

# Rough Sex and Pornography Preferences: Novelty Seeking, Not Aggression

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## ABSTRACT

Research on sexual behavior often characterizes rough sex as sexual aggression and/or abuse. The same characterization exists for pornography and many links between these topics imply an escalation between pornography use, rough sex, and sexual violence. Among 734 male and female undergraduates, we examined relationships between rough sex, sexual violence, other sexual acts, and pornography use. Findings indicate that rough sex is most commonly associated with curiosity and a need for novelty, and that rough sex is associated with pornography consumption and other sexually adventurous behaviors, such as public sex and the use of sex toys. The relationship between rough sex and pornography appears to be rooted in a need for sexual novelty, with only a small subset motivated by aggression.

## KEYWORDS

Pornography, Rough Sex, Aggression, Sexual Novelty

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## INTRODUCTION

In their study of the definitions, motivations, and behaviors in rough sexual encounters, Burch and Salmon (2019) reported that for college students, rough sex is more recreational in nature, consensual and initiated by both sexes, and typically results in little violence and only superficial injuries such as scratches or bruises. They also found that rough sex did not correlate with violence in the romantic relationship or abuse. This is in contrast to a history of research on that topic that views many rough sexual behaviors as sexual aggression (for example, Koss and Oros, 1982). However, rough sexual behaviors have been reported to increase in situations that involve male sexual jealousy and being separated from a sexual partner has been reported as the second most common trigger for rough sex, particularly for men (Burch & Salmon, 2019). While these analyses provided clues as to what motivates

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or triggers rough sexual behavior, several questions remain unanswered. Jealousy may be one motivator for men, but rough sex was reportedly desired and initiated by both sexes, so what the motivators are for both sexes or particularly for women remains unexplored. A large percentage of both men and women reported desiring sexual novelty and engaging in other sexually adventurous behaviors, but as Burch and Salmon (2019) were examining definitions and behaviors they did not explore this finding further. However, the need for sexual novelty may play a role in several sexual behaviors, even those traditionally thought of as motivated by aggression, like rough sex or pornography consumption.

### The Assumption of Sexual Aggression

Just as with the assumption that rough sex is sexual aggression or violence, McKee (2015) has argued that much of the research on pornography and aggression has focused on violence and ignored the issue of consent, lumping consensual BDSM (Bondage Discipline Dominance Submission Sadism Masochism) in with non-consensual acts. These assumptions are associated with the concern that pornography consumption increases sexual violence (Donnerstein, 1984; Malamuth et al., 2000). However, research has also long argued that adults can differentiate between the fantasy shown in pornography and real sexual relationships, and many naturalistic studies have not indicated a relationship between pornography consumption and violence toward women (Diamond, 2009; Diamond et al., 2011). Hite (1981) reported that men viewed pornography as an accurate depiction of male fantasies, but not of how men and women actually interact, and Hardy (1998) found that men 'decode' pornography, and differentiate between the depiction of women in porn and their actual partners. Likewise, Loftus (2002) reported that men in his study saw pornography as fantasy and separate from the real world. In summary, research on pornography consumption and sexual aggression in adults has overlooked women and failed to show a clear link in men.

Lavoie, Robitaille, and Hebert (2000) in their study of adolescent sexual behaviors mentioned that adolescents viewed sexual violence as encompassing a wider range of behaviors than the researchers anticipated, including consensual use of violence in sexual relationships; "Violence for teens was not necessarily a synonym for abuse. Desire to explore rough sex was not only attributed to boys; both boys and girls were said to be influenced by pornography and shared a certain acceptance of sadomasochism." (p. 24). Lavoie et al. (2000) also found that adolescents saw pornography as entertainment and a source of ideas, "They want to explore, they wanna... try something new" (a boy in the 14-16-year age group describing girls who watch pornography, p. 12). Clearly exploring new behaviors is a major part of this behavior for adolescents. These adolescents were also clear that this was different from violence and discussed how violent or nonconsensual behavior was unacceptable.

While decades of research have shown that adolescents and adults can differentiate between pornography and real-life sexual behavior, it raises the question of whether adults (like the adolescents in Lavoie, et al., 2000) tend to use pornography as a source of sexual inspiration. At the very least, viewers may see something in pornography and be curious to try it in a real-life context. However, this is different

from believing that pornography is an accurate depiction of sex or likely to inspire behavior that individuals are not already inclined towards.

### **Pornography Consumption and Rough Sexual Behavior**

Recent research has found correlations between consuming pornography and sexual behaviors. Wright and colleagues (2015) found that interest in pornography was correlated with desire to engage, or a history of engaging, in several rough sex/sexually aggressive behaviors, such as hair pulling, spanking, slapping, choking, or confining a partner. However, the type of pornography consumed was not assessed and while men were asked how interested they would be in watching certain films, they did not report *actually watching* said films. Bridges and colleagues (2016) likewise examined correlations between pornography consumption and behaviors like hair pulling, spanking and choking. Higher pornography use was associated with greater likelihood of both previous interest in and engagement with all categories of sexual behavior. In both of these cases, participants reported previously engaging in both watching pornography and these rough behaviors. Sun, Wright, and Steffen (2017) did find that the relationship between pornography consumption and being the recipient of rough sexual behaviors was strongest in women who started viewing pornography at a young age, but none of these studies has effectively shown that the pornography consumption led to engaging in rough sexual behaviors, or more importantly, if the participants sought out pornographic content and behaviors for the sake of novelty or adventure.

