

## Violence in *Playboy* Magazine: A Longitudinal Analysis

Joseph E. Scott,<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. and Steven J. Cuvelier<sup>1,2</sup>

---

*This paper analyzes the amount of violence in cartoons and pictorials from January 1954, through December 1983 in Playboy magazine. Inasmuch as the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography and Obscenity has focused upon magazines such as Playboy as potentially harmful to society because of the violence merged with sex, such an analysis is appropriate at this time. Each cartoon and pictorial for each issue of Playboy for the 30-year-period was examined for violent depictions. The average number of violent cartoons for the 30-year-period was 6.92/year or 0.58/issue. The average number of violent pictorials was less with an average of 1.89/year or 0.16/issue. The ratio of violent cartoons or pictorials to the total number of cartoons or pictorials was small. The ratio of violent cartoons to all cartoons was 25.2/1000 and for violent pictorials to all pictorials it was 8.6/1000. Moreover, the ratio of violent cartoons to total pages was 2.86/1000 and for violent pictorials 0.78/1000 pages. Although the overall number and ratio of violent cartoons and pictorials in Playboy over the 30-year-period examined was rare, a major question addressed was whether the amount of violence was increasing. Rather than a linear relation, a curvilinear relationship was observed with the amount of violence on the decrease in recent years. Although the effects of violence in sexual material is still being debated, those who argue for greater censorship of magazines such as Playboy because of its depictions of violence need a new rationale to justify their position.*

---

**KEY WORDS:** pornography; violence; sex; cartoons; pictorials.

Revised version of paper presented at the 37th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology, San Diego, California, November 13-16, 1985.

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210-1353.

<sup>2</sup>Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections, Columbus, Ohio.

## INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable research to identify the conditions that are associated with sexual assaults against women. Although such research could take a variety of approaches, one that has recently received considerable attention is the possible relationship between males' exposure to violent erotic material and subsequently condoning aggressive acts against females or acting aggressively toward females. Although the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (1970) reached the conclusion that there was no evidence to support the contention that exposure to erotic material was linked to aggressive assaults, this conclusion has been challenged by numerous researchers during the last decade (Cline, 1974, 1976; Dienstbier, 1977; Donnerstein, 1980; Donnerstein and Hallam, 1978; Malamuth, 1981b, 1983) as well as by the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (1986).

Various feminist writers<sup>3</sup> (Brownmiller, 1975; Chesler, 1980; Dworkin, 1981) have maintained that sexually violent materials, particularly those in "pornography" constitute "hate literature" against women. They maintain that such materials encourage males to view women as objects and reinforce male stereotypes that females enjoy and even desire to be sexually assaulted. Although this appears to be in conflict with the findings of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography, it should be noted that the Commission's inquiry may not have adequately distinguished between material depicting explicit sexual content and those containing violent sexual scenes (Malamuth and Spinner, 1980).

This distinction is most important given some of the recent laboratory findings of social psychologists. Several researchers have linked possible proclivities to sexual assaults and rapes with exposure to violent sexual and or simply violent materials (Malamuth, 1981a, 1983; Mueller and Donnerstein, 1983). Moreover, the frequency of sexually violent material has been significantly on the increase according to a variety of sources (*Newsweek*, 1985; Smith, 1976; Winick, 1977). Certainly the topic of sex is more common in our most widely circulated magazines and its content is of concern to a variety of organizations and agencies (Scott, 1986). This is reflected by the recent grant by the Justice Department for \$798,581 to study the effects of violent sexual portrayals in *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, and *Hustler* magazines and their possible link to violence (*Columbus Dispatch*, 1985).

<sup>3</sup>In referring to feminists' opposition to pornography we mean only those feminists who are so opposed to erotic material's availability. We are aware that certainly not all women or even all feminists are opposed to availability of such material as evidenced by such groups as the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce of the Women's Legal Defense Fund.

The concern with depictions of sexually violent or simply violent material in "adult" nonexplicit magazines may be justified on a variety of theoretical grounds. For example, the nonexplicit magazines, such as *Playboy*, have a much wider circulation than the explicit magazines. If there is a significant increase in their depictions of violent material, then more people are possibly being exposed to such depictions. Two major concerns for mass exposure to these types of material were posited by Malamuth and Spinner (1980). First was the possible modeling and disinhibitive effects exposure to such material may have on the viewers (Burt, 1980; Check and Malamuth, 1983; Donnerstein and Hallam, 1978; Loye *et al.*, 1977). Second, they hypothesized that the coupling of sex with violence might condition observers to associate violent acts with sexual pleasures. If this were the case, the assumption is that males would be more inclined to view females as being masochistic and in need of male domination (Freud, 1938). This is in line with arguments by some feminists who maintain that such "myths" encourage males to believe that if a female does not respond favorably to their sexual advances it is permissible and even desirable to continue to pursue them even using violence, inasmuch as females will eventually respond favorably.

