

“Fandom’s Pornographic Subset”

Kink Meme Communities as Queer Female Practices

ABSTRACT

This article draws on content analysis method research ($n = 78$) that looks at a specific subset of fan fiction: anonymous kink meme communities where mostly women request and write erotic or pornographic fan texts. Reporting on an online survey, this article discusses what kind of role kink meme communities play in the lives of the respondents, how kink meme stories are situated in the larger framework of pornography, and how the respondents view the stories that incorporate unsettling or taboo subjects, such as sexual abuse of children, rape, or incest. This article views kink meme communities as a special subset of fan fiction, and in the article kink meme writing is compared to other forms of female-centric erotica or pornography. The article outlines how kink meme communities, like many other female-centric online communities, can function as places where women and gender minorities can write erotic material that better resonates with them and discuss and explore their sexualities and sexual preferences. Kink meme communities are also shown to utilise queer female writing practices in how they discuss and broaden the cultural view on female sexuality and women’s enjoyment of pornographic material. In addition to this, kink memes are also shown to function as literary communities where some fans can practise their writing.

Keywords: content analysis, fan fiction, erotica, kink meme communities, pornography

WOMEN AND PORNOGRAPHY amount to a contested relationship. The anti-porn feminists of the 1970s and the 1980s saw pornography as visual proof of men's hatred towards women and declared porn as the theory and rape as the practice (Morgan 1977). However, others argue that women's involvement in sexually explicit material can change and reshape society's views on sexuality (Milne 2005, xiii). The changing role of women in the porn industry and in so-called female friendly porn has been studied quite extensively (see e.g., Taormino et. al. 2013; Sabo 2012; Smith 2007), and the Internet, with its digital production tools and online networks, has drastically increased the visibility, accessibility, and variety of porn (Paasonen 2011). Indeed, pornography seems to be everywhere, so much so that Western culture has been described as "pornified" (see e.g., Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa 2007). While this can easily be read as a negative, the explosion of sexually explicit material on the Internet has also given women and queer people an unprecedented chance of having their sexualities represented (Neville 2018). The Internet provides platforms for new kinds of communities where especially women and gender and sexual minorities can form a safe space to discuss their sexualities, lives, relationships, and themselves as sexual beings (Attwood 2009; Harris 2001; Garrison 2000; Neville 2018).

The importance of the aforementioned communities has been well established (Neville 2018; Craig & McInroy 2014; Attwood 2009; Harris 2001; Garrison 2000). In fan fiction studies, slash fan fiction¹ sites especially have been identified as spaces where queer and female desires fuse together (Neville 2018; Lackner, Lucas & Reid 2006; Rambukkana 2007). While fan fiction has been studied quite extensively since the 1990s, the special sub-genre of fan fiction commonly known as *kink meme communities* has received hardly any academic attention. Since slash fiction has been found to be strongly connected to queer activism (Neville 2018), it may prove useful to examine whether the same holds true for kink meme communities.²

Kink meme communities are fandom-specific communities where users request specific stories in discussion threads. The request (fan-

nishly called a *prompt*) usually involves a pairing and a description of an erotic situation or fantasy (called a *kink*). While not all kinks are sexual, the prompts most commonly include some explicitly sexual theme.³ Other fans may respond to the prompt and write a customised fan fiction story, called a *fill*. While kink memes can clearly be categorised as fan fiction, there are some key differences between kink meme communities and other forms of fan fiction that make studying them as a separate subject worthwhile. They differ from other forms of fan fiction in terms of platform and practise, using mostly the somewhat outdated platform of LiveJournal. Most kink meme stories also remain anonymous, never officially acknowledged by their authors. Kink meme communities, unlike most other fan fiction communities, are based on a request and answer procedure, creating customised stories for the enjoyment of the prompter and other community members. This creates an interesting mix of personal and communal, where all the stories are a kind of personalised gift, but at the same time communal “property” that everyone can enjoy. Kink meme communities thus resemble what Karen Hellekson (2009) has dubbed online fan gift cultures. Kink meme community members also seem to take greater liberties with the canon when producing these personalised “gifts” than many other forms of fan fiction.⁴

In kink meme stories, even basic laws of physics can be subverted, and things normally deemed taboo or immoral can be established as erotic and sexually arousing. This as Susanna Paasonen (2011, 3) explains, creates a literary world filled with the fleshy aesthetics of porn: a hyperbolic world, fantastic in its visions of desire and where every relationship between people, objects, and environments is markedly sexual. Kink memes are like a collage of selectively picked parts of the source material, erotised body parts of the actors or characters, and fetishised fan fiction tropes. This focus on isolated parts undoes the coherent whole of the source narratives and recombines the fetishised parts (Wall 2010, 10).

