“EMPOWERED EROTICA”?

OBJECTIFICATION AND SUBJECTIVITY

IN THE ONLINE PERSONAL JOURNALS

OF THE SUICIDE GIRLS

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Abstract

SuicideGirls.com, an “alternative” softcore pornographic website, claims it presents “empowered erotica”. It claims that it provides a voice for its models through the establishment of personal online journals alongside the photosets of the models. In so doing, the website presents an apparently contradictory juxtaposition between two common forms of representation of the female; the objectified female body and the subjective female psyche. This thesis textually analyses selections from the personal online journals of the SuicideGirls.com models in order to examine how the resulting tensions between the apparently binarily opposed categories of female object and female subject are negotiated on the website.

In particular, this thesis concentrates on SuicideGirls.com’s attempts to situate itself as representing “alternative” youth subcultural groups, such as punk and goth, and examines its actual business practices as compared to its feminist rhetoric. This thesis argues that SuicideGirls.com does not provide “empowered erotica” and a genuine attempt to combat the narrow mainstream aesthetic of the beautiful female through its “alternative”, “anti-mainstream” stance. Instead, it finds that SuicideGirls.com commodifies the image of the female body, standardises “alternative” style as a “lifestyle brand” and writes its models as commercial objects of desire, all while it hypocritically claims “alternative” empowerment.
Chapter One: Introduction and Critical Literature Review

1. SuicideGirls.com: A Brief Description

Established in 2001, the erotic website SuicideGirls.com has achieved a reputation as a centre for youth subcultural cool on the world wide web. Its business centres around the marketing and sale of access to pornographic imagery, yet it is often perceived by models and members as “empowered erotica”, based on a claim of “giving the models a voice” in the site.

SuicideGirls.com markets itself as different, hip and edgy and features female models with body modifications and a visually “alternative” subcultural style: “Pin-Up Punk Rock and Goth Girls” (Sascha 2; title bar, SuicideGirls.com). Whereas the site’s founders originally had to advertise for models, they now report receiving “close to 200 applications a week” from women who want to be Suicide Girls (“Help”). There are, as of May 2005, over 600 models featured on the site. Statistics on site members and casual visitors are obtainable only from the reports of site administrators or from observation of activity on the site, but both attest to the popularity of SuicideGirls.com. The “Model” section of the site promises that the online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com models will “reach millions of people”. A March 2005 review by Nicole Cohen of the SuicideGirls book states that “Missy claims it [the site] gets 500,000 visits weekly” (36). A 2003 article by Sascha directly quotes text from the contemporary version of the site which includes mention of “200,000 visitors a week” (5). The site’s message board forums are popular, updated every minute with comments, questions and arguments put
forward by members from around the globe, a non-quantitative corroboration of the site’s popularity.

SuicideGirls.com is a legitimate business, with established business processes and its own jargon to describe components and practices of the site. All models with photosets published on the site must be legally old enough for pornographic modeling in their home state or country. Women who have been accepted to the site but are yet to have a photoset published are known as “Limbo Girls”; this has included several seventeen-year-olds who had photosets published once they had attained their majority. Models who are no longer employed by SuicideGirls.com (whether under their own recognizance or that of the site) are known as “archive girls”; their photosets are archived on the site while their online personal journals are no longer available for viewing by members. Suicide Girls are paid $300US on the acceptance of every photoset for publication, and receive the additional perks of “the coveted pink SG panties, stickers and other goodies from the shop” (“Model”). Depending on the location of the model, the photographs can be taken by one of eight official SuicideGirls.com photographers, five of whom are themselves Suicide Girls, or can be taken by other, non-affiliated, photographers. Photosets are then submitted electronically to the site, where they await either rejection or acceptance; not every photoset is deemed worthy of inclusion in the site’s files. Since the photographers need not be necessarily affiliated with SuicideGirls.com and the submission process is electronic, the models can potentially be located anywhere in the world with an internet connection. In fact, although a large proportion are from Los Angeles or Portland, Oregon, where the site’s two offices are located, SuicideGirls.com features models from every major US and Canadian city, and from “as far away as Italy, Japan, Israel and Canada” (SuicideGirls 11). Site members are likewise cosmopolitan; member journals report members located in almost every country of the world.
The international youth subcultural appeal of the site appears to be rooted in a perception of the site as “empowered erotica”, a perception the official rhetoric of the site endorses. The positive reaction to the site relies heavily on the multi-functional nature of the website, which is a community gathering point, and a news and information disseminator as well as a pornography business. SuicideGirls.com includes a message board, on which members may post messages and discuss things of interest. It features regularly uploaded news reports and a large and well-regarded body of interviews with actors, writers, musicians and youth subcultural celebrities. Several of those interviewed directly praise the site and its self-proclaimed aim of promoting “alternative” and “unique” female beauty, including writers Neil Gaiman and Chuck Palahniuk and actress Selma Blair. The site also includes a gift shop, where SuicideGirls.com merchandise can be purchased and sent anywhere in the world.

The community of SuicideGirls.com is surely an imagined community. However, as Benedict Anderson argues, the mere fact that a community is created and self-manufactured does not mean it is a false community. Rather, he declares, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (Imagined Communities, 15). The style of SuicideGirls.com’s imagined community is produced by the ways the site negotiates conventional distinctions between art/pornography, mainstream/alternative, commerce/culture, voice/silence and subject/object. These binary oppositions, and the methods by which the Suicide Girls both deny and confirm them, are most immediately apparent in the juxtaposition of nude photosets of the models beside their personal online journals.

The site’s popularity and commercial success centres around the models and their presentation as textual personalities as well as visual images. Site creator Missy explains the intended purpose of the website’s creation in the recent SuicideGirls book:
These girls, I thought, could be the new Pin-Up girls, each with their own ferociously unique style and outlook. But that was the thing, I might be able to capture their style and look with my camera, but the girls were so much more than just their image. So I decided I would create a website for the images, and give each of the girls I photographed a space to write, rant, scream, explain, whatever. I would give them a voice on the website, and let them create the site with me, set the tone and share their unique attitude with me. *(Suicide Girls 10-11)*

The “voice” given to the individual models is especially apparent in their personal online journals, placed alongside the photosets of each model. The popularity of the journals is touted as one of the perks of being a Suicide Girl: “Your journal will reach millions of people, and you’re free to advertise your projects, events or art” (“Model”). Models can update their journals regularly, upload pictures to them, and leave comments on their own and others’ journals. SuicideGirls.com, like most internet commercial pornography vendors, sells membership’, which allows full viewing access to the erotic photosets, rather than selling ownership of physical pornographic materials, as does a traditional pornography vendor. A SuicideGirls.com fan does not have to be a member to view most journal entries, but must be a member in order to comment on those entries. Site members are also able to maintain journals, but these are differentiated from those of the Suicide Girls by their grey background, whereas the journals of Suicide Girls are pink, and thus visibly marked off as representative of the site. Site members and Suicide Girls often fend off hypothetical and actual charges of sexism and objectification by claiming that the personal online journals of the models provide evidence of their subjectivity, and thus negate the object status one might otherwise be tempted to apply to the naked women in the photosets.
Both personal journals and pornography can be considered forms of presentation of the self. Personal journals are traditionally imagined as focusing on the individual’s personality, agency and subjectivity, while pornography is often criticised as denying the individual subject by presenting participants solely as sexualised objects. They also are both traditionally feminine forms of self-representation, and have attracted substantial attention from feminist theorists. SuicideGirls.com thus presents an intriguing interaction between binarily opposed categories of object and subject where the traditionally objectifying imagery of pin-up photography is juxtaposed with the online personal journals of the models, which traditionally examine the subjectivity of the writer. This thesis seeks to explore the apparent contradiction between these two forms of representation, and so to examine how the resulting tensions are negotiated, denied and confirmed in the personal online journals of the SuicideGirls.com models, defining the discourses and creating the style of their imagined community.

