‘Would you rather?’ Weirdness and affect in reaction videos to porn

by Lauren Bliss

Abstract
Reaction videos to porn are popular forms of memetic media that circulate widely on YouTube and TikTok. However, analysis remains limited and little attention has been paid to how they mediate porn. This research seeks to understand and clarify the range of reaction videos to porn on YouTube, and analyses how they expose the mutable and shifting cultures of pornographic spectatorship, from being ostensibly private and sexual to affecting and inherently public. Through a content analysis of 276 videos, this study seeks to clarify how reaction videos to porn can be understood as memes and broadly conceptualises the range of content-reactors, as well as distinct patterns in their perspective and overall purpose. This paper argues that reaction videos mediate porn as possessing a weirdly affective power, shaped by participatory logics of the Internet ‘built for porn’ where it seems as if anything can be watched by anyone, with anyone.

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Background

This case study has emerged from a recommendation for a reaction video that appeared in my YouTube suggestions in November 2021. In “Watch Porn With Your Parents, or Describe Your First Sexual Experience | Would You Rather?” (Cut, 2018), a mother, father and twenty-something son watch porn together with the son’s girlfriend and male best friend. Choosing to answer both questions, the son then goes on to describe the sexual acts he and his girlfriend first engaged in together, with all present unsurprisingly uncomfortable, if nonetheless titillated, by his sexually explicit disclosures.

Watching “Would you rather?” was a confounding experience and I had no immediate explanation for the meaning and motivation behind the video: why ask the question and put yourself in this position in the first place? In the tradition of cringe comedy and awkward humour, notable in television series and feature films like Jackass, Borat or The Office, the reaction video lingered on the violation of social codes, taboos and
norms and it refused to release any nervous tension that would allow for laughter, leaving me instead in a state of discomfort. This discomfort is a common trope of cringe comedy (Holm, 2017; Kotsko, 2010) and the subversion of social norms is also an inherent part of online culture (Chiaro, 2018; Phillips and Milner, 2017; Shifman, 2013). However, the reaction video was not an anomaly. Direct searches for ‘reaction video porn parents’ using YouTube’s search bar, alongside later recommendations that appeared in my feed, uncovered a number of reaction videos to pornography with the family in a central role. On YouTube, as well as TikTok, I found vloggers filming themselves with their mothers, fathers, grandmothers, siblings, partners, class-mates and friends reacting to porn together in diverse and ambivalent ways.

Many reaction videos traded in the shock value of social transgression, using sensationalist tactics to attract higher view counts. Yet the reaction videos also demonstrated an ongoing shift in the spectatorship of pornography from a nominally private and unambivalently sexual experience (Alilunas, 2019; Warner, 1999; Kipnis, 1998), largely defined by a homosocial, male audience, to a publicised and ambivalently affected one. Not all reaction videos to porn were purely discomforting and cringe-inducing; some took on an educational or informative stance, such as in mother-daughter and mother-son reaction videos like “Watching Porn with Mum | Genre = ANAL” (2016) or “Reacting to Dirty Videos with My MOM!!!” (2017) that critiqued pornography and that featured mothers descriptively, if self-consciously, comparing scenes with their real experiences and sexual history (The Pro Boner, 2016; Taylor, 2017). Importantly, however, no reaction video actually shows porn, only viewer reactions to what are ostensibly porn videos. Nonetheless, the reaction videos can be understood as a type of meme that can be replicated in different ways but that remain united by a sense of emotional immersiveness and “weirdness” (Phillips and Milner, 2017, Phillips and Milner, 2015). The diverse social ties across reaction videos, between family members, friends, classmates and intimate partners, create a sense of co-presence (Strangelove, 2010; Turner, 2010), or the impression that anyone can watch porn, with anyone, and publicise the reaction on social media.

Despite their widespread existence, online forms of content about pornography, which includes memes and other social media genres, have not been subject to extensive analysis. In particular, analysis of memes that produce lateral modes of thinking about, representing and reading pornography have tended to be limited to the cluster of studies focusing on the 2007 viral reaction to the trailer for the scat fetish porn film Hungry Bitches, also known as “2 Girls, 1 Cup” or 2G1C (Paasonen, 2017; Cardoso, 2017; Declercq, 2017). The meme is famous for the disgusted reactions of vloggers, seemingly unprepared for the film’s eroticisation of defecation. This viral phenomenon remains a well-known meme in the annals of Internet history and has been heralded as the originator of the reaction video (Declercq, 2017) with the viral display of dry-retching vloggers creating a strong distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ pornography (Cardoso, 2017) and acceptable and unacceptable expressions of sexual desire (Paasonen, 2017). However, as this study of reaction videos to porn will show, the disgusted reactions to 2G1C are one mode of expression within the wider category of reaction videos to porn. The genre has evolved to be no longer characterised by unsuspecting and revolted reactions, made famous via the 2G1C phenomenon in 2007, but by a sense of co-presence and an amplified mediation of pornography that is driven by online participatory culture (Strangelove, 2010). In particular, this paper suggests that reaction videos to porn can be conceptualised via their affective weirdness. Unlike awkwardness, cringe humour and ambivalence, weirdness remains under-explored in the study of memes that circulate online (Greve and Zappe, 2021; Phillips and Milner, 2015). Weirdness refers to the strange or transgressive, and is associated with the other-worldly, unsettling and inexplicable (Greve and Zappe, 2021; Fisher, 2016). The notion of weirdness is traditionally considered to be a feature of science fiction and horror genres (Fisher, 2016). For Mark Fisher, weirdness is “that which does not belong” and which exposes what lies “beyond” the familiar [1]; however, online expressions of weirdness can also be linked to awkwardness (Phillips and Milner, 2015). This paper suggests that weirdness is a common affective response in reaction videos to porn, and will consider how they tend to mediate porn as otherworldly, alluring if sometimes disturbing, and as intensely affecting.

