

# The performativity of pain: affective excess and Asian women's sexuality in cyberspace

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## Abstract

This article employs a thumbs and thumbnails analysis to analyze the 85 most viewed Asian online porn thumbnails, videos, and their audiences' comments to argue that cyberspace functions as a space of "affective simulation," rather than simply as a space of representation. For these online viewers, the performativity of pain by Asian women porn stars functions as an entry point to access and externalize their affective excess.

## Keywords

sexuality, online pornography, affective space, pain, gender and race

A young, light-skinned, East Asian woman with long black hair lies on a brown leather couch. The edges of her shirt make a seemingly perfect arch that frames her bra, which no longer does what it is supposed to do: covering and holding her breasts. Instead, the hands of an Asian man, possibly her Math Teacher—as suggested by the video's title—fondle these breasts. The woman looks away as if in pain. Her eyes are partly and gently closed. Her lips are timidly open as if whispering a repressed sound of pain. The man, whose face is mostly hidden, looks on, as if enjoying her and her pain. Viewed by 9.8 million people worldwide, this video is among the 25 most viewed videos on YouPorn.com. Young Asian women looking away, cringing, or squinting their eyes to signify pain are the most frequent images in the online porn world, under the specific category of "Asian." If Asian women have been stereotyped to repress their emotions (think of the submissive, obedient, and dutiful Asian wife/mother archetype), yet, the most frequently viewed online porn videos of these women are the ones in which they vividly perform pain, then, what does this phenomenon tell us about: how the virtual audience engages with this performativity of pain by Asian women; how the digital culture changes our relationship with and in experiencing affect; and lastly, how I, as an Asian woman researcher use emotions to understand what I call "affective excess" in the digital life of Asian pornography?

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Existing studies on pornography, race, and affect in the digital culture have only partially addressed these complex questions. Some scholarship in the field has viewed pornography as a window into societal sexual norms and desires (Manderson, 1992: 455); others consider it a mold that shapes both the boundaries and meanings of what sexual interactions, sexual fantasies, and sexuality may be (Butler, 1990; Schauer, 2005: 50). Those who focus on the harmful effects of pornography argue that men who watch porn become more complacent when they encounter acts of violence against women and show “an increased behavioral intent to rape” (Foubert et al., 2011: 212). Not a surprise, then, that a few feminists have argued against pornography and see it as perpetuating patriarchy (Jensen and Dines, 1998; MacKinnon, 1987; MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997). Moreover, pornography also creates certain expectations for women to perform some acts represented in porn as these images have leaked into the mainstream media. Some mainstream pop music videos are directed by a porn movie director, and women’s magazines provide a “how to” guide to sexually please men or do a Brazilian waxing; porn thus affects women’s everyday lives even when they don’t watch it themselves (Dines, 2010: 100).

Critical of these ideas, other feminists view the argument that porn is harmful for women as “simplistic” and the demand that it be censored as violating the First Amendment (Eaton, 2007: 675). Not only do they see this kind of argument as ignoring women’s agency, they also argue that the “causalistic” argument only holds true as a “probabilistic” rather than a “necessary or sufficient condition”; pornography is only one element in the “complex causal mechanism” of violence against women (ibid.: 703). I need to clarify here that most criticisms against pornography have been addressed to heterosexual porn for men. Studies that look at pornography aimed at heterosexual women have argued how this genre of pornography may open up a new space for women to be the subjects of their own sexual desires (Schauer, 2005: 61).

Scholars who examine pornography from feminist and critical race perspectives show how pornography is useful to help us understand “racialization as a sexual process” and how race emerges as a category that is implicated with sexual meanings (Jensen and Dines, 1998: 84; Shimizu, 2007). In interracial porn, Linda Williams (2004) argues, movies tend to employ fear to arouse desire and in doing so actually further rather than challenge racism. Porn movies indeed use (old) racial stereotypes and therefore, as Gail Dines (2010) points out, racist ideology is further strengthened each time someone masturbates to these images. Of all women of color, Asian women are the most popular women in porn due to their long history of being simultaneously hypersexualized and subordinated (eager to please men and be submissive) (Dines, 2010: 124); hence this article focuses solely on “Asian” women.

Studies on pornography in cyberspace have mostly focused on the ways the Internet reshapes the porn industry, from providing a synopticon gaze (Vannini, 2004: 77), to offering different genres that include women as producers and consumers, unlike in previous media where porn for heterosexual males dominated the industry (Perdue, 2002). Mireille Miller-Young (2005), for instance, shows how black women have become the agents, not only the porn stars, on their websites and as such are able to enjoy financial profit for themselves. This emergence of porn from below thus explains Howard Becker’s call for studies of online “amateur porn” that demonstrate how everyday people use digital technology for porn purposes (Becker, 2002: 342). Other studies have focused on people’s behavioral interaction with porn, that is, people’s motivations for using online porn, such as to strengthen their relationship, to manage their mood, out of habit, and to enact a sexual fantasy (Paul and Shim, 2008: 195–196).<sup>1</sup>

Although studies on pornography have not necessarily intersected with affect theories and the digital world simultaneously, there are some important works that have explored the relationship between affect and technology or the digital world in general. Adi Kuntsman (2012: 7) positions cyberspace as a “digital archive of feelings” where users can record their personal narratives and

emotions. Various scholars emphasize the need of the physical body in the virtual world to make sense of the information gathered online and in the process exposing the body's capacity to generate certain affective responses (Clough, 2008; Featherstone, 2010: 211; Hansen, 2004; Marks, 2002). Lastly, although Robert Jensen (1998: 157) has pointed out the importance of pain in the porn world, functioning as a "thread that connects people in the pornographic world," he has yet to deeply engage with affect theories.

