'Facebook for Kinky People’: A Discursive Analysis of FetLife

by

Catherine Sara McCabe

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Approval

Name: Catherine Sara McCabe
Degree: Master of Arts (Sociology)
Title: ‘Facebook for Kinky People’: A discursive analysis of FetLife
Examiners Committee: Chair: Wendy Chan
            Professor

Dany Lacombe
            Senior Supervisor
            Professor

Cindy Patton
            Supervisor
            Professor

Peter Dickinson
            External Examiner
            Professor
            Department of English

Date Defended/Approved: August 05, 2015
Abstract

This study is a comprehensive investigation of FetLife, a BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism) social networking website. Taking a discursive analytical approach that combines rhetorical-textual analysis with Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model, I look at a site-based scandal to investigate how FetLife is positioned as a safe and private community in order to achieve commercial benefits. Subsequently, I analyse user-generated content on the site, demonstrating that sexual self-representation on FetLife follows the logic of pornography. The adherence to this logic, alongside the site’s commercial realities, strongly contradict its claims to be an ‘alternative’ community space, leading me to conclude that online sexuo-social interactions are a space of conflict and contradiction wherein the nature of privacy and publicness are being radically altered by commercially driven developers, the cultural dominance of pornography and emerging cultures of online representation.

Keywords: BDSM; FetLife; Internet sex; new media; social network site; pornography
For Greg. We did this together.
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Chapter 1.

Introduction

‘For Kinksters, by Kinksters’: BDSM the FetLife Way

*Interviewer:* What is FetLife? Can you describe your job? Can you describe the other employees at FetLife please.

*John Baku (creator and owner of FetLife):* I use [sic] to describe FetLife as Facebook for Kinksters but more often than not the average joe would have no clue what the hell I was talking about. Kinksters is [sic] not a term many people know or understand. So now when someone asks what FetLife is I just describe it as 50 Shades of Grey meets Facebook. Now that explanation gets a lot of smiles! Basically my role is to make sure that we stay true to our initial vision of FetLife which is to make sure that we make people feel comfortable with who they are sexually. On a daily basis I work with every team on making sure FetLife is supporting the kinky community.¹

“For kinksters, by kinksters”:² this is the slogan of FetLife, a free-to-use social networking site that connects people in “the kinky community”³ from all over the world. Likely the most populous BDSM and fetish community online, with over 3 million members⁴ and growing, FetLife is a niche website in a unique position of power and influence. A playful and accessible Web 2.0 mainstay for people who are interested in BDSM and a range of other ‘alternative’ and ‘kinky’ sexualities, FetLife is run by

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³ Baku, “Hush Magazine.”
⁴ As of July 25, 2014. FetLife has a ‘one profile per user’ policy but does not appear to enforce it, so we cannot be certain that these are all necessarily unique individuals, nor can it be said that all of these users are active.
Vancouver-based BitLove Inc., a small company with ten employees\(^5\) headed by CEO John Baku, FetLife’s progenitor and chief developer. As can be seen from the brief quote above, Baku portrays FetLife as caring and community-led, an online space where all users can “feel comfortable with who they are sexually.”\(^6\) The popularity and ubiquity of FetLife in the BDSM world makes it a significant component of contemporary BDSM practice, a place where the textual, the visual and the social converge in a rich and distinctive way, making it ripe for an analysis that can take account of all of these complex elements.

Although I originally intended my thesis research to be an ethnography of ‘real life’ BDSM in Vancouver’s clubs and play spaces,\(^7\) it soon became apparent that FetLife offered unprecedented access to an exciting and emergent form of BDSM space and sociality. This is not to say that online BDSM is analogous to offline BDSM, although it is often presented as such: the structure and possibilities of the virtual world offer something significantly different. In choosing a ‘virtual’ field site, it was important that my analysis accounted for how the affordances of “social network sites”\(^8\) shape interactions, and how electronic communications technologies shape sexualities online. My analysis focuses on two aspects of FetLife: first, the presentation of FetLife as a ‘community,’ explored through a crisis point in FetLife’s story; and second, the sexual representation of FetLife users, explored through a section of the site called ‘Kinky and Popular.’ These two seemingly disparate strands together demonstrate how a site which presents itself as a democratic and inclusive BDSM space in fact prioritises commerce over the interests of its users and is defined by normative and reductive sexual representation.

\(^{5}\) As of July 25, 2014.
\(^{6}\) Baku, “Hush Magazine.”
\(^{7}\) My original plan was to answer questions about how and why BDSM was lived, practiced and performed in present-day Metro Vancouver, in the light of competing definitions of BDSM as an individual pathology, a sexually liberating practice and a lifestyle substantially colonized by capitalism. This piece of research became untenable for ethical and practical reasons.
What is BDSM?

BDSM is an “umbrella term for sexual interests including bondage, domination, submission/sadism, and masochism,” colloquially understood as sex involving pain and power exchange. Until the late nineteenth century the “deliberate use of physical and/or psychological ‘pain’ to produce sexual arousal” was seen as “a sin to be governed by penitentials and religious courts,” whereafter sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis began to apply the “medical model” to such behaviours, enfolding them within a pathological framework. In 1890, Krafft-Ebing coined the terms ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism,’ to characterize particular “deviant” forms of sexual behaviour. Sadism was named for the Marquis de Sade, who wrote long works of fiction detailing sexualised punishment and torture. ‘Sadists’ were thus defined as people who drew sexual pleasure from the infliction of pain upon others. ‘Masochism’ was named for Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, the Austrian author of a short novel called Venus in Furs. The protagonist of this novel becomes enamoured with a very beautiful and cruel woman, and submits totally to her will. ‘Masochism’ was thus defined as deriving sexual pleasure from receiving pain. Sadism and masochism, alongside other so-called

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paraphilias, remain psychiatric disorders in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

As Nathan Rambukkana explains, it is very difficult to track the early history of sadomasochistic subcultural groups, which consisted of small circles of private practitioners and the occasional very private club, most of which didn't know of each other's existence. From the early 1970s, however, the emergence of SM clubs and writing by sadomasochists for sadomasochists has enabled a semi-public community to be assembled.

From the 1970s onwards, SM also became an increasingly common part of the public discourse, being addressed by academics, physicians, psychiatrists, the judiciary, feminists, and activists. However, this increasing visibility did not necessarily lead to greater mainstream acceptance.

The 1990s saw the coining of ‘BDSM’ to denote “a diverse subculture that includes aficionados of bondage, domination/submission, pain or sensation play, power

13 ‘Paraphilias’ are sexual preferences defined as ‘disorders’ in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM). This classification has a controversial history, as many minority sexualities have been included in it, most notably homosexuality, which was removed from the DSM in 1973. Bezreh et al., “BDSM Disclosure and Stigma Management”: 38. The definitions of both sadism and masochism have shifted significantly across the iterations of the DSM. In the most recent volume, a person can only be defined as a sadist if the person upon whom they inflict pain is non-consenting; in the past, to inflict pain upon even a consenting partner was considered pathologically sadistic. Nevertheless, both still remain defined as ‘paraphilias.’ See also Moser and Kleinplatz, “DSM-IV-TR and the Paraphilias” (np) for an in-depth discussion of the status of paraphilias in psychiatry.


exchange, leathersex, role-playing, and fetishes,” although its specific origins remain unclear. At this time, heterosexual BDSM in North America and Europe became more widespread, marked by a flourishing of BDSM clubs, events, support groups, and communities. BDSM is now an accepted presence in contemporary understandings of sexuality; indeed, the BDSM aesthetic has become so widely recognizable that it has featured in commercials for mainstream products like yogurt, IKEA furniture, and cars. Nevertheless, media representations of BDSM, such as the wildly popular *Fifty Shades of Gray*, persist in portraying its proponents as psychologically troubled, despite studies showing that real-life BDSM practitioners are as psychologically healthy as the general population. This suggests that, for many, it is a sexuality that continues to exist at the fringes of normalcy; it is this frisson of the illicit that has been commodified, packaged to sell BDSM to the masses as something that can be lightly sampled to bring spice to a married couple’s ‘vanilla’ bedroom repertoire.

**BDSM Online**

It was undoubtedly more challenging to find and access subcultural sexual spaces prior to the Internet age, and the increasingly widespread use of the Internet has

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17 Ibid.
18 The simple ‘SM’ is often seen as too narrow a definition for the range of sexual practices that are incorporated into this community, but is nevertheless still in common usage. The term S&M is not generally used by those within the BDSM community, and is thus seen by it as something of an outsider’s term. John Cloud and Clayton, “Behavior: Bondage Unbound,” *TIME*, January 19, 2004: http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,993154,00.html.
been significant in the recent flourishing of BDSM. Discussion of BDSM and kink on basic messaging boards and in chat rooms has been documented from the early 1990s, and possibly before. The advent of Internet usage by non-specialists, “the release of the first graphical (rather than text-based) web browser—Mosaic, released in 1993—and the increasing popularity of personal modems” have all assisted the adventurous and the curious in their search for unconventional sexual experiences and spaces.

Even greater ease of access has been provided by the more recent development of portable and wireless technologies and social media, technological changes that have transformed the way we socialise and communicate. Technological hyper-connectedness and the relatively free circulation of sexual images have caused our “public sphere” to “become highly sexualised,” whilst society has “in many ways become physically more private.” Indeed, BDSM has an extensive online presence, including a great many social networks, forums, listservs, dating sites, online stores, and pornographic websites.

**FetLife**

FetLife is “a FREE Social Network for the BDSM & fetish community. Similar to Facebook and MySpace but run by kinksters like you and me.” Its slogan, “BDSM & fetish community for kinksters by kinksters,” is displayed prominently on the public front page. As a “social network site” it is

a **networked communication platform** in which participants 1) have **uniquely identifiable profiles** that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can **publicly articulate connections** that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3)

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site.\(^{30}\) (Original italics)

While there are many other BDSM/kink websites that incorporate some social networking elements,\(^{31}\) FetLife seeks to distinguish itself from them by portraying itself as predominantly a social network and a ‘community’ rather than a dating site. In this way it more closely mirrors offline BDSM spaces, where making friends or connections in the community is seen as equally important to finding sexual partners. (This is somewhat belied by the fact that “in the HTML meta tags that provide search engines with keywords, the term ‘dating site’ is listed four times.”\(^{32}\))

FetLife stands out from other BDSM sites in both its size and its technological capabilities. It has over three million members registered to date,\(^{33}\) is the eighth most popular ‘adult’ site according to the web analytics site Alexa,\(^{34}\) and claims to be “one of the Largest Communities [of interest] on the Interwebz.”\(^{35}\) Technologically, it is much more of a “Web 2.0”\(^{36}\) site than its rivals, drawing on very up-to-date advances in social networking applications and open source software programming possibilities to create a site that is aesthetically and functionally comparable to other social networks (e.g. Facebook, MySpace). Indeed, it is designed to be a comprehensive sexual social

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\(^{33}\) As of July 25, 2014. Of course, these cannot be said to necessarily be unique individuals (despite FetLife’s ‘one profile per user’ policy), nor can it be said that all of these users are active.


networking online space: "a one-stop-shop for one’s kink identity."\textsuperscript{37} Its multi-capability structure means that users can create, look at, and watch visual content, make dates, chat endlessly, write blog posts, plan events to attend, and socialise online, all in a single place that is explicitly geared towards ‘kinky’ sexuality.

**FetLife’s Social Networking Capabilities**

“Social network sites”\textsuperscript{38} are not simply structured for ease of navigation, as a casual user might assume; rather, the structure and language of websites (as with other textual and publishing media/platforms) exerts a strong influence over how they are used and the possibilities that are open to users. Andrea Zanin, “a BDSM workshop facilitator and a scholar of kink”\textsuperscript{39} states that on “its own, [FetLife] is an empty container. Real people with real personalities come along and fill that container, with very predictable results — some wonderful, some horrific, most somewhere in the area in between, which we call ‘everyday life.’”\textsuperscript{40} This is a common misconception: a social network site is not simply empty or neutral, but a complex structure that enables certain types of interaction, discourages others, and imbues the site with specific characteristics. Of course FetLife is large and varied, meaning that its usage possibilities are polysemously rather than plurally defined.\textsuperscript{41} Indeed, developers and users are in constant conversation with each other over how the space is and should be used and the rules that govern its usage.

FetLife has a range of social networking tools, each of which facilitates a different kind of interaction. Each user (or “member,” in the site’s own language\textsuperscript{42}) must create a profile, a defining characteristic of a social network site.\textsuperscript{43} Users can send private and

\textsuperscript{38} boyd and Ellison, “Social Network Sites.”
\textsuperscript{40} Quoted in ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Also common to other types of Web 2.0 site, e.g. dating sites, professional networking sites; see Ellison and boyd, “Sociality,” 159.
public messages to each other, and become ‘friends.’\textsuperscript{44} The site has a huge range of discussion groups\textsuperscript{45} where users interact textually with each other, in message board-style. Many groups have their own rules of conduct, with moderators to control or monitor discussion. “Novices and Newbies” is the most popular group, with 139,536 members and 233,815 comments posted to date.\textsuperscript{46} The next largest group is “Kinky and Geeky,” with 131,191 members and 612,328 comments to date.\textsuperscript{47} As the design of the site encourages users are to connect through common interests, groups, or geographical location, it is explicitly set up as a platform for interactions with strangers, reflecting other characteristics that position it as one big community, interconnected through a common interest in ‘kink.’\textsuperscript{48}

Other social networking tools on the site include: the “Events”\textsuperscript{49} section, which allows users to create and promote ‘real life’ events; the “Writing”\textsuperscript{50} section, which is a kind of blogging function that can be added to by anyone; and pictures and videos, which one can look at, watch, and comment upon. Any of this user-generated content – pictures, videos, and writings – can be given a ‘love’ by another FetLife user, publicly indicating their approval of it. The “Kinky & Popular”\textsuperscript{51} page is a feed that displays content that has attracted a large number of ‘loves’ from other users.\textsuperscript{52} While most sections of the site are free to use, Kinky and Popular is an exception: one can only scroll so far down the feed before this ‘paywall’ message appears: “Support your favorite [sic] geeks and make it possible for us to improve FetLife everyday [sic]. As a big thanks,

\textsuperscript{44} Becoming ‘friends’ means creating site-based linkages with others who then see your activities in their newsfeed and vice versa. It also means that other users can see that you are linked. This squares with the third aspect of Ellison and boyd’s definition of a social network site: users “can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site.” Ellison and boyd, “Sociality,” 160, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{45} 73,452 on July 25, 2014.
\textsuperscript{49} https://fetlife.com/events/all.
\textsuperscript{50} https://fetlife.com/posts/everyone.
\textsuperscript{51} https://fetlife.com/explore/#/index.
you’ll be able to easily *perv over 5,000 of today’s most popular* pics, vids and writings from right here." As Kinky & Popular displays the accumulated favourites of all FetLife users, it offers a sense of what is ‘trending’ or being widely discussed on any given day.

Two page features that are important to this study are: first, the advertisements, found in a sidebar on the right-hand side; and second, links to the site’s technical and legal information, found at the bottom of the page. The advertisements promote a range of ‘kink’-related things, from fetish and sex toy stores to local events and pornographic websites. Each advert is comprised of a small image with two or three lines of text below; both sexually explicit and non-explicit images feature. Clicking on said image takes the user to the site being advertised (a “click-through” in Internet advertising parlance). As the majority of FetLife is free to users, the site is supported in part by the selling of advertising space: this is a common way for ‘free’ sites to pay for their upkeep. FetLife’s other source of income is from user subscriptions to the sections of the site behind the paywall: the extended Kinky & Popular feed, and the entirety of the videos section. While it might be self-evident that FetLife is a commercial venture, this has serious implications for the way it is structured and run. That a website is making money does not preclude it from being an ‘authentic’ part of the community it serves. Certainly, BitLove and the companies who advertise on FetLife appear to be fairly small businesses rather than large, impersonal corporations. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the implications of FetLife as a commercial enterprise that is trading upon the sociality and sexuality of its users.

The second feature, a collection of links to technical and legal information about the site, is found at the bottom of each page. These links are also available on the public front page, so even someone without a FetLife account can access them. Here one can find information about the people who run FetLife; information about how to advertise on

55 The two paid areas are the video section and full access to the K&P feed.
FetLife; site announcements, frequently asked questions and a support forum; information about BitLove’s open source coding projects; a link to pay subscription fees; and, most importantly, some links grouped under the heading “Bathroom Material,” an acknowledgement that they are long-winded and not particularly pleasurable to read. However, these are very important texts, as together they form FetLife’s rules and guidelines for engagement with the site, and the site’s relationship to its users. Included are “Content Guidelines,” “Community Guidelines,” “Terms of Use” and “Privacy Policy.” For the purposes of this thesis, the Terms of Use document is the most significant here, as it contains the rules that one must abide by in order to use the site; it is a long-winded and dull text, something the average user would never choose to read. However, there is a clause within it – an item on the list of prohibited conduct – that has become a point of contention for many users. This clause states: “You agree that, while using BitLove’s Products and Services, you will not... make criminal accusations against another member in a public forum.” This clause has caused particular controversy on the site and is the basis of the scandal discussed in Chapter 3.

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60 Ibid.
Chapter 2.

Theory, Methods, and Literature Review

This thesis takes the methodological approach of rhetorical or textual analysis, combined with elements of Stuart Hall’s ‘encoding/decoding’ model of media production and consumption. Rhetorical-textual analysis is a form that is most familiar to Cultural Studies scholars, and is appropriate for the online ‘space’ I am working in because it is a textual and two-dimensionally visual field of social communication. Indeed, social communication, once predominantly face-to-face and verbal, is now very often mediated by screens, typed text, and still and moving images. The use of textual means of communication for casual, everyday conversations has created new linguistic formations that were previously neither conceivable nor necessary. In this way, technological change has driven social change. Social media are a significant part of this shift, allowing users to socialise ‘virtually’ rather than with those in their immediate geographical location.

Because of the complicated relationship that Internet sociality has to geographical space, scholars have approached online research from a number of different angles. For instance, Jane Juffer and Jonathan Lillie both study the site of reception, which, at their time of writing, was the home (or work) computer terminal. This approach treats the place where the user is physically located as the true ‘field,’ with the online territory that they are accessing being adjunct to that. The anthropologist Adam

61 By ‘still and moving images’ I am referring to the way people often use images rather than text to communicate online. Examples include the use of GIFs to convey reactions, the Instagramming of daily life (https://instagram.com), and the circulation of comedic Vines (https://vine.co).
Fish takes a blended approach, treating the site of reception, the Internet itself, and the socioeconomic context with equal significance.\textsuperscript{64} His analysis takes account of the time and effort Internet users put into their online activities and the contexts within which they use it, arguing against the commonly held conceptions of the Internet as “immaterial” space, free from the constraints of geographically located life, or as an “interconnected global village” wherein differences are “compressed.”\textsuperscript{65}

However, a complex social network site like Fetlife is a space with its own rules, contexts and norms, and as such can be seen as a ‘field’ in its own right, without access to users at their ‘site of reception.’ Thus my analysis will take place on the level of the text (i.e. the website itself, and other texts online), rather than treating Fetlife as a means to access people ‘in real life.’ While FetLife is certainly a part of the offline (‘nonline’?\textsuperscript{66}) BDSM world, online sociality is not analogous to offline sociality. This means that analysis of FetLife cannot stand in for analysis of other forms of BDSM sociality, nor is it possible to know from the research I am doing what part FetLife plays in that world. Treating FetLife as a self-contained online field means that insights gained from this analysis are relevant to the online space alone. Accordingly, my analysis covers: the website and structures that have been built by computer programmers and web developers; the textual and visual interactions of individual users; and the relationship these textual and technological forms have to one another. Using rhetorical-textual analysis and the encoding/decoding model, both the textual level and at the socio-semiotic level of this field can be addressed.

