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## CHAPTER 2

### **Participatory porn culture**

#### Feminist positions and oppositions in the internet pornosphere

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#### **Introductions: pornography, feminisms, and ongoing debate**

Though first-wave feminists had engaged in debate and advocacy surrounding sexual knowledge and obscenity since the late-19<sup>th</sup> century (Horowitz, 2003), American advocates did not begin to address pornography as a feminist concern until the 1970s, ostensibly beginning with the formation of the activist group Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) in 1978. WAVPM was a reactionary response to the mainstreaming of hardcore pornography in the wake of American sexual liberation, which many second wave feminists claimed “...encouraged rape and other acts of violence, threatening women’s safety and establishing a climate of terror that silenced women and perpetuated their oppression... [thus helping] create and maintain women’s subordinate status” (Bronstein, 2011, pp. 178–179).

The resulting “porn wars” (or, more broadly, “sex wars”) of the 1980s and 1990s polarized second- and third-wave feminists into two camps: (1) anti-porn feminists, such as writer Andrea Dworkin (1981) and legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon (1984), who opposed the creation and distribution of pornographic images and videos on moral and political grounds; and (2) pro-porn or sex-positive feminists, such as anthropologist Gayle Rubin and feminist pornographer Candida Royalle, who advocated for freedom of sexual expression and representation. The rhetoric surrounding the social and cultural ills perpetuated by pornography was duly acrimonious, with one prominent feminist writing, “pornography is the theory, rape is the practice” (Morgan, 1978, p. 128)

Now, 40 years after the beginning of the “porn wars,” similarly polarized debate still persists—criticizing pornography and its purported role as an instrument of women’s oppression, or framing it as a potential vehicle for women’s empowerment. Simultaneously, media expansion, democratization, and convergence has not only widened the reach of pornographic media, but also the scope and depth of the conversations surrounding it. The widespread adoption of VCRs and other home video technologies, followed by the proliferation of computers and high-speed Internet across the US, moved pornography from theaters and stag films into the homes of the private consumer. Digital porn

communities such as fan sites and message boards enabled consumers to not only gather and share their interests about sexuality and also sexual imagery with the promise of relative anonymity, but also to establish visible erotic cultures and subcultures, chipping away at the stigma of pornography consumption, as well as sexuality writ large. This was especially true for women during Internet porn's initial heyday in the early 2000s, as noted by multiple authors in *The Feminist Porn Book* (2013); *porn for women* emerged as a counter-narrative to the adult films and images that galvanized second-wave feminists to begin the porn wars.

In *The Feminist Porn Book* (2013), as well as the *Porn Studies* journal that emerged at the same time, porn theorists and practitioners alike engage in extensive theorizing about what pornography created for women *could* or *should* look like, but limited empirical work on what the porn actually preferred by women *does* look like. What sets the porn consumed by women apart from the mainstream adult content consumed by men?

My research (Smith, 2015) has examined the content of two internet porn communities on reddit.com, to delineate and quantify the differences between pornography preferred by male and female audiences. The results, excerpted here, illustrate the continued diversification of pornographic media, particularly with regard to the construction of a gendered "gaze" that directs the filmic frame (Ms. Naughty, 2014; Mulvey, 1999). Perhaps the most striking visualization of this shifting gaze is the development of what I have termed a women's "participatory porn culture," wherein women's fantasies are articulated and then depicted on screen (rather than a more traditional pornographic representation of a male gaze), detailed in the last section of this chapter. I conclude with potential directions for future research, as well as a call for the application of an inclusive feminist sexual ethic to future research on pornography and other sexual representations.

### **Taking the pulse of the porn-watching public: digital communities as representative of erotic preferences and cultures**

The social networking site reddit allows users ("redditors") to share and vote on content on message boards ("subreddits") that coalesce around particular themes—for example, r/gaming for videogames, or r/worldnews for global current events. Users then rank this content by giving "upvotes" to posts they enjoy and "downvotes" to posts they dislike, so that content with the highest number of upvotes appears at the top of the homepage for each subreddit and posts are organized sequentially in order of aggregate popularity.

