Tackling Polarity: Repurposing grounded theory in feminist research

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Abstract

For decades within feminism, polarised debates have served to divide anti-porn feminists from their pro-porn or “anti-anti-porn” counterparts (Paasonen, 2011) to such an extent that the movement has become fragmented and “meaningful dialogue has long since broken down” (Boyle, 2006: 4). This article presents feminist research that sought to explore pornography consumption in ways that would help move past this discursive deadlock towards more nuanced and productive avenues.

In particular, this paper demonstrates how grounded theory approaches conventionally employed for the purpose of achieving ideological goals around objectivity and neutrality, may be repurposed in pursuit of empirical goals around avoiding agenda-driven outcomes and generating new conceptual discussions – within feminism, as well as other fields similarly fragmented by steadfast political, social or moral polarity. In turn, it demonstrates the methodological and epistemological negotiations inherent to such a process.

Keywords: polarization, polarized fields, methodology, epistemology, epistemological tensions
1. Introduction

Political, social and moral polarisation is endemic in modern society (Wernet et al., 2003) in media reportage, activism, party politics and academia to name but a few domains. Juxtaposing views can be identified even within the boundaries of seemingly coherent movements, fields and communities, from the debates around medical versus social models of health and disability (Oliver, 2017), to the fragmentation observed within left-wing politics between post-capitalist and anti-capitalist perspectives (Berman, 2016; Dorey, 2017). Within feminism, similarly polarised debates can be identified, not least with regards to the “porn wars” that have served to divide anti-porn feminisms from pro-porn or “anti-anti-porn” feminisms (Paasonen, 2011). Such is the ongoing polarity between these two feminist camps that “meaningful dialogue has long since broken down” (Boyle, 2006: 4).

In this paper I present feminist research that sought to explore pornography consumption in ways that transcend the binary perspectives that have historically dominated the field. The intention of the research was to help to move past these polarised debates towards the type of nuanced and productive discussion on the topic that we are beginning to see emerge within new academic spaces and publications dedicated to the field. In order to achieve this, I made use of grounded theory tools conventionally employed for the purpose of achieving ideological goals around objectivity and neutrality, repurposing them in pursuit of empirical goals around avoiding agenda-driven outcomes and generating new conceptual discussions that lie beyond anti/pro-porn debates.

It is thus the intention of this paper to show how grounded theory may be repurposed to help propel in new directions those fields wherein internal fragmentation has contributed to the breakdown of collaborative efforts towards common goals, often serving to confine debate to narrow parameters in ways that are unproductive. In doing so, I also seek to elucidate the philosophical and methodological negotiations that such a repurposing may entail. In particular, I will discuss the tensions encountered when applying grounded theory to research on pornography consumption, with a particular focus on how my poststructuralist feminist epistemology as a researcher contested with grounded theory’s positivist foundations.

2. Grounded Theory’s Epistemological Roots

A number of distinct epistemological threads can be identified in the development and deployment of grounded theory. When considering the first iteration of grounded theory as posited by Glaser and Strauss (1967), one notices how the approach put forward represents both Glaser’s academic roots within the Columbia University positivist tradition, and Strauss’s Chicago School pragmatist/social interactionist background (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 8-9). The latter lives more unproblematically with interpretive feminist thinking than the former, particularly vis-à-vis the focus on social processes and relationships upheld in symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). On the whole, however, at the heart of grounded theory lie a number of “epistemological assumptions...reflect[ing] Glaser’s rigorous quantitative training at Columbia University” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 9) and a positivist philosophy that remains at odds with the constructivist/interpretivist inclinations of much feminist scholarship.
Following the constructivist turn of the 1990s grounded theorists started to move away from that which was increasingly perceived to be grounded theory’s positivist traditions (ibid., p. 8), with Charmaz famously introducing the idea of “constructivist grounded theory” in her (2000) paper. Charmaz’s constructivist interpretation emphasises social reality as a construction and research as a similarly constructed process or product, yet retains grounded theory’s inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach on a practical level. In this way, Charmaz (2014, p. 13) provides a way to make use of grounded theory strategies “without endorsing mid-century assumptions of an objective external reality, a passive, neutral observer, or a detached, narrow empiricism.” If, following this, we are to assume that social reality is “multiple, processual and constructed” the role of researcher reflexivity becomes key to any constructivist/interpretivist rendering of grounded theory. Acknowledging the researcher’s positionality and its impact on analysis and participant interactions, is described by Charmaz as representing an inherent part of the research reality: “It, too, is a construction... [and v]iewing the research as constructed rather than discovered fosters researchers’ reflexivity about their actions and decisions” (ibid.). Accordingly, ideas around reflexivity and co-constructed meaning remain inextricable from one another within a constructivist/non-positivist grounded theory frame.

