



Sexual Strangulation: Unpacking the Realities of this Harmful and Dangerous Practice

CultureReframed

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Sexual strangulation is a growing phenomenon in sexual behavior gaining heightened popularity among adolescents and youths. Mainstreamed as the new sexual kink, numerous cultural platforms across the media sphere promote sexual strangulation as the ultimate fun, exciting, and kinky sexual trend. It is supposed that if you are not engaging in it, your sex life is considered to be dull, gloomy, and uninteresting. Absorbed by such conditioning, while blinded to the harms and consequences of sexual strangulation, this dangerous behavior continues to be trivialized and glamorized through every space and platform across our culture. Academics, activists, and healthcare professionals have voiced growing concerns around the lack of awareness and inadequate education about the damaging consequences and physical and emotional harms of this sexual practice.

Sexual strangulation is a highly gendered practice, dangerously increasing aggressive sexual behavior in the endless manifestation of violence against women. Many individuals are unaware of the risks and thus fail to understand the importance of voicing proper consent. Many are also simply giving in to such sexual acts since they are perceived as the norm, so sexual strangulation is increasingly leading to the further killing of women. Moreover, women and girls continue suffering systemic violence not only from their abusive partners, but also through the legal institutions that increasingly uphold defense arguments of 'sex games gone wrong' in the cases of femicides, often resulting in lenient sentences and acquittals of the perpetrators. Such acts, while enabling and reinforcing gender-based violence, continue to shift the blame on the victims, who not only would have suffered physical abuse in their lives, but continue to be shamed and blamed after their deaths.

Sexual Strangulation

Sexual strangulation, colloquially referred to as 'choking,' is a growing sexual trend gaining most popularity among young people (Bows, 2024; Herbenick et al., 2022). This ubiquitous sexual practice is widespread among adolescents and young adults alike. A sexual act once assumably associated with bondage and 'kink' communities (Bows, 2024), has become normalized through a more informal label by mainstream media and other social media. Women's Health magazine proposes: "If blindfolds and role play have veered into vanilla territory, there are still plenty of sex moves ... like choking," (Triffin, 2016, para. 1), whilst on EliteDaily.com, a sex educator was quoted as encouraging those who find themselves stuck in a sex rut to read on and explore "how to choke your partner safely" (Colvin, 2019, para. 17). Moreover, the term choking has been further mainstreamed through the frequent use by individuals to describe various forms of strangulation, as commonly found in The Choking Game (TCG) played by older children and adolescents (Defenderfer et al., 2016), as practiced during sexual encounters (Hone, 2024), and reported in intimate partner violence (IPV) (Joshi

et al., 2012). Studies indicate that strangulation may be practiced individually, or practiced on others, as a means of causing cerebral hypoxia - lack of oxygen to the brain - since once oxygen is regained, it may be linked with euphoric or exciting sensations (Linkletter et al., 2010). Also referred to as 'asphyxiation,' or 'erotic asphyxiation' when practiced during sexual encounters (Bows, 2024), the term describes the manner in which not only oxygen is obstructed, but also blood flow is constricted - through the practice of external pressure or restriction on the neck - as a means of increasing sexual pleasure, excitement, or orgasm (Herbenick et al., 2021). Sexual choking falls under the umbrella of 'breath play,' referring to any sex act that makes it difficult for the person being choked to breathe (WebMD, 2024). This is particularly and commonly observed in kink communities, and BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism) - sex practices that include dominance, submission, and control - (WebMD, 2023), where sexual choking between partners is commonly defined as a practice of breath play (Coppens et al., 2019; Tomassilli et al., 2009). Several different methods are reported to be used in sexual asphyxiation, including hands or limb, plastic bags or plastic wraps, the use of props or weapons, ligatures such as ties, belts, and ropes, as well as specialized BDSM tools like hoods used in breath play, where items may be placed around the neck, or where obstacles are placed in front of the mouth and nose blocking respiratory pathways (Bows, 2024; Sharman et al., 2024; WebMD, 2024). Studies reveal that strangulation during erotic asphyxiation is the predominant cause of death in BDSM (Schori et al., 2022), with established scientific and medical research identifying the increased risks and dangers of participating in such an act (Bichard et al., 2020). Research across the United States, United Kingdom, and New Zealand indicate a high prevalence in the practice of sexual strangulation, disproportionately impacting women and minority groups, causing severe health risks and consequences to their overall wellbeing (Beres et al., 2020; Herbenick et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the practice of sexual strangulation has become exceedingly normalized and sexualized with representations of what is mainstreamed choking, commonly found across popular culture, predominantly in pornography. Interestingly, gender plays a significant role in this context, not only in regard to the person performing the act of strangulation, but also in how one learns about such sexual behavior, as shall be discussed in further detail in this report.