In short, while existing studies have hinted at the importance of paying attention to affect and emotion and the possibility of such a framework to link and move us beyond the binary thinking of the real world versus the virtual world, none of them have talked about the particularity of affect produced in the digital world. Current theories of affect still fall short in describing the phenomenon of "feeling" in the digital world. This creates an urgency to address this issue because, as Mike Featherstone (2010: 213) argues, "new media and information technologies have the potential to alter the range of habitual perceptive and affective structures which operate in everyday life." Thus, we still need a new language and a critical framework to address the complexity of affect in the digital world.

This article deals precisely with this issue. More specifically, none of these studies have merged the four fields of Asian and racial formation studies, affect studies, cyberculture studies, and pornography and feminist studies together to examine how the representation of pain specifically by Asian women in online porn provides us with new understandings of affect in cyberspace and how certain performativity of affect becomes a signifier for Asian women's sexuality. By merging the four fields, using a thumbs and thumbnails analysis (a research method I designed specifically for the online environment) to analyze the 85 most viewed Asian online porn thumbnails, videos, and their audiences' comments from December 2013 to December 2014, I argue that the virtual audience inhabits the cyberworld as a space of "affective simulation" rather than simply as a space of representation. For my argument's sake, I will first briefly contextualize the porn industry in cyberspace and describe my method.

## Pornography in the digital age

The word *πορνογράφος* (from the Greek words *πόρνη* and *γράφω*) referred to the representation of sex workers and courtesans (Schauer, 2005: 43). More recent scholars of pornography define it as "visual and verbal material that exceeds what is socially tolerable in significant form" (Alloway, 1971: 65) (note here the word "exceeds" that signifies pornography as a world of excess), or a "commercial product designed to elicit or enhance the sexual arousal of an intended audience by embodying their sexual fantasies" (Mosher and MacLan, 1994: 99). Pornography indeed holds a particular interest for this study because of its capacity to incite affective responses in its audiences.

Pornography is a very lucrative industry. The global market share for the porn industry in 2006 is estimated to be around \$96 billion. Richtel reported that in the United States alone the adult entertainment industry is worth \$13 billion (quoted in Foubert et al., 2011: 212). In 2010, there were 420 million online porn pages and 4.2 million porn websites; the number of daily search requests for porn was 68 million (Dines, 2010: 47). In 2013, on Pornhub.com alone, there were 14.7 billion visitors, 63.2 billion videos viewed, 1.68 million visits per hour (<http://www.pornhub.com/insights/pornhub-2013-year-in-review/>).

The porn industry is so significant that it is thanks to them that much of the infrastructure of the Internet is the way it is today. This importance is not limited to the Internet; as Howard Becker points out, "one of the first uses of any new communication technology has always been to make pornography" (Becker, 2012: 342). Specifically, in cyberspace, the high demand for paid pornography required the establishment of secure online payment, and this demand to see porn movies

online led to improvement in technology that allowed for a faster download speed (Dines, 2010: 48; Perdue, 2004: 260–261). Not only that, the Internet changes the face of pornography, quite literally. More people can now take part in this business, from becoming new online porn stars to being the producers, distributors, consumers, or “prosumers” (producers and consumers—in cyberspace, the line between the two has been blurred) of these images (Shah, 2007: 357).

For this article, I analyze two of the most popular free porn websites: YouPorn.com (currently the second largest free porn website) and Pornhub.com (one of the three largest porn sites, competing against YouPorn.com and RedTube.com). Both websites are owned by MindGeek, who leads in market share for mobile technology pornography in North America, owning more than twenty websites and movie studios. These websites also have a similar visual structure to that of YouTube.com in that users or other content partners can upload their videos to these sites. The main video is displayed in a large size on the left, with thumbnails of videos that may possibly interest the audience, presumably because they are in the same category, located either on the middle of the page (YouPorn.com) or the middle and the right side (Pornhub.com).

YouPorn was founded in 2006 and acquired by Manwin (now MindGeek) in 2011.<sup>2</sup> It “serves over 100 million page views per day.”<sup>3</sup> In 2012, YouPorn had approximately 4.8 billion visitors; the United States leading with 1 billion visits. The average video view duration on this site is 10:22.<sup>4</sup> Pornhub was created in 2007 in Montreal, Canada. Manwin/MindGeek acquired it in 2010. It claims to host more free videos than other porn websites. The special feature of Pornhub.com is its algorithm that creates a customized or a “curated” playlist based on the viewer’s viewing preferences (when they watch the video, how much time they spend watching it, where they live, etc.) called “PornIQ.”<sup>5</sup> When users sign up for an account on these websites, they can create a playlist of the videos they like (ala YouTube), they could add “friends” to their profile (Facebook style), comment on videos they watch, and have people subscribe or follow their postings (akin to YouTube and Twitter). This thus creates a digital community of “porn aficionados,” as they call it, and demonstrates a paradoxical phenomenon at its best: the private affair of watching pornography made public.

