

No Money Shot?

Commerce, Pornography, and New Sex Taste Cultures

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This chapter is concerned with new internet websites where sex is the focus of participatory cultures and where commerce and community are combined. . . . The chapter focuses on two sites—Nerve, a magazine launched in the late 1990s and dedicated to what it calls ‘smart smut,’ and SuicideGirls, an altporn¹ site created by duo ‘Spooky’ (Sean Suhl) and ‘Missy Suicide’ (Selena Mooney), in 2001. It investigates how these sites combine commerce and community, how they classify their modes of production and consumption as sexy and sophisticated, and how they may be understood in the broader context where the boundaries between sexual representation and self-presentation are increasingly blurred, and where commerce is increasingly part of the way identity and community are produced.

Participation and Consumption: New Sex Cultures Online

The notion of participatory culture is crucial in understanding the emergence of new kinds of cultural production and consumption at the beginning of the 21st century. Writers such as Henry Jenkins (2006) have documented a move towards an era of cultural convergence, in which commercial and amateur media production increasingly sit side by side, and in which people take hold of media technologies to construct communities in ways that have not been possible in the past. As Jenkins writes, ‘Rather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands’ (2006: 3). This is

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particularly evident online where technology has expanded the possibilities of participation enormously, and where many new applications depend on networks, as in popular sites such as MySpace, YouTube² and Second Life. While online networks initially worked as meeting places for subcultures and fan cultures—and continue to function in this way—they also increasingly pull in the ‘ordinary’ consumer. Convergence, networks and participation are thus reconfiguring media production and consumption on an increasingly broad scale. This complicates established ways of viewing cultural production and consumption as a linear process, where ordinary people ‘receive’ media and other products from media professionals.

These changes are also evident in the development of sexually explicit representations online. Until recently, most discussions about online pornography saw it simply in terms of increasing and extending the distribution of existing commercial porn, but new opportunities for sexual production and consumption are becoming clearer. It is now possible to create, distribute and access a much more diverse set of sexual representations than before. Pornographers may operate independently of the established industry in new and alternative ways, while small groups of independent and ‘savvy media practitioners’ are producing and distributing alternative porn in online arenas for peer-to-peer sharing, sex activist and art networks. This is ‘a collaborative producing of porn,’ the beginnings, in Katrien Jacobs’ view (2004b), of a democratization of porn which challenges existing frameworks for representing sex.

The migration of porn to the internet not only complicates existing models of cultural production and consumption, but makes it much harder to classify as a form of commercial sex. Although paysites continue to flourish, an enormous amount of pornographic material is now free to view. Dougal Phillips (n.d.) notes how the file-sharing of online porn dramatically alters the economy of pornographic distribution, producing

‘a community of exchange’ in which participants are simultaneously vendor and consumer. Porn file-sharing challenges the existing commercial structures within which porn operates, and it has the potential to alter existing concepts of pornographic production and consumption.

While some new pornographers rely on ‘gift-giving’ rather than financial transactions, communities are created and participation is possible, even where some commodities must be paid for in a ‘community friendly commodity environment’ (Jacobs, 2004a: 77). The sites that I discuss here fall into this category. They have adopted a subscription model, allowing different levels of access. At Nerve, readers can look at any materials posted in the previous 30 days and some of the photography galleries for free. Membership costs \$7 per month and allows access to all of Nerve’s archives which contain essays, poetry, fiction, advice, blogs, photography and personals, and also to premium photography galleries. SuicideGirls’ membership is \$12 per month and offers extra content to subscribers, plus the opportunity to interact with other members of the SuicideGirls community through groups, chat rooms and webcams. Both sites offer special deals which give a lower membership rate for longer subscriptions. The ‘Suicide Girls,’ whose picture sets, videos, journals and blogs make up the bulk of the site, are paid a fee for their work, but the distinction between model and reader, evident in most forms of pornography, is very blurred here. Suicide Girls are members of the SuicideGirls community, distinguished only from other members by their modelling, the fees they attract for this, and by the lifetime memberships their status as Suicide Girls also earns them.

On such sites, access is related simultaneously to commerce and community: the more you pay, the more you belong. Both sites also engage in more traditional commercial activities; SuicideGirls has moved into merchandising (selling clothes and jewellery), publishing (a SuicideGirls book

appeared in 2004), and performance (there are neo-burlesque tours which are also available to view on DVD). Nerve has concentrated its efforts in publishing, with books on sex advice and etiquette, literature and photography.

