

SEXUAL SUBVERSIVES OR LONELY LOSERS? DISCOURSES OF RESISTANCE AND
CONTAINMENT IN WOMEN'S USE OF MALE HOMOEROTIC MEDIA

by

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Abstract

Title: Sexual Subversives or Lonely Losers? Discourses of Resistance and Containment in Women's Use of Male Homoerotic Media

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Very little academic work to date has investigated women's use of male homoerotic media (for notable exceptions, see Marks, 1996; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017; Salmon & Symons, 2004). The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the potential role of male homoerotic media, including gay pornography, slash fiction, and Yaoi, in facilitating women's sexual desire, fantasy, and subjectivity – and the ways in which this expansion is circumscribed by dominant discourses regulating women's gendered and sexual subjectivities. The dissertation begins with a review of the existing scholarship on women, pornography, and male homoerotic media, followed by an in-depth analysis of online texts discussing women's use of these media. The analysis explores what subject positions are (un)available to women who use these media. Using a Foucauldian, feminist poststructuralist discourse analytic framework, online editorial articles and internet forum discussions were explored using an immersion/crystallization approach, revealing three broad thematic queries posed by online interlocutors: a) whether *women* as a generalized category use male homoerotic media, b) establishing boundaries constructing and constraining a normative woman user, and c) interrogating why women are drawn to male homoeroticism. A variety of discourses were deployed pertaining to each of these themes, some of which served to align women's use with dominant heterosexual, patriarchal, postfeminist, and neoliberal imperatives, while others subverted these imperatives and broadened the availability of sexual subjectivities for women. The tensions between these competing

discourses mark male homoerotic media as a fertile site of resistance and expansion of sexual power and possibility for women.

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However, all along the way I have been girded by the strength of several exceptional individuals who have lifted me up, guided me, patiently endured my hand-wringing, tears, and perpetual delays, and inspired me to achieve more than I ever would have imagined.

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Introduction

In an inquiry of young people's discursive constructions of lesbian representations in popular culture, Jackson and Gilbertson (2009) quoted a young male focus group participant, "Matt," who opined that women would lack interest in viewing erotic exchanges between gay men "unless they're very very lonely old desperate women" (p. 210). Jackson and Gilbertson illuminated the sexual double-standard apparent in Matt's statement: "while only 'very very lonely old desperate women' might watch gay males on television as a source of sexual pleasure...male viewing of lesbians for the same purpose is identified as common" (p. 210). Although this matter was given only brief consideration by Jackson and Gilbertson, and Matt's statement might be considered an inconsequential wisecrack, a review of the literature suggests that academia may share Matt's dismissive sentiments. Ample attention has been paid by mainstream empirical psychology and feminist anti-pornography activists to the potentially harmful impact of pornography on women (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989; Markowitz, 2002; McNair, 2014; Russell, 1993; Senn, 1992; 1993; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016; Wright, Tokunaga, & Kraus, 2016), and on women's physiological sexual arousal and (dys)function (Bailey, 2009; Chivers, 2010; Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Chivers, Rieger, Latty, & Bailey, 2004; Diamond, 2009). In addition, there is a solid body of critical theoretical work on women's sexual subjectivities, silenced or missing desires, and postfeminist exhortations to sexual performativity and receptivity (Fahs, 2011; Farvid & Braun, 2006; 2013a; 2013b; Farvid, Braun, & Rowney, 2017; Gill, 2008; 2009; McRobbie, 2007; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004), including how pornography intersects these in both positive and negative ways (Ashton, McDonald, & Kirkman, 2018; Attwood, 2005; Attwood & Barker, 2013; Ciclitira, 2004; Gurevich, Brown-Bowers, Cosma, Vasilovsky, Leedham, & Cormier, 2017; Paasonen, 2009; Paasonen, Kyrola et al., 2015; Parvez, 2006; Smith, 2007). However, very little academic work has investigated – or even mentioned –

women's volitional use of male homoerotic media (for notable exceptions, see Marks, 1996; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017; Salmon & Symons, 2004). The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the potential role of male homoerotic media (such as gay pornography, slash fiction, and Yaoi) in women's sexual desire, fantasy, and subjectivity.

Contesting the silent presumption that women lack interest in representations of male homoeroticism, interdisciplinary sources including literary reviews, magazine articles, and the Internet revealed distinct communities of women consuming and/or producing homoerotic media, including slash fiction¹ (Bauer, 2013; Jamison, 2013; Salmon & Symons, 2004), Japanese *shonen-ai*² and *yaoi*³ manga (Camper, 2006; Shamoon, 2004), and gay erotica and pornography (Marks, 1996; Schaefer, 2005; Stewart, 2002; Taormino, 2008; Thomas, 2004). It appears that many women did not "get the memo" (i.e., from dominant academic and popular discourse) that male homoerotic media lacks salience as a stimulating genre for women.

This dissertation begins with a review of the existing positivist and critical scholarship on women, pornography, and male homoerotic media, followed by an in-depth analysis of online texts relevant to the subject of inquiry. A feminist poststructuralist epistemological lens (Gavey, 1989) is adopted to guide a Foucauldian discourse analysis (Hook, 2001; Foucault, 1978, 1979, 1982) of open-forum Internet editorial and magazine articles, blog posts, and discussion threads about women's use of male homoerotic media. The analysis explores what subject positions are (un)available to women who use these media. Three broad thematic categories emerged wherein

¹ *Slash fiction*, also known as *slash fanfiction*, is a genre of fan-written fictional work that pairs two leading male characters from a popular media franchise (e.g. Star Trek – Kirk/Spock, or Harry Potter – Harry/Draco) involved in romantic and/or sexual relationships.

² *Shonen-ai* is a popular form of Japanese comic art (*manga*) written specifically for young women consumers. Also known as "boys' love" manga, *shonen ai* portrays romantic illustrated stories about beautiful young men. *Shonen ai* is typically romance-based and avoids overt sexual themes.

³ *Yaoi* is a popular variant of Japanese women's "boys' love" manga which, like *shonen-ai*, portrays love between beautiful young men; however, unlike *shonen-ai*, *yaoi* typically includes overt sexuality and even hardcore themes.

internet commenters sought to query a) whether women (as a generalized category) use homoerotic media, b) to establish boundaries to construct and constrain a normative woman user, and c) to interrogate why women are drawn to male homoeroticism. Various discourses pertaining to each of these themes emerged, some of which served to align women's use with dominant heterosexual, patriarchal, postfeminist⁴, and neoliberal imperatives (Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Gurevich et al., 2017; Potts, 2002), while others functioned to subvert these imperatives and broaden the availability of sexual subjectivities for women (Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997, 2004). The tensions between these competing forces mark male homoerotic media as a fertile site of resistance and expansion of sexual power and possibility for women⁵.

Definitions of Pornography

One of the challenges faced by scholars interested in studying pornography and erotic media is the abundance of differing positions regarding what, precisely, constitutes *pornography*. Public and academic dialogue pertaining to pornography's definition has been heated, with conflicting definitions reflecting varying agendas and philosophical alignments. Notions of what falls within the pornographic wheelhouse are partly dependent on what the user of the term hopes

⁴ *Postfeminism* is a discursive category identified by Potts (2002) and Gill (2016) as a containment strategy by dominant institutional forces in society (i.e., patriarchy, capitalism), aimed at diverting and distracting the political and emancipatory aims of feminism. In postfeminist discourse, feminism is framed to have already "won" the battle for equality, and women are now free to pursue sexuality (as well as a number of other "lifestyle choices") on the same level as men. However, postfeminism uses this presumption of equality to mask agendas that re-divert women's efforts toward self-improvement/beauty/sex appeal, sexual permissiveness and adventurousness in ways that benefit men sexually while distracting women from the reality that equality/equity have *not* been accomplished.

⁵ This work pertains specifically to women, as a social category by whom we, as a culture, are particularly troubled concerning their sexuality (including use of pornography) relative to men's *naturalized* sexuality, which is considered common-sense and taken for granted. I acknowledge that "women" and "men" are porous and fluid categories that are socially constructed; it is this social construction of womanhood and women's sexuality with which I am concerned – I do not aim to make epistemological claims about biological knowledge-fact regarding a fixed category "woman" or "female." Finally, I acknowledge that while gay pornography is perceived by many in this work (myself included) as a positive alternative to mainstream heterosexual pornography on a number of levels, gay pornography is not necessarily without its issues, including potentially exploitative working conditions, sexual coercion, and/or depiction of potentially problematic sociocultural themes such as violence, abuse of power, or sexual coercion/rape.

to establish regarding what pornography *does* – in other words, what purported material consequences are aligned with the definition? Mainstream and lay definitions of pornography tend to be extremely broad, encompassing virtually any representation of sexual behaviour. For example, *Wikipedia* defines pornography as "the explicit portrayal of sexual subject matter for the purpose of sexual gratification." Permeable definitions of pornography invoke a firmly liberal-humanist worldview, presuming that individual preferences and cultural differences in perspective will create additional variation in what is considered pornography, and expand to permit the resultant spectrum of personal perceptions. In this vein, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart went on record as defining pornography as: "I know it when I see it." Berger, Searles, and Cottle (1991) explained that civil libertarians define pornography according to "individual tastes and preferences, and what one person finds unappealing or even offensive, another might find artistic and erotic" (p. 32). In addition to complimenting liberal-humanist principles, this definition is highly compatible with contemporary capitalist and neoliberal sensibilities (Harvey, 2005; Rose, 1996), touting the freedom of limitless choice and variety on the surface, but with a subtle counterpoint that the right choices signify prestige, moral correctness, responsible citizenship, good taste, and distinction (Bourdieu, 2013; Juffer, 1998; Gill, 2008).

Broad definitions of pornography may also obscure feminist (or other) critiques of problematic representations of gender, sexuality, and power found in mainstream heterosexual pornography. It would be easy to dismiss a feminist scholar's contention that pornography contains oppressive images of female degradation as a reflection of her personal opinion, taste, or values, rather than as a legitimate problemization of how women are positioned in many mainstream pornographic films. Russell (1993a) is therefore critical of the contention in

mainstream academia that research on the impact of pornography on women is difficult to conduct due to loose or inconsistent operational definitions of pornography:

Many people have talked or written about the difficulty of defining pornography and erotica, declaring that “One person’s erotica is another person’s pornography.” This statement is often used to ridicule an anti-pornography stance. The implication is that if there is no consensus on a definition of pornography, its effects cannot be examined. Yet there is no consensus on the definitions of many phenomena (p. 6).

Indeed, radical feminist scholars have extensively critiqued pornography along the abovementioned lines, calling for a sharp distinction between *pornography* and *erotica*, primarily to distinguish pornography as a category of media that combines explicit sexual material with gender representations that produce harmful material consequences for women (Markowitz, 2002; Russell, 1993a). For example, Russell (1993a) defined pornography as “material that combines sex and/or the exposure of genitals with abuse or degradation in a manner that appears to endorse, condone, or encourage such behaviour” (pp. 2-3). Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin defined pornography as “the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and words” (as cited in Russell, 1993), and Julie Greenberg (interviewed by Markowitz, 2002), explained that “pornography was defined as material that was degrading and abusive to women, and erotica celebrated bodies and sexuality” (p. 15). Crucial to this conceptualization of pornography is the assertion that pornography is not merely a *representation* of degradation and oppression of women, but that pornography *is* a measurable, predictable, and concrete act of violence against women. Pornography, then, does not reflect or represent a fantasy, or a possible reality. It is, in itself, *the* reality of (hetero)sexuality and sexual relations between men and women, and a vehicle through which female oppression is concretely achieved (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989).

Radical feminist philosophy played an integral role in catalyzing research interest in the impact of pornography on women’s sexuality and wellbeing. Due to these scholars’ focus on the

material impacts of pornography on women, much of this early research was pursued through a positivist, empirical analytical lens. As such, these investigations fall primarily under the purview of mainstream social psychology and sexology.

Mainstream Research and Popular Media

General overview of mainstream pornography research. There is a voluminous literature investigating the negative impact of pornography on women, particularly through attributing to pornography a powerful role in shaping men's sexual behaviours and expectancies (Dolan, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989; Marlow, 2007; Russell & Trocki, 1993; Senn, 1993; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016; Wright et al., 2016). Pornography is argued to constitute and uphold the sexual debasement, oppression, and abuse of women: by objectifying women and dissecting them into heavily scrutinized and sexualized body parts; by reinforcing views of women's sexuality as ideally passive, servile, submissive, or helpless; by fostering masculine ideals of sexual prowess, aggression, conquest, freedom, and entitlement; and by concurrently fuelling men's sexual appetites for the sex represented in the pornography (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989; Senn, 1993; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016; Wright et al., 2016). Some have argued strongly that a causal link exists between men's use of pornography and their sexual abuse of women and children (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989; Russell, 1993b; Russell & Trocki, 1993; Senn, 1993; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016; Wright et al., 2016). Additional research has explored the direct emotional and psychological impact of pornography viewing on women, reporting that women generally experience heightened aversive mood states, such as anger, depression, anxiety, guilt, and shame, after viewing violent and non-violent pornography (but not erotica) (Russell & Trocki, 1993; Senn, 1992, 1993; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016; Wright et al., 2016). However, it should be noted that recent research on women's perceptions of pornography reveals a more ambivalent and nuanced reaction, with women showing a mix of positive and negative responses to pornographic

images (Ashton et al., 2018; Attwood, 2005; Attwood, Smith, & Barker, 2018; Ciclitira, 2004; Gurevich et al., 2017; Kohut, Fisher, & Campbell, 2017; Liberman, 2015; Parvez, 2006).

Popular media – “pornification” of sex, performance pressures, and internet porn addiction. The abovementioned research focused on the negative effects of pornography has been appropriated by popular media’s contemplation of pornography’s impact in contemporary society, including recent books and articles investigating the relatively new phenomenon of internet pornography (Carey, 2011; Dines, 2011; Levy, 2005; Paul, 2005). These popular works typically integrate – albeit loosely – empirical research findings and feminist theory to support moral and/or religious critiques of the detrimental impact of pornography on society, culture, women, and families. For instance, media inquiries have sensationalized the deleterious effects of increasingly accessible and ubiquitous internet porn on young men's sexual expectancies and development (Dines, 2011; Paul, 2005). It is theorized that, as men are consuming pornographic media earlier and with far greater frequency, they are developing unrealistic, distorted norms regarding sexual behaviour, masculinity, and femininity – norms which may detrimentally impact the women (and men) with whom these consumers pursue sexual relationships (Dines, 2011; Paul, 2005). For example, Dines (2011) presents anecdotal accounts of men increasingly demanding pornographic sexual performances from their female partners, including porn-inspired sexual scripts (e.g. extravagant positions, cum-shots, “facials,” anal sex, multiple or easy orgasms) and body-management and grooming standards influenced by the appearance of female porn stars (e.g. breast augmentation, removal of pubic hair, vaginal labiaplasty, anal bleaching). In Levy’s (2005) book on what she terms *raunch culture*, she further asserts that young women have internalized these porn-inspired sexual norms, coming to not only view them as signs of “empowerment,” but also use them to objectify and judge themselves and each other. Other writers have observed that pornography’s emphasis on tireless male performance has led to

increased anxiety around erectile functioning and adequacy of penis size in men (Attwood, 2007; Both, 2016; Jacobs, 2004, Park et al., 2016).

While the archetypal consumer of pornography is presumed to be male, a recent offshoot of this field of inquiry concerns itself with the apparent increase in occurrence of pornography consumption and *internet porn addiction* among women (Carey, 2011; Dubinsky, 2012; Duke, 2010). Although these investigations tacitly acknowledge women's volitional use of pornographic materials (indeed, the title of Carey, 2011's article is *Why More and More Women are Using Pornography*), the emphasis is firmly focused on porn addiction's detrimental impact on women's emotional well-being, relationships, families, and occupational functioning. Women's motivations for using pornography are predominantly explained using biomedical pathology models of mental disorder or addiction; for example, the authors argue that women use pornography to self-medicate for depression or anxiety, and become hooked on the endogenous neurochemical reward produced by pornography-aided arousal and orgasm (Carey, 2011; Dubinsky, 2012; Duke, 2010; also Hilton, 2010 for parallel argument about men). However, the scientific evidence cited by these articles is thin, often consisting of quotes from clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, or counsellors; or peer-reviewed journals dealing with tangential subjects (e.g., the effects of cocaine on neurological functioning). Further, the work is typically undergirded by Christian and right-wing political themes, such as emphasis on preservation of marriage, the family, and moral cleanliness. For instance, Carey's (2011) media investigation of women's online pornography concluded with a reference to an evangelical Christian online help organization (*Dirty Girls Ministries*) for women, spearheaded by an author of the Christian-themed self-help pornography addiction book *Dirty Girls Come Clean* (Renaud, 2011). Additional media coverage on women's internet pornography addiction was found on other Christian websites as well (Anonymous, 2013; LeClaire, 2013).

Despite the media's equating women's internet pornography consumption with addiction, a large-scale survey of the U.S. population conducted by Albright (2008) reported that, of the 41% of 3,859 women respondents reporting a history of internet pornography consumption, only 2% reported pornography consumption consistent with the study's definition of compulsive use. While Albright's findings reveal a large (i.e., normative) population of women engaging in innocuous recreational porn consumption, the media's pathologizing discourses have left little room for the possibility that women's pornography use involves non-pathological desires and fantasies. Indeed, as Attwood (2005) noted in her qualitative review on pornography consumption, there is a paucity of academic and journalistic work devoted to women as active, voluntary users. This absence of space dedicated to discussion of women's desire is a theme repeated *ad nauseum* across scholarship on sexuality – from sexual education curricula to evolutionary explanations of mating behavior, there is widespread silence when it comes to women's sexual desire (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Potts, 2002).

Empirical research on category-specificity of physical arousal. In line with the absence of emphasis on women's sexual desires and fantasies, considerations of the *types* of sexually-explicit materials used by women have been slim, and narrowly focused on the extent to which different categories of materials produce different patterns of sexual arousal between men and women. For example, a considerable literature is devoted to investigations of women's patterns of vaginal vasocongestion in exposure to hetero and homoerotic stimuli in examinations of category-specificity of sexual arousal (Chivers, 2005; Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Chivers, Rieger, Latty, & Bailey, 2004). The primary focus of these studies has been on difference in men's and women's physiological responses to sexual activities between actors of different sexes (e.g. male-male, female-female, male-female) as an indicator of preferred partner gender. These studies have additionally emphasized the discordance between women's stated sexual interest in

the presented stimuli (which is typically consistent with their self-reported sexual orientation), and their physiological responses, which indicate vaginal vasocongestion in response to almost all sexual stimuli presented. However, more recent studies have expanded on these investigations. For instance, Chivers, Seto, and Blanchard (2007) demonstrated that women (both heterosexual and lesbian) displayed category-specific vaginal responses by level of stimulus explicitness (with greater explicitness mapping onto increased levels of response; e.g. nude photos vs. manual or oral stimulation vs. penetrative sex). Additionally, Chivers and Timmers (2012) reported that women experienced variable magnitudes of vaginal responses depending on the relationship of depicted partners to the participant – specifically, women were more responsive to erotic depictions involving their imagined committed partner, or a stranger, than to depictions of a male best friend.

A major methodological limitation of the abovementioned research is that the instrumentation used to compare men and women's physiological arousal assesses non-homologous sex organs in men versus women (i.e. penile circumference versus vaginal vasocongestion). As such, the phenomenon being measured may not reflect women's agentic, appetitive sexual arousal (i.e. their active physiological wanting and propensity to seek out sexual stimulation), but instead a physiological mechanism governing vaginal response to imminent penetration – whether wanted or unwanted. Active processes of arousal may be more accurately measured by clitoral or labial changes (the clitoris in particular, as it is the physical homologue of the penis) than those in the vaginal barrel. Indeed, a clitoral plethysmograph (Gerritsen et al., 2009) and a labial ultrasound/thermistor (Battaglia et al., 2013) have both been developed but have not yet been applied to this area of research. It is perhaps not surprising, given the consistent focus in mainstream sexology on the primacy of penile-vaginal penetration in models of sexual functioning (e.g. Masters & Johnson, 1966), that measurement of women's physical preparedness

for penetration would be given priority over women's appetitive arousal. However, beyond purely empirical issues of instrumentation, this methodological oversight reveals sexology's investment in identified scientific discourses around gender and sexuality (specifically the coital imperative, but also gender discourses regarding male activity vs. female passivity – see Potts, 2002) and constructs women's (and men's) sexuality as best reflected by the organs implicated in penile-vaginal intercourse (Potts, 2002).

Another epistemological limitation of the abovementioned research is its reduction of arousal to numerically-rendered shifts in specific body parts, and the potential implication that these shifts reflect a more *essential* measure of women's sexuality than women's stated sexual preferences (which have been shown to be consistent with women's self-reported sexual identities, but *not* their physical responses). Although Meredith Chivers herself has been diligent in her prioritization of both physical and subjective measurements, and in systematically exploring the implications of both measures (Chivers, 2005, 2010), her research (as well as that of others in her field) has been taken up by theorists and popular media in ways which privilege the physiological indices (Bailey 2009, Carey 2005). Most notably, Bailey (2009) has argued that women *essentially* lack a sexual orientation on the basis of their generalized increases in vaginal vasocongestion across multiple categories of sexual stimuli, despite the self-report data contradicting these findings. In addition to the silencing of women's subjectivities that may result from privileging women's physical indices of arousal over their self-reports, the pooling of women's physiological and subjective data for quantitative comparison with men results in the loss of potentially interesting nuances in the raw data – for example, information about specific kinds, or uses, of erotic stimuli that evoke (or don't!) different women's desires and pleasures (e.g. Steward & McDermott, 2004).

Qualitative research on women's pornography experiences. Research on women's *volitional* consumer use of pornographic materials has been limited despite increasing evidence of comparable usage rates with men (Döring, Daneback, Shaughnessy, Grov, & Byers, 2017; Smith, Attwood, & Barker, 2013). Juffer (1998) theorized this likelihood of increased access among women to pornographic materials in the domestic sphere two decades ago, as internet technology began to provide women the potential to disrupt longstanding domestic and socio-cultural barriers to accessing pornographic materials (such as women's lack of privacy, mobility, and financial independence relative to men). A number of qualitative critical researchers and reviewers have undertaken to expand our understanding of women's use of pornography beyond being passively objectified or victimized via *men's* use of the media (Ashton et al., 2018; Attwood, 2005; Ciclitira, 2004; Parvez, 2006).

Ciclitira (2004) conducted a qualitative study of women's use of pornography to provide insight into the nuances of women's experiences with the medium. She noted that (as discussed above), the polarization of anti-pornography feminist and sex-positive feminist arguments around pornography have obscured a "middle ground" understanding of the complex ways women interact with pornography, and noted emerging observations that women's use of pornography and other sexual technologies can provide independent sexual education, safer sex options, and the possibility to produce and author diverse pornographic materials that are more to their own (and potentially other women's) tastes. Ciclitira administered a semi-structured interview to 40 women users of pornography, and analyzed her findings with a discourse analytic approach. Ciclitira found a number of women were conflicted about pornography due to the influence of anti-pornography feminist work (particularly Andrea Dworkin's), and that for some women, concern, outrage, and anger about the negative political and ethical implications of pornography created considerable dissonance as they attempted to use it to explore their own sexuality,

arousal, and desire. This suggests that, for Ciclitira's participants, the looming presence of institutional sexism embedded in many forms of mainstream pornography complicated their ability to use it as a vehicle for expansion of their sexual subjectivities.

In a similar qualitative study, Parvez (2006) interviewed 30 women consumers of hard core pornography from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, and found that women reported a number of positive motivations for using pornography, including erotic arousal and masturbation, enjoyment of erotic looking at both men's and women's bodies, sexual independence from men, sexual information and education about sexual anatomy, variety, and practices, and alleviating boredom with sexual partners. However, Parvez's main finding was that women consumers were ambivalent about pornographic materials due to their concern that the women represented were not portraying *authentic* sexual arousal, desire, and pleasure, and their fear (based on their own experiences with sexual coercion and violence) that the porn actresses were experiencing sexual coercion and harm. Parvez noted that the women's empathic resonance with the emotional labor required of the pornography actresses was a source of distress, guilt, and ambivalence for women consumers.

An early review of qualitative research by Attwood (2005) indicated that attempts to capture "women's" (as a whole) experiences with, and reactions to, pornography is problematic in that it seeks to falsely generalize a very heterogeneous phenomenon. Attwood reviewed a number of qualitative academic and journalistic works that indicated a multitude of conflicting responses to pornography by women. Some women reported feelings of discomfort, revulsion, embarrassment, body-image dissatisfaction, lack of sexual scripts permitting their adoption of an objectifying gaze, and political/ethical concerns which served as barriers to consumption, while others reported finding pornography a source of sexual independence and pleasure, autonomy and agency, and were able to take up appetitive or objectifying gaze toward the porn actors and

actresses. As seen in Ciclitira (2004)'s and Parvez (2006)'s work, many women reported a combination of these reactions, feeling both embarrassed and aroused, uncomfortable and curious. Attwood's overview reveals the importance of a qualitative approach to the study of pornography use, as it permits for consideration of interactive, varied forms of engagement with the material beyond qualitative measures of arousal or psychological harms.

Ashton and colleagues (2018) performed a systematic review of 22 eligible articles describing women's use of pornographic materials, and presented a number of salient themes emerging from their analysis. Like Ciclitira (2004) and Parvez (2006), Ashton et al. found that women's empathy with pornographic actresses and their apparent level of comfort, enjoyment, and pleasure, was a significant factor in women's ability to derive erotic pleasure from pornography – actresses who were believed to be feigning pleasure, in discomfort, or coerced led to decreased ability to enjoy the materials. Women also reported making various body-image comparisons, favorable and unfavorable, between themselves and pornography actresses, which sometimes produced feelings of inadequacy that disrupted women's enjoyment of the material. Women, particularly adolescent women, indicated use of pornography as a form of sexual education; however, some adolescents indicated dissatisfaction with pornography as an educational tool, noting its lack of realistic representation of sex, bodies, gender, and relationships interfered with relationship expectancies. Further, women in this study reported interactions between pornography and their sexual relationships, noting that pornography had negatively influenced sexual scripts with their partners, and encouraged sexual pressure, coercion, or unpleasant/unwanted practices. Some women reported use of pornography in a relationship context despite its lack of appeal because their male partners expected it of them. This review reveals that while women have various motivations to use pornography to expand their own sexual subjectivities and identities, the tendency for mainstream heterosexual

pornography to be embedded in problematic sociopolitics and heterosexual relational exchanges serves to limit its availability as a tool for sexual self-exploration and growth.

Research on women's responses to male homoerotic media. While there has been very little exploration of women's interactions with male homoerotic media, in more recent years a handful of investigations have emerged. An earlier subset of this research has compared heterosexual men and women's self-reported reactions to homoerotic materials as a correlate of accepting versus homophobic attitudes toward gay and lesbian individuals (Golom & Mohr, 2011; Mahaffey, Bryan, & Hutchinson, 2005). The results of these investigations have been mixed. Mahaffey and colleagues found that heterosexual men's self-reported anti-gay attitudes were consistent with their affective (fear and disgust) responses to gay and lesbian sexual stimuli as measured by a startle probe task (i.e., those with high self-reported anti-gay attitudes showed increased magnitude of startle response), while heterosexual women generally lacked physiological startle responses to gay or lesbian images, even when self-reporting anti-gay biases. Golom and Mohr (2011) found that sexual anxiety differentially mediated heterosexual men's and women's acceptance of gay men following exposure to homoerotic stimulus, with sexually anxious heterosexual men significantly more accepting of gay men following a homoerotic video than prior to viewing, but with sexually anxious heterosexual women being significantly less accepting after viewing. Golom and Mohr additionally observed that heterosexual women with moderate or low sexual anxiety showed no change in their acceptance of gay men following exposure to the homoerotic stimulus, and women participants overall showed lower mean ratings of negative attitudes toward gay men than did the men participants. These studies, taken together, suggest that heterosexual women are somewhat less likely to react with aversion and dislike to homoerotic media. However, neither of these studies queried the women's interest in, or use of, these media for their own enjoyment.

At the time the present study was conceived, only one study, conducted over twenty years ago, was available that examined heterosexual women's self-reported ratings of the erotic value of gay men and lesbians (Louderback & Whitley, 1997). These data were imbedded in a larger comparison of heterosexual men and women's social perceptions of gay men and lesbians, and the authors' primary focus was in determining whether heterosexual men's interest in lesbian erotic stimuli was positively correlated with their more accepting/less homophobic attitude toward lesbian women (it was). The inclusion of female participants appears to have been primarily for use as a comparison group. Louderback and Whitley (1997) did report that, while heterosexual women were more accepting than heterosexual men of both gay men and lesbians, they also ascribed equivalent and low erotic values to gay and lesbian sex. Although the study largely sidelines the women's data, Louderback and Whitley theorized in their introduction that women's low appraisal of the erotic value of gay sex was the result of a higher societal emphasis on sexualization of women versus men (i.e., men are generally less viewable as sexual objects).

Indeed, considerable early and recent scholarship has been dedicated to the sexual objectification of women (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Bordo, 1993; Mulvey, 1975). However, Louderback and Whitley (1997) do not unpack the potential implications of the women's data – for example, the role that social desirability or gender norms might play in reducing women's likelihood of rating *any* sexual act as “erotic.” To posit instead as an uninterrogated fact that women are uninterested in sexual representations of men (or women, or *anyone*) is a retrenchment of essentialist discourses of femininity that presume sexual passivity and absent desire (Butler, 1990; Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002). As such, Louderback and Whitley's research falls prey to the common myopia observed in sexological research – women's sexuality goes largely unaddressed, and potential insights into women's desires are missed (Potts, 2002; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2013).

Since the completion of the present study, three additional research articles have been published investigating women's use of gay pornography (McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). McCutcheon and Bishop (2015) performed a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews with 14 women university students who self-identified as finding gay pornography erotic. They showed each woman three clips of gay pornography (one "vanilla," one depicting a consanguinous sexual liason, and one depicting hardcore, multi-participant BDSM) and then engaged the women in open-ended interviews based largely on the women's spontaneous commentaries. Their analysis revealed three thematic categories in the interviews: discussions of *why* women use gay pornography, discussions about the importance of authenticity in pornography, and homo-negative/femi-negative reactions to the medium. McCutcheon and Bishop (2015) elaborated a number of reasons for watching gay pornography given by women during the interviews, including their own openness to *all* types of sexual imagery, a preference for same-sex pornography versus heterosexual, and the absence of the objectification of women present in heterosexual and mainstream female-female (FF) pornography⁶. The participants also underlined the importance of believability in the pornography, with three themes indicating that higher levels of authenticity, perceived enjoyment of the performers, and emotional connection between the performers improved the erotic value of the works. Finally, McCutcheon and Bishop revealed homonegative and femi-negative discourses in the content of their interviews, with a number of the participants expressing distaste at gay porn actors with feminine or "flamboyant" attributes or who engaged in "sexual risk" behaviours such as "barebacking."

⁶ The term FF to represent female-female pornography distinguishes the mainstream female-female (or "girl-on-girl") genre, which is produced with cisgender, heterosexual male viewers in mind, from lesbian pornography, which is produced specifically for the consumption of lesbian viewers.

Neville (2015), herself an author of male homoerotic fiction, undertook a large-scale study of women consumers of male homoerotic media, drawing on her connections in the online fan community to reach a substantive body of women users. She presented results from a subset ($n = 275$) of women participants who indicated that they use gay *pornography* out of a larger participant group who endorsed use of some form of male homoerotic media ($n = 429$). Neville's study explored the reasons *why* women identified as consumers of gay pornography enjoyed the media. She identified several explanatory themes given by women which overlap substantially with the discursive themes identified in Part 3 of the present study's analysis. These themes included finding men hot/attractive; increased believability/authenticity of the actors' pleasure and mutual liking; easier identification with the *gay male gaze* which objectifies men rather than women; avoidance of the "sexual minefield" (Neville, 2015, p. 198) of women's exploitation in heterosexual pornography; the exotic or "non-conventional" status of gay porn; the equality and power negotiation between the gay porn actors; and the absence of women that the viewer might compare herself to unfavorably. Neville interpreted these findings as an important indicator that women are taking up gay pornography, in large part, because it facilitates a desiring "female gaze" for which mainstream media offers slim to no opportunity.

Ramsay (2017) conducted a small pilot investigation of Western European women's responses to gay pornographic video clips. Ramsay, like McCutcheon and Bishop (2015) and Neville (2015), elaborated on many theoretical reasons why women might prefer gay pornography over heterosexual pornography, including the absence of objectification of women, increased authenticity, representations of a more desirable masculine *kind* (loving, emotionally intelligent, nurturing). Ramsay also queried why women might *not* enjoy gay pornography; however, his theoretical take on this was primarily biophysiological and concerned itself primarily with the mechanisms of women's arousal and receptivity. Ramsay provided gay

pornography clips to a small sample of heterosexual (plus one bisexual) women ($n = 21$) to watch at home, and then conducted follow-up questionnaires and interviews with the viewers (20 participants returned questionnaires, and 21 were interviewed). Somewhat humorously, Ramsay noted that only seven of the participants elected to return the pornographic DVD materials at the end of the study, and noted that all but one of the participants indicated they had enjoyed participating.

Ramsay's (2017) main findings indicated that while the majority of the women found mainstream heterosexual pornography largely distasteful for a variety of reasons (e.g. objectification of women, mechanical sexual scripting, "gross"ness), 16 of the 20 women who returned questionnaires reported finding at least one of the four provided film clips arousing, 14 of whom reported being either "very aroused" or "aroused," and two of whom reported being "somewhat aroused." Two participants reported they were not aroused by any of the materials, and eight reported having been offended by some portion of the materials, meaning that some of the participants found *some* of the material arousing, but other portions of the material offensive. However, Ramsay noted that most of the "offense" was in response to the material's plot quality or production. Only one participant expressed being offended due to the film's (homo)sexual content. Ramsay also discovered that the women viewers engaged in diverse "judgements" of the male actors' attractiveness and displayed a range of variable preferences across multiple body types, and similarly variable responses to the aesthetic value of men's penises and the erotic value of "cumshots." One salient theme noted by Ramsay was women's desire to watch men's embodiment of sexual pleasure and orgasm beyond the presence of the externalized, masturbatory "cumshot."

While participants did not necessarily want to see the expulsion of semen, they did want to see men experiencing orgasms; they wanted to see bodies vibrate, they wanted to hear groaning and see signs of pleasure on faces. Two wanted to see at least one man orgasm

during penetration...most women were not especially pleased with the bouts of masturbation that preceded the ejaculations, expressing disappointment at the lack of physical contact between the models during those moments. (p. 166).

The primary thematic point of Ramsay's (2017) study was that women can and do occupy a *female gaze* – quite distinct from “borrowing” the *gay male gaze* – when viewing gay pornography, one that discriminates and consumes men's bodies and erotic/aesthetic qualities, and one that demonstrates a wide variety of preferences and desires.

Critical Scholarship

Feminist scholarship on pornography and sexuality has been sufficiently divided that the ensuing debates have been termed the “sex wars” (Chenier, 2004; Fergusen, 1984; Freccero, 2008). For several decades, radical, or “anti-porn” feminist theorists have problematized pornography as an enactment of men's power, oppression, and violence against women, and as one of many vehicles through which male domination is performed and upheld (Dines, 2011; Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989). While feminist research is typically situated alongside critical academic philosophies and methodologies, much of the radical feminist work on women and pornography (as described earlier) has remained grounded in positivist epistemological and methodological frameworks (e.g. empirical methods). Indeed, this alignment appears to have been largely intentional, as MacKinnon (1989) has argued strongly for an approach consistent with critical realism (see Sims-Schouten, Riley, & Willig, 2007), holding that critical theory needed to be grounded in the *real world*, in non-discursive empirical reality:

...a feminist theory of sexuality that seeks to understand women's situation in order to change it, must first identify and criticize the construct “sexuality” as a construct that has circumscribed and defined experience as well as theory. This requires capturing it *in the world*, in its situated social meanings, as it is being constructed in life on a daily basis. It must be studied in its experienced empirical existence, not just in the texts of history (as Foucault), in the social psyche (as Lacan) or in its language (as Derrida). Sexual meaning is not made only, or even primarily, by words and in texts. In feminist terms, the fact that male power has power means that the interests of male sexuality construct what sexuality as such means in life, including the standard way it is allowed and recognized to be felt

and expressed and experienced, in a way that determines women's biographies, including sexual ones. Existing theories, until they grasp this, will not only misattribute what they call female sexuality to women as such, as if it is not imposed on women daily, they will participate in enforcing the hegemony of the social construct "desire," hence its product, "sexuality," hence its construct "woman," on the world (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 317).

Thus, even though MacKinnon refers to the social construction of concepts, she and Dworkin (1981) have somewhat paradoxically fought to produce fixed, stable meanings of concepts such as pornography, femininity, masculinity, and sexuality in order to highlight and combat the damage inherent in the *status quo*. Their conviction that academic work must reflect women's experiential reality is therefore motivated by the belief that positivist research can identify concrete targets for political action, thus improving the *real world* circumstances of women. Indeed, it is a common criticism that the more abstract, linguistically complex philosophical works described by MacKinnon (e.g. Foucault, Lacan, Derrida) are prone to confinement in the Ivory Tower, and thus fail to produce measurable gains for the women's movement. Similar concerns have been voiced by Gloria Steinem in response to the work of contemporary feminist poststructuralist scholar, Judith Butler (Denes, 2005). However, Foucault (1980) and Butler (1990b; 2004a) have both illustrated that attempts to pursue critical inquiry using the tools of the oppressors (e.g. empirical science, common-sense discourse) risks reappropriation of the very critical and resistant inquiries being undertaken, and that prescriptions of specific political actions as remedies for political oppression are similarly vulnerable to derailment. That is, static categories that presume to underlie and fix identities such as "woman," "black," "lesbian," and so on, have been misused in the service of oppression (Butler, 1993). We "know" who women are (i.e. what is constituted as "knowledge" about this category "woman"), and utilize this knowledge to justify systemic inequalities – such as the gender wage gap (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Mihaila, 2016) – because a woman's natural essence is passive, weak, less competent, emotional, maternal, and nurturing (Butler, 1990a; Potts, 2002). When feminism presumes to speak to, and

for, a unified category “woman,” it risks inclusion of specific kinds (e.g. white, educated, bourgeoisie, able-bodied, straight, cisgender), and exclusion of others (e.g. non-white, poor, disabled, LGBTQ, etc.) (Butler, 1993).

A good example of the consequences of radical feminism’s use of the tools of the oppressors can be found in what has been termed the “unholy alliance” between radical feminist activists and right-wing religious fundamentalist figures in the U.S. (Butler, 2004). MacKinnon (1989) and Dworkin (1981) (among others’) efforts to combat pornography extended beyond books and articles – the scholars lobbied extensively in the United States and Canada for civil legal reforms that would permit women to sue pornography producers for harm incurred by the media. Their work was appropriated by conservative legislators to craft laws banning and censoring obscene materials. Libertarian or sex-positive feminists (discussed later) raised early cautions that these efforts to legally censor pornographic materials would produce unintended, and undesirable, consequences. These caveats were well-warranted:

One of the dangers foreseen by pro-sex feminists in the anti-porn position was its amenability to cooptation by the moral majority and by right-wingers, and indeed anti-porn feminism was strategically used at various moments in time: when Jesse Helms called for the defunding of the NEA after Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographic exhibits; when the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearings occurred; when AIDS began to decimate populations in the U.S., when it turned out that the internet’s most popular product was porn, to mention a few (Freccero, 2008, p. 213).

While antipornography censorship ordinances in Minneapolis, Indianapolis, and Bellingham were eventually struck down by state or federal courts, the Supreme Court of Canada’s *R v Butler* (1992) ruling overturned an appeal of the existing Canadian obscenity laws’ constitutionality, citing MacKinnon and Dworkin’s arguments about harmful effects of pornography on women. Rather than heralding an increase in obscenity charges against adult video stores, businesses, and website operators importing mainstream pornography, the laws have been disproportionately deployed against gay and lesbian bookstore owners, and to censor or confiscate explicit materials

depicting gay, lesbian, non-white, and transsexual sexuality, as well as postmodern scholarly and literary works – including works by Andrea Dworkin herself (Butler, 1993; Cossman, 2000; Pitchford, 1997). This last point carries a sad irony – Andrea Dworkin’s very efforts to protect and emancipate women were turned against her by the system she sought to change for the better.

A second problem has emerged among feminist scholars when considering the definition (and study) of pornography. MacKinnon (1989), Dworkin (1981), and Dines (2011)’s anti-pornography writings carried their emphasis on revealing the material, measurable effects of pornography to the point of contending that pornography not only represents, but actually *creates, constitutes*, reality:

A feminist critique of sexuality in this sense is advanced in Andrea Dworkin’s *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*. Building on her earlier identification of gender inequality as a system of social meaning, an ideology lacking basis in anything other than the social reality its power constructs and maintains, she argues that sexuality is a construct of that power, given meaning by, through, and in pornography. In this perspective, pornography is not harmless fantasy or a corrupt and confused misrepresentation of otherwise natural healthy sex, nor is it fundamentally a distortion, reflection, projection, expression, representation, fantasy, or symbol of it. Through pornography, among other practices, gender inequality becomes both sexual and socially real. Pornography “reveals that male pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting” (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 328).

Pornography, then, is understood by radical feminists as an active agent, a concrete force that acts directly and harmfully upon women. This goes beyond abuses perpetrated against porn actresses in the making of pornographic videos (Dines, 2011; Dworkin, 1981). The *representation itself* is fixed in MacKinnon’s, Dworkin’s, and Dines’ works as *real*, as acting upon women and men in predictable and measurable ways. Pornography is thus not a case of art imitating life, but of art *determining* or *being* life, of transcending a boundary between the phantasmatic and the real (Butler, 1990b).

Scholars adopting a libertarian, sex-positive, or sex-radical feminist position have challenged these efforts to establish (hetero)sexuality and pornography as necessarily harmful to

women, and have argued that both may hold positive, even empowering, meaning for women (Cossman, 2000; Pitchford, 1997). Cossman explained:

Beginning with the controversial Barnard Conference entitled “Toward a Politics of Sexuality” in 1982, feminists who came to be known as ‘sex radicals’ have questioned the focus on the negative dimensions of pornography and women’s sexuality. Carol Vance, among others, argues that anti-pornography feminism focuses too exclusively on the dangers and negative dimension of sexuality, losing sight of the fact that sexuality is simultaneously a terrain of pleasure, agency, and self-definition (1984). The sex radicals are highly critical of the intolerant, anti-sex position that characterizes dominance feminism’s critique of pornography. In striking contrast, they argue that pornography has a subversive quality, in representing and advocating sexual pleasure and agency for women (p. 393).

Libertarian feminists thus contend that pornography represents not only negative but also potentially positive elements of sexuality for women, and call for (re)deployment of pornography as a site of empowerment, sexual freedom, and pleasure for women. This goal is unquestionably in line with an agenda of an improved political, social, and sexual lot for women. However, the libertarian feminist perspective (rooted in liberal-humanist philosophical discourses of individualism, freedom, agency, and selfhood) is itself vulnerable to (re)appropriation by mainstream neoliberal and postfeminist discourses which neatly conceal the institutional and discursive barriers to a true emancipatory sexuality for women. The libertarian feminist’s image of an empowered woman engaging with pornography in subversive ways that expand her (and all women’s) sexual horizons presumes a freely acting and choosing individual – possibly a white, highly educated, upper-middle class individual as well (Butler, 2013; Juffer, 1998). Recent scholarship has revealed that the language of women’s sexual liberation, adventurousness, freedom, self-actualization, and playfulness has been neatly folded into a *postfeminist contract* providing a plethora of illusory benefits for a supposedly liberated female subject; one which ultimately dispenses with the emancipatory and disruptive political agenda of feminism while subtly buttressing dominant discourses of masculinity, femininity, and (hetero)sexuality (Farvid

& Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007). The libertarian feminist idea of emancipated female sexuality also seems to presume that women's sexuality exists as an innate, essential quality that, when external and internal inhibitions are swept aside, will emerge in its pure, wild, natural form (Butler, 1990; Juffer, 1998; Tiefer, 2004). Essentialist discourses, however, are native to more dominant notions of female sexuality as passive and receptive, and thus common understanding of natural female sexuality leaves little room for women to negotiate active or emancipated sexual subjectivities (Butler, 1990; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

Examination of the “sex wars” schism in feminist scholarship pertaining to pornography reveals an important pattern of resistance and retrenchment in the social construction of women's sexuality and sexual subjectivity. Feminist efforts to identify, problematize, and shift the discursive definitions of gendered concepts such as femininity, masculinity, sexuality, pornography, and power have repeatedly been diverted and defanged. While undoubtedly shifts toward increasing emancipation of women have been gradually, and painstakingly, attained, the full force of feminism's disruptive political power has been siphoned off by divide-and-conquer politics, misappropriation of concepts, and misdirection of activists. Radical feminists' righteous indignation at women's *ad nauseam* depiction in pornography as passive, degraded vessels for male sexual power and desire is dismissed as sex-negative, man-hating, or misguided by other feminist camps, while their legal activism is usurped by male right-wing politicians to target racialized and sexual minority artists for censorship. The window-dressings of libertarian feminism's emancipated womanhood (boundless sexual variety, permissiveness, choice, sexual adventure) have been hijacked by capitalist and neoliberal discourses that redirect these concepts in ways that privilege male sexuality and power, while the politically destabilizing anger, outrage, and activism of feminism is discarded as irrelevant, outdated, and decidedly un-sexy

(Gavey, 2012; Gill, 2008, 2012, 2016; Mendes, 2012). Instead of fostering solidarity through an ethos of accepted heterogeneity of feminist thought and activism, schisms between and discursive misappropriation and misrepresentation of feminist ideologies have somewhat inhibited the (still possible) opportunity to expand and proliferate a multiplicity of feminisms.

Feminist poststructuralist scholars, such as Butler (1990a, 1990b, 1993, 1997, 2004), Morgenstern (1997), Pitchford (1997), and Williams (2004) have taken libertarian feminist critiques a step further in rebutting MacKinnon and Dworkin's definitional and ontological claims about pornography. Butler (1990b) and Morgenstern (1997) have demonstrated that anti-pornography activists have unintentionally reproduced and retrenched the very socially-constructed meanings they wished to dismantle. In effect, by making an ontological claim about pornography as *being* and *doing* real things, antiporn activists have amplified the tangibility and dominance of pornography's negative, oppressive meanings:

I want to suggest that certain kinds of efforts to restrict practices of representation in the hopes of reigning in the imaginary, controlling the phantasmatic, end up reproducing and proliferating the phantasmatic in inadvertent ways, indeed, in ways that contradict the intended purposes of the restriction itself (Butler, 1990b, p. 187).

In imbuing pornography with a fixed, essential meaning, and by charging this construct *pornography* with a reality and power beyond fantasy, beyond representation, radical feminists accidentally collude with the oppressive forces they wish to fight, and miss an opportunity to destabilize pornography, to shift and expand how it is constituted. Morgenstern (1997) presented the following observations regarding MacKinnon's ontological claims about sexuality, gender, and pornography:

Here she [MacKinnon] is arguing that language is performative in that it makes our reality...Where this theory becomes problematic is in its sense of the performative's absolute effectiveness. "Gender is what gender means," MacKinnon writes, but what gender means, for MacKinnon, would seem to be finished off and tied up. There is little sense that a making might also be an unmaking, that the excessive need to restage and restage (the boring repetitions of pornography) also signifies instability (p. 45).

Here Morgenstern (1997) invokes Butler's (1990a; 1990b) notions of gender performativity⁷, contending that the stereotyped gender representations re-enacted endlessly through pornography themselves constitute a performance borne of the instability of the constructs of "male" and "female" – a performance suggestive of an insecurity, an impermanence, a tenuous proposition in constant need of propping up. Feminist poststructuralist theorists contend that, rather than reflecting *or* constituting one reality or truth about (hetero)sexuality, pornography can be *read* as a multitude of potential interpretations, meanings, and representations, and that only the proliferation of alternative readings or understandings can accomplish the displacement of problematic male-dominant representations (Butler, 1990a; 1990b). One such alternative could involve women identifying with (active, empowered) male performers, rather than with (submissive, victimized) female performers:

According to Laplanche and Pontalis, fantasy does not entail an identification with a single position within the fantasy; the identification is distributed among the various elements of the scene: the identification is with the "you" who comes up, the "me" who is sitting, but further, with the verbs themselves, "sitting," "coming up," even variously "coming" and "up," even, abject as it may seem, the grim landscape of cafeteria life that bespeaks the longing for a sudden and decisive erotic interruption. In any case, or rather in all of these cases, identification is multiple and shifting, and cannot be confined to the "me" alone (Butler, 1990b, p. 188-189).

Neville's (2015) and Ramsay (2017)'s recent studies of women's use of male pornography both speak to this potential for empowerment through adoption of the agentic, desiring gaze. Notably, the work of both authors was published in a relatively new periodical – *Porn Studies* (inaugural issue in 2014) – which more generally attempts to move discussions on pornography beyond the

⁷ Judith Butler's work on gender performativity is detailed extensively in her works *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Undoing Gender* (2004). In brief, Butler queries the concrete existence of an objective, essential sex/gender that follows naturally from a biological reality. Butler contends that gender is inextricable from culture and the historical moment, and is thus constructed, mediated, and performed via a series of socially meaningful acts and exchanges. Butler argues that these performances are compelled, imperfect, and must be endlessly repeated to ensure the coherence of the seemingly-concrete concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" (this repetition reveals their ultimate artificiality).

simplistic ideological binary of “harmful versus liberating” or the “effects paradigm” (McNair, 2014), to better understand the myriad meanings and functions operating within the enormous pornographic media sphere (Attwood & Smith, 2014). In other words, the journal’s mandate is to establish the study of pornography as an academic, critical *field* of inquiry (Attwood & Smith, 2014) that locates pornography as a prominent contemporary cultural staple rather than merely ‘an object of concern’ (McNair, 2013). In doing so, pornography may move beyond a phenomenon understood to universally harm passive women, or as a holy grail of women’s sexual liberation, as both stances reduce the complexity of women’s relationship to sexual media much in the same way dominant gender and sexuality ideologies reduce their broader sexual subjectivities. In opening up space to explore how women engage with these media, and the meaning made by various stakeholders around these engagements, there may be an expansion of the terrain of women’s sexual subjecthood.

Theoretical investigations of women’s use of slash fiction and Yaoi. In light of the fluidity of identification in fantasy described by Butler (1990b), male homoerotic representations provide a potential site of transgressive sexual meaning for women. Although only a few primary research inquiries have explored women’s voluntary use of, or discourses around, gay pornography, there has been less attention paid to the non-cinematic forms of male homoeroticism, such as slash fiction and Yaoi. However, some initial theory work has been offered to address these phenomena.

The first of these examples is firmly rooted in an evolutionary epistemology. Salmon and Symons (2004) presented a theoretical discussion of *slash fiction* as an unobtrusive measure of female mating psychology. Slash fiction is a genre of fan-written fictional stories wherein the male leads of popular television and movie franchises are depicted in romantic and sexual pairings. The original instances depicted Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock from *Star Trek*; however,

the genre has expanded across various fiction franchises (e.g. Frodo/Sam from *The Lord of the Rings*, Harry/Draco from the *Harry Potter* franchise – hence the “slash”). Salmon and Symons observed that the homoerotic romances depicted in slash fiction provided two novel departures from typical pornographic and romance genres. First, the inclusion of two male warrior protagonists as lovers permits women readers to identify sexually with an active, heroic, three-dimensional character (rather than a passive, feminine figure). Salmon and Symons constructed this identification narrowly within an empirical discourse of gender nonconformity by theorizing that such “cross”-identification would be most appealing to women who identified as “tomboys”⁸ during childhood. Second, slash fiction, unlike pornography and romance novels, allows for the building of a stable erotic relationship on the foundation of a loyal and pure bond of friendship, trust, and camaraderie, as these close homosocial relationships are typically pre-existing dynamics portrayed by the original T.V. or film characters (Salmon & Symons, 2004). This type of homosocial bond may represent a more egalitarian foundation for sexual relationships, uncharacteristic of the uneven power dynamics typical in a heterosexual partnership. Although Salmon and Symons did not investigate whether women are using slash fiction to de-stabilize, permeate, or challenge dominant discourses of gender and sexuality, they did successfully highlight how slash fiction provides women with a substrate for unique sexual fantasies and meanings.