Several different interpretations continue to be made when referring to either choking or strangulation. Although the term has never been consistent across individuals, it now seems to be a pattern of how safety is viewed (Beres et al., 2020). It appears that when referring to strangulation, it is frequently understood as having underlying connotations, viewed as a more violent practice, rather than choking, which is often regarded as an intimate act (Beres et al., 2020; Herbenick et al., 2022). For instance, according to a general understanding, if using one hand, it is described as choking, while when using two hands, it is described as strangulation, with choking viewed as not a dangerous practice, while strangulation is viewed as dangerous and even associated with death (Herbenick et al., 2022). Aware of the potential risks and lethality associated with this form of asphyxiation, strangulation has been a commonly preferred term when instances of danger was perceived, such as in IPV, in contrast to choking, which is seen as a lesser harmful practice (Busby, 2012). Although the term strangulation is seldom used in kink communities (Weierstall & Giebel, 2017), it is more

generally applied in legal investigations, forensic analyses, in sexual misconduct cases across colleges and universities, and in criminal investigations of sexual assault, including homicide (Herbenick et al., 2021; Roy, 2019; Yardley, 2020). Different terminology seems to be applied in different scenarios. Sauvageau & Boghossian (2010) suggest that choking is a form of asphyxiation since it requires external pressure on the neck to restrict respiratory passageways and/or blood vessels rather than an internal blockage of airways. Scholars and other clinicians stress that external pressure on or restriction of the neck is explicitly strangulation, as such it varies completely from actual choking, which indicates an internal blockage of the airway commonly occurring with food (Contos, 2022; Sauvageau, 2010). Aware of the severity and physical consequences resulting from any form of asphyxiation, irrespective of any scenario, the appropriate term to refer and describe this current growing sexual practice is strangulation - due to the increased health risks, which at times also result in death, including the link to gender-based violence (GBV). However, based on the research and as commonly understood by the general public, the terms 'strangulation,' 'sexual strangulation,' 'choking,' and 'sexual choking,' will be used interchangeably in this report, with every effort being made to adopt the terminology according to the context being addressed.

The Normalization and Mainstreaming of Rough Sex and Sexual Strangulation

Constantly on the rise and inaccurately described as consensual across pop culture, sexual choking is the result of several contextual factors, with gender playing a key role in behaviors and attitudes regarding the understanding of this dangerous sexual practice. With studies demonstrating that women are choked more than men during sex (Beres et al., 2020; Bows, 2024; Herbenick et al., 2022a; Sharman et al., 2024), the escalation of this sexual activity may intensify prevailing gendered health discrepancies, as women are already devastatingly impacted by strangulation in other circumstances (Reckdenwald et al., 2020; Strack et al., 2001). Considering the health risks involved, in addition to the rise in gender-based violence, and in some cases, fatality (Herbenick et al., 2022a; Schori et al., 2022), it is pertinent to understand if such a sexual practice is a learned behavior as obtained from the contextual culture, ultimately contributing to such a rising dangerous phenomenon. To protect individuals, particularly youth and adolescents from such harms, awareness raising and educational tools are necessary. As such, it is salient to comprehend what and where adolescents and young adults are learning about sexual strangulation – a sexual practice so deeply embedded within rough sex - to the extent that it is being perceived as normal, enjoyable, and desirable. Growing scientific evidence not only indicates societal shifts in the manner that young adults conceptualize sexual strangulation and rough sex, but current studies across the continents indicate similar emergent norms and trends encapsulating sexual choking (Herbenick et al., 2023).

Learning About Sexual Strangulation and the Shift in Behavior

Studies carried out in the US identify that most individuals learn about sexual choking while in high school or college, particularly between the age of 12 and 18, often referring to partners, friends, media, pornography, and other internet material as sources (Herbenick et al., 2022). Similarly, other studies conducted by the University of Melbourne and the University of Queensland discovered that individuals mostly learn about strangulation via several sources, including pornography, which was recognized as the most prevalent platform – 61%, followed by movies – 40%, friends – 32%, social media – 31%, and lastly by partners (current or potential) – 29% (Sharman et al., 2024). Other comprehensive studies regarding the prevalence and understanding of sexual choking discovered the following findings: a national poll in the UK found that 54% of women aged between 18 and 24 experienced being sexually choked during sex (Savanta ComRes, 2019); research from NZ suggests that youths consider sexual strangulation as a consensual sexual act, viewed as mainstream, and regarded as not connected to sexual violence (Beres et al., 2020). Meanwhile, a recent study in the U.S. found that 1 in 3 women aged between 18 and 24 experienced being sexually choked during their latest sexual encounter (Herbenick et al., 2022a). Collectively, it could be argued that these studies may indicate an increase in sexual strangulation affecting similar age and gender groups. To better understand the intensity and escalation of this dangerous sexual trend, and how what was once considered sexual violence has now shifted to sexual pleasure, it is relevant to unpack the manner in which the mainstream and normalization of societal and cultural processes affect and reinforce gender roles and gender-based violence through the travesty of rough sex.

