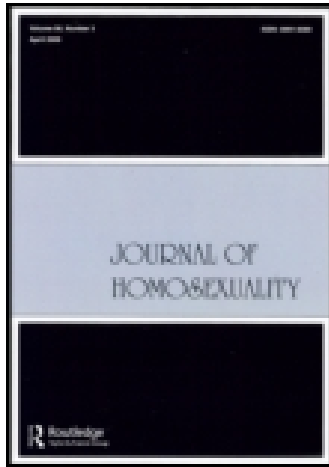


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What We Can't See? Understanding the Representations and Meanings of UAI, Barebacking, and Semen Exchange in Gay Male Pornography

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What We Can't See? Understanding the Representations and Meanings of UAI, Barebacking, and Semen Exchange in Gay Male Pornography

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Since the late 1990s, the use of condoms within gay male pornography has been on the wane. Moving from a niche category into more mainstream forms of commercial pornography, unprotected anal sex has become a dominant theme within this sphere of gay male sexual representation. However, while the definition of what constitutes bareback pornography may at first sight appear unproblematic, this article argues that meanings and understandings of unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) are not constant across all genres of gay male pornography. Using textual analysis and focus group methods, the authors demonstrate how subcultural understandings of UAI are dependent on a variety of textual factors. These include the age, body type, and racial identities of the performers; the setting, context, and mise-en-scène of the pornographic scene; and the deployment of power relations between the insertive and receptive partners.

The article concludes by suggesting that the recognition of the diverse representations of “barebacking” found in contemporary gay male pornography should influence the ways in which health

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promotion strategies address discussions of UAI and bareback pornography.

KEYWORDS *barebacking, pornography, semen exchange, HIV, sexual risk, representation*

In this article¹ we seek to provide a nuanced conceptualization of unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) as it is represented across a range of popular gay male pornographies. Drawing on collaborative research undertaken by the University of Sussex and the Terrence Higgins Trust's *Informed Passions* project, we demonstrate how cultural understandings of both UAI and semen exchange vary dramatically depending on a range of generic and aesthetic variables. In particular, we illustrate how the relevance, meaning, and identification of UAI within pornography is dependent on the number and type of performers involved; the presence of other forms of sexual or cultural transgression within the scene; the perceived relationship between the performers; and the deployment of power relations between the insertive and receptive partners. We also suggest a critical reading of the role that semen exchange plays in bareback pornography. Through this, we hope to add to the ongoing discussion of how gay men make sense of and "read" UAI in sexually explicit materials. It should be noted that this is a British study and that, while our findings may well translate into other national contexts, we do not and cannot speak on behalf of those contexts.

BAREBACKING AND UAI—UNHAPPY BEDFELLOWS?

Before beginning our discussion, we should explain our decision to use both terms—*UAI* (*unprotected anal intercourse*) and *bareback*—in this article to describe acts of anal intercourse between men. Chiefly, we wish to make it clear that these are not meant to be understood as interchangeable; thus a brief discussion of both terms here is useful.

Given the amount of press coverage² that it has garnered over the last decade, the term *bareback* is arguably the more recognizable of the two terms. Indeed, while this term has most popularly been associated with gay male pornography, *bareback* does also carry meaning as a descriptor in both heterosexual pornography and mainstream British popular culture.³ In both cases, the term has been used to identify unprotected vaginal sex (as opposed to anal sex), but it is interesting to note the crossover of the term into other areas of British culture.

Although the origins of the term remain unverifiable,⁴ its discursive prominence within contemporary gay male subculture is difficult to deny. Advertising in gay men's magazines regularly features bareback

pornographic titles, and the majority of British and American gay sex shops today stock an array of bareback DVD films. Meanwhile the gay print media has repeatedly engaged with the topic of bareback sex and bareback pornography, often critiquing those who practice and produce it. To some commentators, such as Eric Leven, barebacking has long been understood as glamorizing unsafe sexual practices to make them appear sexier, “queerer,” and “cooler” than they are:

The cultural fetishization of bareback asks the modern gay man to waver [sic] between what he knows is right and challenges him to tickle the idea of what is wrong. (Leven, 2008, n.p.)

According to Leven, turning sex without condoms into bareback sex obscures the fact that unprotected anal intercourse remains a key transmission route for HIV. Understood from this perspective, the term *bareback* is akin to a marketing tool—the rebranding of a sexual practice that became associated with the global AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s.

From another perspective (namely those who advocate the practice), *bareback* signifies the willing (and willful) decision by some gay/bi/queer/MSM⁵ to choose not to use condoms for anal sex. Read from this perspective, *bareback* can be understood as representing a libertarian (or perhaps, neoliberal⁶) turn in gay male subculture, standing for the liberation—sexually and discursively—of gay male sexuality from the confines of medical and health promotion discourse. For some men, having bareback sex signifies more than simply “fucking without condoms”; it also embodies an acknowledgment—and rejection—of the medical profession’s consensus on sexual health promotion advice, most notably the promotion of the condom code, which has been a pervasive message within gay male subculture since the mid-1980s. Yet, while the term *bareback* is regularly used to describe a wide range of pornography, our research identifies that bareback sex might not always be as visible or as recognizable in texts that otherwise represent UAI. It is for this reason that we will also employ the term *UAI* (unprotected anal intercourse) in this article, in order to address this discrepancy in identification.

