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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Feminist Counter-Publics and Heterosexist Edges of Desire: Extending Edgework Theory via Young Women's Nude Selfie Sharing Online

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Abstract

This article examines how young women engage in edgework through the practice of sharing nude selfies on Tumblr. Drawing on the concept of edgework, traditionally explored in 'hypermasculine' contexts, this article joins recent feminist approaches to reimagine the theory. It does this by highlighting the significance of female-dominated online spaces on the social media platform Tumblr. Women reap considerable benefits from their engagement in sharing nude self-images, most notably in their ability to reflexively develop their erotic identities and improve their wellbeing through reaching a level of body positivity and acceptance of their self-image. The article explains this by emphasizing three key themes: sexual self-objectification and empowerment; the creation of feminist counter-publics; and by reconciling pleasure and risk. Through expanding the discourse on a feminist approach to edgework, this article challenges traditional gendered notions of 'the edge' and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of risk-taking practices in contemporary digital spaces.

Keywords Edgework · Risk · Sexuality · Youth · Tumblr

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Introduction

Online blogs that were popular during the early 2000s acted as spaces where women could develop vocabularies of sexual desire and reduce shame around sex by sharing their experiences and personal information in an intimate setting (Barker et al., 2018; Parry & Light, 2014). More recently, this can be seen occurring within contemporary social media, which enable fluid sexual identity work because their affordances of pseudonymity enable 'safe' spaces for women to discuss their sexual subjectivities (Hart, 2018). However, the degree of safety is questionable, as others argue that those same platform affordances in fact enable misogynistic 'toxic technocultures' (Massanari, 2015), in which women are treated with hostility.

Amidst the sociotechnical milieu of the 2014 celebrity phone-hack scandal (colloquially known online as *the fappening*), revenge porn, and postfeminist sensibilities, we found that on Tumblr, young women voluntarily engaged with the risks associated with taking intimate nude self-portrait photographs (nude selfies or 'nudes') and shared them with strangers online. This phenomenon has been previously examined under a theoretical lens informed by edgework theory (Hart, 2017). Edgework involves voluntarily engaging in risky, leisurely behaviour in pursuit of intrinsic rewards. It involves negotiating the boundaries between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, or order and chaos. The challenge of edgework is to get as close to 'the edge' without falling over it through drawing from one's experience and instinctive skills (Lyng, 2005). Edgework as a practice has been examined in a number of arenas, including in skydiving (Lyng, 1990), motorcycle riding (Austin, 2010), or BASE jumping (Laurendeau, 2011).

In such a context, nude selfies are framed by politicising discourses regarding how people should (from a moral or ethical standpoint) represent, document, or share their bodies and behaviours. Young women are regarded as being at-risk of exploitation or coercion from partners or strangers on the internet because of their nude selfie practices (Albury et al. 2013, pg. 05). Nude selfies on social media sites such as Tumblr problematise mainstream cultural norms surrounding public nudity and its display—and therein lies the thrill. Tumblr users report being drawn in and pursing the thrill of being recognised but controlling the danger by utilising their knowledge of the platform to avoid detection (Hart, 2017). As such, the practice of nude selfie sharing through micro-blogs by young women is a perfect example of edgework combining leisure, skill, pleasure and risk. Previous attempts at developing edgework theory have involved studies of corporate fraud (Wexler, 2010), career risk-taking (Hamm, 2005), and online gaming (Shay, 2015). While these studies have been insightful in developing edgework theory, most have been on 'hypermasculine' (Lauchs, 2023) leisure activities; fewer have examined how women's edgework practices may differ to those of men. As a result, edgework theory has been criticised for being enshrined in narratives of hegemonic masculinity (Laurendeau & Shahara, 2008; Newmahr, 2011). Not surprisingly, feminists researching edgework have called for a reimagining, one which accounts for the skills women employ in the negotiation of risk-taking;

skills which encompass emotional as well as physical and psychological mastery (for example see Newmahr, 2011). However, to understand how women negotiate 'the edge', it is essential to do so in spaces which are 'female-dominated', something which has often been neglected in existing feminist approaches to edgework research.