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\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} I am a little troubled by the term ‘offline’ because so many people now are constantly online in their daily (professional and personal) lives because of wireless internet, smartphones and tablets – not forgetting wearable tech like Google glass and smart watches! ‘Offline’ implies not in contact with the Internet, but this is not really the case for many people these days. ‘Nonline’ perhaps captures our current situation a little better.
Methodology

Rhetorical-Textual Analysis

The Aristotelian rhetorical model underlies the rhetorical-textual approach to texts:

Figure 1 The Aristotelian Rhetorical Model of Textual Analysis.

The textual analysis approach is an intuitive one, whereby one makes “an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.” There “is no such thing as a single, ‘correct’ interpretation of any text” because a range of interpretations are possible, some of which will be more likely than others (“polysemy” rather than “pluralism,” to introduce Stuart Hall’s words). While some might

67 Cindy Patton, “Textual Analysis,” SA 841: Graduate Seminar, class lecture at Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, BC, October 30, 2012.

68 Alan McKee, “A Beginner’s Guide to Textual Analysis,” Metro Magazine (2001), 3. I think it’s worth noting how uncomfortable I feel about using this quote, because it is an admission (and an acceptance) that I am simply doing a kind of fancy guesswork, and this admission feels exposing and unseemly, like it would be preferable to pretend otherwise. And yet, I am leaving it in. I feel the vulnerability has the potential to be rewarding.

69 Ibid., 4.


71 Hall, “Encoding/decoding,” 513.
balk at the admission that my analysis is guesswork, this can be countered by pointing out that all interpretation of data is subjective, whatever claim to objectivity is made by the interpreter.\textsuperscript{72} The idea “that all knowledge is created within culture, and that the kinds of knowledge created will depend on the cultural context within which it is produced,”\textsuperscript{73} frees me as the analyser from any perceived need to erase myself from the analytical process; this freedom from so-called objectivity demands of me a self-reflexivity and self-consciousness about my positionality that might otherwise seem superfluous. As such, the epistemological status of data produced by my chosen means of analysis is most certainly contingent on my own ideology, my own sociocultural context, and my own background, learning, and attitude towards the subject matter. This is not to think in terms of bias, but rather positionality.

Building upon this approach to epistemology, the evidentiary status of textual examples within the analysis must be considered. In more quantitative forms of textual analysis, such as content analysis, an ‘additive’ model is adhered to, wherein the more examples we see of something, the more true we hold it to be.\textsuperscript{74} This approach treats multiple instances of single components as demonstrating ‘representativeness.’ This is not the evidentiary approach taken in rhetorical-textual analysis, which instead asserts ‘representativeness’ by providing a small number of rhetorically rich examples that have multiple interesting components which highlight important aspects of the textual landscape.\textsuperscript{75} In this form of analysis the complexity of the object is the key, drawing upon a literary approach to evidence. We do not understand literary analyses to be unreliable: rather, they can be taken as reliable interpretations of a given text. The sense of reliability comes from the richness of the example alongside the analyser’s careful

\textsuperscript{74} For example, Roberto Franzosi, \textit{Content Analysis} (Thousand Oaks California, London: SAGE Publications, 2008).
consideration of the text’s content and context, familiarity with all relevant aspects of the

text, attention to detail, and strength of argument.\textsuperscript{76}

Additionally, this approach does not mean judging whether a text is an accurate

representation of reality, because a representation is never fully analogous to reality,

instead being an entity with a separate existence and logic of its own. Thus (online) texts

themselves are the field of analysis, rather than a means to access the ‘truth’ of the

individuals behind the texts.\textsuperscript{77} “Discursive ‘knowledge’ is the product not of the

transparent representation of the ‘real’ in language but of the articulation of language on

real relations and conditions.”\textsuperscript{78} Texts can be treated as ‘rhetorical resources’ that have

been assembled in a particular way by the author, and from such an understanding

questions arise, such as:

What do you think the text is and how does it ‘fit in’?

How did the text get where it is?

What histories and narratives does the author draw upon?

What kinds of narrative are available to them?

What kinds of logics/discourses are at play on the website? Is there a

dominant logic/rhetoric to which the site adheres?

How close is the fit between author and audience?

How and why are texts embedded within other texts? How have they

come to be embedded where they are?\textsuperscript{79}

‘Logic’ is a key term within this set of questions. By logic, I mean a set of rules that is

generally followed, a way of thinking about the world, an outlook, a worldview,

\textsuperscript{76} Patton, “Textual Analysis.”

\textsuperscript{77} Regarding the constructionist approach to ‘truth’ and ‘validity,’ see Gary W. Taylor and Jane M.


\textsuperscript{78} Hall, “Encoding/decoding,” 511.

\textsuperscript{79} Patton, “Textual Analysis.”
conventions, norms and mores. As an example, pornography and ‘romcoms’ are two filmic genres that have different logics regarding women, sex and love. In porn, women are always ready and willing to have sex with multiple partners with no performance of emotional connection, whereas in romcoms, women are not generally willing to have sex unless it’s with a loving partner and, once the perfect partner has been found, they are presumed happily monogamous ever after. Neither of these logics reflects real life: they are narrative elements that hold true within a particular genre, and are part of the organisational structure of a genre. In other words, we are able to categorise particular texts into genres because they share the same logic (alongside other aspects, such as aesthetic qualities, form, format, and cultural status). As such, we can find evidence of particular ‘logics’ within texts, which shape them and influence the way they can be understood, an idea that can be equated to the ‘codes’ of Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model.

The Encoding/Decoding Model

This model addresses the social, formal and semiotic elements of the text, and is an analysis tool that considers the social context of media communications alongside technological and formal elements. The model is a four-stage theory of communications, encompassing:

- Production
- Circulation
- Use (distribution/consumption)
- Reproduction

This tool is Hall’s attempt to move on from the traditional mass-communications model of sender/message/receiver, instead conceiving of “a complex structure of relations”

80 By ‘romcoms,’ I mean ‘romantic comedies,’ a mainstream Western film genre that generally features heterosexual, monogamous romance as its central narrative, lighthearted dialogue, and an overwhelming sense that ‘happily ever after’ is fully achievable.

81 Semiotic theories look at technical details. Formalist theories look at non-narrative elements.

82 Hall, “Encoding/decoding,” 507.
wherein the four stages above are seen as "distinctive" — yet linked — "moments," "sustained through the articulation of collective practices."\(^83\) The "object of these practices is meanings and messages in the form of sign vehicles of a specific kind organised, like any form of communication or language, through the operation of codes within the syntagmatic chain of a discourse."\(^84\) Messages are only consumed if they are "translated...into social practices,"\(^85\) thus forming a circuit. The moments of 'encoding' and 'decoding' are "determinate moments," wherein the "raw" event becomes a "story"; the 'raw form' of an event cannot be 'transmitted,' but can only be "signified,"\(^86\) encoded as signs or story. In other words, "the event must become a 'story' before it can become a communicative event."\(^87\) In order for the message to have an effect, "satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use,'" it must be "meaningfully decoded," and it is "this set of decoded meanings which 'have an effect,' influence, entertain, instruct or persuade."\(^88\) This decoding moment and the subsequent effect of the message "cannot be understood in simple behavioural terms."\(^89\) Importantly, the "codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical,"\(^90\) creating differences in the intended meaning and the perceived meaning of a message; in other words the "coding of a message does control its reception but not transparently."\(^91\) This is polysemy rather than pluralism: messages are open to some interpretation, but not just any interpretation.\(^92\) Through this model Hall sought to insert a "semiotic paradigm into a social framework,"\(^93\) moving beyond a model of media communications that did not take into account existing social relations, while still paying close attention to the semiotic aspects of communication.

\(^83\) Ibid., 508.
\(^84\) Ibid.
\(^85\) Ibid.
\(^86\) Ibid.
\(^87\) Ibid. This links back to my brief discussion of the ontological status of texts, in that representations of any sort, whether these are conceived of as sign vehicles or texts, are never direct, 'accurate' reflections of reality, but always altered in some way.
\(^88\) Ibid., 509.
\(^89\) Hall, "Encoding/decoding," 509.
\(^90\) Ibid., 510.
\(^91\) Ibid., 507.
\(^92\) Ibid., 513.
\(^93\) Ibid., 507.
Hall originally proposed this model in the 1970s, at a time when the media landscape consisted largely of television and radio broadcasting, and print media. The Internet, handheld wireless devices and “Web 2.0”\textsuperscript{94} have vastly altered this landscape, creating a much faster-paced and more fragmented media, enabling new formations and possibilities for media communications to arise. Hall’s model reflected a world wherein production and consumption were set apart from one another, the former taking place in newsroom and TV studio, and the latter taking place on the street or in the living room. Now, production and consumption are more entwined, in some sense happening in the same place as each other, and those with access to these technologies are increasingly able to take on the role of producer. As Taylor, Demont-Heinrich, Broadfoot, Dodge and Jian state, the model must be adapted to take into account interactive, multi-media, and hyper-textual formats of communication; accelerating rates of techno-cultural change; increased pervasiveness, transparency, multi-functionality, and autonomy of computers; increased convergence of media systems and program genres; popular anxiety and optimism regarding the consequences of new media; and increasing fusion of organic and technological materials to create ‘cyborg’ bodies and identities.\textsuperscript{95}

Thus the moments of production, consumption and reproduction are no longer so clearly differentiated, for five interrelated reasons. First, the speed at which news and information can spread through the global population has hugely increased, making immediate consumption and reaction commonplace; second, users/consumers have unprecedented direct access to producers through social media, and media producers can be reactive in ways that were impossible in ‘traditional’ media and broadcasting (as demonstrated by the quick reversion of unpopular changes by large media companies like Twitter, Apple and Netflix\textsuperscript{96}); third, producers and consumers are no longer clearly defined groups, because the means of media production are much more readily


available to all (e.g. through smartphone technology); fourth, an increased sense of ‘democratisation’ in communications means that consumers feel ownership over, and the right to have an opinion on and influence, the output of others; fifth, the multiplicity of small-scale producer-consumers alongside monolithic institutions has shifted the scale of production (although large corporations still exert a strong hold on our media, e.g. Google, Facebook). Quoting Henry Jenkins, Feona Attwood writes, "[r]ather than talking about media producers and consumers as occupying separate roles, we might now see them as participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands."97

**Sexuality and the Internet**

By combining a contemporary version of Hall’s encoding/decoding model with rhetorical-textual analysis, we can address the contextual, structural and technical elements of the FetLife website, as well as the interactions that take place within it. Underlying this two-pronged approach is the wish to connect texts to the social realities of the online world, where sexualities are changing and evolving at great pace. New apps, websites, and technologies are affecting the way we have sex and the way we represent ourselves sexually. Scholarship of online ‘sexuo-social’ relations and sexual self-representation has thus far been somewhat limited, in part because “studies to date have focused overwhelmingly on the possible negative effects of Internet sexuality,”98 primarily examining the effects of online pornography.99 Nonetheless, there are scholars who have eschewed the behavioural approach, looking instead at online sexualities and self-representation as cultural phenomena in their own right, and without resorting to the

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99 However, it is important to mention the growing field of Porn Studies, which does not take this ‘effects’ approach, but instead looks at a more diverse range of topics and does not default to a negative view of porn.
language of deviance. A very early example is Marjorie Kibby and Brigid Costello’s 2001 paper, *Between the Image and the Act: Interactive Sex Entertainment on the Internet*, which analyses “interactive sex entertainment sites” that used “CU-SeeMe video-conferencing software,” a small scale, niche precursor to Skype and other online video chat technologies (Chat Roulette, sex cams etc). The CU-SeeMe software and online culture was interactive, constituting “sex entertainment that [was] both image and act,” wherein the producer and consumer roles were conflated, making it an interesting cultural precursor to FetLife as a sexual social network site. This conflation of roles comes from the “many-to-many communication process” of the Internet, which “has broken down strict lines of demarcation between those who produce sex entertainment products, and those who consume them.” “Being simultaneously the producer and consumer enables both self-representation and an active relationship with the erotic object,” making each user an active producer-consumer.

Another study focusing on representation and the online “many-to-many communication process” is Theresa Senft’s 2008 book, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, which looks at the “homecamming movement,” a more widespread and popular phenomenon than use of CU-SeeMe. Homecamming was also a precursor to practices and affordances that are ubiquitous today, “the camgirls” serving as “beta testers’ for a range of techniques that have been taken up at a global level on video sharing sites like YouTube, and social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook.” An important part of Senft’s project is the

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103 For example LiveJasmin, currently the most popular sex cam site (www.livejasmin.com).
104 Kibby and Costello, “Interactive Sex Entertainment,” 359.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid., 360.
107 Kibby and Costello, "Interactive Sex Entertainment," 359.
109 Ibid., 8.
“presentation of self” online and the concept of the “practice of microcelebrity,” which she defines as “the commitment to deploying and maintaining one’s online identity as if it were a branded good, with the expectation that others do the same.” The idea of maintaining a consistent narrative and image for one’s online presence has occurred in part because of the searchability, accessibility, and persistence of information online. Careful construction of an online identity can help to ensure social and professional success: many are the stories of people being fired from jobs after posting something untoward online.

“[P]resentation of self” as a brand is also symptomatic of the requirement to perform “affective labor” online. Affective labour online “is personal, intertwined with questions of lifestyle, and voluntarily carried out by users attaching themselves to online platforms.” Affect “becomes ingrained in site concept design as platforms aim to optimize their ‘stickiness,’ that is, to make users spend as much time on the site as possible, and to return regularly.” The terms “immaterial labour 2.0” and the “attention economy” denote very similar ideas, in essence that “the expenditure of

110 See also Senft, “Microcelebrity.”
111 Senft, Camgirls, 7.
114 Senft, “Microcelebrity,” 347.
115 Senft, Camgirls, 7.
117 Ibid.
120 Wherein “we watch, link, click, and forward, we switch from being consumers to being producers of the most valuable resource of all: attention.” Senft, “Microcelebrity,” 350.
cognitive surplus,” in the form of “participation, discussion, flirting, goofing off” online, is a form of labour that benefits the online platforms we use. As a result our work and leisure time (including sexual leisure) are no longer clearly delineated from one another.

Affective labour is also a key concept in the study of online self-representation, for example in Katrien Jacobs’ 2010 autoethnographic investigation into the way AdultFriendFinder, a ‘hook-up’ dating site, is used in Hong Kong. Jacobs created an “online personality” named “Lizzy Kinsey, scholarly sex machine” to investigate gender, race, and self-representational choices on the site. She concluded that site users create “cybertypes” – “simplified pornographic identities” – to construct “self-portraits,” adopting such “curtailed identities as a convenient mask to hide behind while revealing pornographic selves and crossing boundaries.” Site users deliberately interacted with established signifiers of sex and sexuality when producing and consuming their and others’ self-representations, with a knowing nod towards the artifice of such representations. The idea of the active producer-consumer is thus a recurring

124 This concept originates with Lisa Nakamura, who is more concerned with online racial representation. Jacobs develops the concept in order to place gender more centrally, although race is still of significance. Lisa Nakamura, Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet (New York: Routledge, 2002).
126 Ibid., 701.
theme in online sex research, making it a defining feature of sex online (and, indeed, of online sociality in general).

Another defining feature of sociality online is the infiltration of commercialism into the social sphere in order to find ways to monetise online activity; for instance, large, free-to-user sites like Facebook and Google gather vast amounts of data which allow them to develop innovative marketing that can be finely targeted at individuals or demographic groups. This convergence of sociality and commercialism has also happened in online sexual spaces, as documented by, for example, Jacobs, Janssen and Pasquinelli, Paasonen, and Maddison. A good example is Feona Attwood’s 2007 media discourse analysis of two internet sites that she defines as sexual "taste cultures, Nerve and SuicideGirls. Attwood investigates how commerce, community,
and culture overlap on these sites, looking at how they "construct sexual display as a form of recreation, self-presentation and community building." Sites like SuicideGirls "complicate traditional ways of representing the self; combining forms associated with objectification and commodification and those associated with the expression of the unique self." Also writing about SuicideGirls, Shoshana Magnet focuses on the site's claims of ethical representational practices and diversity. She found that diversity on the site exists only in a commercial way, "reflective of the internet tenet which holds that 'content diversity is good business,'" the "feminist potential" of the site remaining "constrained by its inclusion of only a limited number of women of colour and only as a marketing 'strategy' of diversity."

The key themes that emerge from the study of sexuality online are the presentation of self as brand, affective labour, the active producer-consumer, and the convergence of sociality and commercialism. Together, these ideas speak to the way that new technologies and technological affordances have reshaped the sexuo-social sphere. The online convergence of sociality and commercialism, wherein an active producer-consumer is labouring constantly both on their own self-as-brand and in service to the ‘free’ platforms within which they socialise, is captured well in Stephen Maddison's figure of the "entrepreneurial voyeur," a governmentality-led individual who expertly brands him- or herself and is a consummate contemporary consumer. This figure is based on ideas of "the enterprise society" in Michel Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics*, and taken up by Lois McNay with the idea that the “autonomy” afforded by such a society "guarantees not liberty but responsible self-management."

