

# Reviewing Pornography: Asserting Sexual Agency on *Girls on Porn*

Anne Korfmacher, University of Cologne, Germany

## Abstract

Can pornography ever be an ethical expression of sexuality? Laura and Rachel, hosts of the podcast *Girls on Porn* (2019-), participate in this ongoing discourse by reviewing professional and amateur pornographic videos on their podcast. Their aim is to help their listenership find ethical pornography and, in the course of reviewing a selection of pornographic content each episode, to explicitly subvert expectations about mainstream pornography by primarily focussing on the performance of women's sexual pleasure. The podcast makes use of the popular format of the "chumcast" shows—podcasts that thrive on the casual conversation and easy banter of their hosts (cf. McHugh). The popularity of this format may be explained by the unique affordances of the podcast medium, heightening feelings of intimacy, authenticity and embodiment (Llinares, Berry and Meserko). This article explores how the podcast medium's aural form impacts the hosts' assertion of their sexual agency in their commentary of the pornographic videos they watch as well as in the negotiation of their personal erotic experiences. The affordances of the podcast allow the hosts and their diverse guests to affirm their sexual agency and express their erotic fantasies in a safe space by providing an intimate atmosphere that prompts a paradoxical sense of anonymity as well as a parasocial connection to their listenership. Importantly, it also enables the hosts to mediate the pornography they watch through an aural-only medium which allows a distance to the visuality of pornographic videos which overwhelmingly relies on the objectification of female bodies.

## Introduction: *Girls on Porn*

1 The recent call for contributions to the Routledge journal *Porn Studies* highlights an apparent shift in how pornography is being conceived and consumed, noting that, though "[p]ornography is traditionally understood as a visual medium [...] more recently it seems we may have entered the era of the frenzy of the aural" ("Call for Contributions on Audio Porn/Porn Audio"). Podcasts containing pornographic content abound and openly market their explicitness in the title of the show—*My Dad Wrote a Porno*, *The Porn Lover Podcast*, *There Will be Porn*, *Porn Stars are People*, *Porn Mom Podcast with Sally Mullins* and the *Porn Director's Podcast*—to name but a few. Podcasting's affinity for sexual content has been previously remarked on by Spinelli and Dann (10) and goes hand in hand with a growing interest in erotica and pornography which, according to gender and sexuality studies scholar Lynn Comella, "has never been higher" (439). This trend is particularly noticeable among younger women, who seem to be increasingly drawn to consume pornography (Fritz and Paul 640).

2 The pornographic content prevalent in such podcast audio material may include explicit narratives, often in the form of confessionals, feature intimate conversations between the hosts and provide interviews with guests from all walks of life—including the porn industry. Pornographic podcasts, the *Porn Studies* call for contributions continues, often participate in a

“podcast boom in commentary and analysis” (“Call for Contributions on Audio Porn/Porn Audio”), an observation I have previously explored with Alyn Euritt in an article on *My Dad Wrote a Porno* (Euritt and Korfmacher, forthcoming). In an attempt to provide contextualising insight into current social, political and cultural phenomena, commentary podcast hosts have taken up the mantle of—mostly amateur or semi-professional—commentators to explore topics ranging from the news to their favourite TV shows to the pornography they consume.

3 *Girls on Porn* (2019-) contributes to the boom both in commentary podcasts and in pornography podcasts as its hosts Rachel and Laura comment on pornographic content from a self-professed feminist angle. The podcast thus also joins the ranks of the growing number of explicitly feminist podcasts such as *Call Your Girlfriend*, *Feminist Killjoys*, *PhD* and *The Guilty Feminist*, whose hosts share a passionate involvement in some form of feminist politics. Hosted on the podcast network *Headgum*, the podcast spans 58 episodes as of early-April 2020, each centring around a review of a different popular search term on pornography aggregate sites. Joining the hosts, 22 of these episodes feature guests that are occasionally active members of the porn industry themselves, such as porn performers Mickey Mod and Jessy Dubai. The hosts’ explicit aim—to provide a helpful guide to more ethical pornography—structures the episodes: the podcast includes informative research about each episode’s specific popular pornographic search term, an overview over some of the more hilarious popular porn titles in that particular category, followed by a review first of a mainstream, often highly criticised pornographic video, and finally of a feminist alternative video the hosts endorse.<sup>1</sup> This podcast structure is interspersed with personal confessionals by the hosts as well as interviews with their guests and overall casual banter.

4 By focussing on both mainstream pornography and feminist alternatives, Laura and Rachel participate in a longstanding feminist discourse of whether or not “such a thing as feminist pornography” can truly exist (Potter 106). Tracing the remnants of the sex wars in the 1970s and 80s in today’s discourse surrounding pornography, this article argues that *Girls on Porn* is a feminist expression of female desire that is particularly suited to this aural medium. Drawing on research from the developing field of Podcast Studies as well as Porn and Feminist Media Studies, I contend that the aural form of the podcast affords the hosts and their diverse guests the opportunity to affirm their sexual agency, express their erotic fantasies and negotiate pornography consumption in a safe space by providing an intimate atmosphere that prompts a paradoxical sense of anonymity as well as a parasocial connection with their listenership.

