such aggression (the difference was only statistically significant between the “Gay” and the “Heterosexual” categories: t = 2.890; p = .002). While no videos in the “heterosexual” sample included verbal aggression, such aggression was present in a few m/m and f/f videos, although not frequently (n = 2 and n = 5, respectively).

Table 2 shows that the majority of the differences in aggression between different-sex and same-sex videos are statistically significant even when controlling for other factors. Model 1 of the table shows that both m/m (Odds ratio (OR) = 3.14; t = 2.19) and f/f (OR = 2.82; t = 1.97) clips were more likely to include visible aggression than m/f clips. Model 2 shows that this is also the case for nonconsensual aggression in the m/m sub-sample versus the m/f sub-sample, with the former more likely to include videos portraying nonconsensual aggression (OR = 11.29; t = 2.11).

Our results (see Table 1) show that the variation in overall aggression across our three sub-samples has multiple sources. When compared with the m/f clips, m/m clips were more likely to include acts of forceful anal penetration and gagging, as well as spanking, face and body hitting, and rough handling. However, due to the low frequency of these practices in all categories, these differences were not statistically significant. Certain tags were highly correlated with visible and nonconsensual aggression among m/m clips: 40% of such clips were tagged with “twink” (a term used to refer to small, thin, and often effeminate bottoms); 60% were tagged with “big [or] large dick” (referencing masculinity); and 53% were tagged with terms indicating a distinct power differential between the men (e.g. daddy/son, bear/twink). By contrast, while 26% of m/f clips were tagged with “big [or] large dick”, only 3 m/f videos included forced gagging and only 1 m/f video was tagged with “gagging”.

Table 1 shows that videos in the f/f sub-sample were also more likely to include acts of spanking, hair pulling, face and body hitting, choking, and rough handling than those in the m/f sub-sample. The difference was statistically significant for spanking (t = 2.847; p = .005), face hitting (t = 2.045; p = .043), and rough handling (t = 1.981; p = .049). As with the m/m clips, specific tags were highly correlated with both visible and non-consensual aggression: 65% of the f/f clips featuring visible and/or non-consensual aggression (and 75% of the clips featuring non-consensual aggression) were tagged with “toys” or “strap-on” (with the aggressive woman penetrating the non-dominant woman); 53% were tagged with terms indicating a distinct power differential between the women (e.g. teacher/student, MILF/teen); and, somewhat curiously, tags highlighting a distinction in breast size (i.e. “big tits”/“small tits”) were present in 20% of the f/f clips featuring some form of aggression. By contrast, while tags indicating breast size were present in 33% of the m/f clips, only 4% of these featured some form of aggression.

While acts of aggression were more common in the same-sex sub-samples, acts that are often considered by some
Table 1. Aggression, affectation, and pleasure by category (%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aggression/humiliation</th>
<th>&quot;Gay&quot; (m/m) most viewed (n = 70)</th>
<th>&quot;Lesbian&quot; (f/f) most viewed (n = 70)</th>
<th>&quot;Heterosexual&quot; (m/m) most viewed (n = 70)</th>
<th>All videos (n = 210)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical aggression – Visible</td>
<td>25.7 *</td>
<td>24.3 *</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful vaginal penetration</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forceful anal penetration</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hair pull</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanking</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>24.3 **</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face hitting</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body hitting</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choking</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough handling</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>8.6 *</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other aggression</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ejaculation in mouth</td>
<td>5.7 ***</td>
<td>0.0 ***</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ejaculation on face</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>0.0 ***</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affection/pleasure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical affection (present in video)</td>
<td>73.4 ***</td>
<td>97.1 ***</td>
<td>28.6</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical affection (avg. % of video)</td>
<td>5.4 **</td>
<td>15.3 ***</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-dominant pleasure expressions</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>97.1 ***</td>
<td>68.6</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-dominant orgasm</td>
<td>51.4 ***</td>
<td>70.0 ***</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>44.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-variates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racial composition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White dominant/white</td>
<td>74.3</td>
<td>84.3</td>
<td>77.1</td>
<td>18.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-dominant minority dominant/minority</td>
<td>17.1 *</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White dominant/minority</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-dominant minority dominant/white</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-variates</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant teen</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>34.3 ***</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-dominant teen</td>
<td>11.4 **</td>
<td>52.9</td>
<td>37.1</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateur video</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>1.4 **</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. video duration (minutes)</td>
<td>18.4 (3.3–42.8)</td>
<td>17.5 (4.4–49.2)</td>
<td>16.2 (2.7–51.5)</td>
<td>17.4 (2.7–51.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avg. # of views (millions) (min-max)</td>
<td>3.0 (1.8–7.0) ***</td>
<td>7.8 (5.1–19.1) ***</td>
<td>23.4 (4.5–116.7)</td>
<td>11.4 (1.8–116.7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Two tailed t-tests of significance indicate difference from the “Heterosexual” category: * p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001