Online memes have been distinguished as a textual genre and understood to hold the power to shape public conversation and modes of thinking about key social and cultural issues (Phillips and Milner, 2017; Wiggins and Bowers, 2015; Shifman, 2013; Jenkins, et al., 2013). Memes, as pieces of cultural content, are broadly defined by their replicability and internal, subcultural logics (Shifman, 2013), as well as their
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Reaction videos have not naturally emerged as a result of human curiosity about pornography, or — indeed — from some innate desire to publicise one’s reaction to porn with one’s friends, siblings or parents; rather, they have emerged from the digital networking of affects (Keilty, 2018; Tziallas, 2018; Gallagher, 2016; Hillis, et al., 2015; Dean, 2010) and are shaped by the moderating practices of social media platforms toward sexual content (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020; Faust, 2017; Olszanowski, 2014; Gillespie, 2010). In this light, this study focuses on how reaction videos mediate pornography through mutable and convergent perspectives. The fact we never see pornography in reaction videos also suggests a need to reinvigorate analytic frameworks that assume pornography is located in the hyper-visible display of human bodies and the visual excess of unruly fantasies (Paasonen, 2014). Instead, reaction videos to porn expose the shifting terrain of visual cultures of sex and pornographic spectatorship, from being nominally private and sexual to transformative, discursive and public. Overall, I argue that while we rarely know or see the porn that is being watched, reaction videos still appear to ‘follow the rules of the Internet’ designed and built for porn (Paasonen, 2011) where — however weirdly — nothing appears to be off limits, and where it seems as if anything can be seen and watched by anyone, with anyone.

Conceptualising the reaction video

While reaction videos exist for almost everything, from reactions to ordinary life events like graduation from university or the announcement of pregnancy, to reactions to music videos and video games, all tend to emphasise the experience of an immersive, earnest and unambiguous, emotional response. However, there is considerable debate about what constitutes a reaction video and how their significance should be best interpreted. Reaction videos are an audio-visual extension of the reaction GIF, a “short, silent, looping and untitled moving image” (Eppink, 2014), which is itself an evolution of the flip book and stop motion technology. The reaction GIF is a cultivator of digital culture: images are replicated in favour of collective experience, and without any sense of authorship, and the genre is defined by its “performance of affect and the demonstration of cultural knowledge” [2]. While the reaction GIF has been extensively studied, including in relation to micro-porn cultures (Hester, et al., 2015), the reaction video is a kind of ‘moving-image’ selfie (Warfield, 2017) and is distinct from other types of online memes as they are not always authorless (Shifman, 2013). Reflexivity, intertextuality and hyper-mediation are key features of the genre (Carpentier, 2011; Nicoll and Nansen, 2018). In her study of reaction videos, Warren-Crow (2016) has alternatively considered vocality, youthfulness and themes of consumption as significant components of reaction videos. As she notes, such themes are especially apparent in unboxing videos, like “Nintendo Sixty-FOOOOOOOOOOUR” (raw64life, 2006), which has been popularly seen as the originator of reaction video phenomenon (Know Your Meme, 2006). However, this analysis of reaction videos does not clarify the significance of the publicisation of porn-viewing within reaction videos to porn. We can consider how reaction videos to porn are distinctive in their mediation, especially via their transgression of social norms around the spectatorship of porn, and thus in the way they make sense of online pornography. They expose the shifting terrain of power and production in visual culture, which is no longer “the domain of specialists” but instead something that is produced, distributed and shaped by online networks and participatory culture [3].

While reaction videos to porn tend to show only fleeting demonstrations of erotic pleasure, and do not always make clear what is happening in the porn video being watched, this should not be taken as an
inhibited mediation of pornography. The spectatorship of pornography has been historically defined by modes of technology that enable some degree of privacy, such as the VCR, magazine, or adult theatre (Alilunas, 2019), and our imagining of it centred on individualised, male spectators seeking sexual gratification, primarily through images of sexually dominated women. Reaction videos instead suggest the possibility of “participatory porn culture”, with anyone and everyone watching porn in ambivalent and diverse ways (Smith, 2017). The publicisation of the spectatorship of pornography in reaction videos is thus an example of a technologically enabled shift.

It is worth pausing to consider how pornography is a notoriously difficult idea to define as much as it is to analyse (McKee, et al., 2020; Kipnis, 1998). Definitions of pornography tend to rely on a dichotomy between good and bad representation and are suggestive of high and low, as well as sacred and obscene, forms of expression and representation of the human body and sexuality (Paasonen, 2011). Pornography is usually defined by its sexual obscenity in Western legal frameworks, which commonly means any representation of sex that has no social use or moral value and that shows a sexual act for individual gratification with the potential to offend or harm (Williams, 1999). Any complexities with its definition aside, pornography and technology have developed “in symbiosis” [4]. Pornography has played a critical role in the development of communications technology, including the invention and use of the photographic camera, the VCR, the hand-held video camera, and many features of the Internet, including online payment systems, chat rooms, and photo and video sharing (Tiidenberg and van der Nagle, 2020; Barss, 2010; Paasonen, 2011). The notion that porn “made the Internet” is a widely accepted one (Tiidenberg and van der Nagle, 2020; Paasonen, 2011). However, there is still strong ambiguity about the role and impact of porn, in both society and academic research, meaning pornography is “neither uncontested nor fully embraced” [5]. It is worth noting that studies of audience beliefs, responses and ideas about pornography remain relatively rare and frequently subject to analysis through a specific ideological theory, such as the male gaze, or through a moralised lens that foregrounds ideas of harm and addiction (McKee, et al., 2020; Smith, 2017; McKee, 2017; Maule, 2016; Warner, 1999).

