

The Post-Pandemic Future of Porn

Image: Angelica Alzona/GO Media



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14

1



5/18/20 11:00AM Filed to: PORN ▾

A porn shoot used to mean a day on a professional set with a crew and cast. The makeup artists, lighting technicians, camerapeople, and co-stars that once buzzed around a set have disappeared. Now, performers are filming in their own bedrooms, by themselves or with a significant other, while a director joins remotely via Zoom. It's an attempt to adapt studio shoots amid an indefinite hold on traditional on-set productions in response to the covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, performers have increasingly turned to camming, clips sites, and subscription platforms like OnlyFans to produce their own content, which can range from stripteases to winking moments of domesticity.

“I make quarantine cookies with things I have in my cabinet or I’ll take a quarantine shower and show how to *wash up all of your germ parts*,” said performer Maitland Ward, laughing, of her premium platforms. Recently, she shot a humorous skit for her subscription Snapchat in which she met a man on Tinder but couldn’t go out on a date with him because of the pandemic, so they had to resort to FaceTime instead. She used a filter to turn herself into her own co-star.

The sudden comprehensive shift to at-home, DIY performances has many wondering about the future of the industry. The question isn’t just when things return to normal, but if the norm changes. What will the porn industry, and porn itself, look like on the other side of a months-long shutdown? Speaking with over a dozen industry members, many near-term possibilities were floated: socially-distanced crew members, small hubs of performers who exclusively work together, and covid-19 screenings folded into industry-mandated STI tests. Several people raised the possibility of gang bangs temporarily disappearing, given the increased number of performer interactions. For some, though, this feels less a passing event requiring temporary accommodations and more like a historically catalyzing moment, with reverberations that will be felt for years.

“At the end of the day, this seems like a bigger inflection point than the last recession. It seems poised to change the industry as much as iPhones and tube sites did,” said Mike Stabile, spokesperson for the Free Speech Coalition (FSC), the adult industry’s trade association. “This is the porn equivalent of climate change.”

It’s undecided when the voluntary production hold, which was called for by FSC, will be loosened. Several directors anticipate a return this summer to traditional shoots, at least in some capacity. Director [Kayden Kross](#) of Deeper previously booked shoots for the end of May, but says, “It’s pretty clear that I’m losing those shoots. I’m hoping now for June.” Axel Braun, a director known for big-budget parodies at Wicked Pictures, says, “I don’t think it’s gonna happen until at least July.” It is clear that future shoots will look very different. Kross suspects that crews will be smaller and those behind the cameras may be wearing masks and making efforts to keep their distance. The nature of the content is likely to be different, too. “I tend to go for lots of bodies in my big projects,” she said. “In the wake of corona, that’s not a smart move.”



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LOS ANGELES—Kayden Kross is crouched on a stool, legs tightly crossed, leaning toward a pair of...

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Speculation abounds about the potential to fold in covid-19 screening to the industry's pre-existing system for bi-weekly STI testing. Talent Testing Service, one of the labs in the industry's network, [announced](#) it was beginning covid-19 testing last week. The FSC, however, [states](#) that covid-19 tests "are not yet effective for establishing safer sets," given that "the results could become invalid any time after the test." Stabile says that testing will be a "significant element of resuming production, but we need to determine what type of test and how often it would need to be administered." Given the virus's ease of transmission, he says, "we can't rely solely on testing, but need to establish a full roster of protocols."

By the time the production hold is lifted, some may not return at all. Braun suspects that people who work behind the scenes, like makeup artists, videographers, and production assistants, who don't have ready access to income through subscription platforms, may be forced to leave the business entirely. Smaller studios will struggle to stay afloat, according to Jacky St. James, a director for Bellesa Films and Mile High Media, since they need to provide "regular content to justify memberships to their sites," she explained. Without a backlog of content, they "might be in trouble." For the time being, bigger studios are managing alright, said St. James, but she suspects this may be the final nail in the coffin of DVD sales. Once on-set production returns, "some producers will likely be tighter on budgets," she says.