The Harms of Pornography and the Link to Sexual Strangulation

The majority of online pornography depicting dehumanizing and degrading acts against women, where women are constantly sexually objectified, has led to the structures of sociocultural gender norms, shifting attitudes of violence against women, and the manifestation of aggressive sexual behavior towards them (Bridges, 2019; Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2019). Considering that adolescence is a particular age where heightened curiosity and sexual development occur, in a time and place where explicit pornographic content is easily accessible, particularly by minors, has increasingly become an important researched topic among academics (Waterman et al., 2022). Concerningly is the fact that during this critical stage, adolescents are not only at a vulnerable age, but they may be easily impressed due to their insufficient ability to distinguish between what is healthy and unhealthy sexual behavior, an ability which may develop at a later stage during the early or mid-twenties (Morelli et al., 2017). Studies identify that 90% of boys and 60% of girls are exposed to explicit pornographic content during adolescence (Johnson, 2024; Sabina et al., 2008), frequently via a digital device in their own home (Johnson, 2024). Online pornography is not only freely

available and may be anonymously accessed (Grubbs et al., 2022), but it has become extremely pervasive and profusely available over the Internet, allowing easy access to explicit videos, requiring no age verification (Shor, 2019). A report by the Children’s Commissioner for England documented that popular social online media platforms such as X, Instagram, and Snapchat, were among predominant platforms used by young people to view pornography (de Souza, 2023). Numerous academics, social and health professionals, and educators have raised increased concerns regarding the frequent consumption of pornographic content due to its harmful implications. Scientific research documents that the consumption of pornography among young adult men was linked with higher exposure to portrayals of sexual strangulation which then predicted a greater probability of having choked their sexual partner through the perceptions that sexual strangulation is enjoyable, harmless, and does not require sexual consent (Wright et al., 2021). Continuous evidence-based studies document gender-stereotypical beliefs and expectations regarding sexual attitudes and behavior among pornography consumers, including assumptions of gender inequality, female sexual objectification, and sexual power imbalance (Efrati, 2020; Vera-Gray et al., 2021). Other numerous adverse effects have been identified as a result to frequent pornography consumption, such as the normalization of violence against women, gender-stereotypical attitudes and behavior, along with the acceptance of rape myths (Efrati, 2020; Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2019), including dating and sexual violence (Mead & Sharpe, 2020; Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2019; Vera-Gray et al., 2021; Waterman et al., 2022) and desensitization (de Alarcón, 2019). Accordingly, collectively referred to “pornography-normative” behavior (Bridges et al, 2016, p. 3).

The Dangers Embedded within Sexual Strangulation: Desensitization and Rough Sex

Several studies indicate that viewers of online pornography experience desensitization effects, suggesting that they are more permissive towards physical violent attitudes and sexual objectification portrayed in online pornography (Bridges et al., 2016; Vera-Gray et al., 2021). This is observed in what was previously considered as peculiar sexual practices but are now viewed as normal and acceptable sexual acts (Bridges et al., 2016). Female strangulation is among such sexual practices gaining popularity among sexual partners (Guggisberg & Holt, 2022). Wright & colleagues (2021) assert that such desensitization is the result of the link between pornography and strangulation, in the manner in which strangulation is repeatedly portrayed and assumed to be sexually arousing and safe. Consequently, adolescents tend to believe that such sexual behavior between male and female is normal, intrinsically leading to the development of tolerance in regards to violence against women (Bridges, 2019), with diminished awareness of the harm caused by strangulation (Guggisberg & Holt, 2022).

Although occasionally sharing similar underlying connotations, the term ‘rough sex’ has not been properly identified; consequently, it has been disproportionately framed across different platforms. Recent studies reveal that most undergraduate students now conceptualize strangulation as part of rough sex (Herbenick et al., 2021). To better understand how sexual strangulation is linked with rough sex, an overview of the literature is

required to identify how such sexual trends have progressively become mainstreamed and normalized. The term rough sex has been used in different scenarios to describe divergent aspects - it seems to have a multidimensional use. Women's magazines generally refer to the term rough sex when writing about sexual articles (Gilmour & Lavinia, 2024); individuals make use of the term rough sex as a means of expressing their sexual attractions and behaviors (Doucette, 2014); in porn platforms the term is used to describe the genre (Pornhub, 2019); the term has also been commonly used when defending the alleged 'rough sex gone wrong' cases as insidiously portrayed in sexual assault and femicide cases (Bowcott & Grierson, 2020). Femicide is a term used to define the killing of women and girls because of their gender – regarded as the most extreme and ultimate form of GBV (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE], 2024). Despite that rough sex seems to be widespread among 18 to 24 year olds (Herbenick et al., 2020; Vogels & O'Sullivan, 2019) not much is known about people's proper understanding of rough sex, and the extensiveness of this form of sexual practice among specific cohorts, such as college students and minority groups including sexual and/or gender groups, possibly positioning them at higher risk of being involved in such sexual activity (Herbenick et al., 2021). A glance at separate studies will help shed light on the diversity of sexual behaviors encompassing this term and observe how, sexual strangulation has progressed under the umbrella of rough sex with current studies identifying that most participants consider sexual choking as a form of rough sex (Herbenick et al., 2021; Herbenick et al., 2022).

