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Gonzo, trannys, and teens – current trends in US adult content production, distribution, and consumption

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This essay considers current trends in US adult content production, distribution, and consumption. Included are discussions of various content forms, various distribution channels, emerging niches, and overall philosophical shifts shaping the adult industry in the United States.

Keywords: adult content; pornography; media production; media consumption; adult entertainment industry

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Introduction

On just about any given day, you can visit a major 'mainstream' media outlet and find some mention of pornography – pornography generates this much revenue, pornography is impacting viewers in this particular way, and pornography is responsible for any number of catastrophes and crises. More often than not, however, these topics and themes are fed by misinformation and decades' old imaginations about what constitutes adult content. We are then left to wonder: what constitutes pornography today?

In this essay, I outline and explore different production, consumption, and distribution patterns I have observed during my sociological explorations of adult content produced in the United States and the US adult content production industry. Specifically, what trends are currently emerging from and/or shaping adult content production, consumption, and distribution occurring in the United States?

Background and methodology

In 2010 I published 'From *The Devil in Miss Jones* to *DMJ6* – Power, Inequality, and Consistency in the Content of US Adult Films' ('*DMJ6*') in the journal *Sexualities*. Therein, I explored patterns and trends occurring in a systematic sampling of 26 key adult films produced between 1972 and 2005.

My '*DMJ6*' study was limited at every stage – from the relatively small number of films I considered and the sampling frame from which I drew them, to the fact that adult content production was (is) in a significant state of flux. The greatest struggle I experienced in producing that work, however, was negotiating the non-existent framework within which I was expected to situate the subject matter.

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Although pornography is an endlessly hot topic, little to no systematic considerations of adult content existed. Further, in spite of commonly cited revenue estimates, precise comprehensive statistics describing adult content production and consumption patterns do not exist. Conducting research within this context proved challenging, both in understanding what exactly it was that I was seeing and in justifying any assertions I made.

Given my resources at the time, I do not think I could have improved significantly on the study's design; and I am still quite pleased with the quality of the paper overall. I did, however, want to alleviate some of the gaps I observed throughout the *'DMJ6'* process. Thus, I began PVVOnline.com in 2010.

PVVOnline is a not-for-profit, safe-for-work blog that I write, curate, and edit. Part of the site's mission states:

> Porn is just like everything else in life – multi-dimensional and complex. Each component and dimension of adult content production is also part of a wider socio-cultural past, present, and future. PVVOnline engages these complexities, connecting the dots and offering readers a unique take on the adult industry.[1]

Via PVVOnline, I explore the multi-dimensional relationships existing between wider society and the US adult content production industry. Through consideration of industry culture and developments and in-depth interviews with various community insiders, I explore myriad facets of pornography in a critical manner. I also provide in-depth considerations of adult content as culturally relevant texts. As of late 2013, I have engaged over 200 adult content projects on the site. And though PVVOnline is neither exhaustive nor systematic,[2] it has become a noteworthy space for timely, accessible cultural considerations of pornography as a legitimate creative form and as a significant dimension of wider society.

My assessments throughout this essay are based on the significant and diverse amount of adult content that informs my work, insights and information that have emerged directly from the adult community, and my training and practice as a social justice-informed feminist sociologist. Following are only some current trends and noteworthy developments occurring in US adult content production, consumption, and distribution as I have observed them. These observations all occur within the context of the content to which I have access.

Gonzo form content

Gonzo is a content production form characterized by the presence of a 'talking camera', wherein the person recording a particular sequence or scene is also playing an active, integral role in the on-screen action. For example, a person behind the camera may be giving directions or making comments to performers in the midst of a sex scene. These interactions then become part of the final product (Tibbals 2010). Gonzo form content is generally only loosely scripted, and it does not require the same level of preparation as, for example, most feature-length productions. Consequently, although there is certainly some variability, gonzo form content is generally relatively inexpensive to make.

