

Are Variations in Gender Equality Evident in Pornography? A Cross-Cultural Study

Dana Rei Arakawa

Corey Flanders

Elaine Hatfield, PhD

Department of Psychology, University of Hawai'i at Manoa

Abstract

In the 1960, radical feminist groups and scholars published stinging critiques of common “male-centric” views of sexuality and sexual practices. With the observation that “The personal is political” they offered up an analysis of popular pornography, traditions as to who initiates sexual encounters, the existence/nonexistence of foreplay, common (man-on-top) sexual positions, and the like. Some even said such activities should be abolished (See Firestone, 1970; Solanis, 1971; Dworkin, 1985). Today, the role of sexuality and more specifically the role of pornography in women’s lives is perhaps the biggest debate among feminists. The majority of research on pornography focuses on its misogynistic biases and maladaptive effects; while the minority of literature contends that pornography can be respectful of both sexes, egalitarian, and thus be empowering for women. As yet, however, there is very little research to test these compelling hypotheses.

This paper was designed to show that in societies where men and women are relatively equal in status versus unequal in status different kinds of pornography flourishes. To test this notion, pornography from three countries was selected for comparison based on their ranking on the United Nation’s Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) published in the 2007/2008 Human Development Report: Norway (1), United States (15), and Japan (54).

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the hypothesis that the most popular Norwegian pornography (in magazines) would depict women in more empowered positions than would pornography from the United States and Japan, consistent with their ranking on the GEM. As predicted, in Norway the pornographic models did appear to be more empowered than did the

models in the U. S. and Japan. This finding could be attributed to the much wider variety in Norwegian pornography, e.g. greater variation in the women's age, weight, and body positioning. However, there were no significant differences in the extent to which models in the three countries appeared in demeaning positions. In subsequent research we hope to test the hypothesis that pornographic depictions will have an impact on women's actual empowerment/disempowerment—especially in the realm of sexuality.

Keywords: Pornography, gender equality, cross-cultural, empowerment, feminism

Are Variations in Gender Equality Evident in Pornography? A Cross-Cultural Study

In 1988, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon promoted civil rights anti-pornography legislation (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988) under the assumption that pornography diminishes gender equality by promoting an image of women as inferior to men. Several empirical studies have examined the claim that pornography disempowers women, fostering sexual aggression (Baron & Strauss, 1989; Linz, 1989) and potentially generating and reinforcing sexual discrimination (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988). Conversely, the minority body of feminist literature contends that pornography can have positive effects and potentially be empowering for women (Strossen, 1999). However, very little empirical analysis of the relationship between gender equality and the characteristics of pornography, or the impact of powerful/subservient women in pornography and gender equality exists (Baron, 1990). In addition, the sparse research that does exist was generally conducted in the United States or the West. This is a general problem in American psychology, of course (Arnett, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to investigate whether pornographic images reflect cross-cultural differences in gender equality. In subsequent research, we would examine whether such cultural differences in depictions have an impact on women's empowerment and disempowerment.

Cross-cultural variations in gender equity

According to social structural theory, the division of labor by gender and the gender disparity in power create psychological gender differences (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Applying this theory to sexuality, men are historically more self-sufficient and dominant, able to use women

for casual relationships without commitment (Eagly & Wood, 1999), while women have less power and earning potential than men and must seek long-term, committed relationships with powerful men to obtain protection and resources (Eagly, Wood, & Johanssen-Schmidt, 2004). An unequal distribution of power by gender promotes the idea that women are less valuable than men. One of the consequences of this disparity is the rendering of women into objects whose sole purpose is to satisfy male sexual desires (Hekma, 2008). Thus, social structural theory would predict that gender differences in power create gender differences in sexual attitudes, feelings, and experiences (Petersen & Hyde, 2010).

While men tend to have more power than women in most parts of the world, the magnitude of this difference in power varies across cultures. It seems reasonable to predict that more egalitarian societies (as compared to countries with larger power differentials) should have smaller gender differences in men's and women's sexuality (Petersen et al., 2010).

