

# PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIALS: Correlates and Gender Differences

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*Involving 515 undergraduates, this study used two original scales, whose items were derived from the propositions of the traditional feminist, feminist revisionist, and catharsis models of pornography, to measure attitudes toward sexually explicit materials. Respondents tended to perceive sexually explicit materials as detrimental but also recognized its function as a source of vicarious sexual pleasure and entertainment. Differentiating for gender, findings indicated that men were more likely than women to view sexually explicit materials as beneficial. Women, however, were more likely than men to perceive these materials as sources of entertainment or vicarious pleasure. In regard to the correlates of these perceptions, the regression model which included both genders yielded eight significant regressors, namely, gender, availability of sexually explicit materials in the home, religiosity, attitude toward sexual matters, opinion on abortion, opinion on premarital sex, viewing or reading sexually explicit materials, and frequency of exposure to these materials.*

\* *For the gender-specific models, significant regressors common to both genders were opinion on premarital sex and religiosity. The epigenetic-developmental perspective found support in the women-only model which yielded age at first exposure to sexually explicit materials as a significant correlate. Because all but one correlate which emerged significant were intrapersonal in nature, future models have to incorporate more predictive structural regressors.*

The confluence of sex and politics may be seen in pornography. Although sex is supposed to be private in Western societies, politics is the essence of the public. This inherent contradiction has contributed to the enduring controversy surrounding pornography (Wolfe, 1990). Under the new politics of pornography, violence against women is defined as what we need protection against, whereas what pornography might stand for is not completely clear. By measuring people's perceptions of sexually explicit materials, this paper will attempt to clarify what sexually explicit materials stand for in contemporary society. Do people perceive sexually explicit materials as degrading and instigating violence toward women? Or are they harmless, cathartic outlets for excess libido or creative purveyors of sexual fantasies? This study further posits that men will have a more positive attitude toward sexually explicit materials relative to women. This paper will also shed light on the

intrapersonal and structural correlates of attitudes toward sexually explicit materials.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The conflicting meanings evoked by sexually explicit materials is reflected in the traditional feminist, feminist revisionist, and catharsis models of pornography. The next few paragraphs will discuss the positions of those models.

The traditional feminist critique holds that pornography is a symbol of hegemonic male domination (Dworkin, 1981), eroticizes male supremacy (Stoltenberg, 1989), constricts sexual expression by an obsessive focus on the genital's (Brod, 1981), and encourages violence toward women (Stoltenberg, 1989). Support for this perspective is mixed. For instance, the 1970 U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography could not conclude "that exposure to erotic materials is a factor in the causation of sex crimes or sex delinquency (Little, 1989). In contrast, the

Meese Commission concluded that both violent and nonviolent pornography are harmful (Scott, 1986). Indeed, there are preliminary findings which show that these two categories of pornography can have a negative impact on one's attitudes and behaviors.

It is important to remember that violent or aggressive pornography is defined as X-rated depictions of sexual coercion in which force is used or implied against a woman with the end of performing sexual acts (Donnerstein & Linz, 1987). Although preliminary research indicated that only rapists were sexually aroused by portrayals of sexual aggression against women, research by Malamuth and associates show that nonrapists present evidence of increased sexual arousal to images of forced sex, particularly when the female victim shows signs of pleasure and arousal (Donnerstein & Linz, 1987).

Regarding the impact on attitude, Malamuth and Check (1981) reported an increase in a desire to hurt women and the belief that rape would be sexually arousing experience to the rapist. In the laboratory setting, Donnerstein and Berkowitz (1982) found that exposure to aggressive pornography increases aggression toward women, especially when the aggression is seen as positive for the victim. A caveat in interpreting these findings is in order, however. Scott (1986) noted that Donnerstein never studied films which combined extreme violence and explicit sexual penetration; thus, Donnerstein's research cannot be used to show that violent pornography is more harmful than nonviolent pornography. Donnerstein himself conceded that the relative contribution of the sexual and aggressive components remains unclear.