According to *Adult Video News*' Mark Kernes, gonzo content always includes some form of 'breaking the fourth wall' between viewers and performers.[3] This can

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occur either with on-camera interviews or when performers try to engage the audience during sex acts.[4] Unfortunately, however, the term 'gonzo' is commonly misused. For example, anti-pornography activist Gail Dines claims gonzo is actually a 'genre,' one that depicts 'hard-core, body punishing sex in which women are demeaned and debased' (2010, xi).[5] Gonzo, however, is not a genre – it is a filmmaking form. Consequently, it is possible for any and all adult content to include moments of gonzo, the intensity of sex and/or genre notwithstanding.[6]

Inaccurate yet frequently repeated mischaracterizations, such as that of Dines, muddle considerations regarding adult content production and consumption trends. For example, Dines asserts that content akin to her conceptualization of what constitutes gonzo is commonly produced, which implies that violent and demeaning pornography is also commonly produced. This assertion is both inaccurate and misrepresentative. By conflating film form with subjective assessments regarding the nature of sex depictions, Dines misses a key factor shaping the prevalence of gonzo form content – production cost.

Economic factors shape adult content production, including that of gonzo form pornography. Gonzo content is inexpensive to create, enabling producers to more effectively meet market demands for new material. In this respect, gonzo certainly is both commonly produced and frequently consumed today. But gonzo content is not monolithic, and the actual depictions and themes framed within this film form are extremely variable. In fact, some of what is currently regarded as progressive, ethical adult content employs gonzo's 'talking camera.'

Features – original narratives and parodies

Quite different from gonzo form content are narrative 'feature' productions. Features include sex depictions couched within an overarching plot and/or a developing narrative (Tibbals 2010). Akin to conventional Hollywood film and television, adult content features span the gamut – from comedies and dramas, to miniseries and serials. Further, also akin to Hollywood productions and every other form of narrative text, adult content and adult content producers do not operate in a social or cultural vacuum. Porn and broader social culture shift and evolve within the context of a symbiotic relationship, reacting to and interacting with one another. It is not surprising then that wider social narratives and trends are reflected in adult content. In fact, porn has taken inspiration from a wide variety of mainstream narratives since its very beginnings.[7]

During the past five to eight years, however, the practice of being inspired by wider cultural narratives morphed into a full-blown parody craze. Producers throughout the adult industry created whole series of *This Ain't* [insert source material] *XXX … It's a Parody*-type content, spoofing or dramatically rendering everything from classic television and comic books to celebrity meltdowns and cartoons.[8] Even producers who had previously only shot various forms of all-sex content began to explore feature-form production via parodies.[9]

Parody production, however, reached an apparent acme point around 2010/11 and fewer are being shot today. This may be due to cost concerns encouraging producers towards gonzo and all-sex vignettes[10] and/or shifting consumer tastes. For example, none of the most noteworthy feature projects from 2012 – Elegant Angel's *Wasteland*, New Sensations' *Torn*, and Evil Angel's *Voracious* series – were parodies.

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Web-based content

As technology develops, modes of media production, consumption, and distribution change. This goes for all media forms, including adult content. The adult industry's technology-influenced shifts from reel to video to digital/virtual eras of production, distribution, and consumption are well documented (Tibbals 2013). It is interesting, however, to note the intra-era shifts and developments that are currently shaping the ongoing digital/virtual period. The most significant development in adult centres on the creation of web-based content. Web-based content comes in two primary forms: pre-produced scenes – or 'clips' – that are then sold for streaming and/or downloadable consumption; and live, often interactive, performances that may be archived for later sale/distribution.

