

The Evolution of Online Pornography: Sex, Technology and Conceptual Frameworks

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Abstract: Pornography's expansion online has led to fundamental changes in its content, reiterations, and volume of production. Technologies such as e-commerce payment systems and webcams have made porn more readily available, leading to both an explosion in its production, and a greater diversity of pornographic representations. And as new technologies are developed, the ways in which pornography is consumed continues to shift and change. Unfortunately contemporary porn studies has failed to evolve with these changes. I will provide an in-depth look at the ways porn has changed as it has proliferated online, and argue that if we are to learn anything about the shifting relationships our culture has with porn we must develop ways to study it that recognize its heterogeneity, and make room for its various potential effects and incarnations. I propose that what is needed is a conceptual framework that is as fluid and adaptive as the genre itself.

Social scientists offer many reasons why porn is an important area of study. It is not only “an enormous economic force”, but it has been “a driving force behind the technological development and deployment of almost every type of media” (Jenking qtd. in Attwood 236). It makes us reflect on questions about power and tolerance, it can facilitate a deeper understanding of human sexuality, and it has been argued that porn can provide us with a map of our cultures borders (Attwood 2010; Lehman 2006; Kipnis 1996). As Laura Kipnis argues, because pornography exists “at the edge of a culture’s decorum” carefully tracing that edge can reveal a “detailed blueprint of a culture’s anxieties, investments, [and] contradictions” (120). I approach porn from a feminist cultural studies perspective, meaning that I’m interested pornography as a cultural phenomenon. Specifically, I’m interested in how the changes brought about by porn’s growth online affect not only our culture, but our experiences and perceptions of sexuality. I argue that with pornography’s growth online in the last two decades, and with the advent of new media technologies such as broadband, e-commerce and webcams, pornography has fundamentally changed. I will begin by discussing the different ways the genre has changed with its evolution online, and then go on to discuss what these changes means for those of us studying it.

The Internet brought pornography further into the privacy of the home and made it exponentially more accessible. This led to a dramatic increase in the number of porn consumers, as it’s simply far more available. With this expansion in consumer base there has been a virtual explosion of porn online, something that has been referred to as the “pornography gold rush” (Slayden 54). This boom enabled porn producers to diversify their products, and to target “specialist tastes and niche markets that would be impossible to sustain offline” (Slayden 58). These days virtually any fantasy or scenario you can dream up can be found online. That being said, the majority of mainstream pornography is heteronormative; it depicts fairly homogenous and repetitive forms of sex and sexual representation, and contains highly normative scripts of gender and sexuality. In other words, mainstream porn, for the most part, depicts the same kinds

of bodies, performing the same kinds of acts, in the same kind of scenarios, over and over and over again.

However, even these formulaic representations have changed with the proliferation of online pornography. Within the last ten years a new sub-genre of hetero-porn has emerged, one referred to in the industry as “gonzo” porn. It is also often referred to as “wall-to-wall” because it “contains sex scene after sex scene with no attempt at a plot or a story line” (Dines xxii). And, if looking for free porn, this is predominantly what you find. However, while these representations are the most common, the easiest to access, and the ones that seep into mainstream culture, this is just one of the many types of pornographies available online. In fact, sex on the internet now displays a diversity never before seen in the pornography industry. The sheer amount of material available online, and the constant drive among porn producers to diversify and push boundaries, has actually made room for more diverse representations. In many ways online porn has fragmented into a number of subgenres, of which gonzo is just one. I think of gonzo as the extreme end of a spectrum of possibilities; at the other end of that spectrum we find porn that is transgressive, subversive and constantly challenging the mainstream. The clearest example of this is queer¹ porn – a subcategory of porn that works to subvert and destabilize the gender binary, and to challenge sexual power dynamics. Queer porn achieves this through portrayal of what have been called “insubordinate, disobedient and unruly bodies”, performing acts that subvert and invert normative roles and power dynamics (Moorman 164). So where homogenous, heteronormative porn presents rigid and formulaic representations of gender and sexuality, performed by a limited range of bodies, queer porn draws on a diverse range of bodies, gender identities, sexual performances and scenarios. Though still by no means a mainstream form of representation, queer porn as a genre has undergone massive growth online. This is just one example of how the content of online porn is diverse and continues to offer new possibilities.

Beyond changes in content and consumer base, we are also seeing major changes in the ways people are consuming porn. Media technologies are now undeniably part of the fabric of ordinary life; we have seen a “dramatic expansion of forms of online self-representation and social networking” (Attwood 6). It has been argued that the consumption of pornography is increasingly becoming a part of everyday multitasking, “as users move between socializing, buying commodities and searching for information...chatting, peeping, cruising, masturbating and maintaining friendships” (8). The relationship between sex and technology is an old and established one. As Attwood purports, “technologies have always been adapted for sexual purposes”, and sex often “drives technological development” (8). It is now widely argued that “sex has shaped the Internet as it currently exists” (Slayden 58). Consumer demand for porn has been the driving force behind the development of new technologies, such as “servers, streaming software, chat forums, and e-commerce payment systems”, and this technology continues to develop (Slayden 58). Because of this relationship, the very nature of online pornography continues to evolve and change at a rapid pace.

