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Alan McKee[a]
[a] Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia
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Humanities and social scientific research methods in porn studies

Alan McKee*

Creative Industries Faculty, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

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Porn studies researchers in the humanities have tended to use different research methods from those in social sciences. There has been surprisingly little conversation between the groups about methodology. This article presents a basic introduction to textual analysis and statistical analysis, aiming to provide for all porn studies researchers a familiarity with these two quite distinct traditions of data analysis. Comparing these two approaches, the article suggests that social science approaches are often strongly reliable – but can sacrifice validity to this end. Textual analysis is much less reliable, but has the capacity to be strongly valid. Statistical methods tend to produce a picture of human beings as groups, in terms of what they have in common, whereas humanities approaches often seek out uniqueness. Social science approaches have asked a more limited range of questions than have the humanities. The article ends with a call to mix up the kinds of research methods that are applied to various objects of study.

Keywords: pornography; methodology; quantitative; qualitative; textual analysis; statistical analysis; reliability; validity

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Introduction

In 2011, Foubert, Brosi and Bannon wrote in the journal *Sex Addiction and Compulsivity* that 'It is difficult to find a methodologically sound study that shows a lack of some kind of harm when men view pornography' (Foubert, Brosi, and Bannon 2011, 213–214). In the area of porn studies, methodology – the study of research methods – is particularly important. The authors' claim refers to quantitative research in the discipline of psychology, but there exist other research methods in other disciplines that produce quite different forms of knowledge. The authors' comment suggests that they are not familiar with the variety of research methods available to researchers in porn studies, and this is not uncommon. There has been surprisingly little discussion between researchers who use statistical research methods and humanities researchers who use approaches such as textual analysis about the ways in which their research methods function, the different ways in which they produce knowledge, and the implications of these epistemological differences for our understandings of pornography as a phenomenon. This article aims to contribute to just such a discussion.

*Email: a.mckee@qut.edu.au

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How to read this article

This article takes a slightly unusual approach. It starts by presenting a basic introduction to one of the key methods of data analysis from the humanities – textual analysis – and one of the key methods of the social sciences – statistical analysis – so that readers by the end of the article will, hopefully, have an understanding of each of them. The risk with such an approach is that many readers will already be consummate practitioners of textual analysis – for them, this section will feel like something targeted at undergraduate students rather than something suitable for an academic research journal. But hopefully, for those readers, the discussion of statistical methods might be original and useful. Conversely, for other readers who have been practicing statistical methods of data analysis for 30 years, the section of the article introducing those methods, will feel embarrassingly familiar. But hopefully, for them, the section on textual analysis will be illuminating. It is my hope that by the end of the article there will be few readers who feel that they have not learned anything about research methods, and an increased number of readers who feel that they now have a basic understanding of both textual and statistical modes of analysis. I then go on to identify a number of differences between humanities and social scientific approaches to porn studies, and make a call to mix-up our research methods and objects of study.

Why write about research methods?

I have been researching and publishing on pornography since 1997. In those 16 years I have done many different things with pornography. My first degree was in film studies, and I began by subjecting pornographic films to the same kinds of textual analysis that I had been trained to apply to film noir, musicals and German expressionism (McKee 1997). I moved to Queensland University of Technology, a university that led the way in Australia in analyses of cultural policy, and so found myself exploring what would happen if you tried to take a governmental policy-studies analysis to pornography (McKee 2001). Then I applied for, and won, my first research grant, to study pornography in Australia from the perspectives of production, content and consumption. This led me to explore a series of other approaches to pornography – including quantitative analyses of the texts of pornography alongside surveys and interviews to gather data about the ways in which it was made and the ways in which it was consumed (McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008). I had always been interested in entertainment more generally, and my interest in the aesthetic systems employed in the evaluation of entertainment by its consumers led me to edit a collection that included a chapter exploring the aesthetic system of pornography (McKee 2007). As I explored the ways in which it is possible to study pornography, and the ways in which different methods of data gathering and data analysis produced different kinds of information – indeed, in some ways, produced different objects of study and different meanings of the word 'pornography' – I published some of my insights into these issues (McKee 2009).

And so it was with delight that I received an invitation from Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood to contribute to this journal an article about research methods for studying pornography. I have written before about some of the philosophical differences underlying social scientific and humanities approaches to studying pornography (McKee 2009) and so in this article I take a slightly different approach.

