

***Male gays in the female gaze: Women who watch m/m pornography***

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### ***Male gays in the female gaze: Women who watch m/m pornography***

This paper draws on a piece of wide-scale mixed-methods research that examines the motivations behind women who watch gay male pornography. To date, there has been very little interdisciplinary research investigating this phenomenon, despite a recent survey by PornHub (one of the largest online porn sites in the world) showing that gay male porn is the second most popular choice for women porn users out of 25+ possible genre choices (PornHub, 2014). While both academic literature and popular culture have looked at the interest that (heterosexual) men have in lesbian pornography (e.g. Attwood, 2005), considerably less attention has been paid to the consumption of gay male pornography by women. Research looking at women's consumption of pornography from within the Social Sciences is very focussed around heterosexual (and, to a lesser extent, lesbian) pornography (e.g. Smith, 2007; Williams, 2004). Research looking more generally at gay pornography/erotica (and the subversion of the 'male gaze'/concept of 'male as erotic object') often makes mention of female interest in this area, but only briefly, and often relies on anecdotal or observational evidence (e.g. Mackinnon, 1997). Research looking at women's involvement in slashfic (primarily from within Media Studies), while very thorough and rich, tends to view slash writing as a somewhat isolated phenomenon (indeed, in her influential article on women's involvement in slash, Bacon-Smith (1992) talks about how 'only a small number' of female slash writers and readers have any interest in gay literature or pornography more generally, and this phenomenon is not often discussed in more recent analyses of slash); so while there has been a great deal of very interesting research done in this field, little attempt has been made to couch it more generally within women's consumption and use of pornography and erotica or to explore what women enjoy about watching gay male pornography. Through a series of focus groups, interviews, and an on-line questionnaire ( $n=275$ ), this exploratory piece of work looks at what women enjoy about gay male pornography, and how it sits within their consumption of erotica/pornography more generally. It investigates what this has to say about the existence and nature of a 'female gaze'.

**Key words:** Pornography, Gay, Female Gaze, Women, M/M Pornography

At the Edinburgh Literary Festival in August 2014, the author G. R. R. Martin stated that he had received numerous letters from fans asking for more explicit gay male sex scenes in his *Game of Thrones* novels (and the associated television series), and that 'most of the[se] letters come from women' (in Furness, 2014). The idea that women might be interested in watching men have sex with each other is certainly not new within popular discourses - there was much discussion of this issue after the success of *Brokeback Mountain* with female audiences (see Taormino, 2008), and there has been an increasing inclusion of gay male love scenes in TV shows with a large female viewership (e.g. *The Carrie Diaries*, *The Following*, *Teen Wolf*). Acknowledging that more women than men had bought his first erotic novel (which deals with m/m sex), gay fiction author James Lear observed '[women] fancy men, they're turned on by men and so they're even more turned on by men with men - it's like 'man squared'' (in *The Metro*, 14/10/08). Offering support for the widespread nature of this phenomenon, a recent analysis of billions of hits to the Pornhub site (one of the largest online porn sites in the world) showed that gay male porn is the second most popular choice for women porn users out of 25+ possible genre choices (PornHub, 2014).

However, despite the emergence of porn studies as an area of interest, to date there has been little exploration within academia as to the nature or prevalence of female interest in m/m sex, nor of what this might have to say about female audiences, female desire, and the female gaze. It is difficult to say how widespread the practice of watching gay male pornography is within the female population, as the majority of surveys exploring women's engagement with porn have not asked this question. It could be that the respondents in this study represent only a tiny outlier group, although the recent data provided by Pornhub (2014) would suggest this is not the case. Viewing the Pornhub data alongside the popularity of m/m sex in visual cultural products targeted at a largely female audience (as discussed above), numerous anecdotal references in the literature to women in focus groups responding positively to gay male sex scenes (see Gunn, 1993), and the burgeoning popularity of writing featuring explicit m/m sex amongst women of all ages (Green, Jenkins, & Jenkins, 1998; Jamison, 2013) it would appear that engaging with m/m pornography is not an unusual practice among women who consume erotic material. Through an analysis of the responses given by 275 (self-identified) women who watch m/m pornography as to what they enjoy about it, this exploratory paper aims to provide a deeper insight into how and why these women engage with this type of porn.

