



Explore Sexual Scripts in Sex Comics Distributed in China: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

Previous content analyses on pornography primarily focused on materials consumed in Western societies (i.e., North America and Europe). Yet, little research has been conducted on pornographic materials in non-Western cultures. The present study aims to explore sexual scripts in sex comics disseminated in China. 40 comics were selected from the top rank list of one popular sexual comics app and was analyzed based on three indexes: sexual objectification (indicated by close-ups, ejaculations, gaping, and stripping), sexual agency (indicated by self-touch and initiation of sex), and violence (e.g., physical violence, verbal violence, and coercive sex). Significant gender differences emerged on these measures, with female characters more frequently being treated as sex objects and victims of aggression and less likely to initiate sex. In addition, although physical and verbal violence was not uncommon, the majority of the scenes portrayed coerced sex. The findings suggest that Chinese mainstream sex comics represents a “softer” male-dominated culture compared with Western societies.

Keywords: pornography, scripting theory, sexual objectification, sexual agency, sexual violence

1. Introduction

The development of sex comics (erotic manga)

Dominated by Japan, comics for adults—sex comics (which can also be termed erotic manga) have been a dynamic industry in East Asia. The origin of contemporary sex comics can be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s in Japan. Since then, the market of adult comics quickly expanded and peaked in the 1970s and 1980s. A national survey in 1993 among Japanese teenagers showed that around 50% of males and 20% of females had previous exposure to sex comics (Tjaden, cited in Diamond & Ayako, 1999). Nevertheless, the boom of sex comics also led to widespread public concerns about the potentially harmful effects on children (Diamond & Ayako, 1999). Consequently, the Japanese government issued a series of strict legislations to control sexual expression in media (Kaoru et al., 2021).

In the twenty-first century, the sex comics industry has become more diverse. The Internet facilitates the diffusion of comics, which brings new opportunities to this industry (Kaoru et al., 2021). In China, although pornographic materials are illegal, consumers can still access them



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in the black market. Recent news of several Chinese sex comics apps suggested that their sales exceeded one hundred million. (Nanfang Metropolis Daily, 2022). Another piece of news on some sex comics websites found that nearly one million viewers browsed these websites and 70% of whom were juveniles (youthzqw, 2020).

1.2. Pornography and sexual socialization

The concept of sexual scripts has been utilized in previous studies to understand media representations (Fritz & Paul, 2017; Mukai et al., 2022; Vannier et al., 2013; Zhou & Paul, 2016). According to the sexual script theory, people's sexual desires and sexual conducts follow specific sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). They define normal sexuality and answer questions like why should people have sex? With whom? When? Where? And how should we have sex (Kimmel, 2012; Simon & Gagnon, 2003; Wiederman, 2005)?

Importantly, members of a particular culture learn sexual scripts through socialization (Kimmel, 2005). Thus, pornographic materials can influence individuals by shaping their sexual scripts. Wright (2011) introduced a multi-component model to explain this process, which consists of three components: Acquisition, Activation, and Application. Acquisition refers to individuals learn a new sexual script from pornographic materials. An activation effect is the retrieval of acquired sexual scripts via media exposure. Lastly, individuals perform learned scripts through application. Based on this model, it is necessary to investigate pornography's content to understand what sexual scripts viewers could acquire.

1.3. The objectifying, agentic, and violent scripts in pornography

Previous studies recognized several sexual scripts in pornography: sexual objectification, sexual agency, and sexual violence (Fritz & Paul, 2017). Objectification was often used interchangeably with degradation and dehumanization (Cowan & Campbell, 1994; Cowan & Dunn, 1994; McKee, 2005; Prince, 1990). The current study adopted Fredrickson and Roberts's (1997) definition of objectification, which referred to "the experience of being treated as bodies (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others". Pornography researchers have identified several embodiments of objectification: Close-ups of body parts like the genitals (Cowan et al., 1988; Fritz & Paul, 2017), men ejaculate on a women's body parts (e.g., face and breasts) (Schauer, 2005), women strip or pose to arouse the man, non-normative sexual acts position women as sexual instruments (Fritz & Paul, 2017; Zillmann, 1989).