In the case of pornography, reddit's peer-sourced and group-ranked information architecture offers researchers the opportunity to "take the pulse" of the porn-viewing public at a given moment: the top videos on a not safe for work (NSFW) subreddit are indicative of the porn trends *du jour*. With over 8,400 NSFW subreddits as of April 2016, redditors and visitors can share, rank, and view pornographic content from the normative to the fetishistic (NSFW411, 2016). Much like the companies and websites that create this content, subreddits can offer a very broad range of porn (like on general boards such as r/nsfw, and r/Blowjobs), or very specific genres and niches (r/Russian girls,

r/preggohentai, r/areolas, and r/GirlsHumpingThings, just to name a few)—giving users many options to find adult content that satisfies their particular “carnal resonance” (Paasonen, 2011).

PornVids, one of the largest porn subreddits (with 150,000 subscribers as of May 2016), is devoted to sharing pornography videos hosted on large free “porn tube” websites such as PornVids, RedTube, and XVideos. ChickFlixxx has a smaller readership (39,000 subscribers) and is described as a board “for women, by women,” designed to create a “female-oriented community” where “pro-porn women” can “share links to great sexual content and discuss porn” (r/ChickFlixxx, 2016).

To obtain a representative sample for analyzing the content of these networks, I downloaded and archived the top ten ranked videos from both subreddits at the time of data collection (October 2014). The twenty videos that compose the study sample represent the Internet pornography trends from both communities. Through reddit's peer-sourced and group-ranked information architecture, their landing pages are indicative of real-time user demand. They provide researchers with a finger on the pulse of porn trends of the moment.

These videos comprised nearly ten hours' worth of pornographic content: four hours, 43 minutes, and 40 seconds for the r/PornVids sample and five hours, four minutes and eight seconds for the r/Chickflixxx sample, respectively. While this amount of content is certainly not indicative of the various norms and niches of the millions of pornographic files available online (Döring, 2009, p. 1092; Mazières *et al.*, 2014), these 20 videos provided a representative sample of the most popular content within two porn communities and their respective cultures; that of a more mainstream porn community, moderated by male users and dominated by a male viewership; and its emerging, female-focused counterpart.

After downloading and archiving the most popular content from these two communities, I then systematically analyzed and coded the videos in the sample for both visual (Whose bodies are being shown? What acts are taking place?) and aural (What is being said? In what tone?) rhetoric, as well as for the presence (or absence) of a hegemonic male gaze.

### **Mobilizing practitioner frameworks to codify the male gaze in porn**

“Male gaze,” as coined by feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey (1999) in her landmark essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, describes the dominant heterosexual male perspective adopted in mainstream film that sexualizes, commodifies, and subordinates the female body: empowering man an active “bearer of the look” and rendering woman a passive “bearer of meaning” (Mulvey, 1999, pp. 842–843).

While Mulvey created her operationalization of the male gaze to apply to mainline Hollywood cinema, the concept is magnified in pornography, where gender roles and sexual categories are amplified to titillate audiences—as noted by feminist pornographer Ms. Naughty (Louise Lush) in her 2014 video, *The Male Gaze in Porn (With Commentary by*

*Doge*). After a more than decade-long career creating content in the adult film industry as a writer, director, and critic, Ms. Naughty created the video to deconstruct the reasons why (in her experience) women do not enjoy watching mainstream porn, and to provide a name for those reasons: the male gaze. The framework that Ms. Naughty creates outlines eight different tenets of the male gaze in the construction of pornographic fantasies for men, by men— from phallogocentric imagery ("the headless dick"), to synecdochic representations of the female body ("the woman is always looked *at*, she never *looks*"), to inauthentic portrayals of lesbian sex ("his fantasy"). Her critique uses clips from real porn videos, all comically censored using images from an Internet meme and accompanied by a kitschy backing track (Ms. Naughty, 2014).