Porn, in other words, is often read through the lens of public health and social well-being and is understood as a medium defined by its capacity to harm individuals who then go on to harm others (McKee, 2017). Suggesting the need to offer a more nuanced interpretation of the possible uses and values of pornography, and to conceptualise its pleasures as well as its problems, cultural effects, and social impacts, Paasonen (2014, 2007) has critically described how circular models, also referred to as ‘paranoid readings’, of pornography can only limit analysis to unambiguous outcomes and widespread social effects. The intense and fantastical display of bodies within pornography does not and should not inhibit and limit our capacity to think critically about it. In this respect, it is important to consider how online pornography “is not sex but a media genre” [6]. Nonetheless, there is no consensus across disciplines as to how to define pornography, as found in a 2020 study that examined the views of researchers from various academic disciplines (McKee, et al., 2020). For the purposes of this paper, pornography is defined via its mediation within reaction videos, which tend to suggest that pornography is located on free-to-use online platforms or in a minority of cases in popular music videos, sex scenes in mainstream television series or user-created mashups (No reaction video to porn documents responses to someone reading an erotic novel or listening to an erotic podcast). Pornography is thus implied as being located as a screen based and widely accessible genre of media.

Here, it is important to further foreground that the prohibition on sexual content or images of naked bodies on social media platforms like Tiktok and YouTube does not impede their mediation of porn. Most reaction videos make generic references to the pornography being watched and usually vague identifiers in the title like ‘1980s porn’, ‘Asian porn’ or ‘hardcore porn’ are included. Even in the case of TikTok, which prohibits words ‘pornography’ or ‘porn’ being used in the hashtag, reaction videos are readily networked through hashtags like #ph or #ph reaction, for PornHub. Further, while pornographic content is never seen in reaction videos, it is sometimes heard, and some reaction videos include soundtracks, dialogue and explicit descriptions. Nonetheless, the actual location of the pornographic video remains visually and textually ambivalent, however exaggerated, titillated or visceral the reaction appears to be. Thus, porn is defined by its ambivalence in the reaction video, which can be further related to the logic of the ‘produser’
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in participatory networks, who creates and shapes new patterns of knowledge exchange through a hybrid user/producer role (Bruns, 2010). As a meta-mode of looking, reaction videos to porn create “information about information, knowledge about knowledge” [7] about porn. In other words, ‘porn’ is primarily meaningful through the reaction, rather than through the pornographic text. Porn forms a generic conduit to explore and demonstrate spectatorship in reaction videos, and in turn reaction videos work to mediate and shape ideas and understandings of porn through their memetic logic (Milner, 2016).

Methods

Understanding the mediating power of reaction videos to porn requires mapping out their memetic logic (Milner, 2016), which refers to the way that memes are created, shared, replicated, and innovated across online platforms. Memes rely on interactivity, replication, spreadability and constant innovation to be meaningful (Jenkins, et al., 2013) and importantly depend on intertextuality. A meme can be based on any text or cultural object: “No media text is safe from memetic reappropriation” [8]. This can be related to “rule 34” of the Internet, which is that if something exists online, there is porn of it (Phillips and Milner, 2017). Equally, we could equally say that if something exists online, there is a reaction video to it. To further explore the memetic logics and qualities of reaction videos to pornography, I undertook a mixed quantitative and qualitative analysis by coding videos captured through YouTube Data Tools (YTDT), which is a software tool developed by Bernhard Rieder that extracts data from YouTube’s API. The search query function within the tool was utilised, with keywords “reaction video porn” searched from 2009–2022 and ranked according to relevance. The period was largely selected as it follows on from the 2007 reactions to 2GIC. As reaction videos to pornography have not been comprehensively studied, a large time frame was chosen in order to enable a broad conceptualisation through a qualitative content analysis (Burgess and Bruns, 2012). This broad approach did not allow me to locate any patterns or changes over time, and it did not correlate to any significant historical or social event as such; rather the sample chosen sought to be large enough to enable for a broad conceptualisation of the reaction videos as a meme. In this sense, the findings and discussion below note common tendencies and features; however, focusing on a large set of data means that there are a number of significant findings which could not always be fully explored here.

The large timeframe was also selected because reaction videos to porn are not organised by a hashtag or known cultural referent. The initial search of YouTube videos yielded 500 results using the search terms “reaction video porn”. However, 224 of these were repetitions of other videos or were irrelevant. The large number of irrelevant videos using different search terms was a limitation in the research design of this study. The tool retrieves videos through searching for the presence of specific titles, tags and comments. Results showed that the word ‘porn’ was often included in the title of YouTube videos, including in the comment section, even when the video did not have anything to do with, nor make any meaningful reference to, porn. The term was probably so frequently present because the word or tag ‘porn’ can successfully capture user attention and ensure higher ranking in search results. To ensure the search remained generalised, I relied on the 276 relevant videos using “reaction video porn” to capture a broad snapshot of the genre’s variety across time. The 276 videos retrieved through the YouTube search were coded using categories that were inductively developed using open coding methods. This study has categorised videos according to content reactors, the type of person who featured in the video; perspective, categorised in relation to the audio-visual perspective constructed within the video; and function, categorised as the intended purpose of the text, its notable textual features and its intended audiences.

