

## **‘It’s a really great tool’: feminist pornography and the promotion of sexual subjectivity**

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Drawing from a critical cultural studies-based study that included interviews with producers and performers, and focus groups with consumers, the following paper seeks to demystify meaning-making processes among women that consume feminist pornography. Rather than focus on either production practices or consumer patterns, this study engages with both in an attempt to uncover discursive formations and reception. The following paper describes how feminist pornography audiences arrive at this genre, based on both distaste for mainstream depictions of female sexuality and an interest in diversifying their pornography diet; these orientations have led them to develop a ‘taste’ for ethically produced, or ‘feminist’, pornography content. In addition, data suggest that consumers engage with negotiated readings patterns and normative viewing practices. Drawing on these findings, this paper argues that feminist pornography offers a unique ‘heterotopia’ for a particular population of female, feminist-identified consumers to actively explore sexual practices and develop sexual subjectivity.

**Keywords:** feminist pornography; audience reception; sexual subjectivity; media studies

### **Introduction**

Like other cinematic traditions that construct moving images in reaction to cultural and historical conditions, feminist pornography<sup>1</sup> grows out of a third-wave, sex-positive feminist ideology that seeks to revision sexual subjectivity.<sup>2</sup> However unorthodox, this enactment of praxis positions directors to produce mediated spaces that attempt to challenge the mythologies of mainstream pornography industry (Naughty 2013; Royalle 2013; Taormino 2013). In her book *Good Porn: A Woman’s Guide*, feminist pornographer Erika Lust playfully lists such common myths associated with ‘phony, predictable porn for men’, including:

2. Men can always get it up;
6. When a man is choking a women with his dick, she always smiles and enjoys it;
7. Beautiful young women just love to have sex with fat, ugly, middle-aged men;
13. Every lesbian is tall, thin and pretty and has long hair and nails. (Lust 2010, 21–23)

Despite the growth of this filmic movement, there is a limited amount of qualitative audience research describing meaning-making processes among consumers of

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feminist pornography (Attwood 2005; Smith 2007). Because the mainstream pornography industry has historically privileged a male gaze, theories of female – or even feminist – audience practices are noticeably scant in academic literature. From quantitative analyses commissioned by the US government in the 1970s and 1980s to more recent internet addiction studies, the majority of mainstream published materials analyzing the ‘pornography audience’ have ahistorically focused on effects on male attitudes and behaviours (Boyle 2003). Further, contemporary pornography scholars argue that moral panic and policy advocacy prompted the majority of the aforementioned studies (Juffer 1998; Attwood 2010) rather than an interest in cultural production and consumption.

On the other hand, as the porn studies and feminist media studies paradigms continue to investigate pornography as a dynamic cultural text that warrants multiple methods and frameworks, there has been an increase in contributions centring on the intersections of female audiences, sexuality, gender and explicit media. In the wake of the production of ‘female-friendly’ genres and recent critiques of ‘choice’ feminism (Gill 2003; McRobbie 2008), this research has made a significant contribution to questions surrounding gender identity, agency and negotiation in pornography culture. As a contributor to ‘sex-positive cultural production’ (Comella 2013, 91), feminist pornography offers a unique opportunity for researchers to investigate questions that have circulated since the 1980s Sex Wars; for example, does the pornographic text change when women are the producers? How can and does feminism operate in a filmic genre that has notoriously objectified women? How does feminist pornography reconcile with the commodification of bodies? Is the decoding process different for audiences of feminist pornography? The following paper draws from a larger, qualitative study of feminist pornography and addresses the consumption process of feminist pornography; more specifically, it seeks to answer the question ‘how do female consumers “read” this feminist text?’

Among recent publications interested in female audiences and pornography,<sup>3</sup> Clarissa Smith’s *One For the Girls! The Pleasures and Practices of Reading Women’s Porn* offers an approach to female audience research that privileges complexity and context over gender essentialism and generalization:

I’m not suggesting I can simply map ‘readings’ or ‘decodings’ onto individual women, or that these are somehow the only ‘authentic’ responses to pornography [...]. I should make clear that there are not simply individual responses [...] there are socially and culturally located ways of understanding and participating in a specific cultural form. (Smith 2007, 127)

Here, Smith echoes the same hesitancy to psychologize and individualize that media studies scholars Janice Radway (1984) and Ian Ang (1985) demonstrate in their work on patriarchal media and the female audience. Smith’s above statement highlights the role of gender in the reception process as intersectional rather than primary. In her conclusion, Smith offers an update to this culturalist approach by introducing ‘orientations to pornography’ as a conceptual framework for reception research:

In coming to a sexually explicit publication, readers bring expectations – pornography has social meaning before any instance of use of it – and they measure the material in front of them in light of those expectations. Those expectations need to be understood as orientations to pornography, in other words people don’t interpret pornography, they

respond to it and in and through those responses accord it a significance in their understanding of themselves, their pleasures, the sexual pleasures of others, the social, economic, medical and cultural place of sexuality, the imbrications of pornography in sexuality etc. (2007, 227; original emphasis)

Because of her contextual focus, Smith's use of the term 'orientation' has been instrumental for the organization and analysis surrounding this study. Owing to normative assumptions surrounding the intersection of the pornography industry, feminism, and sexuality that draw from critiques of post-feminism and capitalism, an analysis that focuses on 'orientations' to pornography reiterates the social organization of sexuality and pornography (Weeks 2003) and can locate relationships rather than determinations.