I deployed six of these eight tenets as analytical criteria to determine and codify the presence of a male gaze in the porn videos from both reddit samples (For more information see Smith, 2015). The incorporation of this framework served two purposes. First, it generated data on the more latent and symbolic functions of the content being analyzed, in relation to the performance and significance of gender as constructed by the visual and aural rhetorical actions of the filmmakers and performers. Second, mobilizing Ms. Naughty's categories as analytical criteria continues the feminist tradition of recognizing that there are theorists beyond the academy: that practitioners create and actualize theory in their work, just as scholars do in their publications. My inclusion of the theory of a working pornographer here is a deliberate rhetorical move to value and amplify the knowledge of practitioners alongside that of researchers in the field of porn studies.

### **Positions and oppositions: trends across mainstream and women's pornography**

The results of this study shed light on the differences between the sexual cultures of r/PornVids and r/Chickflixxx, representative of a mainstream audience of mostly male porn consumers, and a more marginal audience largely comprised of female porn consumers, respectively.

Both qualitatively and quantitatively, the videos on the women's porn board demonstrated a greater diversity of sexual acts and practices than those on the mainstream porn board. The r/Chickflixxx sample included use of sex toys, while the mainstream sample did not. Interestingly enough, the woman-friendly sample was also the only one to include any anal sex, a practice typically thought—at least in a hetero-porn context—to be more appealing to men than to women. The video featuring anal sex also included the use of sex toys, and was the only clip in the sample directed by a woman.

Videos from the r/Chickflixxx sample included more kissing and foreplay than those from r/PornVids (6.42% of r/ChickFlixxx video content versus 4.59% of r/PornVids video content), as well as more cunnilingus and manual stimulation/fingering of female performers. However, much of the manual clitoral stimulation across the videos from both samples was performed not by male partners, but by female performers upon themselves. In spite of this, the "male gaze scores" were radically different between the two samples:

the ten r/PornVids clips met Ms. Naughty's (2014) male gaze criteria 44 times (out of a possible 60), while the ten r/Chickflixxx clips had less than half of that, with only 19 instances.

The most commonly met male gaze criteria across both datasets was the prioritization of fellatio over cunnilingus; on this account, even the pornography selected and shared by women was still not entirely equitable, statistically speaking. Women on r/Chickflixxx often complained about the lack of cunnilingus in mainstream porn in particular, which led me to code specifically for the duration of oral sex acts across the study sample. The fellatio ratio—that is, the amount of male-receiving oral sex compared to the amount of female-receiving—spoke volumes, with the r/PornVids sample displaying 13.4 seconds of blowjob for every one second of cunnilingus, while the r/Chickflixxx sample showed 1.26 seconds of blowjob for every second of cunnilingus. Also contradicting the female redditors' claims of gender equity within the pornography they selected, both samples had the same number of videos depicting female orgasm (six videos out of ten on both r/Chickflixxx and r/PornVids)—though it is worth noting that there were more instances of multiple female orgasms, thus a greater total female orgasm count, in the r/Chickflixxx videos. Visual representations of female orgasm are increasingly called for by feminist pornographers and porn theorists alike, particularly when the editors of the leading edited collection on feminist porn theory write that truly feminist pornography “depicts genuine female pleasure” (Taormino *et al.*, 2013, p. 12). If the videos in both samples depict more male orgasms than female ones, where is the gendered and sexual equity that these theorists and female fans envisioned?

While seemingly basic and admittedly a bit reductive, these simple numbers are indicative of greater trends across the visual rhetoric of pornography that value the pleasure of a man over the pleasure of a woman. These trends in turn influence the real life sexual practices of a generation that is increasingly porn educated, with one study showing that more than half of UK students turn to pornography for their sex education (National Union of Students, 2015). Because of pornography's rising status as a sexual educator, the representation of a greater variety of sexual practices is increasingly important and impactful.

