

# Tagging and Sexual Boundaries<sup>†</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate that the mechanisms of power around classifications of gender and sexuality are not always top-down or bottom-up. Instead, the weight of social discipline among members of sexual subcultures themselves helps to create these classifications, often reflecting the nomenclature of subjects and desires within sexual subcultures in a complex relationship to a dominant culture. Critically examining contemporary folksonomic classifications of representations of queer desire within Xtube, a database of online pornography, this paper reveals that social discipline occurs in the stabilization of nomenclature through socialization and through members' overt intervention into each others' self-understanding. The Xtube evidence reveals a complex social and cultural structure among members of sexual subcultures by drawing our attention to the particularity of various modes of sexual being and the relationship between those modes and particular configurations of sexual identity. In the process, this paper allows us to reassess, first, a presupposition of folksonomies as free of discipline allowing for their emancipatory potential and, second, the prevailing binary understandings of authority in the development of sexual nomenclatures and classifications as either top-down or bottom-up.

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Tagging practices within Xtube (and similar sites) serve as a benchmark in studying the development of sexual nomenclatures because they reveal how members of the subculture view themselves, how they view others, and how members of the larger community view them. With more than nine million 'members,' Xtube (n.d.) claims to be "the first adult website to allow members to upload their own homemade photos and videos."<sup>1</sup> It is effectively YouTube for pornography, but with far more social networking design elements, including live camera exhibitionism be-

tween members, a dating portal, a wiki, blogs, groups, forums, quizzes, and polls, to name a few. It also allows members to view each others' profiles, to follow a particular member's images and videos, and to follow which images and videos a particular member likes. Because pornography is representational, it enables us to study societal gender and sexuality. Pornography is, according to Laura Kipnis (1999, 161), "intensely and relentlessly *about* us. It involves the roots of our culture and the deepest corners of the self." As such, the tagging that surrounds pornogra-

phy enables us to study societal gender and sexual nomenclature and social organization.

As I show in a previous essay (Keilty 2009), Xtube attempts to provide a near instantaneous mass mediation and dissemination of sexual representation. One might argue that this wealth of images offers an emancipatory scenario whereby subjects can project their virtual selves into a seemingly endless variety of environments and to embody an infinite number of freely chosen subject positions, roles, and desires. In doing so, we may think Xtube allows for an exploration of the self and one's identity in relation to others (indeed, reliant on others as viewers), or, in other words, an exploration of various stylistics of the self.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in my analysis of the eroticization of hierarchical knowledge structures, I find (Keilty 2009, 246):

Xtube's classification functions to guide, if not overtly discipline, subjects—both the subjects of the images and the viewer as subject. It is evidence of an environment in which desires and subject positions are produced as essential standards through a discourse of hierarchical categorization and classification. Images on Xtube are available to the viewer only through the negotiation of a coarse and elaborate typology in which subject positions are fixed and defined in relation to each other.

Some of these "categories" (Xtube's own language) are authoritative or prescriptive, developed by Xtube's administrators. Xtube requires viewers to select between one and three categories from among more than thirty prescriptive categories to describe an image or video when uploading it to the website. Some of these prescriptive categories include *Amateur*, *Anal*, *Asian*, *BDSM*, *Bisexual*, *Bush*, *Ebony*, *Fetish*, *Fursuits*, *Groupsex*, *Hardcore*, *Interracial*, *Jerkoff*, *Latina*, *Lesbian*, *Mature*, *MILF*, *News*, *Softcore*, *Swingers*, *Teens*, *Toys*, and *Voyeur*. Xtube also requires that members choose whether the video is *gay* or *straight*, and whether the subject of the video is *Single Man*, *Single Woman*, *Man and Man*, *Men and Women*, *Women and Women*, or *Transsexuals*. These are members' only choices, and they probably say more about Xtube's administrators than they do about a dominant culture.<sup>3</sup> Members can also add a title, description, and tags, which Xtube does not predetermine. As a result of these various categorical configurations, members can perform faceted searches that mix and match any of the various categories and tags. Members can search multiple categories and tags or a single cate-

gory or tag simultaneously, all of which has been hyperlinked. Keyword searches include titles and descriptions, which have not been hyperlinked.

