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# "We control it on our end, and now it's up to you" -- Exploitation, Empowerment, and Ethical Portrayals of the Pornography Industry

## **Abstract**

Documentaries about pornography are beginning to constitute an entirely new subgenre of film. Big Hollywood names like James Franco and Rashida Jones are jumping on the bandwagon, using their influence and resources to invest in a type of audiovisual knowledge production far less mainstream than that in which they usually participate. The films that have resulted from this new movement are undoubtedly persuasive, no matter which side of the debate over pornography these directors have respectively chosen to represent. Moreover, regardless of the side(s) that audience members may have taken in the so-called “feminist porn debates,” one cannot ignore the rhetorical strength of the arguments presented in a wide variety of documentaries about pornography. However, the ways in which these filmmakers use audiovisual rhetoric to convey their respective arguments are far from simple. My research explores and analyzes the various types of rhetoric that filmmakers use when creating documentaries about pornography. I also investigate precisely how these types of rhetoric are used, and why viewers find them so persuasive. My visual analysis focuses primarily on Jill Bauer and Ronna Gradus’s *Hot Girls Wanted* (2015), Bryce Wagoner’s *After Porn Ends* (2012), and Christina A. Voros’s *Kink* (2013) – the first offers a particularly negative view of pornography, the second a nuanced view, and the third a particularly positive view.

## **Keywords**

pornography, documentaries, representation

## **Disciplines**

Film and Media Studies | Gender and Sexuality | Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

## **Comments**

Written as a Senior Capstone for Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

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# “We control it on our end, and now it’s up to you”

## Exploitation, Empowerment, and Ethical Portrayals of the Pornography Industry

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### A Capstone Paper by Julie Davin

*Advised by Professor Nathalie Lebon, Ph.D.  
For the Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor of Arts in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies  
Submitted May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017*

**Abstract**

Documentaries about pornography are beginning to constitute an entirely new subgenre of film. Big Hollywood names like James Franco and Rashida Jones are jumping on the bandwagon, using their influence and resources to invest in a type of audiovisual knowledge production far less mainstream than that in which they usually participate. The films that have resulted from this new movement are undoubtedly persuasive, no matter which side of the debate over pornography these directors have respectively chosen to represent. Moreover, regardless of the side(s) that audience members may have taken in the so-called “feminist porn debates,” one cannot ignore the rhetorical strength of the arguments presented in a wide variety of documentaries about pornography. However, the ways in which these filmmakers use audiovisual rhetoric to convey their respective arguments are far from simple. My research explores and analyzes the various types of rhetoric that filmmakers use when creating documentaries about pornography. I also investigate precisely *how* these types of rhetoric are used, and why viewers find them so persuasive. My visual analysis focuses primarily on Jill Bauer and Ronna Gradus’s *Hot Girls Wanted* (2015), Bryce Wagoner’s *After Porn Ends* (2012), and Christina A. Voros’s *Kink* (2013) – the first offers a particularly negative view of pornography, the second a nuanced view, and the third a particularly positive view.

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*Exploitation or Empowerment?  
An Examination of Documentaries about Pornography*

## **Introduction**

Today, documentaries about pornography are beginning to constitute an entirely new subgenre of film. Big Hollywood names like James Franco and Rashida Jones are jumping on the bandwagon, using their influence and their wealth of resources to invest in a type of audiovisual knowledge production far less mainstream than that in which they usually participate. The films that have resulted from this new movement are undoubtedly persuasive, no matter which side of the debate over pornography these directors have respectively chosen to represent. Moreover, regardless of the side(s) that audience members may have taken in the so-called “feminist porn wars,” one cannot ignore the rhetorical strength of the arguments presented in these compelling documentaries about pornography. However, the ways in which these filmmakers use audiovisual rhetoric to convey their respective arguments are far from simple.

My research explores and analyzes the various types of rhetoric that filmmakers use when creating documentaries about pornography. I also investigate precisely *how* these types of rhetoric are used, and why viewers find them so persuasive. My visual analysis focuses primarily on Jill Bauer and Ronna Gradus’s *Hot Girls Wanted* (2015), Bryce Wagoner’s *After Porn Ends* (2012), and Christina A. Voros’s *Kink* (2013, stylized as *kink*). I hope that the research I have done will prove useful to film critics, casual viewers of these documentaries and others like them, and feminists who want to know more about pornography. My research also contributes to our understanding of the ways we are made to think about pornography. My goal, though it may be lofty, was to

say something new about the ways that documentaries influence the opinions of viewers regarding social issues; I hope that I have fulfilled this goal.

It is my assertion that society grants a great deal of epistemological power to knowledge producers. Therefore, documentary filmmakers have a moral obligation to portray social issues such as pornography in an ethical way. For the purposes of this paper, I define “ethical” in relation to two key attributes: and ethical portrayal is both *accurate* and *progressive*. When it comes to the issue of pornography, an *accurate* portrayal depicts pornography as a multi-faceted issue; it strikes a balance between positive and negative aspects of pornography, both as an industry and a social phenomenon, and does not attempt to dismiss either side completely. An accurate portrayal also explores moral gray areas. That being said, a *progressive* depiction of pornography does three things: it portrays professionals in the pornography industry as three-dimensional people, particularly women; it prioritizes subjugated narratives; and it treats pornography as a site for potential in terms of social progress.