The dominant types of people or figures who featured in the reaction video were classified under ‘content reactors’. The types of people who featured were coded inductively and based on viewing of the material, with categories labelled as self-reaction (individuals), self-reaction (groups), porn actors, family and intimate partner reaction, public reaction and other.
The perspective of the reaction video refers to the mediated sense of perspective constructed within the reaction video. Here, reaction videos were coded according to whether perspective was constructed via a single point perspective (without an audible or visible pornographic text), a stereoscopic perspective (with a video inset audible and visible) or if it was retrospective, or a recursive reaction (among other identified forms). This analysis clarified the extent to which point of view, as well as the location of the pornographic text, is mutable. Even if porn is never ‘shown’, it is nonetheless mediated within reaction videos through an exceptionally diverse range of spatial and temporal perspectives. Function was categorised according to the type of reaction featured in the video and analysed according to the intended meanings and ideal audiences of the video as related to the overall purpose of the meme (Shifman, 2013). These categories were emotive, ASMR, self-promotional, identity-framed reactions, educational or explorational about sexual knowledge, ironic, ideological and explorational of issues within the porn industry [9].

A video was counted as a reaction video to porn if it captured or created an affected reaction to a pornographic video, or image, or if it featured reactions to a discussion about porn, or if it showed reactions to representations that were suggestive of online porn. For example, videos were still counted if they featured interviews with members of the public being asked about porn. Many vox-pop videos were retrieved in the search. Vox pop is a civic ritual normally used by mainstream journalists for television news, but in this case, videos like “Aunties and Uncles Talk to Us About Porn” (2019), or “Mumbai on Porn Ban” (2015), had been created by a range of channels and ordinary vloggers to explore the diverse opinions on sex, sexuality, and individual and family porn use. These videos were counted because they emphasised emotional immediacy and mediated a sense that ‘anyone’s opinion’ on their use of or responses to pornography should be publicised. Similarly, reactions to non-pornographic videos (such as to a music video, or to the 2016 comedy film *Sausage Party*) that highlighted any latent or explicit sexual meanings were also counted to reflect vloggers’ framing of the video. In these instances, the word porn featured in the title, or the vlogger had edited the video to highlight explicit gestures or sexual display within a non-pornographic text. Finally, there were a small number of videos (3) that featured the term porn in the title but made abstract references to obscenity or ‘Internet porn’. These included ‘YTP’ (YouTube Poop) in the title, such as “Reacting to YTP: Harry Potter and the Porno of Fire” (Quixotic, 2016). These were still counted as they emphasised an idea of porn based on exaggeration, hyperbole and fantasy and were similarly replicating the weirdness of the reaction video to porn; however, YTP is also a distinctive subgenre that not all may agree is comparably ‘pornographic’ to other reaction videos to porn considered here as YTP is not literalising sex.

Findings and discussion

Types of content-reactors

The dominant types of content-reactors came from either individuals or groups (see Table 1). Individuals’ reactions were coded for videos that featured a single vlogger recording and circulating their reaction to porn. Group reactions were separately coded for reactions by groups of individuals, but who did not explicitly state or appear to be family or intimate partners. Most videos in this category were reactions from multiple people that had been edited into a single video, such as “Korean Guys Watch American Porn For the First Time” (Korean React, 2015). The wide range of types of content-reactions show that social media platforms like YouTube play a powerful role in facilitating a pluralist and interactive exploration of porn.

While all vloggers prioritised and performed a sense of raw and authentic reactions, some could be regarded as influencers for their strategic use of ‘authenticity’, with the intention to monetise their content and maximise their audience (Abidin, 2015). Other videos had comparably poor sound or image quality, limited number of video views or displayed relatively banal and less performative reactions and seemed more interested in capturing and circulating self-image than acquiring a wide audience. Across all content-reactors, however, it was unclear exactly what was being viewed, and thus the reaction could be defined
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through its publicisation of spectatorship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Types and number of YouTube porn video content-reactors.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; intimate partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porn actor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reaction videos however remain limited by the content policies of YouTube and cannot express or show any meaningfully sexual or erotic response. Thus, it is somewhat relevant that no reaction video is able to show masturbation or nudity; however, this does not necessarily mean that reaction videos on YouTube produce a ‘siloing’ of the public visibility of pornography, as suggested by Paasonen (2017) in her analysis of reactions to 2G1C. For one, their emphasis on the affective power of porn, even if in ambivalent and diverse ways, demonstrates the desire for visibility and transparency through displays and descriptions of vloggers’ sexuality and their usually intense emotive responses (Duffy and Hund, 2019). Further, notions of the visibility are complicated by the different ways that porn is positioned as ‘seen’, and often heard, across reaction videos, considered in relation to the sense of perspective constructed later. Finally, while the reaction videos explored here cannot be readily categorised as pornographic texts, whereas reaction videos on platforms like Pornhub can be, their publicisation of porn spectatorship often mediates porn texts in playfully knowing ways.

Understanding the mediation of porn in reaction videos, I suggest, means not limiting ideas of visibility to literal forms, either to images of genitals or sexual acts (Williams, 1999), or to images that could be defined by an intention to sexually arouse or induce orgasm. However, one limitation of my view is that while many porn actors publicised their reaction to their own porn videos, there were no obvious examples of ‘amateurs’ reacting to their own porn videos on YouTube. Given that amateur genres dominate online porn content (Slayden, 2010), the apparent lack of amateur reactions is perhaps indicative of a siloing of visibility of porn and suggestive of the limits of reaction videos to explore social and individual feelings and beliefs about porn.

