

**From Sexual Objectification to Sexual Subjectification?  
Pornography Consumption and Italian Women's  
Sexual Empowerment**

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**Abstract**

Much quantitative research has been devoted to the correlates of pornography consumption, often emphasizing its association with socially undesirable outcomes in the sexual domain. However, much of this research focuses on men, with women pushed into the background if not entirely ignored. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring whether and to what extent pornography consumption among Italian women is related to two indicators of sexual empowerment: the experience of solitary sex without feelings of

guilt and the idea that sexuality is a way to express oneself freely and authentically. To this end, two multivariate logistic regression models were developed. The large random sample survey used here ensures that the findings are more generalizable than those of much quantitative research on pornography carried out to date, which is often based on small convenience samples. The empirical evidence indicates that pornography consumption is associated with higher levels of both indicators of sexual empowerment. Pornography seems to be related to an increased sexual awareness as sexual subjects and to a sense of full entitlement to seek one's own pleasure. However, some of these results are affected by an interpretative ambiguity in terms of the actual meaning of sexual empowerment shown by our indicators. In particular, the indicator relating to the idea of sexuality as a means of self-expression leaves room for an interpretation regarding a neoliberal construction of a new compulsory subjectivity.

**Keywords:** pornography, masturbation, sexual empowerment, female sexuality, Italy, quantitative analysis.

## 1. Introduction

In contemporary societies, where social life and imagery are increasingly sexualized and pornified (e.g., McNair 2002; Paasonen *et al.* 2007; Attwood 2014), female sexuality has been surrounded by a new wave of moral panic (e.g. Paul 2005; Leahy 2008), especially concerning the younger generations (e.g. Tankard Reist 2009; for a critical view, see Smith and Attwood 2013; Ringrose 2016). Sexual experience for women thus continues to be perceived, as Vance (1984) stated more than thirty years ago, as a double-edged sword involving both pleasure and danger, giving women access to pleasure and agency as well as exposing them to the danger of objectification and victimization.

The growth of porn culture is one of the core issues in this public and academic debate<sup>1</sup>. After a period of relative silence, a resurging anti-porn feminist wave is re-focusing

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the Stop Porn Culture campaign was launched in the Usa in 2008 by feminist academics and activists. See Dines *et al.* (2010).

on the need to address pornography as an exploitative cultural industry and mass product and as a means of gender oppression and violence (see Dines 2010; Boyle 2010). At the same time, a new stream of research has assumed as a matter of fact the existence of pornography and has started to analyze the various forms of this everyday and everywhere widespread cultural object and process (see Attwood and Smith 2014; Smith and Attwood 2014).

In this article, we follow Attwood's (2011, 20) suggestion that «by examining different facets and aspects of specific pornographies it becomes possible to understand a variety of porn practices in their fascinating particularity, as we might aim to do in any form of cultural analysis». In the title of our article we purposefully make a direct reference to Gill's famous article, *From sexual objectification to sexual subjectification: The resexualisation of women's bodies in the media* (2003), in which she states that we are witnessing, in popular culture and media representations, a relevant change in «the construction of a new femininity (or, better, new femininities) organized around sexual confidence and autonomy. Indeed, what is novel and striking about contemporary sexualized representations of women in popular culture is that they do not (as in the past) depict women as passive objects but as knowing, active, and desiring sexual subjects» (Ivi, 103). Our contribution to this debate is to move our investigation from media and popular culture content analysis to survey data on individual sexual attitudes and experiences.

By using a survey conducted in Italy, we explore the association between the still controversial sexual practice of pornography consumption and two indicators of women's sexual empowerment. The first is a behavioral indicator: the experience of frequent masturbation without feelings of guilt. The second is attitudinal: the idea that one of the aims of sexuality is free and authentic self-expression. These indicators refer to a sense of entitlement to seek one's own sexual pleasure and to the importance of one's agency in the sexual domain, and are consequently related to the more general concept of sexual empowerment. Many researchers (for Italy, see Romito and Beltramini 2011) have associated exposure to pornography and other adult entertainment material with a variety of negative and socially undesirable outcomes in women's sexual lives. However, some research (e.g., Weinberg 2010) has also found a relationship between pornography consumption and some positive attitudes and behaviors.

This study makes two innovative interventions into research on pornography consumption. The first is its research object, as the quantitative literature on pornography has largely neglected women's experience. The second is the large national random sample on which our analyses are based, which is more reliable than the small and/or convenience samples that have often been used in previous research.

## **2. Theoretical Background: The Controversial Notion of Female Sexual Empowerment**

The notion of female sexual empowerment is one of the more controversial topics in public and academic debate, leading some more radical feminist scholars (e.g. Gavey 2012) to suggest to “forget” and go beyond this concept. In the attempt to provide a concise yet comprehensive review of the debate we follow Gill (2012, 736-737) who identifies three main positions:

On one side of the argument are those who mobilize women's “choice”, “agency” and “empowerment” to champion aspects of “sexualized” culture such as pornography, burlesque or the popularity of pole dancing as a recreational activity – these activities can be defended (or even celebrated) because they are “empowering”. (...) On the other, empowerment is merely regarded as a cynical rhetoric, wrapping sexual objectification in a shiny, feisty, post-feminist packaging that obscures the continued underlying sexism. (...) A further position is interested in the extent to which sexual “empowerment” has itself become a normatively demanded feature of young women's sexual subjectivity, such that they are called on routinely to perform confident, knowing heterosexiness.