A similar genre of women-produced fiction has emerged in Japan over the past forty years, that of boy-love (*shonen-ai*, *bishonen*, *yaoi*, and *shota-con*) manga. These comic-book stories depict a range of romantic and erotic relationships between young men, and the target

⁸ The “tomboy” construction here seems a sort of eye-rolling “permission” given by the scientists to non-gender-conforming young females who are presumed to eventually conform to typical feminine performativity in adulthood – in other words, youthful “gender bending” in females is tolerated within the evolutionary framework because it is temporary and will not interfere with evolution’s end-goal: the proliferation of male DNA.

consumers are young Japanese women. According to Shamoon, “ladies” comics, including the boy-love variety, stimulate the development of women’s sexual fantasy and desire through the same mechanism of identification suggested by Butler (1990b):

Matsui writes, “It was apparent that the boys were the girls’ displaced selves; despite the effeminate looks that belied their identity, however, the fictitious boys were endowed with reason, eloquence and aggressive desire for the other, compensating for the absence of logos and sexuality in the conventional portraits of girls” (178). In addition to homosexual boy-love, many shojo manga feature stories about boys and girls who cross-dress or who magically change sex. All these types of characters give teenage girls the freedom to imagine themselves as acting beyond the strictures imposed on them in Japanese society (Shamoon, 2004, p. 85).

Camper (2006) further highlights the appeal of *yaoi*’s releasing women from identification with feminine representations:

...a romance between two men can bypass misogyny and female stereotypes; removing the femme avatar can open up a freedom of sexual exploration and imagination for female artists that they don’t find in heterosexual erotica. For example, rough play in het relationships is almost always abusive toward women, but with two guys, readers can pick and choose whom they want to identify with (p. 24).

The potential for shifting identification and de-stabilization of gendered power dynamics are further emphasized by Marks (1996), whose academic consideration of straight women’s potential use of gay pornography was the only instance of such scholarship this writer was able to locate at the outset of this study (McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; and Ramsay, 2017, described earlier on, were published during completion of this work). Marks outlined how women have traditionally faced difficulties as spectators of the male-body-as-sexual-object due to the ubiquity of the *male gaze* in cinematography. Marks explained that, according to traditional psychoanalytic theories of *male gaze*, the male characters in any film are inextricably tied to the action of the plot as the phallic agent(s) of power, and that any physical objectification of a man that does not further plot development is met with anxiety and discomfort by the viewer.

However, Marks reported being dissatisfied with this theory, and argued that women could

effectively access empowered spectating or identification through destabilized masculine representations – which Marks hypothesized would be particularly accessible in gay pornography:

Gay porn offers me a way to look at men, overtly sexually, without being looked back at, or in the process pulled into a heterosexual power relation that would inevitably disadvantage me. In male homoerotic imagery, because the male viewer and the male object of the gaze theoretically could switch roles at any minute, like "top" and "bottom," the power dynamic of looking is more flexible (Marks, 1996, p. 2).

In line with the arguments made above by Salmon and Symons (2004) and Shamoon (2004) regarding women's identification with masculine figures, Marks observed that gay pornography can potentially circumvent some of the negative meanings arising for women in mainstream pornography due to its tendency to depict women as passive sexual objects of masculine desire (e.g. Attwood, 2005; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). When viewing mainstream heterosexual pornography representing male-dominant/female-passive power dynamics, the woman viewer can either identify with the powerless feminine position, or the active male one – but in aligning with the latter she may still be burdened with awareness of the discomfort, harm, or degradation experienced by the woman (Ciclitira, 2004; Marks, 1996; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Parvez, 2006; Ramsay, 2017; Stewart, 2002; Taormino, 2008). It stands to reason that, for at least some women viewers, this could prevent comfortable identification with the active masculine subject. Gay pornography may constitute a comparably even playing field with respect to sexual power dynamics – power is certainly displayed and played with, but without the baggage of the hegemonic gendered power differential between men and women (McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017; Stewart, 2002; Taormino, 2008). Gay pornography thus offers women viewers a range of potential subject positions and sexual power roles (passive, active, versatile) to explore, as well as the opportunity to act as the desiring viewer (i.e., the

holder of the gaze), as the broader spectrum of possible masculinities represented permit the viewer to read the male actors as both objects and subjects. Indeed, Marks (1996) adds that:

In thinking about the construction of male subjectivity we have seen that the subject-object division and identification with the phallus as symbol of power are by no means perfectly replicated in the production of masculinity. If masculinity is indeed constructed around vacillation, then spaces are opened up in male representation for multiple desires. If we can acknowledge that power does indeed circulate, that intersubjective relations are based upon negotiated relations of power, then we have room for a contingent form of control. If the gaze is dominating, at least we can take turns wielding it — as in meetings where whoever is sitting in the "rotating chair" gets to speak (p. 13).

To conclude, there have been compelling arguments that, despite the paucity of academic interest in this area of inquiry, women's use of male homoerotic media presents a fertile ground for investigating potential tensions and fragmentations in women's discursive constructions of sexuality, fantasy, and agency, and in the subject positions and identifications available to women consumers of these media.

Method

Rationale

The present study, in a broad sense, investigates how the woman user of male homoerotic media is discursively constructed through online discussions of women's use of gay pornography, slash fiction, and Yaoi. Despite the dearth of academic work in this area, there is a wealth of online public discussion of this phenomenon (as can be confirmed with a simple Google search), which variously invokes dominant and subversive discourses on women's sexuality. There are no works to date attempting to theorize these discussions, and how they function to establish and regulate a "normative" woman user of male homoeroticism, as well as constructing various "abject bodies" (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) of "inappropriate" or "dysfunctional" use. Further, this investigation will illustrate how women's subversive discourses and *insurrectionary speech* (discursive utterances aimed at the destabilization of dominant power structures) around male homoeroticism attempt to open up space in which women can interpellate more satisfying sexual subjectivities (Butler, 1997).

For instance, a function of women's use of these media that has not been considered by previous theorists may include the possibility of development of women's sexuality outside the context of a sexual relationship (heterosexual or otherwise). Due to inadequate sexual education, prohibitive social norms, and what Fine and McClelland have termed the "missing discourse of female desire" (2006, p. 298), young women's sexuality is often left to develop primarily in the context of partnered relationships, and is thus molded to her (presumably male) partner's preferences (Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Farvid & Braun, 2006; Potts, 2002). Despite contemporary representations of women as sexually liberated, independent, and adventurous, these representations are revealed by Gill (2009, 2012, 2016) and McRobbie (2007)

to be strictly bounded within a *postfeminist contract*. Analysis of popular women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Cleo*, and *Glamour* has revealed a proliferation of sexually-themed articles aimed at increasing women's sexpertise and active sexual repertoire (Farvid & Braun; 2006; Gill, 2009; McRobbie, 2007). While these articles utilize a rhetoric of liberation, freedom, agency, and adventure reminiscent of feminist emancipatory aims, the content of the articles indicates an overwhelmingly heteronormative agenda, presuming coital, reproductive, and orgasmic imperatives and phallogentric scripts that position the sexually empowered woman as a self-improving, in-control, emotionally mature seductress who derives her own satisfaction from her mastery of man-pleasing techniques, tricks, costumes, diets, exercises, and emotional/relationship management strategies (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2009; Potts, 2002).

Largely absent from these magazines are techniques for increasing women's own sexual pleasure during solitary or partnered sexual activities, or chronicles of women's non-heterosexual or non-dyadic sexual experiences (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gill, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2011b). Thus, there are too few spaces among these discourses for subject positions *not* compelling feminine passivity, servility, receptivity, permissiveness, submission, interiority, or reactivity – and thus little opportunity for the development of women's agentic or active desire. As such, the exterior trappings of feminist emancipatory politics have been diverted into the predominant capitalist, neoliberal, post-feminist discourses constructing contemporary gender and sexuality, effectively abandoning the political aims of feminism (as these are fabled to have “already been won”) (Gill, 2012, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007; Mendes, 2012). Women's primary subject position in these discourses remains passive and servile – merely wearing a newer, more appealing outfit.

Gay or bisexual pornography may provide more satisfying subject positions for women viewers by encouraging cross-identification with male porn actors performing wider

representations of gender and sexual power roles (e.g. top/bottom, active/passive, versatile), by excluding dissatisfying or anger-inducing representations of passive, servile, or powerless women, and by eliminating the negative body image comparisons reported frequently by women consumers of heterosexual pornography (Ashton et al., 2018; Attwood, 2005; Ciclitira, 2014; Neville, 2015; Parvez, 2006; Ramsay, 2017; Taormino, 2008). As the men in gay or bisexual pornography are positioned as sexual objects as well as subjects/agents of sexual desire, they are viewed by many to be more visually and aesthetically appealing than the men typically featured in heterosexual pornography (Marks, 1996; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017; Stewart, 2002; Taormino, 2008). This, counter to the stereotype of “hairy, greasy men” in heterosexual pornography, may facilitate an opportunity for women to (more easily) inhabit the desiring gaze normally reserved for the male viewer (Marks, 1996; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017).

Importantly, given that heterosexual men frequently exhibit homophobic avoidance of homoerotic materials (Golom & Mohr, 2011; Louderback & Whitley, 1997; Mahaffey et al., 2005), women using these media would presumably be acting independently from any existing male partner, as agents in their own sexual development. This positions gay pornography as a potential site of resistance, as it disrupts the heterosexist discourses of feminine passivity and postfeminist sexual entrepreneurship noted variously by Fahs (2011), Frith (2015), Gill and Scharff (2013), McRobbie (2007) and Potts (2002). When women seek out male homoeroticism, they are not likely being guided, instructed, and led in/to their own sexuality by male partners (or by media how-to guides focused on phallocentric pleasures and partner-pleasing orgasm efficiency). They are instead locating and acting on their own desire for sexual stimulation, entertainment, and enjoyment.

Further, the noted dominance of women in the fanfiction and Yaoi authorship communities (Jamison, 2013) suggests that women are not only viewing male homoeroticism in order to expand their sexual subjectivities, but are also constructing works (fanfiction more generally and slash specifically) as counter-discursive re-authorings of the dominant heterosexual and patriarchal sexuality scripts in mainstream creative media and properties. In doing so, these women are authoring the sexual possibilities they desire, and interpellating space as agentic sexual subjects (Butler, 1997). Indeed, Fine and MacLelland's (2006) "missing discourse of desire" may be found flourishing in the relative obscurity of internet fanfiction archives (Jamison, 2013) and on the pages of Yaoi manga (Shamoon, 2004).

Epistemological Lens and Analytic Framework

This work deploys a discourse analysis informed by a feminist poststructuralist epistemology, drawing upon integral works by Foucault (1978, 1979), Butler (1990a, 1990b, 1993, 1997, 2004), Holloway (1989), Gill (2008, 2009, 2012, 2016), McRobbie (2007), Potts (2002), Fahs (2011), Juffer, (1998), and Tiefer (2004) to address the research questions, and to contextualize and interpret the discursive themes emerging from the online texts. Discourses, in this philosophical tradition, are constructions of knowledge. They do not merely describe or reflect an objective reality or truth. Rather, discourses are *actions* - they create, constitute, and convey meanings about the objects and subjects to which they refer (Foucault, 1978). These meanings are never value-free, and can never be separated from our histories, our cultures, our social affiliations, or the structures of language. It is important to note that, while often deployed in language, discourses are not limited to written texts (Burr, 2015). Rather, discourses are signifying systems (language, images, art) produced by institutions, regimes, or power structures, that identify objects and subjects, and act to define, restrict, regulate, and/or sanction them (Foucault, 1978, 1979; Potts, 2003; Weedon, 1997).

...the will to exercise...control in society and history has also discovered a way to clothe, disguise, rarefy and wrap itself systematically in the language of truth, discipline, rationality, utilitarian value, and knowledge. And this language in its naturalness, authority, professionalism, assertiveness and antitheoretical directness is...discourse. (Said, 1983, p. 216, as cited in Hook, 2001, p. 6).

Discourses are not transmitted in an exclusively top-down manner and are, thus, not a direct act or consequence of what Foucault (1979) defines as *sovereign power*. They are not exclusively exercised upon us by governments, public figures, or organizations. Instead, they are (re)enacted, (re)deployed, and (re)affirmed by their very intended subjects. Foucault (1979) describes this contemporary diffusion of influence as *disciplinary power*, a multi-dimensional, multi-directional matrix of power through which persons are both self-disciplined and externally sanctioned for perceived deviations from the social and cultural quotidian. Through these compulsory practices of self-monitoring and self-control, disciplinary power produces the *docile body* of the contemporary individual subject (Foucault, 1979, 1982).

In poststructuralist terms, the *subject* of a discourse is a person (typically a member of a specific group) targeted by that discourse (Foucault, 1982; Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). For example, *women* are the *subjects* of discourses involving acceptable feminine sexuality. A person may identify with the *subject positions* offered by discourses (e.g., “good wife/girlfriend/partner”), and may take up, embody, and reproduce the discourses as individual beliefs, values, or facts (e.g., “a good wife places her husband’s sexual and emotional needs before her own.”). The subject positions made unavailable by dominant discourses are spaces inhabited (yet uninhabitable) by the oppressed, the abject, or by any object or subject that threatens to destabilize the discourse (e.g., lesbian, bisexual, asexual, or queer women, trans folx, polyamorous women, sex workers, women with disabilities) (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008).

As discussed earlier, radical feminist researchers primarily focused on stabilizing definitions of pornography as a reified institution encapsulating and producing hegemonic

masculinity's oppression of women (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989; Russell, 1997). In contrast, feminist poststructuralism, with its focus on identifying, interrogating, and deconstructing discourses on gender and sexuality, provides a solid framework for investigating the shifting, unstable, multiple meanings women may ascribe to pornography (Butler, 2004; Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997; Williams, 2004). A discourse analysis conducted through a poststructuralist lens allows feminist researchers to move outside observational or experiential knowledge claims, and to instead trace the currents of political and gendered manifestations of power through which subjectivities are made (im)possible (Foucault, 1978; Hook, 2001; Weedon, 1997). In the present dissertation, male homoerotic media provides a particularly interesting (yet almost entirely neglected) playground for the emergence of resistant and transgressive discourses and subject positions for women (Camper, 2004; Marks, 1996; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017; Salmon & Symons, 2004; Shamoan, 2006). These subversions and resistances emerge through what Butler (1997) termed *insurrectionary speech*, discourses that destabilize dominant structures, in this case the heterosexual binary matrix (Butler 1990a) which functions to render women *docile bodies* (Foucault 1979) regulated by passive, servile feminine sexuality norms for the benefit of dominant masculinity (Fahs, 2011; Tiefer, 2004; Potts, 2002). Through this insurrectionary speech, women may *interpellate* (a discursive carving out and claiming of space for subjecthood – see Butler, 1997) more desirable sexual subject positions for themselves, and for other women and femme-identified folk.

Poststructuralist and feminist scholars have traditionally emphasized that no single “correct” discourse analytic method exists – and indeed, attempts to codify a specific, rigid method would be antithetical to the spirit of poststructuralism (Gavey, 1989). Parker (1992) and Potter and Wetherell (1987) nonetheless attempted to produce loose frameworks to guide scholars undertaking discourse analysis from a poststructuralist perspective. For instance, Parker

(1992) identified twenty steps that may be used to identify objects, subjects, subject positions, and discourses within a text, and provided illustrations of how to accomplish each using text from a package of “natural” children’s toothpaste. Parker dedicated his final two steps to a Foucauldian “anchoring” of the work in its historical and political context. Without these final two steps, Parker contended, a discourse analysis remains a sociologically detached academic exercise.

Despite Parker (1992) and Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) attempts to integrate Foucauldian considerations of power and the political, Hook (2001) has convincingly argued that the frameworks they offer are anchored too directly in the texts to be analyzed, and thus cannot situate works amidst the web of institutional, social, and political powers in which its discourses are intertwined. Hook contended that a discourse analysis informed by Foucauldian theory must aim to identify, query, and shift power by situating analysis within historical and political context; when used purely as an analytical tool, Hook argues that discourse analysis becomes sterile and lacking in political relevance:

Foucault’s conception of discourse is situated far more closely to knowledge, materiality and power than it is to language...it is exactly the omission of these three dimensions of analysis that so undermines the epistemological strength, the explanatory power and the political abilities of both Parker’s (1992) and Potter and Wethrell’s (1987) approaches. (Hook, 2001, p. 36).

This dissertation is thus predicated upon Hook’s (2001) interpretation of Foucauldian applications of discourse. Although Hook did not present a systematized framework (indeed, he contended such a framework would be antithetical to a Foucauldian analysis), he effectively clarified the utility of several of Foucault’s concepts as applicable to a politically-grounded investigation of texts. Discourses, in this vein, are not units of communication that transparently convey an objective experience (or set of experiences) of the online discussant. Discourses are instead regarded as *actions* deployed by discussants to organize, explicate, and construct their understanding of reality, and of what is known.

To execute such an analysis, relevant online texts (see below) were collected and compiled into word processing documents, and a discourse analysis was conducted utilizing an immersion/crystallization (I/C) approach. As described by Borkan (1999), I/C involves an intensive yet free-flowing process commencing prior to any data being collected, and continuing through the analytic and interpretive phases of the investigation. The present author commenced a process of immersion by exploring relevant published and unpublished texts, engaged in preliminary theorizing concerning what discourses and themes might emerge in the online texts to be analyzed. This was followed by an in-depth immersion in the texts, in order to identify all possible novel themes and discourses, and generate analytical notes on each, until saturation of themes was reached. This immersion was followed by re-reading of analytic notes to identify thematically-related clusters of discourses, that were then linked back to historical contexts, and to the works of previous theorists.

Although the theories generated during the preliminary phase formed the basis of the initial research questions, with an I/C approach, it is appropriate to gather detailed notes and summaries for each text source, and to refine the research questions and procedure to improve and focus the investigation as new information becomes available (Borkan, 1999). As such, the research questions guiding the dissertation evolved alongside the analysis.

With regard to the material handling of the internet texts, relevant web page materials were either copied or transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Office Word files for reading and analysis. Text transcripts were then used to conduct a discourse analysis of the interview contents. As noted above, an I/C approach was used to process the data (see Borkan, 1999), whereby multiple close readings of the transcripts were undertaken to identify various discourses and subject positions taken up by participants as they engaged in meaning-making regarding their sexual interests. I recorded comments, thoughts, patterns, and themes that arose during each

reading using the “Insert Comment” function of Microsoft Office Word. An I/C approach presumes that, with several close, focused readings of the text, the researcher becomes immersed in the information, and salient insights or *crystals* of understanding will become apparent. This process of repeated close readings is continued until *saturation*⁹ occurs (Borkan, 1999).

As such, immersive close readings of the collected texts identified emergent themes around which discussions of women’s use of male homoerotic media, as well as their own fictional male homoerotic stories, were organized. Key excerpts highlighting these prominent themes were identified, deconstructed, and contextualized with reference to foundational works (e.g. Butler, 1990, 2004a; Fahs, 2011; Foucault, 1978; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004) and identified dominant sexuality discourses (Holloway, 1989; Potts, 2002). As is appropriate for a feminist poststructuralist epistemological lens, particular attention was paid to linguistic tensions and contradictions in the text (Burr, 2015). It is assumed that language expressing said tensions or contradictions may indicate conflicts between dominant (e.g., patriarchal, hetero-normative) and subversive (e.g., feminist, queer) discourses on women’s sexuality, and women’s attempts to reconcile these conflicts as they describe their subjective sexual experiences. *Silences* – gaps or absences where (conceivable) discourses, subject positions, or representations are *not* spoken or given space for discussion – were also examined. Foucault (1980) offered the following insights on the importance of silences in discourse:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but

⁹ *Saturation* is the point at which examination of additional texts fails to produce any novel themes or additional insights – in effect, nothing “new” can be found, only the same previously identified themes.

many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (p. 27).

Silences can be strongly indicative of positions considered to be abject, uninhabitable, or unacceptable in dominant thought (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008), and reveal potential sites of instability for dominant discourses and the power structures with which they are symbiotically connected (Foucault, 1980). For example, if discussants are taking up dominant heteronormative discursive themes and subject positions, there may be an absence of discussion of women pursuing real-life sexual encounters involving male same-sex activities, as these potentialities may threaten to destabilize male privilege in the hetero dyad, and erode conventions around normative femininity and masculinity. As alluded by Foucault (1980), noted above, silences may involve absences, or more overt instances of silencing or containment whereby discussants directly address the topic as unacceptable, or disavow identification with particular subjectivities. Close attention was given to who was authorized to speak about what, whose statements were privileged, and whose were not.

Texts for Analysis

Data comprised open-forum internet samples, with materials (text-based commentaries and creative works) obtained from publicly accessible websites. Researchers specializing in the study of online pornography and sexual violence have effectively conducted discourse analyses using various online texts (e.g. Farvid & Braun, 2013; Paasonen, 2006; Tosh, 2013), and indeed, the Internet is a logical resource for studying what may largely be an Internet-based (or Internet-mediated) phenomenon. Juffer (1998) has noted that the Internet's facilitation of anonymous, cost-effective private use of pornography has been a key factor in women's increased domestic access. The decision to utilize Internet-based texts was in accordance with several factors, including: increased likelihood of accessing large online communities of women who use and

produce male homoerotic media (Jamison, 2013; Juffer, 1998); the popularity of the Internet as an easy and cost-effective mode of accessing, viewing, and disseminating pornography (as well as increased opportunity for users to discuss pornography in this context) (Attwood, 2007; Juffer, 1998; Ross, Månsson, & Daneback, 2012; Müller, Glaesmer, Brähler, Woelfling, & Beutel, 2014); increased willingness to disclose sexual information and marginalized sexual subjectivities online due to user anonymity and reduced risk of social consequences (Ben Ze'ev, 2003; Chiou, 2007; Fraser, 2010; McKenna & Bargh, 1998); and the potential to identify several types of texts and sources (multi-user comment threads, published media releases, blog entries, erotic stories) from a wide variety of perspectives (e.g. public forum discussions; online blogs, journals, magazines, and newspapers; fan-based erotic fiction sites).

All texts used in the analysis were obtained from public, open Internet sources, which is increasingly popular for accessing distinct user communities (e.g., Powell, 2010; Regan et al., 2014). Unlike research volunteers, or online users of private forums and social media sites, Internet users posting in the public domain are aware that their written commentaries are visible to the public (Farvid & Braun, 2013; Hookway, 2008). Ethical guidelines for using internet-based material are still in formative stages. Present British Psychological Society (2013) protocols assert that using public online content which does not require usernames or passwords does not require consent procedures, particularly if content can reasonably be expected to be publicly viewed.

As these texts fall in a region outside the ethical guidelines governing recruitment of live research participants, Farvid and Braun (2013) gave careful consideration to the matter of ethical use of online media for discourse analytic purposes. They proposed guidelines that “blogs, opinion pieces, online news pieces, and possibly public chat forums” (pp. 363) constituted examples of public internet materials that could be collected for analysis in lieu of informed

consent, whereas “closed chat forums, archives of private emails, and membership organisations that do not allow or expect their discussion to be viewed by a/ny public audience, require informed consent” (pp. 363). Based on these considerations, texts for use in this dissertation were *not* derived from private (i.e. registration, password, and log-in required for access) sites where users submit posts with an expectation that their materials are concealed from non-community members. In addition to the closed forums described by Farvid and Braun (2013), I further excluded social media websites where privacy controls may be used to protect individual contributions, including Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, DeviantArt, MySpace, LiveJournal, and other social media and sharing sites. To safeguard against potential identification of public forum users, the given names of individual authors of online multi-user forum comments were not identified (indeed, in the majority of cases, the commenters’ given names were not available). Instead, these commenter/participants’ chosen online aliases were used for identification. However, authors of blogs, formal articles, and original works of fiction were cited appropriately.

Internet sources for texts were drawn from the following:

- Public discussion forums (e.g. general discussion forums, human sexuality forums, dating websites);
- Google or Yahoo Answers Q & A threads;
- Public blog posts, e-zine or e-news articles and editorials;
- Public fan-fiction story archives (specifically the subcategories of these archives devoted to slash fiction).

Three broad categories of texts were sought. First, multi-user interactive forum and Q & A discussions involving female and/or male discussants were included to explore how women’s use of male homoerotic media is positioned in interactive social discussion spaces, as well as how

consumers (and their social circles) make sense of their use. Second, single-author blog entries, magazine articles, newspaper articles, and/or editorials were collected to explore who is being positioned (or claiming a position) as an *authority* on the topic of women's use of male homoerotic media, who is intended as the *audience* of the text, and who is included as the *subject(s)* of the discussion. Finally, for a separate but related analysis not included in this work, examples of women-authored, male homoerotic slash fiction were analyzed to investigate what is (and is not) being offered in terms of sexual subjectivity, possibility, fantasy, and desire, to women by women, through this medium. While these works are not directly analyzed here, the use of these works as a vehicle for women's *insurrectionary speech* was given consideration.

Relevant texts were located using the Google search engine. Public forum discussions and single-author articles or editorial work were located using the following search term combinations: "women users," "women who watch," "women who read," "women consumers," "women who like" PLUS "gay pornography," "gay porn," "gay erotic stories," "MM," "slash fiction," "yaoi," "shonen-ai." For each combination, the first 20 hits were saved in Microsoft Office Word documents including the date of the search, search keywords used, and hyperlinks and content summaries for each hit. Although Farvid and Braun (2013) used the first 10 hits from each keyword search with the logic that these would be the results most likely to be viewed by individuals casually searching for information, I chose to examine the first 20 hits to ensure that relevant discussions or articles were not missed. Each link was examined to determine whether each hit met inclusion criteria, and to identify and eliminate duplicate hits. Unusable links were "crossed out," and the remaining sources were sorted into two master lists of data produced by *single authors* versus *multi-user comment threads*.

For these two types of data sources, *inclusion criteria* were as follows: the "hit" or hyperlink produced a source consistent with the website types listed above (i.e. discussion forum,

blog, e-zine, or e-news source); the article, thread, or website's predominant topical focus was discussion of women's use of male homoerotic media; the content was primarily text-based; the article or thread contained text that was legible, in English, and could be copied or transcribed into a Microsoft Office Word file. In addition to the ethical guidelines discussed in the previous section regarding exclusion of private or password-protected digital information, the following materials were *excluded*: duplicated hits/links from previous searches; hits that led to content other than discussion of women's use of male homoerotic media (e.g. pornography sites; video, image, artistic, or fiction archives); editorials, threads, or individual comments containing illegal content (i.e. child pornography, implied or direct threats against an identifiable individual, hate speech or incitement to violence, defamatory comments, slander, or libel); editorials, threads, or individual comments that constituted *spam* or that served as advertisements for products or services; editorials or threads that revealed personal or identifying information about private users; editorials, threads, or individual comments that were image or video-based, or otherwise presented in a format that could not be transcribed; and editorials, threads, or individual thread comments that contained disruptive or non-topical instances of *trolling*¹⁰. Finally, any topical peer-reviewed academic journal article(s) identified using these search parameters will be excluded from the analysis, and instead integrated into the literature review, interpretation, and/or discussion sections of the dissertation as appropriate.

¹⁰ A *troll* is defined by Google as: “(verb, informal) make a deliberately offensive or provocative online posting with the aim of upsetting someone or eliciting an angry response from them.” Trolling has a tendency to derail forum discussions, diverting user attention toward the *troll* and their behavior instead of toward the intended topic of the thread. It is notable that trolling is frequently employed by male-identified users in order to silence, humiliate, or discredit female voices on the Internet. Thus, while some instances of trolling are potentially useful analytically, particularly if discourses around the topic of interest are taken up by the troll in an effort to offend, provoke, or suppress other users, others are personal or off-topic attacks which yield nothing of value for analysis. The latter instances were excluded from the sample.

Some effort was made to determine the gender identity of the authors of the texts under investigation; however, this was a difficult process. While some source materials (e.g. forum participant profiles) provided clear gender identifiers for the speakers, others did not, and while the online editorial articles typically included the full names of the authors and contextual information in the writing that allowed for gender identity to be determined (i.e., self-reference with regard to gender identity), many of the forum and Q&A commenters participated using aliases that did not directly indicate gender identity. In these cases, effort was made to determine from the text of the forum conversations whether the speaker had made any self-referential indications of gender identity (pronoun use, referring to self as “male/a man,” “female/a woman,” “trans,” “non-binary,” or saying “we” to reference men, women, trans folk, etc.); however, in some cases gender identity could not be concluded with any accuracy. In these cases, the speaker is referred to with the gender-neutral pronouns “they/their/theirs” throughout the analysis.

Research Question

Discourse analysis concerns itself not with the posing of specific hypotheses to be tested, or with the generation of empirical results to be generalized and inferred to produce a static truth/knowledge but with the description and interpretation of multiple discourses of knowledge, meaning-making, and self-understanding (Foucault, 1978, 1982). Discourse is multiple, overlapping, and competing, and produces subjects and subject positions within which the individual strives to make sense of his/her/their lived experiences: “The positions of the subject are also defined by the situation that is possible for him [sic] to occupy in relation to the various domains of groups or objects,” (Foucault, 1972, p. 52). Thus, our research question outlines a general domain of inquiry for the analysis, a focus to guide the reading, but not to limit or (over)generalize what may emerge. Thus, the analysis broadly addresses the following question: What subject positions are (im)possible for women who use male homoerotic media?

Analysis

This analysis comprises three sections examining discourse about women's use of male homoerotic media, whether that be gay pornography, Yaoi, or slash fiction, and how women and their sexual subject positions are constructed within these discussions. The three sections of the analysis were derived via the immersion/crystallization process, through which three salient overarching thematic "questions" emerged from online interlocutors explorations of women's use of male homoerotic media: *DO women like male homoerotic media?*; *WHO is the (non)normative woman user?*; and *WHY do women enjoy male homoeroticism?*. The focus of the analysis is not to *answer* these three questions, but rather to investigate how the participants both posed and formulated discursive responses to each of these broad questions, and how in doing so, construct (and deconstruct) boundaries around women's sexual subjectivities.

Part One of the analysis, "Locating and interrogating women users," addresses a question frequently observed in the online discussions: *DO women like gay pornography/slash/yaoi?* On the surface, this is an interrogation of the ontological status of the phenomenon – in other words, do women users *exist*? However, the act that the discourse performs runs deeper than simple curiosity. It can be established with a cursory internet search that at least a *few* women do like gay porn/slash/yaoi; thus, the repeated public inquiry suggests an attempt to affix the phenomenon to (or perhaps detach it from?) dominant constructed knowledge about women. Thus, it is not a question of whether *some* women like gay porn, but instead, an effort to establish through repetitive questioning whether *women who like gay porn* may be "fixed" as an ontological phenomenon – that is, can enjoyment of two men having sex be constructed as *an essential, natural female trait*? The majority of users appear to be in favor of this notion – any who answer "yes, we/they do," or "It's totally normal" are making a statement not just about their own preferences, but about *woman* as an entity. However, as *woman* is an unstable ontological

construction whose specifications are rarely fully met by any individual who identifies with it (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004), some women may respond by negating this generalization of male homoerotic media use to women as a category, as they are extended no suitable subject position for their own experiences.

Part Two of the analysis, “Constructing a (bounded) normative woman user,” addresses the question: *WHO is the woman user?*, and deals largely with construction of the identity of the woman user. Part of this theme includes the location of women’s use within what is understood as “normal” femininity; a search for fixity that leads from the first theme of *do women (essentially) like gay porn?* How women’s use is constructed – within (or outside) a boundary of “normative” sexuality – invokes myriad discourses that range from liberal and humanist to postfeminist neoliberal self-care constructions of a free-wheeling feminine user exploring her own sexuality. However, this exploration is within carefully circumscribed limits that do not challenge patriarchy, heterosexuality, or monogamy norms. Women’s “freedom” to explore this medium is thus regulated via discursive strategies that galvanize homophobia/heteronormativity; compulsory privacy/concealment; excess, loss-of-control, and addiction; and the charge that women who enjoy these media are *lonely losers*.

Part Three of the analysis, “Constructing motivations,” addresses the question: *WHY do women use gay pornography/slash fanfiction/Yaoi?* There may be some overlap here with the “who,” but the “why” theme tends to focus on an itemization of the *motives* or *psychological explanations* behind women’s being aroused by viewing two men having sex. It is notable that the three existing primary studies of women’s use of male pornography were focused on this topic (McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). The *Why* impulse is extensive, and speaks to a need to continually interrogate and explain women’s sexuality as “other,” as “alien,” as convoluted relative to men’s “straightforward” sexuality, and as something

beyond comprehension or fathoming. This scrutiny has not gone unnoticed by the fanfiction and Yaoi communities, who have been exposed to it for a good deal longer than the newly sensationalized women viewership of gay pornography. While this litany of explanations may in fact be an *old* phenomenon, it is conferred a discursive “novelty” status that suggests a new development or a changing landscape *vis a vis* women’s sexuality. This linguistic illusion of novelty props up liberal, neoliberal, and postfeminist discourses around women’s “emerging sexual freedom” and “adventurousness,” a network of systems that grant women conditional sexual freedom and experimentation, but with a hidden diversion of that freedom back toward heteronormative, patriarchal norms which ensures that men remain the primary beneficiaries of any freedom bestowed upon women (Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Gill, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; McRobbie, 2007; Potts, 2002). The re-occurrence of this pattern of redirection of women’s sexuality and sexual exploration toward hetero-patriarchal goals is observed frequently throughout the analysis that follows.

This itemization of *whys* appears to adhere more firmly to the *normative* definitions of use. It seeks to construct this *normative woman who loves male homoeroticism*, to establish a taxonomy of associated themes that characterize this phenomenon. The *whys* tend not to dig into the marginalized outskirts of the phenomenon. For instance, there is little attempt to guess at the motivations of women who like to read/write slash involving *male pregnancy*, or RPS (real-person-slash) – these users are quickly dismissed as “freaks” and dropped from consideration.

Part One: Locating and Interrogating Women Users

A key question dominating the forums centers on the following: Do women like gay porn/slash fanfiction/yaoi? A recent online study by PornHub (2014) offers compelling evidence from their own consumer statistics base that women’s use of gay pornography is not only widespread, but constitutes their second-most preferred category of pornography across *all*

subgenres (coming in slightly behind lesbian pornography) (PornHub, 2014). However, rather than being a matter of simple academic curiosity, the recurring online questioning of women's use appears to be aimed at interpellating the existence of the phenomenon as a general attribute of femininity. Subtextually, the question is not exploring the empirical answer for whether any particular number of individual women watch and enjoy gay porn, but whether it is an essential characteristic of "women" as a homogenous group (i.e., does it fit within our culturally-produced construct of contemporary womanhood?). *This* particular question, then, cannot be set aside by the existence of individual women users of gay porn – who can be dismissed as freaks or pathological anomalies – it can only be settled if a majority consensus of either permissive or dismissive discourse around women's use of gay pornography can be established. A lot of the themes that follow could be taken as part of the "work" of settling this matter:

Do straight women watch gay porn? (Original Post - Yahoo! Answers, February 18, 2008)

The anonymous poster above qualified their question further:

...do a lot of straight women like watching gay porn? What type of porn do most straight women prefer? (Original Post - Yahoo! Answers, February 18, 2008)

This user is attempting to gain feedback to position the phenomenon in terms of its frequency, and to situate it amongst women's "typical" porn-viewing preferences. This implies that locating women's use of gay porn within a landscape of women's total porn-use habits may settle the question of whether women's use of gay porn is, indeed, an actual phenomenon.

Ladies, do you watch gay porn? I've wondered this for a while now since men watch lesbians do women watch gay porn? (IamChacarron - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, "Ladies, do you watch gay porn?")

IamChacarron's question is framed within a *turnabout is fair play* discourse (discussed in detail later). As there is an acceptable, un-interrogated *norm* invoked that *men watch lesbians*, the user is posing the possibility that women may like male homoeroticism. This constructs female use as

a parallelism of male sexuality. As women's sexuality is modeled, in many ways, after male sexuality – largely owing to Masters and Johnson (1966) and Kinsey's (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1949; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) parallelistic approaches to examining men's and women's sexuality – invoking normative male sexuality may serve a “bolstering” function for women's use of homoerotic media.

Many Q&A forums and article titles suggest that women's consumption of gay pornography is somewhat rare, anomalous, or unexpected:

“Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?” Straightdope, 2007.

“Ladies, do you watch gay porn?” Reddit AskWomen, December 2014.

“How many women are into gay porn?” Data Lounge, 2013.

“I googled ‘Do women watch gay porn?’ Well apparently... Yes, yes they do. Anyone surprised? I know I was!” (Original poster, Realjock gay forums, 2011).

"Do girls like gay porn?" Yahoo! Answers, December 2015.

"Do women watch gay porn?" Zity, 2013.

"Do straight women watch gay porn?" Topix forum, Pikeville, Kentucky, 2013.

While it was common to observe original posters, often male, framing the question as novel or unexpected, others have constructed the phenomenon as a “growth” trend:

It's been quietly gaining popularity for some time. Now, there can be little doubt: the internet has turned women on to the joys of gay porn...it seems a growing number of women are turning to man-on-man action to get them going. Indeed, there's an entire subculture of women who believe that, in the words of one online viewer, ‘there's nothing better than watching two handsome guys f*****. (Welsh, The Telegraph, 2014).

According to Welsh, women's use of gay pornography is a new phenomenon, one that has been emerging gradually over recent years, and one that is steadily increasing in visibility and popularity. She identifies the internet as the vehicle facilitating women's use of gay pornography, something noted by Juffer (1998) in her work on the constraints to pornography (and sexual

subjectivity) created by women's enforced locus in the domestic sphere. Above, Welsh both generalizes the phenomenon to all women, and confines the phenomenon to a "subculture" of women. Further into her article, Welsh prefaces a section with: "Women are finally exploring their sexuality" (2014). She thus positions gay pornography use as a hallmark of the emergence of a feminine sexuality that has presumably been submerged up until this point, just waiting to be uncovered by the right set of circumstances, by a watershed historical moment:

[Pam] Dore, who has been directing porn for ten years and calls herself a feminist, identifies this new confidence in women's porn-viewing habits as political. She compares it to 20th century advances, such as the pill. 'Women have a right to explore their sexuality in the same way that men do,' she adds. (Welsh, *The Telegraph*, 2014).

This (albeit understandable) enthusiasm reflects postfeminist, neoliberal, racialized, and humanistic constraints that remain active in these positions (Silies, 2015); in other words, we cannot presume that gay pornography is the final, victorious harbinger of an emancipated women's sexuality. In this vein, Bethan Jones at New Left Project challenges the veracity of this "sudden emergence" of sexual liberation:

...the publication of E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy in 2012 resulted in hundreds of articles about the emergence of female sexuality and erotica – their authors apparently unaware that women have been consuming porn for years. (Jones – "Johnlocked: Sherlock, slash fiction and the shaming of female fans," 2014).

While Jones is referring in this case to a massively popular instance of heterosexual erotic fiction drawn from a work that was originally a fanfiction work, Jones' larger analysis of the overwhelmingly negative public response to slash fandom casts considerable doubt upon the claim that the cultural zeitgeist has truly embraced a freshly emerging, liberated women's sexuality. Indeed, it would be a mistake to presume that women are now free to "explore sexuality in the same way that men do" despite Dore's justified assertion that women have the "right" to do so. As noted by Jones (2014), slash fiction authors and readers continue to be derided in the media and online for their interest in male homoeroticism. Instead of ushering in a

new era of emancipated sexuality for women, their use of male homoerotic media has become bound up in a postfeminist contract (Gill, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; McRobbie, 2007), and encouraged only in instances where the use would not interfere with the formation and maintenance of heterosexual partnered relationships (Potts, 2002). Relating back to Dore's comment, feminist activists and historians (see Silies, 2015) have argued that the pill, cited by Dore as evidence of emergent sexual freedom for women, was never a true "sexual revolution" for women, but rather a source of additional pressure to increase their sexually availability to men. Like the pill, the public recognition of women's use of male homoerotic media has not been a mark of the pure emergence of women's sexual freedom – a "trapping" of freedom is instead offered. That is, women's recreational use of gay pornography is tolerated because it potentially increases sexual receptivity to male partners – but only within clearly delineated constraints. Any pattern of use that would interfere with men's access to the women's bodies, such as "addiction" or "fannish" behavior, is pathologized. Thus, similar "facilitation" discourses as those appearing about availability of the pill emerge around women's use of gay pornography; these will be discussed in detail further on.

As suggested by the comment from Jones (2014), framing of women's appreciation of homoerotic media has gone to the other extreme as well; rather than positioning it as a rare anomaly, or a growing trend, it is constructed as an epidemic obsession. For example, an article by Brian Moylan in Gawker is titled: *Why are straight women so obsessed with gay sex?* (2010). Like many of the articles under study, Moylan goes on to elaborate myriad hypothetical motivations. Raindude from Hip Forums echoes this framing. Straight women are not just tentatively wading into the fray; they are engaged to a level represented as pathological:

God I have met so many women in the past couple years that were into gay porn. You would not believe the things they have asked me to do. One girl even tried to set something up from a guy on craigslist to have me perform for her. It never happened, so I

am not sure what she would have done. But man, she was frantic. She acted like an addict trying to get some kind of fix trying to set up the thing on craigslist. One chick I know that was a stripper wanted me to do something with one of her clients. (raindude – “My wife watches male gay porn and masturbates, hipforums.com, 2013)

Another article by The Wire, by Alexander Abad-Santos, is titled: *Chinese women can't stop reading and writing gay Sherlock fanfiction* (2014) and details how Chinese women have been persecuted by their government for writing and distributing slash fiction works. While the article itself is less prejudiced, the title invites a pathological reading – the women are so obsessed with slash fiction, they can't stop, even when faced with persecution/prosecution.

Women themselves are often called upon to confirm or deny whether *women use/love gay porn* (e.g., IamChacarron - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, “Ladies, do you watch gay porn?”). Women generally respond with a permissive consensus view affirming that the activity is a *real thing that women do*, and they often make statements to normalize the interest (more on normalization further along):

Yes! (Jeep's Phoenix - “Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?” Straightdope, 2007).

Yes. Oh yes. (SailedTheOceanBlue - “Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?” Straightdope, 2007).

We sure do!... It's very interesting and can be erotic (puresatin - Yahoo! Answers, June 30, 2008)

i have! why not? it's all about curiosity. (N C - Yahoo! Answers, June 30, 2008)

I love watching gay porn....lesbian or straight porn just isn't exciting for me (Meebo - Yahoo! Answers, June 30, 2008)

I love gay porn...if I don't have my laptop with me I close my eyes and think of my favorite gay porn. (AngelBabyCakes104 (f) - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, “Ladies, do you watch gay porn?”)

However, some women respondents are more cautious about generalizing the phenomenon to *all* women:

I do and I'm a girl. I can't speak for the majority of girls though. (Katie A. – Yahoo! Answers, 2009)

Katie, rather than presuming to speak on behalf of “women” as a homogenous construct, specifies her own preferences as possibly distinct from those of the “majority of girls.”

Additional instances like this occur throughout the forum conversations, when women who do not fit (or cede to) a *consensus* position that *women love gay porn* problematize the generalization of the interest to *women* as a general category. Rowsdowerr offers one such resistance to this broad categorization, attempting to frame the issue as a more nuanced phenomenon:

Yes all the time. I think you'll find that not all men like to watch lesbians and not all women like to watch gay men. It's a personal preference thing that doesn't have an across the board answer. (Rowsdowerr (f) - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, “Ladies, do you watch gay porn?”)

Rowsdowerr's response contains a seeming contradiction, in that her initial assertion is “Yes all the time,” and thus the reader remains unclear whether she is referring to her personal experience or to “women” in a more general sense. Her subsequent caveat reveals tension between pressure to affirm the phenomenon (as her own experience matches this affirmation) and her discomfort with making an ontological claim to a general truism that *women watch gay porn*.

Men speaking for women. Many of the question and answer pages and forums addressed the question of whether women use gay pornography directly to women, and while women tended to ground their responses in their own experiences as users, with some qualifying their responses according to their sexual identities or the understanding that not all women might share their preferences, many male commenters presumably felt just as comfortable chiming in on the conversation, sometimes – but not always – establishing their credibility by citing the experiences of female acquaintances or partners. Some male users jumped in to offer opinions on questions posed directly to women users, and felt no need to establish credibility when doing so:

Yes! Some of them do. (Courman – Yahoo! Answers, February 18, 2008).

Yes (Richard M - Yahoo! Answers, February 18, 2008)

Male users also reported polling their female friends, or otherwise support their authority on the subject by referencing their female friends or girlfriends as evidence:

Ive always wondered this I asked a chick friend of mine and of course she just denied watching porn at all =/ (OzzyFTW – Yahoo! Answers, February 18, 2008).

OzzyFTW here speaks to the reluctance of some women to disclose porn use habits to male friends (understandable given that OzzyFTW is now discussing the results of his inquiry on the internet). OzzyFTW appeared to view this denial of involvement with pornography as a natural inclination. However, not all of the male users found their female friends to be so reticent:

some of my girl friends say they watch gay porn. (VX191 – Yahoo! Answers, February 18, 2008)

some do, I know a couple of girls at work who think it's hot and get ideas to use on their men at home.strange fruit (Ric - Yahoo! Answers, June 30 2008)

Ric reports on the viewing preferences of his work colleagues, and then distances himself carefully from any practices or preferences women might learn from gay pornography by characterizing them as anomalous.

none of my straight girlfriends watch it for pleasure but they have watched it (Blade-taste the rainbow - Yahoo! Answers, June 30 2008).

Blade-taste the rainbow claims that none of his girlfriends have used gay pornography for sexual enjoyment, though one wonders how he could be certain about this. His comment suggests that his girlfriends have seen gay pornography either incidentally, or as a curiosity.

My friend Jess says the idea of two men together is the hottest, most orgasmic idea in the world. She is addicted to gay porn. So yes, some girls do lol. (Brendonn, Yahoo! Answers, 2009) *Note: This response was chosen by the asker as the Best Answer despite several well-formulated answers from self-identified female users.*

Brendonn reports on his friend's enjoyment of male homoerotic media by placing it at the forefront of her sexual interests/enjoyment. He then positions this as deviant by characterizing it as an addiction, and finishes off by making light of the phenomenon ("lol").

"My lady loves to watch it! She especially likes it when multiple guys suck, rim, and fuck each other. Add in some BDSM and she can get off multiple times. She really likes to watch it in person!" (kinkycouple2, m, US – Zity, 2013).

Kinkycouple2 discloses detailed information about his partner's sexual preferences for male homoeroticism, and reports that she enjoys observing male-male sexuality in real life. Another male-identified netizen, whose comments indicate him to be a frequenter of gay bars and possibly a drag performer, goes a step further and reveals his role in helping his female friends gain access to gay bars and clubs where they could watch gay men kissing (and etc.):

When I was out dressed recently two female friends told me they both wanted to see two guys kissing and that it really turned them on so I had to take them on a tour of the gay bars. They loved it. So yes women do like to see men together and that is why you will find a lot of straight women in gay bars, (often called fag hags!) This is where I got most of my girlfriends from in the early days. They hate the usual cattle markets where married guys are trying to hit on them all night. One very hard core gay bar banned women from the back room where there is a porn movie playing and usually some interaction going on because they would go in and watch. (Miss Marcia, m, UK – Zity, 2013).

These last two comments are rare instances of a permissive stance toward a woman crossing the constructed demarcation between fantasy (pornography, erotic literature) and the real (watching or engaging in *real life* sexual acts) (Butler, 1990b). Miss Marcia notes that the bars would prevent women from entering the back room in order to watch gay men engaging in sexual behaviours – this makes sense from a standpoint of protecting the men frequenting these clubs from voyeurism, but also serves as a metaphor for the demarcation between the fantasy and the real for women. As we will see further along, women's use of male homoerotic media as a solitary fantasy aid is tolerated, but any desires that cross over into the real are policed in a number of ways.

Constructing opposition: Some women *don't* like gay porn. Women's appreciation of gay porn is not unanimous, and many users have indicated that they are not interested in (or are dissatisfied with) male homoeroticism for a variety of reasons (see Ramsay, 2017). They also seem burdened with a need to explain their reasoning, offering a number of justifications:

“No I do not.” (Lady Scorpio – Yahoo! Answers, 2009).

Lady Scorpio's response is refreshingly to-the-point, and devoid of justification. Hers was the only such explanation I was able to find, as most of the women felt compelled to elaborate their positions.

I'm a girl and I never liked yaoi or yuri.. I also don't mind if the others like it. It just means that we have different tastes. But yeah, sometimes I wonder why others is so fond of it.. Maybe I'm just conservative? LOL, IDK (yellowbuds - “Why do girls like Yaoi?” My Anime List, 2011).

Yellowbuds acknowledges the different preferences people may have for varying kinds of eroticism, but admits some confusion about what would make same-sex eroticism compelling. She then apologizes for this, implying that she may simply lack the sexual adventurousness needed to understand the appeal. She then further diffuses her own opinion with “LOL, IDK” to avoid taking too direct a stance on the issue.

Don't do the porn scene so watching two or more guys together does nothing for me, nor would it in real life. Just the sad case that I am lol. (Elizabeth201, f, UK – Zity, 2013).

Elizabeth201's comment, too, is apologetic and self-deprecating, following her stated lack of interest in gay pornography and/or real-life male-male encounters – implying that there is something undesirable or pitiful about her lack of receptivity to adventurousness, and postfeminist “up-for-anything”ism (Gill, 2008; 2009; McRobbie, 2007).

I as a girl personally do not watch it. I do not want to think of men or women in this fashion. Personally I find it perverted. I am sorry if this offends anyone, but that's my opinion. (nonexistent - “Why do girls like Yaoi?” My Anime List, 2011)

Nonexistent explains her lack of interest in gay pornography as an offshoot of a general distaste for pornographic representations. It is unclear from her comment whether she objects to heterosexual as well as same-sex pornography, but in either case, she also feels a need to apologize for her perspective (which is potentially homophobic¹¹ – “I find it perverted”), and thus acknowledges it as an unpopular viewpoint. In this vein, for some women users, dominant homophobic discourses may potentially coincide with avoidance of gay pornography:

I have nothing against the people who practice same sex relationships.and quite rightly in my country they have equal [*sic*] rights with everything,but as for whatching [*sic*] it and finding it a turn on nothing could be futher than the truth. A turn off is what i find happens if it comes up in anything i am watching, (caz, f, UK - Zity, 2013)

Caz is careful to establish from the start that she does not espouse oppressive views against LGBTQ individuals from a political or civil-rights perspective, but she then appears to echo the common *as long as I don't have to see it* protest (“as for whatching it...”), and reveals that she finds same-sex *relationships* off-putting when they “come up” in popular media. This potentially moves beyond a neutral or disinterested stance toward gay pornography (“nothing could be further from the truth”). Heterosexual relationships are ubiquitous in popular media and rarely evoke disgust or aversion in and of themselves (i.e., presumably few viewers are “turned off” by *Friends* simply because the main characters are in straight relationships), but for caz, it sounds as if when same-sex relationships are represented (“come up”) in media she is consuming, she is “turned off.”