### **Women watching pornography**

The reason for the paucity of research into women who watch m/m pornography may be partly explained by the fact that for much of late modernity the common assumption within the academic literature was that women were not aroused by *any* porn (Carter, 1977:75). Many researchers have observed that it is possible that this perception arose because porn seemed to be about sexual imagery made public, and women had been taught that public displays of sexuality were negatively valued in social terms - 'we have learned that to engage in public displays of sexuality is to be defined as a slut. Where boys learn that sex makes them powerful, we learn that it makes us powerful and bad' (Diamond, 1985:50). In support of this, up until the mid-1990s research on porn found that men tended to hold more permissive attitudes towards porn and were the predominant consumers when compared with women (Laumann, 1994). However, more recent studies suggest gender disparity in accessing porn may be narrowing in the age of the internet. An online poll of 9,000 respondents found that 86% of males reported accessing porn online, as did 59% of females

(Cooper, 2000). There has also been a growing acknowledgement that women may like similar kinds of porn to men. Mackinnon (1997:120) argues that the rise of 'female' produced hardcore heterosexual porn and lesbian S&M fantasy porn make it 'far more difficult to maintain the distinctions between male-orientated pornography and female-orientated erotica', the latter being historically regarded as 'soft, tender, non-explicit' (Williams, 1990:231). Nevertheless, female interest in pornography has been less well explored than male interest, with Ciclitira (2004:286, italics added) noting that 'there has been little empirical work which has elicited women's own accounts about *their* experiences of pornography'.

### **Women watching gay male pornography**

There has been even less empirical work looking at women's experiences of gay male pornography. In her seminal work, '*Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*' Linda Williams (1990) implies that gay male porn is of little interest to women, when she states that she is not going to include gay male pornography in her study of hardcore porn on the grounds that it could not appeal to *her* as a heterosexual woman; 'lesbian and gay pornography do not address me personally' (p.7). Schauer (2005) observes that there is a large number of scenes of lesbian sex distributed across heterosexual male porn sites, noting 'the 'discovery' of lesbian 'pleasures' among the female population is virtually *de rigueur* here' (p.54), whereas she believes that in 'women's porno...nowhere is man-to-man sex symbolically or otherwise evident' (p.58).

However, even if certain areas of the social sciences have been slow to explore and understand this phenomenon, the psychological sciences have noted for some time that many women respond, physiologically at least, to m/m sexual images. Meredith Chivers, who has looked extensively into the nature of female sexual response to pornographic imagery (see, e.g., Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Chivers *et al.*, 2004) has run a number of studies where women have been shown a variety of sexual films: including lesbian porn, gay male porn, heterosexual porn, and monkeys having sex. She and her colleagues have observed that, with respect to genital arousal, most women show a 'strikingly flat profile' (Bailey, 2008:55) - that is, they appear at a physiological level to find gay male sex as arousing as heterosexual sex. This does not tally with self-reported arousal scores (where women tend to rate films that concur with their sexual orientation as more arousing than those which do not), leading Chivers *et al.* (2010:48) to conclude that 'a woman's genital responding might reveal little about her sexual interests'. Chivers *et al.* (2010) also speculate that for women, based on observations of the greater female consumption of nonvisual forms of erotic literature (see Malamuth, 1996 for a review), concordance between physiological and self-reported arousal would be greater when assessed using nonvisual modalities of erotic stimuli. However, it should be noted that, much the same as men, women have more genital arousal while watching sexually explicit videos than they do reading erotic stories or engaging in erotic fantasy (van Dam, Honnebier, van Zelige & Barendregt, 1976), and that romantic content does not enhance genital arousal (Heiman, 1977). While the work of Chivers and her colleagues may well suggest a dissociation between mind and body in women's arousal - and I'm certainly not suggesting that a woman's vaginal lubrication is a good predictor of what she's actually feeling - it may also suggest that women have a more fluid sexual response than men. In her work on sexual fluidity, Lisa Diamond (2008) identifies two different types of sexual desire: *proceptivity*, that is lust or libido, and *arousability*, the capacity to become aroused once certain cues are encountered. She observes that as female proceptivity is a lot less constant than men's, and only peaks for a few days at a time, a woman's sexual desire is

therefore primarily driven by arousability. Diamond (2008:210-212) adds that proceptivity is essentially heterosexual in so much as it is geared around reproductive sexual activity. However arousability is not intrinsically oriented and therefore does not need to be 'gender targeted', leading Diamond to conclude 'if the majority of women's day-to-day desires are governed by arousability, and if arousability is a 'gender-neutral' system, then...women... are [more] likely to have... 'cross-orientation' desires [than men]'. Diamond here is discussing women's greater propensity towards same-sex attractions, and a fluid sense of sexual orientation. However, there is no reason that her theory could not also explain why women might find gay male sex arousing. Taken with the work of Chivers and her colleagues, and viewed in the light of the recent 'discovery' by the media that women might like watching men have sex with each other, it may well be that women enjoying watching m/m pornography is not particularly surprising.