scholars as humiliating (Cowan & Dunn, 1994; Jensen, 1998), such as ejaculation in the mouth or on the face of one’s sexual partner, were considerably more common in the m/f sub-sample. Such acts were performed in about one quarter to one third of the videos in m/f clips, compared with 5% to 16% of the videos in m/m videos (the difference was only statistically significant for ejaculation in the mouth: t = 4.681; p < .001). Naturally, acts involving ejaculation did not occur at all in the f/f videos.

While same-sex videos were more likely to include physical aggression, they were also much more likely to include mutual physical affection and pleasure displays by non-dominant partners. These pleasure displays included smiling, moaning, and specific affirmative verbal indications (e.g. “yes” or “this feels good”). Physical affection was present in all but one of the videos in the f/f sample (t = 11.830; p < .001) and almost three quarters of the videos in the m/m sample (t = 5.572; p < .001), compared with less than 30% of the videos in the m/f sample. Affection displays were also more prominently featured in the same-sex videos in terms of scripts and plots. This is especially true for f/f videos, which portrayed particularly lengthy affection displays, comprising more than 15% of the total video timespan in the average clip, compared with only about 2% of the time in the average m/f video.

As for pleasure displays by non-dominant partners, differences between the m/f and the same-sex samples were particularly evident in terms of reaching or portraying a climax. While only 11.4% of the women in the m/f sub-sample reached (or portrayed reaching) a climax, more than half of the non-dominant men in the m/m sub-sample reached a climax (t = 5.608; p < .001) and 70% of the non-dominant women in the f/f sub-sample also reached or performed a climax (t = 8.721; p < .001). Models 3–5 of Table 2 demonstrate that these differences in affection, pleasure and satisfaction were all statistically significant and substantial (with odds ratios ranging from 18.49 to 95.93 for the f/f sub-sample), even when controlling for other factors. Indeed, these differences in affection
Table 2. Predictors of aggression, affection, and pleasure displays (logistic regression; n = 210).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Heterosexual” (male/female)</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Gay” (male/male)</td>
<td>3.14* (2.19)</td>
<td>11.29* (2.11)</td>
<td>6.14*** (3.90)</td>
<td>2.89* (2.10)</td>
<td>7.20*** (3.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Lesbian” (female/female)</td>
<td>2.82* (1.97)</td>
<td>4.28 (1.21)</td>
<td>95.93*** (5.56)</td>
<td>30.52*** (3.71)</td>
<td>18.49*** (5.47)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Controls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th></th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White dominant with White non-dominant</td>
<td></td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority dominant with Minority non-dominant</td>
<td>0.64 (–0.66)</td>
<td>0.46 (–0.71)</td>
<td>0.53 (–1.07)</td>
<td>0.66 (–0.64)</td>
<td>0.57 (–0.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White dominant with Minority non-dominant</td>
<td>1.27 (0.33)</td>
<td>1.54 (0.37)</td>
<td>1.49 (0.50)</td>
<td>1.07 (0.08)</td>
<td>0.94 (–0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minority dominant with White non-dominant</td>
<td>0.31 (–1.10)</td>
<td>1.11 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.48 (–0.94)</td>
<td>0.33 (–1.60)</td>
<td>1.11 (0.15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th></th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dominant teen</td>
<td>0.61 (–0.80)</td>
<td>0.34 (–0.89)</td>
<td>1.70 (0.65)</td>
<td>1.05* (–2.27)</td>
<td>1.01 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-dominant teen</td>
<td>1.31 (0.60)</td>
<td>0.95 (–0.06)</td>
<td>0.57 (–1.13)</td>
<td>2.33 (1.51)</td>
<td>0.69 (–0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amateur video</td>
<td>1.34 (0.41)</td>
<td>1.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>2.35 (1.25)</td>
<td>0.52 (–1.05)</td>
<td>0.25 (–1.46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video duration (minutes)</td>
<td>1.02 (1.14)</td>
<td>0.96 (–0.61)</td>
<td>1.03 (1.64)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.14)</td>
<td>1.07*** (3.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year uploaded to website</td>
<td>0.93 (–0.95)</td>
<td>1.12 (0.79)</td>
<td>1.02 (0.18)</td>
<td>0.99 (–0.14)</td>
<td>1.08 (0.99)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All coefficients are odds ratios, with two-tailed t-statistics presented in the parentheses * p < 0.05 ** p < 0.01 *** p < 0.001