Relatedly, Check (1984) argued that nonviolent pornography can be as pernicious as the violent forms. Check observed that nonviolent pornography increased the likelihood that subjects would commit rape to the very same extent that violent pornography increased the tendency to commit rape. It has also been observed that extensive exposure to nonaggressive pornography significantly increased men's sexual callousness toward women and that the propensity to trivialize rape persisted up to three weeks after respondents' exposure to nonviolent pornogra-

phy (Donnerstein & Linz, 1987). On the other hand, Baron (1977) and Donnerstein (1983) reported that pornographic stimuli decreases aggression against a person of the same sex at low levels of arousal but the aggressive response increases with an increase in arousal levels. Donnerstein also added that nonaggressive sexual material does not lead to aggression against women except when inhibitions against aggression are lowered deliberately by the experimenter. In regard to the traditional feminist stance that pornography degrades women, Donnerstein (1984) found that nonexplicit depiction that showed only violence resulted in aggressive levels nearly as high and attitudes that were more callous than those that resulted from exposure to a combination of sexual explicitness and violence.

The feminist critique of pornography is not without opposition. Feminist revisionists argue that the feminist anti-pornography movement has frightened women and aggravated women's perceptions of themselves as victims. Further, disillusioned movement members deplore the narrow focus on the most violent and women-degrading pornography instead of an all-inclusive domain which includes soft pornography (Tong, 1984). Other feminists likewise object strongly to Dworkin's and MacKinnon's depiction of women as passive. These feminists believe that free sex has as much value as free speech. In the same vein, still other feminists believe that the anti-pornography campaign, like the pornography it attacks, has had the effect of depersonalizing sexuality and discouraging the development of a multitude of sexual discourses that people can turn to for sexual excitement instead of pornography (Rich, 1982). Relatedly, Webster (1986) claims that pornography "portray(s) women in a positive light as active, desiring, demanding sexual beings who engage in sexual feats (such as fellatio) formerly and currently denied them by their culture."

Further, some feminists are willing to concede that the male-oriented pornography's theme of male sexual dominance and female sexual submission may not be an entirely false view of female sexuality. Indeed, until women define themselves sexually and ontologically,

the place of responsiveness and initiative in women's sex lives is likely to remain an open question (Tong, 1984).

Also arguing for the positive side of pornography, the catharsis model avers that pornography is a "safety valve" which allows men in particular to release, in a harmless way, their sexual aggressions against women (Bart and Josza, 1980). Perceived positively, pornography is also considered a form of marital therapy (Zilbergeld, 1986), an aid to masturbation or sexual congress and a source of sexual fantasies (Lapham, 1984). Concurring, Soble (1986) states that most pornography is consumed to experience sexual arousal, to gratify sexual curiosity, to generate sexual fantasies, or otherwise to gratify sexual desires, with or without masturbation. Pornography is also deemed as a reflection of the pornographic deep within ourselves, people being the "pornographic animals" fascinated and appalled by their sexuality (Wolfe, 1990).

How do men and women perceive sexually explicit materials? Men are generally perceived to have a more positive attitude toward and a greater tolerance of sexually explicit materials relative to women (Lottes, 1985; Bart, Freeman & Kimball, 1985). The 1986 Gallup Poll on sexually explicit materials shows men as the main buyers of sexually explicit materials, their more frequent patrons, and believers that they improve sex lives, provide sex information, and entertain. Regarding reactions to sexually explicitly stimuli, Mosher (1973) reported more affective arousal among men but more negative effects among women after viewing pornographic films. Mosher also saw how women are more likely than men to describe sexually explicit materials as "pornographic, disgusting, and offensive." Relatedly, Symons (1979) observed that men, far more than women, are likely to be sexually aroused by depictions of nude members of the opposite sex. In responding to pictorial erotica, men view women as sexual objects while women view women in the pornographic material as objects of identification through whom they project themselves into the scene.

In accounting for men's visual predilection, the evolutionary approach maintains that women incur serious risks and invest a substantial amount of energy by becoming pregnant should they respond visually to sexual stimulus every time. On the other hand, men can do so at virtually no cost to themselves (Symons, 1979). Symons also noted that while men are drawn to sexually explicit materials in large numbers, women are likely to avoid them. It must be mentioned, however, that Lawrence and Herald (1988) found that women enjoy sex magazines but do not admit. In fact the 1986 Gallup Report on Pornography revealed that about 40% of women acknowledged the "functions" of sexually explicit materials. Consistent with this belief, the growing market for "feminist pornography" (sexually explicit materials made by women for women) indicate some acknowledgment of the value of sexually explicit materials as sources of entertainment or sexual stimulation (Tisdale, 1992).