### ***Women and slash***

One dimension of female interest in m/m eroticism which has been more thoroughly explored is the area of slash fiction (and, to a lesser extent, slash videos). Slash fiction is a genre of fan fiction that focuses on interpersonal attraction and sexual relationships between fictional characters of the same sex, believed to have originated in the 1970s when female fans started to compose stories based around *Star Trek* where Kirk and Spock had a romantic - and sometimes sexual - relationship. Much of the academic research on slash fiction has come from the areas of media studies and cultural studies, with 'the former tending to emphasize the pornographic aspects of slash, the latter its romantic aspects' (Salmon & Symons, 2001:74). Hayes & Ball (2009:222) observe that 'by far the most popular stories have sex scenes between the two main male characters, which are graphically depicted in detail with the explicit aim of titillating the reader'. However, it should be noted that slash fiction is about far more than sex. Lothian, Busse & Reid (2007:103, italics added) maintain that online slash fandoms 'can induct us into new and unusual narratives of identity and sexuality, calling into question familiar identifications and assumptions' and that as such 'slash fandom's discursive sphere has been termed *queer female space* by some who inhabit and study it'. Catherine Driscoll (2006:91) also notes that the fact that slash fiction is 'the only form of pornography mainly produced and consumed by women' is important for what it says about the gendering of porn. However, research from within media and cultural studies on slash, while very thorough and rich, tends to view slash writing as a somewhat isolated phenomenon. Indeed, in her influential chapter on women's involvement in slash, Bacon-Smith (1992) talks about how 'only a small number' of female slash writers and readers have any interest in gay literature or pornography more generally; and this phenomenon is not often discussed in more recent analyses of slash.

Mark McLelland, who has carried out extensive research in the area of women's engagement with boy love manga, asks whether we actually *need* to better understand why women might like m/m sex, and what they might like about it. 'Why should men's interest in 'lesbianism' be taken for granted, whereas women's interest in male homosexuality is somehow in need of interpretation?' he asks, noting that few people react with surprise to the fact that male porn is full of 'lesbian' sex (McLelland, 2001:6). 'If heterosexual men enjoy the idea of two women getting it on, why should heterosexual women not enjoy the idea of two men bonking?... [There is a supposition here that] in a non-sexist world women would 'naturally' choose heterosexual fantasy, itself a sexist assumption' (McLelland, 2001:1). While this is true, there is something, I would argue, different and interesting happening here. Male interest in lesbianism is in-keeping with many previous explanations of how

and why men view and consume pornography (Attwood, 2005). Female interest in watching the visual portrayal of m/m sex is challenging, in so much as it raises questions about the ways in which women can, and do, engage with pornography, and the existence (or not) of the female gaze.

## **Methodology**

Data was collected via an online questionnaire (with open text boxes as well as closed questions) and a series of focus groups and one on one interviews (both face to face and via Skype). I am a writer of gay male erotica and was able to use my existing contacts (in real life and over the internet) to signal boost the survey and the call for participation in focus groups, using a snowball sampling method. The questionnaire data included in this paper came from responses given to the open question 'What do you like (and/or dislike) about gay male pornography?' from women who had identified themselves as watchers of gay male porn.

Once collected (and transcribed verbatim in the case of focus group and interview transcripts), data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is data driven, and aims to construct theories that are grounded in the data themselves. As such it is a methodology that seeks to construct theory about issues of importance in people's lives (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An inductive approach was taken, whereby instead of attempting to prove a preconceived idea or theory, individual cases or instances were studied from which abstract concepts were then eventually developed. The process was also iterative, with data collection and analysis occurring simultaneously, and each informing the other - much of this interactive work relied on making systematic comparisons throughout the research process to construct concepts (see, e.g., Thornberg & Charmaz, 2012).

