Sheffield Hallam University

Strip-Teasing COVID-19 Porn: A promising silhouette of a community, or the dark alley of a platformized industry?

BELINSKAYA, Yulia and RODRIGUEZ-AMAT, Joan <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8391-3638>

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Strip-teasing COVID-19 porn: A promising silhouette of a community, or the dark alley of a platformized industry?
by Yulia Belinskaya and Joan Ramon Rodriguez-Amat

Abstract

Government's domestic lockdown measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19 during 2020 altered the patterns of media consumption, and massively boosted the traffic on video-streaming services including porn sites. This research explores the impact of COVID-19 on PornHub in three ways: video content, conditions of production, and related users' activity. The analysis of a sample of 286 videos within a cluster of thematically relevant tags shows that what appears to be an emerging genre of COVID-19 porn is only a reshuffle of previously consolidated genres scaffolding its symbolic background. The analysis also shows that among the explicit sexual practices, some videos include pedagogical and humoristic insights. These apparently off-topic videos show societal and awareness-raising purposes. This article argues that the capacities of the PornHub interface enable social interactions that transcend the strictly sexual encounter, thus showing a form of social community of practice.

Contents

1. Introduction

The government's heavily restrictive lockdown measures intended to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in 2020 altered the patterns of media consumption and moved working, learning, and entertainment online. Traffic on streaming services and porn sites rocketed: according to PornHub statistics, by the end of March 2020, the site experienced a 25 percent traffic increase, with regional peaks, such as Spain with 61 percent (PornHub, 2020a). Also, online searches for "coronavirus porn" increased (PornHub, 2020a). This article explores the shape of "COVID-19 porn" to identify its genre-related features. The study also pays attention to the conditions of its production, delivery, consumption, and briefly to the social interactions around the videos and between members of the porn site PornHub.

The brand PornHub has demonstrated high levels of adaptability: the company changed policies of access, pursued viral marketing strategies, and adapted contents to audiences' demands. More recently the platform has made relevant moves toward the moderation of content after "a holy war" led by *New*

York Times columnist Nick Kristof (Kristof, 2020; Cole, 2020). It is time to explore how these surges of porn consumption and production feed into the porn industry as a whole, and how this unveils further fertile research strands in pornology.

This paper analyses 286 coronavirus porn related videos sampled by representative relevance from a universe of 7,532 videos obtained with a series of keyword searches on PornHub. The analysis of the video contents is combined with the analysis of users' metadata to identify patterns of user interaction.

The analysis shows how COVID-19 porn is not a fully new creative genre within the porn cultures, but rather a hybrid of several other consolidated genres; and in its reproduction, sexist patterns of gender distribution are deepened more than challenged: the insistent portrait of male-centered sexuality preferences include endings with penetration and male ejaculation. However, the presence of pedagogic and humorous videos also directs attention toward a "more than sexualized" form of interaction among users, movie makers, and followers of the PornHub community. An exploration of the available data on users' activity shows that among the several profiles there is a noticeable level of interaction on a global scale. The site seems to be more than a place "for masturbation" (Prause, 2019).

PornHub is a world-leading company that profits from distributing porn created by its users but is also a platform that commodifies metadata generated by its user's activity including sexual tastes, or attitudes. While this article has been triggered by COVID-19 porn, the analysis opens further questions that invite more research about this platformized media industry. This research shows that between the porn culture, and the monetizing drive of the company-as-platform, a living community of users thrives. The COVID-19 conditions of lockdown and of increased consumption of online streaming and porn have excited and made visible a community of practice that debates, jokes, educates, and builds networks of support between the users of PornHub. Later it will be necessary to dig further into the comments to answer the questions of to what extent the community was already there, or if it will remain there once the COVID-19 conditions change.

2. Setting and frame

2.1. Exaggerations in connectivity

The drastic measures adopted to prevent national health systems from collapsing have seen sound collateral implications. Among them, lockdown measures kept the population in their homes for weeks provoking major work and mobility disruptions. The lockdown also carried physiological implications. According to Campbell [1]: "While community togetherness may be often encouraged after natural disasters, physical separation from fellow community members is the course of action promoted in the current crisis.&edquo; Beyond the high social impact of the measures implemented, the increase of Internet-enabled activity and participation in various existing and emerging online communities has historically surged, pushing the capacity of infrastructures and exaggerating inequalities of broadband and Internet access (Merrefield, 2020). Some companies have risen in these conditions: specifically those companies that are interfacing the physical and online world, particularly online shopping and online entertainment platforms such as music or audio-visual media platforms. Netflix has gained 15.77 million new subscribers since the rise of pandemic measures (Rushe and Lee, 2020).

Another powerful player in the online entertainment market is MindGeek. Even in 2017, alongside Google and Netflix, MindGeek was one of the most bandwidth-consuming Internet resources worldwide (Lemon, 2020). Formerly Manwin/Mansef, MindGeek is the largest porn providing company worldwide with earnings of over US$200 million a year (Barnett, 2019). Founded in 2004 as an amateur pornsite, it hosted lots of pirated content (O'Connor, 2017). However, in 2011, it acquired production companies and rising tube sites, thus contributing to the centralization of the pornography industry (Paasonen, 2017). The narrowly-themed pornography Web sites now owned by MindGeek source a bigger near-monopolist network that feeds to all the key tube sites including RedTube, SpankWire, XTube, ExtremeTube, YouPorn, and also PornHub.

> "In 2016 PornHub's yearly review published that at 99Gb
> per second, 3110 Petabytes of videos had been streamed
> adding to 4,599 million hours of porn on PornHub only (this

is half a million years!) of world-wide distributed
consumption (PornHub, 2017)." (Duller and Rodriguez-
Amat, 2019).

This article is balanced between a discussion of the production of COVID-19 porn, and how the industry fits this production within its own evolution.

2.2. Porn studies

The multiple standards against which porn is usually assessed trigger many intellectual interests. Academically the field of porn studies is crossed with seventies feminist critical thinking opposed to pornography for its stereotyping and harmful consequences (Forrester, 2016). The long tradition of anti-pornography typically associated porn with violence against women (Donnerstein, 1984), the legitimization of dominance, aloofness in relationships (Baron and Straus, 1984), and rape (Russell, 1988). Williams (1989) asserted: "The feminist rhetoric of abhorrence has impeded discussion of almost everything but the question of whether pornography deserves to exist at all. Since it does exist, however, we should be asking what it does for viewers." [2] As it was underlined by Paasonen: "Studies of representation, as practiced in cultural studies, start from the premise that words and images are practices with effects in and for the world. As practices that matter, representations generate both meaning and effects." [3] This is in line with Butler's (1997) view of porn in its visual illocutionary performative force that reinvokes and reinscribes a structural relation of domination. The purely semantic framework is considered to be problematic since porn is "both material and semiotic: it involves fleshy intensities, conventions of representation, media technologies, and the circuits of money, labor, and affect." [4] The author calls porn to account for the "affective intensities" of the images and also for encompassing the role of technology and the programmed algorithms in generating effects. Paasonen addresses online porn as a "nexus of generic conventions, technologies, body styles, and values that, if tuned to the right frequency, has the power to affect its users in unpredictable and often contradictory ways." [5]

In the "dialectical spirit of critical cultural theory" in the context of porn, categories of gender and sexuality blur, "between pop culture and porn culture." [6]. Porn has also been designated as a liberating space: "a playground for diverse sexual identities, as a form of self-expression and embraced by feminism as a right to control ones own fantasy" [7]. As a disruptive opportunity to challenge patriarchal and "heteronormative" sights porn visibilizes gay, lesbian, or non-binary and queer sex. Producer Erika Lust, among others, militates toward promoting a female perspective on the adult movies (Lust, 2019). Also, the "faux-cest" or "near-incest" porn depicting pseudo-incest pornographic scenes (step-mum, step-brother porn) has historically been successful in porn culture because it fulfills hidden unconscious desires (May, 2015) and liberates them from the sexual restrictions reproduced by conservatism, puritanism, and all the power structures associated with them (Li, 2000). Porn is thus an opportunity to explore educational possibilities or sexual rights debates, enriching overall the nuances of the feminist debates. Porn is a source of inspiration and de-marginalization of sexual identities; and it also has a potential for the empowerment towards sexual rights linked to the commodification of sex and pornofication (McNair, 2012).