In an effort to reveal these relationships and contribute to the growing body of scholarship on feminist pornography, this paper is narrowly interested in female audience 'orientations' to, and viewing practices of, feminist pornography. Drawing from the 'media accounts' (Hoover, Clark, and Alters 2004) of focus group participants, this paper theorizes the development of the feminist pornography taste culture, describes viewing patterns of self-identified feminist pornography consumers, and argues that this genre creates a feminist performative heterotopia which offers a productive space for the development of sexual subjectivity.

### **Methodology**

To demystify contextual social relationships, it was essential that the methodology included an invitation for individuals to reveal experiences related to production, consumption, and text (Kellner 2015). Therefore, recruitment strategies were drawn from a critical cultural studies framework and based on attracting individuals with direct involvement with feminist pornography; the owners/directors of feminist pornography (producers), those who watch feminist pornography (consumers), and then, in later stages of data collection, performers of both mainstream and feminist pornography. Ultimately, the goal of the larger dissertation study was to allow those in direct contact with this genre to account for their experiences and interpretations and to track the discursive process of feminist pornography from production to reception. The following paper draws from these data, but focuses specifically on audience reception findings in order to unpack the nuances of feminist pornography spectatorship.

After careful consideration of proximity to feminist activism, the pornography industry, and a nationally-known sex-positive adult boutique, New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco were chosen as the research sites for consumer focus groups. Unfortunately Chicago did not yield enough participants, so that location was dropped from the study. Advertising for the focus groups consisted of recruitment posters that included take-away tabs with a contact email address, and were displayed in female-owned adult boutiques Babeland (New York City) and Good Vibrations (San Francisco). Managers from various locations within each city were contacted via telephone and, once permission was granted, the posters were sent through mail.

The choice for a self-selected recruitment process for this study was the direct result of privacy and confidentiality concerns; rather than advertise in a newspaper,

website, or other public forum, the choice to advertise in a female-friendly adult store was to recruit from a population that was already interested in this topic area. After contacting the email address for this project and expressing an interest in participation, each individual was given a hyperlink to an online self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire, developed through Survey Monkey, was designed to gather demographic information and sensitive opinions that might be too uncomfortable to discuss during the focus groups. Further, the collecting of demographic information through the questionnaire allowed for more time to discuss more substantive matters during the focus groups. For example, questionnaire results revealed that 45.5% of the participants was between the ages of 23 and 27 and 18.2% was aged 28–32. A total of 73.7% was single (never married) and 15.8% identified as married. In terms of employment, 35% reported working full-time and 35% reported working part-time. Forty-five per cent graduated from college and 13.5% completed some graduate work. Once the days and times of the focus groups were confirmed and the surveys were completed, the groups met in private rooms in corporate meetings spaces and non-profit centres: the 19 October focus group (New York City) included four participants; the 22 October focus group (New York City) included six participants; the 9 November focus group (San Francisco) included three participants; and the 13 November focus group (San Francisco) included five participants.

In order to triangulate data and locate patterns and discursive formations, directors and performers were also interviewed for this study. Interviews with US-based producers were mainly conducted over the telephone due to scheduling and location conflicts; participants included Candida Royalle, Joanna Angel, Tristan Taormino, and Shine Louise Houston. Madison Young was interviewed in person and Courtney Trouble preferred email correspondence, so the interview schedule and informed consent were emailed to her directly. This list of directors is not meant to be an exhaustive list; this project could not account for every feminist pornography director in the United States, or globally. Rather, this is a snapshot of the most highly recognizable directors that have won Feminist Porn Awards, appear in independent and mainstream media, and have been recognized on Tristan Taormino's list of global feminist pornography directors (see PuckerUp.com).

After the producer interviews were completed, the decision was made to conduct additional interviews with performers in order to triangulate the data and provide unique contextual insight. After the telephone interview with Tristan Taormino, she offered to assist with any additional contact information. In accepting that offer, the contact information was obtained, through email, for four performers – Dylan Ryan, Jiz Lee, Sinnamon Love, and April Flores – who had worked for Tristan Taormino, as well as other feminist and mainstream directors. In the end, although the design of this study helped respond to numerous research questions surrounding this burgeoning – yet under-researched – pornography genre, the following paper will draw on results that help explain audience viewing practices and patterns.

### **Feminist pornography taste culture**

One of the main tasks of this study was to answer the following question: how do women find feminist pornography? Based on responses, this genre is not found through 'stumbling upon'; rather, participants described a process that can be best described as cultural

‘taste development’. As numerous social theorists articulate, such cultural tastes are influenced by various sources of power, which include the circulation of commercial depictions of female sexuality in mainstream media and mainstream pornography (Byerly and Ross 2006). Further, women experience several structural conditions that affect their taste development: experience as an ‘Other’ (de Beauvoir 1989; Millett 1990); compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1980); sexualization of the female body (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Bordo 2003); the sexual division of labour (Hartmann 1977; Chodorow 1978; Rubin 1984); and violence against women (Bevacqua 2000).

