The Logics of Good Exposure: Empowerment, Whore Stigma, and Free Labor in SuicideGirls' Social Network Porn

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Abstract

My dissertation examines the obscuring of models' labor on SuicideGirls.com, an "alternative" social network porn site. In the early 2000s, a moral panic arose about porn's widespread diffusion in North American culture. Just as these claims of "pornification" reached a critical mass, a different narrative emerged. I found in media accounts and in personal conversations an interest in the potential for a new kind of "alternative" porn. SuicideGirls was the most visible of these websites. The site became known for empowering its models by providing these women with a platform to express themselves as "authentic" subjects. While many feminists have argued that sex work has the potential to be empowering, what is novel about SuicideGirls is the way the site came to be perceived as actively producing porn that empowers women, in spite of site management's claims that SuicideGirls was not a porn site, but rather one that showcased pin-up imagery.

This positioning attracted considerable media attention and no small share of controversy. While early accounts were often glowing, the tenor of media coverage shifted dramatically in 2005, when some thirty SuicideGirls models departed the site and went to the press to publicize their issues with sexual harassment, pay scale, and contractual disputes over ownership of their images, as well as the site's censorship of their complaints.

My dissertation arises directly from these labor complaints. My analysis positions the site in relation to both pro-sex and anti-porn feminisms, as well as to emerging scholarship on new media labor practices, in order to articulate how SuicideGirls framed its models' participation as something other than work. I position my work in relation to recent scholarship that attempts to critically examine and engage with these arguments about appropriate feminine sexuality and online labor, with the hope that my contribution to these debates will be directly applicable to "real world" situations such as the working conditions of SuicideGirls models.

Résumé de la thèse

Ma thèse examine l'occultation du travail des modèles sur le site SuicideGirls.com, un portail pornographique de réseautage social "alternatif". Au début des années 2000, une panique morale est survenue autour de la question de la diffusion généralisée de la pornographie dans la culture nord-américaine. Au moment où ces affirmations de "pornification" atteignaient leur masse critique, une interprétation différente a émergé. J'ai remarqué dans les explications des médias, ainsi que des échanges personnels, un intérêt dans la possibilité d'un nouveau type de pornographie "alternative". SuicideGirls était le plus visible de ces sites internet. Le site a été reconnu pour le pouvoir dont il dote les femmes qui y sont présentées, en plus de fournir une plateforme pour qu'elles puissent s'exprimer en tant que sujets "authentiques". Alors que plusieurs féministes ont soutenu que le travail du sexe peut conférer un certain pouvoir aux femmes, la nouveauté de Suicide Girls réside dans la manière dont le site en est venu à être perçu comme produisant activement de la pornographie conférant un tel pouvoir et ce, malgré les affirmations de la direction du site selon lesquelles SuicideGirls n'était pas un site pornographique, mais plutôt un site montrant des images de pin-up.

Cette position a attiré une attention médiatique considérable et une part remarquable de la controverse. Alors que les premiers comptes-rendus étaient élogieux, la teneur de la couverture médiatique s'est transformée dramatiquement en 2005 quand une trentaine de modèles de SuicideGirls ont quitté le site et ont faire part à la presse des problèmes de harcèlement sexuel, d'échelle salariale et de disputes concernant les contrats et les droits sur leurs images, en plus de la censure que le site maintenait au sujet de leurs plaintes.

Ma thèse émerge directement de ces plaintes concernant le travail. Mon analyse pose le site vis-à-vis tant les pro-sexes que les féministes s'opposant à la pornographie, de même que certains domaines d'études émergents sur les nouvelles pratiques médiatiques du travail, dans le but d'articuler comment SuicideGirls a construit la participation de ses modèles en tant que quelque chose qui n'est pas du travail. Je situe mon propos en relation avec des études récentes qui tentent d'examiner et d'investir de manière critique des arguments relatifs à une sexualité féminine appropriée et le travail en ligne, dans l'espoir que ma contribution à ces débats sera directement applicable à des situations concrètes comme celles des conditions de travail des modèles de SuicideGirls.

Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: SuicideGirls as an Alternative Porn Social Network Site

Talk about piercing the veil.

A group of angry ex-models is bashing the SuicideGirls alt-porn empire, saying its embrace of the tattoo and nipple-ring set hides a world of exploitation and male domination.

The women are spreading their allegations through the blogosphere, raising the hackles of the SuicideGirls company, which has until now enjoyed a reputation as porn even feminists can love.

— Randy Dotinga, *Wired* (2005)

In North America, the first decade of the 21st-century saw renewed concern over "girls gone wild" and the easy accessibility of online porn. Teenage girls, the popular press worried, aspired to emulate porn stars. Porn, these writers suggest, had come to be seen as just another form of (risqué) fun. Moral and legal assaults on pornography also seem to be intensifying, even while middle class moms and college students clamor for courses on things like striptease aerobics. At the same time that porn appears to be becoming part of pop culture more generally, the stigma and punishment of sex work is far from gone.

In the mid-2000s, just as claims about the "pornification" of North American culture reached a critical mass, a different narrative emerged. Alongside this moral panic about porn's widespread diffusion, in media accounts and in personal conversations, I located interest in the potential for a new kind of "alternative" porn, much of which was taking place and being expressed online. SuicideGirls was the

most visible of these websites. The ways the site is framed and marketed led to widespread media coverage, coverage that focused on SuicideGirls as empowering to the women who participate in the site, whether as models or merely as site members. While many women have argued for decades that sex work has the potential to be empowering (e.g. Monét 221), what is novel about SuicideGirls is the way the site has come to be understood as making porn that empowers women. This empowerment is said to come from the act of porn modeling itself. In this dissertation, I argue that, while modeling for SuicideGirls may give some models a sense of self-esteem and autonomy over their sexuality, the greatest potential for empowerment comes from the social networking community that is created on the site. Through this community, models can develop solidarity through the exchange of information about their working conditions, resulting in collective action with the potential to challenge unfair contract terms and expose poor treatment by SuicideGirls management.

This positioning had attracted considerable media attention and no small share of controversy. While early accounts were often glowing, the tenor of media coverage shifted dramatically when some thirty SuicideGirls models departed the site and went to the press to publicize their issues with sexual harassment, the pay scale, contractual disputes over ownership of their images, and the site's censorship of their complaints. Models saw this as a betrayal of both claims of empowerment for the women modeling for the site and of the site's punk and alternative subcultural roots. Around the same time, rival alt-porn companies run by former SuicideGirls models and photographers filed lawsuits involving non-competition

clauses in their contracts. SuicideGirls interpreted these clauses so broadly that

those who have worked for the site were prohibited from working for most other

porn sites. Even before this publicity, fans and participants on the site questioned

whether SuicideGirls' claims of empowerment agreed with its labor practices.

My dissertation research arises directly from the labor complaints made by

models for SuicideGirls. My analysis positions the site in relation to both pro-sex and

anti-porn feminisms, as well as to emerging scholarship on new media labor

practices, in order to articulate how porn functions for women in a new media

context. My goal is to add new understanding of gendered labor online to existing

debates about porn and prostitution through this case study of SuicideGirls. I

address these issues by contextualizing the specific practices of SuicideGirls and

situating the rhetorical claims made by the site and the criticisms engendered by

these claims.

Claims about SuicideGirls as both an exploitative contractor and a sex-

positive, empowering porn producer are contradictory. I interrogate the rhetoric

that shapes such claims, exploring how cultural discourses around "good girl" and

"bad girl" sexuality, alternative subcultural politics and aesthetics, the provision of

"free labor" by digital cultural workers, and social networking site practices come

together to constitute the working conditions of SuicideGirls models. There is much

to query about its claims as a site of "sex-positive" feminism, as well as how sex

work is more broadly understood, and the possible ways that porn can become part

of women's self-fashioning. In the context of these labor disputes, SuicideGirls

presents a vital case for the need to incorporate sex workers' rights perspectives

into porn studies in a political moment that makes it all but impossible to make

claims about the models' actual labor in creating porn imagery and to understand

their status as workers.

My research questions come directly out of the criticisms leveled against the

site. These research questions are a means to rethink women's work in porn as it

has changed in new media contexts. My project is a deliberate attempt to move away

from the polarizing arguments of anti-porn/prostitution feminism and pro-sex and

sex worker feminisms. Historically, there has been too little substantive engagement

with each other's ideological positions. I specifically address the site's relation to

both pro-sex and anti-porn feminisms in order to articulate how porn functions for

women in a postfeminist and new media context.

The following questions guide my inquiry:

1. How are discourses of empowerment used in SuicideGirls? How do

    these discourses of empowerment affect the ways that labor can be

    viewed in a new media context? How does the site frame its

    marketing of empowerment? How do the site's images function in

    supporting and/or countering this marketing rhetoric?

2. How is porn modeling understood in terms of labor on the site? How

    does the idea of empowerment conflict with the creation of fair

    working conditions for its models? What does understanding porn

    modeling as labor allow, and how does it contribute to rethinking

    women's work in porn as it has changed in online environments?

My general goal is to determine how discussions of women's self-esteem and

empowerment play out specifically in the context of porn's new media "knowledge economy," where labor is routinely viewed as something removed from physical work. In the case of porn, models' labor is a source of on-going value as the circulation of their images generates profit for SuicideGirls. Thus, the final set of questions I ask is:

3. How does this circulation affect who is getting paid and for what work? Where is value located and for whom? If the "value" for women is in increased self-esteem, who literally profits from that esteem?

These questions arise directly from SuicideGirls' social media porn platform where "free labor" is performed by women in particular.

The discourses of self-esteem and empowerment that are mobilized in SuicideGirls' marketing resonate with postfeminist media culture. These discourses are examples of the emotional labor of self-formation that have specifically gendered dimensions in neoliberal societies. In postfeminist discourses of selfhood, women are acculturated to see themselves as sexualized subjects rather than sex objects (Gill 437). In this feminine self-understanding, living as a sexualized subject exemplifies a larger cultural shift that emphasizes individual agency and choice. This is evident in how SuicideGirls talks about their models' choices to participate as an opportunity for broader exposure. But since the very marketing of the site operates in conjunction with shifting economic rhetoric about the need for exposure and experience in order to secure certain kinds of employment, the choice to model for SuicideGirls is not one made from a position of absolute freedom. This postfeminist and neoliberal understanding of selfhood becomes a part of the way models seem to

understand themselves, making it extremely difficult for women working for the site to acknowledge that there are other ways in which their choices are constrained. As Rosalind Gill points out, even some feminist literature on issues facing women and girls emphasizes the centrality of agency, choice and autonomy, but often fails to acknowledge the larger social and economic forces that constrain these choices (435).

Elsewhere the claim has been made that women's lives are shaped by this version of neoliberal individualized selfhood, where self-esteem and the attendant flexibility of self are requirements for the precarity of modern life, and especially for participation in the labor market (McGee 166). As both a social networking and a porn site, SuicideGirls positions itself squarely in the center of this project of postfeminist self-improvement through sexualized and empowered subjectivity, making it an ideal model for addressing the links that have been drawn in this context between women's empowerment and their labor. I will explore this link as a means of making claims about how the site both creates and constrains possibilities for empowerment through the formation of labor solidarity.

SuicideGirls' differences from other porn sites are highlighted in the site's own marketing materials and taken up in media coverage and in popular discourse. These accounts highlight SuicideGirls models' authenticity, particularly through the perceived intimacy of the relationship between models and site viewers/members. This authenticity is seen by SuicideGirls' founders as distinct from "mainstream" porn sites which feature models marked as "fake" by their dyed blonde hair, obvious breast implants, and artificial tans (Gray). SuicideGirls models, in contrast, are seen

as authentically expressive of their selves, with their pierced, tattooed "alternative" aesthetics; the authenticity of these kinds of body modifications, rather than the "fake" body modifications of mainstream porn models, is tied to the rhetoric of alternative subculture developed over the last thirty years. The site marketed itself to an audience that found appealing the idea of accessible, "real" models who are not exploited in their work (another claim rooted in alternative subcultural politics). To that end, SuicideGirls gained a reputation for "porn even feminists can love" (Dotinga).

In some ways, there is merit to these claims that SuicideGirls is different from other porn representations. The site is far removed from Linda Lovelace's exposition of the abusive treatment she received on the set of *Deep Throat* in the early 1970s. The story of that film's production has been used extensively to support anti-porn feminists' claims that porn production practices are inherently exploitative and constitute forms of sexual violence against women (e.g. Steinem; Paasonen and Saarenmaa 25-26). SuicideGirls, on the other hand, is a site where empowerment appears to be the rule. But while some forms of empowerment may indeed be possible, others are notably curtailed. My primary concern in this dissertation is to analyze how the site has come to be seen as mobilizing empowerment in its marketing and business practices such that issues of models' labor (e.g. fair contract terms and reasonable compensation) become obscured or are dismissed completely.

THE FOUNDING OF SUICIDEGIRLS

Hi, I'm Missy, the head suicide girl. This is my story, every bit of it true, except the parts where i lie. [...]

So a week later spooky and I found ourselves in Pioneer Square, in the heart of downtown portland, OR. And get this: The whole square was filled with supercute punk and goth girls. I turned to spooky, looked at his video camera and was struck, homer-simpson style, with a great idea.

I wanted to know every one of those girls: the punk girls, the goth girls, the raver girls, all of them. And Spooky, well he wanted to see them naked. So I hatched the idea for Suicide Girls, a website where you can get to know the hottest, cutests, sexiest goth punk and raver girls we can find. [sic]

— Missy Suicide (2001) ("SuicideGirls Story")

SuicideGirls began in 2001 in Portland, Oregon, taking its name from a short story by Chuck Palahniuk, a Portland-based author whose work, according to an interview on the site, has "inspired a generation of fucked up outsiders and insiders alike" (Farber). In her introduction to the first SuicideGirls book, Missy Suicide (given name Selena Mooney) tells the story of the site's founding. She was inspired to take pin-up style photographs of her beautiful and "ferociously unique" punk and alternative friends because these women were not otherwise represented amongst the "impossibly perfect bodies of the blonde bombshells of soap operas and the Abercrombie & Fitch catalog" (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 8). Missy claims that SuicideGirls' creation was intended as a way to encourage these pierced and tattooed women to see themselves as beautiful and to help foster community by giving them "a voice on the website" (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 8).

I singled out SuicideGirls from amongst the proliferation of online porn sites because of the way the site has come to be seen in many media accounts as a source

of empowerment for the women involved with the site. This empowerment is said

to stem from the very structure of SuicideGirls. Missy Suicide is widely credited as

the site's founder, including on the site's own "About" page, and is the public face of

the company; the perception that the site is woman-owned and operated is

widespread, despite disputes over whether she has ever had an ownership role

(Koht). Those connected to SuicideGirls repeatedly describe the site as

"empowering women" (See, for example, Wheaton). Site models/members also say

that their participation is empowering, and that posing for and participating in the

site has helped them to raise their once low self-esteem. For example, SuicideGirls

model Disco wrote in the first issue of the SuicideGirls magazine that "SG was my

catalyst to enough confidence not to care" what others thought of her . They express

that the site has allowed them a platform for the promotion of themselves and their

many forms of creative work. These types of stories are commonly publicized and

marketed in SuicideGirls' own website copy, press interviews, and in their in-house

magazine and DVDs.

Site founders' emphasis on the community found among its models would

seem to suggest that one of the key audiences for SuicideGirls is the models

themselves. Accurate user statistics are difficult to determine; at various points

early in SuicideGirls' history, the site's founders claimed that anywhere from 35 to

55 percent of members were women (Gray; Roe). But, as evidenced by SuicideGirls'

tremendous visibility online and off, the audience for the site goes well beyond its

own models and would-be models. From the site's own statistics, as many as 65

percent of members are men, many of whom as presumably consuming the site for

the same reasons that they would look at any porn site. Thus, the site's audience

includes those who are paid to produce content for the site, such as models,

photographers, and other staff members, and those whose participation in the site is

as a paying member.

The site's claims to empowerment rest largely on its purported differences

from other porn sites, and, in fact, SuicideGirls is careful to describe the site's images

as pin-ups rather than porn. The term "pin-up" is part of the site's positioning as the

"alternative" heir to Playboy, to which the site had made frequent direct

comparisons (SuicideGirls "About 2009"). In describing SuicideGirls as a pin-up

style photography site rather than a porn website, the site makes explicit reference

to an earlier, more "innocent" era of sexual imagery. In the Introduction to the first

SuicideGirls book, Missy Suicide writes of her interest in the "Pin-Up era": "Surely,

with the proliferation of hardcore pornography and graphic sex all over the Internet

and cable, there wouldn't be the same sort of widespread appeal for the understated

beauty of the demure there once was, but so what?" (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 7-8). These

marketing claims attempt to position SuicideGirls and its models firmly on the side

of "good girl" sexuality.

Historically, and in its current incarnations, the pin-up is a genre where

gender and class tensions get negotiated in attempts to define appropriate feminine

sexuality, as Maria Elena Buszek details in her study of feminist pin-up imagery.

Through pin-up imagery, contradictory ideas of good and bad girl sexuality are put

into play; as such they are never fully resolved (Buszek 11). This tension is part of

the historic appeal of the pin-up, which has seen revitalized popularity in the past

twenty years as part of retro alternative culture. SuicideGirls styles itself as part of

this revival.

The pin-up is a figure of teasing ambiguity, often not quite porn and certainly

not considered a form of sex work (Buszek 11). In this way it is similar to burlesque,

the performance cousin to the pin-up's still images. SuicideGirls banked on this

similarity for the various burlesque road shows that the site has sponsored where

models from the site perform in venues across North America. The first tour was

filmed and SuicideGirls released a DVD that featured both performance and

backstage footage. Such exposure has resulted in an increased media and academic

attention to burlesque and striptease that also informs my discussion of SuicideGirls

(e.g. Frank "Thinking"; Mansfield; Pasko; Shteir; Stark).

In addition its framing as a site featuring pin-up style photography, rather

than a porn website, SuicideGirls' draws on the political and aesthetic tropes of

alternative subculture. The SuicideGirls "About" page reads: "The site mixes the

smarts, enthusiasm and DIY attitude of the best music and alternative culture sites

with an unapologetic, grassroots approach to sexuality." SuicideGirls is considered

an "alt porn" site because of the ways the site's models are said to "redefine beauty"

by incorporating prominent piercings, tattoos, non-traditional hair color, and other

stylings associated with goth, punk, emo, and otherwise "alternative" fashion

("Model").

The site uses alternative as a signpost that its models are different from what

site founders deem "typical" vapid porn stars with fake blond hair, surgically

enlarged breasts, whom they see as incapable of self-aware decisions about their

work in porn and thus potentially exploited. Those women who model for

SuicideGirls are positioned as "real" women who are opinionated, sexy and in

control of their own desires and sexuality. By extension, they are also in control of

their labor and of their laboring bodies. SuicideGirls appear to choose porn because

they are empowered and because porn empowers them. And because the site is

alternative too, supposedly its owners are positioned as unlike "typical" exploitative

capitalist porn moguls. The site's alternative framing allows for a merging of these

aesthetic and political claims to "authenticity" and thus gives SuicideGirls' business

model an aura of moral righteousness. Alternative also signals working outside the

mainstream, which dovetails nicely with sex-positive feminism's emphasis on

transgression, as I explore in more detail in Chapter One.

Whatever SuicideGirls' claims, alt porn has become big business. The

popularity of the pierced and tattooed aesthetic of SuicideGirls and similar sites has

led some of the largest porn companies in the US to create their own "alt porn"

divisions. Claims to being the "first" alt-porn site are highly contentious, and while

SuicideGirls is far from the first or only alt-porn site, its longevity and visibility

makes it significant. Although now less popular than it once was, the site's visibility

was particularly high from about 2004 to 2007. The TV crime drama *CSI* aired an

episode in 2006 about the fictional murder of a SuicideGirl, featuring several of the

site's actual models. The site also has ties to mainstream porn companies like

Playboy which featured a "SuicideGirl of the Week" on its website beginning in 2004.

As an extremely popular site with close to two thousand models and membership

and site traffic many times that, SuicideGirls is neither clearly "subcultural" nor clearly "mainstream."

Although the traditional understanding of subculture is that of space for young men (even within academic subcultural studies), over the years those working in feminist cultural studies, and the newer field of "girl studies," have examined the significance of subcultural sites and the practices they enable for girls and women (e.g. McRobbie and Garber; Kearney; Thornton *Club Cultures;* Wald; Driver). Through these subcultural sites, women and girls create community and respond to gendered, raced, classed and sexualized power, both beyond their subcultures and within them. SuicideGirls draws upon the look, sound, and, in some ways, "feel" of female subcultural spaces, especially the Riot Grrrl scene of the 1990s, yet its organization, business model, and other practices prove to be otherwise. The site's use of "alternative" suggests that it operates differently from the perceived exploitation of mainstream cultural industries, but their contract terms, pay rates and corporate practices are no less unfair. The site, then, is a space in which to explore intersections of postfeminist sexuality and subculture, where women's participation is framed in terms of individual agency but at the same time marked by these manifestations of power.

SuicideGirls also calls attention to the participatory nature of the site, as a member-based community where paid subscribers and models (both of which are also referred to by the site as users) can interact in a social networking format. All members, including models, have profile pages where they can list information about themselves, and post pictures, videos, and blog entries, and links to pages of

their friends and favorite models/photo sets. They can also post on members-only forums. As Feona Attwood explains, model-members are "distinguished only from other members by their modeling, the fees they attract for this and by the lifetime memberships their status as SuicideGirls also earns them" ("No Money Shot" 443). By providing models with a voice in this way, the site is able to market itself and its models as more accessible and authentic than other sites that provide only the stereotypical (and scant) information about "average" porn models. In creating a space in which women are encouraged to form community bonds, regardless of the other activities on the site, SuicideGirls has become a significant community for women involved in alternative subcultures such as goth, punk, and emo, among others (Attwood "No Money Shot" 444).

Because it relies on member-generated content, SuicideGirls is also a good example of a common economic strategy of new media companies, where participation in the site allows the company to bypass much of the work of professional content development. The social networking aspect of the site, although both a marketing and labor strategy, has allowed the models to develop some sense of collective identity and share grievances about the site's practices and treatment of them as employees. At the same time, the site has exercised considerable control over this kind of content, frequently trying to curtail criticism by removing unflattering forum and blog posts, and revoking models' access to the site if they make comments deemed overly critical. While the site's postfeminist sexual politics are not wholly transgressive or liberatory, nor entirely exploitative, SuicideGirls' business practices provide much to analyze in terms of labor politics.

My study of SuicideGirls explores the intersections of new media labor practices and discourses of authentic alternative selfhood and sex work that are, to my knowledge, unique among porn sites of this scale.

EMOTIONAL LABOR AND FREE LABOR IN NEW MEDIA SEX WORK

Throughout my research, it became clear that as a category, sex work has become less and less distinct from the more general categories of work. There has been considerable analysis of sex work as labor within a patriarchal system, specifically in terms of a shift from the anti-prostitution arguments that did not consider prostitution as labor. They instead saw it primarily as a form of gender exploitation. In my review of this literature in Chapter 1, I touch on analyses of sex work as labor. What has become clear to me is that much has already been written analyzing labor and selfhood with regard to sex work. There is far less work, however, that examines porn in this way.[1]

Because porn is mass-mediated, authors tend to treat it as representation rather than work. For example, in her introduction to her Porn Studies edited collection, Linda Williams makes an explicit case for studying the "textual workings of popular pornographies," but she makes no mention of examining the production-side of porn ("Porn Studies: Proliferating Pornographies On/Scene: An Introduction" 5). For the most part, however porn studies scholars approach porn

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[1] One of the few pieces to do so is Mireille Miller-Young's discussion of race and gender in relationship to selfhood for Black women in online porn. Other authors have written about prostitution as a form of emotional care-giving labor—like much of traditional "women's work"—and its connections to selfhood and self-esteem (e.g. Bernstein *Temporarily Yours;* Pateman). Their work is discussed in more detail in Chapter One.

as a text to be analyzed, like any other kind of film. Anti-porn feminists have also

noticed this narrow treatment of porn as it is confined to text, rather than labor

(Boyle 37). From their perspective, this is a problem as they often equate porn with

prostitution and with rape. It is also a problem because, as anti-porn feminists

decry, porn performers' labor needs to be theorized as something that is

exploitative, but it is also far more than this.

Porn can be exploitative. On this point, I agree with anti-porn feminists. But I

disagree with their analyses of why this is the case. Anti-porn feminists see

porn/sex work as primarily concerned with the relationship between women's

bodies and intimacy—as an inherent condition of sex *and* as something that should

neither be sold nor commodified. This is typical of the views of cultural feminists

who seek to value women's inherent emotional qualities and the purportedly

"natural" state of emotional intimacy between people undisrupted by

capitalism/patriarchy. But it is this very intimacy that is a product of capitalist

relations. As Eva Illouz, Elizabeth Bernstein, and others have argued, intimacy, in the

form of affective labor, is sold as a product all the time (Bernstein *Temporarily*

Yours; Illouz; Zelizer). So the desire to maintain intimacy as separate from capitalist

labor relations ascribes intimacy to some pre-existing "natural" state, whereas

intimacy might better understood as a discursive relation shaped by capitalism

itself. Intimacy is a form of often-gendered work. Within porn studies, this aspect of

intimacy—presented on SuicideGirls as authentic expression of the selfhood of its

models, as I explain below—is still largely ignored (see especially Williams *Hard*

Core). Intimacy, as understood in porn studies, remains primarily a function of

representation, rather than a function of capitalist gendered relations between people. As such, porn studies examines the stakes of this representation *as* representation as if it were for its own sake, rather than as a product of economic relationships.

In contrast, I examine the labor practices involved in producing porn representations, refusing the distinction between the work of images and the work of performance. I'm interested in the work of representation in multiple senses. I will look at the work of making the images, along with the work of porn acting and modeling. I further highlight the various kinds of self-construction that go into this work, from the physical grooming and costuming to the emotional labor performed on the self and for others. Broadly speaking, I am interested in the "work" porn and its production do. To examine this, I explore the ways that the images themselves are a part of women's self-formation, and the building of self-esteem with respect to both the making of the representation and the representation as an object.

I draw on the feminist literatures on sex work and media studies texts such as Dallas Smythe's ideas about consumption as work and Shawn Shimpach's discussion of the labor of audiences, as well as Tiziana Terranova's notion of "free labor" in new media, which describes the types of activities that appear to be leisure pursuits while simultaneously serving as a source of revenue for new media platforms. The anti-porn and sex positive feminist literatures on sex work and intimacy that I examine address sex work from primarily in terms of gender. My research instead adopts these approaches to examine sex work—of which SuicideGirls modeling is a form—as labor, and further applies the literature on new

media labor to a discussion of the various ways models perform work for the site. I utilize these disparate strands of research in order to argue that SuicideGirls models perform labor, despite the site's attempts to frame their participation as not-porn and not-work.

SuicideGirls presents itself as transgressive, and early media coverage largely replicated the rhetoric of the site's trangressiveness uncritically. Questioning this understanding of the site was my first step in framing my dissertation research. In analyzing the site's claims to transgressiveness and empowerment, I encountered more and more feminist writing that sought to breakdown the binary framing of sex work as either transgressive or exploitative. It is in this vein that I take up Katherine Frank's call to think self-reflexively about sex work and sex work research. By this, Frank means that those who write about sex work too often make claims about the novelty of doing research on sex work which, by extension, allows researchers to "experience their investigations as transgressive excursions into virgin territory, dangerous, rebellious, and stigmatized" (Frank "Thinking" 502). She details the copious research on various forms of sex work that center around questions of power and agency, exploitation and empowerment ("Thinking" 504). Frank's analysis helped me to shift my attention to question to how SuicideGirls modeling came to be associated repeatedly with empowerment when the site itself seems not to have ever explicitly made such a claim.

I also strive for the kind of broad based study of sex work as cultural practice called for by Laura Maria Agustín. "An approach that considers commercial sex as culture would look for the everyday practices involved and try to reveal how our

societies distinguish between activities considered normatively 'social' and

activities denounced as morally wrong" (619). I explore the various tactics that

SuicideGirls' management employs to constitute the site, and the activities of its

models, as normatively social rather than morally wrong.

PORN, SOCIAL NETWORKING, AND THE EVERYDAY

As outcry over the "pornification" of society attests, porn is a part of everyday

life (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa). As such, porn is increasingly integrated

into social life, rather than hidden under the mattress and in back alleys. Jane Juffer

has argued that this process began in the 1980s in North America with the

introduction of erotica in major chain bookstores and increasing access to sexually

explicit television via cable channels. For Juffer, the domestication of porn involves

"rewriting/reworking it within everyday routines" and increasing the movement of

porn between public and private spheres (5). With this domestication, the taboos

around porn have shifted; critics of pornification raise alarm bells at the potential

moral harms to women they see in the normalization of porn consumption and the

potential destigmatization of participating in porn production.

Access to the Internet and digital media technology (webcams, digital

cameras, etc) has further normalized porn production and consumption within the

home. SuicideGirls makes considerable efforts to normalize both porn consumption

and production through social networking. The work of cultural production is

obscured by the everydayness of the site as a space of social networking (see

Terranova; Beer "Pop-Pickers"). Audiences are constituted as target markets

through the invisible labor their members perform whenever they consume mass media products (Smythe; Shimpach). Movies, newspapers, and television shows exist as much to sell things as to entertain. Social networking practices are harnessed in similar ways to produce value for SuicideGirls. I will explore these social networking practices in detail in Chapter Three.

The normalization of participation in social network sites draws heavily on Michel de Certeau's notion of the "everyday." De Certeau argues for the cultural significance of everyday practices, and discusses how to approach the study of the everyday. The activities that take place on the SuicideGirls site, such as writing blog posts and participating in forum discussions, slip easily into everyday practices that are seen as entertainment or a hobby—something done in models and members' leisure time—rather than as work. In this dissertation, I argue that just the opposite is the case; these seemingly leisure-based activities serve as a form of free labor produced by models for the site.

My study of SuicideGirls.com uses a variety of methods to tease out the cultural practices of the site and to understand how sex work can become free labor in the realm of new media. I look not just at the site's production practices, but also at the social networking aspects of the site and its related content. As David Beer explains, "[I]nteractive social networking archives both transform and record everyday experiences, they are communally owned and shaped, and, therefore, provide an opportunity to access cultural memories" (Beer "Pop-Pickers" 4.5). The everyday practices of the site involve SuicideGirls' owners and management, photographers, models, as well as its paying members. Members range from the

relatively passive porn consumer to more active participants who post in forums,

comment on blog entries and photos, rate models' photo sets, and write blog posts

attached to their own profiles. These activities constitute the everyday practices of

the site, taking place both in online interactions and in the physical spaces where

members use their computers, take photos, and otherwise engage in content

production. I refer to these activities as "everyday" practices of because the notion

of the everyday indicates the ways in which these activities are woven into the

fabric of daily life and leisure.

But at the same time, the work of cultural production is somewhat obscured

in these practices. In addition to their work modeling for the site, I examine female

models' own writing in blogs on the site, their participation in discussion forums,

and the ways they (and other members) comment on photo sets. These are the

everyday practices associated with social networking sites, not generally thought of

as typical practices of pornography production. And yet these activities also

constitute work. Similarly, modeling for SuicideGirls is work but is not recognized as

such because of the ways that discourses of labor and affect function in the site.

Modeling for the site is pitched in SuicideGirls' recruitment material as a way to

connect with others and to gain exposure that might translate into work in other

entertainment and creative industries. This was true in the first seven years of the

site's history when models were paid for any photoset appearing on the site; it

became even more the case after the 2008 introduction of the Hopefuls section

when photoset submission (of forty to sixty images with a consistent theme, setting,

and outfit) became a kind of "tournament economy" with models competing to

receive payment for photos that are, in the meantime, viewable to all SuicideGirls

members (Frank and Cook).[2] Given the centrality of the user-produced content to

the site, it is difficult to even distinguish between the more professionalized

production practices of the site and user-produced content (Kostakis). With the

blurring of lines between producers and consumers in online communities,

questions about which of these practices constitutes labor, and particularly sexual

labor (both in terms of sexed labor and sexuality-based work), and how this labor is

perceived and remunerated (or not) are paramount.