and pleasure responses were clearly more pronounced than differences in aggression between the three sub-samples.

Discussion and Implications

Our study is the first to systematically compare expressions of aggression and affection/pleasure across three subcategories of mainstream online pornographic videos featuring various sexual dyads. We found that visible aggression (see Bridges et al., 2010) was present in no more than one quarter of the videos in each type of dyad, while portrayals of clearly non-consensual aggression (see McKee, 2005) were much less frequent. We also found considerably higher levels of visible and non-consensual aggression and higher levels of pleasure displays in m/m and f/f clips, relative to m/f clips. Given pornography’s influence in shaping sexual practices and norms (Gurevich et al., 2017), these findings have implications for cultural and interpersonal sexual scripts. They may indicate a potential expansion of the traditional sexual script.

Some scholars have argued that pornography is, at its core, violence of men against women, since it sexualizes aggression and portrays women as sexual objects who ostensibly respond favorably to being humiliated by men (Dines, 2010; Whisnant & Stark, 2004). Our findings challenge these claims. First, f/f clips had the highest amount of verbal aggression, as well as various forms of physical aggression, such as spanking and choking. Second, m/m clips featured the highest amount of both visible and non-consensual aggression. Below we explore possible explanations for these surprising findings and discuss their potential implications.

Why is Aggression More Frequent in Same-Sex Videos?

Videos featuring two women contained more overall and verbal aggression than videos from the m/f subsample. These findings contradict the expectations laid out by studies that highlight pornography as a site and cause of violence by men against women (Dines, 2010; Dines & Jensen, 2004; MacKinnon, 2018), and by sexual scripts that frame women’s sexuality in terms of receptivity and passivity (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012). More specifically, the relatively high prevalence of aggression in f/f videos challenges the bifurcated understanding of sexuality in the context of pornography, where men’s sexuality is regarded largely in terms of domination and exploitation and women’s sexuality in terms of emotionality and egalitarianism. We offer three possible explanations for these counterintuitive results.

The first potential explanation refers to the role of an assumed heterosexual male viewer. Scholars have suggested that “lesbian” or “girl-on-girl” mainstream online pornography capitalizes on the erotic value that heterosexual male viewers attach to lesbianism (Whitley, Childs, & Collins, 2011; Yost & Thomas, 2012). In this view, online mainstream pornography, including the “lesbian” subgenre, often reflects hetero-male fantasies about female sexuality and sexual performativity (Vincent, 2016; Webber, 2012). Producers of “girl-on-girl” videos, which presumably target heterosexual male consumers, may subsequently mirror the scripts found in mainstream heterosexual scenes to appeal to heterosexual males (Morrison & Tallack, 2005; Webber, 2012). Consequently, f/f clips may be depicting aggression in order to abide by the “structural law” of asymmetrical power dynamics central to the mainstream heterosexual script (see Young, 2017). While these are plausible assumptions, they do not sufficiently account for the substantially higher rate of visible aggression in f/f videos.

A second, complementary, explanation for the preponderance of aggression in the lesbian clips builds on the first and refers to the eroticization of female violence. Similar to the erotic value of lesbianism in hetero-male fantasies (Webber, 2012), the “catfight” is a cultural phenomenon resulting from the erotic value attached to female-on-female aggression both
on- and off-screen (Reinke, 2010; Tambunan, 2018). Through its use of sexualized animal metaphor (see Vaes, Paladino, & Puvia, 2011), the catfight narrative reframes women’s aggression toward one another as sexy entertainment for men (Reinke, 2010). It has thus become a staple of North American mainstream pornography (Reinke, 2010).