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As I suggest above, there has been surprisingly little conversation between porn studies researchers from different disciplines about their practices of data gathering and data analysis. In this article I wanted to provide at least some sense for practitioners of textual analysis and of statistical analysis of what it is that the other does. In the genre of the academic journal article it is not possible to provide an overview of every possible research method and its relationship to porn studies (I did try that in the first draft of this article, resulting in a piece that discussed 27 different methods and was over 10,000 words long, judged by referees to be unreadable and the editors of this journal as unpublishable). It is for this reason that I chose to provide a brief introduction to textual analysis and statistical analysis, to illustrate the use of these methods in porn studies, and to take them as a starting point for a discussion of the implications of these different approaches.

Textual analysis

Textual analysis is one of the key research methods of the humanities. Despite this fact it is difficult to find a straightforward description of textual analysis, or a step-by-step guide as to how to do it. The humanities have not traditionally been rigorous in reflecting on or accounting for their own research methods. I was once asked to write a guide to doing textual analysis (see McKee 2003), and in the course of writing it I realized that there are a series of different forms of textual analysis in the humanities that – at least in my experience – are not generally made explicit as research methods. So in this article I draw out what seem to me to be four common types of textual analysis – even if they are not usually recognized as such. I should emphasize that these are not familiar or settled research methods. This is exploratory writing.

Textual analysis: ideological

The first of my forms of textual analysis is *ideological*. Such an approach looks for hidden ideologies in a text – such as patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, and so on. This form of textual analysis is characterized by a lack of interest in the surface level of what texts *appear* to be saying, and also a lack of interest in what interpretations audiences *say* they make of texts. This approach also tends to look for negative interpretations of a text – no matter how positive a text might appear on the surface, ideological textual analysis aims to find a negative reading (Albury 2009, 648). This approach to the study of pornography has been extremely popular. In one example, Jensen and Dines conducted an 'interpretive analysis' of 14 pornographic videos, at each point looking for a negative interpretation of material. For example, they found that there were no videos in their sample that included rape scenes – and they describe this finding in the following way:

> While some pornographic videos portray women as reluctant or prudish, in need of being coaxed or coerced into having sex, the women in the videos in our sample never said no and were always immediately ready for sexual activity … In short, virtually all women in the videos were portrayed as 'nymphomaniacs'. (Jensen and Dines 1998, 73)

At each point where a number of interpretations are possible – for example, the fact that there is no coercion of women in the sample of videos analyzed could be

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interpreted as a sign of women's consent or agency – ideological textual analysis seeks a negative interpretation.

Textual analysis: poststructural

The second form of textual analysis I propose is poststructural – by which I mean an analysis of a text that makes an informed guess about the meanings of that text made by the audiences who consume it (I explain why I use the term 'poststructural' for this form of textual analysis in McKee [2003, 9–13]). This form of textual analysis is interested in surface meanings, believing that these provide us with useful information about how populations make sense of their world (as to the question why, if we are interested in the meanings that audiences actually make of texts, we do not just interview them to find out rather than doing textual analysis; see McKee 2003, 83–89). In an instance of this kind of textual analysis, Margaret Henderson analyzes two lesbian-produced Australian pornographic magazines, *Wicked Women* and *Slit*. She considers the texts themselves, the genre in which they operate, the industrial context of their production, their likely audiences and the wider cultural context, and uses this information to produce situated interpretations of the texts to support her argument that these magazines 'put pornography in the service of lesbians to de/mystify lesbian flesh: to show lesbians the real and unreal relations of the lesbian and her kind' (Henderson 2013, 178).

Textual analysis: appreciation

This form of textual analysis is most common in the disciplines of literary studies, film studies and visual arts. Writers taking this approach celebrate the text (often understood as a work of art), talking about its beauty or other aesthetic achievements. In academic studies of pornography it is rare to find this form of textual analysis applied to pornographic texts themselves. Mark McLelland's chapter 'The Best Website for Men Who Have Sex with Men', which takes the form of an appreciation of a sexually explicit website, might be a taken as an example of this category:

> I enjoy CFS primarily as a discursive space – it offers me visual, but importantly, narrative pleasure. It is a subversive space – as insulting to mainstream heterosexual norms as it is to a new homonormative gay orthodoxy that sees gay 'liberation' in assimilating those very norms. In other words, CFS is *fully sick*. (McLelland 2007, 83)