There are many web spaces that focus on the online distribution of pre-produced scenes. For example, on Clips4Sale.com[11] a producer can upload their content and benefit the site's significant consumer traffic. Anyone may post to Clips4Sale, although the site mostly caters to newer producers and industry amateurs. Revenues are split between the content owner(s) and the site itself. Sites like Clips4Sale allow producers to build a fan base with minimal distribution overhead. Some more developed, yet still small, studios do, however, distribute DVDs in addition to offering their clips for sale.[12]

Live, interactive sex shows are also extremely popular. Consider, for example, the 'cam-to-cam' video chat network, Streamate.com.[13] Performers can create a profile on Streamate, schedule times to be 'on cam,' and benefit from the site's significant consumer traffic. Any performer may create a profile on these types of sites, although most models therein are generally new and/or amateurs. Consumers pay for interaction time with a 'cam model,' and revenues are split between the performer(s) and the site itself.

Occasionally, production studios will stage elaborate live sex shows. These are similar to the cam-to-cam form in the sense that the performances are happening in real time; however, these larger scale productions are generally more akin to a produced scene than an informal chat. These types of shows are then archived for future repurposing and sale.[14] Further, some specialty studios allow performers to 'rent' time to create their own live performance and subsequent pre-produced content to eventually distribute.[15]

Distribution

As has occurred multiple times in the past, developing technology has changed the way many people consume adult content (Tibbals 2013). Today, if you ask almost anyone working in porn production, they will tell you that DVD is nearly dead. And although I would argue that DVD is not obsolete, consumption of this media form has declined dramatically in recent years. This is a partial consequence of changing distribution modes.

Currently, we are seeing a proliferation of web-based content. In addition to the dimensions I have already discussed, it is important to note that bigger-budget professional producers are also experimenting with initial online distribution, with DVD releases coming after the video-on-demand (VOD) markets have saturated. In many instances, such as with Girlfriends Films' *Poor Little Shyla* (2010) or Evil Angel's *Voracious* (2012), the seams between initial online and eventual DVD

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distribution match up well. In other instances, however, producers may lose DVD consumers by focusing on VOD. Put simply, an emphasis on one distribution mode may result in producers passing up consumers interested in another.

One dimension capable of complicating consumer access to specific products is the distribution deal itself. Distribution relationships come with a wealth of negotiations specific to each respective situation. Consequently, distributors and/or eTailers (online retailers) may decline to carry certain adult content lines and/or may refrain from offering certain titles in all forms (DVD, VOD, etc.). This can be due to cost concerns or the nature of the content itself, among other reasons. For example, I recently sought out a title from Submission Productions, purveyors of hard authentic BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism content). And although Submission Productions' scenes are shot with every precaution and disclaimer in place, the eTail distributor I was contacting told me they did not carry their films because of 'legal concerns.' This was underscored by concerns regarding potential reactions from other more 'vanilla' content producers, with which they already had existing relationships, and/or from the eTailer's target consumers.

Another interesting dimension of online distribution is the affiliate model, wherein distributors and retailers offer webmasters revenue sharing opportunities. For example, a blogger or reviewer will be provided with an online offer code or special link that connects them to a product. If a consumer then makes a purchase via that special code or link, the affiliate receives a percentage of the sale. Not only does this create opportunities for online monetization, it enables distributors and retailers to connect with consumers on a more personal, albeit by proxy, level.

It is imperative to note the importance distribution has on content popularity and trends. Even in my work there is some content I cannot access because of distribution limitations. Distribution has some impact on the content I am privy to and can engage; consequently, it must have some impact on the content to which consumers are privy as well. This must be considered when attempting to assess trends in adult content production and consumption, and the patterns I highlight in this work are no exception.

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(Perceived) Age-centered content

The illusion of youth has been a significant theme in adult content since the 1970s, and it continues to be extremely popular today. Young girl – or 'teen' – content is a genre of porn that focuses on young-looking women performers. Youth is conveyed via costuming and by the actual age of the performers themselves – women who typically work in this genre are of-age teens (18 and 19 years old) or are in their early 20s. This type of content features women and men co-performers and generally seems to be marketed to heterosexual men viewers of all age groups.[16]

Young girl content is not, however, the only youth-centered genre popular today. Twink content, for example, emphasizes young-looking men performers working with men and targets gay men consumers of all age groups.[17] Age-centered themes are also prevalent in lesbian content, with commonplace emphases on both young women performers and 'older–younger' women couplings.[18] Another noteworthy age-centered genre is MILF/Cougar, which emphasizes (relatively) mature women performers working with women and men co-performers.[19] Unlike teen/young girl

and twink content, this genre seems to target a more diverse consumer group, including women, men, and couples of various sexual orientations.