As kink meme communities are best known for producing fandom-based porn or erotica, this study adds to academic discussions about porn produced mainly by and for women, the importance of sexual fan-

tasies in constructing one's sexual identities, and kink memes as female-centric fan spaces of queer activism. As explained above, kink memes are very much tied to other forms of fan fiction communities, and as some slash fiction sites can be understood as queer female places according to Lackness, Lucas & Reid, (2006, 192) this study links kink meme communities to queer female activism.

While there has been much valuable work carried out in fan fiction and slash communities, most of it has been theoretical in nature, positioning slash forums as transgressive or political, without attempting to engage with the actual fans (Neville 2018, 388). This can potentially alienate the fans from the researchers. To avoid such alienation and in the interest of broadening the academic discussion between fans and researchers, I conducted an online survey designed to attract kink meme community members. My research questions set out to establish the importance and meanings kink meme communities hold for their members, to investigate how kink meme readers and writers would categorise and label the material they produce within the larger framework of porn or erotica, and to explore how members view the unsettling and taboo content of some prompts or stories, especially those that feature underage children, animals, rape, or incest. Given that there seems to be a diminishing boundary between online erotic content and real-life sexuality (Arvidsson 2007, 74) I also wanted to understand to what extent sexualised depictions of rape and incest affect the way members view these subjects in real life. Drawing on content analysis method research ($n = 78$) conducted online with people who frequent kink meme communities, and relying on previous research done on fan fiction, erotic material aimed at or created by women, and sexual fantasies, this article aims to examine these issues and to address a few of the existing gaps in the field of fan studies.

Theoretical framework

Fan Fiction as queer female practices

Fan fiction is commonly thought to be a hobby that attracts mostly women. Although Henry Jenkins in his ground-breaking work (1992)

identified slash fiction enthusiasts as mostly straight women, contemporary fan fiction studies have long placed slash fiction in the realm of queer literature, where the normative rules of gender and sexuality can be contested and disrupted. Paul Booth (2014) sees slash as representing the possibility of creating a queer space where media texts can be re-read. Similarly, almost a decade earlier, Kristina Busse (2006) and Lackner, Lucas, and Reid (2006) identified slash fiction as a queer female space where the binary notions of sex and gender can be re-examined and normbreaking conventions of slash writing can be transferred to the way female slash fans communicate together. This is an especially salient point when it comes to kink meme communities; the fleshy, hyperbolic depictions of sex are not limited to the stories but colour also the language the readers use when they express the enjoyment they get from reading. People of varying sexual and gender identities openly express their arousal, their sexual preferences and fantasies in a way that has a potential to queer our normative cultural understanding of female sexuality. The stories themselves also have a clear potential to enrich and broaden our understanding of gender and sexuality (Busse & Lothian 2009). Especially stories about pregnant men have a potential to create a new genderqueer place outside of the gender dichotomy (Kerry 2009, 702). Therefore, it is justifiable to discuss kink meme communities as queer female spaces.

Lucy Neville (2018) shows that slash fiction communities can also function as places of activism and change, where women of all sexualities can improve their understanding of LGBTQ+ issues. The complex gender practices in reading and writing fan fiction can be better examined as queer than as homosexual, and while some fan fiction conforms to binary notions of gender and sexuality, there exists fan fiction texts and fan fiction writers and readers that do not fit the culturally homogeneous category of the white, middle-class, heterosexual female (Reid 2009, 463). Neither, Reid argues, do fans necessarily fit some queer cultural position. There rather exists many queer practices in some fan fiction communities (*ibid.*). Following Dhaenens, Van Bauwel, and Biltreyst (2008, 337), queer theories can be understood as a reaction

against normalised sexual hierarchies. My study situates kink meme communities in the tradition of queer activism, where there are many opportunities for queer reading and writing practices.

Erotica, or porn for women?

Pornography has always been a difficult and contested issue. Laws aiming at censoring the distribution or making of pornographic material have often been justified by the need to protect the innocent, especially women and children, from the harmful effects of porn. Behind this line of reasoning lies the assumption that only men are interested in porn, and that children (and, to some extent, women) are unwillingly exposed to it (Barker 2014, 144). Pornography has been accused of increasing men's violent behaviour towards women, giving young people unrealistic understandings of sex and women, and harming marital relationships (Montgomery-Graham et al. 2015). Feminists have historically had a difficult relationship with porn, starting with extreme anti-porn activists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon. Since the 1990s, however, there has been an increase in so-called female-friendly porn, porn movies and porn sites aimed at female viewers, and erotica aimed at female readers (Ciclitira 2004). Erotica has been described as erotic material that domesticates porn and makes it palatable and more easily consumed by women of all classes and sexualities (Ciclitira 2004, 285; Juffer 1998). As my study shows, however, the line between erotica and porn is often drawn in the sand.