Previous findings identified verbal and physical violence manifested in the form of hair pulling, slapping different body parts (apart from the face), and name-calling as rough sex, arguing as long as these were consensual acts (McKee et al., 2014). Other researchers identified variables for rough sexual behaviors such as biting, scratching, spanking, bondage, hair-pulling, fisting, and double penetration (Vogels & O'Sullivan, 2019). Further studies reported similar findings, including hair-pulling, biting, slapping, being pinned and/or tied down, as being considered as rough sex, with fewer participants actually recognizing choking, punching, or pinching as rough sex (Burch & Salmon, 2019). The latter study found that choking – a behavior that was attributed by the researchers as a more 'violent activity', was viewed by participants more in line with verbal and physical aggression, physical sexual coercion, as well as the threat of throwing something, with gender playing a strong key role in the understanding of such views (Burch & Salmon, 2019). In a further attempt to better understand the ubiquity of certain different sexual behaviors, a National Survey of Pornography Use, Relationships, and Sexual Socialization (NSPRSS) was carried out by Herbenick & colleagues (2020). In this study, among other forms of sexual behavior, choking during sex was identified as a recurrent practice with 12% of women and 20% of men reporting choking someone during sex, while 21% of women and 11% of men, reported being choked during sex (Herbenick et al., 2020). During this research, the act of sexually choking a partner has been described by the researchers as 'dominant' behaviors, while the act of being sexually choked has been described as 'target' behaviors. Such terms are significant as consistent with other studies, gender was found to be a critical active role in such sexual practices, where men were found to engage in more dominant sexual behaviors such as hair-pulling, spanking, and choking, while women were found to be engaged in taking the

target role, such as having their hair-pulled, being spanked, and choked (Bridges et al., 2016; Burch & Salmon, 2019; Herbenick et al., 2020). In another study further exploring the understanding of rough sex, around 80% of those in a sexual relationship reported having engaged in rough sex, with choking considered as the most common form of rough sex – 77.2%, followed by hair pulling – 75.3%, and spanking 68.7% (Herbenick et al., 2021).

As with sexual strangulation, different researchers indicate that pornography consumption and other sexually explicit content as potential influential platforms promoting the practice of rough sex (Bridges et al., 2016; Herbenick et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2021). Researchers suggest that a shift in sexual behavior practices among young adults may have indeed taken place (Herbenick et al., 2021). As observed through the different research, the normalization of sexual choking gradually enmeshed with rough sex, and the acceptance of such sexual activities which were previously considered as scary or in line with sexual assault (Herbenick et al., 2019) may have shifted attitudes and behavior, making rough sex and sexual choking normalized, with sexual choking becoming an acceptable form of sexual activity in mainstream culture. As a means of deeply understanding this phenomenon, and how our environment, particularly pop culture, has played a significant role in this shift, the mapping and unpacking of our social context are further explored.

Mapping Other Platforms Across the Media Sphere: Mainstreaming Rough Sex and Sexual Strangulation

As already discussed, the consumption of pornography repeatedly depicting rough sex infused with sexual asphyxiation has been identified as a leading platform not only in promoting and enabling strangulation, but also in normalizing such sexual practices, particularly among men (Wright et al., 2021). Pornography plays a massive role in eroticizing strangulation, contributing to a broader sphere of normalizing violence in sex by positioning such harmful practices within normative sexual scripts (Vera-Gray et al., 2021). Reflecting this are studies which have identified the correlation between individuals viewing sexual strangulation depicted in pornography and engaging in similar practices themselves (Wright et al., 2021). While numerous studies continue to support such arguments, and acknowledge pornography as the largest platform for teaching and normalizing violent sex practices (Herbenick et al., 2022; Guggisberg & Holt, 2022; Vogels & O'Sullivan, 2019; Waterman et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021), with the proliferation of other social media platforms constantly spreading and feeding society, recent studies indicate that pornography may not be the only source.

New studies reveal that while men generally identify pornography, friends, and mainstream media as sources where they first learned about sexual strangulation, women identify partners, friends, and Internet memes as sources for learning about sexual strangulation (Herbenick et al., 2022; Herbenick et al., 2023). The latter social media platform raises further concerns considering the number of times these are shared, and since Internet memes are regarded as safe innocent spaces which are accessed by anyone, and at any age, particularly children. Popular Internet memes which on the surface seem funny and

innocuous, increasingly portray sexual strangulation as normal behavior, with new studies suggesting that young individuals learn about sexual strangulation from such content (Herbenick et al., 2023). While different cultural connotations have been used to describe the impact of memes, the most pertinent of all is by Shifman (2014) who describes memes as: “cultural information that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon” (p. 18). Despite being disseminated on a micro level, the researcher argues that their effect is on a macro level, since memes are influential in shaping attitudes, creating behavior, and actions of social groups (Shifman, 2014). Academics suggest that although memes may be manifested as humorous, while humour may be trivialized, the memes may serve to reinforce sexist or racist views (Andreasen, 2020). Consequently, based on such arguments, it may be said that while on the surface Internet memes are generally regarded as funny platforms where jokes are shared, through the increased symbolic content of sexual choking explicitly displayed through what is perceived as humorous images and texts, such memes may be influential sources implicitly functioning to increase and enable the mainstream and normalization of sexual strangulation.