2. Pornography, Erotica and Art: Life-writing and Literature

Some debate exists on the site itself about whether Suicide Girls is “pornography”, “erotica”, “pin-up”, or “art”. The site’s administrators disdain the term pornography, preferring to call SuicideGirls “empowered erotica” (Sascha 2). They claim that because the images presented on the site do not include penetration of the vagina and because men do not pose with the female models, the photographs and videos are not actually pornographic.

The urge to distinguish between “pornography” and “erotica” is commonplace among critics of sexually explicit material. In her article “Pornography and Rape, a Causal Model”, Diana E. H. Russell claims that “most anti-pornography feminists
consider it vitally important to distinguish between pornography and erotica," saying that "[w]hile condemning pornography, most of us approve of, or even advocate erotica." She writes:

Hence, I define pornography as material that combines sex and/or the
exposure of genitals with abuse or degradation in a manner that appears to
endorse, condone, or encourage such behavior.

Erotica refers to sexually suggestive or arousing material that is free of
sexism, racism, and homophobia and is respectful of all human beings and
animals portrayed." (Pornography and Feminism, 48, author’s italics)

However, this definition, like most definitions that seek to distinguish between
pornography and erotica, is impractically vague in practice, because it relies on
subjective judgement of what is “abuse” or “degradation”. The most obvious example of
this impractical imprecision is pornographic material featuring
Bondage/Domination/Sadism/Masochism, usually abbreviated to BDSM. Pornography
featuring BDSM often includes pain and/or degradation play during sex. This is
consensual pain, and consensual degradation, and advocated as a very positive experience
by those individuals involved, but Russell’s definition of “pornography” would include
and thus condemn all BDSM sexual material.

Andrea Dworkin, prominent anti-porn feminist, argues that in the male-dominated
sex industry, any discrimination between “pornography” and “erotica” rests on a false
distinction: “In the male sexual lexicon, which is the vocabulary of power, erotica is
simply high-class pornography. . . . In the male system, erotica is a subcategory of
pornography” (Pornography Preface). Dworkin’s thesis that all pornography is abuse,
usually perpetuated by men against women, is much criticised. Yet, while not necessarily
accepting Dworkin’s conclusions of the intrinsically oppressive nature of pornography, I
agree that there appears nothing to be gained from trying to distinguish between “good” erotica and “bad” pornography. As Russell herself wryly points out, “Many people have commented on the difficulty of defining pornography and erotica, declaring that ‘one person’s erotica is another person’s pornography’” (53). SuicideGirls.com displays sexual material. It creates and sells images that are designed to arouse sexual desire. This portion of the site’s content, regardless of what the site administrators and members claim, will be considered pornographic.

However, not all the models on the site would agree. Some of the journals of SuicideGirls.com endorse the distinction between erotica and pornography. Charlotte is a veteran Suicide Girl with five photo sets on the site.¹ On 20 March 2004, she writes:

I am too tired for my own good. I wish that I could do a new set, but trust me, it's better I be absent right now.

I actually got ill thinking about my pictures here on SG, the breast photo's [sic] I can deal with, but full nude, that is not in my character... or maybe it was at one point, I would just feel so much better knowing my flesh wasn't exposed on this website!² Or any website. Should have kept the panties on. Is there a way to remove the full nudes? I mean, they are not even tasteful, but not exactly porn either... right? Forgive me if I can't spell [blush emoticon].”³

This journal entry receives seven comments from site members. Most of the respondents do not answer the plaintive “but not exactly porn either... right?” directly, but instead praise the artistic nature of the pictures, writing, for example, that they are “lovely and not the least bit distasteful” (n2ocowboy) or that all of the “photos on this site are beautiful, incredibly artistic, and sexy in a way that makes sexy distinguished” (BeckaDarling). These responses perhaps indicate the notion that pornography can be “lovely”, “artistic” and “distinguished”, without being any less pornographic. However, one respondent,
anarchick, soon to become a Suicide Girl herself, writes: "I feared of feeling the same kind of remorse if I become a suicide girl, but it was you and you alone that changed my view on the whole website and encouraged me to apply... Don't worry yourself over what is done, we all see you using photography as an artform. Your sets aren't sleazy enough to be pornography." By condemning pornography as "sleazy" and distinguishing it from the "artform" of Charlotte's photosets, this response exemplifies the "what I like is erotica" mindset found within some of the online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com. While this distinction ultimately may be unsustainable, it is an important factor in the discourse of several of the Suicide Girls' journals.

In contrast, the journal of Tina Butcher, Suicide Girl and founder and artistic director of the art gallery Femina Potens, argues that art and pornography are not mutually exclusive. In her SuicideGirls.com personal journal, she describes SuicideGirls.com as a site where an "intervention between the worlds of art vs porn are [sic] able to be made" (17 June 2004). She refers to a recent photoset titled "Soil" which shows Butcher entering an art gallery, where she strips, climbs on to a pedestal, smears herself with mud, and extracts and unrolls a small paper scroll from her vagina (in keeping with SuicideGirls.com policy, the scroll extraction is implied, not explicit). The photoset, she explains, is in homage to Carolee Schneeman's 1975 performance piece, "Interior Scroll". Tina describes the photoset as "an art piece, performance piece, done in a gallery setting and then intervening into a setting where nudity is sexualized."

The photoset itself is open to a variety of readings. Tina's distinction between the world of "art" and that of "porn" is significant; female nudity in the former is often defended as good/artistic' and in the other deplored as bad/dirty. Yet feminist art theorists have established a strong argument that traditional art both reflects and endorses a masculine view of the world where "the gaze is male whenever it directs itself at, and
takes pleasure in, women, where women feature as erotic objects” (Devereaux, 381). By stripping in the white-walled sterility of the art gallery and climbing on to a pedestal as a living, breathing female nude, and by displaying photographs of the performance in the context of a pornographic website, Butcher challenges the assumption that art, by virtue of some ill-defined aesthetic purity, is immune from charges of objectification. She argues for an “intervention” (perhaps better described as an interaction) between the conventional distinction between “good” art and “bad” pornography. Unlike Charlotte, who is relieved to be reassured that the nude photographs of herself are “an artform” and thus “not sleazy enough to be pornography”, in “Soil”, Tina Butcher seeks to fuse the two concepts. Moreover, she attempts to place herself as subject, not object, in the photoset. She attempts to establish this subject position by her own agency in making herself into a statue, and by representing the vagina as a source of language, not as a mute vessel for the reception of male power.