As will become apparent, these concepts formed central principles in the research project I will draw upon during the remainder of this paper. Nevertheless, I also employed a number of the seemingly positivist-inspired approaches advocated by Glaser and Strauss – approaches that do not feature heavily in Charmaz’s constructivist rendering due to their focus on achieving “objectivity” – which required a degree of methodological reconciliation. Before exploring these philosophical negotiations, however, it seems prudent to first give an overview of the research upon which I will draw to illustrate the key points to be made in this paper, as well as a brief discussion of its aims and why a grounded theory approach was deemed a fruitful means for achieving them in a feminist research context.

3. The Context: A Grounded Feminist Inquiry

The empirical lens through which the methodological arguments of this paper are to be examined pertains to a research project exploring feminists’ experiences of pornography and consumer ethics. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the context of porn studies is one that is fraught with controversy, characterised by the “feminist porn wars” spanning over four decades. Until very recently, scholarship on pornography consumption had been dominated by psychoanalytic and media effects theories, which had often revolved around porn harms discourses (Smith, 2007, p. 12). In light of the widespread criticism levelled at these approaches, particularly with regards to their reliance on seemingly unsophisticated, linear understandings of media reception (Attwood, 2005, p. 67; Jones and Mowlabocus, 2009, p. 615), the research referred to in this paper sought to adopt a different method of inquiry and to broaden its scope beyond questions of porn effects. Equally so, it sought to avoid taking for granted the similarly simplistic “porn-as-empowerment” discourses that have been invoked to take on effects-based “porn-as-harm” perspectives. Rather, this study was designed as an exploratory, qualitative investigation of consumer experiences of pornography, using grounded theory in an effort to move beyond polarised porn debates. It focused specifically on feminist-identified consumers, due to the way in which this
demographic could be said to occupy a unique position both within and outside of feminist critiques of pornography.

In this way, the project diverged from the theory-testing approaches common in media effects research and qualitative research more widely (Urquhart, 2013, p. 180). This was, in part, due to there existing so few theories of pornography consumption at the time of research, and even fewer that made efforts to locate themselves outside of the porn-as-harm or porn-as-empowerment agendas (Boyle, 2006). As Paasonen (2014, p. 137) asks, drawing upon Sedgwick’s notion of “paranoid” inquiries, if we are already convinced of pornography’s fundamentally harmful – or empowering – nature, “then what can the ensuing investigation uncover that we do not already know?” It was felt that grounded theory’s focus on inductive theory development, and its iterative approach to data collection and analysis, would thus lend itself to a number of key aims for the project. Chief among these goals was a quest to capture subtleties in the feminist imaginary that might lie between and beyond porn harms-versus-liberation discourses, or that may otherwise extend our understandings of porn and its consumption. Such insights, it was felt, could provide opportunities to transcend the pro-/anti-porn debate in favour of a more critical understanding of the contexts and means by which people generally, and feminists specifically, engage with pornography.

Key aims for the research thus included: (a) eschewing, as far as possible, commonly-held assumptions about the research topic and research subjects; (b) resisting agenda-driven frameworks that seek to validate pro- or anti-porn stances; and (c) allowing for the voices of porn consumers themselves to be heard and taken seriously, in a way that hasn’t tended to be prioritised in pornography effects research or the public arena more widely (Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015, p. 119). Given the absence of an established theoretical model for conceptualising pornography consumption, and porn consumer ethics in particular, another objective for the research pertained to theory development. Grounded theory’s focus on theory development, inductive data collection, rigorous data coding and analysis, as well as techniques for bracketing preconceptions and verifying findings – often employed with a view to achieving more “valid” and “reliable” theory – lent itself to these aims. Moreover, grounded theory offered clear tools and guidelines for going about these tasks, which proved useful for an early career researcher with little experience devising and deploying techniques that could approximate similar aims within other less systematic qualitative research traditions.

