

'We hid porn magazines in the nearby woods': Memory-work and pornography consumption in Finland

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Abstract

This article presents the key findings of a Finnish memory-work project conducted in 2012 on consumer experiences and associations related to pornography. The memory-work material points to a high degree of reflexivity in definitions of pornographic preference as well as to drastic shifts in the ubiquity of pornography from the pre-1990s 'age of scarcity' to the current 'age of plenty.' At the same time, contributors' narratives of childhood experiences of finding and collecting pornography complicate public concerns on early access to porn as specific to digital media. By drawing on original research, the article considers the possibilities of memory-work as a method for exploring the connections between personal everyday encounters with pornography, technological developments, and transformations in media regulation across decades.

Keywords

Pornography, memory-work, media history, porn consumers, Finland

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In the early 1970s, newspapers had adverts for sex magazines and films where one could fleetingly see a tit or a fanny. I'd cut out these details and keep a scratch book. The father of a religious family next door would always read the newspaper first and color these bits in the ads black with a marker so that his son wouldn't see them. (Male, born c. 1950)

This excerpt is from one of the 45 stories on the memories and experiences of pornography that our research group collected from Finnish respondents in 2012. The respondent describes his first encounters with sexual media imagery as characterized by pleasurable titillation underpinned by awareness of societal and moral norms. Highly personal, relatively long and detailed, the story meanders from the respondent's childhood encounters with pornography to buying porn films in Hamburg when these could not be legally obtained in Finland, owning and storing books and magazines for safekeeping, the use of sex toys, and the crucial role that pornography has played in his long-term marriage and sexual satisfaction. On a more general level, the story, like many other submissions we received, makes evident the transformations in Finnish media landscape since the 1960s that can be encapsulated as ones from strict media regulation towards liberalization, and from meagre access to the current availability, increased volume, and diversity of pornography. Like memory-work narratives in general, the story helps to draw connections between the personal and the societal, the experiential and the structural, and to trace how cultural norms are negotiated and how they materialize in everyday life (e.g. Gillies et al., 2004; Haug et al., 1987; Kansteiner, 2002).

Pornography is a media genre of considerable popularity, as well as a hotspot for debates over sexuality and gender, yet it involves some of the most obvious knowledge gaps in studies of media history. Little is known of people's everyday encounters with pornography as these have taken shape over the decades, in a range of media, and in relation to contingent public discourses on sexuality, gender, and obscenity. In order to explore these connections, our research group—titled *Remembering sexual imageries: Pornography, memory-work and Finnish media history* (REXI)—launched a call for written reminiscences on pornography in collaboration with the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literary Society (FLS) in April 2012. Established in 1831, FLS is an international research institute and a national memory organization. As one of its departments, The Folklore Archives collect and study folklore material, oral tradition, personal narratives and memories. They launch several memory collection campaigns annually together with research groups, help to formulate the calls and advertise them, and collect and archive the data.

This was, to our knowledge, the first project to apply memory-work in porn research. In what follows, we present the key findings of the study and discuss the possibilities of written memory-work as a method of data collection in studies of pornography.

Why memory-work?

The perspective of porn consumers has been largely absent in studies of pornography outside research on the effects that the genre is seen to hold (for notable exceptions, see Attwood, 2005; McKee, 2007; McKee et al., 2008; Ryberg, 2012; Smith et al., 2013). In most porn research within film and media studies, the ‘porn spectator’ has been a theoretical figure (e.g. Williams, 1989), an autobiographical self (e.g. McClintock, 1993; Williams, 2008), or a culturally located and specifically addressed spectator position such as ‘lesbian’ (Conway, 1997) or ‘fat admirer’ (Kyrölä, 2014: 157–196). In studies of media effects, porn consumers remain equally, albeit differently, abstract figures identifiable by gender and age, with the main emphasis being on the attitudes of heterosexual men towards porn and women alike (e.g. Hald et al., 2013; Malamuth et al., 2012). Although contemporary media features more than one stereotype of a porn consumer (Boyle, 2010: 144), the popular imagery of ‘men in dirty raincoats, motivated by lust and susceptible to direct “effects”’ (Attwood, 2002: 96; also McKee et al., 2008: xii; O’Toole, 1998: 298) remains recognizable. Abstract figures of porn consumers, especially when combined with generalizations concerning the effects of porn, help to render invisible the particularities of both the ‘consumers’ and the ‘porn.’

