A Darker Side of Venus: An Empirical-Phenomenological Study of Women's Negative Experiences Encountering Pornographic Imagery

Rebecca Gimeno

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A DARKER SIDE OF VENUS: AN EMPIRICAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF WOMEN’S NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES ENCOUNTERING PORNOGRAPHIC IMAGERY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Rebecca Marcelina Gimeno

December 2019
A DARKER SIDE OF VENUS: AN EMPIRICAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF WOMEN’S NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES ENCOUNTERING PORNOGRAPHIC IMAGERY

By
Rebecca Marcelina Gimeno

Approved January 18, 2019

________________________________
Will Adams, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Committee Chair)

________________________________
Russell Walsh, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Committee Member)

________________________________
Lori Koelsch, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
(Committee Member)

________________________________
James C. Swindal, Ph.D.
Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

________________________________
Leswin Laubscher, Ph.D.
Chair, Psychology Department
Associate Professor of Psychology
ABSTRACT

A DARKER SIDE OF VENUS: AN EMPIRICAL-PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF WOMEN’S NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES ENCOUNTERING PORNOGRAPHIC IMAGERY

By
Rebecca Marcelina Gimeno
December 2019

Dissertation supervised by: Will Adams, PhD.

This empirical-phenomenological study explores the psychological dimensions of negatively encountering a pornographic image. The study includes four participants, all adult women who have had an adverse encounter with a pornographic image within the past five years at the time of the data collection. The recollected experiences of the participants were collected through written narratives as well as semi-structured interviews.

The written narratives and recorded audio interviews were transcribed and subsequently analyzed using an empirical-phenomenological analysis, a process that yielded situated structures. From this analysis, thematic elements of each structure were brought to light. Some of the thematic elements that were uncovered amidst the four narratives include, but are not limited to: feelings of anger and embodied dread and anxiety, identification with the pornified subject,
feelings of being haunted by imagery, and seeking to metabolize and transform one’s experience toward empowerment.

From these situated structures, the general structure of the experience of negatively encountering a pornographic image was determined. To this traditional methodology, a further step was added, whereby socio-political and cultural themes that emerged from the data were analyzed. Some of the socio-political and culture themes which were found include: the presence of the male gaze, the vulnerability of the female body, the experience of being silenced, and the importance of storytelling and witnessing.

The study found that the experience of negatively encountering a pornographic image is a complex phenomenon that includes disruption of one’s habitual experiential unfolding, shifts (both overt and subtle) in one’s lifeworld existentials (corporeality, sociality, communality, and temporality), intense emotional reactions such as anger and sadness, and painful experiences of gendered subjectivity within a patriarchal context.

This research project offers new ways of understanding the lived phenomenon of negatively encountering a pornographic image, and it also confronts oppressive cultural forces which disregard these experiences as being shared, comprehensible, or worthy of conversation.
DEDICATION

To all the women on their own painful and beautiful labyrinthian journeys.
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Thank you first and foremost to each woman who bravely shared her story with me. You are each courageous, complex, and inspiring. I am humbled by the strength of your voices. *The future is, indeed, female.*

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   Camille, my Persephonic love. You understand the darkness and beauty of our shared journeys. I know now, that I am/was never truly alone. *This has made all the difference.*

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Preface: A Note on the Process of Writing and Historical Context

This research project is an empirical-phenomenological study which explores four women’s negative encounters with pornographic imagery. These encounters, while varied and highly subjective, also share important thematic elements that help bring this phenomenon to light. While there have been numerous quantitative studies which explore many important aspects of pornography, there are no phenomenological studies, according to my knowledge, which explicitly examine women’s painful, upsetting, or even traumatic responses with encountering the medium.

This is a project that radically trusts in women and in their varied and complex experiences with pornographic imagery. I believe that this trust was honored and amplified by the chosen research methodology—a version of Amedeo Giorgi’s (1985, 2012) empirical phenomenological method, which honors what is uniquely individual in our lived experiences, modified to take into account socio-cultural and political dimensions which are oftentimes shared.

Even today, it is still a bit taboo to study women’s sexual experiences, especially those which do not neatly fit into mainstream notions of how women should understand and speak about their sexuality, and the cultural notions of sexuality which surround us. To write about women, at all, is still a challenging, and at times heartbreaking, endeavor. There are so many things that we as women do not speak of, or if we do speak, it is often quietly, and within the trust of intimate relationships. Pornography, a medium which heavily relies on the female body, is especially one such topic from which women curiously seem to be exiled. As feminist activist and author Andrea Dworkin (1993) powerfully states, “The reality for women in this society is that pornography creates silence for women” (p. 284). I wanted, in part, to confront and surpass this silence.
This project chose me and made its claim on me early on. There were times when I tried to abandon the idea of it, but I continued to feel haunted by its desire to be brought into the world, my world. I could not leave it behind as a mere idea. French author Hélène Cixous (1992) kept me great company throughout the project, even when it was just a dream, and far before it materialized into the written word. I have always related to her sentiments on being seized and captured by the act of writing, as though the act has a desire all its own. In *Coming to Writing*, Cixous (1992) writes, “Writing was in the air around me. Always close, intoxicating, invisible, inaccessible...One day I was tracked down, besieged, taken. It captured me. I was seized” (p. 9).

I felt assured along the way by a committee that believed in the work, and by a director who encouraged me to write as myself, through myself. However, there were also times of difficulty and insecurity, times when I had to trust in myself, in the female authors who had come before me, and in the worth of my participant’s experiences themselves. Throughout this process, I began to realize just how deeply ingrained patriarchy is within me. I felt its traces often, and that was also painful.

Sharing my project with others was an interesting, and sometimes difficult experience. Some were immediately interested, sharing with me their conflictual views on pornography and sexuality. Some felt that it wasn’t a topic worthy of academic research and did not understand why anyone would want to spend the time to analyze such accounts. *It is just pornography after all, and everyone watches it. What is the big deal?* Some worried that it would be co-opted by a conservative or sexually repressive politics, and others just seemed uncomfortable with the topic itself. I learned quickly that pornography pulls for complicated reactions. These complicated reactions would also be present in my participant’s narratives, and in my personal experiences...
and process of conducting and analyzing the interviews. These experiences and interactions made parts of the research experience difficult to face at times.

And then something interesting happened: the 2016 presidential election, in which a politically inexperienced man, whom many consider a misogynist and who had been accused of sexual misconduct throughout his adult life, defeated the first female elected candidate, who in many ways had been one of the most qualified candidates ever to run for president. Throughout the campaign, the public was exposed to now President Donald Trump’s unapologetic sexist rhetoric and degrading comments aimed at women, and at other vulnerable populations. I personally felt the election ultimately to be a kind of feminine wounding, and I was not alone in this feeling.

Amazingly, though, through that collective defeat and despair, another cultural shift has happened, that is, of women radically speaking and sharing their lives. This shift, echoing those of earlier times, has even involved women exposing the predators they have survived, the harassment in the workplace they have undergone, and the distressing sexual experiences they have carried with them. These were once largely hidden and widely ignored traumas. On January 21st, 2017, I found myself “marching” with millions of women in DC at the now historic Women’s March (I say “marching” because the capitol was so packed, all we could do was stand together). As women, we began to slowly unburden ourselves of the secrets, shame, and hidden wounds we had been holding. This experience will forever stay with me.

In many ways, this powerful march symbolized the beginning of very powerful changes in the collective culture. Women began to come forward, publicly, in the months that followed, and outing some very well-known and powerful men who had sexually assaulted them. Social media campaigns such as #metoo began, in which women allied themselves with one another by
revealing their personal traumas and pains they had experienced. Women were talking, whether the collective was ready or willing to hear them.

When I first conceived of the idea for this dissertation, I had no idea that it would coincide with such a powerful collective shift. I had initially felt alone, and for some of my participants, they had felt alone as well. However, I soon began to feel in great company with women across the world who had begun to share their stories. I felt enlivened, and I felt braver.

Yes, this project rigorously and carefully analyzes select women’s negative encounters with pornography. Yes, this project has an academic impetus that will hopefully expand and complicate what is understood about pornography and about the representation of women in image. Yes, this project utilizes a respected qualitative method, thoroughly and depthfully.

However, as I sit here now, I am unashamed to say that this project has also been an opportunity for women to unburden themselves, to speak truth to power, and to share their own experiences, however difficult or confusing. I hope that if other women are to read this that they too may feel less alone. This is about pornography, yes, but it is also about speaking, listening, and witnessing. I suppose that in this way, this project, which I had once been afraid to admit, for fear of losing credibility in the eyes of some larger academic, often-times masculine-Other, is also a political one.

Isn’t this what the women’s liberation feminists meant with their battle cry, the personal is the political? It is impossible to be introspective and not political. It is impossible to speak and not gather the world within that speaking.

Moreover, as we have learned during the latest current events, it is still political to talk about women’s experiences (sexual or otherwise) at all.

Speaking, then, is inherently political.
I am pleased to explicitly affirm the political currents that run through this project.
Chapter 1: Introduction

The following study will explore women’s experiences of “negatively\(^1\)” encountering a pornographic image as well as their various ways of understanding and navigating this complex and painful experience.

My interest in the psychological significance of images, coupled with personal and shared experiences of witnessing harmful pornographic imagery, first oriented me to this topic. As I began to survey the literature on pornography, I found that it was vast and quite diverse. And yet, while much has been written on pornography, there have been no research projects, according to my knowledge, which use a phenomenological research method to analyze or investigate the experience of women negatively encountering pornographic imagery.

Alongside the gap in the literature, there also exists what I understand to be a cultural silencing and dismissal of such distressing experiences. I have noticed that such silencing seems to apply to women’s sexual experiences more broadly, especially those which counter mainstream and dominant beliefs. Perhaps, then, these academic and cultural silences emerge from a pervasive difficulty with inviting women to speak about their most personal sexual lives. The tragedy of this silence is that there is so much to be learned from women’s actual voices.

\(^1\) As will be noted in the method section, my use of the term “negative” here served as a tactical purpose with respect to communicating with my participants. This placeholder allowed an entry point for my participants to uncover and describe to me in their own words what “negative” is for the, in all of its meanings, richness, and complexity.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

A young female client of mine, in session, tearfully described to me the experience of encountering pornographic images on her household computer shared by her and her partner. The images ranged from those you would find in a typical mainstream pornography website, to violent images of gagging and rape. The young woman, who was visibly frustrated, was trying to explain to me how pervasive the images felt to her. She was frustrated because in many ways the images were obviously upsetting, their violence was palpable, but in other ways, she felt that these images also quietly entered into some of the current sexual practices she engaged in. In other words, without her knowledge, without her consent, her sexual life had been shaped by this imagery. After witnessing the images, things began to make sense—for her, tragically so. The encounter stayed with her, and in the months following, the images would haunt her thoughts and even entered her dreams. The trauma of the image was clear and evident. Her words resonated with me, I too have felt the power of image in my life, and I became reminded of a speech given by feminist Gail Dines at the Nova Scotia Women’s Summit of 2012. Dines (2012) states:

Today young people are brought up in what we’d call an image-based culture where the dominant form of communication is the image no longer the printed word. Now, let me say as a culture, when we were print-based we developed some immunization to the seduction of the elegance of the printed word. We have no such immunization to the seduction of the eloquence of the image. The image has a profound impact on you. It is everywhere, and it is powerful in its ubiquity.

In many ways, pornography is everywhere. It permeates our culture in both hidden and obvious ways. The phenomenon of pornography therefore affects the lives of all women. This particular patient of mine was only twenty-two when she encountered the pornographic images belonging to her partner. She stared at the women blankly and wondered if they all had given their consent,
in any true sense. She wondered what their stories were. The violent images were especially devastating to witness. *Who were these women?* Those two-dimensional faces would remain anonymous to her, she would never know. What she was left with was knowing and remembering that she encountered these nameless women just a few moments after enjoying an act of sexual intimacy with her partner. Lips smeared red, a tear in her stocking, the low lighting she so perfectly placed above the futon, all seemed senseless. The hours she spent priming herself for the night just felt like dead, wasted moments. Moreover, she was embarrassed. In our session she could barely look at me, it felt like she was confessing. The timing of the encounter, the images themselves, it was, in her words, a “recipe for disaster.” In those moments alone, she felt the room spinning and felt her stomach cramp, a somatic response that upon remembering continues even today. She would keep silent for a half year, until she came upon another slew of images. She remembers screaming at him. A memory which still, years later, evokes strong feelings of shame for her.

As I listened to her story, and others like hers, I started to familiarize myself with the feminist literature regarding pornography and the politics of representation. I noticed that there was something missing from the feminist critiques of pornography, namely any phenomenological analysis of the actual stories of women who have for one reason or another encountered pornographic images in ways that felt harmful, violating, or even traumatic. Moreover, when stories had been documented, they were largely anecdotal or centered on women who were involved in the actual production of pornography.

From an academic standpoint, accounts of this particular phenomenon have not been explored as fully or as rigorously as possible. In many ways, it has not been analyzed at all. As feminist and writer Susanne Kappeler (1986) writes, “Pornography is a feminist issue. It
centrally concerns women, since women are the object of pornographic representation...Yet...pornography does not seem to have much to do with women. Women are defined out of the question of pornography…” (p. 18). On this distancing of women from pornography, Dworkin (1993) writes, “The pornographers silence women” (p. 184).

When women are involved in the research and discussion of pornography it most often tends to be within a feminist framework which tends to focus, primarily on larger social narratives. For example, writers such as Gail Dines (2010) prefer to discuss pornography’s effects on culture, sexual practices, and economics. Feminist Catherine A. MacKinnon (1996, 2007) focuses her efforts on critiquing pornography via feminist legal theory and human rights considerations. Others, such as author and feminist icon Gloria Steinem (2012), discuss pornography’s power as a political weapon, and a violent practice. However, women’s personal narratives, like the one I present above, are largely absent from the scholarship on pornography, or they have been exiled to blog posts and women’s circles. Nevertheless, I would suggest that most often these stories are shared in whispers between women, or even between lovers—often with the fear of shame or rejection. These stories then become secrets.

What about these specific encounters is so traumatic for women? How does an image carry with it so much pain? I am interested in gaining some insight into the varieties of experience of different women, as well as the similarities and overlaps. To understand this phenomenon concretely and structurally, a variation of Amedeo Giorgi's (1985, 2012) descriptive empirical-phenomenological method will be useful. As feminist Susan Cole (1992) writes, “Feminism has always taken women’s real experience as the basis for theory, and a perspective on pornography should not be any different” (p. 23). Similarly, a Husserlian
phenomenology—the guiding influence on Giorgi’s method—returns us to direct, lived-experience as the source of knowledge

The Psychological Significance of Image:

“There is nothing you can do about it. You are overwhelmed with images. They carry you away, the replace you, you are dreaming. The spectacle is life as a dream. We all want this”- Julia Kristeva (1995, p. 8.)

This is a project on women’s experiences of negatively encountering a pornographic image, but it is also a project that honors and speaks to the psychological significance of images, and our interwoven relationships with them. Images comprise our psychological lives. At times, we become captured by a particular piece of artwork, at night psychic images visit us in our dreams, we take photographs of moments we want not to forget. Images not only grace us with their presence—they allow our psyche to symbolize our struggles, pain, joys, and love. We speak and put into language these images to those around us, thus images as language bring us together and lift us out of ourselves—for they are both us and other. They represent our longings, losses, hopes, and desires. In their otherness we are held and called forward.

The creation of art seems to be a universal human phenomenon which speaks to the existential importance of imagery and representation. Art and the celebration of images are central to our human history. In his work, The Social Limits of Art, author John Manfredi (1982) writes, “Wherever there are people, there is art, and where people are not, there is no art” (p. 19). The need for symbolization for humans is so powerful that architectural structures have been built for the sole purpose of viewing and witnessing art—museums. The art that lives inside of those structures may be experiences as moving and powerful. It is not surprising to stumble upon someone being moved to tears in front of a canvas. It is rumored that Mark Rothko’s paintings are the most wept-over (Hook, 2014).
Aside from artwork, even the sight of a certain color can alter our mood and induce and amplify certain emotional states. For example, in her moving and deeply confessional text, *Bluets*, American author and poet Maggie Nelson (2009) meditates on the color blue, and the power that the color has had on her life. She lyrically writes:

The half-circle of blinding turquoise ocean is this love’s primal scene. That this blue exists makes my life a remarkable one, just to have seen it. To have seen such beautiful things. To find oneself placed in their midst. Choiceless. I returned there yesterday and stood again upon the mountain. (Nelson, 2009, pp. 11-12)

The power of symbolic expression, has surpassed all attempts to stop it, and has flourished even amidst war, genocide, extreme poverty, and fascism. This human phenomenon of art creation, is so great, so critical to the human experience that poets, artists, photographers, musicians, among others have all died because they would not cease producing it in its varied forms. We can recall the gentle spirit of Garcia Lorca, the Spanish poet, shivering in front of an evening firing squad—the power of poetry to symbolize is powerful enough to mobilize a fascist army. Or, we can meditate upon the innumerable number of artists killed during The Great Purge by the hands of totalitarianism. Most recently, American photojournalist James Foley comes to mind. Foley’s passionate and tireless recording of the atrocities of war via photography, led to his capture and subsequent execution in the Syrian Desert. Art is inseparable from life, and without it, without artistic expression and the representation of imagery, we would find ourselves terrible empty, our souls impoverished. As Spanish artist Pablo Picasso is thought to have once famously remarked, “art washes from the soul the dust of everyday life” (as cited in Adams Media, 2012, p. 174).

Although images lift us up, gather mass movements, inspire us to create and to survive, images also have the power to haunt, oppress, and even tyrannize us. Author Cathy Caruth (1995) so poignantly writes, “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or
event” (p. 5). How often in a therapy session does a psychotherapist hear her patients recalling terrible memories symbolized through images? The nightmares that interrupt sleep, the ruminative memories following a traumatic experience, the painful reminder of an ill-fated relationship captured in a photo album now buried away in a closet--these are all testaments to the deep emotional impact, and devastating potential of the imaginary.

Aside from the Jungians and post-Jungians who have always understood images to be an ontological priority, the world of surrealism honored the very powerful, evocative, and at times possessive potential of imagery. André Breton, considered the founder of surrealism, speaks to the haunting, moving, and potentially possessive nature of image. Image, art, and the imagination are active factors in our psychological lives. Breton (1969), in his text *Manifestoes of Surrealism* writes, “Imagination alone offers me some intimation of what can be…” (p.5). As I will document throughout this dissertation, pornography, in addition to its ideological and political nature, also belongs to the symbolic and imaginal orders. As other forms of imagery and representation, it contains within it the ability to produce complicated, rich, and intense responses and experiences. Pornography has the power to arouse us and seduce us—it also has the power to disturb, tyrannize, and oppress us.

**Defining Pornography:**

“At the heart of pornography is sexuality haunted by its own disappearance.”


To better understand this particular phenomenon, we must first explain what we understand pornography to be. Our understanding of pornography cannot merely be based in a subjective understanding, it must account for the society in which it is created, viewed, and distributed. The pornography industry as both enterprise and ideology exists within a capitalist and patriarchal system. In other words, it is culturally and historically situated. As such, many
feminists assert that the ways in which pornography exists and expresses itself, in this cultural and economic system, is inherently oppressive and exploitative of vulnerable people in our society, namely women, and in some cases, children. The majority of available literature admits that pornography is difficult to define. Perhaps the most compelling historical comment on this difficulty, was made by Judge Potter Stewart during the 1964 pornography trials, who exclaimed, “I know it when I see it” (Mackey, 2002, p. 187).

Dictionaries offer a general definition of pornography. For example, the current electronic edition of Merriam-Webster defines pornography in several ways, including, “movies, pictures, magazines, etc., that show or describe naked people or sex in a very open and direct way in order to cause sexual excitement.” But these kinds of definitions do not hold the complexity and nuances that feminist understandings offer. These definitions do not account for the context in which we discover the image, or which the image is first imagined and then realized. Throughout the Women’s Movement, feminist scholars and other concerned citizens alike have offered their own working definitions of pornography to account for culture, economic interests, and issues of power and control.

Scholar Ronald B. Flowers (1998) states, “There is no universal definition of pornography” (p. 116). He goes on to write, “In modern times the definition of pornography has widened to encompass the multitude of ever expanding ways in which sexually explicit material can be produced, including pornographic literature, movies, videos, photography, live shows, and computer pornography” (Flowers, 1998, p. 116). Echoing Judge Potter Stewart’s sentiments, in her book, The Problem of Pornography: Regulation and the Right to Free Speech, Susan Easton (1994) writes, “Pornography is often described as hard to define but easy to recognize” (p. x).
Kappeler (1986), in her text *The Pornography of Representation*, also takes up this difficulty, and urges feminism to pay attention to social discourses of pornography. Kappeler (1986) writes:

A feminist critique of pornography needs first of all to engage with the terms in which pornography is discussed. Pornography is not a given entity in the world, but the construct of particular discourses. It is notorious that there exists no clear-cut definition of pornography; instead, different discussions identify different characteristics elements as their basis for a discussion of the phenomenon. (p. 1)

It is possible then, that what one considers to be pornographic may be shaped by both one’s subjectivity, but perhaps most importantly by invisible cultural ideologies.

Feminists such as MacKinnon and Dworkin, during their work in the legal arena, focused on pornography as an issue of civil and human rights. They moved the discussion away from a concern of obscenity, and instead defined pornography as “sexually explicit material with subordinates women through pictures or words” (Easton, 1994, p. xi).

Scholar Susan G. Cole (1992) has paid close attention to, and written about, the productive aspects of pornography and has made efforts to define pornography in a way that accounts for how it acts within a given culture. Cole (1992) furthers pornography’s definition by accounting for this dimension. She writes:

Pornography is not just a picture, a two-dimensional artifact or an idea. It is a practice consisting of specific activities performed by real people. The notion that pornography is a practice helps do away with issues of taste, interpretation and offended sensibilities that muddy that debate on pornography and it gets at the crucial issue of who is doing what to whom. Defining pornography as a practice and not as a picture transforms the way pornography is discussed…Pornography is a practice of sexual subordination. (Cole, 1992, pp. 18-22)

For Cole, it becomes important to view pornography as *action* rather than as *thing*. Moreover, she asserts that it becomes critical to protect the meaning of the word, to avoid slipping into a kind nihilism and avoid subsequent loss of meaning. For example, she explains, “People often
use the word pornography to apply it violence and war...War is hell, but it is not necessarily
pornographic...Saying that it is obscures the particular way women are used in and affected by
pornography” (Cole, 1992, p. 23).

As culture, technology, and ideas of representation continue to evolve feminist theorists
must seek to redefine pornography, and its place within our culture. I believe this is what Cole
(1992), wisely understood decades ago as, “the changing landscape of pornography.” Today the
internet, technological devices, and social networking websites interact with and produce
pornography in novel ways. Culture and porn have become increasingly interwoven over the past
decade. Gail Dines (2010), a current feminist writer, describes this enmeshment in her text,
_Pornland_. According to Dines, pornography has become such a staple of culture, that to question
its existence itself is viewed as suspicious. As opposed to her predecessors, Dines is more
specific in her critique of pornography, and has largely narrowed her critique to “gonzo porn.”
She writes, “That genre which is all over the internet and is today one of the biggest money-
makers for the industry—which depicts hard-core, body-punishing sex in which women are
demeaned and debased” (Dines, 2010, p. xi).

However, while the ideology of pornography has continually evolved and altered itself to
reflect the changing cultural tides, what remains is the economic and cultural structure in which
it produces itself. Whether by an enterprise such as Playboy, an angered lover submitting
revenge porn online, mainstream marketing, amateur production, or a recorded and uploaded
sexual assault—pornography is being produced and distributed within patriarchy and late
capitalism, and one can argue that its imagery is largely inescapable.

Throughout my time as a training psychotherapist, domestic-violence advocate, and as a
young woman I have heard and recorded narratives of women who have felt in some way
harmed or even “traumatized” by an encounter with a pornographic image(s). For these women, what they consider to be pornographic varies in some ways, but most often they are speaking to what feminism has previously described. Taking a cue from feminists before me, for the purposes of theoretical discussion here, I will choose to define most mainstream pornographic imagery as: *ideology and practice which produces sexualized representation within a specific patriarchal and capitalist system for the purposes of economic gain and, at times, maintenance of the oppression of women.* (That being said, I did not presume to know how my participants chose to define pornography, as subjective understandings of pornography were part of my initial interest in this study.) Feminists have not cared to define pornography in a politically neutral way, nor do I. However, I would like to note that I also believe in the beauty, poetics, and expression that erotic forms of representation may offer. Therefore, I agree with Cole (1992), when she writes:

Pornography is not presented here as a neutral term. Thus, it differs from the term ‘sexually explicit materials,’ which is often used to define pornography to go either way: it could be positive, it could be negative. Defining pornography as practice of subordination embodies the harm, the negative, in the very definition…it contains connotations of inequality and oppression. (p. 24)

Comments such as Cole’s brings an important element into the difficulty in defining pornography, especially when differentiating pornography from erotica. The distinction between erotica and pornography is largely subjective and will of course vary from culture to culture and person to person. In fact, the distinction may be so arbitrary, so individualized, that in some ways the two are inextricably linked. While there is no one answer, there does exist literature on the difficult distinction.

Author, lay analyst, and diarist Anaïs Nin is well known for her erotically-charged and confessional writing. In her essay, *Eroticism in Women*, Nin (1976) asserts how women have
come to distinguish pornography from eroticism, she writes, “Among ourselves, we have made the distinction between pornography and eroticism. Pornography treats sexuality grotesquely to bring it back to the animal level. Eroticism arouses sensuality without this need to animalize it” (p. 8). While some reading Nin from today’s standards may criticize her for being overly binary in her thinking, others have made similar distinctions between the two genres.

Comparable to Nin, feminist activist and author Gloria Steinem (2012) also attempts to differentiate between erotica and pornography. Steinem asserts that sexual intercourse is about far more than reproduction, and that sex may be, in part, about creating an intimate connection with another person. Steinem, then goes on to describe the confusion and difficulty when distinguishing erotica from pornography. While both erotica and pornography are depicted via different forms of imagery, Steinem believes that the feelings the images evoke in the viewer indicate whether the image is a pornographic or erotic one. For Steinem, an erotic image is one that is sensuous and does not require the viewer to feel or identify with a conqueror or victim status. In contrast, for Steinem, pornographic images include themes of domination and violence. As such, pornography begins to equate sex with power. However, she does recognize that what is considered pornographic is also shaped by personal and cultural dynamics.

I decided early on to ask the participants of my study to describe in rich detail their experience, and by doing so, I had initially hoped, in part, to better understand how some women come to understand, define, and recognize pornography in our current historical and cultural situation. Ultimately, their narratives and stories did allow me to better understand the incredibly subjective and complex experience that defining pornography is.

However difficult to define, I believe that it is critical for feminist minded scholars and activists to work towards a shared understanding of what we mean when we say pornography. I
am not alone in my belief—numerous feminists have taken issue with the claim that pornography is somehow impossible to define. In fact, these feminists are often at odds with later feminist movements, such as those rooted in postmodernist approaches, which believe pornography to be entirely constructed or subjectively understood. On the dangers of this relativism, scholar and psychologist William M. Struthers writes:

Many argue that pornography is culturally defined and that culture changes. This line of reasoning is rooted in an ethical relativism...But this relativism is seductive. It becomes a convenient crutch whenever we are confronted with dilemmas that make us uncomfortable. The question of definition is a valid point, but the dodge relies on a moral and linguistic relativism that short-circuits any dialogue on the matter. (2009, p. 25)

Streuthers then goes on to assert, “Rather than agreeing on a working definition, the goal of the Definition Dodge is to establish a roadblock so that the plain effects of pornography are never addressed” (2009, p. 25).

In conclusion, while I agree that what is considered to be pornographic may vary between individuals, I also believe in the power of a shared definition, provided mostly by feminism, that can account for what pornography is, the modes of its production, and its role in shaping ideology. To be without this shared definition, which is by no means closed off to interpretation and revision, renders pornography into a dangerous space of relativism—nullifying political efforts against its seamless permeation.

**Pornography & Capitalism:**

“The ways in which contemporary capitalism undermines women’s bodies, from advertising to pornography to the structures of gendered labour and domestic conflict, are not private troubles with no bearing upon the wider world. They are necessary fetters in a superstructure of
oppression that has become so fundamental to the experience of femininity that it is effectively invisible.”
—Laura Penny (2011, p. 2)

There is a powerful relationship between late-capitalism (capitalism post-World War II) and pornography. Under this later stage of capitalism, there is a powerful rise in consumerism and corporatism, and this is perhaps why there is also rampant commodification of the female body. Currently, in our globalized world, women’s bodies are profited from, regulated, and subjugated. This subjugation happens, most often, through sexually exploitative means including prostitution, adult-entertainment, forced sex-slavery, and the production of pornography.

Philosopher Alan Soble (1986) writing on this relationship between pornography and capitalism, believes it exists due to its functionality. He explains, “There are a number of ways pornography might be functional for capitalism. It is a commodity...Pornography can also serve as a diversion” (Soble, 1986, p. 104).

In 1921, revered communist Alexandra Kollontai gave a speech to the third all-Russian conference of heads of the Regional Women’s Departments. Kollontai focusing on sex work, explains to the audience that under capitalism women’s bodies are often up for sale and profited off of. Kollontai (1921/1977), in her speech, passionately exclaims:

With the rise of capitalism, the picture changes...The sale of women’s labour, which is closely and inseparably connected with the sale of the female, body, steadily increases, leading to a situation where the respected wife of a worker, and not just the abandoned and ‘dishonoured’ girl, joins the ranks of the prostitutes (p. 263)

Kollontai’s words regarding sex work are applicable to today’s sex industry, and how this industry profits from the female body in a capitalist economic system.