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134 Attwood, “No Money Shot,” 441.
135 Ibid., 449.
137 Ibid., 577.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
Ethical Considerations

Rather than a series of discrete spheres, the Web is better thought of as a series of networked, quasi-public spaces peopled by both familiar strangers and strange familiars. In such an environment, the private, the public, and the pornographic will always be a relational, rather than universal, affair.\textsuperscript{141}

The 21\textsuperscript{st} century advent of “social network sites”\textsuperscript{142} like FetLife has made online and mediated sexual interaction commonplace, part of the fabric of everyday life for many. In some ways, FetLife is treated by its developers and users as being a ‘virtual’ mirror of ‘offline’ BDSM and ‘kinky’ sexual spaces; in other ways, it is treated as something entirely different, modelled on the structures and norms of dating sites and social networks. Language that mirrors that of offline sexual spaces prompts users to interact with the site as if they were in such places, which, while being quasi-public, have a certain sense of privacy and protection about them. Gatekeepers, both literal and figurative, guard the door, and relatively few unknown quantities are able to gain access. Those who do are easy to monitor. Not so in online BDSM space, wherein the door is left unguarded, and one is surrounded by strangers who may or may not make themselves known. Here I find it useful to consider Senft’s concept of “strange familiars”:

The expression is a response to sociologist Stanley Milgram (1992), who uses the term ‘familiar strangers’ to refer to people who know each other by sight but not by name (such as people from the same neighborhood who ride the train together at the same time each morning). According to Milgram, social convention dictates that familiar strangers acknowledge each other but, on the whole, keep a tacit agreement not to engage with one another beyond a quick nod and a smile. But does the same commitment not to engage exist when we find ourselves sitting on the train next to someone we watched for five hours last night via YouTube? What if, after reading the blog of a girl who talks about being sexually abused by her father, we suddenly and without warning find ourselves in a public space with the two of them? These scenarios move us from being familiar strangers to individuals bound in strange familiarity: the

\textsuperscript{141} Senft, \textit{Camgirls}, 117.
\textsuperscript{142} boyd and Ellison, “Social Network Sites.”
familiarity that arises from exchanging private information with people from whom we are otherwise remote.\textsuperscript{143}

The sensation of being in contact with ‘strange familiars’ can also be experienced on FetLife. The sexually explicit nature of many of the materials on Fetlife, particularly pictures, videos, and journal entries, makes ‘strange familiars’ inadequate. ‘Strange intimates’ is more à propos: one can observe others having sex, or being tied up and gagged, but have no real-world connection with them. As a researcher, this is all the more poignant when I reflect on my legitimacy in having access to such items. Perhaps it is not the access that feels illegitimate, but the particular ‘gaze,’ work of analysis, and will to knowledge that I bring to my interactions with these materials: a strange intimacy that is not necessarily consensual or welcomed. It is therefore necessary to carefully consider my ethical obligations in this study. This leaves me conflicted: while the user-generated content on FetLife can be accessed by anyone, effectively putting it in the public domain,\textsuperscript{144} I am aware that those who create it very often do so in the spirit of privacy (notwithstanding a conception of one’s online presence as having certain “super-public”\textsuperscript{145} qualities). As a researcher combing through the profiles, pictures, and videos on Fetlife, I see myself as something of a cyber-vampire, feeding upon the ‘lifeblood’ of Fetlife (i.e. its user-generated content) but never contributing anything to it.

But I am not alone: many users are present behind computer and smartphone screens without ever making their presence known within the online space. While social network sites are designed to enable interaction and participation, they are also places where less interactive users are reading, watching, and observing on a daily basis. A

\textsuperscript{143} Senft, “Microcelebrity,” 352.


\textsuperscript{145} boyd, “Super Publics.”
colloquialism for this type of user is a ‘lurker’: someone who spends time in internet forums, social networks, and comment sections but does not participate. The word ‘lurker’ is meant to be humorous, but also suggests something creepy about this behaviour: it implies a presence in the shadows, someone who does not want to be known. As a researcher looking at the site, my lurker-like qualities are inescapable.

As a lurker, I can scroll through countless interactions on message boards, or watch videos and read comments on Kinky and Popular, without anyone involved knowing that I am doing so. I can sit in my lounge or office and silently observe, silently lurk. It is noteworthy that this is possible in a BDSM space: online BDSM-on-Fetlife is open to being ‘lurked,’ in a way that offline BDSM social space is not. While one can stand in the shadows at a BDSM play party, one is by no means invisible. In fact, offline BDSM social spaces are in general well-regulated, socially speaking: the community is said to carefully watch out for unwelcome or dangerous behaviour. Fetlife is a place where both active, visible participation and ‘passive,’ invisible lurking can take place. While in offline BDSM settings, gatekeepers can intervene if participation is socially unacceptable, there is no analogous way of intervening in online lurking.

146 “Lurk 1 Be or remain hidden so as to wait in ambush for someone or something: a ruthless killer still lurked in the darkness 1.1(Of an unpleasant quality) be present in a latent or barely discernible state, although still presenting a threat: danger lurks beneath the surface (as adjective lurking) he lives with a lurking fear of exposure as a fraud 1.2 [NO OBJECT] informal Read the postings in an Internet forum without actively contributing.” Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “lurk,” accessed January 24, 2015, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/lurk?searchDictCode=all.

147 I need to add here I have been a member of Fetlife for many years; not a very active or engaged one, but a member nevertheless, with a small number of Fetlife friends, most of whom I know in real life from my own forays into BDSM. In a sense, my academic work on Fetlife mirrors my personal way of interacting with Fetlife, in that I was more watcher (‘lurker’) than keen interacter. I generally am not all that comfortable interacting online; I don’t feel able to fully communicate with others through text alone, which is an ironic admission, considering that I am now writing this very thesis in order to communicate my ideas via the written word. I think it’s partly my (cursory) familiarity with Fetlife, and partly my bemusement and bewilderment at the fulfillment that people appear to draw from online social networking, that have led me to this place, to the ideas I’m attempting, imperfectly, to address. The idea that social networks, including Fetlife, are structured to create a sense of community, when that metaphor is so precarious, makes their very popularity (and the intense and intimate ways that people use them) deeply fascinating to me.

148 NSA surveillance programme and SFU internet usage monitoring notwithstanding!

149 Weiss, Techniques of Pleasure, 94.
Possibly the most significant technical capability of information technology and computer-mediated interaction is how, with a couple of mouse clicks, anything can be copied and saved forever on a hard drive, or edited, or reproduced elsewhere. This forces us to consider the permanence of what in the past may have been ephemeral and passing experiences. Susanna Paasonen, referencing Lisbeth Klastrup, calls this the (after)life of texts: once distributed online, home media enter a web of exchange and circulation that is ultimately impossible for the producers to control, and texts are gradually detached from their origins and narratives related to them. ... As images and videos travel from one community, group or site to another, the agency of the performers and producers becomes dispersed and their products may no longer be theirs to control.\(^{150}\)

Senft calls this ability “the Grab,”\(^{151}\) a neologisation of ‘the Gaze’: “the grab is at play in the process of circulation, for once an image begins to travel around the Web, it is impossible to control where it will wind up.”\(^{152}\)

As an academic ‘lurker,’ my reasons for being in the social space of Fetlife are perhaps hard to accept for other users, who perceive all lurking activity as ‘grabbing,’\(^{153}\) and the (non-) act of not actively participating as either morally or socially unacceptable. My reasons for lurking are probably different from those of other lurkers: I lurk for collection, comparison, analysis, thinking, considering, comparing, investigating, learning about, learning from...the list could go on. However, it is dangerous to make assumptions about the motives of other lurkers. Certainly we can take a guess about common reasons, such as masturbation, but is it right to think that mine are necessarily more worthy or more valid? There is certainly a commonality between myself and the lurking figure of the masturbator in our will to knowledge of the sexual subject; like sexologists before us, we are both interested in sexual self-display. My non-prurient (less prurient?) interest perhaps takes in more than the image’s ability to sexually arouse, but at the same time a different kind of arousal is piqued in me, one that is

\(^{151}\) Senft, Camgirls, 46.
\(^{152}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{153}\) Cf “the Grab,” ibid., 46.
socially and academically more acceptable, but nevertheless only valid within a particular set of sociocultural values that prizes the intellectual above the corporeal. The everyday Fetlife user who has uploaded explicit images of him- or herself might find my interest more unsettling, simple prurience being quite easy to comprehend, detailed textual analysis less so. Our lurking archetype seeks immediate gratification, whilst I seek delayed gratification in the form of knowledge, development of ideas, and ultimately an academic qualification. Might the regular user think that looking at pictures of people having kinky sex is a funny way to achieve this aim?

As a researcher looking at Fetlife, my ability to lurk, and to copy and reproduce what I find during these lurkings puts me in an interesting position of power, one not available to me in ‘meatspace’ social settings. While the site’s Terms of Use do not proscribe researchers from using the site for their work (the only professionals it bars from practicing their craft on the site are journalists), there are certainly users who see research on Fetlife as an invasion of privacy, as can be seen from the following examples of what I call ‘privacy warnings.’ First, a caveat: I have not cited the following quotes from Fetlife users, contrary to standard academic practice. This is because the originators of these quotes would not want to be cited, as will become clear:

A:

WARNING!!!!

WARNING: Any institutions or individuals using this site or any of its associated sites for studies or projects - You DO NOT have permission to

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154 As Danah Boyd states, digital “architectures alter the structure of social life and information flow. Persistence, searchability, the collapse of distance and time, copyability… These are not factors that most everyday people consider when living unmediated lives. Yet, they are increasingly becoming normative in society.” boyd, “Super Publics.”

155 The Terms of Use state that members of the media can use FetLife “solely for [their] personal enjoyment and not as part of any investigation or gathering of information” (https://fetlife.com/fetlife/tou, accessed June 22, 2014). This has not necessarily stopped them from doing so, as can be seen in the case of the RCMP officer, Corporal Jim Brown, who was placed “under investigation by the force for possible misconduct” after photos of him engaging in consensual BDSM scenes found their way into the news, reported on by CBC, CTV, The Vancouver Sun and The Huffington Post. For example, CBC. “RCMP Officer Investigated Over Bondage Photos.” CBC, July 5, 2012, revised September 4 2012, http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/rcmp-officer-investigated-over-bondage-photos-1.1182049.
use any of my profile or pictures in any form or forum both current and future. If you have or do, it will be considered a violation of my privacy and will be subject to legal ramifications.

B:

WARNING!! All my photos are copyrighted. Any institutions, individuals, and/or third parties using this site and/or any of its associated sites for studies or projects, and/or any duplication (for any reason) and/or posting to any site - You do NOT have my permission to use any of my profile and/or pictures in any form or forum both past, present, and future. You do NOT have my permission to copy, save, or print my pictures for your own personal use, including, but not limited to saving them on your computer, posting them on any other website, or this one and passing them off as your own. If you have or do, it will be considered a serious violation of my privacy and will be subject to legal ramifications under the Privacy Act, Copyright and/or other.

C:

WARNING: Any institution, media or person using this site or any of its associated sites: You do not have my permission to use anything of mine in any way period!

Examples A and B both directly reference “studies or projects,” presumably referring to academic research work. Example C is more of a blanket approach, barring anyone from using “anything” of theirs “in any way period!” These warnings raise ethical questions for me, given that they are addressed in part to me, a person doing one of these “studies or projects” at an “institution.” While these ‘warnings’ do not have any legal weight, nor do they affect the relationship the user has with the site itself (as laid out in the site’s Terms of Use157), their presence indicates an understanding by the site’s users of their status as ‘studied subjects,’ and a negative view of those who access the site for reasons other than to ‘sexuo-socialise.’ Because the site is structured, styled, and

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156 I make this claim because copyright laws are subject to ‘fair use’ or ‘fair dealing’ exceptions in Canada, the UK and the USA, which allow for the use of extracts of works without the copyright holder’s permission for a range of reasons, including academic study, commentary and criticism, parody, and for creating accessible versions for visually impaired people. See “Basics FAQ,” University of British Columbia, accessed January 24, 2015. http://copyright.ubc.ca/guidelines-and-resources/faq/basics/ (Canada); Rich Stim, “What Is Fair Use?” accessed January 24, 2015, http://fairuse.stanford.edu/overview/fair-use/what-is-fair-use/ (USA); and “Exceptions to Copyright,” Gov.uk, accessed January 24, 2015, https://www.gov.uk/exceptions-to-copyright (UK).

presented as a ‘community,’ there are those who perceive its essential characteristics to be “sociability, meaningful connection to others, conviviality, perhaps even empathy and support”158; in other words, those who feel all should adhere to the rules of ‘community.’

Thus, my presence on, and approach to, studying Fetlife is complicated and a little troublesome. I’m aware that some would find my presence distasteful, an invasion of privacy; others would accept the essentially public nature of online interactions; still others might question my motives in undertaking this piece of work. It’s a muddy picture, one that cannot easily be resolved.

Chapter 3.

The Dual FetLife Scandals: The Criminal Accusations Scandal and the Sexual Assault Scandal

The Community Metaphor

As discussed in Chapter 1, FetLife calls itself as an online community. Malcolm Parks explains that rather than being a self-evident and straightforward description, ‘community’ is actually a metaphor for how people use the Internet. This metaphor for online interactions and social groupings has been “so successful that it effectively banished alternative metaphors,” such as “information superhighway,” from everyday usage. The word “community” is laden with “affective and historical complications” and, if treated as a metaphor, can be seen as a narrative component that structures discourse online. Through this pervasive metaphor, social network sites “carry expectations of sociability, meaningful connection to others, conviviality, perhaps even empathy and support.”

In the case of FetLife, the metaphor alludes not only to other popular social network sites (“It’s Facebook for the kinky community”), but also to offline BDSM

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159 ‘Community’ has also become the go-to framing metaphor when discussing socio-political, demographic and identity politics (e.g. ‘the gay community’ rather than ‘gay people,’ ‘the gaming community’ rather than ‘people who play computer games’). This rhetorical practice has the effect of more closely publicly aligning people who may only be connected in a statistical or demographic sense, which can potentially fuel both a sense of solidarity and connectedness, and a more divisive, identity-political protectionism.


161 Ibid., 106.

162 Ibid., 105.

163 Andrea Zanin, “Facebook for the Kinky.” Montreal Mirror, September 4-10, 2008, now available only at Archive.is, http://archive.is/aY7pJ.
spaces. Through its language and structure, FetLife creates the powerful impression that it is a closed, quasi-private space that functions as a community. This impression was severely weakened when a scandal erupted on the site three years ago, comprising of two elements. First, a group of FetLife users challenged a rule contained in the site’s Terms of Use that no accusations of criminal behaviour – particularly sexual assault or consent violation – could be made in any ‘public’ area of the site (i.e. in ‘groups’ or ‘writings’). This challenge was swiftly rebuffed by FetLife. Second, and as a result of these events, Baku himself was publicly accused of sexual assault. This accusation was made outside of FetLife but was widely discussed on the site, and as a result Baku posted an apology on the site too. Through this narrative we can see how Baku, his company BitLove, and the structure and language of FetLife interdependently reinforce the community metaphor, creating the sense of authentic, inclusive, and democratic web space. We can also see how the scandal breaks this illusion.

**FetLife as ‘Community’**

*Hush Magazine:* How would you describe the FetLife community in 3 words? Would you say you're in the business of fetish? Or online community?

*John Baku:* Kink-a-licious. Wow... that is so corny! If I had to choose 3 words it would be ‘FetLife is home.’ For me, and many other people, FetLife is one of the only places in the world where I feel like I just belong.\(^\text{164}\)

FetLife portrays itself as a grassroots business run by people who understand the needs of those they serve, rather than a corporate body exploiting a community for monetary gain. Each employee of FetLife’s parent company, BitLove, has their own FetLife profile, making them all quite literally ‘of the community’ they run. The logic of community is

\(^{164}\) Baku, “Hush Magazine.” Discussing a real-life BDSM community, Staci Newmahr writes, “An understanding of the SM community as ‘home’ is not unique to Seth [one of her informants]... During both casual and public conversations about the scene, the reference to having found a home is strikingly common. This metaphor is carried across degrees of presence in the community; absences from the scene result in homesickness and returning is like coming home.” Staci Newmahr, “Becoming a Sadomasochist: Integrating Self and Other in Ethnographic Analysis,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 37 (2008): 633, doi: 10.1177/0891241607310626.
reinforced through the style, tone, and content of FetLife texts and communications, as demonstrated by looking at its public front page. This page is not sexually explicit and has a simple, clean design: a black background with text in white and red *sans serif* fonts. The content of the front page suggests that it has been designed to entice new users: it includes a description of the site, a single image, a list of reasons to join, stats on the site’s usage, and a box entitled “What are people saying about FetLife?” This box contains quotes from apparently genuine users, such as

‘Great website. I have been checking out facebook [sic] but I have to keep it somewhat neutral as vanilla family and friends are there. Its [sic] great to have somewhere to go where you don't have to hide anything.’ — shy_but_sassy 43F (British Columbia, Canada).

FetLife’s editorial decision to put this quote on the front page actively creates the sense that it is a genuinely private space: “somewhere to go where you don't have to hide anything.”

The list of reasons offered for why one should join FetLife casts it as a place of joyous inclusiveness and acceptance. I think it is worth reproducing this text in full here.

**Why Join FetLife?**

1. It’s Free

Free as in Google, mySpace and Facebook free.

2. It’s Secure

We have a fetish for security. That's why we're the first social network to be 100% SSL. The same security banks use.

3. Your kinky friends are already on here

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165 *Sans serif* fonts are those that do not have *serifs*, the small lines or flourishes at the ends of characters. Popular *sans serif* fonts include Arial and Calibri. The most widely used *serif* font is *Times New Roman*.


167 Ibid.

168 Ibid.
With 3,085,557 members, there is a good chance they are already on FetLife. Find them, message them, share pictures with them and see what they are up to.

4. A great way to make new kinky friends
Don't tell me you are full up on kinky friends.

5. FetLife is not a meat market
And that is why it works. Fewer trolls, less BS and more real people.

6. People on FetLife accept you as you are
It gives you a place to learn, share and explore your kinks.

7. Get in touch with your local community
There is no easier way than FetLife. And if you want to get active locally, we have over 268,062 events listed.

8. Join one of over 73,537 Groups
Our groups are a great place to ask questions, get advice & give advice to/from a large portion of the community.

9. It has a simple design and interface
We are proud of the design. It is simple and gets out of your way.

10. Designed by the community, for the community
We are not a faceless corporation. We are kinksters just like you.\textsuperscript{169}

The sense of a safe, private, and warm community is presented over and over again: its designers are “just like you”; people on this site “accept you as you are”; the site owners are members of “the community,” not some “faceless corporation”; the site is “free” for you; your data is “secure” because they use the “same security banks use.”\textsuperscript{170} The tone is clear, casual, friendly, and open, using colloquialisms (“Fewer trolls, less BS”) and

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
humour ("We have a fetish for security"\textsuperscript{171}). The word 'kinky' comes up a lot: 'kinky' is a playful word, a cute word; it's accessible, fun, and sassy, the 'y' sound on the end suggesting something small, feminine or friendly.

Elsewhere on the page is the site's slogan, “BDSM & fetish community for kinksters by kinksters.”\textsuperscript{172} ‘Kinkster,’ like ‘kinky,’ is a playful euphemism that presents the non-pathological and unintimidating face of BDSM and fetish sexuality. Item 10 on the above list ("Designed by the community, for the community"\textsuperscript{173}) is an unabashed claim to authenticity by the site developers. By stating explicitly that it (BitLove) is “not a faceless corporation,”\textsuperscript{174} they also appeal to an anti-corporate sensibility. The list also subtly references anti-oppression, LGBT and feminist activism by alluding to the idea of a ‘safe space’: it’s described as secure, diverse, and accepting, a ‘safe space’ for people who are ‘different,’ sexually; a true alternative to the mainstream that is safe for you. Users are thus invited to treat it as closed, semi-private, internally trustworthy, and authentic.