Family was coded as a distinctive category to show the shifting terrain in pornography spectatorship and to clarify the extent to which reaction videos to porn publicise novel and weird modes of participation. In particular, while reactions to 2G1C also often featured shocked and disgusted family members, the genre has evolved. Reaction videos to porn now feature a range of family members and intimate partners reacting to porn in different ways. While there has been research into mediated memory making by families through social networking sites (Holloway and Green, 2017), much research on visual cultures of the family have been dominated by studies of mother-infant relationships and have especially focused on the rise of influencer culture (Abidin, 2017), mummy wellness vloggers and ‘insta-moms’, as well as practices of parental mediation (Nansen and Jayemanne, 2016), or sharenting. In this sense, publicised visual cultures of the family on social media remain under-researched (Larsen and Sandbye, 2020). Indeed, family was the third most dominant category after individuals and groups. Family and intimate partner reaction videos to
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Porn can extend any sense of the family gaze, typified by the family photo album which idealises how family ‘should be’ (Haldrup and Larsen, 2003) and may also point to a shift in family viewing practices beyond embarrassment toward screen-based representations of erotic and sexual content in the digital era (Bragg and Buckingham, 2004). Instead, reaction videos to porn featuring family members play on assumptions of visual taboos and the role of screen culture in everyday life. While it is beyond the bounds of this paper to fully consider these ideas in detail, notions of plural literacies about porn are important here (Byron, et al., 2021). The presence of families in videos was often transgressive, and affectively weird; however, as discussed in the section on functions, this weirdness did not necessarily limit discussion or exploration or suggest a lack of knowledge about porn.

Porn actors were independently coded to clarify the extent to which they critically and culturally engage with pornography via non-pornographic platforms. Most videos featuring porn models were strategically produced to market a production company, or work of a specific porn model; however, there was still a marked publicisation of porn spectatorship and many reaction videos featured porn models reacting to and exploring their self-image. Other identity markers were not taken into account in ‘content-reactors’, as the vloggers’ identity was not always obvious or made clear. As a result, any exploration of identity was considered in relation to the purpose of the video, as described later on, in order to more clearly conceptualise how the reaction video was discursively oriented toward different sexualities and types of pornography. Less prevalent categories included ‘other’, which typically referred to a cartoon, still image or non-pornographic video clip, such as an excerpt from a Spiderman film, which had been mashed-up with a porn film to make it appear as if Spiderman was reacting to requests for sex. The public referred to either Vox-pop videos, or videos that appeared to capture the reactions of unsuspecting, unknown people in a public setting, such as “Watching VR Porn in the Library Prank” (Nelk, 2018). The fact that these two categories are less prevalent demonstrates the cultural tendency in reaction videos to emphasise ostensibly authentic and unmediated reactions to watching porn in real time.

**Perspective**

The sense of perspective within reaction videos variably mediated porn as a genre to react to, such as in “Watching Porn for the First Time!” (2016), to a genre to react to oneself performing in, such as in “Porn Stars Watch Their Own Porn” (2016) to a genre to react to other’s reactions of their performances, such as in “Pornstar Couple Reacts to Each Others Porn Reaction & Discussion!!!” (2016), to a genre react to others’ reactions to, such as in “AVGN Atari Porn Episode 33 Deleted and Lost Video — Reaction” (2018). Further adding to the complexity of perspective across reaction videos, some figured porn as a genre to immerse oneself in, such as “VR Porn Reaction” (2016), and others figured porn as a genre to dialogue about, such as in the previously mentioned “Aunties and Uncles Talk to Us About Porn” (2019). These variations were categorised to show their diverse spatial and temporal mediation of porn (see Table 2).

Stereoscopic reactions were the dominant type of reaction. In these examples, reactions were always to an externally visible and/or audible video featured in an inset, with the face of the reactor taking up the bulk of the frame. Stereoscopic reactions created the impression that porn was being watched in real time. While explicit images were always blurred, some stereoscopic reactions featured explicit content through sound, such as dialogue or description. These were counted separately and were the next most common type of reaction. In these instances, explicit content was counted where sexual acts were described to clarify the extent to which sound can be overlooked as a possible mediator of pornographic and/or sexual content on YouTube. Self-retrospective reactions were those that featured porn models reacting to works that they featured in. Despite the fact that the amateur genre dominates the content in circulation on online porn platforms (Slayden, 2010), it is interesting to note that were no apparent examples of ‘amateurs’ reacting to their own works and all vloggers in this category presented themselves as professional porn models. The number of these videos is relatively aligned with the number of videos coded to have a clear commercial purpose, noted in the next category, and also reflects how reaction videos are a form of publicised spectatorship, rather than pornographic texts in their own right.
Table 2: Types and number of perspectives in YouTube reaction porn videos.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stereoscopic reaction (without sexually explicit description, dialogue or audio track)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereoscopic reaction (with sexually explicit description, dialogue or audio track)</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-retrospective reaction</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single point perspective reaction</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction to caricature of porn</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VR reaction:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyperbolic</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curvilinear</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereoscopic</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figurative reaction</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vox pop/public reaction to public talking point about porn</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recursive reaction</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>276</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Single point perspective reactions were those that featured a reaction to an external video, but without any visible or audible trace of the pornographic text. (i.e., only a laptop is visible). For example, in “Watching Porn for the First Time!” (Saryan, 2016) two female vloggers — one of whom is also a porn star — sit on a bed, reacting to porn videos on a laptop, but without offering us any clear description of what that they are watching. It is also never entirely clear when they shift to a new video. Their affected response defines how we imagine the porn they watch, which in the first minute alone ranges from laughter, screaming, dry retching, looking away, and gasping. When they say they will move on to another video, as they are seeking something that is, in their words, “more nice, like [with] romantic sex”, there is still little to clarify what they mean by that. Their statements like “Ohhh I like that” or “I do that all the time” are impossible to make sense of beyond their affected response. Porn seemed to be both alluring, and a source of pleasure, as well as at times unsettling, inexplicable and thus inherently weird. Such reaction videos foregrounded the power of the affected reaction over the unknown, unseen and unheard porn videos, and the pleasure of affected communication for its own sake (Dean, 2010).