I am particularly concerned with the new media platform on which these

activities take place and how this platform affects how SuicideGirls models'

participation is perceived as labor (or not). My research addresses the ways in

which the labor of women's selfhood production (via blogging, modeling,

participation in SuicideGirls forums, etc) as a part of their livelihood production is a

central, if little recognized aspect of this labor. This ties into larger shifts for creative

workers (i.e. freelance, portable, flexible labor online and off) in the neoliberal

economy.

THE GENDERING OF WORK AND LABOR

The distinction between work and labor is a gendered one. This distinction

crucially affects how the labor of porn modeling is understood by SuicideGirls

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[2] SuicideGirls model Hopefuls compete to become paid models for the site in much the same way that many reality tv show contestants compete for prize money and the opportunity for further paid work in their field (as on *America's Next Top Model*, *The Apprentice*, *Top Chef*, and *Project Runway*, for example). This is also similar to the rise of unpaid internships done by students (and increasingly by career-changers like recent PhDs seeking work outside academia), in the hopes of landing the "prize" of paid work on the basis of such experience.

models, the site's owners, and in media accounts; more importantly, it shapes how compensation is discussed and decided. Micki McGee discusses this distinction at length in her book *Self-Help, Inc.* Drawing on Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, McGee defines labor as the work of social reproduction, consisting of the activities one does to keep life going—the daily grind. It is reproductive labor, the work of childbearing and childrearing. It also involves daily household tasks like taking out the trash and doing the dishes and laundry, as well as paid work like trash collection (139). But none of these activities are seen as meaningful work. No one talks of "meaningful labor"; instead people use the phrase "meaningful work." Traditionally, as McGee points out, the people who get to do meaningful work are people with privilege, mostly white, middle and upper class men, but increasingly white women too. In this framing, "labor" is not a calling nor a legacy nor "leaving your mark."[3]

McGee states that in the late twentieth-century, women started to be included in these calls to do meaningful work (39). This produces many contradictions since meaningful work is an idea based on having someone else doing all the daily care labor, the labor of sustaining life. So as women are increasingly told by self-help and career manuals to find meaningful work, it produces conflicting advice. Even on a small scale, people have to "delegate" all kinds of labor-related obligations in order to have time to do what they want to, which in this case is to cultivate meaning in their work and in themselves . But women are much less able to delegate than men for whom work is more often considered a calling. Women are now supposed to do meaningful work and, in the

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[3] McGee provides a detailed account of the origins of the idea of work as a calling, documenting its roots in eighteenth-century Protestant theology.

process, are called upon socially to improve themselves, to do work on *themselves*. And, as women are taught over and over through norms of femininity, the price for not doing this self-labor is feeling bad, to be compensated for by, at the very least, feeling the obligation to do even more work on the self (Rapping).

SuicideGirls is the perfect example of this conflict, where the models are working on themselves by producing "authentic" identity—in the form of alternative aesthetics—and providing emotional labor for others at the same time (Bernstein "Sex Work"). They perform emotional labor for themselves in the form of self-esteem building. At the same time, part of their work as SuicideGirls models is to provide emotional labor for the viewer; models must produce their very selves as authentically alternative in order to create a sense of intimate connection with the viewer. And all the while, some of these women are claiming that they do not need compensation beyond a self-esteem boost or exposure for their talents. Others may perform this free labor for in exchange for exposure and experience.

SELLING AUTHENTICITY: THE CURRENCY OF THE SELF

Given that making porn is work, how might it be analyzed it as such? Analyses of image making as work must include the work of modeling, not just the work of the person behind the camera. Porn modeling is not just work in the sense of labor. It is also work in another sense: it is the work of gender. It involves both the construction of women's selfhood and the construction of femininity.

Part of the reason porn performance is not recognized as work is for the same reason that a woman getting ready to go on a dinner-date with a man who

pays for the meal isn't seen as work. Women do all kinds of labor in exchange for

economically-structured relationships with men, whether or not money directly

changes hands. All that primping and grooming and clothes shopping is rarely

considered to be work (Nagle). But it is work, and quite a lot of work too. Helen

Gurley Brown described this labor as an investment in attracting men in her 1983

advice book *Having It All* (see Hochschild "Commercial Spirit" 26; Scanlon). In

contemporary terms, such work is talked about as an *investment* in the self. For

SuicideGirls models, there is an added element: many of these women state

repeatedly that they model for the site for self-esteem. Some explicitly describe

doing the work of modeling to get paid in increased self-esteem. This increased self-

esteem is a benefit to the individual, but, as with the selling of intimacy and

authenticity, this work is also a form of emotional caregiving (see Bernstein "Sex

Work"; Illouz; McGee). In effect, the framing of posing for SuicideGirls in terms of

self-esteem is not dissimilar to the explanations given by many people who work in

fields like childcare, the arts, and social work who justify their hard work at low

wages in terms of morality (doing it for the "greater good") and personal fulfillment.

Note that those fields in which one provides care for others, such as childcare and

social work, are feminized fields. For SuicideGirls' models, this care of the self takes

the form of body modification (piercings, tattoos) and stylistic and grooming choices

(black clothing, heavy makeup, and hair dyed obviously artificial shades) that are

supposed to reflect one's internal sense of authentic self, thereby creating a sense of

"value and distinction" rather than "crude economic self interest and lack of

authenticity" for both the model and for viewers/members (Bernstein "Sex Work"

478). In this way, care of the self is interpolated as having specific emotional

benefits for the individual model. But it also plays a crucial, if little acknowledged,

part in the marketing strategy for the site. Thus care of the self, in the form of

expression of authentic selfhood through models' stylings and in the form of

increased self-esteem, become part of the invisible fabric of labor on SuicideGirls.

A second major difference is that, in contrast to other caregiving fields, sex

work is seen as morally suspect rather than morally "good." SuicideGirls' discursive

framing, engaged in by both site management and models, inverts the dominant

moral stance toward sex work. But they do so using the same logic that anti-

porn/prostitution feminists use to argue why people shouldn't be paid for sex.

These women are arguing against their own paid labor *while performing that labor*

using the very terms of anti-porn activists who claim that sex is about intimacy and

not money (Kempadoo). These women, in part to maintain their status as "good

girls" and avoid whore stigma, attempt to distance the work they do from "sex

work" by saying that their compensation comes in the currency of self-esteem and

self-improvement.

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

In developing this study, I began to create my own extensive archive of

material related to SuicideGirls, both online and in other media. From the

construction of this archive, I am able to analyze shifts in the site's content from

2001 to 2008. Because online content is frequently transient and the scope of

material is so vast, my archive is, also, necessarily partial. The majority of the

material from the site that I have archived dates from 2005 to the present. Although archiving online material as screen captures provides a means of preserving the content, if it is subsequently taken offline the interactive nature of the material is diminished. Some content from SuicideGirls is available via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine site; however, the site only archives pages that were available to those without a paid subscription, such as the front page and FAQ sections. This necessarily limits what one may access in this way.

The starting point for gathering my source materials were the things I came across before I began to think systematically about SuicideGirls as a site of research. These include the website itself, the first SuicideGirls book, and the "sgirls" community on LiveJournal, a blogging and social networking site. I then used what the site itself flagged as important at key moments of transition in its labor practices, as well as the material SuicideGirls management chose to represent the site in print. These things are significant for my analysis because they highlight the site's public image.

To address my questions about the labor practices of SuicideGirls, I analyze material that can be divided roughly into three categories: (i) material produced by, or in conjunction with, SuicideGirls; (ii) material relating to criticism of the site's labor practices; and (iii) media coverage of the site. These materials allow me to analyze issues of labor through the ways it is and is not made explicit. This first category includes materials produced by SuicideGirls, including the overall website and non-user generated site content like the Terms of Service agreement, books, DVDs, and publicity materials, as well as official SuicideGirls pages on social

networking sites like MySpace. It encompasses photo sets produced in collaboration between models and photographers and approved directly by the site. I also include site content generated by models and other site members, that is property of SuicideGirls. This material consists largely of member review photo sets, blog posts, profiles, discussion forums, and comments as described above. The site produces a variety of texts in other media that I also analyze. The site has released a coffee table photo book, two DVDs, several issues of a magazine, promotional video podcasts, as well as various print memorabilia and marketing material such as posters, stickers, and playing cards. These materials are especially important resources as they are lasting and durable documents of SuicideGirls, unlike the constant changing and vast scope of the website. These documents most directly reflect the site management's position itself as they are edited and officially released by SuicideGirls. The site also has an official presence on MySpace and LiveJournal, where they publicize their activities and where models, members, and fans can and do post comments.

In my study of these archives of the everyday, I delimit certain parameters. My study primarily addresses the period from 2005 to early 2008, the years of most intense debate about the contractual terms to which SuicideGirls models were subject. These controversies increasingly came under scrutiny outside of the site. One of the most prominent places for these debates is the sgirls LiveJournal community (community.livejournal.com/sgirls) that, although not explicitly created to do so, serves as a forum for criticism of the site, particularly on topics that the site's management has censored or otherwise tried to control information about.

Community members frequently post screen capture shots of blog entries and

forum posts that have since been removed by site administrators for expressing

negative opinions about SuicideGirls practices and policies.

Copies of the SuicideGirls contract have also been posted to this community, as

well as links to other sites that serve as archives for material relevant to disputes

between members and the site's administrators. Participants also note particular

models and members who have been "zotted," which is their term for the

management's practice of cancelling memberships after members have made

unflattering comments or criticisms of the site. My own research draws heavily on

the community's archival practices as a record of the purportedly censorious actions

of SuicideGirls' owners and management (Featherstone). These archival practices

also provide me with a means of seeing the emergence of notions of labor solidarity

amongst models for the site.

Models and photographers for SuicideGirls have also gone on to create and

work for other alt-porn websites. Former SuicideGirls staff photographer Lithium

Picnic (Philip Warner) and model Apnea are probably the best known among these,

as they were both involved in lawsuits with SuicideGirls relating to non-competition

clauses in their contracts. My access to legal documents such as contracts and legal

settlements is through the sgirls community. Anecdotally (largely as discussed on

sgirls), SuicideGirls has not been friendly to researchers interested in the site and its

models. The site's owners very tightly control the site's image.

I also consider the extensive media coverage of SuicideGirls as a

phenomenon, especially the business practices of the site and its empowerment

rhetoric. Initial coverage in alternative weeklies and magazines focused heavily on the site's claims to feminist empowerment (e.g. Phillips; Roe; Ziegler). Subsequent coverage has dealt more with the controversies surrounding the site's treatment of models, particularly in light of the departure of many high profile models in 2005 over wages and contract disputes (e.g. Dodero; Dotinga; Hopper and Shepherd; Sobczyk). These disputes are also documented in the adult industry trade magazine, *AVN*, and in blogs that cover the industry. This coverage aids my attempts to develop a sense of the site's cultural prominence and significance.

I regularly visited the SuicideGirls website, the sgirls LiveJournal community, and other related sites in an effort to gather as much material as possible in relation to my project. In my Internet-based research, I followed issues relevant to women's labor on the site in order to contextualize the on-going labor controversies. Sites like sgirls are a fundamental part of the compiling and shifting of materials, which allows participants in these communities to make sense out of the massive quantities of material in circulation that relates to their particular scene. The sgirls community serves as a particularly important site for filtering and consolidating this material, partial though it may be. Its members also perform archival functions within the community. I relied on sgirls as a source because the members are invested both in the site and its critique and intent on documenting the otherwise often invisible actions taken against those models who protested their treatment by SuicideGirls' management.

In dealing with this material, I look for certain recurring themes: discussion of why women model for SuicideGirls, talk related to contracts and issues of

compensation, and self-esteem related topics. I use discursive analysis to study the archival materials of SuicideGirls. In examining the SuicideGirls site and related materials, I pay particular attention to recurrent discussions of selfhood and self-esteem, especially when talk of self-esteem intersects with discussion of work, and even becomes how work on the site is talked about. I look at the controversies around SuicideGirls' contracts and women's labor practices in porn, among models, and in media coverage of the site. I was particularly interested in material that discusses SuicideGirls' working conditions and contracts, particularly how models discuss these issues on the site. I have identified, gathered, and analyzed materials that use terms relating to the economic nature of contracts and to understandings of what SuicideGirls models do in terms of labor by models, site members, and the media. I pay particular attention to the contentious issues noted in media coverage of the site and in the sgirls LiveJournal community such as pay, fair contract terms, and those relating to reproduction of models' images. These issues raise questions of whose labor counts in the reproduction of images, how images are valued, and the relationship between models' identities and intellectual property claims.

Through my analysis, I track the movement of empowerment discourses into sex worker discourses and how they are translated between the two. I looked for the repetition of certain kinds of talk and the language women use to discuss their work for SuicideGirls, and those instances of contestation over the meaning and practices of sex work contexts of representation.

In my analysis of the material I have gathered, the language of self-esteem is the most visible of the ways models discuss their work on the site. The site itself also

talks about work in terms of self-esteem. One of my main interests was in how the site codes women's labor in terms of the language of self-esteem. Is their labor only speakable through self-esteem? Self-esteem is very useful for the site itself in terms of a marketing discourse and in terms of how the models understand their participation in the site. These two things are not entirely distinct, as self-esteem also seems useful for the site's models, but not in the same ways for each. Certainly women do get appreciable benefits from things that make them feel better about themselves. But the benefits they get might not be as great as those that accrue to the site. How does the site articulate models' work and labor and in what terms? What kind of "work" signifying productive work does this discourse of SG labor as an expression of self-esteem/empowerment do?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In my analysis of SuicideGirls, I focus on contextualizing the rhetoric and practices of the site in order to make visible the intersection of gender and labor in new media porn. Chapter One begins with a discussion of the ways my dissertation intervenes in the existing debates around porn and prostitution. I attempt to move away from the polarizing arguments that have pitted anti-porn/prostitution feminisms against pro-sex and sex worker feminisms, who show too little substantive engagement with each other's ideological positions. I position my work in relation to more recent scholarship that attempts to critically examine and engage with the various aspects of these arguments about appropriate feminine sexuality

(e.g. Kempadoo, Sanghera and Pattanaik; Almodovar "Porn Stars") in order to ground my analysis of SuicideGirls in feminist theories of sex work and sexuality.

Chapter Two examines SuicideGirls' use of alternative subcultural politics and aesthetics in the formation of an online community. Looking at the marketing material produced by the site as well as interviews and media coverage from the early days of SuicideGirls, I will address the specific valences of "alternative" in relation to porn and to social networking, as well as the implications of SuicideGirls' combination of these things. Of particular concern are the ways SuicideGirls marshals the rhetoric of alternative subculture to frame how labor, particularly that of the site's models, is understood on the site. I then examine how this rhetoric of alternative porn community operates as part of broader cultural discourses about intimacy in pornography, sex work, and within capitalism. In effect, alternative signifies authenticity, which, in turn, serves to foster the creation of intimate community on the site. I claim that this "alternative" framing, in conjunction with the SuicideGirls' social network platform, shapes how the site's models understand their labor.

The third chapter examines SuicideGirls as a social network site, with a twofold emphasis. The function of social networking that is most obvious to the site's members is as a tool for community creation that is democratic and accessible, according to the logics of both alternative subculture and proponents of Web 2.0. The less visible function of social networking for SuicideGirls is as a means to generate content for the site. This content, produced by members who pay a fee to join the site, then becomes part of the community-creation that draws new

members to the site and entices existing members to return. My analysis focuses

especially on the "Member Review" section of the site, in which SuicideGirls model

"Hopefuls" submit photo sets to be rated by site members, as well as FAQs and

groups geared toward prospective models. If a Hopeful's set is deemed popular

enough, she may be chosen to become an official SuicideGirl and be paid for her

photos at that time. These online content creation practices are part of general

blurring of lines between consumer and producer and between "everyday" leisure

activities and labor, practices some critical new media scholars have termed "play-

bor." SuicideGirls' business practices related to content production raise many

questions around labor and political rights, including the rights of its models to their

images and words and free speech in the "semi-public" sphere of social media,

which I address in the next chapter.

In the fourth chapter, I analyze SuicideGirls' policies and practices relating to

site users and the content they produce by examining the site's Terms of Service

(TOS) and the enforcement of these policies. My analysis stems from the specific

criticisms of the site's labor practices from models and members and from

mainstream media and various other online sources. That SuicideGirls models

actively engage in these debates suggests that these issues are of vital importance to

them. I argue that the prominence of the criticism of SuicideGirls comes from the

conjunction of the site's form and content, its melding of social networking with the

rhetoric of empowered alternative porn, and that this criticism is centrally

concerned with the blurring of distinctions between labor and leisure that take

place on the site.

In Chapter Five, I return to the feminist literature on sex work and sexuality that were raised in Chapter One. This chapter ties together my analyses of "alternative," free labor in social media, and the site practices criticized by SuicideGirls' models in the preceding chapters by foregrounding the specifically gendered aspects of these issues. I address how whore stigma and the affective dimensions of "women's work" operate in conjunction with SuicideGirls' exploitative working conditions and use of "pin-up" iconography to make it difficult for models to develop a broader understanding of their rights as workers. I draw on feminist theories of the division of labor to detail how SuicideGirls' practices fit into larger structures of gendered labor and to suggest new avenues for understanding this labor in a new media context.

I conclude with a short discussion of the 2010 Ontario Superior Court ruling to overturn the major Canadian laws restricting activities in conjunction with prostitution. I examine this case in relation to the labor issues raised by SuicideGirls' treatment of its models in order to demonstrate the ways that my dissertation engages with larger debates about the rights of sex workers to safety, autonomy, and free association in their working conditions.

CHAPTER 1: Good Girls, Bad Girls, and SuicideGirls

"[SuicideGirls] didn't pander to pornography's idea of what sexy is. The women had a wit and intelligence about them that was different from the traditional porn slut."

— Sex therapist Susan Block (quoted in Hopper and Shepherd 74)

The proliferation of online porn has brought renewed attention to debates around what constitutes appropriate feminine and feminist sexuality in the 21st-century (e.g. Boyle; Levy; Paul; Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa). The current debates draw on feminist discussions of sexuality dating back to the 1970s—debates that grew increasingly prominent and increasingly hostile in the 1980s—about the place of prostitution and pornography in feminist politics (Hunter 17). Historically, these feminist concerns are largely framed around two poles: the anti-porn and anti-prostitution arguments of radical feminists, and the arguments of sex radical feminists about the need for women's bodily and economic autonomy.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, sex radical feminist arguments turned into the sex-positive movement, with links to third-wave feminism and postfeminist cultural politics. All these positions are centrally concerned with issues of choice, consent and autonomy for women (Hunter 16). Most feminism is rooted in the belief that women's autonomy over their bodies is a basic right; women need autonomy over their bodies, both in terms of safety from danger and in terms of experiencing pleasure (Vance). Different feminist positions, however, use different strategies with which to address issues of choice, consent, and autonomy.

SuicideGirls plays precisely on such notions of women's sexual autonomy and choice in distinguishing between what it does as a social network pin-up site from what other online porn sites do. In its marketing materials and other public statements, SuicideGirls explicitly spells out that it is not a porn site. The site's management specifies repeatedly that it should instead be referred to as a "pin-up" site (e.g. Wheaton). Sean "Spooky" Suhl, one of SuicideGirls' founders, stated in an interview that the site was created in an attempt to differentiate it from other "Internet porn that was too explicit and cookie-cutter boring" (Madden). But while the site's management may distance themselves from mainstream Internet pornography, it is still clearly a referent for what the site does, how the site (and its models) look, and how it is experienced by users.

Despite these disclaimers, SuicideGirls' photosets can be considered porn by most definitions, in that they are decidedly NSFW ("Not Safe for Work," in common Internet parlance). While the images have what might be called a "pin-up" aesthetic, the photographs that comprise the bulk of SuicideGirls' content feature female models in the nude and, according to the Model FAQ, full nudity is required in all photosets (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2011" 5.9). The Model FAQ outlines the site's somewhat contradictory position in more detail:

> **Fully exposed breasts and bums are a must (no pasties or electrical tape, panties must come off).** […] We prefer the nudity not be explicit or overly pornographic **(no holding, touching or spreading)** and definitely no penetration is allowed. (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2011" 5.9, emphasis in original)

SuicideGirls' definition of "explicit" in this case seems to tread the line between softcore and hardcore pornography. Each photoset is presented on the website as a slide show, generally consisting of forty to sixty sequential images, shot with a single "outfit, theme and setting" (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2011" 5.9). In the first few images, the model (or sometimes two models) removes her clothing in a kind of stop-motion strip tease. The model then poses in a series of images familiar from softcore porn. Some shots emphasize her cleavage; others show her labia. These types of close ups are interspersed with full-body shots that show the setting of the photoset. These full-body images are typical of those used in pin-up imagery in which the model appears to makes direct eye contact with the viewer (Kakoudaki 339). In general, the types of images included in SuicideGirls photosets use elements of pin-up stylings, but can most aptly be considered as "softcore" porn in that they feature full nudity but do not depict sex acts; hardcore porn is generally considered to be where sex acts like penetration are shown (Attwood "No Money Shot" 444). It is precisely the "too explicit and cookie-cutter boring" aspects of hardcore porn to which SuicideGirls positions itself as an alternative.

The site's repeated claims that SuicideGirls is not a porn site sets the tone for models' understanding of their work for the site and shapes the larger cultural meaning of what SuicideGirls is and does. This maneuver is canny marketing on the part of SuicideGirls. It allows both models and members to see themselves as participating in a relatively banal social networking community based around pin-up photos that titillate but are not marked with the stigma of porn. This framing creates an aura of "good girls" gone just a little bad, of punk rock girls next door.

To analyze the construction of SuicideGirls as "not porn," I turn to arguments made by pro sex and anti-prostitution feminists about the status of women who do sex work in order to situate this construction and the effects that such claims have on SuicideGirls models' understandings of themselves as (not) workers in the age of digital free labor. In this chapter, I review the relevant pro sex and anti-porn feminist literature and explore some of the popular expressions of pro sex feminist arguments about sexual liberation for women. I take up these arguments again in Chapter 5 where I examine SuicideGirls' use of this kind of feminist rhetoric and the power of "not-porn" in shaping models' relationship to the site and to their own labor (Ray 161).

In effect, if what SuicideGirls models do is not-porn, it is also not-work. If SuicideGirls is not a porn site, then the models themselves are not porn models. They are not participating in an activity that is socially stigmatized but rather participating in the sort of everyday leisure practices of social network sites. If they are not porn models but instead are participants in a pin-up community, they are also not posing nude for the money. As not-work, their participation in the economy of the site is not exploitation, neither sexual nor economic. As such, SuicideGirls can continue to be thought of—by themselves, by site management, and by site viewers—as good girls rather than bad girls. Thus SuicideGirls, the site, can operate within a social, political, and economic context removed from the stigma of pornography and at even further remove from the realm of "dirty" whores where women participate in sex acts for money.

While the site has not, to my knowledge, made explicit claims that modeling for SuicideGirls is an empowering act, that idea that SuicideGirls empowers women has persistently attached itself to the site. Self-esteem—frequently framed in terms of increased self confidence—is often talked about as if it were the "currency" in which SuicideGirls models are "paid" (i.e. fulfilled) for their work on the site by the models themselves and in media coverage of the site (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 115; Cox). This notion of empowerment persists in relation to SuicideGirls in part because of the ways that the site distances itself from the perceived exploitation of porn. It was and is possible for such claims to circulate about SuicideGirls because of how sex and sex work has come to be understood in the postfeminist moment of the early years of the twenty first century.

My research on SuicideGirls is meant to be an intervention into porn studies and feminist analyses of sex work that presumes from the start that modeling in the context of SuicideGirls' social networking, alternative pin-up site is work as well as porn. This project is an attempt to directly engage, extend and revise the terms of recent articulations of sex-positive feminism by analyzing the labor practices of new media sex work, extending the implications of these new practices for SuicideGirls. By way of setting the stage for this intervention, in this chapter I critically examine the ways in which sex-positive discourses are mobilized in relation to sex work and porn studies. Although much has been written about sex work and new media labor issues, new media/sex work convergences are relatively recent and therefore only just now beginning to draw serious scholarly attention.

One of my goals here is to tease out the nuances in debates between sex positive and anti-porn feminists to determine where they draw on similar arguments, elements of which have been taken up in SuicideGirls' marketing rhetoric. Anti-porn feminist charges of exploitation are too often met with equally simplistic defenses of sex work by sex-positive feminists. For the former, their work frequently amounts to cries of "exploitation" at the very mention of prostitution and pornography without full consideration of the labor issues that contribute to the exploitative practices of sex work. Sex-positive feminism is also often equally reductive, claiming that all sex work is empowering and that all porn should be protected as free speech without consideration of the relations of power at work in questions of gender and labor. Neither position adequately addresses the substance of the other's critique in that neither fully captures the fact that not just gender but also economics must be considered in order to understand sex work as a specific form of gendered labor.

In what follows, I outline the various feminist, academic and popular literatures on sex work, distilling the debates into three main axes: the anti-porn and prostitution position of radical feminists, the pro-sex feminist position, and the sex workers' rights position. Here and again in Chapter 5, I analyze and critique the moral categories of "good girl" and "bad girl," particularly how these are mobilized differently in sex workers' rights and in anti-prostitution literature. Finally, I end this chapter with a look at the literature on sex-positive feminism and pornification, a term used to identify the increasingly visibility of what might be called a pornographic aesthetic in everyday life. These contemporary debates revive older

arguments about sexuality in less politicized terms, and point to the current intersections of sex work and choice that are central to my research on SuicideGirls.

SUICIDEGIRLS AS SEX WORK

I frame my analysis in this chapter around the concept of sex work, which enables me to consider more fully the social, cultural, and economic implications of the empowerment discourses directed at women who model for SuicideGirls in the context of new media labor practices. I explicitly choose to use the term "sex work" rather than prostitution. Carol Leigh (aka Scarlot Harlot), who claims to have invented the term "sex work" in the 1970s (226), states that the "sex worker" coinage was initially adopted as an umbrella term to cover the full range of those doing work related to sex, including "peep show dancers, strippers, and prostitutes." Leigh further explains that "[p]rior to this, other workers in the sex industry would not identify with prostitutes. This is a term invented so we could have some solidarity" (qtd. in Quan 342). Tracy Quan, a sex workers' rights advocate and a former sex worker herself, points out that the term's use is contentious, even—or especially—among those who work "in the business," for the ways that it flattens out differences of class and between types of prostitution work (344). The term also "enables some feminists to ignore the way differences between men and women are accepted in our industry" (345). While I understand the many valences of the term, my use of "sex work," like Leigh's, is meant to emphasize that sex work covers a broad range of practices, including posing for porn as in SuicideGirls. It also highlights the labor, or "work," involved in various types of sex work.

Most studies of sex work focus solely on questions of *whether* sex work is empowering or exploitative (Frank "Thinking" 3); I am interested in exploring the question of *how* discourses of empowerment make labor issues invisible in SuicideGirls. Unlike much of the academic literature on SuicideGirls to be discussed in more detail below, in my study, sex work does not operate in a simple binary logic of exploitation/empowerment. Rather, women, like all workers in a late capitalist economy, make choices as to the form of labor they participate in within the structural constraints of capitalism. Sex work, I argue here, is one of myriad possible options, but one that should always be considered within the economic framework that makes it a "choice."

I also argue that both empowerment and exploitation coexist simultaneously and in relation to one another in SuicideGirls' labor practices. Far too often the issues at stake in new forms of porn along with its representation and dissemination are overlooked in analyses of both new media and of sex work in favor of issues of individual agency and action. I take up these issues together by first laying out the feminist claims about sex work, porn and prostitution in this chapter and then examining how these feminist arguments circulate in relation to changing conceptions of work in the digital economy, as represented by the labor of SuicideGirls models.

RADICAL FEMINIST ARGUMENTS AGAINST PORN AND PROSTITUTION

In the introduction to a volume she edited, Jessica Spector considers the distinctions drawn between prostitution and pornography "in much feminist liberal

academic writing and in U.S. legal/political culture" (*Prostitution and Pornography* 3). She points out that generally porn is legal and increasingly culturally visible, while prostitution is, in most places, illegal and remains widely viewed as morally wrong. But for many, this distinction is not so clear-cut. Although many anti-prostitution feminists argue that "sex work" is a term that obscures the gendered exploitation inherent in the sex industry (e.g. Carter and Giobbe), they share the view of sex workers like Leigh that porn and prostitution are not distinct, albeit for very different reasons.

For radical feminists, the gendered exploitation of prostitution and pornography is a function of patriarchy. Because of the "gender hierarchy that makes women into commodities bought and sold by men," women cannot consent freely to participate in porn and prostitution (Spector *Prostitution and Pornography* 6). In practice, the sexual commodification of women's bodies means that men are presumed to have sexual access to women's bodies, access that is used to justify rape and sexual harassment. In radical feminist anti-porn and anti-prostitution analyses, women's sexual safety is the primary focus, an emphasis termed "stop" feminism by Jill Nagle (7). While Nagle is critical of the limitations of this type of feminist resistance to sexual violence, she also acknowledges the centrality for all feminists of "opposing the nonconsensual treatment of women as *only* sexual bodies while simultaneously challenging the cultural hierarchies that devalue and stigmatize sexual bodies" (6, italics in original). Porn is therefore viewed as an extension of the patriarchal right of access to women's bodies from this radical feminist perspective (Pateman 62).

In this vision of feminism, porn and prostitution's "harms are so great that it is thought that [a woman] cannot reasonably be said to consent to them" (Spector "Obscene Division" 423). Performing in porn involves women exchanging sex for money, just as in prostitution. As Karen Boyle explains, "The camera legitimates the prostitution, according it constitutional protection as 'speech' and rendering invisible the harm done to women used, abused, and consumed in its making and to those harmed by male consumers who internalize a pornographic view of sex" (36). Some go so far as to argue that all pornography is a literal depiction of rape. The endlessly circulated line attributed to Robin Morgan, "porn is the theory; rape is the practice," is the standard justification for this analysis (Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 16). In effect, women's participation in porn and prostitution is seen as a form of sexual violence, an always already non-consensual act of rape.

The historical roots of this argument date back to the moral campaigns of the late nineteenth century to combat "white slavery" which were rooted in migration, colonialism, and classism. Starting in 1910, every state in the US enacted anti-prostitution legislation (Rubin 269). These laws were primarily used to police the sexuality of working class women and to regulate the sexuality of adults, rather than the teenaged girls who were the purported targets of white slavery (Walkowitz "Male Vice" 85). As Judith Walkowitz points out, nineteenth-century feminist aims were not all directly translated into this legislation. "In part, this loss resulted from contradictions in [feminists'] attitudes; in part, it reflected feminists' impotence to reshape the world according to their own image" ("Politics" 124). In addition, actual instances of white slavery and women entrapped into prostitution were quite rare,

and were instead inflamed by extensive media coverage at the time, representing more moral panic than actual fact ("Politics" 126). What began as an attempt to curtail state regulation of prostitution became "a movement that used the instruments of the state for repressive purposes ("Politics" 130).

Even in the late nineteenth century, some feminists voiced objection to anti-prostitution campaigns, arguing that "all women were implicated in [anti-prostitution acts] and they should not accept that safety and private respectability for most women depended on a 'slave class' of publicly available prostitutes" (Pateman 59). These feminists were critical of the effects of anti-prostitution campaigns, which, in their view, served less to increase equality for all women and more to distinguish white middle class women from women of color and working class women by creating and maintaining the boundaries of whiteness and acceptable sexuality. "For [middle-class feminists], as well as for more repressive moralists, the desire to protect young girls thinly masked coercive impulses to control their voluntary sexual responses and to impose a social code on them in keeping with the middle-class view of female adolescent dependency" (Walkowitz "Politics" 127). These moral campaigns and the larger moral panics around the white slave trade ultimately led to the demonization of non-Westerners and restrictions on "Anglo/European women's mobility and sexual freedom" (Kempadoo, Sanghera and Pattanaik x).