A wide range of influences on a person's perceptions of sexually explicit materials is revealed by various studies which posit structural or personality determinants. Structural factors found to correlate significantly with attitudes toward sexually explicit materials include marital status, sex of children, previous exposure to sexually explicit materials (Bart et al., 1985); degree of social control, student status, community size, sex, income (McDonald, Perkins, Sheehan & Curtis, 1972); race, education (Hermann & Bordner, 1983); and age (Merritt, Gerstl, & LoSciuto, 1975); Wilson & Abelson, 1973). Personality factors which were shown to affect attitudes toward sexually explicit materials include religiosity, moral rigidity, and sexual attitudes (Athanasios & Shaver, 1971; Hermann & Bordner, 1983; Lawrence and Herald, 1988).

Further, a person's sexual history appears to be an important factor in subsequent sexual attitudes and behavior. The epigenetic-developmental approach contends that adult sexual attitudes and behaviors are partly determined by early sexual experiences. For instance, childhood rehearsals and erotic play were noted to influence significantly later sexual behavior. Moreover, it has been posited that parents'

standards and parent-child relationships influence the child's initial sexual standards and prepubertal sexual behavior which, in turn, impact adolescent sexual behavior. It has also been noted that changes in the child's cognitions of sexual events and sex-typed behavior in childhood were predictive of adult sexual behavior (Green, 1985).

It can be noted that previous studies on the determinants of attitudes toward sexually explicit materials incorporated both structural and intrapersonal variables when examined as a whole body of research. Taken individually, however, the studies show a tendency to focus on one particular category of determinants. This study will attempt to bridge the two categories of predictors by including both structural and intrapersonal predictors in this study's proposed exploratory model.

## METHODOLOGY

### *The Sample*

Due to the sensitive and potentially controversial nature of this study, approval of its research protocol had to be obtained from the human subjects review committee of this researcher's university. With the approval granted, respondents were then recruited from undergraduates of a large, comprehensive university. The sample size of 515 was generated through cluster sampling. Eleven introductory sociology courses and two upper-division sociology sections constituted the clusters.

It is conceded that the generalizability of this study was limited by the sample's relatively narrow age range and its exclusion of the non-college population. However, findings can still yield valuable insights considering the age group of the respondents (18-25 years old). It is this age group in which patronage of sexually explicit materials peaks, specifically the age bracket 20-29 (General Social Surveys, 1972-1989). Further, Merritt et al. (1975) demonstrated that the attitude toward sexually explicit materials becomes more desirable as one goes up the age gradient. Since 42% of the respondents claimed they viewed or read pornographic materials, the respondents' perceptions will be useful

inputs to the continuing debate on the place of sexually explicit materials in modern society.

### *Operationalization of Variables*

A questionnaire of two parts was administered to 515 students of a large, midwestern university. The first part elicited the values for the independent variables, while the second part was an original Likert-type scale of 20 items which generated the values for the dependent variable, perceptions of sexually explicit materials. To provide a common frame of reference for the respondents, sexually explicit materials was defined as x-rated videos, "adult movies," magazines, and similar materials which graphically portray or describe sexual activities including, but not limited to, masturbation, ejaculation, bondage, sado-masochism, vaginal sex, oral sex, anal sex and variations of these acts by adult and/or child performers within homosexual, heterosexual, solo or group contexts.

The initial pool contained both "favorable" and "unfavorable" items which reflected the themes of the traditional feminist critique and the catharsis or feminist revisionist models of pornography, respectively. "Favorable" items included the idea of sexually explicit materials as sources of sexual fantasies, harmless, sexual release, arousal, and entertainment. "Unfavorable" items included statements on sexually explicit materials as instigators of violence toward women; vehicles for objectification, trivialization of sex, and the constriction of sexual expression.

The initial pool of 20 items was pre-tested among 53 introductory sociology students. It was predicted that the items measured at least two constructs, namely, sexually explicit materials as beneficial or detrimental and the place of sexually explicit materials in society. Allowing for one other possible latent factor, it was decided to limit the factor analysis extraction (varimax rotation) to three factors. It was further specified that an item loading of 0.35 would be the minimum absolute value to be interpreted.