Taken together, reactions to porn that appeared to be watched ‘in real time’ dominated the findings. Less common forms of reaction were VR reactions, which were separately categorised as porn was typically figured as if it were immanent, hyper-real and able to distort the person’s sense of distance between the pornographic images and external reality in novel ways (as a woman cried out in “VR Reaction to Porn” (VR Circle, 2016), ‘Ugh, she’s looking at me!’) This type of reaction may be less common because VR is a relatively marginal way that porn is consumed (Leighton, 2021). Figurative reactions were those that made use of still images or mashups of non-pornographic TV series or celebrities. However, figurative reactions
also sometimes stretched the possibilities of pornography and suggested that any image or sound could possess a sexual power, such as in “ASMR | Girls Reaction on Cement” (2020). Recursive reactions were ‘meta-reactions’, or reaction videos to other reaction videos. Usually, these were reactions to reaction videos by others, however in a small number of cases, vloggers reacted to their own reaction videos.

Reaction videos were classed as caricatures where the reaction was to a suggestive image or sound that was an exaggerated, distorted or overly simplified representation, but that was not explicitly pornographic. For example, there were many reaction videos to the intro music played at the start of a PornHub video, with reactions recorded in a variety of settings, including in the family home, a classroom, workplace, public library, at public concerts, on public transport and so on. Other examples of caricatures were various reactions to the 2016 comedy film *Sausage Party*. In all cases, reactions relied on vloggers or members of the public closely associating exaggerated features of non-pornographic content (such as a jingle or cartoon sausage) with porn. While the point was usually to laugh at and satirise porn, these types of videos also strongly created a sense that porn could be located anywhere and everyone would know ‘what’ was being referred to.

Vox-pop and public reactions were counted for those that featured members of the public discussing porn or unsuspecting members of the public reacting to porn. Some videos featured sole celebrities or unknown individuals discussing porn, which is why there are a slightly higher number (30) than the number of public content-reactors from Table 1 (24). While less prevalent than stereoscopic reactions, this category is still a type of reaction video as it tries to capture and demonstrate the apparent affective power of porn and publicise widespread spectatorship of it.

**Function**

Emotive reactions were the dominant purpose across reaction videos (see Table 3). This category was developed through Paasonen’s (2011) conceptualisation of online pornography as inherently affective and visceral. Emotive reactions were defined as videos that demonstrated a strong bodily response, usually a combination of disgust, humour, shock and/or surprise, but that remained limited to the internal world of the porn video without strong references to one’s own sexuality or to the world outside the video. The ‘emotive category’ was further defined by ambivalence and a diversity of emotional reactions. For example, in “Porn Title Rap” (2015), YouTuber TVFilthy Frank tries to record himself rapping ridiculous titles of a range of porn films sent to him by fans, setting himself the challenge to do so without reacting. TVFilthy Frank is frequently overwhelmed by emotion, shifting from laughter, to disgust, confusion and curiosity toward the definitively weird range of titles, which also include a screenshot of the number of likes the porn video has attracted. Similarly, in “VR Porn Reactions on Oculus from Old People” (2015), a range of older people over 60, both female and male, are shown wearing Oculus Rift technology while watching VR porn. The screen is divided into two, so we can see their perspective (an inset of a censored porn video) alongside a close-up of their body. Like “Pink Guy Raps” and “Watching Porn for the First Time!”, the reactions vary across the video, and across participants, shifting from laughter, to disgust, to pleasure and displeasure, with limited referents for the actual content of the video, and a weak or non-existent sense of each participants’ subjectivity. Instead, the desire to affect and be affected dominates this type of response (Cardoso, 2017), ensuring porn could only be weird and otherworldly, as the reactions shifted from meditating porn as alluring and pleasurable to being unsettling and inexplicably disturbing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotive</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ASMR</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Types and number of functions in YouTube reaction porn videos.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity/marketing (with endorsement or channel link)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT or identity-framed reaction</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational or exploration of sexual knowledge</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironic</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological critique</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration of issues within the porn industry or comment on the politics of porn</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ASMR was coded as a function to account for vlogs that demonstrated sexual or erotic reactions to figurative representations of the human body; for example, to a chicken breast, moulded to be shaped like a vagina, being suggestively stroked or to the image of wet cement being sexually manipulated. These had a limited presence within the reaction videos, which likely reflects the fact that there is limited acceptance of ASMR content as a genuinely sexual form of media (Waldron, 2017). Promotional reactions were those that sought to advertise a specific porn channel or model. These were coded when videos included references to pornography channels or to the work of specific actors. There was only limited presence of these types of videos; however, they generally aligned with the number of reaction videos that featured porn actors.