Historically, communist and socialist movements have attempted to eradicate pornography, and sex-work, from society. For example, pornography was illegal in the Soviet
Union and considered to be a product of capitalist exploitation. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Playboy entered the failed communist state, and did so with much success. In an article written for the online newspaper *Timeline*, author Nina Renata Aron (2017) writes, “Playboy was part of a tidal wave of pornography that flooded the former Soviet Union after it collapsed in 1991—along with many other hitherto hard-to-find consumer goods, from bananas to Pepsi to punk rock.” Playboy, a powerful American company, had begun to capitalize on the unstable political situation in the former Soviet Union, symbolizing not only the emergence and presence of pornography, but of capitalism itself.

Radical feminists who have drawn on Marxist theory and other leftist ideologies, have also strongly opposed, resisted, and critiqued pornography and The Sex Industry. For radical feminists, this industry is inextricable from the society from which it is produced. Therefore, to dismantle pornography, one must also dismantle larger forms of social, economic, and political oppression.

**Andrea Dworkin:**

“I found women whose whole lives were consumed by pornography…women…talked to me, and I became responsible for what I heard. I listened; I wrote; I learned”

—Andrea Dworkin (2007, p. 137)

Feminist author Andrea Dworkin is one of anti-pornography feminism’s most powerful and provocative voices. One could argue that her work lays the basis for most subsequent anti-pornography scholarship. Dworkin’s texts stir emotion in her readers, and one rarely finishes a text by her feeling unmoved. For all her dramatics, vulgarities, and unsophisticated remarks, there lies some kernel of felt truth for many of her loyal readers. Perhaps, despite her sometimes-tactless writing style, her ability to speak so openly and powerfully is why Dworkin remains such an important figure for many today. On Dworkin’s legacy, freelance journalist, activist, and
founder of Justice for Women, Julie Bindel (2015) in an online article writes, “Andrea’s writing and speaking has many legacies, but perhaps the key lesson she taught us was how to conduct ourselves during battle.”

Dworkin’s critique of pornography is controversial, in part, because she sees a relationship between pornography and violence committed against women, including rape and other forms of sexual assault. In her well-known and controversial text *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dworkin (1981) writes on the dehumanizing aspect pornography has on women and understands that the pornography industry is responsible a fair amount of violence against women, both in its production and in the social and psychological effects of its consumption. In fact, for Dworkin, the violence, humiliation, and subordination depicted in pornography is one of patriarchy's most powerful weapon. She believes pornography to be ideological, and therefore, one of feminism’s most important tasks is to confront it head on.

Dworkin, early on in her text writes, “This is a book about the meaning of pornography and the system of power in which pornography exists. Its particular theme is the power of men in pornography … this is not a book about what should or should not be shown …” (1981, p.9). Dworkin is careful not to immerse herself too much in providing guidelines for censorship purposes. Rather, she is commenting on the larger system in which pornography is produced, and what then becomes symbolized through that production. She then further elaborates how pornography and patriarchy relate and depend on one another. For Dworkin, their relationship is interrelated and co-constituted.

In an article for The New Left Project, political and moral philosopher Bob Brecher (2013) explains Dworkin’s views on the relationship between pornography and patriarchy, he writes:
And that’s exactly what Dworkin claims about pornography’s relation to patriarchy: it helps enable patriarchy to function, she insists, by constructing relations between women and men in specifically violent and sexist terms. In particular, pornography constructs sexual desire in our culture at least as much as pornography itself is constructed in response to that constructed sexual desire; the relation between pornography and sexual desire is thus dialectical.

**Dworkin’s Partnership with Catherine A. MacKinnon:**

Dworkin eventually began to work with lawyer and radical feminist Catherine A. MacKinnon. MacKinnon’s work focuses on the ways in which women are treated unfairly and unjustly in the larger society due to patriarchal implementations of gender hierarchy. There are many different societal and cultural forces which construct this domination, and for MacKinnon, pornography is one such force. Mackinnon dedicates much of her writing to the topic of pornography, and like Dworkin does so unapologetically and boldly. In her text, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, MacKinnon (1989) provocatively writes, “Under male dominance, whatever sexually arouses a man is sex. In pornography, the violence is sex. The inequality is sex. The humiliation is sex. The debasement is sex. The intrusion is sex. Pornography does not work sexually without gender hierarchy” (p. 211).

The Dworkin and MacKinnon collaboration is well-known for its work on what is known as The Dworkin-Mackinnon Anti-Pornography Civil Rights Ordinance. The Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance, also known as the Dworkin-Mackinnon Ordinance, is a term for several ordinances originally written by Dworkin and MacKinnon. These ordinances proposed to treat pornography as a violation of one’s civil rights, and to allow a subject who had been harmed by pornography to file a lawsuit in civil court. The ordinances were originally written in 1983, and during the 1980s several cities did indeed pass the ordinances. However, they were ultimately blocked by courts who perceived the ordinances to be a violation of free speech protected by The United States Constitution.
Anti-pornography & The Political Right:

“The answer is simple: We are anti-pornography precisely because we are leftists as well as feminists.” – Dines & Jensen (2005)

Historically, the politically conservative right and anti-pornography feminism have been unfairly and mistakenly aligned. While the political right has launched its own attack on pornography, it has its own sets of motives that are most often incompatible with a feminist vision. Ever since women began speaking out against the pornography industry they have been condemned as right-wingers in disguise, puritans, sexually repressed, and even anti-democratic. The feminist movement has had to consciously separate itself from the political right. These attacks continue today and have become more aggressive. Social media and the internet provide new ways for feminists to become criticized, in fighting against oppressive pornographic and representational practices. Recently, Gail Dines (2010) in her text Pornland addresses this issue.

Dines (2010) writes:

Porn is now so deeply embedded in our culture that it has become synonymous with sex to such a point that to criticize porn is to get slapped with the label anti-sex. As I travel the country giving lectures on the effects of porn, the insults thrown at me by some people are telling: they range from uptight prude to uncool, old-time man-hating, sex-policing feminist—the type of feminist who supposedly screams rape every time a woman and man have sex, the kind of feminist who has been derisively referred to as a “victim-feminist” because she supposedly sees all women as sexual victims incapable of enjoying sex. (p. 1)

Dines is not the first writer to write on this cultural enmeshment. Decades prior, Cole (1992) wrote that pornography and its ideology were becoming the cultural norm. Similarly, radical feminist Susan Griffin (1981) writes, “…the pornographic mind is the mind in which we all participate. It is the mind which dominates our culture” (p. 3). Therefore, because of its seamless role and place in culture, it can feel taboo or may appear pathological to imagine its transformation or, dare I mention, eradication.
At that height of its popularity, feminists belonging to the second-wave Women’s Movement that were critical of pornography were labelled by their opponents, and at times fellow feminists, as being sexually repressed, moralistic, conservative, or even fascist. This led to a strong reaction from women and men fighting against pornography. Not only were they up against multi-millionaire industries and cultural ideology, they were ostracized within the larger feminist movement. More radical, anti-pornography feminists such as MacKinnon and Dworkin respond defensively. MacKinnon believes that a feminist endorsement of pornography indicates an identification with oppression, an internalized type of misogyny, and Dworkin charges the endorsers with being collaborators, not allies (Whitney, 2013).

Griffin (1981), provides a more nuanced critique to this charge, than ones provided by the women listed above. Her feminism has celebrated the beauty of Eros and desire in human experience but is suspicious of pornography. Moreover, Griffin is overall concerned with a transformation of consciousness on a societal level. She writes:

In the name of political freedom, we would not argue for the censorship of pornography. For political freedom itself belongs to human liberation, and is a necessary part of it. But if we are to move toward human liberation, we must begin to see that pornography and the small idea of ‘liberty’ are opposed to that liberation. (Griffin, 1981, p. 1)

She then goes on to describe the consequences of pornography as actually silencing sexuality. According to Griffin, “…pornography, in its intensified mythology, simply expresses the same tragic choice which our culture has made for us, the choice to forget eros” (1981, p. 7).

Like Griffin (1981), Kappeler (1986) is also careful, in her feminist critique against pornography, to separate herself from a critique against Eros and sexuality. She situates herself as someone who is concerned with representation, and not someone who is concerned with the erotic. Kappeler (1986) states:
It is my contention that the feminist argument about pornography would significantly advance if we were to shift the ground of the argument. Pornography is not a case of sexuality; it is a form of representation. Representation, therefore, not ‘real-life sex’, should be the wider context in which we analyze this special case of representation; pornography...This move however takes us out of the comfortable seclusion of the Arts-the storehouses of (respectable) representations - and leads us to look at the functions of representations in society. Crucial factors of representation are the author and the perceiver; agents who are not like characters firmly placed within the presentation as context. This context is political: a question of class, race, gender. This context is cultural: a question of the relationship of representations to a generalized concept of culture...And this context is economic: a question of the relationships of cultural production and exchange. (pp. 1-3)

Pornography and its practices of representation affect then cultural understandings of sexuality. Kappeler is able to define and understand pornography in its nuances and cultural situatedness. The power of representation is that it is created and produced within a specific economic and cultural situation. “Representations are not just a matter of mirrors, reflections, key-holes. Somebody is making them, and somebody is looking at them, through a complex array of means and conventions” (Kappeler, 1986, p. 3).

The pornography industry would like for us to believe that the feminist attack against it is one of veiled right-wing, puritanical opposition. This perceived alliance benefits the industry, and its ideology, by painting radical feminism as anti-sex, and weakens feminism by causing fragmentation. Anti-pornography feminism and the political right, despite the political right's attempt to consume leftist dissent, could not have less in common. For feminists opposing the machine that is pornography, this charge is not only deeply misguided, it is offensive. Feminists like Griffin (1981) attempt to dismantle claims of this collaboration. In fact, she is able to illustrate the misogyny shared by both right-wing political movements and the pornographic industry. She writes, “For the body of a woman is culture’s time-honored victim…Both the church and pornography have chosen the same victim…in these twin cultures, a woman is a blank screen” (Griffin, 1981, p. 19).
Anti-pornography feminists face the same struggles as their predecessors. Books written by frustrated endorsers of pornography, such as Brian McNair (2013), are responding to the resurgence of anti-pornography feminism. However, anti-pornography feminism, rooted in radical leftism, continues to defend their efforts while separating themselves from a conservative politics. In a self-published electronic article, Dines and Jensen (2005) write:

As leftists, we reject the sexism and racism that saturates contemporary mass-marketed pornography. As leftists, we reject the capitalist commodification of one of the most basic aspects of our humanity. As leftists, we reject corporate domination of media and culture. Anti-pornography feminists are not asking the left to accept a new way of looking at the world but instead are arguing for consistency in analysis and application of principles. It has always seemed strange to us that so many on the left consistently refuse to engage in a sustained and thoughtful critique of pornography. All this is particularly unfortunate at a time when the left is flailing to find traction with the public; a critique of pornography, grounded in a radical feminist and left analysis that counters right-wing moralizing, could be part of an effective organizing strategy.

Although not critical of pornography as a potential expression of human sexuality if given the correct social and political circumstances, Soble takes up the limitations and problems found within pornography produced within capitalist society. According to Soble (1985), pornography is a consumerist practice. He writes, “Pornography is designed and produced with these consumer purposes in mind. It is a mass-produced commodity...Pornography makes sexual arousal and pleasure into a commodity. Moreover, pornography replicates the commodification of sexual activity and women’s bodies.” (p. 75).

In contrast to a right-wing politics, opposition to pornography and radical feminism continue to expose the capitalist structure that produces, distributes, and creates such imagery and ideology.

A Feminist Defense of Pornography:

“Pornography and art are inseparable, because there is voyeurism and voracity in all our sensations as seeing, feeling beings.” –Camille Paglia (1990, p. 35)
Not all feminists are comfortable, or agree, with radical feminist analyses of pornography. For some, the radical anti-pornography critiques of pornography leave out the female consumer of pornography, as well as the ways in which pornography enriches sexual and erotic experiences.

Sex-positive feminism is a movement which is thought to have emerged in the 1980s, in part, as a response to radical anti-pornography feminism. This movement in feminism believes strongly in sexual freedom and expression, and is therefore uncomfortable with efforts to silence, and even at times, regulate pornography. As with most discussions surrounding the subject, there are a range of views regarding pornography within the sex-positive camp.

Authors, such as the controversial writer Camille Paglia, are radically accepting of pornography. In an online interview, Paglia (2013) explains her views on pornography:

Pornography is now beyond anyone’s control. It’s a classic example of ever-controversial unregulated capitalism — the market automatically responding to individual needs and desires. I continue to support and defend pornography, which I believe exposes the deepest, darkest truths about sexuality. As an industry, pornography also helps to rebalance the modern psyche: middle-class workers are trapped with their tyrannical machines at home and office. Pornography, with its surging animal energies and guiltless display of the body, brings the flame of organic nature into that mineral wasteland.

Moreover, in her well-known text, Sexual personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson, Paglia (1990) passionately defends pornography, as she believes that it is inextricable from art, and is part of our fantasy and imaginal lives. Paglia (1990) writes:

Feminism, arguing from the milder woman’s view, completely misses the blood-lust in rape, the joy of violation and destruction. An aesthetics and erotics of profanation--evil for the sake of evil, the sharpening of the senses by cruelty and torture...Our knowledge of these fantasies is expanded by pornography, which is why pornography should be tolerated...The imagination cannot and must not be policed. Pornography shows us nature’s daemonic heart, those eternal forces at work beneath and beyond social convention (p. 24).
While not as provocative as Paglia, author Nadine Strossen’s (2000) text, *Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights*, argues for the existence of pornography, rendering it a civil liberties issue. For Strossen censorship is always inherently problematic, and that censoring pornography would hold devastating consequences for women, and for larger society.

While some writers and thinkers, such as Paglia, radically embrace pornographic production and consumption, others argue for more humanitarian and egalitarian forms of pornography. These alternative pornographies include feminist and queer pornographies.

**Alternative Pornographies: Feminist, Egalitarian, and Queer Visions:**

“The internet revolution of the 1990s has significantly facilitated women’s access to pornographic production and consumption and provided new formats and new modes of presentation and distribution, whether in the form of sex blogs, women-owned pornographic websites, or websites of independent, amateur, or queer porn; it also created new possibilities for interaction and exchange through and around porn.” – Amalia Ziv (2015, p. 4)

Apart from those in support of pornography, or who are optimistic about what pornography could evolve into if given the right circumstances, there does exist, currently, what are known as alternate forms of pornography. These alternative pornographies include feminist pornography and queer pornography. I have noticed through my research, that these terms are often used interchangeably, so for the sake of clarity, I shall refer to these pornographies, which counter and resist dominant notions of what pornography is, as alternative-pornography.

Alternative pornography, especially when it claims to be feminist-minded, is a contentious subject. For some, it is revolutionary, liberating, and sexually alive. It seeks to counter mainstream pornography’s problematic messages by including diverse bodies, a focus on female sexual pleasure, and depictions of genuine sexual encounters. For others though, it only
reifies existing exploitative pornographic structures, and is yet another example of the market profiting from the commodification of the female body.

Authors such as Mari Mikkola (2017) describe what feminist pornography may offer society. Mikkola (2017) writes:

Feminist pornographers aim to show...that sexist mainstream pornography gets things wrong. They aim to represent female sexuality more realistically in order to undercut mainstream representations. Feminist pornographers intend to create pornography in a particular way. They have a substantive (contentful) conception of pornography...this conception includes (among other things) the aim to depict a more authentic and realistic picture of female sexuality and the view that promoting better porn can play a valuable educational role by correcting false mainstream depictions of sexuality. (pp. 130-131)

However, if feminist or alt-pornography is so vastly different than mainstream pornography, can it be considered pornography at all? Mikkola ponders this question and goes on to wonder whether feminist pornography is actually a form of erotica. According to Mikkola (2017):

one may wonder whether putative pornography really is pornography. If it involves sexually explicit materials premised on equality, perhaps it really counts as erotica, in which case the antipornography and feminist pornography sides are simply talking past one another. (p. 132, italics in original).

As detailed earlier in the literature review, defining pornography at all is controversial, challenging, and perhaps impossible. In many ways, what is pornographic is subjective and contextual—it is bound by time and culture. Mikkola (2017) understands this difficulty, and so do many others. In so many ways, what is pornographic, and what separates pornography from erotica, is largely personal. Mikkola (2017) describes the certain ways antipornography feminists recognize erotica, that is, imagery which depicts “passionate love” (p. 132). For Mikkola (2017), this distinction between pornography and erotica then is problematic as it:

romanticizes sex, and it connects sex and love in a heteronormative way that reflects traditional gender stereotypes...These are views that self-proclaimed feminist pornographers typically reject...they aim to offer exploitation industrial pornography egalitarian pornographic alternatives. (pp. 132-133)
Author Hans Maes (2017), discusses and explores alternatives to “inegalitarian” pornography. One such vision is “egalitarian” pornography. According to Maes (2017), egalitarian pornography can be understood as “pornography that is premised on the full equality between sexual partners and hence does not eroticize any acts of violence, humiliation, of objectification or any of the gender stereotypes that help to sustain gender inequality” (p.211). Maes (2017) believes that current day mainstream pornography is being inspired by such alternative visions and believes this is in part due to “blunt economic calculation” on the part of mainstream pornographers (p.212). This economic calculation is based on the idea that an increase in female consumers will likely increase the profits for the companies. One may wonder that if in addition to the political potential which drives feminist pornography, is economic incentive. After all, as radical politics have long asserted, there is no truly ethical consumption under capitalism.

Maes (2017) also discusses “radical egalitarian pornography,” this is pornography aimed at being inclusive to various forms of marginalized sexuality, featuring a diverse range of bodies. Maes even writes about the inclusion of disabled and elderly subjects in radical egalitarian pornography. Maes (2017) writes, “There is porn made by and featuring elderly and disabled men and women” (p.216). These changes are largely in part due to internet communities, which allow this pornography to be more accessible to consumers. While this is an interesting and potentially more humane emergence of pornography, Maes is cautious and does comment on the existence of pornographic films that exploit disabled and elderly bodies.

Authors such as Maes (2017) and Mikkola (2017) are careful and moderate in their writings on alternative pornographies. Others are more enthusiastic regarding feminist pornography’s potential to provide important counter-narratives to the adult industry. However,
most writing on the subject admit that the concept of alternative-pornographies, in all of their complexities and diversities, is a complicated one.

In a recent article for the online magazine *Dissent Magazine*, author Claire Potter (2016) traces the history of feminist and alternative pornographies and explores why they have risen in popularity (aside from their political impetuses). One such reason is that the pornography market is now “less regulated than it has ever been.” Potter (2016) writes:

> Pornography ranges from products made at home and distributed independently over the internet, to feminist porn promoted by progressive sex shops like Seattle’s Babeland, to vertically integrated companies selling “alt-porn” like the California-based Vivid Entertainment. Although federal obscenity laws still exist, they are rarely enforced except when sexual materials feature, or are distributed to, legal minors.

Potter goes on to wonder about how feminists should engage with pornography considering that it is so embedded in our culture. She realizes how polarized this conversation continues to be within feminist circles—in that way little has changed. However, she concludes her article with a powerful cry to feminists to take pornography, and its revolutionary potential, seriously. She passionately exclaims:

> As radical feminists understood in the early years of women’s liberation, sex is a site of both power and vulnerability. Contemporary feminist pornographers believe that the stories they tell about sex matter, not just because they give form to our fantasies, but because they can help us question and remold the real-world inequalities that replicate themselves as sexual fantasies. They believe that, because of its popularity as well as its intimate nature, porn offers valuable opportunities for challenging racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and exploitation; for disseminating feminist ideas about women, the body, and sex; and for teaching the art of human intimacy...But if that were an image produced by a feminist pornographer, starring well-paid and protected sex workers demonstrating how sex can be fun, respectful, and safe—couldn’t that be a powerful thing? (Potter, 2016)

Author and philosophy professor A.W. Eaton (2017), like Potter, comments on the rise of “egalitarian” or “self-identified feminist porn” in contemporary society (p. 253). Eaton (2017)
writes, “The last 10 years have witnessed a burgeoning industry of self-identified feminist porn. Witness, for instance, the Good For Her Feminist Porn Awards in Toronto and the PornYes Feminist Porn Award in Berlin” (p. 253). Eaton notes what feminist pornography does not include, namely, “representations of non-consensual violence, expressions of contempt for women, and sexist stereotypes…” (2017, p. 253). Eaton raises interesting points regarding what feminist pornography can do for pornography as a genre. In addition to providing a more humane and egalitarian vision of pornography, it may provide “better” pornography, as the medium is “inventive” and “edgy.” This edginess is also distant from “mainstream” pornography which is often charged with being “redundant,” “formulaic,” and “mechanical” (Eaton, 2017, p. 253).

In conclusion, while alternative pornographies seem to be rising in popularity, the conversation within the realm of feminism remains to be polarized.

A Brief Critique of Alternative Pornographies:

“The new pornography is left-wing; and the new pornography is a vast graveyard where the Left has gone to die. The Left cannot have its whores and its politics too.”

Not all feminists support or believe in the revolutionary power of alternative-pornographies. In fact, one could still critique these forms of pornography as being part of, rather than counter to, the larger adult industry. This is a similar argument that radical leftists make against reform politics. That often through reform, the oppressive system is not revolutionized, but unintentionally reified. For example, these alternative versions of pornography are still bought by the consumer, produced by companies with the intent of gaining capital, and marketing desire.

Although Dworkin’s critique of left-wing endorsed pornography took place before the advent of internet pornography, her arguments can still be applied to these timely manners. In
her text *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, Dworkin (1981) dedicates a section of the text to addressing men of the left and their then allegiance to pornography and to sex work. Today, a contemporary reading of her argument would benefit from discussing the left more broadly, as both women and men consume both mainstream and alternative versions of pornography.

Author Ariel Levy’s (2005) text *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, while not directly aimed at alternative pornographies, does critique newer trends in American Culture in which women are encouraged to sexually objectify themselves and one another. Like the criticisms aimed at alternative pornographies, this cultural trend runs the risk, even unintentionally, to commodify and objectify women. Levy is worried that these current trends in our society, or what she refers to as “raunch culture,” are more subjugating than liberating.

Levy (2005) also asserts that much of this cultural move, of women sexually objectifying themselves and others, is also largely driven by consumerism. Terms like “liberation” and “empowerment” lose their once politicized meanings, and are now common place buzzwords, or signifiers for commodification. Levy powerfully explains, “…if we are really going to be sexually liberated, we need to make room for a range of options as wide as the variety of human desires” (p. 200).

In this way, one may view some forms of so-called “feminist” or “alt-pornographies” in light of Levy’s critique, that often what is marketed as liberatory, is just that—marketed.

**Psychological Research Regarding Pornography:**

The discipline of psychology has also endeavored to study the impact pornography may have on our sense of self, our relationship with others, and on culture. Much of the research I have come across tends to study pornography via quantitative, experimental methodologies.
Much of the research focuses on how pornography may affect criminality, development, and interpersonal relationships.

In terms of mixed methodologies, I did come across several empirical studies that also utilized some qualitative research methodologies. One article by authors Rothman, E. F., Kaczmarsky, C., Burke, N., Jansen, E., & Baughman, A. (2015) surveyed young, low-income Black and Hispanic Youth in order to better understand how pornography is consumed in this demographic. The article found that the subjects they interviewed and surveyed most often viewed pornography on a computer or smartphone, and that a wide arrange of pornography was viewed, including pornography that depicted sexual intercourse, and “extreme pornography” which featured depictions of incest or humiliation (Rothman et al., 2015). A dissertation by Stephanie R. Griffith (2014) entitled Men’s stories of unwanted sexual and pornography experiences: A qualitative analysis, explored men’s unwanted exposure to pornography. The author surveyed 590 undergraduate men and also analyzed their open-ended narratives. Griffith found that unwanted pornography exposure was a relevant issue for this population, and that it might also impact general unwanted sexual experiences.

In terms of pure qualitative research methods, I have not found too much psychological research aimed at investigating, or better understanding women’s direct encounters with pornographic imagery, either negative or positive. However, there are a number of intriguing research projects with have taken up these questions in a variety of ways.

One such study is a thesis by Samantha Bates (2015). Bates’s study entitled “Stripped: An Analysis of Revenge Porn Victims’ Lives after Victimization” is a qualitative project that inquires into the lives of women who have been victimized by revenge porn. The term “revenge porn” is often used to describe pornographic footage of another person distributed without her
consent, often via the internet with intent to harass, shame, or punish. Bates interviewed eighteen revenge porn victims and revealed how their experiences have affected their lives. Bates’s study found and illuminated several themes, including the gendered aspect of the experience. Bates asserts that society would benefit from developing new laws to protect these victims. As such, her project is timely given our technologically embedded culture and new and specific ways in which women may find themselves exploited.

By interviewing the eighteen victims, Bates (2015) concluded that each person experienced invasions of privacy, and that their experiences resulted in negative psychological effects. Bates’s study particularly interests me because she takes seriously the gendered experience of being pornified and exploited in our society. Bates (2015) writes that the “consequences” of being victimized in this way speak to the “widespread policing of female sexuality, and the prevalent views in Western culture regarding sexuality, made possible by compulsory heterosexuality as an institution” (p.127). For Bates, part of the power of revenge porn is that women’s bodies and sexuality are still shamed and kept hidden. Bates (2015) writes:

A more pressing issue, however, is the way that revenge porn, nudity, and female sexuality is often regarded in Western culture. Revenge porn is particularly harmful for women due to the stigma attached to naked photos, which comes from patriarchal values of purity, modesty, and conservatism. p.132

I believe that Bates is speaking importantly to the social and political context in which revenge porn, and dare I say pornography in general, is found, marketed, and consumed. In the recent article “Women's Experiences of Pornography: A Systematic Review of Research Using Qualitative Methods,” authors Sarah Ashton, Karolyn McDonald, and Maggie Kirkman (2018) systematically studied women’s experiences of pornography, reviewing twenty-two articles found amongst five databases. This research is especially timely because of how available pornography has become due to technological advances. Moreover, the authors
importantly assert that women have received less attention than their male counterparts in pornography studies, and therefore deserve attention. The authors powerfully state, “the roles of pornography in women’s lives cannot...be safely inferred from what is known about men” (Ashton, McDonald & Kirkman, 2018, p. 334). This research project uncovered themes that seem important and appropriate to review considering this qualitative project.

The authors found a number “broad themes” including how women encounter pornography, pornography and the self, making sense of pornography, and pornography in a relational context. Especially of interest were the authors’ findings that female consumers of pornography tend to experience feelings of empathy toward the featured subjects. By empathy, the authors mean that while viewing the pornography, the female consumers were actively wondering how the featured subjects were feeling during the sexual acts. For example, they wondered if the subjects of the films actually experienced sexual pleasure and were concerned as to whether or not the subjects felt any distressing feelings during the production of the scenes. These broad themes also gather up sub-themes which explored intentional and unintentional encounters women have had with pornography, conflictual perceptions of the self in relationship to the porn object, and tensions between women’s desire for pornography versus personal values. For example, some women found their own pornography use as not being socially acceptable, especially in comparison to male consumers. The authors also noted that “women’s life stages also constitute a significant context,” as “pornography is likely to be experienced differently depending on a woman’s stage of psychosexual development” (Ashton, McDonald & Kirkman, 2018, p. 334).

The authors conclude that women’s experiences of pornography are complicated, paradoxical, nuanced, and individualized. What seems to me to be so important about this
research is that it captures women’s relationships with pornography in all their subtlety and occasional contradiction. For example, the authors write, “Women may identify pornography as valuable, as detrimental, as a mix of the two, or as initiating dissonance” (Ashton, McDonald & Kirkman, 2018, p. 344). Consequently, this neglected topic of study is one that requires a sophisticated understanding of human sexuality and Eros, as well as a fair amount of tolerance for that which is ambivalent, elusive, and complex.

I find it important to end this section with a brief review of an online article written by academic Rose Meltzer (2016) for Feminist Current online magazine. While anecdotal, and in no means traditionally scholastic, nor scientific, I find myself pulled to include an extremely honest and vulnerable description written by a woman regarding her own troubling experiences with a pornographic image, a description she bravely chose to share with the public. In fact, this dissertation itself is largely about bringing such experiences to light, with the intention to honor, understand, and share them.

In her online article titled “I chose radical feminism over my porn-using boyfriend and got my humanity back,” Meltzer (2016) describes an experience of encountering a pornographic video belonging to her partner. For Meltzer, seeing the video, a video depicting a woman’s face contorted and twisted, a video which one could consider also to be racist, and knowing her partner had used the video to satisfy his sexual desires, was a troubling and hurtful encounter. Meltzer painfully writes, “The whole ordeal left me feeling devastated and nauseous.” She then goes on to explain the ways in which she attempted to take agency and empower herself in the very difficult and vulnerable situation. Meltzer honestly confronted her partner, even sent him resources that explained her feminist position on the issue, but eventually she was left feeling invalidated, her pain minimized. Meltzer made the very difficult and painful decision to leave the
relationship. What I felt to be the most painful aspect of her story, though, was her description of reaching out to others, especially the women in her life, only to be left feeling more alienated, more alone with her experience. While she was met with some understanding, she was also met with emotional absence.