The differences between porn and erotica are often used to establish one as better than the other, but as Susanna Paasonen (2010, 139) argues and my study reveals, the terms porn and erotica can be used to label categories with particular kinds of dynamics and affective power, without valuing one over the other. Porn, however, is a notoriously slippery term that evades definitions. Porn can be defined as erotic material that has no other purpose or meaning than sexually arousing the reader or viewer, while erotica is often categorised as erotic material that can contain plot, more complex characters, and aim to move the reader in other ways than through titillation. Thus, the division between porn

and erotica is often based on aesthetic value: it separates texts intended to be used for masturbatory purposes from more complex depictions of desire (Juffer 1998, 106). As my study shows, however, erotic texts can fulfil both functions simultaneously. Texts resonate differently with different readers. What can inspire one reader to masturbate, can be read as an interesting study of desire by another.

Sexual fantasies as building blocks of sexuality

In his article Martin Barker (2014) shows how pornography and sexual fantasies are often seen as problematic subjects, for academics, legislators, and the public alike. Porn, he argues, is condemned for its literalness, for leaving nothing to the imagination, while at the same time being accused of blurring the line between reality and fantasy (Barker 2014, 144). Barker's discussion about sexual fantasies as important building blocks of one's sexual identity provides theoretical background to my discussion about kink meme communities and their role in helping to explore different aspects of sexuality. Online communities can act as venues where people can explore sex and sexuality critically (Garrison 2000; Harris 2001), and where women – through sexual narrations – can aim to balance autonomous sexual desire with the need for intimacy (Attwood 2009). Kink meme communities provide spaces for exploration and expression of sexual fantasies, but they also provide important resources for identity construction.

Methodology

The data was collected using an online survey that consisted of ten questions that ranged from closed to open-ended. The first three were preliminary questions about the respondents' demographic characteristics (age, sexual identity, gender, and education). Questions four and five explored the different fandoms that the respondents belonged to and to what extent they were active in them. My initial hypothesis, which was based on my experience of various kink meme communities, was that the answers to question six ("What, in your opinion, is the most important role of the kink meme communities? Does the role change from

fandom to fandom?") would vary widely between participants in different fandoms. This, however, proved not to be the case. Indeed, although the respondents belonged to a variety of different fandoms, their opinions about the role that kink meme communities play remained largely the same.⁵

The open-ended questions inquired about the role of kink meme communities in the respondents' lives, how the respondents would situate kink meme stories in the larger framework of pornography, their motivations and feelings when writing or prompting sexually explicit stories, and their thoughts on the "taboo" kinks, such as rape, incest, or paedophilia. The survey was hosted by an online platform called SurveyMonkey and the link was added to various student newsletters at the faculty of humanities at Oulu University. A link to the survey was also posted on Facebook and on two popular fan fiction websites, a Supernatural kink meme website SPN kink meme⁶ and Archive of Our Own⁷, which is a popular general fan fiction website. Recruiting was done purposefully, with the aim at attracting people with at least a rudimentary understanding of the kink meme phenomena and who might have been at least somewhat active in at least one kink meme community. The age limit of eighteen was implemented to all respondents due to the sensitive and personal nature of the questionnaire. An explanation of the nature of the survey and the reasons for collecting the data, as well as contact information for both myself and my principal supervisor at Oulu University were provided with each advertising post. A study plan for my doctoral thesis that included a description of the study in hand was reviewed by the Oulu University Ethics Committee of Human Sciences. No personal data that could be used to identify the respondents was collected and all respondents answered anonymously. After the first review of the collected data, two submissions out of eighty were discarded due to incomplete answers. Thus, the final data set consists of seventy-eight respondents.

Once collected, the data was analysed using qualitative content analysis. The raw data was first read through with keeping an eye on emerging "meaning units", chunks of text describing similar themes (Belotto 2018, 2624). These were identified and labelled with terms arising from the data

and based on the research questions (ibid.). The whole data was thus coded. After coding the data, often repeated phrases common throughout the material were collected. After that, the phrases were condensed to correspond with their actual meanings, as per Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017). Thus, for instance, the phrase “I hope no-one I know reads this [a posted kink meme story]” was reduced to “Fear of being recognized”, and “I’m not alone” to “Longing for validation”. This stage revealed twenty-five original and condensed phrases. In the next stage, the deciphered phrases were clustered together into different categories. Deciphered phrases that had similar connotations or that were thematically linked were clustered together. Out of the twenty-five phrases five categories were formed. The categories were named according to their themes as *Shame/Desire*, *We are not alone*, *Authentic female sex talk*, *Porn with ethics*, and *Literary pursuits of kink meme writers*. All the excerpts from the data used to illustrate each category were chosen because they underline the overarching themes and raise interesting points of discussion.