UAI has become the standard term used within British sexual health promotion contexts to describe anal sex between men that does not include the use of a condom. Generally considered to be the most high-risk sexual activity among gay/bi/MSM in terms of HIV transmission risk, UAI—or rather the reduction of UAI among partners of different or unknown HIV status—remains a key target for the majority of gay men’s sexual health campaigns in the UK today. The term *bareback* has very rarely been used in these campaigns. In part, this may be due to similar beliefs and fears as those expressed by Leven above, that the term glamorizes UAI and makes it both more acceptable and more attractive.

This is not to suggest that *UAI* is used in lieu of *bareback* in health promotion campaigns. The term remains resolutely clinical in tone, and it is substituted in advertising campaigns for more colloquial language such as “fucking without condoms.” However, a prevention-centered discourse of *UAI* permeates current and previous health promotion strategies. As with *bareback* or *barebacking*, *UAI* also embodies a set of assumptions and attitudes. If, *bareback* is seen as potentially affirmative in tone, *UAI* is negatively charged, suggesting its own illegitimacy. *Unprotected* anal intercourse is always accompanied by its unspoken positive correlate—*protected* anal intercourse. Unlike *bareback*, the term *UAI* implies an alternative, safer form of sexual practice and prioritizes this safer form as a more desirable state of affairs. Anal intercourse with condoms becomes anal sex. This normalizing of condom use through health promotion discourse has served to render the unprotected element of *UAI* as counter-hegemonic. This inevitably means that *UAI*—as a term—is prone to unwittingly attracting a particular set of judgments. These judgments may involve the evaluation of a person’s conduct on medical, legal, and perhaps also moral grounds.

This is not to suggest that the use of *UAI* is necessarily wrong. Rather, in highlighting the complex bundle of meanings, assumptions, and attitudes that can be harnessed to this term, we draw attention to the fact that both terms—*UAI* and *bareback*—carry cultural weight and encapsulate meanings and ideas that may not initially be apparent to the user of such terminology.

In this article, *UAI* refers to the physical dimension of the sexual practice under discussion. The term *bareback* is used to signify the act of anal intercourse between men in a cultural context that has witnessed almost 30 years of HIV/AIDS awareness work, and in which gay and bisexual identifying men report high levels of knowledge around safer sexual practices (see Sigma, 2011). Meanwhile, we use the term *bareback* to articulate not only the sexual practice of *UAI* but also the presence of a specific set of generic and performative aesthetics within the pornographic text, which render that instance of *UAI* visible and meaningful in specific ways.

APPROACHING *UAI* AS AN OBJECT OF RESEARCH

This research employed a two-stage methodology involving the textual analysis of a corpus of pornographic material and a series of focus group interviews with gay and bisexual men based in the Brighton and Sussex region of the UK. In the first stage of the research, 125 pornographic scenes taken from popular Web sites and DVDs⁷ were analyzed and coded separately by the three researchers. The findings of this analysis were triangulated and used to identify a set of common themes and variables in contemporary gay male pornography. These themes centered on different sexual practices, the number of performers involved in each scene, the different body types

displayed, the representation of ejaculation, and the use of condoms. This analysis shaped the development of a set of interview questions, which were redrafted following a peer-reviewed pilot interview.

Research participants from the catchment area were recruited to one of seven focus groups via a range of online and outreach methods. In total (and excluding a pilot group), 50 men were involved in a series of group interviews that lasted between 90 minutes and 2 hours. Qualitative data analysis software was deployed to code transcripts using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1992). Coding was cross-referenced to triangulate data and identify the key findings.

When Is It Bareback and When Is It Not? The Challenges of “Seeing” UAI in Gay Male Pornography

Our corpus revealed that just under 75% ($n = 95$) of the material analyzed included representations of anal sex. Of this 75%, just under half ($n = 47$) featured UAI. Neither of these findings are particularly noteworthy, and even a cursory scan of the shelves in a gay porn stockist would be enough to confirm both these facts. However, the analysis also revealed a set of interesting relationships between representations of UAI and other generic and performative elements that have hitherto been undocumented.

Coding revealed that scenes including an interracial or intergenerational dimension or featuring a noticeable imbalance in power relations were likelier to feature UAI than condom use; 68% of the scenes that represented some form of power imbalance (for example BDSM or role play involving dominant and submissive partners) included UAI. Meanwhile, 88% of the scenes depicting interracial sex and 100% of the scenes depicting intergenerational sex included UAI. While conscious that our corpus was relatively small in number, these apparent relationships were something that we sought to investigate during the focus group stage of the research.

