

Bound to Capitalism: The Pursuit of Profit and Pleasure in Digital Pornography

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A couple of years ago, on a foray into Target, I happened upon a display featuring kinky products inspired by the popular *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise. Positioned near toothpaste and antacid, The Official Pleasure Collection illustrates two related phenomena explored in this article: capitalism's ability to appropriate and commodify taboo sexual practices and consequently, the ever-shifting terrain of sexual acceptability. The following cultural study of digital pornography explores the interrelated development of these two themes at this historical juncture by considering how neoliberalism and Web 2.0 influence the production and distribution of kinky pornographic content. The *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise blurs the line between popular culture and pornography. In fact before, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was picked up by Vintage Books, an imprint of Knopf Doubleday, eventually selling over 170 million copies, it was distributed on a fanfiction site where it was created as an erotic response to *Twilight* (Cuccinello, 2017). By collapsing the distinction between producers and consumers and participating in the construction of a vibrant digital public anchored in fandom and creative labor, fan fiction is a clear reflection of the same Web 2.0 logics, particularly user-generated content and virtual community building, that I show have shaped the development of digital pornography through a case study of Kink.com, a popular BDSM (Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, sadomasochism) subscription-based pornography site founded by Peter Acworth in 1997.

This article attributes the acceptability and mainstreaming of *Fifty Shades of Grey*-style kink to the appropriation and commodification of live BDSM subcultural practices by digital pornographers in the 1990s. This early move made subcultural sex practices and emerging identities more accessible to a curious, although not necessarily initiated, public, which normalized some aspects of kink and extended our collective pornographic imagination. As Susanna Paasonen suggests: "There is little doubt as to the Internet contributing to the politics of visibility of various sexual tastes, the diversification of porn imaginaries and understandings of the very concept of pornography" (2007, p. 164). This, in turn, expanded the market for kink creating the conditions necessary for the unprecedented mainstream success of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise, which has subsequently influenced digital pornography.

The Logics of Digital Porn

This project identifies the factors that have influenced the production, distribution, and consumption of kinky digital pornography including neoliberalism, authenticity, and Web 2.0.

Neoliberalism and Authenticity

Neoliberalism refers to political and economic policies that shift power from labor to capital and use state policies and institutions to maximize profit for private industry. One of the central logics buttressing neoliberal politics and economics is the personalization of crisis; its construction as a matter of individual inadequacy. Alternately, and importantly for my project, the personalization of politics favors personal empowerment over collective action, laying the groundwork for the politicization of sexual acts and representations as a political end in themselves.

Stephen Maddison's groundbreaking essay "Online Obscenity and Myths of Freedom: Dangerous Images, Child Porn, and Neoliberalism," critiques the neoliberal logic that "equates commodity choice with sexual emancipation" (Maddison, 2010, p. 17). He notes: "In a range of ways, neoliberalism offers us subjectivities and choices that propose new sexual freedoms, yet these foreclose sexuality to the sphere of economic enfranchisement" (Maddison, 2010, p. 25). In other words, one is sexually free to the extent that they can consume commodified versions of sexuality at their discretion.

Stephen Maddison's "Beyond the Entrepreneurial Voyeur" Sex, Porn, and Cultural Politics," introduces a new vocabulary for critiquing pornography; one that accounts for contemporary political-economic practices and new technologies. He uses the term "immaterial sex" to "describe the creative and affective energies commodified in porn production" and the term "entrepreneurial voyeur" to describe "the ways in which porn consumption, sexual subjectification, and the enterprise culture mutually reinforce one another" (Maddison, 2013, p. 107). He sees pornography as a technique of governmentality that produces the type of desiring subject required of a neoliberal economy. In the production of pornography, sexuality is commodified in a state of competition. He suggests that celebratory readings of pornography fail to adequately account for these issues by privileging individual agency and desire, which is actually limited to choosing content. In other words, pornography helps identify, organize, and by extension manage desire.

Simon Hardy echoes these sentiments in his book chapter "The New Pornographies" writing: "There is an appearance of unlimited choice amid the vast maze of websites and windows, but only in terms of fixed and finite options. The catch is that what is in fact a strictly commodified set of options can be experienced as the expression of the inner desires of the self" (Hardy, 2009, p. 11). Hardy makes a critical observation. Interiority, or a sense of essential sexual truth is, in fact, the project of picking desires from a finite catalog of (often commodified) options. The internalization of sexual desires that emanate outside of the self are experienced as a product of the self.

