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Studying porn cultures

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This article uses the Adult Entertainment Expo in Las Vegas as a lens through which to examine the business and culture of pornography. I argue that adult-industry trade shows are data-rich field sites that allow pornography scholars to move beyond a focus on the pornographic text and examine the wider industry context that gives rise to contemporary porn cultures. These events are also occasions to practice 'porn studies-in-action,' a research approach that involves scholars spending time in those places where pornography is made, distributed, and consumed in an effort to better understand how cultural discourses and practices are organized in specific institutional and organizational contexts. Porn studies-in-action is a form of engaged scholarship that can take as its focus any number of cultural sites, from erotic film festivals to feminist porn sets to adult video stores, with the aim of empirically deepening our porn studies archives.

Keywords: pornography; sex industry; trade shows; Las Vegas; research methods

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One

'You'll want to get safely behind this table,' the man standing next to me warned. It was minutes before the doors at the annual AVN Adult Entertainment Expo in Las Vegas opened to the public, and my new acquaintance did not want me to get caught in the rush of fans eager to meet their favorite porn stars.

The line of men waiting to get inside the Expo was long, filling almost the entire adjoining convention hall space. Those at the front of the line had been there since 8:00 a.m., a full four hours before the Expo's 'Fan Fest' began. Four hours of standing around, making small talk with those next to them, checking their smart phones, and impatiently shifting from foot-to-foot as the hours ticked by.

These early birds were only a small fraction of the thousands of fans – mostly men but women, too – who would make their way through these same doors over the next three days. Who were these people willing to pay $80 for a day pass to meet and mingle with their favorite adult stars, attend special fan seminars and be part of question-and-answer sessions with the industry's top talent? Where were they from and why were they here? And what, moreover, does it mean for them to take their fandom public in such a visible way?

At the front of the line was Tom, from San Jose, California. He was in town for the Consumer Electronic Show, a separate event that, for many years, coincided with the Adult Entertainment Expo. It was his first time attending the Expo. Did he have

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a favorite performer that he was hoping to see? 'I don't even watch porn,' he laughed. 'Like many people,' he told me, 'I'm fascinated by the industry and wanted to check it out.'

Standing next to him was John from Tracy, California. He was attending his second Expo, which happened to coincide with his birthday weekend in Vegas. His favorite porn star, he told me, is Courtney Cummings. 'What do you like about her?,' I asked. 'She has a beautiful smile.'

Chris was from Oakland, California. He has made the trek to Las Vegas for the Expo for the past six years. For him, it is a chance to meet all of his favorite performers, take pictures, and get autographs. I listened as he rattled off some of his favorites: Sophie Dee, Francesca Le, and Lisa Ann, the latter of whom made a splash when she appeared as Sarah Palin in Hustler's *Who's Nailin' Paylin* parody.

Here, the boundaries between fantasy and reality shift as performers step off the computer screen and on to the convention hall floor. Meeting their fans is a chance for many of them to give back and pay it forward, a gesture that says 'Thank you for watching' and 'Please don't stop.'[1]

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Two

From my spot on the press line I watched as the procession of AVN nominated performers and directors made their way down the red carpet, their managers and media handlers close behind. There was rock-star glam, beaded evening gowns, figure-hugging latex, and fetish shoes so high they seemed impossible to walk in. Industry veteran Ron Jeremy shared the red carpet with first-time nominees, some of whom had been working in the industry for less than a year. They posed for the cameras, talked with reporters, and made the most of their red carpet moment.

I spoke with performer Jesse Jane, who described what it was like to have a mold taken of her vagina for a custom-made Fleshlight in her likeness. 'It's weird,' she laughed:

> You go to this complete stranger, sit in a chair and lift your pelvis. They give you a vibrator so you get really engorged, then they put this jelly paste on you to make the mold. After about a half hour, it's all done, but everything tingles for a while.'

Jack Lawrence, who garnered a Best Actor nomination for his performance in *Reno 911: A XXX Parody*, shared his thoughts about why porn parodies are doing so well: 'They are really the only things selling.' He theorized that because porn parodies are fun and playful, many men feel comfortable bringing them home to watch with their wives and girlfriends. Someone else offered a different perspective: people have a connection to the television shows and movies they grew up with. 'Who wouldn't want to have sex with Marcia Brady?,' one female performer remarked.[2]

I asked performer Derrick Pierce if there is anything he would not do on camera. It is the aftermath of sex, he told me, that he likes to keep separate from his onscreen performances. This is what made his performance in Tristan Taormino's *Chemistry* series – a gonzo series that takes a handful of performers to a secluded house for 36 hours and records their sexual encounters – so interesting, he said. 'In *Chemistry*, you didn't shoot your scene and go home. You'd fuck, have coffee, chill out, and

fuck again, so it was impossible to keep the aftermath of sex separate from the encounters.'

Three

Every year, the Adult Entertainment Expo offers a number of business seminars that focus on everything from obscenity law and mobile marketing to adult novelties and social media. Industry powerbrokers take center-stage to discuss the ins and outs of a rapidly changing marketplace, one in which incidents of piracy have skyrocketed, porn sales have slumped, and diversification is now seen as the key to survival. It is a new market order in which women – and their wallets – figure prominently.