These historical debates expose the ways in which the anti-prostitution/porn version of feminism (and larger social discourses about acceptable feminine sexuality) has not been about rights for *all* women. Rather, these campaigns focus

on rights for *good* women, where good is defined implicitly as clean, white, middle-class, and appropriately feminine, as has been pointed out by many pro-sex and sex worker feminists (e.g. Alexander; DuBois and Gordon; Kempadoo; Payne; Stansell). These same authors draw parallels between contemporary radical feminism and the anti-prostitution movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in that both are concerned with preserving the "good girl" sexuality of white middle class women. White femininity thus becomes fixed as innocent and in need of protection, while all other femininities circulate around this ideal, but are not protected in the same way.

These arguments are relevant to SuicideGirls because of the ways that the site's rhetoric of pin-up/not-porn perpetuates the idea that some girls are good and others are bad, even as a certain kind of postfeminist empowered, agentic sexual expression has become more acceptable. Middle class women have more freedom to express certain kinds of sexuality than they did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but their sexuality is still limited and constrained by demarcations of good girls and bad girls. The ways that SuicideGirls positions itself as not-porn is a means of keeping its models within the bounds of acceptable feminine sexuality, as not-whores. While the "goodness" of these pierced and tattooed "alternative" models may not be immediately visible on the surface, their participation in the site is constructed such that they remain good girls gone just bad enough to titillate the imaginations of viewers. For many such viewers, SuicideGirls models are "the indie-rock chicks you'd expect to see at a Strokes show but never thought you'd get to see naked" (Phillips).

PRO-SEX FEMINISM

Pro–sex—also referred to as sex radical—positions have been articulated in feminist literature at least since the early 1970s. I use the term "pro-sex" here rather than "sex radical" to avoid confusion with the anti-porn and anti-prostitution arguments of radical feminism. Pro-sex feminists argue that any discussion of sexuality must incorporate the possibilities for women's pleasure as well as its potential dangers.

> To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal
> structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and
> oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and
> choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in
> which women live. (Vance 1)

Pro-sex feminism is an attempt to invert what Gayle Rubin describes as the "sex negativism" of Western cultures, in which nearly all sexual behavior "is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established...[such as] marriage, reproduction, and love" (278). Pro-sex feminists are highly critical of radical feminist arguments about sexuality, exposing its limitations. Although Gayle Rubin acknowledges that anti-porn feminist rhetoric "directs legitimate anger at women's lack of personal safety against innocent individuals, practices, and communities" (301), this emphasis on sexual danger is also used to justify patriarchy. For example, during the anti-prostitution campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "respectable" women needed the cover of legitimized

heterosexual relationships in order to protect them from the threat posed to their sexual safety by other men (Walkowitz "Male Vice" 88). Yet these same heterosexual family structures were no safe haven from forced incest, rape and sexual abuse, as pro-sex feminists have vehemently argued (see, for example, Califia).

For US feminists, one of the key texts of pro-sex feminism is *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, the proceedings from the Scholar and the Feminist IX Conference held at Barnard University in 1982 (Vance). The conference was highly contentious; it was protested by Women Against Pornography (WAP) and other feminist anti-pornography groups that felt the conference was "anti-feminist" for including speakers on "butch-femme roles, sadomasochism, [and] criticism of the anti-pornography movement" (Vance 452). As Margaret Hunt points out, anti-porn feminist objections to the violence depicted in pornography are limited and should also extend to the much more widely viewed violence in movies of all types. Instead, the way in which anti-porn feminists "attribute[d] oppression so single-mindedly to a particular style of sexuality was not only diversionary but potentially very divisive for the movement as a whole" (83). Among the proponents of pro-sex feminism whose views came under attack were Susie Bright and Pat Califia. Califia wrote crucial essays in defense of sadomasochistic (referred to as s/m) sexual practices, written in the 1980s, collected in the volume *Public Sex*. Bright was the founding editor of *On Our Backs*, a porn magazine made by and for lesbian women. Bright, especially, is a champion of sex-positive feminism and freedom of sexual speech as essential to liberation: "Nowadays, erotic democracy is breaking out, as the end product of the sex wars" (15).

Among the most influential proponents of a new feminist politic of sexuality included in *Pleasure and Danger* is Gayle Rubin, who calls for a political analysis of sexuality that is informed by feminism, but not subsumed under it (310). Her essay "Thinking Sex" was written in part as a response to increasing hostility toward, and regulation of, non-normative sexuality in the late 1970s and early 1980s (271-74). Drawing on examples from the 1880s and 1950s, Rubin articulates how the restriction of "deviant" sexual activity has a much wider repressive function: "The struggles that were fought leave a residue in the form of laws, social practices, and ideologies which then affect the way in which sexuality is experienced long after the immediate conflicts have faded" (274). "Thinking Sex" is influenced by social constructionist understandings of sexuality, particularly the work of Michel Foucault (276). In particular, Rubin called upon feminists to challenge the hierarchy of acceptable sexuality in society which positioned heterosexual marriage at the top and descended from there in acceptability, including lesbianism, prostitution, homosexuality, s/m sex practices, and incest (279). Rubin details the ways in which hierarchies of acceptable sexuality create classes of people whose sexual behavior is policed and prohibited while others are privileged; this hierarchy functions in some of the same ways that racism does, but is also overlaid with race, class and gender in its effects (293). Prostitutes are particularly affected as they are part of "a criminal sexual population stigmatized on the basis of sexual activity" (286). Rubin fundamentally questions the coercion involved in heterosexuality as much as in stigmatized practices such as prostitution (283).

Although feminist anti-porn claims ultimately became widespread gospel, Rubin acknowledges that "sexuality is a nexus of the relationships between genders, [and] much of the oppression of women is borne by, mediated through, and constituted within, sexuality" (300-1). She argues that feminist anti-porn arguments that emphasize porn as a form of violence are based on specious claims that porn leads to violent sadomasochistic imagery which leads inevitably to rape. These claims have then been marshaled by various right wing sources to prohibit currently legal sexual practices. Rubin questions whether such anti-porn campaigns have any impact on reducing violence against women (298-99). She also points out the ways in which feminist anti-porn movements have created a new hierarchy of acceptable sexuality, in which "monogamous lesbianism that occurs within long-term, intimate relationship and which does not involve playing with polarized roles, has replaced married procreative heterosexuality" (301). While heterosexuality is no longer at the top of this hierarchy, the same categories of sexual behavior remain at the bottom, including prostitution.

Perhaps Rubin's most salient contribution is her critique of radical feminist arguments about the "structural constraints" on consent. She points out that "a great deal of sex law does not distinguish between consensual and coercive behavior"; thus, legally, it is always already impossible for anyone to consent to prohibited activities such as sodomy, adult incest, and S/M (304-5), acts that are placed very low in the hierarchy of acceptable sexual behavior. Rape laws as applied to heterosexual acts, on the other hand, rightfully hinge on the question of consent. As such, consent is a privilege already restricted to those whose sexuality is deemed

acceptable. Rubin's critique postulates more than the "feminist liberal" defense of prostitution based on individual rights described by Spector ("Obscene Division"). Her emphasis is instead on prohibitions against groups of sexual minorities as a class.

SEX WORKERS' RIGHTS AND WHORE STIGMA: COMPLICATING THE BINARY

Much of the critique of anti-porn and prostitution feminism has been written by people working in the sex industry. Because they analyze sex work as a form of labor, sex workers and sex worker rights advocates complicate the exploitation/empowerment binary argument that has been posed by sex positive and anti-porn feminisms. While there are some similarities to sex worker feminist arguments, sex-positive feminists' positions are often primarily concerned with individuals'—especially women's—rights to sexual pleasure and free speech, with a strong emphasis on sexual transgression as a political act. Many sex workers' rights advocates look at somewhat different issues than the libertarian bent of sex-positive feminists outside the sex industry. Although some feminist sex workers also take a libertarian position (e.g. Almodovar "Working It"), discourses of sex workers and their advocates often move beyond the binary argument of empowerment/exploitation. Instead, they articulate understandings of sex work in terms of labor, women's economic status, and the labor rights of sex workers as a class (see Nagle; Payne; Chapkis; Brooks; Bell; Brock; Namaste). With its emphasis on labor, the literature by sex workers and their advocates provides a crucial

analytic framework for my exploration of the function of good girl/bad girl

discourses in relation to labor practices in SuicideGirls.

In the sex worker feminist view, sex work is seen in the context of women's

economic possibilities and constraints. The anthology *Whores and Other Feminists*,

edited by Jill Nagle, is probably the most frequently cited work from this

perspective, although it is but one of many such collections (See also Bell; Delacoste

and Alexander; Spector *Prostitution and Pornography*). Some of the most cogent

analyses of women's sexual pleasure and bodily autonomy come from sex workers.

Sex worker feminists and their allies, however, are also the group most likely to

question the terms of this debate. They ask questions about *how* sex work can widen

the possibilities of women's lives in terms of economic opportunities and sexual

pleasure rather than *whether* women can and do consent to participate in

prostitution (e.g. Almodovar "Porn Stars"; Kempadoo, Sanghera and Pattanaik). Sex

worker feminists further challenge the good girl/bad girl label, thereby reframing

these terms with respect to the nature of work. This is also how I approach my

study of SuicideGirls, interrogating how the good girl/bad girl opposition function in

relation to models' labor for the site.

In the introduction to *Whores and Other Feminists*, Nagle spells out a pro-

prostitution feminist position . Nagle references Adrienne Rich's 1980 essay,

"Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," detailing Rich's account of the

ways women police their own behavior (regardless of sexual orientation) so as not

to be *perceived* as lesbian. As a result, even straight women are constrained by the

prohibition against lesbians. Nagle's work is important because she outlines how the

good girl/whore dichotomy polices women's behavior so that they *appear* to be

good girls, nice girls, not-slutty girls, and certainly not whores. Rather than a

dichotomy, she proposes the idea of the "whore continuum," which draws on the

hierarchy of acceptable sexuality laid out by Gayle Rubin and attends to debates

"over 'where to draw the line,' and to determine what other activities, if any, may be

permitted to cross over into acceptability" (Rubin 282). Carol Queen's essay "Sex

Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma," also makes use

of the idea of the whore continuum (132). Queen states many of the shared points of

sex-positive feminism, while highlighting the idea that women's economic agency is

the paramount issue in discussions of sex work. But these kinds of debates are only

possible because of the shame associated with prostitution, what Queen refers to as

"whore stigma."

Nagle also details the ways in which "whore stigma" is perpetuated as a

means for white and/or middle class women to assert their racial and class-based

superiority. Most feminists agree that women need to be safe from rape, but anti-

prostitution feminists, who generally condemn sex workers, argue in effect that

women are only truly safe from rape if they toe the "good girl" line (Bell). Similar

arguments are made in feminist legal defenses. As Margaret Baldwin argues,

"[M]uch feminist legal reform work against sexual violence has explicitly or

implicitly promoted strategies aimed at strengthening the distinction between

'prostitutes' and 'other women'" (115). Ironically, these radical feminist analyses of

patriarchy and violence against women in fact rest on patriarchal assumptions

about appropriate behavior for women. In contrast, Priscilla Alexander argues that

there is no safety from rape without freedom of movement, freedom to walk the streets without fear of being seen as a sexually available woman, in other words, as a whore.

In her explication of the liberal feminist defense of prostitution, Jessica Spector claims that the recognition of a "whore stigma" is rooted in a desire to expand the possibilities for sexual expression on an individual basis (Spector "Obscene Division" 429). Spector's understanding of whore stigma differs from that of Nagle's whore continuum idea. Spector says recognition of this whore stigma is about destigmatizing a broad range of individual sexual practices that are marginalized along with prostitution. But Nagle takes a position not that different from those of radical feminists in arguing that any woman who exchanges sex for money in a range of interactions with men is a whore. She argues that women need to recognize the fundamental inequality in all relations with men. Nagle's argument about whore stigma draws on, as sex radical Carol Pateman points out, radical feminist claims that prostitution is therefore simply the overt version of a sex-for-money exchange that marks the fundamental condition of all women's lives.

Sex workers themselves establish hierarchies of respectability and modesty in relation to one another (i.e., "I'm this, not *that*"). Women who do various kinds of work in the sex industry use good girl/bad girl categories to distance themselves from other sex workers who they perceive as doing "dirtier" work than themselves. Burlesque dancers will adamantly state that they are not strippers and that strippers are sex workers because they get naked, whereas burlesque numbers are tasteful and involve teasing and titillation rather than even partial nudity

(Mansfield). This is also similar to the erotica/porn distinction. As Jane Juffer points out, this distinction enables some things—women's increased access to sexually explicit material in chain bookstores and women-friendly sex toy stores, in particular—while constraining other possibilities by the linking the expression of women's sexuality to appropriate middle class consumption (107). These distinctions replicate the hierarchies of acceptable sexuality that Rubin details, and ultimately reproduce the problematic classed and raced aspects of anti-prostitution arguments that date back to the nineteenth century. Such a hierarchy of respectability is apparent in SuicideGirls' references to itself as a "pin-up" rather than a porn site, where pin-up images are said to be "better" (that is to say less "boring") than the overly explicit sameness of most Internet porn. These kinds of arguments directly affect how sex work is perceived as labor, since modeling in the more respectable pin-up genre allows SuicideGirls' models to distance themselves from the whore stigma that also taints those women who perform (that is to say, work) in porn.

SEX-POSITIVE FEMINISM AND POSTFEMINISM

Whereas sex workers articulate their claims for rights in terms of their labor and economic autonomy, the primary issues for sex positive feminists are sexual autonomy for women, freedom of sexual speech, and an investment in sexual transgression (Nussbaum; Almodovar "Porn Stars"). This distinction is a crucial one for understanding the ideological differences in these strands of feminist thinking

on sexuality (Spector *Prostitution and Pornography*) and how they contribute to the possibilities and limitations of SuicideGirls models' labor.

Queen, like many other sex-positive feminists, frames her claims for the economic autonomy of sex workers largely in terms of individual choice. Such sex-positive feminist perspectives focus primarily on pleasure and autonomy for women and operate from the assumption that all women are equally free to make their own choices about their sexuality. As it was popularized in the 1990s and 2000s, sex-positive feminism increasingly became part of post-feminist rhetoric, a hallmark of which is an emphasis on women's individual choices in the absence of any larger context, particularly social differences of race and class. For many younger women of the "third wave" of feminism, this shift is a means of distancing themselves from the stodgy sexual politics of older feminists (Shteir). While third wave feminism and postfeminism are not equivalent, both share an understanding of feminism defined largely in terms of choice, and neither fully considers the labor implications of porn and sex work.

Rachel Kramer Bussel's "Lusty Lady" column, which ran in the *Village Voice* from 2004 to 2007, is but one of many examples of the popularization of sex-positive postfeminist discourses. Bussel's column explored sexually explicit topics from a first-person perspective, that of a hip urban twenty-something woman who was very comfortable discussing her own sexuality in a highly visible public forum. Similar sex columns, largely written by women and extolling the virtues of sexual liberation and sex-positive feminism, have become a staple of alternative weeklies across North America, demonstrating the acceptance of Bussel's view in her piece,

"Fucking and Feminism," that "having a full range of sexual options should be a high-priority feminist goal." She concludes the piece by declaring, "No one has the right to tell you how to fuck." This stance is sometimes derisively termed "do-me feminism," so-called after a 1994 *Esquire* magazine article by Tad Friend (cited in Bussel), and termed "choiceoisie" feminism by Elspeth Probyn (278). As Rosalind Gill explains, "...one of the problems with this focus on autonomous choices is that it remains complicit with rather than critical of, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating" (436).

Sex-positive feminism is very concerned with women's access to a language of sexuality, and with freedom of sexual speech in general (e.g Bright; Glick; Hollibaugh and Moraga). Bussel lauds the increase in sexual speech online:

> I'm thrilled with the thriving sexually explicit blogosphere, from Inside the Velvet Rope (redvelvetropeburn.com) to masturbation blog Wank Log (wanklog.blogspot.com), but feel we're only halfway there when almost every erotic blogger is forced to use pseudonyms for fear of exposure.

Susie Bright's writing on sexual politics in the 1990s and early decades of the 2000s has also increasingly focused on sexual speech, an emphasis that differs from the sexual liberation arguments she made in the 1980s. Bright's increased interest in protecting sexual speech is in keeping with feminist responses to anti-porn arguments, responses that foreground freedom of speech as the key issue at stake (Spector "Obscene Division").

Feminist defenses of porn on free speech grounds have certain limitations. Spector contrasts the radical feminist position with what she sees as the problematic analyses of pro-sex feminists who do focus on sex workers' rights but limit their definition of sex workers to those doing prostitution, in other words those who perform non-mediated sex acts. At the same time, pro-sex feminists defend pornography on free speech grounds from the point of view of the consumer, rarely considering the labor that goes into the making of porn (Spector "Obscene Division" 430). This idea that porn should be treated as speech rather than acts of labor has also been criticized by such well-known anti-porn feminists as Catherine MacKinnon, among others. The sex-positive feminism of the last two decades could have been in a position to bring together feminist perspectives on sex worker labor with the liberationist goals of pro-sex feminism, but as these writers demonstrate, sex-positive feminism values the latter almost to the exclusion of the former.

In her column, Bussel argues that both men and women should decide what kinds of sexual behaviors are right for themselves. She comments that this freedom of sexual choice is more than a mere feminist issue, but rather both men and women's sexual possibilities are limited by repressive culture. Bussel's stance is a common one. She, like many sex positive feminists, extols the virtues of sexual liberation, with little analysis of the differing effects of both sexual liberation and repression across gender, race, sex, class, and ability (Carter and Giobbe).

Sex-positive feminism is criticized for precisely this overemphasis on transgression, a critique that incorporates aspects of queer theory (e.g. Glick; Juffer; Namaste). Transgression may reiterate some of the limitations of a good girl/bad

girl dichotomy. If it is *good* to be a bad girl, the question of who gets to be a "good"

bad girl takes on greater significance according to class and race. Jane Juffer posits

the mainstream as a space of possibilities as well as constraints. In order to get away

from the transgressive/reactionary divide that replicates a binary understanding of

sexuality, Juffer instead looks at the circulation of sexual texts and possibilities for

access. She argues that the emphasis on transgression locates agency in individual

reading practices rather than focusing on "transforming the conditions of access

that define most women's consumption of pornography" (Juffer 13).

For SuicideGirls models, transgression is located in their individual acts of

performing "alternative beauty," but this does little to alter the working conditions

of porn participation. In fact, it serves to reinscribe their status as good girls gone

just a little bit bad; this "not-whore" status in turn obscures their labor as models by

recasting this work as work on the self. As women expressing an "empowered"

sexuality in an aesthetic package that is marked as different through the positive

inflection of the word "alternative," SuicideGirls models lay claim to transgression in

a number of ways which I detail in the next chapter. What is important to note here,

however, is that without a link to larger economic structures of porn production—a

link explicitly broken by the emphasis on their modeling as not-work and the

SuicideGirls website itself as not-porn—SuicideGirls models appear to be

performing transgression for its own sake, a position that limits their possibilities

more than it enables them.

PORNIFICATION: ANTI-PORN FEMINISM IN A POSTFEMINIST CONTEXT

In the 2000s, debates on sex and sex work within feminism have seemingly come full circle since the 1970s, with the articulation of an anti-porn position concerned with the "pornification" of everyday life. A spate of popular feminist literature has been published that is highly critical of larger cultural shifts toward sexual liberalization and increased access to sexual speech—the very things that sex-positive feminists seek to encourage. Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* and Pamela Paul's *Pornified* both condemn what they see as the increasing sexualization of mass culture and the attendant pressures on young (primarily white and middle-class) women to participate in this culture through its commodification.

Without doing so explicitly, Levy's claims call upon the notion of hierarchies of acceptable sexuality for women that feminists from Rubin to Nagle have denounced. She pays lip service to the idea that some women may derive actual pleasure from having sex "like men," but insists that "there are many women (and, yes, men) who feel constrained in this environment, who would be happier and feel hotter—more empowered, more sexually liberated, and all the rest of it—if they explored other avenues of expression and entertainment" (198). But as each chapter of her book explicates the "repressive" nature of the dominant sexual attitudes and behaviors with which she takes issue, Levy narrows the scope of what the possibilities for sexual liberation might be and simultaneously makes use of the exact rhetoric of individual liberation as that of the "raunch culture" she criticizes. Although popular critics of the sexualization of culture (e.g. Levy) and sex-positive

feminists writing for a mass media audience (e.g. Bussel) might seem to hold

opposing views, both arguments conceptualize a feminist politic of sexuality around

individual rights. It may appear that both are staking claims in a debate about whose

view of sex is the "right" one, but the terms of this debate are extremely limited in

political scope.

The issue for me in my analysis of SuicideGirls' models and their labor is not

whether these women are empowered or liberated through the act of porn

modeling. My concern is with how they understand themselves as workers

deserving of safe, equitable working conditions through their modeling activities.

Though a handful of researchers have looked critically at SuicideGirls, much of this

research leaves to the side questions of work to focus explicitly on issues of

exploitation and empowerment; Karen Healey's thesis, entitled "'Empowered

Erotica'?: Objectification and Subjectivity in the Online Personal Journals of the

Suicide Girls," exemplifies this trend (see also Fargo; Hoffmann; Mansfield;

McConnell). Shoshana Magnet and Feona Attwood have both published articles on

SuicideGirls that move beyond this simple binary. Magnet's piece considers

SuicideGirls as a space of "feminist potential" that is limited by the site's whiteness

and capitalist profit motives, ultimately using "new technologies to represent old

inequalities" (597). Attwood examines SuicideGirls and another sex-oriented online

community (www.nerve.com) as "participatory taste cultures." Unlike the

"Empowered Erotica?" question posed in Healey's title, Attwood identifies

"empowered eroticism" as one hallmark of such communities, analyzing an interest

in sexual liberation as a central point of distinction for participants ("No Money

Shot" 449). Both of these latter studies touch on the issue of empowerment, but do not limit their examinations of SuicideGirls to it; I draw on Attwood and Magnet's more nuanced analyses in my own study.

Studying online porn sites such as SuicideGirls requires an approach that takes into account the ways that women working in the porn industry constitute a community, something that is even more true of porn production and consumption in the digital economy. This type of analysis requires a different critical approach to the study of porn that does not reduce it to the study of porn to a study of it as a form of visual representation. My analysis, as with those by Magnet and Attwood, moves away from what porn looks like as a means of situating SuicideGirls in a social networking context where models' labor is a key, albeit obscured, feminist issue.

PORN STUDIES: ITS PRESENT AND FUTURE

Many popular and academic critics of pornography view what they identify as the escalating sexualization of Anglo popular (often referred to as "pornification") as a major problem. They point to the increasingly blurred boundaries between porn, prostitution and everyday life as sexually explicit TV shows, magazines, and online content become more pervasive, and references to porn and prostitution become normalized within these texts (Boyle 38; Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa 1). Karen Boyle also argues that academic work on porn as genre, citing Linda Williams' edited collection *Porn Studies* specifically, contributes

to the "normalization" of porn and what she sees as an attendant normalization of sexual violence against women (37).

"Porn Studies" is the emergent body of scholarship on porn from which Williams' collection takes its name. Much of this work comes out of film studies and analyses—what Williams refers to as "moving-image porn(*Hard Core*)" in her earlier study *Hard Core*—and as a result, its approach to the study of porn has been primarily as filmic texts (Attwood "Reading Porn"). Much porn online, however, is still-photography, albeit sometimes viewed as automated slide shows. These images may be presented as part of social media, alongside user comments or online chat features. Online porn may even be made by users, as on sites modeled after YouTube such as PornoTube and XTube, as well as in SuicideGirls' Member Review section. The coupling of porn with online social networking raises an important issue. Is online porn the same as porn on film or video? What is its relationship to earlier print and photographic forms of visual porn? The term "moving-image porn" may not convey enough about the different media of porn. Academic studies on new media porn are just beginning to examine these issues (e.g. Attwood "No Money Shot"; Jacobs, Janssen and Pasquinelli; Magnet; Miller-Young; Ray; Senft).

The representation-based approach to porn studies has other limitations as well. Neither porn studies nor anti-prostitution feminists consider porn as a form of labor; in many of these analyses, porn is analyzed only as representation, not in terms of the work that porn models do in producing those images. For that matter, neither do sex-positive feminists always consider porn and labor together in their analyses (Spector "Obscene Division"). As Karen Boyle suggests, current porn

studies scholarship emphasizes porn as texts to study at the expense of examining the exploitative conditions of its production. This approach to porn as just another type of cultural text worthy of study further contributes to the blurring of boundaries between porn and everyday life to which critics of pornification object. Boyle points to Williams' introduction to the *Porn Studies* anthology as an example, taking issue with her analysis of porn's "permeability" into "other, more legitimate texts" (37).

Boyle is half-right in her claims that many porn studies scholars often do not address the conditions of production of the porn texts they analyze. I would argue however, that many, Williams included, do discuss aspects of production. Williams' *Hard Core* presents an analysis of the male producers and viewers of stag and early porn films. But, crucially, Williams does not provide overt acknowledgement of the work that women do in front of the camera. Nor does Williams acknowledge a role for the largely female brothel owners in whose places of business these stag films were screened(*Hard Core*)(*Hard Core*)(*Hard Core*)(*Hard Core*)(*Hard Core*)(*Hard Core*)(*Hard Core*)(*Hard Core*)(*Hard Core*). Williams' analysis, and thus its limitations, is repeated almost verbatim in Jane Juffer's *At Home with Pornography*.

Although limited in its analyses of production, Juffers' *At Home with Pornography* explicitly takes up the project of examining porn consumption as a part of everyday life (2). Juffer argues that in order to understand women's relationship to porn outside the constraints of politicized narratives of exploitation or transgression, porn must be situated in relation to domesticity (3). She emphasizes the "predictable and mundane" rather than new or transgressive texts (23). And

while Boyle insists that sex-positive academic work focuses only on women as those who sell sex, Juffer looks closely at women's consumption practices in relation to porn. In doing so, she also provides the gendered critique that Boyle claims is lacking in porn studies. As Juffer explains, men have more time and money to consume porn, and "[a]s long as the resources remain unevenly distributed, we cannot really lay claim to a genre of pornography that is widely accessible to women consumers in the home" (68). With the increasing accessibility of porn on the Internet, its production as well as its consumption have become a part of everyday life, as SuicideGirls exemplifies.

PORN PRODUCTION, GENDER, AND EVERYDAY LIFE

While Boyle and other critics of porn and prostitution would like to wall these practices off from the rest of society, pro-sex feminists and those working in porn studies assert that porn and prostitution cannot be viewed as distinct from everyday life. In fact, to view them as distinct upholds the very strictures of femininity under patriarchy (Marlowe).

Nagle's analysis of the whore continuum puts claims of pornification in a different light. Perhaps this increasingly explicit content points to something other than the moral degeneracy that Boyle and others suggest. Sex worker feminists point out that sex work is a continuum, of which porn industry workers are a part (Nagle). Perhaps by blurring the boundaries between prostitution and everyday life, women's work in porn is making the kinds of economic and sexual exchanges that undergird all relationships between men and women more visible. This is not a new

idea as Mary Wollstonecraft was the first to refer to marriage as "legal prostitution"

in 1790 (qtd in Pateman 51). There are many service industry jobs in which women

are sexualized in their role as employees serving customers as part of their

performance of emotional labor; waitresses, flight attendants and sales clerks all

draw on this kind of sexualized exchange on the job (Hochschild *Managed Heart*).

Nagle points to the fluidity of sex work and the ways in which women participate in

a range of activities that involve some kind of exchange of sex, or at the very least

erotically charged interactions, for money. The increasing visibility of porn does not

alter these relationships, but instead highlights these types of exchanges across a

wider spectrum of relationships.

The exchange of sex for money has become part of the capitalist imperative

for intimacy (Illouz). As both anti-porn and pro-sex feminists have acknowledged,

this intimacy is a central component of sex work exchanges (e.g. Bernstein

Temporarily Yours; Frank *G-strings;* Pasko; Mowlabocus; Pateman 53). Bernstein

sees shifts in the emotional tenor of sex work with "the emergence of what [she]

term[s] 'bounded authenticity' (an authentic, yet bounded, interpersonal

connection) as a particularly desirable and sought-after sexual commodity" ("Sex

Work" 474).

SuicideGirls is successful as an "alternative" porn site in large part because

the site creates this very sense of "bounded authenticity" within an economy of

intimacy in which authenticity itself is a product. The site's alternative framing

presumes that models' pierced and tattooed bodies represent an authentic

expression of selfhood from the outset (I discuss this in greater detail in the next

chapter). Models' "authentic alternative selves" are further emphasized through the sense of intimacy that the site cultivates through social networking practices like blogging, that give site members the feeling that they know the models as individuals. The intimacy of blogging is visually captured in issues of the SuicideGirls magazine in which models' handwritten words (excerpted from their blogs) are superimposed over images from their photosets. These practices produce a sense of intimacy by presenting SuicideGirls models as "real," as opposed to what the site casts as the artifice of "cookie cutter" models in mainstream porn. Fundamental to the site is that users experience this intimacy as authentic; it is also central to models' experiences of the site.

But for Karen Boyle, "the fundamentally unequal nature of the transaction—which depends upon a john seeing another human being as an object to be bought and sold—is invisible" (41). For anti-porn and anti-prostitution feminists like Boyle, the problem with sex work is that it is rooted in objectification in which equitable power relationships between those selling and buying sex are impossible. True intimacy, in this view, cannot exist in an economic transaction such as this. As such, anti-porn and -prostitution feminist critiques of sex work see these acts as a form of gendered alienation.

Arlie Russell Hoschschild's work also supports this view of the "commercialization of intimate life," though she does not discuss sex work in particular. As she argues, "instead of humanizing men, we are capitalizing women" ("Commercial Spirit" 29). The selling of intimate bodily relations is, in this view, a thing that fundamentally should not be commodified. In other words, the

interlocking operation of gender oppression and capitalism produces alienated intimate relationships between people. Others see capitalism as tainted by patriarchy, where "a system of gender oppression corrupts the 'free market' and prevents equal exchange between men and women, particularly regarding anything related to sex" (Spector "Obscene Division" 424).

But, as Illouz discusses, it is not that capitalism (and/or patriarchy, though she does not state so directly) alienates us from "authentic" relationships. Intimacy, as it is currently understood, may well be a product of capitalism. And, as Elizabeth Bernstein argues, intimacy and authenticity are crucial aspects of many contemporary sex workers' jobs. "For these sex workers, emotional authenticity is incorporated explicitly into the economic contract, challenging the view that commodification and intimacy constitute 'hostile worlds', which has often prevailed in sociological discussions of the subject (Zelizer, 2005)" ("Sex Work" 485). With this understanding of intimacy in mind, the nature of sex work relationships needs to be rethought (Bernstein *Temporarily Yours;* Zelizer).

Recognition of the link between sex work and the selling of intimacy is crucial to my analysis of SuicideGirls. "Those who have fought hardest for the social and political recognition of prostitution as 'work' (as opposed to a uniquely degrading violation of self) are also those for whom the paid sexual encounter is likely to include emotionally engaged conversation as well as a diversity of sexual activities" ("Sex Work" 482). In effect, for middle class sex workers, the job involves far more emotional labor than that involved in simply performing discreet sex acts. This is true for SuicideGirls models as well, as I will demonstrate in subsequent

chapters. I explore the ways that the site draws on rhetoric of alternative politics

and aesthetics, shifting conceptions of labor and contractual obligations in the

digital economy, and policing of acceptable feminine sexuality in the course of

selling authentic intimacy as a product. Porn studies scholars as well as sex positive

feminists need to take up the implications of these blurred boundaries between

porn, prostitution, and everyday life in terms of labor so that those women involved

in the kind of sex work represented on SuicideGirls can effectively control their own

labor.