Since content analysis is based on qualitative textual analysis, it is well suited for researching human experiences (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz 2017, 93). As very little research exists on kink meme communities and the people who frequent them, I employed an inductive approach. Instead of aiming to prove a confirmed hypothesis, I developed abstract concepts from the data. All research questions were answered through thorough textual analysis of the data (Krippendorff 2004, 31). Questions about the importance of kink meme communities are answered in categories *Shame/Desire* and *We are not alone*, the role of the kink meme stories in the framework of pornography in *Authentic female sex talk* and *Literary pursuits of kink meme writers*, and the ethical ponderings concerning taboo subjects in *Porn with ethics*.

Results and discussion

After the data was clustered, five distinct categories illustrating the respondents’ usage of and feelings towards kink meme communities emerged. These thematic categories encompass the variety of ways in which respondents obtain sexual pleasure and find a space to discuss

and explore their sexuality. Within this space the respondents also create erotic material that many of them consider more ethical than typical audiovisual porn, since the question of consent for porn actors and actresses is removed. It is also a place for them to discuss the ethical issues relating to porn, and a platform for some fans to develop their writing.

Demographics

I asked the respondents to define their gender and sexual identities in their own words. The gender distribution among the respondents is in line with previous fan fiction studies' demographics (see e.g., Fielding 2013). Of the respondents, 91 percent identified as women, 1 percent as male, and 6 percent as something other. Sexual identity-wise, 43 percent identified as heterosexual, 6 percent as gay or lesbian, and 23 percent as bisexual. The remaining 28 percent used many different identity labels, such as pansexual, demisexual, and asexual. I am aware of Juana María Rodríguez' (2016) argument that statistics can and have been used to silence and erase especially bisexual identities. This was not my intent. In the interest of making all identities visible, I have used the terms preferred by the informants whenever quoting them. In terms of educational background, my respondents turned out to be quite highly educated, which is in line with other studies (see e.g., Jenkins 1992). Of the respondents, merely 12 percent held a high school diploma only. Most, 57 percent, held a bachelor's degree, while 19 percent held a master's degree and 12 percent a doctoral degree. Age-wise, 38 percent fell into the age bracket of 20–25, 32 percent into the 25–30 bracket, 5 percent into the 30–35 group, and 18 percent were over thirty-five years of age. The remaining respondents were 18–20 years old.

Categories

Of the seven open-ended questions questions 7–10 proved most fruitful; they inquired about the respondents' reasons for writing, prompting and reading explicitly erotic stories (questions 7 and 9), about the respondents' opinions on kink meme stories in the larger context of pornogra-

phy (question 8: “Are explicitly erotic stories porn and if so, what kind or porn?”), and about the potential ethical issues involved in prompts and stories with controversial or taboo content (question 10). Content analysis of these questions generated five key thematic categories that are explored below.

Shame/Desire

One of the first thematic lines to emerge from the raw data was the duality of shame and longing for validation that many of the respondents experienced. These dual feelings explain in part the important role kink meme communities and their open, sex-positive atmosphere play in the lives of the respondents. The shame respondents felt over their fantasies was almost always accompanied by strong feelings of community and belonging, a happiness of having found a community where they could discuss and explore their sexuality without fear of being judged. As one respondent put it:

I think the biggest role across all kink meme communities is the exploration of sexuality and desire in a context where neither is feared or forbidden. I think there is a direction connection (sic.) between this kind of safe space and the ability to question and challenge one’s own sexual identity and to become okay with the variant sexuality of others.
(Female, bisexual, over 35)

She and some other respondents described safe spaces of this kind especially important in today’s society. They reported how they felt that the culture they live in tries to push harmful expectations about sex onto young girls. The social environment was one of the reasons they found kink meme communities important. The same respondent continues: “This is increasingly important in a society that seems hellbent on pushing chastity, purity and abstinence as the only forms of sex ed.” The dual feelings of shame and desire are humorously described by one respondent, as they attempt to explain their writing process: “This is hot and I’m going to hell, God please forgive me” (Female, straight, under 20).

Many respondents pondered why they should feel ashamed of something that other people participate in as well. The shame they felt was in their view a shame pushed on them by society as a whole. While much cultural pressure is put on women and girls to look sexy, we are not expected to really act sexually or enjoy our own sexuality. Sexuality is a very private matter, and sexual acts, be they masturbation or sex with another person, are very rarely discussed with other people. Many respondents felt that belonging to an accepting community helped them to alleviate their feelings of shame.