I don't like watching guys do stuff to each other it kinda grosses me out but I love watching guys jerk off which you have to go to the gay sites for that. (jiller, f – Zity, 2013).

¹¹ For the purposes of this work, I utilize the Merriam-Webster definition of *homophobia* as denoting “an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals.”

While jiller finds male-male homoeroticism distasteful (“it kinda grosses me out”), she is interested in male masturbation, which is also a popular genre among gay male porn consumers. Thus, jiller has discovered a pornographic medium that allows her to exercise a desiring gaze toward a performing male sexual object, but without the disruptive (for her) impact of partnered sexual activities she finds unappealing or uninteresting. Some users were more directly homophobic in their opinions of gay pornography:

I am a straight female. Oddly enough, two hot guys kissing doesn't bother me (very far from that actually). I do find it hot to see two guys kissing because I guess that somehow, I imagine myself being one of the guys kissed (or even in between). But gay SEX? No way in hell. Not for me. I don't know, there's something wrong with the whole picture. I can't see gay porn without gagging. That's just... No. For me, a guy CANNOT suck another guy's thing. It's repulsing. Of course, a lot of straight girls have nothing against gay porn – but I personally can't. Lesbian porn is pretty great though. (anonymous – Yahoo! Answers, 2009).

While Anonymous above is able to appreciate the idea of kissing between two men, she implicitly represents gay sexuality as “wrong,” as something that makes her “gag,” and elicits repulsion. However, her use of the term “guy's thing” when describing fellatio suggests that it may not be gay sex, but graphic male genitalia in general, that she finds repulsive – particularly given that she expresses a liking for lesbian pornography. In this sense, Anonymous may be contesting the requirement that eroticism be “hardcore” or *penetrative* in order to be valid. Anonymous also positions her ability to find eroticism enjoyable as a function of her ability to place herself in the scenario, or in the position of one of the men. Thus, her comfort with “soft” male homoeroticism but discomfort with “hardcore” may reflect her own discomfort with graphic sexuality. The possibility of enjoying as a purely voyeuristic exercise, without fantasizing about inhabiting the corporeality of one of the actors, appears to be unavailable to her. This sentiment is echoed by other users:

Nope, doesn't do a thing for me. Not grossed out by it, not turned on by it – just meh. I guess that for me it's about imagining myself in the situation, and when there's two guys

gettin' busy, I just don't see where I fit in, so there's no real point. (Antigen – "Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?" Straightdope, 2007).

Like Anonymous, Antigen has difficulty locating herself in the embodied sexuality of gay pornography. For both of them, the erotic value of pornography is essentially tied to one's ability to imagine oneself as a participant in the scene, and they cannot access this imaginal landscape due to their stated inability to inhabit a phantasmatic masculine corporeality. This may point to an important difference in the presumed "parallel" between gay and lesbian pornography; while most "girl-on-girl" pornography is produced around the presence of a male viewer (i.e. male gaze), gay pornography is (arguably) also produced with the presumption of a male viewer, possibly omitting an easy space for women to insert themselves into the fantasy script:

Lesbian scenes in porn are written and directed by straight men for straight men. Gay scenes are written and directed for gay men by gay men. Neither really cares what women think. (tremorviolet - "Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?" Straightdope, 2007).

Tremorviolet voices her dissatisfaction with the lack of attention paid to the perspective of the potential female voyeur in most mainstream pornography – heterosexual and same-sex.

Queenofrandon, too, is forthright in her dissatisfaction with all available forms of pornography, noting that none of it is designed with the intention of titillating viewers like herself:

Porn pisses me off. I love watching a girl get fucked by a hot guy, wishing i was her; but i go to search for stuff that will get me wet and its ALL for guys. Straight porn – nasty guys doing hot girls. Gay – hot guys..doing other guys. I tried searching porn for women, ironically enough was just as gay, too foo-foo, not enough HEAT, just lovie-dovie crap ya really didn't come for. Every hot naked guy on the internet is for guys...u want hot porn, ya gotta make it yourself! (queenofrandon – "My wife watches male gay porn and masturbates, hipforums.com, 2013).

Thus, Anonymous and Antigen above have both have detected a (surmountable but present) barrier to women's enjoyment; many women "don't see where I fit in," because they are not considered in the production or presentation of the media. With nobody to identify with, and with film scenes geared toward a male viewer's desiring gaze, women consumers' lack of

enthusiasm for pornography is understandable. There is validity to queenofrandon's assertion that if women want to see pornography that is oriented (visually and otherwise) toward a desiring female viewer, women need to be involved in the authoring and production of pornography. That said, some of the appeal of gay pornography may be the voyeuristic transgression of this very barrier; a stealing into a "men's only" club:

(responding to Antigen above) This is pretty much the opposite of my situation. I don't imagine myself in sexual situations. I don't even imagine myself during my own sexual fantasies. I'm always the voyeur...in fact, I don't like to watch women have sex. Wait, no, that's wrong. All of the het porn out there that I have discovered is made with a male audience in mind. Vaginas and boobs are nice, but as a straight woman, I like to look at manflash [*sic*]. (pepperlandgirl – "Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?" Straightdope, 2007).

Pepperlandgirl speaks again to the idea of inhabiting the desiring gaze typically reserved for male consumers in mainstream pornography. Pepperlandgirl wants to inhabit this gaze, instead of being confined to the body of the passive, objectified female participant in heterosexual pornography. She desires for herself the ability to take the role of the onlooker, with an eroticized male object to look at. It is unclear from her statement whether she has been able to do so in a satisfying manner; if she has, in effect, managed to steal into that "men's only" club and stealthily enjoy its benefits – yet it appears that for many women viewers of gay pornography, this may be part of the appeal.

A few women reported having never given much consideration to the issue in response to queries about their preferences:

I'll need to do some research on this one, its never occurred to me to get my jollies watching a man shoving his **** up another guy's @ss. (Pearl - Yahoo! Answers, February 21, 2012).

Pearl's comment is complex. Her evocative description of gay sexuality rings as somewhat homophobic (again behind a "jokey" veneer), yet her preface "I'll need to do some research"

suggests she intends to go and find out whether she, indeed, finds it “jolly.” Pearl grants herself permission to explore her *own* potential interest in gay porn as a playful experiment, as if she is simply testing the Original Poster¹² (OP)’s hypothesis. Yet this discursive removal keeps her at arm’s-length from any potential pathology attached to the OP’s sexual interest. Indeed, Pearl’s emphasis on the idea not occurring to her further distances her from the OP’s position, and underscores her “othering” of the OP’s gay porn use.

Part Two: Constructing a (Bounded) Normative Women User

The previous section was concerned with establishing the existence of a phenomenon of “women’s use” of male homoeroticism, both through identification of specific instances of use and the attempt to build a “consensus” generalization around women’s preferences. The comments explored in *Part One: Locating and interrogating women users* also gave a preliminary glimpse into the work conducted in this, *Part Two*, of the analysis, which explores the more detailed process of constructing a “normative” woman user. This process involves the synthesis of women’s use of male homoeroticism with pre-existing dominant discourses around women’s sexuality, and therein the commenters construct both a posfeminist position of conditional permission and a process of containment and regulation. Online participants determine whether women’s use is permissible, under what circumstances, with what limitations, and also designate use that challenges or “falls outside” the dominant heterosexual *status quo* as “weird,” “pathetic,” or “pathological.”

¹² The Original Poster, or OP, in a comment thread, is the person who created the originating or “first” post in the thread. The OP is the initiator of the conversation, and is often presenting a question or commentary topic for consideration by the forum community.

“Am I normal?”: Seeking permission and community. A number of the analyzed texts were Q&A forums where women left posts to query whether their interest in gay pornography was common, or more to the point, normal:

Is it normal for straight girls to like male gay porn? (Original Post – Yahoo! Answers, 2008).

I’m a straight girl and I like gay male porn. I don’t like lesbian porn. I still watch straight porn but I find gay porn hotter. Is that normal? (throwaway3489724 – Reddit r/sex, 2014).

Is it normal for a girl to watch gay porn? I may occasionally...partake in such activities...uhhh, is it normal? (Lazaruk – Yahoo! Answers, 2011).

Am I a freak? (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com)

The majority of the respondents to this question either affirmed the “normalcy” of the posters’ interests, or went further on to challenge the definition and validity of normality as a concept, or as a way of understanding right and wrong. The dominant view on the majority of the forums reviewed tended to echo this pattern, with women’s enjoyment of gay pornography affirmed, and even encouraged, as a *healthy* solitary sexual interest: “So, no, you are hardly “a freak” – at least not in any negative sense.” (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com).

Many women voiced feelings of isolation in their sexual interest, feeling like they are alone in their enjoyment of male homoeroticism, or that the pastime is shameful and not something that can be shared openly with others:

Am I the only straight woman who gets off on gay porn? (OP – DC Urban Moms and Dads, 2014).

In response to this original post on the DC Urban Moms and Dads forum, a number of commenters came forward to confess their love for gay pornography, and many indicated relief that others shared their interest. One anonymous user below noted that she, too, felt like she was the “only one like this,” a most isolating subject position to find oneself in. Thus, the discovery of a permissive subject position around use of male homoerotic media would be a boon to women

who have thought themselves part of an abject “outside” to the “normal” (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) (even though, as it turns out, this is a subject position regulated by a number of constraints):

Another woman here who likes it, though I’m embarrassed to admit to anyone in real life. (anonymous – DC Urban Moms and Dads, 2014)

I've been avoiding this for the longest I thought I was the only one like this. I almost told a friend but I didn't want them to think otherwise of me although we watch mega gay movies and bl(boy love) dramas. (anonymous – DC Urban Moms and Dads, 2014)

Both of the anonymous users above reveal their fear of disclosing their interest in male homoerotic media beyond the virtual realm of the internet, where anonymity provides an effective screen against social judgment. The second anonymous user feels so inhibited about sharing her interests, she even avoids doing so with a friend who has a very high probability of sharing her sentiments. Online communities provide the opportunity for a partial “coming out” for women users, and connect them with a community of like-minded women:

My god I feel so relieved. I’m not gonna lie, I thought there was something wrong with me lol! I’m not the only one after all. (KiNKKiTTY8, f – Zity, 2013). *(This after 29 previous comments, many of which indicated that women’s interest in MM pornography is common among the female respondents).*

Thus, even though KiNKKiTTY8’s revelation is a virtual one, it provides her with a sense of immense relief and validation. While the conversation is not occurring “in real life,” she has verified the existence of other women like her, and is comforted in thus knowing there is some “normality” to her interests.

Some users go beyond the validation of the normalcy or acceptability of these women’s interests to challenge the very notion of what constitutes “normal:”

People overuse the word ‘normal.’ If you mean ‘average’ I doubt a majority of women watch gay porn, although far more people watch porn than will admit to it. If you’re just concerned about whether it’s healthy then yeah, there’s nothing wrong with it. It’s very common for straight guys to watch lesbian porn and I’ve known straight and bi girls who enjoy watching gay porn for one reason or another. If it turns you on and it’s not illegal or

harming anyone, why does it matter? (Iaocus – Yahoo! Answers, 2011) *Chosen as best answer.*

I do not believe in ‘NORMAL’ What is ‘Normal for YOU’, might not be ‘Normal’ for your best friend And What is ‘normal; for me’, might not be ‘Normal; for YOU ... Etc So; YES; many females like gay Porn, just a [*sic*] many males like Lesbian porn (High Shaman- Yahoo! Answers, 2011)

Both Iaocus and High Shaman contest the concept of “normal” as a guideline for what is and isn’t acceptable sexual behaviour. However, Iaocus then invokes three discourses to establish the asker’s interest in gay pornography as acceptable. First, they employ a sexual health discourse implying that active interest in visual erotica is an offshoot of a “healthy” sex drive. Next, they cite the number of people who watch gay pornography, which is in effect an appeal to normality by consensus. Finally, they invoke the new age/pagan spiritual notion of “an it harm none, do what thou wilt,” a twist on the permissive liberal sexuality discourse that encourages unrestricted sexual adventure and exploration between and among consenting adults. High Shaman also follows their challenge of the categorization of normal with an appeal to normality through numbers, as well as through the *turnabout is fair play* discursive theme which establishes women’s normality via comparison to masculine sexuality norms (this will be elaborated further in Part Three of the analysis). Both of these comments carry contradictory premises. On the one hand, the commenters wish to depart from the use of normality as a constrictive set of rules that determine acceptable sexuality; on the other hand, they are nonetheless forced to invoke normalizing discourses to justify this supposed departure. Thus, they employ strategies to normalize women’s use of gay pornography while simultaneously challenging the need to do so.

The “tomboy” hypothesis, and the queering of gender and sexual roles. It has been suggested that women who enjoy male homoerotic media are gender nonconforming – or at least, unhappy with the lot traditional femininity has designated for them (Salmon & Symons, 2004). This theory suggests that women’s interest in male homoerotic media is motivated by a wish to

identify with the qualities typically assigned to male lead characters: strength, courage, agency, being in the middle of the action, being the hero, being in control, and being able to form close, lifelong bonds with comrades-in-arms. This theory would be particularly applicable for slash fiction and Yaoi, where the eroticism is typically preceded by adventure and close masculine homosocial bonds:

Speaking of roles, a study published in 2004 by a psychologist-anthropologist duo theorized that part of the female attraction to slash is that it's 'based on shared adventure, and its protagonists slay each other's dragons.' The authors write, 'Although the heroes of mainstream romance novels are 'warriors,' the heroines are not warriors, no matter how intelligent, well-educated, fiercely independent, professionally successful, and spunky they may be.' They surmise, 'The typical slash fan may be a woman who is psychosexually unexceptional but who, for whatever reason, prefers the fantasy of being a co-warrior to the fantasy of being Mrs. Warrior.' Maybe you want to be the pornographic equivalent of a co-warrior — a co-screwie instead of a screwie? (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com)

The study Clark-Flory cites above was the article by Salmon and Symons (2004). Salmon and Symons offered further elaboration on the theory Clark-Flory summarized above:

Who might such women be? Our research suggests at least one hypothesis: They might be, disproportionately, former tomboys. Research on tomboys suggests that most do not reject traditionally female activities but rather embrace traditionally male ones (e.g. they may play with both dolls and trucks). As adults, they typically score high on tests of assertiveness, competitiveness, and willingness to take risks. Slash may have a special appeal to such women because it uniquely fuses traditionally female romance with traditionally male camaraderie, adventure, and risk-taking. (Salmon & Symons, 2004).

Salmon and Symons situate their inquiry in an evolutionary psychological framework, and as such, they focus on how to make sense of slash fiction within a presumptively biologically essential heterosexual matrix, where "female" and "male" are natural, inescapable realities, and heterosexual coitus is the goal of all normative human behaviour in order to ensure the propagation of DNA. Interestingly, even within that matrix, the authors must find space for the notion that "female" is a category that can contain qualities typically essentialized to "males" (Butler, 1990a; 2004). They construct this phenomenon as that of the "tomboy," a little girl who

fails to confine herself exclusively to feminine behavioural norms and preferences, additionally appropriating traditionally masculine interests and qualities. Tomboys are often viewed with equal measures of amused tolerance and exasperation – they are not “really” boys, so their behaviours do not produce the same benefits or privileges for them. Further, their boyish interests are tolerated because they are presumed to be temporary. Tomboys are expected to outgrow their interest in “boy” activities, and to eventually take their place in the (hetero)normative sexual order by adopting feminine characteristics and heterosexual partnerships. As heterosexual imperatives are not threatened by this, the tomboy’s continued assertiveness, adventurousness, and risk-taking may be tolerated as long as they do not persist through to adulthood.

Salmon and Symons (2004) correctly point out that, for a young woman whose subjectivity expands beyond limiting feminine subject positions, slash fiction may offer a more satisfying way to fantasize about romance, sex, friendship, and adventure. When inadequate or incomplete symbols of womanhood are removed, the male characters grow to encompass everything the “tomboy” feels herself to be; spanning both the feminine and the masculine, a means of personhood that transcends fixed binary categories. This begs the question of why women characters cannot fill this purpose. That question will be revisited in the discussion section, where I will address the problem of using a “reverse-discourse” to attempt to thwart an oppressive binary.

Excess and regulation: Reigning in the unruly user. While the vast majority of article authors, forum commenters, and posters adopt a stance of permissiveness toward women’s use of male homoerotic media, and even encourage women to explore this aspect of their sexuality, there are limitations to this conditional sexual freedom. Misogynistic regulation of women’s sexuality and homophobic discourses are leveled by some commenters who denigrate the activity and question the sexual identity and sanity of the women users. Further, when women’s use is

encouraged, it must still conform to certain regulations: Use should remain a *private* interest; it should be *casual* and not engaged in often enough to constitute an *addiction*; it should not cross particular gender-conformity lines and the line between fantasy and reality; and it should facilitate, never *hinder*, men's sexual access to their women partners.

Denying “normalcy” status. While the majority of forum commenters and editorial articles assume a permissive stance toward women's use of gay pornography, a minority of commenters are vocal in their insistence that the behaviour is *not* normal:

no it's definitely not. it's weird if you think about it...I would stay away from her if I were u. (asian princess – Yahoo! Answers, 2011).

Asian princess is emphatic in their charge that the original poster's use of gay pornography is not normal. They decry it as odd, and openly incite others to socially ostracize the user. Other users similarly call for social exclusion or concealment of the interest as a shameful and unacceptable vice:

Absolutely disgusting. You better hide this from any guy you date or marry. (anonymous – DC Urban Moms and Dads, 2014).

Anonymous insists that women's use of male homoerotic media is reprehensible, and that the original poster should take pains to conceal her use from any male romantic partner. Thus, Anonymous not only positions the OP's use as pathological and shameful, but also prioritizes her male partner, his comfort, and his opinions over her sexual interests and enjoyment. Thus, her use is firmly relegated a backseat to heteronormative sexuality.

you need medical help.. Now..!

Source(s):

common sence [*sic*] (rick – Yahoo! Answers, February 21, 2012)

In the post above, rick emphatically reaffirms the original poster's pathological framing of her own gay porn use by insisting that she needs “medical help.” This positions her use as a sort of

illness. He provides a “citation” to back up the credibility of his response – the (misspelled) authority of “common sence.” While the comment conceals its malice behind a jocular veneer, the implication that she is ill and the invocation of common sense as the arbiter of her acceptability taps neatly into two powerful dominant discourses – the medicalization of sexuality (Tiefer, 2004), and common sense as an uncontested mode of producing knowledge and authority (Foucault, 1979). Thus, her activities are indicative of a disease, and any sensible person ought to know it.

I think you are either making this up, or yes, you are the only one. (5 min to midnight! - Yahoo! Answers, February 21, 2012).

5 min to midnight! first challenges the original post’s credibility by suggesting that it is fake, and then follows it up by claiming that if it is *not* fake, then the OP is alone in her enjoyment of gay pornography. This comment aims to isolate the OP through a double attack – erasing both her community and her authenticity – if her story *is* “real,” it is still too alien to be accepted as real, or to be an experience shared by others.

Another user opines on the abnormality of women users of gay pornography in response to an editorial (The Daily Dot, 2014) on the Pornhub Insights study (PornHub, 2014):

And, what about another reality. The sample of woman watching porns is so low (20%), this ‘study’ just depict what quite or minority female ‘freaks’ are looking for in porn. And the top 5 categories, give me an insight about what are these ‘freaks.’ (Fredo – “Why don’t straight women like straight porn,” The Daily Dot, 2014).

Fredo dispenses entirely with the idea that the statistics might reveal a pattern of regular use of pornography, and specific subcategories of pornography (e.g. gay), as common, and instead casts all female users of pornography as “Freaks.” Fredo seems to argue that the results of the Pornhub study cannot be generalized to women because only 20% of women watch porn, yet it is not clear where Fredo obtained this figure – it was not given in the original Pornhub article, or in the

Daily Dot editorial. Fredo thus attempts to establish, using an appeal to a spurious statistical figure, that women who use any pornography are a freakish minority.

Confessional (hetero) sexual orientation declarations. A number of the commenters felt compelled to locate themselves in relation to male homoerotic media use by disclosing their sexual identities as a preface to their discussion of their use of, or preference for, these materials. For instance:

I'm a straight woman... (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com);

I am a straight female. (anonymous – Yahoo! Answers, 2009).

I consider myself straight... (unBROKEN – Yahoo! Answers, 2009).

I'm 100% straight woman (Original Poster – Yahoo! Answers, 21 Feb 2012).

I love gay porn.....Im not gay but 2 hot guys hell yes!!! LMAO (I do, Topix Pikeville Kentucky subforum, 2013).

While these declarations serve to establish the women's sexual orientations to forestall challenges by other commenters (challenges which *did* occur with some frequency in the forums), they also position the women's identities as a contextual factor for their use of male homoerotic media, and lend them some authority to speak on the subject.

Some users invoke non-straight sexual orientations as a means of broadening the net, reminding users that bisexual, fluid, and lesbian women are part of the constellation of women users under survey. Some of the questions specifically poll *straight* women, suggesting either that bisexual/lesbian women's interest is a *given*, or that their sexuality is already "other" and thus not considered relevant in constructing an ontology of women's sexual preferences. Thus, women with diverse sexual identities take up space in the discussion to extend the phenomenon beyond the province of heterosexual women:

I am a bisexual female. (T.I. – Yahoo! Answers, 2008)

I watch and am turned on by gay porn. I am a bisexual female. (T.I. – Yahoo! Answers, February 18, 2008)

As a born-that-way-bisexual woman... (azdiane, f, US – Zity, 2013)

I'm a very, very gay chic... (Sade K. – Yahoo! Answers, 2009)

I'm not straight, but I'm female and I love gay porn. And yes, many many straight women love gay porn as well – why do you think slash fanfiction is so popular? (disharmonia, AskReddit, “Do Straight Girls Like Male Gay Porn?”, 2014)

Well I am a lesbian and I love gay porn! It turns me on way more than lesbian sex.....weird right? lol (Zee – Yahoo! Answers, June 30, 2008)

The idea that lesbian women are fond of gay pornography has been popularized by the recent movie *The Kids Are All Right* and articles such as Taormino's (2008) *Brokeback Mountain Was Just the Beginning*; however, as has been documented extensively, the position of bisexual women has been largely sidelined (e.g. Gurevich, Bailey, & Bower, 2009; Hayfield, Clarke & Halliwell, 2014). Queries around the phenomenon either interrogate straight women's use, lesbian women's use, or “women's” use as a generality (which also presumes cis-heterosexuality). Judging by the diversity of sexual identities cited by the women users of male homoerotic media, it appears that (despite the insistence of many an internet troll) interest in the medium is a poor predictor of sexual identity, and that women of varied sexual identities can nonetheless share a common enjoyment of male homoeroticism.

Sometimes users' confessions around their sexual identities were undertaken in such a way as to clarify that the user is not interested in *gay* men sexually – this appeared to be a more oblique means of circumscribing the user's own sexual orientation and preferences:

Now, I'm not attracted to gay men. It's only hot if it's 2 straight men that would never act “gay” in real life. (hornyhousewife, Topix Pikeville Kentucky subforum, 2013).

This comment not only serves to align the poster with heteronormative sexual preferences, but reproduces dominant homophobic discourses around the marginalized embodiment and

(un)desirability of gay men's sexuality and masculinity. In doing so, the user distances herself from a sexuality she perceives as deviant (but paradoxically finds erotic).

Homophobic/heteronormalizing responses. Homophobia was evident as a regulating discourse in a number of the conversations, and while it was used by both men and women commenters, male-identified users appeared more likely to deploy homophobia and gay-bashing to regulate and police women's behavior, whereas women appeared more likely to invoke it as an explanation for their own non-use of gay pornography:

Why do women like "Slash Fiction" man on man action? Kirk/Spock! That's just wrong! (astro – original post, "Why do women like 'slash fiction,' The Straight Dope, 2004).

Assumptions about women users' sexual orientations were sometimes made by commenters in ways that were meant to bully, silence, or otherwise regulate women's sexual behaviour:

I would get away from it before it turns you into a lesbian. (LëïñŸëñō – Yahoo! Answers, February 21, 2012).

LëïñŸëñō's post raises the spectre the discussion's original poster attempted to forestall with her up-front proclamation "I am 100% straight," suggesting that watching gay pornography will "turn you into a lesbian." Thus, the OP's sexual identity is directly contested and presumed to be vulnerable to external influences. LëïñŸëñō attempts to divert the woman's attention away from male homoeroticism, via threat, to preserve her privileged straight identity. This charge is levelled in other forums as well, in ways intended to shame and silence women users:

o si momi you are the lesbiana! (I only love you when I drink – Yahoo! Answers, 2011).

Haven't you seen "The Kids Are Alright?" LESBIAN couple got off on gay porn. (anonymous – DC Urban Moms and Dads, 2014).

these girls are so GAY! (Edwardandres01, YouTube comment, "Three Girls Tricked Into Watching Gay Porn," 2013).

These comments serve to police and silence the sexual expression of women fans through threat of stigma, gay-bashing, or of having their sexual identities misrepresented.

The commenter below attempts to imply more subtly that male homoerotic media may have a shaping influence on women's sexual identities:

During these years I've been a manga fan, I've got to know many yaoi fans (girls) and most of them during their lives had had homosexual relationships (usually they had had these relationships after discovering yaoi). I don't think yaoi manga can actually change one's sexuality, but it also can't be considered a coincidence that so many yaoi fans declared themselves bi/homosexual/sexually confused. (aocchan - "Do you think Yaoi manga can influence one's sexuality?" My Anime List, 2012)

Aocchan refers to the authority of anecdotal evidence to posit that Yaoi is a genre connected to non-straight sexual identities and activities. He positions the Yaoi as *causal* by suggesting that the Yaoi use occurred prior to these women's engaging in same-sex experiences. Even though he states, disingenuously, that he *doesn't* believe Yaoi can alter a person's sexual orientation, he is, in fact, implying that very thing – his statement that he is not appears a strategic ploy to evade criticism. Praxii offers a response to aocchan's implication that Yaoi is a potential cause of bisexuality or homosexuality:

If someone watches it and decides that they are homosexual. well they were likely already having these thoughts and feelings and thats what led to them watching the show in the first place. And during the show they became more accepting of it within themselves and realized how they felt. (Praxiii - "Do you think Yaoi manga can influence one's sexuality?" My Anime List, 2012)

Praxii's logic is sound – Aocchan's premise that interest in Yaoi occurred chronologically prior to engaging in same-sex activities is not good evidence that Yaoi was the causal agent.

Aocchan's attempt to implicate Yaoi as a corrupting agent is reminiscent of similar alarmist logic around violent video games and pornography in general – it assumes a passive, gullible consumer that will act directly on the ideas represented in a particular medium, without any contribution of the consumer's personality, identity, or rational judgment.

There has also been some interrogation of the gender identities of women users due to their interest in male homoeroticism:

When I was younger it was a bit of a thing for me and I wanted to have a sex change for a long time so that I would feel more 'normal'. (Queer Humpin' Lovin Maybe-Straight – Ask Dot, thedotspot.net, 2013).

QHLMS's comment is not detailed enough to determine whether their wish to transcend gender is reflective of a trans identity, or instead a reflection of their confusion regarding what their interest in gay pornography *means* with regard to gender and sexual identity. However, the relationship between users' interest in male homoeroticism, their sexual identity, their gender assigned at birth, and their current gender identity was observed elsewhere in the analysis, suggesting that for women, non-binary, and trans users, male homoerotic media may open up space for exploration of their gender and sexual subjectivities. Scarleteen fielded a question from a teenaged user suggesting that QHLMS was not alone in wondering whether interest in male homoeroticism was an indication that they were, in fact, a gay trans man assigned female at birth:

I am a girl, but I wish I was a gay boy. Let me start off by saying, I am a straight girl. I know for a fact that I'm not trans. I am a girl, I was born a girl and I don't think I was born in the wrong body. I am comfortable in my body. But recently I find myself looking up anything gay related on the internet. Gay love stories and short videos on youtube, most of my favourite couples on TV shows are usually the gay ones; and not girl on girl. For some reason; I don't like seeing girl on girl, but I love seeing guys together. I think it's more like I'm jealous of gay relationships. How can I be a straight girl who likes boys, but enjoy and sometimes envy gay relationships. I'm just a bit confused about myself is all. What does it mean? Why am I like this?

This is weird, but even when I watch porn, on occasions I watch male and female, but most of the time... I find myself watching gay porn. Most of the gay porn I watch are usually the ones where one of the guys initiate first and the other is reluctant at first... Also I find it absolutely amazing watching a guy suck another guy on porn, it just seems so pleasuring. As I stated before, I'm a girl and I like my body, even my genitals, but when I watch gay porn, I touch myself and imagine I have a penis. I get more pleased thinking about how it feels to have another guy give me a blowjob if I had a penis and imagining a girl doing it turns me off. I just think guys honestly have get more pleasure with their parts than girls do with our parts. I'm jealous of that and I want that, but if I were ever to feel that same pleasure, I want a guy to give it to me. But a gay guy. Except, a gay guy wouldn't do that with anyone unless it's another male. Which I want to be sometimes.

I don't understand... I mean this isn't called 'bi-curious?' But I'm not interested in other girls...(Majani, answered by Jenna, “I’m a straight girl but wish I was a gay guy,” Scarleteen Advice, 2012).

Scarleteen’s Jenna gives a deft response to Majani’s query by providing nuanced and inclusive discussions of gender identity, sexual orientation, fantasy, and “reality” to guide Majani’s self-exploration. Majani’s query speaks to the depth of confusion that may be felt by women users of male homoerotic media, particularly when their use occurs in social isolation, or in the absence of a community of like-minded online users. While only Majani can know for certain what her gender identity and sexual orientation are, it is notable that Majani’s comment speaks to the diminishment of women’s freedom to experience unfettered sexual pleasure to the same extent as men, and it seems that some of her sexual enjoyment of male homoeroticism is, in fact, a wish to connect to this raw, unhindered, embodied pleasure, to experience it for herself.

...I think [Yaoi] has the potential (however small) to make someone unhappy with their own gender. For instance over time they may find the idea of being the dominant male more appealing than being the one getting pounded. And I'm not just pulling this out of my ass, I used to be friends with a girl who read a lot of yaoi, and she eventually told me she wanted to be a man for that very reason. And she wasn't just some crazy obsessive fangirl either, over time she just found the idea of sex as a man more appealing. Whether or not she would have come to the same conclusion had she not read yaoi at all, I don't really know. (SilverDemon - “Do you think Yaoi manga can influence one’s sexuality?” My Anime List, 2012)

SilverDemon echoes Majani’s premise that identification with men’s bodies and male sexuality permits women an otherwise unavailable experience of sexual freedom – the freedom to act as one pleases, to pursue pleasure without consideration for the other, to dominate and control, to *own* desire. This is not to say that these things are inherent in the physicality of male versus female bodies, but that bodies inscribed with masculinity and femininity have come to take on different social meanings, and positive representations of women’s bodies that are sexually free, agentic, and desiring are notoriously absent from mainstream pornography and erotica.

Addiction and pathology discourses. One of the more overtly regulatory themes identified in the analysis was the application of addictions and pathology discourse to women's use of male homoerotic media. While some of this discursive regulation was applied by men commenters, much of the process of regulation and containment was conducted by the women themselves in reference to their own behaviours. Some women discussing their use of male homoerotic media foreclosed or struggled to access any consideration of their own normality, and instead wrote commentary that pre-framed their interest in male homoerotic media as an *addiction*. This biomedical framing of women's use was rarely interrogated by other commenters, and was accepted as a taken-for-granted fact by participants.

I'm in my mid-twenties now and I've been reading fanfiction for what, over 10, 12 years now...At first I just started reading gen fic but then I progressed to reading slash fic and I became so addicted to it...I feel like I am some sort of emotional ***** or something to desire and depend on such fictitious relationships. I've even gone to the point where I've done RPS (Real Person Slash) based on sports players or on musicians specifically and I can't believe I would get to this point where I would be making up these fantasies about real people. I think about my current slash pairing that I am obsessed with constantly and it's so hard for me to concentrate on other things when I am daydreaming about some ridiculous relationship that isn't even real. I feel like when I am in a rut or a depressing point in my life I turn to fanfiction to get that emotional high but I can never get enough, and I am really at the point where it is unhealthy and I need to stop so I can focus on my real life and my career, on meeting real people and re forging my real friendships. I wish I wasn't this kind of person; I am ashamed and embarrassed at the type of person I have become. I feel like slash fanfiction for a straight woman like me lets me experience the imaginary ideal/boyfriend relationship without having to commit or the possibility of being hurt by someone. I know it's gotten to the point where I really need to take a breather and step back from slash fanfiction but I've been addicted so long to this emotional crutch that I don't even know if it's possible or if I even want to stop at this point at all. It is ridiculous and pathetic and laughable how I feel so attached to these TV and film characters – I feel like I know them intimately and that I love them, so much more than the people in my current real-life relationships. (pathotrix – “I am a fanfiction addict,” Experience Project, 2013).

Pathotrix establishes her love of fanfiction as an addiction by invoking a *progressive* addiction narrative. “Gen fic” was her “gateway drug,” and then she advanced through “harder” forms of fanfiction such as slash. Pathotrix finally describes “hitting rock bottom” with the ultimate in

“shameful” behavior – creating her own Real Person Slash¹³ (RPS). Pathotrix frames her use as out-of-control, and as producing psychopathological symptoms such as poor concentration, and neglect of her social relationships and career prospects. She also links her use to depression, and positions it as a form of self-medication.

Pathotrix levels a vicious attack on herself, engaging in shame, self-loathing, and self-negation around her love of slash. She devalues the activity as *inferior to* real-life relationships and sexuality, and mocks herself for feeling emotionally connected to fictional characters (even though fiction’s very goal is to thus engage its consumers). Pathotrix hypothesizes that her use of slash fiction may be a means of avoiding the risks involved with a romantic/sexual relationship – in a sense, enjoying the pleasure and excitement of such a relationship, but without the pitfalls and hardships. Yet the implication is that this wish is inappropriate, even pathetic, and something she has to transcend to become an acceptable person.

Finally, Pathotrix positions her composition of RPS as a reprehensible low – that to surpass the barrier between the phantasmatic slash genre and the *real* connotes a violation. The policing of women’s fantasy in such a way as to prohibit the imagining of real people – even if they are engaging in sexual behaviours they wouldn’t “really” engage in, such as a straight celebrity engaging in gay sex – speaks to a profound barrier in the female imaginary, a sort of self-policing (and other-policing – RPS is one of the most heavily maligned sub-genres of slash,

¹³ Real Person Slash (RPS) is a particularly contested form of slash fiction in which the author places two real people – typically actors, musicians, athletes, or other celebrity figures – in fictional homoerotic/romantic pairings. Opponents of RPS make an argument that the fictional pairing of two *real* individuals is a violation of those people’s privacy, personhood, and chosen sexual identities. What is never considered or mentioned is that the restriction/denigration of RPS is, in effect, an extension of a phantasmatic policing of women that inhibits their ability to fantasize about *real* individuals in general, a circumscription of imaginal terrain that may well reflect an anxiety about fantasizing sexual encounters with people they know “in real life.” The added step of bringing these fantasies “closer to the real,” as seen with RPS, is met with fear, derision, anger, and ridicule, suggesting that RPS poses a substantive threat to heterosexual and patriarchal control of dominant media narratives.

even among other slash authors) that permits women little freedom to author sexual fantasy about those around her.

Other users echoed Pathotrix's invocation of the addiction narrative:

...For the first few months, it was just general fanfiction, but then I immediately got sucked into the slash fanfiction world...I do work and go to school, but I'm reading slash fanfiction every day. If I have a day off, I could literally read it for hours at a time or even just stay home and spend the whole day reading...a few pages of it are always open on the Internet. If anyone requests to use my phone for Internet, I either declare the battery dead or I quickly close the browsers so they don't see anything...I don't tell anyone about my 'addiction' of sorts. It hasn't really interfered with my life, but in a way, it's a big part of it...I don't tell anyone because in a way I'm ashamed of it, but if you think about it, it's like anyone having a hobby they love doing, only the topic isn't quite as accepted. (TypeZero - "I am a fanfiction addict," Experience Project, 2013).

TypeZero mirrors the addiction discourse laid out by Pathotrix's original post, comparing her enjoyment of slash fiction using the same language describing a progression from mild to severe and loss of control. TypeZero describes hiding her use from others because she is "ashamed," and interprets this as further evidence of addiction, even though she also notes that it has had no tangible impact on her functioning or wellbeing. At the end, she attempts to reframe her use by referencing other socially acceptable 'hobbies' – and indeed, replacing TypeZero and Pathotrix's descriptions of reading and writing fanfiction with reading and writing "books," or with "music," "puzzles," "board games," or "watching hockey" would render their behavior analogous to a beloved (and, more importantly, socially accepted) pastime. Framing use as a hobby, or even as a career-related activity for those who author fanfiction (and in some cases, published works as well), would shift the discourse from the pathologized addiction model to one of work-life balance, self-care, health, and wellness. However, the latter discourse appears very difficult for these posters to access. TypeZero identifies the reason women readers' behavior is treated as a shameful addiction – it is the unacceptability of slash fiction itself that qualifies the activity as

pathological, whether through its affiliation with pornography, sexuality, homoeroticism, the *lonely losers* discourse (see further on) or all of those.

Other posters also walked a tightrope between describing the activity as healthy/beneficial, and as unhealthy/pathological, not quite able to confine their own use within the addiction discourse:

Strangely, I do not feel the need to break away from it. I believe that when I'll find something that would capture my attention more strongly, I will give up fanfiction and I will move on...I love fanfiction. I can run away from reality and live my fictional life as I want to. I do know that what I am doing is not healthy for my body and my social life, but honestly, it is healthy for my mind. It has saved my life more than once when I was on the brink of suicide. Anime, manga, fanfiction world is better, there is usually a happy ending. There is love. There is luck. There is caring. There is life. (eriivaa – "I am a fanfiction addict," Experience Project, 2013).

While she takes up some of the discourse of pathology, such as disconnect from reality, detriment to physical health, and interference with social relationships, Erivaa also takes up resistant discourses of health, fantasy, and imagination, constructing fanfiction as an internal playground that bolsters her mental health and hope for the future.

Itsumo adopts the self-pathologizing addiction model, but also highlights the role of social perception in defining her interest in fanfiction:

That's the hardest part saying it aloud. I am nowhere near getting over my addiction but the thing that's helped me from being way too consumed with fanfiction is telling people about it. I'm not talking about posting here where none knows your name or face but your friends and family. Say to them 'sorry (insert name here) I can't hang out right now I am in the middle of this fanfiction' when I said that the first thing my best friend said was 'I'll be there in ten minutes' I ended up hanging out with her instead of reading fanfiction for the next 4 hours. My brother will force me off the computer because he says I'm not doing anything important anyway. What I'm trying to say is that being honest with the people you know will help your situation greatly you will most likely still be reading but you won't be as consumed with your addiction. Oh and I can proudly say I have been reading fanfiction for 6 years. Be proud. (Itsumo – "I am a fanfiction addict," Experience Project, 2013).

While Itsumo exhorts readers to "be proud" of their love of slash fanfiction, and encourages them to share their interest with friends and family, she gives examples of how her family and friends

have responded to this by negating the importance of her interests – for example, her friend dismisses her fanfiction reading as less important than socializing, and her brother considers her use of the computer to read fanfiction to be a lower priority than *his* computer use. While she characterizes this as good from a social perspective (i.e., it forces her to spend more time interacting with real people), the dismissal of her fanfiction use as trivial by her family and friends serves to undermine her interests and desires.

In addition to invoking the addiction model, some users further positioned slash fanfiction use as symptomatic of other individual psychopathologies. Pathotrix and Eriivaa above connected their fanfiction use (both positively and negatively) to depression and suicidality respectively.

CloudEight further connects her use of fanfiction to her Asperger's diagnosis:

Suffering from mild aspergers syndrome I have always had difficulty making friends and personal relationships, so fanfiction gave this new life where I could imagine myself in a world where I wasn't different....I have very little hope in finding someone who can put up with my unusual behavior and lack of empathy, so fanfiction really feels like the only way to have a relationship. (CloudEight – "I am a fanfiction addict," Experience Project, 2013).

While in a sense there is an optimism to CloudEight's narrative – fanfiction has given her a way to connect to fantasy, romance, and sexuality in a way she feels is impossible for her in reality – the fanfiction is implicitly positioned as a "lesser" activity, an inadequate replacement for the real romantic and sexual relationships she finds challenging to pursue because of her difficulties negotiating social relationships. The possibility for fanfiction to constitute its own legitimate role in the exercise of her personal sexuality and desire is unavailable; it always takes a backseat to the absent yet indispensable heterosexual partner.

The women in this section thus construct their use of male homoerotic media as a pathological, drug-like vice that actively interferes with their health, their social and occupational functioning, and most importantly, their ability to attract and keep a (presumably) heterosexual

male partner. The addictions discourse positions fanfiction as antagonistic to healthy (dyadic) relationship development, as an inferior activity, and as a shameful habit tolerable only in moderation (if at all). None of these observations are intended to negate these commenters' freedom to self-identify as an addict, to explore their own discomfort or ambivalence about their behaviour, or to consider seeking help for distress or functional impairment that could result from their use of male homoerotic media. The intention here is to *describe* the functioning of the addictions discourse and popular understanding of the addictions model in framing, constructing, and confining women's use of male homoeroticism in ways which could obscure their ability to understand their own sexuality as a pleasurable, acceptable phenomenon. However, it is worth noting that while popular media reports of internet pornography addiction in women have framed the phenomenon as a social and moral "epidemic," (Carey, 2011; Dubinsky, 2012; Duke, 2010; Renaud, 2011), the scientific "evidence" presented in these articles is sparse, and largely based on clinician testimonials and generalizations from broader studies of the effects of addictive drugs on neurochemistry. Indeed, a large-scale U.S. epidemiological study of pornography consumption among women showed that of the 41% of women reporting pornography consumption, only 2% met criteria for the study's definition of "compulsive use." Given that the prevalence of true pornography addiction appears to be quite rare in women, the ease with which the internet forum participants applied the language and model of addictions to their use of slash fiction is concerning, and suggests that mainstream media discourses on addiction risk and pathology are potentially occluding women's ability to view their consumption of erotic media as healthy or acceptable.

Lonely losers: Infantilizing, derogating, and dismissing. This discursive theme positions interest in male homoerotic media as sign of immaturity, social awkwardness, sexual undesirability, unrequited middle-aged lasciviousness, or as an "early" sexual developmental

interest. This positioning is deployed to (re)prioritize heterosexual monogamy as a paramount expectation for women, functioning to undermine any behaviours or preferences that might interfere with women's position in the heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990a, 2004). The discourse renders women who might prefer or prioritize use of male homoerotic media over "real-life" heterosexual relationships (whether via voluntary choice or lack of available sexual partners) *abject bodies* (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) and only through the acquisition of a male sexual partner may their privilege within the heterosexual matrix be restored (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Potts, 2002). The deployment of this discourse was first seen in the comment that sparked the concept for the present study, made by "Matt" in Jackson and Gilbertson (2009)'s research on media representations of lesbians. In this study, "Matt" stated that he believed women would not be interested in seeing two men kissing "unless they're very very lonely old desperate women" (p. 210). Online commenters invoking the *lonely losers* discourse infantilize, presume advanced age, or otherwise proclaim women users of male homoerotic media as "unfuckable," derogating their sexuality and sexual desirability, and marginalizing their sexual interests as laughable and inconsequential. This marginalization is typically positioned in the service of prioritizing monogamy and heterosexuality.

Throughout high school and my earlier college years, I was exclusively into guy/guy porn – these days, however, I'd say I watch maybe 50% hetero, 20% FFM, 20% MMF, and 10% other randoms on occasion...I thought for me it was because I was really attracted to men (aesthetically and sexually) during adolescence, and hadn't had any sexual experience until college. The change coincided chronologically with my sexual debut. When I started having sex myself, I think I was more capable of empathizing sexually with the female actresses. (serendipitily - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, "Ladies, do you watch gay porn?")

Serendipitily is not openly demeaning toward women users of male homoerotic media, but firmly establishes it as an immature sexual interest, at least in her own case. She hypothesizes that use of the medium coincided with her sexual inexperience, and that once she became (hetero)sexually

active, she began to gravitate toward more heteronormative or hetero-focused erotic media. The tacit implication here is that gay pornography is a safe, voyeuristic medium for sexually inexperienced women who lack the ability to identify with the women depicted in heterosexual pornography. It is notable that serendipitily mentions still being interested in FFM and MMF pornography, which typically contain both same-sex and heterosexual activities – thus, serendipitily may not have abandoned her interest in MM sexuality as she implies, but instead relegated it to a more acceptable context – as a “side dish” in a threesome that also includes heterosexuality. Indeed, perhaps with her “sexual debut” came heterosexual partners with whom sharing her interest in MM pornography was difficult or risky, and for whom she was forced to compromise via inclusion of a heterosexual element in her porn-consumption repertoire, although she does not address this directly.

Other users are far less kind in their characterizations of women who appreciate male homoeroticism:

The basement-dwelling tweenage girls who write fanfic probably love it [gay pornography] the most. I can only get into straight. (anonymous – “How many women are into gay porn?” Data Lounge, 2013).

Anonymous positions women who enjoy homoerotic media as infantile, and as socially and occupationally delayed (i.e., “basement-dwelling”). She emphatically distances herself from these women by proclaiming herself to be only interested in heterosexual eroticism. Several commenters have similarly emphasized the immaturity, sexual naïveté, and presumed social ineptitude of women who consume male homoerotic media:

most ~YAOI FANGIRLS n_____n~ do not understand gay (or...any) sex AT ALL.
seriously most comics i've read follow this format:
seme¹⁴ : oh LET'S AHVE SEX.

¹⁴ Seme = the “top” in the sexual dynamic, typically depicted as hyper-masculine, sexually aggressive, and older or more sexually experienced than the Uke.

uke¹⁵: No0o0o0o0o
seme: YES
uke: noooooo okay.
seme: SEX
uke: IT HURTS SO MUCH. CRY CRY CRY -orgasmu-

it's like, wtf. (nev, "Why the hell do women like Yaoi so much?" Subeta, 2009)

Oh, god. I know. I think yaoi fans are mostly made up of tweens discovering their sexual feelings for the first time ever. I wish they'd do so in a less... disturbing/obsessive way though. :/ (Saddlebred, "Why the hell do women like Yaoi so much?" Subeta, 2009).

To put it simply, those girls are lonely and needs proper reality guidance...
(Ceruleanskydream, "Why do most girls like Yaoi?" Crunchyroll, 2009).

Nev and Saddlebred position Yaoi fans as very young, sexually clueless, and inappropriate (or incorrect) in their explorations of their emerging sexuality and desire. According to Ceruleanskydream, Yaoi aficionados are not only young, but lonely, misguided, and detached from reality, and in need of "guidance" (presumably to be provided by a heterosexual male partner). The assumption is that Yaoi use signals social isolation, lack of an acceptable sex partner, and deficiencies in social and life skills.

Yaoi fan girls are little horny virgins who wants to get laid but cant so they fantasize about it in yaoi anime. (Vanpaia_Naito, "Why do most girls like Yaoi?" Crunchyroll, 2009)

Vanpaia_Naito positions Yaoi fans as immature, oversexed but inexperienced, desiring sexual interactions but unable to obtain them, so Yaoi is a pale substitute for the *real* sexual experience they presumably want. Rather than framing this as a normative part of sexual self-development for women, Vanpaia_Naito's contempt for these young women users is palpable.

It's usually just fat ugly weeaboo¹⁶ girls. (anonymous, "Why do most girls like Yaoi?" Crunchyroll, 2009).

¹⁵ Uke = the "bottom" in the sexual dynamic, usually portrayed as effeminate, sensitive, smaller, younger, and sexually resistant/inexperienced. Uke are often presumed to represent a reflection or "avatar" for the woman reader to identify with.

¹⁶ According to Urban Dictionary's (arguably) *least* offensive definition, a *weeaboo* is "a non-Japanese person who basically denounces their own culture and calls themselves Japanese. They try to learn Japanese through the anime

According to Anonymous, only fat, ugly women are forced to content themselves with Yaoi. Anonymous implies that fat, ugly women are not capable of engaging in romantic or sexual relationships due to their failure to meet heteronormative standards of beauty and sexual objectification, and they must thus be ostracized and forced to settle for Yaoi as a sexual outlet.

All the sexually frustrated women who don't have a real sex life. (anonymous – “How many women are into gay porn?” Data Lounge, 2013).

This anonymous user presumes that the only women who would be interested in male homoeroticism are women who are not actively engaged in “real” (hetero)sexuality. Like those before it, this statement invokes misogynistic, heteronormative, and coital imperative discourses. It marginalizes women’s solitary sexual activity and sexual fantasy, and others women who do not have (male) partners, all in service of privileging partnered (hetero)sexual relationships. The user further implies that women lacking a sexual partner are pitiable and sexually deprived. This statement leaves no room for women to achieve a satisfying sexuality for themselves on an individual basis, and presumes that women’s sexuality can only be fully realized through (hetero)sexual dyadic exchanges.

Hormonal teenagers and middle aged fraus/spinsters. (anonymous – “How many women are into gay porn?” Data Lounge, 2013).

Similar to those above, this anonymous user presumes that users are women with greater sexual appetites but who lack satisfying sexual partnerships because they are too young (teenagers) or too old (middle-aged) to be viable sex partners for men. Again, these women are positioned as lonely, laughable, and pitiable – male homoerotic media is an inadequate consolation for the

they watch and usually end up pronouncing it wrong and looking like a complete idiot.” (BeautiFool, Urban Dictionary, 2009).

absence of the attentions of a heterosexual male partner, which is required for true sexual fulfillment and acceptable womanhood.

Yaoi isn't exactly your mom's anime. If it is, *that's creepy*. (Tempest's Downpour - "Why women want Yaoi," 91.8 The Fan, 2010).

Tempest's Downpour introduces another conundrum; they position Yaoi as the province of young, possibly progressive or edgy people, and not the lame, frumpy, unexciting reading material associated with maternal womanhood. Thus, while some construct male homoerotic media as the province of desperate, pitiable old women, others ridicule and negate the sexuality of older women completely, leaving older users of male homoerotic media with no normative subject position to inhabit. While young women often lack partners simply because they are *too* young (a condition remedied over time), older women are presumed to be alone and partnerless (or partnered and sexless) because they have lost their sexual desirability, and are thus banished to the abject realm (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) of the "unfuckable" woman – the woman who, having no remaining value to men as an aesthetic sexual object, has no sexual value or existence *at all*.

However, not everyone is incapable of acknowledging and appreciating older women's sexuality, or their interest in male homoerotic media:

'We call them porn mums,' says Jake Jaxson, founder and director of an indie gay adult film company. 'They post comments, come to our events and connect with us on Twitter. It's great.' (Welsh, The Telegraph, 2014).

Jake Jaxson thus welcomes the participation of older women as consumers of gay pornography, as they constitute an active, enthusiastic, and lucrative fan base for his work. While perhaps not the most altruistic of reasons for accepting women's interest in gay pornography, the acceptance of women viewers by the creators of gay pornography opens up space for women to participate in

the shaping of the consumer culture, as well as more comfortable subject positions for women consumers.

Some women have also challenged the *lonely losers* discourse by pointing out the logical failures of this presumptive construction of women users:

...it's interesting how the two polar opposite conceptions about fanfic – that it's written by clueless tween fangirls *or* by loveless older women – both manage to co-exist as blatantly misogynistic stereotypes, isn't it? (Baker-Whitelaw & Romano, "A guide to fanfiction for people who can't stop getting it wrong," 2014).