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<sup>1</sup> Mainstream pornography can be distinguished from other forms of pornography through its mass market and wide distribution which is contrasted by pornography with artistic or political goals (Fritz and Paul 640).

Importantly, it also enables the hosts to mediate the pornography they watch through an aural-only medium which allows a distance to the visuality of the reviewed mainstream pornographic videos which overwhelmingly relies on the objectification of women.<sup>2</sup>

5 I begin by tracing the legacy of the sex wars, briefly outlining the struggles surrounding female agency in relation to pornography discourses in order to analyse how the hosts of *Girls on Porn* review both mainstream and feminist pornography in light of these discourses. The section “Reviewing Mainstream Pornography” explores how Rachel and Laura mediate the common objectification of female bodies in mainstream pornography through their commentary while the subsequent section contrasts the hosts’ description and discussion of feminist alternatives. After considering these two main segments of *Girls on Porn*, I examine the intimate nature of the podcast and its audience reception, which leads me to consider how the podcast provides a platform for both the hosts and porn performers to ‘have a voice’ and be heard in the next section. Finally, I consider podcasting’s supposed “cloak of invisibility” (Meserko 29) to illustrate how *Girls on Porn* manages to provide as a safe space for its hosts, guests and listeners to explore their sexualities in relation to the consumption of pornographic videos.

### ***Girls on Porn* and the Legacy of the Sex Wars**

6 The legitimacy of pornography in feminist discourse has long been closely tied to its ethical implications, invoking the systematic exploitation of the female body, the suppression of female desire and the fetishization and forceful submission of marginalised groups of people (cf. i.a. Potter, Comella, Heath et al.). Can pornography ever be an ethical expression of the diverse range of female sexuality without maintaining or even actively supporting a capitalist, patriarchal industry that systemically exploits women? And if so, what does pornography need to look like, sound like, be produced like, in order to subvert conventions that, at least in mainstream pornography, indeed tend to lend credit to critical voices that seek to more strongly regulate or even radically outlaw pornography altogether?<sup>3</sup>

7 This debate is not recent and it takes its cue from the feminist sex wars, spurred originally at a conference in 1982 on the politics of sexuality, “creating a divide over issues broadly relating to sexuality—pornography, erotica, prostitution, lesbian sexual practices, and sadomasochism—and whether such practices are dangerous or pleasurable for women” (Heath

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<sup>2</sup> This article consistently uses woman/women, man/men and female, male to reflect the usage of the terms in the referenced research but I want to explicitly highlight that trans men/women, genderqueer and non-binary folk are not exempt from either pornographic objectification (the opposite is often more likely), nor are they excluded in the *Girls on Porn* pornography reviews (cf. e.g. “Trans with Jessy Dubai”).

<sup>3</sup> See Smith and Attwood for an introduction to different popular and academic stances on pornography.

et al. 199). “For obvious enough reasons”, Madhok et al. contend, “much feminist energy has been devoted to establishing women’s capacity for agency” (1), invoking a history of feminist theory focused on women’s systemic lack of agency. Since the sex wars, then, women’s agency in the production, consumption and representation in pornography has been a prominent issue of contention at the heart of the (feminist) ethical dilemma surrounding pornographic images. The discourse remains important and ever present, heightened by an overwhelming sense of what culture writer Katherine Angel refers to as an “anxiety about female sexuality, discomfort with female desire” (54) that seeks to shame and police women pursuing sex for their own pleasure. These anxieties are often connected to concerns about what it means to be a sexual woman in a society shaped by the desires of men and “the increasing ubiquity of pornographic tropes” (ibid.). Angel continues,

discussing sexuality in the public realm relies on two unsatisfying polarities: on the one hand, seeing forms of desire as shaped by culture (which is often misogynistic) and therefore rejecting these; or, on the other hand, embracing pleasure and therefore relinquishing any critical awareness. It is as if there were only two choices – being critical, or being a dupe. (55)

She thus highlights the prominent binary positions that are remnants of the sex wars and have been coined the “danger and choice stances” towards female sexual agency (Heath et al. 221) and which can invoke postfeminist sensibilities focusing on women’s (sexual) ‘empowerment’ (i.a. Gill and Donaghue, Gill, Burkett and Hamilton).<sup>4</sup>

8     Importantly, the hosts’ choice of production and distribution medium affords the creation of a show that is fairly independent from outside intervention and can centre on pornographic content without censoring repercussions to the project. The podcast medium is characterised by a number of such affordances, including the lack of production oversight, editors and corporate policies, universal podcast standards and platform oversight (Berry, ““Just Because”” 25, 21). In a number of episodes, Laura and Rachel talk about their experiences with social media site *Twitter*, which has previously suspended the ‘official’ social media account connected to the podcast (cf. “Passion with Betsy Kenney” and “Threesome with Mickey Mod”). This suspension of social media accounts related to sexual content of any kind is specifically addressed in the hosts’ conversation with porn performer Mickey Mod, who references the so-called “shadow ban” common on social media sites which prohibits particular groups and whole communities from reaching their intended audiences by blocking their content (cf. “Threesome with Mickey Mod”). As a consequence, sex workers are unable to