Beyond more political and ideological connotation of the debate around the notion of sexual empowerment, one of its problematic aspects is a certain level of abstractness of its definition and articulation, and thereby a disagreement about its dimensions and components: e.g., the opposition between subjective and internal versus objective and external

dimensions. The former refers to the power-to, or a sense of self-efficacy and agency, while the latter is represented by a power-over, e.g., the capacity to exert control over external resources or conditions (Yoder and Kahn 1992). An interesting – and controversial – contribution to solving this tension is provided in Peterson’s article, tellingly entitled “What Is Sexual Empowerment?” (2010), where she suggests that sexual empowerment can be considered as a multidimensional and processual concept. Building on Zimmerman’s (1995) framework of the three components of psychological empowerment – intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral – Peterson attempts to extend this three-dimensionality to sexual empowerment. The intrapersonal dimension includes the perception of control, competence and mastery. Thus, when applied to women’s sexual empowerment, it can be interpreted as a perception of the sexual domain as a site of sexual self-confidence, self-awareness, self-expression and self-efficacy (on this, see also Weinberg *et al.* 2010). The interactional component refers to decision-making and problem-solving skills. In the field of female sexuality, this dimension might correspond to women’s ability to communicate and negotiate what they want sexually, as well as to refuse unwanted sexual experiences. Lastly, the behavioral component involves all the actions taken to directly influence outcomes. In the case of women’s sexual empowerment, this can include the capacity to perform their sexuality – both alone and with a partner – in ways that they feel to be positive, healthy and pleasurable, without feelings of guilt or shame.

Such a multidimensional and processual conceptualization enables us to go beyond an all-or-none interpretation. Defining an experience as sexually empowering for women thus becomes a matter of degrees, of timing in the life course, and of the dimensions involved, so that a woman can feel empowered on some levels and disempowered on others at a certain point in her life or in relation to specific contexts depending on the power relations in which she is embedded and the resources she can mobilize.

Peterson’s proposal provoked a lively debate – that in some cases goes well beyond an engagement in empirical research, radicalizing ideological and political stances often without an empirical foundation – and resulted in a series of articles and commentaries that led to a wider re-examination of the notion of sexual empowerment. This re-examination acknowledged the difficulty of providing a clear-cut definition and worked to explore the unresolved ambivalences and overcome dichotomized views of empowerment

(for a synthesis, see Lamb and Peterson 2012, and their reply to commentators in Peterson and Lamb 2012). One of the most significant limitations of Peterson's definition of sexual empowerment is its focus on individual women's accounts of their sexual experiences, leaving aside the structural constraints and the gendered power relations shaping the context in which they are embedded (see Gill 2012; Gavey 2012).

As for our positioning within the debate, we argue for focusing, in an analytical perspective, on indicators of individual experience of sexual choice and agency. At the micro level, the concept of sexual empowerment does not suffer from the limitation mentioned above, which refers more to a macro level of analysis. Thus, this concept can be a useful analytical tool for an empirical analysis like that presented here, which is situated at the micro-level of social interactions and investigates the association between pornography consumption and an individual sense of entitlement to sexual agency and pleasure. We do not dismiss the existence of structural constraints to shape individual experiences and limit choices in the sexual domain, but we do not have the empirical material to take these elements into account in our analysis. We will discuss this limitation of our work in the final section of the article.

Moreover, the theoretical work carried out by Peterson (2010) allows to unpack the concept of sexual empowerment (for another similar attempt, see Enchull and Liss 2013). This concept, even in its lively debate, is located at a high level of abstractness, and consequently it is very difficult to be properly empirically tested. Peterson's three dimensions of sexual empowerment move to a lower level of abstractness. Consequently, these dimensions can be operationalized through the use of appropriate variables. It goes without saying that this partition in different dimensions is very useful, from a methodological perspective, in a quantitative empirical analysis like that presented here.

### **3. Empirical Evidence: Women's Experiences of Pornography**

Pornography consumption has been accused of contributing to the sexual objectification of women, e.g., reducing women to a mere thing, a spectacle for the male gaze represented as a passive and desiring body that is always available for men's pleasure, thereby allowing harassment, abuse, violence and rape (Dines 2010; Boyle 2010; Attwood 2005; for a

recent discussion of critical porn studies, see Smith and Attwood 2014). More recently, some authors (on this debate, see Gill 2012) have discussed a shift in the impact of porn, moving from a focus on sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, wherein the latter is understood, within a postfeminist neoliberal perspective, as a normative and compulsory call to sexual activation in the construction of femininities that has replaced virginity and sexual innocence as markers of (hetero)sexual desirability.

As a consequence, empirical studies have long focused on the socially undesirable outcomes of pornography and Sexually Explicit Materials (Sem), investigating the association between the consumption of Sem and sexual attitudes and gender stereotypes, as well as behavior: permissive sexual practices, lifetime number of sexual partners, sexual aggressiveness and violence (for recent reviews, see Harkness *et al.* 2015; Peter and Valkenburg 2016; Koletić 2017). The association with other sexual and non-sexual dimensions of adult life, such as sexual satisfaction (e.g., Gouvernet *et al.* 2017; Poulsen *et al.* 2013) and the stability of couple relationships (e.g., Willoughby *et al.* 2016; Perry and Schleifer 2018) has also been explored.

Only a few studies have scrutinized the possibility of socially desirable outcomes of using pornography (e.g., Weinberg *et al.* 2010). Among these studies, the majority have focused on men as the prevalent Sem consumers, finding positive correlations between Sem use and progressive gender role-related attitudes (Lofgren-Martenson and Mansson 2010; Peter and Valkenburg 2016; Kohut *et al.* 2016).