Baker-Whitelaw and Romano note the contradiction between the construction of users (in this case, authors) of fanfiction as simultaneously sexually inexperienced and over-experienced; as sexually immature and sexually past one's prime, and they identify the culprit in this double-think as misogyny. Women's sexuality for its own sake (as well as the creative works that might emerge from it) is no sexuality at all; women's sexuality that cannot be placed in service of male interests is carelessly discarded, often in ways that involve clear failures in logic.

I hate when people generalize that all girls that like yaoi don't have boyfriends, there's plenty of guys that have girlfriends who like hentai and yuri that I know and girls with boyfriends that are huge fujoshi¹⁷. Damn, my friend's older sister one who draws man on man has a fiance, and he probably finds its funny and weird but who cares no? I personally wouldn't care if a guy liked yuri and hentai I think the characters are cute, I let the man enjoys his loli if he wants he lets me enjoy my shota! (lame-desu - "Why do girls like Yaoi?" My Anime List, 2011)

Lame-desu points out that the *lonely losers* discourse is easily waylaid by the existence of numerous women who thwart the stereotype. Her observation reminds the reader that many users of Yaoi, slash fiction, and gay pornography do indeed have romantic partners, and yet continue to enjoy male homoeroticism as part of their personal (and perhaps partnered) sexual interests.

¹⁷ **Fujoshi** (腐女子, lit. "spoiled girl") is a reclaimed Japanese term for female fans of manga, anime and novels that feature romantic relationships between men. - Wikipedia

Lame-desu thus contests the idea that partnered sexuality eclipses or replaces interest in solitary sexual fantasies and activities (e.g. see Fahs & Frank, 2014 on women and masturbation) though in a sense, she is also invoking heteronormative discourse to legitimize these activities – in other words, Yaoi *can't* be just for losers/lonely people because lots of non-losers with boyfriends like it, too. Apart from invoking the very heteronormative imperative that produces the stereotype, Lame-desu is left without a way to challenge the stigma against readers of Yaoi that doesn't fall back on/reinforce the same heteronormative values.

(Hetero)monogamy imperative: Acceptable if not crossing 'real' categories. The *lonely losers* discourse points to an important qualifier operating in the construction of “acceptable” use of male homoerotic media for women: it must always remain firmly subordinate to the role of heterosexual, monogamous partnerships. This is further evidence of how women's sexuality is circumscribed within a postfeminist contract; that is, limited freedom to pursue her sexual interest is provided so long as heterosexual male interests are ultimately served, and not disrupted (Butler, 2013; Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013). Poppet, below, demonstrates this discursive strategy in her response to a question posed on Yahoo! Answers (2012). The original poster was querying whether her use of gay pornography was normal, and revealed fears of sharing her secret interest with her husband due to his expressed homophobic aversion to gay sex:

...You can share this tid bit of info with your husband but do not expect him to enjoy these videos with you. Most likely this will be a solo enjoyment thing for you. I would like to throw up a note of caution. You said, "I can only get aroused by watching gay porn." Is that true? Are you saying that playing around with your husband doesn't get you aroused? If so then you need to get rid of the gay porn and refocus yourself on your husband. (Poppet - Yahoo! Answers, February 21, 2012)

Poppet makes it clear that the OP is *not* permitted to have expectations that her husband will participate in her enjoyment of gay porn. Poppet isolates the OP both in relation to others, and within her own marriage. Poppet then contains the OP's interest in male homoeroticism as only

appropriate for solitary enjoyment. She further claims that if the OP's sexual interest in gay pornography is occurring alongside an absence of arousal for her husband, then the OP must abandon her own sexual needs and interests, and instead emphasize the needs and interests of her husband. Implicit in this exhortation is a privileging of heteronormative, mononormative, household, imperatives at the cost of the OP's individual sexual interests and enjoyment (Hollway, 1984; Potts, 2002). Here we see clear evidence of a postfeminist sexual contract (Gill, 2008, 2009; McRobbie, 2007) – the OP's sexual adventurousness and the development of her own sexual interests and identity are permitted, *only* if these do not interfere with her husband's sexual identity, his access to her body, or the integrity of their marriage.

In a similar (albeit more sympathetic) vein is a response from Blue Sky:

Just as long as this doesn't effect your marriage then I think your fine to keep it a secret, so enjoy yourself and have fun. Its too bad that your husband has to react like that but its also understandable. (Blue Sky - Yahoo! Answers, February 21, 2012)

Like Poppet, Blue Sky upholds heterosexual, monogamy, and coital imperatives by privileging the stability of the OP's marriage over and above the OP's individual sexual interests. However, so long as the OP can preserve this stability, Blue Sky offers a conditionally permissive subject position for the OP, encouraging her to enjoy her individual pursuit in secret. Blue Sky acknowledges that it would be nice if the OP's husband were open to her interests, but also characterizes his homophobic response to male homoeroticism as “understandable.” Thus, heterosexual men are unquestioningly entitled to their homophobic squeamishness.

In a response to a very similar original post on psychforums.com, AlexJ positions an original poster's gay porn use as firmly in the deviant/pathological realm:

Everyone has their own personal fetish or a personal something that turns them on. Is it right? not necessarily. Once you start watching things that are quite obscene and immoral, that's a wakeup call that you might start developing unhealthy, unwanted sexual behaviors. You need to understand that these things usually is disgusting to begin but since you keep engaging into watching porn, it becomes a habit and pleasant. I would

suggest you getting into a healthy sexuality program so you can ‘normalize’ sex. Things are bound to get worse if you don’t do anything about it. (AlexJ – Yahoo! Answers, February 21, 2012).

Here, AlexJ constructs the original poster’s viewing of gay pornography to become aroused as a “fetish” that will lead to “unhealthy, unwanted sexual behaviours.” AlexJ also invokes the earlier-discussed addictions discourse to contain the OP’s behaviour, and to threaten worsening outcomes, stigma, and misfortune if she fails to seek professional help. They position gay pornography as “obscene,” “immoral,” and “disgusting,” and that the OP has only been able to develop an affinity for the practice through habit and conditioning. AlexJ urges her toward a “healthy,” “normal” sexuality, which is presumably dyadic (hetero)sex. AlexJ thus positions the poster’s sexuality as deviant, and then offers her a more desirable, normative subject position through expert guidance (Gupta, 2011; Gupta & Cacchione, 2013), linking sexual realignment with health and a return to a heteronormative focus.

Conversely, some contributions to these conversations contest patriarchal and homophobic containment of women’s (and men’s) sexuality:

It wouldn't hurt to tell him, unless he's an open homophobe; in which case you might reconsider your marriage. I bet he's more open to it than you might think. Most guys are closet bi. At least a tiny bit. (Daniel J – Yahoo! Answers, February 21, 2012)

Daniel J.’s claim that most men are “closet bi” stands in sharp contrast with mainstream psychological and popular constructions of men as universally having category-specific, binary sexual orientations (Bailey, 2009; Chivers et al., 2004; Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Chivers, 2010). He goes on to subvert heteronormative sexual discourses by suggesting to the original poster that her husband might be interested in her pornography; and he goes as far as saying that if he’s an “open homophobe,” he might not be a desirable partner. In doing so, Daniel J. is repositioning the original poster’s issue as one of relational mismatch/incompatibility, rather than a problem with the original poster’s sexual interests.

Evidence of a boundary drawn between women's (private, personal) use of male homoerotic media and their (presumed, privileged) heterosexual relationship is frequently seen throughout the online discussions. Sometimes, this boundary is further marked by *biphobic* and *polyphobic* discourses:

It isn't something I'd want to pursue in my real sex life (I shudder, in a bad way, to think of my boyfriend hooking up with another guy). (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com)

Once in a conversation with a straight female this came up, that she liked gay porn. When I asked if she would be comfortable with her boyfriend having sex with another man, she would have nothing to do with it. Out of curiosity I questioned her further, but she had nothing good to say about bisexuality and was vehement that she would never have anything to do with any man who had sex with other men. I guess it's OK in the abstract, but not in real life." (bicoastaltoo - "Is it normal for a straight girl to watch gay (male) porn? Reddit, r/sex, 2014).

For Clark-Flory, and for bicoastaltoo's friend, male homoeroticism is acceptable as a fantasy pastime, but the application of this homoeroticism to a male partner veers into "unacceptable" territory, invoking biphobic discourses that deny both the women and the men access to the possibility of MMF polysexuality or polyamory. Both quotes invoke discourses of disavowal and disgust. The boundary is thus drawn – male homoeroticism is acceptable in fantasy, but cannot be allowed to subvert hetero and mononormative sexuality norms by crossing over into the *real*.

Evidence that women's circumscribed use of the media is employed in service of men's sexual gratification is also present in many of the comments:

I'll ask her (wife), down the road, about the gay porn angle. While not into it myself, I would be willing to watch it with her, if it would get her hot. (Tristan - "Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?" Straightdope, 2007).

Mine likes it. It doesn't repulse me but it doesn't do anything for me either - but I benefit as it gets her going so I'm all for it! (drphillips, m, US – Zity, 2013)

Here we see women's consumption placed firmly in service of men's pleasure. Tristan and drphillips appear to be encouraging ~~grant permission~~ their women partners to watch gay pornography not simply because the women enjoy it or are entitled to their own sexuality, but

because it also facilitates the men's sexual pleasure and access to their partners' bodies ("but I benefit...so I'm all for it!"). Thus, Tristan and drphillips' encouragement of their women partner's individual interests appear motivated by the expectation that they will, ultimately, be the primary beneficiaries of their partners' increased sexual desire.

Women commenters were also found to leverage men's sexual access to women to establish women's use of male homoerotic media as acceptable:

Guys love watching two, three, or more women together, so why does it bother guys if women watch guys?? Just remember, some women are just as visual and horny as you are...maybe more ☺ You should be glad a woman is into porn...;) (opento it – "My wife watches male gay porn and masturbates, hipforums.com, 2013).

By opento it's reasoning, men should be grateful for the sexual arousal arising from women's use of gay pornography, with an insinuation that it will work in their favor if women's desire is escalated. This provides more evidence of the operation of the postfeminist contract – women's sexual desire is conditionally permitted and encouraged so long as it serves to further men's ability to access more sexually receptive women partners.

One forum conversation was devoted entirely to an original post from a male user who identified his wife as a user of gay male pornography. He sought advice due to his fear that his wife would ask him to engage in gay sex himself:

So..my wife is now into Male Gay Porn..on her computer..iPad..iPhone..anywhere she goes.... It's cool with me..but I guess she is going to suggest something kinky that I perform for her in person..lets talk. (confused emoticon) (PBC51 guest – "My wife watches male gay porn and masturbates, hipforums.com, 2013).

PBC51 guest presumes that his wife's use of gay pornography implies that she is going to get ideas from the pornography to try out on him. He does not elaborate on what he thinks this might be, but as he mentions something "I perform for her in person," the implication is that his wife will request that he engage in sexual activity with another male, though it is also possible that he is concerned that she will wish to have penetrative sex with him. His confused emoticon and

generally reluctant tone (as well as his turning to a forum for advice about it) suggest that he is not enthusiastic about either possibility.

Reverand JC calls PBC51 guest out on the vagueness of his fear:

So what are you afraid of her requesting of you? Do you think it will be like that time you asked her to go down on another woman? It would seem to me that her masturbating to gay porn is a fairly normal thing. (Reverand JC – “My wife watches male gay porn and masturbates, hipforums.com, 2013).

Reverand JC takes a reproachful tone with PBC51 guest, and invokes the *turnabout is fair play* justification (discussed in detail further on) to chastise him for fearing her request for something “kinky.” Reverand JC presumes (or potentially knows from discussion elsewhere on the forum) that PBC51 guest has at some point requested that his wife engage in same-sex relations with another woman for his enjoyment. Reverand JC ultimately positions PBC51 guest’s wife’s behaviour as normal. He evades directly addressing the appropriateness of the wife’s request, but does implicitly suggest that if PBC51 guest has made similar demands, then the wife’s request would be reasonable recompense.

Vanilla Gorilla points out the potential for power imbalance/disruption of patriarchal privilege that comes with women’s consumption of certain forms of pornographic media:

...with gay porn, biggest market share are gals that hide that from their hubbies, and they hide it from their hubbies cos its threatening to the hubby...especially stuff like that reverse gang bang thing, 1 girl 5 guys doing each other but the girl is in charge, that’s for the girls not us, that feminine power shit. (Vanilla Gorilla – “My wife watches male gay porn and masturbates, hipforums.com, 2013).

Vanilla Gorilla highlights how pornographic subcategories such as gay pornography and reverse gangbang threaten to displace the presumptive heterosexual male dominance that mainstream pornography typically reinforces. Thus, a woman user is expected to conceal her use of these forms of pornography from her husband/male partner, in order to protect his masculinity and dominant role in the relationship – lest it be destabilized by “that feminine power shit.” Women

are conditionally permitted to access feminine power in fantasy or solitary sexual isolation, but must avoid at all costs allowing feminine power to bleed into and impact a *real* heterosexual relationship. Thus, she is permitted a phantasmatic *illusion* of sexual power and dominance, but it must never manifest as *corporeal* power, authority, or dominance over her husband.

Joetony69 takes a direct, bracing approach which may or may not be intended to mock the OP:

She wants to see you sucking cock and getting fucked in the ass. Go for it. (joetony69 – “My wife watches male gay porn and masturbates, hipforums.com, 2013).

Joetony69 voices the OP’s unspoken fear that his wife will expect him to participate in sexual activities with another man. Joetony69 then encourages the OP to “go for it,” an unusual extension of permission for male same-sex exploration and experimentation. Such a suggestion hints at sexual fluidity in men (Chivers, 2010; Diamond, 2009) a discourse typically missing from these conversations due to homophobic and biphobic containment of masculine (hetero)sexuality, as well as mainstream sexological research denying the existence of sexual flexibility in men (Bailey, 2009; Rieger, Chivers, & Bailey, 2005).

Sally fields, below, suggests that the wife’s use of gay pornography is motivated by her wanting to send a subtle message to her husband regarding his sexual inadequacy:

Think maybe your wifes trying to tell you something, and maybe there shes likes big men which your not maybe or she would like a 3 some. (sally fields – “My wife watches male gay porn and masturbates, hipforums.com, 2013).

By suggesting that the OP’s wife may be turning to gay pornography due to her dissatisfaction with her husband’s penis size, or perhaps his performance, sally fields again positions women’s use of gay pornography as an instrument in service of heterosexual goals (in this case, communication of dissatisfaction within a relationship) though their suggestion that his wife might enjoy a threesome also subverts the monogamy imperative.

Chelsea13 from eNotAlone describes her use of gay pornography in the absence of a heterosexual relationship, and (like many others) is seeking reassurance that her interest is normal and acceptable:

...I'm 100% sure I'm straight. While it's hot for guys to watch two girls make out, I don't think I've heard about girls getting turned on watching two guys make out. I sort of view guys as 'objects', the way that men traditionally view women. I'm 100% straight. In real life I have issues with finding boyfriends. But at night I just enjoy watching porn and getting it off. Anyone has similar experience? (Chelsea13 – “I’m female, into male gay porn,” eNotAlone, 2009).

Most of the posters reassured Chelsea13 that her use of gay porn is normal, and nothing to be concerned about, and several (believing her to be very young due to the “13” in her alias) counsel her not to rush into a relationship. However, one response, the last in the thread, appears to reassert the heterosexual imperative:

Just be careful not to become so engrossed in the male-male fantasy that you forget YOU are desirable to men, in most cases. (YakasJourney – “I’m female, into male gay porn,” eNotAlone, 2009).

YakasJourney constructs Chelsea13’s solitary sexual interests as secondary to her pursuit of a heterosexual partnership. He cautions her against becoming too sexually self-sufficient, and thus making herself unavailable to male sexual partners. While YakasJourney may be speaking from concern for her emotional health, or need for companionship, they nonetheless invoke a heterosexual imperative (through use of a caution “Just be careful...”) to ensure that Chelsea13’s sexuality remain available for partnered heterosex despite her “acceptable” interest in gay pornography.

There are several comments that invoked the *lonely losers* discourse and the shaming of fangirls to police the public visibility of women (particularly young women) with preferences for male homoeroticism. This shaming plays an important function in preserving the salience of heteronormative, patriarchal sexual interests:

i'm fine with yaoi fangirls and crap but it's not really something you display in public. it's like, keep that crap to yourself, but if you find someone who shares the same interest then talk about it all you want, just not when people who are uncomfortable about it are around. (livotomy, "Why the hell do women like Yaoi so much?" Subeta, 2009)

Livotomy is paradoxically claiming to be tolerant of Yaoi fangirls, but also repeatedly refers to their interests as "crap," and echoes the false "tolerance" of homophobic individuals who claim that they are accepting of LGBTQ individuals as long as their sexual behaviours and preferences remain hidden -- a common mechanism of policing and erasing queer bodies and desires. The efforts to ridicule and suppress young women who openly display their enthusiasm for Yaoi did not end with one comment; the theme was returned to repeatedly throughout the entire thread.

Yaoi is usually pretty Loving annoying, but nowhere near as annoying, and scary, as the damn fantards.

Seriously, don't walk around with your yaoi porn gallery and "YAOI FO SHIZZLE KAWAII DESU" shirts and not expect to be a virgin for life. (ecstasy, "Why the hell do women like Yaoi so much?" Subeta, 2009)

Ecstasy opines that a woman who openly reveals her interest in Yaoi becomes a sexual untouchable. They label her a "fantard," a portmanteau of "fan" and "retard," the latter employed to frame the enthusiastic woman user as mentally deficient (and/or developmentally delayed). Ecstasy presents the Yaoi fangirl as doomed to virginhood forever because her sexual interests are so off-putting that they preclude "normative" heterosexual relationships. This constructed-as-abject woman's open interest in Yaoi threatens her heterosexual availability, and thus it must be suppressed. Notably, virginhood is casually positioned as a worst-case-scenario for women; it is something to be avoided at all costs, something that severs one from the rest of respectable society.

The condemnation of young women who openly voice and display their passion for Yaoi and male homoeroticism is repeated by others below:

I generally avoid anyone who is outwardly otaku¹⁸. Or furry¹⁹. Those generally fall into the same category (OOPS, THERE I GO, GENERALIZING AGAIN)

I agree olga, that's why I mentioned that I think it's a little creepy, haha. Or when people talk about it in public, loudly, where others can hear. When I took Japanese in high school, there were these two girls in my class who talked about Draco/Harry **the entire class**. I just about died. (finch, "Why the hell do women like Yaoi so much?" Subeta, 2009)

For finch, young women who openly display interest in MM sexual pairings (or enthusiasm for fandoms, manga, or other sexual "fetishes") are "creepy" and to be avoided. They emphasize that when young women speak of these things *loudly* – *i.e. unabashedly* – it is particularly unacceptable, as "others can hear." Thus, women's sexual desires and voices are most appropriately kept silenced and hidden, particularly when they vary from the accepted heteronorm:

Quoted material from a previous post, now deleted:

There's a girl that goes to my school with a "I HEART YAOI" messenger bag. What I don't get is why people feel that its so important to tell everyone about their weird fetishes.

LOL. Oh, man. That's creepy.

I think people have the right to express themselves like that, but at the same time, I do find it kinda creepy. Like, why would you *want* everyone to know that.

If I saw someone walking around with an 'I love yoi' bag, I'd definitely avoid them.

(Saddlebred, "Why the hell do women like Yaoi so much?" Subeta, 2009)

Saddlebred, like luvotomy above, is caught in a discursive bind; while they wish to be viewed as tolerant and liberal, proclaiming support for women's "right" to free sexual expression, they also attempt to suppress that sexual expression by framing a woman carrying an "I HEART YAOI" messenger bag as frightening and laughable. Thus, women who "express themselves" are both a threat and a joke, their "weirdness" to be derided and avoided for fear of contamination.

¹⁸ Otaku = "a Japanese term for people with obsessive interests, commonly the anime and manga fandom...Otaku may be used as a perjorative." Wikipedia.

¹⁹ Furry = nickname for individuals who enjoy engaging in sexual play while dressed as animals.

It is notable that the term “creepy” is repeated several times throughout the thread with reference to women whose interests in male homoeroticism have bled from quiet reading behind closed doors into social and public life. “Creepy” is suggestive of anxiety and a perception of sexual threat. Indeed, these women are dangerous; their loudly articulated sexual desires are perceived as unruly, aggressive, and a threat to feminine and heterosexual norms.

Further preserving the “real” – policing the boundary between private fantasy and public/family life. Part of the process of establishing discursive normality and regulation of women’s sexuality involved discussion of *where* and *when* women’s use of male homoeroticism ought to occur, and how public women should “appropriately” be with their use of the media. There appears to be something of a consensus that women’s use should remain private, solitary, and confined, and should not intrude into their family relationships, friendships, or the public sphere.

For instance, some commenters affirmed the acceptability and even desirability of sexual exploration and the breakdown of heteronorms in male homoerotic media, but then made statements otherwise designed to regulate or control the woman user and her behaviour. A good example, below, is from K, responding to a post on Yahoo! Answers made by a 13-year-old girl who was nervous and looking for advice because her mother had caught her looking at Yaoi on her laptop. While K affirms the acceptability of her interest in Yaoi, they also give the young woman some tips on how to manage her behaviour and personal space to make her interest appear more acceptable to her mother:

...I would make it more of a habit to do what she says when she says it, instead of fighting her over it, and if you can, try to preempt her requests. That way, by being so responsible and considerate, she will not think that your interest in Yaoi comes from being bad in some way. Also, make it a habit to put away your books, and close out of skype when you have to do something else. That's just generally a smart idea, because it will keep your privacy. As for your room, just keep it clean, and neat, and leave the door ajar when you aren't there. That way, she knows the place is clean and ventilated, and that you aren't

trying to hide anything. You can find places to put private things, like a storage box, or a shoebox. Most parents try to respect that as you come in to adulthood, you'll want some parts of your life to be private from them. (K - "13 year old girl caught reading Yaoi manga," Yahoo! Answers, 2011).

By K's reasoning, if the OP is able to anticipate her mother's instructions and wishes, is compliant and agreeable, and keeps her room neat and tidy, she will be less likely to be seen as reading Yaoi because she is defiant. Here we see an inducement into a postfeminist contract of sorts; the OP is offered a position of conditional freedom to pursue her sexual interests, but within circumscribed limits: she must also demonstrate herself to be a compliant and dutiful daughter, and keep her use of Yaoi "appropriately" private. Conversely, if she fails to do these things, her Yaoi may be taken as a sign that she is derelict in her duties and thus more subject to accusations of deviancy.

Additional online comments further elaborate on the acceptability of public versus private consumption. While private use is generally viewed with more tolerance, public disclosure of one's interests is seen as hazardous:

Yaoi is targeted towards straight women and it's made by straight women. It's not weird, but don't go screaming that you like yaoi since there are a lot of homophobic assholes around. (Konatsu - "Is it wrong for a straight girl to like reading Yaoi manga?" Yahoo! Answers, 2012).

Here, Konatsu notes that while Yaoi is marketed directly to, and created by, straight women, public acknowledgment of use is nonetheless hazardous due to homophobia. Thus, the work is confined within a private sphere, not to be made visible for fear of being victimized. While Konatsu's warning appears grounded in concern for the users' safety, it nonetheless carries an imperative to women that restricts their freedom to be "out" as users of male homoeroticism.

Discursive strategies to confine women's agentic, desiring sexuality to the phantasmatic solitary go beyond the (presumed hetero)dyad or her peers (online or IRL), and can involve other members of the woman's family as well:

My father has collected erotic art all my life. I even make some of the pieces in his collection now. Playboy, R rated and even as we got older X rated movies were not hidden from us. It's not like we sat down as a family and watched porn, but my brother and I knew it was around. So when my Dad learned I read yaoi my response was "why are you surprised?". I know my Dad has a strong preference for ff. He found out I read yaoi when he was visiting me and a shipment of manga arrived. Mr Nosy couldn't help but look in the box after I had opened it. Next thing I hear is him asking my husband "can't you stop her from reading this crap?". My husband who knows what I read and doesn't care said "it's none of my business what she reads.". He then reminded my Dad that both of them watch ff porn... (empress - "Why do women like Yaoi?" Raythe Reign, 2012)

In the post above, Empress's father, despite having raised her in (an implied) sex-positive environment, and despite having crossed the usual boundary between parents and children regarding the sharing of his own erotic preferences and activities, is disturbed by learning that his daughter is a consumer of Yaoi. Her father's response is a good example of efforts to regulate women's sexuality within the family sphere. Instead of speaking with Empress, he approaches her *husband* to interrogate her reading material. Not only does he dismiss her Yaoi as "crap," but he directly exhorts her husband to exert control over her sexuality ("can't you stop her?"). Her husband defends her individuality and freedom to choose her own pastimes, and invokes the *turnabout is fair play* discourse in her support. The implicit rule here is that, in stopping Empress from reading Yaoi, he would be inviting criticism of his own preference for FF pornography, and her father's as well. While this, again, gives a surface appearance of a shift to a more permissive stance on women's sexuality and freedom, there is an undercurrent of a postfeminist contractual exchange. That is, both the husband's and the father's tolerance of Empress' reading materials is effectively placed in service of maintaining their own access to pornographic materials.

The repeated attempts to contain women's engagement with male homoeroticism to a solitary, private, hidden pursuit separate from their relationships, from their families, and from the public reveals the fissure their desire creates in the dominant heterosexual and gendered power matrices (Butler, 1990a; 2004). While some containment strategies borrow from

discourses of homophobia that serve to contain and pathologize gay men's sexuality, it is apparent that in this context, a primary preoccupation with women's interest in male homoeroticism concerns what their desire signifies in terms of power balance. Women's independent use of the media demonstrates the existence of a "female gaze" (Mulvey, 1975) and their desire to dominate, control, choose, and act as only men are discursively permitted to do (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Potts, 2002).

Resistance: Women's direct articulation of wishes to transcend from the phantasmatic to the real. Despite the numerous discursive strategies used to contain women's desire for male homoeroticism and the viewing of appealing male bodies to a hidden, solitary fantasy realm, a number of women nonetheless voiced their desire to cross that boundary, to move their desire from the phantasmal to the corporeal:

It's better to do it than watch it. Try it sometime. (poppy vox - Yahoo! Answers, June 30, 2008).

Though not entirely clear, Poppy Vox appears to be advocating participation in a real-life sexual encounter involving two men. The following commenter is more clearly identifiable as a woman who has participated as an observer of such an encounter:

You go girl. Watching M2M is much more interesting than all girl or M2F. Having seen it in RL, I'd have to say it's incredibly erotic. (mommabagz, f, US – Zity, 2013)

Mommabagz is open in her encouragement (and appreciation) of voyeuristic participation in *real-life* male homoeroticism. Other women who have not experienced this have also voiced their desire to do so. Notably, most instances of women's disclosure of desire to participate in watching (or engaging with) two men having sex were found on the Zity forum, which is a site for self-identified kink practitioners. This forum offers a safe space for the discussion of women's diverse desires, space which is missing from most other online communities.

I would also enjoy just being a voyeur on the sidelines watching two guys together in a RL situation. (Equeen, f, US – Zity, 2013)

Equeen describes wishing to watch two men engaging in sexual relations in *real life*, without participating herself. While her use of “just” could potentially reflect her positioning of voyeurism lower on a hierarchy of desirable sexual acts than, say, partnered acts, Equeen does not communicate a desire to engage in such partnered sexuality with two men. Other women commenters, however, do:

...I wish my boyfriend was open-minded enough to share my bed with another man. My lover Mike digs the idea but Jim is not. He’s such a party pooper. I would love to be in a polyamorous triad with two men, bisexual men would be nice but as long as each were comfortable with each other would be fine... (egirlky (f) – Zity, Feb 7th, 2014, “Do women watch gay porn?”)

I have always had the fantasy of being with two men and although I have been in threesomes with two men, the men were always straight and for the most part, did not touch each other. I’d love to be with two bisexual men who were open for anything. Be still my heart. (egirlky, f, US – Zity, 2013).

Egirlky eludes to her present and past participation in group and polyamorous sexuality, but notes that while she has had multiple simultaneous male partners, and even threesomes with two men, she has yet to participate in a threesome with two men who were sexually involved with each other. Egirlky is clear in her desire to pursue such a sexual experience, and even indicates that she would enjoy a polyamorous romantic partnership with two bisexual men. Egirlky thus articulates desires that challenge a number of constraining discourses, including heteronormativity, monosexuality, have/hold, biphobia/bisexual risk, and feminine sexual passivity (Hollway, 1984; Potts, 2002). However, it may be inferred that Egirlky does not have the option of actually pursuing such desires, as she appears to be constrained by the wishes of her boyfriend/primary partner, Jim. Thus, the desires of a primary male partner appear to hold a privileged position over and above Egirlky’s desires (although Egirlky may be actively seeking such experiences with other consenting partners, and simply has yet to find the right men).

It is one of my fantasies to see two men go at it and kind of wedge myself in between. If only I could picksies and choosies those 2 gentlemen...hmmm (germangoddess, f, UK – Zity, 2013).

Germangoddess' fantasy is playful and agentic – to impose herself between two men of her own choosing, arranger and conductor of her very own three-part symphony. Yet “if only” establishes that germangoddess does not feel it is possible for her to enact this fantasy. Her barriers are likely multiple – heteronormativity, mononormativity, homophobia, and patriarchal masculine territoriality and dominance may all serve to diminish her ability to arrange such a scenario in real life – as well as, more generally, a lack of active consent from the prospective men.

Misty is a bit more demure in her wish to join in with two attractive gay men engaging in oral sex:

i love hot gay men blowing each other. sure would like to join them (misty, Topix Pikeville Kentucky subforum, 2013).

Misty's framing the desire as a wish rather than a goal similarly speaks to the multiple barriers to women's freedom to engage in – or even *discuss* engaging in – corporeal sexual interactions involving herself as well as two gay men. Understandably, one barrier would be that gay men may well not wish to include a woman in their sexual interaction; however, the absence of women's agentic language in seeking out such interactions (wish vs. plan/seek) points to discursive and imaginal barriers as well as corporeal/logistical ones.

ColorDeprived below ventures where only Egiriky (above) has, and expresses a wish to see her own partner engaging in sexual relations with another man. She thus articulates a desire that transcends the frantically policed boundary between fantasy and the privileged heteronormative *real*:

I also wished my SO would make out with a guy and let me watch/let me make out with both. (ColorDeprived, AskReddit, “Do Straight Girls Like Male Gay Porn?” 2014)

ColorDeprived, however, is cautious in the presentation of her desire. She (like many of the other women) frames it as a wish rather than a *want* – to wish connotes wistful but perhaps unattainable fantasy, while want connotes command or demand. Further, ColorDeprived speaks of her partner “letting” her watch and “letting” her make out with the other man, firmly establishing the primacy of her partner’s dominance within the imagined sexual exchange. Thus, even in articulating a fantasy that ColorDeprived may not anticipate as possible, she locates herself in a passive, receptive role, with her partner deciding whether to fulfill and permit her fantasy. ColorDeprived’s language speaks to the powerful influence of dominant gender discourse, particularly the expectation of male sexual dominance and female sexual passivity.

Thus, even as women subvert dominant patriarchal, heterosexist, monogamist, and gender-normative discourse in order to articulate desires that are seldom permitted space in our culture, these discourses always intrude to buttress the sexual *status quo*, and to privilege the sexual desires and dominance of heterosexual men.

Part Three: Constructing Motivations

In this section I address the last question: querying “why” women are interested in male homoerotic media. Even when the question(s) posed are interrogating the existence of the phenomenon, the articles and conversations quickly move into exploration of the reasons or motivations for women’s use of these media. Unpacking *why* appears to be a burning question in the minds of online interlocutors:

Why do women watch gay porn? like i just don't get it. (Original Post – Yahoo! Answers, 12 Apr 2013)

Heterosexual men in particular appear to be mystified by the phenomenon, perhaps because homophobic social conditioning prevents them from contemplating male homoeroticism as a desirable or pleasing representation of human sexuality. Alternatively, their non-understanding is

performatively (hetero)masculine (Butler, 2004); that is, by claiming *not* to understand, straight-identified men forestall any potential threat to their masculinity and heterosexuality.

Nonetheless, women have been equally invested in exploring their own – and others’ – motivations for their appreciation of male homoeroticism, and extensive online commentary and the occasional literary academic work or dissertation (Bauer, 2013; Jamison, 2013; Penley, 1997) have sought to unearth and itemize the *reasons* for women’s interest in male homoerotic media:

One of the most interesting things that I’ve discovered was that many of these women weren’t even sure *why* they write m/m slash — that it’s been something that’s plagued their minds ever since they first became obsessed with it. One gay woman even said that she was intensely aroused by m/m fiction, the thought of beautiful men’s bodies in the throes of passion, but she herself couldn’t stomach the idea of even getting to second base with a man unless she made herself very drunk or stoned first.

So what was the appeal of men for women who normally don’t want anything to do with men in their own sexual relationships? What about straight women who didn’t even want an identifying female character in their stories to pair with their males? (Pittman – “The joy of slash,” The High Hat, 2015).

One of the sources of confusion for people attempting to parse out the motivations for women’s use of gay pornography appears to be the idea that women should not be interested in sexual activities that they could not, or would not, themselves, be physically involved in. This reveals an assumption about how women’s sexuality may differ from men’s sexuality; while men are acknowledged to derive erotic value from visual stimuli, from the act of looking, women, with their discursively constructed sexual passivity, are presumed to have a sexuality which is receptive, tactile, *responsive* to things being *done to* them. It is thus expected that women seek to *identify with* a female proxy or avatar when engaging with erotica, someone to imaginably insert themselves into in order to vicariously receive the acts being *done to* the female. In the case of women – regardless of sexual orientation – there is no woman present in gay pornography with whom to identify, no place for a female body in the exchange. How then, many wonder, can a woman possibly benefit sexually from such an exchange? What is there for the women to *receive*,

to *empathize with*? Who is *telling her what her body is to do*? Where is her body in this exchange between two (or more) men?

For Yaoi fangirls, why would you fantasize about that? I mean, why think about guys who will never be interested in you? (Kipcha - “Why do girls like Yaoi?” My Anime List, 2011)

Kipcha voices an opinion that hints at another critical imaginal barrier for women, a policing of sexuality that reaches beyond the corporeal to circumscribe even the female imaginary. For Kipcha, to fantasize about the impossible, about men who would never return her affection, is a pointless exercise because it could never lead to *real* partnered heterosex. Thus, Kipcha positions the role of female fantasy as a limited dimension tied to a functional purpose: to rehearse for what could hopefully become *real*. This perspective is concordant with mainstream psychological theories about the evolutionary/adaptive value of fantasy – reduced to its pragmatic functions, imagination’s purpose is solely to ensure survival by increasing our chances of successful mating (Salmon & Symons, 2004). Permission to imagine the improbable, the impossible, just for its own sake, or for women’s own pleasure, is dismissed implicitly by Kipcha as a waste of time and energy. Thus, again, women’s fantasies as a source of solitary pleasure and enjoyment are dismissed as an inconsequential waste of time; only fantasies that focus on the attainment of a *real* heterosexual male partner have value.

The explanatory double standard. An instructive point raised by many online commenters is that there is little interrogation of men’s interest in female-female eroticism; it is typically constructed as a “known fact.” I had initially approached this work with the assumption that it was women’s interest that was neglected/understudied, as all topics regarding women’s sexuality tend to be understudied in sexological research (Fahs, 2011; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). One commenter, Gia, pointed out a similar finding in response to commenters who were highlighting the relative lack of inquiry into men’s interest in lesbian sex:

Actually, a quick search for "why do men like lesbian porn" turns up plenty of results – I believe there are still more men in psychological research than women. (gia - "Why girls like Yaoi: A biological side," Anime Vice, 2009).

However, at least in the realm of internet discourse, it appears that the *opposite* may be true, or at least, that the phenomenon of men's consumption of female homoeroticism has become situated – perhaps due to the influence of both sexological science and popularized sexuality discourses – as a normative element of masculine sexuality. While men's interest in female homoeroticism is accepted as a common-sense element of healthy masculinity that needs no explaining, women's interest in male homoeroticism is repeatedly interrogated.

According to Bauer (2013), and in contradiction to Gia's internet search above, there is almost no literature or direct attempt to explicate why men are aroused by female homoeroticism; it is never even questioned. But women's parallel predilection, while treated as rare, unique, or exotic, is paradoxically receiving increasing attention academically and otherwise – thus, the interrogation may be another means of artificially constructing female sexuality as exotic and different than the axiomatic male baseline. Indeed, as some commenters have pointed out, men themselves do not appear to suffer the same levels of agonizing self-doubt and soul-searching as do women when considering their use of female homoerotic media:

I don't know how many men worry themselves or think they may be lesbian because they like girl on girl stuff. (Black, Ask Dot, thedotspot.net, 2013)

While the question of why *straight men* like f/f (lesbian) entertainment is dismissed as a simple matter of randy boys liking hot girls, the question of why women like yaoi gets a lot more focus. People are paying far more attention to the reasons, as though there is a deep meaning behind the trend. (admin - "Why do women like Yaoi?" Raythe Reign, 2012).

It's amazing that I found so many articles devoted to why women like yaoi, and none about why men like yuri. It's just culturally acceptable for men to think two women together are attractive, while it is mind-boggling for women to feel the same way about the opposite gender. (Tempest's Downpour - "Why women want Yaoi," 91.8 The Fan, 2010).

Woman liking Yaoi – complex mathematical formula. Men liking Yuri – world’s most simple chemistry. (EagleEyes - “Why women want Yaoi,” 91.8 The Fan, 2010).

Why do people find it so strange? Honestly, I don't see a bunch of articles on "Why do men like chicks making out with each other?" I think it's just a sign that women's sexuality still can't be freely and equally expressed without people having to examine their psychology with the implication that something odd must be happening, and most of them do it in the most amateur sense possible. (Sunflower - “Why girls like Yaoi: A biological side,” Anime Vice, 2009).

The commenters above reveal an important function of the exhaustive classification and dissection of women’s interest in gay porn: it buttresses a larger discourse about the complexity/unfathomability of women and their sexuality. This facet of women’s socially constituted gender archetype has been previously identified by other critical theorists (Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004); while men’s psychological and sexual needs are straightforward and uncomplicated, women’s are convoluted, impossible, and alien (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013a, 2013b; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). The quote below illustrates the operation of that “unfathomable women” discourse around the question of women’s use of gay porn:

Reading these threads where women are incredibly open about things us men otherwise wouldn’t know confuses me. Just as I feel I understand women, something like this comes along. (Milosmilk, AskReddit, “Do Straight Girls Like Male Gay Porn?”, 2014)

Here, Milosmilk positions women’s Reddit discussion of their use of gay pornography as more honest and forthcoming than discussions women would have in real life. He characterizes this glimpse into the psychological workings of women as perplexing. These women (and the diverse desires they discuss in the thread) are resistant to the easy, clean categorization that would comfort Milosmilk and make “women” easy to comprehend. Milosmilk is invoking the “from two different worlds” discourse upon which *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* (Gray, 1992) is predicated, reifying this sharp split between the constructed binary genders and the relative sensibilities (and intelligibility) of each (Potts, 2002). This came up elsewhere as well:

I'll say me and my friend have been wondering about this too (We're both teenage males, so naturally we have no idea what the opposite sex thinks). (anonick – "Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?" Straightdope, 2007).

Anonick and his friend assume that it is normal for men their age to be mystified regarding what women think, perhaps not realizing that "women's" frustrating lack of generality is due to their insistence on being individual humans with idiosyncratic interests, personalities, and motives.

dude... that is one of the many parts of the mystery called WOMEN..... a black holes mystery can be solved but a woman's brain is beyond reason and reality.... but i'm not saying that all women that like yaoi are sickos that needs serious counseling.... or maybe i am.... (bujujutko, M, "Why do most girls like Yaoi?" Crunchyroll, 2008).

According to Bujujutko, women and their sexual desires are more incomprehensible than astrophysics, existing in a realm where the comforting laws of science and logic do not apply. This framing of women as outside rationalism, as something "other" than "real," and even something that renders them insane ("sickos") is not new and is part of a discursive strategy through which masculinity is constituted as the rational, logical, human "normal" against which all else is measured (and found lacking) (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Potts, 2002). Thus, the work of continually querying and re-querying women's interest in male homoerotic media may, in fact, be the work of establishing women as the incomprehensible, dehumanized constitutive outside of the human baseline/normal: masculinity (Butler, 1990a, 2004).

Dark Twin, a fanfiction reader and author, problematized the hetero-presumptive framing of the question of "why" in an article exploring and interrogating the various motivations posed for "women's" interest in homoerotic media from a personal perspective:

To conclude...the whole question 'why do het women like slash' is wrong altogether. Slash is read and enjoyed by lesbian women, gay men, and bisexuals of both genders, too, so whether you like it or not it is actually completely unrelated to your own gender and sexual orientation...what I've come to understand as I was working my way through this is: I don't like m/m slash although I'm a heterosexual woman, I like it because I am. (Dark Twin – "Why do I like slash? Plain answers from a het woman," The Fanfic Symposium, 2015).

Dark Twin seeks to simultaneously expand and abolish the query regarding “why het women like slash” by challenging the premise as a heterosexually-confined one, by expanding the phenomenon across the spectrum of sexuality and gender, and by insisting that each woman’s rationale for liking – or NOT liking – male homoeroticism is entirely personal. Yet while Dark Twin is ultimately dissatisfied with a number of the reasons offered by academics and fans alike regarding the “why’s” of women’s interest in male homoerotic media, and while she expresses some pique about the query itself, it is notable that she still devotes pages and pages of writing to unpacking the personal motivations for her interest in slash. This sort of self-interrogation is an extreme example of the process occurring in the online discussions of women’s use of gay pornography, slash fanfiction, and Yaoi.

Some commenters have attempted to move beyond explanation, asserting that interest in male homoerotic media requires no interrogation or lengthy justification:

... we at Raythe Reign have another answer... one that might free you of society’s pressure to explain yourself. Our response is: *who the hell cares?*

We think there’s far too much introspection going on. For us, there is no great mystery. It’s entertainment! If you like men, romance, and stories, what’s not to like about well-written yaoi? You don’t need to justify reading about two men together any more than you need to justify a love of pizza or horror movies... we believe that reading fiction should never be a “guilty pleasure.” What you choose to read for entertainment should not come with any pressure to rationalize, explain, or otherwise apologize for it.

Why do women like yaoi? *Because they like it.* End of story. (admin - “Why do women like Yaoi,” Raythe Reign, 2012)

YES finally I was getting tired of explaining why I love yaoi even to myself! I love yaoi because...I just do! It’s so good and yummy and I absolutely adore it. (LADYaoi - “Why do women like Yaoi,” Raythe Reign, 2012)

Although the LADYaoi and the Admin at Raythe Reign, like Dark Twin, assert that interest in male homoeroticism needs no explanation, it is nonetheless significant that the Admin’s assertion is embedded in a larger article that offers several explanations – this is a pattern that recurs in several commentaries, where women deride the need to explain their use, while continuing to

offer explanations. This is indicative of the double-bind women face: they are compelled to provide justification, even when they do not believe justification ought to be necessary.

The pressure on women to interrogate their interest may be externally compelled as well as internally driven. Many of the original posters of Q&A or Anime forums who pose the “why” inquiry are men. Similarly:

I’ve been asked this by my boyfriend a few times, and it was always in an open-minded sense, because I think he just wants a fundamental understanding of it. So while a “who the hell cares?” answer fits for most people, for some people who just genuinely want to know, without being judgmental, I think some explaining isn’t a bad thing :3” (Nataruma - “ “Why do women like Yaoi,” Raythe Reign, 2012)

Here, Nataruma frames her boyfriend’s repeated queries as innocent and rooted in a non-judgmental sort of curiosity. Yet the very repetition of his questioning suggests an exhortation on his part that Nataruma continually justify or rationalize her interest in Yaoi.

Despite the common framing of women’s use of male homoerotic media as new, many members of the slash fanfiction and Yaoi fan communities are well-acquainted with exhaustive interrogations of their motives. While many of these women are justifiably tired of this process, many nonetheless continue to engage with it, suggesting that the medium is a site of potential instability around gender and sexuality that needs continual shoring up to stabilize and “fix” the phenomenon into something intelligible and non-threatening to the *status quo*. As a result, there has been a proliferation of hypotheses attempting to explicate why women would be interested in watching a sexual exchange that would physically exclude them (and thus ought to be of little interest).

Itemizing “reasons” for women’s enjoyment of male homoerotic media. One of the most common discursive acts present in the online texts involved diverse efforts to generate a series of speculative hypotheses regarding why women would be interested in male homoerotic media. Following from the notion that women’s sexuality is complex and unfathomable

compared to the straightforward, uncomplicated sexuality of men, online commenters generated myriad justifications to explicate the phenomenon, and to situate it within the discursive *status quo* of women's sexuality.

...everyone else seems to have to perform amateur analysis on what makes us tick, which irritates the hell out of me. If I want psychoanalysis I'll go hire a professional. (Nerx - "Why girls like Yaoi: A biological side," Anime Vice, 2009).

I think a better question would be, why would women not like yaoi. It has cute boys, romance, passion, forbidden love. (dagas - "Why girls like Yaoi: A biological side," Anime Vice, 2009).

I guess this ties into 'why' this is happening. who knows. (Black, Ask Dot, thedotspot.net, 2013).

Several of the single-author ezine and blog articles adopt the exercise of itemizing reasons *why* women use male homoerotic media. The writer, often (but not always) a woman positioning herself as something of an expert on women's sexuality (and in some cases, queer sexuality and culture), provides an outline of the phenomenon, a position on its normalcy, and then an itemized list of the "reasons" women are interested in gay pornography (e.g. Black, Ask Dot, thedotspot.net, 2013; Archuletta, Out Front Online, 2013). Salmon and Symons' (2004) theoretical article on slash fiction, as well as McCutcheon and Bishop (2015), Neville (2015), and Ramsay (2017)'s primary research articles comprise part of this interrogatory body of work as well.

Another article referenced in the previous section, written by Dark Twin of The Fanfic Symposium (www.trickster.org, accessed March 2015) adopts a different approach to the question of why, first setting out that "asking the right question" is critical. Dark Twin notes that generalizations of "why women enjoy gay pornography" or "why heterosexual women love slash fiction" obscure the diversities and myriad personal motivations intrinsic to each user, and she

instead chooses to explore “why I like slash.” (Dark Twin - “Why do I like slash...Plain answers from a het woman,” Trickster.org, 2015). She elaborates:

As far as answers go, I didn’t expect there to be only one. I also didn’t expect all the various answers out there to apply to me. What I did discover though is that while reading different people’s attempts at answering the question has been very inspiring and helpful, ultimately the only person that can answer why I like slash is myself. (Dark Twin - “Why do I like slash...Plain answers from a het woman,” Trickster.org, 2015).

Like Dark Twin, many women commenters pull from their own experiences when responding to queries about *why* women use male homoerotic media. Gwen B.’s response on Yahoo! Answers (2009) to the question “Do girls like gay porn” is a good illustration of an inventory of explanations regarding women’s motivations for watching gay pornography and other male homoerotic media:

Yup, I’m pretty crazy about it. I prefer it over most lesbian and straight porn. For me, it’s very hot for a variety of reasons:

- *The men are more attractive and come in more varieties (twinks, bears, musclemen, etc.) than they do in straight porn.

- *The orgasms are real (versus so many fake female ones). Gay male porn is just so passionate.

- *It’s still kind of taboo in some way, and that adds to its hotness.

- *It doesn’t have the annoying, often violent, male chauvinistic aspect that straight porn has, where women’s pleasure isn’t given a thought and men treat the ladies like pieces of garbage existing for their pleasure only, to be used and abused. Unless specifically S/M, gay porn scenes are beautifully egalitarian.

- *Two are better than one! It’s simple- one guy is hot, two guys, even better!

- *It’s very exotic. I know about straight sex, and lesbian sex, but few women get invited into the mysterious realm of gay male sex. It’s that sort of voyeurism into another world that makes gay porn so hot for me and many women, and lesbian porn for straight men.

From what I can tell, a lot of women, particularly younger women, are following this trend. Yaoi (Japanese gay male comics and cartoons) is targeted to be sold at straight women, and they are the primary consumers. The writers of slash fan fiction (stories that pair male characters from popular books, TV shows, and movies, often in pornographic couplings) are overwhelmingly straight young (13-25) girls, which is a gigantic phenomenon. More and more erotic romance stories feature male-male intimacy alone with their hero-heroine lovestory (see Emma Holly). And faghags have always known the erotic component of gay or bisexual men.

So yeah, I’d say it’s a growing trend. Of course, there are lots of women who don’t find it arousing, and I doubt it’ll ever get to the point where women are as crazy about gay porn

as men are about lesbian porn, but we're making a dent. (Gwen B. – Yahoo! Answers, 2009).

Gwen B. proposes a number of hypotheses for her own – and by extension, other women's – enjoyment of gay pornography. Many of these theories (and more) appear over and again in the online commentary articles and forum discussions. The explanatory themes can be arranged loosely into two broad discursive categories. The first category includes explanations which prop up, or seek to preserve, patriarchal masculinity, heterosexism, and the various gendered, sexual, and relational performative norms that service these systems. For these explanations, there is suggestion from the commentary that the beneficiaries of women's use of gay pornography are men – whether via improvement of their partner's sexual receptivity, sexual skill, and adventurousness; validation of their own pornography consumption and habits; or validation of the objectifying and oppressive power of the dominating, desiring gaze.

The second category contains explanations that suggest the media serve as a disruptive, subversive “escape hatch” through which women can pursue alternatives to the patriarchal, heterosexual systems that attempt to “fix” their sexuality – examples that Butler (1997) would term *insurrectionary speech*. While there is always tension between dominant and subversive forces within each explanation or theme, the primary determinant of whether the dominant or the disruptive system is best served is whether the explanation ultimately benefits women (or queer men, or trans folx)'s sexual subjectivities and desires, or whether there is an evident primary or secondary privileging of cis-het men and *their* sexual subjectivities and desires.

Explanations that stabilize the status quo.

Turnabout is fair play. As seen in some of the comments in the section on Normalcy earlier on in the analysis, one of the primary ways the “normality” of women's gay porn use is established by commenters is using a *turnabout is fair play* argument. This argument submits

that, because men are universally recognized via commonsense dominant discourse to find FF pornography arousing, and because this preference is never queried or challenged as unacceptable or unusual, it forms the benchmark against which women's gay pornography use is legitimated.

“Same reason men watch lesbian porn.” (Naylah – Yahoo! Answers, April 12, 2013)

“they get the same as some straight guys get from lesbian porn (Bdb37 - Yahoo! Answers, April 12, 2013)

well, as a guy, ive watched lesbian porn. and so have all my friends. and almost every other man with the internet. im assuming it goes both ways (cyb04rgninja – Yahoo! Answers, 2011)

Naylah, Bdb37, and cyb04rgninja each sum up the phenomenon by equating it with men's enjoyment of “lesbian” pornography. For these commenters, the question of nuance is absent – the phenomenon is the same for women as it is for men.

It's funny this question even has to be asked in the first place, given that men's interest in pseudo-lesbian porn is taken as so obvious as to be unworthy of explanation. Guys are visual creatures, they love the female form, two are better than one — what's the question, right? It's true that research has found men to be more visual, but that isn't to say that women as a whole are *not* (or that some women are not just as visually oriented as some men, if not more so). (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com)

Clark-Flory notes the absence of academic or mainstream querying around men's interest in FF pornography, and explains this absence by citing their interest as ubiquitous, common-sense, and *natural*. Clark-Flory challenges (yet simultaneously reiterates) the mainstream biopsychological knowledge claim that men are more aroused by visual stimuli, while women are more aroused by text, or by contextual cues. Clark-Flory points out that mean variability between genders does not preclude the potential for overlap or variation within genders; nor does it imply that women are not aroused by visual stimuli. Thus, while he gives some thought to the possibility that the phenomena are not directly comparable, he nonetheless draws a logical parallel between the two.