Not Suitable for Work (NSFW) or nude selfie sharing has previously been shown to operate within the framework of edgework theory, as the practice of sharing NSFW nudes on Tumblr is a practice that involves negotiating corporeal and digitally-mediated risks to one's safety and wellbeing; involves addictive, sensual affects; and importantly, digital literacies and experience to navigate the edge with confidence and perceived control (Hart, 2017). What remains however is a nuanced discussion on the gendered element of NSFW selfies as edgework. During our fieldwork, we observed women participating in NSFW selfie sharing (here defined as full-body display, with faces or other identifying features either uncropped or uncensored) at higher rates than men, who commonly shared torso-or-groin photographs, and rarely if ever showed their faces. Consequently, NSFW spaces on Tumblr allowed for risky leisure practices to take place enabling a more accurate representation of how women engage in risk-taking.

Literature Review

Edgework studies have predominantly focused on men's risky leisure activities. However, far from being an androgynous experience, the experience of edgework is largely navigated through gendered constructions (Lois, 2005). Importantly, not much is known about how the edgework of men and women differs, with only a few studies attempting to delve into this distinction. Laurendeau and Shahara (2008) investigated ways in which women skydivers and snowboarders manage the construction of their risk taking within a male sporting domain. Similarly, there is Lois's (2005) examination of women engaging in dangerous volunteer search and rescue operation; Olstead's (2011) study of women's risk-taking and emotion work; and Worthen and Baker's (2014) study of women's lived experiences participating in body building. While these studies are important to furthering understandings of the motivations and experiences of gendered edgework, they all engage in male-dominated edgework spaces. Unfortunately, this does not permit for the advancement of a feminist approach to edgework theory as it imposes a continued construction of risk and risk taking through masculine understandings.

Space is an important variable in understanding individuals' motivations for and experiences of risk, and edgework. Activities such as high-contact sports, rock-climbing and mountaineering, and the spaces in which they occur, have become places where men can 'bond' as well as test and display their virility, and masculine worth to other men (Olstead, 2011). To maintain the patriarchal emphasis of these spaces, women have been often been excluded, or made to feel unsafe. This is achieved, in part, by the gendering of sporting practices, whereby men, from a young age are encouraged to participate in strenuous, aggressive and competitive team sports, while women are commonly directed toward individual

aesthetically pleasing activities (Schmalz & Kersetter, 2006). Further to this, the division between the gender's suitability for certain sports has been reinforced by the disparate media coverage received by privileging male performance over that of female performance (Rolfe, 2023). Male edgeworkers are admired and celebrated for their incredible feats of strength and bravery, from cult figures such as Aron Lee Ralston (best known for the Hollywood dramatization of his Grand Canyon ordeal, later dramatised in the 2010 film *127 h*) to the rise of TV personalities such as Bear Grills. The high regard in which male edgeworkers are held may be due to how closely the characteristics of 'the edge' is therefore tied to masculinity. Displays of courage, stamina, physical strength as well as of self and emotional control, essential in high-risk taking activities, are characteristics which are culturally ascribed as male traits.

However, edgeworking women do not seem to reach the same notable standing. In Western cultures, as well as much of the rest of the world, women are made responsible for their own safety by being charged with avoiding danger by organising their lifestyle in very specific ways. Consider, for example, how women are cautioned by men to avoid wearing particular types of clothing in order to minimise the risk of rape (Rentschler, 2015). In such a context, women's risks are often constructed not only as risk to themselves and to others. Objections to women's risk-taking activities typically encompass protestations over the danger it poses to the family and society, and is perceived as an assault on 'traditional' female common sense (which places nurturing and emotional maintenance as central to the feminine narrative) and in contradiction of established Western norms of femininity.

It is not surprising then that women engage in risk-taking leisure pursuits in smaller numbers than men (Harris & Jenkins, 2006). Consequently, edgework research has focused almost exclusively on those who make up the largest proportion of edgeworkers: white, affluent men. Risk-taking activities labelled as edgework, such as BASE jumping, parachuting, and rock climbing are largely male-dominated. While women do take part in these activities, they are often regarded as interlopers in such contexts (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). Since women are inherently immersed in a culture of Patriarchy which normalizes sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence, women are expected to predict and avoid potential harm. As a result, women may process and understand risk-taking and edgework very differently from men all together. This goes beyond women being excluded from men's spaces, but from the fact that women must navigate risk-taking in the context of a Patriarchal culture. Yet, there are definite benefits for female edgeworkers involved in enacting this transgression—to push against (if only momentarily) the physical, spatial, psychological and emotional limitations and regulations imposed on their bodies (Olstead, 2011). We, like others before us, would therefore argue that the original understanding of edgework theory does not address the intricacies of the experience of 'living on the edge' for women's bodies, as danger (and thus edgework) is inherently thought of in terms of 'raw' physical challenges and hegemonic masculine values (Newmahr, 2011). The privileging of physical prowess and mastery of fear over subtler, and perhaps less physically-oriented forms of edgework, has meant that women's edgework is fundamentally understood in terms of its male equivalent, rather than for its unique form.