Nerve and SuicideGirls are good examples of new forms of alternative pornography and of participatory cultures which serve corporate and community needs, enabling a 'collaborative eroticism' (Van der Graf, 2004). In both, sexual display becomes an important part of individual and collective self-definition. It is used to signify a response and an alternative to the way sex is presented elsewhere—particularly in mainstream commercial porn, which the sites characterize as standardized, bland and anodyne. In this respect, issues of taste and aesthetics become a significant component in the way the communities construct themselves. Nerve 'consciously seeks to blur the boundaries between pornography and avant-garde art' (Jenkins, 2004: 6), while SuicideGirls describes itself as an 'art-sleaze phenomenon'.³ *Wired* magazine contrasts 'stylish subculture sites' like SuicideGirls, with their 'artful nude photos of women who are more likely to be purple-haired, pale and pierced,' with mainstream porn sites which feature 'ugly Web design, annoying pop-up ads, and badly lit pictures of big-haired breast-implemented blondes' (Barron, 2002). Here, *stylishness*—of genre, body display and web design—is crucial in the sites' definitions of themselves.

Nerve and SuicideGirls differ in style and content from commercial hardcore porn, which is still organized around a set of sexual 'numbers' derived from 1970s hardcore video. These are the oral, vaginal and anal penetration of women by men, girl-on-girl scenes, and threesomes. Porn of this kind tends to focus on the explicit display of women's bodies, with male display limited to ejaculation, usually onto the body or into the mouth of a woman—the so-called 'money shot.' This focus on flesh and ejaculation—or 'meat' and 'money'

(Williams, 1989)—is rarely found in smart smut and altporn sites, which favour soft-core images, that is, photographs of women, shot in tasteful pin-up or art styles—rather than images of explicit display or sexual activity.⁴ In addition, on smart smut and altporn sites, sexual content is combined with coverage of music, news, art, culture and counterculture, so that sex is placed in a much broader cultural context than in more mainstream porn sites. Nerve calls itself a magazine about 'sex and culture,' for an audience that appreciates 'original, award-winning writing and photography, as well as discerning coverage of the best films, television, books and music,' while SuicideGirls emphasizes its combination of 'the best music and alternative culture sites with an unapologetic, grassroots approach to sexuality.' Porn is therefore able to take its place alongside other forms of culture and subculture, becoming a focus for engaging in community and culture building.

The combination of amateur and professional production and the incorporation of forms of interaction such as blogs, discussion groups and message boards associated with non-sexual online communities also works to construct the sites as forms of community. Nerve places amateur writing in the dating profiles of 'young, urban trendsetters' alongside professional work, thereby presenting the site as a community, online media as a tool for public self-expression, and sex as a form of self-presentation and relation. Altporn sites tend to address their target communities more narrowly, drawing on the iconography of subcultures, such as goth or hippie, and they are often characterized by the 'do-it-yourself' amateur aesthetic associated with the subcultural production of art, fashion and music. SuicideGirls belongs to this category, presenting itself as a showcase for 'postmodern pin-up girls for the alternative nation.' Young women, often heavily tattooed and/or pierced, appear in a range of forms, including pin-up imagery,

profiles, journals, blogs and cams. The site is a commercial environment and a community at several levels; it belongs to its founders and owners, who run it as a business; it belongs to the Suicide Girls themselves, who are paid to appear on the site, and who 'embody' the community; and it belongs to the members, who are paying subscribers and who participate in the community: on SuicideGirls, both Suicide Girls and subscribers can create a profile and journal; they can chat, use cams, share photos and join groups. What unites them all is their membership of a taste culture which functions to bind them together in relations of economic and cultural production and consumption, which are also relations of community.

ClassySex.com

Sites like Nerve and SuicideGirls are concerned with formulating a sexual sensibility for audiences that have traditionally been neglected by porn—young people and women. For example, Nerve.com promotes itself as a 'smart sex' magazine for 'young, urban, over-educated hipsters.' This involves a recasting of sexual interest as literate and cool, consonant with the late modern association of hedonistic sexuality with a new petitebourgeoisie, of 'classy' sex with women (Juffer, 1998), and with the emergence of porn chic (McNair, 2002). Through the development of particular kinds of tasteful sexual representations for specific taste cultures, new porn audiences are defined as sophisticated and liberated consumers (Jancovich, 2001). This marks a departure in the presentation and marketing of porn which has generally been understood as a low, crude and 'dirty' form of cultural production. The aestheticization of sex can also be traced in other media such as subscription cable television, where it is possible to narrowcast relatively sexually explicit material to a commercially attractive audience of middle-class 'bourgeois

bohemians'—most notably and successfully in the postfeminist drama, *Sex and the City* (Arthurs, 2003). . . .