Among the other questions that I have set out to answer are the following: How exactly do these filmmakers convey certain messages about the pornography industry and the effects that this industry has on the social world? Moreover, is documentary an inherently flawed form because of its subjective nature, or should we applaud films like this for eloquently expressing individual viewpoints? If it is inherently flawed, should we keep striving to create meaningful documentaries about social issues? Should filmmakers make their stance on the issue at hand explicitly clear? I selected a few scenes from each film as sites for analysis, and, through deductive reasoning, used my findings to synthesize a thesis.



## **Feminism and Film: A Literature Review**

### **Feminist Scholarship**

#### ***The Feminist Porn Wars***

Much scholarship has already been produced on the implications that pornography has for feminism. Some takes the form of personal memoir: in *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star*, renowned pornographic actress Jenna Jameson recounts her early life of drug abuse and abusive relationships that resulted from her involvement in the industry (Jameson 2004). Other works represent years of research and careful argument construction. Anti-pornography advocates like Dworkin (1989), Anderson (1995), Eaton (2007), and Dines (2010, 2014) all argue along the same lines of patriarchy and “the personal is political.” They worry that the ramifications of pornography, specifically so-called “hardcore” porn, extend beyond the porn actresses themselves to put the dignity and safety of women at risk worldwide. Their work has been heavily criticized for a range of reasons including cissexism, whorephobia, and academic integrity.

Meanwhile, their pro-porn counterparts like Paglia (1994) argue that the choice of some women to act in pornography is a potentially empowering one. According to pro-porn feminists, porn actresses are working toward gender equality by reclaiming their sexuality in such a radically public way. These ideas are consistent with “choice feminism” – people who subscribe to this type of feminism believe that every choice a woman makes of her own volition is inherently feminist as such. Anthologies of feminist thought on pornography, such as Taormino’s *Feminist Porn Book*, have also been compiled: in the case of this work, which includes passionate testimonials by self-

proclaimed “feminist pornographers,” the overarching tone is undeniably progressive, contemporary, and pro-porn (Taormino 2013). In this book, Taormino gives a voice not only to white women, but to women of color, queer individuals, and those who live at the intersection of these identities, who argue that pornography represents a radical venue of self-expression.

Considering the amount and popularity of pornography categories such as “Interracial,” “Japanese,” and “Ebony,” race should be addressed in all accounts of mainstream pornography; so should sexuality, given the prevalence of “girl-on-girl” pornography and pornography featuring gay men. (Notably, both categories have men as their target audience; girl-on-girl porn is most commonly directed at straight men, where porn featuring gay men is targeted toward other gay men.) Other scholars focus on the interplay of the two major viewpoints, emphasizing the common ground shared by moderates, but also pointing out the commonalities between the so-called “radical feminist” anti-porn position and that of the conservative Christian right; both groups argue for the abolition of pornography, but for different reasons (Zurcher, Louis, et al. 1973).

### ***Visual Rhetoric and Feminism***

In addition to material focusing specifically on pornography and feminism, much scholarship explicitly incorporates visual analysis. For instance, feminist film critic Laura Mulvey’s piece entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1999) informs every work focusing on visual rhetoric in relation to feminism, whether or not the author in question is aware of this specific essay. Her work on scopophilia, the male gaze, and

the objectified other has become extremely influential and has entered the general academic consciousness. Other notable works within the realm of visual rhetoric and feminism include Crosby (2004), who focuses on the contextualization of pornography within what she calls “neopatriarchy.” Calling for a reconceptualization of patriarchy in the modern age, Crosby uses the lens of fictional narrative to explore the concept of power exchange. Messner and Montez de Oca (2005) concentrate more specifically on the way masculinity is shaped by the visual image, and Sikhand’s work (2015) on ethnographic film stands out but is also highly relevant, considering that porn documentaries can easily be considered as ethnographic films. Each of these works can be used as a lens through which to view *Hot Girls Wanted*, *After Porn Ends*, and *kink*; analyses formed using these respective works will undoubtedly be unique, and a well-informed analysis takes them into consideration in combination.

### ***Human Rights and Postcolonialism***

Also informing my research are pieces that de-center Western women and their feminisms, such as Majstorović and Lassen’s (2011) analysis of womanhood as a social construct across several non-Western cultures. Other relevant works include the United Nations’ (1948) declaration of human rights, the United States’ 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), and “The Declaration of the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe,” which was written by a group of 150 European sex workers and civilian allies in 2005 to specifically address rights with respect to the particular needs of sex workers. Documents like these are crucial to analysis of any social phenomenon: if one of the

questions about pornography asks whether or not it is harmful to society, a human rights framework can be useful to conceptualize this idea of “harm.”

## **Film Scholarship**

### ***Writings by Timothy Corrigan***

Though Timothy Corrigan’s (1998) work is not as explicitly feminist as that of Mulvey, it offers a great deal of insight through a lens that is certainly not incompatible with social justice. His work on auteur theory makes the argument that every director leaves an indelible and identifiable mark on the films that they make, and is widely respected in the field of film scholarship. He also offers practical advice for analyzing film scenes and offers definitions for many key terms in the field of film study. This advice proved very helpful for me during my repeated viewings of *Hot Girls Wanted*, *After Porn Ends*, and *kink*; his work also provided me with examples of filmic elements upon which I based my analysis.