Textual analysis: exegesis

My final category of textual analysis (and I emphasize again that these are not settled and broadly accepted categories – I developed them when I returned to textual analysis as a method of analyzing data and tried to understand exactly what academics do under that rubric) is exegesis. When using this approach the writer explains the ideas that are put forward by a text. This approach is most commonly used by academics in the analysis of books by other academics. However, it is increasingly being applied to non-academic texts, as in Thomas McLaughlin's (1996) exegesis of the intellectual work of blues songs. Kobena Mercer has taken this

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approach to pornography, for example, explaining the intellectual work of Robert Mapplethorpe's gay nudes:

> … the shocking modernism that informs the ironic juxtaposition of elements drawn from the repository of high culture – where the nude is indeed one of the most valued genres in Western art history – can be read as a subversive recording of the normative aesthetic ideal. In this view it becomes possible to reverse the reading of racial festishism in Mapplethorpe's work, not as a repetition of racist fantasies but as a deconstructive strategy that lays bare psychic and social relations of ambivalence in the representation of race and sexuality. (Mercer 1991, 186–187)

This approach may seem similar to textual analysis for appreciation. I would argue that appreciation can take a number of forms, while exegesis is a subset of appreciation that is particularly interested in the *ideas* that are offered by a text.

This approach can also include writing about pornography that refers only to previous academic or activist writing about pornography but does not gather any new data from outside those genres. For example, Ullen publishes an article where he engages with the writing of philosopher Rae Langton, who claims that speech act theory helps us to understand how pornography works. Ullen examines her ideas, and the ideas of John Austin about speech act theory, in order to argue that Langton's claim is unconvincing (Ullen 2013).

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Statistical analysis

Quantitative research is a key aspect of social scientific porn studies, and the use of statistical analysis is a key element of quantitative research. Generally speaking, the social sciences are more rigorous than the humanities in their approach to research methods. Methods are explicitly spelled out and taught to undergraduate students. It is expected in most pieces of social science research that you will make explicit what methods of data gathering and data analysis were used to produce your results. The four forms of statistical analysis presented below are likely to be familiar to most social scientists.

Statistical analysis: regression analysis

Regression analyses are used to quantify the relationships between variables – particularly how a change in an independent variable will affect a dependent variable. This has been the most common statistical approach to studies in pornography, typically used to investigate whether exposure to pornography is related to attitudes towards women or attitudes towards sex. Braun-Courville and Rojas surveyed 433 adolescents, and then subjected the data to regression analysis. They write that:

> Binary logistic regression analyses revealed that adolescents exposed to [Sexually Explicit Websites] were significantly more likely to have multiple lifetime sexual partners, more than one sexual partner in the last three months, used alcohol or other substances at last sexual encounter, and ever engaged in anal sex. (Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009, 159)

The biggest issue for pornographic research using regression analysis is the difference between correlation – two things happen at the same time – and causality – one thing causes the other to happen. Psychological research into pornography using statistical methods has consistently confused correlation with causality. For example, Braun-Colville and Rojas find that consuming pornography is related to various other sexually permissive acts. And like all researchers who do cross-sectional surveys they state explicitly that they can't say anything about causality:

> We are unable to establish whether exposure to sexually explicit materials leads to engagement in sexual behavior or whether those individuals who partake in more high-risk sexual behaviors also have a tendency to seek out sexually explicit Web sites. (Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009, 161)

But despite this explicit acknowledgement, they write their article – as do many psychologists using statistical approaches to the effects of pornography – from the assumption that it is pornography which is causing the other sexual behaviours, throughout the paper making statements about 'the Internet's impact on adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviors' (Braun-Courville and Rojas 2009, 156) and claiming that 'prolonged exposure [to pornography] can lead to … sexually permissive attitudes' (2009, 158). They do this even though, as they themselves note, 'Whether visiting sexual explicit Web sites leads to engagement in high-risk sexual behaviors or vice versa cannot be established from this study' (2009, 160).