Altporn Aesthetics and the New 'Porn Star'

The hybridity of these images and the complex readings made of them are related to an aestheticization of sex, which is evident in other areas of popular culture and commerce, for example in lingerie adverts, erotic literature, and the marketing of sex toys (Attwood, 2005; Juffer, 1998). Jane Juffer has characterized this as a domestication of porn, which recasts the consumption of some sexually explicit representations as a marker of distinction, sophistication and taste. In the production and consumption of these, a set of concerns with sexual aesthetics, authenticity and self-expression is foregrounded. This set of concerns can also be found in the amateur pornography that Sergio Messina has dubbed 'realcore,' and defined as representations of 'real people with real desires, having real sex in real places' (n.d.). According to Messina, realcore originated in the BDSM [Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, and Masochism] community, appearing online in the late 1990s. By definition, it has worked to expand the vocabulary of sexual expression, making visible many more types of sexual practice than are generally represented in porn. In both style and content, it has pushed the boundaries of what is understood as porn and as 'real sex.' This kind of representation can be understood as part of 'a broad post-modern taste for "authenticity,"' which includes webcam culture, celebrity nudity, amateur porn and reality TV, and which focuses on new public displays of 'the ordinary,' which often make use of images of naked bodies (Barcan, 2000: 145–6).

Although sites like Nerve and SuicideGirls are clearly related to the rise of realcore, they are very different in aesthetic terms. Realcore is characterized by wide-angle shots, low-fi

presentation, a lack of technical gloss, and a form of performance by its 'models' which acknowledges the presence of the camera and speaks its 'reality' (Messina, n.d.). The aesthetic of Nerve and SuicideGirls is instead derived from glamour and pin-up photography, which in turn draw on the codes of fashion and portraiture. It is also related to the practice of boudoir photography described by Ruth Barcan, whereby ordinary people employ professional photographers to create glamorous pictures of them, thereby imitating 'the images of perfection associated with stars' (2004: 249).

The SuicideGirls aesthetic also involves the recycling of the codes and conventions of retro and contemporary subculture imagery. Missy Suicide describes how the site was inspired by the post-punk style of Portland, Oregon, 'where everyone was an artist and everyone created something,' and by pin-up photography of 1950s' models like Bettie Page, who she saw as 'self-confident, elegant and upbeat' (Barcan, 2004: 7). SuicideGirls is dedicated to the 'post-punk girls who haunted Pioneer Street, listening to Ice Cube on their iPods, decked out in Minor Threat hoodies and miniskirts, with a skateboard in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other, and a backpack of Kerouac and Hemingway slung over one absent-mindedly exposed shoulder' (2004: 8). Despite this delineation of a 'type' of girl who can be defined so precisely by her forms of cultural consumption—young, literate and cosmopolitan with tastes derived from punk and riot grrrl—Missy's vision was to create 'new Pin-Up girls, each with their own ferociously unique style and outlook' (2004: 8).

The characterization of a cool, contemporary, sexy, clever, stylish and urbane femininity—'the girls next door, but more colorful and with better record collections' as the SuicideGirls site puts it—can be contrasted with most mainstream porn representations, where women are defined only in terms of their availability for sex or their sexual prowess. The bodies of Suicide Girls may be 'sexy,' but their tattoos and piercings

also insistently reference individual style and membership of subculture communities. They are hot and cool, sexy and beautiful, and although they may require as much work as the bodies of porn stars, they also signify an authenticity derived from a high glamour tradition, in which 'personality' is indicated through 'image' (Tolson, 1996: 117–18). This recycling of representational codes associated with celebrities works to glamorize and exalt the models, simultaneously refusing the connotations of porn imagery, which 'objectifies' and depersonalizes its subjects. The use of journals and other forms of self-expression on the site also works to construct Suicide Girls as really real, 'emotionally fleshed out' (Tomlin, 2002), as 'whole people' rather than 'just bodies' (in N. Phillips, 2005).

New sex taste cultures such as SuicideGirls complicate traditional ways of representing the self; combining forms associated with objectification and commodification and those associated with the expression of the unique self. This is further emphasized by the way they draw on the visual conventions of glamorous pin-up girls such as Bettie Page, who straddles the border between porn star, glamour model, celebrity and film star. In the process, the women who appear on SuicideGirls may themselves become 'micro-celebrities.'⁵ An insistence on the authenticity of the girls is set against the artificiality of professional porn stars—they are average but unique, where porn stars are spectacular but inhuman. In this sense, an aesthetic of glamour is made to connote authenticity and the everyday, rather than the artificial and fantastic world of mainstream commercial porn.