### ***The Debate Over Documentaries***

Aufderheide’s (2007) piece on the evolution of the documentary genre can serve as a springboard for critical thinking about this topic. Other works focus more explicitly on the political implications and uses of documentary: some filmmakers use a wide thematic scope to gradually shift popular opinion regarding a certain issue, while others focus on a specific person or corporation in order to seek direct and immediate justice (Cook et al. 2015). Others still offer techniques for doing a close-reading of a documentary, arguing that this genre is understudied and supplementing existing

knowledge (Grant, Sloniowski, and Nichols 2014). The overarching debate occurring in the background of these works is normative in nature: while some argue that documentary filmmakers should try to portray multiple sides of the problem at hand, other scholars argue that there is value in completely subjective, one-sided depiction of social issues. Upon careful consideration of these two theories, I have aligned myself and my research with the former.

### ***Writings on Hot Girls Wanted, After Porn Ends, and kink***

A significant amount of writing has been done about these three documentaries respectively, mostly in the form of film reviews. However, this body of work is largely made up of informal writing; my formal analysis supplements existing scholarship by contrasting these three films, their respective ideological standpoints, and the rhetoric that propels them. Hale (2015) takes a rather neutral perspective, choosing to focus mostly on analysis of filmic elements like camera angles and soundtrack; Berlatsky (2016) offers a critique from an intersectional perspective; Snow's piece (2016) is perhaps the most opinionated, as indicated by her use of the word "pornsploitation." Film critics and feminists alike have a lot to say about these films, but rarely have their opinions been compared, if at all. This is one scholarly gap that I have attempted to fill with my project.

### **Using a Visual Analysis Methodology**

The primary method that I use for my research is visual analysis of various images, shots, and short scenes from *Hot Girls Wanted*, *After Porn Ends*, and *kink*. I chose these films because I thought that they represent a good balance of viewpoints,

though my analysis later revealed an overarching anti-pornography tone. I selected a few scenes from each film – enough to give readers an idea of the film as a whole, but enough to still be reasonable in terms of the timeline for my research – and performed in-depth “close readings” of them, specifically through an intersectional feminist lens. This means that I tried my best to keep gender, race, sexuality, class, ability, and other elements of identity and social location in mind while I performed and wrote my analysis (Crenshaw 1991). Given time and resource constraints, I have not analyzed all three films in their entirety, but my scholarly analysis has resulted in a project that is both manageable and meaningful in terms of content and insight.

### **A Brief Note on Standpoint Epistemology**

It is crucial that I take my own social position into consideration when performing my research and analysis. I have never been directly involved in pornography or sex work of any kind, and many would argue that this represents a degree of social privilege; I would tend to agree with them. People who have sex for a living, whether it is on or off camera, face a unique type of social discrimination that I have never had to face. While I have extensive scholarly knowledge on topics such as intersectional feminism, pornography, and sex work, the scholarly nature of that knowledge certainly does not make it more valuable than the lived experiences of pornography actors and sex workers; in fact, many would argue that lived experience is far more valuable than scholarly knowledge (Spencer 2004, Paynter and Rivers 2015).

I recognize my privilege as a middle-class white woman who is about to graduate from college. Though certainly many people in the pornography industry come from

backgrounds of privilege and education, there are also many people who entered this industry or sex work in general because of financial insecurity, home insecurity, lack of other opportunities, and so on. As a result of the privilege from which I benefit, some might argue that I have no right to judge the pornography professionals upon whom my research focuses. My response, which I hope is adequate, is that this research is analytical, not judgmental. I have made every effort during every step of the research process to eliminate any judgmental mindset that I might possess – anything that remains is a limitation of my research. Intent does not equal impact, and all research is subject to criticism; I do not pretend to be an exception to these truths.

### **Primary Argument**

It is my assertion that documentary filmmakers have a responsibility to make the most convincing documentary possible, no matter what their argument is, as long as they offer a progressive view of social justice issues such as sexism, racism, homophobia, and the like. (See page 2 to reference my working definition of “progressive.”) Such depictions convey positive, yet nuanced messages about members of marginalized groups including women, people of color, sex workers, queer people, and individuals who exist at the intersections of these identity categories. Knowledge producers have a responsibility to combat stereotypes in their epistemologies. That being said, there are certain elements of the contemporary pornography industry that are undeniably problematic. Society gives documentary filmmakers a certain degree of power and privilege by assigning them the role of knowledge producer. When filmmakers use this power and privilege to make the public aware of the various ways that exploitation sometimes occurs in the pornography

industry, they have fulfilled their role in an ethical way. When they offer fair and accurate portrayals of women who feel empowered by their involvement in the pornography industry, that is also an example of the ethical use of the power that society grants filmmakers. However, when filmmakers use their highly valuable platform to perpetuate misogynistic stereotypes and myths about the pornography industry, their actions become unethical and indefensible.

As with so many social issues, the true nature of pornography and its implications for intersectional feminism do not lie at either extreme; in my opinion, the key to this issue lies in nuance. One must not try to paint all pornography with a broad brush. It is my belief that both “bad porn” and “good porn” exist: the former includes categories like rape fantasy and race-play, while the latter includes porn that is educational, egalitarian, and/or queer. (Neither of these is intended to be a complete list.) Some vehemently pro-porn feminists would have you believe that “all porn is good porn,” using sex-positivity and choice feminism (i.e. anything a woman chooses to do, even something like rape fantasy porn, is inherently feminist because a woman chose to do it). Camille Paglia, for instance, defends pornography on the basis that it “exposes the deepest, darkest truths about sexuality” – apparently, she views this as inherently positive. On the other hand, some staunch anti-porn feminists, such as Gail Dines and Andrea Dworkin, make the argument that “all porn is bad porn,” usually on the basis of its alleged inextricability from violent patriarchy. In order to give an accurate portrayal of pornography, one must not eschew either category completely, nor can they ignore the “gray area” that exists between “good porn” and “bad porn.”