Although there is a well-established stream of social science research on pornography consumers, studies dealing mainly or exclusively with women as active users of pornography have been very sporadic. As McKeown *et al.* (2018, 341) point out, «Despite the rise in both access to and use of sexual content by women, to date, much of the research on pornography consumption continues to focus predominantly on men's consumption. [...] Given this focus, the ways in which women are consuming this content [...] remains somewhat veiled, and hence, not well understood».

In quantitative studies, gender is often limited to being considered a variable – albeit an undoubtedly relevant one – that can be useful in predicting pornography consumption and shaping usage patterns that differ in terms of motivations, frequency, genre of Sem etc. (e.g., Bryant and Shim 2008; Ross *et al.* 2012; Hald 2006; Traen and Daneback 2013;

Carroll *et al.* 2017). When studies address the relationship between women and pornography consumption, the focus is often limited to the kind of reaction women have towards their male partner's uses of pornography (e.g., Zitzman and Butler 2009; Stewart *et al.* 2012; Resch and Alderson 2014; Szymanski *et al.* 2015) or to their own consumption of non-mainstream pornography (Kimberly *et al.* 2018; Neville 2015).

Qualitative studies, though few in number, have devoted more attention to women's uses of pornography (for a critical review see Attwood 2005; Ashton *et al.* 2018). For many women approaching Sem through their male partners, sexualized images are perceived as frightening and disgusting, fostering a sense of inadequacy and dissatisfaction about their bodies and an anxiety about being pressured into unwanted sexual acts (Shaw 1999). When viewing Sem on their own, women make a distinction between self-arousing sexual images and discomforting and degrading representations of sexual coercion and abuse (Parvez 2006), which often provide misrepresentations of bodies, sexual acts and expressions of pleasure, with the risk of disrupting intimacy (Ashton *et al.* 2019).

Despite these negative feelings surrounding porn consumption, qualitative research also shows that some women actively engage in using pornography in order to make the experience enjoyable and fruitful, and to neutralize the stigmatizing and distressing meanings socially attributed to Sem (Chadwick *et al.* 2018). For some women, watching porn is thus not reduced to a merely passive and objectifying experience, but may become an active and productive experience, though it is not without risk (Parvez 2006; Chowkhani 2016).

The more general effect reported is a broadening of sexual horizons and an expansion of sexual possibilities (Weinberg *et al.* 2010), such as learning new sexual acts, finding wider sources of sexual fantasies, engaging in a greater variety of sexual practices and sexual interactions. Several scholars (Ciclitira 2004; Parvez 2006; Smith 2007; Rothman *et al.* 2015; Chowkhani 2016; McKeown *et al.* 2018; Ashton *et al.* 2019) have pointed to the variety and complexity of possible meanings and experiences of Sem consumption for women: it can provide a vocabulary for exploring desires and phantasies, encourage the sexual awareness needed to negotiate the boundaries of what is considered sexually attractive, furnish a repertoire of possible sexual practices to draw upon and to be shared



for enriching sexual relationships, and influence women's body-image and self-perceptions as sexual subjects.

We can summarize this literature by quoting two of these studies' conclusions: pornography seems to give women the "Permission' to be more *sexually active*" (Ciclitira 1998, 373, our italics), and "To foster a sense of *sexual independence* because it was rooted in personal choice" (McKeown *et al.* 2018, 347, our italics). For some women, porn consumption, although not without moments of discomfort and distress at times, can contribute to normalizing the exploration of their sexual desires, preferences and practices, hence the interest in investigating whether this practice is associated with certain indicators of sexual empowerment.

#### **4. The Present Study**

The present study tackles a research question that to the best of our knowledge has largely been neglected in the quantitative literature: is pornography consumption associated with indicators of sexual empowerment among women? This study contributes to current knowledge in two respects: First, it adds new insights about the role of Sem in women's sexual lives since most of the existing research is focused on men. Moreover, scholarly attention is often limited to young people (see, e.g., for Italy, Scarcelli and Stella 2019), whereas our research focuses on a larger portion of the population. Second, the findings presented here come from a large stratified random sample. This is significant because much of the available quantitative evidence on pornography is based on small and/or convenience samples (for an exception, see Luder 2011), with little or no capacity for generalization.

This work focuses on Italy, which is an interesting setting for the topic tackled here. Culturally and institutionally, Italy is still highly conservative when it comes to gender equality and women's role in society (European Institute for Gender Equality 2015). Some empirical evidence has shown that, as might be expected, this is also true of sexual attitudes and behavior. For example, Italian women have fewer experiences of masturbation and active oral sex than those from United Kingdom, France and United States. Moreover, changes have been slower in Italy than in other countries in terms of lowering

the age that sexual intercourse first takes place, as well as in occurrences of premarital sex (Barbagli 2010). Also, the use of highly effective contraceptive methods, such as the pill or Iud, is lower in Italy than elsewhere, with coitus interruptus remaining the most common contraceptive method among married and cohabiting couples (Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2010a). Finally, on the one hand, Italian female younger cohorts have more sexual partners during the life course than their older counterparts. In this domain, moreover, gender differences are decreasing over time. The spread of these processes have started with the most educated and secularized women. However, and on the other hand, Italian women still have less sexual partners than those from other countries such as France and United Kingdom (Castiglioni and Dalla Zuanna 2010b).

According to Bertone and colleagues (2011), even the more recent permissive sexual scripts that Italian women have been exposed to do not put them in a position to autonomously determine the timing and forms of sexual interaction, and thus, in our view, gain full sexual empowerment. Ferrero Camoletto (2011) showed that among young people, their sexual careers follow scripts strongly shaped by a double gendered standard: men more often place their first sexual intercourse within a context of emotional and relational detachment, while women approach their sexual debut as a romantic experience.