The concept of rough sex and sexual strangulation is rife. It is found everywhere and across any platform, usually manifested in different forms targeting all age groups. A clear example which is considered by many as the onset of rough sex, eventually metamorphosed into sexual strangulation, is the worldwide blockbuster trilogy the ‘Fifty Shades of Grey’, recorded as hugely impacting its audience, and considered as immensely influencing culture through its colossal number of copies sold (Bows, 2024; Cain, 2020; Urwin & O’Keeffe, 2020). Published between 2011 and 2012, it was announced as the bestselling book of the decade. In the UK alone the book sold 4.7 million print copies, while by 2015, more than 150 million copies were sold globally (Cain, 2020). Considering the manner the content of this book trivialized and glamourized rough and non-consensual sex raised concerns among academics, campaigners, and feminist activists who have openly and heavily criticized this book for eroticizing violent and aggressive sexual behavior making it mainstream (Dines, 2015; Soberano, 2014). Forensic criminologist Jane Monckton-Smith stated that ‘Fifty Shades’ gave the greenlight to violent sexual practices with women feeling pressured to take part in such dangerous activities (Urwin & O’Keeffe, 2020). As a result to its exceptional fame, in correlation to recognizing the violence against women portrayed in such content, academics were prompt to investigate the impact such material has on society. In the first empirical study regarding the correlation between health risks and reading popular fiction portraying violence against women, a study of more than 650 female participants aged between 18 and 24, discovered that reading this trilogy had several harmful consequences on young women’s health (Bonomi et al., 2014). Among other findings, this study discovered that women who read the first novel were 25% more likely to be with a verbally abusive partner, 34% were more likely to be with a partner who exhibited stalking behavior, and more than 75% were more likely to exhibit signs of eating disorders (Bonomi et al., 2014). Another study by two Belgian professors who are experts in the fields of bacteriology and toxicology found that the ‘Fifty Shades’ books in an Antwerp library contained traces of herpes virus and cocaine (The Guardian, 2013). Other unfolding events following the ‘Fifty Shades’ phenomenon is the link to gender-based violence. Charged for sexually assaulting his partner, a male abuser in the UK

was cleared of any form of assault stating he was inspired by the erotic Fifty Shades novel (BBC, 2013). The following year he was later imprisoned for attacking his then current partner – his seventh sentence for domestic violence (Cain, 2020). Other correlations to this novel include references in domestic violence and femicide cases. The 'Fifty Shades' has been cited in several court cases of men murdering their partners during sex, mostly through strangulation, occurrences that have shockingly spiked by 90% over the past ten years (Cain, 2020). It is not uncommon in such cases, that defense lawyers have frequently employed what has been dubbed as 'the Fifty Shades defense' shifting the blame on the victim claiming it was her insistence for rough sex that eventually caused the sexual assault, including her death (Cain, 2020). Campaigners maintain that the sadomasochistic romantic novel has enabled the normalization of violent sexual behaviors. They assert that social media are now facilitating the mainstreaming of these behaviors so that young women believe they cannot reject sexual partners who want to strangle them during sex (Urwin & O'Keeffe, 2020).

The media sphere is saturated with content promoting and disguising sexual strangulation as the new harmless erotic sexual kink, at times also dangerously manifested through love stories. Fiona Mackenzie, founder of We Can't Consent To This, said: "Strangulation of women is now culturally normalised as an expected sex act through news and magazines, through social media like Tumblr, Instagram and now TikTok, platforms with a large market with children" (Taylor, 2020, para. 12). Echoing this statement is an investigation led by The Times which uncovered hundreds of images portraying sexual strangulation on Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr - popular platforms among adolescents allowing children as young as 13 on their sites (Urwin & O'Keeffe, 2020). Images of young women being gagged, young women being held down and strangled by men, and children being grabbed by the throat were among the exposed images with hashtags such as #BreathPlay, #Strangle, #ChokingKink, and #Daddy (Urwin & O'Keeffe, 2020). Among the hypersexualized and violent descriptions and tags accompanying these disturbing images, one particular picture which raised intensified alarms was on Tumblr that read "bruise my oesophagus" (Urwin & O'Keeffe, 2020, para. 4). Such hashtags have become so mainstream, that users themselves promote these acts through their own personal posts, such as "grab me by the throat and call me yours", "I'd probably still adore you with your hands around my neck", and "Netflix and choke me" (Urwin & O'Keeffe, 2020). Netflix, the biggest leading streaming global platform with 269.6 million worldwide paid members (Nickinson, 2024), also promote sexual strangulation through contemporary Netflix-produced movies such as 'Obsession' and 'Lady Chatterley's Lover', both films containing strangulation during sex scenes presented as part of a love story (Bows, 2024). Meanwhile on YouTube, a prevalent leading platform among teenagers (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), the song by Jack Harlow titled 'Lovin on Me' with 164 million views, includes repeated lyrics of "I'm vanilla, baby, I'll choke you, but I ain't no killer, baby" (YouTube, 2023).

Across the media sphere, whether in pornography, social media, music, books, magazines, or television, men are the ones primarily depicted as strangling women (Bows, 2024). Correspondingly, scientific evidence on actual life sexual strangulation finds that this is a practice commonly performed by men to women (Herbenick et al., 2020). The dangers of mainstreaming and normalizing sexual strangulation acts not only reinforces the belief for women that they should accept such violent sexual practices, but creates further obstacles for

women in general to leave violent relationships (Thompson, 2021). Recognizing the harms of sexual strangulation and the correlation to gender-based violence, feminist activists, academics, and domestic abuse organizations have been relentlessly and extensively criticizing content eroticizing sexual strangulation making it socially acceptable. The rise and popularity of sexual strangulation across the media sphere raises increased concerns about the normalization of violence against women and girls, particularly when it seems that the violence has drifted out of the fiction and straight into the lives of actual individuals.