## Thematic Analysis

### *Opening the Door*

*After Porn Ends*, *Hot Girls Wanted*, and *kink* are stylistically unique films. The first is a traditional “talking head” documentary, in which everyone is formally interviewed; the second is a less traditional “slice of life” documentary that features almost no “talking head” interviews; and the third could be categorized as a blending of these two subgenres. Moreover, the opening scene of each introduces the stylistic choices that will be used throughout the film in question. For instance, the filmmakers of *After Porn Ends* begin the film with a “cold open” – they do not give the viewer any context for the initial interview with Asia Carrera. If the viewer knows the title of the film they are about to see, they may already suspect that Carrera is not merely a “stay-at-home-mom,” as the text below her face identifies her. The film proceeds with several more of these decontextualized interviews, with on-screen text added to name and describe each interviewee: notable occupations listed include “Bounty Hunter,” “Christian Activist,” “Nursing Student,” and “Artist.” Only later does the viewer learn for certain that all these people once acted in pornography.

On the other hand, *Hot Girls Wanted* and *kink* throw viewers right into the realities of the “scenes” that these two films respectively depict. Jill Bauer and Ronna Gradus’s 2015 documentary *Hot Girls Wanted* begins with the opening of a door. A man and a woman walk out of a house. They both appear to be around the same age, but when the young woman skips to the car and asks if she can drive, the man denies her: the viewer gets the sense that he is older, that he has some sort of authority over her, or both. A hip-hop beat plays in the background as they drive to the airport to pick

up her friend, her fiddling with the air conditioning and leaning out the window. She is briefly shown reuniting with her friend Ava before the screen goes black and text appears: “More people visit porn sites each month than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined[.] More and more of what they watch is ‘pro-am’ porn – videos featuring paid amateurs[.] In the Internet age, porn stars playing ‘the girl next door’ are being replaced[.]” These words remain on screen for an extra beat, presumably to create suspense, before the next line of text appears: “[...]by the real thing[.]” Again, Ava and the other young woman are shown, but the viewer now has a new frame of reference through which to see them: they are pornography actresses. They are the real girls next door.

The disapproving tone of this opening scene stands in contrast to the beginning of Christina Voros’s 2013 documentary *kink*. Voros’s film explores the everyday realities of people who work for Kink.com, “the largest producer of BDSM pornography in the world.” In the words of the on-screen text, BDSM stands for “Bondage & Discipline / Dominance & Submission / Sadism & Masochism.” The film opens on founder Peter Acworth, who “founded Kink.com out of his graduate school dorm room in 1997,” giving the filmmakers a tour of what has come to be known as “the Armory.” As Acworth explains, the previous owners of the building sold it to him because his company would not have to renovate; they could use the foreboding industrial space “as is.” During one point of the tour, Acworth is distracted by the sound of a woman screaming. In his quaint British dialect, he apologizes to the filmmakers: “Sorry, we have a gang-bang going on over yonder” (*kink*). From his casual tone, one might think

he was talking about loud music or a bit of construction, but a gang-bang is “just another day at the office” for the employees of Kink.com.

### ***Narratives from the New Age***

In many ways, the respective opening scenes of *kink* and *Hot Girls Wanted* share certain thematic threads. For instance, the fact that Acworth created a website in graduate school that has grown into a multi-million dollar company in less than 20 years speaks to a “power of the Internet” narrative. The statistic that “more people visit porn sites every month than Netflix, Amazon, and Twitter combined” is also thematically connected to this narrative. Both openings also share a certain light-hearted tone that may surprise some viewers, given the ominous nature of the title *Hot Girls Wanted* and the fact that *kink* is about the world of hardcore BDSM pornography. Regardless, these documentarians chose to begin their films by showing seemingly happy people going about their everyday activities; again, we see the idea of pornography being “just another business.” However, the filmmakers use this happy-go-lucky mood in vastly different ways: while the tone of *kink* remains rather solidly optimistic throughout the duration of the film, *Hot Girls Wanted* darkens considerably in comparison to the upbeat tone of its opening scene.

Bauer and Gradus’s 2015 documentary follows a handful of young women, primarily 18- to 21-year-olds, as they try to navigate their way through the Miami porn industry. Los Angeles is still the “porn capital” of the United States, but it has become heavily regulated in the past decade or so, driving the industry to form hubs in other cities (*Hot Girls Wanted*). The women featured in this film hail from small towns all across the country; some of them had never been on a plane before they flew to Miami

to answer an advertisement that they found on Craigslist. Though the film follows several young women, Tressa was selected to be the primary character, most likely because her story follows the narrative arc that the filmmakers set out to capture. Tressa is a 19-year-old cheerleader from just outside of Arlington, Texas. She has a new boyfriend, who knows about her new career, and two loving parents, who do not. She starts out naïve and optimistic, but it doesn't take long for her to become jaded. In one scene, she is shown at the hospital after having a Bartholin's cyst drained; she explains on her vlog that the gland that lubricates her vagina "got clogged from having too much sex" (*Hot Girls Wanted*).

