

Research lifts the lid on the influence of pornography

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Society needs a more critical, nuanced, and gendered understanding of pornography in the digital age, says Samantha Keene, who graduates with a Ph.D. in Criminology from Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington this week.

Her thesis, "Pleasure, pain, and [pornography](#): a gendered analysis of the

influence of contemporary pornography on the lives of NZ's emerging adults," was funded as part of a 2014 Marsden Grant project focused on rape and the objectification of [women](#), led by Professor Jan Jordan.

"When I started reading some of the literature in the pornography space, I was fascinated by the lack of balance in the perspectives that were being shared," Samantha says. "There are so many conflicting positions about pornography. For example, people are conflicted about whether it should exist or not, or what pornography represents.

"There was also a lack of understanding about the contemporary context, and the landscape into which pornography fits today," says Samantha.

She interviewed 11 women and 13 men for her thesis, talking openly about her own sexual experiences and engagement with pornography to facilitate the open, warm, and welcoming space that she needed to get their perspective on the topic and how it has affected their relationships.

She says participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss pornography and in particular, the stigma associated with it. "For some men, they felt like talking about pornography was only all right in certain spaces. Conversely, some women felt pornography use was somehow saying something about the type of women they were."

One of the most surprising aspects of the discussions she had with her participants was an emerging focus on rough sex. "Some of the women indicated they had some interest in engaging in it, but only within the confines of trusting, accepted, and consensual sexual relationships with a trusted partner."

Samantha has provided media commentary on the "rough sex defense" used in the recent trial of the person accused of murdering Grace Millane.

"The 'rough sex gone wrong' defense essentially allows the defense to construct a narrative that suggests the woman is to blame for what happened that night," she says.

"There has been a rise in this defense in the United Kingdom in particular, and I think that this is the new 'asking for it' defense. This is a new way of blaming or shaming women who are victims/survivors of physical and/or sexual violence."

She says a conversation is needed about rough sex, to explore if it means different things to men and women.

Samantha says [sexual education](#) in schools currently doesn't allow for any mention of pornography, but the Education Review Office identified in 2018 that this is necessary in the future.

"At the moment, I don't think it's being extended enough," says Samantha. "For very [young kids](#) we need to talk about consent and bodily autonomy. But we need to be having discussions from intermediate age about what pornography is, what it represents, and dissecting that fusion of sex and aggression, in conjunction with those important conversations about consent."

She would like to see more open, transparent, and gendered conversations about pornography and its influence.

"I have lifted the lid ajar, and I'd like to lift it wide open, because all these issues are dying to come out. Of course, these issues are not new, they are a continuation of existing structural issues that are related to gender and power dynamics, violence, and sex."

Samantha wants society to continue to have these conversations, and to carry on her own research in this field. She is currently a teaching fellow

at the University and will graduate with her Ph.D. on Wednesday 11 December.

Provided by Victoria University of Wellington

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