Most researchers argued that mainstream pornographic materials tended to objectify women more than men (Cowan et al., 1988; Fritz & Paul, 2017; Klaassen & Peter, 2014). Whereas a few researchers proposed that pornography did not objectify women more than men. Evidence supported that the iconography of pornography contained more information about female characters (e.g., faces, social identities) (Gossett, 2002; McKee, 2005; Palys, 1986; Prince, 1990), which appeared to attach greater agency to female characters. However, such conclusions must be drawn cautiously because mainstream pornography is indeed about male sexuality (Bloom et al., 2016; Brosius et al., 1993). The relative anonymity of male characters



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enables observers to better identify with them, i.e., see through the eyes of the penetrators, which embodies the objectifying gaze (Gossett, 2002).

Unlike objectification, the sexual agency has not been well-defined (Grower, 2018). Curtin et al. (2011) conceptualized sexual agency as the ability to refuse unwanted sex and to communicate pleasurable and safe sex (e.g., use contraception), which consisted of sexual assertiveness and sexual self-efficacy. Based on this definition, a later study proposed a third subcomponent of sexual agency—sexual embodiment (Fritz & Paul, 2017), the ability to experience sexual pleasure (Curtin et al., 2011).

Although not using the term “sexual agency”, many previous content analyses examined measures that captured sexual agency. The results were contradictory, however. Male characters typically displayed more orgasms than females (Fritz & Paul, 2017; Klaassen & Peter, 2014; McKee, 2005). Vannier, et al. (2013) found that it was more likely for males to control the pace/direction of sexual activities than females. Nonetheless, some studies observed no gender differences in the initiation of sex (Klaassen & Peter, 2014; Vannier et al., 2013), or more women as the initiators (McKee, 2005). Mukai and collaborators’ (2022) examined the top best-selling sex comics in 2010 and 2020. They found that there were more female initiators in 2010, but more males in 2020.

Researchers disagree on the definitions of violence. Although they generally include physically violent acts in the definition, it is controversial whether scholars should consider perpetrators’ intentions and targets’ responses (Bridges et al., 2010; Klaassen & Peter, 2014). Donnerstein et al., (1987), for example, maintained that behaviors should be coded as violence if the perpetrators attempt to harm the recipients intentionally. While other researchers, like Bridges and colleagues (2010), coded consensual physically aggressive acts (e.g., sadomasochistic practices) as violence. They pointed out that most violent behaviors in pornography were consensual (Barron & Kimmel, 2000), which may normalize aggression and promote the rape myth: “when a woman says no, she means yes”; “women enjoy rape”..... (Edwards et al., 2011).

There are disagreements over the relationship between violence and objectification (Bridges et al., 2010). For instance, Fritz and Paul (2017) conceived sexual violence as a blatant subtype of sexual objectification. Whereas Klaassen and Peter (2014) took objectification and violence as two independent concepts. Rai and cooperators (2017) argued that many perpetrators believe their victims deserve to be punished and their behaviors are just. In such cases, perpetrators should “humanize” the victims to make their violent acts meaningful, which is inconsistent with the logic of objectification. Thus, the present study treated violence and objectification as two separate concepts.

Because of different definitions, previous studies varied on the prevalence of violence, ranging from 1.9% (McKee, 2005) to 88.2% (Bridges et al., 2010). Cross-media research displayed that Internet pornography included more violent scenes than print pornography. Also, more non-consensual sexual violence scenes were found in Internet pornography (Barron & Kimmel, 2000). Other content analyses showed that pornography typically depicted males as



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perpetrators and females as targets (e.g., Cowan & Campbell, 1994; Fritz & Paul, 2017). With an exception of Barron and Kimmel's (2000) research, in which more than half of perpetrators occurred in magazines were females. As for target responses, Bridges and collaborators (2010) reported that 95.1% of targets demonstrated pleasant or neutral expressions in response to aggression.