The front page also contains a single professional-looking, non-explicit BDSM-themed image which changes on a regular basis, with a small number in rotation. Most interestingly, they are all ‘user-generated content’; that is, all taken, posed and submitted for use on the front page by FetLife users. Images are thematically appropriate (e.g. people tied with ropes, or in rubber clothing), whilst also projecting an accessible version of BDSM and kink, in keeping with the branding of the site. FetLife explains how they choose suitable pictures:

> From our experience, this is what we have learnt makes for a good front page picture:

> **Using Props:** Flogger, St. Andrews Cross, cage, etc.

\textsuperscript{171} It is also worth pointing out that questions about privacy and data protection have also been raised by bloggers critical of Fetlife and BitLove’s security, particularly around the storage and retention of images and videos that appear to be deleted, but are in fact are still available online to anyone with only minimal technical expertise required. See Kirr, “Guest Post: Some Notes About FetLife’s (In)Security.” Maybe Maimed but Never Harmed (blog), accessed March 15, 2015, http://pastebin.com/4jXxz9HR.


\textsuperscript{173} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
**Smiling Happy People:** Smiling happy people are inviting people.

**Color:** People are attracted to pictures that have color in them.

**Highlight our Diversity:** Diversity in age, size, orientation and kinks.

**Be Creative & Different:** To get peoples [sic] attention. (Original italics)

While the site often solicits new pictures from its users for use on the front page, no offer of payment is ever made. This does not put users off: in one FetLife ‘Announcements’ thread asking for more pictures, many hundreds were offered. The sense that FetLife is a community perhaps makes such expectations of free labour more palatable; seemingly being featured on the front page is payment enough. The work of creating user-generated content enhances the “stickiness” of the site, which is “integral to the mechanisms of online profit generation” for social network sites, as active and engaged users attract advertisers.

Use of the word ‘diversity’ in the passage above draws on the language of left-leaning politics, signalling the site’s progressive stance to those who prize ‘diversity’ as a desirable social aim. This use of textual cues to indicate FetLife is an inclusive and diverse community can also be found when one creates a profile. FetLife profiles become the user’s ‘public face’ on the site, reminiscent of the format of dating websites. ‘Gender’ and ‘sexual role choice’ are two of the pieces of information contained in one’s profile. These are the options the user can choose from:

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175 This passage is from “FetLife Announcements,” accessed on April 5, 2013, https://fetlife.com/groups/311, but has since disappeared.
177 Pybus, “Affect and subjectivity.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Dominant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Domme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crossdresser/Transvestite</td>
<td>Switch</td>
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<td>Trans – Male to Female</td>
<td>submissive</td>
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<td>Trans – Female to Male</td>
<td>Master</td>
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<td>Gender Fluid</td>
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<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>pet</td>
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<td>Intersex</td>
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<tr>
<td>Butch</td>
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<tr>
<td>Femme</td>
<td>Top</td>
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<td>Not applicable</td>
<td>Bottom</td>
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<td>Sadist</td>
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<td>Masochist</td>
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<td>Sadomasochist</td>
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<td>Hedonist</td>
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<td>Vanilla</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unsure</td>
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<td>Not applicable</td>
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**Figure 2 Gender and Role Choices.**\(^{179}\)

This multiplicity of options for self-definition reinforces FetLife’s claims of inclusivity and diversity, demonstrating familiarity and solidarity with communities and politics in which such diverse possibilities are accepted; even those who wish to avoid a defined ‘kinky’ role are catered for by the “Vanilla,” “Unsure” and “Not applicable” options.\(^{180}\) Speaking in 2008, John Baku called FetLife “an anti-dating site,” with “an unconventionally large number of” female users,\(^{181}\) thus setting it apart from more ‘cruisy’ online sexual spaces, and again bolstering the community metaphor. Baku presents an idealistic image of


\(^{180}\) Ibid.

\(^{181}\) Zanin, “Facebook for the Kinky.”
FetLife, stating that his original “vision” for the site was “to make sure that we make people feel comfortable with who they are sexually.”\textsuperscript{182} This aspiration appeals to the idea of sexuality as something “outside of” the forces of contemporary capitalism, “a privileged locus of authenticity, and an antidote to modern capitalist alienation”\textsuperscript{183} that “symbolizes something real, something unalienated, undisciplined, and nonconsumptive.”\textsuperscript{184} The paradox is that by creating ‘diversity’ and appealing to notions of ‘authentic’ and nonconsumptive sexual expression, FetLife ultimately generates commercial benefits for itself and its advertisers (and the subgroup of site users who use it to generate their own revenue streams\textsuperscript{185}), reflecting “the internet tenet which holds that ‘content diversity is good business.’”\textsuperscript{186}

**Open-Source Programming Culture**

FetLife is developed using open-source software, which is software “for which the original source code is made freely available and may be redistributed and modified,”\textsuperscript{187} developed collaboratively, and shared freely by programmers around the world. The anthropologist Christopher Kelty describes the culture of open-source programming (or “Free Software” as he alternatively names it) in somewhat high-minded and righteous terms, thus:

Free Software...is not simply a technical pursuit but also the creation of a ‘public,’ a collective that asserts itself as a check on other constituted

\textsuperscript{182} Baku, “Hush Magazine.”
\textsuperscript{183} Weiss, “Mainstreaming Kink,” 124.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{185} These site users are FetLife users whose profiles serve (in part) as advertisements for other online small-scale ‘sexual cottage industries’ and services, e.g. the selling of video clips and pictures.
\textsuperscript{186} Magnet, “Feminist Sexualities,” 592.
forms of power – like states, the church, and corporations – but which remains independent of these domains of power.\(^{188}\)

Open-source programming culture is expressed as democratic, alternative, anti-corporate, and nerdy, community-based but globally aligned.\(^{189}\) BitLove’s developers, including Baku, contribute to open-source software projects through GitHub, the “[w]orld’s largest open-source community,”\(^{190}\) and are thus part of open-source programming culture. As one of their job adverts on GitHub states,

FetLife is run by a bunch of geeks who just want to make a difference in this world by writing sexy code and designing intuitive interfaces...And it’s true, anyone can talk to the talk. But, we walk the walk. We contribute to open source. We speak at conferences. That's just how we roll.\(^{191}\)

The punning, awkward, ‘nerdy’ tone of FetLife and BitLove texts is evidence of the way open-source programming culture has influenced kink/BDSM culture online.\(^{192}\) For example, the buttons for scrolling through photos are called ‘perv’ (i.e. ‘prev[ious]’) and ‘next,’ alluding to the sexual nature of the site, the practice of looking through photos lasciviously (‘perving’ at them)\(^{193}\), and, through the use of misordered letters, to a

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\(^{188}\) Christopher Kelty, *Two Bits: The Cultural Significance of Free Software* (Durham & London: Duke University Press 2008), 7. It is interesting to compare this statement to John Perry Barlow’s 1996 “Cyberspace Independence Declaration,” which posits the internet as an immaterial utopia, disconnected from real life institutions. While Kelty is not saying quite the same thing, he is nevertheless arguing that the free software collective is independent of various institutional forms of power. But this is patently untrue: it is made in places by people who are connected to and dependent on various new and established institutions. See Fish, “Place of the Internet,” 17.


\(^{190}\) https://github.com/.

\(^{191}\) “Rails Guy (or Gal),” GitHub Jobs, accessed June 27, 2014, no longer available.

\(^{192}\) In an interesting parallel, Margot Weiss argues that contemporary manifestations of heterosexual and ‘pansexual’ BDSM in the Bay Area have been heavily influenced by the affluent techie culture of Silicon Valley (Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure*, 15).

common trait of Internet vernacular. As BitLove and FetLife aim to recruit users and advertisers who are openly or implicitly ‘alternative’ and anti-corporate, establishing their open-source credentials is both culturally and economically expedient. A sense of ‘alternative’ authenticity also signals to users that their information and online sexual activities will not be exposed, despite the fact that FetLife has been criticized for its alleged security failings.

FetLife also adopts the reactive and flexible approach to site management and programming espoused by open source programming culture, creating the impression that it is run democratically by controlling tone, style, and positioning of language and interaction. Site developers, functioning as structural producers, can see how consumption manifests and react accordingly, making alterations, reinforcing positions, or whatever else is necessary, with real-time information about how their actions are being received. Such interactions and intimacies mean that the speed and ease of responsiveness is massively accelerated for both producers and consumers. For example, FetLife has a discussion thread called ‘Suggestion Box,’ wherein users can publicly suggest and vote on site changes. Baku’s actions as lead developer of FetLife also reinforce this democratic impression, for instance by asking users to offer their opinions on aspects of site design, such as their distinctive heart-with-horns logo, asking “We’re having problems choosing which shape heart we like the most... which is your favourite?” As the site’s founder, CEO and lead developer – and therefore the individual with the strongest influence over the shape and direction of the site – Baku is...


196 https://FetLife.com/improvements
a figure of particular interest. His self-presentation online is particularly significant in light of the scandal around his alleged behaviour.

**John Baku**

John Baku’s communications and self-presentation on FetLife are as awkwardly nerdy as the rest of the site, suggesting that he is directly responsible for its editorial tone. Baku presents himself as a “lovable clueless doofus”\(^{198}\) with an awkward sense of humour and a genuine, if somewhat uncultivated, penchant for kinky sex. First introductions to Baku usually make this persona clear. For instance, the default message on the ‘friend requests’ page reads:

> What’s the best way to meet people? By:

> • Browsing and messaging people in your area.

> • Joining groups that pique your interest.

> Worst comes to worst, you can always just friend FetLife’s resident clown.\(^{199}\)

> “FetLife’s resident clown”\(^{200}\) is Baku, and the phrase is hyperlinked to his FetLife profile. Elsewhere, a job advert (written by Baku) includes the sentence “Warning, that John guy has a really weird sense of humour.”\(^{201}\) This goofy persona belies his power and influence: he is a successful businessperson and the CEO of the biggest BDSM/fetish social network site in the world. Here is user Wainskote’s take on Baku:

> What John Baku is, is a leader. Whether you want him to be or not, whether he wants to be or not, he simply is. By virtue of having created this resource, FetLife, Baku finds himself in the position of being able to, at his sole discretion, decide how a million and a half kinky people are able


\(^{200}\) Ibid.

\(^{201}\) “Rails Guy (or Gal).”
to talk to, with, and about each other. He is without doubt the single most powerful kink leader on the planet right now.\textsuperscript{202}

This is just the somewhat hyperbolic opinion of one user; however, any individual in charge of the primary means of communication for a particular group of people is most certainly in a significant position of power.\textsuperscript{203}

Baku presents himself as an enthusiast who has turned his enthusiasm and his skills into a commercially successful product that offers his community a unique communication platform. Susanna Paasonen has discussed the dissolution of clear boundaries between the ‘professional’ and the ‘amateur’, due to the large amount of user-generated content and the monetisation of various types of affective labour on the Internet.\textsuperscript{204} While Paasonen is writing about people who make Internet porn, her observations are relevant to Baku, who is in some sense an Internet pornographer too, in that FetLife publishes user-generated pornographic content. By engaging in the “affective labor”\textsuperscript{205} of having a visible online presence as FetLife’s founder, CEO and lead developer – rather than merely being a web developer with a technical interest in the site – Baku can justifiably be called a “micro-celebrity” within the world of alternative sexualities.\textsuperscript{206} Micro-celebrities, says Theresa Senft, are different to classic Hollywood celebrities, in that the interest of audiences turns less on “questions of reality versus image” and instead takes an ethical turn: rather than speculating on who a Web personality ‘really is,’ viewers tend to debate the personality’s obligations to those who made her what she is. This is because on the Web, popularity depends upon a connection to one’s audience, rather than an enforced separation from them.\textsuperscript{207}

The existence of Web-based micro-celebrities blurs the line between “audiences and communities, two groups traditionally requiring different modes of address. Audiences

\textsuperscript{202} Wainskote, “John Baku.”
\textsuperscript{203} See also Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook or the late Steve Jobs of Apple.
\textsuperscript{204} Paasonen, “Labors of Love.”
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid., 1306.
\textsuperscript{206} Senft, Camgirls, 25.
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., 25-6.
desire someone to speak at them; communities desire someone to speak with them.”\textsuperscript{208}

Senft calls micro-celebrity “a practice,”\textsuperscript{209} because it is not just a state, but a form of labour that involves managing one’s online image through one’s actions\textsuperscript{210} to create a “branded self”\textsuperscript{211} or “self as brand.”\textsuperscript{212} Baku’s online persona as enthusiast-turned-CEO, amateur-cum-professional, member of the community he serves and jovial, geeky kinkster, constitutes a coherent “self as brand”\textsuperscript{213} that is mutually reinforcing of FetLife’s authentic ‘alternative community’ brand. It is this deployment of the ‘community metaphor’ that makes users feel safe to engage in the affective labour of developing a stronger and stronger relationship with the site.

By looking at the way communication and branding reinforce the community metaphor, we can see that ‘community’ is not an uncomplicated description of the site, but a discursive device that aids engagement and identification with it in order to enhance its commercial attainments. The dual scandal implicating Baku undermines his online persona, thus undermining his role as FetLife’s figurehead and the site’s claims to being ‘of the community.’ In order to discuss this scandal we must consider the social context that surrounds it, in particular recent debate around the hidden problem of consent violation and assault in kink communities.

**Consent Violation and Assault in Kink Communities**

The online and offline worlds are now so heavily interdependent that they cannot be said to be separate in any meaningful sense. As such, perceived problems in offline

\textsuperscript{208} Senft, “Microcelebrity,” 349. Original italics.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., 346.
\textsuperscript{210} The practice of microcelebrity is something that lots of people do on a day-to-day basis, like deciding which posts belong on work or personal profiles, or deleting unflattering photos of themselves, says Senft (“Microcelebrity,” 346). I have no way of knowing whether Baku intentionally ‘practices micro-celebrity’ or not, and I am making no claims of authorial intentionality. My analysis is merely a reading of the evidence of texts as presented online, rather than an attempt to delve into the author’s innermost thoughts.
\textsuperscript{211} Senft, “Microcelebrity,” 346.
\textsuperscript{212} Senft, Camgirls, 8.
\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 8.
BDSM spaces have been widely tackled online, both within FetLife and beyond. Over the last few years, a number of people have highlighted the apparently high instances of consent violation and assault in kink communities. Kitty Stryker and Maggie Mayhem were some of the first to speak out about these issues, developing a “Consent Culture” workshop\(^{214}\) in order “to raise awareness about what they say is widespread abuse within the BDSM community and a tendency for players to either turn a blind eye or actively cover it up.”\(^{215}\) Mayhem and Stryker, among others,\(^{216}\) accuse the community of trying to maintain the “safe, sane and consensual”\(^{217}\) image of BDSM at the cost of rooting out real instances of abusive and consent-violating behaviour; people in the community are “so focused on saying how BDSM isn’t a cover for abuse that we willingly blind ourselves to the times that it can be,” writes Stryker.\(^{218}\) She claims that the BDSM scene, “which not only faces outside criticism but also serious legal threats, is ‘really invested’ in not talking about”\(^{219}\) abuse within its ranks.

While “Mayhem and Stryker don’t expect much sympathy from the outside world about the problem of pushed boundaries within a scene that eroticizes pushing boundaries...they did hope for a better reception from the people within their own community who are throwing these play parties.”\(^{220}\) This is despite the fact that the “National Coalition for Sexual Freedom (NCSF) released a survey about consent in the BDSM communities,” which “found that one-third of all people surveyed had experienced a violation of their consent during BDSM play.”\(^{221}\) In Canada, the recent case of the CBC broadcaster Jian Ghomeshi, who has been accused of multiple sexual assaults, has

\(^{214}\) Consent Culture (blog), http://www.consentculture.com/.
\(^{219}\) Clark-Flory, “Safe Words.”
\(^{220}\) Ibid.
demonstrated the unwillingness of victims to come forward with their allegations until a critical mass of accusers exist in the public eye. Thus the problems faced by those within the BDSM community who wish to speak out about alleged abuse and consent violation closely mirror those faced in wider society, even while the investigation and exposure of sexual abuse by those in positions of power is an increasingly common theme in public discourse.  

Another problem faced by people who have been sexually assaulted or suffered consent violation in a BDSM context is the lack of legal recourse available to them, due to the illegality of BDSM activities in many places and anti-BDSM prejudice within the legal system. The former issue is one of the law: it is not possible in all jurisdictions to consent to physical injury to the body, and injuries sustained during BDSM scenes are very often not treated as ‘sex’ but as ‘assault.’ The latter issue results from the way that the circumstances and characteristics of BDSM encounters (both in private and quasi-private spaces) function as “bad facts” in assault and rape cases, “which means facts that will make the jury judge the victim instead of the perpetrator.” ‘Bad facts’ make it extremely hard to secure a conviction in such circumstances, because the context in which the encounter took place is not properly understood by those within the legal system, including juries; there is a lack of understanding in particular about what consent means in a BDSM ‘scene.’ As Thomas MacAulay Millar states, “the courts won’t resolve

222 This is particularly true in the UK where, for instance, Operation Yewtree has delved into the history of the television entertainer and charity fundraiser Jimmy Savile, exposing shocking sexual crimes and the concurrent inability or unwillingness of people to speak out about things they saw. For the full report into Savile’s crimes, see David Gray and Peter Watt, “Giving Victims a Voice: Joint Report into Sexual Allegations Made Against Jimmy Savile,” NSPCC, January 2012, http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/yewtree-report-giving-victims-voice-jimmy-savile.pdf. Subsequent to the Savile revelations, a number of other British public figures have also been convicted of a range of sexual crimes.

223 Millar states that “in almost all BDSM abuse cases, there are going to be ‘bad facts.’ The first bad fact is that none of them are going to fit the profile of the stranger rape, the only scenario where juries can apparently be counted on to convict. In BDSM cases, the victim will almost always have gone to a club or a party, or met up with the perpetrator, with the express intention of playing. The victim probably will have said something to that effect by email or PM or text, or said it around witnesses. The defense lawyer can always point to that and say, “see? The so-called victim consented!” You and I know that consent isn’t a lightswitch, consent to being tied up isn’t consent to be fucked and all that. We know that, but do juries know that?” Thomas MacAulay Millar, “There’s A War On Part 4: Just Us,” Yes Means YES! (blog), April 24, 2012, http://yesmeansyesblog.wordpress.com/2012/04/24/theres-a-war-on-part-4-just-us/.
BDSM community cases unless there’s a video or a hospitalization, no matter how clear the boundary violation.”224 This means that legal recourse is often not considered a viable option for those who have been sexually assaulted or had their consent violated during a BDSM encounter. It is within this social and legal context that a FetLife group was set up for the public and anonymous naming of alleged abusers. This group was considered successful by some, damaging by others, and was ultimately short-lived because of its censorship by FetLife.