Consistent with the hypothesis, the first factor extracted was a bipolar factor. The positive pole was constituted by statements linking sexually explicit materials to violence, child abuse,

objectification, deterioration of morality, and addiction to sexually explicit materials. The negative pole was defined by statements on sexually explicit materials as harmless outlets for excess sexual energies, innocuous stimuli, and as performing a certain function in society. This bipolar scale was called Sexually Explicit Materials as Beneficial vs. Detrimental Scale (Scale 1). The internal consistency of this scale (Cronbach's alpha) was 0.82. Because this scale had the highest internal consistency of the three scales generated, it was decided that this scale would be the measure for the dependent variable, perceptions of sexually explicit materials.

The two other scales derived were named Sexually Explicit Materials as Sources of Vicarious Pleasure or Entertainment (Scale 2), and Commonsense Notions of Sexually Explicit Materials (Scale 3) which had internal consistency

estimates of 0.62 and 0.40, respectively. To ensure a greater sampling adequacy for the internal consistency estimates, Cronbach's alpha for the three scales were recomputed using the final sample of 515. Scales 1, 2, and 3 had Cronbach alphas of 0.82, 0.67, and 0.43, respectively. Scale 3 was dropped because of its low internal consistency while Scales 1 and 2 were used as measures of the dependent variable, perceptions of sexually explicit materials (see Tables 1 and 2 below).

### Hypotheses

Using the existing literature on the correlates of perceptions of sexually explicit materials, this study posits that individuals with the following structural characteristics will tend to perceive sexually explicit materials as beneficial or, at least, innocuous: having a committed part-

Table 1. Scale 1 (Pornography as Detrimental vs. Beneficial)

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sexually explicit materials reduce the status of people to that of machines always read for sex.</li> <li>2. Public display of sexually explicit materials must be regulated.</li> <li>3. The presence of sexually explicit materials makes this world a better place to live in.</li> <li>4. Enjoying sexually explicit materials is a harmless outlet for pent-up sexual desires.</li> <li>5. There is no connection between viewing sexually explicit materials and violent behavior toward women.</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Sexually explicit materials tend to encourage sex with a lot of people.</li> <li>7. The availability of sexually explicit materials undermines religious values.</li> <li>8. Sexually explicit materials encourage adults to sexually abuse children.</li> <li>9. Sexually explicit materials exploit women.</li> <li>10. Sexually explicit materials cause people to be treated like sex objects.</li> <li>11. A person who views sexually explicit materials is encouraged to sample more graphic materials as time goes by.</li> </ol> |
|--|---|

Notes: a. Cronbach's alpha for Scale 1 is 0.82 computed with  $n = 515$ .

b. Factor analysis showed Scale 1 to be a bipolar factor as hypothesized (detrimental vs. beneficial). Scoring of responses reflected this bipolarity (strongly disagree = 1; disagree = 2; agree = 3; strongly agree = 4); that is, higher scores (e.g. 3 or 4) indicate a "detrimental" perception while lower scores (1 or 2) indicate a "beneficial" perception.

c. Scoring for item numbers 5, 6, and 7 were reversed.

Table 2. Scale 2 (Pornography as Pleasure Scale)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People consume sexually explicit materials because they find entering its fantasy world enjoyable.</li> <li>2. Sexually explicit materials give people the opportunity to dream about sex acts they cannot do in real life.</li> <li>3. Sexually explicit materials show that sex is just a release of energy (sex is casual).</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Sexually explicit materials create the illusion that this world is full of sexually desirable people.</li> <li>5. Sexually explicit materials allow people to look at bodies of other persons of the same sex without fear of being called gay or lesbian.</li> <li>6. Sexually explicit materials help people remove their sexual inhibitions.</li> </ol> |
|---|--|

Notes: a. Cronbach's alpha for Scale 2 is 0.67 computed with  $n = 515$ .

b. Scoring system: strongly disagree = 1; disagree = 2; agree = 3; strongly agree = 4.

ner; higher social class identification; with parents of higher educational attainment; raised in urban areas; without religious affiliation; and having access to sexually explicit materials in the home. Considering intrapersonal correlates, this study hypothesizes that individuals with the following profile are more likely to perceive sexually explicit materials as beneficial rather than detrimental: male; less frequent attendee of religious services; a liberal outlook on sexual matters; approval of premarital sex or abortion; patronage of sexually explicit materials; frequent exposure to sexually explicit materials; early experience of sexual intercourse; early exposure to sexually explicit materials; and sex life dissatisfaction.