Social theorist Michel Foucault has convincingly argued that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed a proliferation of discourses about sex, which prompted the emergence of experts and institutions to manage sexuality (Foucault, 1990). According to many critical theorists engaging pornography, it functions in a similar vein to psychiatry and sexology. Experts working within these institutions produce narratives of desire that elicit and then manage desire, which forecloses sexual possibilities. Sexuality studies scholar Linda Williams explicitly identifies pornography as part of a power-knowledge apparatus claiming that hardcore pornography emerged out of the West's obsession with "knowing" sex and pleasure, and deriving pleasure from this knowledge (1999). Williams argues that learning the "truth" about our sexual desire is conflated with learning our personal truth, since sex has been constructed as "the secret."

This is where discourses of authenticity and neoliberalism intersect, but as I suggest also begin to break down as the desire for sexual truth is replaced with what I refer to as the logic of sexual assemblages. Although I agree that even just a few short years ago sexuality was linked to truth and authenticity, I suggest that sexuality has become untethered from sexual truth coinciding with the mainstreaming of kink, as well as other sexual identities and practices. This does not mean that authenticity does not continue to resonate for some people, but instead that the very movement to the mainstream emphasizes flexible pleasures. We are moving towards a "try it on" sexual culture in which the meaning of sexuality and importance of authenticity is undergoing revision; it is largely an external discovery based on consumption instead of an internal discovery based on reflection.

This is not to suggest that there is no relationship between authenticity and kink, but instead that mainstream awareness of subcultural phenomena shifts the focus away from authenticity and towards a new model of flexible assemblages in which sexual desires can be remade to reflect a play of surfaces that do not require depth or "realness" to be pleasurable. The discourse of authenticity, critical to understanding sexual subjectivity and authenticating sites like Kink.com are becoming less paramount to discussions. One need not "discover" what they like and commit to it through a subscription and community participation in a virtual environment, but one can instead flexibly try on new identities and try out new practices inspired by the click of infinite buttons. This does not reject logics of sexual fluidity popular in the 1990s, which coincides with the early institutionalization of Internet pornography; in fact, these logics, like kink, are becoming "mainstream" as sex and intimacy are reconfigured as flexible assemblages instead of core identities.

Web 2.0

Web 2.0 refers to a mode of participatory engagement with digital culture. The logics of neoliberalism and Web

2.0 intersect in digital pornography, especially digital pornography that self-consciously constructs (i.e., markets) itself as alternative or anti-normative (queer, feminist, or BDSM pornography), which, as my case study illustrates, is critical to Kink.com's early development (Mowlabocus, 2010). Feona Attwood writes: "Altporn sites ... combine commerce with community, often adopting a subscription model in which prime content becomes available to members for a monthly fee. They often present themselves as sites of community as well as commercial enterprises..." (Attwood, 2010, p. 95). She continues: "The inclusion of blogs, discussion groups and message boards, campsites and chatrooms on many altporn sites further emphasizes the mixing of sex with social networking, self-imaging, and user-generated content. Here "sex work" becomes a stylish and alternative form of self-expression and a way of developing community" (Attwood, 2010, p. 25). As my case study of Kink.com shows, in addition to presenting sex workers as liberated sexual subjects exploring their fantasies, Kink.com encouraged consumer participation, primarily through discussion boards as a strategy to ensure loyalty. This affective labor collapsed product and consumer as part of what subscribers paid to purchase was the community, which they in fact created. Even more, it is Web 2.0 that is shifting the tide on digital pornography's marketability as amateurs increasingly produce their own content, which can be viewed for free on distribution sites supported by advertisers instead of subscribers (Paasonen, 2010).

I am not the first scholar to study digital pornography as a product of neoliberal and Web 2.0 logics that subsequently reinforces said logics. Grant Kien's "BDSM and Transgression 2.0: The Case of Kink.com" is a cultural study of Kink.com that historicizes the site to better understand how pornographic content has influenced shifting understandings of transgression. He identifies three steps in the "mainstreaming process": "first, the steady commodification of what began as a derelict virtual commons populated by deviants; second, the enclosure of virtual spaces that were considered "profane" until their appropriation by capitalism; and third, the legitimation of certain erotic practices" (Kien, 2012a, p. 119). Although I agree with the moves he charts, his 2012 publication does not account for the newest trends in digital pornography and the influence mainstreaming BDSM as well as the rise in free advertisement-based amateur-made pornography has had on production, distribution, and consumption of digital pornography. Much has changed in the last few years.