**Naming Alleged Abusers on FetLife: The Criminal Accusations Scandal**

In 2012, some FetLife users set up a discussion thread in a group called “Confessions: TRIGGER WARNING”225 that allowed users to anonymously name other members who they said had committed sexual assault, violated their boundaries or compromised trust in some way. MacAulay Millar explains it thus:

> A radical social experiment started last winter. In one small group of mostly New York youngish queerish kinksters, the owner started taking anonymous, first person accounts and posting them — including ones that named names [using FetLife handles only]. The results were mixed. Several people owned up to past misconduct, or said that if anyone thought they should be named that they welcomed it. Some folks who were named talked about things they had done wrong and their process to fix it, including not playing while impaired, or recognizing bad relationship dynamics that they had felt gave them license to act wrongly. Others reacted poorly, of course, and some people whined about the drama, because resolving interpersonal conflict is uncomfortable.226

In March of 2012, the admins of this group were sent a message by FetLife telling them that they were violating the Terms of Use, and that all posts that named users were to be deleted. (This message has been reproduced on a number of blogs and threads and can be found at Appendix A.) Thereafter, FetLife’s own moderators (or

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225 Lunas, “FetLife Doesn’t Get It”

226 Millar, “Anti-Sunshine League.”
“caretakers” edited some posts to delete names and deleted some comments in their entirety (for a technical reason: while posts are editable by moderators, comments are not, so had to be deleted altogether). Elsewhere on the site other writings that made accusations were edited unilaterally and without warning to remove names, and a ‘protest event’ set up in response to the scandal was deleted. These actions were widely criticised on FetLife and in the blogosphere for the perceived protection of abusers, silencing of victims, and destruction of a naming-and-discussing system that was apparently working well. Angry commenters suggested that FetLife was ignorant of the issues around consent violation and sexual assault in BDSM communities. Blogger M. Lunas claimed that FetLife “actively seeks to silence victims of abuse,” despite its powerful position in these community/ies as “the overwhelming online center of the BDSM universe.”

However, many users agreed with FetLife’s actions, making a broad range of arguments in support of the site’s stance. Commenters frequently raised the possibility of false and malicious allegations being made easier in an anonymous forum. Some questioned whether BitLove might be held legally responsible for libel as a result of such accusations being published on its site; although they operate in Canada, they might be vulnerable to litigation elsewhere. Many suggested that the real battle was for reform of the legal system to make it less traumatic for victims to come forward and more likely that convictions could be secured. Other suggested that the system of naming-and-discussing was not adequate for dealing with the problem, because a) real abusers

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231 Lunas, “FetLife Doesn’t Get It.”
232 Millar, “Anti-Sunshine League.”
would not be fazed by being accused: only those who had made genuine mistakes or
had miscommunication errors would really be affected; and b) punishments or sanctions
against abusers were far too vague, with the site having no actual power beyond
blocking users (who could then create new accounts and access the site unhindered).  

Thus this issue was, and still is, incredibly contentious on FetLife. The two sides
of this argument are borne of fundamentally opposing understandings of FetLife’s place
in relation to wider society. The site’s policy appeals to the external authority of the law
and the justice system, thereby implying a presumption that these institutions are
necessarily unbiased and just. This can be characterised as taking a risk-averse
position, in that the site is thus protecting itself from potential lawsuits for defamation.
This position is aligned with what one might call a ‘mainstream’ logic, whereby
established social institutions are seen as relatively trustworthy and the appropriate
arbiters of any dispute. In an interview for Slate, the journalist Tracy Clark-Flory pressed
Baku on his reasons for disallowing the naming of accusers:

Asked whether there are legal concerns behind it [disallowing the naming
of accusers], as many in the community have speculated, he says, ‘There
definitely probably is.’ (In Canada, where FetLife is based, laws are ‘much
more friendly to plaintiffs’ than in the U.S., where online publishers are
protected from being held responsible for user posts, says Kurt Opsahl,
senior staff attorney at the Electronic Frontier Foundation.)  

We can thus infer that Baku and BitLove felt legally compelled to take the risk-averse
position, despite being cognisant of the partiality of justice when it comes to contextual
information around sexual assault and rape cases. This is a position that protects (the
business of) those running the site over those using the site. This position is at odds with
the discourse of ‘alternative community’ upon which FetLife is built.

Such a discourse would be more amenable to the opposite position: a position of
distrust that is sceptical of appeals to ‘wider society’ and the law, instead following an

233  These ideas and many more are raised by both the commenters on Millar, “Anti-Sunshine
League,” which has an extensive and interesting discussion thread.

234  Tracy Clark-Flory, “A BDSM Blacklist,” Salon, June 3, 2012,
http://www.salon.com/2012/06/03/a_bdsm_blacklist/.
'alternative' logic. This latter position is more aligned with the proclaimed politics of FetLife as a democratic, anti-corporate, anti-oppressive, non-mainstream ‘community.’ It is more of a risky position to take, in that it leaves the site open to potential lawsuits (in some jurisdictions), and it relies more heavily upon trust and communication within the community. This is a position that protects the users of the site over those running the site, and is more closely aligned to the discourse of alternative community upon which FetLife is built. Understanding the ramifications of the position FetLife has taken exposes the underlying reasons for the disquiet this incident caused among its users. By taking the risk-averse position, FetLife undermines its structural and textual claims to being an authentic, grassroots BDSM community, communicating that the online space of FetLife is not ‘alternative’ space, nor is it space in which users are considered equal to owners. It’s still first and foremost a business: the company must protect its (true) interests by avoiding lawsuits, keeping advertisers (and credit card payment processors235) happy, and carrying on business as usual.

FetLife’s actions in this scandal fundamentally undermine the ‘alternative community’ metaphor that its developers wish to promote, demonstrating that the site is predominantly a commercial space wherein decisions are made for financial and legal reasons rather than communal ones. As a result of this initial scandal a secondary scandal erupted: a sexual assault allegation against John Baku.

The Assault Accusation

On the fifth of August, 2012, a post about FetLife’s criminal accusations policy, entitled “…and the Rape (Finally) Hits the Fan on FetLife” appeared on a blog called Sinshinelove236. The author quoted a statement by John Baku regarding this policy and made pointed commentary:

235 I mention this fact because both Millar and Lunas claim that FetLife only banned discussion of paedophilia and bestiality when their credit card payment processing company insisted they must do so in order to continue using their services. “Anti-Sunshine League”; “FetLife Doesn’t Get It.”

236 This blog does not exist anymore; however many of the original materials are now available at Feel the Love (blog), Tumblr, http://sinshine.tumblr.com.
Let me just stop for a second and say something I definitely would not be allowed to say on FetLife regarding this choice bit:

“Words can’t describe how disgusting rape is and how much hate I have for anyone who has in any way shape or form sexually assaulted another person.” - John Baku

John Baku sexually assaulted me. Drunk. At a kink party. In front of many others. I have pictures, which he has personally asked me not to post.

In that I had met him before and was sort of fond of him and he sort of reminded me of another drunk misbehaving dumbass I once loved, I laughed it off. But let it be clear - the reason John sees no problem with any of this rape apologist bullshit is because he has a foggy ass notion of consent and acceptable behavior himself.

And because HE PERSONALLY benefits from people like me staying silent.237 (Original emphases)

This accusation of assault was rapidly shared and discussed across FetLife and associated web spaces. Baku issued a ‘public’ – to FetLife – apology (see Appendix B). Many people ‘took a side’ on this issue. Some called Baku a rapist238, focusing on his apparently “poor judgement around consent”239. User Wainskote called Baku

one more ‘lovable doofus’” and stating that he “showed an easy ability to confuse boundaries and consent, to defend it on the grounds that ‘she was ok with it,’ and in my reading of his ‘apology,’ to care more about his reputation than about the person who’s [sic] consent he violated.240

In contrast, others called the accuser “disgusting”241 and a “bimbo,”242 reasoning that she was “just wanting to get some attention,”243 she “just wants to make drama for you”244 and she wants to “put pressure on you”245 regarding the naming of alleged abusers.

237 sinshine, “the Rape (Finally) Hits.” Quotation marks around the John Baku quote added for clarity.
239 Wainskote, comment on Baku, “Letter of Apology.”
240 Wainskote, “John Baku.”
241 emi-, comment on Baku, “Letter of Apology.”
242 MS_SM, comment on Baku, “Letter of Apology.”
243 HopefulOne, comment on Baku, “Letter of Apology.”
During this heated debate, a great many FetLife users publicly commented and passed judgement on the situation, testament to both the power of the site’s ‘by the community, for the community’ rhetoric and the sense of investment that users have in its narrative. Here we can see how statements that would have heretofore been part of the private sphere now have a very public and very permanent life online. The shift in medium for this type of communicative act – the private opinion, the judgemental piece of gossip – is a significant change in our relationship with communication itself, one of a set of new and important communicative norms. As danah boyd states,

[d]igital architectures alter the structure of social life and information flow. Persistence, searchability, the collapse of distance and time, copyability… These are not factors that most everyday people consider when living unmediated lives. Yet, they are increasingly becoming normative in society.246

Thus, the “sometimes quasi-public and other times entirely public nature of social media perpetuates and makes visible processes that have always been at play, while warping them in ways that call for new literacies and strategies.”247

The Apology

As a web-based micro-celebrity, Baku is seen to have “ethical...obligations to those who248 have made him what he is: FetLife’s users. As user Thorne states in a comment on Baku’s apology posting, “Whether you just consider yourself a website owner or not, you have a moral and ethical obligation, IMNSHO,249 to be completely informed on this [the issue of rape and cycles of abuse] so you can recognize the behavior, even in yourself”250 (my italics). Baku’s status as an intentional or unintentional micro-celebrity is seen as conferring moral and ethical responsibilities, and his personal

244 CountessCorset, comment on Baku, “Letter of Apology.”
245 zeta123, comment on Baku, “Letter of Apology.”
246 boyd, “Super Publics.”
248 Senft, Camgirls, 25-6. 322
249 This acronym means ‘in my not-so-humble opinion.’
250 Thorne, comment on Baku, “Letter of Apology.”
actions (and the way they are played out on FetLife) are entwined with the shape, direction, and policy of the site because of his visibility as the site’s leader. FetLife’s users, as a ‘community,’ require Baku to “speak with them” rather than “at them,” and this episode suggests that he is unable to do so. This is represented most strikingly in the apology he issued on FetLife after the allegation was made (see Appendix B).

Baku’s 682-word apology was issued on FetLife, cross-posted to his personal profile and the ‘Fetlife Announcements’ group, thus being seen by his 17,968 friends and by the 2.9 million members of the group. The apology is deeply penitent, to the point of self-flagellation: this is very much in keeping with the normative style of the celebrity apology. Rather than directly admitting (or denying) his actions, Baku’s defence rests on a semantic act: while he agrees that something sexual occurred between himself and the accuser, he states that the way his actions are being defined is not correct: she calls it sexual assault, he calls it cheating on his girlfriend. In other words, he is attempting to textually reframe his actions, to change the narrative around the incident in order to paint himself in a different light: he is attempting to shore up his ‘brand.’

We can compare this statement to that of another Canadian public figure who has recently been accused of sexual assault, Jian Ghomeshi (see Appendix C). Baku’s public presentation may be very different to Ghomeshi’s, but these figures share the distinction of having their personal brands undermined by accusations of assault. Until October 26, 2014, Ghomeshi was “the coolly insightful host of Q,” a daily culture show broadcast on the CBC and syndicated by Public Radio International onto 160 local

251 Senft, Camgirls, 25-6.
252 As of April 17, 2014. These are not necessarily unique users
254 Baku, “Letter of Apology.”
stations in the USA. Ghomeshi was “a marquee interviewer with a mellifluous voice,” with a “sophisticated and decidedly hip,” “cocky and well-read” public image: a liberal, perceptive, and popular radio presenter. He was fired by the CBC in October 2014 because of “information that precludes us from continuing our relationship” with him. On the same day, Ghomeshi published a statement to his own Facebook page presenting his version of events.

Unlike Baku, Ghomeshi does not frame his statement as an apology, but as a robust defence of his actions. Although Ghomeshi worked in the ‘traditional’ media of broadcast radio, like many contemporary celebrities he has a social media presence that means he must “speak with” his community, meaning that both statements were addressed to communities rather than audiences. Ghomeshi’s statement opens with “Dear everyone/ I am writing today because I want you to be the first to know some news,” at once an intimate and an expansive declaration of perceived reader/auditor. Ghomeshi is a skilled writer, weaving a compelling and convincing story. While Baku appeals for sympathy, Ghomeshi appeals to the higher authorities of Justice and Truth, and his readers’ sense of themselves as reasonable people: “I am telling this story to


257 Brean, “Jian Ghomeshi’s Journey.”


261 For a full timeline of the case, see ibid.

262 Senft, “Microcelebrity,” 349.

263 Senft, Camgirls, 25-6.
you so the truth is heard," he writes.²⁶⁴ He also references Fifty Shades of Grey, a sophisticated narrative maneuver that appeals to the book’s popularity,²⁶⁵ to the auditor’s potential personal relationship with it, and to the idea that within many of us lie unconventional sexual desires. The author is asking us for empathy for his predicament as a “poor, persecuted pervert.”²⁶⁶

Ghomeshi’s lack of apology is very interesting: it is incredibly rare to see any statement regarding a public figure’s sex life that is not either an apology or a denial: these are the mainstays of the genre. Instead, he does some clever reframing by describing a sexual context in which physical injury can be “mutually agreed upon, consensual, and exciting for both partners”: BDSM.²⁶⁷ While Ghomeshi performs a sophisticated textual reframing, Baku engages in a clumsy recontextualisation that conveys an accidental admission: he states that “if anyone pushed me away or said no I would have stopped what I was doing,” implying that he interacted sexually with people without gaining consent beforehand. If consent is defined as an “agreement in advance to something that hasn’t happened yet,”²⁶⁸ or as “the explicit indication, by written or oral statement, by one person that he/she is willing to have something done to him/her by one or more other persons, or to perform some sort of act at the request or order of one or more other persons,”²⁶⁹ then Baku’s statement actually does reflect what the accuser calls his “foggy ass notion of consent.”²⁷⁰

²⁶⁵ Fifty Shades had not yet been released as a film when Ghomeshi wrote this statement.
²⁶⁷ Star Staff, “Ghomeshi’s Full Facebook Post.”
²⁷⁰ sinshine, "the Rape (Finally) Hits."
As Andrea Zanin writes, Ghomeshi is “of course very media-savvy, because he is media. So he’s well aware that if he creates a lens through which people should perceive things, that colours the conversation in his favour” from the get-go.²⁷¹ No doubt this idea will be developed in his defence case to create a coherent narrative that frames him as a misunderstood ‘kinkster’ being persecuted for his unconventional sexual proclivities. By claiming that what he was doing was BDSM rather than abuse, Ghomeshi demonstrates just how mainstream BDSM is: a workable, if “shocking,”²⁷² interpretation of his actions. Perhaps he also reframes rather than denies flat-out because concrete evidence (SMSs, emails) might surface. Indeed, recontextualisation of evidence is much smarter than direct contradiction, as this creates doubt in the mind of the auditor/reader/observer. Also, since he is accused of abusing people with whom he had existing relationships, his recontextualisation puts their interactions into a grey area for the law to preside upon, thus returning us to the idea that the “bad facts”²⁷³ of assault cases can make the jury judge the victim rather than the perpetrator. “Media-savvy”²⁷⁴ indeed. However, this media approach may ultimately have failed, as more women have come out to say that they have been victimized by him.

Baku’s approach is less media-savvy, because he fails to create a good lens through which to see his assault accusation. His apology statement is written in a casual, off-the-cuff style and contains many grammatical and spelling mistakes. The narrative he spins justifies and minimises his actions, does not demonstrate any awareness of the wider problem of assault in the kink community, makes light of his inebriation, and generally casts him in a somewhat oblivious light. The irony is that this statement is consistent with his image as a “lovable, clueless doofus,”²⁷⁵ and he comes across as the “drunk misbehaving dumbass”²⁷⁶ he is accused of being. But here is where such an image becomes a liability: it undermines the authority his position confers on him and undermines his claims to being a ‘good’ (moral) member of the ‘community’ he

²⁷¹ Zanin, “Poor Persecuted Pervert.”
²⁷² Star Staff, “Ghomeshi’s Full Facebook Post.”
²⁷³ Millar, “Just Us.”
²⁷⁴ Zanin, “Poor Persecuted Pervert.”
²⁷⁵ Wainskote, “John Baku.”
²⁷⁶ sinshine, “the Rape (Finally) Hits.”
apparently belongs to. This in turn undermines the sense that FetLife is the safe, inclusive, and community-driven space it is claimed to be.

However, no formal charges have been brought against Baku and he remains in post as CEO of FetLife. Ghomeshi, on the other hand, now has “seven sexual assault charges and one charge of overcoming resistance by choking”\(^\text{277}\) to his name, and is set to face a very public trial and the possibility of a long jail term. Changes to Baku’s fortune and public standing are certainly less tangible, but nevertheless impact on the way FetLife users view both Baku and the site itself, compromising both the site’s brand as a ‘safe space’ and the ‘community metaphor’ upon which this sense is constructed.\(^\text{278}\)

**Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have shown how the pervasive “community metaphor”\(^\text{279}\) is used to create the sense that FetLife is an authentic, inclusive, ‘alternative community.’ Nevertheless, the criminal accusations scandal and the John Baku scandal undermined this narrative, the former by demonstrating that Baku and BitLove protect their own interests over those of their users, the latter by showing how damage to the reputation of a high-profile member of the ‘community’ affects its reputation and perception among its users. Thus we can see that FetLife is primarily a commercial space, not a community space. Of course, it is not useful to simply dismiss the site as existing solely for monetary gain; while this is part of the truth, there is more complexity to FetLife than the bald profit motive: both developers and users seek to reinforce the sense of alternative

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\(^{278}\) The question over whether this damage is permanent is an interesting one. Certainly if one is to Google John Baku, many critical articles and those referencing the both scandals are near the top of the list. However, there have been (entirely unsubstantiated) suggestions that writings critical of Baku that were upvoted to the top of K&P were quietly removed, so it is possible that FetLife is itself performing damage control on its and Baku’s reputations. This is entirely anecdotal and speculative, of course. Sinshine, “Looking at the KP today it seams [sic] all critical posts is removed...” *Feel the Love* (blog), Tumblr, accessed April 17, 2014, http://sinshine.tumblr.com/post/46233425872/looking-at-the-kp-today-it-seams-all-critical.

\(^{279}\) Parks, “Social Network Sites,” 105.
and inclusive community for social and cultural reasons. However, where this interfered with the legal standing of the site, as in the case of the “Confessions: TRIGGER WARNING” group, activity was swiftly halted, and conventional positioning and attitudes to justice and the law were maintained. Therefore it cannot be realistically maintained that the site offers any kind of genuine alternative to the mainstream.
Chapter 4.

The User-Generated Content of FetLife

Introduction

As we saw in the last chapter, FetLife is a social network site structured and presented as an alternative community that prizes diversity and democracy and is a haven for those with an interest in unconventional sexualities. As with all social network sites, a steady flow of new user-generated content is essential to FetLife’s functioning and is what makes the site ‘sticky’; a high proportion of this content is sexually explicit. The creation and consumption of such content is generative of an increasingly visual and visible form of sexuo-social relations, affecting the way users have sex, socialise, and represent themselves sexually online.