A member's "exploration" within Xtube is always already constrained by a logic of recognizable cues that are regularized, disciplined, and stabilized according to received forms of sex and desire. Tagging occurs in relation to Xtube's prescriptive categories. As such, members' gender and sexual orientation is always named, regulated, and stabilized in advance, along a coarse axis of registers. Because the identity of one's gender and sexual being belongs within discernable boundaries, one might perceive that gender and sexuality are stable, regardless of whether one's feelings transgress these boundaries.

However constrained by Xtube's prescriptive categories, it is by tagging that members have some opportunity to role-play within the 'scene of constraint.' As one might imagine, the tags reveal a highly developed and varied nomenclature and social organization, yet they are not purely particularistic and idiosyncratic. It is regulated by the social conventions of language and ideology. As such, members develop these folk taxonomies in fundamentally communal ways. Indeed, it is important to bear in mind that the purpose of these tags is to name and structure one's gender and sexual being within a broader social network. The practice of tagging one's homemade images and videos primarily occurs so that members enable others to access their representations, for the purpose of sexual arousal. In this way, members' perception, nomenclature, and identity of their own gender and sexuality are intimately tied to each other. That is, the 'power to tag' offers queer individuals a means for describing and structuring feelings of difference into coherent identities and particular social forms, and to relate those forms and identities to the way other people view them, to the way they view other people, and to the way other people view themselves, collapsing the distinction between exhibitionist and voyeur.

Participating within this social network also means that members of Xtube regulate each other's tags and, therefore, social organization. As we have seen, tagging patterns stabilize over time as the number of members increase. While this serves the strictly practical purpose of mostly effective image and video retrieval, it also functions to stabilize the nomenclature used by members to structure their own gender and sexuality in order to participate in Xtube's social relations. Members necessarily have to tag their images and videos in a way that allows for its retrieval by other members. To rely on purely idiosyncratic and

particularistic nomenclature (i.e., either truly unique tags or complete mumbo jumbo) is to remove oneself from these social relations. Hence members structure their own gender and sexuality in a way that is accessible for others and allows for social engagement. In this way, a form of horizontal discipline occurs through the stabilization(s) of these categories. Social relations within Xtube require a common nomenclature that is regularized over time. This is not to say that nomenclature doesn't change over time, but that such a change occurs communally. Thus, however free one is to role-play within these categories, members necessarily structure their feelings of difference and self-understanding into stable, coherent, and discernable social forms.

Overt intervention within queer subcultures especially seems to occur within fetishistic subcultures that are subsumed under a broader queer subculture, such as BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, and Masochism). Websites serving the BDSM communities include *collarme.com*, *bds.com*, and *recon.com*, which claims to be the "the world's largest hookup site for men into fetish gear" (Recon n.d.). Within the subcultures that these sites serve, one's identity as *dominant* or *submissive*, *top* or *bottom*, *master* or *slave* is profoundly important to the social relations within that community. Members of these groups find sexual pleasure in the way these categories are explicitly stable, autonomous, hierarchical, antithetical, and even essential. These categories not only indicate social organization and self-understanding, members also sometimes express them as constitutive of one's destiny and 'true nature.' Because these categories so profoundly define the subculture and the people within it, members of this subculture have a high level of investment in debating the boundaries and meanings of these categories.

At times, intervening to create a common nomenclature runs up against disagreements about the exact meaning of a particular identity category. Most of the overt intervention into each other's self-understanding and nomenclature occurs within the discussion section of Xtube's wiki, but such intervention also occurs within the comments sections of images and videos. In one noteworthy instance of disagreement, when a member tagged his video *boi*, several members debated the meaning of the term. Some members understood the term to mean, as Judith Halberstam (2006, 114) does, a "boyish gay man." Xtube's wiki page, which is edited by members, defines *boi* as any effeminate, submissive gay boy who wishes to distinguish himself from heterosexual boys, and who at-