The issue of sexual fantasies is one that has eluded the minds of many great thinkers, among them Sigmund Freud. In Freud's thinking, sexual fantasies were first the playback of real, often traumatic experiences. Later, he described them as the outcome of other problems, repressed and released in distorted form (Barker 2014, 145). As Barker (2014) points out in his article about the "problem" of sexual fantasies, a Freudian or post-Freudian theory about fantasies being compensatory does not take into account the many ways in which sexual fantasies can be productive (Barker 2014, 146). Through sexual fantasies adults can try out different versions of themselves and reimagine themselves through others' reimagining (Ibid.). This imagining and reimagining was echoed many times in my data. The respondents felt that having a platform to express and discover sexual fantasies was beneficial to them and offered them a possibility not only to learn more about their own sexuality, but also to understand other people's sexuality better. This was seen as especially beneficial for young people and their attempts to learn about themselves and to build their identities:

I think kink memes can serve as a kind of 'gateway drug' to getting into porn. Kink memes tend to be more accessible to young people who are just discovering their bodies and likes/dislikes, and especially to young women, who are told implicitly that they are not to seek or enjoy sexual gratification outside of a committed heterosexual relationship (preferably marriage). Kink memes introduce such consumers to acts and genres they have never before imagined existed and helps them get acquainted

with their own erotic likes and dislikes, as well as learn about their own bodies or even to take those first tentative steps into queer sexuality if they're realizing they're not straight. (Cis-female, heterosexual, 25–30)

This learning about oneself and discovering new aspects of one's own sexuality echoes in what Reinhard (2009) discovered in her dialogue with slash fans. The same themes of identity construction and learning about varying sexualities are also visible in my respondents' answers, which shows that kink meme communities are not a separate realm outside of mainstream fan fiction but rather, as one of my respondents put it, the "pornographic subset of fandom".

We are not alone

Many respondents felt that finding likeminded people helped them feel included:

It helps you feel like you are not some perverted creep who likes deviant things. Kink memes help you realise that thousands or millions of other people are also thinking about Sam and Dean fucking or any other pairing in any number or (sic.) kinky ways and that there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. (Female, straight, 20–25)

Most respondents stressed the importance of community members being polite to one another, even if their tastes and favourite pairings differed. A sense of comradery and a tight-knit community was prevalent throughout the data. Many respondents felt that they as women were already having their sexuality and ability to express their sexual ideas limited by society. Fan fiction scholars have argued that the Internet provides fans with a platform on which they can build communities free from the imposed values of their societies – a sort of cybertopia or a heterotopia, a place within a place with its own rules where fans can discuss and aim to change the rules of society (Reinhard 2009, 5; Rambukkana 2007). As the following respondent describes, kink meme communities offer people a place where their most intimate sexual fantasies can find a responsive audience:

Imagine that when you have a sexual fantasy, you could find the community that fits the fantasy's content/fandom/theme/whatever, make a post describing it however detailed or vaguely as you want, and someone may write an entire story centering around your fantasy in explicit detail for you to read and enjoy. Who wouldn't want that? (Female, pan/demisexual, 20–25)

This strong sense of community and these shared fantasies are some of the themes that separate kink meme writing from many other forms of pornography. As pornography moved from magazines and late-night matinees in movie theatres to personal computers, it became such a personal institution that participation in it habitually led to feelings of shame. In kink meme communities, however, fantasies, stories, and the feelings of shame are all shared. These features are, however, not exclusive to kink meme communities. As Paasonen (2010) shows, discussions about quality stories and sexual fantasies are common on online literotica sites. On many pornographic and erotic platforms, a sense of community can help alleviate the shame of “deviant” sexual fantasies. What sets kink meme communities apart from other online porn or erotica platforms is the way kink memes use existing characters and fandom-specific practices.

Authentic female sex talk

The largest category to emerge from the data highlights the importance of kink meme communities in catering to the erotic needs of women and other non cis-male people. Many participants in my questionnaire discussed how kink meme communities relate to porn and how there is a need for female-centric and queer erotic material. They stressed the importance of having an online space where women and gender and sexual minorities could come together to enjoy erotic material that was specifically tailored to their tastes and created by other non cis-male writers.

In the larger context of pornography, erotic stories better cater to female and other non-cis-male genders, esp. [especially] as they are written primarily for and by these genders in fandom spaces. They are more accessible

to these readers bc. [because] -- the fangirl, female-centric spaces of fandom are more geared towards serving the interests and desires of women -- than male-dominated mainstream porn. (Cis-girl, bisexual, under 20)

The assumption that female writers are better able to cater to and express the needs of women has been discussed by researchers on women-centric erotica. Esther Sonnet in her 1999 article discusses the material construction of female heterosexuality through “women’s pornography”, or commercially published erotic novels by women writers aimed at female readers. In her study, Sonnet links the pledge that every book belonging to the women’s erotica series *Black Lace* is written by a woman, to the feminist claim that women are better able to “speak” sex in an authentic or non-colonised fashion (Sonnet 1999, 173). In other words, women-centric commercial erotica is sold on the idea that only other women can truly understand and express something essential about female sexuality. Feona Attwood’s article (2009) about female sex bloggers echoes the idea that erotica not only makes sexually explicit media acceptable and accessible for female audiences – it can also reveal and reflect the “truth” about female sexuality, and in doing so, create an imagined community of female readers (Attwood 2009, 7). Modern feminist theory does not, however, entertain the idea of a universal female experience. No sexuality is more authentic than another, and no one author or group of authors can reveal the “real” female sexuality. Hence, the name of this category refers to the ideas the respondents put forth about the importance of a female and queer community, rather than some universal truth about female sexuality.