Several theorists have attempted to account for the experiences of women on the edge, with the consensus being that women experience a number of contradictions in their thrill-seeking activities. Some found differences in emotional response to risky activities between the genders (Lois, 2005), while others found differences in the motivations for thrill seeking itself (Laurendeau & Shahara, 2008; Olstead, 2011; Worthen & Baker, 2014). This suggests that there may be gendered aspects to edgeworking which go beyond the contestation of space. Newmahr (2011) argues that 'risk has been, on the whole, limited to bodily risk', and the privileging the physical experience 'ignores and marginalizes, or devalues phenomenological emotional experience' (pg. 690). Adopting a broader experience of risk experiences would allow for a feminist approach to edgework, which takes into consideration the gendered meanings edgeworkers attach to their experiences. Similarly, skill is largely understood in the masculine sense of mastery over the physical body. While female edgeworkers do gain substantial pleasure from their physical mastery (Worthen & Baker, 2014), we argue that this understanding is too narrow. This is not to say that a feminine form of edgework would somehow exclude the element of physical risk and skill, but that by privileging it, we are disregarding other subtler forms of edgework, and the skills required to master them, which may be more female-oriented. Interpreting chaos and order as beyond the physical, would allow for them to be imbued with new understandings and meaning and allow for a richer, more nuanced account of edgework than has previously been attained.

Women's naked bodies have historically been regulated by men (Bateman, 2023). Whether this has been achieved from a religious or medical perspective, feminists have long struggled to regain women's ownership of their reproductive and sexual selves. Porn and erotica have been one of these sites of struggle where women have been highly exploited, usually by men, for men. We argue that erotic practices which are self-driven, and employed as part of a larger identity project can be beneficial and empowering for women. This is particularly salient for those working the edge on the internet, where self-driven publication can aid women to create body positive messages outside normative narratives through 'risky' erotic displays. Yet not all erotic displays fit within these parameters. Pornographic practices can be exploitative and damaging—it positions women as a 'sex-class', disposable, inferior commodities (Dines, 2016)—and promotes 'pornready' bodies compliant with risky sex acts that push women's bodies to extremes (McVey et al., 2022). Consequently, demarcating between those which are empowering and those which are damaging is essential (Dobson, 2015).

Drawing a line between porn and erotica is an incredibly difficult, yet necessary step. Feminist discourse has often placed itself directly in opposition to all pornographic practices due to their exploitative, and often violent nature (Dobson, 2015). However, several feminist scholars have previously argued that a simple and unconsidered opposition to sexually explicit material depicting women may be foolhardy (Gibson & Gibson, 1993). What follows, is that an overly simplistic attitude towards women and sexual objectivity does not allow for the creative power women can exercise in erotic display. Feminists such as Lynda Nead (cited in Gibson & Gibson, 1993) suggest that the attempt to create a distinction between pornography and erotica has been reduced to one between 'high' and 'low brow' culture; 'the aesthetic and the obscene' (pg. x).

However, while this is indeed useful as a starting point, it is insufficient as a tool with which to decipher the agency of women within the creation of erotic display in contemporary internet settings. We say this because the distinction is based on the 'audience' perception and negotiation of erotic meaning, rather than the intention of the creator's message. Instead, we suggest that to make a clear distinction between pornography and erotica, one that meaningfully places women within the creative space, an understanding which includes productive power is necessary.