Despite the ubiquity of these hegemonic forms, the participants in this study displayed a form of resistance (not absolute) to the taste formation constructed by those in control of these texts. In other words, the strategies of ‘enlightened sexism’ (Douglas 2010) and ‘commodity feminism’ (Banet-Weiser 2012) in mainstream media and ‘the formula’ used to construct female sexuality in mainstream pornography failed to produce a taste for hegemonic femininity. Owing to their habitus and intervening variables of third-wave and sex-positive feminism – and for some, queer sexual politics – participants described the development of a critical stance toward these messages. This supports what R. Claire Snyder observed in her meta-analysis of third-wave literature, ‘[ ... ] third-wave feminism is not unequivocally postmodern in its theoretical approach, but it responds to a postmodern, post-Marxist world in which all foundations and grand narratives have been called into question’ (2008, 187). It is important to keep in mind, however, that participants maintain ambivalence toward continued viewing; they continue to consume mainstream media and mainstream pornography despite their critical orientations. It is also important to consider that this study drew from a sample based in the United States, and therefore these critical orientations are based on western values. Consider the following statements in response to mainstream media representations of sexuality:

I feel like in movies, or anything, it’s always, most likely about the male pleasure when it’s a male/female couple. And if you notice, there’s never any hands going, like, toward the clitoris or anything like that, it’s just always, everything’s up here (motions to chest and head). It’s just so–, I don’t know, it’s mostly male-focused and the women are calm and semi-disinterested. (Madeline, New York City, 19 October 2011)

Yeah, I definitely think women are portrayed really inaccurately, all over the map, from religion, from everywhere – all aspects. And basically, I agree with them [other focus group members], you never see a penis – and I’m a lesbian – I don’t even want to see a penis (laughter), but why can’t you see a penis? It’s always women being exploited; that’s how I feel. Even if it’s two lesbians, it’s still for male gratification. (Hazel, New York City, 19 October 2011)

I think it kind of builds on this idea of a sexually empowered woman as a predator with sexual power, you know? She goes after what she wants and it makes her an animal rather than someone with a healthy sexual drive; they demonize her sexual desires. Like, oh, this woman sleeps with a lot of men, automatically she’s aggressive and yet she uses her feminine charms to get what she wants. It’s like, sexuality as a manipulative power rather than empowering. (Lily, New York City, 22 October 2011)

During the 19 October 2011 focus group in New York City, participants critiqued ‘the formula’ as part of a wider discussion of mainstream pornographic representations of sexual practice:

- Emma: It's like you know what's going to happen, it's the same thing over and over again.
- Madeline: It's really formulated and it follows this specific formula and it doesn't seem spontaneous at all. It's just like, we're going to do some oral sex, then some penetration and then, okay, we're done.
- Emma: And anal–
- Madeline: Yes, various other–
- Emma: It's very routine. Yeah–

Although it was beyond the scope of this study to identify exactly how and when participants developed this resistant stance toward mainstream media and mainstream pornography's depiction of female sexuality, the fact remains that they maintain an awareness of the production of these images, why they are problematic, and they have the ability to articulate why they do not care for them. Borrowing Bourdieu's (1998) terminology, their gendered female habitus socializes them to form an unrequited relationship with these images on the one hand, but on the other intervening social variables allowed them to break from hegemonic taste development. This is similar to Feona Attwood's (2007) findings surrounding *SuicideGirls* and *Nerve* magazine. She adopts Bourdieu's 'taste culture' to describe new forms of commercial and participatory pornography that produce specialized relationships with female audiences:

These cultures can be understood as taste cultures which draw on a broader aestheticization of sexual representation where some forms of pornography and their consumers are reconstructed as sophisticated. In the process, sexual display is recast as an expression of authenticity and, combined with an ethos of community, becomes a departure point for thinking about the ethics of sexual representation. (Attwood 2007, 441)

Although focus group discussions refrained from a discussion of 'sophistication', demographic information reveals a comparable specialized audience profile with a curated taste. All participants live in a major liberal metropolitan environment (New York City or San Francisco), 100% of participants identified as feminist, the majority (65%) discovered mainstream pornography between 10 and 15 years of age, the majority of participants were aged 23–32 (marking them as growing up in third-wave feminist culture), 45.5% graduated from college (13.6% completed some graduate work and 13.6% hold a graduate degree), 70% were working, and the majority household income fell between \$50,000 and \$70,000. Further, the majority of focus group participants sexually identified as queer, seconded by lesbian and pansexual, and heterosexual as the least representative.

While this study cannot prove correlations between these social indicators (age, education, sexual orientation, etc.) and an interest in feminist pornography, data reveal that a third-wave orientation, exposure to the culture of a major, liberal US city, and success in the labour environment could impact 'orientations' toward mainstream media and pornographic depictions of female sexuality. Overall, as pornography consumers, focus group participants displayed a heightened awareness of political economy issues within mainstream media, representation, and personal preferences *vis-à-vis* mediations of female sexuality. Based on these data, the feminist pornography taste culture appears to be sexually progressive, self-reflexive, and



arrived at due to an accumulation of prior experiences with problematic depictions of female sexuality.

