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Pornification and the Mainstreaming of Sex ⬤

Susanna Paasonen

Summary and Keywords

The changing cultural role, visibility, and meaning of pornography, particularly its increased accessibility and the sociocultural reverberations that this is seen to cause, have been lively topics of public debate in most Western countries throughout the new millennium. Concerns are routinely yet passionately voiced, especially over the ubiquity of sexual representations flirting with the codes of pornography in different fields of popular media, as well as children's exposure to hardcore materials that are seen to grow increasingly extreme and violent. At the same time, the production, distribution, and consumption have undergone notable transformations with the ubiquity of digital cameras and online platforms. Not only is pornography accessible on an unprecedented scale, but also it is available in more diverse shapes and forms than ever. All this has given rise to diverse journalistic and academic diagnoses on the pornification and sexualization of culture, which, despite their notable differences, aim to conceptualize transformations in the visibility of sexually explicit media content and its broader sociocultural resonances.

Keywords: pornification, sexualization, media, pornography, gender, sexuality

In both journalistic and scholarly accounts, contemporary culture has been diagnosed as "sexualized" (Attwood, 2006, 2009; also Smith, 2010), "pornographicized" (McNair, 2002, 2013), "pornified" (Gill, 2008; Mulholland, 2013; Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saarenmaa, 2007; Paul, 2005), "porned" (Sarracino & Scott, 2008), and "raunchy" (Levy, 2005). Despite their notable mutual differences, such diagnoses aim to account for how pornography has grown mundane in its abundant availability, how people of different ages are routinely encountering and consuming it, and how flirtation with both the sexually suggestive and the sexually explicit cuts through different strands of media culture.

While there is little doubt that shifts have indeed occurred in the cultural position of pornography, forms of sexual representation, and the public visibility of diverse sexual cultures—especially as they connect with the ubiquity of smart devices and network media—there is little agreement about their broader societal significance or implications

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(Attwood, 2009, pp. x–xiv; Church Gibson, 2014; Gill, 2009A, pp. 141–142). The diversity and incompatibility of views are encapsulated in the titles of book-length analyses zooming in on such developments, from Pamela Paul's 2005 *Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* to Brian McNair's 2013 *Porno? Chic! How Pornography Changed the World and Made it a Better Place*. With some notable exceptions, the diversity of views on pornification tends to broadly follow the binary dividing lines of Anglo-American feminist debates long connected to pornography (on these, see Paasonen, 2015, pp. 8–9; Smith & Attwood, 2014).

Diagnoses identify the mainstreaming of pornography as a social problem, often in tones that Clarissa Smith (2010, p. 103) characterizes as a "cacophony of concern." Pornography is associated with gender inequality, sexism, and violence against women and is seen as generative of biased understandings and expectations concerning sexuality (see Boyle, 2010; Dines, 2011; Jensen, 2007). In their journalistic accounts on the increased visibility of sexual representation, both Paul (2005) and Levy (2005) associate porn with sexism, the commodification of sexuality, and the objectification of women, and position it as the opposite of actual sexual freedom and sensuous pleasure (also Sarracino & Scott, 2008). In this perspective, pornography involves the normative reproduction of sameness and a commodity logic that ultimately supports gendered and sexualized hierarchies of privilege and oppression, and its mainstreaming is therefore far detached from social progress. According to the most often and broadly reiterated narrative of pornification, pornography is growing more extreme and gives rise to an accumulation of negative effects on the lives of people both younger and older. Pornography is seen to cause addictive behavior and to affect children's development, young women's self-image, and young people's sexual agency in generally harmful ways (Paul, 2005; Sarracino & Scott, 2008, pp. 209–218; see also Duschinsky, 2013). Such claims are not, however, necessarily supported by empirical research (see Albury, 2014, p. 174; Böhm et al., 2015, pp. 76–77).

In an explicit counterargument, Brian McNair (2013) identifies pornography with the rise of diverse sexual publics, advances made in gender equality, and the rights of sexual minorities. In McNair's view, not only does pornography educate its consumers about the diversity of sexual desires, practices, and orientations, but also it connects to their increasing social acceptance in industrialized Western societies. Rather than seeing the entry of pornography into the public sphere as telling of a backlash against women and gains made in gender equality, McNair (2013, p. 15) associates it with the "democratisation of desire" as "the entry of traditionally excluded and marginalised groups into sexual citizenship" fueled by capitalist commodification—a development counter to those witnessed in authoritarian theocracies characterized by the oppression of women and sexual minorities. Other scholars have analyzed the interconnections of sexual cultures and transformations in the production, distribution, and consumption of

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media in ways that open up the notion of pornography and its potential social meanings for redefinition, yet without limiting them to either negative or positive meanings (see Attwood, 2002, 2009; Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saarenmaa, 2007; Smith, 2010).

All in all, diagnoses of sexualization, pornification, and the mainstreaming of sex focus on how sexual imageries and routines previously considered obscene—literally, ones to be put "out of sight" (Attwood, 2009, p. xiv; Williams, 2004, p. 4)—have gained a new kind of "onscenity" within media culture.