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<sup>4</sup> For a more in-depth discussion of the sex wars and their impact on the feminist definitions of female (sexual) agency c.f. Heath et al.

easily connect, making it difficult to call out unethical industry standards and oppose laws that, for instance, do not distinguish between sex work and sex trafficking (cf. “Threesome with Mickey Mod”). Laura and Rachel are not dependent on these social media sites which have been known to suspend content of a (potentially) sexual nature. As podcast hosts, they are more independent in their content choices.<sup>5</sup>

9 Thus, podcasting, John L. Sullivan argues, occupies the “status of a uniquely democratic medium” (45) and allows the exploration of even the most niche topics (39). This catering for niche or cult content is further maintained by the fact that, though steadily gaining in listenership and producers, podcasting so far remains peripheral to the dominant media and digital culture (Llinares et al. 6). This creative autonomy and positioning at the media cultural periphery, then, allows for podcasters to cater to “more idiosyncratic cultures of interest” (Llinares et al. 2) and is one of the reasons why podcasts with such explicit interests as *Girls on Porn* manage to exist and even thrive.

### **Reviewing Mainstream Pornography**

10 The hosts of *Girls on Porn* use their podcast platform to point out and criticise a whole range of sexist, racist, ableist and paedophilic tropes that are prominent in mainstream pornography, highlighting their ubiquity and questioning their ethical implications. In particular, Laura and Rachel point out the objectification of female performers and their lack of sexual agency and authentic, that is, believable, pleasure. In an empirical study on the agentic and objectifying sexual scripts in pornography from 2017, Niki Fritz and Bryant Paul analysed 300 pornographic scenes to compare mainstream pornography with “categories of internet pornography aimed at women (including Feminist and For Women)”, focussing on “indicators of both sexual objectification (including stripping, cumshots, aggression, genital focus, and gaping) and agency (including self-touch, orgasm, and directing and initiating sex)” (639). Their conceptualisation of sexual agency stresses concrete acts including “to vocalize individual desires, and to direct, demonstrate, and experience personal pleasure” (Fritz and Paul 642) which is reflected in Laura and Rachel’s respective criticism and praise of the pornography they review. The study’s results suggest precisely what the podcast hosts and many of their guests bemoan in their commentary, i.e. that instances of female objectification are more prevalent in mainstream pornography, whereas explicitly stated queer feminist pornography contains more indicators of female sexual agency (Fritz and Paul 642).

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<sup>5</sup> Considering the proliferation of streaming services such as *Spotify* trying to acquire the exclusive rights to certain podcasts, we might see developments in content censorship over the next months or years, however.

11 The podcast's episode foci as determined by popular search terms provide a first insight into these conventions, including terms such as 'secretary', 'teen', 'big dick', 'gang bang' or 'Asian', on which the hosts of *Girls on Porn* further elaborate during their research segment and subsequent commentary. Often, these dominant tropes are connected to patriarchal conventions that fetishize particular bodies among the performers in mainstream pornography. In their episode on the search term "Big Dick", for instance, Laura and Rachel discuss the unrealistic and fetishized nature of the larger than average penis in pornography and explicitly blame a patriarchal industry for its existence (cf. "Big Dick"). Commenting on both the unrealistic standards these depictions set for men as well as the ensuing struggles of the (in this case) female performers (including "cervical pain" and "shallow BJs"), Laura and Rachel argue that the visual nature of most mainstream pornography is to blame for this unhealthy fetishization of unrealistic bodies ("Big Dick"). In the same episode, they also criticise the blatant aggression towards women in mainstream pornography, referring to the trope of "destroy[ing] that pussy" and the common focus on genitalia shots which seem to overwhelmingly objectify female performers ("Big Dick"). These objectifying tropes of mainstream pornography are criticised by the two hosts, as is the lack of agentic action by the female performer, whose masturbation scene and very vocal sounds of pleasure are judged as unrealistic by both Laura and Rachel (ibid.). This criticism of porn's objectification of women and the female performer's lack of agency during sex scenes constitutes a recurring talking point and discussion starter on *Girls on Porn*.