As a fundamental aspect of the genre, feminist beliefs play a central role in both the taste development for feminist pornography and the decoding practice for consumers. In both the online questionnaire and during the focus groups, all participants admitted that they were feminists. When asked about their interpretations of feminism, four major themes included: equality, standing up for yourself as a woman, respect for other's individuality and identification, and proactivity/action. In general, orientations toward feminism supported third-wave discourse's privileging of choice, individuality, and inclusiveness over exclusiveness (Snyder 2008). Nuanced discussions of feminist orientations toward sexuality emerged during discussions about how feminist pornography directors were appropriating feminism in their work: through ethical production practices and subsequent representations of consent, communication, and safety.

However, feminist pornography is still a mediation, and limitations are inherent in the production practices of any media. While directors seek to showcase feminism in their representations and performances, they must make decisions – based on their individual feminist frameworks – about what to include and what to limit in their work, which in turn sets the circulation of a particular feminist discourse into communicative motion. Like any other power regime, feminism has the power to legitimate and delegitimize female sexual practice, and feminist pornography – like any other genre of pornography – is circulating a mediated version of female sexual practice. During discussions with consumers, the issue of limits offered clues to individual sexual and feminist preferences within their developed taste for feminist pornography. Participants discussed their distaste for particular sexual acts rather than a wholesale rejection of violence or objectification.

However, there was a general sense of tolerance for content that was produced by a feminist director, even if it was out of a consumer's 'comfort zone'. For example, during the 9 November 2011 focus group in San Francisco, Arielle discussed her increased interest in bondage play after exposure to it via the work of a feminist director. Before that, she had not been particularly interested in this form of sexual performance due to unfamiliarity and social stigma. In general, focus group participants displayed more confidence in feminist directors and admitted that they were more apt to explore non-normative sexual performance through the lens of a feminist director than a mainstream director. During the 22 October 2011 New York City focus group, Chloe notes the relationship between her sexual curiosity and her trust in a feminist lens or 'perspective':

Yeah, I guess in terms of watching things from a curiosity standpoint, I feel like I really don't have things that I wouldn't be interested in seeing from a more feminist perspective because, yeah, it's just like, I feel like whatever it is, if it's–, I don't know, I guess [pause], I guess if you're bringing up animal things I'm not interested in that anyway, but like, I guess I would be interested in seeing somebody poop on someone from a feminist perspective.

For Chloe, her feminist lens allows for trusted exploration of feminist *praxis*. Due to her particular orientation toward feminism and her curiosity in feminist production – of any kind – she would be willing to suspend her personal beliefs and explore

representations out of curiosity. Similar to Chloe's response, the majority of focus group participants reported an increased trust for feminist directors due to their ethical production practices. Owing to the fact that feminist directors reify sex-positive ideology through their production practices and content, viewers reported they were able to enjoy sexual practices outside their regular viewing patterns. For these consumers, this is a beneficial exchange: feminist directors produce their unique vision of pornography based on their interpretations of feminism and politics; and in exchange, consumers detect and trust feminist production practices and content, and are ultimately inspired to explore their sexuality through the pornographic medium. Both producers and consumers pointed out that this egalitarian process is central to the performative practice of sex positivity.

According to Charlie Glickman, the Education Program Manager at Good Vibrations, sex positivity is:

... the perspective that the only relevant criteria for expressing a sexual practice or experience is the consent, pleasure, and well-being of the participants and the people affected by it. Everything else is irrelevant. And there are a lot of nuances to consent, pleasure and well-being, each of those is complex. But the short version is that as long as everybody's happy and no one gets hurt. (Telephone interview, 12 April 2012)

More specifically, the representation of consent was typically raised as a filmic device that allowed consumers to let down their cognitive guard and find pleasure in explicit content. According to Zooey, 'I also think weirdly, that watching porn has helped me understand in articulating issues of consent and issues of feminism and issues about sex and work ethics' (San Francisco, 13 November 2011). For feminist pornography directors, consent is a negotiated form of communication that assists in the success of their production; if the performers have all the ingredients they need – condoms, toys, understanding of do/don't situations with their onscreen partner – they will deliver a more improvised performance, which makes the media product (DVD, web clips, video-on-demand, etc.) more marketable to discerning audiences. According to Taormino:

If people learn from porn (and that's still a big if), why not give them sexual role models who explicitly ask for what they want, use lube and sex toys, and take more than two minutes to get aroused and achieve orgasm? (2013, 262)

During the 9 November 2011 focus group in San Francisco, Maura described her first time seeing Madison Young in a film and the negotiation of feminism, violence, and sexuality:

... when I first saw Madison Young in a movie, I didn't know who she was and I didn't know if it was feminist porn–, I knew it was done by women, but it was quasi-violent bondage and it was being done to Madison and if I didn't know something about her, I know she personally finds that erotic herself, but someone who didn't know that might think it's kind of heavy. But, she's very empowered by doing that and controlling that and yet there were aspects of that where the woman was screaming out and being subjugated that might not seem feminist on the surface.