During these interviews, participants were invited to listen to two pornographic scenes being described by one of the researchers. These scenes were not taken from pre-existing pornographic material but were constructed using an amalgamation of material taken from the first-stage analysis. Ethical considerations meant that we chose not to screen pornographic material during the focus group interviews.⁸ Meanwhile, the construction of a pornographic narrative that drew on data from the textual analysis ensured that two archetypal (but contrasting) scenes could be developed that allowed us to measure the responses against our previous analysis.

The first scene, depicting group sex in a warehouse, featured multiple “tops” engaging in UAI with one “bottom.” The scene contained masturbation, oral sex, and anal sex. The body shape (muscular) and age (late 30s to early 40s) of the tops were markedly different to that of the

(slim 18-year-old) bottom, and the ethnicity of the active partners also varied from that of the passive partner. In the second scene, set in a living room, two men of the same age (early 20s), build (slim), and ethnicity were described as engaging in a range of sexual practices including kissing, masturbation, oral sex, and anal sex. In this scene, the partners took turns to be the active partner during intercourse (known colloquially as a “flipfuck”). In both scenes condoms were not worn, and in both scenes all performers ejaculated. We consciously chose not to include any mention of the power relations in either scene, although, as shall be discussed shortly, questions of power were raised in almost all of the focus-group discussions that ensued.

Having engaged in a lengthy discussion regarding pornographic genres and conventions immediately prior to this exercise, respondents were encouraged to identify which genre or genres they felt each scene would most accurately fit into as it was described to them. Respondents were asked to explain their choice of genre(s) and (if they did so) why they changed their categorization as the scene unfolded. Following the completion of each scene, the genres identified were read back to the participants, who were then invited to choose which genre or genres they would expect to see this material advertised under on a Web site.

It became apparent during the interviews that there was a disparity in categorizing UAI as bareback across the two scenes. Rarely was the term *bareback* used on its own when describing the first scene, and most respondents opted to describe this group sex scene as a *bareback gangbang* or as *interracial bareback*. Nevertheless, when UAI was introduced into the first scene, the term *bareback* was regularly applied to the scene and continued to be a defining aspect of the scene in the ensuing discussion.

Meanwhile, respondents appeared far more reluctant to characterize the second scene as bareback, even when they acknowledged the presence of UAI during the narration of the scene. Unlike the first scene, respondents regularly went to great lengths to limit the meaning of UAI in the second scene. They also used an array of strategies that allowed them to deprioritize—and sometimes even erase—the presence of UAI within the context of the scene. This “containment” work was operationalized in a number of different ways. One strategy involved legitimizing UAI through the development of a romantic backstory to the scene. This allowed respondents to reframe the UAI within the context of a conventional gay relationship:

MS14: It's like sex in a relationship, it's kind of like normal—

I: Sorry?

MS14: More sort of like what you do in relationships.

I: Oh right, okay.

MS14: More, I mean sex that's meaningful, it means something rather than just "I'm just going to shag you," it's like something more and means something to both of them, like in a relationship.

MS8: They could almost be in a relationship. Because they were intimate and there was lots of kissing and to finish kissing. They could be partners.

I: So that seems different from the first one in that respect?

MS5: It was more consensual.

The presence of kissing, twinned with the location of the scene, became evidence that corroborated the backstory respondents developed for the performers in this scene. The assumption here was that UAI within the context of a loving relationship was acceptable and exposed the participants to less risk of STIs. As the respondents above went on to state,

MS9: So the barebacking may not come across as risky, or as risky. If they seem that they are in a relationship then they might know their status and they might be safe anyway.

I: Would that change how you interpret it? Or how you think about it?

MS9: Yeah, just how you conceptualize what you are seeing from what you described. They could be a couple, they could know their status and they know it's okay to not use condoms. Whereas the other scene it sounds like no one even knows that young 18-year-old boy. He doesn't know their names so the risk is much greater.

A second strategy was to downplay the significance of UAI in the scene, suggesting that it was, in fact, unimportant:

MS12: Do you think when you said without condom, do you think anybody takes any notice any more? Do they think, "Oh he hasn't got a condom on," or you notice he has got a condom on. People are just watching porn and don't actually think about that.

This response is particularly interesting given that this group had, only a few minutes before, been discussing the central role of UAI in the previous scene and the importance of bareback as a key selling point within the promotion of pornographic material:

I: So why did you pick bareback against the other different ones which you did pick out, things like twink there, gangbang?

MS4: Because I think it would be better selling.

MS2: Yeah, promotion.

MS6: The way it developed.

I: *Why do you think it would be better at selling?*

MS6: Because of the risk element.

MS4: Yeah, it seems dangerous, kind of.

I: *So you think that would have more market value?*

MS4: I think so.

A third strategy, and building on the relationship strategy identified above, was to focus on the sense of reciprocity engendered within the scene and to use this as a method for “excusing away” the UAI:

MS13: [There is] lots of reciprocal behavior going on . . . They’re still functionally bareback, but what, in a way the participants interact is . . .