In our thinking here, we are inspired by early work by feminists such as Dworkin (1989), Mulvey (1989), and Rubin (2002)—and more recently—in the sex-positive research conducted by scholars such as Paasonen and McKee (2020). Mulvey, 1989, pg. 11) wrote that '…pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly'. This does not insist that the gaze is always male, particularly given the ability for technology to drive the shift from passive to active co-creation of media, such as the drive towards participatory culture and the potential for new ways of seeing and being seen. Famously, Steinem (1980) suggested that the essential difference between the porn and eroticism is intrinsically linked to the meanings inherent in each word; erotica which is linked to choice, consent, and free will—against the backdrop of pornography, which is intrinsically linked to women's subjugation, and a conflation of sex with violence (in Tarrant, 2016). The distinction between these two terms is essential when examining the edgework practices of women who post NSFW selfies, as it allows for the consideration of the emotional and psychological benefits individuals derive from this 'risky' practice. Women who engage in NSFW selfie sharing through blogs and other platforms risk their emotional and psychological wellbeing as they invite harassment, judgement and exploitation. Yet by their naked displays, they are able to generate new understandings of their bodies as desirable sexual beings (Tiidenberg, 2014).

Unlike most other spaces, within the realm of erotica and desire, the value of the female form can hardly be approximated by its male equivalent. This subverts many power structures found within edgework spaces (whereby women are interlopers), by creating an environment where men are 'invited' rather than 'expected'. We believe that it is these 'attributes' of nude selfie sharing, which may be difficult to encounter in other spaces, that allows for a challenging of dominant discourses of objectification. In such a context, there is worth, value, and pleasure in wanting to be seen and desired as a sexual object—a self-claiming of objectification via the feminine expression of edgework, is simultaneously made possible by and is unique in its spatiality. For those women engaging in nude selfie practices, it is more than simple exposure to risk which creates the seduction, but it is the exploration of sexuality and bodily expression in a context, so often denied to women, which generates the thrill.

Method

The data from this qualitative study was primarily sourced from online interviews with 22 young female Tumblr users, aged between 18 and 25, held between 2013 and 2016. This primary data was supplemented by secondary data gathered

from field note observations of each of the women's Tumblr blogs. Launched in 2007, Tumblr is a micro-blogging social networking site, where users share text, images, and audio and other user-generated and user-created content. During the halcyon years between the late-2000s and late-2010s, Tumblr was a hub for sex workers, queer youth, and sex positivity (Lovine, 2022). Since its creation, Tumblr's userbase primary userbase consisted of young people aged between 18 and 34, was less likely to be affluent, white, or overly male or female than other social networking platforms at the time (McCraken, 2017). Tumblr's slide from safe space for sexual expression started after it was purchased by Yahoo in 2013, and with it, an overt tightening of community guidelines and terms of service around porn that continued after Yahoo was later sold to Verizon in 2017. However, it was not until late 2018 when Tumblr announced a site-wide ban on photos, videos, or GIFs that showed human genitals, female nipples, or any depictions of a sex act.

There is logic in questioning the relevance of data collected several years ago, from what has essentially become a defunct social media platform. One of the key affordances of social media is persistence (boyd, 2014), platforms often act as archives of data long after their 'sunsetting' and subsequent 'digital afterlife' (Ogden, 2021). While the data itself is old, and 'NSFW Tumblr' arguably no longer exists beyond a web of archives (Ramano, 2018; Ogden, 2021), it remains as an ample opportunity to rethink approaches to women's claims of sexual empowerment. As such, we see this as an important historical artefact and wish to examine it differently, through updated lenses, on how to rethink objectification and its potential for understanding edgework, and women's practices of sexuality. What happens to women's empowerment when social media platforms no longer support or allow it, and where else sexual empowerment practices migrate to as a result, are salient and important questions that need to be explored, but are not within the scope of this specific paper. This paper is part of a discussion of the continued relevance of retrospective data collected on Tumblr, NSFW content, and pleasure that continues years after the sunset of the platform (Bronstein, 2020; Edwards & Boellstorf, 2021; Sybert, 2022).

The participants were recruited via purposive sampling. Eligibility for participation required that an individual had to be both able to provide informed consent and operate a Tumblr blog in which NSFW selfies were posted with relative frequency (deemed to be at least one nude selfie uploaded per month). Lastly, it was determined that the nude selfies uploaded by the potential participants contained faces and other identifying features that were not cropped or censored. Selection bias was countered by sending invites to any young woman engaging in the #nsfw #selfie hashtags who met these selection criteria, rather than consciously (or unconsciously) looking to recruit specific individuals. After making initial contact via Tumblr's direct message feature, informed consent was gained through providing participants participant information sheets and consent forms to sign, prior to interviews commencing. Before formally initiating each interview, individuals were made aware that their participation was voluntary, and as such they were able to withdraw from the study at any time. Further, should they opt to withdraw, any data they provided or that had been collected would be destroyed.