Against this background, the REXI project set out to write a historiography of pornography and Finnish popular media culture by building on experiential knowledge of porn use. Existing studies of pornography in Finland have mainly focused on media texts, their meanings, representations, and regulatory regimes (e.g. Kalha, 2007; Nikunen et al., 2005). While nation-wide sex surveys and collections of sexual autobiographies (Haavio-Mannila and Kontula, 2001; Kontula, 2008, 2009) have addressed consumers’ views on and memories of porn use, these have not been the key focus of attention. The multiple definitions, experiences, and uses of pornography across different media have remained largely unexamined.

In order to include the perspectives of the general audience—people identifying as both porn consumers and non-consumers—we settled on the method of memory-work. More specifically, we asked contributors to send us their reflections, definitions, and memories concerning pornography in writing. The call for contributions focused on the central themes of REXI: the role and position of pornography in the everyday life of Finns from the mid-1940s to the present day; the changing definitions of pornography and its technological, legal, and policy contexts, as well as pornography’s meaning in (re-)imagining genders, sexualities, and ethnicities. We inquired after the respondents’ recollections on porn magazines and films, amateur pornography, the use of sex toys in porn, the body ideals of pornography, childhood memories and porn preferences, as well as their definitions of and feelings concerning the genre (see Appendix).

While definitions of memory-work vary, it is an established method in social sciences and feminist research and often applied to topics considered sensitive, difficult to access, and otherwise hard to produce knowledge on (see Onyx and Small, 2001). Memory-work does not facilitate access to people's memories or experiences but tells of how people narrate and reinterpret their memories and construct their understanding of the self (Haug, 1992: 20; Kuhn, 1995). It allows for histories to emerge as fragmented and nonlinear, and for intertwining personal life histories with collective cultural knowledge. In media studies, memory-work has been deployed in accounting for the personal consumption of and preferences concerning film and television (e.g. Kortti and Mähönen, 2009; Kuhn, 2002; Stacey, 1994).

As a form of personal writing related to but not limited by the themes and guidelines set by researchers, memory-work necessitates no face-to-face interaction. In contrast to interviews, it affords the respondents time to reflect and draw on their own personal archives, such as diaries and photographs, in the course of formulating their contributions (Kortti and Mähönen, 2009: 51). Given that pornography is generally seen as a controversial topic and its uses are associated with potential shame and embarrassment, our premise was that the format of private recollection is particularly well suited for charting the memories and experiences related to the genre. The memory-work material harvested was interpreted anonymously, which allowed for an additional layer of distance—and of potential safety—between the respondent and the researchers. Without the frames provided by a physically present researcher, the respondents could write as much or little as they wanted, use as much or as little time they wanted over a period of several months, and choose which of the suggested questions to answer and which to ignore. Rather than identifying our method as oral history, which commonly connotes the oral collection of interview material (e.g. Sangster, 1994), we wish to highlight the highly textual, and indeed literary, character of the material. Some of the contributions are written as snappy essays, others as titillating pornographic stories, and yet others as anecdotes on folklore traditions, humorous recollections, and thoughtful autobiographical reflections.

The desire to reach respondents of different ages, genders, and regional locations was an additional motivation for conducting the memory-work project in collaboration with FLS. The challenges involved in trying to secure interviews from a heterogeneous group of informants were obvious for an unfunded research group with limited resources: in this sense, the choice of method was also a pragmatic one. Our call for submissions was launched in mid-April 2012, with the deadline set for the end of October of the same year. We circulated the call published on the FLS website through email, Facebook, and online noticeboards. The university hosting the research project circulated a press release and project members gave numerous interviews for local and national radio, newspapers, and magazines in order to distribute the call. In comparison to the enthusiastic media response and relatively high public visibility, the number of respondents—45 in total—was an initial disappointment. These replies did, however, encompass 853 pages of text.