### ***The Good, The Bad, and The Industry***

*Hot Girls Wanted* also emphasizes the fact that the young women depicted are often forced out of their comfort zone in order to make more money. In one notable scene, Tressa sits on her bed in Riley's house holding a rubber dildo the size of her forearm. More on-screen text explains that most companies will only hire a "new girl" to do softcore porn a few times; after that, they lose interest unless the young woman in question is willing to do "fetish porn" featuring bondage, forced blowjobs, and the like. Tressa, for example, has been offered \$1,000 to be filmed fitting half of the aforementioned enormous dildo into herself. With all other offers dried up, she tells the camera that she is "practicing." *Kink* also explores this theme of pushing personal limits for the sake of extra pay. In one uncomfortable sequence, a producer named Princess Donna is working on a break-in scene with the now-infamous porn actor James Deen. As the camera starts rolling, a thin blonde woman in a tight-fitting dress hears a knock at the door. She opens it a crack, and three men in ski masks force their way in,

tugging a black hood over her head and threatening her with a knife. The pornographers have told this actress that they would pay her \$1,000 extra if she can get away from the men: they want to get her genuine desperation on film, and could think of no better way to motivate this desperation than money.

The beginning of the shoot goes smoothly, but the tone of the actress's voice shifts and Princess Donna stops the scene. "This bag is not working," the actress says, "I can't do this." Immediately, the male actors back off; the bag is removed, and Princess Donna starts brainstorming to "make it something that [the actress] wants." Right on set, Donna makes the change to a consensual foursome scene. "I work very hard to keep everything within the model's limits," she asserts, "and [to] make it explicitly clear that they're in control of the scene, and that we don't have to push any harder than they want to go."

*Hot Girls Wanted*, on the other hand, does not portray porn professionals in such a positive light. Riley, the 23-year-old man from the opening of the film, is the one who posted the advertisements that attracted the titular "hot girls" – he is a talent agent for Hussie Models, a firm that specializes in finding fresh faces for the aforementioned "pro-am" industry. He is also landlord and chauffeur to the young women he hires. Riley is usually shown on his beige leather sectional couch, surrounded by "his girls" or on his laptop. One noteworthy scene features him looking at pictures of Tressa (stage name: Stella May), the young woman from the opening shot. "She's not fat," he says, "she just needs to get smaller." He gestures with his hands as if they were on her hips, compressing her down to his desired size; the filmmakers present viewers with a very literal manifestation of Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze."

## ***Men in Control***

In both *Hot Girls Wanted* and *After Porn Ends*, the narrative of women being denied agency over their own bodies comes up repeatedly. One way that this occurs is through the disapproval of their male partners regarding their involvement in the pornography industry. In one *Hot Girls Wanted* scene, Tressa visits home again, where she attends a party with her boyfriend Kendall. Their friends all know about Tressa's new career, and they ask about it in a pointed, embarrassing way. Tressa and Kendall exchange uncomfortable glances, and their discussions of her involvement in porn become increasingly negative and heated. When Kendall is being misogynistic or unfair, Tressa is not afraid to stand up for herself, but she is ultimately no match for Kendall's subtle techniques of emotional manipulation. Toward the end of the film, Kendall teams up with Tressa's mother: her story culminates in a conversation between the three of them. Tressa's mother and Kendall, who have never met before this day, convince her to text Riley. Her fingers dash across the touchscreen of her phone, typing "Hey, I'm done with porn." She takes a beat, then hits "Send."

Shortly after, we learn that Tressa and Kendall have the storybook ending that the filmmakers were probably hoping for. It is worth noting that they only regain their "right to participate in the cultural and public life of society" when Tressa is no longer having sex for a living ("The Declaration of the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe"). They are shown having a barbeque with Tressa's parents, both of whom now know that she was involved in porn; she tearfully recounts the conversation she had with her father, during which he told her, "Just know that I love you, and you're my daughter and you'll always be my daughter" (*Hot Girls Wanted*). Again, we see how Tressa's

personal choices and the (dis)approval of the men in her life are closely linked. Notably, in *After Porn Ends*, Mary Carey's story mirrors this narrative. In her interview, Carey describes how she began her career in the industry doing "girl-girl" scenes exclusively because she was married to a man. Mary's marriage to this man was on-and-off, and she altered her work in lockstep with the condition of her marriage: she would film scenes with other men when she and her husband were not together, but as soon as they reconciled, she would return to "girl-girl" pornography.

Presumably, the idea of Mary having sex with other men made her husband feel uncomfortable, and conditions were no different with the man she met after separating permanently from her (ex-)husband. "I didn't do boy-girl for the first six months [of this new relationship]," Mary recounts, but it was actually her boyfriend who encouraged her to get back into the boy-girl scene because she could make more money there. However, this encouragement was always temporary: a couple days before each of Mary's boy-girl shoots, her boyfriend would become distant; on the day of the shoot, he would go out and binge-drink with his male friends; and when the check arrived, he would take it from her, claiming ownership because "he *let* [Mary] have sex with other people" (emphasis mine). This narrative of emotional manipulation harkens back to the tactics that Kendall uses to persuade Tressa in *Hot Girls Wanted*, but Mary reacted in a very different way: she recognized the fact that her husband was gaslighting her, and promptly left him. Once again, we are given the sense that pornography has no place in any successful relationship. Instead, it apparently does nothing but encourage jealousy, conflict, and general turmoil.