The report of the Attorney General's Commission (1986) on Pornography concluded that exposure to sexually violent materials is causally linked to aggression against women. Moreover, they concluded that pornography had become substantially more violent since the 1970s. They reached these conclusions with little scientific basis but rather reliance upon anecdotal data primarily. In fact, one of the only pieces of original research done by the Commission staff was to examine the imagery of the April 1986 issues of top-selling male sophisticate magazines. "Eliminated from the final version of the Report was the full report of its findings: that only 0.6% of the imagery was of 'force, violence, or weapons'" (American Civil Liberties Union, 1986, pp. 41-42).

In addition to the findings that males exposed to sexually violent material may be more likely to either condone aggressive acts against females or act aggressively toward females, recent research has found a significant relationship between the distribution of adult magazines and rape rates. Straus and Baron (1983) and Scott and Schwalm (in press) found that states with the highest rape rates also have the highest circulation rates for adult sex magazines. Moreover, Scott (1985) found that of all the adult sex magazines for which the Audit Bureau of Circulation has distribution records, *Playboy* magazine had the highest correlation by state for circulation rates and rape rates. Subsequent research, however, has found that the number of violent sexual depictions in *Playboy* over a 30-year-period was rare and that the number of such depictions was not linear but rather cur-

vilinear (Scott and Cuvelier, 1987). However, the amount of violence in an adult sex magazine may be linking the violence and sex themes and account for the sizable correlation between *Playboy's* consumption and rape rates regardless of the lack of sexually violent depictions per se.

This paper examines whether violent portrayals have increased in the most widely circulated adult nonexplicit magazine. Malamuth and Spinner (1980) conducted an analysis of *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines from January 1973 through December 1977 and found the amount of sexual violence increased considerably over the 5-year-period. (A careful reading of that article seems to indicate that most of the increase was attributable to sexual violence in *Penthouse* magazine rather than in both magazines.) However, Scott and Cuvelier (1987) conducted an analysis of *Playboy* magazine over a 30-year-period, from January 1954 through December 1983, and found that the amount of violent sexual portrayals was minimal. Moreover, they found that there had not been a linear increase in violent sexual portrayals over the years but rather a curvilinear relationship with the number of sexually violent cartoons and pictorials decreasing in recent years.

The present research examined nonsexual violent portrayals in *Playboy* magazine from 1954 through 1983. The rationale for this period is that by examining *Playboy* magazine for a 30-year-period, one has a considerably better sample from which to draw conclusions as to the possible changing nature of violent portrayals in adult "male sophisticate" magazines. (The first issue of *Playboy* magazine was published in November 1953, without a date on the magazine. Beginning with January 1954, *Playboy* magazine has published an issue each month and our analysis began with the January 1954 issue.) Moreover, although previous research found no linear increase in sexually violent portrayals in *Playboy* for this same 30-year-period, it may be that if simply violent portrayals are more common in an adult sexually oriented magazine, they may somehow have the same effect on male viewers in increasing their propensities to strike out at women.

## METHOD

The data for this research were gathered during 1984. The 30-year-period, from January 1954 through December 1983, it was felt, would provide the best test of whether nonsexually violent depictions had increased in nonexplicit sexually oriented mass circulation magazines. (All of the other nationally distributed magazines published today began circulation considerably after this date.)

*Playboy* magazine was selected as the magazine to analyze for several reasons. First, *Playboy* magazine is the oldest continually published nonex-

plicit sexual magazine. Second, it has the highest total circulation of the nonexplicit sexual magazines, a total circulation of 4,250,324 in 1983, and comparable in circulation to *Newsweek*, 3,022,722 and *Time*, 4,719,343 (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 1983; ABC audits the single sales and subscription rates for hundreds of magazines nationally).

The procedures followed were comparable to those utilized by Malamuth and Spinner (1980). There were 18 undergraduate students who rated the magazines. One female and one male student rated each issue. The rationale for having both a female and a male rate each issue was to control for possible differences in the perception of violence by sex. Each student was assigned the 12 issues from 1 year to rate at a time. The years were divided up so an equal number of students would be starting with magazines in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. This was to avoid any "set" developments that might occur from saturation or tediousness and to avoid biasing of raters evaluation of pictorials and/or cartoons in any preconceived direction.