Of our respondents, 14 were female and 31 male. The youngest one was born in 1994 and the oldest in 1925, with five respondents not indicating their year of birth.¹ Respondents included people identifying as heterosexual, gay, bisexual, and ambivalently androgynous. There was considerable diversity among the respondents in terms of geographical location, educational and professional background—from warehouse workers to psychologists, private entrepreneurs, students, pensioners, artists, journalists, farmers, engineers, and stay-at-home mothers. The length of the replies ranged from hand-written one-page accounts to typed manuscripts tens of pages long. Within these, types of reminiscence and attitudes towards porn varied from pronounced lack of interest to anecdotal recollections and detailed in-depth accounts of individual porn use and the significance of porn in and for personal life history. Importantly, no simple divisions could be drawn between the respondents' indifference towards, rejection, or appreciation of pornography in terms of social factors such as gender, age, or profession.

Requested stories

One of the longest essays we received—36 pages of text typed with single spacing, including a listing of all the websites mentioned—was by the pen name 'Pasi Toikka' (male, born in 1970). Toikka carefully details the development of his personal media archive from 150 digital images in the early 2000s to the terabyte of videos, stories, images, and websites that he currently stores, as well as his techniques of acquiring, indexing, accessing, and backing up the data. The recollection covers his personal relationship to pornography, his history of sex-toy and computer use, his sexual traumas and preferences, and his views on health and body image. It would have been difficult to record such a 'porn life story' with other methods, at least in similar depth. Indeed, the porn life story, a more or less detailed chronological autobiographical narrative, was a recurring format in the memory-work material, although not one explicitly requested in the call.

On the opening page of his recollection, Toikka describes the research project as personally meaningful:

I got quite excited about this inquiry. It's absolutely great to take part in something like this. I try to do my best so that my response would have as much interesting information as possible. I worked on this response for several months and let the text rest at times.

Like interviews, these reminiscences are 'requested stories' (Tuuva-Hongisto, 2007), written in response to a particular call with its specified themes and questions. Toikka was by no means the only respondent to make the effort to dutifully answer our broad range of questions as thoroughly as possible in order to produce the kind of information we requested. Many of the respondents seemed highly conscious of being informants in and for an academic study, and reflected on their own experiences through and in relation to scholarly discourse.

I've spent lots of time in the so-called film circles and we've also discussed porn. We've shown porn at the lesbian and gay film festival, I've watched 70s porn at the film archive, a few years ago the Swedish short film collection *Dirty Diaries* evoked broader discussion. But often these discussions aren't all that much about the content of porn. They tend to involve a certain distancing: it's possible to talk about the fucking one has just seen in a cinematic or representational sense but almost never in terms of, well, who feels like fucking after watching that. It's sort of a shame. (Female, n.d.)

In contrast, the pen name 'Injured by porn,' defines porn as a violent, disruptive force:

I became a rootless adult, and adventurer driven by lust. – my pornified mind led me to live selfishly and to primarily fill my own needs. – my pornified mind finally led to divorce and leaving my three children to live with their mother, fatherless. (Male, n.d.)

The terminology of pornification deployed in the essay connects directly to and demonstrates awareness of contemporary debates on the increased cultural visibility of pornography. While this was not the only contribution critical of porn, it stands apart in its strong emotional tone and dramatic, pamphlet-like rhetoric of damage that is reminiscent of public expressions of concern over pornification (e.g. Paul 2005; Pentzin, 2009). As 'requested stories,' the contributions provide vignettes into people's preferences and thoughts on pornography within particular narrative frames. The respondents drew on, appropriated, and commented on available discourses—and framed their memories accordingly.

This was particularly evident in the stories by the older contributors born in the 1920s who are part of the Folklore Archives' network of respondents. The network members receive regular newsletters with calls for new memory-work projects and some of them respond to most of the calls, regardless of how interesting they may find any given topic. These contributions provided us with the perspectives of non-users with only tangential connections to pornography, as was the case with the oldest of our respondents: 'The word "porn" is so repugnant that writing about it has remained the last thing here... I myself have no experiences that could be associated with the word porn' (Female, born 1925). It is unlikely that elderly people writing on porn largely in terms of aversion would have contributed to the project, had it not been associated with FLS.

Due to the association of the project with the Folklore Archives, some contributors framed pornography as an issue of folk culture and themselves as co-collectors of folklore material. Rather than writing in the first person singular, these authors used more detached forms of writing about 'others,' 'some people,' and general developments. One respondent introduced himself as 'a long-term folklore specialist, collector, and researcher'. The ensuing contribution is tens of pages long and diverse in its anecdotes and recollections related to obscenity that include bawdy lyrics, popular songs and references to humourous mundane incidents.