The Sexualization of Culture

Media and sexuality studies scholar Feona Attwood maps out "sexualized culture" as

> a rather clumsy phrase used to indicate a number of things; a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex.
>
> (Attwood, 2006, pp. 78–79)

As Rosalind Gill (2009A, p. 140) points out, both the preoccupations and analyses attached to sexualization are largely ones involving the media:

> Media are contradictory locations for exploring "sexualization" since they are sites both where the phenomenon can (arguably) be observed and where it is discussed and dissected, usually as a matter of "concern." Not infrequently these two can coexist in the same space, as when newspapers and magazines print outraged or "concerned" readers' opinion pieces about toys featuring the Playboy bunny or the selling to children of T-shirts bearing the legend "Future Porn Star" (to take two recent examples), amidst a range or other content (photographs of topless women, adverts for telephone sex lines and so on) which itself might attract the label "sexualized." The media, then, are paradoxically perhaps both the biggest source of "sexualized" representations, as well as the primary space where debates about "sexualization" are aired.

In the course of such developments, sexual practices, cultures, and conventions have grown increasingly visible in the public eye (Attwood, 2009, p. xiii). This encompasses trends as different as the seemingly global popularity of E. L. James' *50 Shades* trilogy

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(and its sequels), the ubiquitous use of hook-up applications designed for pairing up people looking for romantic and sexual encounters, and progress made in advancing the rights of sexual minorities. As Ken Plummer puts it in his discussion on intimate citizenship:

> Intimacies circulate around the globe embedded within vast social and cultural "flows." They flow across the world in technologies (…)—films, television, music, books; through major world markets—including those of pornography and sex work; through people—who migrate, travel as tourists, and have friends of partners in different cities worldwide; and through ideas—religious, political, cultural. We thus have finanscapes, ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, and ideoscapes within which ideas about intimacy circulate around the world.
>
> (Plummer, 2003, pp. 119–120)

Understood in this vein, sexuality is not merely a personal matter of preference and orientation but equally a public issue connected to citizenship. While transformations in antidiscrimination legislation are local, the broader trends that they connect to are much less so, and are supported by the global flows of capitalism, by media and communication networks, and by the imageries of popular culture that affect ways of perceiving sexuality and intimacy alike. The spread and reach of networked communications, and the speed of the circulation of images, texts, arguments, news, and ideas that it affords, feeds such flows connected to sexual identities, practices, tastes, orientations, rights, and regulations. The mainstreaming of sex, as diagnosed by Attwood, is hence markedly "glocal" in its resonances. As such, it fuels frictions, clashes, and incongruities between global flows and local cultures, norms, and conventions embedded in religious, moral, and political principles. Contra advances made in the rights of sexual minorities in many Western countries, Russia has established laws against "gay propaganda," while the threat of imprisonment and even the death penalty for homosexual acts remains in several Asian and African countries (e.g. Bello, 2012; DeJong & Long, 2013; Rastegar, 2013).

It should be noted that the democratization and publicness of sexuality that both Plummer and McNair address in the context of capitalist consumer culture also involve the regulation of sexual practices and identities, often in predictable ways (Attwood, 2006, p. 82). The imperative of sexiness and hotness equated with desirability (Gill, 2009A, p. 141; Levy, 2005, pp. 30–31), for example, has not so much replaced the imperative of beauty in the lives of young women than contributed an additional normative layer to it. Similar regulatory effects are evident in how the body types and categories of gay pornography continue to feed into dating sites and applications as vectors of recognizability. While many gay men find these categories narrowly confining and difficult to negotiate and relate to, they function as default templates in organizing

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orientations, desires, and identity positions. (See Cassidy, 2015; Mercer, 2017; Mowlabocus, 2007.)

The fondness for scandals and controversies around sex, interest in the sexual activities of others, and the preoccupation with sexual identities and practices, as described in Attwood's diagnosis of sexualization, are of course far from novel cultural trends specific to contemporary media as such. The 19th century, which saw the birth of the modern notion of pornography as descriptive of representations previously categorized as obscene or lewd (Kendrick, 1996), also witnessed the rise of what Michel Foucault (1990) identifies as *scientia sexualis*, namely the rise of sexuality as an object of knowledge. This involved the articulation of identity categories such as the homosexual in drawing boundaries between the normal, the deviant, and the perverted. Sexual acts, preferences, and orientations attached to identity categories became a basis for a truth concerning the individual, one that could be uncovered through the act of confession: "It is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret" (Foucault, 1990, p. 61). Following Foucault, sexuality became a secret to be compulsively uncovered, examined, and analyzed.

Pornography and the Limits of Decency

Far from being limited to the level of the individual, preoccupation with things sexual has been a key strand of popular media culture throughout its history: in print, cinema, television, and beyond. Sexual identities have been represented and negotiated, the boundaries of obscenity tenuously redrawn, and forms of intimacy established in a range of media, often in contradicting forms. And, as Attwood points out, the very notion of sex has undergone drastic transformations in the process: ones connected to politics, ethics, and the shifting affordances of media technology alike:

> Today, "sex" may be an out of body experience, very intimately performed across time and distance; it may be an intense act of communication between strangers; an encounter conjoining flesh and technology; an act of presentation and a representation which is consumed as quickly as it is produced; a way of articulating or disarticulating identity; a type of interaction never before possible in human history. This is very strange given the inherited and still powerful associations of sex with the body, essence and truth, and yet it is already unremarkable and routine to the many people who frequent sex chat rooms or use messenger systems to interact sexually at the beginning of the 21st century.