Although a fair amount of scholarship about digital pornography has been published over the last decade, no current scholarship has foregrounded the cycle of appropriations of BDSM, first by digital pornographers, then by mainstream literary and film companies, then by pornographers, which I suggest allows us to trace the shifting logics of late capitalism. The nearest analysis is by Susanna Paasonen in her epilogue to the collection *Pornification*. Paasonen writes:

Alternative pornographies have – from kink sites to subcultural pornographies – fed back to the imageries of commercial pornography that they seem to subvert. If independent porn productions appropriate poses and elements from mainstream porn while abandoning or disregarding others, this is also the case vice versa. The notion of the mainstream is porous and contingent. New categories and sub-genres are introduced and mainstreamed and they undergo transformation in the process. (2010, p. 163)

Paasonen identifies reciprocal poaching between altporn and mainstream porn; but she does not consider how mainstream culture more generally, from mass paperbacks to blockbuster films, are transformed under the weight of pornography. My original interpretation, grounded in a case study of Kink.com, draws on existing insights about digital pornography that have connected it to Web 2.0 logics and neoliberalism, while updating the analysis to include very recent shifts in the production and consumption of kink.

A Kinky Case Study

Kink.com owes much of its early success to a marketing strategy that threaded narratives of sexual discovery and sexual authenticity across site content, promotional materials, and news media stories about the site's owner, Peter Acworth, as well as its performers. Kink.com's origin story begins in 1997 when owner Peter Acworth was a doctoral student in Columbia University's finance program. While on vacation in Spain, Acworth spotted an issue of *The Sun* with the headline "Fireman Makes 1/4 Million Pounds Pushing Internet Filth." Inspired by the British firefighter's untrained entrepreneurial success Acworth decided to start his own Internet pornography business (Abrams, 2010; Mooallem, 2007). When he returned to the US, Acworth created HogTied.com, a site consisting of still-photos of bound women. Within a year the site was making over a thousand dollars a day. At that point, Acworth decided to

leave Columbia's finance program for San Francisco's fetish scene (Abrams, 2010). Once in San Francisco Acworth diversified the site's content by creating his own bondage scenarios with models he discovered on Craigslist. Soon after, in 2000, Acworth started a second site, *FuckingMachines.com*, which depicted women anally and vaginally penetrated by a variety of custom-made machines. Acworth's original content took advantage of the possibilities offered by the Internet including discussion forums and behind the scenes blogs that encouraged a sense of virtual community and client loyalty, a point I will return to later.

Importantly, *Kink.com* was never just a virtual community, part of its branding strategy was its location within San Francisco's fetish scene. In 2006 Acworth set up shop in a 20,000 square foot armory located in the Mission District (Mooallem, 2007). In the decade Acworth owned the armory *Kink.com* offices were housed there, much of the content was created there, and it served as a meeting place offering tours and eventually even a bar. Kien contends that it is impossible to understand *Kink.com*'s success and its sociocultural impact without contextualizing it within the San Francisco fetish scene writing: "its sociocultural role can only realistically be understood when contextualized among community based web and physical presences such as *Fetlife.com*, the San Francisco Society of Janus, San Francisco's weekly *Bondage a Go Go* event, and the San Francisco Citadel BDSM playspace" (Kien, 2012a, p. 122). The allure of San Francisco and its reputation for supporting sexually diverse communities added to the allure and authenticity of *Kink.com* even as the site became a staple of the community. Even more, practitioners and communities often appear in content for no fee because Acworth does provide a fantasy site for BDSM practitioners.

Acworth marketed *Kink.com* as a public service and community participant as illustrated through the site's mission statement: "To demystify and celebrate alternative sexualities (sic) by providing the most ethical and authentic kinky adult entertainment" (*Kink.com*). Additionally, in Kien's 2010 interview with Acworth, the porn mogul details his long-time donations to kinky community organizations and describes digitized kinky educational programs available on *Kink.com* as markers of his commitment to mainstreaming kink (Kien, 2012b, p. 122). Kien connects Acworth's commitment to mainstreaming kink to profit suggesting it would "expand the BDSM pornography market and build a solid alliance of popular support should there ever come a moralistic legal challenge to the business" (Kien, 2012b, p. 122). Although I do not doubt Acworth's investment in mainstreaming kink, which Kien argues convincingly, it is important to note the limits of Acworth's control over what would happen to kink once it was in the hands, and played out on the bodies, of a mass public that did not identify with the subculture per se. In other words, even five years ago it does not seem that anyone doubted the ability of a regionally specific kinky community such as that found in San Francisco to remain cohesive and strong under the weight of kinks mainstreaming. But, as I suggest, and as my case study of *Kink.com* illustrates, kinky subcultures did shift under the weight of mainstreaming in tandem with the culmination of neoliberal and Web 2.0 logics in popular advertisement-based digital streaming services (Paasonen, 2010).