### ***One Big Happy Family***

In many parts of *kink*, the viewer gets the sense that the pornography professionals depicted have genuine compassion and affection for one another. One notable scene features a male actor gingerly wrapping his female costar's ankles with protective tape to prevent chafing from shackles. Another shows two muscular male actors sharing a tender embrace after an intense whipping and bondage scene. The latter example is part of "aftercare," a crucial concept in BDSM. As one pornographer explains it, "[the model is] giving us the gift of submission... and you can't just leave them that way. You have to reassure them: 'You're still special, I still care about you.'" Moreover, this concept applies to both the actors and the pornographers; there is more to the atmosphere of intimacy at play during a Kink.com shoot than the simple facts of nudity and sex in the presence of others. As one Kink.com employee named Tomcat describes it, the director-model relationship is one in which "you get to watch someone have this incredible experience." Later on in the film, pornography director Van Darkholme describes his relationship with the models who take the submissive roles in his films: "I respect and love the subs when I'm working," he says adamantly. "I care for them a lot."

This theme of affection and intimacy within the industry also runs through *Hot Girls Wanted* and *After Porn Ends*, albeit in different forms. In the former, the "girls" living in Riley's house form fast friendships with one another, having suddenly found themselves with no friends or family in the new and unfamiliar world of porn. Many of these young women come from small, rural towns in historically conservative states, and some of them had never travelled by plane before their Riley-provided flight to



Miami. This narrative of fresh-faced, small-town girls is a crucial rhetorical element of the film and its overarching argument: having never experienced the “real world” of urbanized America, these innocent young women come to Miami optimistic, but leave hardened. According to the filmmakers, the cruelty of the industry fosters a myriad of physical and psychological problems. Internalized misogyny begins to sully the beautiful female friendships depicted in the beginning of the film: in one notable scene, Tressa goes to a photoshoot with Michelle (stage name: Brooklyn), the “new girl in the house.” She quickly establishes herself as the most experienced model there; at one point during Tressa’s shoot, the photographer calls Brooklyn over to tell her, “That’s the look that if you did, man, you’d get booked every single day. Just like that.” In the black-and-white world of *Hot Girls Wanted*, photographer Randy comes to represent the way that pornography not only turns women against their morals, but also against each other.

### ***Careers, Conflation, and Cautionary Tales***

The former models featured in *After Porn Ends* – and, in all possibility, its filmmakers – share these concerns about the twisted nature of relationships within the pornography industry. As one might expect, many of these concerns pertain to alcoholism and drug use. In fact, for Shelley Lubben, former pornographic model and founder of the Pink Cross Foundation, there is a close link between addiction and what she labels as a false and toxic intimacy within the industry:

I [was] involved doing anal gang bangs with five or six different performers and I’m thinking “Oh my god, now I’m bringing big jugs of vodka!” Everyone’s egging you on saying “No, girl, we love you. We’re your family now. You’re awesome.

And there is a family atmosphere that they offer: porn star karaoke, everybody hangs out at the same parties... everyone's very affectionate... That's their family... I wanted out, bad, and I remember crying to God, drunk off my ass on Jack Daniel's, thinking, "If you get me out of this, I'll serve you with my whole life." (*After Porn Ends*)

Though one may not be able to explicitly link Lubben's alcoholism and this toxic intimacy as cause and effect, this quotation strongly suggests that she sees the two as interrelated. This idea of pornography "driving one to drink" is only reinforced by the "Where Are They Now" sequence at the end of the film. As it turns out, Asia Carrera, who seemed to be one of the most well-adjusted and level-headed former pornographic models featured in the film, became an alcoholic shortly after the movie was completed. Upon reflection, the tragedy of her personal history lies mostly in the death of her husband: if nothing else, her involvement in pornography provided her with a fan base, to whom she reached out following his death and received a great deal of financial support. However, the way that the film splices her interview into several separate parts makes it difficult to follow the storyline of her life, and the viewer inevitably conflates her pornography career with her eventual decline into alcoholism as a result.

### ***The Power of Choice***

The filmmakers of *Hot Girls Wanted* were also clearly very selective when deciding what footage would make it to the final cut. Of course, every film goes through an editing process: shots and scenes might be cut because they are non-essential, they are aesthetically unpleasant, something went wrong with the audio or the camerawork, and so on. However, *Hot Girls Wanted* was clearly edited to preserve the cohesion of

certain narratives. The reality of every human life is complex, multi-faceted, and nuanced, but directors Jill Bauer and Ronna Gradus present the lives of Tressa, Rachel, Jade, Michelle, and Kayla as two-dimensional: to put these two dimensions simply, they are all involved in pornography, and they all feel somewhat bad about it. Though I do not deny that there are plenty of young women who have highly negative experiences in the pornography industry, it hardly seems honest or progressive to portray the entire Miami pro-am scene as a hotbed of deception, disempowerment, and abuse. When the end credits roll, the viewer is left to ask: Why did Michelle and Kayla decide to stay in pornography if it is such a horrendous industry? What about the other three women in the house? Why were their stories not included?

Moreover, as my research evolved, I found myself questioning my original conception of *After Porn Ends* as a less polarized portrayal of the pornography industry, lying somewhere between the anti-pornography agenda of *Hot Girls Wanted* and the sex-positive perspective of *kink*. *After Porn Ends* offers occasional glimpses of a balanced narrative, but its overall depiction of the pornography industry is an undeniably negative one. Furthermore, in juxtaposition to *Hot Girls Wanted*, this film does not give the viewer that “slice of life” outlook on the industry; instead, the style of the movie is completely centered on heavily edited “talking head” interviews – even an amateur viewer can tell by the editing that parts of each former model’s story were removed from the final product. Of course, all film auteurs have artistic license, and a film comprised of unedited interviews would not be as entertaining. Though it is commonly thought that the element of entertainment is not as relevant to documentary films as it is to feature films, documentarians have an equally vested interest in keeping viewers interested: the

more entertaining a documentary is, the more people its message will reach. The unethical selectivity of *After Porn Ends* lies in its prioritization of highly negative narratives.