Maura's response is illustrative of observations explained earlier in this paper, including trusting feminist pornography directors due to a developed taste for feminist media



content. However, this quote also points toward a negotiated decoding process; Maura is cognizant of the tension between the performative and aesthetic similarity between feminist and mainstream pornography and the importance of knowing that the director is feminist.

Although most participants describe similar ‘negotiated’ reading patterns due to their mixture of ‘adaptive and oppositional elements’ (Hall 2001, 175), discussions during focus groups also revealed ‘oppositional readings’ of feminist pornography when participants reflected on genre commodification. In this type of reading, an audience member ‘detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference’ (2001, 175). For some focus group members, this alternative framework was a critique of capitalism; they were able to recognize feminist pornography as possibly commodifying the consent process, bodies, and other sexual practices. During the 13 November 2011 focus group in San Francisco, Harper offered a story that illustrated the transformation of queer bodies into a commodity:

That’s interesting because I think that also becomes a trope. I mean, with race class and everything too. For instance, porn that–, I recently had a conversation with a friend and he was considering a role in porn that was specifically for queer people of color or people of different body sizes, who aren’t usually in porn. And they had talked to the producer and the producer was like, that’s great, you can do this, just make sure your partner is either a person of color or like, a bigger person. And they were just like, oh, okay, and also the problematic for them, too, was that the producer was a white lady and, he was just like, I feel really weird and he’s–, my friend is a trans person of color, and, he was like, I feel like I don’t know if this is exploitative of this niche market that people are looking for, like, portrayals of people who normally aren’t portrayed – at least in a particular light. But I think that’s also a consideration. But it is an industry and there is a market for it. You know, if people are going to buy it, then it becomes its own product.

Later in that focus group discussion, Zoey raised a similar point about marketing and commodification:

I know there’s *feministporn.net*, which is run by Madison [Young], and there are a lot of sites under that. I would argue that their tendency to use only femme women–, I’d like to see more of a discussion around that on their websites, but that’s their ... But I think there’s also a lot of people who say their porn is feminist whether or not it is necessarily, whether the theory and the thoughtfulness is behind it, because it’s become a marketing strategy in some circles.

While other participants discussed their critiques of feminist and female-directed pornography – which was directly related to sexual preferences and tastes – they did not bring up the meta-critique connected to marketing or commodification. It could be argued, then, that this oppositional reading was relegated to particular focus group participants, and that a negotiated reading was more common. Audiences have personal sexual preferences and sometimes do not find pleasure in particular feminist pornography scenes or features, but overall, they read the pre and post interviews, the behind-the-scenes takes, and the representation of consent as cues that feminism exists in that space.

### *Consumption practices*

Focus group and survey data revealed that, in general, access to the feminist pornography genre is directly related to participation in feminist and queer communities – and

the establishments that support them, such as female-friendly adult shops including Babeland and Good Vibrations. Regarding the more instrumental notion of access, or how consumers acquire the content after they have been introduced to it, the majority of participants (63.6%) reported via questionnaire that they accessed feminist pornography online, while 36.4% reported adult bookstore/boutiques. Interestingly, ‘borrowing’ from a friend or relative yielded no positive responses despite the community, or social, dimension of this genre. This high percentage of online viewing practice supports both the modern model of pornography consumption – preferences for website memberships and video-on-demand over DVD purchase and rental (McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008; Wallace 2011) – as well as the ‘domestication of pornography’ (Juffer 1998).

Once access is granted – either through online memberships, video-on-demand, DVD rentals, or free streaming sites – participants engage in a variety of viewing practices. For many of the participants, feminist pornography successfully serves its most obvious function: to incite or assist individuals with their feelings of sexual desire. A secondary reported function was education: many participants watched feminist pornography as a way to get ideas for their personal sexual practices, including activity with partners. Consider the following excerpt from the 19 October 2011 New York City focus group:

Interviewer: Overall, what role does this genre of pornography play in your life? What does it do for you?

Hazel: It gives me new ideas. Opens my mind, basically the same thing.

Madeline: I think it’s a really good tool to get new ideas, whether you watch it with a partner or not, but, um, I know my partner does like to watch it and get new ideas and it’s a turn-on and it makes things fun.

Olive: If you’re down in the dumps, it gets your blood flowing if it’s doing what it says it’s going to do so it’s just fun–, what’s happened with my partners a whole bunch of times is um, we’ll watch stuff and be reminded of stuff that the other person likes, you know? There’s only so many things you can do in one session and sometimes you overlook really simple things that your partners like and then you see it on a screen and you’re like, oh, I love that. I like when you do that and it can revitalize things. But not in that methodical, let’s read a how-to book way. More fluid, I guess.