Through this process, a number of key themes were identified in the explanations given by participants as to why they watched m/m pornography, and what they particularly liked and disliked about it.

## **Sample**

The sample consists of 275 (self-identified) women who watch gay male pornography. It should be noted this is part of a much larger survey I have undertaken exploring the perceptions of women who consume many different modes of media with some kind of homoerotic content. Respondents were also asked questions about how they defined pornography, erotica, and romance. Whilst definitions of what constitutes pornography are not unproblematic, this paper focuses on the 275 participants from the larger survey ( $n=429$ ) who identified *themselves* as watchers of 'gay male [visual] pornography'.

Respondents consisted of 26 different nationalities, with women participating from Europe, North America, South America, Asia, Australasia, and Africa. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to over 65.

Table 1: Table showing age range of respondents

Age range	N	Percentage
18-24	72	27%
25-34	88	33%
35-44	48	18%
45-54	44	16%
55-64	14	5%
65-74	1	0.4%

Sexual orientations and relationship statuses were diverse (see tables below).

Table 2: Table showing sexual orientation of respondents

Sexual Orientation	n	Percentage
Heterosexual	111	41%
Bisexual	89	32%
Pansexual	15	5%
Asexual	14	5%
Prefer not to say/N/A	14	5%
Lesbian	11	4%
Queer	9	3%
Questioning sexuality	7	3%
Demisexual	4	1%

Table 3: Table showing relationship status of respondents

Relationship Status	n	Percentage
Single (have had previous relationships)	100	37%
Married/Civil partnership	73	27%
Single (have not had previous relationships)	52	19%
In a non-martial relationship	33	12%
In a polyamorous relationship	6	2%
Prefer not to say	5	2%

Of those in a relationship ( $n=112$ ), 81% were involved with a man, 7% with a woman, 3% with a person who identified as trans/genderqueer/fluid, and 3% with both a man and a woman.

Respondents tended to consume a variety of porn: 68% of participants also watched heterosexual pornography, and 53% also watched lesbian pornography. However, 82% of participants expressed a preference for gay male pornography over other types.

90% of respondents stated they used gay male pornography as a masturbatory aid.

## Results

Nine key thematic areas emerged from the data, which encompass the central reasons female respondents provided for what they liked about viewing gay male pornography. By far the most commonly identified theme was that the women respondents found men, and particularly the spectacle of two men having sex, attractive (**'Boys are hot'**). As one respondent explained, 'I am attracted to males so seeing two of 'em get it on together is like: BOOM, TWICE THE SEXY!' (American, 18-24, in a relationship, undecided). The second most frequently identified reason given was that respondents were more able to believe that both actors were enjoying the experience, and that the sexual desire and pleasure between them therefore felt more 'authentic' (**'Evidence of desire / Authenticity'**). This was because of the very visual cues that indicated sexual desire (erections, ejaculation) and the general attitude they felt was evinced by male porn actors (as opposed to female porn actors), who were regarded as 'enjoying each other more rather than simply playing to the camera' (American, 55-64, married, Kinsey 1<sup>1</sup>). Many respondents stated they enjoyed gay male porn because it was marketed to a target audience they felt they had more in common with (gay men as opposed to heterosexual men), and invited them to adopt a point of view that was more in-keeping with their own sexual preferences and desires (**'The female gaze'**), where 'men are the object of sexual attraction, instead of the women' (American, 25-34, single, heterosexual). Another common theme was the belief that gay porn allows the (female) viewer to avoid what one respondent referred to as the 'sexual minefield' (**'Avoiding the sexual minefield'**). As women do not feature in (most) gay male pornography, there is no need for the female viewer to become concerned with issues relating to the exploitation or objectification of women. Respondents were aware that m/m porn could also be both exploitative and objectifying, but often felt that this was less of an issue, firstly because men were perceived as 'hav[ing] the ability to shove [their partner] away or stop an action [they] don't like' (American, 18-24, single, bisexual), and secondly because 'men don't have to deal with the kind of shit women do all around that, so it's more like a novelty' (American, 25-34, single, bisexual). A large number of respondents made particular mention of the fact that the very act of watching pornography which was 'non-normative' (i.e. not heterosexual) meant they enjoyed watching gay porn (**'Queer space'**). This reason was often (although by no means exclusively) provided by respondents who themselves identified as either queer or lesbian. As one respondent explained, 'I like how non-conventional it is' (Irish, 18-24, single, heterosexual). Another common theme that emerged is what Pugh (2005:110) has described as the 'eroticising equality' of sex where neither party can automatically be decreed to be submissive or dominant simply by virtue of penetration (**'Eroticising equality'**). Many respondents felt this gave a different set of power dynamics to gay male porn than to heterosexual porn, which made it more exciting, as well as allowing a greater 'range' of behaviours. Several also mentioned how they enjoyed the potential for roughness, and even violence, in gay porn as 'characters in gay pornography are seemingly more able to be rough without it being distasteful/non-consensual' (Zimbabwean, 25-34, single, asexual/omosexual). A number of respondents stated that they enjoyed gay male pornography precisely because there were no women in it, who they would otherwise 'be jealous of' (American, 35-44, married, heterosexual) or 'subconsciously compare [themselves] to' leading to them feeling 'uncomfortable about [their own] body' (Puerto Rican, 18-24, single, not sure) (**'No girls allowed'**). A smaller, but significant proportion of respondents speculated that their enjoyment of m/m pornography might be related to the 'taboo' nature of gay sex - both the fact that it was sex that they themselves would 'never get to experience' and probably