Statistical analysis: factor analysis and structural equation modeling

These forms of statistical analysis are employed in exploratory work and allow researchers to understand the structure of the data or reduce numbers of variables. For example Hald surveyed 699 young heterosexual Danish adults to find out if there were gender differences in situational, interpersonal and behavioral characteristics of pornography consumption. He found that four variables of pornography consumption were highly correlated – 'average time of use per week, frequency of use, pornography consumption when having sexual activity on one's own and exposure patterns of pornography within the last twelve months' (Hald 2006, 580). He conducted factor analysis on the four variables to see whether they could be combined into a single measure – 'Pornography consumption' – and found that it was meaningful to use the single measure.

Statistical analysis: cluster analysis

Cluster analysis is used to organize respondents into groups. Lottes (1985) surveyed 395 people to see whether they formed coherent groups in regard to their attitudes towards abortion, biological differences between the sexes, pornography and what constitutes sexual normality. Applying a cluster analysis she found that the sample fell into four groups. The first group had the most permissive sexual attitudes – including towards pornography – were less likely to believe that differences between the sexes were biological and reported the lowest frequency of religious service attendance. The second group gave least support for egalitarian gender role attitudes but 'weak to high' support for sexually permissive views, favorable views on pornography, and weak support for abortion and homosexuality. The third group

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reported a 'moderate' rate of religious service attendance, had the highest support for egalitarian gender roles, low rates of acceptance for pornography, and moderate support for abortion and homosexuality. The fourth group had the highest rate of religious service attendance, the highest mean age, low support for egalitarian gender role attitudes, and consistently sexually restrictive attitudes. This was the only group that consistently disapproved of both pornography and homosexuality and 'attributed gender behavioral differences more to heredity than social conditioning' (Lottes 1985, 417).

Statistical analysis: analyses of variance

The t-test and analysis of variance are used to detect differences between groups of respondents. Lo and Wei surveyed 2628 college and high school students to see whether the third-person effect in relation to internet pornography (the belief that other people are more vulnerable to negative effects than oneself) is mediated by gender. They asked respondents to 'estimate the likely negative effects of "surfing pornographic websites" on moral values, attitudes towards the opposite sex, sexual knowledge, sexual attitudes and sexual behavior' (Lo and Wei 2002, 21). Applying a t-test to the results, they found that 'female respondents were more likely than male respondents to perceive other male students to be more negatively influenced by Internet pornography' (2002, 23–24).

Reliability and validity

As I noted above, the humanities have tended to be less rigorous in their methodology than have the social sciences. Some concepts drawn from the vocabulary of social sciences methodology can usefully be applied to humanities methods – and to the differences between humanities and social sciences approaches to porn studies. The terms 'reliability' and 'validity' will be familiar to any readers trained in the social sciences – although their application to a humanities method such as textual analysis might not be. As for readers trained in the humanities, it is perfectly possible to get through an entire program of research training in the humanities (as I did) without ever being introduced to these terms (although this might be less true for younger researchers – certainly the research training our PhD students in my Creative Industries Faculty receive these days is more rigorous than anything I was ever exposed to).

And so, for those readers like me who may not have a familiarity with these terms, a brief summary – reliability describes the extent to which a method will produce the same data each time it is applied, regardless of who is doing the analysis. Validity describes the extent to which data actually describe what is happening in the situation that is being studied. Some research methods are more 'reliable' than others, while some are more 'valid'. Sometimes these two characteristics can work together, but at others they can come into conflict. Take the example of a statistical content analysis of pornography (where you count the number of times a certain thing happens in pornography) compared with a textual analysis (where you describe in words what happens in pornography). Content analysis has a high reliability – once you have created a definition of what you are counting, then, using the same collection of pornographic movies, any researcher can come up with the same

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results. By contrast, textual analysis relies more on individual expertise: if you were exploring the question 'What are the power relations in 1984 gay porn video *Powertool*?' using textual analysis, two different researchers could come up with two quite different answers, based on their knowledge of the genre, audiences, visual language, and so on.

But, at the same, while content analysis can have high reliability it can also risk low validity. The process of counting allows for little flexibility or nuance, and so once you have your definition in place you have to keep on counting – even if the interpretations that you end up making do not match the ways in which a text is interpreted in the real world. So if you are counting aggression in pornography, for example, once you have your definition – say 'any purposeful action causing physical or psychological harm to oneself or another person' (Bridges et al. 2010, 1072) – then you have to count everything that might fall under that definition. This would include consensual spanking, for example – where one person asks that another spanks them, and then says 'I love that. It's so sexy'. In a content analysis using the above definition, this would have to be counted as an instance of aggression, even if it does not match up with what many people are concerned about when they say they want to reduce violence in pornography. Content analysis does not allow for such caveats, you just find out that 'On the whole, the pornographic scenes analyzed in this study were aggressive; only 10.2% (n = 31) of scenes did not contain an aggressive act' – even if most of them were consensual (Bridges et al. 2010, 1075).