It may be that remote shoots will persist even after the production hold is lifted. Bree Mills, a director for Adult Time, says she won't entirely abandon the new styles of shooting that she's had to experiment with over the past weeks. Recently, she [shot an orgy via Zoom](#), and soon Mills plans to remotely shoot a feature with a pandemic plot using teleconferencing software. She's also developed a handful of live-streaming series and a network of performers who will conceive of and shoot their own projects. "I definitely don't see us just dropping all of this and going back," she said. "This is the start of a new way forward, not just for us but probably the adult industry in general."

Kross questions whether performers currently thriving on sites like OnlyFans will be motivated to return to studio productions. "I think this hold on traditional production has pushed some of the last holdouts into exploring the direct-to-consumer model of production," she said. "If they're successful with those models, we'll have an increasingly more difficult time making an attractive deal to get them to set." She added, "You realize long-term you're making more dollars per minute for this kind of content than for showing up for another production."

Additionally, short of a covid-19 vaccine, the cost-benefit analysis around on-set shoots seems dependent on the availability of reliable screening methods. "Performers, for good reason, are probably going to be much more selective about what physical sets they want to go on versus

generating their own income through their content platforms,” said Mills. “Going to set I have to [ask]: Is it gonna be worth it?”

Even projecting beyond concerns of covid-19 transmission, Stabile says the pandemic will have a lasting impact. He noted that subscription platforms, or “premiums,” have “really surged during the shutdown, and are going to remain a dominant player in the industry” going forward. OnlyFans, for example, saw a 75 percent increase in new sign-ups in March. This signifies a notable shift of power, argued Stabile. “Performers are going to have more control than they ever have,” he said. “This will be the most performer-controlled industry we’ve ever seen.” Recently, FSC hosted a webinar on camming and premiums, with experienced performers sharing their tips and tricks.

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Mark Spiegler, a long-time talent agent, said that “the power has [already] been shifting from studios to performers” and the pandemic “may hasten that a bit.” He added, satirically, “It’s the girls, *stupid*.”

IT’S THE GIRLS, STUPID

Charlotte Sartre, an established performer with a strong fanbase, lost three paid shoots immediately after the production hold, but says she promptly made up the missed paychecks through increased income on OnlyFans. “This is gonna be a big blow for studios, because I think performers who are shooting at home, and who have been shooting their own content for a while, the ball is truly in their court right now,” she said, noting that performers own self-produced content and “can continue to make money off of it for years to come.”

Her husband, long-time performer Lance Hart, runs the porn site ManUpFilms.com and an OnlyFans account, and has seen enough success in quarantine that he’s reconsidering his interest in traditional studio shoots down the line, especially as a Las Vegas-based performer. “Right now, I’m thinking, ‘Why would I drive to L.A., five hours, stay in a hotel, get up early, clean out my butt... to make \$700 to a \$1000, then drive all the way back, when I’m making more than that every day at home now?’”

Sartre and Hart, who have built-in fanbases and years of experience with both traditional shoots and OnlyFans, are not emblematic. “A lot of people that are starting out are living scene-to-scene—and then they have no scenes anymore,” Maitland Ward, a contract performer for Vixen, said of industry newcomers. “It’s going to take a while to nab a following.”

Recently, Ward posted a tweet to her 406,000 followers reading, “I’m going to be subscribing to 50 OnlyFans accounts and I will be RT’ing my purchases. The first 50 accounts that tag themselves below I will personally give you my support and repost your URL to all my

followers.” Ultimately, she promoted and subscribed to nearly 150 accounts. She’s also doing a weekly CamSoda show and donating the proceeds to FSC’s [Emergency Fund](#), which was created to help performers and crew during the shutdown. (This has been all the more essential due to [uncertainties](#) around adult industry members’ eligibility for federal aid, given the exclusion of work involving “prurient sexual interest.”)