However, it is Tina’s personal online journal that ideologically contextualises this photoset. Without this explanation, it is entirely possible to miss the piece’s intended effect as “a comment on audience and context as well as the many roots of feminine power, empowerment, and influence” (Tina, 17 June 2004). Without the journal, the photoset can be easily read as “a girl getting dirty”, taking Butcher’s smearing of herself with soil as a degradation of the female for the pleasure of the male gaze. This reading might still be possible even when the Tina journal is juxtaposed with the “Soil” photoset, but is actively resisted by Butcher’s exposition.

On her gallery website, Butcher reveals that one of her own role models is self-described “Post-Porn Modernist” Annie Sprinkle (Interview with Annie Sprinkle, Femina Potens Website). This choice is significant, both as context for Butcher’s own work on SuicideGirls.com and because Sprinkle is considered one of the most prominent sex-
positive feminists. Sprinkle has had a long and varied career in the sex industry as a prostitute, pornography actress, writer and director, stripper, sex educator, sexologist (she has a Ph.D. in Human Sexuality) and performance artist. Sprinkle’s performance pieces have included pornographic staples such as nudity and masturbation. However, Sprinkle consciously asserts her position as subject by juxtaposing her explicitly sexual performances with frank commentary demonstrating her agency and control of her own sexuality. In “Public Cervix Announcement”, she exposed her cervix to audience members with the help of a speculum and a flashlight, partially in order to demonstrate that “neither the vagina nor the cervix contains any teeth” (“pca”, www.anniesprinkle.org). She cheerfully debunks the myth of the vagina dentata, while at the same time she ironically presents the pornographic “gape shot”. Sprinkle’s deliberate challenge to the assumed boundaries between performance, education, pornography and self-presentation as both object and subject provides possibly the closest antecedent to the SuicideGirls.com model of subjectified objectivity. However, what Sprinkle attempts to achieve by commentary during performance, both live and recorded, the SuicideGirls.com models attempt to achieve through the record of their journals and the juxtaposition of journals with pornographic photosets.

The contextualisation of pornographic imagery provided by Tina Butcher’s journal is only one example of such a challenge to traditional distinctions between pornography, erotica, and art. SuicideGirls.com fans frequently assert that the existence of the models’ online personal journals alongside the site’s photosets justifies their championship of the site as “empowered erotica”. In the SuicideGirls.com “Feminism” discussion forum, models and members argue whether SuicideGirls.com should be classed as “porn”, “erotica” or “pin-up”, but all concur that the journals somehow make a difference to such classifications. Member arachne writes, “i do think the difference
between sg and other soft-core porn is that sgs have brains and personalities that they show through journals, posts, etc" ("how does sg make you feel?" discussion thread, 1). Member topaz agrees that "the humanity and personalization of these girls helps a lot" ("how does sg make you feel?" discussion thread, 1).

It is clear, however, that while the photosets are held to a certain standard of aesthetic presentation, the same is not required of the online personal journals of the models. Some of the standards of acceptability in photosets are articulated on the site, such as the rule forbidding representation of vaginal penetration, and some remain considerably vaguer. The most apparent of these unwritten standards is the site’s adherence, despite the rhetoric of "alternative" beauty, to Western ideal standards of body shape: slenderness; evenness of feature; and a body following Western standards of ideal proportion. However, while Tina feels comfortable claiming the status of "art" for her "Soil" photoset, she does not claim the same status for her online personal journal.

The casual immediacy of most SuicideGirls.com journals is common to online life-writing in general, which is often informal in tone and written with little deference to grammatical or spelling conventions. Online journals or weblogs (also known as "blogs") have historical antecedents in the personal diary and journal. However, whereas the traditional personal journal is usually private, the online personal journal is usually public, at least in part, or to a select group of readers. The often casual tone and informal syntax of online personal journals can be traced to the informal nature of most traditional journals, few of which are ever conventionally published. Therefore, although online personal journals are often written with the awareness of an audience, they are not necessarily written for that audience. Neither do the readers of such journals usually constitute a critical audience. Few readers and fewer writers of online personal journals
hold these writings to the critical standards they might expect to find in conventionally published life-writing.

The life-writings of some of the Suicide Girls actually have been conventionally published in the glossy, coffee-table-book-esque *SuicideGirls*. In her review of the book, Nicole Cohen dismisses SuicideGirls.com’s feminist rhetoric thus: “As for claims of being empowered erotica—the girls have full control over the way they’re photographed and represented—SuicideGirls leaves much to be desired in terms of a meaningful message. The second half of the book, featuring self-portraits of the ‘girls’ and testimonials pulled straight from their online diaries, is a reminder of why weblogs aren’t meant to be published: most of the Girls have nothing to say” (36). Cohen’s dismissal of the journal entries specifically condemns the Suicide Girls’ entries as failed attempts at art. By claiming that the Suicide Girls “leave much to be desired in terms of a meaningful message” and that most of them have “nothing to say”, Cohen obviously expects that the Suicide Girls should have striven for more “meaningful” content in their testimonials and journal extracts if they had meant to be taken seriously as artists of “empowered erotica”. However, the real offence against her artistic standards is in the conventional publication of those extracts. Cohen states that “weblogs aren’t meant to be published”, implying that the conventional publication of the extracts claims an aesthetic status for the journal entries which she believes they do not deserve. If, however, weblogs are unlike literature, which is “meant to be published”, then in their natural habitat, the online personal journals of the SuicideGirls need not meet the standards she expects of conventionally published written works.

Neither arachne nor topaz articulates exactly how the personal online journals of models effect a different perspective on the pornographic works of the photosets, and neither mentions journals-as-literature as a complement to photosets-as-art. Rather, their
mention of “personality” and “personalization” indicate that this difference in perspective might be facilitated by a heightened awareness of the models as “real” persons. For the most part, the personal online journals of SuicideGirls.com do not seek to meet aesthetic standards of literary art, and this lack of “art” can also be read as a lack of artificiality. Therefore, it could be posited that the often informal, frequently misspelled and grammatically inaccurate journal entries of SuicideGirls.com can communicate, by their very informality, a sense of immediacy of a position closer to the self behind their subjects. While all entries are written, few appear to be composed or edited in a process akin to the more formal production of conventionally published literature. This lack of artifice may be read as a more genuine method of “personalization” and a gesture toward authenticity; so a more effective strategy of presenting the Suicide Girls as subjects.