> (Attwood, 2006, p. 79)

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The expansion of media culture into one of ubiquitous access, multichannel and multiplatform consumption has further fueled preoccupations with sexuality and diversified the shapes and forms that sexual representations take. Flirtation with the sexually titillating has been, and remains, a central focus of mainstream cinema within the confines set by regulation and classification systems. While it has been possible to depict sexuality and nudity in mainstream cinema in different degrees across decades, pornography, long an illegal genre and hence firmly outside of any pre-examination and public screening practices, has involved no similar limitations in terms of what to show or how. The 1930 Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, regulated the appropriate style of kisses and embraces displayed in American cinema, whereas stag films of the time dwelled on group sex and lustful activities of various kinds. The standards of obscenity, as witnessed in the outputs of Hollywood cinema and the forms of regulation attached to them across decades, are, in sum, contingent indeed (see Lewis, 2000).

The history of pornography can be defined as one of limited access and the barring of certain images and texts from public view. Legislation and regulation have worked to keep pornographic materials away from the reach of minors (as well as the broader population) and to control both the production and circulation of materials deemed obscene ever since the term "pornography" was coined in the 19th century. The modern notion of pornography is derived from the Greek words for prostitute (*pornē*) and writing (*graphein*). Such "writing about prostitutes" clearly precedes the 19th century, given the diverse history of literature and visual culture focusing on sexual depiction with the intent of titillation (Hunt, 1996; Laqueur, 2003; Mudge, 2000). After archaeologists discovered the sexually explicit frescoes and objects of Pompeii, they were closed off in a "secret museum" in Naples that was only available to gentlemen. Women, children, and male members of the lower classes were considered much too susceptible to the objects' ill and arousing effects to be allowed entry. In *The Secret Museum*, Walter Kendrick (1996) addresses this fencing in and marking off of the obscene as the key event in the modern history of pornography.

According to Kendrick, pornography is defined less through its content than through the practices of classification, censorship, and regulation connected to it. The term pornography has been used to refer to a broad range of images, texts, and practices since the excavations at Pompeii: "In 1857, 'pornography' meant something very different from what it now means; in 1755, 'pornography' meant nothing at all" (Kendrick, 1996, p. 2). In Kendrick's view, a regulatory category such as pornography should not be conflated with any kind of textual particularity (also Attwood, 2002, p. 94). Rather, it can be seen as a contingent marker of low cultural status, value, and taste—and, perhaps even more centrally, the miasmic capacity of pornography to arouse and corrupt those encountering

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it. Such concerns are, for Kendrick (1996, p. 262), encapsulated in the figure of a young person at risk, susceptible to ill effects, and in need of protection that has been used for envisioning the harms of pornography from the 19th century to the current day.

It is noteworthy that debates on pornification often leave the very denominator of pornography, its consumption, aesthetics, ethics, and economies with little attention beyond sweeping generalizations. In such uses, pornography comes across as something that is assumedly always already known and that requires no further definition or study in order to be understood as a point of reference and object of critique. At the same time, the category is nothing if not porous and notoriously difficult to pin down in terms of its contents, forms, intents, or effects (see McNair, 2013, pp. 17–19).

> According to most thesaurus definitions of the term, pornography aims to sexually arouse its viewers and readers by depicting bodies, genitalia, sexual acts, and bodily fluids in attentive detail. The generic specificity of porn has been located in the images and texts themselves (what they depict), in authorial intentions (what they are intended to do and to be used for), in their effects (what they do), in audience interests (what is experienced as pornographic), and in combinations thereof. Notions of obscenity frame pornography in moral terms, casting it as immoral, damaging, and involving "prurient" (impure, lascivious, vulgar, bawdy) interests.
>
> (Paasonen, 2011, p. 50)

Attempts to define pornography are rendered even more laborious by the value judgments and political investments that come with them. The marking apart of porn from erotica, for example, involves questions of, and norms of, good taste and artfulness, whereas antipornography activist interpretations position pornography as both symbol and engine of male violence against women. In a media studies perspective, again, pornography is a marker of genre, the identifying characteristics of which are under constant redefinition in the interactions that occur between the producers, distributors, consumers, and regulators of media. The increased public visibility of materials previously deemed obscene involves both conflict and renegotiation between disparate definitions and the interpretative positions attached to them.

This short conceptual and historical detour helps to point out at least three issues central in terms of contemporary debates on pornification: First, the cultural role—and, at least to a degree, the attraction—of pornography has been based on the constant drawing of boundaries between the unacceptable and the acceptable, the obscene and that which is deemed appropriate for public view and consumption. Second, this drawing of boundaries has been, from the beginning, strongly motivated by the figure of childhood at risk and

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the imperative of protecting it. This figure remains an affective epicenter in contemporary concerns over the pornification and sexualization of culture. Third, the fencing off of pornography as an ill yet titillating force has involved marking it apart from not only from culture proper but even from the category of culture itself. This has made it possible to position pornography as an external threat that must be regulated, combatted, and controlled in order to minimize its harmful effects on culture and society.

Mapping Pornification

In a 1966 TV recording, the French singer France Gall, age 18, performs "Les sucettes" ("Lollipops": the verb "sucer," to suck, also translates as giving oral sex), a song written by Serge Gainsbourg, an artist well known for sexual provocations. The video features more than mere sexual innuendo: Its female performers seem to fellate long lollipops, knowingly meeting the gaze of the camera, while other performers sway about dressed in baggy penis-shaped costumes liberally resembling lollipops. Gainsbourg's lyrics, sung by the smiling, teenage Gall, involve a rhyme with the name "Annie," the taste of "anise" and "pennies" (pronounced very much like "penis"), and elaboration on how anise-flavored sticks going down Annie's throat make her feel in paradise. As over the top as the video may seem to the viewers of today, it was produced as French television variety entertainment in the 1960s, most probably for prime time. For those arguing that flirtation with oral sex in popular media is a development specific to the contemporary moment (e.g., Sarracino & Scott, 2008, p. x), the video may allow some media historical perspective. In any case, it complicates easy analyses of cultural rupture connected to the pornification of media culture that would mark the 2000s clearly apart from the preceding decades. In doing so, "Les sucettes" is more than an isolated, eccentric media historical example on the representations of gender and sexuality.

