

Sexual Violence in Mainstream Online Pornography

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New research reveals that 1 in 8 titles shown to first-time viewers of the most popular pornography websites in the UK describe sexual activity that constitutes sexual violence.

Over a six-month period, the home pages of the top three pornography websites in the UK were analysed, resulting in the largest ever research sample of online pornographic content.

The study provides strong evidence that content describing criminal acts such as rape, upskirting and incest are regularly being presented on the landing pages of the major pornography platforms.

The free and easy access to sexually violent pornography is a form of cultural harm: it risks normalising sexual violence, sustaining a culture in which violence against women is eroticised and minimised.

Serious questions are raised about the extent of criminal material freely advertised on mainstream pornography websites, the accountability of porn companies and the efficacy of current regulatory measures.



What did we do?

Over a six-month period, we collected the largest ever sample of online pornographic content, gathering over 150,000 titles from the landing pages of the UK's three most popular, mainstream pornography websites.

With the aim of developing a new empirical basis for understanding the content advertised to a first-time viewer of pornography, we set out to use this data to answer three key research questions:

- (1) Is pornography describing criminal acts of sexual violence advertised to a first-time user of mainstream online pornography?
- (2) How common is the sexual script of sexual violence in the content advertised to first-time users?
- (3) How is the boundary between consensual and criminal sexual practices communicated to a first-time user?

Methods

The three most accessed pornographic websites in the UK were identified through Alexa Internet, a web traffic analysis tool. At the time of data collection these were Pornhub.com, Xhamster.com and Xvideos.com. All sites gave written consent to

access the data. We developed a web-crawler and parser code, running on a provisioned virtual server. This enabled us to access the sites regularly without them being able to adapt to our behaviour. The code took a 'snapshot' of the landing page for each site, every hour for six months. Over this data collection period, a total of total data corpus of 151,546 unique titles were collected.

To analyse the data we used the [World Health Organisation \(2003\)](#) definition of sexual violence. We developed a set of keywords connected with four broad contexts that fell under this definition: sexual activity between family members; aggression and assault; image-based sexual abuse; and coercive and exploitative sexual activity. The keywords were run against the entire data corpus and results were then manually coded to ensure relevance. The final list of relevant titles was then inputted into NVIVO for word frequency analysis.

Why are titles important?

The titles of pornography videos play a key role in the 'story' being told to viewers about what they are watching. Titles provide the framework for *how* the user is invited to make sense of what they are seeing. Therefore, they are particularly important in trying to understand more about the **social function** of pornography; that is, what messages it gives about what is, and is not, normative sexual practice.

What did we find?

Overall finding

In total, we found that 12% [n=15,839] of the total analysable sample after data cleaning [n=131,738] described sexual activity that constitutes sexual violence.

Most common word?

'Teen' was the most frequently occurring word across the entire dataset. It was slightly more common in sexually violent content.

Is this material harmful?

The short answer is yes. Porn has "seized the narrative" on what counts as normal and acceptable sex. It provides the dominant framework for the development of sexual norms and understandings.

In this context, the ready availability of sexually violent content in mainstream online pornography sustains a culture in which sexual violence is not taken seriously.

Warning: Explicit language

In what follows, we give examples of some of the material including uncensored examples of the titles.

While these titles are explicit and may be disturbing, we include them here because it is important not to hide the reality of what is being advertised to first-time users on these popular porn websites.

Sexual activity between family members

This was the most frequent form of sexual violence. Perhaps surprisingly, we found that representations of step relationships were less common than blood relationships.

Examples of the titles available advertised to a first-time user include:

- *Brother Fucks Sister In The Ass Outdoors*
- *When Mom's Mad, Dad Goes To His Daughter*
- *Daddy keeps fucking daughter till she likes it*

Physical aggression and assault

This was the second most common category, even though we excluded verbal aggression such as “dumb slut gets fucked” and BDSM material that was identified as such. Notably, the word ‘black’ was among the most frequently used terms in this category, suggesting connections between physical aggression, sexual assault and racialised descriptions of black performers.