4. The Challenge: The Need for Both a Grounded and Feminist Approach

The importance of using grounded theory for this project related in part to its emphasis on induction. As highlighted earlier, consumers of pornography have often been spoken for in academic work around media effects (eg. Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1984; Felson, 1996) and in policy research alike (eg. Papadopoulos, 2010; Bailey, 2011). Conversely, grounded theory presents a way to allow for “the words of the respondents themselves to be heard” whilst, importantly, enabling the researcher at the same time to develop a systematic model for understanding these voices in context (O’Brien and Smith, 2002). Furthermore, grounded theory’s rigorous, line-by-line coding processes ensure, as far as possible, that results “emerge” from participant responses rather than from researcher preconceptions.
It is true that absolute emergence remains a questionable concept, since themes that appear to have independently revealed themselves in the data inevitably can only do so by means of a third-party mediator – the researcher – who identifies, describes and theorises them, thus threatening their supposed autonomous status. However, the “bottom-up” approach that grounded theory advocates in its quest for induction remained vital to this research, particularly given the project’s aim of moving beyond stereotypes of the porn consumer and, rather, capturing the “ambivalence, uncertainty, and inconsistency” in people’s experiences of pornography use (Bragg and Buckingham, 2002, p. 7). The type of methodological tension associated with the concept of “emergence” has been addressed elsewhere in the literature with reference to, for example, “abduction” (Peirce 1940) – as a way to reconceptualise inductive analysis in a way that more aptly accounts for the reflexive and interpretive elements of the analytical project (Chamberlain, 2006) – as well as with reference to the “methodological self-consciousness” that fosters reflexivity in the research process (Charmaz, 2017). Such reflexive practice was central to the research at hand; indeed, this paper can itself be considered a product of the methodological self-consciousness punctuating the entirety of the project.

Grounded theory was also deemed an appropriate methodology for this work by virtue of its focus on theory building. It is extremely effective in areas where little or no theory already exists (Urquhart, 2013, pp. 5-6) and, thus, served as a useful means by which to generate a theoretical framework for understanding porn consumption – in this case, amongst feminists – where one did not exist already. As Charmaz (2014, p. 10) notes, many grounded theorists “produce substantive theories addressing delimited problems in specific substantive areas...[and] each exploration within a new substantive area can help us to redefine the formal theory”. Accordingly, the intention for this research was to move beyond the simple description of phenomena towards a substantive theory of online porn consumption amongst London feminists, with the ultimate aim of developing existing formal theory and pushing our thinking around porn consumption forward in new and fruitful directions.

As well as using grounded theory to achieve the aims described above, the project sought to work within feminist research parameters and to uphold certain key “tenets” associated with feminist epistemologies – due to the embeddedness of pornography as a field of inquiry within feminist thinking, but also given my own feminist allegiances as a researcher. Of course, there are many ways of understanding feminist research, with some even maintaining that any research on or about women is, de facto, feminist research. For the purpose of this study, however, going over and above the idea of feminist research simply as research-about-women was paramount, not least because participation in this project was, in fact, not limited to women only. As such, while recognising the lack of consensus regarding what may constitute feminist research, a number of aims were identified to ensure that the research was conducted in accordance with certain prevalent feminist principles. These included a resistance to adopting the traditionally “scientific” stance that ranks the discovery of absolute truths above that of subjective experience; which sees women only as the objects of study; which regards the researcher and their perspectives as paramount; and which does little to address relations of power between researchers and participants (Stanley and Wise, 2002, p. 3). In practice this also implied a number of tangential aims, namely: to frame the research as a co-construction of knowledge and give participants the agency to orient the research in new directions; to resist prioritising
Researchers’ insights over those of participants; to elevate participants’ voices, ensuring their experiences were more authentically conveyed; and to emphasise reflexive practice throughout. In this way, the case for both a grounded and feminist approach was made.