1.4. The current study

The objective of the present study is to examine sexual scripts diffused in China. I asked the following research questions:

1. To what extent does ero-comics objectify men and women?
2. To what extent does ero-comics display sexual agency of men and women?
3. To what extent does ero-comics depict violence against men and women?

2. Method

2.1. Sample

The comics was selected from PicACG, one of the most popular comics databases in China (QianZhan, 2022). The majority of the comics on PicACG were from Japan and then introduced by Chinese scanlators. Other comics were from China, South Korea, and some English-speaking countries. To obtain the sample, 40 mainstream sex comics was randomly selected from the weekly and monthly top comics list in September and October. Of all comics, 36 were produced in Japan, the remaining comics were from China and Korea.

Based on prior studies, the coding unit was a scene (Bridges et al., 2010; Fritz & Paul, 2017; Prince, 1990). The sex scenes were defined differently based on the length of the comics. For short stories (fewer than 70 pages), a scene was defined as the whole story. For long stories with more than 70 pages, a scene was considered to end when the setting changed, or a break occurred, or the primary characters changed. In rare instances that the comics contained multiple chapters, the coders coded the first sex scene from one random chapter. In total, the sample consisted of 26 long stories and 14 short stories; the average number of coding pages was 44.

2.2. Coding process

The coding was conducted by three coders: the author and two assistants. All coders were female, aged 20 to 21, and had a psychology background. The coders had little exposure to sex comics before the involvement of the present research. Before coding, the coders were given a training session to familiarize themselves with the coding scheme. After the training, the coders test-coded 10 comics independently and met twice to discuss the disagreements in detail. The coding scheme was adjusted after the pilot coding.

In final coding, the author coded all 40 comics, and the two assistants independently coded 20 random comics. The author used the percentage of agreement to compute inter-rater reliability because it was used in previous studies (e.g., Bridges et al., 2010; Fritz & Paul, 2017; Klaassen & Peter, 2014). Additionally, researchers suggested that reliability tests like



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Krippendorff's Alpha will be skewed for dichotomous variables, thereby generating reliability coefficients much lower than the percentage of agreement (Paul & Zhou, 2016; Riffe et al., 2019). One variable was removed because the reliability was lower than 80%. The agreement across coders for other variables ranged from 0.98 to 0.85 (see table 4). Coders recoded the scenes when it was considered necessary.

2.3. Coding schemes

2.3.1. Sexual objectification index

Objectification was defined as “treating someone as a sexual object or a plaything” (Cowan & Dunn, 1994). It was divided into five categories: a) close-up on genitals, b) gaping of the anus or vagina, c) stripping, d) external ejaculation on the body (chest and above), e) non-normative sexual acts. There is no universal standard for non-normative sexual behaviors (Bridges et al., 2010; Cowan et al., 1988; Dietz & Sears, 1988; Fritz & Paul, 2017; McKee, 2005). The current study specifies five kinds of non-normative sex: double penetration, anal penetration by penis or inanimate objects, ass-to-mouth (ATM) sequence, female-to-male cunnilingus, and male-to-female cunnilingus.

2.3.2. Sexual agency index

The current study employed a modified definition of sexual agency, which was defined as the ability to assert sexual choices and negotiate sexual pleasures (Fritz & Paul, 2017). It was operationalized with three indicators: initiation of sex, touching one's genitals, and direction of sex. The direction of sex was later discarded because yielding low agreement.