The framework of folk culture and folklore studies was equally prominent in the older respondents' reminiscences of everyday life in the countryside during the days when porn was not available yet explicit jokes and 'dirty songs' abounded. Because of the lack of private space, sexual encounters were semi-public, witnessed by children and adults alike, and the stuff of gossip and circulating stories. The blending together of encounters with porn, sexual content, sex, and experiences of having sex in many of the submissions points to a notable flexibility in what porn may mean.

Defining pornography and personal preference

The broad takes on pornography evident in the memory-work material also stem from us asking the respondents to freely define what they mean by, or understand as pornography. Our premise was that these definitions would challenge given notions of what qualifies as porn, what it is, what it involves, means, or does—and possibly provide new insights into the role and meaning of porn in everyday life. For example, we expected that pornography would not come across merely as a media genre but as an umbrella term for commercial sex—and perhaps as a pejorative term for a range of cultural images and practices. By mapping these definitions on to those coined in media regulation and legislation since the Second World War, it would be possible to explore the potential gaps between institutional, academic, and quotidian uses of pornography as a point of reference. This partly turned out to be the case: the contributors' takes on the pornographic varied from memories of spying on people having sex to personal experiences in the production of BDSM porn. While not all respondents set out to specifically define the term, those who did found the task challenging:

Defining the term porn turned out to be quite difficult for me. I came to the conclusion that I define porn as the depiction of sex where the main emphasis is . . . on hard and noisy sex that's mainly intercourse. (Female, born 1989)

Porn—as I understand it—stands for verbal, pictorial, cinematic, or other depiction that aims to evoke sexual arousal. Usually porn consumption also involves wanking.

There's also another definition of porn: Porn is all kinds of action that somebody experiences as sexually or otherwise distressing or repugnant. (Male, born c. 1955)

Some respondents associated pornography less with pictorial and verbal content than with a certain 'prurient' mode of reception where easily accessible and basically respectable mainstream images and texts—from underwear and swimwear adverts to modernist literature and the biblical Canticles—become the means of sexual arousal by being approached as pornographic. And, as already mentioned, some authors cited raunchy jokes and song lyrics, indirectly defining them as pornography. Yet others chronicled their own sexual histories and adventures—or

perhaps fantasies—and responded to the call by producing pornography of their own. Some detailed accounts of porn seen and read might also count as pornography. All this speaks not only of the elasticity of the pornographic, but also of the range of available modes for experiencing cultural products that are not determined by the intentions involved in their production and circulation.

Importantly, the memory-work material attests to the strength of a textual pornographic tradition as it spans from the history of literary pornography (Hunt, 1997; Marcus, 1964) to amateur erotica writing (Paasonen, 2010) and the continuing popularity of ‘readers’ letters’—in other words, porn stories with an autobiographical framing—in Finnish sex magazines. The respondents write of pornographic book series, miscellaneous fiction and non-fiction titles on sexuality, explicit comics, erotic short stories published in magazines for women, and stories read in—and written to—porn magazines and websites.

Women’s dreams [a series of readers’ stories in the women’s magazine *Regina* known for its erotic stories] again were and assumedly still are pure porn. They often included some soft-core image that showed no genitalia, yet the fantasies written by the readers were full of anatomical terms and direct action. I assume that *Regina*’s existence is pretty much based on the fact that especially earlier on it was an acceptable and easy way for girls and women to access erotic entertainment since the magazine was sold in every kiosk and shop. (Female, born 1973)

Most contributors were highly reflexive in their definitions of pornography. Although positive associations were more common than negative ones, the camps of antiporn and anti-antiporn, dominant in Anglophonic debates to date, remained largely absent (see Paasonen, 2009). The respondents went to some length in order to map out the imageries they were attracted to and to zoom in on particular acts, body styles, and pictorial conventions that they experienced as either desirable or off-putting. Definitions of taste were drawn through negation—through the things disliked or disapproved of—as much as through descriptions of things preferred and enjoyed (cf. Douglas, 1996: 30). For example, Pasi Toikka wrote at length of his preference for corpulent female bodies and his dislike of normative thinness. Other respondents critiqued the plastic falseness of commercial porn (often of North American origins):

I’ve watched almost solely amateur porn online. I like it a lot since I think it’s genuine. It depicts ordinary people in sexual acts and they’re not as fake as regular porn films. I believe that for other people this fakeness offers fantasies to be experienced but what I look for in porn is a sense of real life. So maybe I’m a ‘voyeur.’ (Male, born 1988)

The respondents tend to be very clear on what sub-genres they prefer. In order to find images that arouse, users need to know the available options and actively maintain their porn expertise and literacy.