FetLife presents itself as a place of “multiplicity, testing and experimentation, and the challenging of existing boundaries” that enables ‘resistance’ and celebrates difference. While examples of such resistance through alternative or unconventional sexual representation can certainly be found on FetLife, one central part of the site, ‘Kinky and Popular’ (K&P), presents a very different kind of sexuo-social interaction, one that adheres to the norms of gender representation in mainstream pornography. K&P is a feed that displays images, writings, and videos from across FetLife that have attracted a large number of ‘loves’ from other users, creating a ‘communal favourites’ feed that

280 Pybus, “Affect and Subjectivity.”
shows the most popular, or ‘trending,’ items on the site on any given day. A look at both the ‘resistant’ and the ‘pornographic’ sides of FetLife is merited, in order to address some of the site’s inherent complications and contradictions. Let’s first take a look at the areas of the site where unconventional or ‘alternative’ sexuo-social relations can be found.

**The Possibilities Are Endless...**

The huge variety of groups on FetLife demonstrates the diversity of sexualities and sexual interest catered to by the site. A cursory browse through names of groups yields such varied titles as “Gender Blender”, “Cuckolding”, “Steampunk Kink”, “Women who love to encourage male bisexuality,” “KINKY IN CHICAGO”; “Anime and Hentai Lovers”, “Prostate Milking for anyone who wants infos [sic]”; “Big Areolas/Big Nipples” (for both possessors and fans of); and “Primal Play ~ The Animal Within.” These groups represent a wide range of non-mainstream sexual interests and tastes; additionally there are many groups for non-sexual interests like the British TV series *Doctor Who*, and “Kinky and Geeky,” one of its most popular groups. This multiplicity speaks to the way FetLife can function as a space where unconventional interests – sexual and otherwise – can be shared, discussed and nurtured.

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282 While a certain portion of K&P is available for free, one can only scroll down the page so far before this ‘paywall’ message appears: “Support your favorite [sic] geeks and make it possible for us to improve FetLife everyday [sic]. As a big thanks, you’ll be able to easily perv over 5,000 of today’s most popular pics, vids and writings from right here.” (Original italics) https://FetLife.com/explore/#/index.

283 A group for anyone who has or supports those who have a non-binary gender identity.

284 The sexual fetish of a husband knowing and taking pleasure in his wife having sex with other men.


286 Japanese animation and erotic animation respectively.

The Videos section of the site also offers a wealth of unconventional sexual display and experimentation. Here, behind the paywall, are over 140,000 videos, for the most part home-made by FetLife users. Each video is represented by a still frame image, underneath which is the name of the uploader and any comments that have been made about it. One can read these comments without having paid access, making this effectively a marketing feature to encourage users to start paying. The vast majority of videos have just a few comments attached to them – somewhere between zero and ten is the norm – suggesting that most videos are only watched by a small number of people.

Two contrasting videos can illustrate the broad range of representational possibilities explored by FetLife’s users. The first, entitled “What IS butterfly fisting?,” is just under two minutes long and is a simple instructional video in which one woman demonstrates the sexual technique of ‘butterfly fisting’ on another. The camera is positioned upon a bed. In the frame we see the naked crotch and thighs of a woman, who is lying on her back, legs akimbo, wearing clothes only on her top half. We cannot see her face. Off-camera, the female narrator-demonstrator explains butterfly fisting in simple, straightforward language. We then see her hands enter the frame as she demonstrates the technique on the crotch we see before us. In the background, one can hear the faint sound of the crotch-owner crying out in pleasure. The technique is performed for 44 seconds. The video ends.

Although the video shows vaginal penetration using the hands, it does not allude to the “meat shots” of pornography – by which I mean “moments of genital

288 As of September 28, 2014.
289 Although it must be added that there is a significant minority of videos that are not ‘home-made’: some are ripped (copied and stolen) from commercial porn; some blur the amateur/commercial line by functioning as adverts for small-scale pornographic/fetish websites of various shades.
291 ‘Butterfly fisting’ is a technique for the gradual insertion of both hands into the vagina, using fluid forward movements to slowly achieve penetration.
show...offering visual evidence of penetration" – but rather to the genre of the instructional video, common on YouTube. Additionally, we see women interacting sexually without the emphasis on male gaze or male pleasure as is common in male-oriented ‘girl-on-girl’ pornography. Moans of pleasure are incidental to the narrative, rather than acted and overegged. Such an approach to sexuality is indicative of the contemporary BDSM scene, wherein self-education and a proactive approach to learning are considered desirable qualities for ‘good’ BDSM practitioners. This is a radical approach to sexual education, which emphasises the learning of techniques and ‘erotic arts’/ars erotica over health-related information on biological functions and risks (STIs, sexual assault, pregnancy etc.). The style of the video calls to mind Foucault:

[W]e need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex, so that we became dedicated to the endless task of forcing its secret, of exacting the truest of confessions from a shadow.

This is a sex of straightforward instruction and unashamed physical display that does not dwell in shadow, nor possess a secret that must be forced from within, but speaks itself plainly and in a spirit of sharing and possibility. This is an example of sexually explicit user-generated content that demonstrates an unconventional approach to both sexual practice and sexual self-display: the subject displays herself without shame, towards an educational goal.

292 Linda Williams, Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the ‘Frenzy of the Visible’ (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University Of California Press, 1989), 93. Williams explains that, prior to the “money shot” serving as “the sense of an ending for each heterosexual sex act represented” in a porn film, the meat shot performed this “narrative function.” Williams, Hardcore, 93.
293 www.youtube.com
294 Examples of such tropes include: female actors looking directly at the camera; use of phallic sex toys; adherence to hyper-feminine gender presentation by actors.
297 Foucault, The History of Sexuality, 159.
An untitled video uploaded by user Your-ass-spanked offers us another example of unconventional sexual representation. This short scene is shot in an ordinary living room: green carpet and some beige, flowery curtains, a brown leather sofa in the background: a regular living room somewhere in North America or Europe, perhaps.

Close to the camera, we see a woman from her torso up. She is white, and has brown hair tied up in a ponytail. She wears no makeup, has an average body size, and is probably in her 30s. She has on a thick black collar. There is rope coming from round her neck to bind her breasts. Attached to her nipples is a coat hanger, one that is designed to hang a pair of pants or a skirt, each of its two clips attached to a nipple. The hook part of the hanger is attached to another rope. It appears that someone off-screen is pulling on the rope, causing the clips to tug at her nipples. The woman has her eyes closed. She is quite clearly trying to deal with pain. The camera moves and we see that her hands are behind her back, arms held away from body to the left and right by a spreader bar. The camera pans again and we see that actually the hanger is not being pulled by a person but is attached by rope to a clamp on the mantelpiece. However, the camera person occasionally taps and jiggles the rope, which in turn makes the hanger pull at her nipples. We see the pain and concentration on her face: it’s intense. The camera focuses in on her breasts. The video ends.

Once again this is a very simple video, its main points of focus being the Rube Goldberg-style nipple-torture setup and the intensity and concentration of the subject’s pain/pleasure. This video is an example of what might be called ‘authentic,’ uncontrived

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299 It’s not clear where the user resides because he lists his place of residence as Antarctica, a common choice among FetLife users who wish to obscure their real location.

300 An average body size for North America or Europe; in other words, her body is larger than most that we see represented in the media.

301 A Rube Goldberg machine is one that is “ingeniously or unnecessarily complicated in design or construction...from the name of Reuben Goldberg (1883–1970), an American cartoonist whose illustrations often depicted devices with such a complicated design.” *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “Rube Goldberg,” accessed May 9, 2015, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/Rube-Goldberg.
BDSM: the regular, suburban setting, the regular woman, the demonstration of power, pain, and control, without anything particularly sexually explicit: archetypal contemporary BDSM. It’s deeply intimate and yet offered for consumption by FetLife users (‘the community’), a tiny snippet of a domestic BDSM scene.

Although the focus of each video is the female body – as in conventional sexual representation – these bodies are arranged and framed in ways that challenge contemporary conventions of female sexual display. These conventions dictate how women and their bodies are presented for consumption in the media in pornography and by women themselves in social media and other online contexts. This is by no means a new phenomenon: Erving Goffman’s 1976 book *Gender Advertisements* is an exhaustive investigation of how pictorial displays of adults in ‘traditional’ advertising are strongly gendered, with women being displayed and arranged in ways that depict them as subordinate, childlike, sexually available, vulnerable, and small. This is done through facial expression, bodily arrangement, relative body positioning, gestures, clothing, and props. Dennis D. Waskul and Cheryl L. Radeloff discuss a similar phenomenon found on “rate-my-erotic-picture Web sites where people post erotic digital pictures (mostly of themselves) for viewers to rate” on their attractiveness. Some of these sites allow only face shots, while others allow varying amounts of flesh to be shown. The authors found the women in these images compose “their faces and gazes” in a different way.

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302 My reading might potentially face the criticism that this is not particularly radical sex, because it is partnered, in private and between a heterosexual couple (the uploader of the video, ‘Your-ass-spanked,’ identifies as male), which all fall within Gayle Rubin’s “charmed circle” of “normal...sexuality.” However, this is non-procreative BDSM sex, and by putting a video of it on FetLife the participants have made it into public sex. The use of “manufactured objects” also pushes it into Rubin’s “outer limits.” Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carol S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 153.


304 Although “the pictures shown here cannot be taken as representative of gender behaviour in real life...one can probably make a significant negative statement about them, namely, that as pictures they are not perceived as peculiar or unnatural.” Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, 25.

305 Waskul and Radeloff, “How Do I Rate,” 203.

306 Ibid., 206.
to men, often “sitting, lying, on their knees,” in “classic pose[s] of deference.” While male subjects in their study were almost always shot using a horizontal angle, creating a “neutral, perhaps equalizing” effect, nearly half of the female subjects were shot from above, “thus resulting in a diminutive of subordinating effect.”

The two videos I have described above do not follow these conventions and serve to illustrate how FetLife is a place where representational difference and diversity is produced and consumed, the site’s structural and social affordances giving rise to novel and unconventional forms of sexual expression. This makes it all the more surprising that the user-generated content found on the Kinky & Popular (K&P) page adheres to conventional norms of sexual representation. In fact, the apparent anomalousness of this area causes bemusement even among users. Let’s take a look at it in more detail.

**What’s Kinky and Popular Today?**

K&P is a feed that displays the most popular items of user-generated content from across the site on any given day. One must of course take into account the ‘snowball effect’ that this method of upvoting can create: once a text or an image has a certain number of positive ratings, more people see it, and more people have the chance to upvote it. Notwithstanding this caveat, the content that appears on this page is dazzling in its homogeneity. A large proportion of pictures upvoted to K&P are of individual subjects, the vast majority of which are very conventional sexual representations of women: the subjects are conventionally attractive, feminine, young.

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308 Ibid.


310 According to Alexa, an analytics site that ranks Internet sites according to their global traffic, statistically 45-54 year olds are over-represented as users of the site, while all other age demographics are underrepresented, which makes the over-representation of women in their late teens and 20s as subjects of images upvoted to K&P even more striking (“Top Sites by Category: Adult,” Alexa, accessed June 21, 2015, www.alexa.com/topsites/category/Top/Adult).
slim, white, able-bodied, and have long, shiny, well-kept hair. The aesthetics of these images are often superficially BDSM/kink/'alt'-influenced: black, red, and purple clothes, tattoos, hair dyed bright colours, and BDSM paraphernalia abound. Subjects are often in conventionally gendered poses and positions: face presented to the camera on a tilt, chin down, eyes looking upwards towards a camera positioned above the subject; hip pushed out and body twisted towards the camera to achieve maximum curviness; back to the camera with butt pushed out, head looking over shoulder: female subjects contorting their bodies to present a heightened display of femininity. Such representational tropes can be observed in many mainstream media images of young women, as well as in heterosexual pornography. Many subjects are very pale-skinned, one way in which mainstream conventions of female representation are not followed, with tanned and bronzed (but Caucasian) complexions being standard. However, pale skin is a convention often found in ‘alternative’ representations of ‘beautiful women,’ for example on the popular and successful SuicideGirls website.

The striking uniformity of subjects on K&P speaks to the more general social convention of the bodies of young women being ever on display. Idealised, perfect(ed), impossible female bodies dominate our screens and billboards: to mention this seems banal, it is so widely understood to be true. On K&P, there are very few images of non-white, visibly less able, larger, or older female bodies and almost none of male bodies. However, the erect penis makes a frequent appearance: a huge number of images contain a solo female subject interacting with a penis in some way. We rarely see

311 See Waskul and Radeloff, “How Do I Rate,” and Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*.
312 Ibid., and Waskul and Radeloff, “How Do I Rate,” 203. These gendered poses are comparable to those described by Goffman: women are depicted as childlike: “Grown women are seen standing with the head cocked way over to the side parallel to the shoulder, face-front, eyes and mouth: *smiling*; or the head tucked into the shoulder, face-front, eyes looking up from under lowered lids, seductive-gamin style; or hands twisted behind the back...”; and their “subordination” is ritualized: “A classic stereotype of deference is that of lowering oneself physically in some form or other of prostration.” Goffman, *Gender Advertisements*, viii; 40. (Original italics)
313 Paasonen, “Email from Nancy Nutsucker,” offers a good discussion of this.
315 This follows a common pornographic convention of images that show all or part of a female body, and solely the genitalia of the male body, penis erect. Flaccid penises are extremely rare in porn, even rarer than male faces, as has been discussed by Lehman, “You and Voyeurweb.”
much else of the male body. We see cocks in mouths, cunts, and asses, or grasped in the hand of a woman on her knees. We see cocks ejaculating onto various body parts, particularly faces: this is the ‘money shot,’ the hallmark act of contemporary pornography. In particular, the female-on-male blowjob, and its companion, the facial come-shot, are the sexual acts most commonly depicted on K&P. The blowjob, as a specific sex act, has vast swathes of online porn clips dedicated to it, and indeed is arguably the defining image of contemporary online porn.

The Logic of Pornography

K&P, which is a distillation of the most popular user-generated content from across the entirety of FetLife, is dominated by blowjob/facial come-shot imagery and displays of young, white, female flesh. This alludes very strongly and clearly to contemporary heterosexual online pornography; yet it seems incongruous that a site dedicated to ‘alternative’ sexualities and non-mainstream sexual expressions is dominated by such quotidian pornographic archetypes. Isn’t Fetlife supposed to be an alternative to this banal and sexist mainstream? Isn’t it a queer space, a BDSM community, a place of alternative, niche, and oft-maligned sexualities?

Back in 1992, the renowned pornography scholar Linda Williams suggested that it was in the “proliferation of different pornographies” that “opposition to the dominant representations of pleasure” would emerge. K&P appears to be evidence of the exact opposite effect: the language, cultural framework, and logic of mainstream pornography have infiltrated this sexual minority space. In my analysis, the logic of (contemporary, mainstream, heterosexual, online) pornography comprises of five elements: the commercialization of sex through the blurring of the lines between the amateur and the

316 See Williams, Hardcore.
317 In her content analysis of “Acts Depicted” in spam porn emails, Paasonen states that nearly 59% of all messages depicted female-on-male oral sex. Paasonen, “Email from Nancy Nutsucker,” 405.
318 Linda Williams, “Pornographies On/Scene, or ‘Diff’rent Strokes for Diff’rent Folks,’” in Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate edited by Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh (London: Virago, 1992), 262.
professional; formal repetitiveness, or "seriality";\textsuperscript{319} the cybertyped\textsuperscript{320} representation of women; the dominant narrative of "heterosexual structuralism";\textsuperscript{321} and "the frenzy of the visible."\textsuperscript{322} In order to fully understand this logic, we must first look at the contemporary context of online pornography.

**"The Internet Is for Porn."**\textsuperscript{323}

A vast amount of pornographic material\textsuperscript{324} is now freely available online: sexually explicit pictures, videos, texts – even animated GIFs\textsuperscript{325} – are now accessible at the touch of a button or the swipe of a screen,\textsuperscript{326} catering to almost every possible sexual taste. Estimates about the volume of porn available online vary wildly. The BBC estimates that four percent of data transferred across the Internet is porn:\textsuperscript{327} a vast amount of data. 'If you can think of it, there's porn of it' has become a well-worn adage about Internet porn that speaks to its huge proliferation; the song "The Internet is for Porn" from the musical *Avenue Q* is another amusing illustration.\textsuperscript{328} Migration to the Internet has also resulted in

\begin{itemize}
\item Jacobs, "Lizzy Kinsey."
\item Paasonen, "Email from Nancy Nutsucker.,” 407.
\item Williams, *Hardcore*, 180.
\item I am using the phrase ‘pornographic material’ in the contingent sense that is used by Walter Kendrick, who argues that each time defines what it calls porn in ways that make sense for contemporary values and taboos. See Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1997).
\item An animated GIF “is a graphic image on a Web page that moves - for example, a twirling icon or a banner with a hand that waves.” Animated GIFs have been harnessed by Internet users for creative, often comical effect. “Animated GIF (Graphics Interchange Format) Definition.” Tech Target, accessed May 9, 2015, http://searchsoa.techtarget.com/definition/animated-GIF.
\item The use of social media for sexuo-socialising and dating is now incredibly popular, with dating and hookup apps like Tinder (www.gotinder.com) and Grindr (www.grindr.com) now an established part of the contemporary sexual landscape. These apps call for their users to be producers and consumers of visual media as a means of finding sexual partners and dates: they hark back to the structure of the ‘rate me’ sites, with a dose of speed dating convention (you can only message someone if you both ‘like’ each other) and Instagram sociality thrown in for good measure (judging the suitability of a mate based on their "performance of tastes" [boyd and Ellison, “Social Network Sites,” 221] or "taste performances" [Senft, *Camgirls*, 26]).
\item Lopez and Marx, *Avenue Q*.
\end{itemize}
a huge change in the way porn is produced, distributed, and consumed. Full length films on VHS and DVD have given way to the YouTube-influenced\(^{329}\) format of short clips, or “'vignettes' in the industry vernacular,”\(^{330}\) that can be streamed online. Sites like XNXX and YouPorn\(^{331}\) (currently the most popular, according to Alexa\(^{332}\)) are made up of many millions of these vignettes, which users can watch for free. Revenue is generated by selling advertising space and ‘click-throughs' to other sites.\(^{333}\) Some sites allow users to upload clips of their own, leading to a proliferation of ‘DIY' porn clips being available there and a blurring of the ‘amateur' and the ‘professional.' Vignettes are categorized using a wide range of defining features, such as perceived ethnic or racial makeup, size, body type, and apparent age of the actors; acts, activities, and locations depicted; and the fantasy scenarios at play (e.g. ‘Japanese,' ‘big tits,' ‘teen,' ‘anal,' ‘creampie,' ‘schoolroom,' ‘gay'). Often porn in this format is referred to as “gonzo,” an “emerging” category that comprises of short, hardcore scenes “with little narrative.”\(^{334}\) ‘Gonzo' porn uses “hand-held cameras and point-of-view shots”\(^{335}\) and the cameraman is often involved in the sex act, rather than being ‘external' to the scene.\(^{336}\)

\(^{329}\) Porn has always been adept at harnessing new technologies to its own ends; see Kendrick, *Secret Museum* and Williams, *Hardcore*.

