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Citation: Jones, Steve (2016) 'Extreme' porn? The implications of a label. Porn Studies, 3 (3). pp. 295-307. ISSN 2326-8743

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1196011>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1196011>>

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“Extreme” Porn?: The Implications of a Label

Abstract:

Despite its prevalence, the term “extreme” has received little critical attention. “Extremity” is routinely employed in ways that imply its meanings are self-evident. However, the adjective itself offers no such clarity. This article focuses on one particular use of the term – “extreme porn” – in order to illustrate a broader set of concerns about the pitfalls of labelling. The label “extreme” is typically employed as a substitute for engaging with the term’s supposed referents (here, pornographic content). In its contemporary usage, “extreme” primarily refers to a set of context-dependent judgements rather than absolute standards or any specific properties the “extreme” item is alleged to have. Concurrently then, the label “extreme” carries a host of implicit values, and the presumption that the term’s meanings are “obvious” obfuscates those values. In the case of “extreme porn,” that obfuscation is significant because it has facilitated the cultural and legal suppression of pornography.

The term “extreme” is so ubiquitous in contemporary critical discourse that the twenty-first century’s first decade may eventually come to be known as a period of extreme imagery.¹ Many commentators have eagerly adopted the label, yet little of that commentary has been directed towards the term itself, or the potential pitfalls arising from its pervasiveness. Even the fundamental question of what qualifies as extreme has received scant critical attention, particularly outside of academia where “extreme” is routinely employed in ways that imply its meanings are already understood or are self-evident. However, I argue that “extreme” offers no such clarity. The adjective “extreme” should provide information about its referent. However, in its contemporary usage “extreme” primarily refers to a set of context-dependent judgements rather than absolute standards or any specific properties the “extreme” item is alleged to have. The combination of overuse and lack of clarity has evacuated “extreme” of meaning.

In this brief article, I will use “extreme” to illustrate a broader set of concerns about the pitfalls of labelling. First, as the case of “extreme” illustrates, labels can be utilised as substitutes for engaging with a term’s supposed referents (in this article, the referent will be pornographic content). Second, labels carry a host of implicit values, and when labels are used to the point of saturation – when the label’s connotations are presumed to be obvious, and so are rarely questioned – those values are obfuscated.

In the case of “extreme,” this obfuscation is significant because it has facilitated the cultural and legal suppression of pornography (or at least particular kinds of porn). Whether intentionally or otherwise, users of the term “extreme” have contributed to such regulation. To illustrate, I will primarily focus on one particular use of the term: “extreme porn.” Pornography is broadly believed to have become more extreme since the mid-to-late 1990s (Tyler, 2010: 56).² The subgenre gained a great deal of negative attention in the 00s, and that reputation continues to resonate in discourse about pornography; for example, Lord Chief Justice Thomas (Russia Today, 2015) and the United Nations Broadband Commission for Digital Development (UN Women, 2015) have recently expressed concerns about the impacts of extreme porn. At the centre of such condemnation is the label “extreme.” Inherent to the label is an implicit valuation; “extreme porn” is compared with non-extreme or “normal” porn. In that comparison, “extreme” is a pejorative term. As Alan Sinfield (2004:

64) observes, deeming a practice or image “pornographic reflects a decision to regard it as bad.” Labelling porn as “extreme” feeds the perception that porn is “bad,” but moreover denotes that porn has “gotten worse” in recent years (see Zolbrod in Paul, 2005: 145). The comparison implied by labelling some porn as “extreme” is a shorthand in which some images are marked as controversial or even unacceptable.³ However, the label a) reveals nothing about the content (it does not convey precisely what makes some porn “extreme”), and b) only implicitly makes a comparison: extreme porn is presented as if it is a stand-alone subgenre rather than a relational appraisal.

In what follows, I will investigate the ways in which a label (“extreme”) has been used as a regulatory tool rather than the explanatory mechanism it superficially appears to be. This investigation will entail unpicking the label’s rhetorical functions. The case study elucidates one of the potential dangers of labelling more generally: the act of labelling content as “extreme” has contributed to the quashing of those images. Labels are culturally and politically potent. What this particular case study demonstrates is that labels can be used to exert power in subtle ways. Labels appear to describe the world as it is, and that presumed function can mask the role labels play in normalising particular value-laden perspectives regarding how the world ought to be.

