

# Emerging Adults' Expectations for Pornography Use in the Context of Future Committed Romantic Relationships: A Qualitative Study

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**Abstract** Using qualitative content analysis from the written comments of 404 primarily heterosexual college students, we examined (1) their expectations for pornography use while married or in a committed long-term relationship and (2) variations by gender. Four prominent groups emerged. A majority of men (70.8 %) and almost half of women (45.5 %) reported circumstances (alone or with their partners) wherein pornography use was acceptable in a relationship and several conditions for, and consequences associated with, such use also emerged. Another group (22.3 % men; 26.2 % women) viewed pornography use as unacceptable because of being in a committed relationship whereas a third group (5.4 % men; 12.9 % women) reported that pornography use was unacceptable in any context or circumstance. A final group emerged of a few women (10.4 %) who stated that a partner's use of pornography was acceptable, but they did not expect to use it personally. Implications for relationship education among emerging adults and future research on pornography use within the context of romantic relationships are discussed.

**Keywords** Pornography · Expectations · Emerging adults · Romantic relationships · Gender

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## Introduction

Technological advances have contributed to widespread use of pornography, based, in part, on what Cooper (1998) identified as the “Triple A Engine” (accessibility, affordability, and anonymity). In the U.S., some 40 million individuals regularly visit pornographic websites and worldwide about 72 million view pornography on the Internet (Ropelato, 2007). With the increasing availability of cheaper and faster technology and continuing accessibility of free pornography online (Doran, 2008), the pornography industry has extended its reach across society.

Although pornography use occurs among all age groups, one group receiving increased attention is emerging adults (Goodson, McCormick, & Evans, 2000). Some studies examined how pornography use and acceptance influence risky sexual behaviors among them (e.g., Carroll et al., 2008). Much less attention is given to how pornography use affects their current romantic relationships (for an exception see Lambert, Negash, Stillman, Olmstead, & Fincham, 2012) or their expectations about use in future long-term committed relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore expectations for pornography use (alone and with a partner) in the context of future committed relationships (e.g., marriage) among a sample of emerging adult men and women. We also examined potential gender variations.

## Emerging Adults, Gender, and Pornography

Emerging adulthood is a distinct period between adolescence and adulthood in which a majority of individuals complete high school and attend college (Arnett, 2004). During this period, emerging adults prepare for long-term committed relationships like marriage by exploring and determining desirable qualities and characteristics of a future partner and shaping their expectations for future roles and responsibilities (Barry, Madsen,

Nelson, Carroll, & Badger, 2009). Although findings are mixed, pornography use is noted most frequently among this group (Buzzell, 2005).

Several studies on pornography use and acceptance reveal important gender differences, although much of this research focuses on individuals who identify as heterosexual, or include samples with few individuals identifying as sexual minorities. Most studies found that men view pornography more frequently than women (e.g., Carroll et al., 2008; Maddox, Rhoades, & Markman, 2011) perhaps because the majority of pornography is marketed towards men (Rimmer, 1984). Lopez and George (1995) found that men were more aroused and experienced greater enjoyment when watching sexually explicit materials with male strangers as opposed to female strangers. However, Lawrence and Herold (1988) found that women experienced more arousal and positive feelings about pornography in the presence of male partners than with female friends or mixed-sex groups. Recently, Paul and Shim (2008) found in a sample of 321 college students that both genders reported similar motivations for consuming pornography (e.g., improve mood, satisfy fantasies); yet, men reported their motives as more intense than did women.

Carroll et al. (2008) emphasized the need to understand why pornography consumption is acceptable. About half of the women in their study agreed that viewing pornography was an acceptable means of expressing sexuality, and some 20% who did not use pornography reported its use by others as acceptable. They concluded that “pornography should be regarded as much as [a] value stance or a personal sexual ethic as it is a behavioral pattern” (p. 24).

### Pornography Within the Context of a Relationship

Using pornography while in a relationship is linked with both positive and negative relationship effects. As with research on pornography use in general, studies on couple relationships focus primarily on heterosexuals (e.g., Daneback, Træen, & Månsson, 2009), and the positive influence of pornography use on couple relationships has received limited attention. Positive outcomes include increased sexual performance and positive attitudes toward sex (e.g., Mckee, 2007; Rogala & Tyden, 2003). More studies document the potential negative effects associated with pornography use on the nonconsuming partner (typically female) and the relationship. For example, Bergner and Bridges (2002) found that spouses of chronic pornography users reported feelings of betrayal, decreased intimacy and sexual activity, and feeling less understood by their partners. Pornography use is also associated with higher rates of infidelity and reports of less love and trust, perceiving the marriage as a constraint, and separation/divorce (e.g., Henline, Lamke, & Howard, 2007; Schneider, 2000; Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004; Zillman, 2000; Zillman & Bryant, 1988). Yet, some scholars argue that individuals do not view pornography use *per se* as a form of infidelity (e.g., Whitty,

2003). Consistent with this view, Guadagno and Sagarin (2010) found that undergraduate women perceived cybersex and phone sex with extradyadic partners as infidelity, whereas pornography use was not considered infidelity.