To assess the extent of gender equality in a given society, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) developed a gender empowerment measure (GEM). The GEM ranks a total of 93 countries on a composite index measuring gender inequality in three dimensions of empowerment: 1) economic participation and decision-making; 2) political participation; and 3) decision-making and power over economic resources (UNDP, 2007). We would predict that countries with higher scores on the GEM, reflecting greater equality, would tend to display smaller gender differences in sexuality than would less egalitarian societies (Petersen et al., 2010). Consistent with this prediction by social structural theory, Eagly and Wood (1999) found a negative correlation between the magnitude of gender equality on the 1995 GEM and the magnitude of gender differences in mate preferences. The objective of the present

study is to continue this line of inquiry into the relationship between gender empowerment and sexuality by attempting to determine whether or not variations on gender equality have an impact on the type of pornography that is most popular in a given country. Specifically, we would predict that the higher a culture rates on the GEM, the more images of women in pornography would reflect a powerful status.

Pornography and the Disempowerment of Women

According to anti-pornography feminists, pornography both creates and perpetuates gender inequality through promoting a sexist ideology and discriminatory practices against women (Dworkin, 1985; MacKinnon, 1984, 1989; Baron, 1990). First, pornography promotes a sexist ideology by erroneously portraying women as inferior to men and as objects of male sexual gratification (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1982). Consequently, men learn to devalue and exploit women, having been indoctrinated by such anti-female propaganda (Brownmiller, 1975). The second critique by anti-pornography feminists is that pornography promotes discriminatory practices against women, violating their civil rights (Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988). Dworkin and MacKinnon state that the “The bigotry and contempt pornography promotes, with the acts of aggression it fosters, diminish opportunities for equality of rights in employment, education, property, public accommodations and public services” (1988, p. 33). This critique assumes that pornography is not just fantasy or simulation, but documented discriminatory acts against women with malign consequences.

Pornography and the Empowerment of Women

In opposition to the anti-pornography legislation proposed by MacKinnon and Dworkin, pro-sex and anti-censorship feminists created the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT) to

defeat the legislation (Duggan, Hunger, & Vance, 1985; Ellis, Jake, Hunter, O'Dair, & Tallmer, 1988). FACT argued against the legislation based on the following objections (Amicus Curiae Brief, 1984):

1. The language of the legislation is broad in scope and could easily be used to restrict sexually explicit materials that women find arousing and empowering;
2. The legislation disempowers women by conferring upon judges, not feminists, the power to decide which sexually explicit materials “subordinate” or “degrade” women;
3. Social science research does not support the legislation’s assumption that pornography harms women.

Indeed, consistent with FACT’s argument, most research has suggested that exposure to nonviolent pornography is unrelated to a sexist ideology (Baron, 1990). Padgett, Brislin-Slütz, and Neal (1989) found that attitudes towards women and women’s issues were not significantly related to exposure to nonviolent pornography. Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1988) were also unable to find a relationship between exposure to nonviolent pornography and either the tendency to sexually objectify women, or the belief in traditional sex roles.

In 1995, Nadine Strossen, then president of the American Civil Liberties Union, also argued against the censorship of pornography. Strossen claimed that censorship does not reduce violence against women, but actually endangers women’s rights by endorsing the stereotype of the helpless female victim. Indeed, Baron (1990) examined the relationship between circulation rates of soft-core pornographic magazines and gender equality in the 50 American states, finding that gender equality is actually higher in states with higher circulation rates of pornography. In support of the anti-censorship faction, Baron suggested that both pornography and gender

equality flourish in more politically tolerant societies that place fewer restrictions on sexually explicit speech and evidence greater commitment to equal rights.

The campaign against anti-pornography legislation relied heavily on the anti-censorship, rather than pro-sex, argument—and rightly so, given the lack of empirical data on the potentially empowering effects of pornography. The purpose of this study is to empirically weigh in on the theoretical debate on pornography by quantifying elements that would be considered empowering or disempowering in the pornographic images from three different countries: Norway, US, and Japan. The following hypothesis is evaluated: countries with greater gender equality, as rated by the UN, will have pornography that is more representative of empowered women and less representative of disempowered women than countries with a lower rank on the GEM. The question of impact such differences will have on viewers will have to await subsequent research.