Acworth's early construction of *Kink.com* as a public service coopts a 1990s trend to politicize sexual expressions, acts, and identities. Aristeia Fotopoulou identifies a "conceptual and activist move in queer feminist politics from questions of gender to those of sexuality as the primary site of oppression" (Fotopoulou, 2017, p. 64). Because sexuality was constructed as a site of oppression it was also envisioned as a site of potential liberation. The focus on the individual and her liberation seems to succumb to the logics of neoliberalism previously alluded to, but recent work by scholar Hannah McCann suggests that locating politics on the surface of the body and seeing gender subversion as a political end emerged as early as the 1700s with Mary Wollstonecraft's description of femininity as debilitating; a theme that was picked up in the second wave by feminists including Betty Friedan and Susan Brownmiller (McCann, 2018, p. 21). According to McCann, this logic was normalized in the motto "the personal is political," which too frequently reduced the personal to the political (McCann, 2018).

Additionally, Fotopoulou and I share similar concerns with the relationship between pornography and neoliberalism. She notes: "...discourses of authenticity, productivity and individuality shape a post-feminist understanding of porn, which legitimizes digital pornographic practices and, at the same time, creates new audiences" (Fotopoulou, 2017, p. 75). Acworth took advantage of this moment to build and profit from a material and virtual community anchored in kinky sexuality. One of his primary techniques involves collapsing audience and participant, observer and performer; a possibility that existed because of digitization and which reflects logics of both web 2.0 culture and neoliberalism. Neoliberal consumer choice rhetoric is critical to Acworth's marketing strategy as illustrated by a 2010 interview with *Details*: "We are all different. Some people are wired for monogamy, some, not, some are kinky, some gay; some need sex several times each day, some once per week. The diversity of pornography on the Internet is fueled by demand, and the diversity of our sexual tastes has never been clearer" (Abrams, 2010). Acworth links agency to consumption while also suggesting that sexuality is "wired," an essential truth that must

be discovered. Importantly, he abandons this argument as kink becomes more mainstream; a point I will return to. As I have demonstrated, many scholars have convincingly read digital pornography as a product of neoliberal and Web 2.0 logics, but to my knowledge no one is suggesting that these logics are influencing investments in sexual authenticity as a move is made to stop seeing sexual truth as internal and instead begin to see it as a stylization of the body, an assemblage of desires that do not demand commitment or the weight of “truth.”

The collapse of distinctions between producer and consumer are apparent in *The Upper Floor*, described on the site as “a real life sex party” (“*The Upper Floor*,” n.d.). Although there are paid performers, many of the participants are not compensated for their labor; this is facilitated by the fact that they do not consider it labor. As Melissa Gira Grant wrote in a 2014 *Dissent* article: “extras receive a “free” membership to the site. He pitches the experience to extras as a full-service sex party, with opulent sets, expensive BDSM furniture, sex toys, a bar, and initiation into the Kink community. However, the extras—unlike the paid performers who also engage in sexual performance on camera at the parties—are not regarded by Kink as performers. They are considered “guests” (Grant, 2014). Grant interviewed the producer of the *Upper Floor* for her article, and he suggested that many “guests” did not consider their participation labor because it mirrored the sex clubs they would often pay to enter. The issue is that someone, notably Acworth, was profiting.

The collapse between producer/consumer apparent on the *Upper Floor* reflects Web 2.0 logics and pivots around virtual, and, in this instance, physically located, affective community building that unites strangers through the consumption of digital kink. In a 2012 interview Acworth noted:

We’re really ramping up our live offerings and our social network offerings to build a social network around our products and around our models, so you can not only watch a recorded video of a model, you can open a conversation with him or her, or visit a live show featuring that model or interact with that model while the show is happening. More interactive I would say, more of a community feel. (Getz, n.d.)

Part of what is being sold here is affective belonging and connectivity with other members of an alternative sex public where anyone with a credit card is welcome. The consumers are part of the intangible product, digital pornography, that they purchase; this is explicit in the case of the *Upper Floor* where unpaid participants are given a subscription to the site their presence helps produce. In other words, consumers are producers and product, which creates a tangled heap of obscured commodity relations.