The idea of sexuality as the exposé of the hidden truth concerning the self is deeply embedded in Western society. As Michel Foucault (1990, 58–59) argued, Western technologies of the self have positioned the assumed truth concerning the self in the realm of sexuality. Thus, the act of speaking about sexual desires and acts has been understood as exposing one’s innermost self (Paasonen 2011, 25). This view is much too simplistic, however. The affective resonance of porn, or how porn affects and resonates within us, involves a much more complex traffic

between bodies performing and consuming porn (Ibid). In other words, some pornographic texts may resonate with us despite dealing with subjects we would otherwise find repulsive or morally and ethically wrong, and the type of porn that resonates with us should not be read as an indicator of our real values, as this respondent argues:

And the reason people write about this thing [extreme kinks such as incest] may be because it's the only place you can live out these fantasies without making it too close to reality. You also have to remember that your sexual fantasies and your real sexual preference is not always the same thing. (Female, bi or straight, under 20)

What stands out from this quote, is the respondent's comment about kink meme communities and how they can be the only place where people can live out taboo fantasies without making them too real. Her comment about sexual fantasies and real sexual preference is also interesting and echoes the questions researchers have asked about women's rape fantasies. Why fantasise about something that would in real life be a traumatic and terrible experience? This has been studied by Bivonna and Critelli (2009) in their study about the nature of women's rape fantasies. Their study found that while most participants had sometimes engaged in rape fantasies, not all of these fantasies were erotic or pleasurable in nature (Bivonna & Critelli 2009, 40–41). Their results echo my respondent's notion that fantasies are not always erotic or arousing, and that those that are do not always correspond with one's real life sexual morals or preferences. Many respondents discussed the morality and ethics of providing a platform for all kinds of fantasies, including those that contain themes that are aversive or unsettling to many people. The next category explains this discussion.

Porn with ethics

One very prevalent theme when discussing pornography is ethics. As I stated before, deep-seated beliefs about porn are often based on assumptions such as that only men watch porn and that women are always the

ones to suffer the negative consequences of porn (Ciclitira 2004, 286). Most of the respondents considered this. Many of them argued that kink meme stories are a kinder, softer type of porn, where the fictiveness of the characters and the universe serves as a buffer.

I would read a story featuring some of the kinks you mention [e.g. underage partners, rape] in some fandoms, but I would never read porn story featuring them. It's like... there's a bigger distance between me and those triple fictional characters (I mean triple in the way, that canon is fictional, those basic parrings [sic] in fandom are double fictional and those in kink communities are triple. I think about it that way). (Other, heteroflexible, 20-25)

To this respondent, there is a difference between erotic fan fiction and other, non- fandom-based literary porn, and different rules apply in these different forms of fiction. They view that the triple fictionalisation of characters and settings provide the readers and writers with a kind of barrier, behind which they can enjoy the stories and subjects that would not otherwise be acceptable. The kind of fantasy where all characters are heavily fictionalised ties kink meme stories more tightly to mainstream fan fiction practices than to other online porn or erotica platforms. A porn story featuring unsettling kinks would be too real to the respondent, perhaps because they feel that in a non-fandom porn story about rape, the line between reality and fiction would not be clear enough. By distancing themselves, the fantasiser is better able to see what lies behind the rape fantasy.

Many respondents pondered the question of whether it was morally acceptable to request or write stories that featured “taboo” subjects. Here, the communal and shared nature of kink memes also becomes visible. In the same way that no one in the community has to bear the feelings of shame alone, the ethical ponderings are also connected to the issue of keeping the space open to all. Many argued that ideas or fantasies should not be censored, that fantasies in and of themselves are harmless, while others pointed out that what might be a harmless

fantasy to some, might trigger unpleasant or harmful memories in victims of sexual abuse. As the next respondent pointed out, even purely fantasy-based stories posted on locked forums might trigger real life consequences:

I know that in many fandoms (incl. Sherlock), adult/child fanfic has been used by predators to groom children and teenagers in RL [real life]. Even though I've also heard that some CSA [childhood sexual abuse] survivors read and write adult/child fic as a kind of cathartic activity, we should not ignore the voices of CSA survivors who've said this fic contributed to their abuse and is a major problem. (Cis-girl, bisexual, under 20)

What stands out as remarkable in this quote is the respondent's simultaneous understanding of both the victims of childhood sexual abuse who would view certain stories as triggering, and those who might use paedophilic stories to overcome their trauma. This type of mentality bolsters the communal nature of kink memes, where not only fantasies but also the responsibility of keeping everyone safe are shared. All in all, there seem to be rather few rules governing what is and is not okay to write about in most kink meme communities. Most communities rely on mandatory content warnings and tags labelling the content; in that way, the responsibility is left to the reader.