What does “Extreme” Mean?

Adjectival labels such as “extreme” appear to serve a straightforward function: providing information about the referent. As such, the adjective is meant to clarify meaning. In the case of “extreme porn,” the adjective has the opposite effect. The label “extreme porn” is ambiguous for a number of reasons. Principal among these is that the combination of “extreme” and “porn” is unnecessary; the conjoined label “extreme porn” is tautological insofar as both “porn” and “extreme” serve similar functions. Porn is unabashedly designed to display illicit sexual fantasies in explicit detail. Some members of the populace find those representations desirable (and so pay to see them).⁴ Other members of the populace find such acts (and / or the depiction of certain acts) distasteful. The latter assessment is powerful insofar as the discourse regarding pornography is shaped (and perhaps even driven) by those who seek to disparage porn. Although porn has seemingly become more acceptable and influential within mainstream culture, the “social stigma around porn use” lingers (McNair, 2012: 3 and 82), and such stigma also fundamentally shapes the porn industry (Voss, 2015). Pornography’s appeal is tied into these negative connotations to some extent. Arguably, without the broader connotations of shame that surround pornography and sexual fantasy, porn would not sell to such a large market; if the majority of people explored and discussed their sexual fantasies freely, it seems unlikely that as many individuals would be enthused about pornographic representations that reify such fantasies.

Since porn’s content is taboo, it is inherently extreme compared with other forms of cinema. Moreover, porn’s flagrant, graphic approach to representing sex and the sheer volume of porn produced every year are both markers of the genre’s gratuity. Indeed, the function of “porn” as a signifier of visual excess has led to the label being applied to all

manner of visual imagery, including representations of architecture, food, and poverty (see Hoong, 2010; Lovece, 2010). In such uses, “porn” designates the ostensible extremity of particular portrayals.

Both labels – “porn” and “extreme” – are used to mark material as excessive. Yet the compulsion to qualify “porn” via the addition of “extreme” carries two implications. First, genito-sexual displays are not excessive enough to qualify as pornographic (illicit, excessive) by contemporary standards. That implication is evinced by the inclusion of genitally-explicit depictions of sex in theatrically-released non-porn films such as *Antichrist* (2009, Lars von Trier) and *Love* (Gaspar Noe, 2015), for instance. Second, the distinction between “porn” and “extreme porn” suggests that the latter does more than depict sex in genitally-explicit detail, and that is why the representations are supposedly worse than non-extreme porn. The traits extreme porn exhibits in addition to or in combination with genito-sexual displays epitomise indecency.

These extra attributes are often formal in nature. The vast majority of extreme porn adopts an aesthetic approach known as gonzo,⁵ featuring wall-to-wall sex, eschewing narrative contextualisation, and typically being shot from a performer’s point-of-view. These facets augment traits already found in non-extreme porno feature films. Extreme porn formally distils porn’s general quest to portray intercourse, stripping away the pretence that porn is about anything other than graphically displaying sex. In this sense, extreme porn’s ostensible extremity lies in its flouting of obscenity law, which is founded on the ethos that indecent imagery lacks “any serious literary, artistic...or scientific value,” appealing only “to prurient interests” (Miller v. California 413 U.S. 15 [1973]).⁶

The performances involved in extreme porn are “extreme” for the same reason. Some sex acts portrayed in extreme porn (choking, slapping, cock-gagging) clearly skirt legal edicts regarding eroticised sexual violence,⁷ while others contravene social taboos regarding bodily excretions (sex acts that cater to urophiles, coprophiles, and emetophiles). Such acts are certainly more common in contemporary porn than in studio-produced video pornography of the 1980s. Despite these trends, it is unclear why those particular acts are extreme inasmuch as the legal edicts that forbid them do not adequately evince precisely why they are indecent (rather, they are indecent because they are prohibited). One possible explanation is that these acts are extreme because they flagrantly expose one of porn’s functions. Since the hey-day of 1970s anti-porn feminism, pornography has stood accused of centralising female degradation and humiliation in the service of male sexual pleasure (see Brownmiller, 1975; Morgan, 1978; Dworkin, 1989; Dines, 2010). Contemporary extreme porn’s acts reputedly fulfil precisely those charges (see Kammeyer, 2008: 186; Jensen, 2007: 122).