tempts to be alluring and seductive.<sup>4</sup> Others insisted that the term refers to female-male transgender people. Still others felt it was any submissive man who preferred the receptive role in sex. Ultimately, in this case, members appear to agree to disagree about the meaning of the term "boi," which refuses to consolidate to a particular identity category. One might assume that this lack of consolidation leads to ineffectual retrieval, as a search for "boi" may result in an image that doesn't match what one had in mind. Yet in agreeing to disagree, members seem to accept that the word has multiple meanings and retrieves a variety of results. My point here is not whether overt intervention always leads to single consolidation or whether tags, if consolidated, lead to effective retrieval. Overt intervention doesn't always lead to consolidation, and tags are never purely effective because language is not transparent. My point is only that these terms are deeply personal and social, such a part of one's identity in relation to others that one feels the need to intervene into others' self-understanding when confronted with difference. In doing so, a disagreement about the boundaries of the term leads to multiple consolidations of regulations and re-regulations that likely change over time.<sup>5</sup>

Tagging on Xtube draws our attention to a complex social and cultural structure of particular and various modes of sexual being and the relationship between those modes and particular configurations of sexual identity. Xtube's algorithm allows us to search keywords that not only retrieve images and videos tagged with that word, but also indicates, on the right-hand side of the screen, all of the tags related to that keyword. The algorithm calculates relativity based on how often different tags appear together when members tag their images and videos. Xtube calls these tags "related tags." In a search for *BDSM*, the ten most related tags include *slut*, *big*, *amateur*, *tits*, *wax*, *party*, *cock*, *candle*, *balls*, and *outdoor*. In a search for *bears* (the name for a subculture within a broader gay subculture that usually consists of heavy-set men with hairy bodies), the ten most related tags are *gay*, *daddy*, *daddies*, *hairy*, *mature*, *man*, *old*, *older*, *silver*, and *hirsute*. For *bareback* (a term to describe sexual penetration between two men without the use of a condom), the ten most prominent related tags include *cum*, *hardcore*, *anal*, *ebony*, *facial*, *muscle*, *black*, *jerkoff*, *chubby*, and *ass*. In a search for *domination*, related tags include *Asian*, *Thai*, *Japanese*, *worship*, *control*, *humiliation*, *black*, *pussy*, *BDSM*, and *transsexual*.

While Xtube often lacks a controlled vocabulary for organizing queer subjects and desires, these tags

reveal an abundance of language among members of Xtube's queer sexual subculture, which develop out of socio-citational relations. Each tag points to a number of tagging clusters that represents a particular fetishistic subculture, and tags can belong to a wide variety of tagging clusters. These arrangements effectively represent an index or diagram of the social structure and network in which various representations of gender and sexuality occur. The relationship between some of these tags probably seems, if not natural, at least familiar: among many gay men, *hairy* is a characteristic of *bear*. Other tags, however, create unexpected associations and wondrous juxtapositions, such as the relation between the national identity *Japanese* and *worship*, without the adjectival modification common to a syntactical relationship, resulting in some ambiguity as to the precise way in which these words interact to represent a social relation. Furthermore, these tags, to some extent, allow for a corrective or supplement to Xtube's prescriptive categories. Whereas the prescriptive category *transsexual* is too narrow and too specific a term for describing other transgender ways of being, members often take it upon themselves to supplement that prescriptive category with tags such as *transgender*, *transvestite*, *bisexual*, *crossdresser*, *femdom*, *dominatrix*, *woman*, *man*, and *queer*—tags that seek to refine, counteract, or complicate Xtube's prescriptive category and articulate a different social form.

Many of these tags also reveal the way in which queer subcultures continue to reconstitute the nomenclature of the dominant culture, for better or worse. Consider, for example, the use of troublingly sexist words, such as *slut*, *bitch*, and *pussy*, as they appear in relation to other tags, such as *humiliation*, *BDSM*, and *dominance*. These words, often pejoratives for women within the dominant culture, seem particularly unexpected in describing representations of sex between men. Perhaps, like the word *fag* or *queer*, they function as a reclaiming of offensive terminology. More likely, however, these categories of sexual being reveal that a highly gendered dynamic of power relations exists within the sexual relations between men. As such, queer social organization and self-understanding are deeply embedded in that of the larger culture by reproducing social forms of gendered heterosexuality and sexism.