Given this high level of traditionalism and gender imbalance in the sexual domain, and the related low level of female sexual empowerment, it is of particular interest to investigate the association between such empowerment and pornography consumption, a practice which is neither widespread among Italian women nor regarded as a socially legitimate part of their sexual conduct.

## **5. Method**

### ***5.1. The survey***

This study is based on a 2006 survey on Italians' sexual attitudes and behavior. To date, this is the largest and most recent dataset on these topics available for Italy as a whole<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The fact that the data were collected some years ago is a limitation of this study. However, it should be borne in mind that the analysis presented here refers to a large portion of the population (see below), which

The survey was part of a national research project financed by the Italian Ministry of Education, involving sociologists and demographers from three Italian universities (Bologna, Padua, Turin). The survey is based on a random sample of the Italian population aged 18-69 stratified by age, sex, region, size of the town and education. The survey sample consists of 3,058 individuals (response rate 43%) interviewed using a structured questionnaire about couple relationships, cohabitations, marriages, emotional and sexual socialization, sexual attitudes, sexual experiences during the life course and detailed socio-demographic information about the respondent and his/her family of origin. Some of this information was collected in face-to-face interviews, while a self-administered questionnaire was used for more sensitive data. The initial sample of our analysis consisted of 1,489 heterosexual women<sup>3</sup>.

## **5.2. Measures**

As mentioned above, this study aims to shed light on the potential association between Sem consumption and sexual empowerment. Since this study is based on secondary data, our dependent variables referring to sexual empowerment are not specifically designed to be reliable indicators of this complex concept and its multiple dimensions as discussed in the theoretical section; rather, they can be considered the best proxies among the variables available in the dataset. This is the main limitation of this work, and its implications will be discussed in the final section.

The dependent variables of our analysis cover two of the three dimensions of sexual empowerment: the behavioral and the intrapersonal. As mentioned earlier, the behavioral dimension refers to the capacity to perform one's own sexuality positively, both alone and with a partner, without feelings of guilt or shame. This dimension is operationalized through a behavioral variable investigating the respondent's experience of frequent masturbation without feelings of guilt in the last year. The item is coded 1 if the respondent

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is more stable over time in its characteristics, attitudes and behavior than a small one (e.g., young people). An analysis focusing on the former population is far less affected by the passage of time than an analysis focusing on the latter.

<sup>3</sup> We do not include the very few homosexual and bisexual women (respectively, 5 and 23 cases, who accounted for less than 2% of the overall sample).

masturbated at least 2-3 times a month without guilt, 0 otherwise<sup>4</sup>. Women's experiences of solitary sex have been found to be correlated with a greater ability to gain sexual arousal and orgasm (e.g., Carvalheira and Leal 2013; Bowman 2014), improvements in self-awareness, body-image, self-esteem and sexual pleasure (Herbenick *et al.* 2009) and sexual health (Hogarth and Ingham 2009). Therefore, we can reasonably assume that frequent masturbation without feelings of guilt is related to higher levels of sexual empowerment.

The intrapersonal dimension of sexual empowerment refers to self-expression, self-confidence and self-efficacy in the sexual domain. In the questionnaire, only an attitudinal variable is available to operationalize this dimension. This variable investigates the respondents' level of agreement with the following statement: "The aim of sexuality is expressing oneself freely and authentically". The variable is coded 1 for agreement, 0 for disagreement. Given the importance of self-expression in the intrapersonal dimension of sexual empowerment, we assume that having a positive attitude toward this statement is a plausible proxy of higher sexual empowerment.

The main independent variable of our analysis investigates the respondents' Sem consumption in the last year, taking into consideration different types of material: magazines, movies at home, movies in cinemas, and online websites. The variable is coded as follows: 0 - Never; 1 - Almost never; 2 - Sometimes or often.

### **5.3. Procedure**

The relationship between Sem consumption and the indicators of sexual empowerment can be affected by different antecedent and concomitant confounding variables, with the risk of producing spurious relationships. The survey used here includes many such variables: respondents' age, area of residence, size of the town, engagement in a couple relationship, number of children, education, social class, church attendance and political orientation.

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<sup>4</sup> An even higher frequency of masturbation would be a better indicator of sexual empowerment, but given the Italian traditional cultural context this choice would result in a very low number of women in category 1, and thus not permit multivariate analysis (see also note 5).

Binomial logistic regression models were used to neutralize the confounding effects of these variables. Descriptive statistics for all variables included in the analysis are presented in Table 1.

Variable	Mean or %	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
<b>Pornography consumption</b> (ref: Never, N=1,472)	70.3%			
Almost never	12.6%		0	1
Sometimes or often	17.1%		0	1
<b>Experience of frequent masturbation without guilt feelings</b> (ref: No, N: 1,486)	93.6%			
Yes	6.4%		0	1
<b>Agreement with the statement: “The aim of sexuality is expressing oneself freely and authentically”</b> (ref: Disagreement, N: 1,478)	15.0%			
Agreement	85.0%		0	1
<b>Age</b> (N: 1,489)	43.6	14.6	18	69
<b>Area of residence</b> (ref.: North, N: 1,489)	44.4%			
Center	18.4%		0	1
South	37.2%		0	1
<b>Size of the town</b> (ref.: Less than 30,000 inhabitants, N: 1,489)	56.9%			
30,001-100,000 inhabitants	20.9%		0	1
100,001-500,000 inhabitants	10.7%		0	1
More than 500,000 inhabitants	11.5%		0	1
<b>Number of children</b> (N: 1,487)	1.3	1.2	0	7
<b>Engagement in a couple relationship</b> (ref: No, N: 1,417)	20.2%			
Yes	79.8%		0	1
<b>Education</b> (ref.: Primary school, N: 1,489)	22.7%			
Junior high school diploma	43.9%		0	1
High school diploma	23.8%		0	1
University degree	9.6%		0	1
<b>Social class</b> (ref.: Service class, N: 1,357)	5.8%			
Middle class	33.7%		0	1
Manual workers	28.0%		0	1
Never employed	32.5%			
<b>Church attendance</b> (ref.: A few times a year or never, N: 1,486)	49.6%			
Once a month	9.3%		0	1
2-3 times a month	13.5%		0	1
Once a week or more	27.6%		0	1
<b>Political orientation</b> (ref.: Left or center-left, N: 1,162)	36.1%			
Center	11.1%		0	1
Right or center-right	32.1%		0	1
Not known	20.7%		0	1