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as 'predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual'

'shouldn't be watching', and the feeling that they were seeing 'a man getting enjoyment out of something that is not supposed to be pleasurable, i.e. anal penetration' (American, 25-34, single, bisexual) (*'Taboo / The unknowable'*). Finally, a number of women stated a preference for gay male porn simply because they felt it had better production values, better plotlines, more diverse actors, and more interesting sexual scenarios (*'It's just better porn'*). Several pointed out that they found it more easy to access both 'non-vanilla' porn and 'amateur' porn that was m/m, and that the producers of gay porn 'more often take stylistic risks than mainstream artists...[and] directors, because they often have less to lose' (American, 25-34, single, bisexual).

Approximately a quarter of the female respondents made the proviso that they had a particular preference for gay male pornography where the actors seemed to 'genuinely like each other' (American, 45-54, single, bisexual) and where they were 'obviously enjoying each other - smiling and laughing' (American, 35-44, single, bisexual). There was also an awareness among respondents that there might be something intrinsically exploitative in their use of m/m pornography, and the 'fetishisation' of gay male sexuality, with one commenting 'I've seen gay men...saying, you know...there is a part of us that feels that you're using our sexuality to get off on and we're uncomfortable with that, and, you know, you do sort of have to be: are we being intrusive?' (British, 35-44, married, pansexual). However, many also stated that an interest in m/m sex was part of *their* sexual identity and that their sexuality was their 'territory' (British/Italian, 45-54, married, heterosexual).

## Discussion

It is interesting that when talking about what they enjoyed about m/m pornography, the 275 respondents frequently expanded on their initial observations by stating what they *didn't* like about heterosexual pornography: the way they perceived women as being treated and/or exploited in heterosexual porn, the invisibility of female pleasure, the fact that identifying with the female actress made them less able to enjoy the eroticism of looking, and the fact that most heterosexual porn invited them to view the sex acts occurring from a 'male' perspective - noting the way that the camera tended to linger on female anatomy and that men in heterosexual porn were 'ugly and out of focus at best, and just a disembodied cock at worst' (Australian, 18-24, single, bisexual). To this extent, many of the themes that emerged from the analysis as to why female respondents enjoyed watching m/m pornography can be situated within some of the wider literature concerning the notions of the 'gaze'.

The term 'male gaze' was introduced by the feminist scholar Laura Mulvey in 1975. Building on the ideas of Foucault (1963) - who had discussed the use of a 'controlling' gaze being used at all times in the panopticon as a tool of surveillance, thus creating a relationship between observation, power and knowledge, and Lacan (1961) - who had introduced the idea of the 'gaze' as a way of analysing visual culture and understanding how a spectator views the people or objects they are presented with, Mulvey argued that, in classical narrative cinema, this 'gaze' is essentially male. Mulvey maintained that in narrative cinema men control the gaze; that they do all the looking, and that women are merely passive recipients, being viewed. The male gaze thus occurs when the camera films the woman from the perspective of a heterosexual male, dwelling on her body: the male gaze eroticises the object it looks at, and the camera facilitates that look. Women in narrative cinema are therefore objectified, voyeuristically, for both the straight male director and the straight male