CHAPTER 2: Porn as "Alternative" Community

"We're building an online community as well as a local community." Missy explains. "The girls actually do hang out; we'll have movie night and they come over and watch Friends *and stuff.*

"There's also the blogging community," she continues. "It's kind of the young, early-20s/mid-20s crowd that is into porn and erotica, but there's nobody [in the adult material available] that they would really be attracted to - you know, the cookie-cutter type girls - they want a little something more."

Explaining the "blog" phenomenon, Spooky says, "There's a whole community of people who keep online Web journals, at livejournal.com or blogger.com; and we're kind of a 'dirty' live journal. We're just like these sites where people keep journals, except with us, you can see these girls in various stages of undress."

— Rebecca Gray, *AVN* (2001)

With an image more evocative of an indie record label than an adult entertainment company, Suicide Girls has become the code word for a new, sex-positive brand of cool.

— Amy Roe, *Willamette Weekly* (2003)

From its inception, SuicideGirls has marketed itself as a site of community creation. In the first press coverage it received, SuicideGirls founders Missy Suicide and Sean Suhl (then known as Spooky Suicide) emphasized the similarity of the site to several early blogging communities, as well as the creation of "real life" community around the virtual space of SuicideGirls (Gray). As the Web 2.0 phenomenon of social networking expanded, so did those aspects of SuicideGirls. By providing this space for models to communicate, SuicideGirls encourages the

creation of an intimate community amongst like-minded women, particularly those women who align themselves with alternative subculture.

"Alternative" is the rhetorical framework through which community is created by SuicideGirls; social networking is the tool used to implement this rhetoric. Social networking also has its own rhetoric, rhetoric that informs the community creation practices on the site. In order to understand how "alternative" functions as a subcultural ideology of community formation on the site, it is important to situate the site's use of this rhetoric within its new media context. In this chapter, I will explore the rhetorical moves made by SuicideGirls in linking social networking and alternative porn in the name of community creation and the implications of this alternative framing for understanding community and labor on the site.

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of social networking practices in order to better understand the activities that take place on and around SuicideGirls.com and their relationship to other similar Internet practices. These new media activities are overlaid with the rhetoric of alternative subculture on the site. They overlap to produce an idealized sense of the possibilities for unfettered expression for site models and members. I then provide an overview of the subcultural history the notion of "alternative," in particular its complicated articulation of aesthetics and politics in relation to gender and labor, in order to situate how SuicideGirls models understand their participation in the site. Next, I examine how this alternative rhetoric functions in SuicideGirls as a locus of community formation for the women who are the site's models-members. Here it

becomes obvious that "alternative" enables as well as constrains possibilities for model solidarity. The final section of this chapter locates SuicideGirls in relation to the wider spectrum of online porn. While SuicideGirls largely distances itself from other porn sites, the site's practices and rhetoric have antecedents in other technological manifestations of pornography, including phone sex and web cams.

SuicideGirls creates a space of intimate community from a confluence of social networking practices, alternative subcultural rhetoric, and larger cultural understandings of pornography and sex work. It is from within these tangled discursive formations that my analysis of SuicideGirls' labor practices as both exploitative and potentially empowering takes shape.

COMMUNITY IN SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

Social networks are said to be a key aspect of Web 2.0, the second iteration of the Internet with its emphasis on the net as a platform for people to connect with one another. This emphasis on social connection has been trumpeted as an extension of the much-vaunted democratic potential of the Internet. Borrowing from utopian and libertarian understandings that "information must be free," there was a strong push beginning in the 1990s to create an Internet that was accessible to anyone with a computer and an Internet connection. Initially the proponents of these ideas were computer programmers who placed a high value on the openness of their code work, part of the Open Source movement. Anthropologist Christopher Kelty has characterized this openness as vital to the formation of the "recursive

publics" created online: "If one cannot access and see the software and protocols, if they are not open, this particular public cannot exist" (186-87).

During the late 1990s in the heady days of the dot-com boom, this idea circulated well beyond its origins amongst programmer geeks. In much of the frenzied media coverage at the end of the last century, the Internet's potential was hyped as unlimited. Anyone could get online and for nearly any reason, to express themselves, to connect with others, and to make money. This idea of democratic, open community, what Kelty terms a "recursive public," is useful in understanding the SuicideGirls community. Kelty defines a "recursive public" as "a group of individuals who, more often than not, only associate with each other because of a shared concern for the conditions of possibility of their own association (i.e., the Internet)" (205). SuicideGirls members, while not invested in the technical underpinnings of the Internet per se, form a community that exists in large part because of the potential to talk about itself within that community. I will return in more depth to this idea of recursive publics and community formation later in this chapter in my exploration of the possibilities for the intimate communities created around SuicideGirls' vision of alternative porn. For now however, what is important to know is that sexual commerce on the internet "facilitat[es] community and camaraderie amongst individuals who might otherwise be perceived (and perceive themselves) as engaging in discreditable activity" (Bernstein "Sex Work" 479).

In its earliest incarnation in 2001, the founders of SuicideGirls described the site as a burgeoning community both online and off, a community anchored by the blogs produced by site members (Gray). As such, it was from the very beginning a

social network site, and in fact predates many of what would become the most

prominent social media sites—including MySpace and Facebook—by several years.

New media scholars danah boyd and Nicole Ellison define social network sites (SNS)

"as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-

public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with

whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections

and those made by others within the system." While SNS did not become a

widespread phenomenon until 2003, the elements that would come to define social

networking sites were largely in place by the late 1990s (boyd and Ellison).

SuicideGirls incorporates each of the elements that boyd and Ellison describe. From

the earliest days of the site, members could create user profiles and blogs. Members

were also able to add other members, and most importantly, model-members, as

"friends" linked on their profile pages. Features enabling members to post their own

photos and participate in forums were added quickly, as well as the ability to chat

directly with other members in real time. These elements functioned to created a

sense of accessible community, as well as a means of exposure for models and

members' creative pursuits.

For paying members of the site, the appeal of SuicideGirls' community comes

from two overlapping elements, both stemming from a sense of the site as intimate

social space. The various social networking features provide a means for members

to express themselves and to interact with one another. As people make connections

with others, they are presumed to spend more time on the site, an obvious benefit

for both SuicideGirls and for members. The more active and invested in the

community members are, the more likely they are to write blog entries, upload

photos, and participate in forum discussions. In doing so, they enhance the sense of

participatory community on the site. At the same time, these activities result in the

production of more content for the site, which, to use the preferred marketing term,

is "value added" content for the site. This content generation is not unique to SNS;

however, the for-profit corporate ownership of such content is (Baym 384).

Additional social networking features have been added over time, largely

mirroring those of larger SNS popular with the site's youth-oriented demographic,

such as MySpace and Facebook. The one addition to the social networking functions

of SuicideGirls that merits specific attention is the Hopefuls/Member Review section

introduced in 2008. This feature allowed prospective SuicideGirls to post photo sets

for review by other members, and, if deemed popular enough, these sets might

make them eligible to become official SuicideGirls [i.e. paid models]. Participation in

the Hopefuls section is a means for SuicideGirls to get a vast pool of content for free,

and is part of larger shifts in the nature of creative work under the present

neoliberal economic regime. I will explore this Member Review section in more

depth in the next chapter, which addresses the implications of social networking

and SuicideGirls' content development practices for the labor of its models.

The second aspect of the appeal of SuicideGirls as a SNS is the sense it provides of

"knowing" models in their own words/worlds. The site highlighted the

responsiveness of its models to emails from members in some of its earliest

marketing material and interviews, describing SuicideGirls as "a website where you

can get to know the hottest, cutests, sexiest goth punk and raver girls we can find"

[sic] (Suicide "SuicideGirls Story"). Site co-founder Spooky emphasized that this kind of contact allowed members to foster a heightened sense of connection to the models: "[Y]ou get to *know* the girls" (Roe, emphasis in original). This differs from other porn marketing of "intimate" connection because of the way models are marked as authentic by their subcultural identifications.

This sense of access to the site's models allows members a voyeuristic intimate view into the "real" lives of models, models whose appearance and interests signify their involvement in "authentic" subcultural activities. Members do not have to participate in the community in any way, hence the potential for voyeurism. This voyeurism operates in conjunction with the participatory nature of SNS to produces a kind of voyeuristic intimacy that is in keeping with the longstanding porn conventions and sex work traditions in which male viewers are given privileged access to women's spaces. The strip club and the peep show operate in this tradition, as do porn settings such as changing rooms and harems. This rhetoric of democratized access and community building online is similar to the rhetoric of "alternative" used in the framing of SuicideGirls. Both shape the site's community itself as well as members' sense of that community. Both are also crucial to SuicideGirls' claims to provide democratized representations of sex and sexuality. In turn, each of these elements contributes to how labor is understood by SuicideGirls management and models, especially the rhetoric of democratic access and equitable participation.

ALTERNATIVE POLITICS AND LABOR

There is a long tradition linking alternative subcultural aesthetics—like the tattoos and piercings, hair dyed in "unnatural" shades and exaggerated makeup of SuicideGirls models—with a politics of labor, in this case a perceived desire to operate outside the norms of corporate porn production and the attendant alienation from the product. Since its origins in punk subcultures of the 1970s, alternative politics have been aligned with small-scale capitalist production that incorporates seemingly more intimate relationships between producers and consumers. This ethos of democratic cultural production became known in the 1970s as DIY, for Do It Yourself, a sentiment very similar to that of the Open Source software movement.

Alternative subcultures stress the importance of creative autonomy, decentralized production, and democratic access to maintaining artistic integrity, and, by extension, political opposition to corporate culture industry practices. These ideas came together most forcefully around punk subcultures in the late 1970s. As this punk ethos spread, it was codified in the US and UK as indie (short for "independent") during the 1980s. In the early 1990s, widespread popularization of indie music accompanied the tremendous success of the band Nirvana; at the same time, the subcultural trappings of "indie" became known as "alternative" in mainstream media coverage. Alternative culture in the 90s was marked by an intense concern with control over one's creative labor. This control over creative labor was also very tied to ideas about the importance of authenticity in self-expression. These ideas were paralleled in the Open Source movement, and in

Internet rhetoric in general; notably, both alternative subculture and the nascent

dot.com industry were located on the West Coast.

SuicideGirls has taken up the banner of "alternative culture" in framing the

site, using it as both an aesthetic and a political signifier. An 2003 article about

SuicideGirls in the *Willamette* [Oregon] *Weekly* made clear the site's effectiveness in

using "alternative" to distance itself from dominant perceptions of the porn

industry, particularly in terms of labor: "With an image more evocative of an indie

record label than an adult entertainment company, Suicide Girls has become the

code word for a new, sex-positive brand of cool" (Roe). This invocation of indie

music production harkens to a long-standing opposition between the corporate

major labels of the music industry and small-scale labels. As pop music scholar

Stephen Lee writes:

> [I]ndependent record companies were defined through a set of beliefs
>
> about the importance of musical 'difference', the declaration of an
>
> 'alternative' cultural sensibility, the Romantic myth of the artist, and,
>
> ultimately, the need to maintain a business and cultural separation
>
> from a record industry defined and utterly dominated by the major
>
> labels. (13)

This differentiation from mainstream business practices suggests that alternative

music—and alt-porn as practiced by SuicideGirls—is less defined by capitalist

ideologies that value profits over people. The alternative politics of independent

music production raise the possibility of more direct and "authentic" relationships

between the owners whose capital pays for the release of creative products and those who create the music (Hesmondhalgh 35).

But this potential for less exploitative business relationships is rarely realized; it depends on the benevolence of management in adhering to the principles of alternative production, with little recourse for the artists who work for them when these principles (and contracts, if any) are violated. In practice, the emphasis on small-scale alternative cultural production means that these activities are often done as a hobbyist activity, run out of a garage or bedroom. Production on such a small scale frequently accrues more prestige than money to the producer. Thus, alternative production can become a privileged middle class leisure activity, despite broadly democratic ideals influenced by Marxist ideas about alienated labor. This problem of how to negotiate less alienated forms of cultural production is one that has been faced by cultural producers for well over a century, including social designer William Morris and proponents of the Arts & Crafts movement in the US, UK, and elsewhere (Upchurch). Problematic as it is to grapple with these issues in concrete ways, these attempts are not without value (Gibson-Graham).

In the case of SuicideGirls, the invocation of "alternative" rhetoric is part of the site's appeal. But on a porn site, this alternative rhetoric invokes more than just a respect for creative autonomy in their business model. With the cultural visibility of anti-pornography campaigns, the concerns raised by feminists and others about the exploitation of women in porn production color any discussion of democratic, accessible, empowering community on SuicideGirls. In this context, the site's use of alternative rhetoric suggests that the site may be less sexually and economically

exploitative of its models than most mainstream porn businesses. In her essay on

SuicideGirls as possibly feminist porn, Shoshana Magnet relates an overheard

conversation in which a heterosexual couple comment on the absence of

exploitative practices on the site, as well as the presence of forums for expressing

feminist views (578). I too have been party to similar conversations. It seems that

SuicideGirls has managed to position itself through alternative rhetoric as a site that

sidesteps many of the vexed questions about porn labor. As such, SuicideGirls

models too may think of the site more in terms of the "different" business practices

invoked by the concept of "alternative."

The "difference" that alternative represents for both music subcultures and

for SuicideGirls is a form of "subcultural capital," a term coined by subculture

scholar Sarah Thornton that borrows from Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital,

where the "accumulation of knowledge…confers social status" (*Club Cultures* 10-11).

In building on Bourdieu's concept, Thornton formulates the crucial element in the

accrual of subcultural capital: the media. In this way, "the difference between being

in or *out* of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways

with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure" (*Club Cultures* 14, emphasis

in orginal). Thornton wrote in the earliest days of the Internet. Since then, the

advent of the World Wide Web with its attendant rhetoric of democratic access has

shifted the relationship between subcultures and the "mainstream." The distinctions

between traditional print and television media sources and those of new media

forms like blogs and websites with direct marketing appeals to their publics create

still more complicated connections and resonances for what constitutes alternative.

Thornton's work very productively highlights the movement between subcultural

formations and the mainstream, but could not have predicted just how fluid

movement between the two would become in a new media context.

Subcultures themselves have also become less and less distinct from one

another in the last two decades; with the popularity of Nirvana, marketers paid even

more attention to these groups at the same time that the internet has made them

more accessible to all. SuicideGirls is a prime example of this lack of differentiation

between subcultures online. The main page, accessible even to non-members,

includes a list of the most "popular SuicideGirl photo tags," terms with which

members have labeled and categorized photo sets. These include "punk rock,"

"manga," "gothic," "geek," and "emo," all terms associated with different subcultural

formations (SuicideGirls "Beautiful"). In an online milieu where all these

subcultures are accessible via Google searches, the level of effort required to

investigate a particular subculture is much lower. And whatever the degree of one's

investment in any one subculture, the protectionist aspects of alternative subculture

in the 1990s with its attendant concerns over "selling out" have lessened as new

media forms have proliferated online.

"Difference" is still key, but the ways through which this difference is

established in a new media context have necessarily shifted. For SuicideGirls, the

differences from the mainstream that mark the site as "alternative" are necessarily

less about the degrees of media coverage and exposure spelled out by Thornton. On

the web, which anyone ostensibly can access, media creation is paramount, and, for

social networking sites, degrees of access to this content production are a primary

differentiating feature. SuicideGirls' perceived distance from mainstream porn is based in the creation of a community in which anyone can participate, for a small monthly fee, alongside its use of alternative subcultural aesthetics.

SUICIDEGIRLS' ALTERNATIVE AESTHETICS

In SuicideGirls, the political rhetoric of alternative cultural production melds with the new media rhetoric of democratized access, ideas then combined with a visual aesthetic based in alternative subcultures. This aesthetic of difference from mainstream porn is rooted in the importance of individual self-expression for alternative subcultures and might be understood as a sort of free speech written on the body. For SuicideGirls models, this self-expression is two-fold. First, posing for photo sets is a means of expressing their sexual subjectivity (Magnet 583). Secondly, models sport aesthetic markers of alternative subcultural style such as body piercings and tattoos. These bodily markers differentiate SuicideGirls models from the norms of Western femininity, particularly the normative feminine beauty of "mainstream" porn. This aesthetic of alternative "realness" adds to the sense of intimacy created through the SNS features of SuicideGirls. To members, each model is presented as a kind of "punk rock girl next door", in a framing that is similar to that of *Playboy*. These aesthetic and interpersonal practices signal the authenticity of SuicideGirls' models. This authenticity is an important part of client expectations in sex work (Frank *G-strings;* Sanders).

The confluence of alternative and porn is what brings members to the site's social networking community. SuicideGirls draws on the history of alternative

subcultures in appealing to those who visit the site, much as other early online communities served as "meeting places for subcultures and fan cultures" (Attwood "No Money Shot" 442). But "beautiful naked girls with tattoos" are an obvious element of the site's appeal. In fact, that tagline appears in the header on the main page of the site, suggesting that such search terms are what bring visitors to SuicideGirls, as much as any alternative political rhetoric (SuicideGirls "Beautiful"). These tensions are literally made visible through the site's pin-up photo sets, which I described in Chapter 1 and will revisit in more detail in Chapter 5. Here I will give a more general overview of SuicideGirl's aesthetics in relation to alternative subculture.

Beginning in the 1980s, indie (and later, alternative) was as much an aesthetic as a political stance; indie as politics and indie as sound became increasingly intertwined. With the rejection of the business practices of major labels came a similar rejection of their musical practices. Indie aesthetics were characterized by a style and a musical sound that flaunted a lack of virtuosity and professionalism verging on ineptitude. It was "an aesthetic based on mobilization and access…[which] encouraged the unskilled and untrained to take the means of musical production into their own hands" (Hesmondhalgh 37). These aspects of indie were rooted in the political nature of independent production and distribution but eventually became somewhat disassociated from it. These indie and alternative aesthetics shape the look of the SuicideGirls site as well as the typical "look" of SuicideGirls models.

The earliest incarnation of SuicideGirls had a distinct DIY aesthetic, characterized by production values borrowed from alternative subcultures that set it apart from more "professional" porn sites. With the alternative framework of the site, the amateurish appearance of the earliest SuicideGirls photosets can be read as playfully and, more importantly, authentically DIY. These images were poorly lit, sometimes awkwardly framed, and often shot in what appeared to be models' bedrooms. While much porn appears cheaply produced, alternative subculture was the clear aesthetic reference point for SuicideGirls.

The early marketing text on the site might appear sloppy and unprofessional to a viewer unfamiliar with alternative aesthetics. But to those initiated into the world of self-produced print zines made by alternative music fans, this kind of slapdash, highly personalized writing is but another example of DIY production values. The first version of SuicideGirls' "About" page (found at archive.org) includes a colloquial text by Missy Suicide riddled with spelling and grammatical errors: "In April of 2001, tired of Los Angeles and all it's silicone filled diversions, I woke up one morning, grabbed my hello kitty waffle maker and a bottle of pre-mixed cosmopolitans and jumped into betty, my '67 firebird convertible and hit the road" (Suicide "SuicideGirls Story"). Slick professionalism was an anathema to the DIY "let's put on a show" ethos espoused by Missy Suicide at the site's inception. And from this early date, the difference between SuicideGirls and "silicone filled diversions" is made explicit. This aesthetic of "difference" was based in the "unskilled, untrained" aesthetic of alternative cultural production.

In SuicideGirls' version of alternative aesthetics, the values of independent production are linked to those of empowered individual choices. By choosing to appear amateurish and disavowing hi-tech slickness, the site aligns itself with alternative's anti-corporate (if not anti-capitalist) politics. This is also true with regard to physical appearance, where the politics of alternative style becomes a crucial expression of subcultural authenticity and authentic selfhood. The main page states: "SuicideGirls is a community that celebrates alternative beauty and alternative culture from all over the world," where alternative beauty is defined as women with piercings and tattoos, and non-naturalistic hair color and make-up (SuicideGirls "Beautiful"). This definition of alternative beauty rests on a set of visual markers of subcultural identification. The recognition of this subcultural identity functions between members and models and between the models themselves, serving as the basis for community formation. It gives the site an aura of authenticity, authenticity that functions as a form of symbolic capital.

This emphasis on a visual aesthetic of subcultural difference also circumscribes the limits of the site's community in gendered, classed, and racialized terms. Who is acceptably alternative? Who is not? SuicideGirls' piercings and tattoos mark models' bodies differently depending on their social locations. Not all women are equally able to claim a position of empowered individual expression through body modification and other visible expressions of stylistic difference. Joanne Hollows speaks to issues of access in discussing women's ability to perform stylistic radicalism. Because women are more associated with the mainstream, they are more likely to be constrained by convention. Men are able to rebel because they are

not the ones vested with upholding social structures such as marriage and family. Women, charged with maintaining these social institutions, have more at stake when they deviate from its norms. "Looking different for young women is sometimes the result of a privileged position: sometimes looking 'normal' and 'conservative' is not a result of passivity or a lack of inspiration, but a means of negotiating a safe place in the world" (Hollows 174). This difference in physical appearance can be classed, as Hollows discusses.

But difference is particularly charged for those models whose visible difference is not chosen, that is, for women of color. As media scholar Shoshana Magnet has said of SuicideGirls, the site can be "read as a progressive form of representation of female sexuality [only] because of the way in which these body alterations suggest a deviant form of (white) femininity....[T]he same marks on women of colour are used to endorse racialized narratives around 'primitive' or 'exotic' sexuality" (593). The focus on an aesthetic of difference is a serious limitation to the radical potential of "alternative" subcultural formations.

By framing difference solely in terms of freely chosen individual expression, other types of difference are elided in SuicideGirls' version of "alternative" beauty and culture. As Thornton acknowledges, while the term "alternative cultures" suggests a reordering of social norms, these non-mainstream cultures "tend to duplicate structures of exclusion and stratification found elsewhere" (*Club Cultures* 35). The emphasis placed on "alternative beauty" and authenticity of personal expression constrains who might "fit" as a SuicideGirl. The emphasis on individual expression also affects how models understand their labor, or perhaps don't

understand this work as labor at all. Models perform a great deal of work on themselves, both physically and psychically, in order to fit in with SuicideGirls' "alternative" aesthetics. But for those women who embrace SuicideGirls' "alternative" rhetoric, the site acts as a space of community that may open up new possibilities for community and solidarity as well.

SUICIDEGIRLS AS ALTERNATIVE COMMUNITY FOR WOMEN

With SuicideGirls' emphasis on community created by and for its model-members, this alternative subcultural community is imbued with a sense that it is an alternative space for women who are marginalized because of their personal aesthetic and political choices. This space has the potential to serve as an intimate community for women.

But subcultures have long been considered the domain of men. In much academic work on subcultures, boys and young men were identified as active participants in subcultures on the streets. Girls and young women spent time within the home, with their bedrooms as a refuge and a social space with other girls. This history has been contested as long as subculture studies have been an area of academic inquiry. Angela McRobbie and Jennie Garber wrote an influential essay arguing for the significance of women's participation in subcultures (McRobbie and Garber).

Sarah Thornton explains in the *Subcultures Reader* that since sociologists first turned their attention to subcultures in the late 1940s and 1950s, these cultures have been associated with certain traits: authenticity, deviance, resistance, and

opposition ("General Introduction" 2-5). This opposition was always in relation to a commercially produced, inauthentic, homogeneous, conformist, and passive dominant culture (Hollows 163). Thornton, in her work on British dance music cultures, further maps these subcultural traits as those generally associated with "masculinity," and the traits of the "mainstream" as those associated with "femininity" in contemporary popular culture (*Club Cultures* 115). These associations have been used to limit women's access to subcultural domains. "The universalizing ascription of femininity to mass culture always depended on the very real exclusion of women from high culture and its institutions" (Huyssen 62). Likewise, because women have long been associated with consumption and mass culture, for many men involved in alternative subcultures, the very fact of women's presence in alternative culture is seen a sign of their "selling out" the scene. In discussing alternative culture in the 1990s, Gen X chronicler Andrea Harris explains, "the very term '"alternative" youth (sub)culture,' . . . more or less signifies white male youth, a group that seems more mainstream than alternative when compared to the women of this generation" (Harris 268).

That SuicideGirls explicitly draws on alternative subcultural rhetoric in creating a community for women is a striking shift. This project to include (some) women in alternative subcultures is a continuation of one that began with the Riot Grrrl movement of the early 1990s. Riot Grrrl was an active attempt to make space within punk communities for girls and young women. Riot Grrrl coalesced in 1990 as loose networks of teenage and twenty-something young women who attempted to consciously intervene in the male-dominated punk and indie music scenes by

making these subcultural spaces more accessible to girls and by providing more

receptive forums for exploring issues of central concern to young women, primarily

those dealing with gender and sexuality such as rape, sexual abuse, and sexual

identity.

The site draws on both the visual and the verbal rhetoric of empowerment

used by Riot Grrrl. Many Riot Grrrls were trying to disrupt normative ideas about

the appropriate place for women within punk and alternative subcultures and in

what was speakable in terms of young women's sexuality. This was also expressed

in the self-presentation of many women involved with Riot Grrrl. Many SuicideGirls

photo sets incorporate stylings familiar from Riot Grrrl: baby doll dresses; maryjane

shoes; unkempt hair dyed in obviously artificial colors; smeared black eye makeup;

and messy red lipstick. Perhaps the best-known figure to adopt this style was

Courtney Love, who fronted the band Hole and was also highly visible as the wife of

Nirvana's Kurt Cobain. As interpreted in SuicideGirls photosets, this aesthetic

combines a kind of infantilized femininity with sexualized grotesque, creating

"depictions of sweet, white femininity which has been desecrated" (Magnet 593).

While there is some transgressive potential in this presentation of feminine

sexuality, it functions as such primarily for white women. This was a criticism

directed at Riot Grrrl in the 1990s as well. It is an image that traffics in a familiar

good girl/bad girl dichotomy yet again.

The SuicideGirls community remains one that privileges white middle class

femininity. The site's emphasis on individual expression, drawing as it does from

alternative subcultural rhetoric as well as ideas about new media democracy, is not

linked to any larger politics. SuicideGirls provides a platform for models to express themselves. This self is expressed through physical appearance and the words and photos shared by model-members on their SuicideGirls blogs. The community that is formed around these practices is one that may provide genuine support for the women who participate, as did Riot Grrrl. The site acts as a kind of virtual bedroom for models to share their experiences, part of the longstanding trope of girls' bedroom culture. But here on SuicideGirls, it is a subcultural bedroom community, invoking the alternative subcultural difference from mainstream culture. It is also a porn site in which members are given voyeuristic access to the "backroom" spaces of these models' communal interactions online.

In the interplay of these factors, the scope of possibility for this community is limited. As with Riot Grrrl, the use of alternative aesthetic signifiers provides only certain models with the potential for transgressing norms of white femininity. Since interactions between models are accessible to all paying members (except for certain models-only forums), the community is inevitably shaped by the presence of paying others, whether active participants or voyeuristic observers. These interactions can also be observed by SuicideGirls' management, which can lead to both model self-censorship and to removal of commentary critical of the site, as I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Three.

Despite these factors, the production of community for women on SuicideGirls offers potential for solidarity. This was most evident in 2005 when a group of 35 models staged a highly visible exodus from the site, taking their complaints about their working conditions to the media. This move was made

possible by the community ties that exist on the site and by the "recursive publics" created therein. Since SuicideGirls models live in locations spread across the globe,[4] the possibility for banding together to make their labor issues heard was brought into being by the site's social networking aspects. In some ways, this backroom space created online has links to other forms of sex worker organizing, particularly exotic dancer unionization efforts. It is far easier to discuss working conditions with others who labor under the same conditions in the same space. Thus, many unionized sex workers work in strip clubs because they provide the opportunity to organize on-site with fellow workers, as in the well-known example of the Lusty Lady strip club in San Francisco (Dudash 100).

The community for women on SuicideGirls is one of multiple and contradictory possibilities. In many ways, it is similar to the DIY craft culture championed by third wave feminists in the last decade. Both emphasize women's shared experiences and champion alternative production methods and small-scale economies. These movements also have elements that have become part of postfeminism, in which empowerment is always individual and personal, decoupled from the political. It is a useful intervention for some women. But this community must also be considered in light of SuicideGirls' primary appeal, those "beautiful naked girls with tattoos."

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[4] Site co-founder Missy likes to mention in interviews that "there are Suicide Girls on every continent, including Antarctica. She's a research scientist" (Boudinot).

LOCATING ALTERNATIVE PORN

As an online social networking community, the site is located both within the home and outside it. While this is the case with the Internet in general, it has particular resonance in terms of porn. As Jane Juffer has noted, this movement between the public and private sphere is part of the domestication of porn, particularly in relation to women. With the advent of sexually explicit cable TV channels and the growth of video in the 1980s, pornography moved readily in and out of the home.

SuicideGirls makes very explicit its ties to the "real world," frequently invoking an origin story based in the local community of alternative women that Missy Suicide "discovered" in Portland, Oregon (Suicide "SuicideGirls Story"). The location of the site's founding in the Pacific Northwest is important in establishing the site's alternative credibility. In the earliest version of the site's origin story, she specifically distances SuicideGirls from the artifice associated with Los Angeles. Portland is a physical location and cultural context with associated with "authentic" alternative culture. In addition to its physical and social remove from Los Angeles, its location in the Pacific Northwest links it with the alternative subcultural icons from the region, implicitly referencing Nirvana, Riot Grrrls, and the Seattle grunge scene.

Interestingly, SuicideGirls is now physically located in Los Angeles, the place from which Missy originally fled in an attempt to escape "it's silicone filled diversions" [sic]. But even in this origin story, LA continued to hold some appeal for

Missy: "Somewhere around Barstow, cosmopolitan supply depleted, I realized that I was not on my way to Mexico, and I was in dire need of something to ease the pain of a complete and utter abscense of potato tacos" [sic] (Suicide "SuicideGirls Story"). But a fondness for potato tacos is perhaps not reason enough to explain the site's relocation to LA, widely considered to be the heart of the mainstream porn industry. By 2003, Missy and Sean had begun to talk about plans to expand the site and related business, expansion that would take place with a "cash infusion" from a "Los Angeles management company" (Roe). Included in this business deal was possible relocation to LA. With alternative credibility established online, the site could move physically as its business practices shifted from DIY to those more aligned with the mainstream porn industry.

Also at issue in the site's ability to physically relocate is the historic movement of alternative subcultures. While alternative has been linked to specific places like Seattle in the early 1990s and London in the late 1970s, the politics and aesthetics of alternative and punk have long history of circulation beyond these locales. Participants in alternative music subcultures have been part of larger networks of circulation for decades. This movement took place via touring bands (the physical movement of subcultural people); via zines, fliers, and clothing styles (the physical movement of subcultural objects); and via mass media coverage (the subculture exposure to "outsiders" that Sarah Thornton discusses). This circulation of alternative subculture made the incorporation of new media forms relatively easy. Participants already took part in diffuse networks across physical space. The

creation of virtual space in which to convene was an extension of these existing networks.

The site now seems to exist relatively comfortably in the physical geography of Los Angeles. Tellingly, however, SuicideGirls is more associated with Hollywood than with the San Fernando Valley where most porn companies are based. For several years, the site hosted a weekly dance party called Club Suicide at a nightclub in the hip Echo Park area. For several years, SuicideGirls models participated in a regular radio show on an LA-based station, albeit one that pitched itself as "indie." So its presence in Los Angeles has maintained some ties to alternative subcultures rather than what Missy Suicide termed the "silicone filled" diversions of the mainstream porn industry in the area.

This move took place at a time when the cultural significance of alternative porn was shifting. "Alt porn," as porn featuring pierced and tattooed models with an aesthetic similar to that of SuicideGirls has become known, is now but one of many, fairly mainstream niche genres. Vivid, one of the largest porn production companies, has developed a Vivid Alt division. The films produced under this banner incorporate not only models with SuicideGirls-esque stylings, but feature subcultural activities such as skateboarding and the trappings of more "extreme" sexual activities such as bondage and S/M. The porn industry operates in a capitalist logic where commodification of fetish into niche markets is paramount.