MS18: It sounds like it’s actually romantic, it sounds quite nice, doesn’t it?

MS13: It’s something, it feels different . . . They’re gonna be, the two performers in that particular scenario are on equal, almost equals, aren’t they?

Reciprocity was also used by participants as a method for bracketing off the presence of UAI:

MS42: If I’d just heard that scenario, I would probably assume they were [using condoms], I wouldn’t have assumed it was bareback. . . . I think it probably is, it’s because they seem to be actually intimate and they are kissing and there’s a lot more sensuality going on, it sounds like they would be caring for each other and wearing condoms.

The term *functionally bareback* is perhaps most telling here and serves to evidence our claim that there is a difference between bareback pornography and sexually explicit material that features UAI. Perhaps lacking the term *UAI* to describe the second scene, the respondent here opts to use the word *functionally* to acknowledge the lack of condom use. However, in using the term *functionally*, the interviewee points to a marked difference in understanding the sex represented here. *Functionally bareback* suggests that it is bareback—but not quite, or perhaps, not fully or not properly bareback. Compared to the first scene, this scene does not “feel” like it is bareback, even if it actually depicts UAI. The importance of how this scene feels is relevant here, given the mention of romance that comes (from another respondent) immediately after this statement.

Underpinning the first and third strategy deployed by respondents was an ongoing conversation within the interviews regarding the relationships of power that were—according to the participants—present in the two scenes.

MS30: It's, I would say that what we were saying, the last one [the first scene], rather than rape I'd use the word power imbalance. And this [referring to the second scene], it sounds like a power balance.

MS27: I would be a bit concerned because of the young boy, I would just be a bit sort of concerned, doesn't sound right because he's being raped by the two black men without condoms, I just, I don't know, I'd feel a bit uncomfortable with it.

For many respondents, one of the key differences between the two scenes was the power dynamic brought into play as each scene unfolded. In the group sex scene featuring a younger receptive performer and several older penetrating performers, respondents regularly focused on the assumed power inequalities in the scene. The quotation above is typical of the way in which this scene was characterized: male rape was regularly read into this group sex scenario.

Meanwhile, the second scene was often spoken about in terms that suggested a high degree of equality and balance between the performers. The "reciprocity" identified in the quotation above may have been a reference to the different sexual acts that were included in this scene (reciprocal oral sex and anal sex), but the discussion of power went beyond merely the sexual practices represented. The age and body type of the two performers (both slim and of a similar age) were important markers of equality in this scene. Age difference was a key determinant in the assumption of power disparity, although racial difference and body type played secondary roles in this differentiation.

These discussions of power disparity occurred in the majority of the focus-group interviews and were always initiated by the respondents themselves. Any allusion to force, abuse, restraint, consent, or coercion was notably absent from the description of both scenes, yet it was clear that the content and organization of the first scene resonated strongly with participants' understandings and preconceptions of this genre of pornography.

How can we make sense of this complex set of relationships? What can we learn from the identification of this network of ties and affinities? A good starting point might be the perceived transgression of boundaries, which appears to be encoded in interracial and intergenerational pornography, and which was also apparent in discussions of bareback material.

One might argue that all pornography is transgressive inasmuch as it depicts sexual practices in a gratuitous manner and, in doing so, falls outside of the prevailing moral standards of a given era. Additionally, the loftier appeals to emotion, affect, and sensation that erotica supposedly engenders (Rubin, 2011) are conspicuously absent in pornography. It is the transgressive dimension of pornography—of seeing what should not be seen—that

makes it appealing (Kipnis, 1996). Irrespective of the ongoing discussions regarding the purported sexualization of culture,⁹ pornography continues to operate through this language of transgression.

Beyond this baseline, however, the extent to which a single pornographic text might be thought of as transgressive varies. The oft-cited claim by Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (1964) in relation to hardcore pornography that “I know it when I see it” is perhaps apt here as one person’s highly transgressive porn scene may be, in fact, another person’s mundane skin-flick. This issue remains important today, even when cultural relativism is taken into account.

The other issue, of course, is that of content. Different sexual acts carry with them different notions of transgression. Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act of 2008 (CJIA) criminalized the possession of “extreme pornographic images” and, in doing so, identified (in not unproblematic ways) what was deemed extreme pornography. This definition also serves to demarcate a set of boundaries that pornography must not transgress. These include

1. an act that threatens a person’s life;
2. an act that results, or is likely to result, in serious injury to a person’s anus, breasts or genitals;
3. an act that involves or appears to involve sexual interference with a human corpse;
4. a person performing or appearing to perform an act of intercourse or oral sex with an animal (whether dead or alive).¹⁰

Given these four definitions, it is clear that the “extremity” of extreme pornography is defined primarily according to a specific set of transgressions between categories—life and death, human and animal, and (though less clearly defined) safety and harm.