Even fewer have addressed how viewing pornography as a couple influences the relationship. In the only study we found, Maddox, Rhoades, and Markman (2011) showed that those indicating that they did not view pornography (alone or together) reported less negative communication and infidelity and greater relationship adjustment, dedication, and sexual satisfaction. They found no evidence of positive outcomes of viewing pornography.

### Current Study

In the current study, we attempted to advance the extant literature on pornography in multiple ways. First, limited research addresses the use of pornography, or expectations for its use, within the context of committed relationships. Given this lack of attention and the potential for both positive and deleterious consequences for couple relationships, we focused on expectations regarding pornography use in committed relationships. Second, although previous research highlights differences between men and women regarding pornography use, recent research shows that the gender gap may be decreasing regarding their perceptions of the acceptable use of pornography (Carroll et al., 2008). Thus, we hoped to provide insight on potential gender variations regarding expectations of pornography use. Third, we focused on a critical developmental period, emerging adulthood, when identity exploration occurs and people learn about relationships and establish behavioral patterns that they carry into later life (Barry et al., 2009). We focused on emerging adult college students for three reasons: (1) a majority of emerging adults attend college after high school (Arnett, 2004); (2) they are identified as being particularly accepting of pornography use (Buzzell, 2005; Carroll et al., 2008); and (3) pornography acceptance and use has been linked to sexual attitudes and number of sexual partners among this population (Carroll et al., 2008), which may have implications for the formation of and behavior within later long-term committed relationships.

## Method

### Participants

Of a possible 225 male participants, 202 responded to the questions of interest for this study. Male participants were then matched with a sample of female participants on race, age, and year in school. When multiple female participants could be matched to one male participant, the females were chosen randomly for inclusion. In some instances ( $n = 15$ ) participants did not match exactly; in these cases they were matched first on race,

then year in school, and then age. The final sample consisted of 202 men and 202 women.

On average, men were 19.33 years old ( $SD = 1.72$ ), and women were 19.32 years old ( $SD = 1.81$ ). Most (67.8 %) were White, followed by African American (13.4 %), Latino/a (11.9 %), Asian American (3.0 %), Pacific Islander (0.4 %), and Other (3.5 %). A majority of participants were underclassmen: 32.7 % were freshmen, 34.1 % were sophomores, 22.8 % were juniors, 7.2 % were seniors, and one man reported as Other. Most men (93.6 %) and women (97.5 %) identified as heterosexual. Forty percent of men and 53.5 % of women reported being involved in a romantic relationship.

## Procedure

The demographic and textual data used in this study come from a larger project on emerging adult romantic relationships. At the beginning of the project, which was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board, participants provided consent to participate. Participants received course credit for their involvement in the project, and those who chose not to participate were provided an alternative writing option. The sample consisted of undergraduate men and women at a large southeastern university enrolled in a family development course that fulfilled a liberal arts requirement. Participants completed three online surveys during the semester and demographic information was collected at the first survey. Qualitative data were obtained from participants' written comments about a series of open-ended questions regarding their expectations for future romantic relationships. These responses were confidential and only research assistants read them. The course instructors, from which the data were collected, did not view participants' responses. We focused on several questions regarding expectations for pornography use within the context of romantic/marital relationships:

1. What is your expectation about viewing sexually explicit materials (i.e., porn videos, pictures, websites) while married/in a relationship?
2. Are there circumstances where viewing these alone is okay? Why?
3. What about together? Why?

Although there are limitations inherent in collecting data using this method, it allowed participants time to answer each question in private and without constraints of a classroom or laboratory context. Others (e.g., Kaestle & Allen, 2011) used a similar method and sample to collect data on sensitive sexual topics.

One potential concern was participants responding in a socially desirable manner. Thus, we examined responses to the Marlow–Crowne Social Desirability Scale (Strahan & Gerbasi, 1972). The mean score was 5.23 ( $SD = 2.01$ , range = 0–10) for men and 5.39 ( $SD = 2.09$ , range = 0–10) for women, with higher score indicating more socially desirable responses. We concluded that these participants did not appear to be responding in a socially

desirable manner and did not differ statistically on this measure (analyses not shown).

Two assumptions were inherent in the questions we asked. These questions assume that participants expect to be involved in a monogamous long-term committed relationship at some point in their lives, and evidence suggests that most will marry sometime during adulthood (see Pasley & Olmstead, 2009). We acknowledge that not all emerging adults, including some of our participants, will aspire to such relationships. Also, we assumed that the reported expectations regarding pornography will be similar over time and when they are in a long-term committed relationship. However, we acknowledge that expectations are not static and can change with time, experience, and influence from romantic partners and others (e.g., friends, parents). We encourage readers to be cognizant of these assumptions and their limitations when interpreting our findings. Although a limited number of participants identified as sexual minorities, we included these responses in all analyses rather than limiting our sample to only individuals identifying as heterosexual.