3. Names, Subjects, Objects, Stereotypes and Types

One of the arguments used to condemn all pornographic texts, and some “artistic” texts, is that pornography situates women as vulnerable to the male gaze, so that women are constructed not as sexual agents, but as sexual objects. This theory argues that in so doing, the viewer is encouraged to objectify women, even outside their pornographic viewing experience. Thus some feminists, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon at their forefront, argue that men who view pornography are conditioned to treat women as objects.

Dworkin argues that “male supremacy depends on the ability of men to view women as sexual objects” and that “the primary target of objectification is the woman” (113). Claiming that women’s bodies become objects in pornography, she argues that “the idea that pornography is ‘dirty’ originates in the conviction that the sexuality of women is
dirty and is actually portrayed in pornography; that women’s bodies (especially women’s genitals) are dirty and lewd in themselves.” (201). In Dworkin’s view, pornography does not merely depict degrading acts, but is itself degrading. To Dworkin, the depiction of coercion in pornography is coercion, not the acting out and presentation of a coercion fantasy.

The choice of the name “SuicideGirls.com” for an “alternative” pornographic website that claims to empower women deserves attention. Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones have argued that “Name is constituted by things”, using examples from Renaissance European texts to establish that the names of the time were deeply implicated in objects, both real and imagined (115). This notion of name being “constituted by things” is at least as powerful today as it was in the Renaissance. Nor is the process one-way: in an era where marketing companies endlessly agonise over the best names for things as a branding method, things are also constituted by name.

Site creator and maintainer Missy claims that the “Suicide” in the “SuicideGirls.com” name refers to the notion of “killing” the part of yourself attached to mainstream culture. She explains the origin of the name as: “our hipster slang cribbed from the pages of a Chuck Palahniuk novel [Survivor] for the post-punk girls that haunted Pioneer Square, listening to Ice Cube on their iPods, decked out in Minor Threat hoodies and miniskirts with a skateboard in one hand, a cup of coffee in the other and a backpack of Kerouac and Hemingway slung over one absent-mindedly exposed shoulder” (SuicideGirls 4). Significantly, this description focuses not on any internal qualities that a SuicideGirl might possess, but on the trendy objects with which she surrounds herself. The objects are both signs and signifiers of the status of “Suicide Girl”, implying attitudes, tastes, ethnicity, class and age group without explicitly naming them. The objects listed above signify the lifestyle brand of “alternative” youth sub-culture. iPods
are a product of Apple Macintosh. The most visible alternative to the huge corporation Microsoft Windows, Apple markets itself as the best choice for young, technosavvy hipsters, with the slogan “Apple. Think Different”. A skateboard indicates the owner is a member of the skater subculture, which is regarded as a rebellious, rule-breaking youth subculture. Kerouac’s works, particularly the seminal *On The Road*, are guidebooks for young rebels disaffected from mainstream culture. “Minor Threat hoodies and miniskirts” indicate the heavily branded dress code for the female participants of this youth subculture. Especially when in combination, these objects signal to both the possessor and those who see her with her possessions that she is a certain “type” of person living the lifestyle of her particular niche market; in this case, a potential Suicide Girl.

However, as the Suicide Girl is first identified through the objects with which she surrounds herself and given the name Suicide Girl she is, in turn, defined by that name. Interestingly, this definition is explicitly gender-centred. An autobiographic profile accompanies the page of every SuicideGirl; this lists their likes and dislikes, turn-offs and turn-ons, as well as “vital statistics”, such as their age, occupation and body piercings. The models often use these forms as a place for play, writing “842” for “Age” (Al) or “Freelance Heartbreaker” for “Occupation” (Aiki). However, their “Gender” is not something they may alter in the profile; for all of the models, that profile line reads “Gender: SuicideGirl”. For the models, both gender and name, usually considered essential components of identity, are unavoidably constructed in relation to the dead female. As Bill Brown points out in “Thing Theory”, “death [has] the capacity … to turn people into things” (7). The name “SuicideGirl” positions the subjects of the journal as a thing; the object of the female corpse.

The sexualised female corpse is well established in feminist criticism as the most loathsome image of pornographic iconography. Dworkin quotes several male writers,
including Edgar Allen Poe and his famous statement that “[t]he death of a beautiful woman, is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic” (117). She argues that in both art and pornography, women are constantly depicted as objects, and that “an object is always destroyed in the end by its use when it is used to the fullest and enough; and in the realm of female beauty, the final value of the object is precisely to be found in its cruel or deadly destruction” (118). Dworkin points out that “in 1975 in the United States, organized crime reportedly sold ‘snuff’ films to private collectors of pornography” (71). No proof has ever been found of the existence of genuine snuff films; however, there are films in which murder is acted out, and these films undeniably depict the objectification of women. No longer able to act or communicate, once dead, the woman becomes finally and categorically, a thing; a dead female body.

The name “SuicideGirls” was, as Missy references in the SuicideGirls book introduction, appropriated from a passage in Chuck Palahniuk’s novel, Survivor. The phone number of Palahniuk’s morbid first-person narrator, the only survivor of a religious cult mass suicide, was accidentally advertised as a crisis hotline. When he starts receiving calls from desperate men and women, he recommends that they commit suicide, unable and unwilling to give callers reason to stay alive in a world he views with horror and disgust. Palahniuk’s narrator also uses the calls for sexual satisfaction. He tells readers “don’t think I’m above talking to women this way. Vulnerable women. Emotional cripples” (280). The site’s name was taken from this passage:

Eighteen- nineteen-, twenty-year-old girls, I only want to talk to them.

Community college girls. High school seniors. Emancipated minors.

It’s the same with these suicide girls calling me up. Most of them are so young. Crying with their hair wet down in the rain at a public telephone, they call me to the rescue. Curled in a ball alone in bed for days they call me. Messiah.
They call me. Savior. They sniff and choke and tell me what I ask for in every little detail.

It's so perfect some nights to hear them in the dark. The girl will just trust me. The phone in my own hand, I can imagine my other hand is her. (279)

Palahniuk’s story makes clear that his narrator is despicable and his behaviour repugnant, and so using this passage as inspiration for naming a website which is supposed to encourage “empowered erotica” seems an extremely dubious choice. Palahniuk’s “suicide girls” are portrayed as helpless victims, reliant on a man (the narrator) for validation and salvation, and unwittingly/unwillingly serve as his sexual objects. Moreover, it is implied that many of these “suicide girls” are not only objectified by the narrator, but, with his assistance, become literally deal girl objects: “This is getting nowhere with the girl at the dance club, so I tell her, Kill yourself” (282). Palahniuk’s “suicide girls” are hopelessly dependent, faceless, self-destructive and indistinguishable from one another. This, then, is the eponymous source for the Suicide Girls, those “unique, strong, sexy and confident women” (“Model”).