This delicate balance becomes relevant for an academic discussion that recognizes "the importance of new areas such as porn studies in the wider contexts of media and culture" [8]. Within such a context, pornography has earned controverted significance for more fields including media, gender, sexuality, and technology; and "in the past decade or so interest in pornography has grown exponentially — with a concomitant increase in claims about porn's effects, both positive and negative" [9].

However, the territory of porn studies has already expanded the notion of pornographic in "the everyday, in political discourse, illustrations, and modern art: in objects that are not necessarily produced, distributed or consumed as pornography and, indeed, that may or may not show explicit sexual acts." [10] While recent research shows that it still remains within a paradigm characterized by essentially negative conceptions, there is a perspective that advocates for pornology as a changing understanding of pornography that also identifies its positive effects from a dispassionate approach which considers the contributions of porn whether individual, social, or technological, using a new paradigm. For Gouvernet, *et al.* [11], this would also reduce the "marginalization of scientists working in this direction and of the paradigm itself".

This paper emerges from this invitation to a pornology paradigm change, and far from intending to disregard the dominant tradition of negative approaches on porn studies, this research suggests a

change of focus. Gouvernet, *et al.* (2020) have indicated the impact of platforms such as YouPorn, Pornhub, or RedTube, among others, in changes in the field of study since 2006.

In this case, the paper approaches Pornhub more than as a company or as a porn site, but as a media platform that deals with multiple stakeholders. From this perspective it is possible to avoid a reductive negative approach that does not solve the actual issues involving PornHub. Furthermore, given the latest changes in its policies, PornHub behaves as a platform that "moderates" its content. Such practice aligns it with a broader discussion on platform content moderation; and porn cannot be studied separately from these technological and communicative issues. This paper approaches the platformization of Pornhub highlighting how the platform feeds on current events; and how it does it at the parasitic cost of exchanging the comfort of social interactions for creative labor exploitation.

2.3. Porn penetrates the public sphere

The porn production culture dialogues with timely events through parodies of iconic movies, like *Star Wars* (Booth, 2014), or viral phenomena such as the Storming of Area 51. In 2019 the term "Joker" in porn search engines increased 3,345 percent after the Oscar-winning movie (PornHub, 2019). It is not only a matter of fashion: porn consumption waves happen in times of social crises too, such as the cases during the American Civil War (Uzieblo and Prescott, 2020) or as this paper shows the COVID-19 pandemic (PornHub, 2020a).

Also, porn references are abundant in the media: books, a porn-stardom celebrity culture with autobiographies, or self-help narratives and documentaries currently available, such as *Hot Girls Wanted* or *After Porn Ends*. There is also a "deactivating effect" of labeling practices or objects with the suffix "porn": making "thingsporn" on social media hashtagging: at the time of writing, Instagram #foodporn brings more than 220 million posts; #wineporn 1.6 million; #cabinporn, almost 300k; but also "disaster porn" has been around for some time too (Recuber, 2013). These factors contribute to the legitimizing and normalizing of the consumption of porn; and while porn seems chronically ill-regulated (Edwards, 2000) in the "pornosphere" (McNair, 2012) and with "the pornophication of the public space" (Sørensen, 2007), the interest in pornography is no longer a deviation but rather the "indication of broad-mindedness and a liberal attitude" [12].

The porn industry is worth between US$6 and US$15 billion (Benes, 2018) and has moved out of the dark corners of the VHS shops, and has also left behind price-controlled pornographic products like magazines or DVDs. The Internet has made all types of pornography easy to access, including hardcore, illegal, and just bizarre content which are now available at home. This has transformed the industry steering it towards a 'freemium' model (Barnett, 2019): Tube or aggregator sites — following the YouTube principle — accumulate and stream free content consisting of self-made videos with amateur models similar to those bottom-up communities of YouTube practices (described by Burgess and Green, 2018), with materials emerging from big professional studios (mostly previews, or excerpts, that generate traffic to their own sites). This "porn 2.0" allows viewers to contribute with home-made uploads, to comment, to like, and and to tag content, creating profiles, a following, and communities, that can be monetized (Tyson, *et al.*, 2015). Revenues show a clear double platformization logic (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), such as additional paid services, including advertising, webcams, premium subscriptions, or pay-to-download videos; as well as the monetization of free homemade uploads, and added users' metadata. In spite of the efforts to launder its own image, the platformization of the porn industry still drags issues from those dark alleys: workers' and labor rights, gender discrimination, and intellectual property protection among others. Some authors see the DIY character of amateur porn as a chance for sex workers to take control over their working conditions (Berg, 2017) and as an audience response in favor of authentic sex and against "plastic porn" [13]. PornHub epitomizes the tube business approach: in exchange for the excerpts, PornHub offers loose advertising rights and "rather than seek to limit or control the types of advertisements it hosts, PornHub welcomes cross-promotion relatively undiscerningly." [14].

2.4. The case of PornHub

During the Coronavirus pandemic PornHub generated worldwide press coverage. On 11 March 2020, "the biggest porn portal on the Internet" (Mosman, 2019), granted free premium access to all Italians until 23 April, after the country lockdown. The same happened in France and Spain five days later, and afterwards free access was spread to all other countries. PornHub insights show that the day after the granting of free access Italian traffic increased by 57 percent; with Spanish traffic increasing by 38 percent and French traffic by 61 percent (PornHub, 2020a). Globally, the trend shows consistent

correlation between the rise of porn consumption and the chronology of lockdown implementation, too. Content uploads also increased proportionally to which the brand responded with a 100 percent payout for all pay-to-download and for-sale videos to its verified contributors and verified uploads for the whole of April. Also, PornHub donated money in support of hospitals and spread the word about "staying at home" asking all contributors to use the hashtag #StayHomeHub.

PornHub has faced multiple obstacles to become a socially accepted brand (Gorbatch, 2019) and it has been the target of multiple campaigns. One of the latest (at the time of writing) has forced PornHub to activate new platform measures including "verified uploaders only," meaning that videos can only be uploaded by profiles within the model partnership program established by the platform (PornHub, 2020d); "banning downloads," to reduce the spread of inappropriate videos; and "expanding moderation" by growing a team to eliminate and track illegal contents (PornHub, 2020c). These measures were taken after an article in the *New York Times* (Kristof, 2020) by a columnist backed by a "religious right organization, Exodus Cry, founded by a member of a Christian dominionist ministry, which has advanced anti-gay, anti-abortion, and antisemitic views" (Grant, 2020). Visa and Mastercard threatened PornHub and MindGeek with the withdrawal of their relations, thus spreading the impact among small creators (Cole, 2020). These measures will foreseeably impact the content moderation policies of other social media platforms.

PornHub hosts videos of sexual content which are usually short and with a preference for sex featuring penetration and male ejaculation. The platform states that users' demands go in two directions: a trend for more realistic depiction (including the increase of amateur content done with little equipment and experience and POV videos); and a trend for fantasy play (PornHub, 2019). It is not inconsistent then that a check of the most common search trends shows in 2015 "anal," "amateur," "teen," and — one that would surely have made Freud smile — "mom and son" (Forrester, 2016). In 2019 the most popular search words included "amateur," "alien," "pov," "Belle Delphine," "cosplay," and "mature" (PornHub, 2020b).

And yet, the coronavirus lockdown hit the PornHub search engine: on 13 March 2020, PornHub confirmed that searches containing the word "coronavirus" initially appeared at the end of January 2020 and continued to grow. In the following 30 days, PornHub recorded more than 9.1 million searches containing either 'corona' or 'COVID'; by mid-April these searches peaked at 17 million hits (PornHub, 2020b). The response of the industry was immediate — thousands of coronavirus themed videos were uploaded to PornHub, which — at the time of writing — had been viewed more than 60 million times (*e.g.*, V29 [15]).