### **Participatory porn culture: creating new representations of women's sexuality**

One commonality between both subreddits analyzed for this project is their shared love of a particular male performer: 5'8" (172 cm), 30-year-old James Deen. Young women in particular enjoy Deen's performances because of his “nonthreatening” appearance, “boy-next-door” ethos, and range of work—from softer, more intimate scenes, to hardcore gangbangs produced for websites like kink.com (Rosetti, 2012). The women of r/Chickflixxx devoted entire posts and threads to discussing Deen's work, and his videos were also frequently shared on r/PornVids.

Not only was James Deen especially popular on both porn subreddits analyzed for this project, but a particular series of videos shot for his website were consistently among PornVids and Chickflixxx's highest rated. This group of similarly designed and edited videos, which I refer to as Deen's "civilian porn series," originated in 2013 and continue at the time of writing (summer 2016).

In September 2013, Deen had an afternoon off after his scheduled porn shoot was suddenly canceled. He posted a (seemingly joking) request to his official Twitter account, asking if any female followers would be interested in shooting a scene with him (Deen, 2013a). The response to this informal casting call was so enthusiastic—with messages from hundreds of female fans, according to the still-open call for participants on Deen's website (Deen, 2013b)—that Deen is still shooting videos with applicants today, three years later. At press time for this collection, there are 84 videos listed under the "amateur" tag on Deen's website (Deen, 2016); while not all of these videos were shot with "true" amateurs (women with no previous experience in the adult film industry), two of them were among the top ten videos on r/Chickflixxx (and one on r/PornVids) at the time of data collection. These videos, which typically last for about an hour divided equally between Deen conversing with the women and having sex with them, exemplify the values of a growing participatory porn culture.

Participatory culture, as described by media and fan studies scholar Henry Jenkins and colleagues (2009), emphasizes social connections between members of a culture maintained through active engagement, fostered through "low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement," and where participants mentor each other and in so doing truly "believe that their contributions matter" (Jenkins *et al.*, 2016, p. 7). This isn't the first time that the creations of porn fans have been valued alongside those of professional content creators in the adult film industry; homemade sex tapes (both of civilians and celebrities, such as Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee—see Hillyer, 2004) have circulated on the internet since the mid-to-late 1990s. Homemade sex tapes do appear among the top videos on r/PornVids and r/Chickflixxx, but have not been met with as enthusiastic a response as the videos from Deen's series, which not only feature the bodies and desires of "real women," but do so in a way that connects fans with the object of their fandom—in an unprecedented participatory fashion that depicts and amplifies *women's* fantasies.

Unlike the amateur sex tape genre created by couples in their own home and intended largely for private consumption, this civilian porn series that Deen has created has no historical antecedent—at least not for women. Male fans have been tapped to star in adult videos alongside female porn stars to bring *their* fantasies to life, but female porn fans were not invited to engage with male performers in the same way. Women have self-published porn sites for their own personal and economic gain since the early days of the internet, as noted by DeVoss (2002), but these women too were still creating images and videos that catered to a largely male gaze. Theirs was pornography created primarily for men to purchase and consume.

The creation of this particular series signifies a number of socio-cultural shifts. Firstly, Deen's popularity among women that built to create the series is demonstrative of shifting representations of masculinity in pornography and other sexual media; his "nonthreatening" appearance created by a slim body and self-effacing ethos counters more traditional representations of hegemonic masculinity in adult media. Secondly, the continuation of Deen's series beyond the initial videos in the fall of 2013 remains a testament to the power of the female porn consumer<sup>1</sup>. Finally, and perhaps most pertinently for porn studies scholars, the popularity of videos featuring "real woman" fans of pornography engaging in sexual activities with their favorite adult film star is representative of a move towards a more public and visible participatory porn culture, as the women shooting scenes with Deen are easily identifiable and occasionally even use their real names (see Tisdale, 2015).