2.3.3. Sexual violence index

The current study adopted Bridges and colleagues (2010) definition of violence, which was “any purposeful action that aims to cause physical or psychological harm to oneself or another person”. This definition did not require the targets to express resistance or displeasure, and thus better conformed to the depiction of aggression in pornography in which targets usually seem to enjoy the aggressive acts. Based on previous studies, violence was operationalized with three variables: coerced sex, physical violence, and verbal violence (Klaassen & Peter, 2014; McKee, 2005). Specifically, there were three subcategories of coerced sex: nonconsensual sex (being forced into having sex against someone's will), being manipulated into sex (e.g., being deceived, hypnotized), and being intoxicated (e.g., being influenced by alcohol; extended from Klaassen & Peter, 2014). The author generated the list of physical violence based on Bridges et al.'s study (2010), which included 16 acts: a) spanking, b) pinching, c) pushing, d) pulling hair, e) open-hand slapping, f) choking, g) bondage, h) penis slapping, i) mutilating, j) kicking, l) closed-fist punching, m) gagging, n) using weapons, o) threatening with weapons, p) attempting murder, and r) other. There were two subtypes of verbal violence a) threatening physical harm and b) name calling.



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Moreover, for every instance of violence, the coders used the PAT technique to tally the perpetrator's gender (P), the target's gender (T), and the specific type of aggressive acts (A). Additionally, targets' responses to aggression were also distinguished, which involved two subtypes: a) the target displayed pleasant or neutral responses b) the target displayed displeasing responses.

2.4. Data analysis

McNemar tests on paired nominal data were performed to understand the gender differences in three indexes. 1 ("Yes") and 0 ("No") were used to indicate the presence and non-presence for each category.

3. Result

3.1. Objectification

The first research question concerned about gender differences in objectification. A McNemar test showed that close-up of female genitals (82.5% of the scenes; $n = 33$) appeared significantly more often than close-ups of male genitals (17.5% of the scenes; $n = 7$), $\chi^2(1, 40) = 17.926, p < .001$. Portrayals of stripping were observed only for women, which took place in 22.5% ($n = 9$) of the scenes. As for the other objectification indicators, external cumshot on a female character's body occurred in 50% ($n = 20$) of the scenes; gaping occurred in 45% ($n = 18$) of the scenes. As for non-normative sexual acts, 10% ($n = 4$) of the scenes had double penetration. Depictions of anal penetration (7.5% of the scenes; $n = 3$) and Female-to-Male cunnilingus (5% of the scenes; $n = 2$) were rare. The ATM sequence and Male-to-Female cunnilingus were not observed.

Table 1: Frequency and Types of Objectification and Agency indicators

Content	<i>n</i>	% of scenes	<i>p</i>
Objectification			
Close-up on Male genitals	7	17.5	0.000
Close-up Female genitals	33	82.5	
Gaping	18	45	
Cumshot	20	50	
Stripping	9	22.5	
Double penetration	4	10	
Anal Penetration	3	7.5	
Female-to-Male cunnilingus	2	5	
Agency			
Initiation of sex (Male)	21	52.5	0.003
Initiation of sex (Female)	5	12.5	



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Self-Touch (Male)	0	0	0.250
Self-Touch (Female)	4	10	

3.2. Agency

The second research question asked the extent to which ero-comics demonstrates the sexual agency of men and women. Across all scenes, most sexual behaviors were initiated by male characters (52.5% of the scenes; $n = 21$), whereas only 12.5% ($n = 5$) of the scenes had female characters initiate sex. McNemar $\chi^2(1, 40) = 8.654, p < .05$. Men were significantly more likely to be depicted as the initiators of sex. As for self-touch, only four scenes (10% of the scenes) included masturbation, all performed by females. No scenes had male character masturbated. There were no gender differences regarding self-touch, McNemar (1, 40), $p = .25$.

Table 2: Frequency and Types of Violence

	<i>n</i>	% of scenes
Coerced sex	21	52.5
Nonconsensual	16	40
Manipulated	8	20
Intoxicated	2	5
Physical aggression	6	15
Pulling hair	2	5
Spanking	2	5
Gaging	2	5
Bondage	3	7.5
Verbal aggression	6	15
Name-calling	6	15

3.3. Violence

Table 2 is a summary of the frequency of violence. In total, 33 violent acts had been observed. The majority of the scenes analyzed in the study contained coerced sex (52.5% of the scenes; $n = 21$). Nonconsensual sex occurred most frequently in coerced sex (40% of the scenes; $n = 16$). Less frequent were being manipulated into sex (20% of the scenes; $n = 8$) and being intoxicated (5% of the scenes; $n = 2$). Only a total of 12 physically and verbally violent acts were found, which accounted for 15% ($n = 6$) of the scenes respectively. All expressions of verbal violence were name-calling. The most common physical violence was bondage (7.5%; $n = 3$), followed by spanking (5%; $n = 2$), gaging (5%; $n = 2$), and pulling hair (5%; $n = 2$). Other forms of physical violence were not found.