### *Statistical Analysis*

Because of the exploratory nature of this study and the large number of regressors in the proposed model, this researcher decided on using SAS' STEPWISE regression procedure to generate a viable model. This procedure adds regressors to the model one at a time. The F-statistic for a certain regressor to be added must be significant at the level of significance established for entry (in this instance, .50). After a regressor is added, this procedure looks at all regressors already in the model and deletes the regressor which does not produce a significant F-statistic at the criterion set for a regressor to remain in the model (in this instance, .05). The procedure ends when none of the hypothesized regressors outside the model has an F-statistic significant at the entry level of significance (SAS/STAT Guide, 1988).

A variance-stabilizing transformation was deemed necessary considering that all of the independent variables were categorical in nature. This situation thus resembles the set-up of the traditional analysis of variance. Under these circumstances, it is common to replace the original dependent variable score with the transformed score (Bartlett, 1947; Daniel & Wood, 1971; Goldberger, 1968). After several regression runs on the computer, the reciprocal of the dependent variable scores yielded the best model. With this transformation, the reader must remember to interpret negative and positive

slopes in the regression results as indicative of positive and negative correlations, respectively. To ascertain that the regression models satisfied assumptions about the error terms (independence, zero means, constant variance, and normality), a visual inspection of the plots of studentized residual against the predicted dependent variable values was conducted. Such inspection revealed that both all-inclusive and gender-specific models satisfied error term assumptions.

Low tolerance estimates for each independent variable were used as indications of multicollinearity. Tolerance is defined as 1 minus R-squared where R-squared is obtained from the regression of a regressor on all other regressors in a given model (SAS/STAT User's Guide, 1988). Indications of multicollinearity were corrected through the creation of an index which was a linear combination of variables observed to have low tolerance estimates. This concern for multicollinearity in the proposed model is based on the contention that it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to obtain precise estimates of the effects of independent variables if they are so highly correlated (Goldberger, 1968).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Respondents' Profile*

Of the 515 respondents, 302 were female and 214 were male. The majority was white (88%), raised in small cities (43%), and had upper-middle and upper subjective class identifications (76%). Eighty percent of the respondents' parents finished at least high school. Eighty-six percent reported some religious affiliation. Regular attendance at religious services was indicated by 23% of the respondents, while 42% stated that their attendance was limited to only a few times a year. Thirty-four percent characterized themselves as having a liberal attitude toward sexual issues with the moderately conservative following closely (30%). An overwhelming majority supported abortion and approved of premarital sex (76% and 86%, respectively). Sixty-eight percent reported having sex for the first time between the ages of 15 and 19, while 15% indicated that they have yet to experience sexual intercourse. Ninety percent

perceived themselves as exclusively heterosexual, while 10% classified themselves as homosexual or bisexual.

Concerning the consumption of sexually explicit materials, 42% said that they read or viewed sexually explicit materials; 58% reported they did not. Of those who did, 58% expressed that they read or viewed the materials infrequently. Fifty-one percent of this group reported their first exposure to sexually explicit materials between the ages of 10 and 14. Differentiating for gender, 70% of the men and 23% of the women admitted to viewing or reading sexually explicit materials.

### RESULTS

As a group, respondents presented a mean score of 2.80 on Scale 1, indicating a tendency to see sexually explicit materials as detrimental. However, the mean score of 2.83 on Scale 2 also revealed a recognition of sexually explicit materials' value as sources of vicarious pleasure or entertainment.

Comparing mean scores of men and women showed significant differences (see Table 3 below). From Scale 1, men are shown to perceive pornography as beneficial, while women tended to stress its detrimental effects. In Scale 2 (see Table 3), we see how men tend to reject the notion of sexually explicit materials as sources of vicarious pleasure or entertainment while women showed assent.