Not only does this new amateur pornography series exemplify the values of participatory culture; it signifies a shift towards women's pornographic and erotic agency that distinctly contrasts with typical second-wave feminist accounts of porn demeaning and degrading women. The women in this participatory porn series, and the female fans who share and circulate the videos, are claiming agency: their ability to affect social change. Rhetoricians Carl Herndl and Adela Licona (2007) frame agency as radical, counterhegemonic action that changes or entirely dismantles social, institutional, and/or discursive practices. Couples have shot videos of themselves engaging in sexual acts since before the creation of porn websites, but never have women been provided such an opportunity to participate as an actress in the production of pornography made for them, by them—and in so doing, announce and affirm their status as porn consumers. These women, and their fans in communities like r/Chickflixxx that share and comment on the videos they star in, radically flip the pornographic gaze to create new sexual representations.

The women in this series claim a new erotic agency that has not been afforded to women previously: the ability to have public sex with a porn star who is an object of *female*, not male, desire. In turn, Deen and his female "civilian" partners create a video that reflects that desire back into the Internet pornosphere through thousands of viewings by other porn consumers—of all genders. This reciprocal process redistributes the agency of the pornographic production more equitably between participants, in addition to involving

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<sup>1</sup> Also a testament to the power of the female porn consumer, however, is the decline in Deen's popularity after he was the subject of multiple allegations of sexual assault in November 2015, after a tweet from fellow porn-performer and Deen's former partner, Stoya, claimed that he had ignored her safe word and raped her during their relationship. I cannot fully address Deen's alleged misconduct here, due to constraints of this anthology; however, it would be remiss not to acknowledge these events and their resulting discourse, both inside and outside of the porn community, on consent and the negotiation of power during sexual activity, particularly that which involves BDSM or other power play. The theorizing and reflection on James Deen's participatory pornography here should be taken as what it is—scholarship—rather than an endorsement of his actions or character.

fans in the creation of pornography so that sexual imagery reflects their practices and desires.

### **Conclusions: towards a feminist pornographic and sexual ethic for the digital age**

When I began writing this chapter, the release of the first film in the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy was igniting feminist debate around subjects of fantasy, power, sexuality, and violence. Internet porn communities were similarly divided after James Deen was the subject of multiple allegations of sexual assault and misconduct from former partners and co-stars (Snow, 2015), creating conversation around working conditions for performers in the adult film industry, as well as the importance of seeking consent in all sexual encounters.

What perpetuates the continuing “porn wars” between feminists and non-feminists alike, and what began my foray into rhetorical porn studies, is this paradoxical nature of pornography. Much as politicians claim that the government should not interfere in the private lives of citizens, yet seek to regulate those citizens’ private activities behind bedroom doors, so too does pornography sit tenuously on the contested boundary of public rhetoric and private practice. Those who claim not to watch it aim to police its production and consumption, and those who do consume it are stigmatized into silence around their consumption.

Internet pornography uniquely demonstrates the symbols and manifestations of an erotic culture that is simultaneously public and private. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, porn is always, already a part of our widely circulated norms of gender and sexuality, yet often relegated to the realm of impolite dinner conversation—a thing we speak not of, despite its omnipresence in our media and culture.

While this work is not intended to be a definitive study on the effects or implications of all pornography—it would be foolhardy and reductive to attempt such sweeping generalizations in the first place—it does begin to unpack previous assertions by both academics and pundits alike that porn is a monolithic, violent discourse. It is clear that continued scholarship needs to engage with the multiplicity of sexual representations and cultures embodied through pornographic media, and that partnerships between scholars and adult industry practitioners—such as *The Feminist Porn Book* (2013) and the *Porn Studies* journal—can help to facilitate academic work that more faithfully represents this multiplicity.

Finally, in order to continue affirming the sexual agency of *all genders*, the crucial nature of consent must be emphasized within pornography, and in sexual media writ large. It is clear that continued conversations are needed around not only the multiplicity of sexual practices and bodies, but also the consent required to maintain a feminist sexual ethic that acknowledges and honors bodily autonomy and integrity, in addition to desire.



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