## **Conclusions**

### ***(Un)Ethical Representations***

To me, *Hot Girls Wanted* and *After Porn Ends* toe the line between ethical and unethical documentary filmmaking. Indeed, in my opinion, documentarians *do* have the right to present a cohesive (if biased) argument about the pornography industry as long as their argument is conducive to the greater social good. Presumably, they made these documentaries because they thought it would achieve this goal, but I would reiterate that intention does not equal impact. *Hot Girls Wanted* and *After Porn Ends* argue for the existence of several false dichotomies, the perpetuation of which can only have a harmful effect on society at large. They are as follows, but not limited to:

1. All men involved in pornography are misogynistic creeps, and all men not involved in pornography are upstanding people who want the best for the women in their lives.
2. All women involved in pornography are either courageous for leaving the industry or foolish for remaining in it.
3. All “good parents” encourage their daughters not to be involved in the pornography industry, and thus allowing or encouraging her to stay would make one a “bad parent.”

Of course, these false dichotomies encourage us to ignore issues that exist outside of their binary system, including but not limited to:

1. Misogynistic men exist outside of the realm of pornography, and some men who encourage their female loved ones to leave the industry may actually be motivated by misogyny.
2. There are women who leave the industry at the encouragement of their loved ones who may have actually benefitted from remaining in the industry. Some women who remain in the industry love their jobs and make good money.
3. There are plenty of reasons why parents might encourage their daughter to leave the pornography industry, apart from the possibility that they are simply “good parents.” Some might just want to maintain control over their adult children.

Overall, the portrait that these two documentarians paint is narrow, unflattering, and unethical; as Aurora Snow says in her article about “pornsploitation,” “viewers looking for honest insight into the porn industry will have a hard time finding it.” It depicts women as naïve, selfish, unthinking “girls” shallowly motivated by money; it portrays all of these numerous “pockets” of the industry as corrupt, evil, and one-dimensional; it “others” people involved in pornography by depicting the heteronormative nuclear family as the normal, stable, positive counterpart to the less traditional – and therefore less positive – lifestyles of pornography actresses. Moreover, by completely eschewing other perspectives, *Hot Girls Wanted* and *After Porn Ends* present their argument as *the only argument*, thereby transposing their assertions about specific sectors of pornography onto the industry as a whole. The image of success that *Hot Girls Wanted* and *After Porn Ends* offer is one that caters to hegemony: the successful woman is a

civilian, not a sex worker; she is heterosexually partnered, not single. Film theorist Roger F. Cook might call this obsession with false dichotomies a sign that “[documentary] filmmakers have turned to the techniques and strategies of the Hollywood film industry to entertain their viewers” – these two anti-porn documentaries clearly have heroes and villains, happy endings and cautionary tales (16). However, perhaps the most revealing elements of this argument lie not in binaries, but in singularities: at the end of this film, all of these women are still living lies constricted by the capitalist heteropatriarchy. Whether they return to pornography or find a more “conventional” way of making a living, it will be in a world ruled by money: this characteristic is not limited to the pornography industry. Also not limited to the pornography industry is misogyny, even though these filmmakers would have us believe that the abolition of pornography would represent a great stride in female empowerment.

### ***Comparing kink***

In comparison, all of this is not to say that *kink* is a perfect documentary. Voros’s film is just as biased as the other two that I analyzed; the only difference is its position. While *Hot Girls Wanted* and *After Porn Ends* use casting and editing to build its negative narratives of the pornography industry, *kink* uses the same tools to build its positive one. In fact, in comparison to the other two films, *kink* paints in-depth portraits of fewer “characters.” The scope of *kink* is also limited to a singular physical space (the Armory), while the other two films have a multi-locational backdrop. However, it is my opinion that the filmmakers of *kink* are using their “power” as knowledge producers largely for good. Unlike the other two films, *kink* exclusively portrays women and queer

people as “agents” instead of “others.” Its creators did not set out to make wide-sweeping claims; instead, they offer a portrait of one independent pornography company and show how its ethical business practices allow the company to not only survive, but thrive in our highly competitive “Internet age.” (See *Points of Contention* for further explanation.)

The rhetorical power of this film lies in juxtaposition. Its cast of characters, all of whom work to produce some of the most brutal hardcore pornography on the market, are simultaneously depicted as compassionate, hard-working, and thoughtful. While the cameras are rolling, they do virtually unthinkable things to one another, but they can laugh and hug as soon as the director calls “cut.” Furthermore, the film’s power also lies in its representation – while the other two films barely address non-heterosexual identities, *kink* features in-depth interviews with several queer individuals. Though BDSM pornography is not inherently queer, there has historically been a great deal of overlap between the genres of BDSM pornography and queer pornography, and *kink* does a good job of representing this overlap.