Other commenters have framed the issue in terms of equity or fairness, a set of arguments that appear magnanimous and inclusive on the surface. However, this welcoming stance is

typically bounded within a postfeminist contract (Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Gill, 2009; McRobbie, 2007) around sexual enjoyment and playful experimentation, a subject position that does *not* entail limitless sexual permissions and freedoms. That is, women are extended a conditional sexual freedom insofar as the encouraged playfulness and experimentation is placed in the service of a masculine sexual agenda.

Sure! Guys like to watch lesbian porn, so why shouldn't women be allowed to watch gay porn? (Maya – Yahoo! Answers, 2011).

Maya's use of the term "allowed" is interesting, as it points to a process of negotiating permission which is occurring through these discussions. While men's use of FF pornography is uninterrogated and natural, women's use of gay porn must be scrutinized before social permission and acceptability is granted, and men are presumably part of that dialogue.

Yes. Guy's watch Lesbian porn don't they? No Double Standards here. (? – Yahoo! Answers, 2011).

I don't find it strange at all--I'm a firm believer in equal-opportunity offense, and if, as you say, I enjoy girl-on-girl action then it follows that I have zero right to criticize girls enjoying guy-on-guy action. There's nothing weird about it whether you're male or female. (OneGreatTurtle - "Why girls like Yaoi: A biological side," Anime Vice, 2009)

? and OneGreatTurtle raise the issue of double-standards in social regulation of sexual preferences. They align women's use of gay pornography with themes of fairness and equal rights which borrow from feminist and postfeminist ideologies. While the focus on equality speaks to feminist interests, the tones of permissiveness and even encouragement meander into postfeminist notions of ideal women's sexuality – adventurous, "up-for-it," and sassy (Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Gill, 2009; McRobbie, 2007). Further, OneGreatTurtle's suggestion that he has relinquished the "right" to criticize women's sexuality only because of his own engagement in a parallel behavior touches implicitly on an assumed male role in determining whether or not any

particular aspect of women's sexuality is *condoned* using men's sexuality as a base reference (Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

Scott from Sexpressed.com, on the other hand, had his doubts about the two media categories being automatically equivalent, and argues that while the overwhelming majority of FF pornography is designed to suit heterosexual men's sexual enjoyment, gay pornography is not similarly tailored to women viewers:

It's real easy to bring up the double-standard, too, i.e. that men watch "lesbian" porn and no one bats an eye so why should it be weird for girls to do the same for their gender preference? However, that doesn't really get to the root of the situation. 99.9% of girl-on-girl scenes are performed by women who also have sex with men, either off-camera or on, which means that it's very easy for men to fantasize that the women they are watching engage in "lesbian" sex would, in fact, have sex with them right after they were done with their vagina-licking. Not so much with gay male porn. Sure, there are plenty of "gay for pay" men in gay porn, but most of the men you'll see performing gay sex scenes are 100% totally into men and would never fuck you. So while it's definitely a double-standard to say "Men watching girls do it is fine but women watching guys do it is not," it's not exactly applicable to say that both genders are doing the same thing, because they're not. (Scott, Sexpressed.com, 2013)

Scott thus separates the issue of equity and fairness from that of equivalence or "sameness," and suggests that women's motivations for enjoying gay pornography should not be presumed to phenomenologically mirror men's interest in a form of pornography (FF) which is engineered to titillate them.

Finally, Grey below points out that men and women alike are being stereotyped in these conversations, and raises the observation that within-group sexual preferences vary widely. Indeed, a recent large scale meta-analysis provided strong evidence that within-group variability *exceeds* between-group variability in studies examining binary gender differences (Petersen & Hyde, 2011).

...there are still some men who just dont like Yuri, and some girls who just dont like Yaoi. (grey - "Why women want Yaoi," 91.8 The Fan, 2010)

What is most notable about the *turnabout is fair play* discourse is the repeated, reflexive leveraging of male behaviour as the lens through which women's *normality* is examined, interrogated, and established (or not). This practice has been historically common in sexological research and continues to be an issue in the study of sexuality (Butler, 1990a; Fahs, 2011; Foucault, 1978; McClelland, 2014; Potts, 2002). The notion of women (or non-males more broadly) being understood within their own cohort, separate from comparison with men – or conversely of all humans beings considered together irrespective of gender identification, is conspicuously absent.

Hyperstraight hypothesis. Contrary to the bullying commentary examined earlier on, wherein commenters cited women's use of gay pornography as evidence of lesbianism or sexual deviancy, commenters invoking the *hyperstraight hypothesis* argue that women's interest in gay porn is evidence of being *really* straight:

Cause women like men. Two men awesome. Just like two chicks awesome (Hello – Yahoo! Answers, April 12, 2013)

‘As one female fan put it: “One penis is good, two even better,” he explains. ‘They fancy men, they’re turned on by men and so they’re even more turned on by men with men – it’s like “man squared.”’ (gay fiction author James Lear, interviewed in metrowebukmetro – Metro UK, Oct 14, 2008)

By this logic, if a woman enjoys the process of erotic looking for one man, then looking at *two* must confer an added effect due to simple mathematics. In addition to the argument that “two are better than one,” the hyperstraight hypothesis has a clear homophobic element:

It's basically the idea of 'if one person of the type I'm attracted to is hot, then two of them is even hotter!' Plus if you're not attracted to your own gender you may not want to see them naked and having sex. (2702 – “Is it normal for a straight girl to watch gay (male) porn?” Reddit, r/sex, 2014)

Yes, when I watch porn, I don't want any boobs in it. I'm extra straight, it seems, women doesn't do anything for me. I wish there was gay porn for women like the lesbian porn for men. Gay porn is made for gay men, and some is okay, but there is a lot of bad to sort

through to find anything I like. (anonymous - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, “Ladies, do you watch gay porn?”)

Both Commenter 2702 and Anonymous mention that preference for gay pornography may be motivated by women’s wish to avoid viewing other women’s bodies. By extension, then, gay pornography may be used to signify “extra straightness,” as Anonymous put it. Indeed it would seem that the *hyperstraight hypothesis* serves a similar function for men who consume FF pornography, as a preference for FF pornography could be taken as proof of how straight they are (and that their arousal when watching pornography was not in any way connected to the body or actions of a man). This raises the possibility that the *hyperstraight hypothesis* is partially deployed with the purpose of stabilizing the discursive heteronormality of men’s interest in FF pornographic media, and by extension, women consumers are granted permission to borrow from this heteronormative credibility.

Internalized misogyny. One of the more unsettling interpretations of women’s motivations for interest in male homoerotic media (particularly slash fiction and Yaoi) is the idea that the readers are unfavorably inclined to the inclusion of women in the sexual and romantic materials they consume. These rationales variously implicate homophobia, internalized misogyny, immaturity, sexual jealousy, and insecurity as elements of women’s distaste for women characters in erotic media, and in media in general. As seen in the *hyperstraight hypothesis* above, homophobia and internalized misogyny are evident in descriptions of reactions to women’s bodies, too:

When I started watching porn, I started with gay men porn for the simple reason that as a straight girl, seeing a zoom over a pussy would just make me go "ewwww". :D (Liloute - “Do you think Yaoi manga can influence one’s sexuality?” My Anime List, 2012).

Liloute frames her disgusted response to naked vulvas as a consequence of heterosexuality, implying homophobia (or, at least, sexual lack of interest in women) as explanations for her

distaste for heterosexual porn. However, her discomfort may also be an extension of misogynistic historical representations of the vagina as disgusting, dirty, shameful, and pathological (Blackledge, 2003). Many women continue to experience avoidance of, and dysphoria concerning, the appearance of their own genitals (Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011) and this discomfort may extend to visual representations of other women's genitalia as well. Thus, internalized misogyny would interfere with sexual enjoyment of women's bodies in erotic media, and gay pornography would provide a space where women need not confront this discomfort.

Further examination of this issue suggests something beyond *internalized* misogyny that makes the sexual representation of women unsatisfying.

Ever since I started read and watching yaoi, I've began to hate female characters.
(hihara_lacorda - "Is liking Yaoi manga bad for you?" My Anime List, 2010)

Hihara_lacorda gives no reason for her hatred of female characters, but identifies that she "began" to feel this way when she was exposed to Yaoi. This suggests that her distaste for women in media was not present before her exposure to Yaoi. Perhaps something about the representation of women in Yaoi and anime in general might be responsible for hihara_lacorda's reaction.

most of the time in shoujo mangas, the female lead is whiny and annoying. In yaoi manga, even if the uke [aka the "bottom"?] is tsundere²⁰/whiny, sometimes we still find it cute for some reason ^^.³ (lakers - "Why girls read Yaoi/Shonen Ai manga," Japan Guide, 2011).

Lakers reveals a double-standard in her comment about why she prefers an absence of women in her manga. She notes that the same characteristics she finds irritating and off-putting in women are endearing when displayed by men. Lakers does not appear to understand why this might be

²⁰ a [Japanese](#) term for a character development process that describes a person who is initially cold and even hostile towards another person before gradually showing a warmer side over time. The word is derived from the terms *tsun tsun* (ツンツン), meaning to turn away in disgust, and *dere dere* (デレデレ) meaning to become 'lovey dovey' (Wikipedia).

the case, but there is something *different* about the depiction of these characteristics in a male character that renders them more acceptable. This sentiment is echoed by other commenters:

Anime male characters are usually much better than the annoying female ones. (Sam - "Why girls read Yaoi/Shonen Ai manga," Japan Guide, 2011).

Sam's comment suggests an inequity in the representation or conception of male versus female characters in anime. Thus, the onus may be partly on the artists and their reproduction of dissatisfying gender stereotypes or tropes in their works:

I think the problem isn't so much with yaoi as with *bad* yaoi. You know the type, in which any female character is turned into some kind of demon, or more probably is non-existent (which in itself opens up a problematic can of societal worms). I just don't read the ones filled with misogyny any more... (elisegrey - "Is liking Yaoi manga bad for you?" My Anime List, 2010).

Elisegrey points the finger at Yaoi for failing to include women characters that are well-rounded or interesting enough to engage readers. She identifies misogyny as a problem with the genre, and indicates that even the absence of women may signify a rejection of feminine representation by women authors and readers alike. Other commenters have noted and problematized this erasure of women characters as well:

So many young girls in fandom are eager to erase fictional women, and to justify it by setting impossibly high standards for female characters. Does this come from internal anxiety about their own identities? Probably. But it's still distressing. (lyn - "A brief history of slash," The Toast, 2013).

Lyn raises the argument that internalized misogyny is evident in the readers via the perfectionistic standards to which they hold women characters relative to men. This argument is supported by statements such as Lakers' above, who noted she was far more tolerant of "whining" and "tsundere" behaviours in male versus female characters. However, while there indeed may be an element of lowered tolerance for negative qualities when they appear in female-identified characters, this may not be so much a reflection of misogyny but of fatigue with

the notion that these qualities *are* feminine, or that they are exclusively confined to women.

There is some suggestion of this fatigue in the comments below:

I just don't like the annoying clingy girls who always get kidnapped which unfortunately in anime seems to be around 90 percent of them. (Abbyrose - "Is liking Yaoi manga bad for you?" My Anime List, 2010)

Abbyrose is not necessarily inclined to dislike women characters, but she articulates frustration with the repetitive depiction of women as irritating, emotionally needy, helpless, and vulnerable, which she characterizes as nearly ubiquitous in anime. Snazzle further expands on this line of reasoning:

To be honest I've never liked shoujo²¹ much anyway, and that was before I started obsessing over reading yaoi. I don't hate female characters in general, since there are some awesome ones out there, but I just hate the way shoujo mangakas²² portray (most of) them. Weak, spineless, cry easily, forever needing to be saved by their knight in shining armour. Plus, I don't know how many mangas I have seen which have 'this is the year I get a boyfriend!'. No, just no. Unfortunately the mangakas have also started to veer into trying to make women more 'assertive' but tend to just end up with 'mega bitch' which isn't any more enjoyable to read. (snazzle - "Is liking Yaoi manga bad for you?" My Anime List, 2010)

Snazzle's comments counter the idea that women are rejecting women characters, but argues that they are, instead, rejecting the *unsatisfying* women characters which are ubiquitous in popular media. Snazzle is tired of women characters who are presented as hyperbolic representations of the negative characteristics associated with the feminine: weakness, emotionality, fragility, dependence, lack of assertiveness – and by contrast, the depiction of women deviating from those characteristics as evil, demonic shrews.

²¹ Shōjo, shojo, or **shoujo** manga (少女漫画 shōjo manga) is manga aimed at a teenage female target-demographic readership. The name romanizes the Japanese 少女 (shōjo), literally 'young woman' (Wikipedia).

²² Mangaka is the Japanese word for manga artist. Outside Japan, manga usually refers to a Japanese comic book, and mangaka refers to the author of the manga, who is usually Japanese (Wikipedia).


Jealousy: Insecure women need sexual fantasy alternatives. Some discussions of women's motivation for seeking out male homoerotic media were underpinned by a presumption that women consumers – particularly of slash and Yaoi – are jealous of other women, and do not like the idea of even *fictional* competition for objects of their affection. This argument often co-occurs with the *lonely losers* discourse, and with a general claim about the women's sexual inadequacy. There was evidence of both men and women commenters making this assumption about Yaoi fangirls:

“Because we don't like seeing other girls with guys.” (guash - “Why do girls like Yaoi?” My Anime List, 2011)

Guash's statement can be read one of two ways. The first speaks to internalized homophobic distaste (or internalized body shame) for the depiction of women's bodies in pornography. Both phenomena were elaborated earlier on. The second reading speaks to possessiveness – a sense of wishing to lay territorial claim to a male object's sexuality, and to preclude competition from other women. This heterosexist presumption of territoriality does not appear to recognize same-sex partnerships as a legitimate “threat,” thus minimizing the salience of these relationships relative to heterosexual pairings.

There is also a tendency to presume sexual immaturity, inexperience, and/or insecurity in women who use male homoerotic media due to jealousy regarding the presence of other women:

because they don't want their bishie²³ males to be taken away by another female. MAKING them gay is a good way to deter any other female from getting their grubby hands on them. Most females will probably deny this probably because it admits they're insecure seeing other males getting together with females when they are still lonely and single. So its more a subconscious thing. (panda_general - “Why do girls like Yaoi?” My Anime List, 2011)

²³ Short form of the term *bishonen*, “***Bishōnen*** (美少年, also transliterated  *bishounen*) is a Japanese term literally meaning “beautiful youth (boy)” and describes an aesthetic that can be found in disparate areas in East Asia: a young man whose beauty (and sexual appeal) transcends the boundary of gender or sexual orientation (Wikipedia).

My theory: young teenage girls want guys and can't have them, and therefore do not want to picture these unobtainable men with other, more desirable women, so they'd rather see them with other attractive guys. (mirry, "Why the hell do women like Yaoi so much?" Subeta, 2009)

Panda_general and mirry both deliver a theory of Yaoi interest as stemming from (usually young) women's sexual inadequacy or insecurity. This is reminiscent of the concept of "alpha" versus "beta" males popularized by the online pick-up-artist and men's rights activist groups (Hodge, 2018). The "alpha" is the dominant, confident (typically cishet white) male conferred with the most status and power in this worldview via his "success" in the heterosexual matrix and capitalist marketplace; he has the most attractive partners, the most money, the most freedom. "Beta" males are those who have been "denied" this patriarchal power birthright (presumably, in the eyes of men's rights activists, through the operation of feminism, civil rights, and other forms of power and wealth redistribution), who must content themselves with "mediocre" women or pornography due to their inadequate prestige (Hodge, 2018). In this matrix (also see Butler, 1990a and Potts, 2002), women hold value and privilege solely through their utility to men as status symbols or objects of desire – thus, a "beta" female would be one lacking this capital, and is thus be presumed to also lack a male partner from whom to derive vicarious privilege. It is implied that a woman who reads Yaoi is a "beta" female and can only *fantasize* about keeping fictional male characters for herself by making them gay and thus not likely to be "stolen" by more desirable women. Panda_general suggests this is the only way the Yaoi reader can "have" a man, even in her own mind. Thus, the jealousy hypothesis quickly aligns itself with the *lonely losers* discourse. Women are argued to favor Yaoi and slash because they are unable to form heterosexual relationships with desirable men and are too insecure to tolerate other women doing so. The idea that heterosexual relationships may not be *desired* by the Yaoi or slash reader is never given consideration.

Postfeminist self-improvement. A strong postfeminist self-improvement theme was evident in a number of the online articles and discussion threads, whereby women's use of male homoerotic media is legitimized through its utility as a self-education and training tool for heterosexual women wishing to learn new sexual tricks and techniques to please men. This is another way women's use of the medium is normalized by emphasizing how *men* might benefit from it.

'I think the more gay porn you watch, the more you understand about male sexuality,' said my dear friend Annie Sugar. 'Mostly because men are never really featured in heterosexual porn. Heterosexual porn is often garbage.' (Archuletta, Out Front Magazine, 2013).

Annie Sugar's point in Archuletta's article rings true for frustrated feminist sex researchers and sex educators who have repeatedly noted that women's access to adequate sexual education and resources remains limited compared to men's (Fine & McClelland, 2006), and that heterosexual pornography is no better with regard to representing men's (or women's!) sexuality with any modicum of accuracy (Gurevich et al., 2017). What then, is a good postfeminist to do if she wants to progress beyond reading articles in Cosmopolitan to hone her sexpertise and better "please her man?" Watching gay pornography is argued to be a uniquely valuable source of instruction. Several discussants touched on the idea that women are sexually clueless, and lacking in understanding knowledge of what makes sex exciting, fun, or creative:

Maybe they watch to get tips on how to REALLY pleasure a guy because they don't know what the hell they are doing. (anonymous, Realjock, gay forums, 2011)

[erotica author Kristi Hancock] also admits that gay porn introduced her to 'more creative sexual positions' and that she's found it more useful in her sex life than advice aimed at straight women. 'The techniques work.' (Welsh, The Telegraph, 2014)

Anonymous and Welsh speak to the notion that straight women lack understanding of what their male partners might find pleasurable or exciting. This plays into the discourses identified by Holloway (1989) and Potts (2002) regarding male sexual prowess/expertise juxtaposed with

women's sexual passivity, naivete, and the Madonna/whore dichotomy. "Good" women, according to these discourses, should properly be clueless about sexuality, and in need of expert instruction on what to do, typically from *men* (Moran & Lee, 2011).

There are so many things to learn from watching men have sex with each other. The (*sic*) handle each other differently than women handle men during sex. When women go down on men, they do it in a much more gentle manner. Same with a woman jacking a man off. Men know how much pressure to apply to the clock (*sic*) and balls during sex, and are more often than not, rougher in anal sex than women are if they are pegging. If you watch women peg their lovers in videos, you will notice that they move much slower and more gently than men do when having anal sex. I think part of it is due to women not being used to having dicks to use like men. (Equeen, f, US – Zity, 2013)

Equeen argues that gay men can model and teach more effective and authentic forms of pleasuring men than can women, as women (or, at least, people without penises) lack the necessary experience with the "equipment" to understand what is optimally physically gratifying for a person *with* a penis. Thus, by Equeen's reckoning, the physical embodiment/possession of the object to be gratified provides the most authoritative means of understanding how that gratification is best achieved. Women, then, can best benefit from imitating this superior mastery modelled by men.

Well, I'll put in my two cents here. I happen to enjoy watching male gay porn. For one, it gives me a bit more insight to how men like things done. And you know the old adage, 'Takes one to know one,' right? While I don't watch it but every now and again, I have watched it in the past and have rather enjoyed it. I have learned a lot from watching what men do to men that I could do to men that will drive them wild and keep them coming home to me. (Mashie, f, US – Zity, 2013)

Mashie echoes many of Equeen's points about men's greater understanding of male pleasuring techniques because of their understanding of their own bodies. Further, Mashie describes how improving her sexual repertoire and ability to please men may confer an improved ability to retain men partners. It is here that we see illustrated the coercive elements of the postfeminist imperative to sexual expertise and pleasuring of the man – it is promoted as a means of ensuring men's fidelity (Harvey & Gill, 2011a/b), which for many heterosexual women goes beyond

access to sex and extends to preservation of her domestic and economic security, and in many cases, the security of her children (Juffer, 1998).

I have watched gay porn. It has given me debauched, lascivious, perverted, and in some states, illegal ideas to try out on my husband. (Switchablesu, f, US – Zity, 2013)

Switchablesu's comment is tricky because while her adventurousness and subversion *is* technically being diverted toward her husband's pleasure, the extent to which it is on *his* terms remains unclear from her wording. It sounds at least plausible that she is the one calling the shots in their interactions. Further, it is not as clear whether she is referring to more transferrable-to-heteronormative pleasuring techniques (better blow jobs and hand jobs) or to more gender-fluid or kinky sex play (e.g. pegging). Thus, Switchablesu's comment is more ambiguous with regard to who is controlling the sexual play, and who is benefitting the most in terms of sexual enjoyment.

This brings us to a point which is absent from the comments above – that is, any sort of focus on education or expertise regarding women's *own bodies* and how to please themselves (Fahs & Frank, Notes from the back room: Gender, power, and (in)visibility in women's experiences of masturbation, 2014). While it can be argued that this content is offered to men in a similar way that male-pleasing sex tips are offered to women, men's magazines (e.g. Maxim) that offer instructions on how to please women focus on maximizing orgasm intensity and frequency as a means of accessing more sex for the man, and does not focus on women's pleasure or enjoyment beyond its function as a merit badge to bolster the man's self-esteem, and in increasing women's receptivity to sexual activity and penile penetration (Farvid & Braun, 2006; 2013b; Frith, 2015; Gill, 2008, 2009; Potts, 2002). While it might be argued that women would have little to learn about their sexual *selves* from the sexual interactions of two (or more) men, I would argue that their seeking out this material as an act independent of a male partner's sexual

desires is a marker of the woman's *own* desire, and could inform women a great deal regarding what they might wish from their own sexual interactions (e.g., equality, sincere enjoyment, mutuality).

Explanations that destabilize the status quo.

The analysis of women's motivations for consuming male homoerotic media, the discursive expansion of sexual subjectivities, freedoms, and possibilities are also explored through women's use of *insurrectionary speech* (Butler 1997), an important piece of which includes their own positions as authors of slash fiction and Yaoi (Bauer, 2013; Jamison, 2013). Through online discussions and their own creative works, women variously seek to expand the phantasmatic terrain of their sexual imaginary, a process through which additional corporeal possibilities become available (Butler, 1990b). While some of the focus of this expansion is seemingly shallow (e.g. availability of more attractive, well-groomed masculine sex objects), much of the commentary speaks into the empty spaces and silences of mainstream heterosexual eroticism – discourses of women's own desires, of tenderness and mutuality, of equity and empowerment, of power and dominance, and of the breakdown of barriers imposed on femininity by the heterosexual and gendered binary matrices (Butler, 1990a; 2004).

The presence of the missing discourse of desire. The matter of women's personal sexual desires has a way of slipping out of these discussions (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Frith, 2015), even though it would seem logical for desire and pleasure to play a central role. The ghost of women's desire clings precariously to the abovementioned themes, and is often obliquely implied rather than openly acknowledged. It is far less common for discussions of women's desire to emerge in a direct or pure form – but on occasion, it is articulated:

Turns them on? (kane - Yahoo! Answers, April 12, 2013)

As Kane bluntly states, perhaps women enjoy male homoerotic media because it arouses them, or, more to the point, because they *want* to. However, I located only a few other examples of women describing their desires without apology or qualifications:

I do enjoy watching 3 guys enjoying themselves. Haven't watched it in sometime. But boy did it get the feminine juices flowing nicely. (Miss Stress, f, US – Zity, 2013)

I have...it's an interesting fantasy I have occasionally about being with two men at the time same. (hagoddess, f, CA – Zity, 2013)

...it's so sexy to watch two men together. I especially love seeing them kiss. (egirlky, f, US – Zity, 2013)

It was much more common to observe women's desires being followed up with apparent attempts to justify, question, or make sense of them to themselves and their readers. One original poster from Anime Vice links women's desire back to Meredith Chivers' research (Chivers et al., 2004; Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Chivers, 2010) on gender specificity of physical *arousal* in trying to make sense of women's interest in Yaoi:

...here's an interesting factoid that I just pulled out of a book that I've been reading, Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex. On page 253 of the paperback version, author (and journalist) Mary Roach says:

'A series of studies by Meredith Chivers and colleagues at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto showed that...women, both gay and straight, will show immediate genital arousal (as measured by a photoplethysmograph) in response to films of sexual activity, regardless of who is engaging in it-- male, female, gay, straight, good hair or bad. Men, contrary to stereotype, tend to respond in a limited manner; they are aroused only by footage that fits their sexual orientation and interests.'

Now, this is in a section of the book that discusses the fact that what arouses a woman physically may not be what arouses her mentally, in stark contrast to most men...In other words, the fact that straight and gay women respond physically to BL [Boys' Love] does NOT mean that they have some kind of innate taste for the stuff. It seems to me, however, that given this information, it's not so surprising that some significant number of women, once exposed to boy-on-boy material in a positive setting (aimed at their market, probably shown to them by a friend, etc), would move from only physical reaction to psychological as well." (gia manry - original post, "Why girls like Yaoi: A biological side," Anime Vice, 2009).

Gia invokes reductionist discourses constructed by evolutionary sexology research to explain women's desire to watch male homoerotic media (Bailey, 2009; Chivers et al., 2004; Chivers & Bailey, 2005). By Gia's reasoning, women do not consciously decide to explore male homoeroticism – rather, they view it by accident, become inadvertently aroused, and (via an implied process of classical conditioning) *learn* a preference for male homoerotic media. This explanation overwrites the notion of agentic *desire* with the biologically sterile concept of *arousal* – a mechanism which can be measured with an electronic tampon inserted into the vagina, and over which women have no apparent volitional control (Bailey, 2009; Chivers et al., 2004; Chivers & Bailey, 2005). When *arousal* is the operational definition of women's sexuality, *desire* again retreats beyond the dark, blurry boundaries of “normal.”

Perhaps it is this absence of normative discourses of women's desire that produces the repeatedly-observed pressure for women commenters to justify, or apologize for, their proclamations of enjoyment of male homoeroticism.

I have to admit that I find watching two hot guys kissing then getting each other ready for penetration and having sex is one of the hottest things to see, so yes, I do enjoy watching male gay porn. (Equeen, f, US – Zity, 2013)

Equeen describes the specific elements of gay pornography that turn her on, and directly positions her enjoyment as the motivation for viewing it. Her use of the transition “I have to admit” suggests that, even for someone as open to sexual discussion as Equeen (who is posting on the relatively sexually adventurous website *Zity*), there is shame that comes with articulating these desires – it is not a proclamation, but a *confession*. This confessional quality appears numerous times throughout the analyzed texts:

Actually, on the topic of lesbians liking yaoi and guy x guy in general..ahaha, well, I'll admit that I'm one of them. (Lulu, “Why the hell do women like Yaoi so much?” Subeta, 2009)

Lulu, seemingly abashed, confesses (in response to a comment expressing amusement and disbelief at the notion) to being a lesbian who likes Yaoi and other male homoerotic media.

Nerdilicious more directly articulates her shame and need to hide her preferences, referring to herself as a “closet yaoi fangirl”:

Okay. I'll admit, I'm a closet yaoi fangirl. Not the rabid, squeeing, foam-at-the-mouth kind of fangirl, but a fangirl nonetheless. Probably because... I think it's hot? I'm well aware that it is NOT how actual gay relationships work, and the "uke & seme" roles are a bunch of bullcrap in RL, but I still love it.

The crazy, obsessive yaoi fangirls scare me. The assumption that all yaoi fangirls are like that is also really annoying, even if it does have it's roots in fact. I keep my sexual interests completely to myself unless someone asks me, so very little people know I even like yaoi. Really, we're not all bad. :c (nerdilicious, “Why the hell do women like Yaoi so much?” Subeta, 2009)

Nerdilicious repeats the confessional tone seen above, and frames her articulation of desire as a *question* rather than a *statement* (“I think it’s hot?”). This suggests not only a tentativeness and lack of certainty about her own preferences, but also a *request for permission or verification* from the other users. Further, while her comment, in part, attempts to contest the stereotyping of fangirls, she paradoxically takes pains to separate herself from the “crazy” fangirls being derided throughout the comment thread. In this attempt to distance herself, she thwarts her own efforts to contest stereotypes, and reifies the toxic discourse of the *lonely loser* by validating the others’ characterizations of “problematic” users as mentally unstable, creepy, and out of control.

Another use of the word “admit” that evokes a sense of confessing a sin is found in Murray’s quote below:

I will totally admit to having a thing for gay men. I love them. However, I am not their type. This attraction of mine could be a manifestation of my attraction to men who are not interested in me. But isn’t it true that often our sexual proclivities are directly inspired by our issues? Watching men enjoy each other allows me to enjoy the fantasy of being part of the play and simultaneously allows me to delight in not being involved at all. (Murray, San Francisco News, 2011)

This quote by blogger Ginger Murray illustrates a drive to self-interrogate, and even pathologize, her own desires. As she communicates her fantasy, she uses language implying a confessional quality to her “admission,” and appears to feel compelled to explicate it, to define the causes and reasons for her interest in a “category” of people from whom she would seem to be necessarily excluded – an exemplary contemporary confessional sexual subject (Foucault, 1978). She references her (psychological) “issues” as an explanation for her interest, which serves to pathologize her desire (even though she lightens the blow with humour). Like many of the others I found, Murray’s article goes on from here to elaborate many additional reasons why women enjoy gay pornography (reasons which are all captured in the present analysis and repeated in many other online texts). Interestingly, after explicating the phenomenon, Murray ends off the article by proclaiming to the contrary:

In the end, we don’t really need to explain why something turns us on...what arouses us defies all gender roles, political alliances, and moral codes. What we do in our physical life may be tame or consciously aligned with these concerns. But our erotic imaginations are free to explore all manner of titillations, be they queer, straight, violent, silly, or genuinely strange. The beauty of erotic imagery is that it’s transcendent – a medium through which we taste what freedom feels like. (Murray, San Francisco News, 2011)

Here again we see the tension between pressure to explain, define, dissect, and classify the “phenomenon” of women’s interest in male homoeroticism, and women’s wish for a sexuality free from these explanatory constraints. The author contests the need to justify herself and other women, yet she is compelled to do just that throughout the entire article.

Murray also draws a sharp and artificial distinction between the phantasmatic and the ontological real, further reinforcing the constructed boundaries of normative sexuality for women (Butler, 1990b) – so long as it’s imaginary, sexual freedom for women is permissible and possible. However, the very artifice of the distinction between the imaginary and the real is the true advantage of imagination – what can be imagined can *be*, and it is never clear where fantasy

ends and (what we construct as) reality begins (Butler, 1990b). And perhaps this is what Murray means by “transcendent” – a subtle suggestion that what begins in the mind does not remain confined in a black box entitled “mind.”

The pressure to confess and justify is nothing new to veteran fanfiction authors, who have suffered the scrutiny of baffled, pearl-clutching journalists, academics, and netizens for decades. These authors noticed the double-standard at play in this process long before this dissertation was conceived:

...it was a shame some women felt the need to write long essays justifying their love of slash as being about ‘subverting the dominant paradigm’ or something, instead of admitting that it was really just about what got them hot. And ‘No man ever had to write an article to justify watching girl-on-girl porn!’ (Lamia - “Why do women like ‘slash fiction,’ The Straight Dope, 2004)

Admittedly, the present study could be held up as an example of the need to interrogate and over-explain women’s desire for male homoerotic media – at least, in its initial planning stages.

“Subverting the dominant paradigm” remains one of the key interpretive themes in this work, and was among my primary theories for the political utility of male homoeroticism for disrupting patriarchal oppression of women. Lamia’s contention that this justification is unnecessary does not negate the potential for male homoeroticism to perform disruptive political functions, but her critique of the need for women users to *justify their desire* by invoking those functions is apt, as is her noting the double-standard active in the interrogation of women’s interest in male homoeroticism juxtaposed with the acceptance of men’s interest in female homoeroticism as a natural, biologically-essential *given*. Ahoj makes a similar argument below:

I remember a couple years ago on the Pinto (Chris Pine/Zach Quinto) community, they had a poll up where members could choose from multiple options about why they liked slash. SURPRISINGLY the overwhelming majority of self-reported answers was ‘I just like imagining pretty boys together, OK?’ and not ‘I’m threatened by my own sexuality’ or ‘Focusing on two males allows me to subvert patriarchal expectations and roles about relationships.’ It was interesting because I think a lot of people in fandom probably don’t

even realize why they're doing what they're doing... I certainly did not at the time. (ahoj – “A brief history of slash,” The Toast, 2013)

Ahoj suggests that, for women, the desire to watch/read male homoerotic media may not be so convoluted as the complex assortment of reasons littering the online community and academic inquiries. For Ahoj, it is as simple as a felt *desire*, or *liking*, and subversive or political motivations are unnecessary baggage that interferes with women’s freedom to explore their sexuality as they like. Yet Ahoj also speaks to the notion that women’s use of these media may function in political and subversive ways – not as an intentional product of women’s individual motivations, but as an organic consequence of women’s movement toward their own desires (and potentially away from patriarchal constraints). In this vein:

...I don't see this debate as het vs mxm, but rather about a blossoming of different flavors of eroticized romance for women, and that seems to make people uncomfortable. Which is what makes me think it all comes back to women's sexuality. (Nerx - “Why girls like Yaoi: A biological side,” Anime Vice, 2009)

Nerx keenly observes that the exhausting conversation constructing the woman user of male homoerotic media isn’t an issue of whether it is more appropriate or “normal” for women to desire heterosexual versus homoerotic representations of sex, but is instead a reflection of anxiety about the emergence of women’s desire and the variety of expressive and creative forms in which it can manifest. Slash fiction and Yaoi are powerful examples of this expression of desire. Slash fiction authors have contributed online works that accomplish much in the expansion of sexual possibility and terrain. A few notable slash stories reviewed in preparation for this dissertation offered character studies and plots that reconstructed masculinity to demonstrate the presence of abjected femininity in men, or that demonstrated (and *shifted*) the artificially “penile” locus of the sexual phallus (i.e. agentic sexual power and primacy of focus in sexual dynamics) (Potts, 2002). These two functions in particular are discussed in subsequent sections of the analysis.

Perhaps this threat to dominant (hetero)(cis)sexuality is why those two media (Slash fiction and Yaoi), of the three examined, appear to be most derided and marginalized. The open articulation of women's desire – largely absent in dominant discourse – is profoundly discomfiting to the *status quo*, threatening to disrupt masculinity's foundational assumptions around sex and gender. Thus, as we have seen throughout this section, a variety of strategies are deployed to classify, contain, divert, and redirect this desire to service, rather than disrupt, the interests of dominant discourses in society (e.g. biological, medical, psychological, patriarchal, heterosexist).

Male homoerotic media does not objectify women

There's some skill involved in not letting niggling concerns of ethics, logic or insecurities intrude on a good time. (Dwyer – Perks Magazine, July 16, 2013).

A common justification offered for women's interest in male homoerotic media draws on the well-documented tendency for mainstream pornography to position women as passive sexual objects, and to represent sexual mistreatment of, and violence toward, women (Attwood, 2005; 2007; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016; Wright et al., 2016). As many women experience distress and an intensified sense of their own gender oppression in response to these representations (Gurevich et al., 2017; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017) it is not surprising that some have found gay pornography and its inherent absence of objectified women a welcome refuge from their own sexual oppression:

I find it hard to detach myself emotionally from the woman and wonder if she is really enjoying it. ("Monica," 39, interviewed in metrowebukmetro, Metro UK, Oct 14, 2008).

There is also a certain legitimate guilt that plagues me whenever I view heterosexual porn. I find it difficult not to wonder about the circumstances that were the cause to this effect. Who are these women? How did they get where they are? Can they actually be enjoying this? Is it possible to feel empowered in that kind of situation, or is that just more misogynist bullshit? (Dwyer – Perks Magazine, July 16, 2013).

It can be easier to watch gay porn without worrying whether the stud in the assless chaps feels disempowered or exploited (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com)

Notwithstanding the potential for male porn actors to be objectified and exploited in pornographic representations, male homoerotic media provides an opportunity for women to engage as consumers of erotic representations without being simultaneously subjected to oppressive patriarchal discourses around feminine gender and sexuality:

Gay porn is an erotic vacation of sorts for hetero women where the usual gender baggage is left behind. Guy-on-guy scenes don't automatically call to mind real-world power dynamics between the sexes or the social and political history of male-female roles. (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com)

With gay pornography, then, there is the potential for freedom from the constraints that patriarchal heteronorms place upon women and their sexual subjectivities. Women can enjoy sex without being required to trade in their autonomy, compromise their preferences or personal pleasure to prioritize their partner's dominance and enjoyment, engage in a sexual gatekeeper or emotional caretaker role, or otherwise submit to the mountain of baggage surrounding women's expected roles in partnered heterosex (Hollway, 1984; Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002). Further, there is no need for viewers to weather the vicarious trauma experienced by representations of misogyny and sexual violence against women:

There's less misogyny in gay porn. I don't like porn where women are portrayed as 'sluts,' 'whores,' 'ho's,' 'b*tches,' etc..., and I don't like porn that only focuses on one person's pleasure (in straight porn, it's usually the male, with the woman not at all pleased, or sloppily and ineptly done). In gay male porn, the partners are more or less equal, even as they assume top and bottom roles, and both sides get real pleasure and orgasm (you can't fake it like women in straight porn can)! (reposted from Yahoo! Answers by anonymous, Realjock, gay forums, 2011).

In gay porn, it's hard to tell who's the Pitcher or the Catcher because reciprocation is so common. Power isn't always shared, but there's a whole lot of mutual giving and taking. In straight porn...ha! The guy is usually some bossy creep. The women? Submissive, sex-starved kittens who *inexplicably* want nothing more than to please the creep. (Alvear, HuffPost STYLE, 2009).

Anonymous and Alvear both acknowledge the potentially disruptive intrusion of heteronormative power dynamics for women. They identify hyperbolic, stereotyped gender and sexual roles that demand passivity, receptivity, and sacrifice from women while privileging and propping up male pleasure, aggression, dominance, and control. Both commenters note that gay pornography levels out this uneven power dynamic by representing egalitarian (or *more* egalitarian) sexual possibilities.

Archuletta offers a keen observation that the complete removal of women from the sexual dynamic permits women viewers an escape from the constraints typically placed on women's sexual subjectivity. It is impossible to objectify, abuse, or violate a body that is *not* represented:

A final explanation for why watching gay male porn is so exciting for women is that it offers a solution to take the feminist objection to objectification of women – and the women themselves – out of the equation... 'with gay porn, we can go there and not think about politics and sexism ... there's something about removing women from the equation that's freeing.' (Archuletta, Out Front Online, 2013)

Archuletta's statement hints that gay pornography and male homoerotic media are, by virtue of the absent masculine/feminine binary, a potent site of disruption for heteronormative and patriarchal gender and sexuality norms (Butler, 1990a, 2004). The removal of a feminine canvas upon which the masculine subject can inscribe his patriarchal power, dominance, and control provides women with a safe, fertile substrate in which to cultivate new sexual fantasies and representations of the kinds of masculinity and masculine sexuality *they* wish to see. Herein lies the fundamental threat of male homoeroticism to patriarchal masculinity – the removal of the abject feminine against which masculinity is established as dominant and superior leads to the erosion and collapse of that ill-gotten privilege, as it is exposed as illusory and false in the absence of representations of women's passivity and weakness (Butler, 1990a, 2004).

However, some women note that the exploitative elements found in pornography interfere with their enjoyment regardless of the gender or sexuality of the actors involved:

I have a hard time watching any type of porn because it's usually made for guys and/or it doesn't make me feel good about myself and/or what I am watching. It doesn't give me pleasure without also giving me anxiety of some extent. I know, I'm fucked up. (kaesah (f) - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, "Ladies, do you watch gay porn?")

Kaesah explains that, for her, pornography has become so synonymous with the male gaze, men's pleasure, and women's exploitation, that she experiences negative emotional responses to pornography regardless of who is represented. For Kaesah, there is no escaping the fact that pornography is still overwhelmingly created for men's eyes, not for hers. It is notable that she follows this observation with an individualizing and self-deprecating comment about her failure to subscribe to the compulsory sexual "up-for-it-ness" expected of any good postfeminist woman subject (Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Gill, 2008, 2009; McRobbie, 2007).

On a related note, charges that women's use of homoerotic media (and particularly their authoring of Yaoi and slash fanfiction) is exploitative of gay men's sexuality are also difficult to reconcile:

(Quote from previous poster) 'NK_500 said: Let me say this out loud: yaoi is nothing but an exploitation of gay men by and for straight women.'
lol "exploitation". Just like how every other form of porn exploits women, right? Hell, the ones who doesn't exploit women aren't exactly directed towards women either. (irl)
Lesbian porn is usually directed towards straight men, straight porn is always directed towards straight men, and gay porn is directed towards gay men.
If yaoi is the only little sub-category of porn directed towards women then I don't fucking understand why so many ~~white straight men~~ people complain so much. (holypoop - "Do you think Yaoi manga can influence one's sexuality?" My Anime List, 2012)

Holypoop's comment illustrates a dilemma of intersectional oppression (Crenshaw, 1991) operating in women's consumption of male homoerotic media. On the one hand, many (but not, by any means, all) women consumers of male homoerotic materials benefit from heterosexual privilege which allows them to partake – and perhaps appropriate – the exoticism of gay men's sexuality without incurring the same social, economic, and systemic risks the gay men themselves face. Further, these women may indeed be benefitting vicariously from the

objectification and sexual exploitation of a vulnerable group of which they, themselves, are not members.

On the other hand, gay men also hold privilege in this equation, particularly cisgender gay men who continue to benefit from patriarchy. For example, the gay pornography directed and produced by and for gay men is more widely circulated, ubiquitous, professionally distributed, and socially accepted than women-generated Yaoi and slash fanfiction, which are both marginalized forms of media, at least in North America (Bauer, 2013; Jamison, 2013). Gay pornography also reproduces masculine power and control stereotypes that continue to influence (and limit) women's sexual subjectivities, even when women are not physically present to be represented as weaker, lesser, passive, and exploited. Finally, gay men's protests against women's use of gay pornography echo patriarchal efforts to police, constrain, and define "appropriate" sexual behaviour for women, and to curtain women's access to traditionally male domains of sexual entertainment and exploration (Juffer, 1998). There is no easy remedy to this intersectional dilemma other than to urge the further proliferation of diverse sexual representations and discourses that expand the horizons of accessible sexual subjectivity for all women, as well as for gay and bisexual men, and non-binary and trans people.

Freedom from body image comparisons/anxiety. Women consumers are often presumed to identify with the women depicted in heterosexual pornography when viewing. However, women are also socialized to engage in various forms of mental body image comparisons with other women, and sexual competition is frequently encouraged among women (Ferguson, Munoz, Contreras, & Velasquez, 2011; Hendrickse, Arpan, Clayton, & Ridgway, 2017). Beauty pageants are a publicly popularized example of this exhortion for women to compete for the sexual attention of men (Thompson & Hammond, 2003). CaerieD reports a great deal of

difficulty turning off these cognitive body comparisons while looking at women's bodies in heterosexual pornography:

...I find the inclusion of a woman in porn to be a bit of a distraction for me. I'll identify with her and worry about her being exploited or if she's really enjoying herself. I'll look at her breasts and wonder if they're real. I'll compare her body to mine to see which one of us is better looking. (CaerieD - "Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?" Straightdope, 2007).

For many women such as CaerieD, the tendency to compare the women actresses' bodies to their own may interfere significantly with their ability to fully enjoy or appreciate the media (Gurevich, et al., 2017; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). Indeed, porn actresses are stereotyped as highly artificial women, and are popularly believed to utilize procedures such as skin bleaching, body hair removal, vaginoplasty, breast augmentation, liposuction, and other forms of plastic surgery to produce bodies that are maximally sexually appealing to men (see Dines, 2010, also Neville, 2015 and Ramsay 2017 noted these perceptions in their participants). Women viewers feel themselves unable to "compete" with these heavily augmented representations of ideal femininity, something which may produce significant distress and body image dissatisfaction (Hendrickse et al., 2017; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). This issue may be as salient in other mainstream erotic media forms – for example, romance novels, erotic literature, and graphic novels or cartoon-format films such as hentai. While there are no live models to compare against, women may be similarly written or illustrated as impossibly beautiful objects, again interfering with women's ability to identify with, or separate their body dissatisfaction from, the represented fantasy woman.

This arousal-inhibiting dissonance may be eased for women when using gay pornography and other male homoerotic media, simply due to the absence of women's bodies. CaerieD notes: "With two men, I'm not identifying with either participant, nor am I comparing them to me..." (CaerieD - "Straight women – do you like gay (male) porn?" Straightdope, 2007). Thus, "...the

potential for female viewers to make unfavorable comparisons to their own body virtually disappears.” (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com) Dwyer further describes this relief:

In gay porn, there is no one to measure myself up to, no boobs bigger than mine, no wondering if my vagina looks like that (and if that even matters). All those insecurities that danced in the back of my mind and made me feel ridiculously unworthy were vanquished. (Dwyer – Perks Magazine, July 16, 2013)

For many women, the absence of the sexualized, idealized female object in gay pornography may facilitate increased ability to appreciate the eroticism of pornography without the guilt or distress of feeling their own bodies, or the bodies of other women, displayed and dehumanized for male consumption and pleasure.

Notably, the reduction of body image dissatisfaction may not be the case for nonbinary or trans folx, who might experience body image dissatisfaction when viewing a range of gender-coded bodies. Indeed, this area would be a fruitful subject for future study, as a thorough database search located only one article investigating how trans men engaged with pornographic representations of trans men’s genitals, and how these representations (and the viewers’ reactions) both reproduced and challenged hegemonic, functional genital definitions of maleness (Edelman, 2015).

Authenticity of pleasure. A common justification offered for women’s enjoyment of male homoerotic media, particularly gay pornography, is that depictions of gay men’s sexual interactions are more realistic and authentic than those represented in heterosexual pornography (McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017):

Ginger Murray, a blogger for the San Francisco Weekly says women watch gay male porn because they are “simply turned off by how fake straight porn is.” And she’s right – the majority of straight videos on sites like Youporn or Pornhub are usually plagued by corny music and only capture men on screen from the bellybutton down. Jacob Bernstein, a reporter for the *Daily Beast*, investigated the theory that women are turned off by the fakeness of straight porn, but added that lesbian porn often has the same problem. In an interview with an anonymous lesbian source, Bernstein uncovered that women often find that lesbian porn seems to be made for the pleasure of male viewers

rather than women, not exactly “female friendly” or realistic. (Archuletta, Out Front Online, 2013).

Thus, because both heterosexual and lesbian porn are often produced with heterosexual males as the target viewing audience, women of all sexual orientations are left doubting the authenticity of female pleasure and enjoyment depicted in the scenes – often, it would appear, for good reason:

Also, women in straight porn seem to be either completely overacting, (moaning when they’re barely being touched on nonsexual body parts, etc.) or they just look dead in the eyes and like they’re being tortured which isn’t my thing. (evancalous - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, “Ladies, do you watch gay porn?”)

Evancalous is disturbed by the clear absence of sexual enjoyment on the part of women actresses in heterosexual pornography. Her description of the women as looking “dead in the eyes” is particularly evocative – evancalous reads that the woman’s body is all that is present in the sexual exchange; her agency, her enjoyment, her active participation, and her *subjectivity* are missing. It is small wonder, then, that many women react to mainstream pornography with discomfort. Pornographers’ efforts to mask this marked absence of women’s desire and enjoyment by encouraging over-the-top theatrics are no better received by women viewers:

Prof [Clarissa] Smith says this came up regularly in her research; many aren’t convinced young Eastern European women’s squeals of delight in films are genuine. (metrowebukmetro, Metro UK, Oct 14, 2008).

Thus, the hyperbolic “squeals” of actresses are insufficient to erase the decidedly un-sexy perception that the women actresses are being sexually exploited due to their racial minority status, vulnerable age, poverty, trauma/abuse histories, and/or drug addiction (Smith, 2007).

While this is something of a stereotypic assumption, and erases the agency of women pornography actresses who may be engaging in the medium with minimal exploitation, there are sufficient remaining instances of such exploitation in the industry (Griffith, Adams, Hart, & Mitchell, 2012; Miller-Young, 2010; Ruberg, 2016) to leave women viewers with a bad taste in their mouths (Gurevich, et al., 2017).

Beyond humanitarian concern for the wellbeing of the porn actresses, there is also a preoccupation with the perceived inauthenticity of the women in heterosexual pornography. Clark-Flory (2013 – Salon.com) decries the ubiquity of “aesthetic offenses like globular implants and prepubescent-esque genitalia” in heterosexual porn, a sentiment echoed by forum commenters:

Not as fake as some heterosexual porn. (Umm, f, US – Zity, 2013)

I find the fakeness of female porn starts [sic] off putting, fakeness as in appearance and acting. (anonymous, AskReddit, “Do Straight Girls Like Male Gay Porn?” 2014)

Clark-Flory, Umm, and anonymous all speak to a sense that the women themselves, as well as their behaviors, are inauthentic. This references the wide (and perhaps accurate) perception that porn actresses undergo extensive reconstructive surgery and other cosmetic procedures on various parts of their bodies (e.g. breast augmentation, liposuction, vaginoplasty, anal bleaching, laser hair removal, etc.). These procedures, while undertaken to ensure the women conform to impossible-to-attain feminine aesthetic and beauty ideals (and avoid the criticism of their viewers if/when they fail to do so) (Dines, 2010; Schick et al., 2011) are simultaneously positioned as disqualifiers to their authentic embodiment of womanhood. This double-bind speaks to the impossibility of inhabiting a feminine position in pornography (and in life, as well) – both perfection *and* imperfection are met with derision and erasure by the ever-present gaze of the desiring yet discriminating onlooker. Serano (2007) speaks to this issue in her examination of trans misogyny, contending that it is not just marginalized women (Serano’s focus is on trans women – but marginalized status can also be assumed for women acting in pornography) that face ridicule and accusations of inauthenticity. While she notes that these women must tolerate a distilled form of society’s hostility toward femininity, she points out that *all* women are situated in a double-bind where they must continually *prove* their natural and sufficient femininity

through a series of practices (make-up, high heels, hosiery, dresses, chemicals, surgery) that paradoxically undermine the very possibility that femininity *can* be natural. If we extend this concept to women's sexuality, it stands to reason that women (whom Serano argues are positioned within the binary cisgender matrix as an artificial, insincere, deceptive “opposite” to men's ostensibly natural, effortless, sincere, authentic sexualities) are always already sundered from any sense of an *authentic* sexuality. Thus, women's engagement with MM eroticism could be seen as evidence of the absence of a sexual authenticity for women – it is only through contact with the masculine that authenticity can be realized, and in the complete absence of women, authenticity could be presumed to be at its maximal concentration.

However, for many of the commenters, the issue of authenticity is not limited exclusively to women, but is questioned in heterosexual male porn actors as well. Anonymous voices a strong presumption that “real” sex is essentially different than the “fake” sex represented in heterosexual pornography, and that this latter staged version of sexuality is empty, embarrassing, and fraudulent:

The moaning, the ridiculous “yes, yes, YES!!!” I can't stand it, it's a huge turn off for me. You almost never hear the guy making any kind of sound at all..One of the things I love the most about sex is the noise he makes, so gay porn is right up my alley that way.
(Torreau – “Is it normal for a straight girl to watch gay (male) porn?” Reddit, r/sex, 2014).

