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## ELUSIVE PORN: LEARNING FROM ALASTONSUOMI

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### Introduction

Pornography has never been easy to pin down in terms of what it encompasses, stands for, or marks, while the expansion and diversification of sexual media content on online platforms – including but not limited to camming, sexting, sexual self-shooting, and hook-up app use – has further added to the challenge (Barker 2018; Kendrick 1996; Lins 2023; Paasonen 2024). The field of porn studies has expanded during the past decade as one exploring a broad range of media content and technologies (Attwood & Smith 2024), yet classifying and interpreting things through the lens of porn also poses the question of the analytical shortcomings involved. For if porn is an elusive referent, both historically and in the present, what analytical clarity can it offer in studies of digital sexual cultures? And how do the creators and consumers of sexual make use of the term?

This paper explores boundary work between porn and other sexual media among the users of Alastonsuomi (“Naked Finland”), a Finnish-language image gallery dedicated to nudity and sexual self-expression. Building on 31 semi-structured, pseudonymized in depth interviews conducted by Maria Vihlman, it asks how, and in connection to what kinds of content the participants – many of whom actively engage in sexually explicit self-shooting – evoke the notion of porn. Within this, distinctions become drawn between different platforms, aesthetic qualities, as well as social and personal meanings.

### Self-shooting: pornographic, artistic, personal

Alastonsuomi is an adult image gallery launched in 2007 with a markedly “in-your-face” aesthetic, dick pics being by far the most popular visual content among its 140,000+ registered users. Many of the interviewees had first found the site when looking for locally sourced amateur porn and still use it for the purpose. Amateur and “home porn” (“kotiporno”) were frequent ways of describing the platform’s content and overall DIY

feel. This also connoted a certain sense of freedom – as in Maarit’s discussion of Alastonsuomi as a space where people “do all kinds of stuff” without this stuff being extensively staged, produced, or edited.

Elina associates Alastonsuomi’s value with the possibility to see real people just as they are, “compared to something like porn” which, by implication, comes across as formulaic and manufactured. This was nevertheless not a value judgment, since Elina had also “made some amount of porn” herself, had an active OnlyFans account, and published semi-naked photos on Instagram. Rather than distinguishing between things along the lines of sexual explicitness as such, she marked platforms apart from one another in terms of their felt meaning and importance: Alastonsuomi “has to do with something much larger than just that site (...) it’s just a very large part of my sexuality, in a way, expressing it.” This speaks of Alastonsuomi’s felt importance as a site of sexual self-expression and social connections – sentiments shared by other interviewees, which also find resonance with extant scholarship on digital sexual cultures (e.g., Byron et al. 2024; Tiidenberg 2019; Wignall 2022, Sundén et al. 2026).

For his part, Petteri sees Alastonsuomi as “partly the same thing as some amateur online porn” but not as a porn site as such: “it’s about this kind of chatting and making contacts and (...) like seeing people just for sex.” Timo, who also has a presence on Pornhub, articulates the distinction between the two platforms as one of felt intimacy. Distinctions were made between platforms both on aesthetic and ethical terms, so as to point to broader ecologies of differently sexual and social platforms that users navigate. Noora saw the site as a “replacement” for porn, implying that it shares similar features and functions with, but is not quite classifiable as a porn platform. Even as the bulk of visual content shared on Alastonsuomi could be classified as porn with little difficulty, it is also seen as distinct in its feel, mode, and sociability. There may be far too many dick pics to bother with, and aesthetic and technical qualities may also otherwise be found lacking, yet this also connoted certain homeliness, authenticity, and relatability not associated with much commercial porn, or international mass-scale platforms such as Pornhub. As is the case with any social media, user accounts double as personal archives, with the difference that sexual displays are not only allowed but strongly expected within the social vernaculars of Alastonsuomi.

As people who share their naked photos and videos online, and who foreground the importance of sexual self-expression for their overall well-being and social relating, the participants had little aversion towards porn when making distinctions between different platforms, the content that circulates on them, and the kinds of sociality that they allow for (if any). They nevertheless associated mainstream porn with both opaque labor conditions and a certain predictability of outputs, echoing Alex Monea’s (2022, 155) discussion on the homogenization within both “the porn we see” and “the porn we can imagine,” as brought forth by centralized distribution platforms and their content ranking systems. While the participants place Alastonsuomi within the realm of porn, they do so in hesitant and ambiguous ways, so that the category of porn itself comes across as elastic, contradictory, and situational in its uses.

### **How we classify things**

It is nevertheless crucial to note that almost half of the participants did not mention the

word porn *at all* when discussing their uses of Alastonsuomi. This points to there being no shared on-platform consensus on how sexually explicit user photos and videos are perceived, or what user intentions and modes of engagement might be. This has obvious implications for studying sexual self-shooting: after all, if the users and producers of the said content do not associate it with pornography, then scholars labeling it as such poses obvious problems. The problems related to porn as a contemporary genre classifier, I argue, cannot be simply circumvented by introducing another umbrella term, such as the broadly used “sexually explicit materials” (SEM), precisely since distinctions within sexually explicit materials matter. Umbrella terms by necessity efface contextual nuance in ways not dissimilar to how nudity and sexual content are classified (and effaced) in commercial content moderation practices. The horizontal governance of sexual content results in elusiveness in terms of what qualifies as porn and, consequently, in what it stands for. Using porn as an assembling concept in studies of digital sexual cultures similarly risks a flattening out of the economies of production and monetization, as well as the content generated, shared, used, and experienced.

Paradoxically, the notion of porn can be simultaneously both too expansive in its uses and too partial in what it refers to. The challenge, then, remains for scholarly vocabularies to be able to account for forms of sexual media that are not unambiguously porn, yet intertwine with its aesthetics or uses, and not to dismiss the inner diversity of porn as genre in the process. This means that studies of digital sexual cultures need to be attuned to the terminologies and definitions deployed by creators and consumers, as well as to remain sensitive to the distinctions made between platforms, their aesthetics and social functions. We need to listen with a keen ear.

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