A quick visit to the women's magazines of the 1950s opens up a world of gender-based norms and regulations that are difficult to fathom today, with images of idealized yet subservient homemakers and compulsory codes of feminine allure. Some hours spent watching 1980s televised entertainment—such as Benny Hill, perpetually and hyperbolically salivating over and groping the breasts and buttocks of young female actors—similarly makes evident the pervasiveness of sexist innuendoes and puns that would be unlikely to fully pass in similar programming today. While it would be inaccurate to claim that sexism has since disappeared from television screens, its forms have certainly undergone transformations. The same applies to cultural products like music videos and advertising. While both have been criticized for their suggestive or

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pornified contemporary displays of female bodies in particular (Gill, 2008, 2009A; Railton & Watson, 2007; Reichert & Lambiase, 2006; Rossi, 2007), even a haphazard historical excavation of 1980s music videos shows of the abundance of scantily clad—or, in the case of Duran Duran's "Girls on Film" and "Chauffeur," topless—writhing women. The pop stardom of Samantha Fox, who started her career as a popular 16-year-old topless page 3 girl for *The Sun* and who is best remembered for her 1986 hit song, "Touch Me," was hardly identical in its dynamics of sexual availability to the knowingly, strategically, and complexly sex-saturated public images of today's female pop artists like Katy Perry, Miley Cyrus, or Lady Gaga.

All this calls for distinctions to be drawn between sexual displays and sexism when identifying the stakes in debates on the sexualization of culture: Is this an issue of sexual suggestiveness or explicitness, one of sexism, or a combination thereof? There is a risk that narratives of sexualization and pornification efface media historical continuities and transformations while evoking the trope of novelty and cultural rupture. In other words, it is crucial to investigate more closely what is meant by the concept of "pornification" as such, and what analytical uses it can been put into, if one is to avoid making the kinds of ahistorical generalization that easily emerge when outlining cultural transformations at the expense of their continuities. In discussing transformations in the role and position of pornography in media culture, the term pornification can be connected to three interconnected lines of development, namely transformations in media technology, media regulation, and the general visibility of sexually explicit or suggestive representations (see Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saarenmaa, 2007).

The Rise of Online Pornography

First of all, the term pornification can be used in outlining transformations brought forth by the technological transformations in the production, distribution, and consumption of pornography. The shift from material products, such as magazines, VHS tapes, and DVDs, to online platforms in the course of the 1990s and 2000s heralded a clear shift in the distribution of porn, as users could browse through virtually endless links, sites, images, and video galleries without leaving the comfort of their own homes or offices. Access to online pornography is predominantly free, it can be conducted anonymously (despite the trackability of user actions inbuilt in IP addresses and cookies), and it involves the kind of breadth and range of content that is impossible for more traditional media formats to match.

Throughout the past decades, pornography was produced and distributed in a range of media: in writing and in drawing, in photographic prints and cards, in magazines and books, in 16-mm, 35-mm and 8-mm film, in video, and beyond. These products were

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homemade as well as commercially produced, were distributed through mail order, were screened in cinemas, were featured in pay-per-view television, were shown in peep-show parlors, and were sold in specialized shops. The volume of pornographic trade has been notoriously difficult to estimate, given its semilegal status and, more recently, the difficulty of telling the flows of the mainstream media economy apart from those of the so-called porn industry (Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saarenmaa, 2007, p. 6).

During the 1980s and 1990s, pornography was shared in pre-Web Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), Usenet newsgroups, and IRC (Internet Relay Chat; see Barron & Kimmel, 2000; Dery, 2007; Mehta, 2001; Mehta & Plaza, 1997; Slater, 1998). The introduction of graphic Web interfaces to the larger public, starting in 1994 with the browser Netscape Navigator, enabled more multimedia forms of expression. Gradually, and especially with the spread of broadband connections, streaming video began to take up ever more bandwidth. It has often been noted that the needs of the porn industry drove the development of Web technologies and business practices, from hosting services to safe credit card processing, banner advertisements, pop-ups, Web promotion, and streaming video technology, for the simple reason that, throughout the 1990s, pornography was one of the few financially profitable forms of online content (Bennett, 2001; Johnson, 2010). This echoes the role that pornography has more generally played in adapting early to new media platforms and, by doing so, driving their development (Filippo, 2000; Lane, 2001; O'Toole, 1998; Perdue, 2002; also McNair, 2002, pp. 37–40; McNair, 2013, pp. 27–29; Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saarenmaa, 2007).

In discussing the evolution of the online porn industry, it is noteworthy that the first entrepreneurs were independent and that companies well established in print or film production branched onto online platforms only since the mid-1990s. The landscape of online pornography was, therefore, from the beginning, diverse in terms of its agents, economies, aesthetics, and agendas, and consisted of both independent and corporate actors, and both peer-produced content shared for free and glossier content behind paywalls (see Jacobs, 2007; Jacobs, Janssen, & Pasquinelli, 2007; Paasonen, 2011). Consequently, it should be acknowledged that the notion of "porn industry," online as elsewhere, refers to a highly heterogeneous set of practices and actors that cross regional and national boundaries and involve no unifying agenda or motive (given that even the general principle of profit generation fails to apply to all activities within it).