For Torreau, the over-the-top, unconvincing acting of the woman paired by the wooden, silent presence of the (often headless) male actor is antithetical to women's sexual enjoyment. Torreau highlights that heterosexual pornography is often absent of convincing evidence of pleasure for the *men* actors (excepting, of course, the ubiquitous *cumshot*), and that gay pornography corrects this omission by representing male pleasure (e.g. vocalizations) in a more realistic fashion. This observation is echoed by Alvear:

The dialogue in straight porn is embarrassing. Normal women do not squawk like seagulls during intercourse. Normal men don't grunt “F*** YEAH!” in a scary voice every time

they orgasm. Gay porn has a much wider range – everything from slight vocalizations when something feels just right, to a soft moan to angry grunting. It’s all sooooo much more interesting than the vocal freak shows in straight porn. (Alvear, HuffPost STYLE, 2009)

Alvear highlights how gay pornography expands on the repertoire of how masculine sexuality is represented in mainstream pornography, particularly with regard to vocalizations. Torreau and Alvear’s observations give us important information about the appeal of male homoeroticism for women; it is not just how women are represented in heterosexual pornography that is unsatisfying, but how men are represented as well. Gay pornography circumvents these problematic, tired gendered representations and permits a more diverse means of understanding masculine sexuality. It is presumed to contain more authentic pleasure and enjoyment than heterosexual or lesbian pornography.

With men, it’s clear that both are genuinely aroused. (“Monica,” 39, interviewed in *metrowebukmetro*, Metro UK, Oct 14, 2008).

Monica speaks implicitly to the visibility of men’s arousal as a marker of the authenticity of the sexuality represented in gay pornography. Indeed, the symbolic embodiments of masculine physicality (erection, the cumshot) have long been relied upon as tangible proof of the authenticity of men’s sexual pleasure in pornography (Lodder, 2016; Shamoan, 2004; Williams, 1999). However, the validity of these markers, too, can be called into question, for example, by the existence of “fluffers,” the ability to edit video to produce the illusion of unbroken penile tumescence, marathon-esque longevity, and powerful ejaculations, and the rampant use of sexual enhancement medications in pornography (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gurevich et al., 2017; Gurevich, Cormier, Leedham, & Brown-Bowers 2018; Potts, 2002, Williams, 1999). Thus, representations of masculine sexuality are no more likely to be reflections of “real” sexuality than those of women’s sexuality in heterosexual and “girl-on-girl” pornography. It is possible that it is easier for women to “believe” the men in gay porn are truly aroused and not just acting than it is

for them to believe women – kind of a “flip” of what we see in heterosexual porn, where presumably the male audience aren’t as unconvinced as women that the women are faking it. In other words, perhaps the ability to hold the desiring/objectifying gaze (Marks, 1996; Mulvey, 1975) instead of being relegated to identification with the passive object (Mulvey, 1975; Potts, 2002) makes possible a sort of detachment, or suspension of disbelief, which smooths over unconvincing portrayals of sexual pleasure or enjoyment. It may also be that viewers who are bound within the same impossible gender ideals as the actors in question (e.g., men viewing men, women viewing women) are more sensitive to (and thus more critical of) the presence of this imperative to establish an authentic embodiment of gender (Butler, 1990a; 1993, 2004; Fahs, 2011). Thus, the identification of sexual inauthenticity in same-gendered actors as “less authentic” than the self may serve to bolster (or perhaps undermine, or both) the viewer’s feeling of gendered and sexual validity.

More relational/romantic than straight porn. On a somewhat related theme, many users spoke to the notion that women prefer to view sexual representations in the context of romance or a relational plot/storyline: “...perhaps women tend to be more into the more subtle emotional romance than just seeing people getting it on?” (gilesdesign - “Why girls read Yaoi/Shonen Ai manga,” Japan Guide, 2011). This hypothesis draws on the have/hold discourse (i.e., the notion that sexual activity is permissible for women in the context of a loving, caring relationship) (Holloway, 1989), as well as the popular belief that women are more aroused by erotic literature and romance novels than visual sexual representations (photo and video-based pornography) (note that research does not entirely support this contention – see Heiman, 1975). Some women do report a preference for sexuality contextualized within romance, and it is argued that gay pornography, Yaoi, and slash fiction are more likely to contain romantic or tender elements than heterosexual pornographic representations:

You know I always like an emotional connection as well as a physical one. And if they kiss, it means they're really into it rather than just being gay for pay. (egirlky, f, US – Zity, 2013).

Egirlky's comment ties into the authenticity theme discussed earlier. The representation of kissing in gay pornography constitutes further evidence of valid, believable sexual enjoyment and emotional engagement between the actors. For egirlky, it is important that the actors are genuinely connected, as well as genuinely *gay* – in her eyes, actors who are “gay for pay” break the spell, and relegate the sexual fantasy into one of inauthenticity and phoniness.

It is often presumed by netizens that women prefer sexuality contextualized by a believable plot, emotional drama, and the deepening of a romantic commitment or partnership:

Women, as a generalization, tend to like drama in their romances. That's why chick flicks always have some earth-shattering moment where the two lovers seem like they absolutely cannot be together. And what better odds are their in pulling apart a relationship than public scrutiny and parental disapproval? (“I can't hold his hand in public – people will watch!”) Then there's a conflict, which gets resolved when the one character declares his undying love to the other in an intense scene scattered with rose petals and shoujo bubbles²⁴. (Tempest's Downpour - “Why women want Yaoi,” 91.8 The Fan, 2010).

As Tempest's Downpour has done, there is a tendency to apply these assumptions to all women, erasing men who enjoy romantic or emotional elements in eroticism, women who enjoy sexuality that does not emphasize romance or emotional connection, and genderfluid or trans erotica consumers in general. Indeed, some women contest the romance theory, citing that they're actually looking for gratuitous sex:

I tend to really like series where it's clearly man-on-man (no feminine or really young-looking guys) and totally, unabashedly dirty. As a general rule, I find romance in anime to be really unromantic (though of course there are exceptions), so I don't need a “romance” plot in my yaoi. (hounddog - “Why women want Yaoi,” 91.8 The Fan, 2010).

²⁴ Shoujo or shoujo bubbles, or “love bubbles,” are a manga trope where “a romantic moment in anime is often accompanied by a pastel background with lots of bubbles.” – TV Tropes

Hounddog highlights her preference for hardcore sexuality enacted by emphatically cisgender adult males – she is seeking the representation of stereotypic masculine power exchanged between two men. For her, there should be no intrusion of feminine, gender-ambiguous, or immature sexualities. However, hounddog’s preferences are by no means representative of the diverse body of women consumers.

Indeed, not all of the women commenters feel that gay pornography is an idyllic representation of romantic or emotionally connected sexuality *because* of its adherence to traditional cisgender, patriarchal masculinity norms. Monica cites the genre’s tendency to foray into hyper-masculinity as a turn-off:

...[Monica] says [gay porn is] too macho. ‘There’s lots of spitting and slapping as they grapple to be the alpha male,’ she sighs. ‘I would like to see something a bit softer.’ (“Monica,” 39, interviewed in metrowebukmetro, Metro UK, Oct 14, 2008).

Thus, the assertion that male homoerotic media is primarily appealing to women because it contains softer, more romantic, or more emotionally-charged content does not appear to hold up for many women viewers. Rather, women report a number of diverse preferences with regard to the content of plot, romance, emotional connection, and hardcore sexuality in their erotic media (McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017).

Developing a “female gaze.”

The ubiquity of media, erotic or otherwise, that centers the visual and narrative elements of a given work on the presumptive *male* viewer and his world-view has been noted as a barrier to women’s ability to appreciate and enjoy erotic media (Marks, 1996; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). Pornography and erotic media frequently exclude consideration of women audiences in order to privilege male consumers. While some “couples” pornography attempts to engage the (presumed-to-be-heterosexual) women partners of men consumers, even these privilege the gaze of men (Mulvey, 1975), and script the sexual activities around the same

pornographic tropes designed to accommodate masculine pleasure and dominance. This has been one of the primary reasons given in academia for the tendency of mainstream pornography and erotic media to alienate women consumers (Gurevich, et al., 2017; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). There is no *place* for an agentic woman (or non-binary) viewer, no consideration given to what women want to see, hear, or read, no room made for desires other than the phallic gratification and empowerment of masculinity. It is no wonder, then, that women and non-binary viewers often find pornography alienating and uncomfortable. Male homoerotic media may provide a more open field for the exploration of a *female gaze*; a taking up of the act of erotic looking and objectification of men (McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017).

Male actor aesthetics. One of the stereotypical assumptions noted repeatedly in the analyzed text is a belief that pornographers employ extraordinarily uneven standards of conventional attractiveness in the hiring of heterosexual versus gay male porn stars. This perception was observed by Neville (2015) and Ramsay (2017) as among the primary reasons their women participants professed appreciation for gay pornography. “For some reason in a lot of hetero porn the dudes are super hairy, unfit, and just not handsome in any sense (conventionally, or personally).” (serendipitily (f) - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, “Ladies, do you watch gay porn?”)

According to Exogenic, a Reddit commenter, the logic behind mainstream heterosexual porn’s use of average-looking male stars may be to enhance the comfort of male viewers, a comfort which may include the elimination of any possibility of the heterosexual male viewer’s sexual attraction to the naked bodies of the male actors, assisting them to “identify” with the dominating male, and ensuring they are not sexually threatened by the actor’s (un)attractive physique:

I think the reason for uglier men in straight porn is that this allows their viewership (predominately men) to project themselves onto the male actor more easily. Men are usually not the object of attention in straight porn, the women are. A fit male in this context is distracting and does nothing for the male viewership. An "average Joe" better facilitates wish-fulfillment for the viewer, who can better identify with such an actor. POV porn takes this a step further. (Exogenic (m), Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, "Ladies, do you watch gay porn?")

This is another example of how pornography has been tailored specifically to the psychological and physical requirements of cisgender, heterosexual male viewers – men's comfort and ability to identify with the material is part of the framework of pornography, while these same elements are absent for women, genderfluid, and trans viewers. The gaze of the cishet male porn viewer is sharp and can dissect, demand, and categorize its preferences with regard to women's bodies, but it is apparently easily threatened when a male-identified object enters its line of sight.

In male homoerotic media, though, the male gaze is turned onto male objects with relish instead of homophobic dread, imposing on men's bodies the same objectifying scrutiny that is usually reserved for women. Although gay men are the formally intended proprietors of this refocused male gaze, women and non-binary viewers may take advantage of this breach in the application of heterosexual male privilege and take a turn wearing the "objectifying gaze" glasses. Some of the commenters framed gay porn actors as more physically attractive than straight porn actors:

Straight women appreciate attractive men, and attractive men are in much greater supply in the gay side of the porn industry. (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com)

hotter guys in gay porn (Bdb37 - Yahoo! Answers, April 12, 2013)

That and the guys in gay porn are usually way hotter in my opinion. (Sebastian M. - Yahoo! Answers, June 30, 2008)

Others became much more specific in their objectifying critique of the men's bodies depicted in heterosexual pornography, and their dissatisfaction with what is readily available:

...mainstream porn is often full of portly stomachs and ugly faces. (metrowebukmetro, Metro UK, Oct 14, 2008)

I love gay porn. It seems like the men in straight porn are picked only for their penis size whereas in gay porn their overall looks are sometimes considered too which I like. Gay porn sometimes goes for the ugly guy with a six pack but that is slightly better to me than going for the guy with a giant wang and a beer belly. Even though I'm bisexual, it seems they do the same thing with women having giant implants as their most important feature. I really am more of a face person when it comes to finding people attractive. (evancalous (f) - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, "Ladies, do you watch gay porn?")

One commenter from Kenucky took the objectifying gaze beyond the confines of the pornographic representations, and began to turn it upon the men in her community, to humorous (and somewhat gratifying) effect:

Well, if the str8 guys around here tried a little harder to look as good as the gay guys, and would shave, cut their hair, clean up, and work out, maybe we would watch str8 porn instead. As it is the guys around here don't even try to clean up, or shave, or work out, or brush their teeth, and there are a lot of shaggy haired, fuzz faced guys that just look nasty. Unkempt facial hair just makes you look like a real hick, so does the shaggy, unwashed hair, and the ill-fitting, baggy clothes.

Take a bath, shave your face, pull your pants up, brush your teeth, and comb your hair guys! You need to take a quick look at some of the gay porn guys, they are smooth faced, well groomed, well dressed (for a very short time), and well built, with large weenees, and everything is trimmed up nice and clean and pretty.

Id rather look at them, than at some dirty looking, shaggy haired, grizz faced, yellow toothed hick guy whose clothes dont fit!" (Melanie, Topix Pikeville Kentucky subforum, 2013).

While Melanie's dissatisfaction with the men in her community sounds comically harsh, it is also a fair (even relatively *gentle*) turnabout of the body policing, dissecting, shaming anti-woman commentaries that are ubiquitous in the comments sections of heterosexual pornography sites and webcam channels. Women porn actors (and women public figures in general) face tremendous and continual criticism of their physical appearances. The almost-cartoonish tone of Melanie's criticism serves to highlight the double-standard of body policing discourse (i.e. Melanie's comments would not read as funny or remarkable if they were not so unexpected and out-of-the-ordinary). The relative novelty of such unapologetic and specific criticism of male bodies in my

sample speaks to the entrenched differences in comfort level and entitlement afforded to men's versus women's sexual subject positions.

On the other hand, women were not universally appreciative of the aesthetic of the male actors in gay pornography. Peppermint below expresses her divergent views:

Porn in general turns me off more often than on, and most of the guys in gay porn are just too...pretty for my liking. (peppermint (f) - Reddit AskWomen, December 2014, "Ladies, do you watch gay porn?")

Peppermint is clear that she is uninterested in most pornography yet singles out gay porn actors in particular as unattractive to her because they are "too...pretty." (McCutcheon & Bishop had similar findings – so did Ramsay). This invokes an equivocation of the gay actors' attractiveness with femininity, something peppermint does not appreciate. For women who place high value on patriarchal definitions of masculinity and maleness, the (false) equivalence of gay sexual identity with feminine gender identity may prevent them from viewing gay porn stars as sexually attractive "objects." This may be particularly true of women who have seen very little gay pornography, and are determining their preferences on the basis of stereotypical ideas of gay sexuality and gender identity – in actuality, a wide range of gender presentations are available in gay pornography, and it is possible peppermint could find examples of hyper-masculinity to suit her preferences. That is not to say that appreciation of male homoerotic media is a requirement or an aspirational goal; my intention here is to illustrate that peppermint's framing of gay pornography may be based more in her expectancies about gay men's sexuality and gender identity than in her experience with viewing gay pornography.

Expansion of masculinity. The analysis of women's discussions of the more favorable appearances of masculine-presenting actors in gay pornography leads us toward the broader scope of masculine representation in general. It stands to reason that if women are not satisfied with a rather restricted representation of masculine physicality in heterosexual pornography, they

may be similarly unimpressed by the restricted range of sexual, emotional, social, and characterological features displayed by heterosexual, straight, cisgender male porn actors. Several women commenters have argued that gay pornography and male homoerotic media offer a greater range of representation of masculine kinds, permitting women to appreciate more satisfying and expanded possibilities for their own viewing; and perhaps this demand for a less rigid masculinity may carry over into their general sexual preferences as well.

There's more options for types of men in gay porn; you can have muscled gym bunnies, attractive older men, young angelic twinkies, college-age guys, larger, hairy older guys...lots more than what seems like the same guy in amateur straight porn. (reposted from Yahoo! Answers by anonymous, Realjock, gay forums, 2011).

While anonymous speaks primarily to the aesthetic considerations already discussed above, their comment also highlights a greater range of age groups represented in gay pornography, and perhaps in a less fetishized or carnival-esque manner than in specialized heterosexual porn that depicts particular age groups. Further, anonymous raises the point that viewers may have a range of preferences; unlike the comments citing greater attractiveness or muscularity of a more idealized gay male physicality, anonymous allows that viewers may also appreciate a slender young man, a large-bodied man, and/or a hairy man as well. This sentiment is echoed by Archuletta:

...in gay porn there is a multitude of different types of men, from leather daddies to pretty boys. (Archuletta, Out Front Online, 2013)

While these sentiments reflect a broadening of the more rigid socio-cultural rules around what constitutes an idealized masculine body (as well as a departure from the more “normalized” bodies of men porn actors in mainstream pornography), there is still a tight focus on the aesthetic elements of masculinity, and both Archuletta and Anonymous discursively categorize “types” of men rather than articulating the possibility of a diverse spectrum of masculine possibility.

However, other commenters did see the potential for broadening of masculine representation to include the behaviours and emotional capacity of the male actors:

I couldn't say it better than Tracy Mayo (Boston Globe 29 June 2003, 14):

'It is the projection of gay men as the best of both worlds, attractive and male, while still able to be caring and share feelings.'

Or, as I've read it elsewhere:

'The "ideal" human in a misogynistic world: male body, male power, female ways of relating.' (internet resource, author unknown). (DarkTwin – "Why do I like slash: Plain answers from a het woman." The Fanfic Symposium, 2015).

DarkTwin thus emphasizes the breakdown of hegemonic masculinity (Butler, 1990a; 2004) and highlights representations of men's capacity to possess and display emotional intelligence, nurturance, and effective communication skills as a key attraction of slash fiction. However, she also infers a misogynistic motive in the rejection of embodied womanhood, and in the turning away from representation of women while still trying to invoke some of their stereotypical strengths.

Ren, below, further explores how women take up male homoerotic media in order to expand the range of represented masculine possibility:

...*dan mei*'s readers and writers view the genre as separate from mainstream gay fiction. 'Dan mei depicts the perfection of romance between beautiful young men,' explains 25-year-old Zhang Lu, who has been reading the genre since she was 18 years old. 'It's all about conveying the aesthetic appeal of its male characters through the writing,' Lu says, adding that *dan mei* is a woman's romanticized fantasy of men – the reason for its success – rather than a man's idea of homosexuality. There's even a strong degree of gender elitism involved in its creation. According to one male author of *dan mei* who did not wish to be named, 'The *dan mei* circle' simply does not accept that male authors are capable of writing it. He says that writers and fans 'believe that it requires a complete detachment from reality and the male view of sex and homosexuality.' A female former writer says, '*Dan mei* is a girl's fantasy of gorgeous guys, often with feminine traits. It's very naïve in its depiction and does not feign realism.' (Ren, "Where Slash Fiction Makes for Dangerous Words," Advocate, 2015).

Ren's description of the demarcation between gay men's "authentic" depiction of gay romance or eroticism and women's fantasies about men's same-sex romances contains some interesting paradoxes. While the women who write *dan mei* (a form of slash-fiction fantasy literature

authored primarily by Chinese women) are expanding the representations of masculinity to include characteristics understood to be “feminine,” there is a doubling-down on the gender binary as well, where the men in *dan mei* are dismissed as “not authentic gay men,” as artificial fantasy constructions of the “naïve” women authors, and as “projections” of women into male imaginary containers. This argument has been employed elsewhere in an attempt to stabilize the boundaries of the gender binary – rather than representing new masculine kinds, the depicted men are argued to be “actually women” who happen to have male bodies, or projections of women readers who wish they were men (Shamoon, 2004).

It appears that it is difficult even for connoisseurs of the genre to fully acknowledge the gender-breaking implications of the work they are consuming and producing, perhaps because such challenges to the fixity of gender and the institutions predicated upon the binary are a threat to gender (hetero)normativity and can carry heavy sanctions (Butler, 1990a, 2004). Thus, despite the emphasis on the unrealistic/utterly phantasmatic character of *dan mei* (which, again, may be at least in part a socio-cultural defense), it is notable that the Chinese government has arrested *dan mei* authors and shut down online content during nationwide crackdowns on online pornography, suggesting that the dominant powers in China consider the work a significant threat to the public order (Tang - “Inside China’s Insane Witch Hunt for Slash Fiction Writers,” BuzzFeed, 2014). Though the tenor of Ren’s article suggests that this perception of threat is unwarranted, and the works are more acts of innocent, playful imaginary than of subversion and resistance, the breakdown of gender and heteronorms posed by male homoerotic media (and women’s increasing engagement in the co-creation of masculine kinds) may indeed serve to destabilize the oppressive dominant knowledge base upon which the *status quo* is built.

Potential for gender cross-identification. It has been assumed that people engage with media through a process of identification with the characters sharing their gender:

When women are faced with a male and female romance or sex scene, they naturally associate with the female (metrowebukmetro, Metro UK, Oct 14, 2008).

This presumption is problematic for a number of reasons – one of which is that the gender “binary,” as discussed above, is artificially constructed, and even those viewers identifying as cisgender men or women may feel their gender is not represented accurately by the media.

Women and non-binary folx in particular may struggle with this difficulty, as the stereotypic and two-dimensional portrayal of women, genderfluid, and trans characters have provided few satisfying roles with which to identify (Keeley, 2014; McInroy & Craig, 2017; Serrano, 2007; Tuchman, 2000). It even stands to reason that the poor fit of the represented women may so disturb the viewer that their very presence interferes with ability to immerse oneself in the narrative. For some women, then, identification with male characters may offer more satisfying subject positions and possibilities, even if this means identification with embodiments of gender that do not match their physical or emotional realities (as suggested by the Tomboy Hypothesis in Part Two – see Salmon & Symons, 2004).

When it’s men-only, you can be whatever you fancy – submissive or dominant. ‘It’s a holiday in someone else’s experience,’ explains Smith. (metrowebukmetro, Metro UK, Oct 14, 2008).

Further, beyond identification itself, it may permit women to step out of an empathetic role and into a consuming or objectifying role – a kind of power typically afforded only to men:

...says Lear: ‘Female readers don’t need a central female character to identify with; they get off on men as men get off on women, appreciating their bodies, enjoying graphic descriptions of sex and objectifying men. They love the idea of a randy gay man seducing other men. (metrowebukmetro, Metro UK, Oct 14, 2008)

...we may not necessarily be attracted to the men themselves, to the display of masculinity associated with gay porn...Murray says that by watching gay male porn, she is able to enjoy the action and also be a part of the play, without actually being involved at all in the sex with the men. (Archuletta, Out Front Online, 2013)

It was easier to objectify men than women. A bizarre realisation – suddenly, it was possible to watch porn the way men do; to view people as nothing but sexual objects,

without the guilt of a sisterhood behind me. What that says about me, I'm not exactly sure. (Dwyer – Perks Magazine, July 16, 2013).

Male homoerotic media offers a further departure from the restrictive roles offered to women by the mainstream, in that it not only removes unsatisfyingly passive, objectified women characters, but it also breaks with heteronormative sexual scripts and replaces them with power dynamics that are either egalitarian or directly negotiated by the participants. Men having sex with other men are unlikely to presume that one will be dominant and the other submissive based on gender identification – there must be a process of negotiation rather than a predetermined script demanding that one partner automatically submit and be objectified. In male homoerotic media, we thus may see many possibilities that are absent from mainstream heterosexual eroticism: negotiated power dynamics; men who are passive, objectified, and submissive (but are not ridiculed or punished for it); men whose dominance is based on mutual consent rather than presumptive oppression of a gender or group rendered inferior, and various departures from other tired heterosexual erotic scripts. As Clark-Flory notes, this allows women viewers to potentially identify with a variety of different activities and roles as they will:

‘The men are free to explore their roles and enjoy each other without this omnipresent sound track of what society ‘expects,’ Buchanan said. ‘And female readers can choose to identify with either, or both, protagonists in the story.’ Fantasies are supposed to allow us to escape our usual roles, after all. (Clark-Flory, 2013 – Salon.com)

One of them has to be submissive, so maybe a small part of me likes seeing a man taking what we normally do. (“Monica,” 39, interviewed in metrowebuk – Metro, UK, Oct 14, 2008).

Though Clark-Flory’s comment would appear to define the value of male homoeroticism as confined to a temporary, imagined escape from women’s presumably fixed and inalterable subject positions in the real world, the ability to imagine possibilities outside one’s circumscribed subject position may lead to the creation of new, embodied subjectivities for women as well

(Butler, 1990a, 1990b). The boundaries between the phantasmatic and the “real” are permeable, particularly when we understand gender to be constructed through discourse rather than biological essentialism (Butler, 1990a, 1990b, 1993, 2004).

While at home for the holidays, I dug around in the attic for my old psychology text books. Dusting them off, I came across Sigmund Freud’s theories of psychosexual development. There’s the “oral” stage, then the “anal” stage...wait, someone should rename this “The Different Stages of Gay Porn.” Frustrated, I kept flipping in search of “penis envy.” According to Freud, young girls around the age of four notice their difference in genitalia from men. In a subconscious effort to gain the love of their fathers, they sit around wishing they had a dick.

‘Oh please,’ says Leslie Friebert, a feisty New York publicist. ‘In straight porn the man consists of a penis and occasional dirty word spoken off screen. There’s no envy in that. I like seeing men be vulnerable.’ Her friend Kate agrees, ‘There’s something so hot in objectifying the man.’ Now there’s a switch! Freud’s theory has been widely criticized by feminists, of course, because women would never want their identity to be summed up as envious of men. But does the female viewing of homosexual, male sex neutralize this criticism, thus feminizing penis envy? (Harding, *Playgirl*, 2006).

Some critique of Harding’s framing of women’s psychological motives for using gay pornography is necessary. While he leaves his last question dangling and unanswered (thus distancing himself from potentially taking an unpopular stance), Harding spent a good deal of time formulating his penis envy hypothesis, and the reader is left with the sense that he still believes women being jealous of men’s genitalia is a driving element in explaining women’s interest in gay pornography. What Harding misses in his analysis is the recognition that what women may envy and *desire* is the powerful, active, dominant role assigned to men – in other words, the phallus, not the penis (Gurevich, Vasilovsky, Brown-Bowers, & Cosma, 2015; Mitchell & Rose, 1982). As Gurevich et al. (2015) argue, “it is only by exposing the arbitrary but nonetheless obligatory and inadequate connection between penile potency and phallic power that a fruitful deconstruction of hegemonic gender structures can occur” (p. 517). This deconstruction, while socioculturally resistant to change, is an important one, because in separating power,

agency, dominance, and freedom from this very privileged bit of flesh, we create discursive space for women and non-males to take up and wield sexual power and desire for themselves.

Taking up phallic power without being subjugated by it. To expand on the idea of development of a female gaze, it appears that for many women, male homoerotic media offers a space in which they may explore and exercise sexual subjectivities that are less available to them in mainstream discourse. Specifically, they can identify with the sexual power, agency, freedom, and domination (i.e., the phallus) typically corporeally inscribed upon the penis (thus discursively linked with masculine bodies and denied to feminine bodies via the exclusionary binary) (Butler, 1990a; Gurevich et al., 2015).

From what we learn from these two authors, it's not that women want to imagine overtaking these gay hunks, it's that they secretly want to be gay men. Author Beecroft says, 'In my sexual imagination, I'm a gay man. I write to satisfy a sexual desire that I can't physically satisfy in this body.' That sounds like the extreme embodiment of a woman's desire to have what would traditionally be considered a 'male' sexuality. In Western sexual dynamics, women are often assumed to be passive, the ones who are ravaged by men. But, by aligning herself with a gay male identity, the straight female reader can envision herself as powerful, sexually potent, voracious, and the active participant (or top) – all things that are associated with macho sexuality. And all of this while still in the company of another man. (Moylan, Gawker, 2014).

...what really hit home for me was something that one particular writer — a straight woman — said as to why she writes m/m: 'The joy of being in a body that does what it wants to do, when it wants to do it, no holds barred — just seems intrinsically male to me' ...I spoke to a few of my own close female friends, none of whom are fanfic writers, and they gave me their own examples of how at some point in their lives they longed to be male, even if they had only dreamt it just for a moment, and how they had used that desire as either fuel or as an impetus for their art. And the reasons they gave me were often for the same reasons I desired to be a boy as a child: To wear the loose red tunic instead of the cumbersome blue gown, to be physical without having to compromise my feminine serenity. We all wanted to be the Dragonslayer. To be the Hero. To be Active. Perhaps that is what these women slash fiction writers are searching for — to have the freedom of being male in their female bodies. To feel physically and sexually liberated yet still be the women that they are. (Pittman – "The joy of slash: Why do women want it?" The High Hat: Marginalia, 2015)

The slash writer (like any writer) doesn't only watch what's going on, she's the one who's pulling the strings. It's her who makes the characters do what they do and say what they say and even think what they think - within the limits of canon, of course, but those limits

can be stretched pretty far. The writer is in charge - and when I write, I shamelessly enjoy that. Yes, it's about power, it's about appropriating the characters, bending them to your purposes, making them do whatever you want them to do. And they're so obedient. They do it all the time and never complain. They're just happy to serve and eager to please. What a thrill. (DarkTwin – “Why do I like slash? Plain answers from a het woman.” The Fanfic Symposium, 2015)

The quotes above all articulate the wish to take up phallic power without being subjugated by it.

Beyond simply envying men or wishing to have male genitalia, there is a more nuanced sensibility to women's engagement with male homoeroticism wherein women recognize and resent their artificially subjugated “place” in the sociosexual order and wish to transcend this place by phantasmatically escaping not only the corporeal body that entraps them, but the sociopsychological matrix of *womanhood* inscribed upon it – the conditioned self-loathing, self-inhibition, and self-scrutiny, the external limitations and constraints, the internalized misogyny. Further, Pittman and DarkTwin speak to women consumers' dissatisfaction with the representations of women in media in general, and that fanfiction is a means for women to re-write the dominant representations to suit their liking. As DarkTwin emphasizes, this is a powerful act of subversion, it dislodges the artificial fixity and authority of “canon” works and weakens the power of mainstream media systems to dictate how gender and sexuality can be represented.

The majority of fanfic writers are female or non-male... We can speculate all we want about why this is the case; I've heard many theories over the years. Women like to fill in the gaps, or women like to spend more time with character development. My preferred explanation is the idea that the vast majority of what we watch is from the male perspective – authored, directed, and filmed by men, and mostly straight white men at that. Fan fiction gives women and other marginalised groups the chance to subvert that perspective, to fracture a story and recast it in her own way...It often feels as if there isn't much space for difference in the dominant cultural narratives; in fandom, by design, there's space for all. (Minkel – “Why it doesn't matter what Benedict Cumberbatch thinks of Sherlock fan fiction,” New Statesman, 2014)

Minkel articulates how slash fiction is a free arena in which women may author the sexual narratives they desire to see. The act of appropriating and rewriting the sexual power narratives

of men, and bending them to their own desires and sexual purposes, women are themselves wielding phallic power (Gurevich et al., 2015; Mitchell & Rose, 1982). They become the initiators and controllers of the sexual activity, the protagonists of their stories, the narrators of men's sexual scripts and experiences for their own purposes. In this way, women who write fanfiction can direct the representation of men's sexuality and gender expression much in the way men have controlled the representation of women's for the past several centuries, though certainly not on the same scale – fanfiction remains something of a subcultural niche, and does not occupy the same institutional status or recognized authority as the “canon” mainstream media productions or published works.

Nonetheless, the extent to which women slash fiction authors have used fictional narrative to rescript and relocate phallic power is considerable. For example, during a brief companion search of slash fiction literature conducted as part of an expanded original vision of this dissertation, I located several slash fiction stories that contained innovative and compelling descriptions of diverse sexual possibilities in which the *center* of the sexual plot was not the stimulation of a man's penis to the point of ejaculation. For example, one slash fiction story based on the sci-fi series *Supernatural* contained descriptions of the eroticization of the angel Castiel's wings as the locus of his sexual sensations and pleasure. Another involved multi-way sexual engagement between a number of Decepticons (intelligent “male” robots), whose robotic non-sexual “body” parts (e.g. a robotic arm-cannon, rocket thrusters) were (re)scripted as sexual erogenous zones. Several others involved the re-authoring of male sexual physiology by describing Mr. Spock's Vulcan genitalia as considerably differing from human male genitalia (often being described as “flower-like,” and sometimes including orifices and/or tentacle arms), focusing the sexual script on the stimulation of these exotic Vulcan organs, while still others scripted Mr. Spock's salient sexual erogenous zones as located elsewhere on his body (e.g. his

ears, his hands). While some of these examples can be seen as discursive analogs to penile physiology, they nonetheless all involve a significant re-mapping of male physiology to permit an emphasis on non-penile physicality in sexual scripts – an undertaking that opens up a parallel opportunity for women to inscribe their own bodies as the phallic center of sexual activity (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Gurevich et al., 2015).

An observation made by Moylan, below, gives an important indication of what women authors are “doing” with male homoeroticism in slash fiction:

Gay male sex (especially of the anal variety) is one of the few transgressive acts still left in our porn-riddled culture, mostly because it gives most straight guys the heebie-jeebies. By figuratively putting themselves in a gay role, women are not only expressing their sexual power, but doing so in a forbidden way. Even more forbidden is making another man a bottom – which is what author Erastes says she imagines herself doing. This act, though imaginary, not only expresses her power, but turns other men into passive participants. Now, the woman is no longer on the receiving end and she becomes the vanquisher herself, literally sticking it to the man. (Moylan, Gawker, 2014)

Moylan articulates what may be a key fear driving efforts to contain and marginalize women’s interest in male homoeroticism, and particularly in slash fiction and Yaoi, which are the forms least likely to involve men in their creation and production. The act of constructing a work of slash fiction or Yaoi is a powerful act of creation – an act that can subvert patriarchal supremacy and provide women with “phallic” power that dominates, controls, consumes, penetrates, and *possesses* men. And while Moylan qualifies this act as only “imaginary,” much of how we understand our existence is similarly “imaginary” (e.g., “man,” “woman,” “sex,” “money,”) and not emergent from a biologically essential “real” (Butler, 1990b). As such, the discursive power of these works may exceed what Moylan is articulating, as imagination is not an “only.” What can be imagined, can *be*.

Discussion

This work sought to broadly address the research question: “What subject positions are (im)possible for women who use male homoerotic media?” An immersion/crystallization approach (Borkan, 1999) was employed to conduct a feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (Foucault, 1978; Gavey, 1989) of online editorial articles and internet discussion forums to determine salient themes that served to both expand and limit women’s experiences as consumers of male homoerotic media. *Part One: Locating and Interrogating Women Users* examined online discussions of whether of women’s use *exists* in both an incidental and general sense, and centered around the oft-posed question *DO women like gay pornography (or Yaoi, or slash)?* With the repeated posing of this question, “women” as individuals and as a category were called upon to verify that they do, in fact, utilize the media. *Part Two: Constructing a (Bounded) Normative Woman User* moved past the question of whether women use male homoerotic media to question and construct *Who is the (non)normative woman user?*, establishing parameters within which women users must confine themselves to be considered healthy or acceptable. Women straying beyond these parameters were punished through deployment of various strategies, including homophobic mislabeling of their sexual identities, pathologization through deployment of stigma connected with addictions, mental illness, and developmental delays, or being cast as a *lonely loser*. *Part Three: Constructing Motivations* covered the extensive interrogation and taxonomization of reasons *Why (do) women use male homoerotic media?*, a question which women users oftentimes found exhausting and noted the double-standard of their having to justify their engagement, while simultaneously complying with it and providing detailed confessional accounts of their own motives.

The findings of this study were manifold and varied, but an overarching pattern emerged regarding a discursive “tug-of-war.” On one end of the rope were women attempting to

interpellate more diverse and emancipatory sexual subject positions for themselves – such as development of a solitary, independent sexuality; sexual enjoyment free from the confines of male dominance, passivity, and sexual objectification; identification with sexual power, dominance, and the *phallus*; and development of an agentic *female gaze*. On the other end of the rope were dominant containment discourses such as postfeminist themes redirecting women's use to privilege heterosexual male partners, and discourses on addictions and *lonely losers* used to shame and malign women who pursue independent sexuality to the potential exclusion of men, all of which were deployed to curtail and restrict the expansion of women's sexuality into these territories.

The use of a feminist poststructuralist epistemological lens with a discursive analytical methodology allowed for an in-depth examination of political themes and tensions surrounding women's sexual subjectivities that were either absent (Louderback & Whitley, 1997; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Ramsay, 2017); or lightly touched on (e.g., Neville, 2015) in other extant works on women's use of male homoeroticism, all of which focused in sharply on the itemization of *why* women use male homoeroticism. The meta-issue of *why we are asking why* is missed in the absence of the feminist poststructuralist lens, yet it may be the most important theme of this work, as it highlights the continuing operation of abjection and othering discourses dictating and contraining women's sexuality. Further, the articulation of the counter-discourses and insurrectionary speech issued by women in expanding their sexual terrain (e.g., the dislocation of phallic power from the penis, the re-insertion of the feminine into masculinity to destabilize socially constructed dominance patriarchy) were an important piece of this work.

Part One: Locating and Interrogating Women Users

The question posed “do women use (gay pornography, etc)” is intended to establish a general or essential feminine sexual property. It is not a question of “do *some* women use it” but

instead “do *enough* women use it for it to be normal/natural?” Positioning women’s use of the medium as a growth trend (e.g., Welsh, 2014), as a new emergence or an “uncovering” of suppressed feminine sexuality is tied to liberal, essentialist ideals that reify the construct of a “wild, inborn” sexuality that already exists and is freed when constraints are removed. Indeed, Foucault (1978) wrote extensively on the artificiality of this notion of sexuality as existing in an “unshackled, raw, essential” form predating, or existing outside, history, culture, and discourse – rather than being a wild state that emerges when barriers are removed, sexuality is understood by Foucault to be a knowledge product shaped inescapably by the cultural zeitgeist. Indeed, although women’s engagement with male homoeroticism has not been well-documented in academia, we do know women have been authoring slash fiction at *least* since *Star Trek: The Original Series* first released in 1966 (Penley, 1997), that Yaoi/boys’ love comics have been popular in Japan since the 1980’s (Shamoon, 2004), and that works classifiable as women-authored fan fiction have been evident over centuries of literary history (Jamison, 2013). Thus, the phenomenon is certainly not new, and its construction as such functions to prop up very specific discourses around women’s sexuality, particularly neoliberal and postfeminist notions of women’s advancing, improving sexual freedoms and adventurousness (Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Gill, 2008, 2009; 2012, 2016; McRobbie, 2007)

Further, the idea that women are somehow sexually “freed” by phenomena discursively framed as “new” serves to whitewash the still-existing barriers to women’s sexual freedom and agency. Tiefer (2004) discussed how access to self-stimulating aids to sexual pleasure, such as vibrators, does not necessarily map onto women’s experiences of desire, which are often hampered by barriers such as women’s intersecting load of emotional, domestic, sexual, and financial labor in their families. Fahs and Swank (2013) echoed this in their investigation of women’s use of sex toys, exploring how their use, rather than reflecting a liberal feminist

renaissance, remains bounded by women's heterosexual relationships and their male partners' wishes, and is troubled by a performative pressure that continues to objectify women and their pleasure for men's benefit. The barriers to women's use of homoerotic media are apparent in what *isn't* deemed acceptable, or in what remains under-available and underrepresented.

Women's use of homoerotic media – like their use of other sexual technologies – is still contained within the context of heteromonogamy (Fahs & Swank, 2013; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). Further, male-produced gay porn (which contains its own issues with homonormativity, and privileges white cisgender males with specific body types), the medium most parallel to men's *normative, common-sense* use of visual pornography (Potts, 2002), is positioned as more acceptable than women-authored slash fiction and yaoi through the social sanctioning of women who engage with the latter as *lonely losers*. Modes of homoerotic media that upend the accepted bio-sexual *real* (e.g. “mpreg,” Real Person Slash, works that relocate the phallus to robots, wings, alien physiology) are reviled – threats to the inscription of power onto masculine genital configurations are particularly subject to containment efforts. For instance, Fahs and Swank (2013) described the emerging knowledge that queer sexuality has opened space for women to appropriate the “phallus” through use of phallic sexual enhancement technologies, yet they are careful to note that even this does not fully separate phallic sexual agency from its penile avatar – most sex toys marketed at women continue to be penis-shaped insertables, despite the widespread understanding that women primarily use vibrators for clitoral stimulation and not for penetration. This is likely not an accident – even in seizing sexual power and agency in their own lives, women are reminded that a *penis* is *permitting* and *providing* her pleasure (Fahs & Swank, 2013).

What is tolerated for women is *only* that which ultimately serves and benefits dominant patriarchal norms, and that which privileges and facilitates men's continued proprietary access to women's bodies and sexuality (Fahs & Swank, 2013; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004) For instance, we

can observe a curtailing function operating in the “epidemic/obsession” discourses, a “reeling in” of women’s interest in these media that might extend beyond the bounds of occasional, private, non-partner-disrupting use. The possibility that women users might initiate threesomes, involve their male partners in any way, or use the media frequently, openly, or publicly in the absence of an active male sex partner, are all discursively penalized throughout the online internet commentaries, particularly through deployment of the *addictions/pathology* and *lonely losers* discourses.

Women’s confessional testimonies are sought and offered online in an effort to interrogate and define the construct, and each woman can be seen attempting to negotiate her subject position within a perceived normative category. The majority of women who described using this genre asserted interest as *normal* while women who did not conform (and some who *did*) showed apparent need to justify and qualify the extent to which they personally fit within the constructed norm. This includes women who were compelled to establish their use in conjunction with their sexual orientation and identity – and some women used this opportunity to separate themselves from *deviancy* discourses. Many women made direct statements that they are “straight” to emphasize that their interest in MM erotica is *not* a deviation from heterosexuality (perhaps the possible reading of such an interest as “queer” explains some of the male commenters’ tendencies to support women’s use with the “turnabout is fair play” argument – to prevent the intrusion of such speculations into *men’s* use of W-W pornography).

Queer women also engaged in confessional self-identification to establish their presence and connection to the phenomenon, despite many users’ efforts to directly query “hetero” women and dismiss queer women’s interests as inconsequential or marginal. Bisexual erasure is especially apparent here – the phenomenon is fairly established in the mainstream for lesbians, but for bi women, direct inquiry is absent/silent. This absence maps onto a broader trend of

bisexual erasure noted by critical theorists – bisexuality is erased and silenced within discourses that prop up the binarized constructs defining sexuality and gender, as its very existence is a fundamental threat to the stability of these binaries (Bower et al., 2001; Gurevich et al., 2007; 2009).

The variation in sexual identity claims does demonstrate that interest in MM sexuality maps on poorly to constructs of sexual orientation or identity. Interest in the medium appears to cut across all proclaimed sexual identities, and thus does not appear to be the exclusive province of heterosexual or lesbian women. This diversity among women viewers is consistent with the existing body of literature – academic and mainstream (Neville, 2015; Marks, 1996; Schaefer, 2005; Stewart, 2002; Taormino, 2008; Thomas, 2004). Thus, efforts to utilize women’s interest in the medium to prop up (for example) women users’ heteronormativity through a “hyper-straight” discursive strategy would appear to be misguided (the hyper-straight hypothesis will be discussed in detail further on).

Men – or commenters who could be reasonably inferred to identify as men – also entered into the discussion to assist in determining the ontological reality of the woman user – typically uninvited. The men commenters served to impose constraints and delineations of their own. Men demonstrated no similar need to establish their own credibility or confess their personal connection to the phenomenon when doing so. Many of them spoke *for* women they knew, attempting to align them with the construct in various ways, often evaluating whether they believed this to be *normal* or *abnormal*. Patterns of how men construct normal versus abnormal sexuality for women again line up with the extent to which the women’s use might intrude on the “real” and threaten to upset the patriarchal privilege residing in the binary gender matrix (Butler, 1990; 1993; 2004) and in heterosexual monogamous relationships (Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

Women who can find no subject position within *normative postfeminist adventurousness* (Fahs & Swank, 2013; Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Gill, 2008; 2009; McRobbie, 2007) because they are *not* interested in MM eroticism end up marginalized as well, and appear compelled to justify or defend their position. This often causes them to be caught between validating their sexuality and avoiding the appearance of homophobia or hostility to the LGBT community (though for some, homophobic discourse is nonetheless evident in their defenses). Many of these women also allude, in various ways, to how their lack of interest denotes an unacceptable (by neoliberal/postfeminist standards) level of sexual inhibition or lack of adventurousness, for which they feel a need to apologize. This is consistent with work by Farvid and Braun (2013b), Gill (2008, 2009, 2012, 2016), and McRobbie (2007) on the construction of postfeminist sexualities for women – the sexual “freedom” postfeminism offers as a prize is found to be quite compulsory, and women thus find no true “freedom” for themselves, particularly when their choices do not align with heteronormative interests (i.e., the increased sexual availability of women for desiring men).

Women also discussed their lack of position/ability to “fit” themselves imaginally to the porn. Some found that to enjoy pornography, they needed to be able to insert themselves imaginally into the scenes, and could not do so, perhaps due to constraints or internalization of feminine gender constructs or transphobia, or perhaps because of the problem of “audience construction” – women are not the intended onlooker in straight OR gay porn, so neither are specialized to immerse women or nonmale viewers (Marks, 1996; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017) Thus, finding a subjectivity as a fantasy participant in gay pornography (beyond “voyeur” or accidental witness) may be difficult for women viewers. This may be particularly true of women who identify strongly with passive feminine (hetero)sexual scripts requiring

feminine objectification – the absence of the passive, acted-on female body may interfere with immersion in the fantasy and suspension of disbelief.

Other women commenters, conversely, noted that this very absence was what drew them to MM eroticism, because they are repelled by the objectification and exploitation of women in mainstream cis-het pornography. This was a strong theme in Neville (2015)’s research as well. Some women commenters in the present study pointed out that the absence of women participating in the creation of MF porn as part of the problem (as we’ll see later, the women doing this work have been pushed to the abjected subcultural margins, making these works less readily available to other women – see Bauer, 2013).

Part Two: Constructing a (Bounded) Normative Women User

The question of “who” is the woman user of male homoerotic media was undertaken in the online community to construct a *normative* woman user, and to define boundaries around this constructed norm that were largely consistent with dominant, patriarchal sexuality discourses, including permissive explanations such as the tomboy hypothesis (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). This process is an exercise of what Foucault (1978) termed *disciplinary power*, a collaborative exercise of regulatory social control exercised through discourse, which is “*productive and constitutive* – it produces meanings, desires, behaviours, practices [and] is exercised through its invisibility.” (Gavey, 1992; p. 327). Women’s use that threatened or challenged male heterosexual dominance or patriarchal masculine gender roles were cast as abject and pathological (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008), and relegated to the constitutive “outside” of the healthy, permissible subject position of the “acceptable woman user.” I examined how boundaries were discursively constructed between normal/“essential” feminine interest (including the permissive tomboy hypothesis) and pathological or abjected usage through the deployment of discursive containment strategies, such

as the designation of “unruly” users as *addicts*, *mentally ill*, or *lonely losers*. The line between permissible and abject is always drawn according to what forms of use are most beneficial to male sexual access and least intrusive or disruptive to patriarchy, monogamy, the gender binary, hetero (or homo)normativity, and passive feminine sexuality (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

Am I normal?: Seeking permission and community. The online commentaries contained considerable evidence of women attempting to seek community and establish the normativity of their sexual interests by seeking feedback and reassurance that their use falls within normative female sexuality (particularly *straight* female sexuality). *Permission* to engage in approved ways was constructed and bounded by specific limiting factors. Use must remain:

- Heterosexually contextual – use must facilitate, not hinder, male’s sexual access to their bodies
- Contained within dominant gender conformity/binary lines
- Private – not to be shared with male partners, not “advertised” or admitted publicly (e.g. no “I heart Yaoi” tote bags).
- Casual/infrequent – not an “addiction” or a “replacement” for an in-real-life partner
- Distinct between the phantasmatic versus the real

The normality of women’s use of male homoerotic media was established through the development of these factors that delineate the normative woman user from the abject, or problematic, woman user (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). These factors center heavily on heterosexual relationship discourses and imperatives that normalize women’s sexuality via their maintenance of passive, servile, male-centered, and coital-imperative gender and sexual norms (Butler, 1990; Fahs, 2011; Hollway, 1984; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004), through post-feminist

contracts that allow women limited permission for sexual freedom, curiosity, exploration, and “sexpertise” so long as it serves to primarily benefit heterosexual male stakeholders (Butler, 2013; Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007), and through equivalence with sexuality knowledge that positions men at the normal “center” of healthy sexuality (Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004) – for example, how the widespread acceptance of men’s use of FF pornography as “normal” is deployed to normalize women’s use of MM pornography. In this way, women internet denizens were able to “borrow” from dominant (hetero)sexual and relationship discourses to establish a bounded subject position of healthy normality, so long as their use of male homoerotic media did not cross the boundaries listed above.

The tomboy hypothesis, and the queering of gender and sexual roles. While the tomboy hypothesis constitutes a permissive, tolerant explanation about the nature of women who utilize homoerotic media, given that their “normality” is preserved by the presumption that tomboys will mature into psychosexually unexceptional (i.e., *heterosexual, monogamous*) women (Salmon & Symons, 2004), it also suggests a deeper issue of women’s lack of access to examples of satisfying sexual and gendered subjectivities, and the desire among many women for more flexible and diverse ways of being in the world. Feminine subjecthood in popular media (and specifically in mainstream heterosexual eroticism) is, as we have seen, restricted in a variety of ways along stereotyped gendered lines, with women characters relegated to passive, servile, vulnerable, emotional, weak, and artificial roles. Women’s roles as protagonists in fiction works, while increasingly common, are limited or problematic in a number of ways, while men continue to dominate popular culture in representing protagonists who are strong, virile, adventurous, heroic, rational, admired, and in-control. Further, the men in popular fiction works, unlike women characters, are able to form close, meaningful, lifelong homosocial bonds with other men – something that is frequently missing among represented women characters, who are frequently

portrayed as fragile, passive, and effectively inert – in other words, objects. And women who deviate outside this passive objecthood are invariably positioned as bad – as villains, whores, conniving manipulators, “crazy ex-girlfriends,” or “cold bitches.”

Salmon and Symons (2004) studied women’s interest in slash fiction in order to explore, from an evolutionary perspective, the function of engagement with male homoeroticism for women, given the activity’s seeming lack of evolutionary value. Salmon and Symons’ consideration of the phenomenon appeared to have been hampered significantly by their evolutionary perspective, as by definition evolutionary psychology does not tend to permit for behaviors that do not emphasize heterosexual procreation or proliferation of the species, and in this matrix male homoeroticism would hold no survival or reproductive value for any human. The authors thus attempted to explain the phenomenon by means of a developmental paradigm – the Tomboy – in which young girls and women unsatisfied with their destiny as biological females could conditionally explore or play with “being like a boy.” These girls and women tomboys are given conditional permission for this sort of play, as in “psychosexually normative” women it was not seen to interfere with their eventual adoption of a more appropriate, “mature” femininity, or with their roles as wives and mothers. However, even within their evolutionary framework, Salmon and Symons were able to convey a demand for a female subjecthood beyond what has been traditionally extended to women because the women consumers themselves possess characteristics discursively aligned with masculinity. They, thus, identified slash fiction as an opportunity for women to connect with media in a way that allowed them to borrow – if not inhabit – narrative roles beyond what traditional femininity permits. In the absence of incomplete or unsatisfying female “avatars” with which to (unsatisfyingly) identify, women could instead identify with slash fiction characters that span the complexity of the human condition – emotional

and rational, tender and hard, cold and warm, strong and vulnerable, heroic and passive – characters more consistent with who they recognize themselves to be.