Reflexive practice, elevating participant voice, ensuring authenticity of findings, giving participants greater agency in the research process, and preventing personal agendas from eclipsing participants’ testimony – as well as, for some, a need to deflect critiques of radical subjectivity from the wider academic community – constitute aims that are likely to resonate with feminist researchers across the board. Grounded theory offers ways of achieving these aims. Nonetheless, combining two methodological approaches emanating from quite different epistemological foundations is rarely a simple operation and tensions between the feminist research aims identified versus grounded theory’s quest for rigorous, validated theory quickly materialised. As such, whilst grounded theory brings a number of strengths, it is also prudent to assess its limitations in order to minimise any challenges these might pose, especially when deployed in different methodological contexts. In particular, careful consideration of the underlying philosophical positioning of the research becomes necessary. Of note, however, is that defining one’s ontological and epistemological perspective is of little value if such insights do not also impact on and interact with the processes involved in research design, development and delivery (Crotty, 1998). For this reason, the paper seeks not only to elucidate the theoretical parameters of the project in question, but also to engage in a meaningful articulation of how the grounded theory methodology and methods employed in this project related to and wrestled with the feminist foundations of the research and researcher.

5. Epistemological Tensions

As Charmaz (2014, p. 228) notes, grounded theory has been influenced by, and can comfortably be employed within, both positivist and interpretive frameworks. Whilst positivist approaches to grounded theory tend to prioritise universality and focus on the inductive emergence of data to explain “objective reality”, constructivist grounded theory prefers to acknowledge multiple and changing realities and therefore makes inquiries such as, “What do people assume is real? How do they construct and act on their views of reality?” (ibid., pp. 230–231). Given this epistemological divergence that disavows the existence of objective truth per se, Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory embraces, rather than rejects, the subjective elements inherent to the knowledge co-construction process. Ideologically-speaking, Charmaz’s approach to grounded theory thus aligns well with my own post-structuralist epistemology as a researcher. Furthermore, if “most aspects of positivism [are] antithetical to feminist principles and practice”, as Stanley and Wise claim (2002, p. i), then to take a positivist approach to this research risks defying both the feminist orientations of the work and my own feminist roots, thus lending further support to Charmaz’s constructivist rendering of the approach.

However, it is precisely Charmaz’s apparent deprioritisation of any attempt to achieve “neutrality” – this representing a positivist endeavor at odds with the constructivist philosophy – that simultaneously renders her approach insufficient for meeting the empirical needs of the research project. Indeed, I felt that some attempt towards bracketing my own personal views on the anti-porn versus anti-anti-porn debates was important for
achieving the project’s stated aim of ultimately transcending the parameters of these discussions. This mission was driven less by a philosophical commitment to notions of objectivity, however, than by the need for porn audience research that avoids agenda-driven outcomes. In this way, when seeking to untangle the epistemological-methodological tensions that may ensue when applying such methods in interpretivist/constructivist contexts, the purpose of using grounded theory’s seemingly more positivistic machinery becomes pertinent.

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which positivist assumptions do influence grounded theory more than other qualitative research methodologies. As Urquhart (2013, p. 60) highlights, the very nature of Glaser’s (1992) notion of emergence “implies that there is some objective truth waiting to be discovered in the data”. Thus, as discussed earlier in the paper, grounded theory combines both positivist and interpretive elements in its reliance on empirical observations, yet simultaneous dependence on the researcher’s constructions of them (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 231-232). In light of such acknowledgements, this research has heeded Charmaz’s suggestion that we view positivist and interpretivist approaches as part of one continuum, on which we can locate our research and ourselves. Whilst as a researcher I may currently consider my ontological and epistemological convictions to be feminist and post-structuralist in nature – and thus firmly non-positivist – the research itself may be somewhat more flexibly defined. More specifically, if considered in terms of a sliding scale, we might describe this project as occupying a critical interpretivist-of-centre approach by virtue of its methodology and methods, which, while commensurate with interpretivist approaches, simultaneously demonstrate positivist influences that must be grappled with and embraced. The next section of this paper aims to expound some of the ways in which such apparent contradictions were tackled in this context.