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis

As Weinberg *et al.* (2010) point out, the association between Sem consumption and sexual outcomes does not necessarily indicate causality in a particular direction. This is a limitation affecting much of the research on pornography and this study is no exception. On the one hand, pornography consumption may affect attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behavior, while on the other, these are precisely the attitudes and behavior that may influence people's choices about pornography consumption. This caveat must be borne in mind when considering our research findings, which should be interpreted in terms of robust associations rather than causal relationships.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Descriptive results

Before turning to the details of the multivariate analysis models, we will first present some descriptive data (see Table 1)<sup>5</sup>. In regards our dependent variables, the percentage of women experiencing frequent solitary sex without feelings of guilt is low in the sample, only 6.4%. This is not surprising, considering Italy's traditionalism in the sexual domain and elsewhere, and the fact that our sample includes women aged 18-69, rather than young women only<sup>6</sup>. By contrast, the percentage of women agreeing with the statement "The aim of sexuality is expressing oneself freely and authentically" is very high, at 85%. Moving to our independent variable, over 70% of women never consumed pornography in the last year, 12.6% consumed such material almost never, and 17.1% sometimes or often.

When the sample is divided on the basis of our independent variable of interest, some variations in the distribution of the dependent variables between the subgroups can be seen (Table 2).

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<sup>5</sup> The sample sizes for the analyses put forward in this and in the following section vary according to the number of missing cases of the variables considered.

<sup>6</sup> The low percentage of women experiencing frequent solitary sex does not prevent the use of multivariate models. We have 53 women masturbating frequently among those who never consume Sem, 22 among those who almost never consume Sem, and 45 among those consuming Sem often or sometimes (data not shown, available on demand). Even if these numbers are small, they make it possible to perform the logistic regression presented in the next section (see Table 3, model 1) without problems of empty cells.

	Never (%)	Almost never (%)	Sometimes or often (%)
<b>Frequent experience of masturbation without guilt feelings</b> (N=1,469; $\chi^2 = 41.4$ , Pr = 0.000)			
No	95.9	91.3	85.3
Yes	4.1	8.7	14.8
<b>Agreement with the statement “The aim of sexuality is expressing oneself freely and authentically”</b> (N=1,461; $\chi^2 = 13.7$ Pr = 0.001)			
Disagree	16.0	18.3	7.8
Agree	84.0	81.7	92.2

Table 2. Indicators of Sexual Empowerment, by Pornography Consumption - Bivariate Analysis

Women consuming Sem more often show higher levels of sexual empowerment than those who do so less often, and differences are statistically significant. In regards masturbation as an indicator of sexual empowerment, only 4.1% of women who never consume pornography experience frequent solitary sex without feelings of guilt. This percentage rises to 8.7% among women who almost never consume pornography, and nearly triples (arriving at 14.8%) among those who consume pornography sometimes or often. If we focus on the other indicator of sexual empowerment used here, the percentage of women considering sexuality as a way to express themselves freely and authentically is 84% among women who never consume pornography, decreases slightly among those who almost never do so, and increases by almost ten percentage points, reaching 92.2%, among women who sometimes or often consume such material.

## 6.2. Multivariate Analysis

To assess a robust association between Sem consumption and sexual empowerment while minimizing the risk of finding spurious relationships, it is necessary to employ multivariate analysis models.

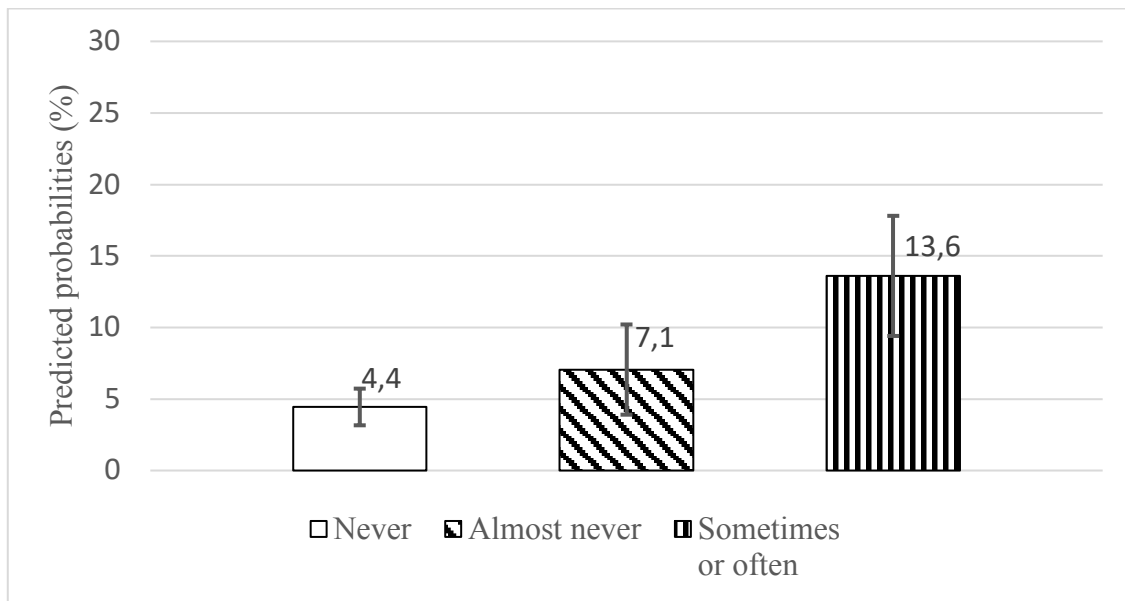
The first model (Table 3, model 1) tests the association between frequent masturbation without guilt and sexual empowerment. The size of the association is expressed through odds ratios. Odds ratios can be interpreted here as the relative propensity to masturbate frequently (e.g., the propensity to do so rather than not do so) for the category of interest in comparison with the same propensity for the reference category.