spectator. From this it is posited that men are socialized to stare at women as objects in order to control them and prevent them from 'looking' back - that is, from having any power of their own. Endemic here is the notion that the gaze objectifies its target and empowers its owner; in other words, that looking is better than being looked at. There has been criticism of the way Mulvey's theory has been overstretched to apply to a range of cultural products it was not originally intended for, and Mulvey herself has stated that she wrote it as a 'polemic' and that a more 'nuanced perspective' might be helpful (in Sassatelli, 2011:128). A number of writers have specifically questioned the usefulness of the concept of the gaze when applied to pornography, arguing that the pornographic gaze is different to that which exists within narrative cinema because the intended effect(s) of the respective films differ. Schroeder (2000:7) points out that the "transformation of the porn film into a private viewing experience has altered its relation to the viewer(s), encouraging viewer engagement in masturbation or sexual intercourse and aimed at maximising pleasure through the creation of changing, inconstant, viewing positions and identificatory relations with characters". However, despite these critiques, certain facets of the idea of the male gaze have - understandably - been adopted to understand the dynamics involved in viewing heterosexual pornography (e.g. Williams, 2004; Ellis, O'Dair & Tallmer, 1990).

Many respondents, while not explicitly citing the academic concept of the gaze, or attempting to explain their preference for m/m pornography in terms of dense psychoanalytic theory, nevertheless seemed very aware of the fact that most straight porn asked them to look at women as a man would, and expressed a dissatisfaction with this. The few studies that have previously examined female interest in gay male pornography have also picked up on this. Ogas & Gaddam (2011:132, italics added) argue that in most heterosexual porn the woman is always the focus of the camera: 'we see *her* expressions, *her* emotions, the graphic details of *her* anatomy... Other than the penis, the man's body and especially his face are rarely highlighted in contemporary porn'. They argue that this 'man's eye' point of view may be a reason why women, particularly heterosexual women, might not enjoy watching heterosexual porn, as in effect, the female viewer is 'compelled to 'have sex' with the woman in the porn - and have sex with her as a man would'. The preference amongst women in this sample for looking at the male form was frequently stated, and many respondents acknowledged that they viewed their preference as being akin to straight men who watched 'lesbian' pornography because they preferred seeing female bodies in a sexualised way than male bodies.

However, a significant proportion of respondents did not stop there, but went on to reflect in quite some depth on the nature of the gaze and spectator positioning when watching different kinds of pornography.

*I like pornography, but, let's face it, the vast, overwhelming majority of it is not made for women. As a female consumer of heterosexual pornography, I often feel as though I'm being manoeuvred into a subject position that is at best an afterthought or a secondary consideration; the woman is generally a vehicle for the man's pleasure, and no amount of 'oohing' and 'aahing' is going to convince me she's as involved as he is. As a female consumer of M/M pornography, I don't have a subject position, and so I can enjoy it much less problematically.*

- British, 25-34, single, heterosexual

In her work on spectator positioning in narrative cinema, Mulvey (1989) acknowledges there are women who gaze - and so, therefore, that there is a female gaze - but denies the possibility of a predominately *feminine* gaze by stating that the female spectator is masculinised. According to Mulvey, specularity, that is, 'to-be-looked-at-ness', is the inherent property of female figures in classical narrative cinema. Therefore, to look at cinema at all, women must borrow the male gaze (Doane, 1987). Is it therefore the case, as Marks (1996) asks, that to look at gay porn a woman must 'borrow' the (gay) male gaze? Marks (1996:130) argues that theories of imaging the male body still assume a masculine viewing subject (be it gay or straight), and as such the female viewer still faces the problem of how to look: 'the male body remains like Teflon, off which female looks glance with nary a scratch'.

In his analysis of gay male porn, Waugh (1985:32) argues that a Mulvey-esque view of spectator positioning and the power of the male gaze is inapplicable to gay porn, where the spectator's 'indemnificatory entry into the narrative is not predetermined by gender divisions' and where 'mise-en-scène does not privilege individual roles, top or bottom, inserter or insertee, in any systematic way'. Work around m/m porn has gone some way to challenge the notions of power and positionality involved in the male gaze, and to contest Mulvey's (1975:11) original statement that 'the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification'. Writing in *Salon* Lili Loofbourow (2014) argues 'the male gaze is now occasionally allowed to be gay', observing that often the 'hottest' scenes on popular television involve two men together. However the assumption here is that the gay male gaze and the female gaze are different... Are they?