Empowered Eroticism

The aesthetic of sites such as Nerve and SuicideGirls is part of the way new sex taste cultures attempt to define themselves, through a variety of oppositions to mainstream culture—and especially mainstream

porn—as creative, vibrant, classy, intelligent, glamorous, erotic, radical, varied, original, unique, exceptional and sincere, compared to the unimaginative, dull, tasteless, stupid, sleazy, ugly, hackneyed, standardized, commonplace, trite, mediocre, superficial and artificial. In the process, a system of aesthetics is evoked as a form of ethics. Indeed, a number of alternative online producers have explicitly linked porn and political activism. The Sensual Liberation Army, which provides links to porn images, asks its readers to visit sites such as The American Red Cross and Democracy Now. The producers of FuckforForest (n.d.) exchange porn for money, which they donate to environmental causes. Furry Girl's VegPorn site donates money from sales at its online sex shop to Scarleteen, the sex education resource for teenagers (FurryGirl, n.d.).

Some altporn practitioners are also concerned with developing an ethical framework for new forms of sexual representation. FurryGirl argues that altporn should revalue models, by inviting them 'to express themselves and have a say in how they are presented,' and by portraying them 'as multidimensional beings, with interests other than sex.' It should defy conventions of beauty, body type and style and challenge 'stereotypes and negative attitudes about race, size, gender, and sexual orientation.' It should be sex positive and uphold 'the idea of safe, sane, and consensual sex play.' It should also work towards building a participatory culture. This should involve 'people who are a part of each other's lives outside of porn,' so that porn becomes 'an expression of the people who make it.' Altporn producers should work 'to foster community on the site,' through forums, journals, chat rooms, and on the web, through networking, making connections and helping each other out (in Watson, n.d.). Similarly, TastyTrixie's Webwhore Manifesto (n.d.) calls for a recognition of the wide range of skills necessary for good webwhoring, which she defines as 'providing sex fantasy entertainment on the internet,'

and the contribution that sex work makes to society, and for 'solidarity in smut'—the promotion of links with other sex workers and the development of a professional code of ethics.

The ethical framework invoked here is one developed by writers such as Annie Sprinkle and Pat Califia, and espoused more recently in collections such as Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller's *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order* (1999), Lee Damsky's *Sex and Single Girls* (2000), and Merri Lisa Johnson's *Jane Sexes It Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire* (2002). Although these retain a critical focus, they tend towards the embracing and shaping of cultural and commercial sexual practices, rather than focusing on their regulation and censorship. The attempt to develop a sexual ethics beyond existing moral frameworks, also exemplified in books like *The Ethical Slut* (1998), by Dossie Easton and Catherine Listz, which is referenced by altporn practitioners such as FurryGirl, provides an important context for the development and analysis of new sex taste cultures, because of its refusal of traditional assumptions that commercial sex is wrong or necessarily harmful.

The most sustained counter-claim to the empowered eroticism of SuicideGirls came in 2005, when nearly 40 models left the site amid claims that the site's male president, Spooky, was abusive to models and used Missy as 'a pro-woman front' (Fulton, 2005). SuicideGirls was criticized for the poor pay and restrictive contracts it offers its models,⁶ and for its heavy-handed responses to the criticisms made by disenfranchised SuicideGirls, removing dissenters and their critical posts from the community (Koht, 2006), and filing legal actions against rival sites when models, allegedly still under contract to SuicideGirls, began working for them (Damsky, 2006). While it is difficult to establish the truth of these allegations, paying attention to the *details* of how new sex taste cultures do and do not work, rather than making assumptions about sexual representation and commercial

sex, will provide a good starting point if we are to begin to make sense of them in ethical terms.

As long ago as 1987, Kathy Myers suggested that we might move beyond the tired and abstract debates about an imaginary monolithic pornography if we started to ask specific questions about how models are selected, how images are produced, what power relationships exist between photographers and models, how images are framed and distributed, and what kinds of contexts they are consumed in. For some writers, these kinds of questions make little difference to 'the fundamentally problematic relationship between viewer and viewed that lies at the heart of all pornography' (N. Phillips, 2005), but in the contemporary climate, when we are witnessing radical shifts in the ways we create and access sexual images, it is crucial that we abandon assumptions about what is 'fundamentally' problematic about new sex taste cultures, such as SuicideGirls, and move on.