Emerging niches

Based on my observations, pegging, big beautiful women (BBW), queer, and tranny (TS) content are currently growing niches within porn production and consumption. Pegging and BBW content are fairly straightforward. Pegging is a sex depiction wherein one performer penetrates another's anus with a strap-on prosthetic. Although the sex and gender identities of performers may vary, the referent 'pegging' generally refers to cis-gender women penetrating cis-gender men. I have noticed an increase in the number of these types of pegging scenes released during the past two to three years.

The acronym BBW refers to 'big beautiful women' – women performers of size. Although BBW content is still primarily concentrated in amateur and web-based spaces, I have noticed an increase in the number of mainstream production scenes featuring women of size released during the past two to three years.[20] The BBW community has also recently begun organizing within the wider context of adult, which I expect will enhance visibility and increase acceptance.[21]

TS and queer content are a bit more complex, and it is important to remember that these genres are unrelated. Reclaimed and highly charged, the term 'queer' is both a descriptor of sexual orientation and a radical political positionality. The term's multi-faceted meaning applies to self-described 'queer porn' content as well. Generally, queer porn features performers of various gender identities and sexual orientations intermixing and exploring genres in ways infrequently seen in other sexually explicit content. For example, a queer porn narrative may feature transgender performers in a 'conventional' romance or a transgender man partnered with a cis-gender BBW in a BDSM scene.[22] Also political, queer porn seeks to present a level of sexuality and identity authenticity (allegedly) absent from most other adult content. I have noticed an increase in queer porn production during the past two to three years, as well as an increase in queer porn performers' and producers' visibility within the wider adult industry community.

Aside from featuring performers of various gender identities and sexual orientations, TS[23] content does not overlap with queer porn in any way. TS scenes generally feature at least one performer who is in the midst of a male-to-female transition. TS performers are generally partnered with cis-gender men or other male-to-female TS performers, although I have noticed a slight increase in cis-gender women performers working in TS scenes.[24] The majority of TS content parallels production patterns of relatively mainstream porn – mostly all-sex and occasional features, much of which can be accessed via VOD or digital download. I have noticed an increase in TS porn productions during the past two to three years, as well as an increase in TS performers' visibility within the wider adult industry community. Stigma and invisibility related to this type of content make assessments of target consumers difficult.

Sea changes – authenticity and ethics

Although it may be the most overt, queer porn is not the *only* space wherein politics make their way into adult entertainment. Various political and social justice

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dimensions can be found in every aspect of adult content production and distribution I have mentioned in this essay, as well as within myriad other complex and developing areas I have not had the opportunity to discuss (race-centered and ethnicity-centered content, romance content, cuckolding content, additional varieties of fetish content, etc.). In fact, although it comes in many different forms, politically charged considerations regarding authenticity and ethics seem ubiquitous to adult content production and consumption today.

Ethics generally refers to the fair treatment of adult performers in their respective workplaces, as well as ethical representations of sex in content. Authenticity refers to the 'realness' of content, and various debates regarding what constitutes 'real' sex and sex-related representations are ongoing. Currently, some segments of the industry and some consumers call for representations that reflect (perceptions of) real life. Others maintain that porn exists primarily for the purpose of sexual fantasy – but whose fantasies are engaged? And how does viewing fantasy content impact viewers' real and 'real' lives?