It could be argued that because the majority of creators of m/m pornography are likely not consciously crafting a work to represent a female perspective, there is very little probability that they considered that women (generally heterosexual or bisexual cisgendered women, but not exclusively, as the results of this study show) would identify with their work. But does this rule out the existence of the female gaze, especially when viewing men having sex with men? Mackinnon (1997:154) states that while it could be said that women and gay males have profoundly different experiences or profoundly different social training it is very possible nevertheless that 'popular culture...deems women's and gay male erotic gazing as pretty well the same thing'. Moore (1988:53) agrees, claiming that 'the codification of men via gay male discourse enables a female erotic gaze' and adding that 'homoerotic representations, far from excluding the (voyeuristic) female gaze, may actually invite it'. As such, Marks (1996:134) posits that 'gay porn offers a good site for female viewers to test out the power of [their] own look'.

It is clear that when viewing m/m pornography, a large proportion of the respondents were very aware of 'their look'. Many of the responses that sat within the 'Taboo / The unknowable' theme stressed that the fact that m/m sex was so 'unfemale', and therefore was not meant to be watched by women, was part of the appeal - as a woman - of watching it.

*It's very physical, there's still the hint of the taboo about it even now, and there are times when I really wish I could swap bodies so I could experience it for myself. I guess it also has the lure of being something that, unless technology advances hugely in my lifetime, I will never be able to experience - it's literally the unknowable.*

- British, 35-44, married, bisexual

Georges Bataille (1957/1986) argued that eroticism is associated with the idea of transgression, claiming that it is inherently disruptive and disorderly, and this is what brings about the feeling of excitement. Heiman (1977:272) then wondered if perhaps 'erotica must be socially unacceptable or norm-breaking in order to be maximally arousing', noting the preference of the women in her study for sexual scenarios that went against contemporary scripts. This might explain why some women enjoy the perceived 'taboo' nature of watching m/m sex, what Mackinnon (1997:162) refers to as 'the naughtiness of illicit viewing'.

However, a number of other respondents, far from stressing the importance of their own positionality as a *woman* watching men have sex with men, discussed how they often felt male-identified when watching m/m porn. This did not stretch only to their viewing of male homosexual pornography, 62% of participants in the sample stated that they imagined themselves as a man during the course of their sexual fantasies<sup>2</sup>. Of those respondents, 85% imagined themselves with another man (or multiple men), 54% with another woman (or multiple women), 23% imagined themselves (as a man) masturbating, 23% imagined being with male and female partners at the same time, 6% imagined themselves with gender diverse/trans people, 3% imagined themselves with mythical/magical creatures, and 3% imagined themselves watching others have sex (from a male point of view). As one respondent explained, 'I feel much more comfortable [watching m/m sex] and I click into it much better. Because in a way I've always thought that way - and I'll share a huge piece of personal information here... when I masturbate I think of myself from a male point of view and stuff like that as well, so obviously it's a key part of me and has been for a very long time' (British, 35-44, married, pansexual).

Mulvey (1981:13) makes a case for what she calls 'visual transvestism', stating that 'for women (from childhood onwards) transsex identification is a habit, that very easily becomes second nature'. Doane (1991:25) writes similarly, noting that 'while the male is locked into sexual identity, the female can at least pretend she is other - in fact, sexual mobility would seem to be a distinguishing feature of femininity in its social construction'. However, both these explanations are embedded in a longstanding feminist narrative stretching back to Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1973) that male-identification occurs because women have been taught to other *themselves*, that is, to see themselves as men see them. It is also possible, as discussed in the introduction, that the women in this study see themselves as sexually fluid in terms of sexual response to arousing visual stimuli, both in terms of gender identification and sexual orientation. In her work on desire between women in narrative cinema Stacey (1987:61) criticises 'the rigid distinction between *either* desire *or* identification so characteristic of psychoanalytical film theory' as it 'fails to address the construction of desires which involve a specific interplay of both processes'.