The interviews revealed a degree of consensus regarding what was considered more or less transgressive within gay male pornography. In fact, transgression was central to the reading of the first scene, which was identified as crossing perceived cultural boundaries around race, age, and body type. The difference in the age of the performers was often discussed as a key factor within the meaning of the scene and was regularly foregrounded in discussions. The (assumed) dominance of the older, active performers was regularly contrasted with the (presumed) submissiveness of the receptive partner, who was routinely referred to as “a proper sub boy,” a “rent boy,” or a “victim” who was “completely used” and “dominated” by the older men.

MS33: He’s there purely to give pleasure to the older guy, he’s just a plaything, yeah, a toy for the older guy to amuse himself with.

Emphasizing the perceived transgressive dimension of this intergenerational scene was the fact that respondents characterized the scene as being “daddy vs. son” or “daddy porn” or “old-young.”

Meanwhile—and supporting the textual analysis—the difference in racial identity of the performers in the first scene also played a role in terms of defining the transgressive element of this scene. Respondents were less forward in talking about the racial dimension of this scene,¹¹ but comments such as “he’s being raped by the two black men without condoms” indicated an awareness not only of the race of the performers but also of what the interracial casting meant within the framework of the text. “Jorge” summed up the general feeling in one focus group, when he suggested that the interracial element was the most transgressive, and therefore the most meaningful, aspect of the first scene:

MS47: Because if everyone in the movie was the same color, there wouldn’t be a possible genre, so the next thing down the line that encapsulates that movie would be the bareback [. . .] Some people might like black people and some people may not. Some people might not want to see it and some people might, and so I think that would then be their first port of call, really.

Often, the degree of transgression was tied into issues of “hotness,” with the former scene variously described as being *hot*, *naughty*, *edgy*, and *taboo*. As one respondent remarked of the scene’s transgressive quality, “there’s so many different things that they violate.” This is not to suggest that all interviewees found the first scene to be sexually exciting. However, it was spoken of in positive terms far more regularly than the second scene, which was variously termed *boring* and *dull*, with one respondent summing up the group’s reaction by saying “I’d want my money back” if they had purchased the scene on DVD or via a Web site. Even when the second scene was not spoken of in negative terms, the language—“vanilla,” “normal,” and “like what you do in relationships”—suggests that it was seen as less transgressive.

These findings suggest that bareback pornography is often understood as more than simply the depiction of unprotected anal sex. Different genres of pornography, different arrangements of bodies, and different configurations and contexts of sexual representation affect gay men’s understandings of condomless sex. These understandings serve to alter perceptions of UAI and obscure similarities (in terms of sexual risk) between otherwise divergent pornographies.

The strategies of containment that were mobilized in the interviews suggest that respondents evaluated UAI differently depending on the context in which it appeared. Often, the representation of UAI in the second scene was “sanitized” through the invocation of backstories and normative

understandings of risk negotiation work undertaken in monogamous long-term relationships. This containment work served to legitimate UAI in this scene at the same time as it was tied to the sexual experiences and practices of those interviewed. As such, the UAI that appeared in the second scene carried with it more social sanction and less erotic capital.

Meanwhile, the first scene was constructed as bareback, and in being thus defined, the UAI was marked out as being one of a constellation of transgressions that occupied this scene. It carried with it less social sanction and far more erotic capital. Finally, where the second scene was more commonly aligned with respondents' own sexual practices (either previous, current, or in an imagined future), the first was considered to exist only in the domain of fantasy, at least to a point.

Playing With Reality: The Role of Semen in UAI and Bareback Pornography

While not wishing to contradict the above statement, perhaps the greatest degree of transgression expressed in the focus groups was, in fact, the movement from fiction to reality that one respondent suggested had occurred during the group sex scene. At the point in the narrative when one of the performers ejaculates inside the anus of another, "Derek" stated that there was a shift in the meaning of the text:

[In terms of] genre there's no change except that it might be that the reality is changing. Before it might have been acting, this time there's no acting [. . .] that would be one shift [in understanding the scene] I would say.

What Derek articulates here is perhaps the ultimate transgression within the context of contemporary gay male pornography and, simultaneously, the (ostensible) fulfillment of pornography's promise—to bring us real sex, to bring us as close to it as possible, and to bring it in as unmediated way as possible (Salmon & Symons, 2004), even if such verisimilitude is inevitably thwarted (see Williams, 1999). This thwarting is not necessarily a failing of pornography. As Cante and Restivo (2004, p. 150) wrote,

[T]he always already dubious nature of pornography's 'empiricism' is of course one of its most overarching characteristics and the source of some of pornography's overarching pleasures.

In its claims to truth, pornography exploits the male orgasm as the visual signifier of sexual satisfaction—for both male and female performers (see

Paasonen, 2006, for discussion)—and visual proof of the (male) orgasm is central to the erotic economy of much male-oriented pornography:

Facial expressions display sexual pleasure (one reason for the frequent close-ups of female faces in heterosexual porn), but the only proof of male sexual satisfaction is ejaculation. (Salmon, 2012, p. 198)

Our respondents confirmed this while stating that pornography that did not feature an ejaculation was a waste of time and a disappointment.