The raters were not informed as to the nature of the hypothesis but were given an instruction sheet to follow for coding and similar oral instructions. They were instructed to keep a tally of the number of cartoons and pictorials in each issue of *Playboy* they examined. Centerfolds or other pictorials that covered two or more pages were counted as only one page. Multiple frame cartoons/stories on a single page were counted and analyzed as a single item. They were to record for each pictorial and cartoon whether there was any violent depictions and if so if it were a sexually or nonsexually violent depiction. Sexually violent depictions were described to the raters as rape, sadomasochism, or exploitative/coercive sexual relations. (This definition was adopted from the instructions given by Malamuth and Spinner to their raters earlier.) If the stimulus was ambiguous as to its violent and/or sexually violent nature, the raters were instructed to be conservative and not rate it as violent and/or sexually violent.

## RESULTS

Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the number of pages per year that contained nonsexual violent depictions for the two groups of raters (males and females). This is a more conservative approach to check for interrater reliability given that the majority of pictorials and cartoons in the magazines were of a nonviolent nature. Moreover, inasmuch as the focus of the research is on trends over a 30-year-period, computing reliability coefficients on an issue by issue basis or even on a page by page basis would not be as germane to the major focus of the research. The alpha was 0.71 for the

two groups of raters on the number of pages containing nonsexual violent depictions.

The alpha between male and female raters is rather low; however, there was no statistical difference in the amount of violent depictions identified by the two groups. Although the male raters did identify more violent cartoons as well as pictorials over the 30-year-period than did the female raters ( $t = 1.60$ ,  $df = 59$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ , and  $t = 0.46$ ,  $df = 59$ ,  $p \geq 0.05$ ), the differences were not statistically significant. Male raters identified an average of 8.61 such cartoons and 2.08 pictorials per year compared to the female raters identifying 5.23 such cartoons and 1.70 pictorials. What must be emphasized is the small number of violent cartoons or pictorials identified by either group of raters, particularly in comparison to the total number of cartoons and pictorials in each issue of the magazine.

The absolute number of pages per issue per year differs considerably from 1954 to 1983. In 1954, the average issue of *Playboy* was 50 pages in length; in 1983, it averaged 231 pages. Similarly, the number of cartoons and pictorials in *Playboy* per issue differed considerably during this time period. In 1954, the average number of cartoons per issue was 8.6 compared to 19.5 in 1983. The average number of pictorials per issue was 5.7 during 1954, and increased to 27 per issue by 1983.

Given the size of each issue of *Playboy*, the depictions of violence in either cartoons or pictorials was minimal. The average number of violent cartoons per year varied from 0 in 1960 to a high of 27 in 1971. The average number of violent cartoons for the entire 30-year-period was 6.92 per year or an average of 0.58 per issue. The average number of violent pictorials per year varied from 0 for 7 of the 30 years to a high of 11 in 1975. Over the entire 30-year-period, the average number of violent pictorials per years was 1.89 or 0.16 per issue.

It is most obvious that the number of violent cartoons and/or pictorials in *Playboy* was rare. In fact, the ratio of violent cartoons to all cartoons was 25.2/1000. The ratio of violent cartoons to total pages was 2.86/1000. The ratio of violent pictorials to all pictorials was 8.6/1000 and to total pages was 0.78/1000 pages.

While the overall number and ratio of violent cartoons and pictorials in *Playboy* over the 30-year-period is limited, that does not address the question of whether the number of violent cartoons and pictorials is on the increase. To address this question, the average number of violent cartoons and violent pictorials per year were calculated for each of the 30 years and plotted (see Fig. 1). Rather than a linear increase, one notes a curvilinear relationship for both violent cartoons and violent pictorials (see Fig. 2). The linear relation for violent cartoons was  $R = .232$ ,  $R^2 = .059$ . When the  $R$ 's were calculated using a 2nd degree polynomial (curvilinear relationship),