Each of the many sites that comprise Kink.com has forums and blogs where subscribers can interact with each other, the webmasters and performers. They may make suggestions about what models to use for what types of shoots and recommend framing scenarios for the videos. Confessions of, mostly female pleasure, replace the “money shot” as proof of authentic desire, but they are, of course, staged. Kink.com performers are asked to narrate the realness of their desire in pre- and post-session interviews that are constructed to appear unscripted. Interview guidelines posted on Kink.com facilitate the framing of the sex scenes as both consensual and enjoyable. Among other things, interview guidelines state: “The model must be allowed to speak in their own words, and not be prompted to answer yes/no questions” (Kink.com). The interviews frame the explicit pornographic content and feature models describing the content as their personal fantasy and Kink.com as helping them explore their sexuality. These guidelines construct the models participating in shoots as sexual agents who are enjoying themselves, which downplays pornography as a site of labor by emphasizing it as a site of pleasure. The erasure of labor under the sign of pleasure and the emphasis on play is one-dimension of marketing authenticity in which material labor practices are relegated to the background. This encourages altporn to be equated with ethical porn with no thought to labor practices.

Journalists frequently embraced the fantasy that Kink.com presented an authentic kinky reality that deemphasizes the labor that goes into pornography as well as issues of exploitation as if doing so is to run the risk of being associated with a moralistic anti-pornography movement. As a result, most news coverage in Kink.com’s early days provides gushing descriptions of a charming Acworth and his empowered co-workers who are able to make a living doing what they love. In a 2008 *Wired* article one journalist wrote:

The secret to the sites’ longevity in an industry known for its churn lies in their emphasis on a genuine sexual experience. Newfangled producers like Kink and abbywinters are building successful businesses by creating content in which sex unfolds naturally, at its own pace. They still offer the content in every way possible, from short clips to features to making-of documentaries to live on-set streaming, but at the root of it all is pure, authentic sex. (Lynn, 2008)

Of course, the fact that most site content is staged, directed, and edited must be ignored for this interpretation

to make sense. In fact, what produces the sense of authenticity is not sex itself, which is usually not simulated in pornography, making it as real as it gets, but instead, stories told after the fact by participants who assure viewers that they did in fact find pleasure in the performance. So, the performance of pleasure, confessed by models is highly orchestrated before and after interviews, is used to equate sex with authenticity as if “real” sex is always pleasing.

The narrative of authenticity, public service rhetoric, and commitment to progressive sex prevalent across Kink.com makes it difficult to theorize the relationship between pleasure and exploitation, but several controversies surrounding Kink.com’s labor practices demonstrate. For instance, in 2011 aspiring pornography performer Aaliyah Avatari, stage name Nikki Blue, approached Kink.com with the idea of live-streaming her first vaginal penetration (Conger, 2013). She had previously had oral and anal sex on and off screen. Kink.com agreed and planned on using a “hymen cam” to offer visual proof. However, the camera’s ability to record the loss of virginity relies on conventional, heteronormative ideas about sexuality and virginity. Many would say Nikki Blue was already sexually active. The vagina, perhaps even the existence of hymen, were linked to Kink.com’s chosen marketing strategy, which further aligned itself with to conventional rhetoric using language like “deflowering” and “sacrificing innocence” (Conger, 2013). Its audience balked at the obvious appeals to conventionality embedded in virgin rhetoric that ignored Nikki Blue’s sexual agency and constructed her as a passive participant in the event (Carmon, 2011). Acworth later apologized for “being normative about female virginity” in marketing materials (Carmon, 2011). In his apology, Acworth wrote:

[W]e marketed it in a way that relied on sexist tropes and myths about the female body that we should not have perpetrated. And that fact was rightfully brought to our attention by bloggers who hold us to a much higher standard than that. We truly thank them for it and are gratified to see issues surrounding female sexuality, virginity and sexism being discussed in public forums – even if it was as a result of our screw up. (Carmon, 2011)

Acworth apologized for failing to live up to the standard of non-normativity that Kink aspired to, which learned about as soon as they were put on public forums. He was able to respond and attempt to reframe the shoot to redeem the event for a kinky public by focusing on Nikki Blue’s creative agency and catalyst for her pleasure.