It could be queried whether the proliferation of expanded representations of femininity would better serve the purpose of creating a more diverse range of feminine subject positions for women. However, the presence of such women characters and actors is not small in popular culture. Women possessed of qualities typically represented in men heroes (strength, virility, emotional stoicism, leadership, heroism, personal complexity, etc.) are common in popular media – from legal procedurals such as *The Good Wife* to historical dramas such as *Downton Abbey* to sci-fi and fantasy fandoms such as *Harry Potter* and *Star Trek*. However, there are distinct limitations to this sort of “reverse discourse” in fighting oppressive dominant paradigms. The only way to truly defeat the dominant gender binary is to reveal that the abject (feminine) is not separate from the dominant (masculine) (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). It is ineffective to “glorify the abject,” or to “uplift” women by highlighting or showcasing their positive agentic qualities that are discursively aligned with masculinity, because it merely reifies the desirability and superiority of the masculine in setting it as an “aspirational” but never fully accessible goal for women, as they are always already on the abject outside of the boundary that constructs the “superior” half of the binary (Butler, 1990a; 2004). Further, abject bodies (women) cannot fight abjection by trying to appropriate qualities that are constructed as the masculine “inside” of the binary, as the qualities will always be recognized as already superior but not belonging to them, and thus “inauthentic.” Indeed, women who embody qualities aligned with dominance masculinity are frequently marginalized in the media as “nags,” “frosty bitches,” “demonic villains,” or “whores,” or are sexually idealized and objectified in ways that continue to remind the viewer of their containment at the feminine end of the binary.

The dismantling of the dominant gender binary can more effectively occur via intrusion of the feminine abject into the constructed masculine ideal (i.e., the narrative protagonist), thus undermining his illusory superiority from the inside (Butler, 1990a, 2004). This is the heart of the “threat” posed by gay men and the trans community as well as by all feminine agency and desire: the lost credibility of masculinity’s projection of all that is “inferior and weak” onto an “essential feminine nature” supposedly embodied only by biological females, and the consequential undermining of masculinity/biological maleness as both the definitional “normal” and the “superior pinnacle” of humanity (Butler, 1990a; 2004; Potts, 2002; also see Serano, 2007). Via this process, patriarchal masculinity loses the entire support structure upon which its supremacy is precariously balanced, as the gender binary’s power to divide human characteristics into “strong” versus “weak,” “noble” versus “treacherous,” and “dominant” versus “passive” according to the constructs of “male” and “female” is exposed as an artificial and spurious cultural fabrication – and not an indelible product of bio-physiological processes (Butler, 1990a, 2004)

Excess and regulation: Reigning in the unruly user. Internet commentary aimed at regulating and controlling women’s use of male homoeroticism borrowed strongly from discourses of homophobia and transphobia, and appeared to function to police of boundaries that construct the hetero/homo and male/female binaries (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004; Potts, 2002). The internet commentaries illustrate how these binaries are protected through declarative identification of sexual identity, homophobic and transphobic discourses, and querying around whether MM and Yaoi can *cause* gender dysphoria and trans identity. Further, instances of use that pose a risk to men’s access to women’s sexuality, or to men’s dominance and patriarchal masculinity, are defined as the abject outside of normal (Butler, 1990a; Ringrose & Walkerdine,

2008; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004) through deployment of the addictions and lonely losers discourses.

Denying “normalcy” status. While most of the internet commenters adopted a permissive stance towards women’s use of male homoeroticism – particularly around casual, private use of gay pornography – a few framed the behavior as abnormal or pathological with very little logic to back up their statements. Accusations of non-normality drew on (questionable) appeals to common-sense (a rhetorical strategy described by Foucault, 1979 as a popular but deeply flawed avenue of knowledge production); on the distastefulness to or objection of the women’s male sex partners (thus framing normality as centered on women’s duties in the heterosexual dyad and binary gender matrix – see Butler, 1990a; Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004); or the assumption that because (cishet) men do not find gay pornography compelling themselves, its use must constitute a deviant or unhealthy activity (Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). Thus, although women are extended some conditional normality or permissiveness in the online domain, this acceptance is not guaranteed, and even women falling within the “normative” range are subject to challenges that threaten abjection and isolation (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008).

Confessional (hetero)sexual orientation declarations. The functioning of dominant heterosexuality discourses and homophobia in the regulation of women users of male homoerotic media were evident in the frequent confessional declarations made by women users regarding their sexual orientations. It was common for women commenters to establish their “straight-ness” as a pretext to their discussions of their use of the media, ostensibly to locate themselves solidly within “acceptable” heteronormative subject positions, and to forestall challenges to their sexual or gender identities. The power of the regulatory gender and heterosexual matrices is quite evident here (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004) in that even anonymous straight women felt compelled to establish their “straight-ness” and protect themselves against accusations that their use of male

homoerotic media might “make” them lesbians or transgender. Some women commenters, however, did identify as bisexual or lesbian in order to claim territory in the discussion of women’s use of male homoeroticism, given that the conversation tended to center on straight women and erase consideration of queer women’s engagement with the materials (parallel with how bisexuality is erased across multiple discursive domains – see Gurevich et al., 2009; Hayfield et al., 2014). Given that women commenters across the entire spectrum of sexual identity indicated interest in male homoeroticism, it appears that despite the use of homophobia and transphobia in regulating and constraining the behavior of straight women, use of male homoerotic media is evidently not determined by women’s sexual identities.

Homophobic/heteronormalizing responses. The confessional declarations of sexual identity made by a number of the commenters were not incidental. The presence of homophobia and transphobia were observed throughout the online forums, where commenters deployed homophobic mockery, questioning of women users’ sexual identities, and warnings that use of male homoerotic media by women could incur “risk” of “turning” lesbian or trans. While there exists no evidence academic or otherwise that exposure to homoerotic materials has a causal effect on sexual identity, the proliferation of this “fear of contamination” in popular thought again serves to buttress heteronormative and binary gender imperatives, particularly when it is clear that departure from heterosexuality and cisgender binary roles invites mockery, derision, and discrimination (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004; Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). These regulatory discourses serve to ensure that, while quiet use of male homoeroticism may be tolerated, women’s use of male homoerotic media must remain hidden, private, and firmly backseat to “real life” heterosexual partners. The presence of homophobic and transphobic aggression, particularly in the online forum discussions, appeared to regulate and oppress women users regardless of their stated sexual and gender identities, narrowing the field of possibility for

women in exploring and determining unique sexual and gendered subject positions, and retrenching dominant institutional gender and sexual matrices (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004; Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). However, despite these harmful discursive sanctions, a couple of commenters nonetheless engaged in direct examinations of their own sexuality and gender, and how their engagement with male homoeroticism had led to questions about, and potentially the expansion of, sexual and gender possibilities beyond heterosexual and gender-binary norms (Butler, 1990a, 2004). Thus, it is apparent that, despite the action of regulatory discourses, male homoeroticism nonetheless opens up space for some women to (re)consider their subjectivities and carve out more diverse, satisfying sexual subject positions and possibilities.

Addiction and pathology discourses. Several of the online interlocutors deployed popular addictions and biomedical discourses (e.g., “progression” or “gateway drug” narratives) in an attempt to make sense of their preoccupation with, or frequent use of, male homoerotic media in absence of a “real-life” sex partner. The media in this context are positioned as a “drug,” a coping mechanism for distress, “unhealthy,” socially damaging, a barrier to “legitimate” relationships and sexuality. The phenomenon of online pornography addiction has received considerable coverage in the media, with a number of articles applying the addictions model to women’s pornography use in ways that primarily caution against the potential risks, harms, and pathology that could result from “overuse” (Anonymous, 2013; Dines, 2010; Duke, 2010; Hilton, 2010; LeClaire, 2013; Park, et al., 2016). The popularity of this topic in the media potentially explains the ease with which the language of addictions comes to be used by women as they attempt to make sense of their experiences. However, while a detailed review of the empirical validity of the addictions model as applied to women’s use of erotic materials is beyond the scope of this work, it is important to note that the women commenters’ key determinant of the pathological status of their use of male homoerotic media appears to be its interference with (or replacement of)

engagement in heterosexual socialization and partnered sexual relationships, suggesting that dominant heterosexual and coital imperative discourses are salient factors in determining what constitutes “overuse” and in framing frequent solitary use of male homoeroticism as pathological (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

The positioning of fantasy sexuality and solitary sexuality as not only “less than,” but also as unhealthy and pathological despite clear benefits and advantages to the users/readers (e.g., more control and freedom, sexual enjoyment and positive affect without risk of rejection, exploitation, abuse, or emotional labor – see Attwood, 2005; Ashton et al., 2018; Ciclitira, 2004; Parvez, 2006) produces a de-centering of independent sexuality that derails women’s desires, interests, and diverse subjectivities (Butler, 2003; Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fine & McClelland, 2006). For the women who self-identify as addicted users, their compulsory concealment of their reading or viewing materials due to very *real* threats of shame or social sanction is interpreted not as oppression, but as evidence of the wrongfulness of their “addictive” behaviour. The construction of knowledge and discourse defining sexual and socio-scientific pathology (which can arguably include internet porn addiction) has been observed by Foucault (1972, 1978, 1982) to play a powerful role in the regulation (particularly the *self*-regulation) of sexual behaviours and experiences – typically in ways that serve to stabilize the cultural status quo.

Indeed, popular discourse disseminated through online and news media regarding women’s pornography use heavily invokes the language of addictions, health epidemic, and risk in constructing internet pornography addiction as an “increasing epidemic” and a moral crisis (Carey, 2011; Dubinsky, 2012; Duke, 2010; Renaud, 2011). However, the scientific data provided in these popularized writings are flimsy, and confined to individual clinician testimonials and inappropriately generalized findings from drug and neurology studies. In

contrast, a large-scale epidemiological study in the U.S. found that, of the 41% of women reporting any pornography use, only 2% met criteria for “compulsive use.” Thus, rather than providing a means of assistance and support for women, the popular dissemination of the addictions epidemic discourse in the media may function to sever women’s access to subject positions as women consumers of male homoerotic media that allow for the possibility that they might *prefer* solitary sexual activity, sexual fantasy, and male homoeroticism to partnered heterosex – and that this might be healthy, acceptable, and beneficial, something they can own as part of themselves (Fahs 2011; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). This positioning of solitary sexuality as pathological functions to stabilize the dominant emphasis on sexuality as partnered, heterosexual, and dominated by men (Butler, 1990a; Potts, 2004; Tiefer, 2004).

Some women commenters also connected their frequent use with other psychopathologies, including depression, social anxiety, and autism, and they tended to relegate male homoeroticism (particularly slash fiction) as an inadequate surrogate for the “real” relationships that might be difficult or undesirable for women with disabilities. The notion of such a sexual life as *superior* to partnered sexuality for those who may prefer solitary sexuality (e.g. some autistic or socially anxious women; asexual, aromantic, or graysexual women) is never given consideration; always, the imperative of partnered heterosex is ascendant in these discussions. This pattern of marginalization of women’s solitary, independent sexual desire, fantasy, and agency in service of an emphasis on partnered (hetero)sex is again indicative of the compulsory power of heterosexual, coital, and patriarchal discourses (Butler, 1990a; Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Hollway, 1984; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

However, while some women commenters struggled to frame their frequent use or reading within a beneficial or positive subject position – for example, as an acceptable hobby or recreational interest – despite several objective similarities with other enjoyable and rewarding

hobbies, such as reading, art, crafting, music, or exercise, some women *were* able to access this position, and affirmed their interest in slash fiction or yaoi as positive, beneficial, and interesting rather than an “addictive” pathology. Further, some women contested the addictions discourse as an intrusion of oppression, social stigma, and judgment; specifically, they were able to articulate that it was the *subject of interest* – male homoeroticism – and its perceived (lack of) social acceptability that invited the application of the addictions framework, not the objective qualities of the women’s solitary sexual behaviour or its tangible consequences.

Lonely losers: Infantilizing, derogating, and dismissing. Interest in MM sexuality (especially *intense* interest) is frequently positioned by commenters throughout the online forums as immature, socially awkward, indicative of early or delayed sexual development (later to be discarded when a *real* partner is found to replace it), or a refuge for sexually undesirable (old, fat, ugly) but lascivious women who have “failed” to obtain privileged status in the heterosexual matrix via attachment to a male romantic partner (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004; Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Tiefer, 2004). This discourse was first seen in the original quote that formed the basis of the current work – Jackson and Gilbertson’s (2009) “Matt,” who claimed that only “very very lonely old desperate women” (p. 210) would ever be interested in viewing media containing male homoeroticism. All of these characterizations function, again, to prioritize heterosexual copulation and monogamy through the positioning of non-conforming, non-compliant women as *abject bodies* (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) with no status, privilege, or acceptable subjectivities in the dominant heterosexual order (Butler, 1990a). Within this discursive framework, only *losers* who cannot participate in the most salient, relevant sexual act (coitus with a man) would fall back on these sexual substitutes (Potts, 2002). Only women *undesired* by men, *unwanted* in the patriarchal/bio-evolutionary matrix (i.e., “unfit to reproduce”) would ever show intense interest in Slash/Yaoi/MM erotic media, because it must always be an inferior, pale

substitute for the apex behaviour in the sexual status quo – heterosexual coitus (Potts, 2002). Many women as well as men commenters participated in the construction of the *lonely losers* discourse, with women in particular appearing to be engaging in a process of attempting to separate themselves from the abjected *loser* position, and to instead establish themselves as *normal*, moderate, reasonable users.

The idea of *volitional* preference or choice is never considered or permitted in these conversations. This discourse, in a more subtle, palatable form, is evident even in Salmon and Symons' (2004) analysis of slash fiction, and involves a positioning of “evolutionarily unfit” women outside the normative terrain of the heterosexual matrix (the “unfuckable” woman – women who are too young, too masculine, too queer, or physically undesirable to men). The notion that *real* heterosexual relationships might be serving as a suppressor or limiter (rather than the absent, desired maxim) of this more agentic engagement with sexual fantasy and desire among women with sexual partners or in *real* relationships is also not considered, yet the dominant discourses active in heterosexual relationships (coital imperative, male sex drive imperative, monogamy, have/hold, orgasmic imperative) (Hollway, 1984; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Potts, 2002) can all act to suppress women's use of MM erotic media – as well as their desires and fantasy lives in general – in the context of the *real*.

However, there was noticeable pushback against the *lonely losers* discourse among the online interlocutors as well. One comment in particular (Welsh, The Telegraph, 2014) demonstrated how the acceptance of older women gay porn consumers by gay pornographers has opened up space for a positive, empowered sexual subject position for older women. A number of other commenters pointed out the logical failures of the “unfit/unfuckable” argument. In particular, the deployment of misogynistic stereotypes denigrating both virginal young girls *and* experienced older women as sexually marginal were identified by a few commenters as

problematic – these users queried that if both the madonnas and the whores are “pathetic,” where is the “acceptable” terrain in between? These commenters raise a salient problem regarding women’s subjugated position in the heterosexual and binary gender matrices (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004; Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004); women’s sexuality for its own sake is provided *no* space in which to exist, except for women in a current state of being a passive object of desire for men (in which case, her agency is *still* eclipsed by male sexual dominance). Yet the reality of the frequent engagement of slash fiction authors and readers *in* concurrent heterosexual relationships exposes the falsity of the *lonely losers* discourse – women are not engaging with male homoeroticism solely due to a lack of heterosexual contact, as many of the women who consume these media have heterosexual partners. Instead, women may have their own motivations for engaging with these materials, reasons grounded in their own, individual, diverse sexual desires (Bauer, 2013; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Fine & McClelland, 2006; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017).

Heteromonogamy imperative: Acceptable if not crossing ‘real’ boundaries.

The discussion above regarding the addictions and *lonely losers* discourses spoke in detail to the functioning of dominant heterosexual and gender discourses in regulating women’s use of male homoerotic media. In addition to these pathologizing strategies, commenters frequently invoked various elements of the postfeminist contract (Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013) to provide space for permissible or casual use within specific constraints. As discussed previously, the salient limitations placed on women’s use center on the maintenance of male and heterosexual privilege – so long as men can continue to enjoy unrestricted access to women users’ bodies and remain the primary recipients of their sexual attention, private, solitary, and quiet use of male homoeroticism is tolerated, and even encouraged if it is understood to increase women’s sexual availability and arousability (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013a; Gill, 2016; Gill &

Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007). However, commenters were quick to restrict women's use of male homoeroticism in the *context* of *real* heterosexual partnered relationships. Many commenters provided caveats for women users that their use of male homoerotic media should be hidden from their male partners, and be confined to private, solitary fantasy – it should in no way cross the discursively constructed threshold between the phantasmatic and the real (Butler, 1990b).

Part of the logic for this demarcation between individual use and partnered use was that male homoeroticism could be threatening to male partners' masculinity, either through reduction of his own arousal, homophobic threat to his sexual orientation or gender identity, or decreased focus on the male partner's pleasure by the woman user. All of these implications of sharing male homoeroticism with a male partner were seen as potentially destabilizing to heterosexual relationships and masculine sexual dominance, and as such, were criticized and derided by several commenters. This is consistent with theoretical work by Butler (1990a), Fahs (2011), Potts (2002), and Tiefer (2004) that emphasizes the primacy of masculine power, pleasure, and dominance in sexual relationships and in cultural masculinity norms, as well as with scholarship on postfeminism that criticizes the perception that women can enjoy unlimited sexual freedoms in the current cultural zeitgeist (Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007).

A further boundary (largely of silence) is drawn to preserve the primacy of heterosexual *monogamy*, and men's *exclusive* sexual access to women partners. Women commenters appeared to be denied permission and space to contemplate corporeal engagement in sexuality involving two men, with some commenters directly articulating that it is unacceptable for women to engage in polyamorous sexual activities or to suggest their male partner perform sexual acts with another man for *her* gratification. A few commenters noted that women should not suggest – or even contemplate – her male sex partner's engagement with another man for her pleasure/enjoyment,

and that they should not express open interest in an MMF threesome (contrary to men's open permission to suggest and fantasize about MFF threesomes), or group sex scenarios involving MM sexuality, as these could threaten the stability of her (monogamous, heterosexual) relationship. This commentary again invokes the dominant heterosexual, gender, and postfeminist discourses outlined throughout this section (Butler, 1990a; Fahs, 2011; Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). The boundary between monogamy and polyamory is policed via biphobic, polyphobic, slut-shaming discourses, and preserves not only women's partner's proprietary access to her corporeal sexuality, but also his gender and sexual identity and her position as an "adventurous but not slutty or deviant" postfeminist sexual citizen (Butler, 1990a; Fahs, 2011; Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004)..

Once boundaried, women's permitted uses are then deployed in further service of men's sexual pleasure and gratification as women are encouraged to use the media to heighten their arousal, sexual openness, and desire in order to bring this into their partnered heterosexual activities (Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013a; Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007). The expectation is that women's use of delimited fantasy engagement with MM sexual imagery will render her more receptive to the sexual demands of her male partner. However, use of male homoerotic media to expand sexual adventurousness that might threaten her partner's sexual orientation (e.g., MMF threesomes) or gender identity (pegging) is also positioned as negative or undesirable, again underscoring the privileging of dominant masculine sexual norms and male control/domination/superiority in any sexual exchange (Butler, 1990a; Fahs, 2011; Gill, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

Women are also punished and ostracized in these comments for being open and "loud" in their enthusiasm for MM erotic media, particularly the more marginalized, women-produced

Yaoi and slash fiction formats. The young women identified as *fujoshi*, *otaku*, or *furry* and who adorn themselves with identifiers of this interest (e.g., fandom accessories, open conversations in public) are repeatedly referred to as “creepy,” and to be avoided socially by men (as suitors) and women (for fear of social contamination). This illustrates the presence of a *threat* posed by the open appearance of sexually agentic, independent young women – much as the presence of sex workers, single mothers, sexually diverse, and “promiscuous” women do, or have historically, as they all symbolize the non-essentiality of committed sexual relationships with men (i.e., proprietary monogamy). As described by Potts (2002), these representations of sexually agentic women are at odds with dominant discourses around gender and sexuality that require women to adopt passive, servile, receptive, conciliatory, and dependent positions relative to men’s dominance, power, expertise, authority, and mastery. More notable than the open prohibitions and cautions voiced by some users against intrusion of male homoeroticism into *real life* was the virtual absence of women’s open articulation of wishes to engage or participate in the sexual behaviours represented in male homoerotic media. The primary location online where women were seen directly endorsing participation in MMF threesomes (or expressing a wish to do so) occurred in a sex-positive “kink” community forum (Zity) which provided a protective subcultural safe space to articulate such desires. This again demonstrates the strong systems of prohibition and permission curtailing the public voicing of women’s various desires – when they *are* spoken freely, it occurs only in marginalized, isolated, heavily protected “bubbles” of like-minded progressives. Even then, these desires are spoken from behind a veil of electronic anonymity.

Further preserving the “real” – policing the boundary between private fantasy and public/family life. The discursive constraints placed around women’s public, “loud” proclamations of their use of slash fiction and yaoi discussed in the previous section foreshadow

an even broader constructed delineation between women's private, solitary sexuality and her compulsory roles in her family and in the public eye – a demarcation again required to prop up women's passive, servile role in the cultural zeitgeist (Butler, 1990a; Potts, 2002). Male homoeroticism is regarded by a number of the online interlocutors as an inappropriate topic to share with children, an embarrassing secret that must be carefully concealed from parents, and an activity that risks bringing humiliation or emasculation upon any male sexual partner (due to his perceived failure to control or contain *his* woman's sexuality).

The imperative that women's use remain hidden from family and public speaks to the operation of a discursive containment strategy aimed at curtailing the expansion of women's sexual subjectivities beyond the safety of the imaginary (Butler, 1990b), as subversive sexual discourses that are voiced, shared, and *taught* (as a mother might teach a child, for example) are perceived to pose a greater risk to *real* (heterosexual) relationships, to masculine power and dominance, and to the nuclear family arrangements that undergird capitalism's economic, social, and political structures (Foucault, 1978; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). However, as Butler (1990b) and Foucault (1978) have both argued, attempts to censor or suppress discourse are counter-productive and merely lead to the proliferation and reproduction of the discourses the censor seeks to eradicate. Netizens' anxiety around, and preoccupation with, the maintenance of "low visibility" of women's use of male homoeroticism thus point to the frailty of the dominant discourses that are threatened by women's noncompliance (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004).

Resistance: Women's direct articulation of wishes to transcend from the phantasmatic to the real. Even though considerable discursive space and energy is devoted in the online data to the containment and regulation of women's use of homoerotic media to the realm of the isolated feminine imaginary, some women were nonetheless observed giving voice to desires and fantasies that moved beyond consumption of male homoerotic media to contemplation of active

engagement in sexual encounters involving two men. A few women described having engaged in MMF threesomes, while others described fantasizing about doing so, or formulating plans to broach the idea to their existing male partners. While some of these comments were framed very tentatively, and remained firmly within the realm of imagination or fantasy, a few did not, and presented the possibility that if women can imagine sexual possibilities through their engagement with male homoeroticism, it is also conceivable to bring these wishes into reality. These comments therefore constitute a form of subversive, insurrectionary speech (Butler, 1997) that challenges dominant heteronormative, mononormative, have/hold, biphobia/bisexual risk, and feminine sexual passivity discourses (Butler, 1990a; Hollway, 1984; Potts, 2002)

Part Three: Constructing Motivations

The largest proportion of material identified online regarding women's use of homoerotic media pertained to extensive speculation about and cataloguing of plausible reasons for why women would enjoy or sexually benefit from this form of eroticism. Heterosexual men's engagement in the discussions was framed either as "anthropological curiosity" linked discursively to the idea that women's sexuality is convoluted and unfathomable or used to publicly renounce their own "understanding" to avoid a (mis)perception of homoerotic interest. Men's participation in the construction of barriers is seldom self-referential, but frequently involved setting boundaries that buttress masculine privilege and pathologize women's expansion into territory that might weaken dominant/toxic masculine ideals or heterosexual relational privileges.

Women's participation in the process of knowledge construction appeared to serve functions of subjectivity-seeking, attempting to establish an inhabitable terrain of "normative" use they could exist within, but also a self-regulatory pressure to "confess" and "self-incriminate" with regard to perceived breaches of the boundaries set either by themselves or others. Foucault

(1978) has much to say about the pressure to confess, to produce discourse as a function of knowledge production linked to institutional power and control:

This is the essential thing: that Western man has been drawn for three centuries to the task of telling everything concerning his sex; that since the classical age there has been a constant optimization and an increasing valorization of the discourse on sex; and that this carefully analytical discourse was meant to yield multiple effects of displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of the desire itself (p. 36-37).

...one had to speak of it as a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, Inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered. It was in the nature of a public potential; it called for management procedures, it had to be taken charge of by analytical discourses (p. 39)

A pattern of discursive tension between claiming of legitimized space versus perceiving oneself or others as “out of bounds” is seen repeatedly throughout the excerpts, with many women defending their interest in homoerotic material while simultaneously self-pathologizing. Foucault had much to say on (self)pathologizing and the need for confession as a function of producing discourse, and particular forms of knowledge/power:

...but which, toward the middle of the nineteenth century, broadened its jurisdiction to include petty offenses, minor indecencies, insignificant perversions; and lastly, all those social controls, cropping up at the end of the last century, which screened the sexuality of couples, parents and children, dangerous and endangered adolescents – undertaking to protect, separate, and forewarn, signaling perils everywhere, awakening people’s attention, calling for diagnoses, piling up reports, organizing therapies. These sites radiated discourses aimed at sex, intensifying people’s awareness of it as a constant danger, and this in turn created a further incentive to talk about it. (1978, p. 49).

Thus, the will to confess is a powerful force through which people conduct the self-regulation of their sexual selves, as well as the production and dissemination of discourse which will, in turn, regulate others according to the accepted cultural zeitgeist (Foucault, 1978).

Some of the confusion about the question of “why” is linked to difficulty fathoming a sexual imaginary for women that is free from women being vicariously connected to a female-coded body/passive object in the sexual exchange. As Potts (2002) has argued, the centering of

sexual power and agency around masculinity has positioned women as requiring sexual ‘completion’ through penetration by the sexual object they lack – the penis/*phallus*. The point of imagining sex women cannot have performed *on* them (or with them) is difficult to access or conceive for many respondents, who cite such imaginings as pointless. This points to a process of phantasmatic policing (Butler, 1990b) that serves to inhibit women’s use of imagination to escape embodied, receptive feminine sexual roles to which their subjectivities must always be tethered (Potts, 2002). There is something of a null space, or at least uncharted space, into which women venture by imagining sexual exchanges that do not involve (and thus do not LIMIT) them. From here, creation of new sexual possibilities and kinds can be conceived.

There is substantial material in the analyzed texts positioning men’s sexuality – and specifically their interest in FF eroticism – as straightforward, essential, and above all, *normal* (Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). The accompanying confusion and interrogation of women’s other, abject, unfathomable sexuality (in this case, evidenced by their interest in MM eroticism) is a device through which men’s sexuality is stabilized, positioning women’s sexuality as the bizarre, constitutive “outside” of normal (Butler, 1990a; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). This discourse persists despite the contradictory “turnabout is fair play” argument that positions women’s use of MM eroticism as normal *because* it is made parallel with men’s *normal* uses of FF erotica; women’s use is variously located – sometimes in paradoxical ways – in the service of masculine sexual primacy.

This paradox is mirrored in how women’s use is both invisible – in that very little academic treatment of the subject is available (exceptions include Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017; Salmon & Symons, 2004; Shamooin, 2004; Marks, 1996) which relegates it to a phenomenon outside the institutional and sexological “norm,” yet also made extremely *public* via the exhaustive interrogation of the subject online, where women are repeatedly called to defend *why*

they are drawn to the medium despite the existence of much online discussion of those very explanations. This simultaneous marginalization and interrogation relates to the centering of masculine sexuality as the accepted scientific sexual *normal* (Potts, 2002), around which women's sexuality is defined and understood as a discursive *outside*, an abnormal *other* (Butler, 1990a; Farvid & Braun, 2013a; 2013b; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

Yet this very need for repetition and re-examination points to the fragile discursive matrix that props up masculine superiority and dominance – it must be continually maintained in the language in order to shore up the cracks and inconsistencies in the construct (Butler, 1990a; Harvey & Gill, 2011a; 2011b). This explains some of the paradoxical logic that emerges when discussing women's sexuality. Women's sexualities are aligned with men's when it is beneficial (such as in the *turnabout is fair play* discourse identified herein), but are also used to constitute a (re)stabilizing “out-group” when they expose “cracks” in the heterosexual matrix that threaten patriarchal masculinity's structural integrity. For example, if women's interest in male homoeroticism raises the possibility that *men* might be interested in or empathize directly with its appeal as well, this threatens to introduce feminization and homophobic threat to the masculinity construct, thus requiring frantic containment efforts (Butler, 1990a, 2004).

On this shifting ground of variable normalization and abjection, women struggle to inhabit subject positions that both fit their experiences and permit them safe harbor from oppression or exclusion from the accepted norm (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Thus, while many women show awareness and resentment of the explanatory double-standard, they nonetheless accede to the pressure to situate themselves within the permissible realm of behaviour. Thus, many of the women itemize varying rationales and motives to justify and normalize their use, while also pointing out that no explanation should be needed. Their awareness of this pressure, whether internally produced or externally demanded, indicates the

operational presence of a restricting force acting upon women's sexuality in order to contain it. *What* is being contained is often telling and speaks to the protection of toxic masculinity and heterosexism: as we have already seen, containment occurs where use of the medium expands women's sexuality beyond the postfeminist contract (Farvid & Braun, 2013a, 2013b; Gill, 2009; McRobbie, 2007), or where it threatens men's sexual access to women or the integrity of their masculine sexual dominance or gender identity (Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

Thus, the discussions outlining women's reasons for using MM erotic media show this tension – at both the general and specific level of analysis. Broadly, the analytic themes can be categorized into two overarching groups based on the discursive actions they perform, and the net beneficiaries of these actions; some serve, on balance, to stabilize dominant masculinity and heteronorms, while others appear resistant and attempt to claim more space for women's diverse sexualities. Perhaps most crucial to this is the forcible re-insertion of abjected “feminine” qualities into masculine subject positions, an act that both threatens and expands masculinity while broadening the sexual possibilities accessible to women and non-males (Butler, 1990a; 2004).

On the specific level, when examining narrow themes of reasoning, evidence of tension between dominant norms/patriarchal institutions and women's desire for room to expand their subjecthood is frequent. Thus, in a sense, the categorization of the themes as either benefitting versus disrupting patriarchal discourses is a bit simplistic and serves more as an organizational tool than an attempt to establish clean categories. Each theme contains an echo of the tension between dominant and subversive discourses, and this process in itself is evidence of the topic's destabilizing potential for dominant patriarchal and heteronormative constructs (e.g. “normative” heterosexuality, patriarchal masculinity).

Explanations that stabilize the status quo.

Turnabout is fair play. The most openly permissive stance toward women's use of MM erotic media is referenced by the discourse of *turnabout is fair play*, or the idea that because men are accepted via a common-sense social consensus to *naturally* enjoy FF eroticism, that women's presumably parallel enjoyment of MM eroticism is "only fair." The academic question of men's enjoyment of the FF genre is neatly sidestepped in this argument; it is treated as an established part of our culture's knowledge base, and as an essential *fact* about men (though note Jackson & Gilbertson, 2009, did see it as a question worthy of study). In this way, men's sexuality is positioned as a baseline norm against which women's sexuality is scrutinized and categorized – a pattern noted by both Potts (2002) and Tiefer (2004) in their work on gender and (hetero)sexuality discourses. This scrutiny, however, stumbles upon a logical parallel where women's use of MM erotic media *cannot* be conceptualized as strange or problematic (particularly the pornographic video forms) because to do so would open the door for a counter-critique of men's use of FF erotic media. As a result, women's use of MM erotic media is positioned as *normal* and *permissible*, on the basis that it is inequitable to pathologize and/or deny women access to a sexual behavior that men engage in as well.

This common-sense equivalency obscures questions of whether being a consumer of these media have similar implications for men versus women as consumers – a question also raised by Ramsay (2017) in his investigation of women's reactions to gay pornography. For example, it could be argued that men's consumption of FF pornographic materials continues to perpetuate the exploitation and abuse of women in the pornographic industry, while the working conditions for male porn actors in the MM porn industry could be different (e.g., less exploitative, less socially-stigmatizing, less degrading). As such, men's encouragement of women's engagement with MM eroticism can be seen to serve a stabilizing function for their own consumption of a

media product that has been argued to produce significantly negative outcomes for women porn actresses – if women are doing something considered to be equivalent, they will be less likely to call out men’s behavior (even if the behavior is fundamentally different from a socio-political standpoint).

The encouragement of women’s use of MM erotic media also links to the postfeminism discourse described in detail by Gill (2008; 2009) and McRobbie (2007), as well as Farvid and Braun (2013a; 2013b). This discourse is a corruption of a liberal feminist ideology that argues for women’s sexual liberation and freedom, and a return to an unfettered and “natural” state of pure curiosity, play, and pleasure (the artifice of a pre-discursive “wild state” of sexuality is outlined by Foucault, 1978). This liberal philosophy, which also has elements of sexual essentialism and negation of the tangible effects of dominant discourse and cultural zeitgeist in shaping women’s sexual subjectivities, is appropriated by the discourse of postfeminism, which proffers the surface rewards promised by liberal feminism (sexual adventure, pleasure, fun), but strips it of the true liberty that might arise from a genuinely woman-centered sexual “freedom” (which Foucault, 1978, might argue to be an impossible dream). That is, women’s sexual enjoyment from these “adventures” is firmly contained within a presumptive heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990a; 2004) where the male partner is the beneficiary of her increased permissiveness, curiosity, sexual receptivity, and pleasure, as these are leveraged to increase men’s sexual access to the woman’s body (Potts, 2002). This discourse is pervasive in the analysis of reasons why women use MM erotic media, as multiple themes indicate that women’s use is normalized only insofar as it facilitates (or at the very least, does not interfere with) men’s potential sexual access to the women users.

Hyper-straight hypothesis. The dominant heteronormative discourse is deployed to position women’s interest in MM eroticism as a signifier of being “hyper-straight.” Here it is

argued that enjoyment of MM eroticism by women (and FF eroticism by men) is a natural extension of being solely attracted to the “opposite” gender, and partially motivated by aversion and disgust at viewing erotic materials containing members of one’s own gender. This justification invokes homophobic discourses – whether explicitly or implicitly – as commenters use their interest in FF or MM to establish evidence of their “extra straightness” alongside their disgust at the suggestion that they might be attracted to the members of their own gender depicted in heterosexual pornography.

Again, men commenters leverage this argument with their own FF pornography use as a basis of normalizing the women’s use of the MM genre, which again serves to strengthen the position of men’s (cis-het) sexuality as natural, common-sense, and straightforward (Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). Women are permitted to conditionally borrow from this normative locus, while men can deploy the discourse to demonstrate their heterosexuality by affirming women’s use as “healthy and normal – just like my own.”

This argument is at odds with sexological and theoretical research on the fluidity of women’s sexuality (Chivers et al., 2004; Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Diamond, 2009) as well as (to a degree) Kinsey and colleagues’ (1948; 1953) seminal works on men and women’s sexuality as existing on a dimensional spectrum; however, some of these works themselves have been deployed to negate the sexual subjectivities of individuals on the basis of their behavior or physiology, and can be said to employ reductionist reasoning to simplify sexuality (e.g. Bailey, 2009). While Kinsey and Chivers’ teams each gave credence to the subjective reports of their participants, both works tended to position biological arousal as more indicative of “true” or “natural” sexual preference than one’s own understanding of their sexual desires. Thus, while it could be suggested that the internet commenters in this study are deploying “hyper-straightness” as a defense against hidden desires for members of their own gender, it can be counter-argued

that modern sexology violates the conscious will of individuals to make sense of their own sexuality in favor of bio-physiological “evidence” thought to reveal the secret reality of people’s desires. Thus, to presume that commenters are hyperbolizing or falsifying their sexual identities against the *essential sexual orientation* of their bodies is somewhat problematic, too.

Internalized misogyny. Themes connected to internalized misogyny and dislike of feminine representations were common. This is linked to the hyper-straight hypothesis, to the extent that the wish for removal of women from the erotic materials appears motivated by homophobic disgust, and a wish to avoid visual exposure to women’s bodies and genitals. The reviewed comments contain discursive elements of both homophobia and internalized misogyny, as the appearance of women’s genitals are cited as the source of the viewer’s disgust. Cultural discomfort with the appearance and exposure of women’s genitals is documented by authors such as Schick and Mullinax (Mullinax et al., 2015; Schick et al., 2011), who observe that women in particular are socialized to feel discomfort and aversion to women’s genitals in general – including their own. This socialized aversion has significant implications for women’s sexual subjectivities, including the discouragement of sex education and knowledge production about women’s bodies, obscuration and suppression of the physical mechanisms of pleasure and desire for women, and vulnerability and dependence of women on men as sexual controllers and experts (Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004; Tolman, 1991, 2012). Thus, in a sense, the diversion of women’s erotic interest away from genuine representations of women’s sexuality may serve to promote masculine centrality in the sexual scripts of women, leaving men as beneficiaries of women’s continued focus on phallic dominance (Potts, 2002).

However, beyond the visual representation of genitalia, deeper dissatisfaction with feminine representation in erotic works was evident, particularly among the commenters on Yaoi

fan sites. These women indicated that they frequently found the women characters in Yaoi and other forms of manga to be distasteful – either whiny, pathetic, weak, and shallow, or “bitchy,” manipulative, calculating, and evil. Commenters also acknowledged self-consciously that the same qualities, when portrayed by men in Yaoi manga, were instead interpreted as acceptable and endearing, which perhaps suggests the presence of these qualities in a female body is what the commenters found problematic. This dissonance could be a product of the fatigue women feel at the restrictive representations of feminine subjectivity available to them (Butler, 1990a; 2004; Potts, 2002).

While this could be understood as evidence of internalized misogyny, some commenters took this a step further and articulated clear dissatisfaction with the sexual and characterological subjectivities offered to women in various artistic works. These commenters, able to separate out their distaste for the represented characters from a dislike of *all women* or all things feminine, recognized that the actual problem was in the two-dimensional and stereotypical portrayal of all of the women as either weak, vapid, and helpless, or bitchy and evil. These commenters yearned for the inclusion of women characters in media with whom they could identify – three-dimensional women who encapsulate the diversity of ‘feminine’ ways of being. We may understand male homoerotic media as a refuge from, but perhaps not a satisfying or complete solution to, the ubiquitous (mis)representation of women’s subjecthood across all forms of media. However, as will be discussed later, the improvement of feminine representation still constitutes a reverse-discourse; thus, the other side of the coin involves the insertion of the abject feminine into the represented subjectivities of male characters and actors. Only in this way can the abjected qualities be re-inserted into *human* subjecthood – and with them, the women upon whom the abject has been inappropriately inscribed.

Jealousy: Insecure women need sexual fantasy alternatives. Further evidence of the operation of misogynistic discourses that function to divide and disenfranchise women from themselves and other women can be seen in the explanatory constructs that cite jealousy and insecurity as driving motivations for women's consumption of MM erotic media. This explanation touches back on the *lonely losers* discourse in serving to array women's sexual subjectivities on a hierarchy of desirability to men – desirable women do not *need* to resort to MM erotic media because they are desired by *real* men, a condition always positioned as preferable and indicative of advanced status. The women who do not satisfy this condition – the *lonely losers* – are thus argued to palliate their unhappiness and jealousy about their exclusion from sexual desirability by consuming exclusively male erotic content. In doing so, it is argued by some commenters that the women can eliminate hypothetical competition for the objects of their affection – as the men's gay sexuality (by the function of heteronormative primacy) may not “count” as sexual competition or proprietary/sexual “ownership” in the minds of readers who perceive heterosexual commitment/marriage to be the primary locus of sexual possession of another. In other words – much as heterosexual men do not consider lesbian women to be “taken” by their lesbian partners in their sexual fantasies, so too may women discount the validity of gay men's sexual and romantic commitments.

As in the *lonely losers* discourse, the positioning of women users of MM eroticism as ostensibly undesirable “beta” women motivated by jealousy and inadequacy props up hegemonic discourses that organize men and women into power and privilege hierarchies on the basis of masculinity-serving qualities (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Hodge, 2018; Potts, 2002). The primary designator of women's value in this hierarchy is sexual desirability to men, and within this hierarchy women must compete continually to be awarded the prize of male attention and approval (Fahs, 2011, Potts, 2002). Women who “fail” at this competition are marginalized and

ridiculed and are presumed to be consumed with jealousy and longing for the lost masculine validation their “inferior status” confers upon them.

Acknowledgement that women’s desirability and sexual subjecthood may exist separate from their status as objects desired by men is entirely absent from such arguments. For example, the possibility that the reader does not desire a sexual relationship with (or sexual objectification by) men is not considered, excepting instances where the user is an identified lesbian (and even so, while the lesbian consumer may escape the presumption of *wanting* male sexual attention, she does not escape positioning as an object of male sexual titillation). Women who are too young to be identified as potential sexual objects are granted conditional, tongue-in-cheek permission to engage with the materials as a developmental stopgap measure until they reach sexual maturity and (presumably) take their designated place in the hierarchy of women’s sexual subjecthood. Women who do not have – or prioritize finding – some male partner to validate their sexuality are presumed not to meet any man’s subjective threshold for sexual desirability – whether because they are too old, too fat, too ugly, disabled, or otherwise *damaged* (Fahs, 2011; Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Women’s volitional engagement in this process of negotiation never enters into the equation. That women might prefer solitary sexual activity; erotic media; women, non-binary, or trans partners; or the products of their own creative imaginings appears unconceivable, or at least difficult for the commenters to access.

Postfeminist self-improvement. Women’s process of negotiating their subjecthood in the desirability matrix is well-researched in literature on post-feminist discourses and sexuality (Fahs, 2011; Farvid & Braun, 2013a, 2013b; Frith, 2015; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). In addition to their corporeal attributes and learned embodiment of femininity, women are granted the opportunity to increase their sexual capital as objects of male desire via the adoption of a repertoire of man-pleasing sexual tricks, tips, and techniques designed to heighten men’s sexual

pleasure and arousal (Barker, Gill, & Harvey, 2018; Gill, 2009; Harvey & Gill 2011a, 2011b). A number of commenters cite the potential value of MM erotic media as tutorial manuals for enhancing men's pleasure. As articulated by Potts (2002) and Fahs (2011), the appropriate role for women in heterosexual scripts is as a passive, accommodating, pleasing, but ultimately sexually inexperienced and clueless receptacle for men's desire and gratification. As such, women are socialized toward sexual illiteracy, and are presumed to be innocent and in need of instruction and tutoring in the ways of male sexual mechanics. In contrast, men are discursively positioned as "sexperts" who innately possess carnal expertise and mastery that women lack (Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Potts, 2002) – thus providing a means by which men may condition and shape their women partners to accommodate their sexual preferences.

What better place to turn than MM erotic media for an unfettered, "untrained" woman hoping to increase her sexual literacy and "capital?" Absent of clueless and passive women who lack sexual knowledge, MM eroticism represents skilled men who adopt the actively pleasing, skilled, and effective techniques that modern, "liberated" women are encouraged to master (Farvid & Braun, 2013b; Farvid, Braun & Rowney, 2017; Frith, 2015; Gill, 2008, 2009; McRobbie, 2007). Presumably inspired by possession of the same physiological "equipment" they are tasked with exciting, men are thought to inherently *know* what will maximally please them and thus be able to demonstrate this through sex with other men. Women are encouraged by several of the commenters to use the media not for their own gratification, but instead to attend to and reproduce these pleasuring techniques and tricks in order to attract and "keep" the sexual attention and fidelity of male partners (Farvid & Braun, 2006; Gurevich et al., 2017; Machin & Thornborrow, 2003). In other words, as elaborated by Harvey and Gill (2011a, 2011b), the women are articulated pressure to continually hone their sexual entrepreneurship skills in order to increase their socio-relational capital. As such, both gay male sexuality and women's sexual

development are given conditional legitimacy in exchange for their deployment (and containment) as an educational vehicle privileging women's potential cis-het male partners.

Explanations that destabilize the status quo.

The noted missing discourses of desire (Fine, 1988; McClelland & Fine 2006; Muise, 2011) in the abovementioned explicatory themes are not *entirely* absent in the online tapestry of meaning-making around women's use of MM erotic media. While they are conspicuously overlooked or sidelined in the context of explanations serving to appropriate women's sexual behavior in the service of male gratification, they are nonetheless raised at various points by commenters who sought to expand the boundaries of women's sexuality, to make space for women's sexual self-exploration, agency, and desire, and to establish their contribution to the production of sexual possibilities and kinds. These attempts to create space are often plagued by re-intrusions of dominant discursive constraints and power structures; the confinement of women's efforts to expand their turf can be seen in the "fringe" status of slash fan fiction and Yaoi, both of which are marginalized, ridiculed, and relegated to out-of-the-way "safe spaces" well clear of the public eye (Jamison, 2013). It is likely not by accident that the more often male-produced, mainstream gay pornographic representations are afforded greater permission and tolerance than women-authored slash fanfiction and Yaoi; both the consumers and creators of the latter two media are derided, pathologized, and infantilized by the online community. Yet it is in slash fiction and Yaoi specifically that much of the important work of expansion is occurring – in engagement with these media women are able to re-author dominant representations of sexual kinds, and re-allocate the distribution of sexual power, privilege, and subjectivity.

The presence of the missing discourse of desire. There are a few instances of women making unqualified declarations of their desire for MM eroticism, but these were relatively rare throughout the body of the online commentary. In these few comments, women made simple,

direct reference to their enjoyment of MM eroticism in much the way white cis-het men are free to make unqualified statements of “fact” around their sexual desires and preferences. However, the vast remainder of the comments touching on women’s self-identified desire or liking of the genre loop back into itemizing of motivations, rationalizations, pathology, and containment. The presence of this looping narrative demonstrates these women’s compulsory need to justify and explain, to establish their sexuality within *acceptable* boundaries. (Farvid & Braun, 2014)

In these confessional statements, women commenters’ agency and self-possessed sexuality slips away, barely glimpsed, beneath a sea of negotiation with dominant discourses and power structures – whether these be reductionist sexological or biophysiological theories (Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004), dominant hetero-relational discourses (Butler, 1990a; Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002), or any of the other justifications outlined in this dissertation. Some of this cyclical process of resistance-and-justification occurs in a self-conscious manner, where the women appear conscious of the double-standard and resentful of the pressure to justify themselves. However, this awareness is rarely sufficient to prevent them from engaging in the process anyway – this is indicative of the potency of dominant gender and sexuality discourses stacked against them. Even when it is recognized, the women appear bound to articulate the justifications.

The (self-identified) veteran consumers and authors of MM erotic media are more likely to be aware of, and fatigued by, this justification process, and are the most vocal proponents of owning their interest in the genre and foregoing the need to rationalize it. These authors, perhaps owing to their deep immersion and participation in the work (whether conscious or not) of deconstructing and rewriting dominant sexual discourses, appear more likely to communicate active awareness of, and intent to, disrupt and renegotiate the boundaries of the sexual *normal*. These women commenters and authors work both through their direct discussions and their artistic works to create sexualities that transcend the established gender and sexuality

binaries/matrices (Butler, 1990a, 2004). While some of them deny this sort of “political” motivation for what they do, the possibilities they create and/or represent through their works open the way for additional sexual subject positions for humans of all gender and sexual stripes.

The threat this disruptive work poses to the heterosexual and masculine-dominant *status quo* potentially explains the observed discursive patterns of ridicule, marginalization, containment, and appropriation which diffuse the potential for these works to upset the “natural order” of sexuality (as defined through knowledge bases including biology, sexology, psychology, medicine, and socio-cultural “common sense”). Yet even amidst these containment strategies, the possibilities of the opening of space for other sexual kinds remain.

Male homoerotic media does not objectify women. There are no women to oppress in MM erotic media. The very removal and absence of women in MM homoerotic media frees women viewers of all the socio-sexual baggage they carry in the heterosexual matrix – the positioning as an *object* or an acted-upon rather than a *subject* or agent, the compulsory passivity, naivete, receptiveness, fragility, emotionality, and vulnerability that are painted to the construct of *woman* and her sexuality (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Potts, 2002). Absent women cannot be passive, abused, violated, exploited, objectified, idealized, or otherwise represent women’s oppression. Gay pornography is created for the male gaze, but this gaze seeks male objects, not women (Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017; Shauer, 2005). Thus, it is a gaze much less fraught when women attempt to take it up for themselves – there is far less potential for gay pornography to evoke empathetic pain, humiliation, guilt, shame, or diminishment of women’s humanity (Marks, 1996; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). Yaoi and Slash go a step further in that women themselves are crafting – at least in written and artistic/drawn form – a true “woman’s” gaze, finding a voice and an outlet for women’s desires *relatively* freed from dominant heterosexist oppression of the feminine, a gaze that unabashedly seeks men as objects of *women’s* visual and

erotic pleasure. With Yaoi and slash fiction, the desiring gaze need not be borrowed from gay men; these media provide glasses that fit the wearer even more closely. This oppression can still creep in via negatively-portrayed women supporting characters (as discussed previously), as well as through the satirically or hyperbolically feminized gay male figure (e.g. the *uke* in Yaoi). However, the engagement with LGBT/queer politics evident in many of these communities serves to break down the problematic (cis)gender and (hetero)sexual binaries rampant in mainstream media genres; thus, homophobic and transphobic ridicule directed at gay or feminine men is relatively rare among members of the slash and Yaoi fan bases. These men instead are received as “cute,” endearing, and sexually desirable examples of a different masculine *kind*. The importance of this diverse masculine kind will be revisited further on.

Freedom from body image comparisons/anxiety. This discourse can be considered a companion to the jealousy and insecurity discourse discussed earlier, in that women’s socialized pressure to compete with other women for men’s attention is recognized as a motivation for interest in MM eroticism. However, in this version of the rationale, the focus tends toward a more positive framing of MM erotic media as a “safe space” for women, where they can escape the emotional distress and cognitive dissonance of their habitual comparisons with other women’s bodies. Literature on women’s body image dissatisfaction has long implicated self-comparisons with media images of “ideal beauty” in the development of psychological difficulties, particularly eating disorders, among women (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, Quinn, & Zoino, 2006; Stice, Gau, Rohde, & Shaw, 2017) and body image insecurities have also been shown to be a significant factor in the inability of many women to tolerate and enjoy heterosexual pornography (Ashton et al., 2018; Keihani, 1998; Kyrölä, 2014; Senn, 1992;1993; Siegel, 1997). The porn industry’s reproduction (and exaggeration) of the mainstream media’s perfectionistic, colonialized feminine beauty ideals forces these self-comparisons on the woman viewer, who is expected to somehow identify with

women to whom they may bear very little resemblance. Rather than being able to “step into” this idealized feminine avatar, many women instead engage in a series of mental comparisons between the porn starlet’s physical attributes and their own, typically “coming up short” on the exaggerated feminine attributes. This leads to the implication of failure and dejection – emotional consequences with decidedly detrimental effects on sexual desire and agency.

MM eroticism sidesteps this problem through a mechanism of simple subtraction. Without any women with whom to compare themselves unfavorably, women viewers are free to engage with a variety of sexual and erotic representations unburdened by body image insecurities or internalization of harmful, perfectionistic sexual desirability ideals. This freedom creates space for a less complicated kind of sexual self-exploration and engagement. However, it is important to note that this space may only be uncomplicated for cisgender women, as genderqueer, nonbinary, or trans folx may continue to suffer from gender dysphoria and body image insecurities because of the emphasis on, and normalization of, representations of cisgender sexuality.

Authenticity of pleasure. The presence of multiple sources of dysphoria for women watching porn actresses of the same gender (e.g., body image insecurities, sexual threat, and vicarious oppression) is compounded by the related problem of authenticity (Ashley, 2016). Several commenters indicated throughout the online texts that they gravitated toward MM eroticism because they are repelled by the inauthenticity or “fakeness” of heterosexual pornography, with particular emphasis on the artificiality of the women porn actresses (Ashley, 2016; Gurevich et al., 2017), a concern which was raised by Neville (2015) and Ramsay (2017) as well. This dissatisfaction with the representation of femininity was reminiscent of Yaoi readers’ previously discussed dissatisfaction with the way women are depicted in mainstream anime and manga.