My most recent discovery is Japanese hentai. Drawn images leave more room for imagination than porn performed by actors. (Male, born 1950)

Hardcore teenage porn (women aged 18 to 20), along with interracial porn (black dudes with big cocks fucking young blonde broads), is probably one of my favorite genres. (Male, born 1977)

My favorite porn genres have remained the same for at least two years. The categories I prefer are anal and interracial porn. The latter preference I've sometimes considered dubious in that it occasionally has led to a certain fetishization of black men, although only at the level of thought. I've since realized that a more political analysis of sexual preferences may not be necessary unless these preferences have some questionable practical effects. Although how do you define questionable then. In addition to these, I also like to watch lesbian porn, although only such where women really know how to fuck women. It's quite rare to find that especially on more mainstream porn sites, but not impossible. (Female, n.d.)

The contributors address pornographic preferences as particular yet multifaceted, and as not necessarily coinciding with the sexual desires or practices shared with partners (while remaining connected to them). Pornography features in the stories as a means of defining the kinds of bodies and sexual scenarios experienced as arousing and of exploring and reflecting on personal sexual tastes and attitudes towards social categories, norms, and conditions. In other words, that which turns one on or off is by necessity a question of both personal history and cultural context. The knowledge of available options in the realm of sexuality contributes to and complements individual self-understanding and self-knowledge, especially among young consumers:

The site 'Keepstill — 0 holds barred' had gay porn under headings of all possible body fetishes (armpits, feet, hair, balls, ass, certain positions, etc.) and it was very eye-opening and a favorite site of mine, occasionally an actual safe haven for my own sexuality. 'Masculinifinity and gay sex advice' also gave lots of advice in searching for erotic masculinity, body-consciousness, and it also had stories. (Male, born 1986)

Porn consumers specialize and accumulate their know-how: they are no different from consumers in general in that they carefully select that which they prefer (McKee et al., 2008). Notably many respondents also wrote of drawing, writing, and editing pornographic images and texts themselves:

The preliminary preparations of the masturbation that can take hours are really important . . . It was the same when I used to draw, I masturbated when the picture started to be ready, a sort of a cartoon of one or two frames . . . On the computer I first choose a few images and edit them and place them on the right side of the screen. Then

I look for an erotic story online and put it in the word processing software and edit the appearance a bit and then place it on the left side . . . I masturbate reading the text and looking at the images. I have a special cloth also at hand that I swipe the semen on . . . Sometimes I spend a long time looking for images in my collection or new images online with image search and then spend time looking for new stories. The search has its own very special attraction. (Male, born 1970)

The memory-work narratives point to a considerable degree of reflexivity involved in porn consumption, as well as to notable fluency in articulating one's preferences and misgivings concerning the genre. To draw a comparison, in Beverley Skeggs and Helen Wood's (2012) study of reality television consumption in the UK, the degree of reflexivity seemed deeply connected to class. Respondents of a higher economic and educational background were more readily able, or willing, to reflect on their reactions in interviews and observational situations than working-class respondents. We came across no such explicit class distinctions in terms of readiness for reflexivity and conceptualization. This may be partly explainable by the crucial differences between British and Finnish social structures, as well as by our method of written memory-work that invites and temporally enables private reflection. The contributions we received do make evident how navigating the wide array of currently available porn requires technological and linguistic competence. This can be seen as a form of cultural—and sexual—capital, if not explicitly as an issue of social class.

From scarcity to abundance

As heterogeneous and anecdotal as the memory-work material is, certain broader themes and issues reoccur that help to map the particular in relation to the more general, and the personal in relation to the more public. First of these themes is the overall transformation of media culture. To paraphrase John Ellis (2000), our material renders the move from the 'age of scarcity' to the 'age of plenty' strikingly visible. Most informants who have experienced this transition describe a time when especially pornographic films were difficult to access and of limited variety, and when magazines had to be acquired through effort, and clearly distinguish this from the current free and abundant availability of online pornography.²

I remember that as a child I always watched movies in the hope of seeing female nudity. Often the film itself remained a side issue as I was only waiting for a woman's breasts to be shown.