\(^{330}\) Schaschek, *Pornography and Seriality*, 3.


\(^{332}\) “Top Sites by Category: Adult,” Alexa.

\(^{333}\) For an in-depth discussion of the economics of the online porn industry, see Gilbert Wondracek et al., “Is the Internet for Porn? An Insight into the Online Adult Industry,” paper presented at WEIS 2010, 9th Workshop on the Economics of Information Security, June 7-8, 2010, Boston, USA.

\(^{334}\) Paasonen, “Labors of Love,” 1305.

\(^{335}\) Ibid.

\(^{336}\) Williams states that hardcore can generally be understood to be a “relatively episodic form,” and, despite the fashion for feature-length hardcore films in the 1970s, the porn films that preceded them, i.e. ‘stag' films, were usually short because of the restrictions of the technology (Super 8 film). Thus modern ‘gonzo' porn more closely resembles these earlier stag films. Williams calls porn “the one film genre that always tries to strip” the “masquerade of femininity” away and see the visible ‘truth' of sexual pleasure itself,” and the short, episodic style of ‘stag,' ‘gonzo,' and ‘online’ is more suited to this endeavour. Williams, *Hardcore*, 49-50.
The Blurring of the Lines between Amateur and Professional Porn, and the ‘Sexual Cottage Industry.’

FetLife’s videos are also presented in vignette form, and again there is a blurring of the lines between amateur and professional, in that many users seek to monetize their online sexual activities by posting videos and images that direct the consumer to sites outside of FetLife where they have photos and video clips for sale; a popular choice is Clips4sale, a hosting site for “fetish and amateur” video clips and images.\(^{337}\) Many FetLife users have links to this and similar sites from their profiles or videos, thus monetising (on a small scale) their online sexual identities, the labour inherent in creating such identities, and the sexual labour of creating these videos.

While “[p]rofessional porn performers” can be seen as “actors who master sexual techniques, simulate pleasure and perform”\(^{338}\) “using all the props of professional productions: lights, backdrops, make up, editing, special effects, etc.,”\(^{339}\) on K&P we see imagery that alludes to porn, accompanied by praise offered for apparent amateurs who appear to have mastered sexual techniques like professionals: amateurs who are competent at visually representing the porn actor – or other sex worker – receive acknowledgement and praise, for example: “Great talent on that young lady”\(^{340}\), “She takes you like a pro & has one great, juicy big clit!”\(^{341}\), “Awesome Job you Really are a Good Cum Sucking And Cock Sucking Whore!”\(^{342}\) (all my italics). The eroticisation of and approval given to ‘amateurs’ who are able to signify and represent ‘professionals’ demonstrates the cultural status of pornographic actors as those who are most competent at representing sex. In an interesting parallel, the aesthetics of amateurism

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\(^{337}\) Clips4sale, http://clips4sale.com, can be categorised as a site for both amateur and so called “ProAm” (Paasonen, “Labors of Love,” 1304) porn producers and performers, given that some users upload just one or two clips, while others upload many hundreds.


\(^{341}\) Loveswatchingher, comment on ThicknessCounts, “new sub?” FetLife video, 0:15, accessed October 11, 2014, no longer available.

have strongly influenced professionally made porn found online today, in terms of production values and techniques (e.g. use of handheld cameras for 'authentic' amateur camera wobble), and in terms of content (the category of 'Amateur' is available on most 'vignette' porn sites, where 'amateur' is understood as a "subgenre of commercial pornography")\(^{343}\). This is partly because of the blurring of boundaries between the two categories, and in part as a response to the tastes of consumers for pornography that shows something 'authentic,' "someone doing something because they like to be seen"\(^{344}\): the archetypal 'amateur.' Ironically, "real amateurs are busy polishing their productions, not scuffing them up"\(^{345}\) in order to more closely resemble 'professionally made' porn.

Indeed, the distinction between professional and amateur porn is becoming increasingly difficult to make out. As more and more people have the means to not only consume but to produce porn, there has been a blurring online of 'amateur' and 'professional' porn actors and producers, even bearing forth a recognisable hybrid genre, "ProAm, connoting people working in porn semi-professionally outside the large production companies."\(^{346}\) This "cottage industry-type cultural production"\(^{347}\) does not necessarily make a large amount of money for its producers but, as Luke Goode and Alan McKee state, regardless "of outcome, the presence of financial motivation should temper any temptation to presume or to overstate the voluntaristic nature of these social media spaces."\(^{348}\)

Many of the women whose photos and videos are regularly 'upvoted' onto K&P have harnessed their popularity and "affective labour"\(^{349}\) for financial gain via such

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\(^{343}\) Paasonen, "Labors of Love," 1305.


\(^{345}\) Senft, Camgirls, 28.

\(^{346}\) Paasonen, "Labors of Love," 1306.


\(^{348}\) Ibid.

\(^{349}\) Paasonen, "Labors of Love," 1306.
“cottage industry-type cultural production.” Commonly, such users present a sociable face (made up of textual and visual materials) on their profile and offer links out to, for example, a personal subscription website, a hosting site like Clips4sale, or a third-party funding site like mygirlfund. A great example is user SteamGirl, a 24 year old “Kinkster” living in Portland, Oregon. SteamGirl’s photos regularly appear on K&P and she is widely known and recognized on FetLife. Her profile demonstrates a quintessential blurring of sociality, sexuality, and commerciality: she is a consummate “entrepreneurial voyeur.” The ‘About Me’ section of her profile opens with a link in bold to her paid-access “neo-Victorian erotica” site; this is followed by a personal introductory paragraph that appears straightforwardly social and has a certain benign, generic quality to it (“I created a FetLife account 12 months ago as a way to meet other like-minded, kinksters since I moved to Oregon”). Such a performance of authenticity and of belonging to the community can be both socially and economically expedient. The user states that she has “a lot of friends on here simply because I accept all friend requests,” a social networking choice that prioritizes market exposure over meaningful connections.

The profile mixes commercial, sexual, and social information in an undifferentiated way: details of her various businesses (clothing design and erotica; a

354 Evidence for her fame on FetLife includes: the “I ♥ HEART ♥ STEAMGIRL! OFFICIAL FETLIFE FANCLUB” group (https://fetlife.com/groups/81788); her many friends; and discussions on the site more widely.
357 A longer example: “I created a FetLife account 12 months ago as a way to meet other like-minded, kinksters since I moved to Oregon. I’m a happy, comfortable introvert and find it easier to get to know people on Fet and skype before meeting at clubs and munches. I also enjoy using this site as a way to express and explore fetishes that, until now, I’ve had no one to share them with. FetLife has become my safe haven for openly loving and perv ing without being judged for it and a place where I can find the answers to most of my kink-related questions. I have a lot of friends on here simply because I accept all friend requests. I do make the time to reply to all emails and comments, though it might take me a couple of days.” “SteamGirl,” FetLife profile.
358 Ibid.
call for models) abut ‘personal ad’-style information (‘I’m looking for a female playmate. Someone gentle and sweet and currently unattached’\textsuperscript{359}). She provides the link to her Amazon Wishlist,\textsuperscript{360} allowing anyone looking at her profile to purchase her a gift, but also presents personal information that creates the impression of someone vulnerable and open, looking for meaningful friendship.\textsuperscript{361} SteamGirl exists (in the sense of existing through these texts) in this area where leisure and productive activity coincide, her textual identity inherently part of the product she is selling, alongside the two-dimensional visual product of her images, and the ‘affective labour’\textsuperscript{362} of sexu-socialising which is also essential to her ‘self as brand.’\textsuperscript{363} This is a commercialised sociality, wherein the user is trying to maximise market reach and make her appeal as broad as possible. She is by no means alone, however; such combinations are very common.

Trebor Scholtz, quoting Alexander Galloway, writes that, in the online world “it is impossible to differentiate cleanly between nonproductive leisure activity existing within the sphere of play and productive activity existing within the field of the workplace.”\textsuperscript{364} The blurring of lines between work and play becomes even more interesting when one is looking at sexual activity, including sexual self-representation, consumption, and labour, making it harder to differentiate between sex ‘for pleasure’ and sex ‘work.’ In this blurring of lines we can detect the logic of pornography, which dictates that one’s pleasure, body, sociality, and self-representation are all monetizable, all exploitable. Fitting one’s online persona – self-as-brand – to the perceived preferences of the market by “entrepreneurial

\textsuperscript{359} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{360} This common practice can be compared to the practice of the customers of professional Dommes paying them in ‘tributes,’ wherein desired goods and services can (but don’t always) replace money in the transaction (see Goddess Nia, “Buy It for Me: My Life as a Financial Dominatrix,” \textit{New York Magazine}, October 29, 2012, nymag.com/thecut/2012/10/my-life-as-a-financial-dominatrix.html).

\textsuperscript{361} “I have mild dyspraxia which affects my spatial awareness (this basically means I bump into shit all the time). I can’t cook very well but I make a mean gluten-free blueberry muffin. I often sit like a squirrel and I have telephobia.” “SteamGirl,” FetLife profile.

\textsuperscript{362} Paasonen, “Labors of Love,” 1306.

\textsuperscript{363} Ibid., 8.

voyeurs,\textsuperscript{365} consummate online sexuo-social producer-consumers, has become a naturalised strategy for online interactions. This adherence to representational norms is well-described in the concepts of “seriality,”\textsuperscript{366} “heterosexual structuralism,”\textsuperscript{367} cybertyping,\textsuperscript{368} and “the frenzy of the visible.”\textsuperscript{369}

### Seriality, Cybertypes, and Heterosexual Structuralism

Although it has been documented elsewhere that online sexual self-representation often follows pornographic conventions,\textsuperscript{370} the near-complete adherence of FetLife’s K&P feed to the logic of pornography is still remarkable. One of the most striking aspects of this adherence is the incredibly repetitive nature of these images. Similar subjects and similar sex acts appear again and again: young, white, able, feminine bodies; the blowjob, the ‘facial,’ the ‘money shot.’ Sarah Schaschek points out that the repetitiveness of porn is often dismissed “in passing” by scholars who see it as “part of the ‘problem’ of pornography.”\textsuperscript{371} But this “seriality,”\textsuperscript{372} says Schaschek, is not a problem to overcome, but an inherent part of the genre. This “formulaic structure”\textsuperscript{373} is very clearly reproduced on K&P. The uniformity of female body types represented on K&P alludes to the “commonplace notions of sexiness” that can be found in “cybertypes,” which are “simplified pornographic identities” that assume “familiarity with

\textsuperscript{365} Maddison, “Beyond the Entrepreneurial Voyeur,” 102.
\textsuperscript{366} Schascheck, \textit{Pornography and Seriality}, 4.
\textsuperscript{367} Paasonen, “Email from Nancy Nutsucker,” 407.
\textsuperscript{368} Jacobs, “Lizzy Kinsey.”
\textsuperscript{369} Williams, \textit{Hardcore}, 180.
\textsuperscript{370} For example, Attwood, “No Money Shot”; Jacobs, “Lizzy Kinsey”; Magnet, “Feminist Sexualities.”
\textsuperscript{371} Schascheck, \textit{Pornography and Seriality}, 4.
\textsuperscript{372} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid.
pornographic clichés of gender and race." The use of “stock characters” — “cybertypes” — is a structural characteristic of the porn genre, considered necessary because more complex characters evoke “different kinds of emotions” and “tend to decrease and disturb the viewing experience”, or, as one FetLife user put it, in a debate about K&P:

...when one watches porn, you really couldn't give less of a fuck (no pun intended) of 'what kind of person is she,' or 'she is flawed, but she has nice sides about her'... blablabla. No, when you watch porn, you just want to watch someone hot and good looking. You just want to get off.

In other words, porn must be repetitive, flattened, and easy to decode if it is to have the power of immediacy that its consumers require in order to reach orgasm without being distracted by “complex and contradictory” representations.

The “recurrence and predictability” of particular sexual acts points to what Susanna Paasonen describes as “heterosexual structuralism,” with genders “seen as mutually opposing yet interconnected by heterosexual desire.” This involves focusing on “body parts marked as primary signifiers of gender difference, such as genitalia, breasts, buttocks, long hair, and red painted lips. Gender differences are defined as primarily sexual and culminate in the presentation of genitalia,” followed by the male come-shot, which functions as the ultimate visual representation of pleasure. This

374 Jacobs, “Lizzy Kinsey,” 692. This notion of “cybertypes” is drawn from the work of Lisa Nakamura, who is concerned with “how racial identity, racial diversity and racist attitudes are engendered in machine-enabled communication practices.” Because the people we see featured in K&P pictures are overwhelmingly white, a group not typically racialised in pornography – white bodies are seen as ‘raceless’ unless in contrast with bodies of different racialized groups – I have not observed the cybertyping effect as it refers to race, as per Nakamura’s work, so I have only taken it up in reference to gender. Jacobs, “Lizzy Kinsey,” 691-2.

375 Paasonen, “Email from Nancy Nutsucker,” 411.


377 Paasonen, “Email from Nancy Nutsucker,” 411.


379 Paasonen, “Email from Nancy Nutsucker,” 411.

380 Schaschek, Pornography and Seriality, 2.

381 Paasonen, “Email from Nancy Nutsucker,” 407.

382 Ibid.
constant labouring to make pleasure visible is what Williams called the “frenzy of the visible”: this frenzy harnesses technologies to see more (and be seen more) and is the “logical outcome...of discourses of sexuality” that seek to probe “the measurable, confessable ‘truths’ of...bodies and their pleasures” in order to control them. The never-ending stream of user-generated content produced by the constant labour of “entrepreneurial voyeurs” online is the apotheosis of this “frenzy of the visible.”

In their study of “rate-my-erotic-picture” sites, Waskul and Radeloff describe how their participants “explicitly revel in a delighted gaze” and “do not challenge standards of beauty and sexual capital,” instead “willingly offer[ing] themselves to a viewing audience who rate” them by the standards of “commercial sexiness and hegemonic norms of gendered sexual display.” We can see these standards reflected in K&P, despite it being the ‘communal favourites’ feed of a site populated by enthusiasts and practitioners of non-mainstream sexualities. The adherence of these upvoted images and videos to the logic of mainstream porn suggests that, online, porn acts as a synecdoche for sex: allusions to pornography are understood as allusions to sex and the erotic in general. In other words, the popularity of such seemingly conventional pornographic imagery indicates that “that the only space available for [people] to express their sexuality is through imitating commercial sexiness,” even in an ‘unconventional’ BDSM space like FetLife.

In Williams’ 1992 “comparative analysis of the contemporary pornographic field” she stated that, “while there is no escape from the power and dominance of the masculine heterosexual norm, it is precisely in the proliferation of different pornographies” – in her analysis, homosexual, bisexual, sadomasochistic, and “bi- and

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384 Ibid., 35.
385 Ibid., 34.
388 Waskul and Radeloff, “How Do I Rate,” 214.
390 Williams, “Pornographies On/Scene,” 262.
beyond”\textsuperscript{391} – “that opposition to the dominant representations of pleasure can emerge. It is thus in the profusion rather than the censoring of pornographies that resistance can be found to...the dominance of the heterosexual masculine pornographic imagination.”\textsuperscript{392} FetLife, rather than being part of this resistance, cleaves strongly to the conventions of mainstream porn, suggesting that the quirks and weirdnesses of users’ unconventional sexualities have been smoothed out and airbrushed by the homogenous and commercialising logic of porn. The sense that sexuality can be a space for the opening up of possibilities and “a potentially transgressive force against the traditional boundaries of public and private”\textsuperscript{393} is diminished.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that while FetLife is a place where a diverse range of non-mainstream sexualities, fetishes, and activities thrive, adherence to the logic of pornography has rendered its central area, K&P, a flattened-out representational space. As a result of technological innovations, porn has adapted to the online world in its form and format, its free availability, and its unavoidability; thus, the visual language and logic of porn have become so much more commonplace than anyone could have anticipated. Although FetLife appeals to the idea that “sexuality symbolizes something real, something unalienated, undisciplined, and nonconsumptive,”\textsuperscript{394} K&P’s adherence to the logic of pornography contradicts this: it’s artificial, alienated, disciplined, and commercialized.

However, as Lynne Segal has stated, one must be careful of veering too strongly towards either

cybertopian feminism which understands cybersex as liberating, [or]
cyberdystopian feminism which sees cybersex as exploitative. Although

\textsuperscript{391} Ibid., p259
\textsuperscript{392} Ibid., p262
\textsuperscript{394} Weiss, “Mainstreaming Kink,” 124.
recent treatises on cybersex have attempted to break down this false binary, these two opposed positions remain – sometimes mirroring Second Wave feminist debates which occurred with respect to pornography. 395

Rather than condemning FetLife or K&P, I wish to document how the “increasing commodification of the internet” 396 has led to such ostensibly alternative spaces as FetLife being strongly defined by the logic of commercial sex. As technological advances like superfast broadband, wireless devices, and social media have opened up myriad ways and means for us to be sexual and to create sexual representations, the veering of K&P towards a conventional and banal norm is surprising, if not outright troubling. However, the wide range of unconventional sexual representation that we see elsewhere on FetLife suggests that there are ways of using new technologies that open up possibilities and challenge mainstream conventions. The fact that this unconventional sexual representation is not upvoted enough to appear on K&P is no bad thing: the creation of these sexual media for the love of it, without an eye to their commercial potential, speaks to a more democratic and plural form of sexual expression, without potential for monetization and marketization.

396 Ibid.
Chapter 5.

Conclusions

In this thesis, I have undertaken a broad, multi-level analysis of FetLife, combining a rhetorical-textual approach with elements of Stuart Hall’s ‘encoding/decoding’ model of media production and consumption. In Chapter 1 I provided an overview of FetLife; in Chapter 2 I detailed my methodological approach and outlined some of my ethical considerations; in Chapter 3 I analysed the site as a space that has been constructed to create the impression of being a ‘community,’ looking in detail at the controversy surrounding John Baku and the criminal accusations scandal; and in Chapter 4 I looked at user-generated content on the site, showing how it is strongly defined by the logic of pornography. The adherence to this logic means that the conventions, modes of representation, and visual languages that can be seen on FetLife often closely resemble those of online, mainstream, heterosexual pornography; this stands in dramatic contrast to the way the site employs the ‘community metaphor’ to shape its interactions with users, and users’ interactions with each other.