Additionally, these particular sex acts became markers of extremity in the 00s because humiliation itself was a source of political controversy during this period. For instance, the Abu Ghraib photographs were deemed indecent by many commentators, precisely because they tap into the same themes of shame and degradation that characterise extreme porn. For instance, according to Zurbriggen (2008: 311) the Abu Ghraib images are directly

comparable to “pornographic fare in which women are posed in humiliating positions for the amusement and sexual pleasure of others.” Such connections to pornography were rife in the commentary surrounding the Abu Ghraib photographs, even though “most of the images leaked to the public were not in fact pornographic or even sexual” (McClintock, 2009: 62). The seemingly incongruous connection between extreme porn and Abu Ghraib stems from broader anxieties regarding cruelty, shame, and wilful power-exploitation that became particularly prominent in the cultural zeitgeist at the time (see Jones, 2013: 73-79). As Carrabine (2011: 9) observes, the Abu Ghraib scandal highlighted how prevalent cruelty had become in the culture, manifesting in “reality television, performance art and campus humiliation rituals” (see also Kohm, 2009: 191; Thompson, 2007).

It is apparent why extreme porn became a cultural and political flashpoint in this context, yet none of that context is provided or captured by the label “extreme.” Much like the term “porn,” the label “extreme” has been applied so broadly that it has been voided of its specificity: that is, it is unclear what precisely counts as extreme in contemporary discourse. For example, ISIS beheading videos, Max Hardcore’s films (“extreme pornography”), and the Korean supernatural drama *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003, Kim Jee-Woon) – which was marketed via Tartan’s “Asia Extreme” DVD label – have each been overtly labelled “extreme,” but for different reasons. An ISIS beheading video is extreme because it depicts genuine murder (“an act of extreme cruelty” [Friis, 2015: 746]). Max Hardcore’s films are extreme because they express disdain for the legal edicts that surround pornography in the US. For instance, Hardcore’s output is typified by sexual acts involving adult performers who are presented as being below the legal age of consent (see Maddison, 2011: 178; Kleinhans, 2004: 23). *A Tale of Two Sisters* is extreme only inasmuch as its depiction of fictional supernatural entities is frightening; it fits with a range of supernaturally-themed East Asian films that one distribution company (Tartan) labelled “extreme.” The label allowed Tartan to sell subtitled films to a largely English-speaking genre audience who may not have otherwise engaged with “world cinema,” for example (Dew, 2007: 60).

In terms of their alleged extremity, the three examples are barely comparable. The label cannot simultaneously encompass all three texts while retaining enough specificity to be coherent. Bringing these texts together under the banner “extreme” invites such comparisons, which only serve to highlight how indistinct the label has become. Moreover, a hierarchy forms when these texts are brought together; since *A Tale of Two Sisters* contains no sex or nudity and only simulated “moderate horror and violence” (BBFC, n.d.), it is presumably the least extreme of these ostensibly extreme objects. The label “extreme” lacks signifiatory consistency, meaning something different in each case. Cumulatively, the implied meanings of “extreme” have been stretched too far in this discourse.

“Extreme” is an adjective, and as such it ought to qualify the noun it is paired with. The over-use of “extreme” in critical discourse muddies that function, voiding the term of meaning. The label “extreme” alone is not enough to qualify an object’s excessiveness. To illustrate, in his response to the sexually-themed horror movie *A Serbian Film* (2011, Srdjan Spasojevic) – a film that presents extreme porn production as a source of horror – Geoffrey MacNab (2011) uses the label “extreme” five times, but qualifies three of those uses.

MacNab's phrases "more extreme," "ultra-extreme," and "equally extreme" evidence how the adjectival function of "extreme" is undermined in critical responses to such images. There should be no need to dub an object "ultra-extreme," since "extreme" ought to already include the meaning "ultra" (a synonym for excessive). MacNab's use underscores that there is no benchmark for what counts as extreme, so "extreme" fails to signify other than in a circumstantial sense: as is clear from MacNab's phrase "equally extreme", "extreme" is evoked as a relational value.