Porn too also has its own conventions of authenticity and "realness" which affect how SuicideGirls is able to establish its credibility as an alternative porn site. In framing the site as a space of intimate accessible community, SuicideGirls

operates within a heterosexual male tradition of porn and sex work, including the

voyeuristic tradition mentioned earlier. According to porn studies scholar Linda

Williams, for (heterosexual) male viewers, the intimacy of porn lies in its status as

testimony of the body (*Hard Core*). Hardcore porn conventions depict women's

orgasms as a kind of "true speech," in much the same way that SuicideGirls' tattoos

and piercings write authenticity on their bodies.

SuicideGirls' claims to the authenticity of the site and its models are based in

alternative's rhetoric of difference and authenticity, tropes of democratic

participation online, and porn conventions of intimacy. These elements shape the

interactions that members have with the site's models. The site's claims, however,

are in direct opposition to feminist anti-porn critiques in which porn is understood

as the ultimate commodification of intimacy. As I discussed in Chapter 1, many anti-

porn feminists view porn as inherently violent to women and make no distinction

between rape and sex acts performed before cameras. This understanding of porn is

based in the idea that patriarchy so structures women's experiences that women

lack full agentic capacity to consent to such sex acts.

The SuicideGirls community functions simultaneously in very different ways,

some of which call into question this perceived lack of agency. The site is a

community by and for women who share some interest in alternative subculture.

SuicideGirls' "alternative" framing leads its models (and others) to expect something

different: something different from typical porn and different from mainstream

corporate culture. When these models come to realize that SuicideGirls' difference is

only skin deep, they get angry. On the site, models can and do build solidarity out of

this anger over their working conditions. At the same time, the SuicideGirls

community exists in a space where members can view these interactions

voyeuristically, as well as participate in these interactions themselves. For

members, these activities are forms of authentic intimacy tied to conventions of

porn. For models, this intimacy raises questions about the affective labor they

perform on and for SuicideGirls. The next chapter examines the labor implications of

the site's use of social networking and porn.

CHAPTER 3: The Labor of SuicideGirls' Social Network Site Practices

Web 2.0 is the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the Internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them. (This is what I've elsewhere called "harnessing collective intelligence.")

— Tim O'Reilly, *O'Reilly Media* (2006) ("Web 2.0 Compact Definition: Trying Again")

Un- or underemployed? Don't just be a blogger! Diversify your skills by also being a photographer, a stylist, a social media expert, and a dogwalker!

— Minh-ha T. Pham, *Threadbared* (2010)

This chapter examines the labor practices of SuicideGirls.com as both a social networking site and an alternative porn site. From the point of view of the owners of this new media platform, the content produced and shared by models and paying site members is vital because it draws new members and keeps existing members returning. What distinguishes SuicideGirls from other social network sites is that user participation extends to posting photosets that include nudity. But for members and models, community formation, rather than content production, is a central part of SuicideGirls' appeal. As is reflected in the site's marketing rhetoric, this community is democratic and accessible according to the logics of both alternative subculture and proponents of Web 2.0, as discussed in the previous chapter. This rhetoric shapes how models and members understand their participation in the site. But their participation has another dimension that is not

addressed within the utopian rhetoric of Internet democracy nor in the DIY ideals of alternative culture.

This participation is a form of "free labor." It is the free labor done by models and members on and for SuicideGirls' social network porn site that I explore in this chapter. I focus on current scholarship on changing conceptions of and practices of labor in new media contexts and analyze how these labor practices operate in the context of SuicideGirls. I begin by defining "free labor" as explored in new media scholar Tiziana Terranova's influential essay of the same name. The concept of free labor is the basis for my description of the three groups that produce content for SuicideGirls—models, members, and those hired directly by the site—and the types of content each produces. The new media content production practices of SuicideGirls models and members are then situated within the context of cultural studies research on cultural production and consumption.

How site participants have come to understand the blurring of the distinction between consumer and producer is an important factor in analyzing SuicideGirls in terms of new media labor practices. But these practices are also part of larger shifts in labor conditions under neoliberalism. This is especially visible in the context of the Member Review feature of the site. In addition to the affective dimensions of participation in social network sites, it is crucial to consider labor online in terms of control and by comparing wages to profits (Scholz and Liu 31). These contradictions and confluences are central to understanding the conditions of SuicideGirls' labor.

THE FREE LABOR OF NEW MEDIA CONTENT PRODUCTION

Although the ideological understanding of the Internet's democratic possibilities discussed at the beginning of Chapter Two still has widespread traction, it is limited in its practical application. Money has come to dominate the Internet as this rhetoric of freedom has become integrated into neoliberal economic logics. As such, access and influence on the Internet is not available to just anyone. Rather, those most visible on the Internet are those with the most capital (Hindman). There is no "outside" of the commercialized Internet; all activities generate value and even supposedly "free" spaces rely on corporate networks for their infrastructure (Scholz and Liu 22). The SuicideGirls community is no different.

While community is a central aspect of SuicideGirls' appeal for members and models, their very participation in the site is structured by economic transactions and the discretion of SuicideGirls management. For members, a monthly, annual, or semi-annual fee is required. Models receive free membership to the site as part of their compensation after submission of their first photoset. But both groups can have their access revoked if they are deemed to violate site policy. In obvious contrast to the libertarian rhetoric of the "free" Internet, community access and participation require an initial capital outlay and are ultimately controlled by those who own the site. Rather than participants in a "free" Internet, models and members are more aptly considered as providers of "free labor" for the platforms that structure this participation.

This free labor on the Internet blurs the line between work and pleasure in that it is "[s]imultaneously voluntarily given and unwaged, enjoyed and exploited," as Tiziana Terranova describes in her influential essay on the nature of digital labor (33). By definition, free labor reflects both affective desires for greater autonomy and capitalist imperatives for increased productivity. As such, the "free" in free labor has a dual meaning; it refers to labor that is unpaid as well as uncoerced, or freely chosen (48).

Despite the lack of payment, there are other kinds of benefits that accrue to individuals doing free labor which help to explain their participation. In earlier decades of the twentieth century, this "cultural discount" was seen as the province of artists who voluntarily worked for the "gratification of producing art" in lieu of wages commensurate with their skills and education levels (Ross "Mental Labor" 6). In the digital economy, free labor has expanded to encompass a larger and larger portion of workers, many of whom do not see their participation in terms of labor at all. Free labor performed for social network sites has the potential to produce positive affects for users in terms of community membership, self-fulfillment, and creative and intellectual autonomy. These affective dimensions are so central that Henry Jenkins et al included them in the definition of participatory culture, of which social network sites are part. The authors particularly note the importance of a sense of social connection and of the value of their own contributions to fellow participants (3). What the definition of participatory culture does not acknowledge is the way that these affective dimensions are a key means of getting people to perform activities that accrue value for corporations, even though they may not feel

like "work" to those participating in them. "Praise, social capital, and peer recognition are currencies in this post crunch economy where more than 30% of people who just entered the job market cannot find a job or already gave up looking" (Scholz and Liu 34). For those performing free labor, the reward for this participation is primarily affective rather than material.

The second type of benefit from free labor is the potential for this participation to lead to paid work. Jenkins et al extol the importance of participatory culture for building skills for future employment and advocate the incorporation of the media creation practices of participatory culture into school curricula (4). Axel Bruns describes these skills as "C4C": creative, collaborative, critical, and communicative (6.1). In the process of building these skills, participants can develop portfolios of their creative work and gain exposure that may attract the attention of potential employers, leading to eventual paid work. While Jenkins et al also note benefits in the form of greater democratic participation and citizenship, the examples provided all refer to teenagers whose technology and new media skills translated into profitable business ventures (5). It seems that even the staunchest advocates of the benefits of new media participation frame these benefits primarily in terms of the labor market. But what is the incentive to an employer to pay someone to do work that others will perform as a form of free labor?

While free labor may provide some genuine benefit to individuals who engage in these practices, the corporate benefits are far greater. Heeding Laura Liu's call to compare wages to profits in thinking about digital labor, it is crucial to understand that individual benefits pale in the face of the profits to be made from

free labor. The employer has no responsibility to these (not) workers: their

participation can be cut off at will and employers are not obligated to provide a

minimum wage or any form of benefits. But, as Terranova argues, this free labor is

vital to online business models (48). Endlessly updated content is mandatory in

order to keep people's interest. To provide this content requires an endless supply

of (free) labor. Ultimately, the people are the content. While Jenkins et al believe

that the value of participatory culture lies in its alterations of commercial culture,

these alterations are a necessary form of free labor for the culture industries (8).

Affective labor is vital to corporate capitalism; the affective rewards of this labor are

a key means of extracting value. These practices represent continuity rather than a

break from previous means of media production, as I explore later in this chapter.

As Terranova argues, the dichotomous idea that work is inherently alienated while

creativity is liberatory is no longer true, if it ever was. "The Internet does not

automatically turn every user into an active producer, and every worker into a

creative subject" (35).

PRODUCING SUICIDEGIRLS CONTENT

Social network sites are a form of what Henry Jenkins has termed

"participatory culture." These cultures share certain characteristics:

> A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to
>
> artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating
>
> and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship
>
> whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to

> novices. A participatory culture is also one in which members believe
>
> their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection
>
> with one another. (Jenkins et al. 3)

For SuicideGirls models and members, the opportunity to participate in the culture

of the site is a large part of what attracts them to the site and compels their

continued participation. Their participation results in the production of image- and

text-based content in the form of personal photos, blog posts, and forums, and more.

This content helps build a community that attracts more paying members.

But the site itself must also produce content, especially marketing materials, to

entice people to participate in the site. These layers of participation and content

production constitute SuicideGirls. However, these layers are not always readily

distinguishable and overlap considerably in practice. This makes it difficult to trace

labor activity on the site: who owns what, who produced it, and to what ends. This is

part of the milieu in which "free labor" happens online.

In an effort to map out this labor, rather than delineating types of content

produced, I look at who produces content and how they are compensated. The

content itself can circulate in a variety of ways that are potentially quite removed

from its initial appearance on the site. Although members and models may not think

about their participation on the site in terms of labor nor consider their

contributions to SuicideGirls as "content production," this activity is central to

SuicideGirls' business model. By tracing groups of producers, the labor that goes

into the production of SuicideGirls content can be more clearly linked to the content

itself.

The relationships between SuicideGirls and those who produce content for the site are highly varied. But the site does differentiate between types of members. Following the site's designations, I have grouped these content producers into three categories based on their relationship to the site and the type of compensation (if any) they receive for their work. The first group is those hired directly by SuicideGirls to produce content for the site, including permanent staff members and those who work on a freelance basis. These people may work as photographers and writers, or hold marketing and administrative staff positions. While these people may also be SuicideGirls models or members, they are listed in the site "About" page and their profiles (if any) include the designation "staff" or "photographer" (SuicideGirls "About 2009"). SuicideGirls may also employ other staff permanently or on a contract basis who are not listed on this page (in particular programmers and other IT professionals who are responsible for the technical infrastructure of the site). My research does not address these staff and/or contract positions; rather, I focus on those staff identified on this page whose roles are visible to all those who participate in content production and consumption, as this is the level at which free labor operates.

The second group includes those models that have received payment for one or more photo sets submitted to the site, designated "SuicideGirls" on their profiles. But SuicideGirls are not the only group whose photosets appear on the site. Models designated "Hopefuls" are those who have submitted photos via the Member Review section of the site. While they receive free membership to the site just as official SuicideGirls do, Hopefuls have not received payment for their participation in the

site; I will discuss the status of Hopefuls in depth in a later chapter. The final group

includes paying members of SuicideGirls who are not otherwise designated as

photographers, staff, SuicideGirls, or Hopefuls.

The final group includes paying members of SuicideGirls who are not

otherwise designated as photographers, SuicideGirls, or staff. These people are not

compensated for their participation in the site; rather they pay a membership fee to

join. While there is overlap between these groups, the site clearly delineates their

distinct roles.

Those employed by SuicideGirls as staff and photographers participate in the

creation of several types of content, including photosets and videos, marketing

materials, and editorial content. At various times, the site has used staff writers to

produce editorial content such as news articles and interview features. However,

authorship of these sections has shifted over time, with content produced by

members and by paid staff at various points. The "news wire" was initially produced

by members on a voluntary basis; compensation was in the form of "Army Points"

which could be exchanged for free SuicideGirls merchandise or to extend a

member's subscription to the site (Subrosa). In 2007, the site brought in paid

"culture editors," including actor Wil Wheaton and academic blogger Bitch PhD.

However, this experiment in paid content generation of this type was short lived. By

early 2008, the news wire was once again largely comprised of member-created

content. Paid editorial content is now limited to interviews with cultural figures that

might appeal to the "alternative" interests of SuicideGirls members. These shifts

between paid and member-created editorial content mirror the shifts in the creation

of other types of content as well, which I will discuss in depth later in this chapter.

The category of SuicideGirls member is the most elastic of the three. All

SuicideGirls models and employees are included in this category and may

participate in the same types of site activities as members. These include member

profiles, postings to message boards, membership and participation in various

"Groups" of members with shared interests, contributions to the news wire blog, use

of the site's "Chat" feature for instant messaging, and the posting of personal photos

and video. But in each of these instances, member participation is always

demarcated by their status, as listed next to their member icon.

Members with no other status indicated are distinct in that they must pay in

order to participate in the site. Their access to the site is purchased with monthly,

semi-monthly, or annual subscription fees. As of 2010, annual membership is

US$48. The only compensation available to members for their participation was as

part of the SuicideGirls Army, a "street team" comprised of members who promoted

the site as fans, both online and off. Army members received free merchandise such

as stickers and t-shirts in exchange for contributing content to the site and

promoting it elsewhere. However, this program is no longer in effect as such. The

SuicideGirls Army is now primarily an "Affiliate" program for online businesses,

rather than a means to encourage individual participation and promotion of the site.

The site's description of the program reads in its entirety:

> The SuicideGirls affiliate program is a way for independent companies
>
> or websites to earn cash by promoting SuicideGirls. It is intended for

sites whose target audience is over 18 and caters to an indie,

alternative lifestyle. Some examples of such sites (who are currently

affiliates) are: model Twwly, online tshirt store Zero Boutique, and

web comic Questionable Content. (SuicideGirls "Affiliates")

Affiliated sites receive a fee when a new member joins SuicideGirls by clicking

through a link from the affiliated website. While such an Affiliate program is fairly

standard Internet marketing—Amazon.com has a similar program, for example—it

is a significant shift in how SuicideGirls views, and rewards, member participation.

This shift is most evident in the inception of the Hopefuls section of the site, to be

discussed in the next section.

Models for SuicideGirls, referred to by the site by the coveted "SuicideGirl"

title, are expected to participate in the site in ways similar to members. Models

create profile pages, write blog and forum posts, participate in Groups, and post

"personal" photos and videos to their profile pages. For models, additional

uncompensated participation might also include public appearances, responding to

comments and personal messages left by members, and the repurposing of their

images for use in SuicideGirls marketing materials and merchandise. Their images

might also be resold to other websites. These activities are free labor for the site;

models receive payment only for those photosets that are selected by SuicideGirls.

A key distinction between model and member participation is that of

expectation. While a member of SuicideGirls can choose to take part in a range of

content-generating and community-building activities, it is also possible to simply

pay a membership fee in order to view site content. Some members may rarely, if

ever, view the site after joining. In contrast to the voluntary participation of

members, SuicideGirls models are expected to actively participate in the site in

order to remain in good standing with management. As stated in the previous

chapter, SuicideGirls were even expected to respond to emails from individual

members at the site's inception. The site was very explicit about the link between

site participation and their willingness to purchase additional photosets from

models. The 2004 Model FAQ states:

> If you model exclusively for SuicideGirls and are an active member of
>
> the community we will most likely buy sets from you as often as you
>
> send them in. If you model for a number of sites and/or are not active
>
> on SuicideGirls, we will most likely only be able to buy sets from you
>
> very occasionally. (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2004")

But, in effect, SuicideGirls participation entails more work than modeling for a

typical, non-social networked porn site since all the labor of participation and being

available for members must be done for little to no additional compensation. I will

explore this labor in detail in my discussion of the site's Hopefuls section.

And what exactly is their compensation in exchange for this level of

participation? As of February 2004, models were paid approximately US$300 for

each photoset posted to the site (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2004"). The current rate of

pay, effective since 2008, is $500 per set accepted as Set of the Day and posted on

the front page. Acceptance of a photoset by the site also entitles each model to a

"lifetime" SuicideGirls membership and various other perks. In 2004, those extras

included "free t-shirts, clothing, and sticker, free tickets to SG sponsored and

member events in their area, and a forum to reach over 200,000 people a week"

(SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2004"). However, these "lifetime" memberships could be

revoked if a model's participation was not deemed acceptable by site management.

This practice, called "zotting" by site models and members, is not uncommon and

will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter that addresses criticisms made

of the site's business practices.

SuicideGirls' reliance on a combination of paid, unpaid, and paying labor for

the production of site content is part of a larger shifts in conditions of work and

leisure. These shifts can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution and intertwine

closely with the rise of mass media entertainment. I will explore this history in the

next section in order to situate the changing relationship of work and leisure in new

media and to highlight forms of labor beyond content production that take place on

and for SuicideGirls.

LABOR, LEISURE AND THE WORK OF THE AUDIENCE

The "free labor" of online content production described by Terranova is part

of a long history of shifting conceptions of labor and leisure in relation to cultural

consumption. SuicideGirl's online content creation practices reflect these changing

conceptions, accelerated by the advent of social networking, that blur the lines

between consumers and producers. While these shifts are visible across a wide

range of media and labor domains, they arose out of a specific social and political

context. Understanding the distinction between labor and leisure (or lack thereof) is

crucial to understanding SuicideGirls' labor practices because of the ways that the

site utilizes the "leisure" time of its models and members to produce content for the site. Even those members whose participation is entirely passive perform labor for SuicideGirls in that these contributions help to constitute members as the site's audience (Shimpach 352). In this section, I explore shifts in understanding the dichotomy of labor and leisure and connect these shifts to how audiences have been understood by media and cultural studies scholars in order to situate the labor performed by SuicideGirls members and models in the context of participation in a social network porn site.

Conventional wisdom holds that modern industrial capitalism is marked by a sharp cultural division between everyday leisure activities and labor (Burke 137). But these divides—between labor and leisure, consumers and producers—are historically situated and partial at best. Historian Peter Burke suggests that, as much as the work/leisure divide is a product of industrialization, it also needs to be understood in conjunction with the rise of the "disciplinary society," where, "[a]s free time was increasingly organized, and institutionalized, people became more conscious of it as a separate domain, rather than as a pause between bouts of work" (149-50). By the 1960s, Marxist cultural critics such as the Situationist International saw leisure as being alienated and commodified in much the same way as labor. The Situationists went so far as to posit that "free" time was an oxymoron, given the all-encompassing degree to which leisure was structured by social and economic forces ("Questionnaire" 142). It is from these ideas about the totality of alienation that media and cultural studies scholars began to examine the nature of the relationship between cultural producers and consumers.

The complicated relationship between labor and leisure can be seen in the construction of mass media audiences. While the audience has often been characterized by its fundamentally passive reception of mass media messages, media studies scholars such as Dallas Smythe began to revisit this understanding in the 1970s by considering the work that audiences do. Although it remains implicit, part of the job of the audience is to be a captive audience for advertising and, ultimately, to consume those products advertised (Scholz and Liu 20). In the digital economy, this work, termed "attention labor" by digital media scholar Trebor Scholz, involves "the amount of time there we spend online and where we spend it" (20). Both commercial and non-commercial media need audiences; in both cases, the audience serves a function for someone or something beyond itself (Shimpach 345). This function could be the sale of products through commercials (natch), product placement in the media itself, or through marketing tie-ins like giveaways and contests. In non-commercial media, the function is more often tied to some kind of "cause," be it sustaining the media outlet in question (as in the pledge drives of US public television and radio stations) or building support for social issues (as in the case of ad-free feminist magazine *Ms.).* In Web 2.0, through their role as both producers and consumers of media content, the new media "audience" works for both advertisers and the mass media (Napoli 512). The labor that goes into constructing such audiences is an important consideration in the history of the blurring of boundaries between production and consumption because it is largely invisible (Shimpach 346). The audience's historically invisible labor contributes to

the invisibility of models' and members' labor in SuicideGirls' content production

practices and in other, more implicit, forms like attention labor.

Much as the divide between labor and leisure has never been total, the

slippage between production and consumption that is evident in SuicideGirls'

content production practices has a longer history than that of Web 2.0. This slippage

is related to the active work done by audiences; it is through this work that

audiences are constituted. Media scholars, including Henry Jenkins and Shawn

Shimpach, argue that such labor has been a crucial element in the work of culture

industries from the early twentieth century (Jenkins "Afterword"; Shimpach).

In order to construct an audience from individual participants, the audience

must be quantified in terms of demographics and dollars. Thus, constructing an

audience is part of the work of market researchers that necessarily also involves the

participation of the individual audience members who take part in activities like test

screenings, and provide their demographic information when filling out surveys.

That the demographic information collected as part of market research is freely

given undercuts most people's understanding of the provision of this information as

labor, even though the free labor of the audience is what enables the target

marketing of that very audience. Just as with Terranova's explication of "free labor"

online, this market research is based on "voluntary, uncompensated labor"

(Shimpach 352). Thus, in Shimpach's framing, the audience's leisure was never free;

viewers of mass media were always "countable" as an audience for advertisers and

for entertainment industry profits. The degree to which "countability" has been

extended in Web 2.0, and especially on social network sites, is related to Burke's

claim about the ways the labor/leisure distinction sharpened with the rise of

governmentality. With increasingly rationalized, organized, and quantified spheres

of work and play in the early decades of the industrial revolution, leisure came to be

seen as distinct from labor. Now, however, leisure and labor distinctions are less

marked because of the extent to which our so-called leisure time spent as mass

media audiences and social media participants has become rationalized and

quantified for others' benefit.

     For audience members granted early viewing of a new film or Internet users

given access to a social network site in exchange for their demographic information,

it may be more useful to understand these things as compensated in "free-ish,

convenient services" in order the underscore the costs of such participation (Scholz

and Liu 21). Social network sites, including SuicideGirls, extend the scope of this

market research much further than that of typical demographic surveys. Their users

and the data they provide are central to the Web 2.0 business model, as Tim

O'Reilly[5] explains:

> One of the key lessons of the Web 2.0 era is this: Users add value. But
>
> only a small percentage of users will go to the trouble of adding value
>
> to your application via explicit means. Therefore, Web 2.0
>
> companies set inclusive defaults for aggregating user data and
>
> building value as a side-effect of ordinary use of the
>
> application…[T]hey build systems that get better the more people use
>
> them. ("A Platform Beats an Application Every Time")

---

[5] O'Reilly is widely credited with coining the term "Web 2.0."

This information, including personal relationships and highly specific lists of tastes and interests, can be considered "data labor" (Scholz and Liu 18). Additionally, what Scholz categorizes as "fan labor" is the work involved in providing personal content such as photographs and narratives that are the draw for other site visitors (19). In the case of SuicideGirls, the available user data includes information on members' sexual tastes and interests as indicated by the images they view. Even the least active members of the site—those who may view various types of site content but do not maintain a public profile page—leave a data trail about which pages they visit.

Because of the ways that their engagement with the site becomes marketable data, what SuicideGirls models and members alike do on the site has economic value for the SuicideGirls corporation. This value goes beyond that which members pay in membership fees. It also extends beyond the value of photosets that models may be paid to produce. The very act of joining the site, or being part of the SuicideGirls' audience, produces value. Thus, all members provide a form of free labor for the site. SuicideGirls' business model depended on this free labor from the very start.

"PRODUSAGE" AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE IN WEB 2.0

Seeing audiences as participating in their own construction enables an understanding of media consumption as something other than passive (Shimpach 349). Contrary to popular assumption, reading and watching are activities that entail *doing*, an agentic engagement with media texts (Shimpach 354). Even in popular concerns over media effects, the implicit assumption is that, even as the

audience is said to be passively receiving messages laden with, for example, violent

pornographic imagery, viewers engage with the media they consume in order to "re-

create them in the realm beyond the sofa," that is to say in the "real world"

(Shimpach 353). The audience is never purely passive.

The agency of seemingly passive audiences exists in tandem with the by-

definition active nature of participatory culture, in which people create their own

media texts by altering existing products of the culture industries (Jenkins et al. 8).

Rather than a radical break from previous forms of cultural consumption, the fusion

of labor and leisure in social network sites is part of an on-going process of

negotiating cultural production and consumption. While the scope of this content

production has expanded with Web 2.0, it is not without precedent. Audiences have

been expected to do a certain amount of work in order to understand and

contextualize media texts since the earliest days of cinema. Then, this work involved

reading interviews, reviews, and gossip columns and discussing films with others,

all as a means of making sense of popular films and the new narrative forms used to

convey their story lines (Shimpach 350). Now, this work has expanded to include

the creation of original content, from posting queries and fanfic to online fansites to

writing reviews on a wide range of websites, including those of retailers such as

Amazon.com, movie listings sites, and smaller, more fan-oriented communities.

Axel Bruns has termed the collective efforts of participants that fuse

production and consumption online "produsage." While Bruns sees these "user-led

content creation approaches" as a new development beyond traditional models of

industrial production, this is not true of the culture industries, as media studies

scholarship on audience labor has demonstrated. Fans' desire and ability to create media content is also not new. And, as Jenkins reminds us, participatory cultures have "multiple histories…much larger than the history of specific technologies or commercial platforms" (Jenkins "Afterword" 239).

Whether online or off, the media creation practices of participatory cultures take place within communities based around mutual interests. In many cases, the creation of specific media objects may be less important than the experience of community participation through the creation of shared space (Jenkins "Afterword" 234). The importance of participatory culture lies in the emphasis on process rather than product (Jenkins "Afterword" 236). Indeed, for SuicideGirls' models and members, participation in a community based around alternative subcultural identities may be a more significant consideration than the free labor they provide for the site, as I explored in the previous chapter.

But this emphasis on the affective dimensions of participatory culture does not take into account the limitations of that participation in the monetized sphere of Web 2.0, in which this participation results in corporate profits and where users have limited control over the media content they create. The problem is that these Web 2.0 sites, with their emphasis on users as data points for aggregation, do not necessarily offer the "scaffolding and mentorship" which Jenkins sees as critical to participatory cultures ("Afterword" 239). The scope of this content is shaped and constrained by the Web 2.0 platform of the site, both in terms of the technical specifications and the parameters of user agreements. Perhaps most crucially, "the unpaid data provision of blogging, updates, and social networking may be enjoyable,

and motivated by personal satisfaction, but still generates value for the economy

that is made invisible and therefore contributes to the notion that similar paid forms

of work can be undervalued" (Scholz and Liu 45).

Even if, as Jenkins argues, the product is less important than the process,

participants, as well as academics, continue to express strong reservations about the

use of their content and demographic information for corporate gain. Bruns

describes the potential misuse of produsage communities as "hijacking the hive," in

which "harbouring services [such as SuicideGirls] abuse the trust placed in them...by

exploiting the lock-in of content and/or community to extract a continuing rent of

one form or another" (section 5.4). He argues that corporations should respect the

implicit rules of produsage communities or risk causing irreparable harm to brand

reputation and the potential for complete disintegration of the very community that

sustains corporate interests (section 6). But in the case of social network sites, from

Facebook to SuicideGirls, hijacking the hive has *not* fatally damaged their brands (as

I will detail in relation to SuicideGirls in the next chapter). Instead, the rent

extracted from produsers most often takes the form of free labor, where "[t]he new

Web is made...of new ways to make the audience work" (Terranova 52).

FROM "PRODUSERS" TO "PLAYBOUR": LEISURE AS LABOR ONLINE

The relationship between producers and consumers that has been

heightened with the advent of Web 2.0 is a sharpening of this labor of leisure. Both

labor and leisure are less routinized, taking place increasingly outside traditional

workplaces and 9-to-5 schedules, often simultaneously within the home and online.

These changes affect not just the labor of social networking, or the labor of leisure more generally, but the very nature of work in neoliberal networked societies. These shifts are part of the ways in which "sacrificial concepts of mental or cultural labor […] are increasingly vital to newly important sectors of the knowledge industries" (Ross "Mental Labor" 2). With models working on contract from any location with access to the Internet and digital cameras, SuicideGirls' labor practices exist at this juncture. In this section, I discuss the shifts in conditions of labor online and provide specific examples of how these conditions operate for SuicideGirls models and members.

As cultural theorist Andrew Ross notes, "[W]ork has been increasingly distributed from sites of production to the realm of consumption and social networking" ("New Geography" 45). By acknowledging that "pleasure and play can be a part of labor" in the digital economy, the category of unpaid labor usefully expands in order to think more fully about work (Scholz and Liu 20). This "Taylorization of leisure" "is what Julian Kücklich has termed "playbour." "Like other forms of affective or immaterial labour, playbour is not productive in the sense of resulting in a product, but it is the process itself that generates value" (Kücklich). Playbour, unlike produsage, emphasizes both the work—albeit unpaid—and leisure aspects of digital labor. It is important to understand that labor entails more than employment or waged work (Terranova 46). Labor can also be what people do for pleasure, or play. The lessening of distinctions between leisure/pleasure and work/toil for certain categories of workers is also visible in conceptions of work as a calling, a kind of moral imperative to "do what you love" regardless of compensation

(McGee 41). As paid labor becomes increasingly tied to notions of pleasure, leisure activities have also become a form of work for corporations. In the case of social media, the time one spends on such sites is time spent increasing the value of those companies for shareholders or private owners. Playbor, unlike produsage, makes clear that the relationship between play and labor is less and less distinct.

Unpaid labor has become a crucial part neoliberal employment conditions, going well beyond the scope of playbor in digital environments. It is a fact of much white-collar work. Feminist media scholar Melissa Gregg describes the additional activities that have been incorporated into such work: "Combined with the performative labour of defining deliverables and actioning outcomes, the modern workplace involves a raft of tasks that amount to preparing and asking for potential work—while also reiterating the significance of past work on top of the workload that has always been expected" (Gregg "Learning" 211). In a sense, these shifts parallel the conditions of those of SuicideGirls models who are paid per photoset, but who are also expected to maintain blogs, participate in discussion forums, and build relationships with other models, site staff, and members in order to maintain good standing on the site. I will explore the nature of this additional free labor in more detail in the following section.

The contract-based work done by SuicideGirls models is part of a general lessening of stability in working conditions. More and more, the structure and conditions of digital labor resemble those of informal labor (Scholz and Liu 40). "Post-industrial capitalism thrives on actively disorganizing employment and socio-economic life in general, so that it can profit from vulnerability, instability and

desperation" (Ross "New Geography" 44). The entrenchment of the Internet in everyday life has created conditions for increasingly flexible labor that can be performed wherever there is access to the Internet. With the advent of smartphones, this access is near-ubiquitious; the reach of such "distributed labor" platforms as Txteagle and Amazon's Mobile Turk includes the rural US, India, and sub-Saharan Africa (Scholz and Liu 17-18). This reach also extends into the homes and leisure time of culture workers in Europe and North America, a category that includes SuicideGirls models and members. The Internet makes this expansion possible both materially and ideologically.

Central to the ideology is the idea of the Internet as a "gift economy," ostensibly operating at a remove from the constraints of "physical distance," "money and politics" (Barbrook, cited in Terranova 36). But the "gift economy" exists neatly within the larger sphere of neoliberal capitalist economies, as well as the "profit-seeking, crowd-sourcing aspirations of both established and budget-conscious start-up media companies" (Gregg "Learning" 210). Under the logics of digital gift economies, like that of participatory cultures, the rewards of participation are not monetary; instead the benefits are said to be affective and communal. Once again, work is done for emotional self-fulfillment rather than for monetary gain.