Following these developments, this research aims to unearth what lies behind such new search trends, and behind the COVID-19 related porn surge in general. The purpose is not to explore the actual demand as it seems Forbes already knew that "it likely has a direct correlation with the many unknowns about the disease. Any resource is still a resource" (Silver, 2020); but more to identify how this surge adds to the discussions about the porn industry as an Internet multi-platform system. This article considers these time-related oscillations of user behavior and this distributed creation of content uploads as symptomatic of the platformization of PornHub. There are signs of social interactions — and of community building — that work as trade-offs for the commodification of user data, and of the advertising and commercial purposes that define PornHub as a media platform.

Specifically, this article intends to:

1. Map the thematic contents against the possibility of a new COVID-19 porn genre;
2. Describe users, production, and distribution features of the COVID-19 related videos;
3. Find patterns that help to understand the trends within the porn industry as a whole.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

A list of key terms (see Table 1 for term results) was used to drive a Python-automated term search that collected the identification key (VKEY) of the first 7,532 videos. This automated search was done on a clean browser without cookies or a previous search history and on the heterosexual option of PornHub,

which is the one shown by default when the main page (pornhub.com) is opened on a such browser. The PornHub search engine works with word arrays and not in Boolean language; therefore, word combinations do not necessarily add to previous searches, but the search engine algorithm produces new results ("coronavirus" did not provide the same results as "coronavirus porn").

Table 1: Number of videos per search on PornHub.	
Word search	**Number of videos**
Coronavirus	935
Coronavirus porn	1,436
Coronavirus patients	1,389
Coronavirus quarantine	1,110
Coronavirus sex	1,413
COVID 19	1,249
Total	7,532

The initial stack contained only 3,468 unique videos. The high repetition suggested that the collection was exhaustive; and we continued the sampling using criteria of relevance, rather than statistical relevance. To determine the sample, we used the 1,810 unique tags labelling the 3,468 videos. Only 50 of these tags were semantically related to COVID-19 (see Appendix). Overall, 845 videos of the 3,468 contained at least one tag; and 286 videos had more than three COVID-19 relevant tags. This is how we formed the sample for this research.

3.2. Data analysis

The analysis of the 286 videos was done adapting an Image Type Analysis typically performed on pictures as in Brantner, *et al.* (2019) and Rodriguez-Amat and Belinskaya (2021). "The method combines quantitative and qualitative features of visual content analysis and allows for the quantification of recurring image types and their qualitative analysis and interpretation." [16]

The method applied to videos is still useful. An open coding procedure applied on a pilot sample of 50 videos offers a first list of 10 categories inductively identified that leads the coding structure adapted to the full sample forming a final codebook of 14 categories, and 31 subcategories of videos that was applied to the rest of the sample either from the title or the contents. Additionally, the analysis was useful to identify the number of actors in the video, and where possible, their genders. The videos' and users' metadata was also captured, which included duration, number of comments, number of views, or the number of categories used; also user, and user related features such as: number of posts, gender, location, ethnicity, number of videos posted, watched, and relationship status.

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4. Results

The three strands forming this section respond to the three questions above. First, the video qualitative analysis identifies the less original features of the "coronavirus genre" emerging rather like a hybrid repertoire product of already consolidated genres of porn. Second, the description of users and uses shows a ranked pattern of users depending on follower numbers and on the amount of activity analogous to the quantitatively mapped patterns on YouTube videos (Rieder, *et al.*, 2020). Third, considering the first and second strands, we discuss some significant features of porn as a platformized industry while developing more questions for further research in a double direction: is porn moving toward an industrious ecosystem of users and monetization, and toward an emerging community in

tension with a profit logic that might or might not be strategically relevant for the platform itself (Gillespie, 2010)?

4.1. A particular porn: Coronavirus generic repertoire

The screening of the sample of 286 videos showed an iteration of settings and narratives. The analysis has identified four core lines and a fifth that accounts for the rest (42 videos): quarantine (154 videos), medical (53 videos), pedagogic (23 videos), and humor (12) (see Figure 1).
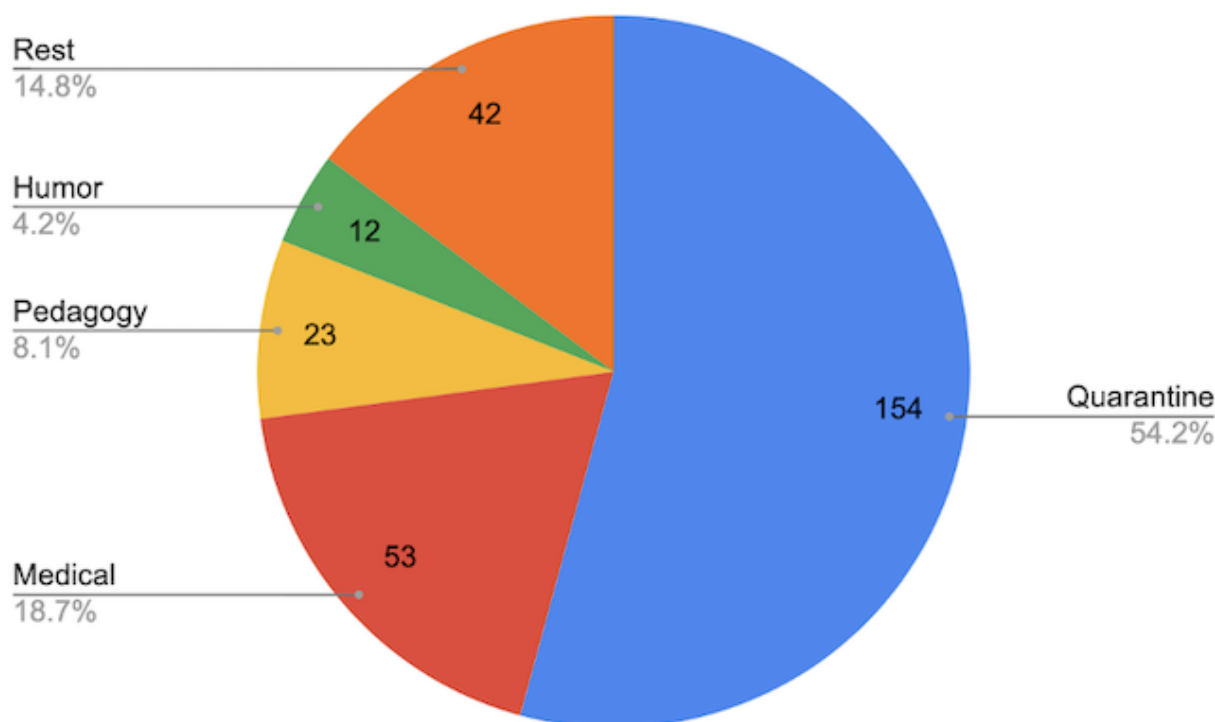

Figure 1: Video-type analysis (*N*=286).

4.1.1. Quarantine

This category included all posts featuring quarantine and lockdown conditions, these videos constituted more than half of the sample — 53 percent. This batch of videos either mentioned quarantine or lockdown explicitly during the video or in the title: *While the World Thinks About COVID-19 We've Fun Isolation Shelter In Place* (V1, *sic.*). Often actors wear masks (57 videos out of 154): bacterial (40), gas (1), or carnival masks (16). Masks played the double role of hiding the identity of amateur actors, and of reminding the audience of the sanitary/contagious emergency.

The analysis identified four subcategories: Couples (80 videos), Solo (48 videos), Step-family or Neighbor (14 videos), and Public spaces (5 videos). This distinction improves the detail of the analysis.

Slightly more than half of the videos (52 percent) show couples having intercourse while quarantined. The narratives either tend toward the joy of being quarantined: *Quarantined with hot wife* (V2), *Stay at home for the coronavirus is not so bad* (V3), *Quarantine and chill* (V4); or towards the negative effects of boredom or of coping with the situation: *I Got Bored In Coronavirus Quarantine & Treated Her Ass With Anal Creampie* (V5). Most of these videos are labeled as a "homemade production"; and are shot with a mobile phone. A third of the cases only show close-up penetration without the detail of bodies or faces.