Hazel: The whole attention to detail–

During the 9 November 2011 focus group in San Francisco, each participant revealed very different reasons for the role, or the ‘why’, of pornography in their lives:

Well, being unemployed, sometimes it’s a way to pass the time because it’s the most fun thing to do at the time and um, actually it’s interesting that you talk about your relationship with your partner [directed to Arielle] because I’m currently in a long-distance relationship and um, we trade back and forth – he’ll pick out things for me, I’ll pick out things for him – and it’s almost a way–, and sometimes we’ll watch things together and it’s–, you feel more connected and involved. And also, I really like to orgasm, I really like sex and, you know, since I don’t have my partner here, it’s a way of fulfilling that pleasure. (Ramona)

So, if we include non-visual stuff, because for me, if you put in the category a really trashy novel, well, I don't know if you'd call it a novel, but like, I have a particular genre that I like and literally, it's a quickie thing – I have fifteen minutes, you know, I'm having a hormone spike, I have to do something, um, and I grab a book on the shelf and twenty minutes later I'm good. And that's pretty much a solitary thing whereas the visual porn is more likely to be shared with my wife as a marital aid. (Maura)

I don't know what role it plays. I think it's just one aspect of sexual experimentation. (Arielle)

During the 13 November 2011 San Francisco focus group, the discussion of 'why' centred around pleasure:

Interviewer: So why do you watch?

Naomi: To get off.

Abigail: No, I would say that, in fact I was going to say that I don't watch porn to get off; I watch porn to get turned on.

Zooey: Yes.

Abigail: So I do often watch the whole way through, unless it totally sucks and then I'll stop, but if it's good, I'll watch all the way through because it's really hot foreplay.

Naomi: What's interesting is I say to get off, but I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that, with kids around, I typically don't have a lot of time, so it's a very focused, get in, get out, get off. [Laughter]

Drawing from diverse responses, some patterns emerged. Participants watch: to 'get off'; to explore and expose themselves to diverse sexual behaviour; as an instrument to assist with foreplay (sexual aid) with a partner; to get 'turned on'; and as a way to support feminist activity/activism. Aside from the last category, the other patterns are similar to the reasons that men and women watch mainstream pornography (Paul 2005; McKee, Albury, and Lumby 2008). Interestingly, although there has been an increase in scholarly and mainstream media attention toward pornography addiction and/or the use of pornography to replace the lack of intimacy within a relationship, these psychological issues did not emerge during focus group discussions. Rather, some participants spoke of isolated issues with some of their partners, but once partners displayed distaste for watching pornography as a couple it was not pressed afterward. Further, data also revealed instrumental viewing patterns, rather than open-ended marathon viewing sessions. According to the questionnaire, 0% of participants watches every day, 95.2% watches one to four times per week,<sup>4</sup> 78.3% watches in the evening (8.7% watches in the afternoon), 91.3% also watches mainstream pornography, 47.8% watches a few scenes then turns it off (21.7% watches with a partner and decide together when to turn it off), and 56.5% will 'sometimes' re-view a clip that they have already seen (26.1% 'rarely' does).

In terms of couples' viewing and sexual intercourse, responses indicated that feminist pornography is used as a 'sexual aid' or 'foreplay' for sexual activity between couples. For Arielle, a participant in the 9 November 2011 San Francisco focus group, viewing as a couple was often domesticated:

Well, sometimes we'll watch it when we're folding laundry and this is more entertaining than television, it might not be a sexy situation and we'll see something and then we'll

talk about it later. Sometimes we'll watch it like TV and then sometimes we'll watch it as foreplay or whatever.

Overall, once feminist pornography audiences gain access to this genre, they then give themselves permission to find pleasure in pornography in a very mundane way.

There was only one focus group that engaged in an extended discussion of viewing rituals while watching pornography. That conversation took on the suggestion that women create an artificial 'mood' before viewing (see Blue 2006); instead, creating a positive experience with pornography has more to do with mental preparation and being 'present in your body' (Chloe, see below):

Interviewer: You bring up something interesting – do you set up a mood when you watch?[Disagreement]

Rosie: Just up here [points to head].

Chloe: Well, I feel like that's in a lot of books, too. I feel like I read a lot of books are like, you know, women, you have to masturbate because know your body and I feel like a lot of times in those books, it's like, and you might want to take a bath, or whatever–

Violet: Create a mood–

Chloe: Yeah, get comfortable and create a mood and I feel like that's something people do and that's awesome, but it's not important to a lot of people the way it's made out to be.

Rosie: I think that is very much about being more in touch with your–, I think the idea that it's about being in touch with your physical body and sometimes that's fun and sometimes it's completely unnecessary to be in touch with your physical body.

Anna: Or I think, for me, I get there faster and I don't need to have a ritual to get there because I'm 40 and I've been masturbating for more than 30 years [laughs]. I don't need a transitory period. I know when I need to get off and I just do it. And I know where my body is and I know what that means.

Interviewer: Great. So does anyone here have a ritual you use to get you in the mood to watch porn?

Grace: Not really. Um, I'm just at home and if the mood strikes; it's not a planned thing, so it happens a couple times a week.