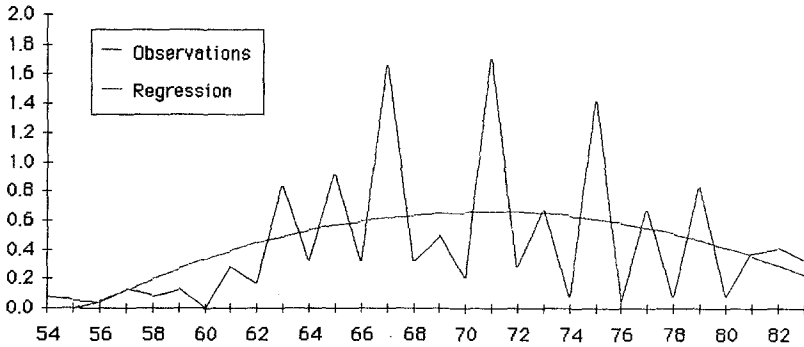


Fig. 1. Violent cartoons in *Playboy* 1954-1983, average number per issue.

the  $R$ 's increased significantly to  $R = .473$ ,  $R^2 = .224$ . The violent pictorials followed the same pattern. The linear relationship was  $R = .186$ ,  $R^2 = .035$ , and the 2nd degree polynomial (curvilinear relationship) was  $R = .210$ ,  $R^2 = .044$ . (The  $F$  tests calculated to determine whether the 2nd degree polynomials were statistically significant from the linear regression for the cartoons and pictorials were  $F = 5.23$ ;  $df = 2.57$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and  $F = 0.77$ ;  $df = 2.57$ ,  $p > .05$ .)

This analysis indicated that there had not been a monotonic increase in violent cartoons or pictorials in *Playboy* magazine over the last 30 years. This finding was even more surprising given the increase in the average number of cartoons and pictorials in each issue in recent years. Without even controlling for the number of pages or the number of cartoons and pictorials per issue, this analysis found a decrease in the number of violent depictions in *Playboy*. Whether the decrease in violent depictions found in

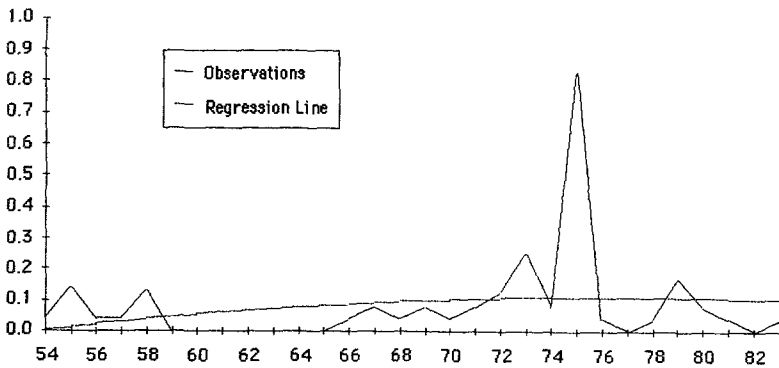


Fig. 2. Violent pictorials in *Playboy* 1954-1983, average number per issue.

*Playboy* is characteristic of other adult (male sophisticate) magazines cannot be addressed from these data.<sup>4</sup> However, previous research which has found that the number of sexually violent depictions has been decreasing (Scott and Cuvelier, 1987), along with these findings that violent depictions are also less frequent than in the past, has implications for claiming the possible relationship between exposure to violent sexual depictions and proclivities to assault women.

## DISCUSSION

This research has considerable implications for previous findings which have linked the distribution of adult magazines with rape rates. Straus and Baron (1983) and Scott and Schwalm (1987) found statistically significant relationships between rape rates and circulation rates of adult magazines. Various fundamentalists and feminists have argued that depictions of sexual violence in such adult publications are the cause for such findings.

Previous research has found that violent sexual depictions are rare in *Playboy* and have been decreasing during the last several years (Scott and Cuvelier, 1987). This research examines whether simply violent depictions in the most widely circulated adult magazines have been increasing over the years. If such violent depictions were common and had been increasing in such publications, one might make the inferential leap and argue that violence in an adult-type magazine would link violence and sex and have the potential stimulus effect advanced by various censorious groups.

This 30-year-analysis of violent depictions in *Playboy* magazine did not find that violent depictions were common nor that they were increasing. In the oldest continuously published adult magazine in the United States, the number of violent depictions has always been minimal and the number of such depictions has been on the decrease in recent years. For the entire 30-year-period examined, violent depictions were identified on less than 4 of every 1000 pages of the magazine. Violent cartoons accounted for 25 of every 1000 cartoons and violent depictions in pictorials accounted for 9 of every 1000 pictorials.