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Cam, clips, and premium sites have seen an influx not only in viewers but also creators. Of the 3.7 million signups seen in March by OnlyFans, 60,000 were new creators. The clip site ManyVids has seen a 22 percent increase in live webcam performers, [according to](#) Forbes. The greater sex industry, beyond just porn, has gone online, leading to [Instagram Live strip clubs](#) and the “girlfriend experience” [via Skype](#). Social media influencers have [turned to](#) these online spaces (even Caroline Calloway [has an OnlyFans](#)) and now Beyoncé is [referencing](#) the site. At the same time, OnlyFans just announced that it is cutting referral bonuses, which is a significant income stream for creators, as Vice [reported](#). As power shifts to performers, the question is how these direct-to-consumer platforms will make a grab for it.

This all makes for greater competition within a realm of entertainment that is often underestimated. “People think that camming and sex work and adult performing is easy,” said Ward. “They’re like, ‘Oh, now that I’m home I’m just going to try to cam.’ It’s not easy.” St. James, who hasn’t had an income since late February, recently started an OnlyFans account and has found it to be all-consuming. “I am actively shooting, editing, updating constantly,” she said. “It’s every single day.”

The signal boost of studio productions might become all the more important amid increased competition. Braun says his parodies tend to get the kind of global exposure that can launch careers. “My educated guess is that I’ll be fine,” he said. Similarly, Jules Jordan, who runs an eponymous porn studio, argues that “most performers will continue to rely on the promotion, creativity, and distribution that large studios provide.” Performer Jessica Drake, who has an exclusive contract with Wicked Pictures and runs an OnlyFans account, points to those traditional distribution routes as helpful for performers who otherwise rely on social media platforms that are “notorious” for targeting sex workers with [censorship, shadow bans, and takedowns](#)—or, as she puts it, “erasing us altogether.”

On a different note, John Stagliano, owner of the porn studio Evil Angel, said, “The question now clearly is: What is the value that porn companies like mine can bring? I think it is better lighting, better direction, better editing, better overall filmmaking skills, and better equipment.” St. James emphasizes a point of more literal value: a traditional on-set shoot typically results in an immediate paycheck for a day of work—and, once the production hold lifts, “people are going to need immediate money.”

Performer Jiz Lee, editor of the essay collection *Coming Out Like a Porn Star: Essays on Pornography, Protection, and Privacy*, is concerned for newcomers currently flocking to subscription platforms. “While this influx has the potential to normalize adult labor, in the meantime, there’s still a lot of stigma around sex work that can negatively impact family relationships, housing, and access to other employment—whether now or later down the road,” said Lee. They pointed to books like *Thriving in Sex Work* by Lola Davina and *The Smart Girl’s*

Guide to Privacy by Violet Blue as important resources. “People in our industry have come together for years to provide support where our governments fail us,” said Lee. “I just hope new folks are able to find these resources available to them should they be needed.”

Kross believes the current performer influx will continue, pointing to economic need and the increasing social acceptability of porn. “If you look back through the generations, you can see waves of performers who came in for various reasons and the industry is affected by that,” said Kross, who started performing in 2007. She points to the talent boom following the mainstream successes of Jenna Jameson and Sasha Grey. “When adult has become particularly attractive, we get big waves, and I think it’s going to become particularly attractive,” she said.

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Porn, in particular, seems “particularly attractive” for viewers stuck at home. Adult sites have seen a rise in traffic as people retreat to their homes and computers. Pornhub reported a peak 24 percent global increase above average on March 25, although it coincided with an announcement that the site’s premium content would be free for 30 days. In late April, after the promotion lapsed, daily traffic ranged between 10 to 15 percent above average. It seems unlikely that increased viewer demand will go anywhere, even as shelter-in-place orders are loosened. “There’s a part of me that believes the adult industry is going to come out with not even a bruise,” said Kross. “This content is basically that thing that’s going to hold off all these people who aren’t able to have any other outlets.” It remains to be seen how historic unemployment rates will impact viewers’ willingness to pay for porn, particularly in the age of piracy-fueled tube sites.

Even beyond the current moment, Ward wonders about the pandemic’s longterm impact on our access to, and comfort with, the real-world intimacies that porn portrays. “People are getting so used to socially distancing,” she said. “Will we be so distanced from each other for a period of

time that porn will be the main way that they get sexual satisfaction?” It might be that the adult industry changes less than viewers’ relationships with it.

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