Within the analytical theme of authenticity, commenters were seen to be partially focused on the inauthenticity of the porn actress's enjoyment of the sexual activities in which they participate. It appears extremely difficult for women watching heterosexual pornography to "suspend disbelief" in the way viewers typically do when consuming fictional media, and commenters demonstrated a keen discomfort with the idea that the women actresses are not truly enjoying the sexual encounters (Ashley, 2016; Attwood, 2005; 2007; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). This discomfort is understandable in that it co-occurs with the viewer's potential body image insecurities, with their bearing witness to other women being objectified, and with concern for the socio-political wellbeing of the women they see on screen. These discomforts may hit too close to home for many women, as research indicates that a significant proportion of women struggle with enjoyment of (and pain during) sex, and that "inauthentic pleasure" or "faking orgasm" is a prevalent phenomenon among women (Frith, 2015; Thomas, Stelzel, & Lafrance, 2017). Indeed, Thomas and her colleagues (2017) uncovered some disturbing implications around women's motivations for faking orgasm, in that it appears to serve as a "safe" strategy for women to end unwanted or coerced sexual activity. Thus, it is likely that women dissatisfied with the authenticity of women's pleasure in pornography are articulating a desire to see an advancement of true sexual pleasure, active sexual consent, and agency, not only for porn actresses, but for themselves as well. Given that representations of women "genuinely" enjoying sex may not be a high priority for the pornographic industry, it makes intuitive sense that women would turn to a medium such as MM eroticism that offers, at least, a more convincing act, if not true sexual pleasure and enjoyment.

Several commenters extended their dissatisfaction with the women's acting to criticism of their "fake" or "artificial" appearances. Women in the porn industry are selected for hyperbolized physical markers of what maps onto our social construct of feminine "beauty" and "sexual

attractiveness.” They tend to be young women with clear skin, slender builds, small waists, large breasts and hips, and a virtual lack of visible body hair. These attributes are further exaggerated through use of lingerie, high heels, heavy make-up, wigs or hair extensions, false eyelashes, and even extreme procedures such as anal bleaching, surgical breast augmentation, vaginoplasty, and liposuction. These hyperbolic representations construct a particular archetype of performed, impossible femininity (Butler, 1990a, 2004) that could be expected to evoke dissonance in many women viewers.

Numerous netizens in the analysis (men and women) commented negatively on the inauthenticity and artificiality of porn actresses’ appearances, setting them in a category separate from “real women.” However, as Serrano (2007) raised in her discussion of the public’s reaction to (and obsession with) the feminization and authenticity of trans women, the very construct of femininity is one that is associated with artifice, manipulation, and unnaturalness. Thus, women in general (whether cisgender or trans, straight or queer) must continually (and impossibly) strive to demonstrate their authenticity within an impossible standard that is partially defined *by* inauthenticity. We see this phenomenon here wherein women netizens define themselves as authentic in comparison with pornographic actresses that are abjected as “artificial” and “fake,” yet who are at the same time positioned as hyperbolic exemplars of a feminine sexual ideal (Butler, 1990a, 2004). A similar phenomenon is seen in the pressure for women consumers to utilize cosmetics in order to appear “more natural” than they would appear without make-up – the paradox here is evident, as women who use make-up in a stylistic fashion that “over” emphasizes femininity are positioned as fake or flamboyant, while women who do not use make-up at all are positioned as dumpy and ugly rather than “natural.” As such, “naturalness” for women is an aspirational impossibility, as the conditions through which feminine naturalness must be achieved require use of a precise yet ill-defined amount of artificial augmentation (Butler, 1990a, 2004;

Tiefer, 2004). Perhaps one of the discomforts of mainstream pornography for women, then, is the visibility of the hyperbolic excess of femininity, and the discomfort and dissonance this representational paradox may evoke in women viewers.

More relational or romantic than straight porn. This discourse draws heavily on the ‘have/hold’ discourse (Hollway, 1984) and the common assumption that women are more sexually responsive to eroticism embedded in a romantic or emotionally-centered context. This assumption is derived from the premise that women are socialized as sexual gatekeepers, and to be sexually “chaste,” with the ‘have/hold’ discourse offering women conditional permission to “let down their gates” if sexual activity is occurring in the context of a loving, committed relationship. The have/hold discourse poses its own restrictions on sexual behavior in that it contains women’s sexuality within an emotionally committed and exclusive (hetero)sexual dyad, and takes a less permissive stance toward casual sex, solitary sexual behavior, and non-monogamy (Farvid & Braun, 2014).

The strategic containment function of the have/hold discourse (which is similar in many ways to the conditional freedoms of postfeminism) plays out in the internet commentaries around MM eroticism. Many commenters opine that women’s use of MM eroticism is a remedy to the loveless, emotionally-sterile, promiscuous sexuality of mainstream heterosexual pornography, with gay pornography offering more visual displays of tenderness, affection, and genuine mutuality and caring than straight porn (and with some complaining that even gay porn is lacking in this department), and with Yaoi and slash fiction often involving sexuality in the context of a romantic and/or dramatic plot. However, other commenters rebel against this containment and indicate that they desire access to eroticism free from the constraints of romance and emotional commitment, noting that the romance or plot elements interfere with their enjoyment of the material.

The one unifying theme emerging from these discussions of porn actors' corporeal qualities and emotional range of expression is that the majority of women commenters find themselves faced with a lack of satisfying representations of sexuality (*and* relational dynamics) available. The women of the slash fiction community in particular have taken this matter into their own hands, and have been working for decades to increase access to more diverse representations of sexuality, and while their focus has been on expanding and re-writing male characters in popular culture, the function of this act in breaking down the dominant gender binary is a quiet revolution.

Developing a “female gaze.” Given that women are likely to be discomfited for a variety of reasons with the way women are represented by mainstream erotic media, it is logical that male homoerotic media (with its definitional absence of sexually objectified women) permits women to more easily inhabit the desiring gaze, thus disrupting the process of problematizing gendered embodiment and authenticity (for women). While a few commenters problematized the objectification of male actors (at least in pornography), which again produced a sense of dissonance and dissatisfaction with the erotic representations available to them, many of the women commenters indicated that the absence of women facilitated their ability to enjoy erotic media free from the emotional complications of their own sexual objectification.

If it is, in fact, easier for some women to adopt a desiring gaze when not directed at members of their own gender, then MM erotic media provides a fertile substrate for cultivation of a *female gaze*. Netizens in the analysis frequently commented on the double-standard of attractiveness in heterosexual pornography – while the women tend to exemplify impossible beauty standards, the men who appear in pornography are physically unremarkable (with the typical exception of the size of their penises) (Gurevich et al., 2017). This uneven emphasis on women's beauty over men's again speaks to the presence of the objectifying male gaze – the men

in pornography are not intended as the objects of desire, but as subjects with whom the male viewer can identify and inhabit phantasmatically for sexual gratification (Marks, 1996; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). The men in pornography serve as “surrogates” for the viewer, a role that enhances men’s comfort and relieves feelings of sexual threat and homophobia, but which – as per many of the analyzed comments – leaves women with very little to enjoy.

Male actor aesthetics. It is possible that the very dissatisfaction of women with the men of heterosexual pornography is, in itself, evidence of the existence of a *female gaze* – just one that is very rarely accommodated. Women commenters dissected the physicality of the men in heterosexual pornography citing many of the same complaints that men tend to level against women’s physiques – they are criticized for being too hairy, too fat, too ugly, and too sloppy for the women’s preferences. Similar processes of dissection and classification of male desirability were observed by Neville (2015) and Ramsay (2017) in their investigation of women’s use of gay pornography. However, in all cases, these criticisms read as gentle compared to the onslaught of verbal abuse and harassment reserved for women porn starlets, and for women in general. Indeed, some of the commentary read as almost humorous, suggesting that the very engagement of women in the process of dissecting men’s attractiveness is something unexpected or novel.

Nonetheless, the *female gaze* appears to place men in a similar – if less institutionally-entrenched – double-bind as women, in that the men in pornography also appear to struggle to find “acceptable ground,” and are variously critiqued for exhibiting exaggerated masculinity (muscles too big, too much hair, too large a body) and for exaggerated femininity, as many women who indicated that they do *not* like gay pornography explained that they find the femininity of some gay men porn actors unappealing.

This dissatisfaction does not hold true across all of the commentary, however, with a number of netizens indicating that they appreciate and celebrate the physical, cultural, and sexual diversity of the men in gay pornography. This pattern of diverse responses to men's bodies was noted by Neville (2015) and Ramsay (2017) in their investigations as well. Several users in the present study cited diversity as one of the primary attractions of the medium, and in this we can see that perhaps the *female gaze* has the potential to see and appreciate diversity traditionally passed over by the *male gaze* (though not – as it would appear – the *gay male gaze*, and perhaps it is the borrowing of this diverse means of looking that affords the *female gaze* this expanded visual range). The merging of the social constructs of masculinity and femininity in MM eroticism and particularly in slash fiction will be discussed further on, with specific attention paid to the implications of this for the erosion of toxic masculinity and the (re)construction of additional masculine (and feminine) kinds.

Expansion of masculinity. The lack of diverse male characters in mainstream media and mainstream pornography is a superficial layer of a much deeper problem identified in the online commentary, and that is the lack of satisfying representations of masculine (and, indeed, *human*) gender and sexual kinds. Netizens spoke to the rigid, stereotyped masculinity roles portrayed by heterosexual men in pornography, who were observed to show little emotional range or presence, little diversity with regard to sexual scripting or sexual power dynamics, and embodiment of an “average Joe” type of masculinity in order to facilitate greater identification with the sexual protagonist for straight male viewers.

Women commenters elaborated on the role of gay pornography in offering additional options for viewers with regard to the kinds of masculinity portrayed in the erotic media. Slash fiction and Yaoi offer similar (and perhaps even further) expansion of these portrayals in that these fantasy media permit for the expansion of their characters beyond the traits embodied by

human film actors (and, in some cases, expansion beyond human or even living beings entirely!). Many women consumers of gay pornography noted that the availability of additional kinds of masculinity not only enhanced the visual range of diversity, but also emotional range and gendered and sexual power diversity. For example, many women noted that they perceived gay pornography to be more loving and romantic, and that they experienced the sexual and emotional connection between the actors as more genuine and pleasurable, allowing the women to connect more deeply with the materials.

Within the internet commentary and academic works (Shamoon, 2004) on male homoerotic media and the breaking of the gender and heteronormative sexual power dynamic, a re-intrusion of the dominant discourse is evident in the attempt to characterize the submissive or “bottom” characters in a male-male power dynamic as “actually women,” or as projections of women into male bodies to facilitate women’s ability to identify with the male sexual object. This discursive strategy is deployed to (re)stabilize the dominant binary gender matrix, and to curb the potential for these expanded masculine kinds to break down the binary and the global power *status quo* it supports. The seriousness of the threat posed to the binary is evident, for example, in the punitive reaction of the Chinese government to *dan mei* authors – if the works were indeed merely flights of naïve, childish fantasy with no potential to destabilize the status quo, it is likely the Chinese government would consider this subcultural literary genre of little consequence (Ren, 2015).

Indeed, the “intrusion” of the feminine into men characters – rather than functioning as a superficial tack-on, or a simple representation of a “man in a dress” or a “woman in men’s clothing” – serves an important representational function. The characters (in slash particularly) are not “ruined” or even altered by the presence of the feminine, and it can thus be seen that the feminine object was *there all along* in each male character. Without the woman foil onto whom

all vulnerability, weakness, nurture, tenderness, emotion, and “irrationality” can be projected, we realize these qualities not as essential afflictions of womanhood, but instead as part of the entire spectrum of human experience (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Serrano, 2007). A consequence of this intrusion of “feminized” human qualities into masculinity is the undermining of the hegemonic male construct, as masculinity’s position of dominance in human culture is established via the projection of anything not controlled, powerful, individualistic, and self-interested onto the feminine “outside” of masculinity.

Potential for gender cross-identification. Given that the process of breaking down the matrix of patriarchal sexuality and binarized gender representations in the media is a far-from-complete paradigm shift, women are still left with very few opportunities to identify with characters – and sexual protagonists, in particular – who permit for the taking up of a desiring, agentic, *female gaze* (Marks, 1996; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). Complete, multi-dimensional, and diverse women characters are still a relative rarity in popular culture, and those who are present tend to attract a very vocal backlash from the male viewing audience (see Tran, 2018). Producers of both the mainstream fictional works upon which slash fiction stories are based *and* mainstream heterosexual pornography are well aware that male viewing audiences assume they will be catered to and that their viewpoints and interests will drive the narrative; thus, the creation of mainstream works that do not center men is considered by many production companies to be an unacceptable financial risk.

This leaves women with few options when seeking to immerse themselves in media from an active, agentic standpoint. There have been historically few places in popular media or mainstream pornography for women to identify with *women* who take up and wield sexual power, agency, and control (at least in the absence of simultaneous sexual objectification, character assassination, and/or heavy social sanctions). Thus, a powerful potential option is cross-

identification with male characters who better represent their lived experiences (or the experiences they desire to have) (see Salmon & Symons, 2004). Male homoerotic media provides a unique opportunity for this – the absence of unsatisfying women characters with whom the women may feel compelled to identify could theoretically facilitate an easier route of cross-identification with men, allowing them to immerse themselves in active, agentic fantasies where *they* hold the power, control, and dominance in their sexual relationships (Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). In other words, cross-identification with the men in gay pornography, slash fiction, or Yaoi allows women to assume a desiring, objectifying *female gaze*, in which men actors or characters become the object of *their* sexual desires. Free from the power dynamic complications that the intrusion of heterosexual and gender norms would otherwise impose on them, women commenters articulated the capacity to freely enjoy being aroused by masculine sexuality and men's bodies without the need to accommodate them or *be* with them (and thus become the dominated object) (Marks, 1996; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017).

Butler (1990b) has argued that pornography, as a phantasmatic construct, has always played upon the possibility of escaping the identity referent one is assigned in the “real,” and that constraints limiting women to an “injured party” are a(n ineffective) consequence of patriarchal censorship discourses demanding that women can always only reside in that space – a containment strategy which Butler does not accept as impermeable:

Indeed, if pornography is to be understood as fantasy, as anti-pornography activists almost invariably insist, then the effect of pornography is not to force women to identify with a subordinate or debased position, but to provide the opportunity to identify with the entire scene of debasement, agents and recipients alike, when and if those “positions” are clearly discernible in the actions and landscapes of masturbatory scenes of triumph and humiliation...if the pornographic representation is someone else's fantasy, that of “men” – broadly and ambiguously construed – and if “the woman viewer” is the injured object of that fantasy-turned-action, then women are by her [Andrea Dworkin's] definition never agents of pornographic fantasy. The very possibility of identifying in fantasy with a debased position requires an active and persistent foreclosure of other possible identifications. (Butler, 1990b, p. 193).

To Butler's point, while women may *struggle* to extricate themselves from their socially constructed identity referents in fantasy, they are nonetheless quite capable of doing so, and women's fantasy engagement with male homoerotic media offers compelling proof of such a departure.

A further advantage articulated by commenters was that that gay pornography, slash fiction, and Yaoi offer more equitable or negotiated power dynamics, so that even when power play is represented between the men, it is more evident that this power dynamic is the result of a consensual contract or exchange, and not a coerced or inevitable consequence of the patriarchal discourse that automatically positions the man as the dominant actor in heterosexual exchanges. While a number of the internet commenters framed this "fantasy" identification with men as a "temporary" escape from a presumably permanent condition of embodied female sexual objectification, submission, and powerlessness, Butler (1990b) has eloquently illustrated that the boundaries between the phantasmatic and the real are semantic constructions themselves:

...we can understand the "real" as a variable construction which is always and only determined in relation to its constitutive outside: fantasy, the unthinkable, the unreal. The positivist version of the real will consign all absence to the unreal, even as it relies on that absence to stabilize its own boundaries (Butler, 1990b, p. 185-186).

In a sense, it is precisely the moment in which the phantasmatic assumes the status of the real, that is, when the two become comellingly conflated, that the phantasmatic exercises its power most effectively (Butler, 1990b, p. 186-187).

Fantasy has been crucial to the feminist task of (re)thinking futurity; to that end feminist theory relies on the capacity to postulate through fantasy a future that is not yet (Bartkowski, Haraway). In this formulation, fantasy is not equated with what is not real, but rather with what is not *yet* real, what is possible or futural, or what belongs to a different version of the real (Butler, 1990b, p. 185).

Thus, the distance between women's capacity to imagine taking up sexual power and their *real* ability to do so may be shorter than the commenters presume.

Taking up phallic power without being subjugated by it. Male homoeroticism generally (via omission of women and heterosexuality) removes many of the aforementioned barriers to women's enjoyment of erotic media, including women's body image concerns, ethical concerns that women porn actresses are vulnerable to coercion and exploitation, dissatisfaction with the portrayal of women as passive and artificial sexual objects, the frequent depiction of oppression and abuse of women, and the rigid, ubiquitous depiction of cishet male characters that typify toxic masculinity (Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). This elimination facilitates women consumers' ability to explore and take up sexual subjectivities that may be otherwise unavailable to them in media, and likely in life as well. Via mechanisms of audience cross-identification with men having sex with men, as well as via authorship of these sexual relationships, women are able to take up an agentic female gaze, and to experiment with the relocation and embodiment of the phallus (Marks, 1996; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017; Potts, 2002), the ideological locus of sexual power, primacy, and agency typically (and arbitrarily) inscribed upon the body of men via the symbolic avatar of the penis.

The discursive equation of the phallus with the penis is a mechanism that denies women access to sexual power and agency through the operation of the exclusionary gender binary – as the penis has come to symbolize all sexual power and importance, women are denied these privileges from birth by the absence of this organ.²⁵ Drawing on theories presented by Lacan (1977), Grosz (1994), and Rose (1982), Potts (2002) articulates the function of the symbolic centering of the active, agentic sexual power of the phallus onto a biologically *real* male physiology:

²⁵ There is an exception here regarding trans folx, whose very transcendence of the presumptive physiologic basis of masculinity and femininity warrants a separate discussion which is regrettably beyond the scope of this work. The interested reader might begin with Serrano (2007).

In Lacanian theory, the ‘phallus’ represents the transcendental signifier in the symbolic order (the order of language and power). Power, authority, and control over desire are predicated on the subject’s relation to the phallus (Lacan, 1977). According to Jacqueline Rose (1982), the very sexualization of bodies – that is, the differentiation of bodies into two types, male and female – is not based on anatomical differences per se, but on a division created within/by phallogocentric discourse, a division represented by the supposed presence or absence of the phallus...thus, the penis takes up a privileged position in the sexual economy. ‘The phallus functions to enable the penis to define all (socially recognized) forms of human sexuality. The *differences* between genitals becomes expressed in terms of the presence or absence of a single (male) term’ (Grosz, 1990: 117, italics in original). Women are regarded as castrated because they ‘lack’ the organ which stands in for the phallus, and this representation, in turn, secures the phallic functions of the penis (Grosz, 1990). (Potts, 2002, p. 116-117).

Despite the potency of this entrenched symbolic equivalence of phallic masculinity with sexual power, many of the functions of male homoerotic media cited by women indicate the falsity of the equation of the penis with the phallus. While penile stimulation and penetration are still frequently the focus of male homoeroticism (particularly in gay pornography, but in slash fiction and yaoi as well), there are penises present in the homoerotic exchange which are *not* the active or central focus of the sexual script. Further, as previously discussed, women’s act of authoring slash fiction or Yaoi is, in itself, a taking up of phallic power, and the women frequently utilize this power to decentralize sexual focus from the penis to other locations – other body parts, imaginary alien physiology, or even robotic parts. It is in these acts that we can see the operation of women’s desire – the blossoming of a generative, creative sexual power that expands the realms of sexual possibility for women beyond the restrictive confines of dyadic heterosexuality and female corporeality. By identifying in fantasy with a gay man, or by re-authoring male characters as gay lovers, women can control and direct men’s sexuality in ways that men have traditionally directed and controlled women for their own gratification.

The majority of the internet commenters in this study framed this exercise as a *fantasy* exercise, drawing a clear delineation between the imaginings of women consumers and the presumably restrictive *real* in which their *true* sexuality must play out. However, the boundary

between imaginary and real from a poststructuralist perspective is (as mentioned earlier) more arbitrary than what is presumed within the positivist framework used for most knowledge construction around human sexuality (Butler, 1990b). Human imagination is an integral element of the frameworks we use to understand the world around us, and to understand ourselves. Thus, the first step in expanding the *real* sexual possibilities available to women is the capacity to *imagine* those possibilities, and with male homoeroticism as a catalyst, women indicate that they have been doing just that.

Conclusion

Women's use of pornography has historically received inadequate attention in academia. Earlier investigations on the impact of pornography on women were confined to radical anti-pornography theories and studies of the harmful impacts on women at the hands of men who consume pornography (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 1989; Markowitz, 2002; McNair, 2014; Russell, 1993; Senn, 1992, 1993; Wright & Tokunaga, 2016; Wright et al., 2016) or on women's narrow physiological responses to erotic stimuli (Bailey, 2009; Chivers, 2010; Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Chivers et al., 2004; Diamond, 2009). Feminist poststructuralist and critical scholars have produced theoretical work on how women's sexual subjectivities are restricted, constrained, and silenced within dominant patriarchal discourses, including the invisibility of their sexual desires, and the functioning of postfeminism and neoliberalism in circumscribing sexual freedoms and possibilities (Fahs, 2011; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013a, 2013b; Farvid et al., 2017; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Gill, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). Furthermore, a newer body of qualitative work has focused on how women's have a myriad of positive, negative, and ambivalent *interactions* with pornography – beyond the role of passive reception or victimization previously theorized, these works examine how women are – or are not – using pornography for their own sexual purposes (Ashton et al., 2018; Attwood, 2005; Ciclitira, 2004; Gurevich et al., 2017; Paasonen, 2009; Paasonen et al., 2015; Parvez, 2006; Smith et al., 2013).

Expanding on this new literature, a small handful of investigations have sought to examine women's use of male homoerotic media, a phenomenon that, while not at all new (Bauer, 2013; Penley, 1997) has received very little academic attention in psychological literature. Early exceptions included Salmon and Symons (2004) evolutionary theoretical investigation of women's use of slash fiction, which argued that young women who are

“tomboys” would be most drawn to the genre, and Marks (1996) feminist theoretical work outlining the potential appeal of male homoeroticism for women in providing for a female gaze and freedom from the ethical and oppressive dissonance created for women when they watch heterosexual pornography. To follow these, McCutcheon & Bishop (2015), Neville (2015), and Ramsay (2017) all conducted qualitative studies of women who use male homoerotic media such as gay pornography and slash fiction, and described a number of positive reasons given by the participants *why* they found the genre(s) appealing, as well as a few reasons why they might not.

The present study sought to expand on this work beyond a simple itemization of the reasons given by women and theorists for their use of male homoerotic media, to investigate how women’s use of male homoeroticism is being socially constructed (Burr, 2003) within (and outside) dominant heterosexist and gendered discourses, and to determine what subject positions are (un)available for women who use these media. Using an immersion/crystallization approach (Borkan, 1999) within a feminist poststructuralist discourse analytic epistemological framework (Foucault, 1978; Gavey, 1989; Hook, 2001; Parker, 1992; Weedon, 1997), an extensive investigation of online internet editorial articles and discussion forum comments was conducted to identify discursive themes relevant to women’s use of male homoerotic media, including gay pornography, slash fiction, and Yaoi.

Three overarching thematic categories were identified with this approach as online interlocutors attempted to make phenomenological sense of women’s use of male homoerotic media, and the analysis was organized along these three themes. *Part One: Locating and interrogating women users*, addressed the oft-posed question among netizens: “*Do women like gay pornography/slash/Yaoi?*” While the purpose of the question may appear to be driven by curiosity or a desire for education, the fact that the question was posed over and over across the internet despite previous instances of the conversation being readily available suggests that the

function of the question moved beyond curiosity to an attempt to establish or fix a *consensus* or *generalization* about women as a phenomenological category. In other words, online interlocutors sought to determine (and establish) whether enjoyment of male homoeroticism is an *essential* quality adhering to the discursive construct “woman” – whether it is a *natural female* trait, one that can be understood to arise from a place of ontological fixity (Butler, 1990a, 1990b). As the majority of online commenters made positive statements (either using themselves or others as points of reference) concerning women’s use of male homoeroticism affirming that “women” do indeed use gay pornography, slash fiction, and Yaoi, there emerges a strong discursive theme of essentialization and naturalization of women’s enjoyment of male homoeroticism, despite the existence of women commenters who indicated that they do *not* like gay pornography, slash fiction, or Yaoi. Indeed, discursive ontological construction of normality is a problematic phenomenon as the vast majority of individuals will deviate from constructed properties of any category of normality, a form of false categorization which leaves women with no representative subject position within the social order (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004). This sort of “inside/outside” binary logic obscures the vast diversity of women’s sexuality, and curtails discursive space for ambiguity or growth. Nonetheless, discursive strategies, while powerful, are also fragile and in constant need of shoring up (Foucault, 1978; Butler, 1990a), and women throughout the analysis worked to subvert the constraints and limitations posed by dominant thought to carve out more satisfying subject positions for themselves – both as users and non-users of male homoeroticism.

Part Two: Constructing a (bounded) normative woman user moves beyond the interrogation of whether women (as a generality) enjoy male homoeroticism to interrogate *Who is the woman user?* This part of the analysis revealed the functioning of several permissive and restrictive discourses aimed at constructing an acceptable, bounded, *normal* woman user, and

distinguishing her from abnormal, pathological, or deviant users who are cast as *abject bodies* (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) to stabilize the boundaries of what is constituted as a “normal” woman user (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004). Permissive discourses that determine normative use borrow heavily from dominant heterosexist and postfeminist ideologies that serve to permit women limited sexual freedom, so long as that freedom does not threaten established male patriarchal power and sexual dominance (Fahs, 2011; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013a, 2013b; Farvid et al., 2017; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Gill, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). As such, women’s use of male homoeroticism is permitted and encouraged so long as their behaviour remains casual, silent, private, solitary, and imaginary. A large volume of discursive space was committed to elaborating these constraints. Women were exhorted not to “overuse” male homoeroticism, with overuse defined primarily by whether use occurred to the exclusion of finding and keeping male sexual partners – this overuse was policed (including multiple instances of discursive self-policing – see Foucault, 1978) via the language of addictions and psychopathology, and constructed women who use male homoeroticism to the exclusion of heterosexual socialization and sexuality as addicts and/or mentally ill. The message here was that women who choose male homoeroticism and solitary sexuality over partnered monogamous heterosexuality are deviant and *abject* (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008) – this is consistent with the operation of dominant gender, heterosexual, and coital imperatives that determine women’s social acceptability via their sexually subservience and accessibility to men (Butler, 1990a; Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). Nonetheless, a few of the women commenters were seen to challenge and subvert the addictions and pathology discourses, and maintained that the positive functions of these media for their sexual desire, mental health, and wellbeing outweighed (or at least balanced out) the negative social stigma and judgment incurred by frequent use.

The frequency and intensity of women's use of male homoeroticism was also regulated by the *lonely losers* discourse, which firmly articulated a distinction between a normal, casual, partnered user (particularly of gay pornography) and an abject, deviant, enthusiastic user (especially of slash fiction and/or Yaoi) whose use of the media appeared to interfere with or replace partnered heterosex. Women users pathologized via the *lonely losers* discourse were characterized by commenters as too young, too old, too fat, too ugly, too silly, or too "creepy" to be considered *fuckable* women, and as such, their claim to sexual acceptability via the dominant heterosexual and gender matrices was argued to be null (Butler, 1990a; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). Thus, the *lonely losers* discourse props up dominant heterosexism and patriarchal masculinity by maintaining that women would not *choose* to forego sex with men in order to have solitary sexual interactions with male homoerotic materials – instead, they must content themselves with it as an inadequate replacement for desirable male partners because *they can't do any better*. This harkens back to Matt's original comment in Jackson & Gilbertson (2009) that only "very very lonely old desperate women" (p. 210) would ever be aroused by male homoeroticism – the comment that inspired this very body of work. However, the *lonely losers* discourse was subverted by several commenters, who noted the contradictory logic and impossible constraints posed by the argument that women who are enthusiastic about male homoeroticism are both "too young" and "too old" despite the presence of enthusiasm across all age ranges, or the presumption that enthusiastic users are lonely and single when many of them are in partnered heterosexual (or same-sex) relationships. Indeed, the transparent function of the *lonely losers* discourse in protecting men from the threat of sexual inadequacy or isolation is clear – far from being *losers*, these women are dangerous: sexually independent, in touch with their desires, and aware that they are not beholden to heterosexual men for their own sexual needs or gratification. In fact, many slash fiction and Yaoi users are also *authors* of these works, and are

active in the production of sexual possibilities and subjectivities that intentionally exclude the oppressive elements of dominant heterosexist and gendered ideology (Bauer, 2013; Butler, 1990a; Penley, 1997).

It is perhaps this very danger that drives the discursive limitation of women's use of male homoerotic media to the solitary, private, and *silent* imaginary. Women are frequently cautioned in the online commentary against loudly discussing or announcing their enthusiasm for male homoeroticism in public, and women who fail to comply with this compulsory silence are labelled as “freaks,” “fantards,” and “creepy,” and thus to be avoided and derided by men and distanced from “moderate, normal” women users. This hostile effort at restriction and containment marks loud, “out” women users as producers of *insurrectionary speech*, proliferators of a subversive discourse of feminine sexuality that poses a direct threat to the heterosexual and gendered status quo (Butler, 1990a; 1993, 2004). Women are also warned in the commentaries not to share male homoeroticism with male sexual partners, as it is presumed that the materials pose a threat to his masculinity, to the integrity of their sexual dynamic, and to his proprietary access to the woman user's sexuality. Further, women are exhorted not to transcend the boundary between the imaginary and the *real* by pursuing or suggesting sexual experiences or behaviours that include male bisexuality and polyamory (e.g. MMF threesomes), again because such desires pose a threat to the integrity of their cishet male partners' masculinity and sexuality. Nonetheless, there was ample evidence in the data of women who subverted these restrictions – both the “obsessive fangirls” so reviled by other commenters for their “I heart Yaoi” tote bags and loud discussions of their favorite slash fiction pairings in public, and women forum commenters who described experiences with erotic voyeurism of MM sexual encounters, engagement in MMF threesomes, or desires to pursue these sexual opportunities. Despite the

heavy discursive restrictions and social sanctions placed on them, these women are claiming territory discursively and experientially that expands and diversifies their sexual subjectivities.

Part Three: Constructing Motivations not only provided naturalistic validation of many of the findings of McCutcheon and Bishop (2015), Neville (2015), and Ramsay (2017) regarding women's motivations for use of male homoerotic media, but moved beyond descriptive itemization of motives to investigate how the construction of these motives functioned to either reaffirm or subvert heterosexist and postfeminist constraints on women's sexuality (Fahs, 2011; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013a, 2013b; Farvid et al., 2017; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Gill, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). The near-ubiquitous presence of this interrogation of women's motivations in the online editorial articles as well as the internet forum commentary threads speaks again to a collective will to interrogate, compel confessional testimonials, and to categorize sexual knowledge kinds that goes well beyond innocent curiosity, and that instead functions to *produce* and *disseminate* certain kinds of knowledge while suppressing or silencing others (Foucault, 1972, 1978, 1982).

The discursive themes that emerged relevant to the construction of women's motivations for use of male homoeroticism fell into two loose categories: *Explanations that stabilize the status quo*, and *Explanations that destabilize the status quo*. Stabilizing discourses included *turnabout is fair play*, the *hyperstraight hypothesis*, *internalized misogyny*, *jealousy: insecure women need sexual fantasy alternatives*, and *postfeminist self-improvement*. Destabilizing discourses included *the presence of the missing discourse of desire*, *male homoerotic media does not objectify women*, *freedom from body image comparisons/anxiety*, *authenticity of pleasure*, *more relational/romantic than straight porn*, *developing a "female gaze,"* and *taking up phallic power without being subjugated by it*.

The analysis of the stabilizing discourses indicated a general trend toward framing women's use of male homoeroticism along lines that facilitate and prop up dominant heterosexism, patriarchal masculinity, and the postfeminist contract (Fahs, 2011; Farvid & Braun, 2006, 2013a, 2013b; Farvid et al., 2017; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Gill, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2007; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). The *turnabout is fair play* discourse positions women's use of male homoeroticism as normal and acceptable because it is analogous to men's enjoyment of FF pornography – a phenomenon that is accepted as natural and common-sense among the online interlocutors. This leveraging of masculinity as the normative center of sexual knowledge gives the appearance of permitting women a conditional position of acceptance “borrowed” from the parallel with men's behaviour (– see Potts, 2002); however, this “equitable acceptance” is shown to be conditional and perhaps even illusory through the various strategies of inquisition, containment, and regulation leveled at women versus men who use homoerotic media.

The *hyperstraight hypothesis* invokes homophobic and heteronormalizing discourses to claim that women's use of male homoeroticism is acceptable because it is indicative of their being “hyperstraight.” The logic here is that, because “100% straight” women desire *only* men, their enjoyment of seeing *two* men engaged in sexual activity without any women to “dampen” their arousal is a function of simple mathematics – if seeing one hot guy is arousing, then seeing *two* hot guys together must be *more* arousing. Again the use of masculine heteronormativity is deployed to normalize women's motives, as the “one girl good, two girls better” argument is frequently invoked as evidence of men's heterosexuality (e.g., see Bailey, 2009; Chivers & Bailey, 2005). However, this discourse is at odds with academic work on the sexual fluidity of women (Chivers et al., 2004; Chivers & Bailey, 2005; Diamond, 2009), as well as with Kinsey's seminal work on women and men's sexual orientations as occurring along a dimensional

spectrum (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953). Furthermore, the clear existence of queer women who endorse enjoyment of male homoeroticism cleanly contests this discursive explanation.

Internalized misogyny was posed as an additional potential motive for women's use of male homoerotic media. These arguments dovetail somewhat with the *hyperstraight hypothesis*, suggesting that it is women's inherent dislike of other women, and particularly the appearance of women's naked genitals (Mullinax et al., 2015; Schick et al., 2011), that motivate their interest in male homoeroticism. This socialized aversion and disgust surrounding women's sexual anatomy is theorized to facilitate sexual passivity and dependence in women, enhancing male dominance, control, and mastery in heterosexual relationships (Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Swank, 2013; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004; Tolman, 1991, 2012). However, many of the women commenters emphasized that their avoidance of women in erotic media centers more around their unsatisfactory portrayal, as women characters in media were seen as embodying a multitude of negative feminine stereotypes – either as weak, pathetic, helpless, and shallow, or (when showing qualities of dominance and independence) bitchy, villainous, evil, promiscuous, and monstrous. Thus, it may not be an inherent, internalized hatred of women that leads women to appreciate the removal of women characters from their erotica, but instead dissatisfaction with the sexual subject positions offered by these two-dimensional women (Butler, 1990a; 2004; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

Harkening back to the *lonely losers* discourse, the *jealousy* discourse posited that women prefer male homoeroticism because the absence of women characters eliminates potential psychological competition for the affection of the male characters depicted in the erotic media. These women are positioned as immature, insecure, and jealous because of a presumed lack of desirable male attention in their real lives, and that they are thus drawn to male homoeroticism because they can imagine themselves as having fantasy access to desirable men that cannot be

stolen from them by female competitors (because they are gay). This argument is problematic for all the same reasons as the *lonely losers* discourse (discussed above), and additionally discounts the possibility that *gay men* could be legitimate competitors for desirable sexual partners. This logical flaw reveals again the functioning of heteronormative discourses among the commenters, as only heterosexual competition is considered to threaten the women users or provoke jealousy or fear of rejection (Butler, 1990a; Potts, 2002).

The *postfeminist self-improvement* discourse directly hijacks women's use of male homoeroticism for their own sexual gratification, and places it instead in service of men's sexual satisfaction (Barker et al., 2018; Frith, 2015; Gill, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2011b; McRobbie, 2007). Occluding women's own desire, arousal, and sexual pleasure (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Frith, 2015), the postfeminist discourse positions women's motivations for viewing male homoerotic media as primarily educational, providing women with tips, techniques, and strategies that can be deployed to pleasure and satisfy their male partners more successfully. Postfeminism is partially grounded in a neoliberal sensibility around continual, compulsory self-improvement aimed at preserving and retaining heterosexual privilege via the satisfaction and fidelity of a male sex partner (Barker et al., 2018; Gill, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2011b; McRobbie, 2007). This discourse also plays into gender discourses constructing women as passive, dependent, and sexually naïve, as it is assumed that the gay men – because of their *masculinity* – are possessed of superior sexual proficiency, expertise, and mastery than are women, and are thus more adept and skilled in various sexual techniques than women are capable of being (Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004). Postfeminism is a powerful limiter of the range of sexual subject positions available to women – it functions to subvert and derail the resistant, revolutionary force of feminism's demand for increased freedom, independence, and equity by *appearing* to offer the promise of these freedoms (via a permissive stance toward sexual play,

curiosity, and experimentation) while simultaneously requiring these freedoms to benefit – and *never* compete with – men’s sexual power, dominance, and privilege (Barker et al., 2018; Gill, 2008, 2009, 2012, 2016; Harvey & Gill, 2011a, 2011b; McRobbie, 2007).

The *Explanations that stabilize the status quo* are those that speak to what Fine and McClelland (2006) termed the missing discourses of desire; that is, these subversive discourses functioned to claim additional territory, and more satisfying sexual subject positions, for women. Throughout the online discussions, the *presence of the missing discourse of desire* can be seen as women made comments affirming their desire to watch male homoerotic media, and their sexual enjoyment of the genre. However, these comments were frequently plagued with recursive references to the various dominant, restrictive discourses they sought to escape, as women appeared unable to voice their desires without qualifications, justifications, or interrogation of their own motives. Indeed, the majority of instances where women made direct claims to *desiring* (or enjoying) male homoeroticism occurred alongside confessional expository aimed at defending their desires against criticism or ridicule. Here we see the operation of a compulsory institutional pressure for women to confess, to explain, and to frame their behaviour within *normative* boundaries (Foucault, 1978; Farvid & Braun, 2014). Thus, while the articulation of desire serves as a vehicle of subversion, it is always complicated by dominant discursive strategies deployed to obscure and silence that desire (Butler, 1993; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Foucault, 1978). Women commenters who were veterans of the slash fiction genre (particularly veteran *authors*) offered the strongest pushback against the repeated interrogation of their motives and the compulsory need to justify their work; however, even these commenters were not impervious to the pressure, and tended to offer justifications while simultaneously criticizing their necessity. Interestingly, it is these women authors who potentially pose the greatest danger to the status quo, as their work contains the most disruptive subversions of patriarchal discourses of heteronormativity, binary

gender norms, and toxic masculinity (Butler, 1990a, 1990b, 1993, 2004; Fahs, 2011; Fahs & Frank, 2014; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

The argument that *Male homoerotic media does not objectify women* is one of the most frequently cited motivations for women's use of male homoeroticism, both by the online interlocutors and by preliminary academic work (McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Marks, 1996; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). As male homoeroticism by definition does not include women at all, it sidesteps the problematic sexual oppression, objectification, and degradation of women that complicates so many women's interactions with mainstream heterosexual erotic media (Ashton et al., 2018; Attwood, 2005; Ciclitira, 2004; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Marks, 1996; Neville, 2015; Parvez, 2007; Ramsay, 2017). This provides the opportunity for women to engage with erotic materials without being simultaneously oppressed by them – they are free to identify with both the passive and active male actors, the dominant or the submissive, or anything in between. As such, male homoeroticism provides a means of escape from the prescribed feminine gender and sexuality roles regulating heterosexuality (Butler, 1990a; Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004).

Male homoeroticism provides *Freedom from body image comparisons/anxiety* for women users through the same mechanism; because there are no women in male homoeroticism, there are no female bodies for women viewers to compare themselves with, no emotional distress, cognitive dissonance, or insecurity triggered by the portrayal of women with more idealized physiques (Ashton et al., 2018; Keihani, 1998; Kyrölä, 2014; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Marks, 1996; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). Without the psychological weight of these body image comparisons, women are able to engage with male homoeroticism in less complicated, more pleasurable ways – unlike in heterosexual interactions, where women's bodies and their desirability is an ever-present preoccupation (Fahs, 2011; Potts, 2002; Tiefer, 2004), women

consuming male homoeroticism can access sexual arousal, pleasure, and satisfaction untethered to their own corporeal shortcomings (Ashton et al., 2018; Keihani, 1998; Kyrölä, 2014; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Marks, 1996; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017), thus perhaps partially freeing themselves psychologically from the confines of the gendered and heterosexual matrices (Butler, 1990a, 1993, 2004).

The discourse around the *authenticity of pleasure* is another frequently observed theme in the online commentaries and in academic literature (Ashton et al., 2018; Attwood, 2005; Ciclitira, 2004; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Marks, 1996; Neville, 2015; Parvez, 2007; Ramsay, 2017). Several online interlocutors made reference to beliefs that gay pornography (in particular) represents more genuine, authentic sexual enjoyment and pleasure than does mainstream heterosexual pornography. Commenters often complained that women porn actresses in particular were unconvincing in their portrayals of sexual pleasure – but beyond an aesthetic disdain for “fakeness,” most women described being disturbed by this because of their ethical, empathic concern for the safety, comfort, and wellbeing of the women featured in mainstream pornography. As observed by Ashton and colleagues (2018), Ciclitira (2004), and Parvez (2006), women’s own frequent experiences of sexual harassment, coercion, and violence sensitized them to the representations of sexual coercion and violence in many mainstream heterosexual pornographic works, and this sensitivity was noted to interfere significantly with women’s ability to unproblematically interact with pornography (while some women noted being aroused by such representations, the arousal occurred in tandem with disgust, horror, and self-recrimination at having *been* aroused by another woman’s discomfort and pain). While male homoeroticism is not necessarily lacking in representations of coercion, aggression, or violence, the perception of gay male sexual partners as more equitable with regard to negotiated power and consent, gay pornography is seen to eliminate the inequalities inherent in heterosexual relationships

(McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2005; Potts, 2002; Ramsay, 2017). This again removes a psychological constraint upon women's sexual engagement with eroticism – in viewing two male equals in a sexual exchange that appears convincingly genuine and pleasurable, they can more freely enjoy their sexual desire and arousal without being burdened by guilt, shame, and distress regarding a fellow woman's suffering.

Closely related to discussion about the authenticity of pleasure in male homoerotic media is the notion among commenters that these media are *More relational or romantic* than straight pornography. Many commenters described being particularly aroused by the frequent presence of kissing, caressing, eye contact, and the appearance of genuine caring between actors/characters in male homoeroticism, and positioned this in sharp contrast to the detached, mechanical, impersonal sexuality they perceived in mainstream heterosexual pornography. While this preference for a relational context in eroticism invokes the have/hold discourse described by Hollway (1984), which serves in many ways to limit women's sexual freedom by confining sexuality to committed, loving monogamous relationships, it also speaks again to women's empathic connection to the characters in erotic media, and their wishes to see representations of deeper emotional range. Many slash fiction and Yaoi authors are active in the production of media that expands the emotional range of men beyond the static masculinity norms that emphasize rationalism, emotional rigidity and control, aloofness, and dominance.

An important function of male homoeroticism noted by online interlocutors and academics alike is its ability to facilitate the development of a desiring *female gaze* (Marks, 1996; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017). As women are typically assigned a role of passive sexual objectification in mainstream heterosexual media while men are positioned as the active, desiring, dominating, and consuming agent, it has been difficult for women to escape the corporeal and psychological limitations of their representational

erotic avatars and step into the role of the agentic, desiring *subject* of sexual interactions – both in fantasy, and in reality (Marks, 1996; McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Mulvey, 1975; Neville, 2015; Potts, 2002; Ramsay, 2017). However, the removal of the passive feminine object serves to relegate the men in male homoerotic media to the role of *object*, encouraging viewers to enjoy them visually and sexually. Many of the commenters discussed the improved *Male actor aesthetics* in gay pornography versus heterosexual pornography, claiming that gay male pornography actors are more beautiful, physically fit, and well-groomed than the cishet men featured in heterosexual porn, who were criticized by many women commenters for being too hairy, too fat, too ugly, or too sloppy to be sexually attractive. However, as noted as well by Neville (2015) and Ramsay (2017), there was wide diversity in women’s preferences and tastes, and while many applauded the attractiveness and diversity of gay male porn actors, others derided them as “too feminine,” “too pretty,” or otherwise too stereotypically gay to be sexually appealing. While this sexually objectifying, consuming gaze is in essence the “borrowed” gaze of gay men, it nonetheless opens up space for women to function as sexual agents, as choosers of sexual partners, rather than being confined to passive, receptive objectification.

Among slash fiction and Yaoi consumers and writers in particular, the desire for *Expansion of masculinity* was evident throughout the online commentary. Women commenters expressed dissatisfaction with the rigid, stereotyped masculine characters in heterosexual pornography and across popular culture in general. They reported fatigue with the portrayal of emotionally restricted, domineering, cold, controlling, and/or “Average Joe” representations of masculinity, and instead expressed desire for a wider diversity of masculine kinds. Slash fiction and Yaoi authors have participated heavily in the expansion of masculine representation throughout their works, and possessed the ability to *author* masculine kinds that encompass a wide range of characterological features, emotional range, and behaviours – from violence and

domination to tenderness and passivity. The function of this authoring of masculinity is incredibly important, as the removal of feminine receptacles for all human frailty, weakness, emotionality, and passivity requires their inscription onto the male characters in homoerotic media instead – and when this occurs, it becomes apparent that these “feminine” qualities have been part of “masculinity” (and of humanity) all along, as the “intrusion” fails to break the characters (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Serrano, 2007). Thus, instead of resorting to a futile “reverse discourse” wherein women are granted improved status through their “emulation” (but never genuine possession of) desirable masculine qualities (a process that only serves to uphold the primacy of the “masculine”), the insertion of the *feminine* back into the protected construct of masculinity erodes and destabilizes its position, which is built upon the false construction of all that is feminine as “lesser” (Butler, 1990a; 1993; 2004). It is perhaps this form of *insurrectionary speech* (Butler, 1997) which poses the greatest threat to the status quo – as the boundaries (both physical and psychological) between masculinity and femininity are demonstrated by these authors to be false, masculinity loses all the basis for its ill-gotten privilege.

The development of expanded positions for women is, however, no less important, and the potential for *gender cross-identification* provides an opportunity for women to step outside of the compulsory corporeal and psychological confines of femininity (Butler, 1990a, 2004) and explore a wider range of imaginal subjectivities typically reserved for men. Without any women characters to constrain women viewers to their “rightful place” in the gender binary (Butler, 1990a, 2004), they are instead free to identify with the wider range of subject positions available to men – active, powerful, strong, free, competent, exciting protagonists – without needing to leave their own qualities behind. For many women, the represented men characters may be a more accurate fit to their lived experiences – or if not, they can provide a range of experiences the women may *wish* to live out. And as Butler (1990b) has argued, the distance between the

phantasmatic and the real has always been an artifice of discourse, and thus, to imagine a possibility, and then to speak it, is to bring it into being.

The final subversive theme identified in this work describes how male homoeroticism permits women to *take up phallic power without being subjugated by it*. The artificial discursive equation between the *phallus*, or the active embodiment of sexual power, domination, desire, and control, and the *penis*, a corporeal flesh appendage linguistically and corporeally attached to men and masculine-identified individuals (Lacan, 1977; Grosz, 1994; Potts, 2002; Rose, 1982) is a mechanism that excludes women and femininity from taking up and exercising sexual desire, agency, power, control, and mastery. However, the primacy of the *phallus* rests on the foundation of the socially constructed gender binary matrix, through which masculinity is defined through all it is *not* – the abject feminine (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Potts, 2002). Without a feminine representational receptacle upon which to project all weakness, all emotion, all frailty, all passivity, and all inadequacy, male homoerotic media comes to encompass all elements of the “masculine/feminine” binary at once, and destabilizes the uneven power matrix upon which the gender binary is built (Butler, 1990a, 2004; Potts, 2002). As such, the absence of a default male-dominant dynamic in male homoerotic media opens possibilities for affirmative (rather than implied or coerced) consent, negotiated power exchange, and the dislocation of assumed phallic privilege in men – if men are able to forego dominance and phallic power in their sexual relationships with other men, then they are not inextricably bound to this power by biological drives, “natural birthright,” or the physical fact of having a penis. This dislocation of sexual dominance, or the *phallus*, from the physical confines of the penis has important implications for women (cis and trans). If *phallic power* is not an essential, inalienable birthright of “man,” and if it can be put aside by men, relocated into aliens, animals, robots, or monsters (as often occurs in slash fiction and Yaoi), then it can also be taken up and possessed by women.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of relevant caveats and limitations pertinent to this investigation. The analytical work should be understood to be descriptive, tentative, and impacted by the sociopolitical location of the researcher – the interpretations offered herein are not attempts at generalization, statements of fact, or claims to a definitive or concrete knowledge about women and their behaviour. Rather, the interpretive work is intended to explore the apparent possibilities generated within the data for women's sexual subject positions – it is likely not an exclusive or exhaustive list of possible subject positions or sexual kinds.

As the analysis was confined to pre-existing, public domain discussions of women's use of male homoerotic media, there was no potential to follow-up with the commenters to clarify meaning or context, to query or confirm gender identity, sexual orientation, or other demographic information, or to delve deeper into salient themes or discourses (Jowett, 2015). Additionally, it is possible that the online data retrieved using the Google search engine was vulnerable to what is known as the “filter bubble effect,” as Google's search algorithms are known to be partially informed by individual users' past search histories and browsing habits (Kliman-Silver, Hannak, Lazer, Wilson, & Mislove, 2015; Zook & Graham, 2007). However, three recent studies (McCutcheon & Bishop, 2015; Neville, 2015; Ramsay, 2017) also exist that used in-person interviews and/or online questionnaires, and most of the themes identified in those studies were identified in the present investigation, as well as a number of additional themes not observed in those three studies. Thus, it can be argued that the data obtained for the present analysis was reasonably representative of the broad volume of online discourse pertaining to this subject. Further, an upside of the use of public-domain internet commentary is the likelihood that the greater anonymity and freedom offered by participation in internet forum discussions may have led to the expression of thoughts and ideas that might not be revealed during a face-to-face or

telephone interview with a researcher (Ben Ze'ev, 2003; Chiou, 2007; Fraser, 2010; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Nonetheless, it is hoped that future research will continue to use a combination of online and interview-based data to further clarify how demographic features such as participant gender identity and sexual orientation inform their discussions of male homoeroticism and its consumers.

Another drawback of the research design involves the conceptualization of the research around a presumptive gender binary – in investigating how (cis)*women*'s subject positions are being negotiated around use of (cis)*male* homoerotic media, a valuable opportunity was lost to investigate subject positions for nonbinary and trans consumers, to explore consumer responses to a broader range of LGBTQ erotic media, and to analyze the interactions between these more inclusive categories of gendered and sexual embodiment and representation. In a similar vein, the largely anonymous data pool foreclosed the opportunity to investigate whether women of colour might have unique experiences or subject positions in relation to male homoeroticism, and whether institutionalized racism (including lack of availability of positive representations of people of colour in the media) might put a further constraint on women's opportunities to engage with these media in positive or expansive ways. These areas are both deserving of future scholarly attention, and it is hoped that future research will undertake critical analysis of the (un)availability of male homoeroticism and other varieties of LGBTQ eroticism for nonbinary and trans consumers, for women of colour, and for individuals at the intersections of these (and other) axes of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

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