## Measures

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on the written comments from participants (Krippendorf, 2004). We used a modified form of grounded theory methods with open, axial, and selective coding (LaRossa, 2005). Also, we allowed our knowledge of the extant literature on pornography use generally, and among emerging adults specifically, to guide our analysis. Consistent with our study purposes, we were interested in learning about differences between men and women as they describe their expectations for use of pornography within their committed relationships.

The open coding process began with four coders who independently reviewed and coded the first 20 male and first 20 female responses. The team then met to discuss similarities and differences among the written comments. Groups emerged from the responses to the study questions, and portions of responses were used as indicators of group membership. This process was repeated sequentially (independently coded another 20 male and 20 female responses and then met) until all responses were coded. Overall coder agreement was high; 86.6 % of responses were coded similarly among all coders. When disagreements arose (13.4 % of responses), discussion ensued regarding each response until agreement was reached. This process yielded three distinct groups that included men and women and 1 group of women only responses.

During open coding, LaRossa (2005) noted the need to consider the “degree of intensity” within groups. As responses were coded, some responses differed in their intensity. Indications of intensity arose out of the language participant's used within their responses to frame their expectations towards pornography use. For example, among respondents more accepting of pornography, some reported lower levels of acceptance (e.g., “I am not a

big fan...”), general acceptance (e.g., “I think it is okay...”), and enthusiastic acceptance (e.g., “Porn is absolutely acceptable...”).

During the axial coding phase, each group was critically examined for important within-group variation. Glaser (1978) identified several coding families within the axial coding process, one of which is labeled as “The Six C’s.” These include causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, and conditions. The *context* of participant’s written comments was specified by the questions to which they responded (pornography use while married/in a relationship). The context was further delineated as use alone or with one’s partner. Our focus was not to identify the causes of use but the conditions (“are there circumstances...”) of use. Importantly, we found considerable variation in men’s and women’s attention to the conditions and consequences for pornography use, which was made salient during the axial coding process.

During the selective coding phase, a theoretical story emerges (LaRossa, 2005). Here, we focused more on how our findings were consistent with and contrary to the existing literature on pornography use, particularly among emerging adult populations. Although we describe the coding process as linear, open, axial, and selective coding actually occurred simultaneously.

## Results

Three distinct storylines emerged that were consistent across men’s and women’s responses: *pornography use is acceptable while married/in a relationship*, *pornography use is not necessary/acceptable because I am in a committed relationship*, and *pornography use is not acceptable in any context*. Unique among female participants was a fourth group: *I don’t expect to use pornography, but my partner can*. A few written comments ( $n = 13$ ) did not fit with the dominant storylines that emerged and are not discussed here (see Table 1).

### Pornography Use Is Acceptable in the Context of a Relationship

A majority of male (70.8%), and just under half of female (45.5%) participants reported acceptance of the use of por-

nography while in a committed relationship. More men than women were in this group,  $\chi^2(1) = 26.46, p \leq .001$ . Not surprisingly, a great deal of variation existed among responses regarding the *intensity* of acceptance. As an example of greater endorsement, a 19-year-old man explained, “I think it is okay to view these materials whilst in a relationship, its natural and healthy. It would benefit a relationship if it was viewed together, if not, it is still perfectly fine to view alone.” Similar to other women, a 22-year-old woman stated, “I don’t feel like viewing sexually explicit materials is a big deal at all. Whether in a relationship or not, alone or together, I think it is fine. It may even enhance some relationships in a positive manner!”

Others voiced a more moderate acceptance of pornography use in a relationship context. Some responses (particularly from women) demonstrated hesitancy about expectations of use alone or together in a relationship, as evident in the following example of an 18-year-old woman who took a cautious approach to endorsing pornography use in her future relationship:

I feel that it is *somewhat* acceptable, but if he must watch porn, I would rather it be something with me and him in it. Viewing it alone once in a while just to get it out of your system is okay, because everyone has their own fantasies. Together would be a better situation, because then you can discuss what you saw and if you would like to add it into the sex life. [emphasis added]

Given the nature of the questions, disparities arose regarding acceptance of viewing pornography alone or together. Some held the expectation that viewing pornography alone, particularly if one’s partner was unaware, was unacceptable, but viewing it together as a couple was acceptable. As an example, one 22-year-old man stated:

Viewing porn can be potentially dangerous to a relationship. If viewed alone, without a partner knowing it can create secrets in the relationship and could be the first step to cheating. It could, however, be used as a way to spice up things in the bedroom if viewed together.

Notably, women more frequently commented about acceptance of conjoint use with their partner, as opposed to viewing pornography alone.

