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Women's Encounters with Pornographic Texts: Encoding/Decoding and Resistance

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Tracey Jennifer Adamson
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Abstract

The aim of the present study was to undertake audience research (from within the cultural studies paradigm) into ways that women watch pornography. Given that the dominant position within feminism towards pornography has been anti-pornography pro-censorship, the debate surrounding pornography within feminism has concentrated on harm-based analysis. My research is an attempt to address this imbalance, focusing instead on the possibilities of pleasure in pornographic imagery, and by asking specifically about issues that inhibit and generate pleasure in sexual imagery.

Using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, the present study asked four groups of 3 to 4 women to respond to specific examples of hard-core male identified and women-identified pornographic images. Following viewing the clips each group entered into focus-group discussion concerning the way the images represented women, the degrees of identification with the women on-screen, and the possibility of pleasure in erotic imagery. Wider cultural considerations regarding cultural expectations and definitions of pornography and erotica were also discussed.

Textual analysis of the clips revealed that pornography is principally organised according to gender difference that *privileges male sexuality over female sexuality*. Women's responses to this 'preferred encoding' were organised according to whether the women agreed that pornography failed to offer pleasure for them as viewers, negotiated parts of pornography as pleasureable, or opposed the idea that pornography could not offer pleasure for women.

Whereas women are expected to abhor pornography, a view perpetuated by the harm-driven censorship campaigning of anti-pornography theorists, most of the women in this study negotiated pleasure in aspects of pornographic/erotic imagery. I found that although the text themselves do subordinate women's sexuality, women can and do take active pleasure in pornography. It was the textual construction of pornography that was found to be the most offensive aspect of pornography, as it is a construction of sexuality that often fails to represent women's pleasure and misrepresents women's sexuality.

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