Previous research has found that the circulation of adult magazines is correlated with rape rates and that *Playboy* magazine has one of the highest correlations of any of the adult magazines to rape rates (Scott, 1985). This

<sup>4</sup>The point to be emphasized is that while the results from Malamuth and Spinner's (1980) analysis are not clear on the increase in sexual violence in *Playboy*, it appears that the majority of violence they identified was from such depictions in *Penthouse* magazine.



research, along with previous research, finds that such correlations cannot adequately be accounted for by violent sexual depictions (Scott and Cuvelier, 1987) or, for that matter, by violent depictions in sexually oriented magazines.

## REFERENCES

- Audit Bureau of Circulation. (1983). *ABC Audit Report: Magazines*, ABC, Schaumburg, IL.
- American Civil Liberties Union. (1986). *Polluting the censorship debate: A summary and critique of the Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography*, American Civil Liberties Union, Washington, DC.
- Attorney General's Commission on Pornography. (1986). *Final Report*, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC.
- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 38: 217-230.
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, Simon and Schuster, New York.
- Check, J. V. P., and Malamuth, N. M. (1983). Sex role stereotyping and reactions to depictions of stranger versus acquaintance rape. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 45: 344-356.
- Chesler, P. (1980). Men and pornography: Why they use it. In Lederer, L. (ed.), *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, William Morrow and Company, New York.
- Cline, V. B. (1974). Another view: Pornography effects, the state of the art. In Cline, V. B. (ed.), *Where Do You Draw the Line*, Brigham Young University Press, Provo, UT.
- Cline, V. B. (1976). The scientists vs. pornography: An untold story. *Intellect* (February).
- Columbus Dispatch*. (1985, May 20). Dirty books not in category of being illegal bedfellow, p. 11.
- Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. (1970). *The Report of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography*, Bantam Books, New York.
- Dienstbier, R. (1977). Sex and violence: Can research have it both ways? *J. Commun.* 27: 176-188.
- Donnerstein, E. (1980). Pornography and violence against women. *Ann. N. Y. Acad. Sci.* 347: 277-288.
- Donnerstein, E., and Hallam, J. (1978). Facilitating effects of erotica on aggression against women. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 36: 1270-1277.
- Donnerstein, E., and Linz, D. (1984). Sexual violence in the media: A warning. *Psychology Today* (January).
- Dworkin, A. (1981). *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, B.P. Putnam's Sons, New York.
- Freud, S. (1938). Three contributions to the theory of sex. In Brill, A. A. (ed.), *The basic writings of Sigmund Freud*, Random House, New York.
- Loye, D., Gorney, R., and Steele, G. (1977). An experimental field study. *J. Commun.* 27: 176-188.
- Malamuth, N. M. (1981a). Rape fantasies as a function of exposure to violent-sexual stimuli. *Arch. Sex. Behav.* 10: 33-47.
- Malamuth, N. M. (1981b). Rape proclivity among males. *J. Soc. Issues* 37: 138-157.
- Malamuth, N. M. (1983). Factors associated with rape as predictors of laboratory aggression against women. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 45: 432-442.
- Malamuth, N. M., and Spinner, B. (1980). A longitudinal content analysis of sexual violence in the best-selling erotic magazines. *J. Sex Res.* 17: 226-237.
- Mueller, C., and Donnerstein, E. (1983). Film-facilitated arousal and prosocial behavior. *J. Exp. Soc. Psychol.* 119: 61-67.
- Newsweek*. (1985, March 18). The war against pornography. pp. 58-66.
- Scott, J. E. (1985). Violence and erotic material—The relationship between adult entertainment and rape? Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Los Angeles, CA.

- Scott, J. E. (1986). An updated longitudinal content analysis of sex references in mass circulation magazines. *J. Sex Res.* 22: 16-23.
- Scott, J. E., and Cuvelier, S. J. (1987). Sexual violence in *Playboy* magazine: A longitudinal content analysis. *J. Sex Res.* 23.
- Scott, J. E., and Schwalm, L. (in press). Rape rates and the circulation rates of adult magazines. *J. Sex Res.*
- Smith, D. D. (1976). The social content of pornography. *J. Commun.* 26: 16-24.
- Straus, M., and Baron, L. (1983). Sexual stratification, pornography, and rape in American states. Presented at the annual meeting of The American Society of Criminology, Denver.
- Time.* (1976, April 5). The porno plague, pp. 58-63.
- Winick, C. (1977). From deviant to normative changes in the social acceptability of sexually explicit material. In Sagarin, E. (ed.), *Deviance and Social Change*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, CA.