As I have shown, tagging within Xtube reveals a highly developed and varied queer subculture that serves to structure social relations and self-understanding. These tags also indicate a form of horizontal discipline, either when members of Xtube

overtly intervene into the self-understanding of other members, or when nomenclature necessary for effective retrieval and social engagement stabilizes over time as socialization occurs and social conventions develop. Finally, these social relations always occur within and against a dominant culture. We see this in the way queer subcultures sometimes reproduce social forms of gendered heterosexuality, but also in the way queer subcultural nomenclatures develop as a way to role-play within the constraints of prescriptive boundaries of gender and sexuality.

The Xtube evidence reveals the ways in which mechanisms of power around classifications of gender and sexuality are not always top-down or bottom-up. Instead, the weight of social discipline among members of sexual subcultures themselves helps to create these classifications, always in a complex relationship with the dominant culture. The complex cultural and social structures of members of these sexual subcultures reveal the particularity of various modes of sexual being and the relationship between those modes and particular configurations of sexual identity. Nevertheless, members of sexual subcultures do not name and organize their particular modes of sexual being in entirely idiosyncratic ways, free of culture and discipline. Instead, folksonomies develop within the conventions of a particular language and in relation to broader cultural ideology. Folksonomies offer an emancipatory potential against authoritative or prescribed notions of gender and sexuality, but such potential always occurs within a scene of constraint.

Further research should examine the specific development of various sexual nomenclatures within specific information institutions at various points in history. Such a project will help us continually refine our understandings of the relationship between power, authority, and identity. It will also enable us to develop concepts in relation to existing theories, rather than merely 'applying' or adapting concepts from other disciplines. The Xtube evidence indicates that we need to begin paying more attention to other social forms of sexual and gender non-conformity—other ways in which gender and sexual relations have been organized and understood, differentiated, named, and left deliberately unnamed. We need to specify the particularity of those modes of sexual being and the relationship between those modes and configurations of sexual identity as they develop within and against a dominant culture. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we need to understand how organizing and structuring feelings of difference, as part of the 'power to name,' helps people resist social op-

probrum and gives them strength to publically defy social convention. This paper provides a remarkable illustration of the extent to which gender and sexual boundaries are culturally constructed, and it reminds us that struggles over the demarcation of those boundaries are a central aspect in the study of gender and sexual knowledge organization.

## Notes

1. The quote comes from Xtube's wiki, <http://wiki.xtube.com/index.php?title=XTube&action=purge>. The figure for the number of 'members' comes from Xtube's homepage, <http://www.xtube.com/>. Both retrieved April 17, 2012.
2. I elaborate further on this point in my essay "Tabulating Queer" (2009, 246).
3. The relation between a dominant culture and Xtube's administrators may confuse some readers. By way of clarification, let me explain that the prescriptive categories of Xtube's administrators certainly participate in a dominant Western culture, but always in a complicated way. At times, Xtube's prescriptive categories reflect the dominant heteronormative organizations and narratives of sex, sexual relations, and desire recognizable to a U.S. or Canadian audience. At other times, Xtube's categories name fetishes or subcultural sexual communities that a dominant culture finds taboo. As a result, some readers may question where power is being exercised. In this essay, I mostly focus on vertical power that stems from a dominant culture, but vertical power also comes from Xtube's administrators, which I discussed in a pre-

vious essay (2009). Vertical power, as I have said, occurs simultaneously with horizontal power, which occurs between members of a subculture. I hope I have avoided any slippage between Xtube and a dominant culture in this essay.

4. Retrieved April 21, 2012 from <http://wiki.xtube.com/index.php?title=Boi&action=purge>
5. I am aware that "super tagging" or "tag bombing" is another common form of overt intervention within online tagging. I didn't see much of it on Xtube, so it doesn't make its way into this essay. Future research might examine how "super tagging" or "tag bombing" functions as a form of social discipline and regulation.

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