¹ The term ‘queer’ has multiple meanings and uses: “to identify gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex communities; to denote nonmainstream sexual groups which might include both non-straight communities and straight transvestites, SM enthusiast, and fetishists; to suggest an unsettling or deconstruction of fixed sexual identities and categories, or the celebration of differences; or simply to indicate resistance to sexual norms” (Moorman 163). Each of these uses of the term can be detected in queer porn.

The changes we are seeing in the consumption of online porn are linked to broader changes in the ways people use the Internet to create, consume and share information. We're now in an era of online communication that many are calling Web 2.0, a "more *participatory* generation of media-making", that is characterized by sharing, collaboration, and user-generated content (Mowlabocus 70; emphasis in original). 2.0 websites offer a communal and interactive context for sharing and consuming media. The clearest example of this is Wikipedia, an online encyclopaedia made up of "unlocked, editable content", such that entries are not only user-generated, but are in a constant state of revision, forever a work-in-progress (Mowlabocus 70). As you read entries you can edit, add, and erase content, blurring the lines between knowledge production and consumption.

Changes in the ways porn is accessed, shared and consumed are keeping pace with these broader changes in Web use, ushering in a new era of online porn that some are calling "Porn 2.0" (Slayden 66). Porn 2.0 refers to the multiple new ways to consume and interact with pornography. In addition to being able to produce your own amateur porn to post on user-generated, YouTube-style sites, porn consumers can also now post comments on the videos they have watched, compile interactive lists of their favourite videos on each site, join website forums, watch live webcams while 'chatting', post response-videos or even share their own webcam footage. The porn consumer now "actively organizes and *controls* their porn in ever more individual ways" (Mowlabocus 73; emphasis in original). These changes are working to "smudge the boundaries between producer, performer, distributor, and consumer" and in so doing they are complicating the traditionally linear relationship between production and consumption (73). They are also threatening the porn industry's previously indestructible business model. Amateur porn has become a huge part of the material being accessed online, and it is now virtually impossible for porn producers to match the volume of product coming out of user-generated sites. Further complicating things is the rise in Porn Aggregators. These are websites that compile and organize porn from numerous online sources and make it available free of charge, either to be watched online or downloaded onto your computer. These sites are rapidly becoming the primary way the average porn consumer accesses material. Beyond the massive databases of free material that these sites offer, if you take into account the many ways in which online porn can be ripped, downloaded, torrented, and shared, you can see how the amount and availability of free porn continues to grow exponentially. Who knows what all these changes will mean, or where they will lead us. What is clear, however, is that pornography is now a fluid genre, and one that is in a constant state of change.

Unfortunately, the majority of work being done in contemporary porn studies has failed to evolve with these changes in the genre itself. What I'm finding is that research and theorizing tends to cling to outdated definitions and conceptual frameworks that severely limit the scope of work being done. In addition, the majority of work in this field remains split across a pro-porn / anti-porn divide, with theorists either defending pornography as a site of sexual liberation, freedom and possibilities, or condemning it as a site of abuse, contempt and moral decline. We seem to have lost the middle ground in which pornography can be many of these things, or different shades of each.

As we can see, between the exponential growth in consumer base and volume of product available, the constant push for diversification of product, and the changes in the ways porn is being consumed, pornography is no longer a singular phenomenon. It's not one thing. It is

instead “a genre of consumption with many branches”, “a set of cultural practices” that is in a constant state of change (Wicke 180; Attwood 3). In other words, porn is a single term that refers to a large and heterogeneous body of material that is created and consumed in a variety of ways. And just as there is no longer a single, discernable ‘pornography’, there is also no single attitude towards, reaction to, or relationship with it. If we hope to uncover how porn is used, understood and experienced in our culture, we need a set of tools that is as fluid and adaptive as porn itself. To this end, I have developed a framework for studying porn that conceptualizes it as a constellation of possibilities, rather than one specific thing. This allows for an understanding of pornographies that not only acknowledges its history and makes room for future incarnations, but also allows for different forms of porn, and the various effects of each, to coexist. This approach makes room for the grey areas, and acknowledges that there is a fluid spectrum of positions and intersections that fall between the poles of liberation and oppression. This means that my analyses can at once recognize and honour the liberatory and transgressive potential of different types of porn, while still allowing for the evaluation of porn’s dangers and negative effects. By conducting research within this kind of framework, we can single out problem areas and condemn specific practices, while recognizing that these aren’t necessarily characteristic of pornography in its entirety. This kind of approach will allow for more nuanced research into how different types of porn are created, consumed, thought about, interpreted, embraced and resisted, and into how its uses change across time and context. It is only with this type of analysis that we will begin to develop an understanding of what porn means in this historical moment.

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