12 During the podcast episodes, the aural-only podcast medium forces the two hosts to mediate the chosen pornographic videos, thereby distancing their listeners from the visuality of the depicted sexual acts. This medium constraint is an affordance in disguise. Instead of assuming that their podcast listeners have watched the pornographic videos beforehand, Rachel and Laura recount the events in the videos and describe the sets and the performers' actions throughout. This recapitulation of events in the form of retrospective commentary affords a mediation and translation—or 'recodification' (cf. Raible)<sup>6</sup>—of the pornographic content through the feminist lenses of hosts Laura and Rachel and their guests. In its function of bridging a gap between the readers (here: viewers/listeners) of a text (cf. Gumbrecht), the commentary form of *Girls on Porn* frames the mainstream pornographic video as misogynistic and unexciting due to its objectifying (male) gaze and lack of female sexual agency. Thus, when the female performer in the porn video is masturbating, one of the hosts not only criticises the

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<sup>6</sup> According to Wolfgang Raible commentary is based on the phenomenon of recoding (*Umkodieren*): "Wenn wir andere *verstehen*, kodieren wir das, was wir verstanden haben, mit eigenen Mitteln und eigenen Vorstellungen um, wir passen es an unsere eigenen Wissensvoraussetzungen oder unser eigenes Vorverständnis an" (51).

sex act as blatantly fake but also talks about her personal, bodily reaction while watching the scene, confessing: “I was also dry watching it” (“Big Dick”). This mediation highlights the hosts’ affective, embodied responses, thereby, on the one hand, reiterating the fetishizing portrayal of female performers, and on the other, exposing the porn’s failure to have its intended effect on Laura and Rachel—to arouse.

13 The hosts also speculate about the performers’ pleasure during the production of the video, projecting their own experiences on the portrayed women in order to ascertain the authenticity of their supposed sexual pleasure. In the same episode, Rachel and Laura describe the female performer’s very young appearance as making them feel uncomfortable, and note that while she is “doing her best”, she seems “uninspired” and as if the male performer could easily “crush her skull”, considering his size in comparison to hers (“Big Dick”). The predominant sense of unease is palpable in these comments and is not particularly mitigated by the ironic tone in which one of the hosts describes the woman’s “fear and panic in her eyes” (“Big Dick”). Laura and Rachel continue to describe the female performer as a “ragdoll” and a “human pretzel” and declare their detachment from the sexual acts through both explicit statements and sighs that communicate their exhaustion with the, in their eyes, unbelievable sexual performance (“Big Dick”). The hosts’ commentary thereby mediates the visually unpleasurable pornographic content for the listeners and particularly highlights the female performer’s objectification and lack of sexual agency.

14 Hence, the hosts’ affective reactions to the pornographic videos are central the podcast commentary and not only include critical responses to the portrayed sex acts but also very intimate personal responses. While on one hand, the hosts heavily criticise mainstream pornography and its conventions and tropes, on the other, they also provide alternative expressions of female desire by including recommendations and commentary of feminist pornography in similar search term categories.

### **Reviewing Feminist Pornography**

15 Laura and Rachel’s podcast objective, to provide ethical alternatives to mainstream pornography, overlaps with the aim of feminist pornographers to “take the economic, physical, and social vulnerability of performers seriously” (Potter 111). Tracing the history of feminist porn to the sex wars, Potter argues that pornography supporters within radical feminism recognised both the exploitation of women as well as the sexual violence committed against them (105). Instead of fighting for an outright ban of pornography, however, these feminists established alternative visions for pornography which

introduced new workplace ethics that protected female performers' physical safety, gave them the power and status to make their own creative decisions on the set, and eventually, provided the opportunity to direct their own films. (Potter 107)

In keeping with these ideals, feminist pornography introduced stricter rules to provide for their performers' safety, "the director had to put the actor's pleasure and agency at the center of the story, ask for actors' consent for any sexual act, permit actors to revoke consent, and provide clean and safe working conditions" (Potter 108). These are ostensibly minimum standards but according to Potter "[t]he industry is also less regulated than it has ever been" and "[a]lthough federal obscenity laws still exist, they are rarely enforced except when sexual materials feature, or are distributed to, legal minors" (108). The negotiation of industry standards and performer's safety and agency is also addressed on *Girls on Porn* and will be considered in section "Agency & Voice".

16 For now, I want to illustrate how *Girls on Porn* recognises the considerable shortcomings of mainstream porn by contrasting their critical reviews of mainstream pornography with feminist alternatives. In the same episode as analysed before, Laura and Rachel lead into their feminist porn review by highlighting the platform *Deep Blush* as an alternative site for more ethical pornography consumption. So as not to promote mainstream aggregate sites, the hosts only provide links to the feminist porn they review in their episode show notes and even offer their platform subscription passwords to their guests in order to encourage them to consume more ethical alternatives (e.g. "Secretary with Jon Gabrus"). During the commentary itself, the hosts once again describe the sexual scenes as they unfold and talk about their personal reactions to the performers' portrayed pleasure.

17 Whereas the mainstream video discussed in an episode is met with concern and a voiced lack of arousal, the feminist alternative is contrasted as arousing. In one scene of the feminist video, the hosts describe how the female performer 'dry humps' her male co-performer which is met with one of the hosts' note: "just from looking at it—that feels good" ("Big Dick")—which stands in stark contrast to the previous admission about the mainstream video: "I was also dry watching it". What is more, the hosts specifically mention the video's male performer Owen Gray as one of their favourite performers and assess the female performer's aroused reactions to his ministrations as authentic, analysing her body language and identifying with her pleasure: "I believe she came", "her feet were cramping", "her eyes rolled" ("Big Dick").