However, the Suicide Girls themselves do not appear to consider the name morbid or objectifying. In fact, the site’s name has attained an iconic status divorced from the self-destructive, helpless sexual objects that actually inspired it. The journals of SuicideGirls.com’s models do not reveal a consideration of the thanatic implications of the site name, but pride in being able to claim the name for themselves. A Suicide Girl, as understood by the models, is not a dead girl reduced to the status of an object, but the “unique, strong, sexy and confident [woman]” described in the “Model” section of the site. Thus, the site acquires the subcultural credibility of being named after the work of a popular “alternative” author, while it disregards the disturbing implications of the name’s original source and objective content. The site has thus established a new definition for
the term “Suicide Girls” that revolves around the “empowered” models, not the distinctly unempowered victims who inspired their title.

Moreover, when the name’s source is disregarded, as it has been by the site and the models, the descriptor “Suicide” cannot itself be read as clear confirmation of Dworkin’s theories of the objectified dead girl. Literal suicide can be a form of protest, but it is a one-off act of protest on which the protestor cannot expand and it annihilates the subject in the very act of articulating her protest. The counter-culture rebellion in which the SuicideGirls.com models claim to be participating requires a continual speaking and acting out, not a single act of unsustainable protest. If anything, the name “Suicide Girl” might be read as strengthening the subject-position of the SuicideGirls.com models, giving them the sanctity and respect reserved for last words at the same time that these are able to be updated and expanded and so engendering a continuous rebellion. There is a further sense of agency in the choice of “Suicide”. Unlike Poe’s heroines, these women are not passively awaiting death from consumption, nor, as in the fake snuff films, are they murdered. They are not done to death. They have done, or have had done, unto themselves.

This sense of agency is further reflected in the body modifications celebrated on the site. The models dye their hair; insert metal into their flesh; engrave symbols, words and pictures permanently onto their skin. They express their subjectivity on the surface of their bodies, decorating those bodies as objects for display. Thus the observer in viewing the object-bodies in the objects of the photographs, is also viewing the subjectivity of the model, expressed in her choices of style and body modification.

Dworkin might class these body modifications among the “strategies employed so that the natural female body will fit the male idea of ideal female beauty” (117). This standardisation of what it means to be a beautiful woman, contributes, she argues, to the
objectification of women. Among other strategies she lists hair dying, foot-binding, breast enlargement and reduction, and the wearing of high-heeled shoes; these strategies could certainly be extended to include piercings and tattoos. However, Dworkin’s objection to reshaping the natural female body rests in the assertion that the standard of beauty women aspire to with such strategies is solely a male standard. It is an ideal of beauty which is imposed on women by men, and thus one that does not presumably arise from their own agency and desires.

The models of SuicideGirls.com are unlikely to agree that they are transforming their bodies for the pleasure of anyone but themselves, even though they receive tribute from admirers for the decoration and modification of their bodies as well as for their “natural” beauty. Fashion historian Valerie Steele, in *Fetish, Fashion, Sex & Power*, argues for the body as canvas, claiming that “[t]he fetishistic appeal of a second skin extends to decorating the body itself” (160). She cites Charles Gatewood, a photographer who argues that “body art has to do with taking control of your life and your body … transforming to facilitate personal change and growth” (161). In demonstrating their “control” of their bodies by treating them as objects to be decorated as a way to display this “personal change and growth”, the Suicide Girls occupy both subject and object positions simultaneously. This post-modern multiple positioning of the female as subject and object is not available within Dworkin’s theories of pornography, which inevitably positions male as subject and victimiser, and female as object and victimised.

In response to Dworkin’s presentation of pornography as having only one possible message - that women are objects for sexual use – gender theorist Judith Butler points out that to “argue that representation is discriminatory action [allows for] no interpretative leeway between the representation, its meanings, and its effects” (496). Butler would prefer to “shift from an epistemological framework to one which takes the pornographic
text as a site of multiple significations” (496). She argues that “pornographic representations as textualised fantasy do not supply a single point of identification for their viewers, whether presumed to be stabilised in subject-positions of male or female” (496). As explored in the seminal work *Gender Trouble*, Butler’s theory of gender as constructed self, rather than an inherent nature linked to biological sex, is indispensable to a reading of a pornographic text that claims a subject-position for its models. Working from Simone de Beauvoir’s contention that “One is not born a woman … one becomes one”, Butler points out that the fact that one can say “I feel like a woman” or “I feel like a man” supports her theory that gender is influenced by culture and more fluid than a strict biological interpretation will allow (*The Second Sex* xvii; *Gender Trouble* 22). Since Western culture in particular is imbued with a sense of the importance of things, Butler’s theory of gender allows for the possibility of a constructed feminine (or masculine) subject mediated through objects, which, in a capitalist society, frequently become commercial objects. The journals of SuicideGirls.com models may well provide examples of this feminine subject, which depends on objects through which to mediate its subjectivity, and is partially constructed through presentation as a sexual, commercial object.

Traditional ideals of feminine beauty are ironically played upon in SuicideGirls.com, and much of this play revolves around the use of objects as props. Occasionally, these props are incorporated as body modifications, becoming part of the body at the same time they decorate it. Model Dyme published this photograph of a recent body modification in her journal:
This particular modification is known as a corset piece. Dyme introduces the picture:

“So this is what i spent doing [sic] friday [sic] night at a BDSM show here @ a huge sex shop called The Adult Super Fun Store” (28 June 2004).

The adoption of the corset piece appears to be a more extreme and weirdly inverted form of the punk adaptation of lingerie as outerwear. As Steele points out: “The punks subversively reappropriated the much maligned symbols of sexual repression and defiantly wore thrift-store bras and girdles as outer clothing. Indeed, the entire trend of underwear-as-outerwear, which has played such an important role over the past decade, must be understood in part as an attempt to demystify sexual taboos” (137-138). Read in this way, the adoption and display of a corset piece by Dyme seems to be a transgressive approach to the bodily constraint of traditional feminine dress. By exaggerating and aggressively displaying the traditional constraints symbolised by the corset, Dyme
challenges the male ideal of beauty and the torturous measures women have undertaken to fulfil it. She thus transforms her body into a site in which gender power struggles are acted out, and where she displays an ironic aggression towards the corset, even as she incorporates it into her flesh. It is perhaps significant that the corset piece was specifically implanted at a BDSM show, an arena where sexual power-struggles become “scenes”; a site where sex becomes play/display to the observers and participants. Dyme, not content with attaching a corset over the body, incorporates one into her body, which becomes the body-as-corset – a powerfully fetishised object that is transformed through the equally powerful fetishistic process of body modification. However, in claiming agency in the modification – “this is what I spent doing Friday night” (italics mine) – and in the display of the modification, Dyme also claims a subject-position in the transformation of her body-as-object.