Nikki Blue’s own account foregrounds pornography as a site of labor and it illustrates the precarity of sex workers. Kink.com has Acworth’s bottom-line, not the interest of performers at the center of their labor practices. The highly-publicized shoot took place in January 2011 on the Upper Floor and involved three male performers each of whom were to vaginally penetrate Nikki Blue; however, penetration was very difficult, and she screamed far more than usual, even for a BDSM shoot. In fact, before being fully penetrated the live and very well attended shoot was stopped for quite some time. According to Nikki Blue, she had to have vaginal reconstructive surgery after the shoot and her recovery took months (Conger 2013). She contends that she was blacklisted after her performance, because she requested workers compensation for injuries suffered during the shoot (Conger 2013).

Many disgruntled employees have since come forward with stories that contradict Acworth’s construction of Kink.com as a utopian space where performers are free to explore their sexual fantasies while being treated with dignity and earning a fair paycheck. Kink.com lists the model’s rights on the website demonstrating to consumers that models are given the autonomy to control shoots to a reasonable extent and end them when they wish. However, as suggested in recent scholarship by Aristeia Fotopoulos: “Empowerment discourses, and the focus on choice and agency, are ... often used to mask the exploitative conditions of sex work” (Fotopoulou, 2017, p. 77). It is not that sex work is inherently more oppressive than other labor, but instead that recognizing it as labor can be a challenge, and further, identifying and critically analyzing the type of labor it is, temporary and precarious, too frequently escapes analysis because such a critique has no clear place in existing pro- and anti-pornography debates. A nuanced reading of pornography sees the industry as an industry and reads it dialectically to reveal contradictions inherent in the logic and rhetoric of changing production, distribution, and consumption practices. The problem with constructing a false mainstream/alternative pornography binary is that it is often taken-for-granted that altporn is on the side of ethics and is somehow not clamoring after profit. I suggest, along with several other scholars, that altporn emerged at a particular historical juncture and profited off the politicization of public visual queer sexualities as political ends in themselves. Far from being above, beside, or beyond capital altporn is entwined with it, bound to it.

Maggie Mayhem, self-described “sex hacker, erotic artist, porn producer, and writer”, describes her ambivalence about working in the pornography industry by detailing the difficulty of asserting agency within labor relations (Mayhem, n.d.-b, n.d.-a). In one blog post, she describes being disempowered as a laborer who had little control over her work conditions noting that, for instance, quick bathroom breaks were difficult to take while bound so models were asked to relieve themselves in buckets (Mayhem, 2013). Additionally, according to Mayhem, models

were requested to work six-hour shifts with minimal breaks and have sex for free with performers and producers as practice runs. Mayhem asserts that she met with producers to discuss these issues but often felt voiceless and disempowered. For Mayhem the disempowerment she experienced, as a laborer, remains a source of shame. Her critique brings to the surface that the armory is “a workplace and porn is a job” (Mayhem, 2013). Moreover, she critiques The Upper Floor, a site on Kink.com that features people having sex with one another for free, noting that Acworth profits off this content without having to pay participants for it. At issue is not the enjoyment of the participants --- you can love your job while deserving to be fairly compensated for it and provided with safe conditions in which to do it. As Mayhem succinctly states: “Are we really fucking to make sure that the millionaire in the castle is a bigger millionaire?” (Mayhem, 2013).

I have discussed how neoliberalism intersects with and influences consumption habits, but it is just as critical to the organization of labor. In a neoliberal economic system, the profits of capitalists increase as the pay of laborers decreases. This is exasperated by attacks on unions that collectivize and empower laborers. In “Beyond the Entrepreneurial Voyeur? Sex, Porn and Cultural Politics,” Stephen Maddison writes:

On the one hand we can see the work of altporn entrepreneurs as expressions of the post-Fordist multitude: emergent expressions of creativity and sociality, arising from the articulation of communities of interest, where inter-dependence and co-operation is expressed by user-generated content and interactivity in forums, blogs and reviews, as a function of new technological possibilities. On the other hand, we can see altporn entrepreneurs as immaterial laborers for whom the distinction between life and work, and work, and leisure, has collapsed, and for whom the opportunity to comply with the requirement to enterprise themselves arises from an exploitation of their latent immaterial creativity. (Maddison, 2013, p. 107).