Labelling as an Attempt to Contain

"Extreme" implies comparisons, but the way the term has been used has led to a lack of clarity over what is being compared, and the values underpinning such judgements. Much of the confusion surrounding the label "extreme" in discourse regarding pornography results from conflating its conceptual meaning with its function as a genre label (as in "extreme porn"). "Extreme porn" refers to a set of conventionalised traits that became prevalent enough to gain critical mass. As I have already established however, both terms ("extreme" and "porn") also carry conceptual meanings: both signify that images breach standards of acceptability. The conflation of the conceptual meaning and the genre-label meaning implies that the particular attributes that characterise extreme porn are taboo-breaking *per se*. However, a proviso is necessary. Neither the films that constitute extreme porn nor the acts depicted therein are objectively extreme in and of themselves. The standards that these images and acts breach are only the standards of the moment. While the "extreme" of "extreme porn" should provide information about its referent (porn) then, it inadvertently reveals more about the ways in which judgements about content are made.

The label "extreme porn" offers the genre's critics a way of dismissing or vilifying particular images, while also skipping over a logical stage. In being so affronted by contemporary sexual representations and dubbing them "extreme," critics too often over-emphasise present values, while negating conceptual or historical understandings. Graphic depictions of anal penetration – which are routine by porn's conventional standards today – were considered unacceptably indecent in the 1950s (see Eskridge, 2002: 202). As Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott observe, "the kinds of pornography that characterized the early postwar years tended to be what today [in an era of extreme porn] we might view as quaint" (2008: 57). However, this diachronic evaluation evacuates "extreme" of its conceptual meaning. Sarracino and Scott perceive the porn of the past from their perspective in the present, but they fail to sufficiently explain how porn made in the past was perceived *in* that prior time-period. "Extreme" pornographic imagery made in 2016 contravenes current standards of acceptability, but porn that was made in 1916 and contravened contemporaneous standards of acceptability would also have been considered extreme (whether or not that exact label was used to demarcate such a judgement). The assessment of an object's extremity is relative to the standards of the period in which those images are assessed.

The standards against which extremity is judged continually evolve. However, in contemporary discourse, “extreme” is typically employed as if the label refers to a fixed value, and as if standards are clearly delineated rather than being mutable. For example, when Ira Isaacs faced obscenity charges for producing and selling scatologically-themed sex films, his own defence attorney Roger Jon Diamond referred to the images as “the most extreme material that’s ever been put on trial...There’s no question the stuff is disgusting” (Fox News, 2008). Many people will certainly find pornography involving faeces repulsive because faeces is a pathogenic disgust elicitor.⁸ What is notable, however, is that Diamond evokes present standards of extremity as if they are absolute. It is not that he or a majority would find the material disgusting: according to his statement, the material simply (and unquestionably) *is* disgusting and therefore “extreme.” This is a routine aspect of extremity discourse. This conception of extremity occludes the relationship between what is currently (reputedly) extreme, earlier representations from which depictions that are currently labelled “extreme” evolved, and future moments of extremity.

Where such relations are addressed in the discourse of extremity, they are habitually treated as signifying that imagery is “getting worse” (for example, see Shalit, 2007: 101). Comprehension of what should be termed “extreme” is hampered by the notion that representations are now more extreme than ever before and will continue to decline in the future. In seeking to vilify pornography of the moment for instance, critics too often neglect the kinships between contemporary rape-fantasy films – such as those made by Extreme Associates in the 00s, including *Forced Entry* (2002, Lizzie Borden) – and 1970s rape-themed porn films such as *Sex Wish* (1976, Victor Milt) and *Unwilling Lovers* (1977, Zebedy Colt). Instead, the label presents “extreme porn” as a unique, distinct category, thereby divorcing extreme porn from its lineage as part of the porn genre. For example, although Sarracino and Scott (2008: 157) recognise that “degradation is certainly not new to porn,” they forsake that continuity to focus on pornography in “the last several years,” linking violent porn to the contemporaneous political and cultural moment via a discussion of the Abu Ghraib scandal and “torture porn” (a subgenre of horror movies). Tracing the generic lineage of extreme porn more carefully would elucidate similarities in the kinds of representations considered and dubbed “extreme” over the past 40 years, as well as differences. Being aware of that picture allows us to better grasp (a) the significance of modifications within specific genres such as pornography; (b) why particular attributes are currently considered to contravene acceptability standards; and (c) what standards have changed or otherwise. Without such comparisons, the rhetoric of extremity remains reactionary.