**Table 1** Expectations for pornography use in a committed relationship context ( $n = 404$ )

Group	Storyline	Men		Women		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
1	Acceptable while married/in a relationship	143	71	95	45	238	59
2	Not necessary/acceptable because I am in a committed relationship	45	22	54	26	99	24
3	Not acceptable in any context	11	5	25	13	36	9
4	I don’t expect to use, but my partner can	0	0	21	10	21	5
	No fit with other groups	3	2	10	5	13	3

My expectation about viewing sexually explicit materials while in a relationship is that it is okay to view them while together. If you were to view them alone, it would not be acceptable because the other person may be getting the wrong idea, that you are not interested in them anymore. Watching them together makes it acceptable because then you both know that you are there watching the same thing not with another person. (18-year-old woman)

Compared with women, men more frequently discussed the acceptability of viewing such materials alone, and they commented that viewing pornography with one's partner would be uncomfortable.

I think the viewing of sexually explicit materials comes as an aid when the partner is not wanting sex. Humans do have biological needs. I think it is okay alone, but it needs to be discreet. I wouldn't feel comfortable watching pornography with my partner, it would feel awkward. (21-year-old man)

#### *Conditions for Pornography Use*

Perhaps the largest differences between men and women in this group emerged when identifying the conditions for pornography use. Women more frequently discussed necessary conditions to make viewing acceptable, and they most frequently reflected "controlled use." Comments addressed the frequency of pornography viewing and avoiding addiction. As an example, an 18-year-old woman explained the difference between healthy use of pornography and addiction, when she said, "I think viewing sexually explicit materials is okay if in a normal, healthy way, not an everyday thing where someone is addicted." Another 18-year-old woman expressed similar expectations:

My expectation is for each of us to use proper discretion. Yes, I think it is okay for each of us to view them while we are alone or together. I think it is completely normal for someone to be turned on or sexually attracted to the way someone else looks, I admit that I even am at times. But at the same time there is a bold line of discretion when a harmless couple minutes turns into a couple hours habit.

Although men discussed conditions for controlled use less frequently, some men did address an expectation about frequency of use: "Viewing explicit material while married or in a relationship I believe, as long as it is kept under control, is completely acceptable" (19-year-old man).

Conditions also emerged regarding ensuring that use of pornography did not negatively affect the relationship or diminish feelings towards one's partner. For some women, overuse of pornography was perceived as deleterious to the relationship, such as decreased relationship stability:

I find watching sexually explicit materials while in a relationship is [sic] perfectly fine, unless one partner is getting more satisfaction from such materials than what they are receiving from their partner. This goes to say that if a partner starts to depend on the sexually explicit materials then both partners need to re-evaluate their relationship together and determine solutions. This also coincides with saying that people in a relationship can watch these materials alone or together if it does not jeopardize the stability of the relationship. (19-year-old woman)

Another expressed similar conditions, stating that:

Viewing sexually explicit materials while in a relationship or marriage is okay as long as it's not interfering with the relationship. People need privacy so it's okay to view it alone, some individuals need that fantasy. Also, viewing together is okay because it probably creates more connection in a relationship. Basically, it's okay to view explicit materials as long as it doesn't ruin a relationship or taking up time in a relationship. (20-year-old woman)

Regarding relational conditions, some men emphasized acceptable use of pornography in the event that one's sexual relationship was lacking in some manner.

I think it is okay as long as you don't look at them every day or too often. Yes, there are times when it is okay [to view pornography alone]. It is okay when one partner cannot get aroused. It is definitely okay to look together. You both are agreeing to do something. (18-year-old man)

While in a relationship I feel like there is no real need to watch porn but that does not make those forbidden because I feel like sexuality is human. There may be circumstances where viewing these alone may be okay if there was extreme sexual frustration. Also, viewing them together could be okay if the couple are both okay with it. (20-year-old man)

An overlapping condition among men and women in this group was ensuring that one's partner was "okay with" the use of pornography in the relationship. In this sense, one's partner serves a gatekeeping role, with men more frequently discussing the need to obtain approval from their partners before they felt that it was okay to view pornography, alone or together. As an example, one 19-year-old man expressed:

I feel like it would be up to your partner whether it is appropriate or not to watch sexually explicit materials while married or in a relationship. I personally feel it is ok to view these on your alone time, and I feel like it is going to happen regardless. Viewing these images together is also based upon the couple. I feel like, if both partners feel that

it is fine to watch them together and they are both into that kind of thing, I think its fine.

A 20-year-old woman showed a similar expectation, when she said:

Personally, I don't believe it's bad or it's good. Sexually explicit material simply shows human sexuality put into action. One partner or the other can view it as long as both consent to the sexually explicit material. However, it should not take away from the overall passion of the relationship, and if it does then it has become excessive.

Finally, a less prominent but overlapping condition that emerged among men and women pertained to viewing pornography alone. A few mentioned that, in the event partners were away from each other for extended periods or were in a long-distance relationship, individual use was acceptable.