The group of Solo videos (31 percent of quarantine videos) consist of quarantine-related masturbatory practices: *Coronavirus has me feeling dirty and stressed and really horny* (V6); or *She Fucks Herself With Her Dildo So Hard To Squirt* (Coronavirus Therapy) (V7).

The third group is the generically called "family porn" (nine percent of quarantine related videos). The "Neighbor" or "Girl next door" genre was also included here. Results showed stepbrothers (3) or sisters (4), stepmothers (3) or fathers (3), and stepdaughters (1). This "faux-cest" genre is a growing porn genre that has been conveniently adapted to fit coronavirus and lockdown situations. Half of them (7 videos) were professionally made with professional actors (for example, V8). This also shows the attention paid by the industry to trends, and its fast reaction to adapt this particular "faux-step" genre to the coronavirus porn surge.

The fourth type (five videos) incorporates the use of public spaces or outdoors as a rebellious response to lockdown policies: using a fitting room (V9), a car (V10), or outside (V11).

4.1.2. Medical

This is the second type of video and includes all videos either offering a form of cure for the coronavirus (28 videos) or stage medicalized situations with a nurse (13 videos) or a doctor (9 videos). All the "nurse" videos included a female taking care of a male patient; whereas often the male "doctor" embodied authoritative roles of knowledge and of power inviting the patient "to undress" or "prescribing treatment." These videos insist on traditional heteronormative gender roles (V13), with (V12) exemplifying an exception.

Other videos incorporate stories of coronavirus cure, prevention, and experimental (sex-related) treatments, vaccination, and testing, or follow-up check-up, including a "deep check-up" of patients introducing themselves with a cough (V14).

In this category of videos, the medical and clinic fetishes are extensively reproduced: from the decoration, setting, and dressing, to the use of masks and personal protection equipment (PPE) (gloves, hazmat or scrubs, or mask). In 23 videos (43 percent of the medical videos) at least one actor/actress was wearing a mask.

4.1.3. Pedagogical

Both PornHub contributors and viewers treat the crisis as an opportunity to provide or to receive vital information or, on the other hand, to conveniently monetize the interest in information. Therefore 23 videos (eight percent of the sample) are the third type. They show intentionally useful information on how to avoid virus contagion (*i.e.*, cleaning vegetables [V15], washing hands properly [V16 — there were eight videos on this], or recommending the use of masks or other protective means [V17]). In one video (V18) the amateur porn actor Chase Poundher posts an online radio interview to "The Vegas Take." He explains coronavirus porn is similar to airlines safety instructions using humor to raise awareness and create viral outreach. Chase Poundher's "pedagogical pornography" had 742,000 views at the time of data collection. He is allegedly a PornHub influencer.

4.1.4. Humor

A total of 12 videos (four percent of the sample) share intentionally humorous features. Most of these videos are not penetration-centered, but some still retain a sexual-erotic flavor; as in the case of *Nikki Peach Fucks Corona Bottle* (V19). The presence of Corona beer is a recurrent gag, as is the symbolic value of toilet paper: either for self-pleasure (V20), as something worth lap-dancing for (V21), for sexual trading (V22), or as a last resort, nutrition (V23). Similarly, PPE has been treated with humor; cutting a protective helmet out of a water bottle, for example (V24).

4.1.5. Rest

The rest of the videos (42 out of 286 were left over from the previous categories) include miscellaneous compilations, for instance, of topless women coughing (V25), music and gaming videos (V26), or a crab with toilet paper in its claw (V27).

These five categories seem to map a nascent — not so original — genre of COVID-19 porn; but the new hybrid has a long way to go to become a genre in itself. For now, it breeds from the repertoire

crossovers of other consolidated porn genres: such as medical-hospital porn, which is a classic among the shared fantasies of porn culture, probably spiced with the added fetish of protective-plastic-gagging-limiting mask; family porn, strongly emerging over the last few years, and "trading porn" including sex-in-exchange against sexual-based blackmail. Thus, more than a new porn genre, this behaves more as a peak in the interest curve and awareness of the COVID-19 pandemic. Users, sensitive to trends, respond swiftly by uploading adapted videos or changing the title of previously recorded material (33 percent are close-up penetration videos only contextualized by the title).

Clumsy recordings and the mobile phone vertical format of some videos which have low editing or sound quality also favor the idea of a rushed home-made production system. The industry, reacting to data nuances from viewing activity and search engine reports, have joined this trend with fresh professional quality creations, too. The tension between videos from the industry and user-generated content insists on the similarity of PornHub with the described evolutionary patterns of YouTube (Burgess and Greene, 2018). The analysis of video and users' metadata in the next section should help understand the role and the ecosystem of PornHub as a platform. The data illuminates some patterns of consumption and production of COVID-19 porn.

4.2. Patterns of consumption and reproduction of COVID-19 related porn

The qualitative analysis has identified features involving technical conditions of video production. The unequal exposure of male and female bodies is very significant: the vast majority of videos do not show the male's face and prioritize the exhibition of his member. The visibility of other male body parts includes hands, legs-feet, chest (88 videos). Overall, 57 of the 286 videos only depict close-up details of penetration; and the full masculine body is visible only in 38 videos. Instead, the full feminine body is visible on 128 occasions and the woman's face is more likely to be seen. Arguably these technical decisions — filming with the mobile held at arms-length — establish unequal gender rights and settle discriminatory distinctions that become generic-style features in creative porn production.

The data also shows how the industry has a high and fast capacity for production. The first video collection was made between 19 March 19 and 21 March 2020; and after the refining and sampling process, approximately one percent of the videos were removed. Figure 2 shows how long the videos were online (measured by an approximate number of days).
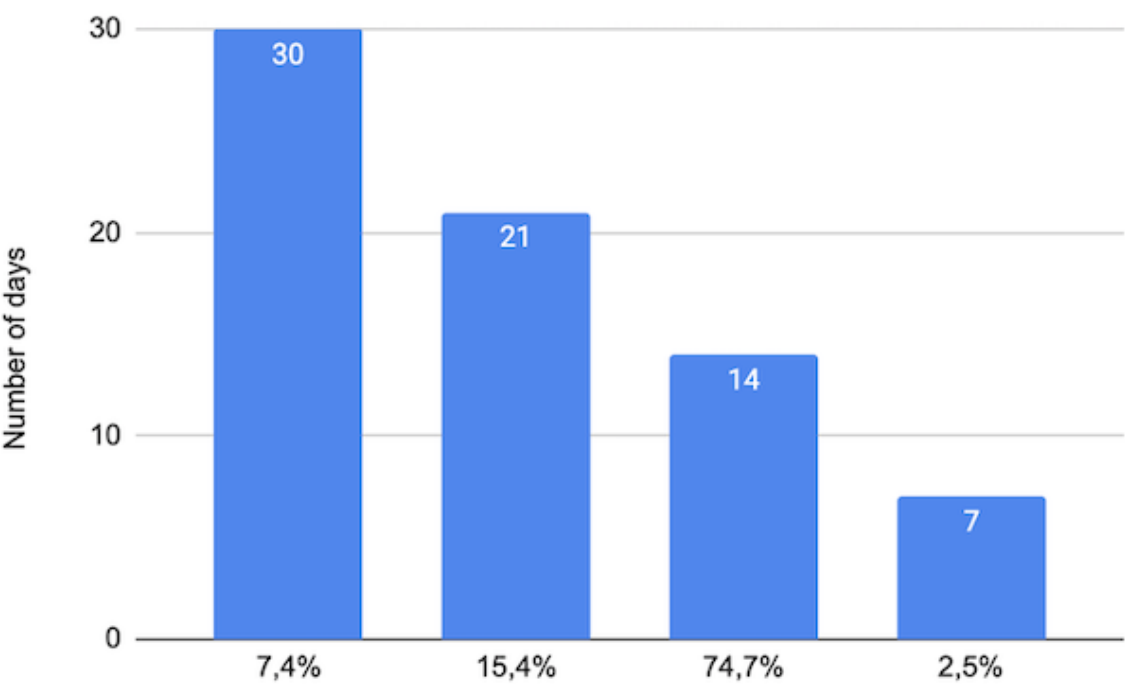
Figure 2: Number of days since video publication (on data collection date — 20 March 2020).
Note: Most of the videos were posted the first week of March; some others were available weeks before: the
search engine even brought up videos posted more than five years ago.