This might seem like a purely semantic or academic issue if it was not for the fact that such discourse has facilitated the curtailment of various images (not only materials that flout legal standards). The label “extreme” has been widely proliferated in the last decade, and that discursive trend has been treated as if it signals a boom in the production of extreme materials and / or relative freedom from censure. However, the ubiquity of the label and its evocation in condemnatory critical discourses is indicative of a broad-scale desire to re-establish the limits of acceptability.

The desire to suppress particular images is not only expressed as a matter of personal distaste or critical remonstrance; these desires are also concretised via law. Following the inauguration of “extreme” in critical discourse, three infamous hardcore porn producers were imprisoned for creating extreme imagery. Heads of Extreme Associates Rob Black (Rob Zicari) and Lizzie Borden (Janet Romano) were indicted in 2003, and both served 10-month jail sentences (2009-10). Max Hardcore (Paul F. Little) was indicted in 2007, began serving a 46-month jail sentence in January 2009, and was released in January 2011.⁹ These convictions sought to impede production directly. The censorial gambit – penalising three figureheads of extreme porn – has been impactful. Max Hardcore announced that he intended to move away from pornography following his release from prison (Kernes, 2011), and although he is currently running a membership-based tubesite (max-hardcore.com), his presence in the industry is low-key. Although Black denies that he has been “tamed” by his brush with the law, he has since dubbed extreme porn “silly” and turned towards porn aimed at the couples market (*Louis Theroux: Twilight of the Porn Stars* [2012, Jason Massot]). Despite rumours that he is attempting to return to extreme porn production (South, 2015), Black now runs a blog and radio show focused on “political and social commentary,” entitled *Xtreme Politics*. Black retains an air of extremity as part of his brand (labelling his blog “Xtreme”), yet his new-found status as a social commentator and controversialist is muted compared with his prior incarnation as a boastful producer of extreme porn.

However, it is not only American producers of extreme porn who have been targeted by law makers during this period. In the UK, Section 63 of The Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (2008, also known as the Dangerous Pictures Bill) outlawed consumption of and access to extreme porn (see Jones and Mowlabocus, 2009: 613-28; Attwood and Smith, 2010: 171-188).¹⁰ In 2009, Andrew Holland was charged with possession of extreme pornography under this legislation; it was alleged that Holland possessed a video of a woman having sex with a tiger (which transpired to be a man in a tiger costume). Although Holland was acquitted in 2010, the case highlights two problematic aspects of the legislation against extreme porn. First, despite Holland’s acquittal, the associations forged between Holland and extreme porn – arising out of the charges against him – “had a devastating impact on his reputation” (Jackman, n.d.). The stigma surrounding “extreme porn” is so powerful that merely being (falsely) accused of possession has a detrimental impact on one’s social status. The label “extreme porn” not only confers a value-judgement about the object; it also speaks for the character of those who (supposedly) consume those images. Second, as the obscenity lawyer Myles Jackman (n.d.) notes, the label is perilously ambiguous: “the term ‘extreme’ pornography is not clearly defined in the legislation; and therefore a potential defendant would not be able to understand [sic] anticipate if being in possession of certain images might be illegal” (see also Hester, 2014: 6). The case made against Holland highlights that “extreme” is used to convey a judgement (unacceptability), but it fails to denote what precisely is unacceptable.¹¹ Thus, porn consumers are coerced into policing their consumption,¹² and many will err towards over-cautiousness out of fear that they might unwittingly break the law.¹³

Such cultural and social oppression concretises the rhetorical function of the label “extreme.” The development of extreme porn across the 00s does not denote a boom in the production of radically transgressive images, but rather an attempt to forcefully demarcate the limits of acceptability via legal edicts. Despite this desire to establish boundaries of acceptability and the role discourse plays in pushing for such limitations, “extreme” itself does not provide any precise information about why particular content is unacceptable. Regardless, in attempting to demarcate the boundaries of acceptability, those who delimit such boundaries (law enforcers, censors, critics) should take some responsibility for the supposed extremity of the images they dub “extreme,” since their evaluations provide the standards against which the images are judged. One might imagine that extreme materials are created by mavericks who intentionally seek to push the boundaries of propriety. However, without an opposing faction who seek to establish and police boundaries of propriety, there would be no limits to transgress. Delimiters create extreme imagery *qua* “extreme” imagery by labelling images “extreme.”¹⁴