If a couple has a long distance relationship then it may be okay for each person to view these materials on their own. Viewing these explicit materials together should not be done; both partners are present to fulfill each other's needs so there would be no need for this. (20-year-old woman)

My expectation about viewing sexually explicit material while in a relationship should be a decision that is completely mutual. I personally believe that during certain circumstances viewing these kinds of materials would be perfectly fine. I feel this way because when loved ones are far apart, the loneliness and sexual desire may reach frustrating peaks for both partners. Maybe by viewing this explicit material these urges may be somewhat satisfied, in [a] semi-respectable fashion. (21-year-old man)

### *Consequences of Pornography Use*

For this group of men and women, most of the comments about the consequences of pornography use were positive. A majority of the comments centered on relationship enhancement as a result of introducing the use of sexually explicit materials into the relationship. Whereas women tended to focus more on conditions for use, men commented more frequently on positive outcomes associated with viewing pornography. Most frequent were comments about enhancing the sexual relationship by adding “spice” or “a spark” to the relationship, using pornography as a teaching aid to learn new sexual techniques or positions, and introducing novelty to the couple's sexual encounters.

Viewing these materials could help the relationship. A circumstance in which you can view these alone is if you want to surprise your loved one with a new move that you couldn't think of. To watch it together can help you think of another way to have sex, like coming up with different positions. (18-year-old man)

I do not see any harm in viewing explicit materials in any circumstance. It is normal and gives the individual ideas to make sex more interesting. It is okay to watch them together or alone because, once again, it helps excite the relationship when someone brings something new to the bedroom. (23-year-old man)

Although less frequent, some women also discussed the positive effects of viewing sexually explicit materials within the relationship. One 21-year-old explained, “Viewing sexually explicit materials while married or in a relationship can be helpful. I think that it can be used as a learning tool for [the] inexperienced or used for ideas.”

### *Pornography Use and Infidelity*

Several participants in this group commented that pornography use was not considered infidelity. Interestingly, some also discussed pornography use more as an alternative to infidelity. As an example, a 19-year-old woman stated, “I do not really care when it comes to viewing sexually explicit materials. I would rather them do that than go around and messing around with another woman.” Alternatively, an 18-year-old man said:

There is nothing wrong with viewing sexually explicit materials while in a relationship because it is just a form of entertainment. Women may see it as cheating, but it's only a way of passing time really, no action is being taken and cheating involves action.

### *Language*

Contrary to other groups that emerged in the study, several men and women in this group used language that suggested pornography use was “natural” and a part of “human nature.” For example, “I see nothing wrong with watching porn videos while in a marriage or committed relationship. Viewing them alone is perfectly normal and healthy, and viewing them together can always spice things up in the bedroom” was offered by a 21-year-old man. An 18-year-old woman expressed similar sentiments on the “humanness” of viewing explicit materials:

My opinion of viewing sexually explicit materials while married/in a relationship is that it is acceptable. I believe that viewing them alone in any circumstance is okay, it is human nature to want to explore both our bodies and other people's. Even when with another person, viewing things like porn is, in my opinion, okay.

### *Pornography Use Is Not Necessary/Acceptable While in a Relationship*

Several male (22.3 %) and female (26.2 %) participants had a shared storyline, stating that the use of pornography was not



necessary or acceptable *because of* the relationship context. They reasoned that pornography was not needed when a committed romantic partner was available to fulfill sexual needs. No significant difference were found in the frequency with which men or women were categorized into this group,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.08$ ,  $p = .30$ .

Although we intentionally specified the context for pornography use, participants in this group expressed that it was because they were in a relationship that using pornography was not acceptable. As noted, a common reason for non-use was that they expected their romantic partner to fulfill their sexual needs. For example, a 19-year-old woman said, “I believe that viewing any type of porn is unnecessary, especially when you are in a committed relationship. In my opinion, if you have an emotional and sexual relationship, there is no need to resort to watching porn.” Typical of men’s responses in this group, a 19-year-old expressed a similar sentiment:

I think viewing sexually explicit materials while in a relationship isn’t right because there shouldn’t be a reason to be watching other men or women do sexual acts while you’re with somebody else. The whole relationship should not be based on sex, but you can have sexual acts with your [significant] other so you should not be watching videos.

Integral to this storyline was the potential damage (consequence) that pornography use could inflict on one’s partner or the relationship. For example, an 18-year-old man commented on the negative individual and relational influences, saying:

Sexually explicit material should not be in a marriage or a relationship. That adds additional stress to be perfect or compare yourself to the people that your partner is fantasizing about. You shouldn’t view them even together, because sometime down the road it will cause problems whether it be addiction, jealousy, or infidelity.

Although both men and women expressed concern for potential relationship harm, alarm arose more frequently among women regarding personal inadequacy associated with their partner’s use of pornography. For example, a 21-year-old woman said:

Neither do I plan nor will [I] allow the watching of explicit materials to go on in my relationship, together or alone. I don’t have the desire to watch porn or look at magazines. As a woman, I think if my boyfriend and/or husband wanted to watch or look at porn, I would probably wonder if I am enough. But, I don’t have a problem with making videos or taking pictures with my husband, as a good compromise to the situation.