Finally, we would like to suggest another possible explanation that acknowledges potential changes in how both men and women think about the violence of men against women. This kind of violence has become less acceptable as feminist conceptions of patriarchal power relations and the illegitimacy of violence in intimate partner relationships have been gaining social acceptance, at least in affluent societies (Messing, Ward-Lasher, Thaller, & Bagwell-Gray, 2015; Pierotti, 2013). These ideas, in turn, may be increasingly permeating the mainstream pornography industry, rendering men’s violence toward women during sexual acts a practice of declining legitimacy and popularity. Conversely, aggression between two women may be perceived by many (men and women alike) as less threatening, as it does not contain in it the traditional notions of patriarchal power imbalance and the potential to turn into an abusive relationship outside of the (virtual) bedroom. Regardless of these explanations, the substantially higher rates of aggression in f/f videos remain unexpected and, once again, challenge the perception that men’s violence against women is the defining feature of current mainstream online pornography.

More instances of visible, and substantially more non-consensual, aggression in the m/m videos compared to m/f clips indicate that gendered hierarchies of sexuality are not restricted to heterosexual scripts; “straight-acting” gay masculinity and a rejection of the feminine are also a prominent feature of gay scripts (Kendall & Martino, 2012). This pattern emerges most clearly in videos tagged with phrases such as “big dick”, with these videos often displaying aggressive behavior on the part of the “top” with the (presumably) larger penis toward the “bottom”.

These findings serve to problematize “gay affirmative” conceptualizations of m/m pornography, which, perhaps disproportionately, focus on its ability to provide sexual minority men with a validation of their sexual desires (Tucker, 1991) and to encourage safer sex practices (Watney, 1997). The comparative preponderance of aggression in mainstream m/m clips indicates a potential assimilation – if not exaggeration – of gay masculinity into hegemonic masculinity.

The confluence of different- and same-sex scripts into overarching scripts of desire [e.g. sexualizing “butch/femme” (Randazzo et al., 2015) or “top/bottom” (Kendall, 2004) dichotomies in the same way as sexualizing power differentials between men and women] may partially explain the aggression we found in same-sex clips. Indeed, we found that in all three categories we analyzed, the dominant partner was generally more masculine and more likely to be the aggressor, while the nondominant partner was more feminine and more likely to experience aggression. Finally, perhaps the aforementioned higher rates of aggression in m/m and f/f videos are connected to the absence of “traditional” patriarchal power imbalances, leading video creators to frame aggression in more performative terms.

Why are There More Displays of Affection and Pleasure in Same-sex Videos?

Affection and pleasure displays in online mainstream pornography are a large component of sexual scripts but have previously been discussed mainly in terms of dominant male sexual pleasure (van Doorn, 2010). Our findings draw attention to acts of affection, pleasure displays, and displays of climax among non-dominant partners. Most notably, displays of climax among non-dominant partners were performed in a majority of the f/f and m/m clips, compared with a small minority of the m/f clips. The results for f/f videos are in line with recent work on sex between women, suggesting a higher frequency of orgasm when women have sex with women, compared to when they have sex with men (Frederick, John, Garcia, & Lloyd, 2018; Willis, Jozkowski, Lo, & Sanders, 2018). Affection and pleasure displays may also reflect broader cultural expectations of women’s “nurturing” and “soft” sexuality (Segal, 1998). Despite the performative aspect of these pleasure displays, Pornhub’s 2017 “Year in Review” reveals that “lesbian” was the top term searched by women viewers (who make up 29% of the site’s visitors), and “lesbian scissoring” was the second most commonly searched term. The report also noted that women viewed the “Lesbian” category 197% more than men did in 2017 (Pornhub, 2018).

Our findings about the more frequent portrayal of affection and mutual pleasure in f/f videos may help explain these tendencies. Such content is likely a drawing feature for women, regardless of sexual orientation, as they may find it hard to empathize with and get aroused by m/f videos where affection toward women and women’s seemingly authentic pleasure are substantially less prominent.

Finally, when looking at the results for m/m clips, the simultaneity of high rates of non-dominant pleasure displays and non-consensual aggression is particularly puzzling. These seemingly contradictory patterns may be partially explained by scripts specific to gay “narrative conventions” (Escoffier, 2003) that include dichotomized active/passive roles (Mercer, 2004). Kippax and Smith (2001) argued for the “possibility of intimacy and mutual pleasure within fantasies of domination and submission,” (p. 413) a sexual reality in which “active passivity” is also a possibility in m/m sexual interactions. Others have discussed how “getting pleasure from giving pleasure” (Dangerfield, Smith, Williams, Unger, & Bluthenthal, 2017), and bottoms’ “forbidden pleasure” (Carballo-Díéguez & Bauermeister, 2004), are components of the gay script and of the sexual power dynamics between men. However, scholars such as Kendall (2004) see such discussions as a moot point, since the distinction between “top” and “bottom” eroticizes hierarchy and objectifies the bottom.