The work of online pornography involves both the performance and production side of things but equally that of distribution: of running servers, writing scripts, creating information architecture, and sorting out metadata. In addition to entailing a range of relatively novel professional roles and tasks, online pornography involves the accentuation of inner distinctions, subcategories, and niches within the genre. As Wendy

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Chun has pointed out, pornographic images distributed in newsgroups and BBSs were difficult to index, whereas the Web, with its emphasis on metadata that facilitates the searchability of visual and audiovisual content, has necessitated the marking out of pornographic subcategories, titles, and terms for users to search and choose among (Chun, 2006, p. 106). This has rendered all kinds of inner distinctions—ones concerning body styles, sexual acts, subgenres, specific performers, or national origins—increasingly manifest and recognizable. Since porn sites try to evoke the interest of curious users with novelties and specialities, the so-called mainstream of pornography has constantly and extensively harvested sexual subcultures and niche practices, familiarizing them in the process (Paasonen, 2011; also Attwood, 2007, pp. 452–453; Dery, 2007; McNair, 2002, p. 206).

The spread of digital cameras, and smart phones in particular, has provided both amateurs and semiprofessionals with inexpensive tools for producing their own pornography. While amateurs have produced their own explicit content for decades, it was not easy to circulate on VHS tapes or as printed matter. The case is markedly different with digital images and videos shared on online platforms, given their ease of production and potentially global reach of circulation. Especially the introduction of video hosting sites modeled after YouTube (est. 2005), such as PornHub, XHamster, YouPorn, and RedTube, has facilitated the easy distribution of all kinds of pornographic clips, amateur content included. Combined with the increased circulation and ensuing accumulation of pre-digital pornographies on online platforms and the constant avalanche of novelties, this has resulted in a clear diversification of available content. At the same time, the wide use of tags and other forms of metadata has made this range of available options strikingly evident.

Recently, the landscape of online porn, long characterized by inner diversity and fragmentation of the kind outlined above, has been increasingly driven toward centralization. MindGeek, the company that owns PornHub and most other leading tube sites, has something of a virtual monopoly on porn distribution, with its circa 21 billion visitors in 2015 alone. MindGeek also owns many of the companies whose products it distributes (Auerbach, 2014). The rise of tube sites has affected the patterns of porn consumption in drastic and obvious ways: If, throughout the 1990s and beyond, porn consumption was characterized by endless searching, clicking from one link to another, the opening up and closing down of pop-ups and mousetraps (which tried to make it impossible for the user to leave), in quest for potentially interesting content, in the 2010s, tube sites promise to host all possible content within one interface. The user needs merely to browse through the available categories and conduct key term searches within it. This centralization follows patterns similar to the developments connected to corporations like Google and Facebook—large corporations buy up smaller enterprises,

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expand their operations within the online economy, and collect massive volumes of data on user activities, preferences, and trends.

Pornography has been considered "recession-proof" in the sense that its profits tended to steadily increase despite oscillations in markets. Although porn continues to sell, DVD and magazine retail sales have plummeted and users are predominantly attracted by free content online. Video-sharing platforms, together with the facility of distributing porn in P2P (peer-to-peer) networks and the popularity of freely circulated amateur content, have contributed to the drastic decrease in porn profits made. Production companies are closed down and bought up, which leads to further centralization within the porn industry. More pornography is being produced than ever, today more pornography is available than ever before, and the number of visits to porn sites keeps on increasing, yet the profits of the porn industry have, in general, diminished. Meanwhile, traditional adult brands, most famously *Playboy*, are refashioning themselves into lifestyle brands devoid of sexual explicitness.

The centralization of porn distribution and consumption is, needless to say, far from total, yet it is clearly a novel direction in the evolution of online porn. Another key trend is the continuing popularity of amateur porn, on and off tube sites, that challenges traditional notions of the porn industry, its actors, operating principles, and motives and further fuels the shift of profitability from porn production to its online distribution. McNair (2013, pp. 29–30) sees such "citizen porn" as exemplary of the democratization of the field of pornography. The popularity of homemade porn can also be associated with a broader process of pornification or sexualization, where certain templates of sexiness and desirability, influenced and permeated by the iconographies of pornography, circulate and abound in people's self-presentations and public fantasies. In such a framing, the issue would be one of normative templates for depicting sexuality, and their glocal travels in media culture.

Media Regulation

In addition to transformations in media technology, pornification can be used to characterize developments in the control and regulation of pornography as general processes of liberalization and deregulation. The current "onscenity" of hardcore materials previously deemed too obscene for public circulation, and the debates connected to it, presents a recent development in how pornography, as a product and part of culture, is regulated. The legal status of porn has clearly changed in most Western countries since the 1970s, Denmark being the first country to decriminalize audiovisual pornography in 1969. As the legal status and public visibility of pornography have gradually shifted and changed—the 1970s "porno chic" of 35-mm pornographic feature

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films and public debates, fueled by legislative changes in many countries, being a particularly notable period of transition—its boundaries have been increasingly redrawn in terms of criminalized content, while child pornography, violent porn, and animal porn still fall outside the realm of acceptability.