Infidelity was discussed by a few men and women. In these instances, they reported similar sentiments that using pornography while in a relationship was considered to be or was similar to infidelity.

I don’t think viewing sexually explicit material while in a relationship is okay at all, whether alone or together. If my boyfriend needed to view sexually explicit material to get pleasure, I would interpret it as him being dissatisfied with me. I find that a man who views porn is similar to [a] man choosing to engage in sexual activities with another woman. (19-year-old woman)

Viewing sexually explicit materials while being married or in a relationship is cheating in a sense because the viewer(s) isn’t being faithful to that one person. It’s almost as if they need other people to make them sexually aroused. I don’t see why anyone should feel the need to view these materials because they aren’t in a relationship with the people in the porn videos, pictures, or websites, and that’s just inappropriate. (19-year-old man)

#### *Pornography Use Is Acceptable for Others*

A distinct variation emerged among this group during the coding process. Although these men and women were opposed to pornography use within their relationships, several women and a few men (38.9 % and 20 % of this group, respectively) explained that pornography use was acceptable for others in relationships. For example, a 19-year-old woman reflected:

My expectation, personally, would be to not view sexually explicit materials while married or in a relationship. I would definitely not do this and if my partner suggested it or wanted to I would probably then realize that he is not the person for me. I would never view them alone either. But as for other couples viewing it or other people viewing it alone I have no objections. I believe that that is their business and I have no room to judge or tell them what to do. It is their life and they can lead it as they see fit.

#### *Pornography Use Is Not Acceptable in Any Context*

A small minority of men (5.4 %) and significantly more women (12.9 %) reported an expectation that regardless of the context, relationship or otherwise, pornography use was unacceptable,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.98$ ,  $p = .014$ . Perhaps not surprising, those in this group used value-laden language to write about their expectations about pornography use. For example, a 21-year-old man stated, “Pornography should never be viewed in or out of a relationship. It is foul and dehumanizing.” Similarly an 18-year-old woman expressed, “I think porn is disgusting. I would never view it at all, ever. Why is there even a need to watch it?!”

For some, pornography use was strictly forbidden based on moral and religious standards, which seemed to influence expectations for non-use in general and in relationships, specifically. As an example, an 18-year-old man said, “God says not to view pornographic images so I choose not to and the woman [I] choose

to spend the rest of my life with won't watch them either." Similarly, a 20-year-old woman discussed how the use of pornography countered her religious beliefs:

I believe that viewing sexually explicit materials in general is wrong. Viewing these materials while in a relationship I consider cheating to an extent. I don't believe that viewing these materials in anyway, whether it be alone or together, is okay because this is what I believe with my religion. I believe that this goes against my moral beliefs.

One important aspect of the storyline that emerged from this group was concern for potential negative effects on the individual who views sexually explicit materials, such as unrealistic expectations for one's partner or sexual relations: "I believe that a healthy relationship diminishes the need for pornographic material. I don't believe that these materials should be viewed in any circumstance because it can set unrealistic expectations for partners and cause lust for unattainable relations" (19-year-old man). Similar comments were offered by women: "I do not agree with looking at sexually explicit materials ever. I believe that they give people, especially men, false ideas about women and sex. Most of these materials are very impersonal and sex should be a personal experience" (19-year-old woman).

#### I Don't Expect to Use Pornography, But My Partner Can

A few women (10.4 %), but no men, reported that although they did not have expectations for personal use while in a relationship, they were not opposed to their partner using pornography. Interestingly, this group of women viewed their male partner's use of pornography as stereotypical and inevitable.

I personally am not a big fan of viewing sexually explicit materials. I know that men are notoriously known for it, and it really wouldn't make or break a relationship for me if my partner viewed those types of websites. I, however, simply want nothing to do with it and would not view them together because I don't feel as if I should have to rely on something online to "satisfy" our sex lives. (20 years old)

Personally I find nothing special about explicit materials. I have never watched porn in any shape or form. But I do understand that men view this as a part of life. If my partner decides to watch that material while we are in our relationship or married I understand. But, hopefully while we are married it won't be a lot. I really can't ask my partner to change his ways and how he has fun and gets "entertained." He is entitled to do as he pleases just as long as he doesn't ask me to take part [in] it. I don't feel as if we need to watch that together. (18 years old)

Several women in this group commented on how their partner's pornography use was related to infidelity. Their comments

suggested that use was an acceptable alternative to infidelity. An 18-year-old participant put it best, when she said:

I have no problems if my partner was to look at sexual stuff while even married, but if he were to do any actions such as cheating then I have a problem with it. I have no interest in watching or seeing sexual stuff, but my future husband can watch all he wants alone. As long as he doesn't cheat on me.