6. Philosophical-Methodological Negotiations in Practice

Over and above the aforementioned “emergence” issue, arguably applicable to all grounded theory research conducted within a constructivist paradigm, one example of how positivist influences appear to be exerted in this research may be identified in the apparent “verification” processes adopted. As Urquhart (2013, p. 60) observes, readers of research undertaken within a positivist frame will undoubtedly require assurances that conclusions drawn from the coding process do not reflect the subjective interpretations of one person alone. In a similar manner, whilst not working within a positivist frame, this project did seek to “corroborate” key analytical findings with another researcher familiar with the subject matter, as well as, importantly, participants themselves. This may seem to represent a somewhat contradictory, or even redundant undertaking, given that constructivist/interpretivist grounded theory rejects the underlying assumption that there exists some external reality against which to verify findings in the first place:

Generally, using [grounded theory] in an interpretivist paradigm, where researchers construct interpretations of social practices, is easier because there is more commensurability between the notion of coding (generally subjective) and the idea of constructing interpretations. So, generally, verification of the coding is not required. (Urquhart, 2013, p. 61)
However, the purpose of engaging in this process of “verification” related to a feminist-oriented imperative to achieve analytical transparency and to ensure that participant voices were either heard directly or were otherwise well-represented in analytical and theoretical observations made, rather than privileging the perspectives of one researcher and/or appealing to notions of uncritical universality. In this way we might understand the process to more closely resemble Tracy’s (2010) notion of “member reflection”. This choice thus represented an attempt to address the relative invisibility of consumer perspectives in porn research and public debate, and also to reflect the co-constructed nature of the research itself.

Accordingly, whilst this project did seek some level of corroboration of findings, it is perhaps more useful to think of this process as one of “crystallization” (Richardson, 2000; Tracy, 2010) rather than necessarily that of “verification”, given its underlying purpose which pertains more to post-structuralist feminist thinking, and to the idea of co-constructed meaning, than to positivism. If we are to understand post-structuralism in terms of its emphasis on a discursive social reality; on subjectivity as being made up of interpellated discursive structures of understanding; and on the intelligibility of reality and materiality as being dependent on “speech acts” that both describe and produce the things to which they refer (Butler, 1990), then it is necessary to consider this research as a project serving to describe, but also potentially intervene in and influence participants’ understandings of their porn consumption practices. As such, I wished to acknowledge the eventuality of this research process elucidating, but also creating and expanding, shared meaning. The very act of asking individuals to discuss pornography, for example, whilst remaining a very broad topic, still encouraged people to think critically about a part of their life to which they may not hitherto have given much thought. As one participant in the online group activity anonymously stated:

“I probably have never consciously thought about what is important to me in porn, although some things work and some really don’t so there must be things that take precedent.”

Thus the research process revealed itself to be more than the simple collection and analysis of data; it also came to play a role in the formation of the very experiences it set out to explore. It is in this way that research findings exposed themselves not as mere descriptions or understandings of phenomena, but rather as co-constructions thereof. Accordingly, I sought to reflect this co-constructedness by providing the opportunity for key analytical findings to be reviewed by participants, thereby helping the analysis to reflect an intersubjective understanding of the research topic.

“Triangulation” is another tool commonly used in positivist grounded theory research, whereby two or more methods are utilised to collect data on a single phenomenon. Making use of an online group activity, demographic free-form text surveys, and in-depth interviews to gain insights into participants’ pornography consumption practices, I appeared to draw upon a strategy of data triangulation. However, whilst triangulation tends to be a tool for improving the “validity” of findings, the process of drawing upon a variety of data collection methods in this research did not necessarily intend to serve this purpose. Indeed, other qualitative researchers have usefully reimagined the concept of validity and reframed it in terms of “quality” (Tracy, 2010; Clarke and Braun, 2018), as well as soundness, validity and authoritativeness (Yardley, 2008) demonstrating the ways in which techniques such as
triangulation may facilitate the development of a “fuller or multifaceted understanding of a topic” (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

In addition to notions of quality, however, a significant part of my decision to use an online group exercise, for example, alongside other data collection methods such as interviews, in fact resided in the potential for the former to help delineate the parameters of the research topic without relying on my own interests and pre-existing assumptions as researcher. By facilitating unstructured participant discussion on the research topic, the online group activity enabled a broad exploration of themes that participants deemed most significant, rather than relying solely on my own insights or potential agenda for research design and development. By means of line-by-line analysis, open and selective codes were developed from the data collected during this initial group discussion, which subsequently formed the basis of the survey and interview questions posed in the second phase of the research. As such, this strategy formed another attempt to dissociate, as far as possible, pre-existing researcher assumptions and values from the data. However, as before, this was driven not by an appeal to positivism, but rather stemmed from a wish to eschew some of the pitfalls common to much pornography research that has historically taken certain assumptions about pornographic media and its consumers for granted (Mowlabocus and Wood, 2015, p. 118).