Those who remained in the study would have their data de-identified and stored securely in accordance with the ethical requirements of the University which had endorsed the research project.

The participants were given a choice of either video, audio, or text-based interviews (online chats) via Skype messaging service, at a time that was convenient to them, and most self-selected to participate in text-based interviews via Skype. The semi-structured, online interviews lasted approximately 60 min each. This form of interviewing method provides the flexibility necessary for engaging with a disparate cohort of research participants. Interview questions related to a variety of issues concerned with the use of Tumblr, the affect associated with participants' NSFW content production, and how boundaries or norms were negotiated. The interview questions were not drawn from a rigidly structured nor exhaustive list, rather, they were used as a guideline that could be altered slightly depending on the direction each interview took as each participants' unique narrative unfolded in response to the questions they were asked. The data from the interviews was subjected to a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), out of which themes of objectification, sexual desirability, risk-taking, and the production of feminist counter-publics emerged from the inductive coding process. Care was taken not to alter the intention or erase the unique voices of the participants.

Research such as this does involve limitations and ethical dilemmas. The sampling method might be arguably considered "cold-calling", given that the recruitment involved initiating contact with previously unknown to any potential participant—as such, the strategy had the potential to be perceived by participants as an unsolicited nuisance and yield a high non-response rate. However, it proved to be an efficient means of recruitment, with all 22 individuals agreeing to participate in the research within a period of 4 months. An ethical dilemma was raised in regard to the subjectivity of the researcher, whose position as a white, cisgender man, made attempting to speak with young women about images displaying their naked bodies, and about their sexualities, inherently problematic. Consequently, measures were taken whereby the researcher could ensure their credibility and authenticity. Doing so required carefully curating a recruitment approach that made visible his academic "online footprint" as much as possible. This meant providing links to academic online profiles, to previous publications, and the contact details of supervisors.

The last notable limitation of this study was with regards to sample size. Qualitative research involving small sample sizes are often criticised for lacking generalisability and should at a minimum aim for 'saturation', that is, the point at which no new insights are gained from further data collection (Charmaz, 2014). While consensus is generally lacking when seeking the answer to 'how many' interviews is 'enough', some suggest that anywhere from 5 to 50 is satisfactory (Dworkin, 2012). With a sample size of 25, the sample of this study is within this scope, however, our contention is that as with much qualitative research, the findings and discussion herein are not intended to be read as conclusive. Rather, the data and its analysis in what follows is intended to be read as a jumping off point for injecting new scholarly debate around objectification discourses and women's voluntary risk-taking in an online setting.

Findings and Discussion

Feminine Edges: Shame, the Fear of Discovery, and Exploitation

Edgework involves clearly observable threats to one's 'physical or mental wellbeing or one's sense of an ordered existence' (Lyng, 1990, pg. 857). Sharing naked images on Tumblr is a form of 'intimate edgework' (Hart, 2017) which requires negotiating the boundaries between chaos and order, an ordered or disordered way of living. Failing to negotiate the edge in this context could mean having a nude image recognised by a friend, family member, or co-worker, and lead to feelings of shame, or experiences of social exclusion or even loss of employment. In the interviews, young women's narratives of their NSFW selfie experiences often involved fear, particularly around being exploited or blackmailed by men. Kimberly, a 20-year-old, explains:

> **Kimberly**: 'Many men request personal information as they badger us for nudes…"Add me on Facebook? U wanna chat?" type stuff. And then it's always "send me a pic of you doing blah". And sometimes it's less than safe. especially with skype or Facebook, because then there's a possibility they may find your IRL friends or family, and threaten to leak your nudes if you don't keep giving them what they want.'

This was expanded upon by Jessica, a twenty-two-year-old who added:

> **Jessica**: (being found on Tumblr) is a very real prospect when you think about it. I mean, we are in the age of technology. It's so easy to find most things nowadays, if you've got the time and motivation. For me, there's always that fear of not being able to procure a job because someone got a hold of my nudes. Like, suddenly I don't fit a company's profile of being a respectable employee, or whatever. Or being slut-shamed by people I know after some dickhead posts my images all over my friends' or family member's Facebook walls. I have had to learn how to keep my tumblr life and my real life VERY separate.