Conclusion: Misdirection

Ultimately, the label “extreme” is a source of uncertainty rather than elucidation. First, “extreme” divests images of meaning, because the label has been used in ways that hyperbolise the extent to which images transgress acceptability standards. Second, the same discourse divests the label itself of meaning because labelling an array of material “extreme” homogenises that material. Nuance and distinction between degrees of or types of extremity – the standards against which extremity is seemingly measured – are erased when a single image is dubbed “extreme.” Third, creators and consumers of extreme images are chastised for transgressing boundaries of acceptability (Weitzer, 2015: 266), but it is hard to see how one can purposefully transgress boundaries that are not established with sufficient clarity. Without an absolute standard or a set of defined criteria to measure extremity against, the label itself is redundant.

“Extreme” paints contemporary imagery as being more controversial and alarming than any other preceding imagery. The overemphasis on both a) the present, and b) the urgency with which action must be taken in response to extreme imagery,¹⁵ distracts from the label’s broader conceptual meanings. The label “extreme” may be intended to fix particular meanings or values within discourse on a topic such as pornography, but it also distracts from content-based understandings. In the press rhetoric that surrounds extreme porn’s “shocking nature,” little account of content is offered (to illustrate, see Brown, 2009). There is also scant evidence of any attempt to understand what these texts signify about contemporary anxieties regarding the body, shame, or sexual violence (for instance) within the non-academic condemnation of extreme porn. Critical discourse is focused squarely on remonstrating against such imagery. To illustrate, Rape Crisis’s campaign against “rape porn” a) makes no distinction between simulated and genuine rape, b) offers no substantial evidence to support the presumptions about consumers’ attitudes towards sex that instruct the campaign, and c) fails to reflect in any depth upon what the existence of rape porn suggests about rape itself. Rather, Rape Crisis’s (n.d.) proposed solution to the “problem” of

rape-themed pornography is an outright ban. Suppression without understanding is itself an alarming form of reactionary extremism.

As a rhetorical tool, the label “extreme” actively establishes (rather than passively referring to) where the threshold of acceptability lies. The specific traits that signal extremity change over time, but what those attributes conceptually signify in their contemporaneous context does not. The practice of labelling an image “extreme” appears to be a process of demarcating which images or acts violate current standards. Yet, because the label offers no specific information regarding the content of such imagery, the discourse could be more productively thought of as providing an understanding of what such materials signify *by* violating standards. Extremity discourse is a sleight-of-hand that seems to be focused on images, but points away from that which is most pertinently articulated: anxieties surrounding contemporary attitudes towards propriety and cultural suppression.

Although this article has focused on one label (“extreme”) and a particular iteration of that label (“extreme porn”), the issues raised here extrapolate to the practice of labelling more broadly. When using labels as explanatory frameworks, one should seek to employ labels that explicitly refer to distinct objects, rather than vague, ill-defined notions; the latter usage is indicative of the user’s lack of reflection on the referent or an unwillingness to explain the concept and content referred to. Even worse, the proponent’s use of a label may mask an attempt – intentional or inadvertent – to misdirect the receiver; to advance a particular set of values while pointing towards the referent. When that happens, the receiver is primed to focus on and question the referent rather than the label or the labeller’s motivations. In the case delineated here, the referent (porn) is presented as the problem that occupies our attention, meaning that the label (“extreme”) – and the values it carries – remains unquestioned. Thus, when confronted with the labels that others use, it is prudent to question their applicability and the rationale for employing a label at all. Such a tactic would enrich critical discourse by challenging (rather than proliferating) hollow uses of labels. The latter matters because, as is illustrated by the condemnation of extreme porn, labels can be used to justify forms of social and even legal oppression.

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¹ To clarify, in this article “extreme” (in quotation marks) will refer to the use of that adjective as a label. Since the article proposes that extremity itself is contentious and ambiguous, all adjectival uses of the term within this article should be taken as if they appear in scare-quotes.