Method

Sample

The unit of analysis is a still image of a single woman, collected from the popular pornography of Norway, the United States, and Japan. Sixty images from each country were selected, for a total of 180 images. In order to standardize the comparison between countries, only images with a single woman were added to the selection pool.

Images were selected from mainstream pornographic magazines and Internet websites, as well as from the portfolios of the most popular porn stars from each nation, in order to capture the most common depictions of women in pornographic images. Past research has supported the use of pornographic images from magazines and the Internet for content analysis (Malamuth &

Spinner, 1980; Matacin & Burger, 1987; Scott & Cuvelier, 1993, Gossett & Byrne, 2002).

Research assistants were trained to compile three pools of images from the mainstream pornography sources of each nation. From each national pool, 60 images were selected at random to compose the final sample of 180 pornographic images to be used for content analysis.

Measure

Two coding guides for disempowering and empowering factors were created to quantify the level of disempowerment and empowerment in each pornographic image. Prior content analyses of pornography have predominantly focused on identifying negative or disempowering factors (Dworkin, 1981; Cowan, Lee, Levy, & Snyder, 1988; Cowan and Dunn, 1994). Thus, the disempowerment coding guide was compiled from what past research has deemed demeaning or degrading towards women. The disempowerment scale is a 24-item measure, consisting of yes/no indicators to identify the presence of factors such as:

- The woman being bound and dominated, indicated by the use of props like leashes, collars, gags, or handcuffs;
- The woman being depicted as overly youthful or infantilized, indicated by the use of costumes designed to make her look childlike or young;
- The image focusing exclusively on a woman's sexualized body parts (Cowan et al., 1998), indicated typically by a full-frame shot of the breasts, butt, mouth or vulva, or if the woman's genitalia is spread open (Britton, 1999);
- The woman is positioned solely to satisfy the sexual desire of the man, without regard to her apparent comfort or pleasure, indicated by a contorted or unnatural pose, or if she is in a submissive position (e.g. on her knees gazing up at the camera);

- The image represents an idealized and unrealistic body type, with the woman being very thin or underweight, having unnaturally large breasts that appear to be surgically enhanced, or having skin unblemished by scars, stretch marks, or other “undesirable” characteristics.

With no prior research on empowering pornographic content to draw from, the 21-item empowerment scale was created using the inverse of many of the disempowerment factors. These anti-disempowerment indicators included whether the woman is physically *un*-restrained and in a natural pose, if she is *not* made to appear childlike through youthful costumes or facial expressions, or if the frame includes the woman’s entire body or at least her face. Other examples include whether the woman is of average or above average weight, whether she has a natural looking body (e.g. blemished skin including cellulite or wrinkles), and if she is in authoritative or at least neutral position (gazing down or directly at the camera).

The average effective inter-rater reliability of the disempowerment scale was $r' = 0.73$, and $r' = 0.70$ for the empowerment scale (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1984). The disempowerment and empowerment scales were negatively and minimally correlated ($r = -0.23$, $p = .002$), indicating that the scales were measuring two distinct phenomena. The non-correlation of the scales implies that pornographic images can be analyzed for both disempowering and empowering factors.

Procedure

The images were coded by 12 research assistants who attended a training session to familiarize them on the various indicators used in the scales. The research assistants were divided into four groups of three people each. Each of the four groups was assigned 90 images

to code (30 from Norway, 30 from the US, and 30 from Japan) on either the disempowerment or the empowerment scale; two teams coded the images using the disempowerment scale, and the other two used the empowerment scale, resulting in each image being coded on both scales.

Members of the teams independently coded the images, and then met as a group to address any discrepancies between their individual results and reach a consensus on each item. Thus, each team produced one coding of 90 images on a single scale. Positive indicators (“yes” responses) on this coding were summed, to yield a consolidated score for each of the 180 images (90 from each of two teams) that were compared between each country in a one-way ANOVA.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The mean disempowerment scores for Norway, the United States, and Japan were 7.03 ($SD=2.25$), 6.55 ($SD=1.35$), and 6.88 ($SD=1.89$), respectively. The mean empowerment score was 11.52 ($SD=1.79$) for Norway, 10.75 ($SD=1.91$) for the United States, and 10.60 ($SD=1.99$) for Japan, as represented in Figure 1. The pattern and direction of the mean empowerment scores support the hypothesis that countries with higher gender equality have pornography that is more empowering than less egalitarian countries.