Community and Ethics

Adherence to the community metaphor on FetLife is both implicit and explicit. User NekoSuki made a well-received attempt to define what she saw as the rules for being a ‘good’ community member in a piece called “Dear Probably Well Meaning but Somewhat Annoying and/or Creepy Guy,” which trended to the top of the K&P page. The piece addresses “the clueless behavior of some men” who “hit up every potentially available woman and group” in their area, bombarding them with friend requests and
messages, in order to get “freaky laid” as quickly as humanly possible. NekoSuki very helpfully lays out what she sees as the rules for being a good member of FetLife, based on a conception of the site as a ‘community.’ She says,

While [FetLife] may seem like a porno paradise and hookup site at first glance, it is actually first and foremost a community. Communities are bonded by common interests and social order. Obviously, you have a common interest or you wouldn't be here. But do you understand the social aspect?

NekoSuki demonstrates that the two conflicting logics of FetLife – community and pornography – are very much apparent to its users. The popularity of the post and the approving comments left on it indicate that it struck a chord with many; for example user LwL said, “It should be required reading for everyone who joins FetLife”; user Joell said, “Thanks a ton! You have done this community a service.”

The direct engagement of FetLife’s users with the metaphor of community prompts me to consider the ethics of my own engagement with the site. Throughout the research process, I have often thought about where the line between public and private sex and sociality falls, if indeed it can be said to exist anymore at all. Fuzziness and slippages between the public and the private, or the removal altogether of boundaries between these areas, are part of major changes that the Internet, social media, and associated technologies have made to our social sphere. In this investigation, I have treated my subjects as one would people in a public setting for whom an expectation of privacy is not reasonable. Nevertheless, as a quasi-invisible ‘lurker’ who does not make her presence known, I am putting myself in a position of power in relation to those I am studying. However, it is certainly in keeping with the realities of interacting online that my data collection methods have this lurking, searching, reproducing quality. My invisibility on FetLife is what makes it different from other forms of ethnographic enquiry – although I am already somewhat ‘visible’ to the developers behind FetLife, and the publishing of this thesis might eliminate my invisibility to other users. In a space that others choose to

398 Ibid.
399 Comments on ibid.
engage with as ‘community’ or as ‘pornography,’ my form of lurking does not fit clearly in either camp.

Destabilising the notion that visibility equals engagement is the fact that many FetLife micro-celebrities\textsuperscript{400} treat the space more as a means to access an audience than as a community in a more conventional sense. Whether visible or not, users on FetLife – including myself – form part of the community-as-audience that must exist for the practice of “micro-celebrity”\textsuperscript{401} to work. As such, we are all part of what danah boyd calls a “super-public”\textsuperscript{402}, the geographically and temporally unbound audience-public that has access to the online world and can interact with it in inconceivible ways, meaning that the online lives of ordinary people are lived “on display”\textsuperscript{403} in a way that was neither possible nor conceivable prior to the widespread use of network technologies. Inevitably our sociality, sexuality, and expectations of privacy have been altered by such changes.

So while I still have some discomfort about my mode of engagement and the sense that I might be invading privacy, I am also aware that I am providing many users with exactly what they desire: an engaged and attentive audience. This ‘strange intimacy’ leads me to consider whether this ethnographic enquiry is itself a form of cybersex, since, like other users, I am engaging with sexual materials on the site and gaining a type of pleasure in the process: a pleasure of knowledge about my subjects that can be seen in some ways as pornographic, in Williams’ sense that porn is about trying to get closer to a visual knowledge of sexual pleasure.

**The Entrepreneurial Voyeur**

On FetLife, the language and cultural framework of mainstream porn appear to have infiltrated the space of a sexual minority. Here we see how porn online acts as a synecdoche for all sex, excluding other logics that might shape online sexual self-

\textsuperscript{400} Senft, “Microcelebrity.”

\textsuperscript{401} Ibid., 346.

\textsuperscript{402} boyd, “Super Publics.”

\textsuperscript{403} Ibid.
representation. I would not consider this an ‘anti-porn’ conclusion to reach; rather, I want to demonstrate how this logic offers a very narrow definition of what sexuality is and can be, thereby shutting down possibilities for sexual representation. This is symptomatic of much larger changes that Internet and social media technologies are having on our lives, whereby individuals are “encouraged to view their lives and identities as a type of enterprise, understood as a relation to the self based ultimately on a notion of incontestable economic interest.”\(^{404}\) In this conception of the “self as enterprise,”\(^{405}\) one’s self is a ‘brand’ to be controlled and managed, one’s activities and practices are always a form of labour, and one is constantly producing, consuming, and reproducing within an ever-more-mediated social sphere.

Lois McNay states that “the interpenetration of modes of capital accumulation and everyday practices has become intensified, creating new kinds of flexible regimes that sustain themselves in part through the reconfiguration of identity and subjectivity.”\(^{406}\) This can be seen in online sexuality, as represented by Stephen Maddison’s figure of the “entrepreneurial voyeur.”\(^{407}\) Entrepreneurial voyeurs are immaterial labourers 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.\(^{408}\)

In light of this kind of contemporary subjectivity, the contradictory nature of Fetlife makes perfect sense: it is presented as an alternative and authentic BDSM community, yet its reality is commercial and pornographic. In this disconnect we can distinguish the reason

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\(^{405}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{406}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{407}\) Maddison, “Beyond the Entrepreneurial Voyeur,” 102.

\(^{408}\) Ibid., 10. In the course of contemplating this view of contemporary, mediated subjectivity, an uncomfortable question arose: was I an ‘entrepreneurial voyeur’? I’m certainly increasing my own intellectual and cultural-economic capital by conducting this research: and my performance of research benefits me – in theory – economically, when I receive my advanced degree and go on to be a successful and productive worker in whatever field I enter; while online space might feel separate, it is in fact entirely part of the social and economic realities of the rest of life.
why the community metaphor is so powerful: it attempts to re-insert the rules of the offline community into the online space, creating a sense of security and familiarity without which users would not so liberally generate the ‘content’ that keeps the space going.

**Embodiment, or, What Happens If Sex (Solely) = Masturbation?**

In contemplating the online world, I also thought a little about the interface between oneself, one’s body, and cyber-reality. If one can view online porn as a synecdoche for sex, we can think about sex online as a substitute for sex between (mainly) unmediated bodies. In their study of the users of “CU-SeeMe” video conferencing software, Kibby and Costello explain that

> the erotic experience that can be created using CU-SeeMe software is mediated through a machine. The participant touches the computer keyboard, the mouse and their own body, and the sense of touch is enhanced by the multiplicity of contacts, and by the particular relationship of the body and the machine. ‘The pleasure of the interface’ results from the computer's offer to integrate the body and the machine, and from the spectator's simultaneous attraction to and dread of cyborg existence (Springer, 1991: 306). CU-SeeMe disperses sexual experience across the boundaries that previously separated body and machine.

As body and machine are increasingly coincident, body and body become increasingly separated, and an increasingly isolated form of sex – masturbation – proliferates. At the same time, people are increasingly connected across the network, affording them the ability to have sex with countless others in whatever time zone or geographical location. This speaks to the inherent tension of the “online community” and “global village” metaphors: while we are increasingly connected, we are also increasingly atomised, ‘entrepreneurial voyeurs’ labouring alone yet never unconnected. In this we can see the

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409 Kibby and Costello, "Interactive Sex Entertainment," 365.
410 Ibid., 353.
411 Ibid., 365.
413 Fish, “Place of the Internet,” 17.
supremacy of the individual, an essential component of neoliberalism. As Lois McNay states, the “autonomy” afforded by a society wherein the self is an enterprise “guarantees not liberty but responsible self-management”.\textsuperscript{414} governmentality epitomised.

It’s important to acknowledge that this reading is inevitably shaped by my own positionality, the investment I’ve felt in reading the work of sex-positive and anticensorship feminists from the 1980s and 1990s, and the sense that BDSM is imbued with the promise of difference, and a certain outlaw magic. FetLife is the largest online representative of BDSM, but it does not live up to its alternative promise: it is a quasi-community space that’s actually commercial, and its central communal feed is conventional, even misogynistic, and most certainly flattened, deadened, and repetitive in a pornographic way: it closes down possibilities, rather than opening them up. The sense of disappointment I experience is an inevitable result of having investment and a political position, a sense of hopefulness about diversity of representation, and a taste for the unconventional.\textsuperscript{415} My interactions with the ‘strange intimates’ of FetLife leave me with the sense that the site is not “a truly ‘queer’ space” that allows for multiplicity, testing, experimentation, and the challenging of existing boundaries,\textsuperscript{416} but something flatter, less exciting, and in the end, more exploitative.

\textsuperscript{414} Maddison, “Beyond the Entrepreneurial Voyager,” 102.
\textsuperscript{415} Weiss suggests that a public fascination with non-mainstream sexualities indicates some desire for the sense of freedom and the outlaw that seem to be inherent in them. Weiss, “Mainstreaming Kink,” 126.
\textsuperscript{416} Wilkinson, “Perverting Visual Pleasure,” 190.
References


Appendix A

Email to Admins of the Group “Confessions: TRIGGER WARNING.”

We really love that you are presenting an opportunity to FetLife members to anonymously tell their stories in “Confessions: TRIGGER WARNING”. We’ve thought from the beginning that allowing people to present their stories of experiencing non-consensual activities was an important thing to allow on FetLife, and even wrote a clause into the Terms of Use to specifically state that real rape could be discussed from a therapeutic perspective. Registered sex offenders convicted of sexual violence and/or non-consensual sexual offenses are not permitted to have accounts on FetLife. We’re also trying to work with the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom on their “Consent Counts” project, which is helping to tackle the problem of sexual abuse & intimate partner violence in the kinky community. In short, if someone is convicted of non-consensual activities in the scene, we’ll kick them off and we should be warning people about them!

However, we also do not allow accusations of criminal conduct when a conviction has not happened. Unfortunately, many of the posts in this thread are doing just that. We’d like to give you the opportunity to continue this great service to the community in this way. We’ll delete all the comments that name names. If you can anonymize any accusations that come in from now on, we’ll allow the thread to stay open. If not, we’ll have to delete the thread completely. We hope it doesn't come to that – we’d really hate to do that – and we hope that we can come up with a way to keep this going in a way that helps everyone.

Appendix B

John Baku ‘Letter of Apology & More Info’

Over 3 years ago, @Yianni69 and I were flown down to SF for some meetings. After 9 hours of flying, 5 hours of meetings, and very little food... we went to a Kink.com party. At the party I had 4-5 drinks. Not a crazy amount... but with the crazy day we had... it was irresponsible of me.

Not only was it a horrible idea because 4-5 drinks hit me like a ton of bricks but because I already promised that I would go to a party that was being held at the SF Citadel that night.

I will forever regret my next decision. I decided that even though I was drunk that it was better that I go to the event then let people down. That was probably the biggest mistake of my life... one I will continue to pay for... and for good reason.

The next day, I realized that I made a huge mistake by going to the party and I felt extremely guilty for ruining many people’s night.

Over the next week I talked to in person, called, and emailed at least a dozen people to apologize profusely for my actions. Everyone I spoke to was really understanding and forgiving. I really really appreciated that pretty much everyone accepted my apology.

That was the first time I ever went drunk to an event and the last time.

Many might ask why I didn't make a formal apology to the community about this over 3 years ago. Because that night, I cheated on my girlfriend of 3 months, and I couldn't, at the time, man up tell her what I did. I didn't want to hurt her. But in the end, I ended up hurting her even more. Thank god she's accepted my apology and we've worked through things and have now been together for 3 and a half years. Love you babes.

Why am I making a formal apology now? One, because it is long overdue and two, because it was brought up in someone's writing that made K&P today.

In that writing, the user links to a blog post where the author hypothesizes that the reason we don't allow people to name their abusers is because I sexually assaulted her that night.

When I saw that, I felt so friggn sick. I know I was really happy that night but if anyone pushed me away or said no I would have stopped what I was doing. So I checked all my private messages (PMs) with this person. In one PM I apologized profusely for any inappropriate advances I might have made towards her. In their response, they thought that overall it was kind of funny and even slightly endearing. That they just felt flattered at the attention. That it's fun to get pawed everyone once in a while and no one ever bites their neck and that I decorated her neck quite nicely.

122 days later, she started another conversation with me making fun of the fact that sometimes I am listed as the "Creator of FetLife" and was all cute with me.
269 days later, she posted a pic of us from that night. I asked her nicely to take the pic of us down. She removed it and was extremely nice about it. Their were two reasons why I asked her to take it down (1) to not hurt my gf and (2) because I am embarrassed about that night.

So reading today that I sexually assaulted her was shocking to me considering all the conversations we've had together since.

And no matter what, I will never forgive myself for what I did that night. The fact that I went to a party drunk, the fact that I cheated on my gf, and the fact that I let down this community. I am really really sorry for what I did and I completely understand anyone who is extremely disappointed with me.

NOTE: This is an apology and what happened at the SF Citadel over 3 years ago. With respect to naming abusers, please see this announcement.

Appendix C

Jian Ghomeshi’s Facebook Post Regarding his Dismissal from CBC and Q

Dear everyone,

I am writing today because I want you to be the first to know some news.

This has been the hardest time of my life. I am reeling from the loss of my father. I am in deep personal pain and worried about my mom. And now my world has been rocked by so much more.

Today, I was fired from the CBC.

For almost 8 years I have been the host of a show I co-created on CBC called Q. It has been my pride and joy. My fantastic team on Q are super-talented and have helped build something beautiful.

I have always operated on the principle of doing my best to maintain a dignity and a commitment to openness and truth, both on and off the air. I have conducted major interviews, supported Canadian talent, and spoken out loudly in my audio essays about ideas, issues, and my love for this country. All of that is available for anyone to hear or watch. I have known, of course, that not everyone always agrees with my opinions or my style, but I’ve never been anything but honest. I have doggedly defended the CBC and embraced public broadcasting. This is a brand I’ve been honoured to help grow.

All this has now changed.

Today I was fired from the company where I’ve been working for almost 14 years — stripped from my show, barred from the building and separated from my colleagues. I was given the choice to walk away quietly and to publicly suggest that this was my decision. But I am not going to do that. Because that would be untrue. Because I’ve been fired. And because I’ve done nothing wrong.

I’ve been fired from the CBC because of the risk of my private sex life being made public as a result of a campaign of false allegations pursued by a jilted ex girlfriend and a freelance writer.

As friends and family of mine, you are owed the truth.

I have commenced legal proceedings against the CBC, what’s important to me is that you know what happened and why.

Forgive me if what follows may be shocking to some.

I have always been interested in a variety of activities in the bedroom but I only participate in sexual practices that are mutually agreed upon, consensual, and exciting for both partners.
About two years ago I started seeing a woman in her late 20s. Our relationship was affectionate, casual and passionate. We saw each other on and off over the period of a year and began engaging in adventurous forms of sex that included role-play, dominance and submission. We discussed our interests at length before engaging in rough sex (forms of BDSM). We talked about using safe words and regularly checked in with each other about our comfort levels. She encouraged our role-play and often was the initiator. We joked about our relations being like a mild form of Fifty Shades of Grey or a story from Lynn Coady’s Giller-Prize winning book last year. I don’t wish to get into any more detail because it is truly not anyone’s business what two consenting adults do. I have never discussed my private life before. Sexual preferences are a human right.

Despite a strong connection between us it became clear to me that our on-and-off dating was unlikely to grow into a larger relationship and I ended things in the beginning of this year. She was upset by this and sent me messages indicating her disappointment that I would not commit to more, and her anger that I was seeing others.

After this, in the early spring there began a campaign of harassment, vengeance and demonization against me that would lead to months of anxiety.

It came to light that a woman had begun anonymously reaching out to people that I had dated (via Facebook) to tell them she had been a victim of abusive relations with me. In other words, someone was reframing what had been an ongoing consensual relationship as something nefarious. I learned — through one of my friends who got in contact with this person — that someone had rifled through my phone on one occasion and taken down the names of any woman I had seemed to have been dating in recent years. This person had begun methodically contacting them to try to build a case to defame me. Increasingly, female friends and ex-girlfriends of mine told me about these attempts to smear me.

Someone also began colluding with a freelance writer who was known not to be a fan of mine and, together, they set out to try to find corroborators to build a case to defame me. She found some sympathetic ears by painting herself as a victim and turned this into a campaign. The writer boldly started contacting my friends, acquaintances and even work colleagues — all of whom came to me to tell me this was happening and all of whom recognized it as a trumped up way to attack me and undermine my reputation. Everyone contacted would ask the same question, if I had engaged in non-consensual behavior why was the place to address this the media?

The writer tried to peddle the story and, at one point, a major Canadian media publication did due diligence but never printed a story. One assumes they recognized these attempts to recast my sexual behaviour were fabrications. Still, the spectre of mud being flung onto the Internet where online outrage can demonize someone before facts can refute false allegations has been what I’ve had to live with.

And this leads us to today and this moment. I’ve lived with the threat that this stuff would be thrown out there to defame me. And I would sue. But it would do the reputational damage to me it was intended to do (the ex has even tried to contact me to say that she now wishes to refute any of these categorically untrue allegations). But with me bringing it to light, in the coming days you will prospectively hear about how I engage in all kinds of unsavoury aggressive acts in the bedroom. And the implication may be made that this happens non-consensually. And that will be a lie. But it will be salacious gossip in a
world driven by a hunger for “scandal”. And there will be those who choose to believe it and to hate me or to laugh at me. And there will be an attempt to pile on. And there will be the claim that there are a few women involved (those who colluded with my ex) in an attempt to show a “pattern of behaviour”. And it will be based in lies but damage will be done. But I am telling you this story in the hopes that the truth will, finally, conquer all.

I have been open with the CBC about this since these categorically untrue allegations ramped up. I have never believed it was anyone’s business what I do in my private affairs but I wanted my bosses to be aware that this attempt to smear me was out there. CBC has been part of the team of friends and lawyers assembled to deal with this for months. On Thursday I voluntarily showed evidence that everything I have done has been consensual. I did this in good faith and because I know, as I have always known, that I have nothing to hide. This when the CBC decided to fire me.

CBC execs confirmed that the information provided showed that there was consent. In fact, they later said to me and my team that there is no question in their minds that there has always been consent. They said they’re not concerned about the legal side. But then they said that this type of sexual behavior was unbecoming of a prominent host on the CBC. They said that I was being dismissed for “the risk of the perception that may come from a story that could come out.” To recap, I am being fired in my prime from the show I love and built and threw myself into for years because of what I do in my private life.

Let me be the first to say that my tastes in the bedroom may not be palatable to some folks. They may be strange, enticing, weird, normal, or outright offensive to others. We all have our secret life. But that is my private life. That is my personal life. And no one, and certainly no employer, should have dominion over what people do consensually in their private life.

And so, with no formal allegations, no formal complaints, no complaints, not one, to the HR department at the CBC (they told us they’d done a thorough check and were satisfied), and no charges, I have lost my job based on a campaign of vengeance. Two weeks after the death of my beautiful father I have been fired from the CBC because of what I do in my private life.

I have loved the CBC. The Q team are the best group of people in the land. My colleagues and producers and on-air talent at the CBC are unparalleled in being some of the best in the business. I have always tried to be a good soldier and do a good job for my country. I am still in shock. But I am telling this story to you so the truth is heard. And to bring an end to the nightmare.