## **A thumbs and thumbnails analysis: toward a new research method in cyberspace**

Alan McKee (2012: 549) argues that pornography is essentially a form of entertainment and as such is “audience-centered.” Exploring the world of pornography thus necessitates that we study its audience. More traditional audience studies, however, tend to focus on the audience “reception” and thus usually employ any of the following methods: “anonymous surveys, administered face-to-face or through online formats; one-on-one interviews; focus groups; and structured screenings (where a group of respondents watch scenes from pornographic films and then talk about the imagery that they have just viewed)” (Leap, 2011). These conventional methods are appropriate for their more traditional purposes of finding out “whether and how audiences take up that offer: whether they affirm the dominant order as it is articulated through an image, or whether they resist in some way” (Rose, 2007: 198). In other words, audience studies seek to explain how an audience responds to the text and creates their own readings of the text. However, this more traditional approach cannot fully address the complexity raised in cyberculture studies and analyze how the audience affectively and directly interacts with the materials and with other audiences in the digital world where they can feel that no one is watching them (they can hide behind their avatars), yet simultaneously know that everyone is observing them (they are commenting to and with each other).

In response to this, some digital scholarship has revisited the notion of “audience.” Some emphasize the need to see the audience as more of a user, prosumer, or participant, rather than a strictly receiving audience; others have questioned who is being included and excluded in this very construction of the audience and the need to situate the audience within an entire system of cultural politics (Turow and Draper, 2014). Sonia Livingstone (2013: 23) lays out the three main approaches in the audience studies: the behavioral paradigm, the resistance paradigm, and the performance paradigm (how the audience performs when they are aware that they are being watched), and then adds the fourth approach: “participation paradigm.” None of these, however, can help us answer the questions I raise in this article.

For this reason, I have designed a new method called “thumbs and thumbnails analysis.” The latter gets at the *interaction* between the audience and the materials, and the interaction among viewers. The thumbs-up and thumbs-down become a way for the audience to engage *with the materials*, expressing their likes and dislikes, as well as *with others*, letting others know their opinion. In the digital world this rating system functions as what Dellarocas (2003: 1407) calls “the digitization of word of mouth.”

The thumbnails analysis is useful when we want to understand which thumbnails get the most views by the audience and why. This is because when we search for something online, particularly if it is an image, we are usually presented with rows of thumbnails, a sneak peek to help us decide whether or not we want to click on the image. We tend to click on a thumbnail that holds the most promise for an affective effect, that of desire, pleasure, or anything we fancy. Ask anyone who has ever been on a dating website; if they’re honest, they will admit to clicking on someone’s profile simply because their thumbnail picture looks attractive). The same goes with thumbnails in the porn world—someone clicks on a video because the thumbnail seems most (sexually) appealing to them. It is therefore important to try to understand what makes a thumbnail clickable and what the pattern of omission and repetition of these most viewed thumbnails and their meanings is. Hence, in sorting through and compiling my data, I chose their “most viewed.” In this case, their interface becomes my method.

What needs to be highlighted in thumbnails analysis is that we are required to pay attention to where these thumbnails are located in relation to others and with what effects. However, this is not a spatial analysis asking questions of site design or *mise-en-page*. Additionally, we also need to click and closely read the movie to supplement our thumbnail analysis. Yet, the emphasis in thumbnails analysis is on the *pattern* of these thumbnails as they appear *together* rather than the narrative in each video, viewed on its own. Furthermore, because online research is characterized by the sheer volume of possible data and the interactivity of its users, we need a method to limit and compile these data. Thumbs and thumbnails analysis can also be used for this task.

For example, when I clicked on the category of “Asian” on YouPorn.com, on 23 December 2013, there were 6431 videos. Certainly, I could not analyze them all (and the number grew significantly during the year I did my research to over 10,000 by December 2014), let alone analyze the hundreds of comments that each video would garner. Thus, using the thumbnails analysis to discover the most clicked videos, I chose the website’s “most viewed” filter to narrow down the number. I then selected 50 of them on YouPorn.com and numbered them 001–050. The same day, I used the same method on Pornhub.com, using both “most viewed” and “all time” filters (other available filters: daily, weekly, monthly). I chose the 50 most viewed videos out of 5901.<sup>6</sup> I numbered these videos 051–100. Interestingly, after 1 year of observing these videos, the ranking stayed almost the same with only a few videos at the bottom fluctuating. This may be because once a video becomes a most viewed video, it is more likely for the website to recommend it to viewers, resulting in increasing number of clicks.

In this study, except for the video I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I do not refer to their titles, and instead use their log numbers. This is done to avoid sensationalizing the more vulgar titles of these videos and to maintain as much as possible the privacy of the users. I therefore also do not use the usernames even though these usernames are not linked to any identifiable offline identities.

After viewing these 100 videos, I noted that there were only 95 unique videos: five videos were listed on both websites. Out of these 95 videos, I excluded 10 more videos by way of thumbs-up analysis. I excluded all videos that had less than an 80% thumbs-up rating. There were 18 videos with at least a 90% rating, and 67 videos with an 80%–89% rating. The length of these videos ranges from 1:11 to 1:33:15 (the average is 20 to 30 minutes). The partners of the Asian women in these videos are mostly males, except for six videos (women also perform pain when their partners are women, with the exception of two cases); 28 of them are Asian males, 40 of them are whites, 6 of them are black, and the rest are either unclear or the face of the male did not feature in the video. All except one video show that the Asian in the video refers to the Asian *women* stars, revealing the gendered nature of this category. The one video that features an Asian man with a non-Asian woman received only a 68% viewer rating. It is also interesting to note that in these thumbnails there is a pattern of absence of men's faces. In porn, men's faces and emotions are rarely the focus. This is because, as Jensen and Dines point out (1998: 78), emotions have often been relegated to women, showing yet again how the porn world is a very gendered one. Men's faces may also be missing in these videos because the videos are shot from a man's point of view to allow the (assumed heterosexual male) viewers to imagine themselves as the ones having sex with these women.