The nature of video production explains such a sudden surge of production. Two hundred and twenty of
the 286 videos were labeled as "Homemade" videos (this is almost 80 percent), against 50 videos
labeled as "Professional." The rest of the videos were either discarded or deleted in subsequent rounds
of data collection. Only 19 videos used more than one camera, 56 videos were shot from a POV
perspective with a handheld camera, more than 60 videos used a phone (recorded in vertical formatting
intentionally or not). Even if the vast majority of them (247) were filmed in high definition, with only
13.6 percent filmed in low definition, the bulk of technical strategies favored rather low-quality videos
for fast production and uploading. This appeals to a certain level of "literacy" in the sense meant by
Burgess and Greene (2018) regarding the YouTube community: "not only being able to create and
consume video content but also being able to comprehend the way YouTube works as a platform" [17].

4.2.1. Social activity

To understand the uses of PornHub as a social platform during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary
to move the focus to the profiles posting these videos: 240 unique users uploaded the 286 sampled
videos. Most of them, 71 percent of the profiles (205 users), uploaded only one video; eight percent
uploaded two videos; and 3.5 percent uploaded three videos. Only one profile had four videos in the
sample; their title started with "Day X: quarantined COVID-19–," and all of the videos were tagged
with "coronavirus," "COVID-19," and "quarantine", which fitted the research criteria. The first
noticeable point regarding the profiles posting is that there are four different kinds: porn stars, models,
users, and channels. Even if the algorithm mixes them in the search, there are multiple factors that
point at their differentiated social value. Of the 240 unique profiles identified, 161 were models, 20
porn stars, 44 were users, and two were channels (see Figure 3).
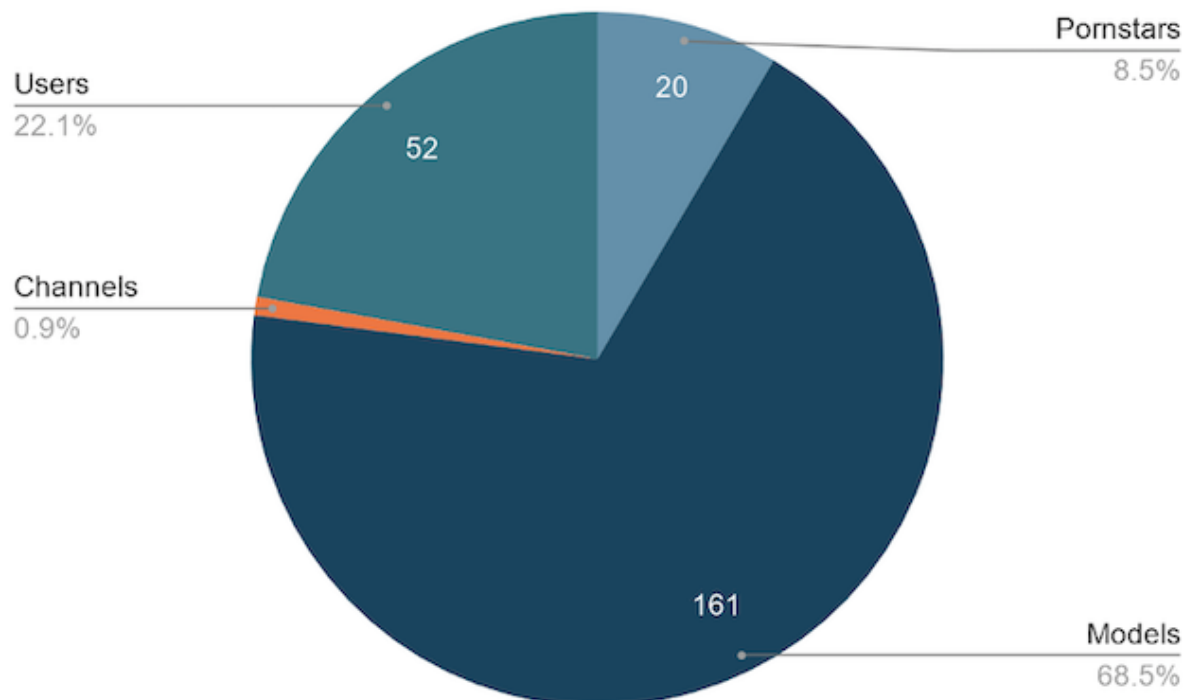
Figure 3: Typology of users in the sample (*N*=240).

Porn stars are well-known actors and actresses already involved in the adult film industry circuits. Their profiles are ranked after algorithmic criteria that include a number of views, and a number of subscribers (*i.e.*, "Top trending porn stars"). Compared to models and users, porn stars tend to have the biggest number of views: with over 100 million video views, and, in general, more than 100 million subscribers. These numbers are well beyond the YouTube elite tier (above 100k subscribers: that is less than half a percent of the YouTube channels [Rieder, *et al.*, 2020]). The social relevance of these channels, at least within PornHub, is therefore very significant. Porn stars are celebrities, and users become fans and subscribers. These porn stars attract high amounts of PornHub traffic and activate voyeuristic interactions, rather than social networks, because they are beyond the reach of the PornHub community of practice.

Instead, models attract the interest of the platform. PornHub has been growing a Model Partner Program that offers multiple revenue streams and includes support for personal branding strategies and other forms of access to the platform. The revenue depends on the performance of the advertising around the posted videos: "In the Model Program, you are paid a percentage of the ad revenue made on your verified videos. The percentage of your payout is dependent on the performance of the ads around your video." (PornHub, 2020c).

The organization of ModelHub sets a new level of profiles that generate content and activate the social relationships within the platform. This also points at further critical explorations that have already been raised in research on platformization, including regarding the contractual and eventually free or precarious labor conditions defined by the program (see Deuze, 2009); or the broader discussions including copyright, ownership, and "digital sharecropping" (Soha and McDowell, 2016) of the creative work. Whatever the case, models get rewarded by their number of views, the number of hits on the advertising placed around their videos, and the social activity generated overall.