Examples here include:

- *Crying blonde bitch takes rough cunt drilling*
- *again and again forced*
- *Rhianna fucked while she's asleep!*

Image-based sexual abuse

This category includes all forms of non-consensual creation and/or distribution of sexual images including material commonly

known as ‘revenge porn’ and ‘upskirting’, as well as voyeurism including hidden cameras and ‘spy cams.’ These videos contribute to a context where the taking and sharing of private sexual videos is seen as a legitimate sexual practice, rather than a form of [sexual violence](#).

Titles included:

- *Beach Spy Change Room Two Girls*
- *Pharmacy Store Bathroom Hidden cam*
- *Upskirted While Putting Groceries In The Car*

Coercion and exploitation

This category was designed to capture coercive forms of sexual activity that met the WHO definition but did not include explicit physical violence or non-consent. We found that words describing young women were particularly common, with the top three words being schoolgirl, girl and teen. Examples include:

- *Chubby Spanish Teen Needs The Cash*
- *Dopefiend HATES CUM in her mouth LOL*

Why does this matter?

The material we found plays a key role in creating the climate in which coercion and assault are normalised, deemed acceptable and where women’s non-consent is eroticised. This is a form of cultural harm.

This is not a causal argument about direct behavioural effects. Nor are we claiming that the titles are referring to real acts of violence, though some may be. Instead of looking at the effects of pornography on the individual, we are focused on its consequences for social understandings about sex and also about what counts as sexual violence.

Our findings show that mainstream online porn is contributing to a culture in which the boundary between sex and sexual violence is blurred, and the harms of sexual violence are minimised and mocked.

These videos were not hidden in the deep recesses of the sites. They were freely and immediately advertised on the landing page for a first-time user: their ‘shop window’ for the young and new to the world of online porn.

What can we do?

Hold pornography companies to account

These titles are in contravention of the porn companies own Terms & Conditions, yet we found them through simple key word searches. This is a stark failure in the duty of care of these companies towards their users: not only can someone easily and accidentally see material the sites themselves deem inappropriate in their T&C,

but also the algorithms determining what appears on these landing pages are not set to exclude such content.

Government regulation

Governments worldwide are grappling with how to regulate social media and porn companies. Far more active steps must be taken by regulators to hold these companies to account; to ensure swift removal of unlawful content; and to require compliance with their own terms and conditions.

Improve sex education

Properly resourced and expert-led sex education is urgently required in all schools. In an age-appropriate way, young people need education about sex including sexual pleasure, sexual violence and pornography. Governments should fund the specialist violence against women and girls sector to develop and design training programmes and resources to support teachers in delivering this work.

About the research

Full reference to the research

Vera-Gray, F, McGlynn, C, Kureshi, I., Butterby, K. (2021) [Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab035), *British Journal of Criminology*, <http://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azab035>
Free to download at <http://academic.oup.com/bjc/article-lookup/doi/10.1093/bjc/azab035>

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Authors and Contact

Dr Vera-Gray and Professor Clare McGlynn have a long track record of research and policy work on pornography. In 2014-15 they worked together with Rape Crisis South London, the End Violence Against Women Coalition and Professor Erika Rackley, to [campaign](#) to make the possession of rape pornography a criminal offence. This [reform](#) was successfully introduced in 2015.

[Dr Fiona Vera-Gray](#) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Durham University. She is the author of [The Right Amount of Panic](#) (2018) and [Men's Intrusions, Women's Embodiment](#) (2016).
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[Professor Clare McGlynn QC \(Hon\)](#) is Professor of Law at Durham University with over twenty years' experience influencing criminal law reform relating to sexual violence, image-based sexual abuse and extreme pornography. She is the co-author of [Cyberflashing: recognising harms, reforming laws](#) (2021) and co-author of [Image-Based Sexual Abuse: a study on the causes and consequences of non-consensual sexual imagery](#) (2021).
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Support services

Rape Crisis (women and girls) www.rapecrisis.org.uk
The Revenge Porn Helpline www.revengepornhelpline.org.uk
Women's Aid www.womensaid.org
Survivors UK (men and boys) www.survivorsuk.org