In gathering the data for the video comments, I also used the thumbs-up method. First, I chose those comments that made it into the "top comments" (based on how many likes they received). Then, I included the first 100 "most recent" comments (another feature of the website). In a sense, I conduct my research by following how the data appear to the viewers.

Some scholars have raised a concern that anonymity in cyberspace may mean the possibility of creating "false identities" likely to skew the data collected (Ashford, 2009: 304). Nonetheless, it is almost a cliché to repeat it here, but when studying discourses of race, gender, and sexuality, or specifically, the virtual audience engagement with the texts and others, it does not matter whether or not these identities are "real" in the physical world. It matters that these are the dialogues being held in cyberspace and as such are revealing of the discourses that shape and govern these exchanges.

## Cyberspace as a space of affective simulation

Not simply a "window" into another world, the computer screen has become a "virtual invader" that both "mediates" and "generates" reality (Vanderbeeken, 2011: 247). As a mediator of reality, the screen provides us with virtual experiences that then "eclipse" and "overshadow" our physical-world experiences (ibid.: 248). As a generator of reality, the screen produces new images that are considered as simulacra and hence produce "a surplus of reality" (ibid.: 251, 253). Other times, the screen is seen as the "hole" through which Alice (of the Wonderland kind) has to fall to access the reality down below—a layer of reality that is perceived to be "more real" than the interface itself (Shah, 2007: 353). Moving beyond this debate of reality versus virtual reality, prevalent in cyberculture studies, while simultaneously recognizing the need to pay attention to the materiality of the body, I propose that cyberspace needs to be perceived as a space of "affective simulation," and not simply as another medium of representation.

What is the difference between simulation and representation? I turn here to Jean Baudrillard (1994: 6), who argues:

Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, *from the radical negation of the sign as value*, from the sign as the reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum.

Hence, in studying representation, the big question that is often asked is: is the representation faithful to the “real” image and what are the consequences of these representations to the “real” image/subject’s life? It is about measuring the proximity and truthfulness of the copy to the model. In perceiving cyberspace as a space of simulation, I am not interested in the question of the real. Simulation detaches itself from and even challenges this question. As Baudrillard (1994: 13) further states, “It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology) but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.” As such, questions such as “are these *representations* of Asian women in porn harmful?” or “are these women *really* in pain?” are irrelevant. The “real” no longer matters. It does not matter not because it does not matter but because it *cannot* matter: “the real is no longer real.”

Cyberspace as a space of affective simulation means that what is being simulated in the cyberworld is our *affects*. Affect is defined as a “physiological shift that accompanies a judgment” (Brennan, 2004: 5). Here, my focus on affect, rather than simply emotion, follows the theoretical shift in the field where scholars have noted how “affect,” registered in the biological plane, has been overlooked in the humanities (Gibbs, 2002). Thus, to bring back the “physicality of the body” into the conversation, Elspeth Probyn suggests that we be mindful not only of emotion that “privilege[s] cognition” but also of the physiological responses that affect circulates (Probyn, 2004: 329–330).

When Žižek (2006) stated, “I know very well it’s a fake but, nonetheless, I let myself be emotionally affected,” he hinted precisely at what I am getting at here. Whether or not the image is real is irrelevant to the fact that it has emotional and affective ramifications. Hence I would like to reboot, if you will, my digital connection with the notion of the real by echoing Annette Markham (1998) and Sharon Lehner (2010) in that “when experiences are experienced, they cannot be ‘not real,’” (Markham, 1998: 120) and that images that can create emotional responses that drive the viewers into action suggest that images have real consequences (Lehner, 2010: 659). I am drawing on their works here not to resurrect the dead notion of the real. Rather, I aim to draw our attention here to *experiences* and *emotions* as resurfacing the materiality (rather than the “realness”) of the body that *feels*. Indeed, as Vivian Sobchack (2000: 139) argues, any technologically based text is always read “through our perceptive sensorium, through the materiality (or *immanent mediation*) of our own bodies.”

When watching porn online, for example, not only are we brought back to our senses, our own sensations, and our own bodies, but there is also the *expectation* of the body to be *affected* by porn. Watching online pornography is always an embodied experience. The body makes itself present when tingles of desires or cringes of disgust are felt. As Zabet Patterson (2004: 106) points out, “the appeal of the pornographic image is importantly corporeal, and images become effective as porn to the extent that they elicit certain bodily sensations, almost involuntary.” Pornography is indeed a “body genre”: the viewer’s body “caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen” (Williams, 1991: 4). In some ways, this is what Michael Sicinski calls the “laboring body in pornography,” both at the level of the performers

and the viewers (quoted in Osterweil, 2004: 450). The body has to work to experience or produce pornography.

The assumption that underlines the argument of cyberspace as a space of affective simulation is: people go online to *feel* something (i.e. to feel loved, inspired, connected...). The invitation to click is an invitation to feel. By signing in, we agree to be affectively stimulated by what is projected from the cyberworld. In the case of porn movies, we simply cannot watch porn and not feel anything toward the scenes or the actors in these videos. This is precisely the danger of porn movies that structure their narratives around *feelings* of contempt toward women—as I discuss in this article, Asian women, whose performativity of pain may subliminally register as the viewers' pleasure.