I’d like to end with Meltzer’s (2016) own words, as they are poignant, timely, and haunting. Meltzer passionately and boldly writes:

Radical feminism gave me my humanity back. I implore you to rediscover your own humanity as well. A profound kind of empathy lies dormant in you, buried under years of socialization. Dig it out, if only for the girls and women who will come after you. Read. Think. React profoundly, unabashedly. Talk to other women, and feel for them. Fight: Do not be afraid…
Chapter 3: Method

The Importance of a Phenomenological Method:

“Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it's caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But, because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself.”
— Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964, pp. 163)

Feminists have historically resisted the oppression and silencing power of patriarchy. And yet, even though second-wave, radical, and anti-pornography feminists all insist that their movements celebrate and validate subjective experience, the actual personal accounts of negative encounters with pornography are largely absent from their scholarship. Scholarly inquiry into pornography focuses primarily on collective, socially constructed phenomenon. While this is valuable work, lived-experience is usually overlooked. This gap in the research is most present in critiques of pornography. I have not been able to find any phenomenological or qualitative work that enquires into women’s painful or traumatic experiences with pornographic imagery itself. Thus, I returned to subjective experience itself, and examined this experience rigorously via a variation of Giorgi’s empirical-phenomenological methodology. To better understand this collective, but often rendered silent or invisible, experience, I believe that we must return to lived experience. To borrow a line from feminist and phenomenologist, Sonia Kruk’s (2001), “Women’s experience will, indeed, be part of ‘the bedrock of evidence’ for our account” (p. 138).

Amedeo Giorgi’s (1985, 2012) descriptive empirical-phenomenological research method was well suited for this qualitative study. Giorgi’s research method, based on Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological philosophy, relies upon individual descriptions of one’s actual lived experience. The gathering of these rich descriptions was crucial for this method as they were analyzed structurally and thematically.
I believe that the radicality of an empirical-phenomenological approach lies in its commitment to question the obvious—how are the negative encounters with pornographic imagery actually lived? How are these encounters experienced in our shared world? By asking these questions, we are inviting these experiences, often shrouded in a cultural silence, to be put into language.

Phenomenological research recognizes the importance of employing a fundamentally open attitude towards our research participants which allows access to the open field of lived-experience. As phenomenologist Max van Manen (2015) writes—so lyrically:

From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching—questioning—theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to become the world…in doing research we question the world’s very secrets and intimacies which are constitutive of the world, and which bring the world as world into being for us and in us. (p. 5)

In addition to depthful inquiry and celebration of lived experience, phenomenology informs us not only of our individual, but of our collective subjectivity. This has been elaborated most eloquently via Merleau-Ponty’s idea that the body is our locus of experience and that la chair du monde is the realm in which we identify ourselves as embodied individual subjects. Our embodiment takes place within a particular shared social setting that always comes before us, existing before we take our first breaths. Thus, to uncover and understand our experiences we cannot simply begin with us, the supposedly sovereign subjects entering into the world, we must also begin with the socio-political world that enters into us. It is this socio-political world that feminism so boldly addresses.

By having researched this particular experience phenomenologically, we are now better able to understand how some women may be negatively affected, even afflicted, by encounters
with pornographic images. In many ways, these encounters have the potential to alter the
subject’s perception of herself, others, and the culture in which she finds herself thrown. The
content of her world, despite the unchanging “factual” landscape around her, becomes changed.
As feminism has boldly stated, we live in a porn-culture, and as such these images often enter
into our daily lives without our consent. A phenomenological investigation not only uncovered
what about this particular experience may be experienced as harmful, it can now serve to enrich
the ways in which feminism defines and understands pornography. I suspect that these now
analyzed narratives can even enliven political efforts that seek to transform and eradicate
pornography that is deemed misogynist, violent, and unethical.

Early on, I suspected that the participants would differ in their descriptions and
encounters with pornographic imagery, and this was the case. For example, some of the
participants accidentally stumbled upon the pornographic imagery, and others intentionally
sought out the images. Moreover, for some participants it was the violence of the imagery that
felt the most palpable and hurtful, and for others it was the overexposed depiction of the female
bodies. Feminist phenomenologists have written on these differences in experience as not being a
hindrance to research, but as a recognition of the richness of the human experience and of
subjectivity. Feminist phenomenologist Sonia Kruks (2001) writes:

For also possible is a respectful recognition of another...in the experience of feeling-with
her suffering. Such an experience involves a double awareness: both an immediate
affective response to another’s pain, and a simultaneous awareness that my response is
not the same as the other’s suffering. This response acknowledges that I am not with you;
we are connected, and your pain concerns me, yet I recognize that the pain is yours and
not mine. My solidarity must admit of the difference between us, even as we share a bond
of sentience. (p. 175)

Perhaps initially, feminism and phenomenology may appear to some as mutually
exclusive, or at the least two very different schools of thought. For some feminists, the
philosophical tradition of phenomenology feels oppressive, or at least at odds with the feminist project. However, considering that both phenomenology and much of feminism encourage the return to lived-experience, I believe that in many ways these two orientations can build on one another. I agree with author Michael Garko (1999) who writes, “Just as lived experiences are fundamental to feminism, so are they critically crucial to existential phenomenology” (p.168). Feminist Phenomenology has attempted to bridge the two orientations. Authors such as Iris Young (2005), Linda Fischer (2000), and Linda Martin Alcoff (2000), among others, have written from within the potential unity and tensions between the two fields.

In *Feminist Phenomenology*, Fisher (2000) discusses the often overlooked and controversial relationship between phenomenology and feminism. She describes how many intellectual domains, such as Marxism and post-structuralism, have historically incorporated feminist analyses into their theoretical orientations—the exception to this has been traditional phenomenology. Fisher believes that there are many reasons as to why this may be the case but pays attention to one possible explanation. According to Fisher, this explanation encompasses two threads. First, Fisher believes that many feminists and phenomenologists believe that they are working within two very different world views. For example, Fisher worries that because essentialism is often associated with phenomenology, and because much of feminism has been written in response to, and against essentialism, that many feminists become deterred from interacting with the philosophical tradition. Secondly, she is concerned that feminists might view phenomenology as a theory that neglects the particularities of social and political discourse.

Moreover, Fisher (2000) points out that traditional phenomenology has not taken up analyses of gender or sexual difference much at all. Even when phenomenology draws upon phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty who is appreciative of embodiment, there is still a
neglect of analyzing specifically gendered-experiences. Despite all of this, though, Fisher (2000) argues that the difficulties between the two orientations can be “countervailed by the still larger commonalities and possibilities for interaction” (p.19).

Although feminism and phenomenology may approach subject matter differently, they do not need be at odds with one another. Psychologist Lisa Cosgrove (1987) has explored such concerns and implications in her dissertation, *The Aftermath of Sexual Assault: An Empirical-phenomenological Investigation*. In fact, recognizing a woman’s position within the larger context may allow for a more profound understanding of how she may encounter such imagery. In addition, a phenomenological analysis of this experience “resists the ideological biases of a feminist approach, while at the same time it appreciates the implications and impact patriarchal society has in terms of how a woman experiences….” (Cosgrove, 1987, p. 81.).

In conclusion, a phenomenological description, which dialogues with a feminist perspective, brings the subjective voice back into the feminist debate and understanding of pornography and women’s experience. A feminism informed by the phenomenological tradition places the individual, and politicized, experience of living as a gendered subject back into our understanding of the lifeworld, subjectivity, and embodiment.

**Research method:**

“We must go back to the ‘things themselves’.” –Edmund Husserl (1900/2008, p. 168)

So far in the project, much of the literature regarding pornography and its feminist critique have been reviewed. Although the available literature does offer important and valuable insights regarding the effects that pornography may have on society and culture, they often remain neglectful of a rigorous examination of lived-experience. Therefore, this study employed
a variation of Giorgi’s empirical-phenomenological method to allow the experience of negatively encountering pornography, to reveal its meaning descriptively.

This empirical-phenomenological method for human science psychology was established in response to natural science research tendencies to eliminate or reduce the importance of qualitative meanings (Giorgi, 1985, 2012). This phenomenological approach, committed to rich description and careful analysis served as a meaningful method that addressed the questions and complexities pertaining to this phenomenon that both traditional research and feminism have not. I believe that this is because this approach returns us to the experience itself, as lived and described by the research participants. As a result, the significance of the experience was uncovered and elucidated. In addition to this framework, I was also informed by a feminist perspective, and kept in mind the social context in which we as women find ourselves. By this, I mean that as researcher I was sensitive to discourses of oppression, gender, and liberation.

First and foremost, before I conducted any interviews, I wrote a brief self-reflective statement regarding my presuppositions and prejudices pertaining to pornography. In this statement, I spent time fleshing out what about the experience I assumed would be painful. I did not, and do not, believe that my subjectivity was a hindrance in this research project. Yet, I firmly believe self-reflection to be a critical part of phenomenological analysis. Therefore, this spirit of self-reflexivity and hermeneutic sensibility was present throughout the completion of the research. Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer so importantly reminds us of the importance of the hermeneutic circle. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1927/2008) writes:

What is decisive is not to get out of the [hermeneutic] circle but to come into it in the right way. The circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may move; it is the expression of the existential fore-structure of Dasein itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our
interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves. (p. 195, bracketed word added).

Similarly, Gadamer (1960/2004) discusses the importance of a remaining faithful to text, even amidst our own subjectivity. Gadamer (1960/2004) writes:

A person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s fore-meanings. (p. 271)

I include these statements by Gadamer (1960/2004) and Heidegger (1927/2008) because they were useful when I analyzed the data. By journaling, I was able to better understand my personal biases, and was able to then document when I felt surprised by the data, or perhaps more importantly, when I assumed to understand (with too much comfort, perhaps) what a participant had written or said. In other words, the journaling reminded me to return to the data itself.

Furthermore, the writing of my initial statement, and the maintaining of a personal journal, aided me in adopting and maintaining a phenomenological attitude. According to Giorgi (2012):

The researcher who wants to employ the descriptive phenomenological psychological method has to begin by assuming the correct attitude. First of all, she has to assume the attitude of the phenomenological reduction which means that she must resist from positing as existing whatever object or state of affairs is present to her. The researcher still considers what is given to her but she treats it as something that is present to her conscious-ness and she refrains from saying that it actually is the way it presents itself to her. In addition, she refrains from bringing in non-given past knowledge to help account for whatever she is present to. (p. 5)
After I completed my initial self-reflection and took care to enter into the phenomenological attitude, I followed a variation of Giorgi’s method (1985, 2012). This variation remained close to Giorgi’s procedural steps, with the practice of careful self-reflexive practice and the inclusion of a further step of analyzing the data for socio-cultural themes. I will now list and then briefly describe the methodological steps I followed to conduct my research.


Step 1: Personal Researcher Reflexivity Exercise:
As mentioned above, my first step was to complete my initial self-reflective written exercise which allowed to me adopt the phenomenological attitude as researcher. I returned to this written account repeatedly as I completed the data analysis.

Step 2: Participant Selection and Initial Protocol:
I recruited and interviewed four adult women, ranging from their late twenties to mid-thirties. I provide a detailed description and introduction to each woman in her respective chapter.

I recruited participants through fliers that were distributed (physically and virtually) across local cafes, public spaces, and internet communities. In these fliers I sought out women who were at least eighteen years old, and who had experienced the phenomenon within the last five years at the time of the data collection. In the fliers themselves, I was transparent regarding my intentions to research the lived-experience of negatively encountering pornographic imagery.
I took special care to screen participants to ensure that they were open in sharing their lived-experiences.

While I ended up interviewing four women, six people in total reached out to me. I was not able to interview two of the six potential participants. One of the individuals identified as a cisgender male, and I explained to him that I was only seeking experience from adult women. The other individual, a woman in her late seventies, had come across a pornographic image over twenty years ago. As her experience took place more than five years ago, she was not suitable for this study.

Before any interviews or data gathering took place, I gave each of the four participants an IRB-approved consent form which detailed the purpose of the research, the duration of their participation, how confidentiality would be maintained, and a statement that their participation was voluntary, and that any refusal to participate involved no penalty. Moreover, they were each given access to available psychological resources, in the unlikely case that their participation caused any excessive emotional distress.

**Step 3: Obtaining the Original Descriptions:**

After I received each woman’s signed consent form, and gathered her demographic details, I asked each woman to write a brief narrative in reply to the following writing prompt:

*Please describe as detailed as possible, one particular situation in which you negatively encountered a pornographic image. Include what led up to the situation, the context of your experience, what you actually experienced, what you felt and thought and did upon encountering the image, and how you responded afterwards, both soon after and later. To help me understand your experience and responses, please be as vivid and detailed as you can in writing your experience.*

Each participant privately worked on her written narrative and sent them to me. I received each narrative via e-mail.
I would also like to highlight my use of the term “negative” here. I chose this specific word to act as a placeholder, in order to fully allow and encourage my participants to expand as fully as possible, in their own words, what this symbolized for them specifically. For example, if I had chosen to use a word, such as “traumatic,” I may have unintentionally limited the range of painful emotions this experience may conjure up.

**Step 4: Reading the Descriptions:**

After obtaining the original descriptions, and before reading them, I returned to my journal and documented with special care, once again, my own presuppositions, biases, and beliefs regarding what I was about to read. Afterwards, I then read each description in its entirety. As I did this, I marked off parts of the descriptions in which I was interested in seeking more detail or clarification. I kept in mind the following questions as I did so: 1. What about the materials felt pornographic to the participant. 2. What about the experience was “negative” or “painful”? According to Giorgi (2012), “The researcher first reads the whole description in order to get a sense of the whole. The phenomenological approach is holistic and so no further steps can be taken until the researcher has an understanding of what the data are like” (p. 5).

Following this process, I briefly returned to my self-reflexive journal and documented and explored the reasons why I had marked off specific parts of the participants’ descriptions. This practice was helpful for me when I analyzed the data later on.

**Step 5: Collaborative Interviews:**

After I spent time with the written narratives, I emailed each participant to set up an in-person, semi-structured interview. I explained to each woman, that I planned to read her description aloud to her, and that I was interested in obtaining more detail and clarification regarding certain aspects of her interview. I let her know that as I read the interview back to her,
that I would occasionally pause, and invite her to provide me with more detail regarding what she had written. At times, I may ask her specifically about certain things she had written. Moreover, I explained to each woman that the interviews would be audio-recorded, and later transcribed and combined with her original descriptions to form an integrated, full description.

Immediately after I conducted the interviews, and before I interpreted or analyzed any content, I wrote a reflection. In this reflection I asked myself this following question: *knowing my personal biases and presuppositions, how did they come to play during the interview?*

Once I journaled, I completed integrated transcripts of the data. By this, I mean that from each participant’s written narrative and our subsequent interview, I crafted an edited synthesis, an integrated transcript, which fuses the data into one cohesive document. This edited transcript does not deviate from what the participants (or I) wrote or said. However, I did eliminate redundancies and extraneous commentary, such as “ah” and “um” from the transcripts. In the document any material derived from the written narratives is indicated by italicized font. These integrated transcripts can be found in the appendix section of the dissertation.

I then proceeded to analyze the data.

**Step 6: Delineating Meaning Units:**

Before I revisited the data, I wrote again, privately, about my experiences, assumptions, and feelings regarding the research process, and any of my own biases, questions, and curiosities which emerged following the transcription of data.

Afterwards, I read each description and integrated transcript to get a sense of the participant’s overall experience of the phenomenon. This allowed me to break down each description into smaller segments called “meaning units.” These units represented smaller parts of the participant’s descriptions that revealed aspects of the lived-experience of the phenomenon.
I demarcated these “meaning units” whenever I found a shift in meaning in the participant’s descriptions. According to Giorgi (2012):

The researcher then goes back to the beginning of the description and begins to reread it. This time, every time she experiences a transition in meaning from within the aforementioned attitude, she makes a mark on the description. This is the process of constituting parts. Most descriptions are too long to be retained easily and so the constitution of parts helps in the analysis. These parts are called meaning units and they are arbitrary and carry no theoretical weight. They are correlated with the attitude of the researcher. It is assumed that different researchers will have different meaning units. (p. 5)

Step 7: Psychological Interpretation of Meaning Units:

Once the meaning units were delineated, I again returned to my journal and explored anything else which had emerged for me. After I wrote privately about my process, I then used my own words to organize the meaning units according to thematic content in terms of the meaning unit’s psychological significance.

Step 8: Situated Structure:

After I organized the meaning units, I formed, for each participant, what is called the situated structure. This situated structure reflects and interprets each participant’s personal experience of the phenomenon as it emerged from their own descriptions and subsequent interviews. This is when I as a researcher moved towards interpretation. During this process I articulated different constituent themes and meanings, and I also showed the interrelationship between themes. Moreover, I provided verbatim quotes from my participants’ narratives in order to illustrate the themes and demonstrate that they emerged from the actual data.

At the end of each situated structure, in which I implicitly demonstrate the interrelatedness between themes that form the gestalt of the structure, I have added a brief section on the interrelatedness of the themes, which does so more explicitly. For the sake of clarity, I briefly describe how these themes coalesce into the larger phenomenon and converge to
dialectically form the situated structure. Although these themes are interdependent, given the interwoven nature of experience, they are not strictly chronological or linear.

During this entire process, I returned to my journal, and in the spirit of hermeneutics, I documented and paid close attention to the ways in which my own subjectivity may have influenced the data, places in which I found myself surprised, and other moments in which some of my previous beliefs were confirmed.

**Step 9: General Structure:**

After I completed the four situated structures, I developed the general structure of the phenomenon. Before crafting the general structure, I briefly described the unique aspects of each participant’s narratives, this allowed me to better express on what the four narratives had in common, and it was also a way for me to honor the subjectivity of each experience.

In order to determine the general structure, I entered the process of imaginative variation, in which I determined from the data which aspects or themes of the experience were essential to the phenomenon, as described by my participants. Then, I crafted the general structure which captures phenomenon of negatively encountering a pornographic image as described by the four participants.

As I wrote the general structure, I referred myself back to my journal in which I had documented my ongoing personal process. As I read my entries over, I paid close attention to the ways in which my own personal biases and beliefs were present, as well as challenged, by the actual data.

**Step 10: Analyzing for Socio-Political and Cultural Themes:**

My final step included an analysis of the socio-cultural and political themes that emerged in the data analysis. I identified these by carefully reviewing each narrative, and its pertaining
situated structure, for any socio-cultural and political content. I then further reviewed the general structure for any such related themes. This step of the analysis was a supplement to the phenomenological work that was completed as stated above. I then commented on, and dialogued, these themes with relevant literature.
Chapter 4: Results

This chapter shares individual lived experiences of negatively encountering a pornographic image, as described by four research participants. The four women all used she/her/hers pronouns. The participants all identified as white, and their ages ranged from late twenties to early thirties. All the participants’ names and other identifying markers have been changed to protect their identities. These changes were as collaborative as possible. For example, most of the participants chose their own pseudonyms, and we made sure together that their confidentially felt as protected as possible.

Before I introduce the participants, I will include a brief section which documents and explores my initial written reflection. Then, I provide a chapter for each participant, with the following format: 1. An introduction to the participant, 2. A brief description of their image, 3. A description of our interview, 4. The situated structure, which highlights each narrative’s themes, and how they interrelate to one another. These themes will be supported by way of empirical evidence from each participant’s written and interview testimony.

Following the situated structures will be, 5. A commentary on the unique aspects of each narrative, 6. A general illustrated structure, 7. An Analysis of socio-political and cultural themes which emerged from the narratives, as each situated structure is situated within a larger cultural milieu.
Personal Researcher Reflexivity Exercise

Before I conducted any interviews, I began my research journal with a personal researcher reflexivity exercise in which I wrote about my presumptions, beliefs, and biases regarding pornography. I also documented the reasons why I assumed that women may feel harmed by some forms of pornographic imagery, and pornography more generally. I continued this practice of private journaling throughout the duration of the research project. This practice allowed me to cultivate, as much as possible, a phenomenological attitude, and helped me to process explore the information I was given.

Here, for the sake of transparency and in the spirit of solidarity with my participants who have bravely shared their experiences with me, I will insert some of what I wrote about privately on my biases and beliefs going into the project. The written excerpts are indicated by the italicized font.

It is so difficult to explicitly state how I personally distinguish erotic from pornography. Some kind of felt sense... something hard to describe with words. Erotica is somehow likened to art in my mind, or some kind of beauty. But then, it all feels so subjective, so situational.

I am still caught up in how difficult it is for me to recognize pornography as opposed to erotica. I wonder how this has changed during my own life. I would say that erotic images, or Eros, draw me in.... they are somehow inviting. Pornography often is experienced by me as somewhat of a shock.

I once had been harmed by a pornographic image (a video) sent to my mobile phone without my consent, of a man I had only met a few times (in a non-romantic context) ...it was of him masturbating. So, this makes me wonder if at least one image includes a depiction of the male body, although I assume the images will largely depict women. I can’t tell why I am assuming this, maybe some larger collective assumptions regarding this topic?

I am wondering if the women’s narratives will vary in what they understand pornography to be...it does seem a bit subjective, but not entirely. Something that links our understanding
collective...or somethings...but what are they? Perhaps it is what many authors have already mentioned or hinted at...that pornography is often sexually explicit, and most mainstream forms of pornography are dehumanizing, or violent.

I believe that at least one of the narratives will feature an image that depicts violence or humiliation.

I’m wondering if the women came across the images accidentally, or if they were active consumers of the medium. There is a cultural stereotype that seems to mark men as the sole consumers of pornography. However, I know this is not true.

Will jealousy be an aspect of the experiences at all? I feel like there is an unfair stereotype of women being harmed by their partner’s pornographic use because they feel jealous or insecure. Part of me believes this is a patriarchal understanding that becomes ingrained in those of us living within this specific cultural milieu, myself included. This upsets and sadness me. Writing this makes me feel uncomfortable. I could see this as being a valid and shared experience amongst some women. Relationships are never uncomplicated.

Will the images trigger any previous sexual traumas for the participants? Will previous traumas result in someone being more sensitive regarding such imagery? This makes me feel uneasy...I don’t want to be reductive in my thinking. By that I guess I mean that I do not want to minimize the shared political consequences of pornography. I do not want to overshadow the political with something that is more pathological? It is hard to put into words what I am trying to say. I want to be careful with the data, I want to honor the collective pain of gendered experience, but I also want to honor personal dynamics and history. I think it is all interrelated anyway.

I think that part of the pain may have to do with viewing a body that one identifies with as being depicted in humiliating, violating, submissive, or violent manners. To be represented in a painful, dehumanized way.

I wonder if guilt will be a part of these experiences, either guilt over feeling affected by imagery, or guilt for seeking the imagery out in the first place.
A Brief Concluding Remark on the Personal Writing Exercise:

Above, I have shared my personal writing excerpts in a loose, candid style. I wanted, in part, to convey as honestly as possible my initial recorded assumptions regarding pornography, and my fantasies regarding the project. Now, I will describe some of the thematic content which emerged in my personal writing exercise. I revisit this exercise, and the larger practice of keeping a research journal, in the final chapter of the dissertation.

First, as I reflect on the above excerpts, I seemed to have struggled with how I conceptualized pornography. As I have discussed in the literature review, defining pornography is a complex practice for many other authors and disciplines. While I struggled with this, and still do in some ways, there are some things I did know about how I personally recognized pornography. What emerged in the writing practice was my sense that much of mainstream pornography objectifies the female body and includes violent and dehumanizing material. I also noted that I personally found there to be a distinction between pornography and erotic imagery, but that I found it quite difficult to capture what I meant by “erotic imagery” in any concrete way. Writing this now, I still feel this to be a complicated distinction.

Second, I make assumptions regarding my imagined participants and how they would understand and interact with pornography. As I reflect on my personal writings, I painfully notice just how much certain mainstream narratives regarding women and pornography, which are often rather patriarchal, have been internalized. For example, I had assumed that the majority of the participants would be more passive witnesses of pornography, rather than active consumers of the medium. I also noticed that I held certain assumptions regarding the reasons why a participant may feel negatively affected by their experience. Apart from the painful and
offensive power that objectifying images can hold, I also wondered if an imaginal participant’s previous traumas may at all be triggered by pornographic materials.

Third, while more implicit than what I have remarked on so far, I cannot help but now notice a tone of anxiety in the writing, and this was part of my experience when undergoing the exercise itself. Due to these feelings and experiences of anxiety, I felt unable to write long or linear passages, and instead preferred to quickly write down my reflections. I believe this anxiety and discomfort was in part due to the sense that I would soon be meeting with real participants. Another part of the anxiety, though, was also reflective of the emotional pain of realizing just how many dominant and upsetting views regarding women and sexuality were ingrained in me. In addition to this anxiety, writing and reviewing the journal was also somewhat of a painful experience. It was painful in that the writing process really led me to reflect on just how oppressive and unjust our society still is, especially towards women. At times, I began to feel overwhelmed—overwhelmed with culture, and overwhelmed with how confusing and conflicting my personal views and assumptions were.

On that note, I will end this brief reflection with a quote by Cixous (1992). I kept her words close to me during many difficult parts of the personal writing process as they both provided me with solidarity, comfort, and motivation. She writes, “Writing: first I am touched, caressed, wounded; then I try to discover the secret of this touch to extend it, celebrate it, and transform it into another caress” (Cixous, 1992, p.45).
Eliza

“To be asked to describe a situation where I’ve encountered a pornographic image and felt adversely affected is easy. To me, ‘one image’ has really just become an overarching and continual experience and ‘feeling’ about pornography.”
Introduction to Eliza:

Eliza is a partnered Caucasian woman who works in the health sciences sector. She was 29 years old at the time of our interview in June of 2017. She learned about my study through an online contact of hers who had seen my flier and passed it along to her. I did not learn the details of the process, but I sensed that it took place privately and felt very personal. Eliza told me explicitly that she couldn’t say more about the woman who had guided her to the project. I did not press or ask anything further. I already felt that I was entering into a kind of sisterhood with this project. Talking about sexuality, even between women, is never uncomplicated.

Eliza first contacted me by email saying she would like to participate in my study. She noted in her email that she was glad I was doing this study because “there is minimal support out there.” By this, she later expressed her feeling that much of women’s sexuality remains unspoken. We spoke further about the study and its method by e-mail and set up our interview at her private residence.

Summary of Eliza’s Image: Mascara Girl:

When initially reading over Eliza’s written narrative, I was initially struck by the intensity of her statement: “To be asked to describe a situation where I’ve encountered a pornographic image and felt adversely affected is easy. To me, “one image” has really just become an overarching and continual experience and “feeling” about pornography.” Before and during our interview, I did encourage Eliza to focus on a specific image that came to mind, and one that she felt particularly affected by. This request was easy for Eliza, and she decided to choose an image that she had seen while browsing the internet for pornography the week before our interview.
The particular image that emerged for Eliza was one of a woman depicted in a moving gif\(^2\) form. According to Eliza, the woman was shown to be performing oral sex against her will. Eliza wrote: *But like last week, you know, there's an image, this woman giving a blow job, but it's like she's not the one who's choosing to do it. It's like she's being forced to go through with it, and looks like she's got like mascara running down her face, she is crying.*

Eliza was particularly struck by the crying depicted in the image. According to Eliza:

…the mascara thing. With that, it’s like... there's a physical dominance that doesn't seem like it's wanted. And I know that what's going on in pornography is an act but these women are being told... I mean, I don't know how it works...but it feels like...jamming it down her throat until she can't breathe, crying all over the place.

Eliza further described the kinetic quality of the image during our interview: “Yeah, a moving gif. Crappy part of it too, it's just like happening over and over again, like really fast. And it wasn't something you search for, like it is just there.” This image was one she stumbled upon. This image was not sought after, and one could argue, on a free pornography site like the one Eliza chose to use, was unavoidable. This gif, like so many others, are featured on the pornography website, and are usually meant as an advertisement for other paid sites. When a person uses a pornography website for free, they are impossible to escape: “it's on that sidebar thing. I immediately saw it. I thought it was screwed up. It was just there flashing…”

**Description of the Interview:**

The day we were scheduled to meet, I took a taxi and then walked the last ten minutes to Eliza’s home. As I walked to find her house, I remember feeling nervous as it was my first interview, and because it all seemed to have happened so quickly. The summer air was humid and heavy, and I felt very lost in my thoughts. I remember being worried that I would do

\(^2\) A gif, officially known as The Graphics Interchange Format, is a bitmap image format supporting both static and animated images.
something “wrong” and that I would somehow fumble through the interview process. When I arrived, I was welcomed by Eliza and was struck by the quaint beauty of her home. Eliza told me that she lived there with a roommate (who was currently at work), and I was led to her kitchen table. We sat and went over together what was in her signed consent form, and how we would proceed to conduct the interview. Eliza seemed at ease in the space, and she thanked me for allowing me to share her story. Before we began, Eliza made us a warm pot of coffee and told me to feel at home. All of my earlier worries seemed to fall away as we began to talk together.

Throughout the interview, Eliza was warm, welcoming, and very open with me. I was struck by her energized presence and commitment to talking about women’s sexual experiences, and sexuality, more openly. At times, the mood of the interview was tender and soft. However, there were also expressions of frustration, anger, laughter, and perhaps most important—hope.

**Situated structure with individualized themes:**

Below are the individual themes that I found during my analysis of Eliza’s interview transcript. These themes, in both their individuality and interrelatedness, organize the gestalt of the situated structure.

*One image as overarching and timeless*

Eliza powerfully wrote in her original narrative: “*To be asked to describe a situation where I’ve encountered a pornographic image and felt adversely affected is easy. To me, ‘one image’ has really just become an overarching and continual experience and ‘feeling’ about pornography.*” In other words, negative encountering a pornographic image is an experience in which Eliza often finds herself, in an almost timeless and repetitive manner. This quality was also present during our interview as I often felt called to gently re-direct her to focus on the
specific image she had chosen to describe, while also allowing for the natural unfolding of her experience of this continual and interconnected moment.