While most respondents argued that the importance of having a place to discover and express even the unsettling or sinister aspects of sexuality trumped the need for censorship or strict rules, some worried about the implications of probing too deep into the murky waters of human sexuality. Declaring herself a “perfect example of hypersexualization and deviance” and a “weirdo”, this respondent wondered what happens when all sexual taboos are broken: “Sometime [sic] it scare [sic] me a little. What happens after the bestiality and incest and Guro? There is no more taboo, and I don't want to become a real world deviant.” (Omnisexual woman, 20–25)

Her concerns over her fantasies influencing her real life echoe in the claims of anti-porn advocates according to whom porn is the theory

and rape is the practice. This also echoes the paradox of condemning pornography on one hand for its explicitness, of leaving nothing to the imagination, and on the other hand for arousing uncontrollable fantasies that might cause porn users to abandon the line between fantasy and reality (Barker 2014, 144). A common fear is that viewing or reading violent pornographic material may lead to violence. As Robin Anne Reid (2009, 471) shows, however, there is more than one way in which erotic or pornographic stories with violent or taboo content may resonate with readers. They can be read also for their literary value, not only to derive erotic pleasure (Reid 2009, 467). As the following respondent explains, in kink meme communities one can enjoy stories that are both erotically enjoyable and compelling studies in character development.

Like many others, I have written stories about slavery and non-con-sensual encounters. These stories, to me, are not pornographic, yet they feature sex. Or maybe they are pornographic but not erotic. But the gist is, I think some stories are arousing – –, in others the sexual acts are just a tool to get the story, the meaning or the character development across – –. In kink memes, both kinds of stories exist. (Cis-female, queer, 25–30)

While the respondents expressed different views on freedom of expression and the need to protect the vulnerable over the need to publish every fantasy, the unifying theme amongst them was to tolerate the sexual preferences of others. To many of the respondents, the importance of kink memes lies in the learning about and understanding other people's sexuality, as well as one's own: "Kink memes are doors to others' sexual beliefs and fantasies, which bring new perspectives to contemplate and further speculate on. Broadening, eye-opening." (Cis-female, biromantic demisexual, over 35)

Kink meme communities are not just places to reveal and discuss sexual fantasies, as many respondents pointed out. The non-pornographic or non-erotic aspects of kink meme communities are discussed next.

The literary pursuits of kink meme writers

One of the aims of my survey was to analyse how kink meme community members see the stories they read and write, whether they view them as porn or something else, and how they situate erotic fan fiction writing in the larger context of pornography. The respondents offered many different opinions about the labels of porn and erotica and whether kink meme stories even have a place in the larger context of pornography. Most described kink meme stories as porn, erotica, or both, and many used porn and erotica interchangeably. As one respondent argued, explicit kink meme stories are erotica, which she understood as “literary porn – literary in the sense of ‘written word’, not literature. It’s straight-up porn” (Female, bisexual 20–25). Although she described kink meme stories as “straight-up porn” rather than literature, kink memes are also literary communities. While most respondents used the texts for erotic purposes, there were a few who only read or wrote kink meme stories as literary or thought exercises.

The border between porn and erotica, no matter how porous or weak it is, is often set in place to separate quality fiction with erotic themes from low, formulaic, mass-produced pornography with no redeeming social value. In short, the distinction is meant to separate *good* from *bad* (Paasonen 2010, 145; Juffer 1998, 106). However, as Paasonen points out and as is seen many times in my respondents’ answers, the line between porn and erotica is often not very clear. Because both terms have become so loaded with supposed social value or lack thereof, it may be prudent to ask why either of them should be used anymore. Paasonen answers this dilemma by referring to the different modalities of the texts and to different reader sensations that texts marked as erotic or pornographic arouse (Paasonen 2010, 150). It all comes down to how a text resonates with the readers.

There are similarities between kink meme communities and other non-fandom-based erotica, which highlights the literary nature of kink meme communities. Paasonen in her study of erotic stories published in *literotica.com*, a massive archive of amateur erotica, reveals many interesting findings similar to mine. First is the distinction between porn

and erotica, which I have already discussed. The other is the question of what makes a good erotic story and what kind of reader responses good stories receive. Paasonen notes that while *literotica.com* is very much concerned with producing quality erotica and separating it from porn, the story reviews readers leave vary from helpful suggestions of how to make the story even better, pointing out the importance of good grammar and proper use of language, to very fleshy, intimate descriptions of arousal (Paasonen 2010, 148). These same kinds of reader responses can also be found in kink meme stories. Readers in *literotica.com* and kink memes both are likely to pay much attention to realism and believability, and to how well a story was able to move and affect them. In *Literotica* stories, this believability comes from, among other things, well drawn-out, relatable characters. The same is true in kink meme stories, with the added request that the characters must also be recognisable – *in character* – to be believable.