18 This perceived authenticity is highlighted on multiple *Girls on Porn* episodes whose hosts always emphasise the female performers' pleasure as more centred in feminist/alternative porn. Especially Owen Gray's "quiet check-ins" with his female co-performer are lauded by Laura and Rachel, who note the communication as particularly positive and arousing ("Big

Dick”). This focus on female pleasure highlights that the podcast hosts judge the pornography they consume predominantly based on the assumptions they make regarding the production of the video. Knowing that the pornographic video originated on an alternative porn website, was produced by a feminist pornographer or features performers vocal about ethical pornography, the hosts provide further ‘evidence’ of the presented video’s ethical nature by reflecting on the ostensible authenticity of the female performers’ pleasure. The contrast staged between mainstream and feminist alternative porn on *Girls on Porn* thus mostly centres around the apparent lack of authentic female pleasure in mainstream porn as well as the absence of harmful tropes and objectification in feminist alternatives and vice versa.

### **Intimacy & Exploring the Self on *Girls on Porn***

19 While the aural nature of the podcast medium distances the hosts and their listeners from the visuality of the criticised mainstream videos, it also affords an intimate discussion of other, more pleasurable, sexual expressions and experiences. Podcasting’s intimacy has been remarked on and explored countless times in podcasting scholarship (cf. also Euritt in this special issue), most notably by Richard Berry whose concept of podcasting’s “hyper intimacy” highlights the heightened sense of closeness podcasting can elicit:

Podcasts are listened to in an intimate setting (headphones), utilizing an intimate form of communication (human speech). Furthermore, in many cases, podcasts are presented by people from within a listener’s own community of interest or by people she/he may already have a relationship with via social media and are frequently recorded in a podcaster’s own personal or domestic space. (“Part of the Establishment” 666)

Especially the so-called “chumcasts”, “in which two or more hosts riff off each other, chatting in a casual or rambunctious manner around a theme, making the listener feel included in a private no-holds-barred conversation” (McHugh 12) seem to appear as particularly intimate in form. These chumcasts, such as *Girls on Porn*, invite listeners who “want a relationship with a presenter/host/story-teller rather than to immerse themselves in a sea of story/sound/visceral experience” (McHugh 16). This sense of a relationship between podcasters and listeners has also been noted by Melanie Piper, who argues that the podcast medium allows hosts to form parasocial bonds with their listeners (48).

20 Llinares et al. also emphasise how the technological affordances of podcasts—such as having to choose one’s podcasts more consciously than radio shows and listening to podcasts through headphones—can elicit a “deeply sonorous intimacy” for the podcast listeners (2):

To be a private, silent participant in other people’s interests, conversations, lives and experiences, relating to a subject you are passionate about, generates a deep sense of connection. Perhaps such immersion into a simultaneously interior and

exterior sonic experience may be the essential reason why podcasts have become so popular: they offer the listener a means to explore the self while simultaneously providing anchoring points in the chaos of a digital and material experience that is increasingly blurred. (2)

*Girls on Porn* hosts Rachel and Laura explore their personal sexual desires in relation to pornographic videos on the podcast, but also invite their listeners to join in, offering a “deep sense of connection” to their audience, as well as “a means to explore the self”. One *Apple Podcasts* five-star listener review explicitly references the introspective act prompted by the podcast:

I have so many 🧐🧐🧐 [three emojis with monocle] moments listening to this podcast. I held many preconceived notions and wives-tales as truths, but after each episode I walk away with the facts and *a new interest in exploring myself*. I’ve even had the courage to try some new things because of this podcast! I think listening to this every week has helped me understand different facets of my sexuality and of those around me. I can’t wait for each update! Thank you so much for your courage and creativity! (Caycegale!, emphasis added)

*Apple Podcasts* reviewer “Caycegale!” also notes the “courage” of the two hosts, thanking them for tackling an intimate and potentially taboo topic such as porn consumption which highlights the perceived value of the podcast for its listeners.

21 Other five-star reviewers point to similar aspects of the podcast, particularly illustrating that the podcast “becomes a social event that is akin to the practice of checking in with friends” (Piper 48):

I love Laura and Rachel’s personalities and openness (and voices 🗨️ [emoji sticking out tongue]) and I cannot get enough of them! Thank you so much for this beautiful work of art. (colbyjww)

Love the pod; laura and rachel are hilarious and *super relatable*. Amazing commentary. [...] (Jewelsmariee, emphasis added)

The hosts are funny and *genuine* and it's so refreshing to hear women talk freely about something I've always loved and been so fascinated by! I actually feel like I can talk to people about porn like any other media without feeling weird or “ashamed” now because of this podcast which has been really cool for me. I've even been turned on to some cool stuff and am officially paying for ethical, quality porn which I feel great about :) [...] (Cir49, emphasis added)

The reviewers emphasise the hosts’ relatability, authenticity, confessional engagement with their topic and even more personally, their voices. These comments indicate the sense of intimacy and close connection between hosts and listeners that seems to be elicited by the podcast.