Data Analysis

The consolidated mean scores on both scales were analyzed using a between-group ANOVA and additional Post Hoc tests. Contrary to the hypothesis, there was not a significant difference between the mean disempowerment scores for each country, $F(2, 177)=1.057$, $p=.35$. However, there was a significant main effect for country-based differences on the empowerment scale,

$F(2, 177) = 4.033, p = .019$. This result indicates that the empowerment scores do differ significantly between the countries. Use of the Scheffe Post Hoc test revealed a significant difference between Norway and Japan ($p = .032$), but not between the US and Norway or the US and Japan, as shown in Table 1. The results indicate that pornography in Norway, a country ranked first in gender equity among ninety-three countries, depicts women in a more empowering way than Japan, ranked 54 of 93 on the UN GEM.

Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this research was to test the hypothesis that countries with greater gender equality will have pornography that is less disempowering and more empowering than less egalitarian countries. Anti-pornography feminists contend that pornography creates and perpetuates sexist ideology and sexual discrimination—a claim refuted by anti-censorship feminists, who suggest that pornography may actually be associated with a tolerant political environment more favorable to gender equity than a sexually-restricted society (Baron, 1990).

The reaction against the anti-pornography campaign largely hinged on anti-censorship rhetoric, rather than a pro-sex argument. While several content analyses have focused on the negative aspects of pornography including the prevalence of racism (Cowan & Campbell, 1994), violence (Palys, 1986; Yang & Linz, 1990), and the exploitation of women (Cowan et al., 1988), no content analyses could be found on the potentially empowering aspects of pornography. For this reason, the present research sought to code pornography on two scales—disempowerment and empowerment—to empirically test the relationship between pornography and gender equity, and provide the first foray into a positive, empowering content analysis of pornography.

The finding that Norway, ranked highest by the UN in gender equity, has pornography that is more significantly more empowering than that of Japan is consistent with prior research supporting the argument of anti-censorship feminists, who argue that cultural values are reflected in pornography, which may in turn shape social attitudes. This result may be due to a greater social acceptance of adolescent and female sexuality in Nordic countries than in many other Western cultures (Treen, Spitznogle, & Beverfjord, 2004). Also, from the qualitative feedback provided by the research assistants and a review of the coding results for individual items, the significant difference in empowerment for Norway may lie in a greater variety of body types presented in mainstream Norwegian pornography. Whereas the bodies in American and Japanese pornography tend to conform to a “perfect” societal ideal—thin, young, flawless—the Norwegian pornography evidenced a greater variety of body type and, in the words of a research assistant, “more natural, less surgically-modified bodies.” Furthermore, while the preference for heavier set women tends to fall under the fetish category in American pornography, Norwegian pornography displayed a wider range of body types within the mainstream sample.

However, the results of the ANOVA failed to support the hypothesis that greater gender equity would result in less disempowering pornography, as no significant differences were found between countries on the disempowerment scale. This finding could be because mainstream pornography includes many images that are deemed by feminists to demean and disempower women. While Norwegian pornography offers a wider variety of body types—conforming less to a societal ideal that is disempowering to the average woman—there are still many images that do not promote a healthy respect for women.

The finding that Norwegian pornography was both 1) more empowering than Japanese pornography and 2) similarly disempowering as the pornography from the United States and Japan suggests that empowerment and disempowerment within pornography are different constructs. Indeed, the lack of correlation between the scales supports the idea that empowerment can be measured separately from disempowerment. While pornography may have disempowering features, this research supports the hypothesis that some pornography may also include empowering features that correlate with cross-cultural differences in gender equity. While the task of isolating and identifying all empowering features is beyond the scope of the present study, this research suggests that they do at least exist. A content analysis of pornography through an empowering lens is a new, pro-sex approach to complement the anti-censorship critique against opponents of pornography.