² It is important to note that despite the perception that porn has become more extreme, such conclusions (including Tyler’s) have been refuted (see Weitzer, 2015: 260-261). In this article, I am not concerned with the empirical matter of whether porn has become more extreme (if extremity could be measured empirically). Rather, I claim that a) the perception that porn has become more extreme has facilitated the spread of the label “extreme porn,” and b) various conceptual problems follow from this use of “extreme.”

³ This article will focus on the ways in which critics and legislators have vilified certain representations by referring to porn as “extreme.” This is not to imply that such labelling is a purely top-down process. Numerous pornographers have used the term “extreme” as a marketing tool; as their name suggests, the porn production company Extreme Associates (to whom I will return later in the article) used the term “extreme” as an integral part of their branding strategy, for example. However, this use of “extreme” still connotes controversy, illicitness and unacceptability. Thus, such marketing perpetuates these meanings, even though the connotations are coded as desirable.

⁴ This is not to suggest that porn use is homogenous; for a discussion of various uses of and reactions to porn, see Attwood, 2005.

⁵ Note that even though extreme porn favours the gonzo mode, not all gonzo porn is extreme; on this distinction (and errors arising out of that conflation), see Tibbals, 2014: 129.

⁶ Although I quote from the American legal context here, the postulations are indicative, capturing the general ethos iterated by obscenity laws in other jurisdictions, including the UK.

⁷ In America, such pornography is subject to obscenity law (details regarding specific obscenity cases made against American extreme porn producers will be detailed later in this article). In the UK, such pornography now falls under Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 (relevant concerns about this legislation will be detailed later in the article). I refer to US and UK legal responses to extreme porn in tandem because both raise similar concerns regarding the nature of “extremity” as obscenity. As Arnold observes, recent cases made against “extreme porn” producers highlight that obscenity is not defined with sufficient specificity in US law, and as such the law is “unconstitutionally vague” (2005: 629; see also Kalich, Evans and Forsyth, 2010: 593). In the UK, the same concerns have been raised over the failure to define what counts as “extreme porn” in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 (see Wilkinson, 2011: 494; Nair and Griffin, 2013: 352; McGlynn and Rackley, 2009: 245).

⁸ On the intersections between pathogenic and sexual disgust elicitors, see Andrews III et al. 2015: 771-772; Fleischman et al. 2015.

⁹ For detailed discussion of these cases, see Arnold, 2005; Adams, 2012.

¹⁰ According to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act (2008) Section 63, an extreme pornographic image is “grossly offensive, disgusting or otherwise of an obscene character,” and portrays “in an explicit and realistic way” an act that “threatens a person's life”, “results, or is likely to result, in serious injury to a person's anus, breasts or genitals”, “involves sexual interference with a human corpse”, or entails “a person performing an act of intercourse or oral sex with an animal.” The Criminal Justice and Courts Act (2015) Section 37 amends the previous legislation to additionally include any act that “involves the non-consensual penetration of a person's vagina, anus or mouth by another with the other person's penis, or...non-consensual sexual penetration of a person's vagina or anus by another with a part of the other person's body or anything else”.

¹¹ See also the concerns raised by Backlash (n.d.) regarding the wording of laws against extreme porn in the UK.

¹² Presdee's (2000: 71-73) observations regarding the commodification of transgressive content pre-empt this shift towards penalising consumers; Presdee posits that cruelty has been commodified via a culture of the “illicit and the grotesque” that consumers can seemingly enjoy “in the seclusion and privacy of [their] own homes... without punishment and without sanction.” However, he also warns that “[w]hether we are thrilled by it, shocked by it, turned on by it or horrified by it is of no concern to the manufacturer,” yet “how we are affected by it and how we respond to it are of increasing concern to media regulators.”

¹³ On this point I am indebted to conversations with Julian Petley and Clarissa Smith.

¹⁴ In many cases, creators may label their own images “extreme”. However, the production of an image and the discursive marking of an image as “extreme” are two separate operations. By labelling the images “extreme” the creator also acts as a delimiter, and in that role they produce images as “extreme.”

¹⁵ See, for example the uses of “urgently” and “immediately” in Rape Crisis's campaign against a “loophole” in the UK's extreme porn law (Rape Crisis South London, n.d.).