22 This feeling of intimacy and parasocial relationship between podcasters and their listeners seems to be what is most captivating about the podcast medium (Tung n.p.) and can be linked to an increased preoccupation with authenticity, suggested by the informality and confessional nature of many podcasts. Kathleen Collins argues that most conversations on podcasts are “far less structured or planned and more spontaneous, intimate and confessional” than those found in traditional broadcasting (232). Indeed, the conversations on *Girls on Porn* are probably as intimate and confessional as one can get, talking about their personal porn watching habits and discussing their sexual preferences when having sex themselves. As Collins continues, especially in podcast interviews confessional behaviour by both host(s) and interviewee(s) is encouraged (ibid. 232). This confessional nature increases the perceived intimacy and authenticity afforded by the aural podcast medium and is, for instance, illustrated on *Girls on Porn* episode “Secretary with Jon Gabrus” in which their guest opens up about his personal porn watching habits. By establishing parasocial bonds with their listeners through authentically sounding intimate confessionals, then, the hosts create a community of more educated, entertained but also intimately engaged listeners.

### **Agency & Voice on *Girls on Porn***

23 By broadcasting their commentary of mainstream and feminist pornography as well as their personal sexual and porn experiences, Laura and Rachel’s motivation is both educational but also demonstrates, as Richard Berry celebrates in (amateur) podcasters, “a desire to engage their audience and have a voice” (“Part of” 644). The sense of intimacy invoked by the parasocial relationships of the hosts and their listeners is closely tied to the foregrounding of sound and particularly voice in podcasts. Not only does the human voice imbue digital communication with a greater sense or an “aura” of authenticity, it also reinscribes an embodied experience in ways that previous online media did not (Tulley 263, 259).

24 As feminist scholars and producers of their own podcast *Feminist Killjoys*, PhD Raechel Tiffe and Melody Hoffmann argue, “like the physical body, the voice occupies space” (116). Podcasting thus becomes an act of occupying space, of making oneself heard, of ‘having a voice’. This is especially pertinent considering the spatial dominance of “privileged bodies” and their voices in contrast to marginalized ones (ibid.). Podcasting about pornography on *Girls on Porn* can thus be read as an act of defiance against mainstream objectifying pornography and a celebration of feminist pornography centred around female sexual agency. Laura and Rachel’s podcast commentary not only criticises pornographic content, it also negotiates what it means to be a pornography-consumer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to express sexual desire and pleasure through the production of pornography.

25 *Girls on Porn* creates a platform for porn watchers like Rachel and Laura, on the one hand, and for porn performers to talk about their experiences and struggles in the industry, on the other. As Potter argues:

If mainstream porn makes women hyper-visible, the industry goes to great lengths to make the conditions of their labor invisible—work on porn sets is usually self-regulated, non-unionized, and without benefits of enforceable industry standards for wages and intellectual property—conditions that can contribute to exploitation. (111)

In contrast to mainstream pornography, *Girls on Porn* decreased the “hyper-visibility” of women in favour of making their sexual desires but also their concerns about mainstream pornography audible to the podcast listeners. It also provides a platform to speak about the invisible labour of pornography and to talk about the unregulated working conditions many performers have to face. Sharing his history in the porn industry and employment at kink.com,<sup>7</sup> podcast guest Mickey Mod talks about his conscious decision not to work for unethical companies which often promote toxic masculinity, stereotypes and/or poor communication that can lead to unsafe situations for performers (cf. “Threesome with Mickey Mod”). He corroborates Potters’ argument with his personal experiences but also highlights that while many companies lack policies to protect performers, “porn is not a monolith” and many performers make conscious choices to participate in and promote only productions they feel comfortable endorsing from an ethical standpoint (“Threesome with Mickey Mod”).

26 In addition to women often being exploited in mainstream pornography, there is also still a lot of stigma around sex work and public knowledge about the industry has not changed as dramatically as porn itself (Potter 113). As a result, many performers are unable to “speak up” because “when performers are harmed or go unpaid, they are caught between a self-regulated industry and a justice system that does not recognize that sex crimes or economic exploitation can occur on a porn set” (ibid.). Unlike most advocates on either side of the discussions around “‘protection’ in the industry” who are not “listening to what performers themselves have to say about the working conditions in the porn industry, and what they want and need to do their jobs without fear” (Potter 109-10), *Girls on Porn* highlights the importance of listening to those implicated in the industry. The podcast, quite literally, invites its audience to listen, to inhabit an intimate aural space that highlights the performer’s voice, their specific inflection, accent, pauses and other linguistic patterns that connect them more deeply to the listeners than, for instance, a written article might.