PRECARITY, AFFECT & THE CURRENCY OF SELF-ESTEEM

The increasing precarity of employment has occurred hand-in-hand with this shift in the rewards of work. With economic insecurity has come an emphasis on employment as a calling and on the need to perform work on one's self in order to

attain this calling (McGee). This work on the self is framed in terms of self-

actualization, where fulfillment comes from work rather than from the leisure time

that one's employment bought in earlier decades of the industrial revolution

(Terranova 37). More and more work is now seen in the same terms as that of the

"starving artists" toiling over their craft in drafty Victorian garrets. This "creative

class" is ever-expanding as more and more people are encouraged to "pursue work

one loves irrespective of compensation" (McGee 41). Thus, work is no longer

performed in the name of individual sustenance but for personal fulfillment. Those

who labor (and those who playbor) no longer need money or benefits; what these

workers need is self-actualization (McGee 43).

Micki McGee relates this shift from earlier spiritual implications of the notion

of work as a calling to the popularization of psychologist Abraham Maslow's ideas

about taking up this calling in a spiritual vein via self-actualization. In Maslow's

"hierarchy of needs," "Psychotherapeutic notions of health and well-being were

conflated with spiritual values of saintliness or goodness, while the Protestant

religious imperative to pursue a calling was wedded to notions of mental health and

psychological well-being" (McGee 43). This is the model of work endorsed by

SuicideGirls, as well as in new media generally.

For SuicideGirls, the reward for participation in the site is often presented by

the site itself as increased self-esteem. The first SuicideGirls photo book includes

"some of [models'] words to explain who they are," excerpts in which they

frequently extol the increase in self-worth that accompanied their participation in

the site (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 11). For example, Annie describes feeling "more

confident, more secure, [...] more sexy, and more in tune with who I am" since becoming a SuicideGirls' model (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 115). Zeta, a model from Columbia, states, "[T]here aren't anybody like me and it is very hard for me to live here because of that and in SG I found so many girls like me with my same style and the same way to see life, this site has done a lot for my self-esteem" [sic] (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 155). These are seemingly the actual words, complete with grammatical errors, of specific SuicideGirls models. At the same time, their inclusion in a book produced by site management speaks to the ways in which the site itself wishes to promote the idea that modeling for SuicideGirls is about something other than monetary gain. In these examples, self-esteem, self-expression, and community are foregrounded as emotional benefits arising from models' participation.

The affective appeal of these types of flexible and autonomous work is not to be dismissed; these work arrangements provide individual benefits for some even as they structure acceptable employment choices for all. Many critics of new media labor point to the importance of personal autonomy in the digital economy, for good and ill (Gregg "Normalization"; Ross "New Geography"; Scholz and Liu; Terranova 37). One of the primary rationales for the adoption of flexible labor forms that can be performed outside of traditional workplaces is the potential to perform one's job out from underneath formal strictures and supervision (Gregg "Normalization" 290; Ross "New Geography" 36). This potential echoes the utopian values of alternative culture, discussed in the previous chapter, with its emphasis on individual creative autonomy operating outside the sphere of the corporate music industry, and by extension the possibilities of SuicideGirls as a community and a platform for

individual self expression. The site explicitly calls upon these possibilities for showcasing creative work, the implications of which I will discuss further in the Hopefuls section.

While this emphasis on personal creative autonomy does not take into account the scope of digital surveillance available to employers or workers' constant connectivity, its utopian dimensions remain vital. There is a tremendous sense of possibility in the idea of working conditions that can be shaped to fit the dimensions of every individual's life, especially in the face of pervasive economic precarity. Part-time and/or flexible work might allow time for other needs and interests, including community activities, travel, recreation, and caring for others. The emphasis on individual choice and autonomy in neoliberalism has been widely taken up precisely because of the ways it "exploits the credo that individuals actually have some power over their economic destinies," a belief that "can and should be shared by individuals in a vibrant work environment that is also protected from the rough justice of the market" (Ross "New Geography" 38). With this flexibility, however, comes an individualization of risk, with employment increasingly taking the form of short-term contracts. Freedom from the constraints of an office setting too often comes with little to no guarantee of secure employment nor benefits or other social security provisions in the face of age, disability, or caregiver responsibilities. Freedom is thus defined as mobility while working, never freedom from working (Gregg "Normalization" 290). Andrew Ross suggests that one way to provide a more equitable system might be through "a guaranteed income or social wage, decoupled from the circumstances of employment" (*Nice Work* 212).

But until such social programs are implemented, the self-fulfillment and autonomy of work under neoliberalism comes at a cost to many workers: "As the workplace became more inclusive, free or self-actualizing for employees, it became less just and equal in its provision of guarantees" ("New Geography" 35). In particular, this flexible labor is highly gendered; it fits neatly within dominant cultural norms about women's dual commitment to paid work and to domestic caregiving labor, such as child rearing and elder care (Gregg "Normalization").

THE FREE LABOR OF SUICIDEGIRLS HOPEFULS

Even sex work has begun to be viewed in terms of the benefits of its flexible scheduling, autonomy, and high pay:

> For women who are able to bring technological skill and experience to sex work, it is increasingly possible to work without third-party management, to conduct one's business with minimal interference from the criminal justice system, and to reap greater profits by honing one's sales pitch to a more elite and more specialized clientele. (Bernstein "Sex Work" 479)

The caveat, as with any entrepreneurial work, is that sex workers as individuals must willingly take on the associated risks along with the benefits. In this way, sex work becomes another form of the entrepreneurial labor so valued in the new economy of neoliberalism.

SuicideGirls too is discussed in terms of possibilities as a form of flexible labor. In keeping with the general conditions of free labor, these possibilities have

both positive and negative dimensions that incorporate capitalist imperatives as well as affective aspects. Following from SuicideGirls' invocation of the aesthetics and politics of alternative culture, the site can be understood as a space of DIY entrepreneurial possibility for its models. In the digital economy, DIY equals entrepreneurial. In this context, SuicideGirls' alternative culture emphasis translates into being a creative entrepreneur where risk is central to all activity. Thus, the risk of "exposing" oneself as a SuicideGirls model is justified as a risk worth taking because the site provides a platform that "will reach millions of people" for marketing the models' "projects, events or art" (SuicideGirls "Model (2007)"). As early as 2004, the site touted the "rewards outside of money" available to models, particularly significant since models were paid only $300 for each photoset accepted at the time (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2004"). The 2007 SuicideGirls Model application page further emphasizes the opportunities for "exposure" available by including a long list of other media in which SuicideGirls had been featured, including "music videos, tv shows, radio shows, film and music festivals, fashion shows, countless magazines and advertising campaigns" [sic].

For SuicideGirls site management, any risks to posing nude online are minimal in comparison to the potential benefits. "As for the charges of exploitation, she [Missy] said models get plenty of opportunities to promote their own bands and 'artistic endeavors'" (Dotinga). The opportunity to model for SuicideGirls is presented by the site as a way to gain exposure for models' creative pursuits and talents. This exposure, it is suggested, may lead to further opportunities for paid work. The logic here fits neatly with the changing labor conditions of the new media

economy where the provision of "free labor" is a necessary condition for participation online. In return, participants may reap affective rewards ranging from a sense of community belonging to increased self-esteem, in addition to potential future economic gain. But at what cost and to whom? What happens when the familiar cultural trope of the casting couch meets new media's reliance on free labor?

The risks and benefits of such exposure on SuicideGirls are exemplified in the site's Member Review section in which prospective SuicideGirls models, known as "Hopefuls," post photosets to be rated by site members. In the Member Review section, members are invited to "help us choose the sets that make it on the front page" (SuicideGirls "Hopefuls"). If a Hopeful's set is deemed popular enough, she may be chosen to become an official SuicideGirl, at which time she is paid for her photos.

The Hopefuls section was introduced in 2008, after the success of "Second Chance Sundays," a feature that allowed prospective models to post sets rejected by site management for a "second chance" at becoming a SuicideGirl if their sets received sufficient community approval (Rigel "New SG Model Guide"; Rigel "Second Chance"). In the "New SuicideGirls Model Guide" forum topic, Rigel, then the SuicideGirls model coordinator as well as a site model, announced that as of April 1, 2008, the site would introduce a new means of reviewing photoset submissions. Each prospective model is asked to submit photosets for "staff review," "member review" or both; however, the 2011 version of the Model FAQ states, "[W]e rarely purchase sets via Staff Review." (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2011") With this change,

the weekly Second Chance Sunday feature became a regular site section with attendant forums and groups. As of 2011, Member Review now showcases more than twice as many model Hopefuls than are officially designated SuicideGirls. At least two paid sets were to be posted to the front page of the site each day at the time of the formal introduction of the Hopefuls section (Rigel "New SG Model Guide"); as of 2011, current practice is to post a minimum of one paid "Set of the Day."

Among the relevant groups for Hopefuls are a private group restricted only to Hopefuls participants and a general Hopefuls group in which would-be Hopefuls can find additional information about the submission and selection process, and promote their sets once their photos are posted (SuicideGirls "Groups > SG Hopefuls > Home"). It is the latter group that consolidates the majority of official and unofficial information on how to become a SuicideGirl and which comprises the bulk of material for my analysis of Member Review practices. SuicideGirls also has a section for models' frequently asked questions (hereafter referred to as the Model FAQ) about how to submit a set to Member Review, linked prominently in the main thread in the Hopefuls public group as well as from the main model page, that provides considerable background on the application process. However, the bulk of information mentioned in the forums is not otherwise easily located on the site, making clear and concise requirements for participating as a model difficult to access for those not already familiar with the site. As danah boyd and Eszter Hargittai have noted in relation to SNS privacy settings, those users who are "least familiar with a service" are more vulnerable to "how companies choose to set or

adjust default privacy settings" ; in the case of SuicideGirls, it is likely that those

potential models who are least familiar with the way the site functions will have

difficulty accessing the information they may need to participate successfully as a

Hopeful, let alone as a paid SuicideGirls model.

Hopefuls exist in a category somewhere between models and members.

Those women who have submitted sets accepted for Member Review receive a pink

"Hopeful" tag on their profile page, similar to the "SuicideGirl" tag given to models

who have been paid for at least one photoset. Hopefuls also receive free

membership to the site for one year after their first set is accepted for Member

Review (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2011"). For each subsequent set placed in Member

Review, their membership is extended. Thus, unlike members, they do not pay to

access the site. Their access is similar to that of the lifetime membership given along

with first payment as an official SuicideGirl. However, because Hopefuls'

membership terms are for a fixed period, their access to the site, including to their

own images, is potentially restricted. If a Hopeful decides not to submit additional

photosets for Member Review, her images may remain on the site even as the model

loses access to most of the site's content. The site does make clear that Hopefuls may

remove their images after their photoset has appeared on the site for at least 90

days, and provides the model with the means to do so herself via a photo

management interface on the site, but many models complain in the forums that

they are not able to do so.

While their site membership is free, Hopefuls pay to participate in the site in

other ways. Models may have to pay to work with a photographer and/or a photo

editor even before their photoset is accepted for the Member Review process. In response to the Model FAQ query, "How much do I have to pay to get a set shot by a staff photographer?", the site indicates that prospective models are not required to pay for a photographer's services. But if a model chooses to have her photoset shot by a SuicideGirls staff photographer, the photographer is "allowed" to charge "their own rate for their time (shooting + prepping the set)" in a "private agreement between you and the photographer." The Model FAQ also indicates that staff photographers may refund some or all of this fee after receiving payment for their work from SuicideGirls—that is, when the model's photoset has been accepted to become a paid SuicideGirls set—but such arrangements are at the photographer's discretion (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2011" 9.62). Non-staff photographers are expressly prohibited from asking for payment from models; the Photographer FAQ states that "if you do so, we will never use you again" ("Photographer FAQ" 10.39). This provision is difficult to enforce, however, and Hopefuls forum comments indicate that many would-be models are unclear on these stipulations.

Rates of photographer payment are also unclear. According to the forum post announcing the New Model Guide of 2008, upon acceptance, both the model and the photographer receive $500. But a comment on that topic suggests that only SuicideGirls staff photographers were to be paid $500; other photographers receive a lower amount (Amina). This is borne out in the Photographer FAQ, which specifies that photographers earn $100 for each set posted to the front page of the site ("Photographer FAQ" 8.32). These discrepancies make it still more difficult for

prospective models to determine what amount staff and non-staff photographers

might charge or reimburse for their services.

Would-be models may also have to pay an additional fee to have photosets

edited, referred to as "photoshopping" after the industry standard Adobe Photoshop

software. The site provides detailed information for preparation and submission of

digital photo files for each set in the Photoshopper FAQ and Photographer FAQ as

well as part of a downloadable package. This download package includes extensive

guidelines on appropriate photo retouching and technical specifications as well as

the required SuicideGirls logos and fonts to be incorporated into each image, which

gives an indication of the scope of work expected by the site for each photoset

(SuicideGirls "Photoshopper FAQ" 1.2). According to the Photoshopper FAQ, the site

"can only pay you for photoshopping the set if the set is accepted and goes up on the

front page as the Set of the Day" ("Photoshopper FAQ" 1.1). As of 2011, payment for

photoshopping work is $100 in addition to the $100 photographer fee

("Photographer FAQ" 8.32).

However, whether any payment at all was to be given for photoshopping was

a matter of considerable confusion with the introduction of the new model guide in

2008. Rigel, the SuicideGirls model coordinator at the time, responded to several

queries about photoshopping and payment with the following explanation of the

site's practices (reproduced exactly as it appeared on the site):

> we can only pay for sets that we send out to photoshop.
>
> -if you send your set for staff and member review and we want to
> photoshop it, we will pay the photoshopper.
>
> -if you send your set to someone to photoshop before you submit it,

> we cannot pay them regardless of whether they are a staff photographer/photoshopper or not, or whether the set is accepted or not.
>
> -if it is you worked with a non staff photographer and they prepped the set, they can be paid for both the pictures and the photoshopping if the set is accepted.
>
> capeesh? ("Groups > SG Hopefuls > Sets In Member Review")

From Rigel's comment, it appears that the site may, at their discretion, provide photoshopping services internally or pay a photographer for doing so, but will not pay for third-party photoshopping. This explanation did little to shed light on the situation. A few comments later, someone asked, "so we should never pay a photographer but we should pay a photoshopper?" [sic] (Rizzo). The thread continued in this vein with several more queries about payment for specific photoshopping situations. It ended with a debate about whether models should learn how to photoshop their images themselves, in an effort to "save […] a few bones" (OroroMunroe). While models may indeed "save" the photoshopper fee by doing the work themselves, to do this is another form of free labor. Models must acquire the required software, learn the necessary skills, and follow the specifications set out in the Photoshopper FAQ. But, even after doing this work, they are not likely to be paid any additional amount for their photoshopping efforts, whereas a staff photographer would be able both to charge a fee to the model and to invoice SuicideGirls for that work upon acceptance of the set as Set of the Day. However, according to many commenters, photoshopping may increase the likelihood of a set's acceptance, and thus the model's chances of receiving payment (e.g. Dot; MetroGlamour). So models have considerable incentive to pay to have

their photographs taken and possibly to pay an additional fee for photoshopping in order to gain the coveted status of SuicideGirl.

Those Hopefuls who wish to be selected as official SuicideGirls and paid for their photosets must also wade through conflicting directives from SuicideGirls site management and representatives in determining how the selection process works as well as how best to improve their chances of selection. The Model FAQ from May 2008, shortly after the Member Review section was introduced, describes the selection process for photosets chosen for the front page: "Sets are chosen first and foremost for their ability to showcase your personality. They should be sexy, funny, unique and most importantly show the viewer what you are about" (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2008" 9.37). The FAQ further explains that sets are chosen on the basis of "quality over quantity," meaning, in this case, that popularity in terms of sheer number of comments on Member Review sets is not the sole criteria for selection. Rather, SuicideGirls may choose sets with "fewer, but more detailed and passionate responses from other models and photographers."

As of 2011, the Model FAQ specifies the criteria used to "choose what set to put up on the front page":

> Ratio of Loved It to Not For Me
>
> Ratio of # comments to time in member review
>
> Diversity of commenters
>
> Quality and length of comments

Feedback from The Council[6]

Feedback from the SG Photographers

Model activity on the site (blogs, comments, groups, etc.) (SuicideGirls

"Girls FAQ 2011" 8.46)

These criteria emphasize set popularity and more arbitrary qualities as determined

by the site's management or their chosen representatives. Since feedback from

SuicideGirls photographers is taken into account, working with an official site

photographer is an obvious means of increasing the visibility and appropriateness

of a model's photoset for selection as Set of the Day. But, as indicated previously,

Hopefuls may have to pay to work with these photographers. This social structuring

of participation in the site is similar to that which Angela McRobbie describes as

part of the extension of subcultural practices into the domain of work which she

terms "club sociality." "In this case the club culture question of 'are you on the guest

list?' is extended to recruitment and personnel, so that getting an interview for

contract creative work depends on informal knowledge and contacts, often

friendships" ("Clubs to Companies" 523). This dependence on networks of personal

relationships mirrors the significance of social network sites. It also neatly elides

issues of access and equity for SuicideGirls models.

Site participation is also a crucial means of increasing the visibility and

popularity of a Hopeful's set. A would-be model's involvement with the site was

deemed vital for selection as a SuicideGirl as early as 2004 (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ

2004"). This participation might include creating a promotional thread about one's

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[6] An invitation-only group that helps to select member review set winners (see SuicideGirls "The
Council").

set in the Hopefuls group, actively maintaining a site blog, and cultivating "friends" on the site. But this time and effort spent cultivating popularity and creating additional content for the site by promoting one's photoset, writing blog entries, posting additional photos and video, and participating in groups and forums is no guarantee of selection as a SuicideGirl. Nor is there a clear time period in which a model's photo set may be chosen as Set of the Day. As one SuicideGirl wrote in the forum, "There is no definite time or waiting period, a hopeful will become a suicide girl when and **IF** staff buy their set, and sometimes staff buy a set quickly, sometimes they never buy it at all" [sic] (Scotty). Thus Hopefuls must continue to put time and effort into participating in the SuicideGirls community indefinitely in order to perhaps be chosen as Set of the Day from amongst the several thousand other women whose pictures appear in section.

These practices to compel continued participation in the site have expanded to include even those SuicideGirls models whose photosets have been chosen as Set of the Day—and who have been paid for that initial set. These models now submit additional sets for consideration through the same process as those of Hopefuls. There is even as separate group in which SuicideGirls can spotlight their sets in Member Review (SuicideGirls "Groups > SG Sets in Member Review"). While these photosets may be submitted for Staff Review, the majority of all sets are chosen via the Member Review section. McRobbie points out how forms of "club sociality" have become prerequisites for employment, where "an incredible amount of time must be invested in social contacts and networking because to be out of the loop could mean being out of a job," or, in the case of SuicideGirls, out of the running for even

the possibility for paid work ("Everyone is Creative" 195). In the "democratic" realm of user-driven content on SuicideGirls.com, neither site participation nor the title of SuicideGirl is a guarantee of paid work from the site.

The Hopefuls section functions as a kind of SuicideGirls internship. As I have argued, unwaged labor is increasingly seen as necessary prerequisite to the *possibility* of paid labor. But exposure on SuicideGirls is taken to a literal extreme; Hopefuls pose in the nude for photosets in order to be recognized for other skills and abilities besides their bodies. The practices of submitting photosets through the Member Review section are the furthest extension of free labor for SuicideGirls.com. These practices illustrate the issues I have raised about social networking content production and new media play-bor, with the additional consideration of porn as a form of free labor within this milieu.

New media porn thus must be considered as a form of creative labor that entails specific types of gendered sexual and emotional labor. How does posing for porn build the kinds of skills related to employability that are said to be so central to participatory culture and produsage? Since many, if not most, SuicideGirls Hopefuls participate in the site for reasons other than to build a career in the porn industry, what benefits might they derive from this literal exposure? How might they understand the risks they are taking in exchange for these benefits? The next chapter explores those SuicideGirls' policies and practices that were the subject of extensive criticisms by the site's models and others and their implications for models' labor.

CHAPTER 4: The Limits and Possibilities of SuicideGirls as a Social Media Community

This chapter explores SuicideGirls' treatment of its models and their responses to this treatment. I analyze the site's policies and practices alongside complaints made by SuicideGirls models about the terms of their contracts and their working conditions. In many ways, SuicideGirls' business practices are similar to those of other types of social media (particularly Facebook), about which much has been written, by users, media scholars, and journalists. These critiques of new media labor practices have become part of how people understand social network sites (SNS) in general and SuicideGirls in particular. Participants are very aware of their role as "produsers" and are critical of the capitalist economic structures of the Internet (Jenkins "Why Participatory Culture"). These criticisms have become part of the dialogue of the site and a means of building community and solidarity amongst models, both within and outside SuicideGirls' platform. The particulars of criticisms of SuicideGirls are also rooted in the site's melding of "alternative" rhetoric with social networking.

According to danah boyd & Nicole Ellison, much of the scholarship on SNS focuses on "impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structure, online/offline connections, and privacy issues." Notably, each of these topics foregrounds users' activity on SNS. As David Beer points out, in boyd & Ellison's emphasis on users, "capitalism becomes this analytic given, present in part in the descriptions, but remaining for the large part absent, especially in the

analysis" ("Social network(ing)" 524). Even Henry Jenkins has acknowledged the

limitations of his earlier work on participatory culture in light of Web 2.0's

monetization of participatory culture. While he still maintains that participatory

culture has value, he advises that "[t]he trick…is to see participatory culture as

having some real potentials for grassroots empowerment even as we maintain a

healthy skepticism towards specific web 2.0 practices which restrain rather than

enable meaningful participation" (Jenkins "Why Participatory Culture"). Certainly

this is true of SuicideGirls. This potential for solidarity building and organizing for

change exists even within its highly monetized social network porn context; at the

same time, corporate ownership limits those possibilities. It follows from this that

the limitations of corporate capitalism be considered in any thoroughgoing analysis

of SNS. This chapter details key issues around which criticism of SuicideGirls' labor

practices have coalesced and the ways that social networking has enabled and

curtailed such criticisms, concluding with an example of how SuicideGirls' policing

of content became a way for models to exercise autonomy over their working

conditions.

CRITICISM OF/ON SOCIAL NETWORK SITES

Increasingly, for users, "SNS are already a part of how they live and a part of

how they research" the activities of other users (Beer "Social network(ing)" 523).

Criticism of SNS has become another vital part of the experience of using these types

of sites. Of particular concern to users are issues of privacy and intellectual

property, both of which bear directly on users' labor and employment. Social

network sites are inherently sites of communication and connection shaped by the "persistence," "replicability," "scalability," and "searchability" of bits, which danah boyd refers to as the "structural affordances of networked publics" ("Social Network Sites as Networked Publics" 46). These affordances are what differentiate SNS from other types of networked publics. The particular structures and affordances of SNS create the conditions that enable critique—by giving people a platform to communicate and form community online—and simultaneously provide SNS with the power to clamp down on those conversations, limiting them particularly through their user agreements and practices.

SuicideGirls, like all SNS, uses community and communication as a draw for members. SNS research on the content of exchanges amongst users deals primarily with the mundane nature of most exchanges: social pleasantries that serve a "social grooming" function (boyd "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics" 45). These analyses rarely point to the significance of meta-commentary on SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, and SuicideGirls: talk *about* SNS comprises a large part of SNS exchanges. Effectively, many SNS create conditions for people to share issues and problems with the site on the site itself, while at the same time limiting acceptable content through their user agreements and Terms of Service (TOS).

As SNS users have increasingly come to understand social network sites' corporate ownership of content and platform as a matter of concern, they have taken to those sites to discuss issues concerning site policies and usage. Although awareness of corporate ownership doesn't necessarily stop their use of any particular site, it may limit or alter the way people use SNS, just as SNS policies may

limit what can be discussed on such sites. While conventional wisdom holds that

SNS users are unaware of and/or unconcerned with privacy issues, danah boyd &

Eszther Hargittai's research indicates that this is not the case. The multiple well-

publicized changes to Facebook's privacy policy have caused many users, from the

most avid to those who rarely engage with the site, to alter their individual privacy

settings.

> Overall, our data show that far from being nonchalant and
>
> unconcerned about privacy matters, the majority of young adult users
>
> of Facebook are engaged with managing their privacy settings on the
>
> site at least to some extent. The frequency with which they adjust
>
> their settings and their confidence in doing so may vary, but most
>
> report modifying their settings. (boyd and Hargittai)

While these privacy issues have been extensively covered by journalists, Facebook

users also post and re-post status updates on Facebook explaining how to limit the

potential privacy violations resulting from newly introduced features such as Social

Ads and Beacon (the latter of which was the subject of a class-action settlement

relating to privacy issues), as well as circulating this information on other SNS such

as Twitter. The widespread dissemination of such privacy concerns via Facebook

itself is a function of the persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability of

SNS.

CRITICISM AND COMMUNITY AMONG SUICIDEGIRLS MODELS

This interest in using SNS to share information and discuss concerns over the practices of those same SNS is also shared by SuicideGirls' models and participants, many of whom have been very visible in voicing their concerns about the site's treatment of its models, in addition to the concern with privacy and intellectual property issues common to users of many different types of SNS. For SuicideGirls participants, the impulse to engage in site criticism is also rooted in the conjunction of the site's form and content, the merging of social networking and empowered alternative porn. It is a crucial aspect of the site, but one always structured—and limited—by the site's corporate ownership. Through enforcement of the site's Terms of Service, SuicideGirls' management can and do limit what kinds of criticism are acceptable within the site. Thus, this extensive criticism of SuicideGirls has come to exist both within the site itself and on other SNS such as LiveJournal and Myspace.

Since the first large-scale media coverage of SuicideGirls' labor practices in 2005, the visibility of this criticism has become part of what interests people in SuicideGirls. Such controversies are mentioned prominently on the site's Wikipedia entry and have appeared there in one form or another since the events of September 2005 ("SG Wikipedia 2011"; "SG Wikipedia 2005"). The SuicideGirls Wikipedia entry also links to the sgirls LiveJournal community under the heading "Critics" ("SG Wikipedia 2011"). This group bills itself as "the OPEN forum for LJ members to discuss SG" ("sgirls - Community Profile"). The group description is careful to avoid characterizing itself as strictly for criticism of SuicideGirls, explicitly stating: "We are not anti-SG. Yes, this group includes many expats of the site; however, we aren't

here to blast them out of the water. We're here to talk about whatever you may have to say about either the site itself, or anything related or peripheral to it." But, despite their disclaimers, the sgirls LiveJournal community is one of the main sources for information critical of SuicideGirls.

Because of the visibility of criticism of the SuicideGirls site, many prospective models ask online whether they should model for SuicideGirls. The response to such queries on sgirls, as well as elsewhere online, is almost always a sharp "No." To justify this answer, people frequently point to the site's unethical practices such as reselling models' images to other porn sites, SuicideGirls' highly restrictive non-competition clauses, and the difficulty of becoming a paid model from amongst the thousands of Hopefuls on the site. Prospective models are even warned in the SuicideGirls' Model FAQ that their participation may have risks, with the question: "If my employer / family / friend finds out, will you take down my pictures?" (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2011" 11.71). The FAQ response reads, in part: "If you are frightened of someone finding out, please do not apply to be a SuicideGirl. It's hard to undo being naked on the internet" (SuicideGirls "Girls FAQ 2011" 11.71). In the Hopefuls Group, the primary post highlighting useful information for would-be models includes a link to a post on the possible risks of modeling for the site for those models in, or interested in, certain careers, particularly teaching or other positions dealing with children (Rigel "Read Before Posting"). These conversations indicate that women are thinking about the implications of making themselves visible online, and that current and prospective SuicideGirls models are actively involved in determining the stakes for themselves in doing this kind of work.

Just as in boyd & Hargittai's research, young women contemplating participation in SuicideGirls' social network porn actively consider privacy, particularly implications for their future employment. They discuss the possibility that future employers, family members, or romantic partners may discover images of their nude bodies on SuicideGirls and whether the risk of such a discovery is worthwhile. That these privacy concerns are raised largely around issues of labor and employment highlights important shifts in ideas about selfhood and employment. There is little presumption of a separate sphere of private life away from the eyes of employers or even that one's laboring self might be distinct from one's "personal" self. SNS users' awareness of the increasingly public nature of SNS interactions shapes how they use these sites. In their discussion of previous scholarship on SNS, boyd & Ellison note that a key area of inquiry has focused on "impression management" by users of SNS. SNS users frequently manage their participation in order to present a particular kind of desirable presence, including for prospective employers. Those designated as "Friends provide context by offering users an imagined audience to guide behavioral norms" (boyd and Ellison).[7] At the same time, studies suggest that SNS users are concerned about "social privacy," especially from authority figures "who h[o]ld immediate power over them" (a category likely to include employers) (boyd and Hargittai). Thus, it is crucial to include employers as part of the imagined audience to which SNS users address their participation; employers and would-be employers play a significant role in

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[7] boyd & Ellison capitalize "Friend" to distinguish the list of social connections on SNS from other social meanings of the word "friend," a convention I follow as well, albeit with the acknowledgement that these categories frequently overlap (See Beer "Social network(ing)" for discussion of this overlap).

how individuals police their behavior online, even if those employers are not included as Friends on a particular SNS.

Since SNS users' imagined audiences include prospective employers, Angela McRobbie's concept of "club sociality"—with attendant demands that those working in creative sectors be endlessly "on" and attuned to the performative aspects of networking—is especially relevant with the expansion of SNS. McRobbie describes "network activity" as "geared towards being sociable and pleasing and endlessly self promoting in order to keep all opportunities open" ("Re-thinking"). For SuicideGirls models and Hopefuls whose aim is to be selected for paid photosets, the need to network with an eye toward potential employers is particularly acute. They may shape their participation explicitly to gain popularity and receive favorable notice from SuicideGirls' staff. This implicit pressure to present an image that appeals to SuicideGirls' management shapes the possibilities for members to criticize the site as much as does the corporate ownership of SNS. As McRobbie argues, the focus on networking as a strategy for obtaining paid work "has meant de-politicisation and lack of attention to blocks to access on the basis of gender (and maternity) and race and ethnicity" ("Re-thinking").

While rhetoric about SNS privacy issues is often framed in terms of "gender–neutral messages, such as the potential risk of losing a job," being visible online has specifically gendered dimensions (boyd and Hargittai); as such, issues like online privacy play out differently for women than for men. In boyd & Hargittai's study, "women are much more likely to have changed their Facebook privacy settings and to have done so multiple times, suggesting that women are more actively seeking to

manage privacy," perhaps, as the authors suggest, because women are inculcated with cultural beliefs about the risks to personal safety in online activities. SuicideGirls models and would-be models are also very concerned with issues of privacy and personal safety, both online and off, because the visibility of their nude bodies on the site may make them targets for stalking and harassment. At the same time that their exposure at SNS may put them at risk, they are also able to use the site's SNS features to strategize around these issues.

These discussions of employment, safety, and privacy—as structured by larger social discourses as they are—represent some of the more liberatory, or at least communal, possibilities for participation in SuicideGirls' social network porn site. Angela McRobbie has argued that part of the neoliberal turn of the creative economy is the lessening of conditions for workplace organizing, since endless networking and contract-based employment mean that "there is little time, few existing mechanisms for organization, and anyway no fixed workplace for a workplace politics to develop" (McRobbie "Clubs to Companies" 519). Despite the many limitations in a digital economy characterized by free labor done for SNS, SuicideGirls presents some possibilities for this kind of solidarity building, however constrained. The community aspects of SNS allow for SuicideGirls models to find others who are dealing with similar issues and grievances.

Models can, and do, use SuicideGirls as well as other SNS to talk about the conditions of working with and for the site. The ability to post and dissect documents, particularly individual contracts, is one of the tangible examples of new possibilities for community and solidarity available to those whose labor takes place

outside traditional workplaces, like those who model for SuicideGirls. Models'

criticisms of SuicideGirls coalesce around labor issues and working conditions in

large part because they can compare these documents that govern their working

conditions much more easily than they can be made aware of the individual

interactions between other site models and SuicideGirls management and

photographers.