Consistent with previous research (Bridges et al., 2010; McKee, 2005; Klaassen & Peter, 2014), significant gender differences emerged for the perpetrators and the targets' genders. Men were overwhelmingly the perpetrators of sexual violence, committing 97% ($n = 32$) of the violent acts, $\chi^2 = 27.273, p < .001$. By contrast, women were much more likely to be depicted as the recipients of violence, $\chi^2(1, 33) = 23.758, p < .001$. 94% ($n = 31$) of the violent acts



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depicted women as targets. As for the target responses, 76% ($n = 25$) of targets responded positively or neutrally with violence, which was significantly more likely to happen than negative responses (24% of the acts; $n = 8$), $\chi^2(1, 33) = 7.758, p < .05$.

Table 3: Perpetrators, Targets, and Responses

	<i>n</i>	% of acts	<i>p</i>
Perpetrator			
Male	32	96.97	0.000
Female	1	3.03	
Target			
Male	2	6.1	0.000
Female	31	93.9	
Target Response			
Positive or neutral	25	75.76	0.005
Negative	8	24.24	

4. Discussion and Future Directions

4.1. Discussion

The primary contribution of this study is that it is the first systematic analysis of the objectifying, agentic, and violent scripts in sex comics. The results suggested a gender gap in objectification, with female characters more likely to be depicted as sexual objects than males. Among all sexually objectifying acts, close-ups on female sexual areas (82.5%), external ejaculation on a woman's body (50%), and gaping (45%) had the highest occurrence rates. Previous content analyses on other pornographic media also reported high rates of the abovementioned sexual behaviors (e.g., Bridges et al., 2010; Fritz & Paul, 2017; Gorman et al., 2010). This could suggest that these sexual acts are common scripts across pornographic media in Western and East Asian societies.

Moreover, this study suggested a gender gap in the initiation of sex. In line with Mukai et al.'s (2022) observation, male characters were significantly more often to be depicted as the initiators. This was in contrast to previous findings that women initiated sex as frequently as men (e.g., Klaassen & Peter, 2014; Prince, 1990). This discrepancy may suggest that pornography diffused in Western societies tends to ascribe stronger agency to female characters than their East Asian counterparts, which could be due to social campaigns and movements in Western societies.

Furthermore, the rates of physically violent scenes were lower than some previous findings (e.g., Bridges et al., 2010; Fritz & Paul, 2017). Whereas coerced sex appeared in more than half of the scenes. This was incompatible with prior evidence that coercion was relatively uncommon to initiate sex in pornography. A content analysis of eight-pager comics in the United States found that only 10 comics (10% of the sample) involved defloration/rape



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(Palmer, 1979). Vannier and cooperators (2013) investigated the contents of online teen and MILF pornography. They reported that persuasion (when one partner hesitated to engage in sex) occurred in less than one-fifth of the sample. In addition, in this study women were often the victims of coercion, whereas, in Palmer's (1979) research, the majority of aggressors were women. The inconsistency indicates that pornography in Eastern Asia and Western societies represents different forms of male-dominated culture.