## Performativity of pain and affective excess

One of the unique features of cyberspace is its interface that allows us to “externalize” our experience *with* an audience (Sperb, 2006: 127); experience happens as we externalize it. Online porn became popular not simply because of its privacy and immediacy but also its (public-forming) technological features (i.e. clicking, commenting, etc.). As Katrien Jacobs (2005: 223) points out, the difference between watching porn online and offline is that online you are encouraged to have an orgasm while chatting with others or having webcam sex with others. The consequence of this process of externalization of experience is that as a viewer externalizes his or her experience online, race, as it intersects with gender and sexuality, becomes cemented as a category of experience through this simulation machine. For instance, after analyzing the comments posted under these videos using the thumbs-up analysis, I notice how the audience attaches pain to the figure of the Asian woman, further strengthening the existence of the category of race (and the meanings attached to it) as a category of experience that is registered at the affective level. Unlike Asian (or a white who plays an Asian) women in older porn movies that Shimizu (2007: 126) analyzed, who wore kimonos and other racialized ornaments, most Asian women in these online porn movies and thumbnails do not necessarily have these cultural markers. It is their facial/emotional expressions, sound, and what they do with their body that have become their *dominant* racial signifiers.

The “scream,” for example, has become one of the racialized, sexualized, and gendered markers of Asian women in porn. The top commenter (with 95 likes) of video #061 commented, “FYI GUYS, Japanese women cry and whine while getting fuck because they want men to know that they are being submissive to the male counterpart. Not like the majority of FAT ASS, FAT WAIST AMERICAN WOMEN” (emphasis original). Here, the viewer attaches the signifier of a scream to the figure of Asian women, and it is this experiencing of the scream that shows how race as an experiential category is (made) of affective simulation, and in this particular case, at the expense of shaming fat American women's bodies.

This fascination with the scream speaks, of course, to the larger fetishization of pain. As Juan-David Nasio (2004: 88) points out,

... the semblance of pain—is the *scream*. What is fetishized, what is crystallized, that around which the perverse scene is arranged, is a scream that simulates pain as well as pleasure. The simulacrum of pain, that is, its fetishized feature, is the scream.

This fetishization of pain in the form of a scream in these videos, however, is one that is particularly attached to Asian women and as such is gendered and racialized. That is, unless it is in the specific context of bondage, discipline, and sadomasochism (BDSM), the scream is not commonly addressed to other racial groups. This “scream” fetish is indeed acknowledged by the viewers. One of the viewers of video #005, for example, admitted his/her screaming fetish bluntly, “Her



screaming/moaning makes me want 2 cum!” to which someone responds, “Lol Blasian your [sic] right it does,” to support the other’s fetish.

Of course, not everyone embraces the scream as their fetish. Some “hate” it, saying, “I hate how all Japanese porn artist [sic] pretend like it hurts... Like we really believe a porn star is that tight!? I muted it and still thought I could hear her pathetic fake whining!” (video #022), and thus calling out the failure of such a performativity of pain through screams and externalizing their feelings of disappointment and annoyance. Some others simply question the scream. A viewer of video #005 asks, “why do all Japanese girls sound like they’re getting raped when they have sex?” Another asks a similar question, “why do all jap girls scream when they have pencil dicks in them!?” A similar comment on the same video employs similar mockery, “not sure why she’s screaming, his yo-yo is as big as her thumb.” The underlying assumption in these comments certainly is the obvious: the scream can only come from the hurtful (too-big) penis. Simultaneously, Asian men as a racialized and gendered category are emasculated by these narratives that mock their masculinity and position them as an inferior category through the size of their penises. A commenter on a video #056 writes, “The first Japanese-speaking girl in a porno to moan and not sound like she’s crying” (with 16 likes). Nonetheless, all of these comments once again reveal the sonic norm of Japanese women (one of the most popular ethnic categories) in porn videos, who moan as if they’re in pain.

Moreover, in these comments viewers often evoke their experiences in the “real” world to testify to the truthfulness (its proximity to the real world) of these representations of Asian women’s sexuality. This certainly is the writing convention in the cyberworld; it is also the norm in cyberculture studies (i.e. to study the effects of the Internet on *real* lives). This writing norm is unproductive, however. As I have argued elsewhere, cyberspace has its own epistemic logic (Saraswati, 2013b). Further challenging the normative and early writing convention in cyberculture studies, I view the audience’s comments as taking part in crafting a world of simulation that consists of all worlds, including cyberspace and the physical world, by linking, traversing, and absorbing these various layers of reality, using them as part of a long citation chain in the simulated world. A viewer of video #005 comments, “In Tokyo last week, I confirm they moan this way:-)”. A similar comment is expressed by a viewer of video #025: “I’ve been in Pattaya six or seven times now and sex with whores and bargirls is a great way to spend the night. In Thailand no tourist is supposed to sleep alone. Just use condoms and fuck like crazy. Thai girls are born to get screwed!” First, this shows how these viewers feel the need to validate their comments via the route of “experience.” Here, they are evoking experience as an *a posteriori* proposition: experience as an epistemological apparatus to gain insight to evidence and therefore “truth” (Schellenberg, 2014: 87–88). In this article, however, I consider experience as neither an *a priori* or *a posteriori* construction but rather as an effect of “affective simulation.” That is, experience is registered as providing us with an access to generate a particular *feeling*. For example, when a viewer visits a porn site and clicks on the category Asian, they hope to bask in the affective pleasures simulated by the scream and performativity of pain of these Asian women, if that is indeed their “fetish.”