Chloe: I think this is kind of what we were saying but didn't explicitly say–, I think there's two sides of that, like, sometimes it's just like, about just being more present in your body and all of these things can help – having candles or taking a bath or massage oil – I feel like that's part of it but there's also this distance, like, a distance between your everyday life where you like, walking around and then, like getting to a point where you would feel sexual where you're not feeling sexual all the time or something like that. Or, the idea that women don't feel that way and they need something and I feel like that's not necessarily true. I think there are people who want these things and then I think there are other people who are like, yeah, I could just watch porn and masturbate or have sex anytime in the

day and it's not like getting in to some other mental mode or something.

This conversation becomes especially relevant within the context of pornography consumption and sexual difference. The notion that all women would need a 'transition' into a mental mode for watching pornography suggests that viewing this material is not natural behaviour for a woman. While some women do enjoy the use of calming aids – such as candles, music, massage oil, etc. – the assumption that women need a ritual to enjoy pornography supports gendered and essentialist approaches to women as sexual beings. Rather, focus group discussions did not reveal viewing patterns or behaviour that could be coded as symbolically feminine or female specific.

Overall, focus group responses indicate that viewers consciously work against the initial interpellation (Althusser 2001) of mainstream pornography and re-establish their subjectivity in their developed taste for feminist pornography. On the other hand, this otherwise agentic re-establishment could also be considered an example of interpellation because they have been 'hailed' as audiences due to their preferences and trust in feminist directors. However, it is entirely too reductive to cast audiences of feminist pornography as complicit or passive. Although audiences may depend on particular conventions or viewing patterns, focus group discussions reveal various nuanced and negotiated readings of feminist pornography, which points toward critical viewing habits and individualized approaches. The management of feminist ideals, definitions of feminism, the discursive emergence of sex positive feminism, and the incorporation of feminism into commercial practice have all emerged as powerful negotiations for directors, performers, and viewers of feminist pornography.

### **Feminist performative heterotopia**

Because female sexual subjectivity has been historically managed by institutions and their supporting discourses, feminists have historically fought for their right to reclaim their sexual subjectivity through praxis and empowerment measures. However, the 'right' reclamation approach has been interpreted differently within the women's movement and feminist theory. While most feminists can agree that there are institutions – both material and ideological – which sexualize rather than empower women, there has been a lack of agreement over which institutions needed the most reform. The pornography industry has become a familiar battleground, yet feminist pornography operates as one such site of cultural reappropriation.

When asked whether or not they felt responsible for teaching women about sexuality and how they felt their voices were contributing to the way women approach sexuality, all of the directors' responses reflected an interventionist approach rather than an interest in providing determinative answers to female sexuality. Consider the following:

I debunk myths about queer female sexuality constantly, and include trans women as a part of an overall focus on making sure that women are seen as authentic sexual creators that deserve satisfaction as much as men. I hope that when women watch my porn, they feel inspired to be sex positive and vocal, and excited. As for men, I hope that they take away personal notes on how to please women, continue having sex after male ejaculation, and use toys, fantasies, and communication to enhance sex. (Courtney Trouble, email correspondence, 15 February 2012)

No, it wasn't really about helping people. I suppose it was initially for selfish reasons. I just wanted to see stuff that I want to see and, you know, if that changes or opens up the possibility of other people's fantasy life, awesome, but this might be catering to a very small group of people and to me that was all right. Like, obviously the idea—, I wanted different body types and different gender expressions, not because I want to change the world, but mostly because those people who are different gendered expressions, there just wasn't anything out there that was catering to those tastes. (Shine Louise Houston, telephone interview, 16 November 2011)

So, my thing—, you know one of my goals has always been to be explicit. I have always been explicit in the way that I talk about and write about sexuality. So, I don't use euphemisms. I like charts, but in addition to the one-dimensional charts, we need to see the body parts because I think that there's still too much of sex education which people can't connect with because we're using medical jargon, these technical terms, these strange diagrams and we're not actually getting to what is happening with bodies [...]. We need to stop being really vague and get specific. Because I think that's what people want, they want specifics. They don't want vague, weird, like, Cosmo magazine sex tips. (Tristan Taormino, telephone interview, 13 October 2011)

I'm lucky, I get to have sex with people who are professionals at having sex, like, they might be with someone at home who doesn't know what they're doing and they might get hurt and I don't want—, I'm not trying to spread the word that everybody has to be filthy in order to have a healthy sex life [...]. So porn doesn't have to be sex education or giving people lessons on you know, how to take dick or give blowjobs or eat pussy or whatever, you know, I hope that I can inspire other girls to believe they're sexy no matter who you are. (Joanna Angel, telephone interview, 12 October 2011)

Each response reveals a reluctance to assume a position of power or influence over their viewers, yet they identify specific goals: from providing images of differently gendered bodies and inspiring girls to believe that they're sexy 'no matter who you are', to offering sexually explicit images so that women can form a more substantial relationship with their bodies (i.e. development of female sexual subjectivity). Discussions with consumers revealed that these 'goals' are positively received and then filtered according to personal needs, tastes, and desires. However, because consumers also reported negotiated readings of feminist pornography, it can be argued that both directors and consumers recognize the limitations of this genre (*vis-à-vis* structure, personal tastes, interpretations of feminism), and, as a result of this reflexivity, feminist pornography becomes a site of productive tension.