According to scholars, hegemonic masculinity in American and European cultures emphasize competitiveness, emotional detachment, and a proclivity to violence (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2005; Kupers, 2005). While in East Asian societies, due to the influence of Confucianism, the ideal manhood is considered to be softer and more cerebral than Western notion of 'macho man' (Louie, 2012; Kimmel et al., 2005). Conventional Chinese masculinity is constructed around the dichotomy of *wen* and *wu*. *Wen* symbolizes the civil, genteel ideal, which is typified by classic scholars (e.g., Confucius). *Wu* symbolizes the martial ideal, which is represented by soldiers (e.g., Guan Yu). Importantly, *wu* not only embodies military prowess and physical strength but also the wisdom to know when to exert and suppress violence. Historically, the two styles of masculinity were in a dynamic relationship, with *wen* often considered superior to *wu*, as reflected in the phrase "place greater value on wen than wu" (*zhong wen qing wu*; Louie, 2009; Kimmel et al., 2005). Therefore, in sex comics, unequal power relations between gender are mainly represented in the form of coerced sex, presenting powerful male perpetrators and submissive female victims.

Taken together, the data suggested that sex comics distributed in China followed a common script, which tend to attribute greater agency to males whereas portrayed female characters in an objectified and subordinate way. Furthermore, rape myth/token economy (i.e., the targets, usually women, expressed resistance but eventually appeared to enjoy the sexual activity; Vannier et al., 2013) were prevalent in sex comics. Most targets who were initially coerced into sex displayed positive or neutral expressions at the end. The findings provide implications to understand the potential impacts of adult comics.

4.2. Limitations and future direction

There are a few limitations of this study. The first limitation concerns the sample. The current research only examined 40 sex comics from the rank list of one app. Since there are other websites and apps that provide sex comics, the sample may be insufficient to represent the sex comics favored by Chinese viewers. Future studies should have a larger sample size and examine sex comics from multiple websites and apps.

Secondly, this study focused on the contents of mainstream sex comics, which primarily targeted the male audience. According to Kaoru et al. (2021), more females start to read sex comics. A prior study on women's comics BL (*yaoi*) finds that it tends to present "male" characters in a feminized way (McLelland, 2010). Future content analyses should contrast the "for women" and mainstream sex comics to investigate differences in female and male



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sexuality. In addition, future studies can compare subcategories of sex comics, like *Lolicon*, *Shemales*, and *cuckolding* (*netorare*, NTR; Kaoru et al., 2021).

Moreover, this study only investigated sex comics in China. Given that erotic manga is also diffused in other East Asian societies, further studies can examine and compare the available sexual scripts in sex comics across East Asian cultures, for example, between China and Japan.

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Appendix A

Table 4 Reliabilities of Objectification, Agency, and Violence Indexes

Code	Reliability
Objectification	
Close-up on Male genitals	92.5%
Close-up Female genitals	97.5%
Gaping	95%
Cumshot	85%
Stripping	85%
Double penetration	85%
Anal Penetration	95%
F-to-M cunnilingus	97.5%
Agency	



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Initiation of sex	85%
Self-Touch	95%
Violence	
Coerced Sex	85%
Physical Violence	92.5%
Verbal Violence	95%

Appendix B

Table 5 Definitions of Objectification and Agency Indexes

Code	Definition
Objectification	
Close-up on genitals	When the primary focus of the scene is a close-up (full screen images) of sexual organs or private areas for a sustained period of more than two seconds
Gaping	The excessive stretching of the rectum or vagina with the hands, other objects, or due to recent penetration
Cumshot	Anytime a man ejaculates on a woman's chest, face, or mouth
Stripping	When a person dances, moves, or displays themselves, optionally taking off their clothes while moving, for the purpose of sexually arousing another person either shown or not shown
Agency	
Initiation of sex	The point in an interactive situation at which the first instance of sexual contact occurs
Self-Touch	Any touching of the vulva or penis with the fingers by the self
Coerced Sex	
Nonconsensual	When someone involved in sexual activity did not agree to have sex and was coerced into having sex against his or her will.
Manipulated	Whether a man and/or woman in the scene was manipulated to have sex (e.g., by deceiving, telling lies).



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Intoxicated

醉酒(酒精)

Whether there was a man and=or
woman depicted as intoxicated (used
drugs or alcohol).