Second, I am not interested here in scrutinizing the validity of these comments, that is, whether or not the viewers actually went to Tokyo or Pattaya, and therefore could provide us with a credible account of “real” sex with “real” women there. After all, in the world of simulation, the real no longer matters; the real becomes the utopia (Baudrillard, 1983: 123). What I am concerned with here is the *conditions of possibility* that made such an utterance possible to begin with. Thus, utterances such as the above “Thai girls are born to get screwed!” or other comments such as “Wake up bitch! You ain’t done! ;)” (a violent order followed by a wink that signifies that the commenter is joking) reveal the hostile and violent conditions that make it possible for these viewers to even think and say these words. When someone utters a violent statement toward anyone in cyberspace,

even when not identifying their “real” self, it undoubtedly has *affective* effects on the speaker and those who read or hear such an utterance.

Third, the viewers’ comments on the performativity of pain by these Asian women function as an entry point to access, experience, and externalize their “affective excess.” That is, statements such as these that I call “digital dump” show how these pornographic websites become a container (or a dumpster?) with the capacity to absorb the excess of affect from other layers of reality, such as the physical world. In no other world other than this virtual space can a person, or rather an avatar, make a racist, sexist, and heterosexist comment, and, for as long as it is not attached to the person’s offline identity, get away with it and even be embraced by others. Unlike Baudrillard who sees the world of simulation as signaling the loss of depth of feeling, I see the world of simulation as having the capacity to absorb the excess of affects in other worlds as well as producing and circulating a different kind of affective “intensity,” to borrow Massumi’s (2002) word, because unlike being part of a movie audience where they cannot take part in the film, in the online world the audience can choose to participate in that world, even to become the porn stars themselves, and to comment and interact with other viewers from around the globe at the speed of light, or at least at the speed of their Internet access.

Thus, the comment boxes that “record” as one externalizes their experience, become a container for the affective excess of the viewers. This container is a “safe” space for the viewers to express, externalize, and experience their feelings—they can do so while remaining within the safety and comfort of their own homes, yet this same space remains affectively hostile for Asian women performing on these websites. Cyberspace thus provides a unique space of intimate encounters between these viewers and the figure of the Asian woman: the stereotyped inanimate Asian subject becomes alive (and screaming!) on their screen and the audience can still be in control of their own feelings toward the Asian women and their feelings about this encounter, and externalize them as they wish and remain safe, as long as they don’t reveal their offline identities. Nonetheless, this further exemplifies my argument that cyberspace is a space of affective simulation. *The discourse of “interaction” in cyberspace happens through affective simulation.*

One may wonder, however, why are “Asian” women the ones being cast to perform pain in these videos? Certainly, there is a long history of visibility in which Asian women have been cast in these roles of “exotic” and “docile” women who “liv[e] to serve men sexually” (Jensen and Dines, 1998: 86; Tu, 2003: 268). Their race becomes “the main draw” in these movies (Tu, 2003: 268) because as a figure, an Asian woman is not merely “a person or an individual, but a placeholder of ideology. She is a linguistic category that references sexuality, especially in terms of visibility, in which her presence alone signifies exoticism” (Shimizu, 2007: 97). The porn category of “Asian” thus already carries with it references of sexual performativity, which in this specific case includes gendered and racialized performativity of pain.

It is not a surprise then, that if Asian woman is a “placeholder of ideology” that it becomes a hook to hang and conflate different ethnicities together. For example, in video #097 the porn star’s name is “Jessica Bangkok,”<sup>7</sup> yet a commenter said, “Filipina always loves to suck dick. My Filipina wife loves to suck cock and swallow cum.” In another example on Pornhub.com, the advertisement that goes with video #053 is a video on the top right of the screen that asks the viewers, “Like Chinese Women? Our members have American fetish. English must be your first language. SEE PICS.” This ad is accompanied by an image of a young (supposedly, as the ad claims) Chinese woman with black glasses and braided pigtailed, wearing an unbuttoned green flannel shirt that exposes her breasts, once again playing the stereotype of the “nerd” and innocent Asian girl. This “fetish” for “American” (presumably white?) and on the other side of this narrative, fetish for “Asian” show how affective structure is racialized.

Some other comments even conflate Asian with different racial groups. For example, in the most viewed video #001 on YouPorn.com, a commenter admits, “Hey, I want one of this (sic) maids. Got to love latin girls,” to which someone replies, “yeah latin haha. lily thai is latin,” to mock the other viewer who cannot see the relationship between the actress’ name “Thai” and a country in Southeast Asia, revealing the commenter’s ignorance and assumption about existing stereotypes (possibly in the United States) of Latina as maids. It is worth mentioning here that while cyberspace itself *is* a historically specific space, gendered and racialized images that appear in this world are mostly disturbingly ahistoricized, stripped bare from their historical roots, redressed (by way of Photoshop software, for example), linked to, and commodified for the global market, and consumed at a single digital moment of “panoptical time” (McClintock, 1995).

## Digital culture and the changing relationship of affects

What follows from the argument that cyberspace is a space of affective simulation and that porn websites function as a container for the viewers’ affective excess is a new knowledge of how digital culture changes our relationship with affects. More specifically, I argue that in the digital world the performativity of affect is experienced as an excess, a simulacrum.<sup>8</sup>

Previously used in visual art history as a derogatory term to describe an “unskilled” work of art, or a bad copy of the original (Camille, 1996.), simulacrum has since acquired a more diverse and even opposing meanings. For Deleuze (1990: 262), a simulacrum becomes “a positive power which denies *the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction.*” He sees it as more of a creative force that challenges the hierarchical relationship between the model and its copy. Baudrillard (1994: 122), however, sees simulacra in a more negative light, as pervasive, empty (no-depth) replacements for “real experience” in a postmodern world. Building from both of these works and extending their meanings, I see simulacra as neither offering a positive or a negative possibility but rather as providing a new mode for understanding the relationship between affect and the digital world as one that is of simulation and excess.