The gender distribution of different users is represented by Figures 4–6. The identified female pornstars were between 18 and 35 years old, with an average of 24.3, while males were slightly older being between 19 and 34 — on average 25.6. In the sample, there was also one "29-year-old" couple. The 99-year-old female was considered an outlier. Users provide less information about themselves on their profiles, and their activity is counted by the number of times they have viewed other videos. Because not all users show their ages, the average can only be estimated to be around 31 years old across genders. But 61 percent of masculine membership outnumbers only five females.
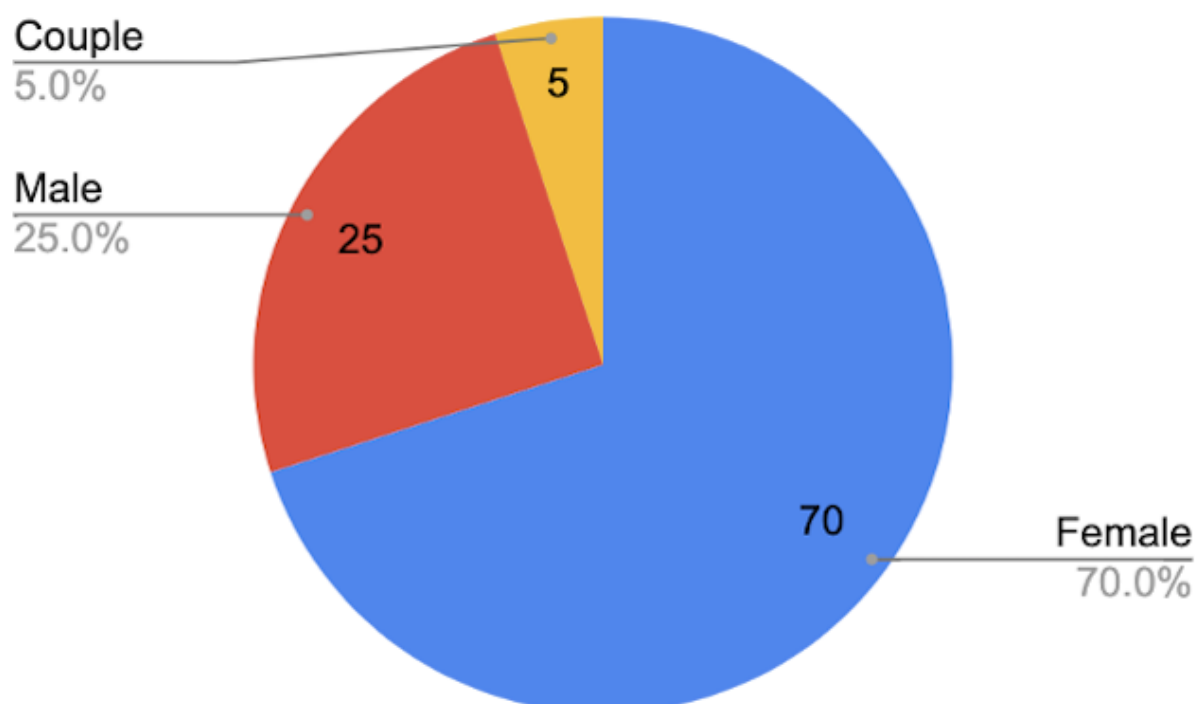
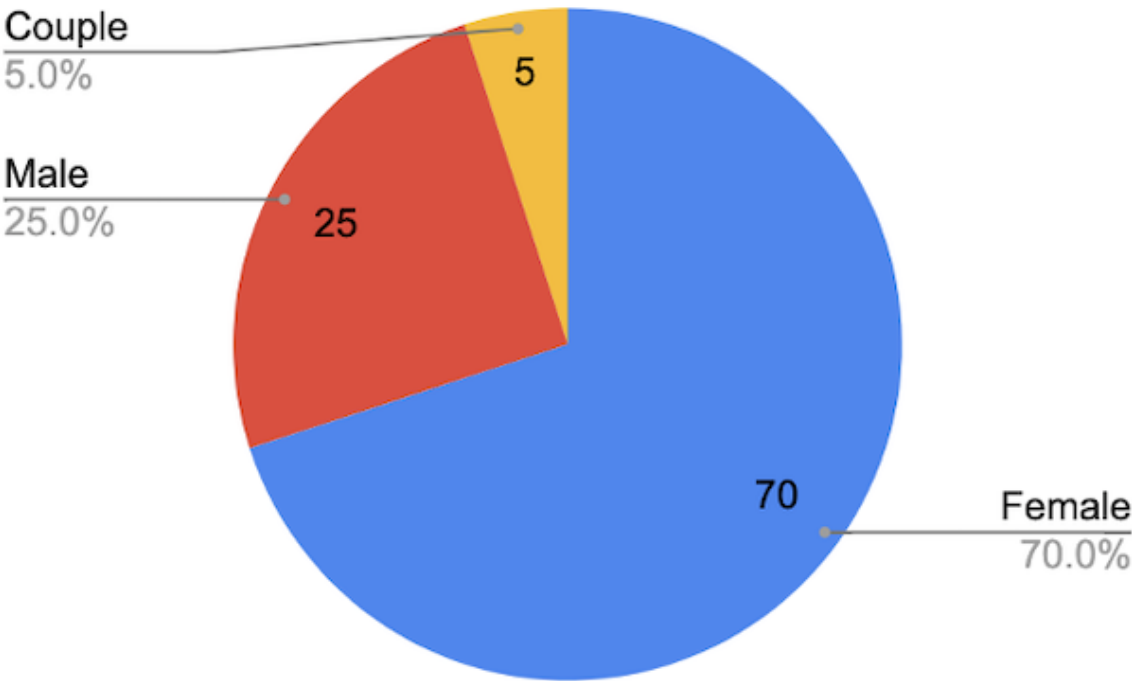**Figure 4:** Gender of users: Porn stars (*N*=20).

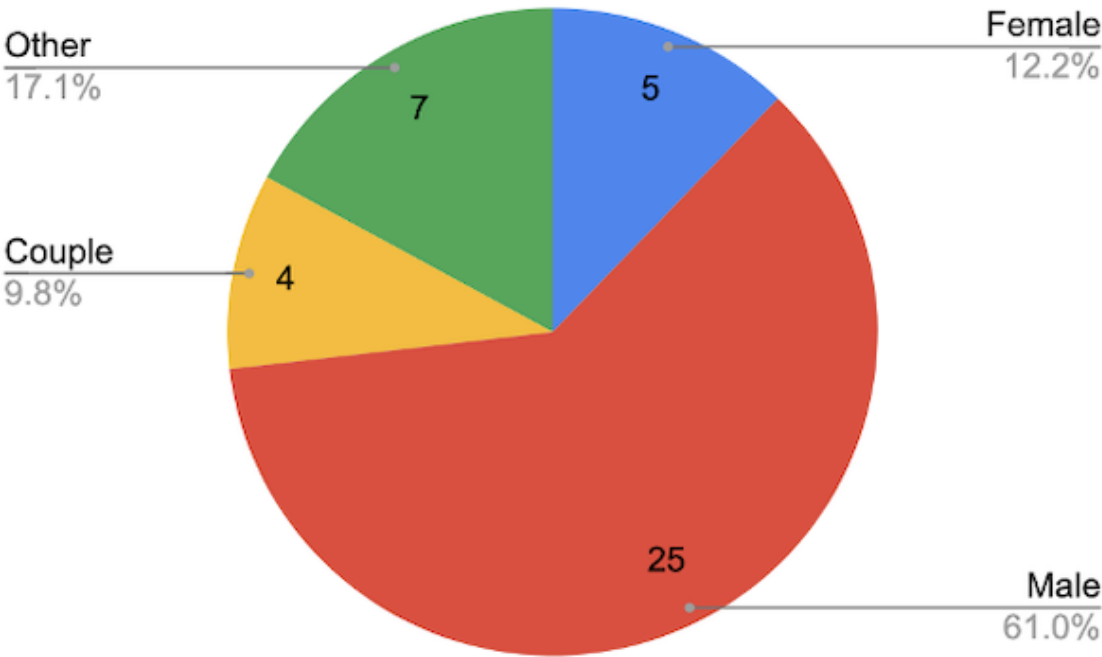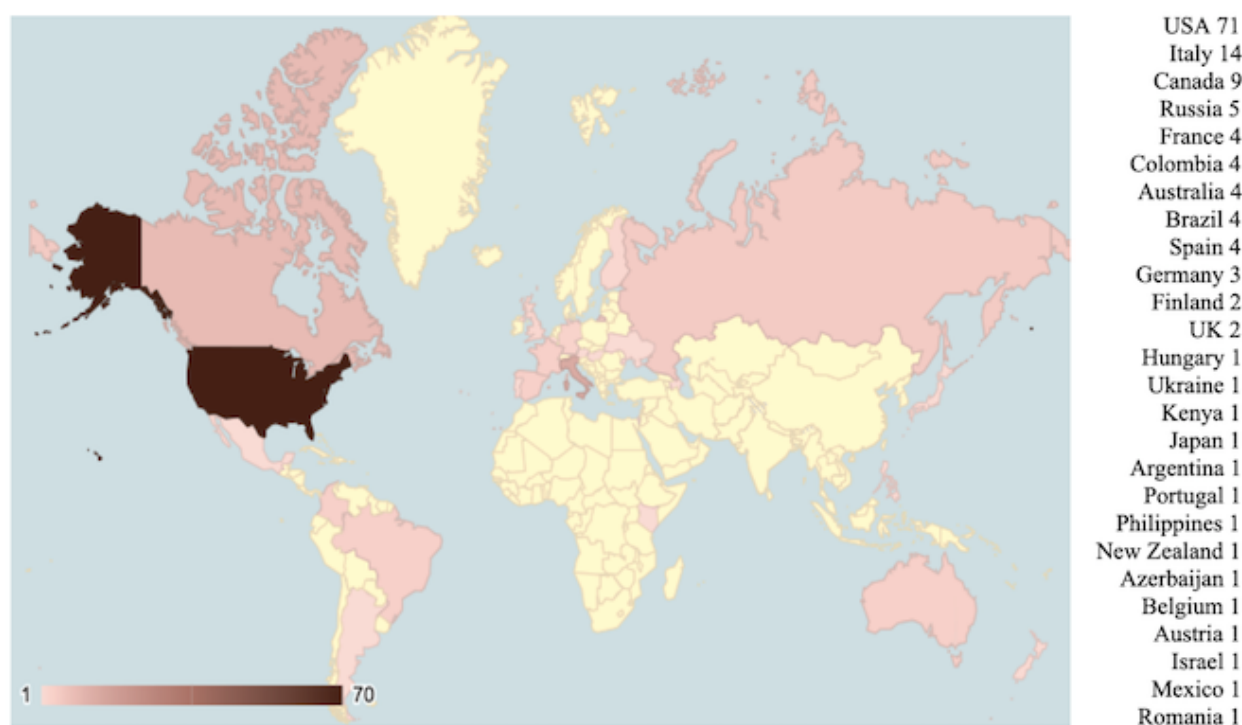**Figure 5:** Gender of users: Models (*N*=161).

