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CARNAL PRACTICES: ONLINE PORN CONSUMPTION AMONG QUEER EAST ASIAN MEN

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Despite porn's ability to arouse and titillate or disgust and anger (and sometimes all four at the same time), scholars have only relatively recently started to examine it through an affective lens. Writing in the inaugural issue of *Porn Studies*, Susanna Paasonen (2014) advocates for porn studies scholars to consider how the application of affect theory can help us better understand the allure of pornography. Paasonen identifies three ways in which affect theory can be used in porn studies: theorizing the encounters and intensities between porn and the viewer (this position views affect as non-personal), examining how intensities and attachments are understood and communicated (which positions affect as embodied), and explicitly incorporating the researcher's affective experiences and reflections. Most porn studies research on affect builds on the contribution of Paasonen, who in 2011 published *Carnal Resonance*, in which she develops the titular concept to describe the movement and intensities of affects between bodies and porn. Like Paasonen's *Carnal Resonance*, most affective porn research typically falls within the first camp of theorizing affect as it relates to porn, given many researchers' focus on intensities and encounters (e.g., Arroyo, 2016; Rehberg, 2019). While a small proportion of scholars have taken up the third position of reflecting on the scholarly self and their affective porn experience (e.g., Vörös, 2015), little attention has been given to the second approach Paasonen identifies.

This research emphasizes the second approach to the application of affect theory in porn studies by considering how queer East Asian men understand and engage with online pornography. Paasonen clarifies that *Carnal Resonance* (2011) "contributes to our knowledge on the visceral appeal of porn" rather than to the "knowledge gaps on the production and usage of porn" (p. 19). My contribution to affective porn studies is to focus on the latter by building on Paasonen's concept of carnal resonance and applying it to the examination of how porn is used by consumers. My approach to affect theory aligns with Paasonen's, as well as those of Sara Ahmed (2015) and Margaret Wetherell (2012), whose views are rooted in feminist thinking that questions the binary implications of "the turn to affect" in the humanities. "The turn to affect" has been read and critiqued as a turn away from the representational (Paasonen, 2011), as a turn

away from emotions (Ahmed, 2015), and as a turn away from discourse (Wetherell, 2012). Like Paasonen, Ahmed, and Wetherell, I view affect as socioculturally constructed and within contexts of contact.

While Paasonen's (2011) and Ahmed's (2015) approach to affect foregrounds its circulation, Wetherell's (2012) approach is decidedly more human-centered. Wetherell views affect as "*embodied meaning-making* . . . [,] something that could be understood as *human emotion*" (p. 4, emphasis in original). Given my focus on how consumers use porn, I also draw on Wetherell's conception of affect, which describes affects as being recruited, mobilized, felt, and interpreted in the body at various moments of encounter, all while the individual is attempting—both consciously and not—to make sense of these experiences. This sense-making is always in relation to discourses and contexts. Wetherell argues that a practice theory approach to affect can not only reveal patterns of affects but also the ways practices and their associated affects are unevenly distributed and enacted. Ultimately, Wetherell advocates for the concept of affective practice to consider how social practices become patterned and emotionalized, as well as how they are negotiated with. Though prior practices may inform current ones, negotiations within practices highlight the potential mechanism by which practices can change over time and across contexts.

In order to investigate how queer East Asian men understand and engage with online pornography, this study brings together Paasonen's (2011) carnal resonance and Wetherell's (2012) affective practice. Separately, the two concepts emphasize different dimensions of the affective movement between humans and others (people, objects, discourses, etc.). But more than using the two concepts in isolation of each other to highlight different aspects of this movement, I propose merging the two into what I am calling *carnal practice*. In doing so, each complements the other in ways that allow us to more fully see how individuals understand and engage with pornography. A practice approach supplements carnal resonance by bringing into focus routine patterns in the process of consuming porn, as well as how negotiations with discourses can change over time. These discourses highlight the inequalities in how and to whom particular affects circulate, affects in which the individual senses, makes sense, and negotiates. Carnal resonance supplements affective practice by highlighting the materiality of objects and how the materiality places limits on the ways in which affects circulate and are felt within the body. Overall, the concept *carnal practice* not only views the routine consumption of online pornography as a patterned and emotion-laden practice, but also posits that there are constant negotiations when engaging with porn and the platforms on which it is consumed.

The concept carnal practice is applied to 48 semi-structured interviews, conducted between February 2019 and September 2020 in 5 countries—Taiwan, South Korea, China, Japan and Canada—to consider how queer East Asian men navigate their respective internet space, are drawn to particular content and platforms that satisfy their desires and curiosities, and make sense of the porn they consume. From the interviews, themes of platform affordances, authenticity, reality/fantasy, and race emerged. Specifically, participants discussed notions of being drawn to authenticity in porn as well as porn that seems real (that is, most similar to their lived experience), attraction to particular sex acts, scenarios and races, being unable to fully articulate why they are

attracted to a particular performer, and, in other cases, allowing a platform's algorithm to help facilitate and fine-tune their desires, to name a few. Ultimately, this paper uses the concept of carnal practice to examine how one engages with and makes sense of online pornography through the affectively felt practice of searching for, finding, and getting off to online pornography. Although this study focuses specifically on the practices of queer East Asian men, the concept of carnal practice is not limited to this group and has wider application.

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