The overall experience of searching for pornography online is one that Eliza both freely chooses to participate in and feels negatively affected by. For Eliza, the online world of pornography feels somewhat painful and alienating. When she described these sentiments to me, the notion and experience of temporality came up again. According to Eliza, the emotions that emerge can be difficult to explain: “I mean I can try to describe them, but they happen pretty fast, you know, the way that thoughts barrel thorough...I recognize it, and I feel the dissonance, and I feel the negativity, but I'm there for a reason. So, I continue on.” In other words, Eliza notices shifts and disruptions in the experience of her lived-time.

Although Eliza did offer to focus on and describe to me her experience of one particular image, that of Mascara Girl, she did make it clear to me that this image, while somewhat unique in its characteristics, was like so many other images she had seen and been affected by. During our interview, she explained: “...I see a lot of the same stuff over and over again, with just a different girl.” This experience of witnessing repetitive imagery also added to Eliza’s sense of this particular experience as being inextricable from the others she has witnessed. For Eliza, it is not only the images that are repetitive and similar, but themes of “punishment” and “aggression” which the images carry.

As our discussion found its particular ebb and flow, and gently shifted around of its own accord, I began to gain a better sense of what Eliza meant with her descriptions of the overarching nature of the experience, and how her sense of lived-time becomes affected. For Eliza, her search for and consumption of pornography follows a particular rhythm and ritual in which many elements tend to repeat themselves. Moreover, there are aspects of problematic
temporality for Eliza, as she does not fully give herself over to the natural flow and unfolding of the present moment, but rather feels a need to control and compartmentalize the time frame within which her viewing of pornography takes place (this will be expanded upon in the next theme: *ritual and dissociation as defense*.) Moreover, in the service of her pornographic interests and desires, she must take charge of time in a certain way, rather than allowing herself to surrender to the present moment. The methodical nature of her searching is measured moment by moment, step by step.

During the interview, Eliza seemed to allow herself to freely associate out loud with me, but there were moments where I sensed Eliza closing certain possibilities of continued dwelling and reflection. Time seemed to fall away as I listened to her recount her experiences to me, I could not believe how quickly our two hours together passed by. I remember thinking and later writing in my journal, about this parallel process, about her experience of witnessing such imagery and my experience of the interview: *moments became blended, time--elusive.*

*Ritual and dissociation as defense*

Ritual and dissociation interconnect with the presence of temporality in the previous theme. Associated with the elements of temporality evident in Eliza’s experience of searching for pornography, and viewing the images, are themes of ritual (organizing of time) and dissociation (losing of time). By dissociation, I am referring to the psychological process by which incoming experiences and information are deflected away from integration, as well as the emotional experience of moving away from traumatic, painful, and distressing situations.

In Eliza’s written and spoken narrative, she describes her searching for online pornography as a process which tends to follow a particular routine, and the experience never seems to fall outside of its prescribed order. Following the viewing of pornography, Eliza
attempts to dissociate from the experience as a kind of defense against the pain it causes her, rendering it into a kind of oblivion.

For Eliza, this ritual begins by establishing and entering into a certain kind of moodedness, which she describes as her “personal time.” In her written narrative, she wrote: “So the particulars are always loosely the same. I am alone. I am at home. I'm in bed. I'm feeling that I'd like to engage in achieving personal sexual satisfaction.” Once alone, in her bedroom, Eliza explains that she searches for pornography online by using her personal laptop computer. During our interview she explained this specific process to me in more detail and focused on her experience from the previous week when she encountered Mascara Girl:

I was tired, and I had a long day. I close the door, and usually have some kind of music on, I don't want to be heard by my roommate. It's like leading up to me getting on the Internet. I only use one site, there's just one I know of, it's called Porn Hub. I'm not usually on my computer beforehand, it is an intentional decision to do this. That is the mission, I am in bed and I open up my laptop and I go straight to the website.

This search tends to be rife with problems for Eliza, as she struggles to find pornography that sexually satisfies her and finds a lot of the pornography available to be degrading towards women. However, once she does find pornography that is sufficiently satisfying, she masturbates until she achieves an orgasm, or what she describes as reaching “personal sexual satisfaction.” Following this part of the experience, Eliza then attempts to put a distinctive end to this experience, both continuing to structure time and attempting to let go of the time she just experienced. She explained: “So when I am done, I immediately exit the site, and I put my computer away. I don't just relax, I immediately do something else.” I then went on to ask about the night in which she stumbled upon “mascara girl,” wondering if that night was different in terms of process or routine. According to Eliza, it did not: “That, that's what I do. If I am not watching pornography, if I am just doing things with my own thoughts, I will lay there and just
relax. But, last week, and every other time, I immediately turn it off.” This is in contract to
Eliza’s other sexual experiences without online pornography, in which she allows herself to
reflect on what had just taken place and relax into and enjoy the present moment.

In other words, during and after her consumption of online pornography, Eliza does not
allow for a natural unfolding of experience: she follows a plan which signals to her the end of
this oftentimes painful routine and compartmentalized experience. Eliza’s ritual of searching for
online pornography and attempting to render the experience into oblivion can be in part
understood as a defense against the very distressing experiences of witnessing certain types of
pornographic images such as “mascara girl.” For Eliza, an important part of her ritual of
searching for and consuming pornography is the distancing from and forgetting the experience
after achieving orgasm. After marking the end of the ritual, Eliza chooses to put the experience
out of her mind, it refuses integration. She expressed this by saying: “I kind of feel guilty after
being on that site. Because of that, I actually don't think about it at all after I am done using the
website.” I asked Eliza if she could describe this sense of “guilt” with me, she responded by
saying:

It is quick in passing, but I feel like I shouldn't go on that site to watch these things…I
mean, I keep going to the same place, and this site has to make money somehow. It
doesn't feel good, and I am using it anyway. I guess I don't really know what other
options I have. However, I also have to do more research. But that's kind of why I feel
guilty...it's just that I feel kind of bad. Even in the moment.

During our conversation, Eliza began to put into language, perhaps for the first time,
these attempts towards distancing and forgetting. As she spoke aloud these words, I noticed in
her a moment of self-understanding and realization:

It's kind of funny. I know that I do that, and I guess I never really so plainly said it out
loud, or even acknowledged that to myself. In terms of just thinking about the details of
what happened last week, what always happens with me when I do that. You know that's
literally what I do every time.
Entering into and navigating the male space

As Eliza begins to search online and sift through the website which she always uses, she begins to feel as though she is entering into a space not made for her:

Yeah, I mean...as soon as I put the website up, the browser window pops up...there's little pictures for every category, like a thumbnail. Surrounding that, there's always advertisements and things like that. And this particular time, and every time, when I get on this site, it doesn't feel like a space for me, it feels like it's made for men. And so that's like one of the first negative feelings that I feel what.

For Eliza, this experience is one that seems to be painful and upsetting. I noticed a shift in her tone as she described these feelings to me. She spoke more softly, and I felt some sadness enter into the room. Eliza went on to explain why the space feels unwelcome to her: “…all of the pictures are women that you see like in the thumbnails, basically. Then the advertisements, they use gifs, well the gifs are always a male dominating a woman in some way. It happens every time, including this particular experience I am talking about.” She then reiterated to me, “it feels like the space is made for men.”

Due to these sentiments, Eliza finds herself having to carefully “navigate” the world of online pornography. During our interview Eliza said that looking for pornography is a “process.” She seemed visibly frustrated as she recounted her experience to me:

It's not like there's some category that I know I will like, and just go there. There's categories I wouldn't click, just because I know it's not something I'm interested in. But, there's always searching, there's never like, oh this will do. Most of what I click on, just like last week...I am watching for half a second, and I feel like I don't want to see that...

Upon entering into this particular world of online pornography, Eliza attempts to find something which aligns with her sexual desires while also carefully trying to avoid the aspects of this space which she experiences as degrading. However, on the website Eliza uses, avoiding the pornography which upsets her is not possible. In her written narrative Eliza wrote:
...as I navigate the website there are gifs on the side bars of women’s heads being smashed into torsos, mascara streaming down their faces. Girls in plaid uniform skirts and pigtails who resemble children rather than women holding stuffed animals, bent over from the waist down. A woman kneeling with her tongue out surrounded by 5 sets of male legs, sperm covering her face. A veiny hand clasped around a red and irritated neck as it’s choked. Category names like “babysitter” “cuckold” “gang bang.”

These are all images Eliza is forced to contend with the content of the website she visits a couple times of month. These depictions of sexuality do not reflect or amplify Eliza’s personal “sexual reality,” and are experienced as largely inescapable and painful. Having now clarified this component in the structure, I will turn now to the next theme which builds upon the consequences of Eliza’s experiences of viewing such disturbing imagery, including how they negative impact and hinder Eliza’s sense of sexual well-being.

Sexual dissatisfaction and disturbance

Between entering into a space she feels alienated from, and seeing images that she finds degrading and offensive, Eliza’s experience of finding and consuming pornography is oftentimes painful and negatively affects Eliza’s sexual pleasure.

For one, as described earlier, her conflictual feelings regarding online porn use create a situation in which she attempts to immediately distance herself from and repress. Moreover, she is usually unable to easily find pornography suitable to her needs. She must navigate the website while encountering images, such as Mascara Girl, without her consent or desire. Eliza described how her sexual pleasure decreases while searching for online pornography:

...sometimes I've had trouble getting myself in the mood to want to do that because it's hard, because I'm not relating to the content...I do have individual thoughts about what I'm seeing, but it's an overall negative feeling in the sense that has sometimes made it hard for me to get in the mood. There have been times, when I have given up...I'm trying to watch what I'm seeing, and allow myself to forget about how I'm feeling about what I'm seeing...but it doesn't always work, and then I sometimes stop.
Sometimes, Eliza is so negatively affected by what she is seeing that she is unable to proceed with viewing and consuming online pornography. In addition to how she described this experience to me, she also told me that the situation feels “annoying” to her. It feels annoying to have to navigate a space she feels so alienated from.

Part of the uncomfortable experience of searching for pornography is that Eliza feels “cognitive dissonance” between many of the images she sees online and what she calls her own “sexual reality.” In her narrative, Eliza wrote: “These images and gifs are disturbing and I have often paused to watch them or look at them for a moment before moving on, feeling defeated.” For Eliza, these painful feelings are also connected to a larger, shared world. She explained: “But this disturbance I feel, is also inside of me, it's something I recognize as a part of reality in this world. Like in terms of the sexualization or objectification of women.”

**Defeat and the objectification of women**

For Eliza it was important to ground her personal experience and feelings regarding pornography and sexuality in that of a larger cultural milieu. Eliza recognizes that the “disturbance” she feels when witnessing certain forms of pornography speaks to the broader “sexualization” and “objectification” of women in our society.

…part of my emotion is for others. So largely I mean... I feel lucky that I'm not in that situation. I think about the person in the image, and about women in general. I would like it to all be different. I also feel that for men too. Our culture conditions us to think about things very strongly sometimes.

At this point in the interview, Eliza began to express another painful emotion, “defeat,” which emerges when she encounters troubling forms of pornography. In her narrative, Eliza powerfully wrote, "That defeat is hard to explain, and is loaded." I enquired further about what Eliza had meant and she explained:
By loaded I mean that...the image I saw last week, it’s a bad experience on its own, but it's tied to a lot of other things that I think about that are separate from that very moment. I bring a lot of feelings with me to that experience.

This was also captured in her written narrative, in the following statement: “It is the reminder that *many* look at women as something to be sexualized, objectified, punished, controlled, subservient.” As I read this aloud to her, Eliza sat up straighter and in a resolute and serious manner said: “I think in the US, and all over the world…that women have had the unfortunate experience of being told and made to feel that they are lesser than men, for a really long time.”

While the experiences of living under patriarchy, and witnessing distressing pornographic images, are difficult for Eliza, she also expressed in her narrative an optimism for a more egalitarian pornography.

**Hope for a better pornography**

Following her expression of anger and annoyance directed at the pornography website she uses, Eliza did express some curiosity and hope regarding a different kind of online pornography that could be for her, and for other women like her. Eliza admitted to me that she had not really researched or looked into sites that may be better for her, but told me that she knows they do exist. I read aloud Eliza’s written words: “... *I’m pissed and continue to be pissed that there is such a wide variety of shitty porn with the warped sexual desires of men portrayed in mind. Where is all the porn made for women, by women?”* Eliza, expanded on these sentiments:

> It would be an awesome world if there were options that felt like they were for us. I'm saying that, I think that would be awesome if pornography showed something else other than women being punished, being in pain, or being depicted as far younger than they are…It just feels ridiculous honestly. I go through this range of emotions. I am annoyed, I'm disturbed, I am angry. You can even hear it in my writing. I am angry that It doesn't exist for women. I mean, some does, but it is marginalized. There's only a few people who could probably tell me a website that has a different experience to offer.
One of Eliza’s main concerns with the kind of pornography she is advocating for is that of limited accessibility. Eliza told me that although she is not familiar with how pornography is actually advertised, she does feel that these marginalized forms of pornography seem to not be advertised at all.

*Sexual well-being and gratitude*

Another theme that emerged throughout Eliza’s written and spoken narrative, especially towards the end of our time together was that of the importance of speaking openly about our sexuality as women, and as men. At one point, Eliza stated: “… I see myself as part of a larger community, and like I said I more readily feel the stuff about women, but I also like feel for men too. I think we all need a lot more education.” In another moment, she also passionately expressed:

Yeah. I mean it wasn't until I was probably twenty-five that I even cared about satisfying myself really. Most young girls, even myself included, just don't grow up being told that it's ok to want pleasure and that it's not dirty to be sexual. When I was younger, I made decisions that I think I wouldn't have made if I had someone to talk to me about sex more openly. I think I would have understood it at a much earlier age, instead of 30 or 25. Like I said, it's not wrong to be sexual or to want to receive pleasure, or give pleasure. But in my personal opinion there needs to be more open discussions about this.

This statement corresponded to statements Eliza made in her written narrative: “*It makes me sad and angry for women in general, and especially young girls who, like myself, grow up very confused about what sex is supposed to be all about.*”

Eliza also expressed gratitude towards her relationship with her male partner, and spoke very highly of their relationship, including their intimate life. When describing this aspect of her sexual life, Eliza was visibly overcome with emotion, that I can only describe as delicate tenderness. She said to me, with tears in her eyes:

I feel very emotional about all this stuff when it comes to my partner actually. But it's like a positive emotion in a sense like I'm overcome by how beautiful the relationship is.
It is what I always envisioned and wanted, but I've never found it in this way before him. I have balance with him, we have a positive sexual relationship, I am very emotional about it, in a happy way. I am getting tears in my eyes, I feel like all women should experience that.

Her sexual experiences with her partner differ greatly from those of her experiences alone. As opposed to her attempts at dissociating from the experience of consuming online pornography, her intimate experiences with her partner seem much more integrated. There is a kind of remembering or carrying of these experiences onward. These experiences become part of her life.

Eliza does discuss her complex feelings regarding pornography with her partner, but has chosen not to watch pornography with him. She feels protective regarding their partnership, and there is a sense of damaging something by allowing pornography into their life as a couple. On this decision, Eliza explained:

I don't keep it separate in terms of conversation, I talk to him openly. But yeah, about not wanting to watch porn together...maybe a little bit afraid to share it with him. I don't want to see what he would choose, or what parts of the painful aspects of culture are in him. He is a man, we both grew up in this country, I don't want to see him be like influenced by it. It would feel disturbing for me.

A concluding commentary on thematic interrelatedness:

In Eliza’s account of her relationship with pornography, interwoven elements of temporality constitute each other and allow for the continuation and repetition of an experience that might otherwise be untenable. The ritualistic nature of the experience breaks up Eliza’s wrought and complicated search for pornography into smaller, more manageable segments, providing her with some degree of familiarity and order, even against the intrusion of objectification, disturbance, and defeat. The ritual aspect of her search also allows Eliza to dissociate from and banish the distressing aspects of her experience so that she can continue with her day, and eventually re-enter the unique temporality of the ritual.
Each element of this larger experience folds into and interrelates with the others. Ritual allows Eliza to find safety and distance from a conflictual and painful experience she often returns to, within an imaginal space that often does not feel like her own. The marking of the end of the ritual, and the move away from integrating the experience, alleviates Eliza’s feelings of guilt or pain. It is through the clashing of these distressing encounters with Eliza’s romantic relationship that an interruption of the world of the ritual opens up new perspective and a challenge for integration. This interruption also occurred in my conversation with Eliza. Beyond only the contained, repetitive privacy of her encounters with pornography, encounters with others allow Eliza to know the astonishing range of what is possible for women like herself—both the wounding alienation of oppressive patriarchy, and the transformative power of integrative, loving erotic experiences. Eliza’s sense of this range allows her to imagine a healthy sexuality, for herself and culture, constituted by greater consciousness, agency, and love.
Isobel

“...maybe if I have sex with this person enough...that this will stop him from using porn.”
Introduction to Isobel:

Isobel is a married Caucasian woman who works in education. Isobel is passionate about animals, literature, and folk music. She was 31 years old at the time of our interview in July of 2017. She learned about my study through my electronic flier. Isobel first contacted me by email saying that she would like to participate. We spoke further about the study and my method by e-mail and phone, and set up our interview at my private residence.

Summary of Isobel’s image: the porn star:

At the time of our interview, it had been a few years since Isobel had encountered the image she had chosen to speak to me about. Isobel first came across this image, a brief video, on her partner’s personal computer while working through her ambivalent feelings regarding her partner’s consumption of online pornography, something experienced by Isobel as deeply painful and difficult to understand.

Isobel initially had stumbled upon a variety of images, but she felt particularly affected by a video featuring Andi Pink. Pink is a rather well-known nude model and internet porn star. In Isobel’s narrative, she wrote: "There was a lot that bothered me about what I'd found, but one porn model in particular stuck out. I found brief video-clips and images of a porn model called Andi Pink.” At the time Isobel did not know who Pink was. In addition to the video, Isobel saw that her partner had looked up many images of Pink, and she saw them displayed in gallery form.
All of the images deeply affected and hurt Isobel; it was, as she commented, a “conglomerate” of imagery. Concerning the video on which Isobel had chosen to focus for the project, she wrote:

There was a whole gallery of her pictures with shots that had camera angles that were invasive and seemed exploitative – pictures of her bent forward, naked looking back at the camera while the image focused on her backside and things like that. There was also a brief video clip of someone encouraging her to take off her shirt. And, she does so and makes it seem like she’s giddy and partially embarrassed about it – very much seemingly to give the impression that she’s a young girl without a lot of experience. That’s what really sickened and bothered me the most: the intention of the images to convey the impression that she was very youthful.

Isobel reiterated to me that she was upset that Pink was depicted as looking particularly young.

Pink also seemed to be portrayed as exposed and “vulnerable.”

I'm thinking about like what makes this pornographic too …. Andi Pink was I guess softcore porn, it wasn't a hardcore video of two people having sex. But, the image, was like, made for the Male Gaze, as people say. This was somebody like exposing themselves, like putting themselves into a vulnerable position of being posed a certain way. Seeing someone in a very, in your face, kind of exploitative position.

Another aspect of this video which distressed Isobel was that Pink was being directed by a male voice off-camera who was instructing Pink to act and pose in certain, specific ways. For Isobel, it appeared that Pink was being “coaxed” to perform, and Isobel was unsure as to whether or not Pink had any real agency of her own. According to Isobel:

…it was a male voice. He was not on camera, but she was. The male voice was directing her, and it was obviously being used as a device to give someone arousal in an exploitative way. Like it seems that maybe she’s not 100% comfortable, because she is appearing as somewhat hesitnt, pausing, acting like a young teenager who is somewhat comfortable, but she is going with it anyway, because she is being coaxed into it. It wasn't an obvious yes on her part.
Moreover, Isobel also discussed with me why she thought that Pink, and the video, may have stood out to her. After all, Isobel had encountered many upsetting images that day.

Yeah, I think it was like conglomerated, but definitely Andi Pink most of the time. She really stuck out in my memory. I think that she was kind of like the representation of everything I had been through and seen. Maybe though it was because she had a name tied to the image, even though it was obviously made up. The other images or search terms like "Greek Babes" or whatever, they didn't have names. Andi Pink was this person.

The psychological and emotional resonance of this image, and others like it, had stayed with Isobel for several years. During our interview, I learned more about Isobel’s complicated and ever-evolving relationship to this specific image, and to pornography more generally.

**Description of the Interview:**

As someone who lives alone in a small studio apartment in Pittsburgh, I wasn’t used to hosting, especially something formal, such as a research interview. I remember cleaning my apartment in a frenzy the day before, making sure that my habitual chaos was somewhat hidden, and that I actually had beverages and small snacks in my usually empty refrigerator. The toils of living alone during intense graduate studies had made my day to day living somewhat unconventional, and rarely predictable. While I was more flustered concerning my surroundings, I felt calmer regarding the idea of the interview itself. The first one seemed to have had unfolded gently and naturally. I had hoped that Isobel and I also would establish our own rhythm. Topics such as pornography are not always discussed so openly and so descriptively and are rarely recorded!
Isobel arrived on time. She was warm and had a lovely, energetic presence. She wore her blondish hair in a pixie cut, reminiscent of Twiggy or Mia Farrow. Her eyes were bright, and she wore a beautiful colorful scarf. During our interview, Isobel and I laughed often, even though there were moments of sadness and stillness. Isobel seemed to have little trouble describing experiences to me, and I was struck by her openness and energy throughout the entire process. The bravery and ease with which she shared her story made me feel more at peace in her presence. I commented on her light and easygoing nature at one point, and she remarked that it was in part due to having worked through this painful experience on a few levels, and most importantly, allowing herself to fully feel and surrender into her emotional experiences, however painful. Afterwards I wrote in my journal, *I wasn't expecting to laugh and smile so much during this kind of discussion. What a lovely encounter.*

**Situated structure with individualized themes:**

Below are the individual themes that I found during my analysis of Isobel’s interview transcript. These themes, in both their individuality and interrelatedness, organize the gestalt of the situated structure.

*Pain and confusion*

Isobel’s narrative begins with a painful and disorienting experience of encountering her partner’s use of pornography. At the time, Isobel had been dating her now husband for several months. Early on in their relationship, Isobel and her partner would discuss topics such as paid-for pornography, and other forms of adult entertainment. Her partner told her that he had never
purchased pornography. Isobel interpreted this to mean that he was not using online pornography at all. However, she soon discovered that he was indeed looking at online pornography that was available for free. This realization startled her and caused her a fair amount of emotional suffering. In her narrative, Isobel wrote:

Eventually my partner did tell me that he regularly looked at pornographic videos and images. I was somewhat surprised because he had said he never “purchased” pornography. He said, “yes, I never bought it, but I do find it online.” I've been trying to remember if he actually showed me some of what he looked at, or if I simply remember the experience being visual because of the vividness surrounding the memory.

As I read this aloud to her, she nodded her head in agreement. This initial experience of contending with her partner’s use of pornography, and her own complicated views of pornography, was one that was very painful: “The experience was definitely incredibly visceral. I felt sick, confused, and unsure as to how to have a meaningful conversation about it because I was so jolted.” Isobel was very much in love with her partner; she was attached and invested in cultivating and sustaining their relationship. However, she also felt hurt, misled, and confused about why he was using pornography. Moreover, she felt surprised as she had shared her views surrounding pornography, and other topics regarding sexuality, early on in their relationship. The problem of pornography in their relationship would be one that caused a great deal of emotional suffering, but also reparation.

**Feeling unaware**

Another theme which emerged in Isobel’s narrative was that of Isobel feeling largely unaware of pornography’s rampant presence on the internet, and about pornography itself:
All of this is to say that I wasn't aware or familiar with how ubiquitous pornography is on the Internet. I had several close male friends who I occasionally talked with about topics like pornography, and they subscribed to particular porn sites that they paid for, so, again, I wasn't aware that porn is free and easily accessible.

Isobel had limited access to personal computers and the internet growing up. Her parents eventually purchased a family computer when Isobel was in high school, and the computer was placed in the living room. Therefore, Isobel did not experience the world of online pornography, and it wasn’t until college that she realized how accessible it was. In her narrative, Isobel wrote:

My family didn't have a computer until I was at the end of my high school years, and the one we eventually had was shared and located in the middle of our living room –so I would never have ventured onto such sites (assuming I would have been aware of them to begin with).

Once Isobel realized that online pornography was readily available on the internet, she had the assumption that it was something that people mostly “paid for.”

Apart from being unaware as to how accessible pornography is on the internet, Isobel also held assumptions as to why or how people engage with it more generally. Before pornography as a problem emerged in her life, Isobel believed that it was something single men used, and not something someone would seek out if they were in a sexual relationship.

According to Isobel:

I think, I thought that looking at those images was unnecessary … like I kind of believed, at the time, I thought that when people were in relationships and they were having sex regularly like … I always thought of pornographic stuff as in the single domain … like … I'm looking at porn because this is like my outlet because I don't have somebody that I'm with right now. So that was like another idea that I had in my head at the time.
These experiences of not understanding and not knowing also were painful on their own terms. Isobel, an academic, a woman passionate about learning, was faced with a limited understanding and lack of experience. In her narrative, she wrote: “I also felt stupid or naive. There was a whole landscape of porn on the Internet that I’d been unaware of. I felt gullible, like a child. I am certainly not a fan of feeling like I’m not intelligent, and that's definitely how I felt.”

*The imaginal*

During our conversation, Isobel and I spoke about how her limited understanding of pornography contributed to shaping her fantasies of what pornography may look like. After finding out that her partner had been using online pornography, Isobel imaged what this pornography could be, and she described to me this internal experience. While Isobel had not seen online pornography herself, she had seen an erotic film called *Nine Songs*, which she considered to be pornographic. This film, as well as other pop-culture references, formed Isobel’s fantasy images of pornography:

> *My brother had actually bought me a film called Nine Songs which is definitely pornographic. So, I had that film, but to me watching the film was…never a sexual experience for me…So I had like an idea of what porn could look like…Ok, so Nine Songs…the people in that are kind of like basic folk, pretty like down to earth looking people. And then of course like, you know, I had images of like porn stars like Pamela Anderson and the people that would be in Playboy. So, I feel like I had a sense of... when my partner told me that he looked at porn, like, I knew that it was the context of nine songs but the people of like Playboy…*

She went on to describe how this imaginal pornography looked in more detail:

> I mean like obviously even though I didn't have this great knowledge of like how widespread porn had become on the Internet, I had still been familiar enough with the fact that there are videos out there of people, and images of how mainstream porn stars would look, how they would have more of like the cookie cutter kind of like big boob like blond hair like type of
thing...that was sort of, like, the visual images that I had.

*Quest for knowledge*

One of the most important themes that emerged from within Isobel’s narrative was that of a personal quest for knowledge. In both her written narrative and in our interview, Isobel described a desire and an eventual plan to learn more about her partner’s interest in pornography, and pornography more generally. Without this quest, it is likely that Isobel never would have come across those images of Pink, images that would forever alter her feelings regarding pornography and her relationship.

Early on, Isobel accepted and admitted to herself that she had a limited understanding of pornography and why it appealed so much to her partner. She also realized that although his use of pornography felt hurtful, she may benefit from understanding more about it herself. For these reasons, Isobel decided that she must, on her own terms, learn as much as she possibly could handle. For Isobel, a woman who is highly educated and immensely curious about the world she lives in, knowledge is indeed power.

Her attempts to know more began with talking about pornography to other people. Isobel explained:

So I was working at a library, and I found myself just talking about it. I talked about it with other people, you know, over the time we were together. It was like a research mission. Inside, I am like, if I can research this, like, that that's like my strategy, I guess. Like I guess from being a sort academic, I'm like, if I just research this I will know how I feel.
As she spoke to others about pornography, Isobel began to get a better sense as to why someone may be drawn to using online pornography. However, these conversations did not make her feel better about her partner’s use of pornography: it still hurt her deeply. She still felt insecure about herself, worried that she was not "enough" for him. By this, Isobel indicated to me, through gesture, that she was referring at least in some way to her own desirability.

Eventually, after a series of lies and betrayals, Isobel realized that her partner’s pornography use was not going to truly stop, or at least not altogether. The day she came upon her partner’s search history, on the computer, was the day she decided to truly look at the images. For Isobel, not knowing is always worse than knowing.

Another part of this quest led Isobel towards discovering alternative forms of pornography. Due to Isobel’s personal research into pornography, she learned even more about what was available. According to Isobel: “I was able to kind of explore female directors of like pornographic videos, and you know what is called feminist porn which I know is a contentious thing for some folks…”

**Expressing anger**

Throughout her narrative, Isobel discussed the important, difficult, and cathartic experience of expressing anger. For example, when she first was coping with the discovery of her partner’s pornography use, she expressed her “discomfort” about it to him. After she expressed this feeling, he told her that he would stop.

Eventually, she discovered that her partner still had been using pornography. Isobel experienced a range of emotions, including anger. By the time she encountered the image(s) herself, Isobel felt rageful:
So, I was mad about the way she was posed, the whole thing … I wanted this to be obliterated. I wanted these people to not exist, not in a homicidal rage way, but I wanted to wipe these images and I guess these people off the face of the earth. That is how I felt.