Another example of exploitative labor practices at Kink.com that increased Acworth’s profit at the expense of workers’ livelihood is a 2012 shift in the payrate of cam girls who perform in live-stream digital peepshows (Conger 2013). According to a [SF Weekly](#) article that Acworth has since refuted, Maxine Holloway, a cam girl, tried to organize her coworkers to protest the rate decrease and was fired (Conger 2013). Much as Acworth humbly apologized for the rhetoric used to market Nikki Blue’s hymen cam shoot, he apologized for how he handled the pay cut, although not the cut itself. He is quoted stating that it was his “biggest mistake of 2012” (Conger 2013).

Since Kink.com relies on the idea that its performers are thrilled to be working at the site where they can explore their sexual fantasies while earning a paycheck in a progressive work environment, these critiques are a reminder that Acworth may love the BDSM community that he identifies with, but he is also profiting off of it and he maintains a position of economic power that does not yield to any safe word. This is significant since the workings of capitalism are obscured behind the discourse of pleasure and the forging of a community both virtual and face-to-face that does benefit from the accessibility and visibility Acworth has brought to kinky sex practices. It is sites like Kink.com that have opened the gate for BDSM practices to seep into the mainstream by demonstrating their profitability and providing them with respectability.

Feona Attwood suggests that in the early 2000s pornography professionals were often characterized by “a reflexivity that marks them as thoughtful practitioners, indicating an overlap between critical, artistic, and activist interventions into the production of sex media” (Attwood, 2010, p. 88). She attributes this to Web 2.0 participatory practices and the increasing mainstreaming of kinky sexualities. So, in this period BDSM practitioners could propose shoot ideas to Acworth, as did Nikki Blue, with a legitimate desire to see a fantasy created. However, also as noted by Attwood, the pleasure of pornography professionals and their precarious employment situation in the industry are not mutually exclusive (Attwood, 2010, p. 91). A both/and reading of pornography needs to replace an either/or interpretation. Performers can be empowered to engage their fantasies while being economically exploited. Even more, as it is often performers’ fantasies that inspire content they are providing unpaid immaterial labor just as the “extras” performing on the Upper Floor as well as, and less explicitly, discussion forum participants who informed Acworth about their disappointment in his marketing of Nikki Blue’s “virginity” shoot.

I opened with an anecdote illustrating just how mainstream kinky sex has become by discussing stumbling upon a display of furry handcuffs branded as [50 Shades of Grey](#) merchandise while shopping at Target. Ironically, the popularity of [Fifty Shades of Grey](#) inspired recent shifts in Kink.com’s marketing practices as Acworth decided to appeal to a broader audience. In a 2014 press release Acworth wrote: “With the mainstreaming of kink as evidenced by the huge popularity of [50 Shades of Grey](#), we feel there is an opportunity to serve a wider customer base in the future (“Kink.Com: We’re Shifting Focus to Become a Lifestyle Brand” 2014). Community members are recoded as customers, and Acworth envisions Kink.com becoming a lifestyle brand encouraging kinky sex practices through the

sale of pornography and sex accessories.

One strategy to reach a larger audience and create a wider market for kinky pornographic content as well as the paraphernalia that accompanies it is Kink University in which participants can “Learn how to perform and enjoy the actual BDSM skills mentioned in the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*!” (fiftyskillsofgrey.com). For instance, bondage gear is sold on the site and in 2015/2016 was marketed as “Go Beyond Grey” to appeal to franchise fans as well as that desire for novelty that keeps the machine churning. Of course, new consumers, once reached, must have new commodities to consume.

As of 2018, overt appeals to *Fifty Shades of Grey* have since been abandoned, but Acworth’s attempt to expand kink’s market has not. Kink.com is no longer trying to appeal to a relatively small but extremely loyal community of consumers as it did in Kink.com’s early days. In fact, Acworth made the decision to back away from much of the extreme content that put him on the map. As early as 2012 Acworth is quoted stating: “There will always be extremes that the mainstream society will find objectionable. I don’t want to get more hardcore . . . there’s not a big market for more extreme content, it doesn’t really appeal to the masses” (Kien, 2012b, p. 129). In the last five or so years, there has been a noticeable in how Acworth imagines Kink.com’s ideal audience, which has influenced shifts in marketing strategy and, by extension, content availability. These days Acworth is more likely to appeal to the masses than BDSM loyalists who made him millions. Moreover, this logic demonstrates that the market, far from freeing representational practices, limits representations based on the assumed tastes of the majority.