Figure 6: Gender of users: Users (*N*=52).

This gender distribution of users by types is meaningful: the heterosexual landscape of this sample shows porn stars as being mostly female, models as couples, and users as males. The small sample and the narrow conditions and purposes of data collection do not allow for a scaled conclusion about the gender distribution of the users in PornHub; however, there are some conclusions that can still be drawn. The three categories describe a heteronormative binary discrete model of male/female, or couple, and also echo sexist patterns of a binary gender approach that divides between the "showing gender" (women dressed and made up to like) versus a gender that "enjoys" (men owning, and expected to be pleased). Such a reductive distinction opens a strand of difference between the capacities of PornHub and those described by Burgess and Greene (2018) as "achieved" by user participation and community building in YouTube.

4.2.2. Number of identified users per country

The geography of the sampled COVID-19 porn users includes multiple, sometimes unreliable, variables: city, country, hometown, or birthplace. While still useful starting points, in combination with the rest of available data, they allow us to sketch some geographical features of PornHub. The map of "coronavirus-porn" shows a non-linear and a non-homogeneous geographic distribution of activity (see Figure 7). There is a strong concentration of activity in the U.S., and a surge of activity in Italy (as the data was collected on 20 March). This spread of activity shows the global reach of participation in the platform, while it also helps to identify centers and peripheries in this geography of practice.

Country	Count
USA	71
Italy	14
Canada	9
Russia	5
France	4
Colombia	4
Australia	4
Brazil	4
Spain	4
Germany	3
Finland	2
UK	2
Hungary	1
Ukraine	1
Kenya	1
Japan	1
Argentina	1
Portugal	1
Philippines	1
New Zealand	1
Azerbaijan	1
Belgium	1
Austria	1
Israel	1
Mexico	1
Romania	1

Figure 7: Country by users of PornHub, whatever their specific profile or role (*N*=142)
Note: PornHub users identified a country — not necessarily current, or origin; not necessarily true. This is still a significant form of placing PornHub in the world.

4.2.3. Interactions

Users are not isolated. The PornHub interface follows their digital footprint beyond video posting. The data indicates some of the users' social activity: the automatically generated number of views; and the number and quality of comments received by the videos and posted by users.

The automated number of views is available in rounded-up numbers (9.4 million, or 132K), but it is enough to know that when collected, the videos analyzed reached 2.3 million views on average. Only the most viewed video in the sample already had 63.5 million views (V29), and the next 110 videos had more than a million views.

The collection of these factors, and the permanent echoing of YouTube community features as described by Burgess and Greene (2018), and by Rieder, *et al.* (2020), lead to strong conclusions about social participation in PornHub. This social participation consists of: skills learned and platform literacy, a fast and timely reaction, the drive to earn viewers by adapting homemade production to current trends, and the collaborative and supportive contents in some videos that appeal beyond arousal and help with humor or with sanitary advice. These same indicators can be used to state that PornHub is a platform that uses participation as a strategy for monetization, and for the show: by utilising cheap labor to generate content, by ring fencing production and holding the copyright on the interface and on content, and by establishing statistics-friendly capacities that can be used later for promotion (such as the binary gendered model). These two options, a platform ringfencing production for profit and a space for skilled users to interact are not entirely contradictory, but the nuance is fundamental to understand the gravity of the tension between them.

To properly understand the uses of PornHub it is necessary to track users' interactions through data that shows a fair amount of engagement and of proactive interaction: 286 videos generated 4,553 comments. Their distribution is uneven: 86 videos have no comments at all, but one video (published by a model with 400k subscribers) reached 1,046 comments.

The numbers of comments, still, say too little. Only further research — beyond the scope of this exploratory piece — will need to analyze the specific contents of comments, and draw on networked interactions between users and their statements. This will help clarify many aspects involving circulation of information, shapes of the network (what videos are central, which users are more active, which bonds between users can be identified, etc.). Such analysis of comments can also show connections between users, tags, and videos; as well as the spread of meanings produced by users. It is premature to develop that analysis at this stage.

4.3. Discussion: A resilient 2.0 social media platform

Results show that COVID-19 has triggered a lot of activity on PornHub. This research has been designed to explore the features of that activity in three ways: analyzing content of videos, considering the technical conditions of production, and identifying user activities.

Contents, from the image-type analysis of a sample of 286 videos, has shown that the cluster of tags thematically organizing the recently posted videos still does not grow a new genre such as *COVID-19 porn*. Instead, previously consolidated genres act as a cultural background for the development of the new videos: genres such as medical porn, involving body nudity, specific power dynamics, and the fetish of PPE masks, gloves, and bodysuits; and stepfamily porn as a resource to incorporate homely landscapes, forbidden and transgressive fantasies, and predictable "unexpected" surprises. These main inspirations are combined with other narratives such as the condition of "staying at home" and lockdown policies, the idea of quarantine as a deprivation of the senses, and boredom as a source for masturbatory practice. In terms of creativity, therefore, COVID-19 porn does not emerge as a particularly new territory.

However, as well as depicting sexual practices openly featuring arousal, some of the videos appeal to other aspects of users' humanity for pedagogical and humoristic purposes. These videos have a clear intention of raising awareness among users, both of public health and self-care. These videos come as a somewhat extra-diegetic surprise on the porn platform. It is not yet at the meta-level of YouTube skills described by Burgess and Greene (2018) that have helped grow the platform culture, but both video types offer alternative reading contracts that insinuate that PornHub has a social level of interaction that transcends the sexual encounter, and that opens up the possibility of the existence of a social community of practice. The combination of the capacities set up by the platform, and the exceptional sanitary conditions of COVID-19 might have helped the visibility of an underlying condition — a pre-

existing community — that has found ways to interact by sharing help, or understanding the complicity of sex, and reaching out from the solitude of the masturbatory practice to shared public health advice.

The analysis of video content has also shown that representation patterns of sexual bodies were not innocent or disruptive and are in fact rather far from what, initially, one could attribute to bottom-up built communities. Instead, sexism and rather conservative assumptions of penetration-centered sex are echoed in multiple ways: unequal anonymity of male and female actors and unequal body representations — whereas the woman is more often fully visible, the man's body is preferably phallocentrically exposed. Videos also prefer to narrate sexual intercourse oriented towards penetration and finishing with male ejaculation. Not much of a novelty, here: patriarchy still reigns as the dominant sexual narrative, and idealized creative spontaneous diversity is missing in action.

The devices used for the production of videos condition their quality, but this does not challenge heteronormative perspectives: handheld mobile phones produce a certain image quality, but low-quality production. The analysis of these aspects has shown a high amount of production in a very short time, but the waves of data collection have also identified that sometimes videos change titles, or change tags, in order to reappear. This means that adding COVID-19 related tags to videos shot before lockdown can cause them to come up in new searches. Some videos disappear, mostly for copyright-related reasons. The community members are skilled at adapting the speedy delivery of homemade videos: speed matters, and adaptation to the new trend is essential for the platform. The *Joker* or *Star Wars* triggered PornHub searches; if the community runs to get their phones to catch the first place in the search engine, this could mean that a form of shared platform culture is gaining traction, too.