SuicideGirls.com therefore appears to confirm Butler’s theory of pornography as a site where multiple points of identification are available, rather than Dworkin’s theory of a single possible reading of pornography as intrinsically and unavoidably objectifying. The opportunity for varied readings of the pornographic images on the site is supported by the existence of personal online journals juxtaposed with the pornographic materials of the site. By providing a subjective exploration of the writer’s psyche, the SuicideGirls.com personal journals present the models in photosets as subjects, as well as objects. This relationship is complex; the subject is often mediated through the object. In turn, the object, particularly the body as object, often signifies the agency of the subject in the modification and display process.

Moreover, by displaying personal online journals besides pornographic photosets, the Suicide Girls maintain a traditional way of performing of female subjectivity in a non-traditional medium. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenk argue in the introduction to
Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography that "Autobiography localizes the very program of much feminist theory – the reclaiming of the female subject – even as it foregrounds the central issue of contemporary critical thought – the problematic status of the self" (2). There are over 600 Suicide Girls, and, with the disturbing exception of the "archive girls", each one has a journal on the site (although some update infrequently). While Dworkin accuses conventional pornography of providing a single message and a single image of the woman as a simple sexual object, the multiplicity of online personal journals available for consumption at SuicideGirls.com provides women as multiple, individual subjects.

Moreover, the self presented by each model by no means occupies a coherent or uniform subject-position. The journal of Suicide Girl Nixon specifically argues against one reading by her audience of the model's sense of her "self". Having recently uploaded a photo set, she is upset when "some dickhead inevitably writes me a note that says "but Nixon, it's not the real you..."" (29 June 2004). In the same entry she disparages one photo set named "Cuddle" as "Yes, it's cute. But guess what, assholes. IT'S NOT THE REAL ME". She claims that two other sets, including the recent upload, are more representative of her identity, then orders her readers to "Start paying some attention to my journals and my comments and get over your fucked-up mental image of me". That the "fucked up mental image" is one that she herself has assisted in creating is not mentioned; the journal entry functions as resistance to one popular reading of her presentation on the site, not as an apologia for the photoset itself.

Other journals present a fractured subject position. Snow employs a stream of consciousness style and writes "two. i split in two. snow. andrea. snow. andrea" (13 June 2004). "Andrea", presumably Snow's real name, is thus presented as distinct and 'split' from Snow, the Suicide Girl. Model Fractal writes: "Sometimes it feels like there's
nothing that really belongs to me. ... I can't picture my own face in my mind. It all reminds me of other times, other lives I've led. It gets hard to pinpoint where I really am in all of it. ... where is she in all of it? She feels like nothing but an enigma” (11 Jan. 2004). The shift from “I” to “she” in Fractal’s entry reveals a conscious distancing from the “I” of whom she writes. These journals resist any reading of the self as a coherent, singular subject, representing the self as containing the possibility of two, or multiple, subject-positions.

The online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com thus actively contradict an articulation of the female as object, the most common reading of the status of women in pornographic texts. In the introduction to Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate, Lynne Segal points out that “Anti-pornography feminism is compelling because it makes intuitive sense. Much of pornography is at the very least complicit in some of the most offensive aspects of our sexist, male-centred culture: it appears to position men as active and powerful, women as commodified – objects, not subjects” (5). Yet, the fluid interaction between subject and object that occurs in post-modern culture and counter-culture allows the Suicide Girls to claim subject and object positions simultaneously. In particular, the transgressive process of body modification aggressively challenges conventional assumptions of a clearly defined subject, distinct from and superior to an equally clearly defined object.

Of course, the administrators of SuicideGirls.com cannot ultimately dictate how the pornographic images are read once access to them is sold. They cannot compel their members to read the models’ journals, nor can they force their members to subscribe to their mission statement of “empowered erotica”. Neither can they control the use of the images outside the site. The site includes this warning: “The images on the Suicide Girls site are intended for individual use only. Any other use or reproduction, digital or
conventional, without the express written consent of SG Services, Inc. is strictly prohibited. Violators will be pursued and prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. All models are 18 and older” (“Legal”). Reproduction away from the contextualising boundaries of SuicideGirls.com is therefore theoretically safeguarded. However, in practice, image theft is common on the internet, and pictures originally from SuicideGirls.com can and do appear in other internet locales, stripped of the contextualising exploration of subjectivity the journals provide.

It is impossible to generalise about the “typical” SuicideGirls.com personal online journal, because no such type exists. There are over 600 SuicideGirls.com models, and all but the “archive girls” keep current personal journals. Accordingly, when choosing journals to study, I endeavoured to select journals I saw as representatives of certain archetypes common on the site: Scarlett is thus the Cheerful Goth; Tina the Feminist Artist; Snow the Angsting Damsel-in-Distress and so on. The texts selected for study from the site also cover a wide range chronologically. Extracts date from the site’s inception in mid-2001 to texts contemporary with this thesis’s final research stages in May 2005. In-depth examinations of these representative archetypal journals are accompanied by examples from other models’ personal online journals less closely scrutinised. The writing style, tone and content of the personal online journals of the Suicide Girls vary widely, both from journal to journal and, occasionally within a single journal.

However, the Suicide Girls’ online personal journals also contribute to a reading of the site as having, not a single, united subject, but as an incoherent “whole”. Olivia, a full-time employee of SuicideGirls.com as both a model and a computer programmer, provides a concise and articulated view of this paradoxical united disparity in her personal online journal. The entry in full:
fuck anyone who's ever said all suicidegirls are the same.

some of us take care of children, mentally ill people, our ailing parents, our suicidal friends, drug addicts, ourselves - some of us are artists, book-keepers, musicians, strippers, scientists, writers, gas pumpers, checkout girls, dominatrixes, students, unemployed - some of us are in love, some of us are in pain, some of us are in jail - some of us cut ourselves to feel alive, some of us tattoo ourselves to feel beautiful, some of us take road trips to reawaken ourselves - some of us do it for the cash, some for the fun, some for the compliments, some for art - some of us are nice girls, mean girls, sad girls, angry girls, complicated girls - some of us hate you, some of us hate each other, some of us love the entire world - some of us were beaten by husbands, molested by fathers, messed with by girlfriends and betrayed by friends - some of us only have the fact that we are suicidegirls in common.

so shut the fuck up. (28 Nov. 2004)

This entry repudiates any perception of sameness among the Suicide Girls, while confirming points of their commonality. As Olivia asserts, “some of us have only the fact that we are suicidegirls in common”, but this is actually a great deal. Suicide Girls have in common: gender; youth; at least one source of income; bodies that have been modified by tattoos and/or piercings; and the presentation of themselves through the media of nude photography and online personal journalling. Many of them also share ethnicity and class. While, as Olivia forcibly states, their life experiences, personalities and reasons for
participating in SuicideGirls.com may be very different, Suicide Girls actually share much more than many citizens of cyberspace.