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<sup>7</sup> Kink.com has been mentioned multiple times on the podcast as providing better working conditions for performers.

27 On episode “Trans with Jessy Dubai”, Laura and Rachel provide a platform for porn performer/“trans adult star” Jessy Dubai to talk about her experiences in the industry and her perspective on pornography as an artform (cf. “Trans with Jessy Dubai”). Recounting her performer history and family struggles, she talks about her start as an escort, how she had to confront serious familial abuse in the early stages of her career and how she finally managed independence starting her Myspace website and working for Kink.com (ibid.). While her experience as a trans woman suffering from abuse conjures up cycles of abuse that might have traumatised her so as to have impacted the way she frames her personal and professional narrative as a success story, the interview with Laura and Rachel also reveals an attempt not to pathologize the porn performer but to listen to her experience, instead. If the discourse around pornography’s ethics is clearly bound up with questions surrounding female sexual agency, it is also about one’s agency to speak about, contextualise and problematise these experiences. In the interview with Rachel and Laura, Jessy Dubai stresses her own pleasure in the porn performances she takes part in and emphasises her personal philosophy that pornography should be contingent on the performers’ comfort. “Never do anything you don’t want to, and only do things that you want to”, Jessy Dubai advises, not only addressing the hosts of *Girls on Porn* but also listeners who may or may not be porn performers who are just starting out in the industry (“Trans with Jessy Dubai”).

28 True to the ethos of the podcast, Jessy Dubai’s interview does not reinforce a “choice” stance that uncritically celebrates porn performers’ agency without considering structural constraints on women in the porn industry. Instead, recognising the capitalist driving force of the American porn industry, Jessy Dubai notes that she knows female performers who are not able to choose freely which companies they work for because they are not yet known in the industry (cf. “Trans with Jessy Dubai”). She thus mirrors her colleague Mickey Mod, whose description of the porn industry as “business driven” and “probably one of the purest examples of capitalism” seems to resonate for her (“Threesome with Mickey Mod”) and acknowledges her privilege due to her recognisability. Mickey Mod admits to a similar privilege and notes that his career has allowed him to be “more intentional” when choosing a job (“Threesome with Mickey Mod”). We should note, at this point, that the porn performers interviewed on the podcast reflect only on their personal experience with the American porn industry, and neither they nor Laura and Rachel touch on culturally specific differences regarding the porn industry and its legal status in other countries.

29 The podcast medium facilitates discussions surrounding pornography uniquely, not only because it provides a space for the hosts and their guests to express themselves and make their

voices be heard, but also because the medium's affordances enable the listeners to feel connected to their hosts who nonetheless remain concealed through the distinctly temporally displaced aural medium. While the porn industry "relies on performers' capacity to separate sex work from intimacy" (Potter 111), *Girls on Porn* connects porn performer with porn consumers in an intimate confessional space that allows for their voices to be heard. Especially considering the current pandemic crisis, listening to those disenfranchised and silenced in sex work and the porn industry might provide more compassion and awareness for the realities of their lives.

### **Podcasting's "Cloak of Invisibility"**

30 While podcasts thrive on the parasocial relationships between the hosts and their listeners, the podcast medium's inherent temporal displacement and aurality also work to cloak the hosts in invisibility. As Vincent Meserko argues, as an auditory medium, the podcast medium provides "a cloak of invisibility" for the podcast hosts (29). In reference to comedy podcasts in particular, he notes how podcasts are caught in a "constant process of revealing and concealing—revealing the insights and wisdom of the comic while simultaneously concealing his or her identity behind the cloak of the invisible audio medium" (Meserko 38). In the case of *Girls on Porn*, the lack of visuality not only distances the listenership from the sexist and fetishizing mainstream pornographic content, it also banishes everything but the hosts' voices into the background. In addition, the hosts' casual chumcast-style conversations create a semblance of liveness that hides the temporal displacement inherent in the recorded nature of podcasts. This can be liberating for podcasters, Meserko argues, because it implies the immediate absence of a potentially critical or rejecting audience (33). He notes quite aptly, that it is not the podcast content, per se, that is entirely unique in its rhetorical form, but the "relational frames" that allow podcast communities to form between the host and the listener (Meserko 25-26).

31 On *Girls on Porn*, Rachel and Laura can share their most intimate erotic experiences with their listening audience, while being able to hide behind the cloak of the aural medium that makes it possible to hide full names, faces, bodies and other indicators as to the identity of the hosts. While many podcasts have several social media accounts connected to them, it remains fairly difficult to trace the hosts of many podcasts beyond their names and listening to a podcast is most of the time independent from/does not necessitate a trip to the podcast's

website.<sup>8</sup> This apparent invisibility, paradoxically, does not seem to lessen the sense of authenticity and intimacy evoked by the podcast. Despite being a public space where hosts are able to perform parts of their selves, podcasts also afford the careful guarding of one's private life, hiding the hosts' identities in plain sight and protecting them from harassment or intrusion in their everyday lives (cf. Piper 56). After all, while listeners might connect with the personal experiences of the hosts, they only share a *parasocial* relationship with them—only the semblance of a deep connection.