Isobel wanted to direct her anger outwardly, and eventually she did. In the narrative, Isobel wrote:

*I simultaneously felt paralyzed, but also a kind of sadness and anger that created a kind of energetic outburst – like, I was willing to do anything to get the pain I was feeling inside out of myself. I hated the porn models for making me feel as terrible as I did. I cried. I called my partner at work, and he knew how serious it was because it had been such a source of tension throughout our relationship.*

Deciding to confront him, Isobel shared these feelings of anger with her partner. She told me that she felt that it was so important to express her feelings of rage. However, there were also moments when Isobel’s anger was directed inward. She described to me intense feelings of self-loathing:

Yes, and I think it was all woven together. All were tied together, like my partner, my disgust with myself, my not knowing about this, my frustration with the image. It isn't three distinct things. It is all wrapped up together. My anger with the porn model is also anger with myself.

She went on to say: “When I say I want to obliterate the porn model off the face of the Earth, which sounds horrible, it is also anger with myself. It isn't like, I hate her, or these people, it was also a self-loathing as well.” I asked her to expand more upon what she meant by “self-loathing.”

Poignantly, and heartbreakingly, she responded:

…when I want to wipe the traces off these people off the face of the earth, is also a desire to erase the vulnerable in myself. I want to erase the fact that I felt silly and naive. The two are connected. So, I think that my frustration with these people is like a frustration with myself.
Embodied experiences of anxiety and dread

For Isobel, many of the painful feelings she experienced during this time were also embodied. The first time Isobel found out about her partner’s pornography use, she described it as “visceral”: “The experience was definitely incredibly visceral. I felt sick…” Later on, while contending with her partner’s use of online pornography, she would experience “waves of anxiety” that would wash over her, emotionally and physically. Isobel wrote: “When he realized how much it upset me, he adamantly told me he would not do it again. I continued to think about it when we were apart. A wave of anxiety would wash over me.” When I wanted to know more about how she experienced this wave of anxiety, she expanded: “So, these feelings of anxiety would wash over me, it was just like this feeling of dread I guess. It was definitely really embodied, the feeling and sensation … it’s like, I would suddenly think about just all of sudden I think about it.”

Between the painful realization of her partner’s engagement with pornography and her futile attempts to stop him from wanting to use it, Isobel began to feel worse over time: “The pain definitely took on a physical aspect for me. I felt so devastated inside…” Her emotional suffering eventually felt so debilitating to Isobel that she made him go to his doctor to ask for anti-anxiety medication she ended up using herself:

Yeah definitely. I also told my partner that I couldn’t handle feeling that way. It almost turned into some kind of self-harm. I had started my graduate program during this, and I just couldn’t function the way I was feeling … and I actually made him go to the doctor and try to get anti-anxiety meds. I felt that it was my fault and that he should go, and I did take the pills for some time.

I could tell that this was difficult for Isobel to share with me. She became quiet at this point. We sat with this for a few moments.
These embodied feelings of dread, anxiety, and distress also made Isobel want to self-harm, and she found herself pushing her partner away from her: “It’s a difficult sensation to convey, but at the time, hurting myself or him (when he tried to get close or hug me) was the only way I could embody and enact what I was feeling inside.”

**Fixation and attempts at control**

Isobel, deeply hurt and affected by her partner’s pornography use, and his broken promises to stop, desperately attempted to find ways to control him and to get him to stop using it altogether. One of the ways she did this was by having sex with him as often as possible. By doing so, she thought that he would no longer want or need to use online pornography. She described this approach to sex as a type of “mission” she placed herself on. She explained:

I was putting a lot of pressure on myself, like in my head thinking about what I can do to make this stop. I think of it now as my way of trying to get control of the situation ...I had misconceptions about why he was watching porn and what it was for. As I mentioned already, I thought it was what single people did because they didn't have someone to have sex with regularly. Then it turned into me thinking that, maybe if I have sex with this person enough...that this will stop him from using porn.

Whenever Isobel knew her partner would be away for several days, she would try to have sex with him as much as she could. She had hoped that this would stop him from seeking out porn which made her feel “insecure” and “not enough.” I asked her if this felt like a lot of “work” or “planning.” Isobel said that she would describe it as an “ongoing effort and mission.” These efforts required a lot of energy from Isobel, and she said that sex was less about being together, and more about fulfilling her personal mission.
Isobel began to experience her constant rumination about her partner’s pornography use and her attempts to prevent it from happening as a kind of obsession and “fixation.”

You know you hear about somebody that has obsessive compulsive disorder and they feel like if they flick the light switch enough times good things will happen, and the bad thing of dread won't happen. And I do think that this kind of became like an obsessive type of situation for me.

*The male gaze*

When learning more about Isobel’s painful experience regarding pornography, and the Andi Pink image more specifically, I began to pick up on another theme: the presence of the male gaze. For Isobel, part of what was so distressing regarding the video of Andi Pink being directed by a male voice off-screen was the vulnerability and inauthenticity of what was being depicted.

For Isobel, Andi Pink was posed in a certain way that seemed so exposed and somehow exploited. She also was depicted as younger than she was. These were all qualities of the image that Isobel saw as deliberate in terms of the pornography’s production. These choices in Andi Pink’s depiction were meant to arouse the consumer within a specific cultural milieu. Isobel expressed to me:

I guess it could always be argued how much agency she had as an individual but I would say from what I saw like her framing and her posture and posing was meant to titillate, and it was a male gaze type of thing.

The idea of the male gaze was also present when imagining her partner’s arousal during his own pornography use. It troubled and disturbed Isobel to imagine her partner being sexually
turned on by depictions of women in what she considered to be vulnerable and exploitative imagery.

*Haunted by imagery*

Although Isobel readily chose to stay with her partner, and to deal with all she had seen regarding pornography, there was a time that was still emotionally difficult for her. She described thoughts of the images as occasionally washing over her, in random moments, and upsetting her: “we could be out to dinner and having a fine time, and all of a sudden the memory would get in my mind and it would just all of a sudden turn into a sense of just despair. I would start to question things.” Isobel likened these experiences to characters from the Harry Potter books known as dementors. She explained:

> When the dementors are nearby, the other characters feel like they’re having their happiness drained from them. That’s what these waves felt like. Even if my partner and I were having a nice time together, he felt like a stranger to me in some ways because I didn’t envision him looking at these other women.

I asked her more about the dementors, partly because I didn’t have a frame of reference for the characters. We talked about this more, and Isobel described the experience to me in different words: “It would be like this sinking feeling, like the dementor being there, causing this this feeling inside of me, this outside force, It wasn’t something that I wanted to happen…”

*Surrendering into and therefore out of suffering*

Isobel’s quest towards understanding pornography and eventually witnessing an image, among many, that caused her a great deal of pain was a quest largely of suffering. However, this suffering eventually evolved into a sense of acceptance, and this shift led to a stronger and more communicative relationship with her partner. This journey, which included catharsis and
acceptance, was largely brought about by Isobel’s eventual surrender into her suffering. Over time she began to judge herself less harshly, and after expressing her feelings of anger directed at both her partner and herself, she allowed herself to radically trust in her own experience.

For example, whenever Isobel would experience painful emotions related to these events, she just would allow herself to sit with them. Isobel poignantly said: “I wouldn't try to distract myself. Once it was there I would kind of let it make me feel like I'm sinking down.” Through this “sinking down,” Isobel was able to find greater emotional stability and freedom: “Once I was able to delve into my feelings and no matter how bad they were … like I was able to kind of like explore things more from a point of knowledge.”

**Deepening of relationship**

A sweet and gentle theme also emerged in Isobel’s narrative: the deepening and strengthening of her relationship with her partner. Through all of the pain, turmoil, and conflict, both Isobel and her partner grew closer. For Isobel, she learned to express herself more fully with her partner. I sensed a lot of love while she talked about this aspect of the experience. Isobel told me that through her own researching of alternative forms of pornography, she was able to have more “honest” conversations with her partner. She begun to understand more about her partner’s interest in pornography, and what it meant to him. At the end of our interview, she beautifully said: “Through all of this we learned how to really communicate, about everything. It was a learning process, without the suffering and dread, maybe we wouldn't have gotten so close.”

**A concluding commentary on thematic interrelatedness:**

Isobel’s initial encounter with pornography began before later encounters with the actual images themselves. These first encounters took place between her and her romantic partner, when Isobel first discovered her partner’s hidden use of online pornography. At this point her
habitual life, including her relationship, was disrupted and negatively impacted. This disruption led Isobel to question her relationship, her own desirability, and even her own beliefs regarding pornography.

This initial confrontation with her partner’s pornography consumption affected Isobel’s experience of temporality, corporeality, spatiality, and communality. Her experience of lived-time and lived-space became interrupted by unwelcome and intrusive thoughts surrounding her partner’s use of pornography. She was unable to avoid these ruminations and could no longer inhabit her habitual daily life in the ways she had before her confrontations with pornography. She experienced a sense of emotional distance and, one may even argue, exile.

These changes and deeply wounding experiences began to affect her relationship with her body. Isobel described feeling unwell during this time, as well as deeply angry and anxious. She yearned to let her rage out, but she struggled to find constructive ways to do so. Isobel described self-destructive moments in which she ended up self-harming or self-medicating during the most painful moments of her experience. Moreover, she began to question her desirability and eventually began to employ her sexuality and her body as means to prevent her partner from seeking out online pornography. In these ways her corporeality became intensely present to her, and her body became objectified, rendering Eros silent. Sex with her partner was no longer about sexual pleasure and intimacy. Rather, sex became a tool, an attempt to stop the painful reality of her partner’s internet pornography consumption. These efforts on Isobel’s part were futile, and no matter how she presented her body, how available she made it for sex, her partner continued to use and conceal his pornography consumption. The futility and relational failure were devastating for Isobel.
Following these futile and exhausting efforts, her relationship to her partner began to deteriorate. Isobel described to me the fights and intense discussions they had together. Eventually all of these feelings and difficult experiences led Isobel towards going on a personal quest to better understand pornography, as well as her and her partner’s sexuality. Part of this confrontation with her feelings led Isobel towards discovering firsthand the images her partner had sought out on his own, specifically the keywords he had entered into the online search image, as well as gallery images of a porn actress named Andi Pink. This discovery caused Isobel a great deal of distress. While many of the images were troubling to Isobel, there was one video of Pink that was especially difficult to witness. Isobel was shocked at Pink’s depiction as far younger than she was, and under the direction of a male voice off camera. Pink’s body was being acted upon by forces outside of her, and that force included the male gaze.

That video confronted Isobel not only with her partner’s interest in and consumption of online pornography, but also with larger social themes of sexuality, misogyny, and the business of pornography. This video gathered up a very painful part of the world we live in, and Isobel felt deeply affected by what she had witnessed, so much so that the images would continue to present themselves spontaneously in her mind, and she often felt as though their presence would rob her of enjoying the present moment.

However painful this process had been for Isobel, she discovered something very important about herself. She discovered that the only way for her to truly cope and emerge out of suffering is to confront her feelings directly, allow herself to surrender to the depths of those feelings, and learn how to move forward with more agency, directedness, and honesty. As a result, Isobel experienced her relationship as ultimately strengthened, having benefited from her
own confrontation with pornography and the intense personal work she made of that confrontation.
Veronica

“I felt disturbed to see my body so opened and exposed. I felt like I was showing something sacred in a profane context.”
Introduction to Veronica:

Veronica is a Caucasian woman who works as an artist. She loves the sea, solitary travel, and the color turquoise. She was 29 years old at the time of our interview in August of 2017. Veronica first learned about my study through word of mouth, and later saw an electronic flier. Veronica contacted me by email saying that she would like to participate in my study. We spoke further about the study and my method by email and phone, and we set up our interview at her private residence.

Summary of Veronica’s Image: me as she:

Veronica encountered her image several years before our interview. This image was a pornographic photograph of her, taken by her ex-partner. In her narrative, Veronica described the image by writing: In the old picture, I was on the bed, but lying down, wearing a piece of lingerie that in retrospect felt so infantilizing and uncomfortable to look at myself in—something black and lacy, no crotch, girlish touches of pink. My legs were spread, and I was looking at the camera.

This photograph of Veronica lived, and potentially still lives, among others on his phone (in an app he preferred, designed to look as if it is for business files, in order to keep the curious from discovering the actual pornographic content). One day, inspired by her partner’s taking a new photograph of her, Veronica was looking through previous pictures of her he had taken, and saved, throughout their relationship. In her narrative, Veronica powerfully described this image in more detail, one that she would term “submissive.”

“I was scrolling through images and stopped on one very explicit pornographic image of me, from the beginning of our relationship, that really upset me. I think I remember this experience so well because I was shocked. In the old picture, I was on the bed, but lying down, wearing a piece of lingerie that in retrospect felt so infantilizing and uncomfortable to look at myself in—something black and lacy, no crotch, girlish touches
of pink. My legs were spread, and I was looking at the camera. I felt disturbed to see my body so opened and exposed. I felt like I was showing something sacred in a profane context. I felt horrified at how vulnerable I was, how defenseless (and how unaware at the time that I was not in control). What unsettled me most was the look in my eyes. I thought that I looked really young, almost fearful, and like I had surrendered my power. I felt nauseous with remembering that at the point the picture was taken, I think part of me had wanted to feel that way. I was upset with myself that I had let someone capture me in such a raw state.”

Seeing this image was, and continues to be, a painful experience for Veronica. She had difficulty witnessing herself depicted so pornographically, and so “exposed.” Veronica said to me:

I actually remember, the first thing I thought was, a picture like this shouldn’t exist. Because it was a moment when I was alive, and it shouldn't have been frozen … it was a moment when I was alive in something so … I use this word a lot … but vulnerable … that it should not have been captured.

During our interview, I learned more about this particular image. I learned that her ex-partner had picked out the lingerie, lingerie that Veronica never quite liked herself. I also learned that he was in control of how her body was positioned and presented: her legs spread open, her pubic hair removed. Veronica told me that dwelling with this image was emotionally difficult for her, but that it felt important to describe what exactly made it so upsetting. She expanded on this feeling by talking more about the lingerie:

… I want to talk more about this image, even though it’s hard. I was wearing this like body stocking … that sort of thing that I was wearing. I mean they aren’t inherently disgusting. It was just like … it was a really gross one … like it was cheap and black and crotchless … and it had these like pink bows in a couple of places, and … little-bo-peep creepy pink bows… it wasn't a piece that was designed to satisfy some kind of like pedophilic fetish … but it had that quality, sort of girlish … so much of women's lingerie has that quality to it … an infantilizing thing that gets sexualized which I'm like really not into … Now I don't feel comfortable in anything like that …. I will cut off the bows.

As mentioned, Veronica encountered this painful image moments after her ex-partner had taken a new picture of her, an “erotic” one in which she was wearing a camisole that she liked, posed in a way that was not overly-exposed and that expressed something important to her of the woman she had become in the few years between the images. On this contrast, Veronica wrote:
Looking back and forth between the picture of me in the camisole that he’d just taken, and the old picture, I think what sobered me most of all was the contrast—in the new picture, I saw a subject, a woman solid in herself; in the old picture, I saw an object, a woman lost and at the mercy of someone else.

While the camisole picture was in no way perfect—their relationship was unsatisfying, and Veronica said that she still felt like she was in someone else’s “cage”—the picture was more empowering, more human. These two images would stay with Veronica and symbolize two different women—the second offering a tantalizing glimpse of a new erotic subjectivity, one she would leave her relationship to devotedly pursue.

Description of the Interview:

The day of our interview, Veronica welcomed me into her small, artistically decorated home. Many of the art pieces in her living room were her own, and I was struck by their raw beauty. She explained to me that she lives alone and that her residence feels very precious and intimate to her. Veronica was as alluring as her space; she wore beautiful linen fabric and a jasmine perfume. I was delighted to be in the apartment of a woman who, like me, lives alone in her late twenties. I felt enlivened in the space.

Veronica gracefully led me through her house, showing me some of the art pieces and other objects which she had collected during her travels. She appeared to be floating in her linen dress. Eventually Veronica and I sat on the floor of her living room, and she lit candles and placed pillows around us. I remember feeling comfortable in the intimacy of the space. Although I was nervous, as I had been with the other interviews, I allowed myself to set my nerves to the side.

I told Veronica that I would begin recording, and that I would read back to her the narrative she had written and pause when I desired more information or detail from her. She agreed, and we began the interview process. The interview lasted around two hours. Veronica
spoke freely and very passionately about her experiences. She allowed herself to express her emotions in front of me, and she took her time recounting her experiences. I wrote in my journal: “Veronica was unafraid to show her tears to me, she allowed them to be there, she did not wipe them away.”

**Situated structure with individualized themes**

Below are the individual themes that I found during my analysis of Veronica’s interview transcript. These themes, in both their individuality and interrelatedness, organize the gestalt of the situated structure.

*Immortality & fate of image*

A major theme that emerged in Veronica’s narrative and re-telling of her experience is that of the immortality of image, this theme encircled many aspects of Veronica’s account. Veronica’s understanding of her image as immortal, and the distress this understanding gives her, is grounded in a shared external reality, due to the emergence of internet culture. It can be argued that little to nothing can be truly erased in today’s technological world.

Veronica spent, and spends, time wondering about the fate of her various images from throughout her sexual life with men, including and importantly, the one she had chosen to share with me. Veronica wrote: “I wonder sometimes still about the fate of M’s image of me that so sickened me that day. I expect that M still has it.” She wonders whether her image continues to live on in some technological realm, because she knows for certain that both her ex-partner, and another previous boyfriend, had saved nude pictures of women, including of their ex-girlfriends, on their computers.

For Veronica, these fears were realized particularly through an experience she had a couple of years ago with a man she dated following the breakup with her ex-partner. This man,
photographer, also had captured Veronica’s body with his camera lens, as well as the bodies of other women he had dated. One day she was at the photographer’s house, and he showed her a collection of nude photographs of a number of his ex-girlfriends and casual sexual partners, all stored and carefully organized on his personal computer. Veronica reported feeling upset that he had thought this collection was appropriate to show her, as well as shocked at the mass of preserved content. This harrowing encounter confirmed her worst fears: that an image often does not belong to the subject depicted, that its fate is out of the subject’s hands, and that it tends to live on.

Veronica held the men who preserve such images accountable for an ethically unsettling choice, describing the practice as “creepy.” She went on to characterize the psychology of this choice as a kind of Bluebeard Complex, in reference to the French fairy tale about the wealthy man who murders his wives and stores their corpses fetishistically in a secret room. On her association to Bluebeard, and on being disturbed by the storing of images, she wrote:

I realized why I was creeped out—it felt to me as if the men were narcissistically invested in keeping these animal pelts or trophies, even if they were hidden away and the men never looked at them. I remember once sitting down with him at his computer to look at pictures of me and in horror realizing that he had file after file after file of explicit images of women, all just labelled with their first name: I mean probably 25 files, if not more. And I was one of those files. The analogy I thought of was Bluebeard—this man keeping pieces of women in a virtual room, like corpses or body parts. Even if consent was given at one time, there on his computer in perpetuity it all seemed murky and objectifying and even dismembering: I wondered how many pictures there were like that old picture of me that M took, that if the depicted woman saw herself now, she would be horrified. It was like I needed to see personal pornography in that volume to understand that somehow all of the men in my life had identified with this dark archetype of Bluebeard, even if they weren’t consciously trying to be dehumanizing.

For Veronica, the dark archetype of Bluebeard unsettled her. After reading this painful section back to her, she responded, saying: “Bluebeard is the perfect analogy for me… a man who was murdering his wives and then keeping them hidden. And then also tells his new wife
don't go into this room. It's my secret, and that secret is my right. That is where the bodies are…” Or in this case, the “images” of the bodies.

Veronica told me that these experiences have now changed the way she allows others to photograph her. She now is more protective over who gets access to her body, and she wants to be the author (or at least collaborator) and sole owner of her image. She also feels that it is a man’s responsibility to delete such imagery if the woman withdraws her consent and access to her sexuality, even if she does not have the opportunity to ask him to do so. Veronica explained: “Today I really do believe that when a woman withdraws access to her physical body and sexual energy, a man has a moral responsibility to delete her image as well. She owns it, not him; just like how she owns her body.” Reflecting on her own image, specifically, she said to me: “I didn’t want that sexual encounter to be continuing into eternity. But because there was an image of it, it is continuing into eternity…” Thus, the question of the immortality of image also speaks to Veronica’s larger concerns regarding consent. Veronica never consented to having her image stored by someone else indefinitely, and now the fate of that image, and others like it, is mysterious: “…it is now a mystery… I don't know because I've not been in contact with this person anymore”

Self as Overexposed & pornified

Interwoven with, the previous theme of image as immortal, and the painful realization that Veronica’s images may be out of her hands, recorded somewhere in the external world is the theme of feeling overexposed and pornified also arose in Veronica’s narrative. Throughout Veronica’s written narrative and interview, she described feeling over-exposed in her pornographic image. For example, Veronica wrote: “I felt disturbed to see my body so opened and exposed.” This overexposure felt too “vulnerable” to be captured via a photograph, so much
so that Veronica felt as though her very witnessing of the image felt like another “violation” itself. During our interview, Veronica admitted that she had trouble writing about this image, so much so that the very act of writing, similar to the witnessing, also felt like another violation committed against herself, or the woman, in the image.

Veronica described a desire to cover up the woman in the photograph. She expressed this desire to me tenderly, and I could sense the sadness in her voice. She wrote: “I was upset with myself that I had let someone capture me in such a raw state. I felt like I wanted to put clothes on myself…” Veronica also described in more detail how her body was positioned in the image—her legs were spread wide open and she had her pubic hair completely removed. These were choices made to satisfy her ex-partner, and though at the time they were consensual, when Veronica looked back at her exposure, she experienced pain, vulnerability, and a sense of being “exposed” and “bare.” In other words, Veronica was confronting the pain of her attempt to meet pornographic aesthetic standards for someone else’s desire, and for the desire of her own internalized pornographer. At that time in her life, Veronica felt that in order to be sexual and to be wanted by a male partner, she had to perform herself as a certain kind of pornographic object. She was not yet able to imagine or embody a sexuality unconditioned by expectations of exposure, submission, and particular demands on the female body.

Self, not-self

The theme of self, not-self, was interlaced and encircling of other aspects of Veronica’s account. Throughout the written narrative and interview, I noticed shifts in how Veronica identified with, or distanced herself from, the subject in the pornographic image. At times Veronica chose to de-identify with herself in the image. In these instances, she would refer to the woman in the image as “she,” making it clear that this woman was from a prior, different life.
For example, when Veronica contrasted the pornographic image with the other photograph of herself, she wrote: “I saw an object, a woman lost and at the mercy of someone else ... I felt terrified by the former woman, and captivated by the face of the newer woman.” Many times, throughout her narrative and interview, Veronica chose the language of “she” or “woman” instead of “me.”

For Veronica, the woman in the pornographic image belonged to a different life. This different life does not reflect Veronica’s present-day reality of sexuality. So much has changed for her; she is no long “that woman” in the image. At one point in our interview, Veronica said: “Unlike that image, where I refer to myself as her. That did not look like me.” Subsequent images, in which Veronica was more herself, free, and alive, reflect Veronica back on herself. She is not alienated from these images. This transformation, documented via photographs, is one that arose from very painful moments in Veronica’s life. This transformative process is also connected to the next theme, from submission to self-advocacy.

**From Submission to self-advocacy**

Another painful theme that emerged in Veronica’s narrative is that of submission, or of being submissive, in ways beyond that individual pornographic image, but that that image exemplified. At the time when Veronica was photographed pornographically, she was living in a relationship in which she found herself repeatedly going along with what her partner wanted, and overlooking her gut sense that the relationship was lacking a deeper kind of humanity, respect, and love. Veronica described her partner as apparently kind and feminist in public, but in their private life controlling of her behavior and bodily self-expression, with a perspective shaped by conventional pornographic aesthetics. Veronica noted that she participated in this arrangement willingly, but with increasingly mixed feelings and even distress. For example, Veronica said
that she wore lingerie that she partly disliked, engaged in sexual behaviors and attitudes with which she was not totally comfortable, and aesthetically groomed and altered her body to please her then-partner in ways that sometimes made her feel loss and sadness. As described, she allowed herself to be captured through photography that fetishized her vulnerability and submission, that rendered her an “object” and in retrospect made her feel horrified by how something so “vulnerable” was being exploited. When describing that particular painful pornographic image, Veronica said: “It's a very submissive image, really an image of like, do whatever you're going to do to me.” This statement captured Veronica’s awareness of her overall surrender within the relationship.

Though it occurred within a larger context of personal awakening, Veronica’s encounter with the pornographic image catalyzed her decision to change her life and advocate for herself in new and transformative ways. After working with the initial pain and difficulty of witnessing how she had allowed herself to be captured pornographically, and how she had allowed herself to be treated in relationship, Veronica found herself being able to speak up and to make choices that once felt impossible to her. After Veronica left this partner, she embarked on a personal journey toward greater wholeness and loving relationship. Her transformation did not take place over night, but it deepened and unfolded through subsequent experiences, in which Veronica began to create in earnest a life that felt less passive, less objectifying, and more her own.

During her subsequent relationship with “the photographer,” Veronica deliberately began to explore new ways of being photographed, an exploration that allowed for a greater sense of “agency.” She was no longer the woman who had her legs spread wide open, passive victim to a man’s camera lens. Veronica was now becoming an active participant in how she engaged in the creation and capturing of her image:
My romantic life (and just my life) since my relationship with M has felt like an effort at reclamation of my own image on my own terms, and a turn toward self-expression and self-determination, rather than seeking to be someone else’s pornographic fantasy object. It seems not a coincidence that in my next serious relationship with C, I was with a photographer, and that I spent a lot of time in that relationship being photographed. Some of those pictures were erotic, but much more of them were images of me just in my life. I gravitated most powerfully to the nonsexual images, and when we did take sexual photos of me, I was more involved and generally had more agency.

These experiences of developing greater agency led Veronica to truly want to take ownership over her image, to control who is allowed to have access to her body. Following her breakup with the photographer, she decided to confront him and ask that he delete any pornographic footage he had of her. Veronica described this moment as pivotal in her development, highlighting this transformation from submission to self-expression and self-advocacy. In her narrative, Veronica wrote:

For me it was a huge deal that at the end of my relationship with C, I asked him to delete his copies of all of the sexual images of me—the first time I ever asked a man that. It felt like a way of rectifying the way I’d let men treat me and the way I’d treated myself—it felt too late to ask my previous boyfriends, but I could ask this man. Whether or not he actually deleted them—he said he did, but I can never know for sure—knowing that I at least let it be known that I wanted control back felt like a turning point for me.

Changes in technology have also allowed Veronica to move from a more disempowered to a creatively empowered place. Having access to a smart phone now allows Veronica to engage in the practice of taking “selfies,” erotic, or otherwise. She wrote: “I also had a smartphone by this point, and being able to take selfies, erotic and not, made a big difference in my sense that I had authority when it came to my own image that men did not.”

Veronica’s shift into a creatively empowered place, along with the many painful experiences she had encountered throughout her sexual and romantic life, opened a new path in Veronica’s erotic relationship with herself and others. This path is one that she describes as “sacred,” and will be discussed in the following theme.
A sacred sexuality

The more recent transformative erotic and loving experiences Veronica has undergone have led her to appreciate a “sacred” sexuality. This sexuality is one in which Veronica feels “powerful” and radiant. This new sexuality developed in stark contrast to what Veronica viewed as her sexual conditioning within patriarchal culture, a process that rendered her as primarily experiencing her own sexual arousal through being objectified and dominated. During our interview, she tearfully said to me: “I feel really aware that part of how I experience sexuality is shaped by patriarchy… I don't feel at ease about that.” For Veronica, however, this is a conditioning that she could develop beyond through new experiences with herself and with more integrated and compassionate male figures. Thus, she found an incredibly vast understanding of her erotic and sexual life. She now enjoys a new sexuality, one that she cannot turn away from, one that is “sacred,” and unlike that pornographic image, does not exploit what is most precious about her body. Thus, inextricable from Veronica’s view of sexuality as sacred, is the sacredness of her own corporality. When Veronica explained to me that the pornographic image made profane what is sacred, I asked her more about what she meant by the term “sacred,” she explained: “Sacred as in love,” an erotic experience that is inextricably relational and even numinous.

She went on to describe in more detail this sacred sexuality she has been enjoying with her new partner, the partner who does not ask for explicit photographs of her, the partner who would not want to keep a secret room of them, because he expressed to her discomfort with the idea of claiming a part of her separate from the intimate relational context in which she shared herself with him. In her written narrative, Veronica described what sending an “erotic” selfie to her this new lover might be like. She beautifully wrote:
Sometimes I imagine what I would take for him, and I’m never sure. It is hard to imagine getting it just right. I know I would want to show him something “true” about my sexuality, our sexual bond, and the way I imagine and express it all in my own unique way. I guess it feels like the true gift would be the sharing of my erotic imagination, my delight in myself, and my trust in him—rather than giving him a porn object.

When Veronica and I met, she actually had had an experience of mutually exchanging erotic images with this partner when he was out of town. She shared that the encounter had been much like she predicted—that these photographs, though sexual, were not like ones she ever had taken before. She said that the encounter retained a mystery and connectedness far from pornographic objectification, with a mutual choice following it that the most sexually vulnerable images of herself should only continue to exist in her possession.

**Identifying with the goddess:**

In dialogue with this sacredness, an ultimate theme that emerged in Veronica’s narrative is that of her identification with goddess figures, as a contrast to the submissive and infantilized images of feminine sexuality that had invaded her sense of herself and her relationships.

Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was especially present in Veronica’s psychological and emotional transformation. As she moved from being objectified by previous boyfriends (and by herself) to feeling truly seen and loved by her current partner, she began to feel connected to Aphrodite, and in union with herself and with her lover. On a beautiful sexual encounter with this lover that Veronica recently experienced, she wrote:

*I remember when he and I first had sex...I was on top of him and he kept telling me I was a goddess and that I was so powerful and he was completely overcome and I felt like I was encountering something I never had before. Like I almost had to get used to how to be aroused by my own radiance and strength. I’d been so conditioned to be aroused by subjugation and masochism. But now, I feel like I cannot go back....*

Veronica wanted me to know that for her, Aphrodite as an embodiment of sexuality does not find herself in pornography, or in any kind of objectification. This goddess cannot be abstracted from
the spontaneous vitality of sexual encounter. She is erotic in a way that makes whole, rather than
dismembers; that inspires masculine awe, rather than masculine domination. Veronica also noted
how finding this goddess power connected her more deeply to the joy of her own humanness and
its part in the goddess’s body. For example, she said that she now enjoys sending her partner
playful selfies that express a range of emotions, as well as sharing her body with him in all its
states of being (un-groomed, menstruating, etc.). Veronica reflected that there is an entire
“goddess world” to which she wants to remain connected, one in which women experience
reflections of themselves, in their lives and in their lovers’ eyes, that feel fully and complexly
alive. This is a world in which empowered/empowering wholeness is the vessel for sexual
intimacy and pleasure:

I want to make my own goddess world…Or…I want to be in touch with the Goddess
world. So, I don’t I don't think I ever really felt at ease with having such patriarchal desire
and it felt like something foreign inside of me that wasn't mine… My new model for my
sexuality…is that I want to feel like I could have a thought that I’m a queen, or I'm a
goddess, and that that could make me have an orgasm rather than thinking I’m a slut and
orgasming.

A concluding commentary on thematic interrelatedness:

Veronica’s initial encounter with the pornographic image, an image of herself, was a
painful one that disrupted the flow of the unfolding present moment. This disruption provided a
foundation from which Veronica would begin to question, and eventually transform, her beliefs
about her erotic life and pornography more generally. Within her narrative, she expressed
interwoven lifeworld themes, most explicitly elements of corporeality, temporality, and
communality. For Veronica, this difficult encounter would forever alter her life, and lead her on
a challenging but important path to developing a stronger sense of agency, autonomy, and
choice. This path also gave birth to a new way of erotically engaging with herself, technology,
and others.
In the photograph about which Veronica chose to bravely speak, she was depicted as exposed and submissive; she also was pornified. This photograph was not a celebration or a representation of Veronica’s humanness. Instead, it was one in which Veronica’s body became object, rendering invisible her subjectivity.

At the time Veronica was being directed to pose by her former partner, who was responsible for all aspects of the photograph: styling Veronica, choosing what she wore, and dictating how her body was aesthetically modified. He oversaw the creation of that image, for his personal viewing pleasure alone. In that moment, and in many other moments of Veronica’s adult life, her lived-body was acted upon by forces other than her own. In this case, these forces were another person’s desires, which were interwoven with larger cultural notions of sexuality.

This representation of Veronica felt so unlike herself that she eventually had difficulty recognizing herself in that image—she felt distanced and estranged from the woman in the photograph. Elements of her past, present, and future became powerfully conjured up in that very photograph. The photograph was evidence of something troubling that had taken place, and Veronica had trouble coming to terms with her compliance in the taking of the photograph and all it represented about her relationship. She had to contend with her past, and in that contending she would discover important ways in which she wanted to live.

Veronica’s past, the past captured in that photograph and turned into relic, became a means for her to become the woman she is today. Importantly, in encountering the image, and in the events which followed, she began to desire a future, and cultivate a present, in which she would never be depicted pornographically again.

Through these difficult moments, Veronica not only was concerned with her development, but also with the fate of the image that set her on that very development. She
wondered how long the image would continue to exist before it became erased, or perhaps more distressing, she wondered if it would live on in some virtual realm eternally.

Over time, and through other relationships in which Veronica would be eroticized and photographed, by other men and eventually by herself, she began experimenting with her sexual life, and most importantly, with more direct communication. In becoming more direct in her communication style, she could put into language and speak her own desires, even if these desires ran counter to the desires of an erotic partner, or to cultural notions of what sex and erotica should be and look like. Veronica also sought to rescue, to regain control of, other images of her past, even if she surrendered the image that inspired this journey to a twilight of uncertain existence.
“Over time, however, that image continued to haunt me. I realized that watching porn had changed my sex life to the point that it was rare to have a sexual encounter without intrusive pornographic images.”
**Introduction to Quinn:**
Quinn is a Caucasian woman who is currently completing a graduate degree in the liberal arts. She was 35 at the time of our interview in October of 2017. She learned about my study by coming across a flier of mine and first contacted me by email, saying that she would like to participate. We spoke further about the project and the method by email and set up our interview at her private residence.

**Summary of Quinn’s Image: braces girl:**
At the time of our interview, Quinn had encountered the image two and a half years ago when she was searching the internet for pornography. She described this encounter as “chilling.” On that day, she was on a popular pornography website, youporn, when she stumbled across the image, a moving gif. This gif featured a young woman, made to look far younger than she most likely was, being lifted up and down on a man, a man who was smiling directly at the camera. According to Quinn, the woman was shown as having pigtails, braces, and a petite frame. She described the image in her written narrative:

_There was an image of a girl with braces on she was probably between 18 and 20, but clearly many markers were trying to pull for the audience to perceive her as much younger. Across the image read, “teenage slut.” She had pigtails and braces, small breasts and a straight waist without much hipline. She was very thin and petite. Were it not for the fact that this was put out by a legitimate operation, I would have thought she was 13. I believed at that time, and still do, that they were attempting to pull that impression. The image was in gif form, where she was picked up by a large man and lifted up and down on his erection while smiling large at the camera. There was a lot of camera work to show all the features that marked her immaturity._

According to Quinn, across the image were the words “teenage slut.” During our interview, I noticed that Quinn referred to this woman as “braces girl.”

Quinn told me that she had done a bit of research on how pornography is produced. This knowledge, and the specifics of the image, led her to believe that this image was crafted specifically for a certain audience, a certain viewer. The intentionality behind the image made it
even more painful for Quinn. This gif was no mistake. It was an advertisement, a symbol--this image spoke to larger cultural narratives about how women are sexualized and commodified.

During our interview, Quinn expanded on this symbol. She said:

she looked thirteen, and he looked like he was in his mid-30s or early 40s, and he was this very large person and she was this very tiny person, and there was just so much symbolism there for me of what it means to be a woman in the world and what the world wants from you... almost just all kind of distilled and concentrated into that one image.

Quinn also painfully noticed that the image had a high rating of “85%” by viewers. The popularity of the image, in addition to the image itself, was a painful reminder to Quinn of society’s preference for younger women. She began to reflect on her own subjectivity—she was now a woman in her mid-thirties. Would she be left behind? Was she still desirable? What did this high rating say about the people around her, the people with whom she inhabits the world? Quinn wrote: “It made my feelings about gender and humanity more negative, and I remember feeling more resentful of the men in my life for a little while after that.”

For Quinn, it was quite interesting that this image had affected her so deeply. After all, it wasn’t the most disturbing image she had ever seen, nor was it the only upsetting gif which had lined the pornography sites Quinn had explored. However, perhaps Quinn had seen something echoed and reflected of herself, and her lived experience, in that image. She wondered about this possibility aloud, and she poignantly said:

I don't think it was the most striking image I've ever seen of that particular pre-teen style, but it just really caught me that day. And maybe there was something about her... Maybe it was the fact that I had braces as a teenager, maybe it was the fact that she was smiling so big but it didn't look genuine…I was thinking…I just got this flash image in my mind, like I wonder if the director just said like, “Ok smile now,” and that you know, the idea of like people always telling women to smile and it collapsed inside of me.
Description of the Interview:

The day of our interview, I took a taxi to Quinn’s neighborhood, but I got lost during my walk to her home. Luckily the Pittsburgh autumnal air was soothing, and I was struck by the beauty of the historic neighborhood. I felt some amount of anxiety, as I did before each interview, but also a sense of serenity, as this was the final interview. I thought back to each woman I had sat with, and quietly meditated on how painful and precious it is to speak about such intimate experiences. Once I made it to Quinn’s house, she greeted me and explained that we were alone and had the privacy to speak together. Quinn led me to a table and welcomed me with a pot of hot herbal tea. Her home, which she shared with roommates, was spacious and beautiful. I felt comfortable sitting across from her and explained to her how the interview process would unfold.

During our interview, Quinn openly and bravely shared her story with me. I noticed in her a spirit of resilience, as well as a steady presence. The interview allowed me to obtain a more detailed account of what she had gone through, and I remember feeling impressed by her emotional openness, humor, and strength. Quinn was unafraid to be, to speak, and to share.

Situated structure with individualized themes:

Below are the individual themes that I found during my analysis of Quinn’s interview transcript. These themes, in both their individuality and interrelatedness, organize the gestalt of the situated structure.

*The presence of a painful past*

A theme which was present in Quinn’s narrative, and one that formed an important foundation from which Quinn could speak about the presence of pornography in her life, was that of her past with pornography, and how it reverberates into her present. Quinn wanted me to
know that other painful experiences regarding pornography had come before her stumbling upon the “braces girl.” The earliest hurtful experiences that she had regarding pornography involved her father, and his hiding of pornography throughout her childhood home. This pornography tended to feature young, thin women, much like the gif she encountered that day on the internet. In her narrative, Quinn wrote: “When I was child my dad had porn hidden around the house. I found it more than once and it was often ‘barely 18’ sort.” She went on to describe her father as being “fat phobic” and remembers him and her mother making disastrous “pacts” to stay thin: “...she failed. He never forgave her.” For Quinn, these experiences left her with a belief that she could only be desirable as a thin woman, and that her body added to, or took from, her self-worth. She wrote:

In this context I saw the pornographic images as what I was supposed to eternally look like and saw myself as a malleable body that could succeed or fail depending on whether I was able to keep my BMI small enough to be “attractive” in the sense I was raised to find important.

Many years later, in her adulthood, Quinn found herself in several relationships with men who all had been using pornography. One partner seemed to be “addicted” to using pornography, and even dropped out of college and lost jobs to watch it. This relationship left Quinn feeling “dehumanized” and “desexualized.” As a result, she vowed to “avoid” this kind of relationship in the future, and now she only dates men who do not use pornography: “...I currently have agreements with my partners not to watch porn, and select men based on whether or not they have a proclivity toward regularized porn sessions...”

This theme of Quinn’s painful past with pornography, especially her experience of her former love relationship that was deeply damaged by it, led Quinn to intentionally decide to watch pornography herself, a choice described in the following thematic element.
**Intentional decision to watch pornography**

Eventually Quinn made the intentional decision to use online pornography herself as a way to better understand why all of the men in her life seemed to be lured by it. During this time, she had also begun to research more about how pornography is produced. Quinn explained:

Eventually, in my mid 20’s, I wanted to see for myself what the big deal was. What was so appealing that someone would be willing to lie and in many ways cheat on an otherwise healthy relationship simply to watch something online? So, I started watching porn. To see why they couldn’t stop.

Intentionally watching pornography taught Quinn a lot about relationships, sexuality, and herself more broadly. She quickly learned, at least in part, why some people may be drawn to viewing pornography. Quinn was shocked at how immediately and intensely aroused she herself became when first using porn. In her narrative, Quinn wrote: “At first I was amazed at how aroused I became. Simply from watching a 5-minute video…in a way that I only was with partners after a long session of foreplay. But without any of the hassle” I asked her more this description, and specifically about the word “hassle,” and she explained:

It was incredible…it was like five minutes of viewing these images, and it was like I had been making out with somebody in a hot and heavy way for like an hour, which is really fast like really just immediate, and I don't mean hassle like it's a hassle but sometimes if it's late at night and you just want to go to bed but also want to have sex and an hour foreplay is not functional, it’s not going to happen…but it took five minutes. It was a shock to me and I was like oh this is it, this is why people do this.

While Quinn came to better understand the appeal of pornography, especially in terms of immediate sexual gratification, she experienced negative aspects in her own consumption of porn, including experiencing the images as intrusive during her sexual encounters with others in the non-virtual realm.
Intrusive imagery

Born out of the previous theme of Quinn’s intentional decision to watch pornography is the theme of intrusive imagery. Following Quinn’s exposure to pornographic images, including but not limited to gifs like the one she brought to the project specifically, she experienced shifts and disruptions in her erotic experiences, especially with others. Quinn described to me facing intrusive pornographic images which appeared in her mind during intimate moments with lovers. During these moments, there was a disruption in Quinn’s temporal experience in which the present unfolding moment’s flow became disrupted via images flooding her imaginal sphere. Her sexual experience was no longer limited to the immediate moment, or to the in-between of two bodies, but now included invasive pornographic images she had seen beforehand. Quinn expanded on these experiences, and explained to me:

I could not have a sexual encounter with someone without having intrusive images of pornography like in your mind. I would be thinking about the porn, and not on purpose. Like the porn scene would come up in my head when I would be performing or having oral sex performed on me, and I would get graphic images of whatever porn I just watched in the last two weeks. I have a very visual memory.

As she described this to me, I noticed a shift in Quinn’s energy—she seemed frustrated. Even though it seemed a bit obvious, I wanted to know more about how she emotionally experienced these intrusive images. I then asked her if these experiences were “unwelcome.” She replied by saying that she felt “guilty” that she was thinking about other images and other people during her sexual encounters with a lover. On this guilt, she explained:

I didn’t like it, I felt guilty and I felt like there's someone else in the room, like I wanted to be having this intimate bond with this person, and then all of a sudden it's like Frank [sarcasm] pops and I’m like, “get out of here, I'm trying to like be with this actual person.”

This theme also includes Quinn’s experience of being “haunted” by “braces girl.” Years later she still thinks of her.
Unavoidable imagery

Related to and encircling the theme of intrusive imagery is the theme of unavoidable imagery which briefly, yet notably, emerged in Quinn’s narrative. Quinn encountered “braces girl” when searching a mainstream website for pornography. Although Quinn had intentionally decided to view pornography, she did not intentionally seek out an image such as the gif she stumbled upon, a gif that would affect her so deeply. However, unwelcome imagery is one risk of using free pornography sites.

During our interview, Quinn acknowledged and clarified this risk by saying: “Oh, it popped up. So, when you're looking on these sites the top bar and the bottom part of the screen will have gifs and you can't avoid them.” She went on to further explain that while she could actively avoid searching for things that felt “uncomfortable” to her, she could not avoid the “lining of the free porn site.” Not only could she not circumvent seeing the gif, she had no control over the gif’s content. She described the experience as: “just chilling.”

Youth, desire, & fear of aging

An emotionally poignant theme which emerged in Quinn’s narrative is that of youth, desire, and the fear of aging. This theme is tangled and interwoven with the other elements of the situated structure, especially via the themes of Quinn’s painful past with pornography. In this theme, Quinn comments on her lived-body and how her corporality is experienced by herself, other individuals, and the larger world around her.

The gif which caused Quinn so much distress was that of a woman made to appear far younger than she was, and far younger than the legal age of consent. For Quinn, this intentional choice to depict and market this woman as a young teen rather than as an adult, was a painful realization regarding what tends to be marketed and accepted as desirable and sexually appealing
in our society. In Quinn’s understanding, and personal life history, younger women are viewed as sexually and erotically superior to older women. During our interview, she also discussed how seeing this image led to a spiraling of thoughts regarding her own fears regarding aging, loneliness, and partnership.

Quinn shared some of these thoughts with me, and I noticed how devastating and jumbled her words felt to me:

So, there's just this…the way I started thinking…I mean it was already there before I saw this image, but it just enhanced this idea that, oh so what if you know when I turn 40 suddenly the men that I date or the men that I'm attached to just want to put me on a shelf so they can find a younger model? All these fears I think about being an aging woman in a patriarchal society…that your youth is the draw for a man and that's what they want and they're going to just trade you out… And there's that fear of becoming the starter wife. I think for me that fear has definitely increased once I hit my 30s, and has advanced throughout my thirties. So, when do I become the starter wife? And when do I get traded out for the trophy wife? And then I'm looking at this, for all intents and purposes, 13-year-old, and I'm imagining…so that the man they paired her alongside is probably, I don’t know, the way porn works is that the producers try to make it, like, they draw in men, so that men watching porn can see themselves in the man in the image. It is a very intentional decision. So, I'm looking at this man and he's in his 30s and early 40s and I'm like, oh that's the person they're imagining fantasizing about this girl.

At this point in our interview, I felt a sadness enter the room. Quinn spoke more softly, and I noticed the fears and insecurities in her words. Quinn’s realization of her own mortality, and her aging process, was bumping up against society’s expectations and preferences for a certain kind of woman.

After expressing these fears and worries to me, Quinn shifted into expressing resentment and anger, deeply connected to, and inextricable from, all that she had just voiced. This element of the situated structure will be explored in the following theme, resentment and anger.

Resentment & anger

An important theme that emerged in Quinn’s narrative is that of resentment and anger. After viewing the gif of the young woman, Quinn wrote that she felt “resentful of the men” in
her life for some time. During our interview, when I asked her more about this, she powerfully explained:

After seeing that image. It was like really hard like being in the grocery stores and I would be looking around and I would get these horrible thoughts like “which one of you motherfuckers is masturbating to 13-year-old looking girls on the Internet tonight? I hate you all.” Or like, men would be like opening a door for me at the grocery store, or like dudes on the street being like, “hey honey,” you know, I would be like in my head thinking, “yeah, I bet you get off to a 12-year-olds, so, Fuck you.”

This resentment also extended to the woman in the image itself. For Quinn this was a more painful realization, as she did not enjoy feeling mad at this anonymous woman, a woman whose story should would never know, a woman who, like Quinn, was being treated as an object under this certain cultural context which often oppresses women. In her narrative, Quinn with great honesty grappled with this woman’s subjectivity.

Even more hard to admit, I resented the girl. As a feminist, I try to never funnel the negative effects of patriarchy against other women, but in that moment I resented that girl for taking a role that made her look like a pre-teen and asked her, asked myself, asked the screen, “how could you enable men to lust after girls barely in their teens? Girl children?” Then I felt guilty. I still feel all of these things, but choose to act as if I don’t.

This felt like a sensitive topic, and I approached it delicately. I wanted to know more about this experience, and after I paused, Quinn spoke:

the resentment towards her…It flashes in me sometimes where I think, “God like you had to have known that that's what you are participating in. Don't you think you're doing a disservice to all young girls?” I'm going to guess that there probably are a handful of men out there who watch that kind of porn who actually molest young girls, “like do you not feel like you're contributing to that problem?” Yeah there are times that like I've gone back and forth with it…But then and then I go to other thoughts, words like, oh but I bet she has to pay her bills.

At this point, Quinn’s expression of resentment opened a space of empathy and camaraderie. I shared with her my sense of this movement, and she agreed and said: “Yes, empathy and concern.”
Leaving pornography behind

Another theme which emerged and was a result of all the complex elements of Quinn’s experience is that of her decision to stop consuming pornography, and to leave that once intentional choice behind. This decision was in part shaped by her coming across, and being so affected by, “braces girl.” Quinn also believed that pornography was taking her away from the present moment, and from the immediate presence of the lovers with whom she yearns to intimately bond. Pornography seemed to have affected Quinn’s temporality, social relations, and experiences of her lived body. She explained her decision to me:

I just completely stopped. I learned what I needed to learn by consuming it. For myself porn consumption isn’t for me, and I don't know if this would be true for everyone. I don't know. For me porn use would take on the qualities of drug use in seeking, searching the excitement and the desensitization, it would also become a very expensive habit because to not have the coercive imagery that you don't want that’s all over the free sites you would have to pay for porn. So, it would be a very expensive habit, and it would be at the sacrifice of the love relationships that are so important to me, like it would take something away from those encounters. And sex is such an important thing to me in such an important part of my bonding experience for other humans that I want to be intimate with that it’s not worth the sacrifice.

Quinn’s decision was also in the service of protecting her experience of sexuality, intimacy, and love relationships.

Alternative visions of pornography

Before Quinn’s ultimate decision to stop watching pornography, and following her distressing encounter with “braces girl,” she had sought out alternative forms of pornography. Quinn explained to me that watching these other forms of pornography served as a “palette cleanser” for her. In her written narrative Quinn explained this choice, writing:

Immediately following my encounter with braces girl, I found a nice wholesome queer clip of 25 and 35-year-old queer actors doing a kink scene in a way that was clearly very consensual. I told myself the fact that I sourced the material and scrutinized the performance and identity of the porn stars absolved me of any guilt manifested by braces girl. I got off. I went to bed. Over time, however, that image continued to haunt me.
Although Quinn intentionally sought out material that she felt more ethically aligned with, it was not enough to erase “braces girl” from her psyche, an image she still thought about at the time of our interview, years later.

I inquired more about this experiencing of watching queer porn. During our interview, Quinn explained how this experience took place after encountering the gif:

So right after that I was like oh gross! I need to cleanse my palate! Yeah. And then I found some paid for porn that's well made and, the actors and actresses and everyone in between, it’s just well-sourced porn. Everybody there is there because they want to be and they are excited to be making porn of various identities and body shapes and genders and that felt so, I got this feeling, I need to cleanse my palate or something, I need to get that image out of my head and I would watch something that is maybe more expensive but it is well done, that may be actually doing some revolutionary thing in the world where you're really giving the option. If people want to do this drug, if you want to call it that, at least they can do it ethically. I did feel better for a couple of minutes but it didn’t really cleanse my palette. That image would be with me forever, braces girl.

I noticed a softness and an aching when Quinn expressed her somewhat failed attempts to rid herself of her previous painful encounter with “braces girl.” Quinn, in more detail, expressed her futile attempts to correct over the difficult experience with something she felt was better:

when I went to bed that night after finding better porn, I was feeling very good about myself and like, I made the ethical decision. It was kind of like narcissistic like gloat about how ethical I am, and how gross those people who like those images are. But it didn’t work.

A concluding commentary on thematic interrelatedness:

In Quinn’s account of her relationship with pornography and painful encounter with “braces girl,” she expressed interlacing lifeworld themes, including elements of temporality, corporality, spatiality, and relationality. When musing over these connections and interwoven elements that form the gestalt of Quinn’s situated structure, I was reminded of van Den Berg’s (1972) beautifully written commentary on the power of material objects which gather with them an entire world. He writes, “Our world is our home, a realization of subjectivity. If we want to
understand man’s existence, we must listen to the language of objects” (van Den Berg, p.40). In this case, it was the language of a virtual object, the gif of “braces girl,” which opened a painful and powerful experience regarding womanhood, identity, immortality, alienation, and agency.

Quinn’s encounter with the virtual object, the gif “braces girl,” was initially disruptive, and would be one that would continue to haunt her, interrupting the flow of the present moment. In this way, her temporality had been impacted. During sexual encounters, Quinn’s would be disrupted by visuals of pornography, making her feel distant from the person with whom she longed to be bonded. This distancing was distracting, and her sense of spatiality was altered. Quinn’s negative encounter with the gif, with pornography more generally, and with her history all became tangled up with one another, speaking to how she experiences her lived body, her corporality. She referred to this corporality as “malleable” and discussed the ways in which her body may also be viewed by others. Moreover, elements of relationality and communality were present in her experiences of resentment, anger, and empathy directed at others, and towards the larger society in which we are all thrown. These relational elements allowed Quinn to find a deeper, experientially-grounded sense of ethics toward herself, pornography participants, and her partners, and led Quinn to commit to erotic choices that she believed to be interpersonally responsible and fulfilling.

The gif that Quinn encountered opened a larger experience in which so much was illuminated and expressed. Quinn’s past with pornography unfolded into her later engagement with similar images and visual representations of women in which she imagined how others may view her, and how she viewed her own body—her own place in this larger, sometimes oppressive world. These painful experiences allowed Quinn to bravely confront and come to know pornography for herself. This confrontation led to a greater understanding of how others
may view the medium, and allowed her to understand something more about her past with men, pornography, and her own hopes for her erotic and sexual life.
Unique Aspects of Each Participant’s Narrative:

After conducting, transcribing, and analyzing each interview, despite the significant points of overlap and variations on shared themes, I was struck by the considerable differences. I found these differences as interesting and illuminative of each women’s unique subjectivity, and therefore, I will briefly highlight what I find to be the most salient unique qualities of each participant’s narrative before I present the illustrated general structure.

Eliza:

Eliza’s narrative was the only one in which the participant described ritual use of pornography. For Eliza, her online use of pornography happens in a very formulaic, repetitive way. Moreover, Eliza was the only woman to describe intense efforts to forget and distance herself from the experience of consuming pornography.

Isobel:

Isobel’s experience was unique in that she explicitly described experiencing fantasies of self-harm related to her partner’s use of pornography. She also described briefly using substances to cope with the pain she was experiencing. Her experience of using and contending with pornography was also closely interrelated with her romantic relationship.

Veronica:

Veronica’s narrative was very, very different from the others in that it was the only one in which a participant had witnessed herself depicted in a pornographic image. Moreover, Veronica's narrative was the only one in which a participant more generally discussed the taking, sending, and storing of erotic images.
Quinn:

Quinn’s narrative touched on her developmental history in a way that the others did not. Quinn also was open regarding feelings of resentment and anger she had experienced towards men more broadly following her encounter with the pornographic image.

**Introduction to the General Structure:**

The general structure is a synthesis, articulated in psychological language, of each woman’s lived experiences disclosed in their respective individual structures, which were, in turn, organized into interrelated themes. I compared these interrelated themes among the four situated structures. At times the commonalities were clearly evident, while at other time the commonalities were more implicit, emerging when comparing themes across structures, or under more inclusive themes. The general structure leaves out the particularities of the four situated structures, synthesizing their thematic elements of negatively encountering a pornographic image into this larger structure which transcends the specific individual descriptions. This effort to convey the most general meaning of the phenomenon is derived from Giorgi’s (1985) assertion that “…the general description…tries as much as possible to depart from the specifics to communicate the most general meaning of the phenomenon” (p. 20).

As researcher, I attempted to embody the phenomenological attitude—a stance of abiding reflection on and reference back to the original data of each participant. In the formation of the general structure, and in the spirit of feminism, it was important to describe the phenomenon in an explicitly psychological way, being as descriptive as possible, while also keeping as close to each participant’s understanding of her own experience.

While this general structure identifies the factors that have made possible the specific experiences of each participant, it does not lay claim to a generalized structure that can be
universally applied to all women, across varying cultures or eras. However, this general structure does seek to say something about how other women may psychologically and emotionally be harmed by pornographic imagery, and the context in which these experiences arise. In other words, it seeks to further, and complicate, our existing psychological understandings of how this phenomenon may be lived, and what conditions, both materially and emotionally, give rise to this experience.

**General Structure:**

*The Primacy of Technology*

The phenomenon of a woman negatively encountering pornographic imagery emerges out of a specific historical context and being-in-the-world in which a woman is continually exposed to, and continually engaged with, technology—in particular, nowadays, the internet. Her lived experience is so embedded in this technological realm that the absence of technology and the internet would render her story impossible and unrecognizable.

*The Encounter & Encountering*

Negatively encountering a pornographic image is a disruptive and shocking experience. This experience is usually preceded by a person engaging with a pornographic image, either intentionally or inadvertently, via the realms of technology and the internet. During this event, the woman is exposed to a range of images and eventually encounters a specific image through which she experiences a shocking disruption in her temporal realm. In other words, the woman’s habitual and usual situation (for example, flipping through images stored on a smartphone) becomes interrupted. This disruption makes an emotional impact on the person and calls something to her attention—it interrupts the flow of her unfolding experience, interjecting its powerful presence.
This disruption affects many domains of her lifeworld, including her interpersonal relationships, her experience of her body, and her place within the larger world. Intense emotional reactions, experienced in both the psychological and corporeal realms, are experienced following the initial event. These intense emotions are experienced both immediately upon encountering the image and subsequently. In other words, the event of the encounter evolves into an encountering that develops and remains present over time. As the encounter endures, the woman continues to grapple with and experience its constituent meanings, through a variety of experiences-emotional, psychological, and lived. The encounter holds meanings for many aspects of her life.

When the woman encounters the pornographic image, she experiences intense emotional reactions including anxiety, anger, resentment, disgust, and sadness. Painful moments of the past, as well as unsettling questions about the future, also arise in these moments. Following this initial emotional experience, the woman also experiences shifts in her sense of sociality: in how she is positioned in larger communal, political, and cultural lenses. She grapples with what these shifts mean about her individual experience and for the men and women around her.

As the woman begins to articulate and make meaning of the event, she experiences an awareness of her life under the presence of patriarchy and late-capitalism, and the larger societal oppressions these systems produce. In other words, the encounter brings up for the woman a variety of painful feelings regarding how she experiences her place within the collective structure. Her typical experience of her everyday sociality and communality gets is into disarray. The deeply personal and individual experience of initially encountering the image has shed light on a larger, external world whose sometimes oppressive meanings and realities specifically shape the woman’s apparently private experience. No longer is the experience solely between
woman and the image. The image gathers up an entire world in which it was produced and discovered. Thus, the world begins to take on new meanings for her; things that were once unnoticed or pushed to the side are now felt in more immediate ways. It is also interesting to note that perhaps with a shift in attunement or experience of the political and cultural landscape, the woman experiences concern for the subjectivity, or erasure, of the female subjects depicted in the pornographic image. In other words, she experiences concern for the identity of the female subjects featured in the images, and wonders about whether they have given their consent, who they are as women, and how these pornographic depictions result in the subject’s sexual objectification and commodification.