Sexual Strangulation and the Link to Gender-Based Violence

Violence during consensual sex appears to be the new universal norm. Dr Samantha Keene, a senior lecturer at the Institute of Criminology at Victoria University of Wellington asserts that “rough sex seems to be experiencing a bit of a cultural moment” (McClure, 2024, para. 2). Steven Pope, a psychotherapist specializing in sex and relationships, refers to the rise and normalization of violence during consensual sex as “a silent epidemic ... it devalues the relationship but - at its worst - violence becomes acceptable” (Harte, 2019, para. 25). From his experience of increasingly seeing clients suffering from trauma caused by lengthy unconsciousness as a result to being strangled during sex, Pope adds his concerns that many individuals are engaging in such behavior as they believe it is normal, however, they are oblivious of the risks and harmful consequences to such dangerous acts (Harte, 2019). The role of sexual strangulation has been characterized as “setting the stage” for domestic violence (Thomas et al., 2014, p. 125), guaranteeing that the perpetrator, can or will murder the victim. Further studies in the context of IPV and strangulation reveal that if a woman has been strangled, the chance of her being murdered increases eightfold (Glass et al., 2008). Such concerning research, in addition to the mainstream of rough sex and sexual strangulation, are reflected in further different studies which will be discussed, demonstrating how individuals are experiencing sexual aggressive behavior which seems to have become the norm.

In a study in the UK surveying approximately 2,000 women aged between 18 and 39 reveal that more than a third (38%) had experienced unwanted rough sex - including slapping, choking, gagging, or spitting during consensual sex, while 42% reported to have felt pressured, coerced or forced into it (Savanta ComRes, 2019). Of the women experiencing unwanted rough sex, 20% explained they were left feeling terrified and distressed (Savanta ComRes, 2019). According to the Centre for Women’s Justice, these figures demonstrate “growing pressure on young women to consent to violent, dangerous and demeaning acts” (Harte 2019, para. 13). In Australia, a study by Melbourne University Law School and the University of Queensland investigating the prevalence of sexual strangulation among 4,702 young Australians aged between 18 and 35, revealed that 57% had been strangled, and 51% reported strangling a partner (Sharman et al., 2024). Several academics propose that the fact that strangulation is regularly referred to as choking, even by survivors of IPV is not simply a misnomer. Rather, they offer this as an example of “epistemic oppression” or disempowerment, enabling the reduction of strangulation within relationships and the legal systems (Ciuirria 2020, p. 12; Manne, 2017). Activists reveal that the frequent gendered trait of

strangulation may encourage broader manifestations of coercion and control by men over women. Considering that strangulation is a distinctive and predominantly detrimental form of IPV (Joshi et al., 2012), a growing fear is that abusers may be using sexual strangulation as a means of concealing sexual assault, including murder (We Can't Consent to This, 2024), particularly femicide. Among other health risks associated with strangulation, recent homicide data in the UK shows that 14% of female victims in England and Wales were killed by strangulation or asphyxiation (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2023). Most of these killings are in the context of IPV (McGowan & McKenzie, 2023). Recent studies discovered that strangulation is the most common method of killing in sexual homicide (Kim et al., 2023).

Further to the femicides, it is not uncommon nor unheard of that defense lawyers have used the rhetoric of 'rough sex gone wrong' in court hearings, actually shifting the blame on the victim by claiming she had consented to the act which eventually injured or killed her (Yardley, 2021). With the upsurge of femicides, particularly through the act of strangulation, and the increased use of 'rough sex gone wrong' court claims, has raised growing concerns among women's organizations and senior lawyers. Investigations have discovered that over the past two decades, the UK has witnessed a tenfold increase in the manner such claims have been easily applied in defense cases of femicides (Bowcott, 2019). Investigations have found that male perpetrators who kill women are increasingly shifting the traditional 'crime of passion' defense to the 'sex game gone wrong' excuse (Yardley, 2021). Professor Elizabeth Yardley, a criminologist at Birmingham City University, argues that the normalization of BDSM across different media platforms created a "culturally approved script" for men who kill women (Yardley, 2020, p. 29). Corresponding such a statement are the continuous reports of endless injuries through the epidemic of violence against women, and the rise in femicides. Reports by the Guardian reveal that while in 1996 there were 2 cases where women suffered fatalities and were injured by means of 'rough sex', by 2016, such defense cases escalated to 20 occurrences annually (Bowcott, 2019). Moreover, reports by the campaign 'We Can't Consent to This' - a campaign created as a response to the surge of femicides and other injuries resulting from violence defined as being consensual, as well as a culture of normalization of violence against women and girls - reveal that in the UK alone, more than 20 women a year are injured or killed with the repeated claims of 'sex games gone wrong' (We Can't Consent to This, 2021). During a year campaign aimed at better improving the handling of femicide and violence against women and girls (VAWG), reports by the Femicide Census founded by Karen Ingala Smith and Clarrie O'Callaghan, also joined by the Observer, revealed that every two weeks, a woman is murdered by strangulation (Roberts, 2022). O'Callaghan confirms that in the UK "strangulation is the second most common method after stabbing that men use to kill women" (Roberts, 2022, para. 6).