One limitation of this study is low inter-rater reliability (average $r' = 0.73$ for the disempowerment scale, and $r' = 0.70$ for the empowerment scale), which can be remedied in a replication by more extensive training of the coding assistants. In the present study, coders received a 1.5 hour training under the assumption that the coding was straightforward; post-analysis feedback solicited from the 12 coders revealed confusion about a few certain items that were independently resolved on a case-by-case basis. Closer examination of such items and a revision of the scales, in addition to more extensive training, would undoubtedly bolster inter-rater reliability and the validity of the measures.

The second major limitation of the study is the problem in resolving difficulties of cross-cultural comparison. Certain factors complicated an un-biased comparison: e.g., obscenity laws differ between the three nations. Specifically, the law on distribution of obscene materials in

Japan's penal code is typically interpreted as the illegality of showing penises and vaginas in pornographic images, which publishers circumvent by blurring certain parts (Japanese Penal Code, 1907). Another challenge in cross-cultural comparison arose in the difficulty of ascertaining what constitutes mainstream/bestselling pornography in Norway (Treen et al., 2004). While both Japanese and Norwegian nationals were consulted in the data collection process, future research would benefit from a more extensive collaboration with researchers from the cultures in comparison. Such collaboration is critical to developing an empirically sound cross-cultural research methodology that ascertains measurement equivalence (Matsumoto & Yoo, 2006) and appropriately identifies the cultural and universal components in question (Smith, Spillane, & Annus, 2006).

In conclusion, this research supports the work of anti-censorship feminists and opens an empirical pathway for the pro-sex approach. As Boyle (2000) argues, anti-pornography feminists may need to eschew the traditional argument that attempts to establish a causal relationship between pornography and violent behavior, and focus instead on how some pornography is produced and consumed in ways that are abusive to women. The present study shows that some pornography may present women in an empowered role and as possessing empowering attributes reflective of cross-cultural differences in gender equity. This result may perhaps lend support to the argument that not all pornography is inherently harmful.

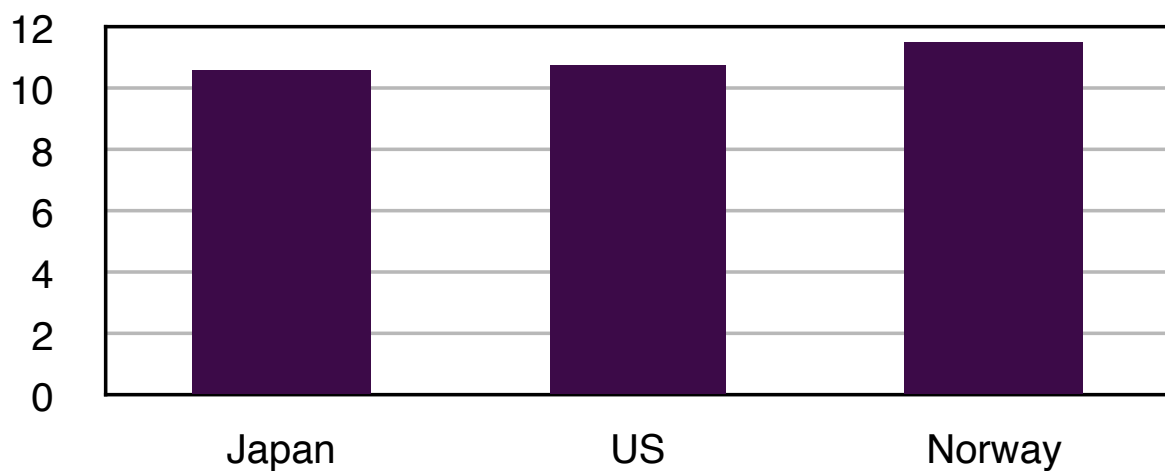


Figure 1. Mean empowerment scores for Japan, US, and Norway

Table 1

Scheffe Post Hoc Test: Empowerment Scores

Nation Comparison	Mean Difference	<i>p</i>
Norway - Unites States	.767	.089
Norway - Japan	.917*	.032
United States - Japan	.150	.910

Note. * The mean difference is significant at $p = .032$

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