Such developments toward the deregulation of pornographic content have been partly caused by the challenges posed by online distribution. Traditional forms of media regulation based on pre-examination and classification of locally produced or imported content, as deployed in the context of film, television, and print media, work poorly in the context of networked media, where content deemed obscene or illegal in one country can be hosted on a server operating under the legislation of another country. And, given the sheer volume of pornographic content that is currently in circulation, the effort that regulation requires is far from minor.

Parallel to the processes of deregulation and onscenity, there is clear movement in an opposing direction as initiatives of systematic national regulation, filtering, and censorship—that which Brian McNair (2013, pp. 3–4) identifies as "anti-porn backlash"—that involve feminist activists and conservative politicians alike. Centralized filtering of online content has long been a governmental strategy deployed in undemocratic countries like China and Saudi Arabia and, more recently, in the United Kingdom. Motivated by an interest to "protect children and their innocence," Prime Minister David Cameron's 2013 initiative aimed at blocking access to pornographic and other disturbing content by making Internet service providers filter it off unless the subscriber explicitly wishes otherwise. The filtering initiative exemplifies the re-emergence of pornography as a topic of public concern, debate, and policy in the course of its increasing onscenity. Chun (2006, p. 80) discusses how, in the 1990s, both attempts at U.S. government regulation and forms of public attention toward online pornography paradoxically fed the "pornographic gold rush." Moral panics and scandalized media exposure concerning online pornography made its accessibility publicly known and fueled interest in it, while the introduction of measures to protect adolescents from the harms of online pornography in fact pushed the commercialization of sexual content (Chun, 2006, pp. 110–111). This dynamic is close kin to Walter Kendrick's ideas on the centrality of acts of regulation and policing for pornography and its public appeal.

Porno Chic

Transformations in the regulation of pornography link to the third, and final, approach to, or use of, "pornification" as descriptive of shifts in the cultural role and position of porn (Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saarenmaa, 2007, pp. 8–13). Discussed in both diverse and mutually contradictory ways as "porno chic" (McNair, 2002, 2013), the "porning" of culture

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(Sarracino & Scott, 2008), the "normalization of porn" (Poynor, 2006), and "raunch culture" (Levy, 2005), this development refers to the sheer popularity of pornography (bearing in mind the staggering number of PornHub visits alone) but, equally and even more centrally, to the broad circulation of imageries "which borrow from, refer to, or pastiche the styles and iconography of the pornographic" (McNair, 2013, p. 36). For Attwood, the contemporary mainstreaming of sex concerns the presence and onscenity of pornography in particular:

> Porn stars are entering the world of mainstream celebrity, writing bestselling books, acting as sex advisors in lifestyle magazines and becoming the stars of lad mags. Porn has turned chic and become an object of fascination in art, film, television and the press. Porn style is also now commonplace, especially in music video and advertising, and a scantily clad, surgically enhanced "porn look" is evident, not only in the media, but on the streets.
>
> (Attwood, 2009, p. xiv)

Such mainstreaming involves the broader cultural reverberation of pornographic aesthetics in, for example, film festivals specializing in experimental and vintage pornography and the broad referencing of the codes of sexiness associated with pornography in the media and the arts. In its myriad forms, porno chic is based on the premise that audiences are familiar enough with pornography to understand the references and connections drawn to take enjoyment in them (McNair, 2013, p. 37). At the same time, these codes and conventions are in constant transition and their diversification makes it more difficult to identify the iconography of pornography as a clear point of reference. In his discussion on sexting, Tim Gregory (2015, p. 10) points out how identifying the exchange of sexual images as telling of pornification "assumes that there are standard pornographic poses, which for a generation who grew up with the diversity of pornographic images available online is not something that can be presumed."

As pointed out above, flirtation with sexual explicitness and the aesthetics of pornography is a long-standing media cultural trend. According to Rick Poynor (2006, p. 132), "by covering porn, the media borrows some of its dirty glamour and sense of danger, while in turn it confers legitimacy, making porn a topic of interest and discussion like any other." Cutting through both art and popular culture, porno chic "aims to transfer the taboo, transgressive qualities of pornography to mainstream cultural production" (McNair, 2002, p. 70). This gives rise to an apparent paradox, since, historically, the attraction of porn has owed to its violations of public morality and taste by being obscene and off the mainstream. It can therefore be argued that some, or even much, of its power would be lost were it to be mainstreamed and welcomed as one media genre among others.

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According to media scholar Annette Kuhn (1994, p. 23), "In order to maintain its attraction, porn demands strictures, controls, censorship. Exposed to the light of day, it risks loss of power. Pornography invites policing." Following the line of thought, also introduced by Kendrick, that pornography involves the titillating scent of "forbidden fruit," it, again, relies specifically on articulations of disapproval and practices of regulation. On the one hand, pornography may be seen as losing some of its forbidden and transgressive edge in the course of its mainstreaming and open accessibility. On the other hand, antipornography motions continue to support it.

Messy Conceptual Terrain

The three lines of development connected to the notion of pornification, outlined above as ones concerning technological, regulatory, and cultural transformations, are easy enough to identify and illustrate with an ample array of examples. At the same time, the question remains as to how suitable a term "pornification" may in fact be for identifying and analyzing them. There is a risk that the term does not allow for sufficient distinctions to be drawn between different kinds of materials, "soft-core and hardcore pornographies, the public circulation of sexually suggestive imageries and the explicitness of action shots" (Paasonen, 2015, p. 6). Images flirting with levels of undress and sexually suggestive poses and references may be ubiquitous in print media, television, and social media platforms, yet the same does not apply to the more explicit, straightforward, and even grotesque imageries of hardcore pornography that are, in fact, algorithmically filtered out from platforms like Facebook, forbidden in the user agreements of YouTube, and excluded from the flows of public broadcasting and network television.