Taking into account that sexual strangulation is a highly gendered practice (Herbenick, et al., 2021; Moore & Khan, 2019; Sharman et al., 2024), in line with the upsurge in femicides across the globe - approximately 48,800 women and girls have been intentionally killed (not necessarily through strangulation) by an intimate partner in 2022 (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2023, p. 3) has stirred deep concerns. Activists and academics in the field of GBV are deeply worried with the growing phenomenon of sexual strangulation and the manner in which abusive partners may be adopting such a method in further

manifesting their violence and abuse, ultimately killing their victims, and how through the normalization in the rise of this sexual trend, abusers may actually be getting away with murder (Das, 2023). Taking into account the manner in which sexual strangulation has become so prevalent, it is surprising how in reality not enough is known about it – especially how consent may be discussed, bargained, or recognized for strangulation.

Strangulation: Risks and Consent

Considered a gendered act, a meta-analysis investigating gender differences in violence refers to strangulation as “very clearly a male act” (Archer 2002, p. 327). This corresponds to current literature which continues to stress that strangulation is a highly gendered practice (Herbenick et al., 2021, 2022a, 2022; Sharman et al., 2024). A study among undergraduate students in the US revealed that women, LGTQ+ individuals, and racial/ethnic minorities are among those commonly targeted with sexual strangulation (Herbenick et al., 2021). Out of 4,168 participants, this study discovered that 26.5% of women, 6.6% of men, and 22.3% of trans and gender non-binary participants reported to have been choked during their recent sexual activity (Herbenick et al., 2021). Meanwhile, other studies in Australia found that 61% of women, 43% of men, and 79% trans or gender diverse individuals reported being strangled during sex (Sharman et al., 2024). Such studies demonstrate that irrespective of gender, sexual strangulation is enacted primarily by men (Herbenick et al., 2021). While it may be argued that this is due to anatomical causes, with regards to hand and neck span, studies propose a power dynamic frequently caused by intense jealousy defined as Othello-like, with the need to assert control (Joshi et al., 2012; Sorenson et al., 2014). Studies identify several reasons for engaging in sexual strangulation: thinking it would satisfy their partner, giving in to sexual compliance, being expected to engage in such sexual acts, experimenting in sexual kink, wanting to push sexual boundaries, beliefs of power and dominance (Bows, 2024; Bridges et al., 2016; Herbenick et al., 2022; Whitson, 2024). Nevertheless, despite that sexual choking is gaining exponential popularity, this does not mean that it is necessarily desired by those receiving it or engaging in it. According to numerous research, a substantial number of women in particular, although consenting to sexual encounters, do not consent to the explicit act of being choked (Bows, 2024; Herbenick et al., 2022; Hone, 2024; Savanta ComRes, 2019). What is certain is that sexual strangulation has become so infused with the mainstream umbrella of things, to the point that it is being perceived as the norm in sexual behavior, resulting in many young people assuming that it is OK to do it without consent. Numerous investigations indicate that most individuals who have experienced sexual strangulation had never asked for it nor commenced it, and many describe and report that it either happened without consent, or that consent had been assumed (Harte, 2019; Herbenick et al., 2022; Moore & Khan, 2019; Savanta ComRes, 2019; Sharman et al., 2024). New studies in Iceland found that out of 227 participants, 33% had been choked during sex without consent (Vilhjálmsdóttir & Forberg, 2023). Additionally, a growing number of women report to have been shamed as ‘boring,’ ‘vanilla,’ or ‘prude’ when they refused to be choked during sex (We Can't Consent to This, 2024). The misconception that sexual strangulation is safe, as such

does not require consent, along with the lack of proper knowledge regarding the potential harms as a consequence to such sexual acts, including intimidation, sheds further concerns about its acceptance and normalization among the general population, especially with studies demonstrating that women frequently opt for submissive roles to satisfy their partners (Bridges et al., 2016; Herbenick et al., 2022). Such sexual behavior creates further distortions and blurriness when strangulation is undesired, especially for those suffering the strangulation (Sharman et al., 2024). Moreover, increasing risks are augmented for those partners taking the submissive roles, which may hinder them from voicing their fear or distress to being strangled, or to simply being able to stop the action of strangulation, or even worse, placing them in further risks such as being unable to physically signal someone to stop (Herbenick et al., 2022).