The number of identified users and their diversity (240 users for 286 videos) is also a starting point to understand the roles of participants on PornHub and the resilience of the industry. Data distinguishes between channels and three kinds of human profiles: porn stars, models, and users. They are defined mostly by the amount of traffic they generate; and this shows different personal data from them. The analysis of ages has shown little more than that men are slightly older than women and that the mid-twenties is the most popular age of engaging with the porn platform. The first analysis of the geographic distribution of users has also shown that there is a particular tendency favoring the centrality of participation from the United States, Italy, Australia, and Latin America. Also, the gender of these profiles has shown that the distinction is consistent across the three: porn stars are mostly women, models are mostly couples, and users are mostly men. These options cannot be generalized for the whole platform but reproduce traditional sexist views that place women in the giving, exhibitive, or objectified role while men adopt the watching, judging, receiving, or simply appreciative position of power.

In the broader picture still, these users post self-produced porn, and that same production is afterward viewed, liked, commented on, followed, subscribed to, and interacted with by other users of PornHub. This builds a "platform effect" that extends from a prosumer sense of humanity among creatorsconsumers, to a system of following that brings celebrity-models-porn stars closer. This creates two more secondary relational user-groups: fans and friends. Users can be "friends" with whom they share or interact, and fans can contribute, also with money ("tips") to the work of models, to make them porn stars. This idea initiates the perception that the users of PornHub interact on the platform, and this is an invitation for further research into the detail of the network of interactions and relationships between users.

A first step in this direction will be the consideration of comments. The number of comments is generally low but yet, as it has been described above, the activity is higher than expected. This demands further research: specifically a double analysis of the network of comments and their contents to explore the repertoire of meanings. An analysis of the comments is key if the purpose is to understand the social space and the community of practice within the PornHub audience.

However, just beyond the global network of users posting videos about COVID-19 porn, there is a powerful global company that trades with porn. PornHub appears in the news with a set of popular outreach measures; and under these circumstances, it is not difficult to come with the idea that below that human network, there is still a sharp sense of platformized opportunism to be aware of.

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5. Conclusions

In times of a global health and economic crisis, the industry of pornography shows adaptive resilience, responding quickly to extreme circumstances, as a fast-growing sector in the Internet flows. It is necessary to critically turn the research gaze to this phenomenon: porn as a pornology needs to be faced, for its social-cultural implications, as well as for being a powerful sector that spreads across public life.

Pornography is controversial as a cultural, social, and also political expression: its analysis has shown sexist male dominance as well as other ideologically taken-for-granted common places. But this paper has also shown that the interface of the platform enables social interactions including forms of commenting on and recommending sensitive public health behaviors. It is true that this can be part of the strategy of the platform to show participatory patterns and profit from them, but at least this initial research on COVID-19 porn confirms the thought that the industry is openly embracing shapes similar to those of social media platforms. PornHub and the porn industry are entering at full speed into the process of platformization.

Platformization means cheaper production, faster distribution, greater creative diversity; but it also slips away from the regulation of intellectual property that protects amateur authors among others. Also, the user is more vulnerable when the platform profits from a two-way system of value: starting with the appropriation (adding a corporate logo to all homemade videos posted) and distribution-exhibition of contents created by other users, for free; and finishing with the profit made by the commercialization of data generated by user interactions.

The datafication of porn consumption threatens serious implications derived from the metadata generated by user interactions. Data indicates sexual practices, tastes, and habits of millions of users; and this correlates easily with health insurance-company relevant concerns, the politics of human bodies, and behavioral control as collateral from surveillance effects, let alone the reductive normalization of what is socially and algorithmically considered acceptable or bizarre.

This research shows that at this stage pornography should not only be confronted for its body representations and cultural impact. Research should also investigate an industry that embraces technological developments, interfaces, and languages such as mobile devices, but also augmented and virtual reality while benefiting from cheap production, profiting from producers, and cropping commodified metadata.

This research was designed to explore COVID-19 porn as a rising phenomenon, by looking at the genre, at users, and at production; but beyond the answers to these three initial questions, this research has found something more.

Somewhere between the opportunism of a platformized site that generates videos of explicit sexual content, and the cultural transgressive possibility of a new genre emerging in the porn culture, this paper has shown traces of a community of practice. In the exceptional conditions of the global emergency of COVID-19, videos have invited an audience to practice self-care, and to behave in accordance with public health directives: use a mask, wash your hands. This form of appealing to the audience is unusual in porn genres and somehow breaks the fourth wall. In this context, this serendipitous finding can only be treated as a seductive opening for forthcoming research that gravitates to the analysis of comments to look for a spread of shared meanings and for a network of users socially interacting with each other. These future findings might draw the promising silhouette of a living community, or the darkness of a platformized industry. 🅵🅼

About the authors

Yulia Belinkskaya is a researcher in the Department of Communication at the University of Vienna.
E-mail: yulia [dot] belinskaya [at] univie [dot] ac [dot] at

Joan Ramon Rodriguez-Amat is principal lecturer and subject group leader for media and photography for Sheffield Hallam University.
E-mail: mon [dot] rodriguez [at] shu [dot] ac [dot] uk

Notes

[1.](#) Campbell, 2020, p. 2.

[2.](#) Williams, 1989, p. 4.

[3.](#) Paasonen, 2011, p. 10.

[4.](#) Paasonen, 2011, p. 2

[5.](#) Paasonen, 2011, p. 18.

[6.](#) Kinnick, 2007, p. 7.

[7.](#) Jacobs, *et al.*, 2007, in McQuail and Deuze, 2020, p. 155.

[8.](#) Lugo-Ocando, 2020, p. 474.

[9.](#) Attwood and Smith, 2014, p. 2.

[10.](#) Boyle, 2006, p. 4.

[11.](#) Gouvernet, *et al.*, 2020, p. 242.

[12.](#) Sørensen, 2007, p. 23.

[13.](#) Henze, 2013, p. 54.

[14.](#) Mosman, 2019, p. 29.

[15.](#) : For ethical compliance the specific references to videos are not published; the authors are happy to make the database accessible upon request.

[16.](#) Brantner, *et al.*, 2019, p. 680.

[17.](#) Burgess and Greene, 2018, p. 80.

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Appendix

	Number of videos including the tags related to COVID-19.	
N	**Tag**	**Number of videos**
1	corona	768
2	coronavirus	704
3	corona virus	262
4	quarantine	252
5	COVID	171
6	COVID 19	147
7	coronavirus porn	106
8	corona virus porn	34
9	coronavirus patients	32
10	COVID19	29
11	wuhan coronavirus	27
12	corona quarantine	26
13	isolation	21
14	COVID 19 coronavirus	18
15	quarantine chill	15
16	coronavirus sex	13
17	quarantine sex	9
18	corona virus sex	8
19	corona virus fuck	8
20	self quarantine	4
21	coronavirus italia	4
22	milfs quarantine	4
23	coronavirus mom	3
24	coronavirus italian	3
25	coronavirus cure	2
26	quarantne	2
27	coronavirus COVID19	2
28	milf quarantine	2
29	coronavirus anal	2
30	cure coronavirus	2
31	quarantine anal	2

32	quarantine blowjob	2
33	corona virus cure	2
34	self isolation	2
35	breast coronavirus	1
36	coronavirus test	1
37	COVID2019	1
38	coronavirus pussy	1
39	latina coronavirus	1
40	italian coronavirus	1
41	milf coronavirus	1
42	coronavirus stepmom	1
43	porn coronavirus	1
44	fuck corona virus	1
45	teen quarantine	1
46	corona virus japan	1
47	coronavirus italy	1
48	corona virus mom	1
49	bbc quarantine	1
50	bbc coronavirus	1
	Total	**2,704**

Editorial history