Identity-framed reactions were those that explored typed responses from specific gender, sexual or ethnic groups or other identity-based categories, such as in “Real Lesbians React to Lesbian Porn” (2013), “Korean Girls Try to Watch Adult Movie with Adult Movie Star” (2021) or “Chinese React to American Hardcore Porn” (2017). Reactions were coded as identity-based where the title or framing of the video suggested it would focus on identity; rather, than when someone only briefly or passingly mentioned their nationality, gender or sexuality. In general, these videos exaggerated and made fun of identity stereotypes and distanced themselves from the pornographic text, rendering it weird; for example, “Real Lesbians React to Lesbian Porn” systematically poked fun at the representation of lesbian sexuality on screen and the different women wittily noted how actions within scenes were performed for a male gaze. Scenes were readily described as faked, or as acts no lesbian would engage in. The most fantastical and bizarre scenes were isolated for description and analysis, such as a scene of a woman putting an entire stiletto shoe inside her vagina: “That’s how you know it’s for men!” While the data shows the presence of categories or titles that refer to specific identity markers (such as queer reactions, lesbian reactions, Korean reactions, etc.) are relatively rare compared to other videos, they nonetheless were united by distancing themselves from the content on screen and reacting as if it were weird and alien.

Educational or exploration of sexual knowledge were coded when reactions primarily tended to explore the significance of the porn video in relation to one’s sexual history, desires or fantasies. Some of these videos did include identity markers as a framing device in the title of the video; however, they were distinguished from the former category because they did not react as if the porn were weird in the same way. In explorational reactions, ambivalence about porn was a dominant feature and it was interesting how reactions within this category tended to conflate pornographic media with literal sex in weird and often playful or knowing ways. For example, in “Watching Porn with Mum Genre = ANAL” mothers sat with their adult sons and daughters to watch a range of anal sex scenes, de-emphasising the power of fantasy and representation to create a stronger sense of distance from the ‘too real’ pornographic text through semi-explicit descriptions of sexual acts that they had engaged in (Byron, et al., 2021; Kipnis, 1998). In this video, an adult daughter reacted with both shock and intrigue while listening to her mother describe her pleasurable experiences of anal sex, which was compared to what she saw as an unrealistic scene they had
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just watched together. In this respect, educational reactions were categorised where they reacted to porn as not simply a ‘bad’ (or ‘good’) representation of sex, but where porn served as a conduit for sexual exploration and discussion. In this respect, explorational reactions can be further understood through the idea of porn literacies (Byron, et al., 2021) and the need for researchers to engage with the critical awareness of consumers of porn, who can be affected by, and may of course enjoy or be critical of, the fantastic, degrading or exaggerated display of bodies in porn without losing critical awareness of its generic codes and conventions [10]. Importantly, in this category, any critique or discussion within exploratory reactions was defined by its ambivalence as the same vloggers would go on to find later (but still unseen and unknown) scenes pleasurable, and/or because such explorations were juxtaposed with vloggers who did find the same scenes pleasurable. Knowing humour was also an important component of some explorational reactions; for example, where parents were positioned to explain sex as if their (adult) offspring had no sexual knowledge at all and where “that awkward feeling” of watching sex scenes with parents was deliberately sought out, publicised and laughed at (Taylor, 2017).

Reaction videos were separately coded, on the other hand, as ideological if vloggers primarily or unambivalently criticised pornography according to the idea that it was manipulative, misogynistic or an otherwise distortive portrayal of sexuality. Ideological critique tends to dominate academic and public discourse about pornography (Byron, et al., 2021; MacDonald, 2019; Paasonen, 2007) and was separately coded for this reason; however only five were identified as belonging to this group. I would suggest that this is not because reaction videos are not able to be critical of porn, as many videos included criticisms of content to certain degrees. Instead, ideological critique has traditionally assumed the need to displace or repress bodily pleasure and sensation in order to maintain critical awareness and insight (Paasonen, 2011; Sobchack, 2004) and it tends to also assume the audience either lacks knowledge about porn or that its effects are so immanent and intense that it leads to a loss of critical and cognitive awareness (Byron, et al., 2021). Reaction videos, as inherently affected, knowing and often humorous reactions to porn, conflict with certain tendencies and assumptions in ideological models of criticism and this may be why any such critique is relatively rare.

Reaction videos were coded as ironic if the reaction was deliberately contradictory, or if it staged two opposing interpretative frames. For example, the video “LPS: Reacting to LPS Porn (Part 1)” was coded as ironic as it was footage of a toy from the Littlest Pet Shop Series, filmed ‘watching’ a scene of two LPS toys ‘having sex’. The fixed stare of the miniature toy dog certainly satirised the ‘reaction video to porn genre’; however, only nine reaction videos could be coded as ironic. This finding is meaningful for the study of reaction videos to porn as memes, as it distinguishes them within online participatory culture usually defined by irony and antagonism (Phillips and Milner, 2017).

Finally, reaction videos were coded as exploring issues within the porn industry or the politics of porn if they featured an interview or discussion about the politics, economics or logistics of production, distribution, exhibition or viewing of porn, but without featuring someone actually watching a porn video; for example, the reaction video from the channel Unscripted, “Aunties and Uncles Talk to Us About Porn”, was counted in this category as it featured a range of older Indians responding to different questions about pornography, including about the Indian governments’ 2018 decision to block Indians from being able to access pornographic Web sites, as well as the meaning and significance of porn viewing, its purpose and its effects on young people. The conflicting reactions to porn by different participants publicised porn spectatorship as having a weirdly intense and affective power, which was celebrated by some and vilified by others.