STEPWISE results for the all-inclusive model revealed that models yielded the following statistically significant regressors: availability of sexually explicit materials in the home,

gender, frequency of attendance at religious services, attitude toward sexual matters, opinion on abortion, opinion on premarital sex, viewing or reading of sexually explicit materials, and frequency of exposure to sexually explicit materials. An examination of the slopes indicated that the relevant hypotheses were confirmed in the anticipated directions (Table 4). However, an examination of the tolerance estimates for the regressors revealed multicollinearity as indicated by relatively low tolerances of two regressors, namely, viewing or reading sexually explicit materials and frequency of exposure to sexually explicit materials (.18 and .17, respectively). To correct this multicollinearity, scores for the two cited regressors were added to constitute an index which was called "patronage of sexually explicit materials." This newly created artificial variable was then included in the revised model (Table 5). This model presented regressors with tolerances ranging from .65 to .85, hence indicating that the multicollinearity in the original model was corrected. The sign of the slope for this artificial variable indicated a confirmation of the hypothesis in the desired direction; that is, people who patronize sexually explicit materials are more likely to perceive such materials as beneficial rather than detrimental.

STEPWISE results for the gender-specific models (men only and women only models (Table 4), also showed a confirmation of the study's hypotheses. Statistically significant regressors common to both men and women were opinion about premarital sex and frequency of attendance at religious services. Opinion about abor-

Table 3. Comparison of Means Between the Sexes on Scales 1 and 2 (in standardized scores)

| Scale   | Groups | No. of Cases | Mean   | Separate t-value | Variance df | Estimated 2-tail prob. |
|---|--------|--------------|--------|------------------|-------------|------------------------|
| 1. Sexually explicit materials as Beneficial vs. Detrimental          | Men    | 213          | -2.103 | -6.77            | 473.37      | .0001                  |
|   | Women  | 302          | 1.506  |                  |             |                        |
| 2. Sexually explicit materials as source of pleasure or entertainment | Men    | 213          | -0.363 | -.203            | 512.29      | .05                    |
|   | Women  | 302          | 0.260  |                  |             |                        |

Table 4. Predictors of Perceptions of Pornography:  
Regression coefficients for all-inclusive and gender-specific samples  
(Standardized coefficients in parentheses)

| Regressor  | All-inclusive   | Men only       | Women only      |
|--|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| A. Structural:   |                 |                |                 |
| 1. Availability of sexually explicit materials in the home | -.019 (-.123)*  | — <sup>a</sup> | —               |
| B. Intraindividual   |                 |                |                 |
| 1. Sex   | -.016 (-.117)** |                |                 |
| 2. Frequency of attendance at religious services           | -.007 (-.135)** | -.008 (-.145)* | -.007 (-.168)** |
| 3. Attitude toward sexual matters                          | -.005 (-.075)*  | —              | -.005 (-.097)*  |
| 4. Opinion on abortion                                     | -.015 (-.095)** | —              | -.014 (-.102)*  |
| 5. Opinion on premarital sex                               | -.016 (-.083)*  | -.011 (-.046)* | -.017 (-.111)*  |
| 6. Viewing or reading sexually explicit materials          | -.028 (-.207)** | —              | -.047 (-.358)** |
| 7. Age at first exposure to sexually explicit materials    | —               | —              | .021 (.133)     |
| 8. Frequency of exposure to sexually explicit materials    | -.006 (-.088)** | -.008 (-.119)* | —               |
| Constant   | .457            | .477           | .399            |
| R-square   | .321            | .284           | .245            |
| Adj. R-square  | .297            | .221           | .200            |
| Standard error   | .056            | .065           | .050            |
| F value  | 13.048**        | 4.548**        | 5.427**         |

\*\* =  $p < .01$

\* =  $p < .05$

<sup>a</sup> Not significant at .05 level

tion, attitude toward sexual issues, and age during first experience of sexual intercourse were significant correlates for women but not for men. While viewing or reading sexually explicit materials was significant to women, it was frequency of exposure to sexually explicit materials that was important to men. The regressor, age during first sexual intercourse, was significant for women but not for men. Tolerances for the regressors in the gender-specific models ranged from .69 to .96, indicating an absence of multicollinearity.