Across scientific research, partnered sexual asphyxiation is given less emphasis, probably as it appears to be associated with lower dangers since it is understood that someone is present to lessen risks, and because of the common practice of the use of hands rather than the use of hanging, which is applied to constrain the airways (Herbenick et al., 2021). Nevertheless, irrespective of any scenario, whether using hands, bondage, hanging, or any other means, individuals practicing sexual strangulation face an increased serious risk of health issues. Despite that there may be some sex educators and sex therapists recommending that sexual choking may be done safely (Holland, 2023), health experts warn that no safe method exists to practice strangulation without exposure to high risks (Hone, 2024; Institute For Addressing Strangulation [IFAS], 2023; Tuohy, 2022; Whitson, 2024). These include substantial physical consequences which may be long lasting, emerging weeks or even months after the act of strangulation, especially after numerous episodes of being strangled (Huibregtse et al., 2022). While generally leaving no visible signs of injury, strangulation leaves devastating harmful effects (Bichard et al., 2020). Studies reveal that risks associated with sexual strangulation are extensive. These may range from short-term effects such as coughing, vision changes, hearing problems, marks on the neck, vomiting, loss of bowel control, headaches, confusion, agitation, including thyroid injuries – neck swelling, pain, respiratory distress, and difficulty swallowing (Alayaaf & Kim, 2023; IFAS, 2024) - to long-term changes in the brain, including stroke, cardiac arrest, seizures, paralysis, speech disorders, anxiety as a result to being strangled, as well as miscarriage of pregnancy, including death (Bichard et al., 2020; Herbenick et al., 2022; Hone, 2024; Huibregtse et al., 2022; Kissane, 2024; Sauvageau, 2016; Whitson, 2024). Such fatalities (that of the unborn child, and the victim being choked) may not be instant, but may happen weeks or even months after the initial acts of strangulation (Kissane, 2024). Studies identify that consciousness can be lost in as little as 4 seconds of arterial pressure, indicating a mild brain injury (Bichard et al., 2020). Other physical harms may also happen quickly, as individuals may suffer a fit from lack of oxygen in around 17 seconds, may experience loss of bowel control in around 30 seconds, and death may occur in around 150 seconds (Kissane, 2024).

Dr Parkin a senior forensic physician at the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine, stresses on the false notion of having a ‘safe word’ or ‘safe gesture’ to indicate distress, or to stop the person committing the strangulation, stressing this is completely unreliable since numerous victims report being unable to indicate such danger (Parkin, 2024; Whitson, 2024).

Substantiating such claims are former studies indicating that due to the trauma suffered by strangulation, individuals may go in freeze mode considered as “traumatic immobility” (Farr 2002, p. 276), hence they are unable to indicate such ‘safe gestures’. Strangulation is an exclusive act of intimate terrorism (Johnson, 2010), as such it comes to no surprise that in addition to the physical effects, psychological consequences are also suffered. Nonetheless, irrespective of whether sexual choking was consensual, the surviving sexual partner(s) may be criminally charged with the death of the victim (Roma et al., 2013; Sauvageau, 2016; Sandler, 2018). Considering all the repercussions, including the extremely high health risks involved, should serve as a red flag to anyone considering engaging in such sexual practices, while at the very least, to get informed through proper evidence-based research, rather than through misinformation which is easily glamorized and trivialized across pornography and other social media platforms.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the countless studies demonstrating the harms and dangers related to strangulation, other considerations also need to be addressed. Especially since according to some findings, compared to straight women, bisexual women consider strangulation as an enjoyable sexual experience, with many individuals reporting to engage in strangulation either by strangling a partner, or by being strangled by a partner during sex (Sharman et al., 2024). Lesbian and bisexual women have reported to commonly participate in kink activities, with younger lesbians and bisexual women reporting to be more likely to participate in asphyxiation/breath play (Pavanello Decaro et al., 2024). Other research suggests that for some individuals who identify as bisexual, pansexual, or queer, such kink activities may be a possible platform helping them to explore gender identity and sexual orientation, while for some others, engaging in kink communities helps them heal from trauma (Sprott & Benoit Hadcock, 2018). Such findings make it evident that extra attention and sensitivity should be given when discussing such issues, as a means of avoiding causing stigma or harm to such marginalized groups. Nevertheless, as has been discussed in this report, a plethora of research highlights and identifies the extensive harms related to sexual strangulation, the conflation of sexual strangulation and GBV, the increased risk of death and femicide, and the common practice of using the ‘sex games gone wrong’ excuse to get away with murder. With perceptions of sexual strangulation as positive and safe after exposure to pornography, and considering that most commonly adolescents learn about sexual strangulation between the age of 16 and 18 (Sharman et al., 2024), conversations about the harms and dangers of this sexual practice should commence early. Furthermore, considering the manner that sexual strangulation continues to be glamorized and trivialized across pop culture, shifting sexual attitudes and behavior, while increasing the risk of harm particularly to females, merits urgent attention through the development of comprehensive porn-critical sex education designed on evidence-based research, such as the one developed by Culture Reframed. Such tools may

help younger individuals to better understand the vast potential dangers pertaining to sexual strangulation, help them shift the misinformation of normalizing rough violent sex depicted in pornography, understand the true meaning of consent and that it may be withdrawn at any point, and empower individuals through confident strong amplified voices in being assertive and take personal control in their informed decisions. Such strategic education may be effective in providing critical thinking about the influences shaping norms and sexual expectations encompassing sexual strangulation, thus help reduce the risk of harm, avoid violence and trauma, reduce GBV, and ultimately save lives.

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This Report was published February 2025, written by
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