Pornography as Self-Presentation

Danielle DeVoss (2002) has argued that women's self-published porn sites can be seen as '*identity projects*' (2002: 76), and Ruth Barcan maintains that more generally, images—particularly those of nudity—now play an important part in the way we form our identities, constituting, to use Foucault's term, a major 'technology of the self' (2004: 212). In this context it is important to develop an understanding of the key forms of nudity that contemporary culture privileges—celebrity nudity, glamour nudity and homemade nudity (2004: 212). Since the early 1990s female celebrity nudity has increasingly been presented as 'a sign of liberation,' in which 'economic freedom . . . sexual liberation and freedom of choice' happily coincide (2004: 242), and in which porn is able to become 'chic' (McNair, 2002). Glamour photography works to allow ordinary people to participate in the kind of 'image-work' previously

associated only with celebrities, and is often undertaken at times when 'identity and/or body image have become self-conscious or precarious in some way' (Barcan, 2004: 249). Homemade nudity is most evident in the explosion of interest in sexually explicit material featuring real people—in realcore, reality TV shows and chat rooms. The accessibility of all these new forms has made sexually explicit imagery more culturally visible, whether it is accessed by individuals or not (Barcan, 2004: 254).

Digital technologies are changing the kinds of 'identity work' performed in western cultures, and self-presentation is increasingly mediated. Barcan argues that we can make sense of new forms of image and identity work as part of a shift towards understanding identity in terms of a 'staged authenticity,' which combines 'desire for the real, fetishization of the real, resignation to the fact that the real is always elusive, fun in fakery, and celebration of the delights of role-play and performance' (2004: 255). In this context, commercial sex inevitably takes on new significance, by providing resources for the development of sexual identities, and by providing arenas for presenting those identities.

The success of SuicideGirls has dramatically increased interest in alternative pornography and the number of altporn sites is growing fast. The aesthetic of these kinds of sex taste cultures, and the way they address young hip consumers, has also sparked some interest from the mainstream porn industry. An article in *Adult Video News* about porn for the youth market recommends that porn producers, 'Hook in the currently secondary non-mainstream buyers now, and hold on to them as they mature and their favored product gains acceptance' (Stokes, 2005). It argues that if it is to appeal to young, sophisticated consumers, porn must be presented in a form they can relate to aesthetically, and it must fit into their existing practices of media consumption.

There are already signs that the aesthetic and address developed by sites like

SuicideGirls is being appropriated by large porn production companies. Filmmaker Eon McKai, whose work fits the SuicideGirls aesthetic and demographic, has been hired by VCA Pictures, which is owned by *Hustler*, to make porn for the youth market. Dismissing contemporary mainstream porn as 'tired out and out of touch,' and noting how ground-breaking SuicideGirls has been, McKai argues that 'There's a ton of kids like me who listen to emo, punk-rock, goth, electro, or drum and bass . . . and there's no smut for us.' McKai's film, *Art School Sluts* (2004), is made 'from the scene for the scene,' and features Suicide Girls as extras, girls 'you could catch dancing . . . around town on any night of the week' (McKai, n.d.).

Sex taste cultures like SuicideGirls and Nerve are the nearest thing we currently have to the kind of porn recommended by *Adult Video News*, and they provide a model of the ways that commercial sex representations may develop in the future, both within community sites and within the existing porn industry. They are part of a 'reconfiguration of erotic life' in which sex and commerce are combined (Bernstein, 2001: 397). The rapid growth of new forms of online pornography and the taste cultures that grow up around them are blurring the boundaries between porn and other aesthetics, between commercial and non-commercial forms of sex, between consumption and community, and between sex as representation and self-presentation, recreation and relation. It poses new questions about what we mean by commercial sex and how we might develop its study.

Notes

1. Altporn is sometimes also called punk porn or indie porn, and, as these names suggest, has a particular subculture focus.

2. A porn clone of this site now exists at <http://www.pornotube.com/> (accessed 10 January 2007).

3. The *Los Angeles Times*, quoted on the SuicideGirls site, <http://suicidegirls.com/tour/> (accessed 9 September 2006).

4. Some altporn sites portray a much wider range of sexual practices than is generally depicted in porn—the BellaVendetta site organizes its galleries according to 'fetish' and 'kink' categories, including asphyxiation, bathrooms, blood sex, clown porn, crafts and hobbies, food, glasses, horror, menstrual art, love letters, smoking, tickling, weapons, and wheels. See BellaVendetta (n.d.). See Burning Angel for examples of altporn video, <http://www.burningangel.com/> (accessed 15 January 2007).

5. The term is used by Terri Senft (2005) in her discussion of the fame achieved by women producers of webcam sites, or 'camgirls.'

6. According to a report by Deidre Fulton (2005) Suicide Girls 'get \$300 per photo set, plus additional money if they go on tour, shoot videos, or pose in photos with another girl.'

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