Successfully engaging in this edgework on Tumblr required women to undertake specific preparations and possess specific skills or literacies. This might entail regularly deleting and creating new blogs under new alias, treating their online accounts akin to 'burner phones' in spy films in order to make being discovered difficult. It might also mean exercising deliberate choice in how 'active' they participate in nude selfie culture on Tumblr, by choosing not to tag their images at all (Hart 2017, pp. 307–309).

Sensations: Feeling Good About Looking Good, Body Positive, and Empowerment

When asking why young women engaged these risks, most of the responses were variations of because it felt good, and more specifically, because I feel good when I do it. Self-actualisation is the sense of direct personal hardship in one's actions,

when their behaviour is not coerced by the normative of structural constraints of one's social environment (Lyng, 1990). Engaging in edgework can allow an individual to push back against social and environmental constraints, in simple terms, to 'feel alive'. Edgework experiences reflect 'immediate desires and goals…the "true self", as it were' (pp. 878–879). Negotiating edges has important consequences for the individual in terms of their sense of self, status and identity (Reith, 2005). Studies of edgework have shown how drug users for example report feelings of invincibility when under the influence—similarly, our participants felt exhilaration through challenging acceptable norms regarding what a woman's body "should" look like, and perhaps more importantly, how it "should" be displayed. Beverly, aged twenty, stated:

> **Beverly:** I don't always feel great about myself…I've never thought of myself as attractive or anything beyond average…But when I post a picture on Tumblr, and people respond with positivity and encouragement… it gives me such a boost to my confidence. I was brought up by my parents to believe that the body is private. For my eyes only. So yeah, it's freeing to put something out there that is considered intimate and private on the internet for everyone to see. I'm very much the daredevil, in that sense.

Similarly, Donna, a 23-year-old, described how her NSFW selfies were empowering for her, as a means for her to have a voice as a woman:

> **Donna**: 'I'm not into porn, certainly not the typical porn that appeals to men on Tumblr that's just basically straight out of hardcore movies. I value the intimacy in sex and the beauty of the female form, rather than just the tits or vagina…I realised that erotic self-portraiture was also a way to express myself. I'm only realising now how much that I struggled with gender and my sexuality, my body and my race…but this fem-friendly erotic space on Tumblr in which we can express ourselves in the way we want to, and band together, has really opened my mind. I think as a society we are still struggling with the idea that women can be nude and not sexual, but even more importantly that women CAN be sexual creatures on their own terms.'

Rather than acting as a detrimental force in their lives, producing and sharing nude selfies on Tumblr were critical for our participants in their developing a sense of wellbeing and belonging. As was the case for many of our interviewees, nude bodies in NSFW selfies were displays of "real girls" and "real bodies", bodies that did not conform to mainstream ideals about feminine beauty. They were sharing images which served to re-write sexual scripts (Tiidenberg, 2014) through the ability for them to challenge discourses of 'heterosexiness' (Dobson, 2015). Sharing nudes on Tumblr allowed our participants to self-reflexively explore sexualities and embodiments that were often denied to them elsewhere. The affordance of self-expression generates the thrill for many nude selfie sharers. Many expressed a belief that their NSFW selfies were a means by which to become more confident in their bodies. While mainstream media reinforces and rewards heteronormative beauty standards (Awad et al., 2015), Tumblr was valued

by its users for its counter-cultural sensibilities (Renninger, 2015). The platform's lax policy guidelines, combined with the sexually liberal attitudes of its userbase, meant that Tumblr was perceived as a space that was open, and welcoming to nudity, marginalised identities, and progressive ideologies (McCracken, 2017; Reif et al., 2023). Tumblr users value 'authentic' presentations of self in an environment where deception and curated impression management are common (Hart, 2015). In the context of our research, women's 'authentic bodies' are those which embody overweightness, stretch marks, acne, body hair, an absence of make-up, or other counter-hegemonic beauty traits.

The Production of Erotic, Feminist Counter-Publics

Our participants would also frequently describe how they felt that the popularity of the female form on Tumblr was largely due to the value women placed on the aesthetic of their nude images over men. Some felt that the disparity owed to a broader preference for women and women's issues on Tumblr in general. Beverly explained:

> **Beverly**: 'Men and their nudes never tend to be as glorified as women's nudes… On Tumblr, women are immortalized, with feminism having a huge representation in the site. Even to the extent that female body positivity is often talked about much more than male body positivity.'