Site administrators can severely limit these kinds of exchanges on the site

itself by censoring critical comments made by members and models. Some actions,

such as removing forum posts or blog entries with content critical of SuicideGirls'

practices may have a certain visibility, but it can be difficult to determine at whose

behest those items were removed and for precisely what reasons. While these

SuicideGirls' posts and entries were frequently preserved via screen captures and

posted elsewhere on the internet, these kinds of actions on the part of SuicideGirls'

management are, in general, difficult to track without scrupulous attention to a wide

swath of the very large and complex scope of the site. However, by comparing

contracts, models had concrete evidence of the terms governing the conditions of

others' work for the site as well as their own, despite the physical distance

separating them from each other and from SuicideGirls headquarters and staff, and

other often invisible aspects of their individual working relationships with the site.

Through the Groups feature, members of the SuicideGirls model community

also discuss tips and tactics regarding safety and business practices. In a Hopefuls

forum post from 2004, a SuicideGirl warned other would-be models about her

experiences with a photographer who was subsequently charged with murder: "As

much as we may want to believe that nude modeling is always about art and beauty, it can be a dangerous business. Do not fall into the trap of feeling invulnerable" (Morgan). This post, which remains pinned near the top of all topics in the SG Hopefuls group, has led to an on-going discussion about the practice of escorts accompanying models on photoshoots. These discussions of tactics and strategies to increase physical safety are similar to ways that other kinds of sex workers also share information both online and through in-person exchanges (Blissbomb). SuicideGirls' models ability to use SNS features to connect with one another "facilitat[es] community and camaraderie amongst individuals who might otherwise be perceived (and perceive themselves) as engaging in discreditable activity" (Bernstein "Sex Work" 479).

As McRobbie notes, it is from these "embryonic" possibilities that new forms of solidarity and critique may emerge, although we may not be able to recognize them based on current models of labor organizing. For example, models of union organizing developed in the middle of the twentieth century may not be identically applied to workers whose labor takes place within such dispersed domains as those of SuicideGirls' models. But the seeds for critique are available in the very self-reflexivity that activities such as the constant openness to possibilities that being a SuicideGirls Hopeful entail (McRobbie "Everyone is Creative" 198). It is in models' criticisms of SuicideGirls that these seeds are made most visible. This criticism is based in the community developed on SuicideGirls' own site and expands with the "persistence," "replicability," "scalability," and "searchability" of bits on the internet, where documents like contracts and court proceedings, news coverage, and

personal statements persist, are replicated and made searchable and scalable to anyone who Googles "Should I model for SuicideGirls?" In order to understand how these criticisms were made visible, it is important to understand the mechanisms that SuicideGirls' site administrators use to limit certain kinds of participation in the site.

LIMITING CRITIQUE THROUGH SUICIDEGIRLS' POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Criticism of SuicideGirls took place most visibly between 2005 and 2008, outside the site as much as via its social network features. In large part, models and others who took issue with site practices in this period did so in forums outside SuicideGirls because of systematic efforts to suppress criticism by SuicideGirls' site management. While models were able to use the site's Groups feature to discuss some issues related to working conditions, such as model safety and relationships with freelance photographers, other issues that more directly implicated the site proved more contentious. Complaints about contract terms, working conditions related to site practices, and SuicideGirls' policy changes were among the issues subject to policing by SuicideGirls staff.

SuicideGirls provides the framework for people to connect, communicate, criticize, and organize, but site management ultimately controls all content posted to the site in accordance with its Terms of Service (TOS). The TOS, in conjunction with site design, is the architecture of all social network sites, fundamentally shaping social interaction (Tufekci "Google Buzz"). The Suicide Girls' TOS governs site content, conduct, privacy and legal provisions related to age, among other

topics. Content is defined in the TOS to include "all data, text, software, music,

sound, photographs, graphics, video, messages or other information or materials of

any kind" (SuicideGirls "Legal 2006"). As stated clearly in the TOS, this content is not

owned by SuicideGirls. At the same time, when a model or member uses SuicideGirls

to transmit content of any kind, the site is automatically granted full rights to the

use of this content:

> [A] User who successfully Transmits Content to the Site grants to
>
> SuicideGirls a perpetual, world-wide, royalty free, non-exclusive,
>
> irrevocable and fully sublicensable license to use, distribute,
>
> reproduce, modify, adapt, publish, translate, publicly perform and
>
> publicly display any or all Content so Transmitted and to incorporate
>
> such Content into other works. (SuicideGirls "Legal 2006")

In effect, SuicideGirls' management may use this content for virtually any purpose

and do not owe any royalties to the creators of this content. The only exception is in

the case of those models who have been paid for photo sets; their work is governed

by a separate Model Contract. Under this section of the TOS, it is made very clear

that models and members produce content (other than paid photosets) as a form of

free labor for the site, just as they do for other SNS where such language is not

atypical.[8]

Since SuicideGirls retains a license to use this content, but not ownership of

it, the section on copyright in the TOS raises questions about the extent of

SuicideGirls' control over other uses of content submitted to the site. The TOS states

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[8] See York for Facebook's similar language, adopted in 2009 (7).

that, with the exception of email, "all Content and Services on the Site are protected by federal copyright laws and are protected under treaty provisions and worldwide copyright laws" (SuicideGirls "Legal 2006"). Third parties, including users, are prohibited from making use of site content through reproduction, copying, editing, publication, transmission, or downloading "without the prior written consent and permission of SuicideGirls." But if users retain ownership of the content they submit to the site, why would they then be required to ask permission of SuicideGirls for use of their own content? There is no mechanism, however, for users to raise such concerns; participation in the site, and thus in the criticism of the site that takes place within SuicideGirls' platform, is contingent on pressing the "I Accept" button that signals agreement with the entirety of the Terms of Service. While this clause of the TOS may or may not be legally valid or enforceable, it is but one indication of the extent to which SuicideGirls management attempts to control users and the content they produce.

Alongside this license to use content, SuicideGirls reserves the right to terminate a users' access to the site and/or to remove content for any reason. Notably, "SuicideGirls or its designee has the right (but not the obligation) in its sole discretion to refuse, move or delete any Content that is Transmitted onto or made available via the Site" (SuicideGirls "Legal 2006"). Thus, in keeping with site practices, any content may be removed at any time and for any reason, with no stated process for appeal of this action. But SuicideGirls management is not obliged to remove content should, for example, a model no longer wish her photos to appear on the site (a point which is also spelled out in both the Model FAQ and in the Model

Contract). SuicideGirls management can also terminate users' access to the site without notice, discarding or keeping the terminated user's content at their discretion, again with no opportunity appeal, nor any discussion of how such decisions are made. Taken together, these clauses of the TOS give SuicideGirls' management sweeping power to remove all forms of site content, including blog entries and forum posts, thereby curtail dissenting opinions and criticism.

The extent of control over content and access spelled out in the TOS is elaborated elsewhere on the site. While it is unlikely that most people read the entirety of SuicideGirls' Terms of Service, the site's policies regarding content also include "any other guidelines, rules or notices posted elsewhere on the Site, including, without limitation and by way of example only, information included in the part of the Site called 'THE FAQ', 'Hookup' or 'Groups'" (SuicideGirls "Legal 2006"). Any site user who accesses or uses any part of SuicideGirls automatically agrees with all such terms and conditions, wherever posted to the site. Given the byzantine nature of SuicideGirls' site infrastructure, it is extremely difficult to track these policies or any changes to them.

The SuicideGirls Help FAQ elaborates on some of these policies in an area of the site that is perhaps more likely to be encountered by users. While the FAQ section heading "Your Account: Passwords and Account Settings" does not clearly reflect the topic of acceptable site behavior and content that is included here, this section clarifies the TOS in a relatively accessible location linked from the front page of the site. The section answers questions relating to acceptable speech and site usage such as: "What kind of behavior can get my account suspended?" and "I think

black people are stupid. I think the Jews are trying to take over the world. Can I

espouse those viewpoints on your site?" (SuicideGirls "Help FAQ" 4.5-4.6). The FAQ

explicitly states that violation of SuicideGirls' Terms of Service will result in account

suspension, as "[h]aving a public profile that allows you to the post to the boards is a

right that is very easily lost" (SuicideGirls "Help FAQ" 4.5). On the topic of acceptable

speech, the FAQ elaborates at considerable length:

> Freedom of Speech does not apply to posting on SuicideGirls. We are a
>
> private club and may remove you as a member of our club for any
>
> number of idiotic statements, including but not limited to: sexist
>
> statements, racist statements, conspiracy theories, hurtful remarks,
>
> threats of violence, demands upon the staff or members, delibrate
>
> lieing [sic], attacks upon the staff, just good old fashioned idiocy.
>
> (SuicideGirls "Help FAQ" 4.6)

This list of prohibited content is similar in many respects to that of other social

media platforms' TOS (York 6). An obvious difference is that SuicideGirls does not

prohibit obscene or pornographic material. The explicit mention of "demands" and

"attacks" on staff is also atypical, giving SuicideGirls' management wide latitude in

policing criticism directed at the site, which could easily be interpreted as an attack

its staff as they are the ones who set and enforce site policies.

The FAQ response continues, directing those users who question these rules'

limits to freedom of speech to John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. Mill's text is invoked as

"a critically important exploration on the ethics of tolerating opinions that you find

repugnant and what a private citizen is obligated to do in the face of speech they

disagree with" (SuicideGirls "Help FAQ" 4.6). This defense of SuicideGirls' legal right

to restrict speech on the site is quite eloquent and intellectually grounded, in

marked contrast to the to the language used in the FAQ about appeals to any such

decisions by site management.

Should members violate the SuicideGirls' TOS, resulting in removal of content

or even account termination, they have no recourse in disputing these decisions. In

an earlier section of the Help FAQ, site management makes SuicideGirls' position on

appeals unilaterally clear. To the question, "The staff wasn't fair to me, who can I

make an appeal to?", the following response is posted: "No one. Whining about

things not being fair is for grade school kids and college professors. Those of us who

live in the real world think you should shut up and move on" (SuicideGirls "Help

FAQ" 1.3). So SuicideGirls' management justifies their restrictive policies with

classical political philosophy, but those who further question how these policies are

enforced are petty, overly intellectual complainers at remove from everyday life.

The tone of these statements gives a sense of SuicideGirls management's approach

to dealing with users.

LIMITATIONS OF THE DIGITAL QUASI-PUBLIC SPHERE

Other social media sites may be more polite in their policy statements, but

SuicideGirls' lack of an appeals process is not unique. In her analysis of several

major social media platforms' varying policies and practices for regulating content,

Jillian C. York describes both Facebook and Flickr as lacking clear appeals processes

to contest account suspensions. She finds that YouTube, Blogger, and Twitter have

more explicit policies and are more responsive to user complaints. These sites'

Terms of Service agreements, like that of SuicideGirls, provide legal protection for

restricting users' speech and limiting their access. There is no comparable legal

requirement for transparency or accountability to users of such sites. As a private

entity, SuicideGirls may restrict speech and deny access to users, as spelled out very

clearly in the Help FAQ and in the site's TOS, and is legally protected in doing so.

In its legal status as a private, US-based corporation not unilaterally

obligated to protect freedom of speech or rights of assembly, SuicideGirls might be

considered similarly to the physical space of a mall. Under US case law, the First

Amendment does not apply to "private actors" such as mall owners and

management; thus there is no federal Constitutional guarantee of access or free

speech in these private spaces. At the same time, "the Supreme Court has ruled that

states may interpret their constitutions' free speech and petition provisions more

broadly than that of the federal Constitution" (Kang and Cuff 123, note 93). So there

is legal precedent preventing private entities like malls from prohibiting speech

entirely. While these actions may be legal, depending on jurisdiction, whether they

are ethical is another matter.

Social media participants as well as social media management frequently

argue that those who take issue with restrictive TOS should "leave if [they] don't like

it." There are, however, limits to this individualist solution. On social network sites

like Facebook, the "leave if you don't like it" approach, as Zeynep Tufekci has noted,

fails to take into account the ways in which the value—to both the user and to the

SNS—of users' content is inextricably liked to networked relationships on that

specific site ("Facebook Privatization"). These relationships are what make a social network site as pervasive as Facebook a "social utility" as much as a form of social media (boyd "Facebook is a utility").

If Facebook is a type of public utility similar to that of the water or electric companies, what is SuicideGirls? Unlike Facebook, SuicideGirls is not free to join. Nor is SuicideGirls the near-ubiquitous, essential service that many feel Facebook to be (boyd "Facebook is a utility"). How should users understand their relationship to SuicideGirls? What are the implications for those who leave in protest over the control granted to SuicideGirls in the TOS or for those whose access to the site is blocked? When leaving the site may mean losing access to both the social relationships and content they have developed, including, in many cases, nude photographs of themselves, the implications of such acts have different stakes than leaving a site like Facebook. Leaving, for SuicideGirls' models, might be the cleverest way to counter the control exercised over them by site management. Therein lies one of the possibilities of an expanded understanding of the "digital quasi-public sphere.

POSSIBILTIES OF THE DIGITAL QUASI-PUBLIC SPHERE

One of the major issues with social networking as a digital public sphere is that it largely takes place within privately owned platforms, in effect a "quasi-public sphere" (York 3). The digital quasi-public sphere functions similarly to how legal scholar Jerry Kang and architect Dana Cuff's characterize the contemporary public sphere. Kang and Cuff locate the public sphere as much in privately owned sites

such as shopping malls and in interstitial spaces like "the space between the front porch and the sidewalk, the shop window, the farmers' market, and the private school playground" as in purely publicly owned spaces (118). They argue that the idealized public sphere may not exist as such; as Michael Warner has argued in his book *Publics and Counterpublics*, it may never have. But at the same time, Kang and Cuff posit that the mall "holds forth the constant possibility of reinvention and reconstruction" that can make it "more or less like an ideal public sphere" (120). Social network sites have similar potential as spaces that are both privately owned and an extension of the public sphere. In the case of SuicideGirls, site users may be limited in what they can express on the site, but the site remains a platform for these users to connect and then take their concerns elsewhere in the digital public sphere.

The shifting of these conversations between and among a range of digital sources—from SuicideGirls to social network sites like MySpace and LiveJournal, feminist blogs and porn industry trade publications, to technology media outlets and alternative weeklies and back again—suggests that no single social media platform holds its users captive. SuicideGirls is not a closed public sphere; there are other digital platforms and media outlets to sustain and amplify its users' critiques. And sometimes models simply leave the site, whether to set up their own solo porn sites or to move on to other, less visible, activities.

SuicideGirls' management exercises control and enforce site policies through specific, often invisible, practices. On the site itself, criticisms were frequently removed, as documented extensively in the sgirls community on the LiveJournal

blogging and social network site. Announcements indicating changes to site policy were not always open to comment; at other times, comment threads were closed or critical comments deleted as soon as criticisms emerged (e.g. Wheaton). Posting blog entries and comments critical to the site eventually became a tactic used by models who sought to sever their relationship with the site, and presumably to end any contractual obligations to SuicideGirls (with the exception of non-competition clauses).

The documentation of the otherwise invisible actions taken by SuicideGirls site administrators became an important part of the dialogue about SuicideGirls outside the site, and provided another means of creating a sense of collective grievance out of what might have been seen as individual actions taken against a particular model. These efforts to make SuicideGirls' business practices visible through networked flows of information online, as well as direct appeals to journalists at a key moment, resulted in media coverage of these criticisms and the actions taken by models in protest of their working conditions. The flows and disruptions of information critical of SuicideGirls' practices between the site itself and outside sites were most in evidence in relation to the publicity surrounding model departures in 2005. This coverage was part of SuicideGirls models' strategy to "leave if they didn't like" their working conditions.

"LEAVE IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT" IN ACTION

Some models do question their working conditions and how the site fails to deliver on what they perhaps misread as a promise of empowerment and of

fairness. In a word, what SG seemed to promise was difference from those "dirty"

porn sites that Missy and Sean were so careful to distance themselves from in their

public statements both on the site itself and in interviews (see Wheaton; Madden

respectively). In 2005, over thirty SuicideGirls models made good on the call by

critics of various social media's Terms of Service to "leave if you don't like it" and

they did so to very different ends than those who leave other social networking sites

like Facebook. Because Facebook serves such a central role in people's social lives,

leaving Facebook is seen by many media critics as cutting oneself off from a flawed

but necessary social utility, likening leaving Facebook to leaving a non-optional

public utility like a electricity provider (e.g. Tufekci "Facebook, Network

Externalities"; boyd "Facebook is a utility"). Instead of leaving such sites over their

Terms of Service, such scholars call for changes in Facebook's user policies.

SuicideGirls is not a necessary site in the same way and models who leave do so

because they recognize the site as an employer who does not treat them

appropriately. These models left SuicideGirls in protest over the unfair treatment by

the site's management, particularly what the models understood to be misogynistic

and sexually harassing behavior from site founder Sean "Spooky" Suhl. Models like

Jennifer Caravella, known as Sicily on the site, claimed that "SG is not a feminist-

empowered site" and described Suhl as a "raving misogynist" (quoted in Hopper and

Shepherd 80).

Because the models departed en masse, their collective complaint had weight

enough for the media to pay attention. The models' action was covered in a variety

of places, primarily tech-oriented media outlets like *Wired*, music magazines that

covered alternative culture like *Spin,* and alternative weeklies like the *Boston Phoenix* (Dotinga; Hopper and Shepherd; Fulton). Both models and SuicideGirls' management were interviewed for these articles. The site's publicist issued a statement to media outlets inquiring about models' departures: "Despite our best efforts we are not always able to meet the individual needs of each and every model. We recently parted ways with several of the SuicideGirls for various reasons. We feel saddened by their accusations and wish them well in future" (quoted in Fulton). Missy Suicide stated that the models' beefs were "rumors and lies" spread by "a few girls" and defended the site's practices as satisfying to the vast majority of models (Dotinga). Management, in effect, tried to downplay these departures as the actions of a few individual "disgruntled employees" (Hopper and Shepherd). But this wording is very telling—for perhaps the first time, SuicideGirls' models were recognized as employees. The weight of their collective departure forced site management to acknowledge its models as workers, even as they denied the veracity of models' complaints.

Knowing that site administrators removed material critical of SuicideGirls' policies and practices and would also revoke memberships for such comments, some models even began to criticize the site specifically to get themselves kicked off the site and released from contracts they found overly restrictive. Departing from the site in this way allowed dissatisfied models to exercise a clever sort of autonomy over their working conditions. They accomplished this maneuver by complaining visibly and repeatedly in their journals and in forum posts in order to get administrators to kick them off the site. Often their removals occurred with little to

no explanation, but models knew that their complaints were the reason for the revoking of their memberships; this strategy was often discussed on the sgirls LiveJournal community. These actions by site management were entirely permissible under the TOS. Effectively, models used the site's policies against the site itself for their own ends. This example gets at the complexity of the possibilities and limitations for models' solidarity and autonomy over their working conditions on SuicideGirls. These models used SuicideGirls own restrictive TOS as a weapon against the site, arguably an apt, and certainly a poetic, response to the way that these same Terms of Service were used as a weapon against models who criticized SuicideGirls' labor practices. In using SuicideGirls' policies and practices of policing content strategically in this way, models managed to exert control through the very means the site used to control them.

For SuicideGirls models who began to question the site's treatment of them in talking to others with similar complaints via the social networking features of the site, the sharing of such complaints led to a sense that something was wrong, that the site had broken certain promises. Part of the reason these models felt so wronged stemmed from the promise of the site as an alternative to typical porn, more communal and more celebratory of its models' "unique" beauty and points of view. The response of SuicideGirls' site administrators when models attempted to question the site's failure to live up to its promise was to curtail these discussions, which only added to models' sense of broken promises; SuicideGirls came to be seen as draconian in policing community rather than being the different, more accepting space that it purported to be.

These models left SuicideGirls largely because they were angry that the site was not in fact the "different" porn site that they had been led to expect though its "alternative" aesthetics, emphasis on community through social networking, and its framing as a pin-up, rather than porn, site. Rather than participating in a site where a communal ethos, women's empowerment, and respect for women as promoted through celebration of alternative beauty were the norm, their experiences reflected the same old labor exploitation of free labor in the digital economy, with the additional element of nudity. They wanted to get out of the onerous contracts imposed by SuicideGirls, to have their complaints addressed directly rather than censored, and to take part, whether as models or participants, in a woman-owned business that made good on its supposed promise of empowering women (Dotinga; Fulton). Instead they found SuicideGirls to be a site where models could not speak up about problems with their working conditions, where they were poorly paid and expected to put in an immense amount of time into the site in order to get additional paid work, however minimal that pay might be.

This then, is why the models left. They wanted respect, safe working conditions, and some control over their labor and associations. These are complaints common to a great many workers. For these models, the minor solidarity of leaving as a group developed though social networking and the gestures toward respect hinted at in the site's celebration of their "alternative beauty." Thus, SuicideGirls created the conditions for this critique and the actions that resulted from it, despite site management's efforts to curtail both through its Terms of Service and its enforcement. This is important because it highlights the interplay of

possibilities and limitations that characterize the digital public sphere. Social media platforms in particular allow for community creation and solidarity through the critique enabled by their form. SuicideGirls, however, is more than just a social media site. It is a porn site too. In the next chapter, I turn my attention toward the intersections of these economies of social media and the politics of porn as sex work.

CHAPTER 5: Not-Porn, Not-Work & the Catch-22 of SuicideGirls Models' Labor

As the previous chapters have shown, SuicideGirls is a site where the labor of new media porn models is constantly being obscured. This is accomplished by means of a complicated rhetorical mixture of not-porn morality, alternative politics and aesthetics, and the free labor of social networking—all lines of analysis which have been detailed in the preceding chapters. A significant task in this dissertation has been to make the labor of SuicideGirls models visible, in spite of the site's efforts to mask it. Here, I analyze how the various means discussed in previous chapters operate in relation to one another to both obscure models' labor and to allow for the eventual recognition of it by models themselves as well as by site management.

In this chapter, I begin by revisiting the sex positive and anti-porn feminist debates discussed in Chapter One in order to demonstrate how the categories of "good girls" and "bad girls" are constituted through SuicideGirls' revisionist reading of the pin-up's history as empowerment but not-porn. The site's marketing materials invoke this history as part of what distinguishes SuicideGirls from more explicit Internet porn. This not-porn framing also serves to position its models as morally good and at a remove from whore stigma because "[w]hores […] are something that women are not only supposed to not *be,* but also not be *mistaken* for" (Nagle 5, emphasis in original). In addition to making visible the site's moral claims that what it is selling is not-porn, I detail the ways in which the site positions the labor of its models as not-work through its associations with the purported

leisure pursuits of social media and through its use of the DIY ethos of alternative

subculture. SuicideGirls modeling as not-work and as not-porn is perhaps best

exemplified in the ways that modeling for the site has come to be seen as

empowering. Although each of these issues has been discussed in some detail in

previous chapters, here I knit these pieces together—much as the site itself does—

in order to make visible the conjunction of gender, labor, and morality in the

political economy that constitutes SuicideGirls models' labor.

WHORE STIGMA, OR HOW NOT-PORN BECOMES NOT-WORK

In both sex positive and anti-porn feminisms, there is an investment in

questions of women's agency, in particular whether or not women can freely make

choices about their sexual expression. As I discussed in Chapter 1, sex positive

feminist arguments emphasize women's ability to make individual choices without a

critical consideration of the structural conditions that determine what choices are

available to different groups of women. This emphasis on choice stems from the

ways in which, under neoliberalism, the ideal of equality for women has been taken

up in service of very different political ends. In this political climate, women's

differing social positions are subsumed under the presumption that such equality

has already been achieved, and that all women are equally positioned to make life

choices from amongst an endless array of possibilities. At the same time, the risks

and consequences of these choices are understood to be the sole responsibility of

each individual (Rentschler 258). Sex positive feminist emphasis on choice thus

ignores the political economic inequalities that shape the sorts of work open to

women of different class positions. I will address this issue of class in more detail

shortly.

Choice, then, is the central tenet of sex positive feminism. For some young

women, feminist porn performer Nina Hartley's claim that "an intelligent woman

could choose a job in the sex industry and not be a victim, but instead emerge even

stronger and more self-confident, with a feeling, even, of self-actualization" (qtd in

Strossen 186) has become a hallmark of sex positive feminism.

Hartley's stance, like that advocated by Rachel Kramer Bussel (discussed in

Chapter 1), is one that is, as other more nuanced readings of sex work have pointed

out, only partially true. Women make these kinds of "empowered" choices about the

expression of their sexuality within social hierarchies. As Nina K. Martin argues,

"While sex work can be an active and individual choice, this choice is constrained by

often rigid standards of beauty supported by the maintenance of racial and class-

based hierarchies " (36). The contradictions in these claims of empowerment are

most readily made visible through a feminist labor analysis that goes beyond the

issue of choice. If economic empowerment for women, through control of their own

labor conditions, is to be achieved, such an analysis needs to include not only a

discussion of empowerment (as this is linked to choice) for *some* women but also of

sex work as classed and gendered work from which porn is not to be excluded.

For SuicideGirls models, the desire for empowerment is discussed repeatedly

in terms of individual emotional benefits and choice. By the same token, sex-positive

rhetoric of sexual liberation is often tied to notions of women's autonomy to make

choices about the sexual display of their bodies from a place of individual pride and

power. But women's empowerment, whether through sexual liberation or a feeling of self-confidence, is about more than just choices with consequences, benefits, and risks for each individual. The lack of structural analysis in these choice-based arguments speaks to the neoliberal postfeminist present where an analysis of the context in which women live these individualized choices and risks is all but impossible. This analysis is impossible because individual choices and risks are the very terms in which popular understandings of feminist goals are themselves grounded (Gill 436). This is a situation that renders many of the arguments made regarding choice and consent tautological, at best. At the same time, individual emotional benefits have become the standard currency for achievement of these goals.

In contrast to sex-positive feminists' emphasis on equality and choice, anti-porn feminists in the 1980s as well as their contemporary counterparts, hold that women's lack of agency makes the choice to participate in sex work an always already false one. This is because many anti-porn feminists view as impossible any kind of consensual sexual relationship *for pay* between men and women. This stance too is lacking nuance. What is missing in the analyses of both sex positive and anti-porn feminisms is an understanding of women's labor and of how invisible moral codes linked to class position shape understandings of sex work. Gender, while absolutely necessary to feminist analyses, is thus only one of the analytic categories needed to make sense of women's economic choices. Another is labor.

Anti-porn feminists see women's participation in sex work as structured primarily by gender. The economic structures that also shape women's lives rarely

enter into these analyses. But if women's ability to make choices about their labor is not considered in light of of economic forces, one is left with a case of category confusion. Gender is not, and should not be, the be-all end-all of analytic category for feminist interrogations of porn, nor of sex work more generally. Morality—the social context that shapes dominant notions of goodness and badness—and economy—the material context that shapes women's labor—also need to be interrogated. Too often, it is an invisible moral code that structures allowable conversations and an equally invisible economic code that structures necessary understandings of women's work. In these binary framings, sex work is either morally liberating or it is morally stigmatized; economics does not fully enter into the analysis as that which actively constrains women's decisions about their labor. In the case of SuicideGirls, the rhetoric surrounding its models' activities is that of empowerment commodified as choice and self-confidence. This empowerment rhetoric contributes an implicit understanding of models' participation as that of "good girls" untainted by whore stigma.

The gendered aspect of this empowerment rhetoric is not the only factor contributing to SuicideGirls' construction of models' participation in the site as not-porn and not-work. The site's social media platform is a platform for labor as much as for play. These seemingly disparate aspects of the site, analyzed in conjunction with one another, come together to produce the gendered political economy of women's labor in SuicideGirls' new media sex work platform.

While what SuicideGirls models do is not likely to meet the approval of most anti-porn feminists, the site does draw on a rhetoric related to those very

arguments. Instead of understanding all women's position on the whore continuum, which is about labor and economics as much as it is about gender and sexuality, anti-porn feminist arguments see porn and prostitution as being primarily about the constraints of gender—prostitution as the buying and selling of women's bodies by men. Prostitution abolitionists would rather criminalize the lives of women who do sex work than allow them to earn money in a morally "bad" way, thus reinforcing whore stigma (Queen 129). As Carol Queen argues, the problem with these particular anti-porn feminist activist stance is that they see their task as removing women from working conditions tainted with whore stigma, rather than working to overcome whore stigma in the name of equitable working conditions for all women, no matter how stigmatized or bad girl their activities are (130). Such arguments do not interrogate the stigma around sex work and whore stigma's relationship to patriarchal conditions of gendered labor. They instead rely on the stigma in order to situate themselves as "saving" women from the horrors of the sex trade. Working conditions for many sex workers, including those who model for SuicideGirls, are indeed poor. But it is fundamentally impossible to dismantle sex work without dismantling whore stigma. Instead, what is needed are efforts to recognize sex workers as women and as workers deserving of rights, in order to transform the conditions of their labor.

Anti-porn feminist arguments do not, thus, examine closely enough the position of all women in a system of sexualized and gendered labor exchange. Or, as Jill Nagle explains, "compulsory virtue" is demanded of all women such that they do not appear to be selling sex (5). But in a patriarchal and capitalist economic system,

many women who do not sell sex for money participate in "implicit sexual-monetary exchange, such as legal marriages or long-term cohabitation" (4). As such, all women are a part of the whore continuum by virtue of the way that they participate in systems of gendered labor.

All women may not be "whores," but their activities are often classified according to the simplified categories of good girls and bad girls. For example, the taint of "whore" often operates in tandem with that of "slut," a coalition of stereotypes highlighted by the Toronto-based feminists who held the first "Slut Walk" on April 3, 2011. This march was organized in response to a local police officer's remarks that "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized," that is, sexually assaulted or raped ("Toronto 'slut walk'"). The goal of the march was to highlight the fact that women may be sexually victimized regardless of what they look like or how they are dressed; no woman is "asking for it" by virtue of what she wears, whether it be flannel pajamas or a mini-skirt and stiletto heels. Slut Walks have subsequently been held in a number of North American and international cities and become subject to debate within online feminist circles as to whether "slut" is a term that can be reclaimed for feminist ends. Such debates replicate the very stigma that the original Slut Walk sought to expose, in that any woman runs the risk of being raped regardless of her appearance. Much like "slut" in the current postfeminist neoliberal moment, the word "whore" may be applied to women whether or not they are, in fact, whores, as those SuicideGirls models who went public with their complaints discovered (a point I return to at the end of this chapter).

In contrast to the workings of whore stigma, for many middle-class sex positive feminists, sex work is understood as a choice from amongst the various employment options available to them, a choice that can be empowering precisely because it is made from amongst multiple options. But what these feminists do not fully account for are the economic constraints placed on all women's choices. Even middle class women continue to make less money than men in equivalent jobs. As Elizabeth Bernstein has pointed out, even in the period of economic expansion that was the late 1990s dot-com boom, middle-class university educated women still faced gender inequality in the information technology (IT) sector, where they comprised only about one quarter of all IT workers in the San Francisco area. The women in her study found more lucrative work in the sex industry than in the booming technology sector of the period ("Sex Work" 475). So sex work is a choice made by middle class proponents of sex positive feminism as well as by women from other backgrounds in a context of systemic economic inequality. SuicideGirls models' choices to participate in the site are made within this same structural inequality.

Additionally, SuicideGirls reinforces whore stigma by claiming it is not a porn site, and by emphasizing the ways in which models benefit in non-monetary ways from their choice to participate in the site. But, by distancing their models from the actions of "whores," "silicone-filled" porn stars, and other sex workers, SuicideGirls' management implicitly contributes to the "socially sanctioned abuses [that] fall disproportionately on those [sex workers] most lacking feminist and other support: women of color, poor women, transgendered women" (Queen 130).

SuicideGirls' implicit use of whore stigma is also tied to the way the site frames itself as a pin-up, rather than porn, site. Whore stigma operates in SuicideGirls when the site makes claims about offering something different than the crassness and explicitness of other porn sites. By using the rhetoric of the pin-up, the site effectively distances itself from porn in terms of its content and, by extension, presents its models as site participants rather than porn models. In describing SuicideGirls as a pin-up site, the site draws on the history of the pin-up as a figure historically associated with feminine empowerment, agency, and sexual liberation (Buszek).