_After the Encounter_

The “after” of the experience is the situation in which the initial encounter, and feelings which emerged immediately upon witnessing the image, is lived as past. The image has been encountered and witnessed, that initial disruptive moment has passed by, and the image is no longer materially present. However, while lived in the past, the woman can no longer return to her pre-encounter life unmarked by the experience. In many ways, the image continues to haunt each woman, and resides in her psyche, shaping her everyday experiences. While technically “past,” this encounter lives far beyond its original situation, in time, space, relationships, and recollections.

Due to the painful emotional and psychological experiences these encounters produced, the woman’s rhythmic and habitual unfolding life has been disrupted to such an extent that something has to be addressed or changed. In relation to these desires, she is impelled to some kind of action as a way to actively engage in finding some sort of solution in order to remedy the painful disruption that has taken place. There is psychological, emotional, and relational work to
be done in order to move through the painful experiences, and to restore her preferred way of being-in and relating to her world, although this world has been changed. This process, and the changes it brings, allows her to find new ways of relating to and understanding herself, others, pornography, and the larger world.

Following this process, the subject may find, or fantasize about, ways to deliberately avoid having the experience repeat itself. She may change how she engages with technology, who she finds herself romantically entangled with, and how she takes up her own sexuality.

Finally, during her personal journey of coping with what she has endured, moments of gratitude and hopes for a better sexual future, both individually and collectively, become expressed. She articulates what can be understood broadly as the sacredness of sexuality and Eros. She contrasts this sexuality with the pornographic images by which she has been harmed. Another world becomes hoped for, dreamt, and even in some ways, brought into existence.
Socio-Political and Cultural Analysis

In addition to bringing to light the experience of negatively encountering a pornographic image, this dissertation also allowed room for the exploration of social, cultural, and political factors that arose in the data. Below, I shall highlight thematically these factors which emerged amidst the four participants’ experiences and briefly dialogue them with existing literature, particularly drawing on feminist theory, mythology, depth psychology, and liberation psychology. These disciplines allow for, and encourage, a move from individualistic to collective understandings of lived experience. The move from the individual to the collective invites us to see the participants’ experiences as partly socio-politically constituted and constituting, including in terms of potential collective transformation that their individual suffering brings to light. The present analysis continues and takes further my initial discussion in the literature review.

Storytelling and Witnessing

“Like all storytellers, we are both circumscribed by, and able to contribute to, the larger cultural narratives that surround us.”

–Ruti, (2009, p. 38)

Whether overtly, or more implicitly, each narrative in some way spoke to the importance of sharing these often hidden and vulnerable experiences. The importance for women to share their lives has been a belief strongly held since the beginnings of feminism, and especially embraced during the Women’s Liberation Movement. There is power, witnessing, and communion that becomes possible when women tell the truth about their lives, even if that truth is painful and vulnerable. Each participant, in her own way, expressed gratitude for having a space to talk about such private, painful experiences. I expressed gratitude in return, knowing very well how difficult it is to speak of such personal, private, and often misunderstood experiences.
There is power in speaking, both on individual and communal levels. The power of speech is especially relevant for women, as our accounts historically have been absent and even excluded from much scholarship and documentation. This gap is gradually being filled in as women attain more and more equality in our sometimes-oppressive society. Nin (1976) wisely speaks on this absence when she asserts, “We are obliged to accept what our culture has so long denied, the need of an individual introspective examination. This alone will bring out the women we are, our reflexes, likes, dislikes, and we will go forth without guilt or hesitations, towards the fulfillment of them” (1976, p. 9). Nin believes strongly in “the woman of the future” who would create, and share her experience, without shame, hesitation, or reservation. It is through this introspection, reverie, and dwelling with that once unspoken experiences are able to be rendered into language, shared with the self, others, and the larger masses.

Other feminists such as Gloria Steinem and author Rebecca Solnit (2014) have commented on the importance of storytelling and listening, as well as its difficulties. These difficulties are faced by many women, as we have for so long been denied the space and respect to speak and be listened to. Solnit, speaking to the silencing effects of what modern-day feminists term “mansplaining” states, “Every woman knows what I am talking about. It's the presumption that makes it hard, at times...that keeps women from speaking up and being heard...that crushes young women into silence…” (2014, p. 4).

Storytelling also, importantly, brings us together as a community of women who share similar understandings, experiences, and difficulties. Experiences that may have felt painfully particular to oneself become normalized, better understood, validated, and at times even challenged through their differences. Our stories also provide alternate understandings to once one-sided versions of women’s experiences; in this way stories are able to subvert and disrupt
the current social order. Early feminism understood the precious nature of stories and speech when the movement encouraged consciousness-raising groups. In her essay “Fighting Back on Feminist Terms: Empowerment Through Self-Defence Training in Neoliberal Times,” Bell A. Murphy (2018) powerfully asserts, “...hearing stories from others who are similarly located in social power to us can help women identify patterns between their personal and collective experiences as women. This, in turn, can assist women and girls to locate the cause of their experiences--of violence, fear, shame and so on--in social and cultural norms rather than personal failings” (p. 83).

The Presence of The Male Gaze & Patriarchal Wounding

“I sat with my aunt and mother. I put oil on my body and laid out in the sun, feeling disgusting and exposed, grown up and done, tender like a piece of meat. Like a preview for womanhood. I was not okay with or ready for: No exit ramps.”

– Sara Sutterlin (2015 p. 28)

The oppressive presence of the male gaze and the consequences of patriarchy, were evident in each woman’s narrative. The male gaze originates from Laura Mulvey’s (1975) essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” For Mulvey, the male gaze was a way to describe the objectification of women in cinema by the camera as it was controlled by a male perspective. According to Mulvey, because we live in a world where there is sexual inequality, an activity such as gazing or looking becomes split. This split divides an active male gazing, versus a passive female gazing. For Mulvey, the male gaze projects onto female figures certain phantasies. In turn, these phantasies determine and direct how the female figure appears and how she is styled. Mulvey asserts that women are both gazed upon and displayed in specific ways to meet these male phantasies and often their appearance is encouraged to have an erotic impact on the viewer.
Following Mulvey’s work, the male gaze seems to have taken a life all its own and is more broadly understood as a masculine and heteronormative way of viewing the world, and female subjects. The male gaze has also been applied and taken up in many areas of study, including feminist studies, philosophy, film studies, psychology, and literature, among others.

Some of my participants directly touched upon the male gaze in their narratives. Each participant also was struck by how the images they had seen were produced, and how the subjects featured in the images were directed to appear. For example, Isobel was struck by how Andi Pink was styled to appear far younger than she actually was, and how her body was posed. Veronica was shocked and unsettled to see how she was directed to appear so explicitly in the image, it was painful to hear her comment on her spread legs and how overly exposed her body was. Some of the participants understood these aesthetic and production choices as pornography’s relationship to the commodification of the female body and understood even a single image as part of a larger adult industry, one that is highly profitable, accessible, and oftentimes degrading.

The success of an industry largely built upon the male gaze relies upon certain oppressive social factors, including the painful presence of patriarchy and its relationship to late capitalism. While this term is quite complex, for the sake of this research project I will briefly describe what is meant by the term. Late capitalism, originating from the 1970s writings of Belgian economist Ernest Mandel, is a phrase that Marxists use to describe capitalism from around 1945 onwards. In other words, it helpfully captures capitalism post World War II, and also interestingly marks the impending death of the economic system. For Marx and Engels, capitalism was a precondition of a communist society. Author and professor Harry Targ explains:

The concept ‘late capitalism’ is useful because it suggests something about this time in capitalism’s development historically; that capitalism may be overdeveloped and hence
subject to stresses, strains, and pressures for radical change; that capitalism today is characterized by a variety of new features requiring analysis; and that among these features are special kinds of economic concentration, globalization, and cultural homogenization. (2006, p. 15)

As Targ indicates above, this late stage of capitalism is markedly different from earlier stages as it has seen a rise in globalization, corporatism, and consumerism, and has been influenced by postmodern theory. This modern-day capitalism has touched all aspects of culture. Andy Warhol is one such example of the fetishization of consumer culture. Moreover, late capitalism differentiates itself from classical Marxist conceptualizations of capitalism, as we no longer live in a purely industrialized economy.

Pornography as an industry has flourished under such economic conditions. As the industry has flourished, pornography has become extremely profitable, accessible, and even somewhat inescapable. Therefore, pornography touches the lives of most of us, in some way or another, and for some, it may also be experienced as overwhelming.

These larger cultural and political forces form a web, and one can argue that they are interrelated as well as inextricable from one another. Under this specific cultural and political situation, the participants expressed experiences of dehumanization, subjugation, passivity, and violence. While each woman had her unique way of naming and describing these experiences and their emotional resonances, they all were pointing to the larger system in which we all are thrown.

The Vulnerability of the Body and the Tyranny of the Image

“The woman’s body on pornographic display is very much like the corpse on the dissecting table. Both are anonymous.”—Robert Romanyshyn (1992, p. 210)

Within these larger experiences of sexuality and life within our current socio-political situation, each woman expressed how her corporeality, or that of other women, is acted upon by
larger oppressive forces. These forces oftentimes entered into each participant’s personal relationships, including with her romantic partners and her own relationship to her body and self-worth. For some participants, these forces emerged in some of the women’s erotic relationships with their male lovers and partners. Isobel, for example, felt insecure regarding her own desirability following the discovery of her partner’s secretive consumption of online pornography. Quinn, following painful encounters with certain pornographic images, began to experience herself as an aging body that will one day become less attractive to men. Veronica discussed how she aesthetically altered her body in order to fit her partner’s sexual preference for how a woman should look. She was struck by how much she had altered her appearance in order to please her partner’s desires, which can be understood as desires shaped by particular pornographic aesthetic standards. Eliza feels so ashamed for using a certain mainstream pornography site that following orgasming, she habitually attempts to banish the experience into some sort of oblivion.

All of the images described by the participants featured female subjects all directed to look and pose a certain way. Each woman sensed that these decisions were somehow purposeful and driven by patriarchal understandings of sexuality. Susan Griffin (1981), in her text *Pornography and Silence*, beautifully writes on the painful practice of altering our bodies to fit an ideal that isn’t even ours, and the hurt and anger that may emerge as a result. According to Griffin, “Ordinary women attempt to change our bodies to resemble a pornographic ideal. Ordinary women construct a false self and come to hate this self” (1981, p. 207). Isobel, so distraught over her partner’s secretive use of pornography, began to use her body and her sexuality to seduce him away from pornography, an attempt that proved futile. This failed attempt led to a loss of erotic pleasure for her, and also led her towards feelings of
insecurity. Quinn traced how pornography has led her towards feeling as though her body was vulnerable to the desires of others, and only attractive if her body was under a certain weight. Veronica described removing her body hair and wearing lingerie chosen by her former partner in order to meet his standards of sexually desirable feminine presentation.

These experiences create a distance between the pornographic object and the living subject. Romanyshyn (1992), drawing directly on Griffin (1981), understands the woman’s body in pornography as anonymous and occupying a space of “linear perspective vision” created for observation. Romanyshyn (1992) writes on this linear perspective, stating:

It is a space of separation and a space within which depth as a matter of vertical levels has been replaced by depth as a matter of distance...there is a literalization of the feminine in the woman and a reduction of the woman to the sexual, the latter being an issue which is thematic in pornography and a very strong current in the history of the abandoned body… (pp. 210-211).

Pornography distances, moving the viewer away from the depths (Romanyshyn, 1992).

As a researcher, I also was interested in each woman’s expression of concern for the women depicted in the pornographic images. In some way, each participant demonstrated curiosity about the women in the images, as well as a sense of empathy for who that woman may be, or what she had gone through. Steinem (1992) writes about how as human beings we are sensitive to how other human beings are treated culturally, including how the physical body becomes taken up and understood in society. On the power of “physical imagery,” in her text, *Revolution from Within*, Steinem (1992) writes:

*The body seems to have its own antennae that can sense the degree of esteem—or contempt—in which similar bodies are held.* Regardless of how distorted and self-hating out body image may have become, our real bodies seem sensitive to the fate of others like them…The images of power, grace, and competence…have a life-giving impact—just as trivialized, stereotyped, degrading, subservient, and pornographic images of bodies that look like ours do the opposite, as though we absorb the denigration or respect through our
nerve endings. Wherever negative physical imagery has been part of low self-esteem, a counterpoint of positive imagery can be part of raising it (pp. 202-204, italics in original).

It makes sense then, that pornography, and its depiction of woman, throws us as women back on ourselves. It also makes sense, then, that more empowering forms of pornography or erotic images may add to a woman’s sexuality. This was expressed by several participants who were open to, and appreciative of, alternative forms of pornographic and erotic imagery that were more in line with their personal sense of ethics.

Through the troubling and painful experiences of Veronica, Quinn, Isobel, and Eliza, we can see how images can by experiences as tyrannical, oppressive, and even traumatic. However, the images were not created in a vacuum but within a society that produces them. Participants touched upon the commodification of women, how pornography is advertised and distributed, as well as the production of the medium. It should also be noted that pornography is reliant on a certain vision of sexuality and of women’s bodies. Romanyshyn (1992) writes:

The value, I believe, of indicating a connection between pornographic vision and the abandoned body with its shadow history is that this connection allows us to understand more deeply how very much our cultural-psychological dreams of distance, of departure and escape, of domination, mastery, and control of nature, are an incomplete and unbalanced masculine dream which has lost touch with the feminine...The discarded feminine is reduced to mere matter, a reduction achieved primarily through a humiliation of the woman’s body... (p. 211)

During the interviews I was able to see the participants situate themselves, the images they had seen, and the pain which ensued because of their experiences within the larger culture.
On Being Silenced

“Our silence. The silence and the silencing of women...Our invisibility in history. The manuscripts of Sappho burned, the writing of women never published...These several centuries of the silencing of women are a palpable presence in our lives…”
—Susan Griffin (1981, p. 201)

The silences which surround these experiences also speak to the larger social oppressions which encircle, conjure, and create them. As liberation psychology has asserted, it is misguided to conceptualize trauma and suffering by overlooking the social and political context of these experiences (Martín-Baró, 1996). In order to take on these contexts, though, it requires a speaking, witnessing, and validation of such experiences. In this case, such speech, hearing, and validating is not easy to do, as it is a painful and somewhat uncomfortable process. It was clear from my experiences of sitting with the participants, from my own life, and from the lack of literature on the phenomenon that this is one of many experiences that women are not openly able to discuss. I had to put aside my own discomfort in order to ask my participants certain questions, and to receive their stories. I believe that my training as a psychotherapist greatly aided me in tolerating certain kinds of material and in the asking of very vulnerable questions. However, these conversations still were challenging at times. Women do not speak often of pornography and speak even less of using pornography. This silence too, then, is another oppression and burden women are often forced to carry.

While each woman touched upon the difficulty and peculiarity of speaking about such experiences, Eliza directly and passionately addressed this cultural phenomenon of silencing. During our time together, Eliza spoke openly on her frustrations regarding the silence that surrounds women’s sexuality. In fact, confronting and counter this silence is one of the reasons Eliza had chosen to participate in the research project. For Eliza, this silence can lead to unhealthy sexual practices, as there is a cultural lack of sexual education.
Griffin (1981) takes up the devastating effects of silence that surround women and pornography. She is especially concerned with silence’s potential to distance a subject from herself, in other words, silence may erase subjectivity. For Griffin pornography, especially violent forms of pornography, is reliant on this disastrous and powerful relationship. Griffin (1981) writes,

...the silence we have inherited has become part of us...it is a blank screen, and onto this screen a fantasy which does not belong to women is projected: the silence of women the very surface on which pornography is played. We become other than ourselves. (p. 201)

According to Griffin, following this silence is a lie. She writes, “Just as silence leaves off, the lie begins. This lie is not only the lie the pornographer tells, but the lie a woman begins to believe about herself...” (Griffin, 1981, p. 201). These lies, for Griffin, are the lies that larger systems of power, authority, and even interpersonal relationships reflect onto the female subject. These are similar lies that certain forms of pornography speak to her as well. These lies psychologically affect women, especially during their developmental years. “Even as a small girl,” Griffin (1981) writes, “she begins to try to mold herself to fit society’s image of what a woman ought to be and that part of her which contradicts this pornographic image of womanhood is cast back into silence” (p. 202).

Each participant faced this silence and bravely spoke through it, in spite of it, and against it. Quinn, detailing her painful childhood experience regarding pornography, felt her body as alarmingly “malleable.” Veronica, who viewed herself depicted pornographically, also spoke to how her body was depicted as overly exposed, almost profane. Though painful at the time, she was not yet able to speak this pain aloud, to herself or to her partner. Instead, she partook in the creation of these images, immersing herself in her partner’s desire regardless of any discomfort she may have felt. In that moment, she became a porn star. Griffin (1981) writes, on this loss of
agency, “She is the pornographic idea of the female. We have learned to impersonate her...we have become talented at seeming to be what we are not” (p. 202). Viewing those images later, Veronica could barely recognize herself, as the woman in that image felt so foreign from her now. Griffin (1981) also captures violent pornography’s power to distance a woman from herself, “Over and over, pornography depicts acts of terrible violence to women...For pornography is violent to a woman’s soul. In the wake of pornographic images, a woman ceases to know herself. Her experience is destroyed” (p. 202).

The Heroine’s Journey Into and Out of the Underworld

“To discover who she is, a woman must descend into her own depths…and descend to her individual feeling values. It will be her task to experience her pain...a woman must trust the places of darkness where she can meet her own deepest nature and give it voice…”
—Judith Duerk (1989, p. 21)

Emerging out of silence to create something new, to speak of oppression and injustice, to forgive ourselves for our own participation and self-hatred, all takes a great deal of courage. Each participant in her own way faced her own tumultuous, risky, and ultimately courageous journey into and out of harmful experiences with pornography. Griffin (1981) writes on such journeys toward Eros:

Psyche’s journey toward Eros and immortality is a journey into the dark side of our mind, into the knowledge that the dark one within us which we would deny is ourselves…the ‘immortality’ she achieves through this journey is no magical longevity but rather a capacity for understanding, which is part of all our souls. This is a knowledge that lies beyond the ego, knows your grief as my grief, resonates with all being. (p. 260)
While each woman’s journey is deeply private and unique, it is also in some ways transpersonal, as the pains and sublimations of such pain each woman experienced is shared amidst all four women. They are all journeys which reclaim Eros, subjectivity, and precious hope.
These journeys can also be situated mythically. Both feminists and depth psychology have encouraged the return to myth as illuminating of shared experience. The myth of Persephone is especially pertinent here, as Persephone is one who goes under in order to go over. There are several ways of conceptualizing and psychologically working with the figure of Persephone. Perhaps the most common is to conceptualize the daughter of Zeus and Demeter as a woman held captive against her will, raped, and kidnapped from a beautiful sunlit meadow. For others, Persephone is masochistically drawn to Hades and into his dark underworld. However one chooses to understand the myth, it is important to note what all visions of the myth share: that is, the story of a woman who has had to brave the depths, who for one reason or another surrendered into Hades, and who through that descent created a new sense of self, sensuality, authority, and love. Her darkness, bravery, and power bring us a sense of relatability and even hope. Hope for survival, change, and autonomy.

Painful and dark moments in a woman’s life may relate to, and benefit from, her identification with a journey into the underworld as expressed in the myth of Persephone. To be able to die, to then resurrect. This resurrection may be facilitated by integrating experience and metabolizing pain. On archetypal descent, Duerk (1989) writes, “A woman, searching for her self, must descend to her own depths. She must leave the upper world…” (p. 23). On this downward journey, and its eventual ascension, Duerk explains (1989), “As a woman descends to her feeling depths, she touches a separate mode of being. It is grounded in the Archetypal Feminine and, through it, in the eternal self. In her descent, a woman strikes root in that Self. She returns to the world changed” (p. 24).

This archetypal descent is present in the participants’ narratives. Each woman, in her respective story, followed the ebbs and flows of her experience with the pornographic images.
She allowed herself to explore and submerge into the depths of such experiences, sometimes in ways that caused her great harm, akin to Persephone's entrance into Hades, and emerged with new and important knowledge. For example, Eliza’s engagement with a website she knows to cause her great harm is part of her ritualistic use. There is a darkness perhaps to how she expresses her sexuality. One wonders why she repeatedly goes onto the same online space, and I believe part of her wonders, too. Isobel’s descent into her partner’s use of pornography caused her great harm, so much so that she resorted to using substances as a way to cope. Isobel continued downwards into her own version of Hades in order to better understand something about pornography, her partner, and herself. Veronica experienced many years of pain with men, and with pornographic imagery, before she was able to emerge out of the depths with a greater sense of autonomy. Quinn immersed herself in pornography, consuming pornography and coping with its consequences, having to learn something that was painful before she was able to leave it behind.

In these ways, each woman is a Persephone, rising and falling in a rhythmic grace.

This archetypal experience and event of descent has been recorded in myth and religion throughout our human history, whether it is Psyche retrieving the box for Aphrodite in the underworld, Christ’s death and resurrection, or Orpheus’ journey to retrieve his wife, Eurydice.

Each participant entered into and out of her own personal Hades in what can be considered to be her personal underworld journey. While there was pain, there was also movement and ascension out of that pain. For example, Eliza began to speak about her own participation in consuming pornography from websites that brush up against her personal sense of ethics; in fact, she contacted me in order to speak her experience. She chose to describe her very painful experiences with something that is often shrouded in great secrecy. Veronica
decided to no longer depict herself pornographically, to speak her experience directly, and to take back the lens. Veronica’s reclamation of her subjectivity following experiences of being pornified reminds me of Griffin’s (1981) comments on courage. Griffin writes, “...it is precisely great courage which a woman needs if she is to step out of her pornographic role and to cease impersonating the female” (1981, p. 210).

It can also be argued that each participant’s journey was guided by the presence and transformative power or Eros and love. After all, it is the love Demeter has for her daughter Persephone that allows the young goddess to emerge out of Hades, allowing spring to blossom. Without love, there would be no ascent from the darkness. For Eliza, her sexual relationship, one that brings her great joy, was contrasted with the devastating nature of the troubling images she had seen. Her love relationship confirmed her personal sexual reality, one that she keeps close to her heart and protects, and one that she wishes for all women. For Quinn, the presence of pornography distracted her away from her lovers, and this distraction caused her great pain, as she wanted to remain in intimate moments, intimate moments which pornography seemed to rob her of. As a result, she decided to leave the world of pornography behind. Isobel, guided by a deep love for her partner, entered into the unknown and emerged with a greater sense of agency and a closer love relationship. Veronica too was ultimately transformed by a recent love relationship with a man that brings her a sense of sexual sacredness. On this transformative potential of Eros, Griffin (1981) writes:

> It is the nature of love to upset the daily order of things. Just as must Romeo and Juliet, love must defy authority and ignore the lines of old enmities. For eros does not accept the order of the world which the ego needs to believe. And it is for this reason that erotic knowledge is dangerous to culture. (p. 261)

As much as this is a project that aims to better understand certain kinds of painful encounters with pornography, it is also a project of speaking against the heavy oppression of
silence, reclaiming love and self, and hoping for a different kind of pornography, and perhaps a
different kind of world all together.

**Another World is Possible**

“Sometimes we have to do the work even though we don't yet see a glimmer on the
horizon that it's actually going to be possible.”
— Angela Davis (2016, p. 29)

The hope, belief, and even the possibility for social change was present in each narrative. Though none of the four women blindly believed in some utopian future that was about to take place tomorrow—I sensed despair, exhaustion, anger, and caution throughout these interviews—I did experience questioning, hoping, and longing for something better, something new. Each woman took up this possibility differently. For Eliza, it was the beauty and faith that her love partnership gave her; it was the belief in her own sexual reality counter to what she would often find on the mainstream website she used; and it was her knowledge that other things, possibly better things, do already exist in the world. For Isobel, it was her courage; it was her ability to surrender into and out of the depths; it was becoming closer with her partner; and it was her belief that other forms of pornography may be a step towards something different. For Veronica, it was the immersion into her goddess world, where her sexuality is celebrated alongside and inextricable from her humanity; it was art and love; and it was a sense of agency and self-direction. And finally, for Quinn, it was her steadiness, her honesty, and her willingness to be honest with others in the face of oppression. For each woman, her personal hopes and beliefs were the promises of hope and beauty against the backdrop of a larger, complex, and oftentimes painful world.
Author Mari Ruti (2009) speaks on the tension between being thrown into a world with all of its overarching ideologies and beliefs, and the possibility for change at the individual level. Ruti (2009) writes:

...even though the socially situated nature of our subjective realities forecloses certain futures, we are never merely inert pawns of our cultural worlds. We are both initiated into culture--caught up in its representations, expectations, and norms of behavior--and capable of initiating actions in it...the fact that the range of our actions is dependent on, and restricted by, the collective settings within which we undertake them does not imply that we have no impact on the world. (pp. 37-38)

Each participant also spoke of different, somehow better forms of pornography, whether they be queer, feminist, or something more personal and sacred. As described in the literature review, there are a variety of opinions on how to reform pornography, radicalize it, or even abolish it. There are debates on what is erotic and life affirming, versus what is exploitative and pornographic. For some, these alternative versions of pornography, such as queer or feminist, are a promise for something better, a counter-narrative to what is often so dehumanizing within our given system. For others, reform is never wise, and reinforces rather than corrects the oppressive culture in which we find ourselves.

This desire for new pornographies also speaks for hopes of more egalitarian and fulfilling sexual realities for women. These negative encounters with pornography upset many aspects of the participants’ lives, and yet, they were each able to hold onto a vision and yearning for something better, for themselves, for the men they love, for other women, and for culture more generally. Liberation psychology founder Father Ignacio Martín-Baro (1996) speaks on the importance to include mental health in the discussions and creations of a more humane society. Along with economic and political safety are personal senses of well-being. He writes:

If the foundation of people’s mental health lies in the existence of humanizing relationships, of collective ties within which and through which the personal humanity of each individual is acknowledged and in which no one’s reality is denied, then the
building of a new society, or at least a better and more just society, is not only an economic and political problem; it is also essentially a mental health problem. (Martin-Baro, 1996. p. 120)

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can see the ways in which each participant’s narrative contains important data regarding the presence of larger cultural themes on individual experience. As both phenomenology and feminism know and assert, we are inseparable from the larger world in which we find ourselves thrown. In this existential thrownness, we must contend with the society and culture of our time. While not all our suffering is a result of an unjust social order, some of it is, and what is not a direct result may be exacerbated by such larger forces.

All four women each brought with them stories that captured their unique subjectivities, histories, and inner dynamics, and yet, these stories also touched on the larger society that all four women exist. In these shared experiences and struggles, are the seeds of solidarity, collective change, and the importance of belonging and sisterhood.
Chapter 5: Discussion:

Negatively encountering a pornographic image is an experience that is quite complicated, varied, and painful. As I have already explored the varied nuances and detailed components of the experiences of the four participants, here I will elaborate on the psychological significance of the findings, discuss the project’s limitations, explore implications for further research, and share some of what surprised me. Finally, throughout this section I will weave in some personal reflections, as well as provide some concluding thoughts on my experience of the project itself.

Image & Psyche

The very first thing that comes to mind upon reflecting on the psychological significance of the findings is the power of image, pornographic or otherwise, within our lives. In many ways, I have been attuned to the world and presence of images. Since I was a child I gravitated to the imaginal realm and always surrounded myself with art. Throughout my life I have painted, practiced photography, and enjoyed creative writing. Recently, training as a clinical psychologist has made the importance of image even more evident to me. I listen to my patient’s fantasies and dreams--I honor their oneiric worlds. The images dreamt, the emotions that become rendered into symbols, the precious objects they keep close to them—these elements all comprise and speak to their psychological lives.

While this is a project about painful encounters with pornography, it is also a project about the relationship between psyche and image. This phenomenon would not be possible to study if this crucial relationship was not recognized. If images did not make an impact on our psychological lives, we would not dream, and we would have no use for art. One of the most powerful abilities of art, in addition to its ability to inspire us and lift us out of the mundane world, is to capture our many varied and conflicting emotions and experiences. This power of art
to convey such complexities was also evident in the ways the four women spoke about their encounters and experiences with pornographic images.

The participants discussed the initial impacts of the pornographic images they had encountered, whether by choice or by chance. I heard descriptions of shock, disgust, dread, and anger. Moreover, they all in some way or another discussed the lasting power of those images in their lives, whether they felt haunted by them or committed to forgetting them. As I descriptively document and expand upon in the results section, these initial encounters transformed into an ongoing encountering, and an unfolding experience that would affect their experience of temporality, spatiality, communality, and corporality. Alongside these lifeworld existentials, the women’s fantasy lives, intimate relationships, sense of self, and political awarenesses were all affected, gathered up, and changed.

The four women had powerful ways of describing the presence of these images in their everyday lives. For example, Isobel powerfully likened the pornographic images and resulting difficult emotion as she experienced to the Dementors from Harry Potter. Veronica’s painful encounters with the pornographic images she had posed for led her to create and fantasize about what she considered to be a “goddess” world, containing her sexuality and her intimate experiences with men in a realm that felt autonomous, safe, and pleasurable. Moreover, Veronica described the sweet importance of her newfound practice of sending her partner selfies, as opposed to something like erotic sexts. We can see from her story just how photographs and images connect us to one another, allowing us to present ourselves through space and time, even de-severing painful distances, if only momentarily. Quinn painfully recounted to me the ways in which the images she had seen would enter into her imaginal realm during sexual experiences with a lover. She felt a great distance emerge between her body and the body of the man she was
intimate with as the pornographic images flooded her mind, and this distance was upsetting. Eliza, so troubled by the images she would encounter during her searches for online pornography, would rely on ritual to help render those images into some sort of oblivion. Of course, this banishment wasn’t entirely possible--the images would nonetheless find ways to return.