Within gay male pornography specifically, ejaculation has been conceptualized as its *raison d'être* (Dyer, 1985), and more recently Dean (2009) has compounded this belief in his identification of a variety of ways in which semen is utilized in contemporary pornography. Building on this theme, the textual analysis revealed that, with the exception of mouth-to-mouth semen exchange¹² (“snowballing”), “cum-play”¹³ was far more prevalent in pornography that involved UAI, and the relationship between cum-play and UAI remains an important one.

Semen remains an ambivalent and unstable signifier within gay male subculture, attracting a diverse range of meanings and understandings (see Holmes & Warner, 2005; Shernoff, 2005; Reynolds, 2007). During the AIDS crisis, it became conceptualized as an abject material¹⁴ and the embodiment of sexual risk. With no way of detecting HIV outside of the clinician’s office or the medical laboratory,¹⁵ semen stood in for the unseen virus—the signifier of a potential infection. As with much of the discourse around HIV/AIDS, such signification also engaged a moral register, whereby semen exchange became more than simply risky—it was also morally out of bounds.

More recently, and resonating with older cultural understandings of ejaculate (see Aydemir, 2007), Mowlabocus (2010) has identified the reclaiming of semen as a transcendental substance within the online barebacking community, marking the act of internal ejaculation as one that is touted by some as offering “an opportunity to reconnect gay men with their own bodies” (315). This (re)connection is the premise of Dean’s (2009) argument that semen represents an ambivalent gift within bareback subculture, one that binds participants together.

Internal ejaculation and cum-play represent yet another transgression that marks bareback pornography as more than just UAI. It also points toward the transgression of boundaries between representation and the real. In other words, while respondents discussed the gangbang scene as being a “rape *fantasy*” or “power *play*,” the ejaculation of one man’s semen into the anus of another served to move the scene from a position of fantasy to one of reality—that really is semen being ejaculated into the anus of the receptive partner—and the risks, meanings, and associations that are bound up with this practice are similarly real.

Of course, the physical risks of such a practice are wholly dependent on the presence of STIs, including HIV, and it is imperative that this be

remembered at all times. Yet it remains a fact that when one man ejaculates into the anus of another, and especially when this act is represented in a manner that foregrounds the ejaculation and any ensuing cum-play, gay male pornography disables any suspension of disbelief and dismantles any sense of illusion—you can fake a rape scene, but you cannot realistically fake a cum-shot.¹⁶

This intimate knowledge, which is bound up in the moment of ejaculation, is held in stark contrast to the ignorance (or, at best, the ambivalence) audiences have regarding the performers' HIV status. It matters little whether the performers are sero-sorting or have been screened for STIs prior to the shoot.¹⁷ What is being witnessed in this moment of internal ejaculation or insertion of ejaculate is the potentiality of risk. We are not watching HIV being transmitted. We are not watching the mixing of HIV strains. Neither of these acts is visible or verifiable. What we are watching when we watch a bareback cum-shot is risk—specifically, the risk of HIV transmission. To repeat, it matters not whether HIV is present for the representation of risk to occur. It also matters little whether other STIs are present, for, unlike HIV, hepatitis, gonorrhea, or chlamydia do not carry with them the moral baggage that the aforementioned virus does.

This potentiality of risk resonates with gay, bi, and MSM consumers of bareback pornography, not least because it is the same sense of risk that they themselves may well have experienced in their own sex lives. Allow us to clarify this admittedly contentious point. We are not suggesting that all gay men have, or indeed desire, unprotected anal intercourse. Nor are we suggesting that bareback pornography causes gay men to have unprotected sex. Neither are we suggesting that gay or bisexual men or MSM seek out sexual risk behaviors. Rather, we suggest that gay men, bisexual men, and MSM continue to have sex in a context in which a sense of risk is deeply ingrained in male-male sexual practice.

This deeply ingrained sense of risk should not be associated solely with intentional UAI and barebacking. It is a risk that most gay/bi/MSM men have experienced in diverse forms during their lives. Whether as a result of condoms breaking or slipping off, or fears over oral sex or pre-cum or morality-induced panics that equate all forms of queer male desire with disease, the risk of HIV infection has been especially prevalent within male-male sexual cultures, even though many of the practices engaged in¹⁸ carry no or very low risk of transmission.

Recognizing how the transgressive dimension of cum-play operates within gay male pornography allows us to better understand its increasing prevalence in contemporary material. Beyond simply depicting that which gay and bisexual men are otherwise told not to do, internal ejaculations, creampiees, felching, cum-fucking, and cum-eating serve to amplify (on a spectacular scale) the pervasive sense of risk that has colored gay/bi/MSM sexual cultures since the mid-1980s. This, in turn, injects a degree of

uncertainty within the pornographic text. Collectively, such depictions serve to invest a great deal of erotic capital in this array of activities, coding it in the same way that other cultural transgressions have been coded within pornography.