I will explore this relationship by returning, once again, to thumbnails analysis but this time to demonstrate why these thumbnails received the most clicks as opposed to others and the ways in which affect in the digital world is simulated as an excess, a simulacrum.

Noticing the different patterns of the thumbnails, I find it interesting that when I click on Asian categories without the “most viewed” filter (the default filter is “Date” on YouPorn.com and “Featured Recently” on Pornhub.com—both signaling how the digital world is a quickly changing archive), I see more variety of narratives and images, from “bondage” to “presidential tape,” to “teen,” to “schoolgirl,” to “Kama Sutra,” to “masturbation” thumbnails, although there are still some images of women seemingly in pain. When I used the “most viewed” filter, the thumbnails that appear tell a different, if more homogeneous, story: women in pain. That the most viewed thumbnails are of women’s faces (or vaginas) seemingly in pain is revealing of the audience’s preference and expectation of Asian women’s sexuality in porn, and the dominant narrative about Asian women in porn videos (Dines, 2010; Shimizu, 2007). However, this defies the norm of the social media world where it is videos and video games that have high arousal emotions that tend to be shared the most, and those that are positive are 30% more likely to go viral (Cohen, 2014; Nelson-Field et al., 2013: 210). Nonetheless, what is learned from the thumbnails analysis here is that these videos that are the most clicked are popular because they provide fodder for the racialized desires of the viewers, and reveal how Asian women’s emotions and bodies are understood and expected to perform in porn, that is, via the route of pain.

Even more interesting to note is that these women perform pain in more or less *similar* ways. Analyzing their thumbnails, I observe that videos #008 and #011—located directly above—show a

woman in bed, looking away to their left, closing their eyes, and spreading their legs while seemingly repressing their pain. If we scan both thumbnails quickly, we might even think that they are the same pictures! This kind of facial expression quite widespread in videos on these websites is reminiscent of Edo period paintings of a samurai, usually represented with a very big penis, having intercourse with a young woman while an older woman is holding her down, as part of the young woman's initiation into the courtesan world, signifying a narrative of violence and pain: this sex act happens against her will. That each image seems to visually cite the others (or each porn actress performs a similar expression of pain/pleasure that mimics the other porn actresses in their performing pain-as-pleasure) makes for a loop of a referent system (in this case, a very long citation chain all the way back to the Edo period, or perhaps even earlier than that). It is this loop that cites but that which is not the original, since there had never been an "original" performance of Asian women's pleasure/pain to begin with.

Indeed, the visual structure of YouPorn.com and Pornhub.com is already a play of simulacra. When you click on the YouPorn.com "Asian" category and use the "views" filter, you will arrive at a page that offers you twenty-four thumbnails of the most viewed videos, displayed in three columns of eight rows apiece. When you hover over each thumbnail, you will see different scenes from the video, supposedly to help you gauge whether or not the rest of the video will *affect* you in the way you want it to. On the top right of the website, there is a video that advertises another porn site; on the bottom of the website, there are three panels of videos or images that also advertise other websites or sex-related products such as a website that sells Viagra. Clicking on the next page, you will see 31 more thumbnails. You could keep clicking on "next" until you reach page 341, presumably until you exhaust all of the 10,395 videos under this Asian category (2 September 2014). When you look closely, between the main window on the left and the advertising windows on the right and the bottom of the page and other related videos in the middle of the right side of the screen, these images *together* function as a constant and chaotic loop of a referent system. For example, clicking on the second most viewed video on Pornhub.com, video #052, with 25 million views and an 85% rating, we see an advertisement on the bottom of the page for punishtube.com or "18 and abused" (these ads do not remain the same). Here, the words "destroy" used in the video's title, "punish," and "abuse" provide a chain of textual and visual citations that signify pain. Underneath the main video, there are eight videos, two of them have "Mandingo" (a black man) as the stars and in their titles. The other six videos show various sex acts of women, not all Asian, with black men. Under "related videos" on the right side of the screen, there are ten more videos, displayed in two columns. All of these videos show (mostly Asian) women having sex with black men in various positions and displaying facial expressions that signify pain. These thumbnails thus become a sort of repetition, a repetition with a difference, a repetition with no point of origin, "a copy without a referent" (Stapleton, 2014), a simulacrum.

Moreover, viewing these 24 porn thumbnails in one gaze intensifies the affect evoked. First, it creates the feeling of women (as most pictures show women's faces, vaginas, or bottoms) as disposable, that there is an endless supply of these Asian women, one after the other, page after page. Second, only one woman—in video #012—is shown smiling, while the rest of the thumbnails show women experiencing some discomfort and pain, with all the usual range of facial expressions supposed to convey their uneasiness while letting the man do what he needs to do. Bombarded with these images in one panoptic gaze, the intensity of the affect becomes even more powerful. Pain has indeed been used as "a mode of corporeal intensification," or in masochism narrative, as an "instrument" to intensify sexual acts (Grosz, 1995: 199; Lyon, 2005: 33; McCosker, 2005: 33). Simultaneously, as Gabrielle Murray (2008) notes about torture porn, this intensity can also function "as excess and its kinesthetic potential affects us in a sensory and immediate way." In these videos, this intensification of the sex acts via Asian women's performativity of pain becomes the

viewers' access to experience and contains the excess of affects that spill over from other layers of reality. Pain as a system of relationality is fraught with unequal power relations. Hence, these viewers, positioned as the voyeurs who take pleasure in the pain of these Asian women, further affirm the subordination of Asian women.