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Odds Ratio	Std. Err.	P-Value	Odds ratio	Std. Err.	P-Value
<b>Pornography consumption</b> (ref: Never)						
Almost never	1.69	0.52	0.093	0.74	0.18	0.210
Sometimes or often	3.75	1.00	0.000	2.18	0.64	0.008
<b>Age</b>	0.98	0.01	0.092	1.00	0.01	0.775
<b>Area of residence</b> (ref.: North)						
Center	0.87	0.24	0.609	1.23	0.32	0.412
South	0.49	0.14	0.012	0.74	0.15	0.140
<b>Size of the town</b> (ref.: Less than 30,000 inhabitants)						
30,001-100,000 inhabitants	1.84	0.49	0.024	1.08	0.25	0.729
100,001-500,000 inhabitants	0.69	0.26	0.326	0.61	0.15	0.039
More than 500,000 inhabitants	0.72	0.26	0.355	1.77	0.55	0.068
<b>Number of children</b>	0.98	0.03	0.476	1.01	0.03	0.775
<b>Engagement in a couple relationship</b> (ref: No)						
Yes	0.62	0.16	0.057	0.71	0.17	0.145
Missing	0.91	0.60	0.892	0.57	0.22	0.146
<b>Education</b> (ref.: Primary school)						
Junior high school diploma	1.29	0.76	0.660	1.36	0.35	0.226
High school diploma	1.55	0.97	0.485	1.50	0.46	0.185
University degree	3.14	1.94	0.065	1.62	0.63	0.215
<b>Social class</b> (ref.: Service class)						
Middle class	0.52	0.22	0.121	0.75	0.32	0.493
Manual workers	0.47	0.25	0.149	0.98	0.44	0.958
Never employed	0.43	0.23	0.117	0.92	0.42	0.863
Missing	0.75	0.39	0.580	0.73	0.37	0.531
<b>Church attendance</b> (ref.: A few times a year or never)						
Once a month	0.95	0.42	0.903	0.63	0.18	0.097
2-3 times a month	0.47	0.20	0.072	1.13	0.34	0.685
Once a week or more	0.47	0.17	0.036	0.76	0.16	0.208
<b>Political orientation</b> (ref.: Left or center-left)						
Center	0.52	0.25	0.181	0.69	0.22	0.253
Right or center-right	0.76	0.22	0.341	0.87	0.21	0.568
Not known	0.64	0.27	0.282	0.58	0.15	0.039
Missing	0.59	0.18	0.090	1.12	0.28	0.658
<b>Constant</b>	0.33	0.34	0.287	10.05	7.87	0.003
<i>Pseudo R2</i>		0.15			0.05	
<i>Log pseudolikelihood</i>		-296.6			-572.1	
<i>N</i>		1,466			1,458	

Table 3. Association between Pornography Consumption and Women's Sexual Empowerment - Multivariate Analysis



Thus, the odds ratio of 1.69 for women who almost never consume Sem means that the relative propensity of masturbating frequently among these women is 69% higher  $[(1.69-1)*100]$  than the same propensity among women who never consume Sem (see Pisati 2003; Menard 1995). The p-value is only slightly above conventional statistical significance, so this difference cannot be completely ignored. If women who sometimes or often consume Sem are considered, their relative propensity of masturbating frequently is 275% higher  $[(3.75-1)*100]$  than the same propensity among women who never consume Sem. The difference between women who almost never consume Sem and those who so quite often is statistically significant at the conventional level (data not shown, available upon request). For a better grasp of the association between the dependent and the main independent variable of interest, the predicted probabilities were calculated and shown in a graph<sup>7</sup>.