Following on from this is the notion of reflexivity, which permeates much qualitative research, particularly that which operates within non-positivist and feminist frames. Interpretivist and constructivist research often seeks to explore the nuance in experiences of time- and context-bound phenomena, over and above the more positivist quest for broadly generalisable and universal truths. Indeed one criticism of positivism in the social sciences is the idea that:

*when laws are derived from empirical regularities at particular points in time and place, they do not address generic and universal processes but, instead, make time-bound events sound more universal and generic than they actually are.*

(Turner, 2006, p. 453)

Thus, non-positivists often spend a great deal of time situating their research in a social, geographical, political, cultural and/or temporal context; delineating scope; acknowledging their own role and involvement in the research process; and accounting for the impact of this on data collection and analysis. Whilst qualitative researchers with positivist inclinations may see reflexivity as another mechanism by which to approximate objectivity, by highlighting – and ultimately seeking to eliminate – pre-existing assumptions and values from the research process, interpretivist feminist researchers often prefer to adopt reflexive practices as a means by which to acknowledge and embrace the subjectivity of the researcher and the experience they bring to the analysis:

*reflexivity enables the feminist researcher to locate herself as a subject of history so that her perspective develops from understanding her situatedness in a particular context. Reflective practice also promotes transparency in taken-for-granted power relations embedded in the researcher-participant relationship.*

(Plummer and Young, 2010, p. 313)
Once again, a tension reveals itself between the non-positivist foundations of the research – and indeed my own feminist allegiances – on the one hand, with the project’s somewhat positivist aim of detaching the researcher’s values and experience from the research as far as possible, on the other. For example, this project made use of memo-writing not only as a tool for inductive theory development, but also as a means by which to highlight assumptions pertaining to the research topic that did not emanate strictly from the data. While in much feminist research, particularly that which works within “strong objectivism” (Harding, 1992), such tools may be employed with a view to embracing and amplifying researcher bias, this did not in fact constitute an aim I wished to pursue in this instance. Rather, by making my own personal, social and political reactions to participant responses textually visible, memo-writing actually served as an attempt to safeguard against the possibility of these interests inadvertently impacting the direction of the research in a non-inductive manner.

Though, in many ways, this resembles a more positivist approach to reflexive practice, once again it is necessary here to remind ourselves of the underlying reason for wishing to minimise subjective researcher perspectives; namely that of elevating participant voices and emphasising the co-constructed nature of the research, in a way that is much more commensurate with constructivist thinking. Furthermore, whilst I sought to diminish any personal or political influences that might be exerted on the analysis of data, seemingly in accordance with the positivist tradition, I also took – and continue to take – great pains to highlight my recognition of the ultimate impossibility of ever fully achieving this separation between researcher and data, and thus between “fact” and “value”.

In these ways, we might conclude that this project adopted a form of “weak” or “mediated” constructivism (Plant, 2004). This can be contrasted with “strong” constructivism – an epistemological approach associated with much feminist research – which dismisses attempts to triangulate and verify findings due to there being “no point of reality on which to triangulate” (Urquhart, 2013, pp. 61-62). Mediated constructivism can be seen in terms of an attempt “through various data collection techniques, to understand existing meaning systems shared by actors” (ibid.). This remains in keeping with the feminist epistemological foundations of this research, whilst also accommodating grounded theory’s positivist influences and taking advantage of the ways in which the techniques they inspired might serve to strengthen qualitative research within an interpretivist-of-centre frame – especially research seeking to push thinking beyond unproductive debates and polarised agendas.

7. Beyond Polarity

Much work has gone into trying to emphasise how validation techniques employed within grounded theory, as well as in other – often positivist – approaches, can be used without necessarily adhering to notions of objectivity. Often such work has pointed to new ways of conceptualising what “validity” in qualitative research might constitute, and has disconnected the pursuit of neutrality and objectivity from conceptualisations of good quality altogether. It has been the contention of this paper, however, that – even within a feminist, non-positivist frame, such tools may be adopted not in spite of, but because of, their capacity to help researchers adopt a more neutral approach to their research endeavours, where such an approach is warranted.
Of course, good quality feminist research need not try to approximate any form of personal or political neutrality at all to make valid claims to knowledge. However, it is the contention of this paper that it is nonetheless possible to embark upon such a task without compromising one’s feminist and/or non-positivist epistemological foundations. I have demonstrated in this paper how such a task might be accomplished, how the empirically-(rather than philosophically-) driven quest for neutrality may be reconciled with non-positivist and feminist epistemologies, and how validation techniques such as those offered by grounded theory may be repurposed to this end.