## Discussion

Much variation exists among emerging adults' expectations regarding the role of pornography in their future committed romantic relationships. Additionally, important gender differences about their acceptance of pornography and conditions and consequences for use were found. The majority of men in our study (70.8 %) were accepting of pornography use, either alone, together, or both, within a relationship context. Although significantly more men than women offered a storyline of acceptance, almost half of women (45.5 %) were accepting of pornography within the relationship to some extent. These findings support those reported previously (Carroll et al., 2008) that women are fairly accepting of pornography use, albeit less so than men. We add to this finding by showing that acceptance is conditioned more so for women than men. Common among these conditions was controlled or moderate use so as to avoid addiction, and this supports previous research regarding women's concerns about partner's pornography abuse (Bridges, Bergner, & Hesson-McInnis, 2003). Such concerns are warranted given the ease with which pornography can be obtained (e.g., Cooper, 1998) and the increasing number of couples that report pornography addiction as a relationship difficulty in therapy (see Mitchell, Becker-Blease, & Finkelhor, 2005). Additionally, women seemed particularly cognizant of the need to protect the quality of the relationship and ensure that their partners maintained love, commitment, and respect towards them. These conditions are relevant in light of the reported negative effects of pornography use (e.g., Stack et al., 2004; Zillman, 2000).

Among the accepting group, another distinction emerged regarding the perceived positive consequences of pornography use, identified most frequently by men. This gender difference supports previous findings (Hald & Malamuth, 2008) that men report more positive consequences of viewing pornography than do women. Most of the comments focused on improving the quality of the sexual relationship and often expressed the view of adding "spice" to the relationship or bedroom. Specifically, men most frequently talked about adding spice by using pornography as an educational tool to learn new positions and techniques. The desired use of pornography as a teaching aid has been reported previously (see McKee, 2007). Further, several participants suggested that watching pornography alone or together while in a relationship could enhance the relationship, and research shows



that relationship dedication is higher among those who view sexually explicit material with their partners, compared to those who view it alone or both alone and with one's partner (Maddox et al., 2011). Thus, using pornography for relationship enhancement may occur when partners limit themselves to viewing pornography together.

The accepting group also commented on the perceived connection between pornography use and infidelity, expressing two prominent views: pornography use is (1) *not* infidelity and (2) an *acceptable alternative* to infidelity. Previous research links heavy pornography use to decreased relationship stability and divorce (Schneider, 2000) and increased risk for infidelity (Zillman, 2000); however, much less is known about partner's joint use and infidelity. Maddox et al. (2011) found that couples who view pornography together also reported more instances of infidelity compared with couples who did not view pornography. Related to our study, participants may not perceive pornography use within a relationship context as infidelity or believe viewing it is an acceptable alternative to infidelity, but they may be at greater risk for infidelity. Clearly, more research is needed on the contexts of pornography use and its relationship to infidelity among committed romantic partners.

A second prominent group that emerged was men and women who expected that pornography would not be viewed in a relationship precisely because of being in that relationship. The prominent storyline behind their expectation was that sexually explicit materials were not necessary, as they had a partner to fulfill their sexual needs; they did not need to turn to pornography to meet these needs. In fact, many viewed the introduction of sexually explicit material in the relationship as a threat to the relationship rather than a means of enhancing it. Due to this threat, these men and women sought to protect their partners and their relationships by avoiding having them believe that they were turning to pornography because of deficits in the partner or the relationship. A distinct variation within this group was those that preferred pornography not be a part of their personal relationship, but who were accepting and nonjudgmental of others' use of pornography. This finding also fits with research by Carroll et al. (2008) that the definition of pornography includes both behavior and value stances. In this case, although some men and women did not appear to be accepting of pornography for themselves or their future romantic partners, they were accepting of pornography overall. We agree with Carroll et al. that scholars need to parse out differences between personal acceptance and use from more global attitudes of acceptance. Differences in acceptance may be related to other important relational areas, such as attachment, infidelity, and relationship quality.

A group emerged demonstrating a more global non-acceptance of pornography. This group differed from other groups primarily because their narratives specified that a relational context did not matter when it came to pornography. Pornography use was "wrong" whether one was single, in a relationship, or married, or being viewed alone or together. An important

gender distinction arose with more women than men in this group. This fits with past research showing that women were less accepting of and used pornography less frequently than men (e.g., Maddox et al., 2011). Men and women in this group frequently used value-laden and moral language, some of which referred to religious beliefs and practices. This finding is consistent with research by Maddox et al. who found differences in individual and couples' use of sexually explicit materials based on self-reported religiosity, such that those reporting non-use scored higher on religiosity compared to users.

One interesting gender difference that emerged was a female-only group who themselves did not expect pornography use but were accepting of their partner's (usually men) use. In fact, some of these women fully expected pornography viewing as something that "men do." According to Maddox et al. (2011), individuals in relationships where one partner views pornography alone may be at increased risk for relationship problems, including negative communication and lower relationship adjustment, dedication, and sexual satisfaction.