At night we could see a pay channel with bad image and white noise (the signal probably got to our TV from the neighbors'). Often when my mother and sister had gone to bed I'd watch that pay channel and wish that, by some miracle, I'd begin to see it properly. I didn't believe in God those days but once I even prayed that the channel would show. (Male, born 1981)

I recall from my childhood how rarely I got LP records or those porn magazines; or how rarely there was music with an image on the telly. Now there's an abundance of music and porn in different shapes and forms and also those youtube music videos... Now there's so much free material and so little time. (Male, born 1970)

Because of strict regulation of audiovisual material, the history of Finnish pornography has largely been one of print culture (Paasonen, 2009). It is therefore unsurprising that magazines figure predominantly in the accounts of those born before the 1980s. Hardcore magazines have been openly sold in shops and kiosks, and during the 1970s and 1970s, the most popular of these had a circulation of over 100,000—by no means a small figure in a country with a population then of less than 5 million. Porn films were, particularly before the popularity of VCRs in the 1980s, much more difficult to come by. The respondents describe purchasing 8 mm films from Sweden, Denmark, and Germany, for while film production and distribution was illegal in Finland, private consumption was not penalized. One of the stories describes the odyssey of young men from northern Finland heading across the border to Sweden in search of 8 mm porn films. Once the expensive film cartridges were purchased, it was necessary to hide them from the customs officials. Packed in plastic and hidden under the rubber mat of the car, the films were finally safely imported for screening:

We darkened the room and the atmosphere was dense, the projector finally began to whirl and porn appeared on the large screen. The reels had no sound but color image and especially moving image was the most crucial element those days. And when after nine pm it was time to leave for the restaurant, we had watched each of the films probably five times over before having the patience to let the projector cool off for the next weekend's screening. (Male, born 1948)

With its long preparations, financial investment, guilty suspense, and victorious social sharing, the contribution describes a cultural landscape dissimilar to the current one where access to audiovisual porn requires hardly any effort on the part of the consumer, and where social viewing is relatively rare outside intimate relationships. According to the contributors, the joint purchase, sharing, exchange, and stashing of porn magazines, especially among boys and men, was as common a practice as acquiring porn for personal and relationship use.

My friend Vesku and I had saved enough in gas money to buy a Jallu [a porn magazine] among the two of us. We decided to buy it from a gas station in an uninhabited spot that was luckily also in the next municipality. It was 12 km away, the temperature was almost twenty degrees below zero, and the lights only worked in one of the mopeds, but then again the matter was also important. (Male, born 1967)

Numerous respondents describe finding, browsing, hiding, and storing more or less explicit magazines at home, at the homes of friends and family, in trash bins, and

especially in the woods. Indeed, many of the memories evoked nearby woods as semi-public spaces where porn magazines were discovered, hidden, and consumed. The general attention paid to nature and rural lifestyle is noteworthy, and perhaps illustrative of Finland's relatively recent urbanization and modernization. Especially outside major urban centres, the acquisition and use of pornography in the era of print porn required more effort and social exchange than may easily be imagined today. All this undermines stereotypical views of porn consumers as lonely, unsocial, and isolated in their activities.

Porn and childhood

Connected to the shift from scarcity to abundance, one crucial—and perhaps striking—finding in need of further investigation is that respondents of different ages and genders write of coming across pornography, and indeed looking for and collecting it, since the age of approximately 10 or 12. In a recurring storyline, children come across pornographic magazines by accident or are shown some by their friends:

I got familiar with porn at quite an early age. I lived in the United Kingdom from ten to eleven and I vividly recall how together with a couple of friends we hid a plastic bag in the nearby woods with the porn magazines found from the suburb's paper bins before leaving... When returning after a year and a half, my friends told me that the stash had 'mystically vanished.' Who knows if the magazines had moved to my friends' places or if someone else had found our stash. (Male, born 1975)

Some time towards the end of the elementary school we gathered money by collecting waste paper, for buying the school a TV as I recall... As the oldest students of elementary school, we were storing the piles of magazines from the tractor to the barn and it was good to check the stream of magazines flowing through our hands. The most serious collectors would go home after school with their inside pockets bulging. The landfill was also an excellent acquisition channel. (Male, born 1967)