Further proof of the temporal specificity of this transgression is borne out by the fact that many of the practices mentioned above did not feature in gay male porn until relatively recently. This includes the period immediately prior to the HIV/AIDS crisis, when condoms were rarely worn in gay porn. Beyond very specific niche pornographies, gay male pornography has historically operated according to the same visual and performative rules as heterosexual male pornography, with ejaculations occurring outside of the body, often on the body of the receptive partner (Salmon, 2012). Williams (1999) frames the “money shot” as both a mainstay of (heterosexual) hardcore and also the moment when pornography’s register moves from one of tactile to visual pleasure. Such a shift both accounts for, and is the result of, external ejaculation, which is at once visible proof of the male’s sexual pleasure and “the very limit of the visual representation of sexual pleasure” (p. 101).

Beyond the stylistic practices of hardcore pornography (but drawing on such well-established codes of representation), the mantra of “on me, not in me” was taken up by health promotion campaigns in the UK during the late 1990s. One such example (by the UK’s GMFA charity) invited gay men to “cum like a porn star” in an effort to encourage external ejaculation. The history of health promotion and pornography, it seems, is not without a dark sense of irony. Thus when Derek—and, by extension, the authors of this article—suggests that ejaculation in bareback pornography signifies a transgression between fiction and reality, this transgression must be understood as operating at a moral, cultural, and visceral level if not a physical one.

CONCLUSION

Although some respondents felt that that bareback pornography might be nothing more than a fad, that the term is already losing currency within gay subculture, and that gay male pornography is past the “bareback moment,”¹⁹ we argue that understanding what bareback pornography is, how it operates, and how it is read and given meaning by its audience remains important. It is especially pertinent that health promotion organizations have a nuanced and complex understanding of this pornography, not least because consumers of this material are likely to also be users of their services. “Speaking the right language” has always been key to the success of gay male health promotion strategies, and, as that language changes, so must we learn how to articulate and work within this new shifting landscape.

Our work has demonstrated that while all bareback pornography falls under the general medicalized heading of UAI, the presence of UAI does

not always mean that pornography is “read” as bareback. Indeed, the term *condomless* is beginning to be used by mainstream gay male porn studios, arguably as a way to distance their version of UAI from this controversial and inflammatory term. This refusal to use *bareback* to describe scenes of UAI also points to the differences between different contexts of UAI in pornography. Although the risk of HIV transmission may well not change, the meanings of each instance of UAI may be radically different depending on what else or who else is featured in the scene. Further research into whether these more recent scenes of condomless sex feature internal ejaculations and extended cum-play is required, but it is beyond the scope of this study.

Meanwhile, the creation of the term *bareback* does not necessarily provide consumers of such material with a way of talking about different forms and contexts of UAI. The phrase *functionally bareback* highlights both the need to be able to articulate instances of UAI in pornography that are not understood as bareback and the difficulties of doing so. We do not seek to conclude this article by suggesting yet another term for talking about anal sex that does not include condom use. Rather, we hope to have provided a much-needed intervention into ongoing discussions regarding representations of UAI and gay men’s pornography more broadly.

Chiefly, we hope to have demonstrated how pornography that features UAI and that is understood as bareback relies on the transgression of social and moral hegemonies in creating and sustaining what we might term its *erotic capital* (Green, 2008). Thus, the absence of condoms within contemporary pornography is granted further subcultural meaning when other forms of behavior that are deemed non-normative, atypical, or counter-hegemonic are brought into play. Proof that interracial and intergenerational sexual relations (for example) are often understood as non-normative is evident in the fact that such groupings of bodies are fetishized through pornography’s strategies of marketing. While none of those interviewed suggested that racial and generational difference was, per se, abnormal or perverse, several did identify the cultural taboos or non-normative dimension of pornography that featured ethnic or age-based diversity among its performers. Such findings, of course, point to the problematic racial discourse (less so with age) that permeates much gay male pornography (see also Fung, 1998). Nevertheless, or perhaps as a result of such discourse, the interracial and intergenerational dimension of UAI pornography served to enhance its status as bareback.

Meanwhile, and with UAI being a transgression of what we might term the contemporary gay male sexual hegemony, any move to censor or otherwise prohibit the representation of this sexual practice runs the risk of only further fueling the desire for bareback pornography. Considering the fact that UAI was regularly framed as taboo, as “naughty,” and as something one should not engage in by respondents, we conclude that further criticism,

condemnation, or censorship of bareback pornography or UAI might serve, in fact, to underscore the transgressive and therefore erotic power of such material.