I am standing on a raised dais in front of a crowded seminar room moderating a session that addresses women's growing power and influence in the adult entertainment industry. What kinds of products are women buying and what factors are influencing their purchases? What marketing strategies are being used to reach female consumers and with what effects?

Joining me on stage is feminist porn director Tristan Taormino, who talks about her commitment to producing ethically made porn in which performers are treated well and compensated fairly. Jackie Strano, executive vice president of the legendary retailer Good Vibrations, notes the added value of cultivating friendly and inviting shopping environments with a well-trained and knowledgeable sales staff. Queer porn director Shine Louise Houston emphasizes that not all female consumers are straight and white, and nor do all women want the same things from their porn.

For an industry working hard to reinvent itself, one thing is clear: women are the new 'power consumers' who are driving much of the discourse – not to mention growth – in today's adult marketplace.

Four

The small press room is crowded. A reporter to my left is cranking out a story on his laptop while a boisterous group of videographers interviews punk-rock starlet Joanna Angel. Behind me, a line of journalists and photographers wait to pick up their media credentials. Their job for the next three days is to bring the Expo to life, in both words and pictures, for readers everywhere.

Earlier in the day I shadowed *Las Vegas Sun* photographer Leila Navidi in an effort to better understand how a photojournalist for a family-friendly newspaper tells a visual story about what is billed as the largest adult entertainment showcase in the world.

Navidi explained that shooting an adult-themed event is all about finding images that are out of the ordinary yet not too risqué:

> I learned a lot shooting the Expo [in 2011]. I wasn't aware of all the restrictions, so there were things I didn't pay attention to, like a poster in the background that showed a nipple. We couldn't run that photo.

And as far as images that are different: 'You see lots of women on stripper poles, but you don't see a lot who are wearing a sombrero and braces.' (Yes, she snapped a photograph.)

We walked past a booth where a female performer was sitting demurely on a couch surrounded by a group of men who were holding their camera phones high

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above their heads, taking pictures. Navidi started to shoot the scene. A few frames later, the woman changed positions and Navidi lowered her camera. 'I can't shoot that,' she said, shaking her head. 'I can't have her ass in the photo.'

It is not that a little butt is an absolute deal-breaker, but the sexual connotation of the performer's pose was. Minutes later Navidi got a text: 'I have to go. My editor is waiting for my photos.'[3]

Behind the scenes and inside the porn industry

I offer these tableaus from the Adult Entertainment Expo as a way to begin thinking about the different elements that comprise contemporary porn cultures: consumers and their wallets, performers and their handlers, new and increasingly diverse market niches, and the various people behind the scenes and in front of the cameras who make it all possible, from tech gurus and graphic designers, to adult-industry lawyers and public relations experts. Part business, part spectacle, part fan fest, the Expo brings together under one roof a mix of people, products, commercial interests, and political investments. Here, Wicked 'Contract Girls' rub shoulders with queer porn stars; mega-brands such as Hustler share the convention floor with small startup companies hawking butt enhancement cream and designer condoms; members of the XXX Church promise salvation, while cosmetic surgeons promote breast augmentation procedures. New products debut, business owners network, and industry stars are crowned.

Adult-industry trade shows, such as the Adult Entertainment Expo, are microcosms of the sex industry and as such they provide a rich, sociological lens through which to examine the business and culture (and the business culture) of pornography (see Comella 2010). They are data-rich field sites that offer researchers an opportunity to move beyond the pornographic text and examine the wider industry context that shapes the business of pornography. Indeed, Georgina Voss (2012) notes that while a great deal of research focuses on the product of pornography and its effects, we know surprisingly little about the industry itself. Voss calls for scholars to pay greater attention to the business practices and social dynamics that inform the porn industry, and encourages researchers to go 'further behind the scenes' to 'seek out material from further inside the industry' (2012, 404), including from industry trade events.

Adult-industry trade shows are a chance for researchers to experience the industry up close and in person, to talk to the people who work within it, and to hear what they are saying to each other, to fans, and to members of the media, the latter of whom play an important role in packaging the porn industry for popular consumption. Trade shows are also occasions, I suggest, for scholars to take stock of what we know about contemporary porn cultures, what areas remain unexamined, and what kinds of research approaches might lend themselves to deepening and expanding our porn studies archives.

I have attended the Adult Entertainment Expo every year since 2008, as a researcher, a credentialed member of the media, and an invited participant in the Expo's popular seminar series. Occupying these various roles has enabled me to participate in and observe the industry from a number of different vantage points. Attending the Expo as a journalist, for example, has given me access to what goes on behind the scenes, from the chaos of vendors setting up their booths, to the

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controlled mayhem of the red carpet, to a deadline-driven press room. I have interviewed mainstream porn's 'It Boy,' James Deen, talked with queer porn's poster girl, Courtney Trouble, and written about the palpable nostalgia that many industry bigwigs have for an era when DVDs were king and making money hand over fist was guaranteed. Writing about the Expo for a general readership has meant looking for fresh, new angles to cover, a task that has forced me to pay closer attention to parts of the industry that I might have overlooked had I been focused exclusively on my own research agenda. It has also given me a platform that I can use to intervene in and help shape what gets said about pornography in the popular press, including writing about topics that complicate the often reductive narratives that position the porn industry as inherently harmful or completely exceptional (see Comella 2013).