## DISCUSSION

In this study of perceptions of sexually explicit materials and their correlates, the existence of multiple interpretations of sexually explicit

materials was evidenced by the finding that the respondents as a whole (both men and women) perceived pornography as both potentially beneficial and detrimental. This finding suggests that sexually explicit materials cannot just mean one thing because genre conventions enable multiple interpretations of reality to exist simultaneously. For example, sexually explicit materials cannot only be about men brutalizing women. They can also be a medium through which a man can see the image of another man enjoying himself visibly in a situation which most men never get to see (Wolfe, 1990). Further, a person's response to sexually explicit materials can be "layered, complex and multiple." Some pieces can be boring, mechanical, badly written, on one hand. On



Table 5. Revised All-Inclusive Model: Multicollinearity Corrected

| Regressor  | Regression coefficient | Standardized coefficient | Tolerance |
|--|------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|
| A. Structural:   |                        |                          |           |
| 1. Availability of sexually explicit materials in the home | -.010*                 | -.071                    | .78       |
| B. Intraindividual:  |                        |                          |           |
| 1. Patronage of sexually explicit materials <sup>a</sup>   | -.015**                | -.352                    | .65       |
| 2. Opinion on premarital sex                               | -.023**                | -.128                    | .74       |
| 3. Opinion on abortion                                     | -.012*                 | -.081                    | .78       |
| 4. Outlook on sexual matters                               | -.004*                 | -.073                    | .85       |
| 5. Frequency of attendance at religious services           | -.006**                | -.128                    | .77       |
| 6. Gender  | -.010*                 | -.82                     | .74       |
| Constant   |                        | 479                      |           |
| R-square   |                        | .320                     |           |
| Adj. R-square  |                        | .311                     |           |
| Standard error   |                        | .051                     |           |
| F value  |                        | 33.497**                 |           |

<sup>a</sup> An artificial variable created from an index generated by respondents' composite scores on the regressors viewing or reading sexually explicit materials and the frequency of exposure to these materials.

\*\*=p<.01

\*=p<.05

the other hand, some can be earnest and wholesome (Tisdale, 1992).

Women, however, tended to view sexually explicit materials as pernicious, while men viewed it as beneficial, consistent with the literature (Bart et al., 1985; Lottes, 1985; Symons, 1987). It is also interesting to note that the 1986 Gallup Report on Pornography showed that more women than men consistently favor a total ban of pornographic media showing sexual relations, sexual violence, and nudity. Further, General Social Surveys, 1972-1989 data show that significantly more women than men believe that sexually explicit materials lead to the breakdown of morals and the encouragement of rape.

Women's aversion of sexually explicit materials, in general, can be partly explained by the traditional feminist argument that sexually explicit materials are an exclusively male phenomenon which permits men to have whatever they want to do sexually. Hence, pornography is

men's truth about sex (Stoltenberg, 1989) because it provides men what to them is sexually arousing such as images of dominance, violence, exploitation, and humiliation of women. Hence, consistent with the evidence supplied by Heilbrun and Seif (1988) who observed that most of their male subjects considered pictures of women in bondage to be sexually arousing, men's pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, and exploiting.

Another explanation of men's positive perception of sexually explicit materials can be drawn from evolutionary theory which posits that men and women respond differently to visual stimuli. Men, far more than women, are attracted by provocative visual stimuli. Men are more likely to be sexually aroused by depictions of nude members of the opposite gender because they cast women as sex objects. Women, on the other hand, view women in sexually explicit media as objects of identification through whom

they can project themselves and their bias toward the importance of relationships, caring, and nurturing (Gilligan, 1982).

It is, however, ironic that while women generally consider sexually explicit materials as detrimental, they also recognize that sexually explicit materials can be sources of vicarious pleasure or entertainment. This finding corroborates Lawrence and Herald's (1988) observation that women enjoy sex magazines but do not admit it and Symons' (1979) finding that women are potentially capable of being aroused by sexually explicit materials. The possibility of women's enjoyment of sexually explicit materials is in consonance with the feminist revisionist view of sexually explicit materials which holds that women are active sexual partners who know what they want sexually. A woman who enjoys sexually explicit materials believes that sexually explicit materials send the message that women's sexual selves are real and that there are no limits to what women can enjoy or imagine. Further, sexually explicit materials can help women expose themselves truly to themselves. This task accomplished, it will be easier to expose themselves to others (Tisdale, 1992). Another way of explaining women's ambivalence toward sexually explicit materials is to contend that women's experience of more restricted access to sexual opportunities leads them to turn to vicarious modes of sexual expression. Thus, to women, sexually explicit materials are not mere substitutes for actual sexual activity but are regarded as "authentic, autonomous, sexual activity" (Soble, 1986).