A number of respondents, particularly those who regarded m/m porn as a type of 'Queer space', rejected the concept of a 'gendered' gaze entirely. It should be noted that within a lot of the discourse around visual culture, the concept of the male gaze has become seen as something almost ubiquitous, a cliché, a lazy metaphor for the patriarchy. Many objected to the fixity of the alignment of passivity with femininity and activity with masculinity, as well as the failure to account for the female spectator (Silverman, 1980; Kaplan, 1983; de Lauretis, 1984; Stacey, 1991). Evans and

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<sup>2</sup> In response to the question: 'When you fantasize (sexually), do you ever imagine yourself as a man?' Respondents were then given an open text box to expand upon this answer

Gamman (1995:13) argue that 'such usage undermines complex argument and produces crass and essentialist models of social relationships', stating that they want to shift the course of the debate by engaging with what Constantine Giannaris (1992; cited in Evans and Gamman, 1995:13) refers to as 'genderfuck' - claiming this helps to acknowledge that there are in fact 'many perverse but enjoyable relations of looking'. 'Genderfuck' here is a term used to describe confusions in gender recognition, with the observation that the imagined 'self' has the freedom to mutate into alternative manifestations.

The idea of a 'genderfucked' gaze is not a new one. Building on the early Lacanian concept of the 'gaze' from within the area of art history, Randolph (2002) states that Michelangelo's David defies homogenous constructions of binary homoerotic and hetero-normative gazes, instead permitting an androgynous gaze constantly shifting in time and space. A number of respondents discussed exactly such a shifting gaze, one where they could watch m/m pornography from a number of perspectives, depending on their mood.

*I watch het porn and I can't stand most of it, because the ladies are fake, their reactions, and everything just bugs me. I can view gay porn from an outsider perspective and not see myself in the girl, but rather just enjoy it separately and maybe identify with the top or the bottom, however I am feeling that day.*

- American, 25-34, single, heterosexual

Butler (1990) argues that to some extent all women are 'male-identified', and that 'the feminist pursuit of some mythic state of authentically female identification is illusory at best, and often rigidly exclusionary and regulatory in effect' (Kotz, 1993:189). Kotz criticises earlier work in porn studies, pointing out that even progressive analyses of heterosexual porn like Ross (1989) and Williams (1990) which argue for 'pornography from a woman's point of view' rest on 'a completely naturalised reading of gender relations, in which it is assumed that readers or viewers identify along predictable male/female lines' (p.190). A very different reading would emphasise 'the possibility for multiple and contradictory gender identifications which shift and disperse within the scene, so the woman viewer, in effect, can be anywhere' (p.190). Mercer (1991:180) discusses the idea of inhabiting 'two contradictory identifications at one and the same time', and Evans and Gamman (1995:41) argue that 'this idea of multiple and simultaneous identification...has always been part of the female experience of viewing'. Cumberland (2003) writes similarly about slash fiction, questioning whether female writers of slash project themselves into the story as a man, or experience androgyny, a transgendered (phallic) experience, or an out-of-body experience. An analysis of the myriad answers provided in response to this study would suggest the answer would appear to be *all* of the above when it comes to how women respond to m/m pornography.

## **Conclusions**

It is clear from numerous studies into pornography that people find watching others have sex pleasurable. If pornography is here to stay there is no reason to limit that pleasure to men. It would appear gay male porn currently offers women a way to engage with pornography - to experience the pleasure of watching porn - in a way that much heterosexual pornography does not. Of course, gay pornography is not unproblematic, and does not manage to sidestep entirely the issues of

exploitation, oppression, abuse of power, misogyny, and objectification levelled at heterosexual pornography (see Dworkin, 1981; Stoltenberg, 1989), as respondents in this study appeared to be well aware. But it seems to offer women a way into enjoying pornography that many in this study were unable to find elsewhere, as well as offering them the chance to experiment with the power of their own gaze and to explore their sense of sexual orientation and gender identification. Cante & Restivo (2004:142-143) argue that m/m porn is always 'non-normative, whether one conceives the non-normative as a violation of patriarchal law, or, more experientially, as the excess attached to feeling different and acting like an outsider'. They go on to state that 'all-male pornography at some point also *becomes* the field for the (utopian) reinvention of the world eternally promised by identity politics'. To this extent, gay porn subverts the patriarchal order by challenging masculinist values, providing a protected space for non-conformist, non-reproductive and non-familial sexuality, and encouraging many sex-positive values. Is it any wonder that some women like it?

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