The preponderance of simultaneous aggression alongside affection and pleasure displays in same-sex videos challenges and complicates suppositions that while m/f pornographic
sexual scripts sexualize violence (Dines, 2010), same-sex scripts are often geared toward sexual empowerment (Ryberg, 2013). This simultaneity also challenges assumptions about the relationship between gender and power, which are central to theorizing about traditional heterosexual scripts predicated on male dominance and female submission (Sanchez, Fetterolf, & Rudman, 2012), particularly in the pornography industry (Dines, 2010; Whisnant & Stark, 2004). For example, in the f/f clips, the dominant sexual script of women as passive, nurturing, and loving is both threatened and validated by an aggressive female who embodies a “masculinized” sexuality while desiring to please the non-dominant partner. The presence of affection in these same clips also challenges arguments that aggression is primarily designed to maintain the patriarchal status quo and women’s subjugation (see Reinke, 2010; Tambunan, 2018).

Our findings may have significant impacts for some sexual minorities, whose pornography use can play a role in fostering a sense of community (Lipton, 2012). For instance, to the extent that pornography use is higher among gay men (Adams-Thies, 2015), it is possible that the scripts in mainstream m/m scenes like those we analyzed have a notable impact on MSM’s “real-life” encounters. Similarly, if lesbian communities have a unique relationship to pornography, as Packard and Schraibman (1994) suggested, it is possible that scripts, even in mainstream f/f clips which may not be explicitly produced for sexual minority women, may impact their own sexual scripts in distinct ways. That is, given the ambiguity surrounding both female actors’ pleasure in – and intended audiences of – mainstream f/f pornography, sexual minority women viewers may experience barriers to “decoding” sexual scripts, relative to heterosexual women (see Chadwick, Raisanen, Goldey, & van Anders, 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study had several limitations, which we hope future work in this area can address. While this study did not specifically sample for “kink” or “BDSM” videos, a small subset of videos categorized as “gay” and “lesbian” were tagged as “kink” (n = 5) and/or “fetish” (n = 19). Previous research has reported some intersections between kink/BDSM and same-sex pornographies (Cruz, 2016; Fritz & Paul, 2017), which may complicate the meanings of aggression. Kink pornography often does display aggression, but its underlying premise is to foreground consent, and negotiate power and risk through “play” (Stardust, 2014), rather than uphold misogynistic or heteronormative understandings of gender, sexuality, and power. Kink and BDSM often operate according to a “politics of perversion” (Cruz, 2016), which seeks to destabilize normative expressions of sexuality. Such “politics” challenge the sexual norms governing which forms of consensual sex are permitted or celebrated, and which are banned or decried. More importantly, they challenge dominant understandings of zero-sum power dynamics (LeFranc, 2018). Future work could use the politics of perversion as a theoretical lens to compare aggressive content and patterns across subgenres of pornography, with attention to the role of differing sexual scripts for gender and sexual power dynamics.

Future qualitative research could also expand on how aggression and affection in pornography are gendered, and the role of pornography in (re)shaping gendered sexual scripts connecting dominance, aggression, and affection. Such research could examine whether users respond differently to “intra-gender” aggression and affection than to “inter-gender” aggression and affection, exploring our proposition that the former may be perceived as less threatening and having the potential to develop into intimate partner violence in viewers’ lives. Specifically, researchers could examine potential differences in how viewers decode affection and pleasure displays despite aggression, as well as affection and/or pleasure displays because of aggression. Reception studies could also consider the extent to which users actively “disorder and deconstruct” (Gurevich et al., 2017) imagery combining aggression and affection.

Finally, since most of the existing research focuses on m/f and m/m pornography, future studies could systematically compare sexual scripts pertaining to aggression, affection, and pleasure between mainstream pornography featuring sex between two women and lesbian- or queer-produced pornography. For instance, researchers could examine how viewers of varying gender and sexual identities decode both aggression and affection in mainstream versus lesbian- or queer-produced f/f pornography.

Declaration of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References