MAKING LABOR VISIBLE IN THE WHORE CONTINUUM THROUGH PIN-UPS

The pin-up iconography that SuicideGirls mobilizes is part of a history of sex work and sexualized images of women that treads the line between the "good girl" sexuality of middle class women and "bad girl" working class sexuality; this line is where whore stigma is enacted in SuicideGirls' rhetoric. The site's pin-up imagery connects with contemporary readings of the pin-up as a figure of sex-positive empowerment through this history. As Despina Kakoudaki has argued, the pin-up is a genre of pornography with varying degrees of explicitness throughout its history (339). She goes on to detail the "blind spot about the pinup's overt sexual allure" that developed as part the pin-up's deployment as a symbol of "American wholesomeness and innocent charm" during World War II (340). The discourses called upon by its use of pin-up imagery inform SuicideGirls' relationship with their models and model Hopefuls as well as models' understanding of their participation

in the site, even as SuicideGirls' management claims pin-up as a form of sexualized

imagery distinct from porn.

The type of pin-up imagery that SuicideGirls draws upon most directly is that

which was popularized in the US during World War II; it was in this period that the

term "pin-up" emerged (Kakoudaki 345). As Maria Elena Buszek details, the

illustrated "Varga girl" pin-ups in magazines like *Esquire* "represented and helped

popularize a remarkably self-aware and aggressive female sexuality," of a kind

previously associated with disreputable female figures like prostitutes, actresses,

and suffragettes (186). In this period, the pin-up came to represent the increasing

presence of professional women in the workforce, albeit highly sexualized. This

war-time take on the pin-up, which Buszek characterizes as "both a tantalizing and a

wholesome ideal," persists in SuicideGirls' insistence that its photosets are

"innocent" pin-ups rather than "explicit" porn (187).

In the early 1990s, the pin-up was revived via coffee table books and home

décor objects such as clocks and magnets as part of the "alternative" culture interest

in retro-chic and mid-century kitsch. This reinscription of the pin-up's cultural

meaning continued in the early 2000s with the rise of what has come to be known as

pornification, seen especially on "alternative" porn sites like Suicide Girls. Suicide

Girls makes use of the pin-up's hip timeliness as a means of articulating female

sexuality that simultaneously courts "alternative" readings and maintains a certain

respectability for its middle class viewers and models. As Missy Suicide has stated,

the site's "pin-up" imagery reflects "confident women who're not afraid to express

themselves." She went on to describe the positive effects of these images: "I get e-

mails all the time from people who feel better about themselves and their bodies because of the work the models on SuicideGirls do" (Dodero).

The pin-up aesthetic maps onto discourses of empowerment as self-esteem and as sexual liberation that, despite rhetorical claims to the contrary, produce conditions for greater exploitation of women's labor in the sex industry. The basis for this exploitation is in the ways that SuicideGirls mixes what is clearly porn (though not spoken of as such) with rhetorics of good girl self-improvement in order to obscure its models' labor. Even though SuicideGirls models post nude photos of themselves on the Internet, the site presents them as pin-up models whose images are less sexually explicit than those of other Internet porn models. Because they do "pin-up" modeling with its history as a tantalizing but wholesome genre of popular imagery, SuicideGirls models can seemingly operate at a remove from whore stigma—though as has been demonstrated, no woman is ever outside of this system. In SuicideGirls' framing, their models are not-porn models. They pose for what are described as demure teasing photosets, rather than the explicit hardcore sex acts site management wishes to differentiate the site from. Thus the site can sell the idea that models' labor is something empowering to the models themselves, as well as to SuicideGirls viewers. In this way, the site suggests that models participate in order to feel good about themselves, rather than to explicitly participate in porn production, a very "dirty" business. Empowerment thus becomes its own reward, rather than models being empowered through things like fair working conditions, reasonable pay, and control over their images. In this way empowerment itself begins to serve as a kind of currency.

It is not only by explicitly claiming it is a pin-up site that SuicideGirls casts itself as not-porn. SuicideGirls also uses more implicit means. In both interviews and in SuicideGirls' own publications, site management emphasize that models choose to participate for emotional benefits like increased self-worth that might be interpreted as a form of feminist empowerment, and to find acceptance amongst other members of the SuicideGirls community. SuicideGirls casts its models as something different from typical porn models; such models are perceived to be unquestioning victims of normative beauty standards as well as of porn's purported crassness. In contrast, SuicideGirls models are said to participate in the site as an empowered choice, one that allows them to build community bonds, to find self-acceptance, and to expand the audience for their creative pursuits. As such, the site creates the appearance that SuicideGirls models are the ones who benefit most from their participation in this platform for expressing their empowered authentic selfhood. In this way, its models become good girls who model for the site for reasons far removed from economics. Thus, for models, participation in the site comes to be seen as not-work as well as not-porn.

Site viewers are the often invisible witnesses to all of this. The models are presented as "real" punk rock, emo, goth, and alternative women, just like the girl at the punk show whom the viewer might never get to see naked outside the Internet. But within SuicideGirls, those women's participation, and site's packaging of their subcultural aesthetic realness, is sold to the viewer as an choice that the model is makes because she is an empowered, agentic, postfeminist subject. I am not arguing about whether or not SuicideGirls models themselves exercise agency and are

personally empowered in their participation. The important aspect is the way that models' perceived empowered, authentic selfhood is sold as a product, one that presumably has some erotic frisson for the viewer, regardless of individual models' experiences or self-understandings. This perception of empowerment is also used to entice women to participate in the site as model Hopefuls; as such, the currency of empowerment functions for models as well as site viewers. This currency—of choice, self-acceptance, and sexual liberation—borrows much from the rhetoric of sex-positive feminism.

In analyzing the conditions of women's labor and the contexts in which women's "empowered" choices to participate in porn are made, it becomes apparent that empowerment is a commodity with exchange value. For SuicideGirls models, empowerment is the currency they receive in exchange for their "choice" to model for the site; the currency of empowerment is also evident in the self-confidence some models say they gain in posing nude for photosets. Models' empowered selfhood is also part of what is sold to the site's paying members. What matters then, to prospective models, to paying members, and to the site's management, is that models appear to embody an affect of empowered postfeminist sexuality.

This kind of free labor—labor in exchange for affective rewards like self-esteem—bears a great deal in common with the free labor of women's domestic labor. Both are uncompensated monetarily and done in exchange for emotional benefits. But for SuicideGirls, self-esteem is seen as an individual internalized emotional reward, unlike familial or maternal love, which is dependent on the

caregiving relationships between women and the families for which they provide care.

In summary, then, SuicideGirls' rhetoric of the pin-up attempts to position its models as good girls who don't do "dirty" things like pose for porn. At the same time, the site is associated with sex positive rhetoric of empowerment as sexual liberation. Empowerment also comes to be understood such that modeling for the site becomes linked to a related, but slightly different, sense of the term. Self-esteem building—often voiced by models as self-confidence—is said to occur through SuicideGirls' celebration of models' "alternative beauty." In addition to constructing the site as operating at a remove from whore stigma through the use of pin-ups as not-porn, a large part of how models appear authentic is through the signposts of alternative subcultural aesthetics and politics.

ALTERNATIVE AUTHENTICITY AS NOT-WORK

The rhetoric of alternative subculture bears directly on SuicideGirls' framing of its models labor as not-work and not-porn. In particular, the site's invocation of authenticity as a form of intimacy is yet another means of obscuring models' labor, as I discussed in Chapter Two. Models perform work on themselves in order to appear legibly alternative, and thus authentic, in terms of their physical appearance. Models also perform "free labor" by engaging with members through various social networking features, such as forums and direct messages; this kind of communication contributes to models' perceived authenticity (discussed in Chapter Three). SuicideGirls' management highlights models' "alternative beauty" as

deserving of celebration. The site suggests that these women should be admired—and empowered—for their authentic selves.

Producing porn models as good girls is a crucial element of SuicideGirls' marketing strategy (and success). Thus when SuicideGirls management claims that its pin-up-style photosets are not porn, and when they frame models' participation as good girl empowerment through expression of authentic "alternative" selfhood rather than as sex work, they produce a genre of porn sold as distinct from "real" sex workers (that is, the work bad girls do). SuicideGirls attempts to construct a domain where what their models do is both not-porn and not-work; porn modeling in this framing is an expression of models' empowered alternative beauty through pin-up-style photos. Thus, SuicideGirls models framed as are good girls expressing their sexuality in appropriately transgressive ways rather than in "inappropriate" ways as sex workers.

But SuicideGirls' use of "alternative" also helped to consolidate community amongst its models. Finding community amongst other "alternative" women is a frequently mentioned life-changing aspect of SuicideGirls in the first book. Cherry states, "Being a part of SuicideGirls has helped me to meet girls that actually think the same way as me. […] Being one of the SuicideGirls has helped me to not only build on my creative side, but also my belief that there are others like me out there, after all" [sic] (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 120). This community was the basis for models' solidarity, as model Annie describes (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 115). Solidarity, in turn, creates the conditions for producing change through collective action. For SuicideGirls models, the collective action of leaving the site *en masse* forced

recognition from Missy Suicide and others identified with SuicideGirls management

that its models are indeed employees with a business relationship to the site, and

are not just a community of friends participating in this social networking site for

the fun of it (Hopper and Shepherd 81). SuicideGirls produced this solidarity

because of the way that social networking and alternative authenticity functioned to

help models develop a sense of community on the site.

NOT-WORK AND WHORE STIGMA IN SUICIDEGIRLS' SOCIAL NETWORK PORN

The rhetorical elements of site's framing coalesce in such a way that

modeling for SuicideGirls is figured as not-porn and not-work through postfeminist

rhetoric of empowerment and choice, authentic alternative selfhood, and through

models' provision of free labor. Modeling for SuicideGirls is framed by the site as

not-work because of the ways that much of what SuicideGirls models do on the

site—creating profiles, writing blog entries, adding other members as friends,

participating in forums, etc—is part of the "playbor" common to many social

network sites (see Chapter Three for a more detailed explication of this). These

social network activities appear to be not-work because they are associated with the

kinds of leisure activities that people do for fun and sociability online. What is

invisible here is the labor-time expended by social media users in producing content

for these sites under the guise of creating communities (e.g. for fun) and then

participating in them. These leisure activities generate profits for corporations

rather than for those users who generate the content and who comprise the

monetized communities in social media. This is the very definition of "free labor."

Since models' pay is so low (in the event she gets paid at all) and SuicideGirls'

poor working conditions are relatively well known, models are cast by the site as

participating for other reasons. These reasons are much like those of people who do

other kinds of free labor. Models may participate for emotional benefits like self-

esteem or for social benefits like community membership and social capital, with

potential for additional paid work through these networks, as described by site

management in interviews and in SuicideGirls' own publications.

The first SuicideGirls' book features a number of such accounts. Heather, who

became a model, and then a SuicideGirls employee, in 2003 (five years before the

introduction of unpaid Hopefuls sets), states that she decided to pose for the site

initially as a way to earn extra income. But, for her, money quickly became

subsidiary to other reasons for participating, like personal autonomy. "Money comes

and go. […] SG has a comfortable feeling to it. The site, girls, staff, everything having

to do with the site lets you do what YOU want to do. I'm into that." Heather goes on

to describe another benefit of her participation: "I think the most I have gotten

through being an SG girl is…to quote Missy…Feeling empowered. I really never

thought about that word. Now I'm doin the site, I'm accomplishing goals that I have,

and I feel more comfortable with my body" [sic] (Suicide *SuicideGirls* 126). In

selecting such accounts for inclusion in *SuicideGirls*, the book, Missy Suicide used her

editorial role to emphasize the affective and interpersonal benefits of site

participation. Indeed, many models' texts are set up as responses to questions

seemingly designed to elicit comments about these types of benefits: "How did you

hear about SuicideGirls and what made you want to become one?" and "How has your life changed since becoming a SuicideGirl?"

Missy Suicide has also suggested that some models pose for SuicideGirls in order to get exposure for their creative work (Dotinga). For SuicideGirls models like Frankie, who works as a tattoo artist, "SG is another place for me to display my work (work that I have done and work that I have collected on my own body). It is also a good place to check out everyone else's tattoos not to mention all those lovely ladies!" (57). For Frankie, modeling for SuicideGirls presents an particularly good opportunity to showcase her creative work as a tattoo artist. For others, the exposure benefits them in less direct ways. Caz, another model based in the UK, writes of the opportunities that being a SuicideGirls model has afforded her:

> I find myself being whisked away, meeting other models, SG meet ups
> with members, job offers, at festivals supporting the site, being
> interviewed for TV, and meeting such high profile celebrities as Bruce
> Dickinson [of Iron Maiden fame]. I find myself a more confident
> person now, but I'm still me. The site doesn't change you, each person
> with their own unique personality adds to the site. (Suicide
> *SuicideGirls* 119)

Caz's account highlights the opportunities for visibility beyond the site, including possible paid work. But her penultimate comments return to the intangible affective benefits of participating in SuicideGirls. The exposure and opportunities available to models slide almost seamlessly into individual affective rewards.

This kind of exposure is part of how the social networking aspects of SuicideGirls' modeling have been figured as not-work at the same time that the development of social capital through networking has become one of the economic strategies of cultural workers. As Angela McRobbie has described, this constant networking has become normalized within social interactions, a part of everyday life rather than something done "on the clock" as part of a 9-5 job ("Everyone is Creative"; "Re-thinking"). Contract workers, especially those who work in creative sectors, talk to friends who work for an organization that might give out arts funding grants. Or one might attend a cultural event—at a club, an art gallery, or a party—and meet someone who needs someone to do contract graphic design work, for example. While on the surface, people go to parties to socialize, for cultural workers in the digital economy, part of that socializing is always keeping an ear out for opportunities. This may not be the explicit goal, but everyone in that social network is aware that everyone else is also looking for more work. It literally pays to be aware of others' training and skills so can that these people can contact one another when graphic design work comes up, someone needs a haircut, or is organizing a benefit where a friend's band might play. These things are part of the fabric of social life, so that they do not appear to be the same kind of overt networking as exchanging business cards at a trade show.

All these social networking activities coincide with SuicideGirls' pin-up framing such that the models are seen as good girls not doing porn. Instead, as SuicideGirls' management states, the site's platform serves as a way for models to get useful exposure for their creative pursuits (as explored in Chapter 3). Following

from this logic, modeling for SuicideGirls is not about the exploitation of sex workers' labor or their bodies. Rather, it is "only" about the same kinds of (exploitative) practices that characterize the free labor of all social networking. It is also "only" about the kind of socializing as networking ("club sociability" in Angela McRobbie's term) that freelance creative sector workers participate in in order to secure work. In the site's framing, modeling for SuicideGirls is normalized as being just like the leisure activities everyone else does in social media and just that of like other freelance cultural workers. In many ways, this understanding of models' labor is apt: porn modeling is a form of creative labor and the business strategies employed by SuicideGirls models are indeed similar to those of other freelance creative workers. This framing serves a dual function, however. It insists that SuicideGirls are just like many others in the digital economy, rather than in the special category of porn model/whore. But this recognition as "just like" so many others—both those who participate in social networking as a leisure activity and those whose social interactions are always shaded by the need to obtain paid contract work through personal contacts—fails to recognize the unique situation of SuicideGirls models who are posing naked on the internet for money (or the prospect of it), and who are thus workers deserving of rights. At the same time that this framing obscures their labor, it also serves to further shore up SuicideGirls models' position as "good girls" on the whore continuum because what they are doing for the site is not only not work, it is most especially not sex work.

SOLIDARITY DESPITE (AND BECAUSE OF) SUICIDEGIRLS' PRACTICES

While SuicideGirls models' participation is associated with a rhetoric of empowerment through individual choice, their choices are constrained by the dense legalese of the site's Terms of Service that models may well simply click through without reading, as well as the social and cultural rhetoric of social networking as a space of play (discussed above). Without a sense of the conditions in which these models work and participate in the site, the structural conditions of their labor, to talk only of individual empowerment is both limited and limiting. SuicideGirls' social network platform structures models' working conditions; it also structures their responses to these conditions, as was discussed in Chapter 4.

Despite the site's efforts to construct a certain reading of its practices for participants, models have found ways to use SuicideGirls' social network platform to come together in order to register their unhappiness over their working conditions. They did so first by voicing their complaints on the site and then taking these complaints to new venues outside the SuicideGirls platform when the site's administrators began using its Terms of Service as a means of policing dissent. This produced several different—often collective—actions on the part of SG models: Some left the site entirely and brought their disputes to the attention of the media, who covered their claims extensively; others used site administrators' enforcement of the SuicideGirls' Terms of Service which allowed for the removal of content critical of the site, in order to get themselves kicked off the site. Ultimately, some SuicideGirls models did come to see themselves as workers who are poorly treated despite all the ways that their labor was made invisible by the site itself. Only with

this recognition could these women attempt to campaign for better working

conditions.

WHORE STIGMA IN ACTION

But when these models' complaints about SuicideGirls treatment of them

received press attention, not all of these popular media accounts were sympathetic

to models' concerns. Some of this media coverage instead suggested that, as porn

models, these women did not deserve to be treated with respect. For example, an

article in the New York Press gave a thorough account of the complaints of former

SuicideGirls models based on interviews with several of these women. But the

author went on to suggest that models should not have expected better. "It's hard to

take seriously girls who took off their clothes for money, and were then shocked—

shocked!—that the man giving them money to get naked didn't respect them"("Pin-

Up or Shut Up"). Just at the moment when SuicideGirls models asked for recognition

of their rights as workers, they came to be seen as undeserving of them because the

nature of their participation in the site was not read, popularly, as pin-up not-porn

made by empowered good girls, but as typical porn modeling done by bad girls

undeserving of respect. In effect, once models voiced a desire for respectful

treatment as workers, they became once again tainted with the whore stigma that

SuicideGirls as a not-porn site had so carefully attempted to extricate itself from.

This, then, is the problem with whore stigma in action. SuicideGirls models

expected to be treated with the respect granted to good girls, perhaps even more so

because of the site's attempts to frame their participation as good girl pin-up

modeling in the everyday context of social media rather than as pornography. But, despite this framing of porn models like SuicideGirls as good girls claiming their right to make sexually liberated and empowered choices, in the eyes of many journalists, the moment these women stepped too far in asking for other kinds of rights—such as recognition of their participation as work deserving of respectful treatment and fair pay—, they became "bad girls" who did not deserve rights in the first place. The only way to escape this double bind is to recognize that all women are placed on the whore continuum, whether they acknowledge it or not. A specific woman may try to distance herself from acts further along on this continuum of respectability by claiming she is not a whore, but rather a stripper, a porn model, a housewife or a grandmother, in short, a good girl. But this defense sets up these "other women"—the women that are not good girls—as undeserving of rights as workers, of bodily autonomy, and even of life itself (as I argue in the concluding chapter).

What's missing here, again, is an analysis of labor, of the ways that women exchange sex for a variety of things, and the history of women as part of property exchange between men. All women are on the whore continuum (Nagle). Women's relationships with men are structured by economic exchange (Strathern). Here it becomes clear that labor is as important an analytic for considering sex work at the current moment as is "choice" or "empowerment."

In this chapter, I have analyzed the various ways that SuicideGirls models' participation in the site is constructed as not-work in large part through SuicideGirls' claims that the site is not-porn. I also argued that the labor of

SuicideGirls models should be considered as work against the perception that social networking is a form of "play." SuicideGirls models and hopefuls' participation in the site should not be understood entirely through the rhetoric of digital labor's false autonomy, nor that of the false autonomy of sexual liberation presented by pro-sex feminists. Neither should it be circumscribed by the false autonomy ascribed to the politics and aesthetics of alternative subcultural difference. Instead, their participation needs to be recognized in terms of their status as workers and, as such, SuicideGirls models need to be afforded the rights all workers deserve, regardless of whether they work clothed or unclothed.

Fundamental to the recognition of SuicideGirls models' participation in the site as work is the need to break down the division between the sort of work done by good girls (i.e. not-sex work) and that done by bad girls (sex work, among other things). This is because bad girls—a category into which sex workers of all stripes are lumped—are more easily denied certain rights with the justification that they are considered, socially and legally, to be undeserving of them. This is an argument made even at the highest government levels, as in the Canadian government's appeal to a 2010 Ontario Superior Court decision that overturned several laws concerning prostitution. The federal lawyer pursuing the appeal has argued that prostitution is inherently dangerous and that "there is no obligation to maximize the safety of prostitutes, because it is not a constitutionally protected right to engage in the sex trade" ("PM 'a bad boy'"). Under such logic prostitutes are not viewed as a workers deserving of protections on the job, but as participants in a special category

of degrading activity, who effectively get what they deserve for choosing to exchange sex for money.

But, like the women who put forward the original Ontario Superior Court case, the women who model for SuicideGirls inhabit an economy of sex work regardless of whether their participation is framed in terms of their being good girls or bad girls. SuicideGirls' disavowal of bad girls through their not-porn claims needs to be countered by the recognition that sex workers are deserving of rights, both as women and as workers. As such, they deserve safe working conditions, workplace autonomy, and rights to associate with others doing the same work. These things are what produce solidarity.

CONCLUSION: Sex Workers' Rights as Labor Rights

In October 2010, the Ontario Superior Court of Justice released a decision declaring that Canadian laws criminalizing activities related to prostitution were in violation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms because they deny sex workers "liberty" and "security of the person." Prostitution itself is not currently illegal in Canada. However, certain activities around prostitution are criminalized, creating a tenuous legal situation for sex workers. The Ontario court decision overturned existing laws criminalizing living off the avails of prostitution, "communication for the purposes of prostitution," and "common bawdy houses" on the grounds that such laws created extreme workplace safety risks (sections 210-213 of the Criminal Code). Laws that prohibit communication for purposes of prostitution make it difficult for street-based sex workers to assess potential clients; they must immediately enter the car of someone who approaches them looking for sex or risk arrest because such solicitation is illegal. By criminalizing living off the avails of prostitution, sex workers are unable to legally hire anyone to accompany them when they meet with clients, including bodyguards and drivers. Such restrictions may, again, place sex workers in dangerous situations, compromising their safety by forcing them to work in isolation. Prohibitions against keeping a common bawdy house—which might be a brothel or a massage parlor—make it difficult for sex workers to work together in a single space, again placing them at greater risk by forcing them into isolated working conditions. It is this last point that is most

relevant to my discussion of SuicideGirls as a social network porn site where women can communicate about their working conditions and begin to formulate a sense of solidarity in light of poor treatment from management and lack of autonomy over their own images.

This court ruling, currently under appeal, ensures that the labor of sex workers, whether in prostitution or porn, will feature prominently in Canadian cultural, legal, and political debates in the coming years. My project, with its emphasis on the role of new media technologies in the labor of porn models, engages directly in these debates through analyses of the rhetoric surrounding the labor of SuicideGirls' models.

The massive scale of the global porn industry and the industry's rapid adaptation of new media forms make online porn a key area for media studies. Due to the contradictory claims about SuicideGirls.com as both an exploitative contractor and a sex-positive, empowering porn producer, there is much to query about its claims as a site of "sex-positive" feminism, as well as how sex work is more broadly understood, and the ways that porn can be understood as gendered labor. In the context of these labor disputes, SuicideGirls presents a vital case for the need to incorporate sex workers' rights perspectives into porn studies in a political moment that makes it all but impossible to make claims about the models' actual labor in creating porn imagery and their status as workers.

The Ontario Superior Court decision is important vis a vis SuicideGirls because it is judicial recognition of sex workers' right to basic protections *as workers*, particularly to safe working conditions and to some measure of autonomy

over those working conditions. As I demonstrated in Chapter Four, SuicideGirls

models voiced complaints about these same issues. Models' complaints centered on

their working conditions: sexual harassment, poor pay, and reselling of their images

to third parties without their explicit consent.

While Hopefuls model for SuicideGirls without pay, their activities are not

the same as the free labor performed by Facebook users. It is a Hopeful model's

body on display in these photosets, socially stigmatized (though not illegal) as that

is. In this sense, porn modeling has a similar status to that of prostitution in Canada.

While technically legal, whore stigma operates in conjunction with exploitative

working conditions to make it difficult for models to develop a broader

understanding of their rights as workers.

The social networking function of SuicideGirls enables models to share their

grievances and develop a sense of collective complaint rooted in their right to

workplace and sexual autonomy. The creation of this sense of autonomy is the most

potentially empowering aspect of SuicideGirls. The sharing of issues about working

conditions that happens within SuicideGirls' alt-porn framework is what encourages

models to see themselves as having a sense of self-esteem when linked to

community, opening up the possibility of creating solidarity. This kind of solidarity

building happens outside of the larger sanctioned corporate dictates of these sites,

but it still can happen. Just as the mall is a space of public sphere possibility

alongside the limits of private ownership, SuicideGirls is a form of privatized public

sphere where more activities occur than those dictated by corporate policy. Thus,

while SuicideGirls' Terms of Service and management actions are extremely heavy

handed in the policing of content on the site, the site can still serve as a meeting point for models to begin to formulate their critiques. Then, when SuicideGirls limits their dialogue on these issues, there are other venues for models to exercise their autonomy in discussing their problems with the site's working conditions.

Users of social media find ways, both simple and complex, to communicate in spite of the restrictions put in place on SNS. On SuicideGirls, the Terms of Service and model contract terms may be highly limiting and exploitative on multiple levels, but participation in and modeling for the site are not without a glimmer of hope and possibility for models to assert their rights as workers. However, this possibility is quite different from the empowerment discussed in media articles that ask whether modeling for SuicideGirls is empowering. It is not modeling *qua* modeling for this social network alt-porn site that is empowering; the potential for empowerment is in being able to come to a sense of shared community solidarity around working conditions.

In the preceding chapters, I explored the limits and possibilities of the social network porn community on SuicideGirls.com. In Chapter One, I reviewed feminist literature on porn and prostitution. This chapter explored the arguments made by pro sex and anti-prostitution feminists about the status of women who do sex work in order to situate SuicideGirls' claims that the site is not-porn and the effects that such claims have on women's understandings of themselves as (not) workers in the age of digital free labor.

Chapter Two examined the ways in which the site's framing mobilizes discourses of alternative aesthetics and politics in the creation of a community of

models and members. I detailed how these discourses promote an understanding of the site as a space outside the norms and business practices of the "mainstream" corporate porn industry, much like the ways in which alternative music labels positioned themselves as distinct from, and in opposition to, corporate-owned major labels in the 1980s and 1990s. SuicideGirls' alternative framing is also used to promote the site's aesthetic of difference, in that its models are said to be "reinventing beauty" because these women have piercings, tattoos, dyed hair and dramatic makeup rather than the purported artifice of the models in mainstream porn imagery. This alternative framing sets SuicideGirls up as both aesthetically and politically different from mainstream porn. Because alternative subcultures are seen as operating outside the norms of corporate capitalism, it is often assumed that, as an alt porn site, SuicideGirls too operates at a remove from the exploitative practice of the porn industry. The idea that the site is less exploitative, along with the belief that the site is woman-owned also leads to the sense of model empowerment that is so often attributed to SuicideGirls in media coverage. While this alternative framing is decidedly less liberatory than these claims would lead one to believe, particularly for women of color and working class white women, the site's emphasis on women's rights to express themselves along with the community formation made possible by the social networking features of the site, contributes to a sense of agency and community for the women involved in modeling for SuicideGirls.

While SuicideGirls makes use of alternative subcultural political rhetoric, the site's labor practices are very much in keeping with the neoliberal digital economy. In the third chapter, SuicideGirls' use of free labor was explored in relation to online

content creation and to larger shifts in the nature of creative work. I looked at ways

that SuicideGirls' rhetoric dovetails with the imperative to perform cultural labor

for free for the "exposure," to constantly network in hope of securing (more) paid

employment, and to participate in the "tournament economy" where paid work goes

only to one winner out of many aspirants. The Hopefuls section of the site

emblemizes all these practices. It is these practices that led to the public complaints'

of many models.

SuicideGirls creates community through social networking platforms and

through alternative subcultural framing, but constrains the possibilities for that

community when the site itself is the topic of criticism. The fourth chapter focused

on the ways in which SuicideGirls sets out and enforces limits to acceptable content

and participation in the site through its policies and practices, as spelled out in the

Terms of Service. SuicideGirls' models are subject to these restrictions in their

communication with other site users. Because of the limits placed on their speech by

site management—through removing posts critical of the site and by removing

users who complained too often—SuicideGirls models had to find other venues to

spread the word about how they were treated by site management and staff. Models

then took their complaints to other social media like LiveJournal, and brought these

issues to the attention of journalists who reported on these issues.

The fifth and final chapter examined the gendered dimensions of SuicideGirls

models' labor in the context of the rhetoric of alternative subcultures, new media

free labor, and SuicideGirls' policies and practices in limiting criticism of the site. Jill

Nagle's concept of whore stigma forms the backbone of my analysis of the ways in which SuicideGirls models' labor is understood in the context of the site.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

There are two different directions that I could pursue in furthering this research project. One direction is a study of labor policies in relation to the increasing precarity of media and cultural industry livelihoods. Another is a political economic analysis of the commodification of sex positive values through the selling of a certain kind of sexuality to middle class women.

There is much to be studied about communications and creative workers, particularly those who work in new media. Some preliminary research is being done, as by Nicole S. Cohen on organizing strategies amongst freelance writers in Canada . But there needs to be more research on organizing efforts amongst creative workers of all types in new media. For example, the Future of Music Coalition (futureofmusic.com) is actively working to understand how musicians earn their income, as a means of better helping these workers access benefits typically tied to employment such as health insurance and unemployment benefits, as well assisting them in navigating the changing contractual landscape of the music industry.

Since Hollywood film industry workers, in skilled trades as well as in creative sectors, have been unionized for decades, and they work in contract or project based situations, these models may be worth investigating to see how they may be expanded to incorporate protections for other kinds of contract and project based workers. The 2007-2008 strike by members of the Writers Guilds of America is an

example of workers trying to organize for rights. Residuals and payment for digital

distribution of their work as writers for film and tv productions were key issues

because, as they argued, such streams of income are vital for sustenance in times

between projects("2007–2008 Writers Guild of America strike")("2007–2008

Writers Guild of America strike")("2007–2008 Writers Guild of America strike").

What organizing already exists? Is anything new being done to organize

these workers? What strategies from existing labor organizing are useful and what

are not? What can be done to improve working conditions for those who work in

ways that differ from the traditional single industry salaried 9-5 model?

If I were to pursue the sexuality dimension of this project, I would do a close

study of women-owned sex toy shops since their inception in the 1970s. My interest

in this lies in examining the middle-classing of a certain empowered version of

women's sexuality that is evident both in SuicideGirls and in these sex shops. Sex

positive feminism can now be purchased in the guise of high tech and/or

environmentally friendly handcrafted luxury goods. For example, the titanium

vibrators such as Le Lynx, precision engineered by a former manufacturer of aircraft

parts, sell for upwards of US$200. Other high-priced sex toys are promoted as

"green" because they are made of non-toxic materials like silicone or wood and

feature rechargeable batteries. Many such shops were once explicitly feminist and

focused on educating women about their own sexuality, including lesbian desire.

Over the last two decades, which coincide with the rise of postfeminism, these shops

have increasingly come to cater to a "wider" public, defined as normatively

heterosexual and reasonably well-off financially. I am interested both in how this

transition has occurred and in the confluence of political economy and ideology around women's sexuality that such sex shops realize.

Some women's sexuality is celebrated while the sexuality of certain other women is highly policed and regulated. At one end are the middle-class heterosexual women that women-friendly sex toy stores wish to attract as customers. At the other end are the sex workers whose working conditions are currently being contested in the Canadian government's appeal of the Ontario Superior Court decision overturning prostitution laws. SuicideGirls exists at the nexus of these economic and political practices that structure the acceptable limits of women's sexuality

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