A key message that I seek to convey in the paper relates to the possibilities grounded theory offers for conducting research in contentious fields, where the quest to avoid defending one side of a moral or political debate is paramount for moving discussions into more productive realms. The tools it offers for approximating a degree of “neutrality” in qualitative research – while sometimes shied away from in non-positivist and feminist work at large, or reformulated in ways that de-emphasise neutrality as a desirable goal – prove useful in attempts to resist imposing one’s own attitudes, beliefs and values on the research process and outcomes, even if the reasons for doing so do not pertain to ideological positivism. By broadening our research horizons to include aims and approaches that appear antithetical to our epistemological perspectives, such as the pursuit of “neutrality”, we may in turn expand our capacity to push thinking beyond narrow debates, and open up new avenues of inquiry.

Though the attempt to bracket my own subjective values and opinions did not represent an aim in and of itself, it did prove important in my endeavours to resist focusing the research on moralistic binary disputes that have historically dominated the field of porn studies at the expense of more nuanced discussion. Whilst acknowledging the impossibility of ever achieving complete objectivity in the research process, in this research I nonetheless found it prudent to utilise grounded theory techniques, including the more Glaserian tools that diverge from Charmaz’s constructivist rendering of the methodology, to achieve these aims. Such machinery included processes of verification and triangulation, as well as other tools that are perhaps more commonly found in non-positivist qualitative work but which are usually, in such instances, conceptualised in ways that deprioritise the pursuit of neutrality in favour of other indicators of good quality (for example, inductive coding, memo writing, as well as constant comparison, theoretical sensitivity, and integrative diagramming.) Indeed, I too aimed for good quality in my work, and adopted such techniques in part to achieve such ends. However, rather than rejecting the quest for neutrality in my attempts to reconcile these techniques with non-positivist thinking, I sought to embrace the pursuit of neutrality, instead rejecting the purposes for which such attempts were embarked upon. By adopting grounded theory approaches that appear to align themselves with positivist thinking, but repurposing them in a way that aligned with my non-positivist feminist epistemology, I was able in my research to move past a preoccupation with pro- or anti-porn morality politics, enabling me to achieve my research objective of producing a theoretical model of pornography consumption that better reflected the nuance of consumer experience and ethical decision-making.

8. Concluding Remarks
Taking seriously the need to engage critically with one’s methodological and epistemological orientations (Minas et al. 2017), this paper set out to expose the philosophical tensions encountered in a feminist research project that – despite its non-positivist, feminist underpinnings – employed grounded theory approaches usually reserved for research within the positivist paradigm. By exposing the processes through which certain grounded theory tools – especially the validation techniques stemming from Glaser’s positivist roots, which Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory thus tends to eschew – were repurposed, this paper took up a number of challenges posed by colleagues in the field. These include efforts: (1) to eschew methodological tokenism (Zavos and Biglia 2009:168); and (2) to exemplify the important task of hanging one’s methodological “laundry” for all to see (Minas et al. 2017).

This paper sought not to rehearse discussions within the extant literature around how we might reimagine concepts such as induction, verification, and triangulation in ways that reject associated appeals to objectivity or neutrality (Richardson, 2000; Tracy, 2010) thus rendering them more commensurate with constructivist and interpretivist philosophies. Rather, I wished to demonstrate how constructivist researchers may actually find it useful to embrace the neutrality-pursuant tools that grounded theory offers and deploy them to achieve ostensibly similar ends, yet for fundamentally different purposes. In particular it is my contention that these tools and their capacity to approximate – if not ever fully achieve – “neutrality” may help us look beyond polarised debates that impede discussion about that which may lie beyond. It has also been my objective to emphasise, however, that such a repurposing must be accompanied by a process of reflexive methodological and epistemological untangling, as well as to demonstrate how this may be done in practice.
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