What I did not hear from the women were comments such as, “who cares about what I saw, it was a picture, and pictures aren’t real.” Or, “it’s just pornography, it isn’t a big deal.” Those images, photographs, and videos all gather a world within them, and like the other things of the world create important relationships with us. We are always and already interwoven with the world around us and we are inextricable from it. Van den Berg (1972), in his text *A Different Existence*, captures the imaginal power of material objects beautifully. He describes the emotional relevance of a wine bottle set out by a man for his friend:

It is winter. Evening is falling, and I get up to switch on the light. Looking outside, I see that it has started to snow. Everything is covered by the glittering snow, falling down silently out of an evening sky. People are moving soundlessly past my window. I hear someone stamping the snow from his feet. I rub my hands and look forward to the evening, for a few days ago I telephoned a friend to ask him if he could spend the evening with me. In an hour he will be standing before my door. The snow outside seems to make his visit even more pleasant. Yesterday, I bought a bottle of good wine, which I put at the proper distance from the fire. I sit down at my desk to answer some mail. After a half-hour the telephone rings. My friend is calling to say that he cannot come. We exchange a few words and make another appointment. When I set down the receiver, the stillness of my room has become slightly more pronounced. The hours to come seem longer and emptier. I put a log on the fire and return to my desk. A few moments later, I am absorbed in a book. The evening slips away slowly. When I look up a moment to think over a passage that refuses to become clear, the bottle by the fire catches my eye. Once more, I realize that my friend will not come, and I return to my book. (van Den Berg, 1972, pp. 33-34)

In this description, we come to understand that the wine bottle is not merely a material object, but an object interlaced with meaning. While the wine bottle was produced initially as a
commodity, it is experienced as having a multitude of meanings, especially ones that are ever so subtle. Van den Berg captures an especially interesting potential of the wine bottle to bring to people together, and to become an integral part of their relationality. Such relationality also means that the wine bottle can become a bit of a sad reminder of the loss of what could have been.

Similarly, these pornographic images speak to the power of the imaginal world, while these images were created with the intention to produce certain sexual experiences and responses, they also show just how the simple objects and routines of our lives take on great psychological power. The pornographic images can be seen as just another commodity, produced to procure consumer demand, and thus capital. And yet, they also have the power to haunt and to produce feelings of alienation, pain, woundedness, anger, and despair. They even have the ability to inspire underworld journeys and paths of destruction, healing, and self-discovery. The material world is always experienced as interconnected with the psychological. Van den berg poetically captures this, he writes, “Never do we see objects without anything else...We see things within their context and in connection with ourselves...We might say we see the significance things have for us. If we don’t see the significance, we don’t see anything at all” (pp. 37-38). Perhaps looking back, this was my initial instinct to utilize a modified version of Giorigi’s empirical-phenomenological method. Not only did I believe in the importance of bringing to light this phenomenon, as it is so shrouded in silence, but I knew that to do so would be to view these images as important things of our shared world, and thus reflections, messengers, and carriers. It never was and could never be “just porn.”
The Courage to Speak

As a feminist-minded researcher, I was attuned to the ways this project would be challenging to conduct, and even more so to partake in as a subject. To participate in this project, or rather, to talk about such experiences at all, is to confront and surpass society’s silencing of such experiences. Long after the initial data collection and analysis, I remain struck by my participants’ courage. During this process I realized just how very uncommon and taboo it remains to discuss women’s sexuality, especially in relation to painful experiences with pornography that challenge our cultural status quo. For example, during my meeting with Eliza, she discussed with me the reasons she initially decided to contact me about her experience. For Eliza, one of the main reasons was to counter what she experienced as a cultural silencing of sexual education by sharing her story. Throughout our interview she also spoke about her concerns regarding this lack of sex education in our culture, and her worries concerning the effects of this lack on both young women and men. Following our meeting, I wrote in my personal research journal about how I found myself agreeing with Eliza, and I also explored how I have struggled with knowing how to speak through such difficult and complex experiences and how I have grappled with learning to speak more fully and directly.

I felt the challenge and difficulty of speaking about certain topics as I conducted the project. Even as I privately read over the participants’ narratives, I felt my heart flutter when taking in their very personal and painful experiences and reflections. During the interviews, I realized just how much easier I found it to write about such topics than to speak. I found that it is often far easier to cite existing literature, and to pose theoretical questions to a page. There were some moments when I felt my own discomfort emerge as I conducted the interview; I think it was nervousness regarding the logistics of a process, combined with a sense that I was talking about things that are not often spoken.
However, I could immediately tell that I was not alone. I could see how this experience was shared between the participant and me. Veronica became tearful when discussing her overexposed photographed body. Eliza’s voice trembled when discussing her masturbation rituals with me. Quinn bravely spoke about her personal insecurities and painful past with pornography, even when it felt vulnerable. Isobel spoke through the difficulty of disclosing to me sensitive experiences of self-harm and the very private sexual moments she has shared with her partner. Not only did they speak about these experiences, they wrote about them, and sent me these precious documents.

I also found myself uncomfortable at times, especially when asking my participants for more details, especially when speaking about masturbation, pornography consumption, and past sexual experiences. My psychotherapy training was crucial in providing me with the steadiness and courage to ask about these experiences, and it also helped me receive the material as sensitively as I could. That being said, I cannot help but feel as though I could have asked more, and perhaps shared more. At times I felt too constricted, too worried about saying the “right” things, as though they even exist. As I sit here and write this now, I feel a tenderness towards the four women, and I wonder about how they are coping with the very complicated experiences of womanhood. I hope that this dissertation also conveys the love I have for all four women, and for the stories they so bravely and generously offered me.

As I have explored in earlier parts of this dissertation, authors like Anaïs Nin, Hélène Cixous, and Gloria Steinem, among others, have all written, in some way or another, about the importance for women to speak and even write about their experiences. In Cixous’ (1991) powerful text *The Book of Promethea*, she asserts the importance of claiming our identities as women. Cixous writes:
But I am just a woman who thinks her duty is not to forget. And this duty, which I believe I must fulfill, is: ‘as a woman’ living now I must repeat again and again ‘I am a woman,’ because we exist in an epoch still so ancient and ignorant and slow that there is always the danger of gynocide. That is what I believe. That is what I believe, I believe personally. I believe and it is my duty to believe, and I owe it to all the veiled women in the world to believe that I must still stubbornly utter the magical, unveiling credential words ‘I am a woman.’ When? As often as necessary and possible. (1991, p. 9)

This speaking is crucial because for so long women have been silenced, and in some ways still are. Currently, as we can see in movements such as #metoo, women all over the world have been speaking about their experiences with misogyny, sexual assault, and harassment. This has been an extremely important political shift that is able to directly challenge and shatter the silence that has surrounded us all for far too long. As with any important countercultural movement, especially in the many historical moments of feminist emergences, there has been a fair amount of backlash, often coming from the political right, claiming that many of these women are hysterical, aggressive, and even conducting witch hunts against men. In other words, it is still dangerous for women to tell the truth, and to speak about the truth fully, directly, and explicitly. There is still so much work left to do.

Feminist psychology has also encouraged women to speak about their experiences and has been able to helpfully frame at least some suffering as a result of, or exacerbated by, an unjust social order. Author Aarti Dua (2006), writing on feminist psychology, explains this powerful relationship that exists between individual suffering and socio-political oppression. She writes: “...the distress or difficulties experienced by the person need to be seen as evidence of what is wrong, deficient, or missing in the social and cultural context...” (p. 30). Moreover, for Dua, a feminist psychology may also view a person’s distress, or difficulties, as a way to survive and even counter larger forms of oppression. As I reflect on this research project, I am aware of just how few opportunities and spaces women have to truly process and share our experiences.
regarding pornography, and other aspects of sexuality, without judgement. I am also sensitive to the fact that often much of what is distressing about pornography, and pornography generally, is oftentimes so inescapable and so infused in the larger culture. As such, it is no surprise to me that the participants often had no one to turn to, or ways to safely express their feelings of rage, alienation, or distress.

Each participant bravely shared with me her distresses and difficulties. Through each woman’s willingness to confront these experiences, put them into language, and grapple with their complexities, I witnessed firsthand the power of storytelling. I am humbled by just how resilient they each are living in spite of these larger forces that surround their lives.

**Underworld Journeys, Persephone, & the Power of Myth**

“Lost in Hell,-Persephone,
Take her head upon your knee;
Say to her, “My dear, my dear,
It is not so dreadful here.”
—Edna St. Vincent Millay (1921/2016, p. 28)

Myth provides us with important knowledge that has been carried down throughout the ages. Moreover, it can be especially grounding for us to realize that many of our experiences, especially those which are painful, have been lived before, survived, and graced with meaning-making, reverence, and dignity.

I first spoke about the myth and the archetypal theme of the goddess Persephone and her voyage into the Underworld in the socio-cultural section of the results chapter. I would like to revisit this particular archetypal myth and theme, as well as other related archetypal themes which emerged in the data, as I believe their presence holds particularly powerful psychological significance and meanings.
Before I discuss the ways in which the archetypal myth emerged in the data, and its psychological relevance, I will say a few things regarding the psychological richness and potency that the dark goddess Persephone offers many women. According to scholar Carol S. Pearson (2015), “Persephone is a dark goddess because she presides over realms where things happen that are private or secret—in the afterlife, in quietly shared confidences, in desire, and in sexual union” (p. 237). Persephone, in her darkness and complexity, can offer us a psychological space to explore our most vulnerable and precious experiences.

Moreover, archetypal psychologist James Hillman believes that Persephonic experiences occur when we experience and go through “sudden depressions, when we feel ourselves caught in hatefulness, cold, numbed, and drawn downward out of life by a force we cannot see, against which we would flee” (p. 49). Similarly, Carl Jung (1953) in his text *Psychology and Alchemy*, writes “The dread and resistance which every natural human being experiences when it comes to delving too deeply into himself is, at bottom, the fear of the journey to Hades” (p. 439).

Persephone provides us with the dignity of the underworld—a place where we can listen to the wisdom in our suffering, knowing that whatever engulfment we may experience is temporary, and even crucial towards metabolizing the pain of our lives. By reflecting on our relationship with our respective underworlds, we may realize that we carry grief, suffering, and loss that we often attempt to turn away from. In fact, many of us negate the underworld altogether; as ancient Greek and Roman myths have illustrated, the realm of Hades is largely invisible to the living. To enter into the territory of Hades is to enter into the territory of the dead, but it is also to open ourselves to the process of integration, and metabolization of pain, traumas, betrayals, and losses.
Each woman bravely discussed what can be understood as her own underworld journey, as well as the presence of this underworld in her life. Isobel very courageously discussed experiences of self-harm, substance abuse, and self-destructiveness with me. Eliza descriptively shared with me the rituals she keeps hidden from the other parts of her world: her search for online pornography remains in the shadows. Veronica spoke of her many love experiences with Hades-like figures and the pain she endured as a result of these relationships. Quinn spoke of difficult developmental experiences, as well as feelings of rage and grief she carries with her.

As queen of the underworld, Persephone honors pain, and respects its cyclical presence in our lives. Importantly, she can serve as a helpful guide as she understands how we can explore the darkness without allowing ourselves to be engulfed by it—after all, spring always arrives. In this sense, a crucial part of the myth of Persephone includes a resolution; that is, her eventual ascension from the dark underworld. Each participant, as I have documented in earlier sections of this dissertation, has explored the value of dark voyages and pain. Importantly, each woman has carried on living, and living vibrantly following difficult and painful encounters with pornographic imagery.

In addition to resolution and ascension, one can also view Persephone’s story as an important counterpoint to traditional progress narratives, in that Persephone repeatedly returns to the dark god and reigns as Queen in the underworld. In this way, Persephone is a victress of her fate, a woman who is sexually alive, and one who does not shy away from the depths. This modern and feminist understanding of Persephone endows the goddess with more agency, Eros, and vibrancy than earlier understandings which portray her as an innocent child, a naive victim of abduction and rape. Persephone, perhaps, was not merely abducted by the dark god; perhaps she was also compelled towards him, and willingly seduced. In many ways, her time with Hades
marked the start of her womanhood, and helped Persephone individuate from her mother, Demeter. Paulien Albanese (2015), in her modern retelling of the myth as a play, captures these erotic sentiments. Albanese lyrically writes, “Tell them that you weren’t hungry, tell them you followed the pomegranates seeds because they tasted like blood, like love” (p. 58).

The American poet Louise Glück adds an important component to a modern and feminist-minded interpretation of the myth. In many of her poems featuring Persephone, she writes of a woman who has entered the depths not as a mere victim, but as an active and autonomous participant. This is the paradox we all face during certain dark erotic moments and their experiences of difficulty. For Glück, Persephone is a young woman who is seduced by the dark god while also struggling to individuate from her mother. In the poem “Persephone, the Wanderer,” Glück discusses these paradoxes, contradictions, and frustrations. In attempting to liberate herself from one force, Persephone finds herself caught in another. She writes:

is earth ‘home’ to Persephone? Is she at home, conceivable, in the bed of the god? Is she at home nowhere? ...She does know the earth is run by mothers, this much is certain. She also knows she is not what is called a girl any longer...she believes she has been a prisoner since she has been a daughter...You drift between earth and death which seem, finally, strangely alike... (Glück, 2006, p. 17)

These modern Persephonic themes were also present amongst the four participants’ experiences. By this I mean that each woman displayed experiences in which she asserted her agency, especially when seeking out sexual pleasure or directly confronting and expressing her thoughts and beliefs in spite of the difficulties which emerged.

As we can learn from the myth of Persephone, often much of life, and much of what pains us, distresses us, is also what compels us forward. Akin to mythology, psychoanalysis and certain philosophical traditions understand this paradox especially well. For example, Friedrich Nietzsche (1954) in Thus Spoke Zarathustra poetically captures traversing the depths when he
writes, “I love those who do not know how to live, except by going under, for they are those who cross over” (p. 15).

I see this frustration and repetition of pain in Eliza’s repetitive use of pornography, especially when Eliza described feeling constantly hurt and negatively affected by the very websites she seeks out. In fact, Eliza is so impacted by these websites that she attempts to obliterate and exile the experience and the imagery from her memory. Eliza is not alone in her experience of repetitive pain. Quinn also explored pornography over time, even pornography that caused her distress. Moreover, she remarked on the painful presence that pornography has had in her personal history and life-story. Similar to Quinn, Isobel described her repeated attempts to explore pornography even at her expense. In addition to the pornography she explores, Isobel also described the agony of her repetitive thoughts and worries, and the ways in which she attempted to use her sexuality and body as a substitute for her partner’s chronic and secretive use of pornography. Veronica repeatedly allowed herself to be photographed in ways that she now considers pornographic and violating. It took her much time, many experiences, to develop her current sense of sexuality and limits.

As Persephone rises from the underworld each spring, each of the women also discussed their ascension from the pain of their experiences, and what they had each learned. In the Persephonic spirit, they were able to appreciate the value amidst and even because of their suffering. Hillman (2015), drawing on myth and Jungian psychology, writes on the value of suffering and difficulties:

*Why do we focus so intensely on our problems? What draws us to them? Why are they so attractive? They have the magnet power of love: somehow we desire our problems; we are in love with them much as we want to get rid of them . . . Problems sustain us -- maybe that’s why they don't go away. What would a life be without them? Completely tranquilized and loveless . . . There is a secret love hiding in each problem.* (pp. 275-276)
The power of myth is that it lifts us out of ourselves, while at the same time mirroring all that we have endured. Myth powerfully contains us in the human experience and allows us to see our experiences reflected and shared throughout human history. In this way, it is both us and Other. Like a powerful painting or piece of music, we become gathered up and reflected to ourselves. Persephone teaches us how we can survive trauma, depression, and darkness, and how in our ascent back to Earth we have become empowered and stronger—we have become the Queens of the underworlds we had to traverse, and even in the upperworld, our power remains with us.

For each of the four participants, like the dark goddess, they were able to rise from the darkness, even after long periods of winter. Also, similar to Persephone, the darkness often revisited them, and they it. Eliza often enters into Hades during her very troubling and repetitive online searches for pornography. However, the love of her male partner lifts her up into an erotic Spring where she can more fully enjoy her sexual experiences. Isobel spent a lot of time in the Underworld during her painful explorations of pornography. While she believes that her very surrender into pain ultimately provided her with the strength to overcome its difficulties, she occasionally feels the traces of the darkness in her life. Veronica explicitly spoke about her journey through distressing sexual and romantic experiences, and now enjoys a fuller sexuality which is more in line with her newly developed values and sense of self. Quinn also experienced the painful presence of pornography throughout her life, and ultimately found grounding through her sexuality and righteous anger. While each of the four women have suffered, and continue to suffer in their own ways, they all mentioned in some way or another the healing power of community, love, and self-acceptance.
Limitations

Reflecting back on the process of my study, I would like to note some of the project’s limitations. The limitations and constraints are important to identify in case I, or others, should further the research.

As empirical-phenomenological research focuses on analyzing a select number of experiences of the given phenomenon, there are of course limitations in terms of the diversity of the research participants. In terms of this specific project, there was definitely a lack of diversity in the background of the participants. For one, the four women were very close in age. I would be interested in hearing from women of different ages, both younger and older. I wonder how conceptualizations of pornography would differ amongst these generational differences. As social media, and practices such as sexting, are becoming more and more everyday, I believe that speaking to younger women especially would be timely and important to explore.

Secondly, as the participants all identified as white, there was not a range of racial identities present. Perhaps this is why, I wonder, that topics and concerns of race did not arise in the participant’s written or spoken data. Moreover, while not all of the women were comfortable discussing sexual identities with me, the majority of the women identified a heterosexual, while one woman identified as queer (but preferred I do not specify this in her narrative).

Thirdly, each of the four women had received an undergraduate degree, and the majority have received at least some amount of graduate education. Perhaps related to this, each woman clearly had some personal conceptualization of gendered experience, and a fair amount of political awareness and political identification with progressive and or leftist ideologies. I would be interested in speaking to women of varying educational levels, as well as political identifications.

I also realize that as researcher I share in many of the identifications of the participants. I
found myself relating to each woman, especially in regard to the ways in which the women spoke about gendered experience and politics. While this is not inherently a constraint to the project, I do wonder how I would be challenged to listen and attune myself differently if I were to speak to women of radically different backgrounds to my own.

Other limitations are in regard to what I may do differently if I were to repeat the project. First, while each woman at least implicitly described to me why the images they had chosen to speak about were in fact pornographic, I would have liked to know more about their personal definitions of pornography. Therefore, if I were to ever revisit this project, I would make sure to explicitly ask this to each woman.

Second, I would try to be more active in the actual interviews, and not so constrained. I felt myself becoming more and more natural as I conducted the interviews, but even so, I would welcome myself to be more vibrant and alive in subsequent interviews.

Third, I would have liked to spend more time processing the experience of the women sharing their stories. I inherently believe in the healing and transformative power of storytelling. I am reminded here of Jungian analyst Jane Davenport Platko’s (2013) thoughts on storytelling. She beautifully writes, “Our stories are mirrors. We can look into them and return to ourselves. We can make of them an offering” (Plato, p. 308.). Listening to each woman’s story did feel as though I was receiving a precious offering. While each woman expressed gratitude for the opportunity to tell her story, I would have liked to focus in more on her emotional experience of putting the story into language, and the understanding that she is taking part in a project alongside other women.
Future Horizons

As I touch on above, I would be interested in repeating this research project with the hope of seeking experiences of women from varying backgrounds. I am especially interested in hearing from university-aged women, as so much has changed given the prevalence of smartphones in childhood and adolescence, internet culture, online dating, and social media.

Moving forward, I would also be interested in hearing from men, and would be very interested to hear about some of the painful experiences they too have had with pornography. During my clinical work, I have heard from male patients regarding their own troubling experiences, especially with online pornography. Moreover, I have spoken to male acquaintances and friends who have shared with me vulnerable and difficult experiences they have had. Similar to the participants of this project, the men who have shared with me their stories have remarked on being troubled by violent and dehumanizing imagery. Others have shared with me their frustrations with finding themselves reliant on online pornography. When they share this with me, I notice that they often disclose a longing for actual physical and human connection in the non-virtual realm.

There have been male authors who have written critically on pornography. Robert Jensen, whom I have cited occasionally throughout the dissertation, has boldly and very honestly written about what he considers to be the problems inherent in mainstream pornography. Jensen’s (2015) text *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* is a bold critique of pornography as well as a collection of anecdotes from Jensen’s experiences in anti-pornography activism. Jensen does not shy away from what he understands to be the problems of pornography, including its relationship to normative notions of so-called toxic masculinity. Early on in his text, Jensen (2015) writes, “Pornography as a mirror shows us how men see women. Not all men, of course—but the ways in which many men who accept the conventional conception of
masculinity see women. It is unsettling to look into that mirror” (p. 14).

Another future project that I would be interested in conducting would be focused on women’s negative experiences receiving and or sending sexts. So often, both in the session room and in my personal life, I have listened to women describe the violent experience of receiving pornographic images sent to them by men. This violation often takes place in the realm of online dating, but I also have heard women share stories of receiving a picture of male genitalia from men with whom they are not even romantically involved. In fact, I myself once received, out of the blue, a video of a man I barely knew masturbating. The experience was very violating, and I did not know what to do, or even how to talk about it with anyone. Even today, when I think about that experience, I feel unwell, and I also somehow feel at fault even though there was nothing I could have done to cause or prevent his actions. In such troubling incidents, there is a clear lack of consent, and the women are clearly affected and disturbed.

Surprises and the Unexpected

During the process of collecting and analyzing the data, I found myself surprised at various moments. I documented many of my assumptions regarding what I thought I would find in my journal, and while some of what I thought would happen did, there was so much that I did not expect.

What struck and surprised me the most was the receiving of narratives of women actively engaging with online pornography. Before speaking to anyone, I wrote about my assumption that the majority of the women would describe to me hurtful experiences of randomly encountering pornographic imagery, or experiences of their male partners watching pornography, and their encounters with those images. I realized my surprise when Eliza, the first participant, sent me her written account. I was not expecting to read about her experiences navigating the world of online
pornography, and even less so to read about her masturbation practices. So much of patriarchal mainstream notions regarding women and sexuality have been so ingrained in me, such that that I did not even realize the extent to which I carry them around. I remember feeling impressed that she would so boldly share her story with me, as well as disturbed that I was so surprised by this.

My experience of surprise did not end with Eliza. I was caught off guard to hear Isobel describe to me so openly her experiences of rage, and some of the consequences that came from that rage. Again, this was another moment in which I internalized larger social norms regarding how women ought to express, or rather not express, their feelings of anger. As I journaled, I realized that I was assuming that I would hear more about sadness and pain than about anger. I was extremely surprised to hear a story like Veronica’s in which she herself was the pornified image. In fact, it was my interactions with her that have led me to become more curious regarding women’s experiences of sexting. Similar to Isobel and Eliza’s stories, I was not expecting Quinn’s narrative to be one in which she openly described her experiences with consuming pornography and her feelings of anger directed towards men that she experiences in her daily life.

Moments of surprise were helpful to me in that they allowed me to pay closer attention to what I was learning. I felt myself focus differently when I found myself shocked or disrupted by something I heard or read.
A Brief Reflection on the Journaling Process

Although I have implicitly touched on some of my personal process and experiences as a researcher, I want to discuss more explicitly here how journaling was crucial during the process of data collection and analysis.

I have already been transparent regarding my own political and personal reasons which initially drew me towards this project. I proudly identify as a feminist, by this I mean that I believe strongly in securing equal rights for all genders. I also recognize that as far as we have come, there are still many forms of oppression, and a fair amount of social inequality society must contend with. I, like the participants, have had extremely complicated experiences with pornography, and some of these experiences have been troubling. While none of these four stories in this dissertation are my own, I often identified with aspects of the participants’ narratives. I had moments in which I longed to join with the participant, and to say, “I too have felt this way.” While I believe that this shared sisterhood is enriching and beautifully important for women to find comfort and understanding, I also know that, if unattended, it can become problematic for the research process. It may become difficult for the researcher to differentiate her own voice from that of her participants. For example, when a researcher relates very strongly to a participant, she may overlook the subtleties of the narrative and assume that she knows what the participant means. One way in which I strove to remain attentive and attuned to my own process, without allowing it to blend with my participants, was to embrace a reflexive position. This reflexive position was largely supported by the keeping of a personal research journal in which I allowed myself to privately, freely, and creatively document my own process, biases, personal associations, and confusions. As I conducted the research I returned to this journal often. I paid very close attention to moments in which I found myself “understanding” things too easily, and other moments in which I found myself shocked or mystified by what I heard. I also
made sure to continually go back to the data itself following any journaling exercise or data analysis. Therefore, this is why, in part, I so heavily incorporated the participant’s own language into their situated structures. I would ask myself often: am I making this interpretation based on my own beliefs, or the data itself? At times, I had to re-assess what I was claiming; at other times the interpretation was present in both the participant’s data and in my personal journal.

The process of journalling was a surprisingly emotionally challenging process. I noticed the ways in which rather patriarchal notions had entered my psyche. I did not realize just how many assumptions I had carried with me for so many years. As I mentioned in previous sections, I found myself caught off-guard by certain details of the participants’ narratives. I did not expect, for example, to hear women talk so openly about their personal practices of searching the internet for pornography. I also struggled with knowing and recognizing that I felt timid, at times, when talking about sexuality so openly. This truly struck and somewhat upset me as I often engage with sexual topics within a psychotherapeutic context. However, there was something more challenging about facing these topics in front of a participant, an audio recorder, and a written record of the process. The safety of the therapeutic alliance, the privacy of the session room, the sacredness of the psychotherapist-patient relationship all allow for soulful and sensitive conversations. These factors were not available to me during these research interviews. A part of the pain I am left with now is knowing just how much my own gendered subjectivity has informed the ways in which I sometimes struggle to talk openly about certain delicate subjects.

I also experienced a few moments of difficulty in attempting to separate my own experiences from those of the participants. By carefully documenting these select moments, I was able to then further journal about my own experiences that I felt were like the experiences I had listened to. Often through this careful journaling, I discovered that what I initially assumed
to be a similar experience was often quite unique in its subtleties and context. Thus, I was able to find moments of similarity as well as difference. In other words, in addition to writing about my responses to the narratives, I also wrote about my own history and experiences. By doing so, not only did I see the ways in which my own history was present in how I was listening and understanding, I also began to see more clearly the socio-political dimension which is shared. I am a bit shy to admit, but the reality of this shared socio-political dimension, which emerged during this careful journaling process, was rather powerful for me. Not only were my participants no longer alone, I was no longer alone. It was not until the very end of the project that this camaraderie made itself known to me.

Although I did my best to maintain a phenomenological attitude and stance towards the data, my own history and subjectivity inevitably played a role in the research process. That being said, I do not believe that it is necessarily a hindrance to the project. I quite honestly do not believe it is possible to fully view any data objectively. Yet, I believe it is important to aspire to be as faithful to the data itself. Despite the best of intentions though, unconscious dynamics and subjectivity will always be present, one way or another. This is why reflexivity is so important in conducting any kind of research. In The Wounded Researcher, Romanyshyn (2012) beautifully writes:

The first step in acknowledging the complex character of research is to recognize that it is through the complex that one is drawn into a world. The image of a neutral observer and/or the dispassionate researcher is built on the fiction of the complex-free person, whose neutrality and dispassion separate him or her from that which he or she studies…The point I wish to make here is that it is, in fact, through our complexes that we are initially drawn into life, love, and work…A topic chooses a researcher as much as, and perhaps even more than, he or she chooses it. (p. 112).
Concluding Thoughts

This study resulted in important findings for psychology, as well as pornography studies and women’s studies. By utilizing a modified empirical-phenomenological method, a fuller description of this phenomenon was arrived at. Importantly, it provides insights into the complex ways in which women negatively encountering pornographic images, what is understood to be pornographic, and how the responses to these experiences continue to shape a woman’s unfolding lifeworld.

As I prepare to leave this project behind, what stays with me is my belief in the power of image, storytelling, and community. I believe that pornography, like any other image or object, has the power both to offer us pleasure and to do harm and even be experienced as violence. I also am left with the knowledge that we still do not often speak boldly or descriptively about female sexuality, and that this silence is political, and it is internalized—at least it is in me, and in my participants’ narratives. Such silence is functional in that it allows an unjust system to operate at the expense of certain groups of people, people whose own silence often tragically feeds their oppression. While pornography often does cause harm to women, it is reliant on women—on women’s bodies; on women's complex and often painful participation, engagement, and consumption; and on women’s silence about these experiences.

Pornography is a powerful medium, and it permeates society in so many ways, even the subtlest. Pornography is also a massively powerful industry that is not going away anytime soon. I wonder if it is possible to indeed make it more humane, as many alternative forms attempt. I wonder about the numerous women trafficked into pornography and what becomes of their lives. I wonder about the people who profit from mainstream pornography, and the men who produce it. I wonder about so many things. So, I think I am left with more questions, but I am also more comfortable in knowing that pornography is complicated, both erotic and objectifying, and
elusive. I also understand that pornography is no longer just about men, and that perhaps the rise in female consumers will begin to create shifts in how the medium is produced. Perhaps. However, I remain suspicious regarding these alternative-forms of pornography. I do not trust capitalism with protecting women, especially when in the culture as it is, we remain the ultimate tool of profit.

Also, most importantly, my thoughts reside with the four brave women who shared their personal experiences with me, and with whomever reads this project. I am so humbled by their experiences, and I hope that they know that they are not alone. This is what I hope most of all.
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