Regarding the correlates of perceptions, it is interesting to note that outlook on sexual issues, opinion of abortion and premarital sex consistently emerged as significant correlates in both the all-inclusive and gender-specific models. This suggests that perceptions of sexually explicit materials belong to a cluster of interrelated issues whose common denominator is their linkage with human sexuality. The salience of the abortion issue to women is highlighted by the fact that this regressor was a significant correlate for women but not for men. Frequency of attendance at religious services was another regressor which correlated significantly with perceptions

in both all-inclusive and gender-specific models. The finding that the greater the frequency of attendance at religious services, the more likely a person will perceive sexually explicit materials as detrimental supports the findings of McDonald et al. (1972), Hermann and Bordner (1983) and General Social Surveys (1972-1989) data which indicated that a significantly greater percentage of church-goers relative to nonchurch-goers believe that sexually explicit materials lead people to commit rape and contribute to the breakdown of moral values. On the other hand, significantly more nonchurch-goers than church-goers believe that sexually explicit materials are sources of sexual information. The regressor, frequency of exposure to sexually explicit materials, was important to men but not to women. For women, it was whether or not they viewed or read sexually explicit materials which was important. These results make sense considering that men are the main consumers of pornography (1986 Gallup Report on Pornography; Robertson, 1987). To men, it is not a question of the mere act of viewing or reading. The relevant question is how frequently men do it. In the case of women, who generally do not patronize sexually explicit materials, the proper question is whether they patronize such materials at all.

It is likewise interesting to point out that the women-only model provided some support to the epigenetic-developmental perspective which posits that early sexual experiences correlate with subsequent sexual behaviors and attitudes. It was found that the earlier the exposure to sexually explicit materials, the greater the likelihood of perceiving sexually explicit materials as detrimental. The processes and mechanisms which bring about this outcome certainly deserves further study, most likely through a longitudinal case studies.

The above findings on correlates of perceptions showed that only one structural regressor emerged as significant. All the other significant regressors were intrapersonal variables. These results suggest the private and personal nature of sexually explicit materials and that the factors correlated with perceptions are more deeply psychological than structural. As Tisdale (1992) aptly expresses it:

What I do is the product of many factors, not all of them sexually motivated. But what I imagine doing is pure—pure in the sense that the images come wholly from within, from the soil of the subconscious. The land of fantasy is the land of the not-done and the wished-for. There are private lessons there, things for me to learn, all alone, about myself.

All the aforesaid findings considered, a complex and multi-faceted perception of sexually explicit materials emerges. Sexually explicit materials can be of some use, innocuous, or potentially dangerous. The multiplicity of perceptions augurs well for the shaping of the future discourse on sexually explicit materials. The flexibility and open-mindedness inherent in compounded perceptions are attributes of critical importance in dealing with a complex issue such as sexually explicit materials where boundaries between the functional and dysfunctional are constantly shifting, where tolerance for sharply divergent views are necessary in order to balance sexual freedom which is a contradiction of the human condition, on the one hand, and excessive regulation of pornography which is a denial of the pornographic deep within ourselves, on the other (Wolfe, 1990).

#### *Suggestions for Further Study*

While this study's model demonstrated the greater salience of intrapersonal correlates in the

respondents' perceptions of sexually explicit materials which suggests the highly personal nature of such materials, the non-emergence of structural factors as significant correlates can be an indication of a specification error in the model. Therefore, future models of perceptions must incorporate more predictive structural predictors. Some possible structural regressors are extent of formal sex education, region where respondent spent most of his or her life (East Coast, West Coast, Midwest, Deep South), proximity of residence to an adult bookstore, experience of family violence, peer influence, and extent of conversations about sex in the family among others. To strengthen the personality factors, reliance on self-assessments of sex life satisfaction must be replaced by the use of valid and reliable scales such as Snell and Papini's (1989) Sexuality Scale. Similarly, subjective evaluations of outlook on sexual matters and issues must be supplanted by the use of a more valid and reliable scale such as Hendrick and Hendrick's (1987) Sexual Attitudes Scale. A measure of sexual arousal to pornography and an index which will capture a respondent's experiences of rape, sexual harassment, or sexual assault will also prove valuable. Incorporating these variables into the models generated by this study will hopefully yield a more insightful understanding of how people's perceptions of sexually explicit materials are shaped.

#### NOTES ON THE AUTHOR

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