Finally, bearing in mind our findings that bareback and UAI are not understood as one and the same practice, any strategy (health, legal, cultural) that seeks to target bareback pornography may well not fit pornography that does not feature power disparities and cultural transgressions but that also features UAI. As UAI becomes more and more mainstream, and as producers of gay pornography suggest that condom-only studios and performers are being pushed out of the market, this finding may have stark implications for the future success of gay men's health promotion. Amid all this uncertainty regarding how best to proceed with, and to act on, research such as this, one thing remains clear. Banning bareback pornography no longer seems either a viable, or safe, option—if, indeed, it ever was.

NOTES

1. The title of this article borrows from Paul Morris's 1999 film *What I Can't See*, which the production company, Treasure Island Media, proudly claims is "the first bareback gangbang video" to be commercially distributed. Shot in a hotel room in San Francisco, the title refers to the ocular deprecation of the receptive partner—the "bottom"—who remains blindfolded throughout a group sex marathon involving 25 men penetrating him anally and orally during one evening.

2. Barebacking came to international prominence following a *Rolling Stone* article (Freeman, 2003). Meanwhile, in the UK, *The Guardian* has featured several articles in the subject of barebacking and bareback pornography (see Wells, 2000, and Riley, 2009).

3. In 2012, the final episode of the ninth series of *Shameless* (Channel 4) included a reference to heterosexual bareback sex. This follows the previous use of the term in the critically acclaimed British film *Kidulthood* (dir. Huda, 2006).

4. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the late porn star and author Scott O'Hara first coined the term in the early 1990s.

5. MSM—men who have sex with men.

6. In using the term *neoliberal*, we acknowledge the critically insightful work of Adam (2005) in this arena of research.

7. Viewing statistics, popularity ratings, and sales data were used in the development of this corpus.

8. The decision not to screen pornographic scenes during the focus groups but to describe scenes obviously points toward a potential limitation of this research. This was a decision that, as researchers, we spent a long time discussing. This discussion centered primarily on balancing our wish to obtain valid data from our participants with our commitment to ensuring the safety and comfort of those who volunteered to take part in this research. Added to this was the advice sought and proffered from the ethical review board of the participating academic institution and the participating health organization's (legitimate) concerns regarding the funding of research that screened images of unprotected sex—images that remain highly controversial to many. Inevitably, the issue of public relations also played a role in the decision-making process. During the period of research, the project partners were repeatedly asked (in hostile tones) why research into representations of UAI was being funded by an organization that promotes sexual health and safer sex among gay/bi/MSM men. Irrespective of our motives and our methodology, some felt it inappropriate that the Terrence Higgins Trust be involved with anything that touched on bareback pornography. To say that bareback pornography remains a highly inflammatory subject is an understatement. Our decision not to screen scenes means that embodied reactions to the material could not be traced in the research. Likewise, we have been unable to base our analysis within the framework of audience and reception studies and draw on the valuable tools that this branch of media research might offer. However, we finally agreed that the ethical implications of screening instances of UAI outweighed the limitations of using other methods of engagement.

9. See, for example, Papadopoulos (2010) and Bailey (2011).

10. Full details of the legislation can be found on the UK government legislation Web site (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/4/section/63>).

11. Culturally specific understandings of race mean that although this research found some hesitancy around “speaking race” in a British context, focus groups run in different national contexts may well offer less (or indeed more) reluctance.

12. Which, interestingly, was far more prevalent in pornography that involved condom use.

13. *Cum-play* is a colloquial term for a range of practices that involve ejaculate. These include using a finger or penis to “push” semen into an anus, licking cum and then exchanging it orally, pushing semen that has been ejaculated into the anus back out, licking or sucking semen out of an anus (“felching”), drinking semen, masturbating using semen as lubricant, and a plethora of other acts.

14. Of note here is Elliot’s (2009) analysis of Lum’s experimental film, *Indelible* (2004), in which he makes an argument for identifying semen (particularly when not aligned with reproduction) as an abject material, noting that such abjection comes from semen’s “association with fatally infectious sexually transmitted disease in unprotected sex” (p. 146).

15. Indeed, the invisibility of HIV was a key issue within HIV campaigns throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Within gay men’s health promotion, the fact that HIV was undetectable to the human eye and the contemporaneous understanding that HIV status could not be “read” on the body of a sexual partner were central messages disseminated through advertising material.

16. This is not to suggest that ejaculation and ejaculate are not faked in pornography (whether gay or straight). Escoffier (2007) reports one performer confessing that he once used hand cream in lieu of being able to achieve an orgasm during a performance.

17. Indeed, while some directors include a declaration regarding the negative status of their performers, gay men’s high degree of knowledge of HIV testing (see Sigma, 2011) and infection would suggest that they are aware that screening requires a 3-month window and retesting at the end of this period to ensure an accurate picture of an individual’s HIV status.

18. Such as negotiated, unprotected sex between monogamous partners who have tested for STIs together beforehand.

19. All claims that the authors of this article strongly refute. One need only point toward the recent forays into UAI by big-name gay male studios such as Sean Cody and Blake Mason for evidence that representing condomless sex remains an integral part of the gay male pornoscape.

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