The personal online journals of the SuicideGirls.com models are also intrinsically attached to the business and community of which they form a vital part. The SuicideGirls.com models, as the basis of the site’s business and reason for existence, hold privileged positions on SuicideGirls.com, achieving iconic or celebrity status on the site itself. Likewise, the online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com models are privileged in the site’s hierarchy. This privilege is visibly marked by the colours of online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com models; their journals are backgrounds in pink, whereas members’ personal online journals on the site have grey backgrounds. This colour distinction also applies to comments Suicide Girls make in the forum threads and to comments left by Suicide Girls on others’ journal entries and on models’ photo sets. Against the grey background of members’ comments, the Suicide Girls’ commentary provides distinct visual confirmation their role as representatives of the site. Moreover, updating the journal at least occasionally appears to be one of the conditions of continued employment at SuicideGirls.com. According to several members, the personal online journals of the models of SuicideGirls.com are integral to the community feeling of SuicideGirls.com. In this sense, the journal becomes part of their work for the site.

Therefore, although the personal online journals of the models of SuicideGirls.com are written by different women, the individuality of those personal online journals is problematised by the commercial aspect of the site. This is not to say that the site presents a coherent, united subject; it, like the journals that contribute to it, is a fractured, partial construction. Each personal online journal may be composed of contradictory or multiple subjects, which, in turn, contribute a larger sense of the ‘subject’ of SuicideGirls.com the business and community. This larger subject is in itself naturally
multiple and frequently contradictory, but it encompasses the personal online journals of its models in the way that other online blogging sites such as LiveJournal.com do not. As multiple voices contributing to a partial, but recognisable, subject, the online personal journals of the models of SuicideGirls.com thus echo the fractured, partial state of the female subject in realspace, with an immediacy unavailable to life-writing published in the traditional manner.

The interactivity of the personal online journals of SuicideGirls.com allows for the cyberspace version of “gossip”, a specifically feminised interaction. In her article, “Already Always Virtual: Feminist Politics in Cyberspace”, theorist Patricia Wise argues that: “There may be value in thinking about the more powerful thing of gossiping – of maintaining underground cultures of connection through powerful ‘talk’ with ‘gossips’ (or friends) – which can constitute, as it always has, a crucial counter-cultural network of support and solidarity” (188). In realspace, gossip has been dismissed and marginalised as unimportant, much as the maintenance of a powerful oral tradition of storytelling has been dismissed as “old wives’ tales”. At best, gossip is considered a silly activity; at worst it is malicious and harmful. Gossip is also considered the province of women, particularly older women. As Patricia Mellenkamp points out in High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age and Comedy, “[g]ossip has been historically tied to a negative image of the body – old, wrinkled and female” (177). She argues that “[t]his linkage of age and gossip, fueled by fear, has not vanished in our culture” (177). Like traditional personal journal-writing, traditional gossip is a private activity; Mellenkamp articulates Patricia Spacks’s assessment of gossip as “to be serious, gossip must be in person, and oral” (178). Mellenkamp herself asserts that while public gossip exists, it is often presented as “news”, not “gossip”, and stripped of its negative associations with elderly women “by the hiring of young male anchors or very young and perky female anchors”
The public gossip of the tabloid magazines and gossip columns is more obviously ‘gossip’, but it, like traditional, private gossip, is also gendered, marketed to “... chiefly white women of middle age or over,” with estimates of 90 percent female readership” (199). In sharp contrast, casual communication between people or amongst groups in cyberspace, is not gendered, and is often recorded as public text. As well as the comments left on members’ and Suicide Girls’ journals, SuicideGirls.com’s forum boards, with threads as diverse as “dirty talk” and “feminism”, may constitute in part a network of ‘gossip’ as powerful communication contributing to solidarity similar to that theorised by Wise.

Moreover, by inviting readers to comment directly on the texts of online personal journals, the journals of SuicideGirls.com allow for a form of casual interaction unimaginable in life-writing in realspace. In Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation, Lynne Truss bemoans the more casual relationship of the reader to internet documents. Having earlier recounted a story of finding marginalia in a text she consulted in the writing of her own book, she then describes printed books as “static and fixed”, and asserts that: “Picking up the book in the first place entails an active pursuit of understanding. Holding the book, we are aware of posterity and continuity. Knowing that the printed word is always edited, typeset and proof-read before it reaches us, we appreciate its literary authority” (178; 180). She compares this to the product of the “new technologies”, particularly the Internet, which she considers:

[I]nherently impersonal and disembodied ... Electronic media are intrinsically ephemeral, are open to perpetual revision, and work quite strenuously against any sort of historical perception. The opposite of edited, the material on the internet is unmediated, except by the technology itself. And having no price, it has
questionable value. Finally, you can’t write comments in the margin of your screen to be discovered by another reader fifty years down the line. (181)

While I agree with Truss’ perception of many internet documents as intrinsically ephemeral and unmediated, I do not agree with her assessment of its “questionable value.” Moreover, her dismissal of the possibility of marginalia for Internet documents is short-sighted and inaccurate. Life writing on the internet, unlike life writing in the traditional format of published text, not only allows readers to comment in the ‘margins’ of the documents, but also allow them to make those comments accessible to other readers. Most online personal journals allow readers to add comments which are published underneath or linked beside the main entry through the use of a form which (usually) automatically adds the comment to the text.

The SuicideGirls.com journals allow for the interactivity of adding commentary to journals, although adding to the attached page for each entry, like viewing access to photosets on the site, is a feature limited to paid members only. These comments thus contribute to the composition of the complete journal as a text, and often inform the content of successive entries by the SuicideGirls. Scarlett writes: “Thanks to all my comments for the previous depressed entry -- things worked themselves out, like they always do. I've been a bad girl lately again though, why am I so weak to ___ and ____?” (10 Jan. 2004). This entry acknowledges and responds to the commentary on a previous entry; the commentary of the readers has contributed to the text on which they comment, a feat of interactivity almost impossible to accomplish in realspace life-writing. The consumers of the SuicideGirls.com personal journals are also contributors to the journals, through their cyberspace-granted ability to add ‘gossip’ to the entries once created. The SuicideGirls.com models may bear the initial burden of creating the text, but once created, the combined commentary on entries is often several times the length of the
original entry. Moreover, the “gossip” of these literally marginalised contributors not only responds to the text of the journals in a method unavailable to published life-writing in realspace, it does so in a manner that confirms the multiplicity of the subject position in the SuicideGirls.com online personal journal. The “voice” that is claimed by the Suicide Girls is not a singular voice. Unlike the phallogocentric “I am” of realspace, the journals of SuicideGirls.com, with their interactive marginalia and multiple subjects, perform a many-voiced female subject of “we are”.