In 2010 and 2011, I was invited to moderate the Expo's popular women's seminar. In assuming this role I went from being a detached observer to an active participant in the production of Expo culture, resulting in yet another vantage point from which to examine and engage with the industry. As the session's organizer and moderator I was now in a position to help shape what was being said about the women's market and by whom. It was important to me, for example, that feminist pornographers and sex-positive entrepreneurs were included in these discussions, not as afterthoughts but as industry leaders who were cultivating the women's market long before it was considered trendy and profitable. It was also important that panels be diverse, especially in terms of race and sexual orientation, in the hope of complicating the common perception that women are a homogeneous group of consumers who want nothing more from their products than heterosexual romance and pretty packaging.

Last, but certainly not least, attending the Expo as a researcher for the past six years has enabled me to better situate the segment of the industry that I study – the women's market for sex toys and pornography and the people and discourses that influence it – within a wider commercial and cultural context. This is important for a number of reasons, including the fact that feminist pornographers, sex-toy manufacturers, and retailers do not exist in isolation from larger industry dynamics and practices, but are in constant dialogue, and sometimes tension, with these forces. As a field site, the Expo has allowed me to observe how feminist entrepreneurs negotiate an industry that many of them continue to feel conflicted about and alienated from – in spite of the market's recent embrace of women.

Porn studies-in-action

The framework I use to study porn cultures is indebted to what sociologist Paul du Gay (1997) describes as the 'language of culture,' including the ways that people 'think, feel and act in organizations' (1997, 1). As a sexuality scholar trained in the field of communication, I am interested in analyzing the complex and often contradictory processes of meaning-making, including the conditions under which cultural texts and products are made, how they circulate, and how they are consumed in specific geographical, institutional, and organizational settings (see Comella and Sender 2013).

One way to 'get at' the cultural dimensions of pornography is to ethnographically go inside and behind the scenes of the porn industry to better understand its

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many moving parts. The objective here is not to search for some hidden 'truth' about pornography (e.g. is it harmful or empowering?). Rather, the goal is to establish a better vantage point from which to observe, engage with, and make sense of how discourses and practices are organized within specific cultural contexts, including by whom and with what effects.

There is a value to this kind of critical, on-the-ground and up-close approach to studying pornography – what I like to think of as 'porn studies-in-action.' Porn studies-in-action requires that we leave the confines of our offices, and spend time in the places where pornography is made, distributed and consumed, discussed and debated, taught and adjudicated. Methodologically, porn studies-in-action recognizes the limits of what is knowable based on the examination of pornographic images and texts alone. It is an approach that is context dependent and empirically driven, one that takes us out into the social world where we can hone our powers of observation and our capacity to listen to and analyze how particular communities of people narrate and make sense of the cultural universes that they inhabit. Porn studies-in-action is accountable to cultural plurality, specificity, and nuance; it rejects sweeping generalizations and foregone conclusions that rely on preconceived notions about pornography's inherent 'truths' and effects.

This approach to studying porn cultures may take as its focus any number of cultural sites, from industry trade shows, to erotic film festivals, to adult video stores, to feminist porn sets. Porn studies-in-action might involve talking to and observing performers and directors, photographers and camera people, makeup artists and hair stylists, public relations experts, advertisers, marketers, distributors and wholesalers. It may include observing the activities of adult-industry trade associations and First Amendment lawyers, anti-pornography activists and state legislators, sex therapists and support groups. Porn studies-in-action might take us into college classrooms where pornography is taught or into the various places – from bars, to strip clubs, to bachelor parties, to homes – where pornography is consumed. It might involve examining art exhibits, sex museums, historical archives, and other places where the lines between art and pornography blur. No potential research site is off limits, including academic and activist contexts where pornography is discussed and debated, embraced, or rejected. Porn studies-in-action is a form of engaged scholarship that allows researchers to ask different kinds of questions, produce new forms of knowledge, and, importantly, expand our porn studies archives in rich and meaningful ways.

Notes

1. A version of this originally appeared as: Comella, Lynn. 2011. 'Who's at the Front of the Line at AEE?' *Las Vegas Weekly*, January 8. Accessed January 7, 2014. http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/blogs/porno-blog/2011/jan/08/who-aee/
2. A version of this originally appeared as: Comella, Lynn L. 2011. 'A Red Carpet Recap from the AVN Awards.' *Las Vegas Weekly*, January 9. Accessed January 7, 2014. http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/news/2011/jan/09/red-carpet-recap-avn-awards/
3. A version of this originally appeared as: Comella, Lynn. 2012. 'AVN Day Two: The Expo through the Eyes of a Photographer.' *Las Vegas Weekly*, January 20. Accessed January 7, 2014. http://www.lasvegasweekly.com/blogs/porno-blog/2012/jan/20/avn-day-two-seeing/#/0

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