These are stories of fascination and secrecy where the titillation of the forbidden is impossible to uncouple from that evoked by the magazines themselves. Since the stories are recurring, they work to question the premises and arguments concerning the 'pornification' or 'sexualization' of culture as specific to the current day (Attwood, 2009; Nikunen et al, 2005; Paasonen et al., 2007). If indeed Finnish children have come across—and collected—pornography at an early age well before the era of online porn, it then follows that recent reports of porn invading the lives of children through smart phone technology around the age of 10 (Vaarne, 2013) mark a continuum of practice, rather than simply a rupture therein. While the issue is too complex to be fully unpacked here, it seems evident that analyses of

the move from an age of scarcity to one of plenty need to be complemented by an understanding of continuums of practice that undermine any simple narrative of transformation. On the one hand, respondents regularly refer to the internet as having had the largest impact on their porn use and there is little reason to doubt the fundamental nature of media technological transformations—be this in terms of the ease and expense of access, the expansion of production, or the diversity of available choices. On the other hand, this should not lead one to ignore the continuities involved.

It is also noteworthy that the contributors do not narrate their early encounters with pornography in terms of trauma and shock, but rather through the tropes of discovery and fascination. This result parallels those of the *Understanding Pornography in Australia* project, where interviewees narrated their childhood experiences with porn as educational and beneficial rather than harmful (McKee et al., 2008: 159–160). Several of our contributors describe porn as having opened up new vistas, ideas, and fantasies, and helped with their later sexual self-definition. Public discourses on children and porn are generally framed through concern, and attempts to block access to porn are generally motivated by an interest to protect children from harm (e.g. Vänskä, 2012). Such articulations remain absent in the memory-work material. Even the contributors who reject pornography on the whole do not explain their aversion in relation to childhood traumas. On the contrary, the stories recurrently feature nostalgic overtones. This may be partly explained by the method of memory-work in that contributors recollecting their childhood and youth look back on their younger selves with tenderness and irony, and generally emphasize their own agency as the ones who looked for, found, and explored pornography. This mode of writing is in direct conflict with the tendency to downplay the agency of children in the realm of the sexual (see Kendrick, 1999; Lamb, 2001; Simpson, 2011). Earlier research has argued that people addressing media effects rarely invest the media with the power to affect them personally. Rather, it is *the others*—such as children—who are seen as susceptible to impact, who risk being addicted, and who are in the need of protection (Andsager and White, 2007). It seems that one's former childhood self is similarly excluded from susceptibility to media effects.

Analytical vistas of memory-work

Our research material provides no possibility for generalization since 45 respondents can hardly be considered representative, no matter how small the national population in question. The stories do provide vignettes into individual experiences of pornography, as narrated by a limited group of people in response to our call. The surprisingly low rate of participation raises several questions that we have no definite answers for. Was the reach of the call extensive enough or did the research context narrow it down? Is pornography simply considered too banal, irrelevant, or visceral as a topic to be engaged with? Did the form of submission (e.g. writing by

email or on paper, guided by a notably large and varied set of open questions) turn out to be too demanding for potentially interested respondents? Or was the low number of contributions testament to the cultural moment where pornography is simply too ubiquitous to be easily addressed?

According to one of our contributors, 'with free accessibility the interest also wanes. I argue that booze must've tasted better during prohibition' (Male, born 1946). Abundance did not however cause the interest towards pornography to wane in the memory-work narratives in general, nor did it decrease the time and energy dedicated to searching for and consuming porn. At the same time, the shift from the age of scarcity to that of plenty has certainly impacted the appeal that porn holds for its consumers. In the age of plenty, porn invites and even demands the exploration of available sexual practices, fantasies, scenarios, and images in ways that the age of scarcity did not enable.

While characteristically anecdotal and fragmented, the memory-work material is hardly trivial. It shows how private experiences connect with, and are shaped by, broader social, political, and economic conditions. In the contributions, media regulation and cultural norms concerning sex and sexuality materialize in everyday practices—for example, when contributors write of hiding and collecting porn magazines and experiencing simultaneous shame and excitement when doing so. The material is rich and varied in its accounts of sensations, emotions, practices, and definitions connected to pornography across decades. Despite its limitations, the material makes evident that memory-work can produce knowledge that questions simplified assumptions and concerned public discourses on porn consumption. Memory-work replaces abstract figures of porn consumers with culturally located and complex narratives where contributors reflect on their embodied selves, desires, and aversions. As a method, memory-work both necessitates and affords an understanding of porn consumption as specific in its cultural frameworks and personal resonances, and as inseparable from the local particularities of media regulation.