As noted earlier, research has argued that women's blogs act as safe spaces for discussion and embodied desire, wherein particular online 'commons' enable women to develop 'vocabularies of desire', reduce shame, and regain control over information about feminine sexuality (Tiidenberg, 2013, pg. 179). Many of our female bloggers described support and camaraderie whenever male Tumblr users were 'outed' for misogynistic comments. As Evelyn, a 19-year-old, explained:

> **Evelyn**: '…there's a common understanding that we're putting ourselves out there primarily for others and so when guys say stuff like "ew you're fat" or "gross" or whatever, us girls will stick together and scorn them for it, shame them until they leave that girl's blog all together…Knowing we have that support out there makes it easier to do what we do, I think.'

Similarly, Layla, an 18-year-old, said:

> **Layla:** 'Chimananda Ngozi Adichie says "We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are". We as women are told to humble ourselves, not make any noise, don't take up too much space. What kind of a life is that? I think women have realised that the NSFW space within Tumblr is a space where we can share a picture of ourselves if we're feeling good about ourselves (or god forbid WANT to feel good about ourselves), because we know we (women) are looking out for each other.'

Both responses point towards an edgework that is collaborative in nature. It is a form of risk-taking that requires working together to navigate the edge. As Newmahr (2011) puts it, 'edgeworkers construct and constitute the boundaries for one another'

(pg. 692). NSFW selfie bloggers have the potential to challenge the norms surrounding women's sexually-expression and freedom. Sharing nude selfies transgresses the limits of how a woman's body should be displayed, how a woman should feel about her body, and how men should view and interact with women's bodies. All edgework seeks to control 'the seemingly uncontrollable' (Lyng, 1990: 872). We concur with Newmahr (2011), that if men represent the 'seemingly uncontrollable' for women, then a space like Tumblr enables us to understand 'the empowering character of edgework and the sense of omnipotence it produces' (Lyng & Matthews, 2007: 89).

The way in which our participants communicate their understandings of the spaces in which they negotiate risk builds upon the work of Olstead (2011) who focuses on spatiality and the relationship between space and women's risk-taking practices. Olstead's notion of 'emotional territories' sets forth how a dichotomy between nature/culture works as a means by which women self-actualise through their risk-taking. The discursive constructs of the unbound freedoms of the wild, natural outdoors versus the constraints and regulations of the urban metropolis betray tensions however, with Olstead noting that the gendered performances of her edgeworking participants occur in 'the boundaries of the utterances available to them'. Consequently, what our interviewees are describing then is the creation of a feminist 'counterpublic' (Salter, 2013) within Tumblr, one which manages the encroachment of men's power, allowing women in NSFW Tumblr spaces to further exert a perception of control over the risks they face online when sharing images of their naked bodies. Research into feminist counter-publics on social media is not novel. McLean and Maalsen (2013) argue that platforms such as Tumblr, which straddled the liminal spaces between publicness and privateness, provide 'safe' spaces for 'subaltern communities' (Sills et al., 2016, pg. 945). Other feminist researchers have argued that hashtags, such as #bodypositive, act as communities of solidarity that disregard demographic and embodied characteristics (Dixon, 2014; Gill & Orgad, 2018). Previous studies have shown that such hashtag practices risk narrowing the potential for counter-ideals to flourish (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2018), however, it is worth pointing out that contrary to the work done by Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2018), that previous research into Tumblr found that the platform enables and celebrating ad hoc, neotribal moments of non-hegemonic bodies, such as the #theblackout hashtag, attached on specific days during the year in which the nude selfies made by black women were shared en masse by users to increase the visibility of bodies that countered dominant discourses of white, feminine beauty (Hart, 2018).

Reconciling Pleasure and Risk

Feminist scholars have been grappling with women's empowerment for some time. In describing postfeminism, Dobson (2015) argues that women's empowerment is made possible through their sexuality and compliance with hegemonic norms of beauty, while simultaneously coopting neoliberal attitudes around autonomy and desire. However, this postfeminist sensibility, according to Dobson, is contradictory; it opens up avenues for expression while simultaneously permitting scrutiny

and judgement from others (pg. 159). Being a sexual subject in late modernity presents women with a problematic 'double bind' (Young-Eisendrath, 2023), whereby the process of self-sexualisation is either a real or imagined source of emancipatory power for women (Aubrey et al., 2017; Gill & Donaghue, 2018).