However, this is not to say that Asian women as porn stars are mere victims of the porn industry with no agency of their own. These women have an agency in acting what is demanded of them, or by creating a rupture during their performance. Indeed, this performativity is made visible when there is a rupture. For instance, in video #025, an Asian woman with a petite body moans, “ah, ah, ah” and closes her eyes as her client pushes his penis inside her. She faces the ceiling as if surrendering to the pain that consumes her. At 5:29, however, she opens her eyes, looking first at the camera, then at her client, before smiling faintly as if the whole scene is funny to her. This rupture that reveals her performativity continues until 6:05 when she resumes her role in the video. Not only revealing her own performativity, this break also functions as a reminder that she is actually working. As Sicinski (2004: 466) argues, “we as viewers are supposed to forget that the men and women on screen are *at work*.” For these porn stars, to *be* an Asian woman in the porn world means that they have to learn to perform pain during sexual acts. As such, affect becomes a disciplinary apparatus for the laboring body of these Asian women porn stars.

### **By way of conclusion: doing research on Asian porn, emotions, and excess while being Asian**

Some mornings I would curl up in bed like a hopelessly depressed person. The thought of having to watch another porn video or stare at the thumbnails of an overly stretched vagina stabbed by a merciless penis would make my entire body cringe in pain. It is as if my whole body would shut down every time I set out to write this article. This was by far the most difficult article I ever wrote. Why is that? Of course, as I argued earlier, cyberspace is a space of affective simulation. People go online to and will inevitably *feel* something. To assume that I would not feel anything while watching these videos is simply naïve. Yet, as I struggled through the process of forcing myself to watch and write this article, I became intellectually and perpetually intrigued: what is this pain telling me?

Staging my feelings as a researcher at the front and center of this section follows the logic of knowledge production in affect studies: *emotions matter*. Our senses are our epistemic apparatus (Saraswati, 2013a). As Jensen (1998: 157–159) points out, paying attention to the pain we feel when watching pornography could tell us about the structure of oppression in our society and how pain functions as a mode of power and control. I realized that as I was watching Asian porn videos as an Asian researcher, they necessarily called out, or to use Althusser's (1971) word, interpellated, my subjectivity, although it is a simulated identity. Reading the comments of the viewers further reminded me of how unsafe cyberspace is for Asian women, including myself.

However, I insist on the urgency and significance of analyzing these porn videos and thumbnails as something that cannot be ignored—the larger project from which this article stems is one that examines Asian women's sexualities in cyberspace. It is therefore impossible, incomplete, and misleading to conduct such a study without examining the porn world, as it is indeed one of the dominant ways in which Asian women's sexuality is constructed in this space. My responsibility is thus to produce knowledge about Asian women's sexuality from a feminist objectivity, or in Donna Haraway's (1988) term, “a situated knowledge,” perspective.

What is particularly intriguing about studying the online porn world is its cultural location as a space of excess, the exploration of which allows us to understand what it means to inhabit this

very space. I consider these spaces of excess as a “monster”<sup>9</sup> whose presence actually functions as a bridge that links the normal and the deviant. Still, I would like to entertain the possibility of reimagining a different, more affectively progressive relationship with pornography that embodies a feminist ethics. A visual and digital artist, Shu Lea Cheang, for example, created a website called Milk—a “hybrid site” for “surfing for porn and galvanizing activism around a political issue” (Oishi, 2007: 24). Through this website, she aspired to change one’s bodily “conditioned relationship” to online porn by producing a pornography art website for activism and hence shifting the very affective relationship of one’s body with porn (ibid.: 32).

What we do know for certain, however, is the ways in which emotions have inhabited the abyss in academia, as the “excess” of what “rational” thinkers do not value. Yet, they are there, inviting us to dive into the depth of their mystery so we may emerge from it with better answers for our various questions, as we embark on the knowledge production journey. This article is a theoretical and methodological attempt to jump into the abyss and better understand the digital world, Asian women’s sexuality, and the digital viewers’ affective interactions with porn videos.

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### Notes

1. Moreover, although women and men share these motivations, women are less “intense” in expressing these motivations than men (Paul and Shim, 2008: 196).
2. <http://highscalability.com/blog/2012/4/2/youporn-targeting-200-million-views-a-day-and-beyond.html>
3. <http://www.extremetech.com/computing/123929-just-how-big-are-porn-sites/2>
4. <http://visual.ly/youporn-2012-big-numbers-hard-facts>
5. <http://pando.com/2013/10/09/what-media-companies-can-learn-from-pornhub-and-its-new-porniq-service/>
6. “Indian” is a separate category on this website.
7. Thai and Japanese are the most popular ethnic groups in these videos. Korean and Indian come next.
8. Arguing that performativity of affect is a simulacrum, I do not argue that it is “artificial.” Deleuze (1990: 265) asserts, “The artificial and the simulacrum are not the same thing. ... The artificial is always a copy of a copy, which should be pushed *to the point where it changes its nature and is reversed into the simulacrum* (the moment of Pop Art).”
9. I refer to “monster” here as Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star (2000), incorporating Donna Haraway’s idea of monster, use it as things that resist to be normalized.

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