These are characters you have an attachment to, characters you know like the back of your hand, people, in a sense, that you have a voyeuristic interest to see in your favourite fantasies. –. I love when authors manage to make sex unique, in a way that makes sense for the characters to do, instead of the typical “we were horny and then sexytimes”. If I wanted that, I would be on the internet and look up some shitty free erotica. (Asexual woman, 20–25)

In her answer, the respondent describes vividly and lovingly the importance of fan fiction and the unique nature of certain fantastical fandoms in inspiring imaginative, fantastical porn that remains true to the beloved characters. She is not alone in differentiating between fan erotica and mainstream erotica, either. Another respondent described the importance of readers being already familiar and invested in characters – an aspect she thought was lacking in original erotica. She also noted that the interaction of the fandom can add an extra layer of excitement, that the communal nature of kink meme communities added to her enjoyment. “I’m turned on by the thought of others reading the

kinky prompt and being affected by it. Imagining them imagining the kinky situation is hot.” (Cis-girl, bisexual, under 20.)

This, I feel, is one of the key aspects of kink meme communities; they turn the personal, often solitary and shameful, act of reading pornography into a communal exercise. That is not to say that other, non-fandom erotica or pornographic sites can not be communal. Rather, what separates kink meme communities from other forms of pornography or erotica is the reliance on characters that the readers and writers are already intimately familiar with. Kink meme communities imagine new ways to explore the worlds, characters and relationships readers and writers already know and love, thus providing safe spaces for all sexualities and genders to explore and construct their own identities.

Conclusion

Kink meme communities are online spaces that have much in common with other fan fiction communities and other female-centric online spaces. The data presented here offers a small sample of my research on the role of kink meme communities and their place in the larger context of female-centric online communities dedicated to writing and sharing erotic material and discussing women’s sexuality. In this paper, I have explored and discussed the meanings and usage of kink meme communities, how the respondents view the erotic/pornographic material and how they situate kink meme stories within the broader framework of pornography or erotica. I have also discussed how the respondents view unsettling and taboo subjects and material in some kink meme stories and how these subjects affect them. Kink meme communities are shown to be online spaces where the free exercise of female and queer sexuality is not feared or censored. To many respondents, these communities are important in that they provide safe places to explore gender and sexual identities outside the normative binary of male/female or hetero/homosexual. In kink meme stories, sexuality and gender are discussed and presented in all their variations and the fleshy, intimate tone of the stories is often carried over to the discussions among the community members. Kink meme communities can also function as places for queer

activism, in that they stress the importance of providing erotic material created by and for gender and sexual minorities, which ties kink memes to many other fan fiction communities. The term queer is therefore used both as an identity, or as a way to escape strict identity labels, and as an analytical tool to understand the many ways kink meme communities blur the boundaries between normative ideas about female sexuality.

Pornography and erotica are labels that carry a lot of stigma. In the data presented here, porn and erotica are often used interchangeably and when discussed separately, they often refer to different modalities of the texts. In some stories, the pornographic material is there to illuminate something about the characters or the fictional world, while it in others aims to arouse the reader sexually. This goes to show that kink meme stories are not used only for brief sexual satisfaction; they can also be compelling literary exercises.

The issue of ethics and censorship is often discussed in porn studies. It is also prominently present in the data presented here. While there was consensus among the respondents about the importance of the freedom to write without fear of being censored, many respondents were concerned about the effect that some subjects might have on the survivors of rape or childhood sexual abuse. Kink meme communities are shown to be places where the members are deeply aware of the ethical issues surrounding porn.

The data presented and analysed here adds to our understanding of women's and gender and sexual minorities' use of erotic and pornographic material. The study sheds more light on kink meme communities and their place in the larger frameworks of both fan fiction and pornography.

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NOTES

1. Fan fiction is a literary practice where fans of a certain media text come together to imagine and write their own stories using the characters and worlds created by someone else. Slash fiction is fan fiction where two same-sex characters are written into a romantic and/or erotic relationship.
2. The name "kink meme" consists of two parts. *Meme* in this context can be understood to mean activity that is repeated by a group of people (Wall 2010), and *kink* refers to any erotic or sexual theme that plays a central role in stories shared in the community.
3. For a discussion about the term *kink* and its different usages in fan fiction communities, see Wall 2010.
4. This, however, is not the case in all kink meme communities. For a quantitative and qualitative analysis of a kink meme community based on the TV-series *Glee*, see Ellison 2013.
5. One prevailing difference that some participants mentioned was that the style of the story is influenced by the fandom: "I go to Supernatural kink meme whenever I want to read kinky stuff. The Thor fandom and k-pop fandom tend to have more

stories with real plots, though some of SPN kink meme fics are very interesting to read as well.” (Female, bisexual, 20–25)

6. <https://spnkink-meme.livejournal.com/?skip=10>
7. <https://archiveofourown.org>