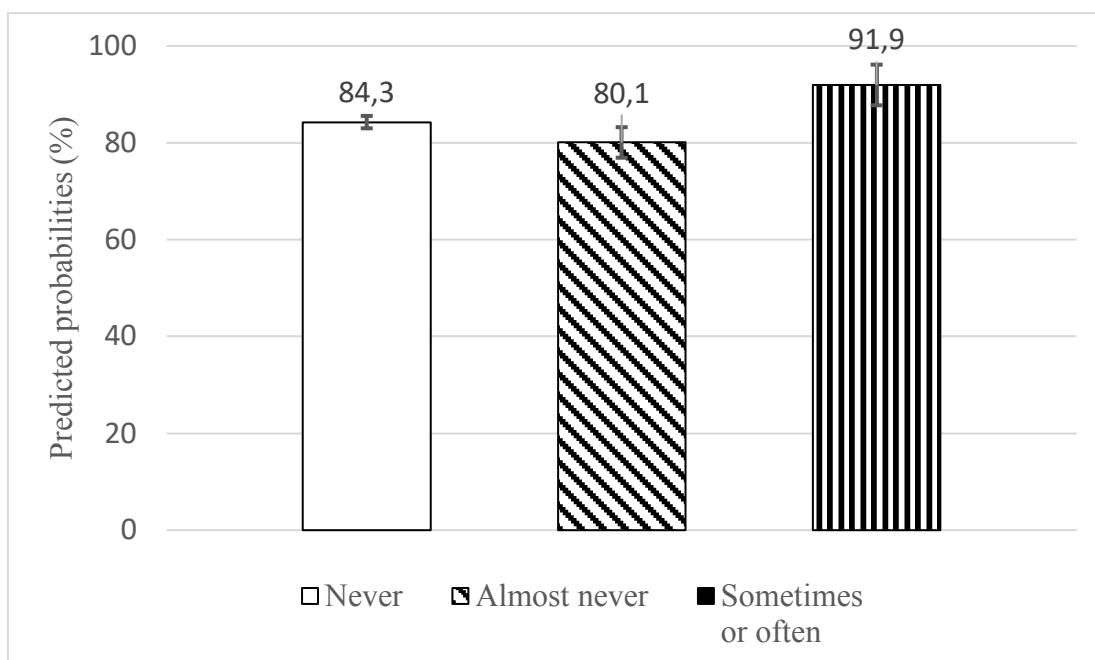


Graph 1. Predicted Probabilities (%) and Confidence Intervals of Experience of Frequent Masturbation without Guilt Feelings, by Pornography Consumption

<sup>7</sup> Average predicted probabilities and their confidence intervals, obtained through the Stata command *Margins*, are computed by setting control variables at their observed values.

Among women who never consume Sem, the predicted probability of experiencing frequent solitary sex without guilt feelings is 4.4%. This probability increases to 7.1% among those who almost never consume Sem, and reaches almost 14% among frequent Sem consumers.

Moving to the other indicator of sexual empowerment (Table 3, model 2), the relative propensity to agree (rather than not agree) with the statement “The aim of sexuality is expressing oneself freely and authentically” of women who almost never consume Sem does not differ from the propensity of women who never consume Sem. Compared with the latter, however, women who sometimes or often consume Sem show a 118% higher propensity  $[(2.18-1)*100]$ .



Graph 2. Predicted Probabilities (%) and Confidence Intervals of Agreement with the Statement “The Aim of Sexuality is Expressing Oneself Freely and Authentically”, by Pornography Consumption

As regards predicted probabilities (graph 2), the probability of considering sex as a means of self-expression is 84.3% among women who never consume Sem, does not change among those who almost never consume Sem, but reaches almost 92% among those consuming Sem sometimes or often.

## 7. Discussion

Is Sem consumption by women associated with seeking one's sexual pleasure and self-expression through sex, two indicators of sexual empowerment? To the best of our knowledge, quantitative research has overlooked women's use of adult content, and the associated attitudes and behavior, due to its focus on the correlates of men's pornography consumption. The research findings provide a positive answer to our initial question: women who consumed Sem in the last year are more likely to experience solitary sex without guilt and to interpret sex as a means of self-expression. Our large random sample makes it possible to generalize this empirical evidence, unlike the small convenience samples used in many previous studies of pornography.

It must be emphasized, however, that we cannot make a distinction between the consumption of different pornographic genres. Our data did not provide the detailed information needed to understand whether women consumed cis-heterosexual-male-centered pornography or if they used softer and more women-oriented Sem. Since the latter still accounts for a very small portion of adult entertainment, we can reasonably assume that much of our respondents' Sem consumption consisted of cis-heterosexual-male-centered pornography, which is probably associated with female sexual empowerment to a lesser extent than pornography centering on women's sexuality and pleasure. Notwithstanding this fact, we found a positive association.

Our results seem to be in line with the strand of research exploring whether the use of pornography can have socially desirable effects (e.g., Weinberg *et al.* 2010), and in particular with the qualitative studies indicating that pornography may be associated with women's sexual agency (Ciclitira 1998) and sexual independence (McKeown *et al.* 2018) in terms of a wider sexual imagery and sexual repertoire, an increased sexual awareness as sexual subject and a sense of full entitlement to seek their own pleasure (e.g., Smith 2007). Our work thus seems to cast doubt – at least according to the data used here – on the one-dimensional interpretation of the objectifying effect of pornography shown by some of the literature (e.g., see, for Italy, Romito and Beltramini 2011), in line with recent qualitative research uncovering the nuanced and plural understandings women have of their experience of pornography and pleasure (Ashton *et al.* 2019).

However, a caveat must be borne in mind: our findings must be viewed in the light of the lively debate around the various understandings of sexual empowerment. Recalling Gill's (2012) distinction, our indicators of women's sexual empowerment are to some extent open to different interpretations. On the one hand, the positive association between Sem consumption and the experience of frequent masturbation without feelings of guilt seems to trigger a positive reading of sexual empowerment as a matter of sexual awareness, agency and pleasure. From this perspective, female masturbation is seen to play a positive role in sexual development, and is interpreted as «a positive component in the structuring of female sexuality» (Carvalheira and Leal 2013, 364). As Bowman (2014) states: «When a woman masturbates, she experiences her sexuality in a way that does not conform to dominant expectations of femininity or female sexuality. She is not concerned with producing offspring, nor is she concerned with preventing pregnancy. She feels sexual sensations that are not provided by a partner, and, because no partner needs to be present, she need not concern herself with anyone's pleasure but her own. In this way, the "excessive" nature of masturbation may be related to feelings of *sexual empowerment* for some women» (364, our italics). According to Fahs and Frank (2014), masturbation has enhanced many women's lives in positive ways, allowing them to express a positive approach towards their bodies, to adopt an affirmative and nurturing self-acceptance, to relieve stress, to have fun and to gain pleasure.