In many ways, debates about ethics and authenticity are literal. For example, ethical considerations regarding occupational safety and individual autonomy drive perspectives regarding both using and not using condoms in porn (Tibbals 2012). But what messages do representations of 'unprotected' sex send to viewers (and is this even relevant)? Workplace ethics call for standardized pay scales for specific types of labour; however, there are instances wherein performers will work for content trade and the prospect of future monetization instead of collecting their going day rate. Is this a fair, ethical arrangement? And is it unique to the adult industry? In other ways, debates about ethics and authenticity are more philosophical. For example, some performers, producers, and others call for 'feminist porn' – a self-identified genre and social movement with no one articulated definition (Clark-Flory 2013). At the same time, many producers and performers reject the attribution while creating content that seems decidedly feminist (Noelle 2013). At the centre of every one of these debates are porn performers themselves, each of whom are impacted by individual choice, market concerns, and representation.

In almost every respect, adult content is complex. Even if one was to focus only on the images contained in 'pornographic' representations, with no consideration of production processes or variations in reception, we would still be left with a vast and diverse body of work that is constantly shifting. Consequently, there is no way to say 'pornography is this' or 'pornography is that' – as I have done in this essay, all one can really do is attempt to describe and contextualize existing patterns as they currently resonate (in this case, with me).

Regardless of an individual's or an entity's position on the nuance of content, authenticity, ethics, and/or related issues, I have noticed something interesting emerging from the adult industry community lately – awareness. And although different segments of the industry may choose to engage these issues in variable ways, awareness of authenticity and ethics is refreshing. It has had, and will continue to have, an impact on contemporary pornography overall.

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Clarissa Smith for requesting the writing of this piece in the first place. Email the author with any questions and comments.

Notes

1. 'About'. Accessed July 28, 2013. http://pvvonline.com/?page_id=2249.
2. When I began PVVOnline in 2010, I had no special access to adult content – I simply began requesting DVD screeners from an ever-evolving list of content producers. My goal was to cast my net wide, engaging as diverse a selection of content as possible. Today, I receive DVD screeners from most major adult content producers in the United States. I occasionally receive projects from smaller US producers and European studios. I would estimate that I have received somewhere between 2500 and 3000 titles since 2010. I have also been given access to content behind website pay walls (approximately 50–60 over the years) and have received review copies of numerous other adult-related projects (various types of books, software, adult novelties, etc.). In spite of my best efforts to reach out to every possible producer, I do not receive content from every corner of the adult industry, either within the United States and globally. Consequently, some dimensions of adult production are not reviewed as thoroughly on PVVOnline. Further, I am physically unable to review all the content to which I have access. Instead I engage as many projects as possible, with an emphasis on content I regard as especially socially significant and/or culturally relevant.
3. See *Theories of Performance* by Elizabeth Bell (2008) for discussion of the fourth wall, the imaginary divide between theatre performers and their audience. 'Breaking the fourth wall' occurs when performers acknowledge the audience.
4. Email correspondence with *Adult Video News*' senior editor for legal affairs Mark Kernes (August 23, 2013). Quoted with permission.
5. In addition to assertions made by anti-pornography activists, some scholars have asserted that more intense sex depictions (e.g. gang bang, deep throat, ass-to-mouth, etc.) 'have come to figuratively constitute characterising elements of gonzo styling' (Biasin and Zecca 2009, 144). This statement, however, is somewhat of an overgeneralization. Although more intense sex depictions are commonly present in more intense gonzo form content, these same depictions can be found in, for example, more intense feature content (see discussion of *Wasteland* and *Voracious* for examples). The hallmark of gonzo is the film form, variable iterations and intensities of sex depictions notwithstanding.
6. See IAFD.com for examples of various gonzo form titles such as *Latin Mouth Club* (2012), *Kristina Rose: Unfiltered* (2012), *Lesbian Sex* (series; 2011–ongoing), and *Lesbian Bukkake* (series, 2004–2011), and *Nacho Invades America, Parts 1 and 2* (2011, 2012). Accessed September 20, 2013. http://www.iafd.com.
7. See, for example, *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973) and *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (1975). Also see discussion in Tibbals (2010).
8. See IAFD.com for examples of parody titles such as *Twilight Zone Porn Parody* (2010), *Batman XXX: A Porn Parody* (2010), *Hustler's Untrue Hollywood Stories: Lindsay Lohan* (2009), and *Simpsons: The XXX Parody* (2011). Accessed September 20, 2013. http://www.iafd.com.
9. See the production histories of New Sensations and Digital Playground for examples. Both companies initially only produced various forms of all-sex content but subsequently broadened their respective scopes to include high-quality (e.g. New Sensations' *Big Lebowski: A XXX Parody*, 2010) and/or 'blockbuster' (e.g. Digital Playground's *Top Guns*, 2011) parody content.
10. Along with gonzo, vignette collections are a form of all-sex adult content that depicts sex scenes only, with no conventional developing narrative. Vignette collections string sex scenes together with an overarching concept. For example, the sex scenes may be connected by a costume/visual theme or by the continued presence of a particular performer. Because of the effort necessary to create a cohesive collection, vignette productions are generally more expensive that pure gonzo. They are not, however, generally as expensive as a feature film.
11. See http://clips4sale.com and http://clips4sale.com/do/storeinfo. Accessed August 1, 2013.