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Common factors versus uniqueness

A second point about the different kinds of knowledge produced by a humanities approach such as textual analysis compared with a social scientific approach such as statistical analysis concerns their different orientations towards similarity and difference. Large-scale surveys can provide a good sense of what large populations have in common but they are not much good at letting you understand the individual idiosyncrasies of how particular groups or people make sense of the world – they favor commonality rather than uniqueness. On the other hand, textual analysis is often applied to texts that are idiosyncratic rather than representative – texts that show how things could be done differently, which are surprisingly transgressive or creative or insightful. In those texts it is their very lack of representativeness that is prized.

The kinds of questions asked

Finally it is worth making explicit that research methods can only answer the questions the researcher asks. This is so obvious that it hardly bears mentioning – except for the concomitant argument that therefore no research method can be objective. I have written before about the different understandings of the concept of objectivity in the humanities and social sciences (McKee 2009, 631–635). In the humanities it is now generally accepted that no piece of research can be objective, in the sense of considering every possible point of view about an area of study. By contrast, much social science work remains committed to the belief that researchers can be properly impartial and let the facts speak for themselves. In reconciling these

approaches it is useful to think about the questions that have been asked about pornography. There exist hundreds of articles that use statistical methods to attempt to discover whether consuming pornography causes men to have negative attitudes towards women. But I have not come across any articles that use statistical attempt to discover whether consuming pornography leads to more open levels of communication about sexuality, or to a better level of acceptance of one's sexual identity, or higher levels of sexual agency. The studies that explore the question of whether consuming pornography causes men to have negative attitudes towards women is good social science that gathers and analyzes its data in appropriate ways. But the research tradition in pornography can never be 'objective' in a more everyday sense of that word because it can never ask every possible question about its area of study. There will always be possible approaches, issues, voices and concerns that are excluded from the research. Much of the statistical work on pornography has focused on the homogeneous and the unitary – what is the (single) effect that pornography has on everyone who consumes it?

By contrast, textual analyses of pornography have tended to address a wider range of questions – exploring not only the ways in which pornography might represent women in ways that are sexist or violent, but also representations of domesticity in amateur pornography (Albury 1997), the porn star as brand (Nikunen and Paasonen 2007), and pornography and breastfeeding (Giles 2002), among many other topics. This is not to say that there is any essence of textual analysis that makes it more suited to answering a wide range of questions: it is rather that, historically, statistical forms of analysis in porn studies have tended to focus on a more rigidly confined series of questions.

Conclusion

Foubert, Brosi and Bannon, following their contention that 'It is difficult to find a methodologically sound study that shows a lack of some kind of harm when men view pornography' (Foubert, Brosi, and Bannon 2011, 213–214) go on to use a t-test on survey results to find that 'men who saw mainstream pornography scored significantly higher on self-reporting likelihood of raping and likelihood of committing sexual assault than men who did not see mainstream pornography during the last 12 months' (2011, 221–222). But this is only one aspect of thinking about the relationships between pornography, individual consumers, and the cultures and society within which it is consumed. Clarissa Smith (2002), for example, has suggested in her qualitative research a whole range of responses that pornography might provoke – such as boredom, disappointment or embarrassment. At this moment in the history of porn studies I am not aware of any statistical work that attempts to measure the extent and importance of those responses to the genre. But would it not be interesting to find out? What becomes clear from studying the different research methods that are applied to pornography is that porn studies can benefit from conversations about methodology across disciplines, and from more creative mixes of research methods with objects of study. We are starting to see statistical methods applied to original topics – such as the experiences of women who appear in pornography (Griffith et al. 2013). But there still remain many issues that have never been subject to statistical analysis, and many aspects of textual analysis that could benefit from the rigor about methodology typically applied in the social

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sciences. We have barely scratched the surface of the work to be done – which is wonderful news to report in the first issue of a brand new journal devoted to the area of porn studies.

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