### Implications

Emerging adulthood is a time of relationship exploration (Arnett, 2004), when individuals form expectations for future, more stable and committed romantic relationships, such as marriage (Barry et al., 2009). Relationship education for emerging adults is a means of delivering relationship knowledge and teaching relationship skills (e.g., communication and conflict resolution skills) to promote healthy relationship functioning (for a review, see Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, 2011). An underlying assumption of relationship education is that increasing relationship knowledge and skills will enhance mate selection and increase relationship maintenance and functioning (once in a relationship). Relationship education efforts targeting emerging adults often focus on individual and relationship awareness, making informed relationship decisions, and learning how to effectively communicate with one's partner (e.g., Olmstead et al., 2011). Given the increased access to pornography via the internet (Cooper, 1998) and the frequency of pornography addiction as a presenting issue in relationship therapy (Mitchell et al., 2005), relationship education for emerging adults should address sexuality, with expectations for pornography use within a committed romantic relationship as one component. We argue that the potential relationship benefits and drawbacks associated with pornography use (individually or as a couple) should be addressed early on in relationship formation, so individuals acquire the skills to discuss their expectations with a partner. As part of the mate selection process, they also can be taught to identify partners with similar views and expectations about sexually explicit materials, which may increase relational compatibility regarding this aspect of sexuality and expression.

Our study adds to the scant literature on pornography use within the context of a relationship. Considerable variation

clearly exists regarding expectations for use in this context, the conditions that allow for such use, and perceived benefits and drawbacks. Future research examining pornography use within relationships should seek to include both relationship partners to provide a clearer picture from multiple perspectives about how sexually explicit material use influences individuals (e.g., self-esteem) and their relationship (e.g., quality, stability). The process through which pornography is introduced in a relationship is also unclear. It is possible that the way pornography is introduced within the couple relationship (catching one's partner vs. a deliberate discussion between partners) and timing of the introduction of pornography (early in the relationship vs. later) may be more influential on the relationship than the pornography itself. Thus, knowing more about the couple's process and dynamics may provide a more complete picture of how pornography use affects the couple's relationship.

Our study also highlights the variation that exists with regards to expectations towards pornography use in future committed relationships; however, future research should continue to examine the variables that contribute to this variation. For example, studies can attend to the role of individual (sexual orientation, personality, religiosity, attitudes towards sex, race/ethnicity), social (peer perceptions, beliefs, attitudes), familial (parental monitoring and attitudes), and contextual (region, socioeconomic status) influences on the formation of these expectations. We also suggest the need for expanded research on the influence of current and future relationship partners on expectations for or actual pornography use within romantic relationships (Maddox et al., 2011).

### Limitations

Despite several strengths, this study is not without its limitations. Due to the way in which we collected the data (non-random) and the nature of the study (qualitative content analysis), our findings are not generalizable to all college students. Study participants were those enrolled in a family development course and this limitation is important for several reasons. First, although the course fulfills a liberal arts requirement for the university, students who self-select into the class may differ in important ways from those who chose not to enroll. Second, participants in a course on family relationships may hold more biased (perhaps negative) views on expectations for pornography use than students in other courses (e.g., human sexuality). It is important to note that individuals participated in this study prior to receiving content from the course, and that the content of the course excluded discussions of pornography, its use, or influence on couple or family relationships. Third, we did not include non-college participants, so our findings are not generalizable to the population of emerging adults who do not attend college. It may be that non-college samples of emerging adults hold different expectation for pornography use within a relationship context.

As mentioned, data were collected as part of a course assignment. Although we did not find high socially desirable responding overall, responses might have varied had these questions been offered as extra credit or for other compensation. We give additional attention to the fact that those who scored high on the social desirability scale (9 or 10 on a scale of 10;  $n = 25$ ) were retained, because we could not determine whether their scoring high on the scale influenced their responses to our open-ended questions about pornography. Due to the possibility of influence, we recommend caution when interpreting the findings.

Another limitation was our inability to follow-up with participants, particularly when their written responses were not clear or when additional information was needed. Similarly, we were concerned that our methodological approach might yield responses that were not rich in description. To address this limitation, we collected and analyzed data from a larger sample of men and women than is typical in qualitative studies. Using a larger sample increased our confidence in the group and subgroup saturation and variation.

Two additional limitations are noteworthy. Although we asked participants about their expectations for when they felt pornography use was acceptable, we did not ask them to comment on when it was unacceptable. Some participants did report this side of their expectation, but the question to which participants were asked to respond was imbalanced in this way. Thus, our result may have differed had we asked them to also comment on when such use was perceived as unacceptable. Lastly, although we selected several demographic indicators to match men and women (age, year in school, race/ethnicity), we may have overlooked other indicators that would have enhanced their comparability, such as frequency of religious service attendance, romantic relationship status, or family structure.

### Conclusion

Our findings contribute to the literature by focusing on pornography use in the context of relationships and examining a population prone to viewing pornography. Although our study is qualitative in nature, we had a large sample that allowed us to examine a spectrum of variation among men and women, while also conducting difference tests between groups by gender. Thus, this study is a first step in increasing our understanding of how pornography is perceived among emerging adult college students within the context of future committed relationships.

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