32 This seemingly paradoxically intimate “cloak of invisibility” contributes to the sense that *Girls on Porn* provides a safe space for the hosts, their guests and the listeners to partake in private conversations about intimate topics. This is supported by Collins, who notes that “[t]he social world of podcasting, [...] engenders a perceived ‘safe place’ where like-minded listeners gather and create a sense of a virtual community” (236). This feeling of safety is especially important when it comes to intimate and potentially controversial subjects such as porn viewing habits.

### **Conclusion: The Future of Feminist (Porn) Podcasts**

33 As an explicitly feminist porn-reviewing podcast with the aim to provide a guide to more ethical pornography, *Girls on Porn* provides a confessional safe space that affords its hosts and their guests to talk about the intimate topic of porn viewing, as well as a platform for porn performers to share their experiences in the industry. The podcast participates in the ongoing discourse surrounding female sexual agency by considering how mainstream pornography operates and how its visual (re)presentation of (female) bodies affects both viewers in general and the hosts specifically. Neither dismissing pornography completely, nor glorifying the whole industry as a way for women to exert their sexual agency, the podcast provides a platform for the negotiation of female pleasure that advocates for a more nuanced consideration of porn, highlighting both voices of viewers and feminist performers that do not let themselves be taken in by the “danger and choice” binary. Instead, Laura and Rachel recognise the dangers of pornography without ignoring that performers have agency to act and negotiate their performances, roles and working conditions in more feminist productions.

34 I want to conclude by pointing out that *Girls on Porn* demonstrates how the podcast medium can be valuable for feminist endeavours, which can profit from what Doane et al. have noted as the productive intersection between podcasts and public scholarships (119). Like Tiffe

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<sup>8</sup> The *Girls on Porn* website [www.girlsonporn.com](http://www.girlsonporn.com) provides short bios for the two hosts and features a handful of professional photographs. This information is not accessible on podcast aggregate sites, however, nor via any connected RSS feeds.

and Hoffmann they highlight how audio media can decentre dominant voices by foregrounding “perspectives of nearly all individuals in the story” (Doane et al. 120), in the case of *Girls on Porn* the consumers and performers implicated in the porn industry. According to *Apple Podcasts* reviewer ChamberlainsHinge, the goal of the podcast seems to have an impact that mirrors but also surpasses university teaching, specifically because of its engaged and intimate nature:

The best description is that it's like sitting in *the most interesting grad seminar* of your life with breaks for laughing until your crying. . . . I also love that *the hosts don't keep themselves at a remove* from the porn they are reviewing. They can step back and critique the hell out of it in a thousand smart ways but they also come back to---did this turn me on? why or why not? I think for women in particular it's wonderful to hear them talk about female desire *without shame*. Guys have been talking about jerking off forever, but there's still this stigma around women owning their own sexuality. Women talking openly about desire is a better world and kudos to the hosts for contributing to it. (“Perfect and Fun”, emphasis added)

While specific podcast audiences are difficult to trace and online reviews are predominantly anonymous (both male and female coded usernames suggest a mixed demographic of listeners, however), we can note an overwhelmingly positive response to the podcast online. On *Apple Podcasts*, for instance, the show has been rated 4.5 out of 5 stars, with 409 ratings in total, and the podcast’s *Twitter* account has currently 757 followers. The minority of non-five-star ratings, interestingly, sound childish and highlight a dissatisfaction with the focus on female sexuality: “Kind of stupid, like the two hosts. Not useful or funny” (BiffBifkin); “Demonizes male sexuality” (Cheet577); “It’s a valid point that the straight cis male point of view is the clear majority of porn content, and pointing out how unfair that is important, but does it need to be 90% of the content of this podcast? Why not suggest more diverse content? I get it, porn is eww, but listening to how eww it is for an hour gets boring” (Jdortch).

35 As Smith and Attwood note: “One of the key ways in which public debates about pornography are framed is around pro/positive and anti/negative views, drawing on a general calculation of sex as a good or bad thing, as liberating or empowering, or as dangerous or oppressive” (11). While Laura and Rachel are not feminist scholars in their own right, even though they often refer to academic research on pornography (e.g. on ep. “Passion with Betsy Kenney”), their choice of aural production and distribution medium provides affordances that are valuable for feminist discussions about pornography that seek to complicate simplistic binaries beyond academia into public discourse. These affordances include a lack of censorship, the foregrounding of diverse voices, the mediation of objectifying visuals, intimate parasocial relationships with the listeners and a protective “cloak of invisibility” for the hosts. In this light, *Girls on Porn* might help to inspire more critical feminist outreach through the podcast

medium which takes its cue from the hosts' personal, involved approach to the topic of pornography.

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