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12. See http://severesocietyfilms.com. Accessed August 1, 2013.
13. See http://streammate.com. Accessed August 1, 2013.
14. See, for example, http://www.wickedpictures.com. Accessed August 1, 2013.
15. See, for example, http://www.puba.com. Accessed August 1, 2013.
16. See IAFD.com for examples of 'teen' titles such as *Lolita* (2010), *Innocence of Youth* (series; 2012–ongoing), *My Sexy Kittens* (various series, 2006–ongoing), and *Cuties* (series; 2010–ongoing). Accessed September 20, 2013. http://www.iafd.com.
17. See, for example, http://www.helixstudios.net. Accessed July 28, 2013.
18. See the catalogue for examples. Accessed July 28, 2013. www.girlfriendsfilms.com. It is important to note the development and rising popularity of 'lesbian' porn. Different from both girl–girl, which seems to target heterosexual men viewers, and queer porn (see my following discussion on emerging niches), lesbian porn producers such as Girlfriends Films and Juicy Pink Box create amalgamations of 'realistic' lesbian sex and cinematic fantasy. See http://www.girlfriendsfilms.com/. Accessed August 1, 2013.
19. See IAFD.com for examples of MILF/Cougar titles such as *Housewives of Amber Lane* 1 and 2 (2008, 2009), *MILF Thing* 1–7 (series, 2008–2011), *White Mommas* (series, 2009–ongoing), and *My Friend's Hot Mom* (series, 2004–ongoing). Accessed October 24, 2013. http://www.iafd.com.
20. See, for example, New Sensations' *Big Girls are Sexy* series. Accessed August 1, 2013. http://www.newsensations.com/.
21. See, for example, http://bbwfanfest.com. Accessed July 28, 2013.
22. See, for example, http://pinkwhite.biz. Accessed August 1, 2013.
23. A note on terminology. In my observations, 'tranny' is the attribution used most frequently by performers featured in TS scenes, by TS content producers, and by TS content consumers. Other commonly, but less frequently, used monikers include 'TS' and 'shemale.' Although I support persons' rights to be addressed in whatever manner they choose, I struggle with the terms 'tranny' and 'shemale.' My use of 'TS' *in lieu* of either of these terms is my attempt to distinguish between two genres of adult content that both feature performers of various gender identities and sexual orientations (queer and TS), but are otherwise unrelated, without engaging terms that I find difficult. I am aware that there are colonizing dimensions to this decision; however, use of the term 'TS' is the most accurate and least personally and professionally uncomfortable reconciliation I can formulate.
24. See for example Evil Angel's *TS Playground 3* (2013), a collection featuring TS performers together (one scene), TS performers with cis-gender men (three scenes), and TS performers with cis-gender women and men (one scene). For web-based content, see for example http://www.shemalepornstar.com. Accessed September 20, 2013.

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