Lastly, Herbenick and colleagues (2020), in a large scale nationally representative survey of adolescents and adults, examined lifetime pornography consumption, types of pornography consumed, and dominant and submissive rough sexual behaviors (choking, spanking, BDSM). They found that more frequent past pornography consumption and a greater lifetime range of pornography consumption were significantly associated with engaging in both dominant and submissive rough sexual behaviors among all participants. However, these researchers acknowledge that college students in other studies (including Burch & Salmon, 2019) report engaging in these behaviors as “examples of playful sexual aggression” (Herbenick et al., 2020, p. 629). Importantly, Herbenick and colleagues (2020) presented data on the role of consent, or to put it more clearly, the explicit lack of consent, in some of these behaviors, as well as percentages of the type of pornography consumed by the sample. However, no findings on the relationship between rough sex and pornography were presented.

### **The Need for a New Perspective**

In total, the research on pornography and rough sexual behavior is lacking answers to significant questions: those of causation, consent, and type of pornography. The role of pornography in rough sexual behavior is integral to the larger question; why people engage in rough sex. Participants in Burch and Salmon (2019) reported that they often engaged in rough sex “to try something new”, or out of “boredom”, which indicates that rough sexual behavior may stem from a desire for

sexual adventurousness, but most research on rough sex has not examined this factor. In fact, while Burch and Salmon (2019) examined definitions of rough sex, levels of engagement and initiation, and the types of behaviors men and women engaged in during rough sex, they did not examine the role of pornography consumption, reasons for pornography consumption, and most importantly, other sexually adventurous behaviors. This analysis is vital to the argument that rough sex or pornography consumption is less motivated by sexual aggression, but rather part of a larger suite of sexually adventurous behaviors.

This work also adds a new perspective to the evolution-based research on sexual behavior. Much of the previous research has focused on men, in particular measuring male thrusting and other sexual behaviors in jealous contexts (Burch & Gallup, 2019; Gallup & Burch, 2004). The heretofore unexamined desire for sexual novelty provides another explanation that is more universal and less associated with violence. Indeed, both men and women have long sought out novelty in other contexts (Clark, 2018; Kashdan & Silvia, 2009) and benefited from it, including in social, academic, psychological, and health realms (Kashdan & Silvia, 2009).

This series of analyses tests the following predictions:

1. That pornography use will be associated with engaging in rough sex.
2. That novelty triggers will be more predictive of engaging in rough sex than aggressive triggers.
3. That behaviors considered to be sexually adventurous (use of sex toys and public sex) will be more common in those who also engage in rough sex.

## METHODS

The methodology for data collection was first published in Burch and Salmon (2019). A sample of 734 male and female undergraduates were instructed to complete an extensive questionnaire on their romantic relationships. The questionnaire asked for demographic information (gender, age, race, sexual orientation, relationship status, etc.) as well as several inventories focusing on sexual experiences, sexual behaviors, and relationship variables. Participants were asked if they had rough sex, how often they engaged in it, how often they initiated it, and the factors that triggered it. Participants were given a series of Likert scales describing frequency ranging from “Never” to “Very Frequently” when reporting triggers of rough sex. Both men and women were asked to report their (and their partner’s) behaviors when engaging in a rough sexual encounter. Participants were also asked about whether they had used sex toys or ever had sex in a public place.

For the purposes of the current study (investigating motivations and other sexually adventurous behaviors), subscales were created for aggressive and sexually adventurous triggers. For sexually aggressive triggers the items “jealousy on your part”, “arguments”, “being angry at your partner”, and “thinking your partner cheated on you” were selected. For sexually adventurous triggers the items “boredom”, “wanting to try something new”, and “playing out a fantasy” were selected. For more detail on the methodology and other findings, please refer to Burch and Salmon (2019).

## RESULTS

### Participants

As with Burch and Salmon (2019), participants were 734 undergraduate college students (169 men and 565 women) with a mean age of 20.6 years ( $SD = 3.9$ ). Participants were recruited from various undergraduate and graduate courses at a northeastern US university, with 92% of participants reported being heterosexual, 5% bisexual, 2% homosexual and 1% other (Burch & Salmon, 2019). The majority of participants were single (96%) and self-report of their ethnicity indicated 85% were Caucasian, 7% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 4% reported another ethnicity.

### Rough Sex Predictors

A linear regression analysis was used to investigate whether sex, pornography consumption, aggressive triggers and novelty triggers predict the frequency of engaging in and initiating rough sex. The overall model was significant,  $F(4, 474) = 22.84, p < 0.001$  and explained about 16% of the overall variance in the rough sex variable ( $R^2 = 0.162$ ). Inspection of the standardized regression coefficients indicates that although aggressive triggers did not predict rough sex, there were main effects of the other variables. The main effect of sex indicates that females were more likely to engage in rough sex while the main effect of pornography consumption also indicated that pornography consumers were more likely to engage in rough sex than those who did not watch pornography. In addition, as novelty triggers increased, rough sex also increased (See Table 1). The semi partial correlations indicate that novelty triggers accounted for the largest amount of the variance (10%) in rough sex.