Our work seeks to extend explorations by researchers to illustrate how self-sexualisation has positive impacts for women's lived experiences (De Wilde et al., 2019; Erchull & Liss, 2013). This is certainly not dominant discourse, with much postfeminist critique arguing that women engaging in self-objectification and sexualisation online are enacting sensibilities that reinforce dominant regimes governing women's sexual regulation. Where this becomes complex is the increasing normalisation of naked displays online (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Ringrose, 2010), and expectation to perform as the idealised sexually empowered woman in these postfeminist times (Gill, 2018). Jessica Ringrose's recent work (2010 on teen girls' negotiations of sexiness on social media aligns closely to our aims in this paper. Olivia, a 22-year-old explained that taking nude photos makes her feel 'super sexy', that the fear of people potentially finding out was countered by the anticipation of the response of her followers, and the belief that the practice enabled her to be her 'sexual self'. This was echoed by Alice, a 21-year-old woman, who described how her NSFW selfies enabled her challenge societal standards around feminine sex and sexuality:

> **Alice**: 'I never post things for other people, in fact I ignore requests all together. NSFW selfies are different to porn because in a nude selfie, I control what I want to share. I'm not taking orders from some sleazy guy with a camera. I choose how I want to look and when to stop before I cross a line. Tumblr is great because women can be sexual in this space more so than in any other space. I feel more accepted in this space and more respected. I feel like my followers *get* why I'm doing it and are less likely to judge me for doing this type of thing. Because there's so many more women in and involved in nude selfies here.'

Ringrose (2010) argues that in performing 'sexy' online, girls walk a fine line between getting it 'right' and getting it 'wrong', with negative consequences (slut-shaming) by peers (pg. 175) in ways that speak directly to our women's past edgework on Tumblr. However, where Ringrose (2010) and her Gill (2018) found that the expectation to be sexually self-objectifying heightens women's anxieties around embodied perfectionism, and disciplinary power, edgework appears to be a vehicle for sociocultural transgression, and a rejection of dominant discourse and sexual scripts. Specifically, the women we interviewed gave responses that illustrated a rejection of pornification in favour of an erotic aesthetic.

Conclusion

This article has examined the nature of Tumblr and NSFW selfies in the context of further developing a feminist approach to edgework theory. The aim of the article was to show that how women experience and negotiate risk in female-dominated spaces is critical to a feminist rethinking of edgework theory. Women

reap considerable benefits from their engagement in sharing nude self-images, most notably in their ability to reflexively develop their erotic identities and improve their wellbeing through reaching a level of body positivity and acceptance of their self-image (Hart, 2017). For some, such as those enduring body dysmorphia, the act of sharing a naked image on the internet is seen as nothing short of a thrilling experience which improves wellbeing in ways that are meaningful and rewarding to them. Importantly, these women expressed the belief that these benefits could not be experienced outside of the feminist counter-publics of NSFW Tumblr, due to the stigma and moral judgement placed upon nudity and selfies more broadly present in non-subaltern social network sites and the broader heteronormative public sphere.

This research extends previous attempts at feminist approaches to edgework theory. More than focusing on the skills or the specific boundaries women work within, we need to ensure that the risky spaces, in which women are the dominant gender, are also attended to (Olstead, 2011). Porn and erotica have historically been a site of struggle, where women have been highly exploited, usually by men, for men. However, as our participants have shown, women on Tumblr collaborated to make a female-friendly space in which misogyny and abuse are mitigated through feminine support and camaraderie. While Tumblr itself has entered its sunset as a popular social media platform, our historical data is hoped to prove useful for further theorisation of women's pleasure seeking via voluntary risk-taking. Objectification is not necessarily disempowering; women can find self-actualisation in the pleasure leveraged through provocatively playing along the edges of object and subject as they take and share nude self-images online. Ultimately, this article is an attempt to illustrate not merely how women's nude self-images allow for a feminist rethinking of edgework theory. Rather, its primary aim was to show what edgework can enable women to achieve; namely, a claim to sexuality and the pleasure of being sexually objectified that operates outside of the heteronormative, hegemonic, patriarchal male gaze. It is an attempt that hopefully moves us away from the never-ending debates of whether or not empowerment is truly available to women, or whether social media provides new avenues for women to be exploited by the male gaze (Travers, 2023).

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