Online pornography is easily, freely, and abundantly available. However, contrary to what the term "exposure," which is widely used in describing encounters with pornography, implies, porn is also something that needs to be knowingly searched for and actively sought out. Addressing recent British reports on children and sexualization, Martin Barker comments on the frequent uses of "exposure" in describing young people's encounters with adult content online. According to him, these speak of a

> dismissive attitude towards research which showed that, where young people do look at pornography, the motives for doing so range from "masturbation," to "wanting to know more about sex," to "curiosity," and to "boredom." Such motives for looking do not fit well with the working model of cumulative effect, corrupting influence, and slippery slope to doom, all of which is set in motion by that word "exposed."

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(Barker, 2014, p. 143)

The terminology of exposure, supported by the framing of pornography as a force somehow external to culture that threatens to "pornify" it, ignores the user motivations of people of different ages. Counter to the abstract figure of a young person at risk who is passively exposed to pornography, empirical research points to adolescents' foregrounding of their own media literacy, showing notable resilience in terms of content they find disturbing, and having a range of reasons to consume pornography and a variety of interests attached to it (e.g., Albury, 2014; Barker, 2014; Bragg & Buckingham, 2009; Buckingham & Chronaki, 2014; Mulholland, 2013; Spisak, 2016). As Barker notes, such perspectives, along with a range of questions concerning adolescent sexual agency, are nevertheless routinely rendered invisible by the hegemonic discourse of concern.

Linda Papadoupoulos' 2010 report for the British Home Office, *Sexualisation and Young People: A Review*, reiterates many of these concerns, also arguing that "prolonged exposure increases the likelihood of consuming material that depicts either potentially 'harmful' or, what the UK government labels, 'extreme' sexual behaviours such as violent sex, sadomasochism and bestiality" (Papadoupoulos, 2010, p. 12). Here, as elsewhere, the term "exposure" does all kind of work. It helps to frame pornography as a force that enters the lives of children without any volition or activity on their side—and, in fact, frames pornography as a force that enters culture as if from the outside. In this framing, the discourse of exposure is both facilitated and motivated through the marking apart of pornography from culture proper.

Another set of problems lies in how discussions on pornification may ignore elementary distinctions and developments within the category of hardcore pornography itself, fixing it instead into a knowable, singular entity. Differences between different sub-genres, aesthetics, and practices of circulation may be rendered invisible even as they remain both highly pronounced and crucial in and for understanding the phenomena under discussion. Generalized debates on the "pornification of culture" may, in short, engender a simplifying master narrative out of diverse and conflicting cultural tendencies in ways that pave the way for analytical obscurity (Nikunen & Paasonen, 2007). Following such a line of thought, Clarissa Smith argues that the terms "pornification" and "pornographication" have, in the course of their abundant reiteration,

been so widely taken up as descriptions and explanations of cultural shifts and worrying experiences, that they obscure the specific histories and politics of both the cultural artefacts under examination and those who are doing the examination. The claims of "pornographication" and "pornification" are already so

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saturated in the languages and references of concern and regulation that they restrict the range of possible explanations that can be admitted.

(Smith, 2010, p. 104)

It may in fact well be that the connotation of concern, combined with the imprecision inherent in the term "pornification" itself, work against its productive uses as a descriptive or analytical term when exploring the public role and position of pornography: "Rather than explaining or describing cultural tendencies in their complexity, pornification may create a fallacious impression of order and unity and effaces ruptures and mutually conflicting developments from view" (Paasonen, 2015, p. 5). These problems are amplified by the highest visibility of those diagnoses of pornification that feed media panics connected to the normalization of sexual representation and anxieties concerning online pornography (Hunter & Attwood, 2009, p. 547, 551).

These responses re-articulate quite familiar concerns around the loss of childhood, commodification, technology, representation, and desire, though they are entirely contemporary in focusing on addictive behaviours, women's collusion with their own objectification, adults preying on children, and the blurring of boundaries between genres such as porn and horror that depict the body *in extremis*.

(Hunter & Attwood, 2009, p. 552)

There is a clear seduction to concepts such as pornification in describing sociocultural trends and tendencies that may not be organically interconnected. Such concepts may provide a semblance of unity and coherence where there may in fact be little, and where different processes and interests overlap and possibly contradict one another. Given how the terms pornification and pornication more or less rhyme with "fornication," they may also easily connote moral judgments over the phenomena addressed. At the same time:

Pornographication/pornification has no very precise meaning; they are a matter of social and cultural perception. The same questions asked of obscenity, pornography, erotica—what are the boundaries of the term, what is included and excluded and why, how are its boundaries maintained—need to be asked of "pornographication." How is this term deployed and to what ends?

(Smith, 2010, p. 105)

Similar problems are unavoidable with the concept of sexualization. For, as Rosalind Gill (2009A) argues, the developments that the term aims to cover are much too broad to be reduced to a singular narrative or any single homogenized notion. Like sexualization, the

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term pornification may, then, be put in much better use in formulating questions concerning media culture than in explaining or describing them. Questions can be asked, for example, of how fitness pole-dancing classes connect or fail to connect to the iconographies of pornography, how sexually suggestive selfies distributed on Instagram cite or do not cite these visual conventions, or how sexually explicit scenes in films like Lars von Trier's *Nymphomaniac* (Denmark, 2013) interface with hardcore materials. Rather than assuming a connection—let alone any causality—between such examples and the genre of pornography by default, it is more productive to frame the matter as one of potential continuities and disconnections, flows and reverberations. In such a framing, the notion of pornification obviously cannot promise or provide any ready answers. Furthermore, in order to have analytical leverage, such investigations need to remain sensitive to cultural contexts and specificities.