On the other hand, the association between Sem consumption and the belief that sex is a means of self-expression can lead to a more controversial interpretation: it can be understood as evidence of sexual agency, but it may also be considered a feature of the new sexual norm of heterosexiness (Favaro 2017), in line with the neoliberal celebration of the individual as a free self-entrepreneur, calling on women to become sexually confident and perform as expected in a sexualized culture (Gill and Scharff 2011). From this perspective, the importance given to sexual self-expression can be seen as part of a «rhetoric of agency, choice and self-determination, which within sexuality discourses have produced an 'up for it' femininity, a sexually savvy and active woman who can participate appropriately in consumer practices in the production of her choice biography» (Evans *et al.* 2010, 115). Thus, the association between Sem consumption and sexual self-express-

sion may be seen as part of the post-feminist shift from sexual objectification to compulsory sexual subjectification in which women are represented not as seeking men's approval, but as pleasing themselves (Gill 2003, 2008).

Our data do not allow us to fully resolve this dilemma. Consequently, this study can be regarded as providing the foundations for a closer qualitative examination of the association between Sem consumption and sexual empowerment, in a circular dialogue between qualitative and quantitative research. The former type of analysis will make it possible to investigate the meanings of the relationship between Sem consumption and female sexual empowerment in greater depth. For the time being, we can suppose that if Sem is positively associated here with frequent masturbation without feelings of guilt – an indicator of empowerment which is, in our view, less affected by this interpretive ambiguity – its association with the importance of self-expression in the sexual domain could also be interpreted more in terms of positive empowerment than of disempowerment.

We are aware of the theoretical and methodological limitations of our study, some of which have been mentioned in the previous sections. With regards the former, our inquiry into sexual empowerment has focused chiefly on individual trajectories<sup>8</sup>. This choice, which was due to the nature of our single-country data, does not mean that we do not recognize the importance of taking the contextual and collective dimension of empowerment into account, or that we are not aware of the risk of being trapped in an individualistic framing of the issues around gender, sex and power. In our view, adopting *an individual level of analysis* does not correspond to take up an *individualistic approach* which downplays the relevance of the collective level. Looking at micro-level social processes and exploring the associations, within individual biographies, of experiences that can trigger sexual empowerment in some individuals *does not* necessarily divert attention from «creating the conditions of possibility for all (...) women to enjoy safe, consensual and

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<sup>8</sup> Lamb (2010) points out the importance, even at a micro-level of analysis, of looking at the unequal distribution of sexual resources (e.g., sexual information and education, access to sexual health services and devices etc.). We tried to take into account this point running our analyses with three additional controls capturing the respondents' level of sexual education: difficulties about speaking of sex with father and mother at 14 years old, and frequency with which the respondent spoke of sex with friend at the same age. The findings of the analyses does not change from those presented in the previous section (table not shown, available upon request).

pleasurable sex» (Gill 2012, 743). Our work tackles a topic that has largely been neglected by quantitative studies. We thus believe that offering initial empirical evidence situated at the micro level of the social interaction can be a relevant contribution to the scholarly literature, which can then be extended to the macro level in subsequent research, potentially contributing to re-designing informational campaigns and other kinds of programs targeted at women's sexual health and rights. In this respect, Lamb (2010, 315) reclaims the importance to support girl's development of critical skills to question how contemporary sexualized culture is influencing them. We agree with this call, and we believe that our analysis can provide empirical basis for further discussions and interventions.

Insofar as methodological limitations, the variables used here as indicators of sexual empowerment were not specifically designed for this purpose, but can be considered the best proxies among the items available in the dataset. Of course, this fact undermines the accuracy by which a concept as complex and multidimensional as sexual empowerment can be measured. Another problem is that we have no information about the context in which our respondents consumed pornography. We do not know if it was a free and informed choice, if the choice was to some extent forced by the partner, if pornography was consumed alone, in the couple, in a group, etc. This information would have allowed us to investigate the situation in which Sem consumption has the strongest association with female sexual empowerment. Moreover, our sample – though larger in size than samples used in many previous studies – does not enable us to perform a separate analysis for the different cohorts of women. This is a serious limitation, since a cohort approach appears to be of particular relevance: we can expect the association between Sem consumption and sexual empowerment to vary among different cohorts of women who have been socialized to different sexual scripts (Bertone *et al.* 2011). The differences in the sources of pornography (e.g., magazines, cinema, Vhs/Dvd, internet) available to the different cohorts should also be taken into account.

Future studies should expand these research findings by addressing these limitations. This will require large quantitative datasets, if possible permitting both a cohort and a comparative analysis. This study focuses on Italy, a conservative country with low levels of gender equality, a persistent sexual double standard, and significant gender differences

in the sexual domain. In such a setting, women's Sem consumption and sexual empowerment are neither widespread nor do they enjoy broad social acceptance. It is thus of interest to investigate whether these dimensions are positively associated even in more gender-equal countries such as Scandinavia, where they are more legitimate. Lastly, the variables used in future research should be specifically designed to be reliable indicators of sexual empowerment, in order to avoid interpretative ambiguity, and should also allow for an in-depth investigation of the experience of Sem consumption.

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