Memesis and weirdness

We can see from the findings of this content analysis that reaction videos to porn signal a shift in the ambivalent position pornography takes in the public sphere; rather than a ‘public secret’, “ubiquitous yet effaced and silenced, widely consumed yet defined as miasmic filth” [11], reaction videos instead figure porn as an authentic mediator for self-exposure, self-publicity and sexual exploration in a variety of ways. However, the vloggers’ ambivalent, contradictory and conflicting reactions to largely unseen and
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Unclogable texts meant that it was difficult to conceptualise what was ‘authentic’ about the pornography being viewed, or indeed the reaction itself beyond its weird capacity to surprise and affect (Warner, 1999; Dean, 2010). In this sense, reaction videos have been understood as a distinct type of meme. In Shifman’s definition, memes are created “with awareness of each other”[12] as they are circulated, transformed and imitated across digital networks through variations that refer to and replicate an original text, which may be virally mimicked, parodied or remixed. Memes are also usually conceptualised as ‘authorless’; however, the reaction videos to porn considered in this paper stretch the definition of a meme, as they are not always directly replicating or referring to a known original text (like 2G1C) nor are they always authorless. This is especially the case in examples created by porn models for strategic purposes, but also the case in identity-based reactions or reactions that centred on family members, which still evoke a sense of authorship, even if only by an abstract image of a grandma, a Korean woman, an uncle or aunty, and so on.

YouTube has been criticised for its playing host “to a culture of violent affrontery in which nothing is sacred”[13], yet it is worth pointing out that obscenity is what has always defined porn, well before the Internet. Here, I suggest reaction videos can be understood through their mediation of porn, and tendency to react to it, as weird. The English etymology of the word ‘weird’ refers to the transgressive, the strange and the abnormal, often in a derogatory sense, as well as to the transcendent, the inexplicable and the otherworldly (Greve and Zappe, 2021)[14]. This dual meaning of weirdness is applicable to reaction videos to porn. This is the case in videos like “Watching Porn for the First Time” (2016), where we see reactions entirely disconnected from a meaningful sense of the text being reacted to, or “Reacting to Dirty Videos with My MOM!!!!!” (2017) where porn is deliberately watched to evoke and explore the awkwardness of viewing sex scenes with family members. However, while weirdness may be affected in different ways, across most videos there is strong awareness of the generic codes and conventions of porn and there are very few genuinely ideological critiques of porn that complain of its allegedly deceptive power. I suggest that even as porn is figured as a weird genre of media across most reaction videos, viewing such reactions through the idea of porn literacies can ensure a ‘paranoid framework’ of analysis is avoided and audience competence is allowed for (Byron, et al., 2021).

Finally, it is worth considering that the sounds, dialogue and description in many reaction videos is sometimes sexually explicit. While both YouTube and TikTok technically prohibit sexually explicit content, the definition of what constitutes depiction seems relatively rigid and notably seems to exclude audible representation and linguistic references with many videos featuring sexually explicit dialogue from vloggers, as well as audible porn soundtracks; further, this research has found that such videos are often not subject to age restriction. For example, the reaction video, “Ask a Porn Star: Your Most Hardcore Sex Scene” (2017) clearly sought to titillate and shock via rolling descriptions of (for example) torn and punctured orifices, psychological torture (from waterboarding), burst and bleeding eye vessels, extensive bruising, broken bones and so on. This particular video is a strong example of how pornography can be defined by its figurative shaping and transforming of the limits of the human body, turning depictions of pain into a source of sexual pleasure (Williams, 1999), as well as how reaction videos can mediate porn while also satirising it, if only ambivalently. The exaggerated, hyperbolic and (depending on one’s point of view) in some ways funny, descriptions often seemed more fantastical than real, pointing to how context is also important factor to consider in the reaction video (Paasonen, et al., 2019). Nonetheless, sound is still playing an ambivalent role in many reaction videos. This also echoes the tendency, identified within cinema studies, that sound and dialogue is too often seen as secondary to images in meaning (Altman, 1980) and exposes as problematic the assumption that pornography is primarily a visual form of media, defined by its “frenzy” of visibility (Williams, 1999).

Conclusion

Reaction videos, as memes, are weird and ambivalent toward what porn is, what it does, who watches it and why. Porn reaction videos on YouTube, in shifting the spectatorship of porn from the private to the public,
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show how digital networks now occupy a dominant place in the creation and circulation of visual culture. As we can never hope to identify or really know what is being watched or thought about, our knowledge of porn is instead shaped via the meta-mode of looking within the reaction video (Bruns, 2010). From this view, reaction videos to porn are akin to a “media of acknowledgement” [15] confirming the presence of porn in the public sphere and confounding any analysis of its exceptional status within our culture (McKee, 2016). As this paper has argued, reaction videos mediate porn through modes of memetic production, circulation, and consumption by wielding a weirdly affective power, shaped by participatory logics of the Internet ‘built for porn’, in which anything can be watched by anyone, with anyone.

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Notes
9. The search also led to the discovery of viral reactions to pornography originally circulated on Tiktok, but that had been later uploaded to YouTube. Like YouTube, Tiktok also prohibits any depiction or reference to pornography; however, unlike YouTube, Tiktok does not allow the word porn or pornography to be used in the title or hashtag. As noted, users readily circumvent this restriction by using terms like ‘PH’ (standing for Pornhub). However, this study limits its focus to YouTube as this has clearer search criteria for capturing titles and keywords. Future research could investigate TikTok, and the use of hashtags like #ph and #phintro to explore how users make sense of and react to porn on the platform.


14. The modern notion of weirdness has its origins in the ‘weird sisters’ of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* who were weird for their ability to foresee and determine the future. The historical richness of the idea of weirdness will not be explored in depth here, except to note that weirdness is both a transgressive and transcendent idea.


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Editorial history

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