**Table 1.** Linear regression analysis predicting frequency of engaging in/initiating rough sex as a function of sex, pornography consumption, and aggressive and novelty triggers

Variable	B	SE ( $\beta$ )	$\beta$
Sex	0.557	0.186	0.127**
Pornography use	.0557	0.244	0.105*
Aggressive triggers	-0.016	0.012	0.066
Novelty triggers	0.141	0.020	0.376***

Note: \* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.01$ . \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

In addition, with regard to other behaviors that could be considered related to novelty seeking, participants who engaged in rough sex were more likely to engage in a variety of behaviors in comparison to those who did not engage in rough sex including: using sex toys,  $X^2(1, 667) = 36.66, p < .001$ , engaging in public sex,  $X^2(1, 653) = 33.26, p < .001$ , and have had more sexual partners,  $t(662) = 3.13, p < .005$ .

### DISCUSSION

Firstly, it is important to reiterate that rough sex involves a number of influences and expectations, and analyses of other variables can be found in Burch and Salmon (2019). Secondly, we acknowledge that this research is limited by several measures, including culture, developmental stage, level of sexual experience, and sample size. Indeed, some of the findings here could be the result of small samples and require replication with larger groups. It is also important to acknowledge that this study, like the vast majority of studies on pornography use and sexual behavior, does not attempt to examine causal relationships. Participants were asked about their previous experiences which included pornography consumption and rough sexual behavior causal relationships cannot be inferred.

As already discussed in Burch and Salmon (2019) both men and women engage in and initiate rough sex. However, this study focused on further investigating sexual adventurousness and pornography consumption as motivations for rough sex. In both men and women adventure triggers were more frequent than aggressive triggers. In addition, engaging in rough sex was connected to a number of other sexually adventurous behaviors, such as having sex in public and using sex toys. As pornography consumption and novelty triggers were associated with engaging in rough sex, this suggests that pornography consumption is more about seeking out sexual novelty and less about aggression. It must be reiterated that this relationship is not necessarily causal. As we have seen in other literature (Bridges et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2017), some people who watch pornography also report current and prior experience with rough sex and other sexually adventurous behaviors. The behaviors are clearly associated and there is evidence of their appearance throughout the person's history; for example, losing virginity at a young age or an increased number of sexual partners being associated with rough sex.

The discussion of novelty and sexual adventurousness presents an important question, and limitation. The items compiled for the "sexual adventure" subscale included behaviors that would be considered novel and those that would be considered adventurous. While "novel" is simply behaviors that have not been practiced before, adventure indicates a degree of risk. These categories, while combined for this study and used interchangeably, need to be investigated separately. Are rough sex, pornography consumption, use of sex toys, and sex in public being engaged in for the sake of novelty, or is risk the primary motivation? Where do these behaviors fit in the larger literature on sensation seeking and sex? Does one motivation play a greater role in rough sex or pornography consumption? Some studies of adolescents have suggested that sensation seeking may play a more causal role in people's sexual interests (Beyens et al., 2015). However, some recent

work suggests that sensation seeking and pornography consumption are correlated but that there is no causal relationship (Esplin et al., 2021).

We are not suggesting that people do not get ideas regarding sexual behavior from pornography, but decades of literature indicate that adolescents and adults clearly distinguish between reality and pornographic fantasy. What our data do seem to show is that some individuals seek out a greater variety of sexual behavior, and this includes rough sex, pornography, sex toys, and having sex in public. Given the findings of Burch and Salmon (2019), it appears that there is also a subset of men who are triggered by romantic jealousy in their relationships to engage in rougher sexual behavior. This is where the parsing out of sexual aggression and rough sex begins; the motive for the behaviors must be examined closely, as well as consent and severity of sexual acts.

As with most research on the topic, this study points to several directions for future research. First, there is little research on the motivations for rough sex. While we included a large number of possible triggers in our data collection (27 items, see Burch and Salmon, 2019), this is by no means an exhaustive list and more research needs to be done in this area. Secondly, little research exists on sexual adventure or the need for sexual novelty, and even less on this need in young adults. This is surprising when so many of the variables examined in this study; rough sex, pornography consumption, use of sex toys, having sex in public, and even sexual intercourse itself, can be categorized as sensation seeking behavior. More needs to be done to determine the breadth and depth of this sexual adventurism and need for novelty. What other behaviors are engaged in? Are there sex differences in preferences? What other sexual variables are correlated? Third, if people use pornography for “inspiration” in their sexual lives, what is this process and how do their existing sexual preferences influence their search for pornography? Salmon and colleagues have written on the topic of pornography preferences, but not with the aim of examining sexual adventurousness (Salmon, Fisher, & Burch, 2019; 2020). Clearly additional work remains to clarify the questions raised in this work.

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