Despite changing marketing strategies, Kink.com is no longer raking in the money it once did, largely because of the same Web 2.0 logics that enabled the initial boon of digital porn. Users are generating their own content and distributing it for free on streaming sites like YouPorn that are supported by advertising (Paasonen, 2010; van Doorn, 2010). In a 2017 interview with J.K. Dineen, Acworth shared that Kink.com subscriptions were down to 30,000 from 50,000 and revenue was down by 50 percent. Acworth responded to dwindling profits by laying off his labor force and putting a halt to content production (Dineen, 2017).

Yet another recent transformation occurring at Kink.com is its location in San Francisco, a point Kien identified as central to Kink.com’s identity and success. Acworth sold the armory after a decade of ownership for \$64 million in early 2018 (Dineen, 2018). Kink.com is hardly the vibrant community it once was, either digitally or in the brick-and-mortar armory. In fact, the content on Behind Kink, Kink.com’s documentary site, is frozen in the summer of 2016 reading as a eulogy to a digital pornography industry that was too smart for its own good (“Behind Kink,” n.d.).

Post Kink?

A feedback loop emerges in the history of Kink.com. Acworth appropriated live sex cultures and commodified them in Kink.com’s early years, serving to reach and create a consuming public for kinky pornographic content. Once BDSM expanded the pornographic imaginary, because of its digital ubiquity, enabling previously taboo sex acts to anchor the plotline of mainstream literary and filmic sensations, Kink.com changed production and marketing strategies, although its distribution model remains the same. This suggests that Acworth’s love affair with kink could never be separated from his love affair with capital.

Far from refusing normative sexual orders, pornography reshapes normative sexual orders expanding our collective pornographic imaginary and producing, as some have suggested, a “pornocopia” of desires (Mooallem, 2007). However, the multiplicity of pornographies produced remain tethered to the logics of capitalism (even, as is increasingly the case, when they are not produced by profit but instead created by amateurs and distributed on advertisement heavy sites like YouPorn). The logics of capitalism reflected are those of consumer choice and individual agency that reduce politics to consumption and individual sex practices. Even attempts at creating sexual communities, which was part of Kink.com’s original mission, have been abandoned to provide more people with the ability to flexibly “try on” different sexual identities and practices.

I do not wish to imply that pornography and even more so sexual subcultures cannot prompt new ways of thinking and performing intimacy and sociality as suggested by a range of queer theorist (Bersani & Phillips, 2008; Dean, 2009). In fact, Eleanor Wilkinson’s recent article, “The Diverse Economies of Online Pornography: From Paranoid Readings to Post-Capitalist Futures” makes important contributions to debates about the politics of pornography (2017). She begins by noting the influence of Web 2.0 on digital pornography, specifically the collapse of clear distinctions between producers and consumers before introducing her very provocative claim: “I argue that

attempts to frame pornography as always capitalistic are profoundly limited, as such a framework can only manage to capture just one dimension of the diverse economies of online pornography” (Wilkinson, 2017, p. 2). She suggests that Web 2.0 allows for the co-existence of post-, non-, and anti-capitalist pornography. I agree with Wilkinson, but in focusing on the economy she seems to only be considering the material exchange of capital --- the for-profit motive endemic to capitalism. I, on the other hand, think that digital pornography helps to produce the kinds of social subjects that neoliberalism requires; individuals who see politics as personal instead of collective, consider easily discarded flexible assemblages of identity more compelling than the search for sexual “truth,” and subjects who associate pleasure with endless consumption. This is not to say that any of these characteristics are negative in and of themselves, but instead to identify how they may contribute to the reproduction of exploitative socio-economic conditions, and even more, how they may be the product of a stage of capitalism.

Wilkinson also makes the provocative claim that many critics of digital pornography are deeply suspicious of people who think that making their own pornography can be liberating. She writes: “The fact that Web 2.0 now offers a wide range of material that differs from commercial heteropatriarchal porn is dismissed as irrelevant. Instead, it is argued that it is the all-encompassing power of pornography that has duped people into foolishly believing that making their own porn can ever be a form of liberation” (Wilkinson, 2017, p. 8). She considers this line of reasoning anti-pornography, which seems unnecessarily divisive. As this paper has demonstrated, I am highly critical of pornography, but hardly anti-pornography. Instead, I suggest a move needs to be made for collective world making and institutional change **in addition** to imagining and enacting new modes of intimacy and sociality which only ever serve as space offs within a larger system of racist heteropatriarchal oppression and capitalist exploitation. As my case study of Kink.com has illustrated, the pursuit of non-normative sexuality is not antithetical to oppression and exploitation, but instead is quite easily co-opted by capital as the normative core of sexual act and identity normativity expands to make room for varied sexualities.

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