By juxtaposing possibility and limitation in the same media space, consumers are able to actively recognize the presence of resistance in this material form. For example, during focus groups, some participants spoke of the 'formula' in mainstream pornography, but then discussed how although feminist pornography used those conventions, directors nuanced it by adding discussions of consent around it, or shortened the amount of time dedicated to fellatio, and so forth. These sites of tension and resistance produce reflexive moments, which allow directors and consumers to confront their own beliefs about female sexuality and feminism.

Following this logic, feminist pornography becomes a site, or space, that promotes the collision of opposing discourses about sexuality. On the one hand, pornography is a site of commodified bodies, filmic conventions, for-profit motivation, and historical discourses about sexual practice. On the other hand, feminist practices of pornography production involve actions toward improved labour conditions, depictions of safe



sexual practice, representations of alternative (commodified) bodies, and ethical production practices. Both of these currents exist in the same mediated space but are bound as a set of relations that preserve the intelligibility of the pornographic form, while at the same time offering a recognizable intervention. Another way to name this contradictory spatial system is 'heterotopia', a space described by Michel Foucault as 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible' (1986, 25).

As a feminist performative heterotopia,<sup>5</sup> feminist pornography provides a space for the exploration of feminist and queer sexuality within the constraints of media production, the pornography industry, and the cultural disciplining of sexual practice. Feminist pornography directors, equipped with varying second-wave and third-wave interpretations of feminism, translate their vision through production practices and content in the hope that audiences will use these mediations to challenge and empower their own beliefs about female sexuality. Through the mediation and circulation of diverse examples of female sexual desire, audiences are able to unlock interests and preferences that have been otherwise hidden from mainstream institutional discourses on sexuality. Illustrations of sex toys, sexual positions aimed at female pleasure, communication and consent between partners, and other feminist pornography devices can promote sexual confidence in various ways, as demonstrated in this paper.

This feminist performative heterotopia was created by feminist directors to deploy a new discourse of sexuality within the filmic and industrial constraints of pornography, and has successfully provoked audiences to think differently about sexuality, pornography, and female pleasure. But feminist pornography is not a feminist utopia – it is not a perfect deconstruction of all the perceived harms found in mainstream pornography – and nor is it meant to be. As Foucault reminds us, 'these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces' (1986, 24).

Instead, the project of feminist pornography creates an opportunity for alternative discourses of female sexuality; discourses that, according to consumers, are unavailable in mainstream media and mainstream pornography. These discourses successfully flow from a niche population of ambitious feminist directors to discerning feminist consumers who have developed a particular taste for this content. For this intersecting social segment, feminist pornography offers the chance to engage directly with agentic, explicit representations of female desire from third-wave, sex-positive feminist perspectives. What results is an interplay between online and physical space that exemplifies what Katrien Jacobs (2004, 73) calls 'networked sexual agency'. She argues that, 'Porn heterotopias cannot be seen as purely disembodied spaces, but rather as mediated spaces where porn users explore phenomenon and interact with each other's mental, physical and emotional journeys' (2004, 74).

However, some respondents predicted that feminist pornography is in danger of commodifying queer bodies and producing a new 'formula' for female sexuality while at the same time producing a contract of trust with consumers who will push their personal, sexual boundaries because they know that a 'woman' or 'feminist' produced the content. So while feminist pornography consciously operates on the fringes of the mainstream pornography industry, and offers diverse sexual discourses, it is still subject to the logics of media power and industry. But like most other forms that contend with a similar conundrum – such as alternative journalism and independent filmmaking – it still offers possibilities for meaning, subjectivity, and reflexivity.



## Notes

1. Tristan Taormino offers a comprehensive definition of feminist pornography in *The Feminist Porn Book*, although she admits that there isn't a 'standard definition' (2013, 260). She writes: 'First, the production must be a fair and ethical process and a positive working environment for everyone ... Feminist porn attempts to counteract the messages we get from society that can be reflected in mainstream porn: sex is shameful, naughty, dirty, scary, dangerous, or it's the domain of men, where other their desires and fantasies get fulfilled ... Feminist porn creates its own iconography and is committed to depicting diversity in gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, class, body size, ability and age' (2013, 260–262).
2. This paper draws from Deborah Tolman's (2002) definition of sexual subjectivity, which is directly related to the practice of sexual agency, but is more directly related to sexual practice: 'A person's experience of herself as a sexual being who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being' (2002, 6).
3. Other examples include Attwood (2009, 2010) and Juffer (1998).
4. The 'amount of time' in the questionnaire was operationalized as the amount of times a participant participated in a viewing session of feminist pornography, from start to finish, for any amount of time.
5. In their article about British sex shops, Adrienne Evans, Sarah Riley, and Avi Shankar (2010) use the term 'postfeminist heterotopia' to describe the space of Ann Summers, a popular adult store. They write: 'As a postfeminist heterotopia, Ann Summers is a space constituted through contradictory discourses which construct the subject in complex ways, producing a heteroglossia of competing meanings' (2010, 225).

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