Discussions on the public visibility of porn and sex are carried out on different continents, in different political regimes, and with notably different tones and political investments (Jacobs, 2014). Several analyses of pornification focusing on American culture have addressed the interconnections of Puritanism, sexual repression, and popularity and mainstreaming of pornography (Hall & Bishop, 2007; Levy, 2005; Sarracino & Scott, 2008). Levy, for example, argues that "Our national love of porn and pole dancing is not the byproduct of a free and easy society with an earthy acceptance of sex. It is a desperate stab at free-wheeling eroticism in a time and place characterized by intense anxiety" (Levy, 2005, p. 199). In something of glaring contradiction, the United States is a key global hub of porn production and its citizens avid consumers of pornography while public resistance to, and moral panics concerning, pornography have high visibility. At the same time, the aftermath of the so-called sex wars continues to divide American debates on pornography into two opposing camps.

In Nordic countries like Finland, concerns are routinely voiced about adolescents' access to online porn (Spisak, 2016), while public memoranda frame pornography as a problem in terms of sexual health, relationships, and gender equality. At the same time, antipornography activism remains minor and the topic of pornography, in general, fails to evoke major public passions (see Paasonen, 2009). In India, Western influences seen as threatening traditional Hindu values remain the focus of concern. In this context, "The word 'pornography' has rarely been used to denote the *genre* of pornography, that is, sexually explicit material produced specifically for sexual arousal. It has been used to describe material that *connotes* sex, like film songs, advertisements, cover girls, rape sequences, consensual sex and even beauty pageants" (Ghosh, 2006, p. 273). Even such a brief contextual scan helps to show that although key themes connected to debates on pornification certainly circulate internationally, no cross-continental diagnoses are viable, given the drastic differences in the respective interpretative frameworks. Even if Anglo-

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American perspectives and concerns remain dominant in both academic and journalistic debates on pornography and its mainstreaming, their context specificity needs to be acknowledged and their claims for generality perpetually questioned.

Review of the Literature

The most widely read journalistic analyses of the pornification of culture include Pamela Paul's *Pornified* and Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, both published in 2005. Both of these books address the sexualization of culture from a markedly North American perspective and with an emphasis on its harmful implications for gender equality and personal sexual lives. Similar emphasis on sexualization and pornification as social problems and concerns is pervasive in public debates, in general interest titles like *Pop-Porn* (Hall & Bishop, 2007) and the *The Porning of America* (Sarracino & Scott, 2008), as well as in research reports on the sexualization of adolescence (Papadoupoulos, 2010). The discourse of concern, as exemplified by these bodies of work, functions as the dominant framing for discussions on the increased visibility of sexually explicit media content and its role in the lives of both adults and adolescents. This discourse of concern is supported and amplified by the equally ubiquitous association of pornography with both individual and social harm, as voiced in newly re-activated antipornography activism in particular.

In his 2002 *Striptease Culture* and 2013 *Porno? Chic!* Brian McNair offers an explicit counterargument to the discourse of concern. For McNair, the sexualization of culture is connected to increased gender equality and freedom of sexual minorities: rather than being a tool of control or oppression, pornography then becomes framed as an element of liberation. This focus on the democratization of desire is partly echoed in Ken Plummer's (2003) analysis on sexual citizenship as connected to both global and local flows of media images and public debates.

Pornification and sexualization of culture have been addressed in the research anthologies *Pornification* (Paasonen, Nikunen, & Saarenmaa, 2007) and *Mainstreaming Sex* (Attwood, 2009). Both of these volumes contextualize transformations in media culture and analyze their implications in Western societies beyond North America without subscribing either to the discourse of concern or to that of liberation. Pamela Church Gibson (2014) and Rosalind Gill (2009A) similarly focus on the complexities that the flirtation with pornographic conventions in fashion and advertising involves in and for feminist cultural analysis. Robbie Duschinsky (2013) has tracked the popularization of the discourse of sexualization in United States and Britain and argues that, by focusing on young female minors as the ones being negatively affected, it has worked to downplay their

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sexual agency in problematic ways. In *Young People and Pornography*, Monique Mulholland (2013) examines girls' strategies for negotiating pornification while also analyzing the affective dynamics connected to adolescent sexuality and explicit media content.

Diagnoses of sexualization and pornification have also been criticized for doing away with crucial contextual nuances and historical perspectives, perhaps most forcibly by Clarissa Smith (2010), who associates the discourse of pornographication with unsustainable conceptions of authentic sexuality as somehow separable from media and consumer culture. At the same time, the terminology of sexualization and pornification has become mainstreamed and established as shorthand for complex and often contradictory developments and practices. Launched in 2015, the journal *Sexualization, Media, & Society* explores the shapes and forms of hypersexualized media, more often siding with antipornography perspectives than not (see Bridges et al., 2015). For its part, the launch of the journal *Porn Studies* in 2014 demonstrates the increased scholarly interest in pornography, as supported by porn's high visibility as both an object of consumption and a topic of public debate (see Attwood & Smith, 2014).

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Susanna Paasonen

Professor and chair of Media Studies, and deputy director of the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies at University of Turku

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