Notes

1. A total of six respondents were born in the 1920s, three in each of the 1930s, 1940s and 1960s, four in the 1950s, ten in both the 1970s and 1980, and one in the 1990s.
2. According to Kontula's large-scale sex surveys (2009: 168), pornographic materials were more commonly used in Finland in the 1970s than in the 1990s and 2000s. While this may seem paradoxical, common usage and availability need not go hand in hand in the case of porn (see also Paasonen, 2009). The 1971 survey inquired: 'Have you read or flipped through a magazine or book that in your view could be called pornographic?' (Kontula, 2009: 167). In other words, it defined porn as printed material whereas the later surveys addressed 'pornographic material' more generally. The issue is one of different definitions of porn (what is defined as pornographic to start with), as well as one of a shift from predominantly textual and still image material to audiovisual porn that both the surveys and the memory-work material point to. Complicating Kontula's (2009: 168) claim that the 'moving image has monopolized porn,' many of the REXI informants describe their

interest in reading and producing pornographic texts, only the main platforms are now online rather than in printed form.

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Appendix: The call for contributions

Collection of memory work, 16 April–31 October 2012

What experiences do you have of porn?

How have you approached it and what are your sentiments concerning it?

The collection charts Finnish experiences, memories, and views on porn. We're interested in both the attitudes of people of different ages towards porn, and in the transformations in the material considered pornographic across decades—from the men's magazines of the 1940s to contemporary online porn without forgetting literature or cinema. The aim of the collection is for *(name and affiliation removed)* to figure out what Finns understand with and as porn, how they have related to it, how porn has been visible in everyday life, and what their experiences and views concerning it are. The replies will be archived for research purposes at the Folklore Archives of SKS, and the electronically received replies also at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive.

Write freely on your own memories and experiences of porn. Every reply is important. You may consider for example the following themes and questions:

Everyday porn

- What does the term “porn” mean to you? In what sense do you use the term and what do you refer to with it?
- How have you experienced porn in different periods of your life? Are your experiences positive, negative, or something in-between?
- Where have you looked for, found, or collected porn during different decades? Where have you observed others finding it?
- Do you have memories of collecting porn, such as storing magazines, books, or videotapes within the home?

- Do you have memories connected to porn regulation, legislation, or transformations therein?
- Do you remember sharing porn with friends?
- Do you remember any particular discussions on porn with your friends or family?
- What kinds of memories or thoughts do sex shops evoke in you?

Media images

- Do you recall any specific men's magazines (their images or stories), films, TV programs or web sites? Can you tell why these are the ones you remember?
- What kinds of porn have you watched? What kinds of porn have you heard your friends or acquaintances talk about?
- Where do you think porn has been watched?
- Has the material understood as porn changed throughout the decades?
- Do you recall porn movies shown on TV (e.g. the *Emmanuelle* series)?
- Have you encountered porn made by amateurs and if so, how have you felt about it?
- Have you yourself written or drawn porn? If so, have you shared it with others?
- Do you recall porn cinemas?

Childhood and youth

- What memories do you have of porn from your childhood and youth?
- Do you recall how porn could be accessed in your childhood and youth?
- What thoughts did porn evoke in you on women, men, sex, and sexuality?
- Do you recall who you discussed porn with in your childhood and youth? How did the adults near you relate to pornography?

Body ideals

- What kinds of bodies and acts have you watched or would like to watch in porn? Do you think body ideals have changed in porn and how?
- Has porn affected what kinds of bodies you consider attractive or arousing? Has it impacted your experience of your own sexual attractiveness? If so, how?
- Do you think porn has had an effect on the body ideals of those close to you?

Sex toys

- Are sex toys included in your own perception of porn? What kinds of toys are connected to porn?

- Has porn given you ideas on the use of sex toys or conveyed an unpleasant view of them?
- Has the depiction of sex toys in porn reinforced or transformed your views of sexual expression?

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