### ***Points of Contention***

Though it would be simpler to conclude this paper without discussing the complexity and nuance of these three films, it would also represent a rejection of ethical knowledge production on my part. The creators of all three films also chose to include scenes, characters, and ideas that do not necessarily line up with their respective primary arguments. For instance, toward the end of *kink*, Voros decides to include an interview with one female Kink.com employee who seems to have very mixed feelings

towards her own involvement in the pornography industry. Personally, she finds her work in pornography very fulfilling: her work dominating other women on camera allows her to express a side of herself that she has to hide in her everyday life as a mother to her children. However, when asked if she would encourage her daughters to work in the industry when they get older, she hesitates, saying that there are “a lot of broken souls in this business.” The choice of the filmmakers to include this interview at all, but particularly toward the conclusion of the film, represents an attempt to offer a more balanced view of the issue on which the film focuses. In this sense, *kink* does not attempt to transpose its positive perspective onto pornography as a whole; it acknowledges the “other side” of the industry, making sure that the viewer also considers the downsides of pornography as a social phenomenon.

Similarly, one concluding scene from *After Porn Ends* represents a departure from the overarching tone of the film. In this scene, one of the former pornographic actors interviewed in this film sits beside his daughter. Presumably, the filmmakers have asked her a question along the lines of “What do you want to say to your father?” because the scene begins with her asking someone off camera, “In the moment?” and someone confirms. Looking intermittently at her father, Richard, Juliana says, “Thank you for being who you are... It’s interesting, what I’m sitting here thinking is, ‘I wonder how many other people out there can have [a conversation about sex] with their parents’... It’s very normalized... When you can differentiate between sex and love and everything that happens in between, it’s a huge gift... and I’m grateful that that’s my world.”



In the context of a film that has portrayed pornography as a negative force in so many ways, this scene stands in a rather stark contrast. What Juliana says to her father in relation to his previous career as a porn actor comes across as genuine, touching, and truly wise; in fact, the scene concludes with Richard responding, "I'm impressed." Notably, the filmmakers chose to include this only 15 minutes before the end credits roll, and it is safe to assume that, as a result, many viewers might walk away from watching *After Porn Ends* with this scene fresh in their memories. Like the previously-discussed scene in *kink*, the inclusion of this scene represents an attempt to give the viewer a lasting impression of *After Porn Ends* as having presented a balanced (read: more ethical) view of the Hollywood pornography industry.

However, I would stand to argue that the "point of contention scene" in *After Porn Ends* is "too little, too late." Though director Wagoner's choice to include the scene with Richard and his daughter towards the end of his film gives it extra rhetorical strength, the progressive portrait of pornography that Juliana paints in a minute-long segment ultimately does not stand a chance against the other 89 minutes of the film, in which pornography is depicted as an overwhelmingly negative social force. *Kink*, on the other hand, includes a solid five-minute-long interview with an unnamed woman who has serious doubts about the pornography industry, specifically whether or not she would want her own children to get involved. The length of this interview compared to Richard and Juliana's interview, specifically considering its placement at the very end of *kink*, gives it much more rhetorical strength in relation to the film as a whole. As a result, *kink* leaves viewers with a perspective on pornography that is much more balanced – and

therefore, much more accurate – than the depictions that *Hot Girls Wanted* and *After Porn Ends* offer.

### ***Shared Pitfalls***

It is important to note that none of these films adequately address the issue of race. In a world where one can visit any given “tube site” (e.g. PornHub, RedTube, YouPorn; essentially, sites with a wide variety of free pornography) and find categories such as “Interracial,” “Japanese,” and “Ebony” listed under “Most Popular,” race should most certainly be addressed in any portrayal of the industry. Latinx identities are briefly mentioned in *Hot Girls Wanted*, but the film does not perform any in-depth exploration on this topic. Similarly, Asia Carrera does mention the significance of her success as a “half-Asian” pornography actress in *After Porn Ends*, but the vast majority of the film focuses on white people. Black people are nearly completely absent from all of these films, save for a couple of brief mentions. In *After Porn Ends*, Shelley Lubben says that it was “a beautiful Black man” who got her involved in the pornography industry, failing to specify the race of any of the other professionals she worked with; she is a product of the racist society in which she lives, which labels white as the “unmarked category.”

In another scene, Mary Carey asserts that she does not plan to re-enter the industry, but if she really needed the money, she would go back and do “girl-girl” scenes; if she needed the money at 30, she would do a “boy-girl” scene; if she needed the money at 35, she would do a “boy-girl scene with a Black guy.” In this comment, we see the combination of several narratives: the idea that pornography is a profession for young women, the idea that a woman must do “fetish porn” to remain in the industry, and the idea that interracial sex can (and should) be fetishized. This ideological

treatment of Black bodies should certainly not be tolerated, much less classified as “representation.” Notably, none of these films make an effort to explicitly recognize or represent non-binary identities, either – everything is explained in language of “men and women,” with nothing in between.

### ***Final Thoughts***

My research on these three documentaries has answered many of my initial questions, but it has also called many of my preconceived notions into question. When I began this process, I hoped that I would be able to say something new and important about these films by the time I finished; I even thought I might formulate an original theory about the genre of documentary film as a whole. However, it would be disingenuous to create a false unity between these three nuanced films for the sake of my argument. After analyzing these three films, I have arrived at the conclusion that the filmmakers of *kink* used their power as knowledge producers in an ethical way, and the filmmakers of *Hot Girls Wanted* and *After Porn Ends* did not. Despite the separate nature of these claims, I am optimistic that my research represents a progressive contribution to social epistemologies about pornography. By thinking deeply about controversial institutions such as the pornography industry, we can begin to consider the ways that complex social issues such as misogyny, violence, and capitalism intersect. Only then can we as a society begin to dismantle these oppressive and closely-linked systems.

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*I hereby affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.*

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Julie Davin".