4. Cultural icons, Commercial Objects and “lifestyle brand”: SuicideGirls.com and Commerce

SuicideGirls.com claims to be a vibrant champion of “alternative” youth subculture, promoting the “ferociously unique style and outlook” of its ‘girls’ (SuicideGirls 10). However, it is also a business, and while its stated aim may not be profit, the success of the site indicates that there is a profit to be made. There is some question, therefore, as to whether the commercial means of the site’s operation compromises the ideals of the site’s ends, especially since the site itself is a vocal participant in an anti-capitalist, anti-mainstream discourse. This apparent contradiction between SuicideGirls.com as “alternative” icon and SuicideGirls.com as lifestyle brand necessarily problematises the presentation of the Suicide Girls through their personal online journals, as the models perform as both cultural icons and commercial objects.

On 26 October 2004, lawyers working on behalf of gaming giant Nintendo sent a cease-and-desist email to SuicideGirls.com administrator Sean, claiming that SuicideGirls.com had infringed Nintendo intellectual property. The email was instantly posted on SuicideGirls.com’s message board forum, and subsequently linked to or
reproduced in many other internet news sites and discussion forums. It reads

"IDENTIFIED PROBLEM: Pornographic Web site uses Nintendo in link, text, source
code, Zelda and Metroid in text" and claims that "It has come to our client's attention
recently that you are using the Nintendo trademark(s)/works in the hidden text/visible
text/meta tags and/or title and/or links of the above-referenced sexually explicit Web site"
("The Site" forum, 27 Oct. 2004). The claim refers to one SuicideGirls.com member,
RuneLateralus, who named the Nintendo games Zelda and Metroid in his member profile
as his favourite video games. Sean immediately posted the email on the SuicideGirls.com
"The Site" forum, sarcastically commenting "I enjoy an ice cold coca cola on a hot day.
Do you think Coca Cola is going to sue me for posting that?"

News of Nintendo's lawyers' ill-advised move quickly spread over the internet,
through gaming and computer news sites such as Boing Boing(sponsored by
SuicideGirls.com), Voodoo Extreme and Slashdot.org. The Voodoo Extreme article was
titled "Don't Say You Like Nintendo Games; They'll Sue You" (Burnes, 27 Oct. 2004).
Gaming webcomic and commentary website Penny Arcade made the news the subject of
a comic strip, entitled "Hoochie Coochie Man", sarcastically positing that one could make
a career out of sending cease-and-desist letters to someone who "used the word
'Metroid'" (Holkins and Krahulik). Nintendo, alerted to the poor publicity and
bombarded with indignant and sarcastic emails, sent an apologetic email to Sean,
explaining that the letter had been sent by mistake, and offering a free Nintendo gaming
system and game of their choice to both Sean and RuneLateralus.

Despite imputations over Nintendo's motives, the original email from Nintendo's
lawyers referred to SuicideGirls.com as a "sexually explicit Web site", implying that it
was the mention of the game in connection with objectionable material, rather than the
mention itself, which had promoted the automatic cease-and-desist letter (Jardin, “Nintendo to sue SG?”). The apology email further clarified the situation:

We know that many of our fans are old enough to make their own choice about what they want to view on the Internet. We value the support of our fans and we respect their decisions. The letter was sent as part of an ongoing Nintendo program to aggressively protect our younger consumers from the hundreds of sexually-explicit sites each year that use Nintendo properties to attract children. We are proud of our efforts in this area. Unfortunately, the site posting identified in our letter was targeted by mistake. (Pescovitz, “Nintendo apologizes to Suicide Girls!”)

The “aggressive” protection leveled at sexually-explicit sites apparently does not extend to aggressive protection of “younger consumers” from SuicideGirls.com.

Regardless of Nintendo’s motives and justifications for both the initial action and the apology, the incident emphasises how complicit SuicideGirls.com is with consumer culture. It also demonstrates the willingness of the consumers of SuicideGirls.com own brand to defend “their” site as “different” in comparison to both mainstream pornography and corporate giants like Nintendo. The discussion of Nintendo’s cease-and-desist letter soon prompted the familiar debate as to whether SuicideGirls.com was pornography or art. The consensus appeared to be that, far from protecting their brands or their consumers, Nintendo had been picking on the little guy (or girl) because they thought they could. Frequenters of the internet’s biggest gaming community and news sites were suddenly discussing a subject which had been hitherto largely limited to SuicideGirls.com forum boards and the challenge to traditional taxonomy found in the photosets and journals of models such as Tina.
Jerry Holkins, one of Penny Arcade’s two creators, decides in his news column that SuicideGirls.com is pornography - but *tasteful* pornography. He describes SuicideGirls.com as “a site where, among other things, girls take off their clothes” and pointed out that “I can understand why Nintendo as a corporate entity might not want their juggernaut brands associated with teen coochie” (“Hoochie Coochie Man”, Penny-Arcade.com). Holkins and his co-creator have themselves declined to include SuicideGirls.com in the organisations that advertise on their site. He notes, however, that “[it] may be that my scheme for rating pornography has been damaged by the Internet, but the site is actually pretty tasteful compared to other sites I have subscribed to, many of which are filmed in barns.” This tastefulness, Holkins implies, should have mitigated Nintendo’s reluctance to have “their juggernaut brands associated with teen coochie.”

The incident and its resolution serve to illustrate both the nature and the perceptions of SuicideGirls.com. It is hence perhaps not so surprising that discussion soon focused on whether SuicideGirls.com was art or pornography: it appears that if SuicideGirls.com can be categorised as “alternative” art, then gamers can be unconflicted when supporting it against the “juggernaut brands” of Nintendo. SuicideGirls.com identifies itself both as “alternative” and as “empowered erotica”, and site members and models justify their involvement with the site by conflating the pornographic and alternative style of the site, suggesting that a site where “ferociously unique style” is celebrated cannot be anything other than empowering (*SuicideGirls* 8). That “alternative” credibility depends on the status of the punk-rock, goth, emo and other youth subcultures with which SuicideGirls.com identifies itself. Alternative youth subcultures, whatever their particulars, are perceived to be anti-mainstream, anti-consumerism and anti-homogenisation: they are perceived to be pro-individual expression and freedom.
The reality is that alternative youth subcultures have become immensely marketable brands and advertisers and corporations are fully aware of both the buying power and the desire for many young people to find identity in rebelling against mainstream culture. Online encyclopedia Wikipedia describes the Emo subculture as being ironically rooted in consumerism: “Emo fashion, according to its proponents, is deeply rooted in a ‘being proud of who you are’, anti-consumer subculture. Critics of the fashion point out that it has become so mainstream that it has become shallow and antithetical to this notion” (“Emo”). Hence the young American hipster can buy her punk or goth clothes in Hot Topic chainstores nationwide, use Mac eyeliner, listen to “indie” bands signed to major labels on her Apple iPod, and still believe that her literal buy-in to a carefully branded youth subculture expresses her “ferociously unique” style. There is an enormous void between the façade of an anti-consumerist “individual expression” in alternative style and the corporations which use the carefully branded youth subcultures to create desire for “alternative” style objects.

SuicideGirls.com is both victim and instigator of youth lifestyle branding. As an “alternative” pornographic commercial enterprise popular with hip youngsters, the appearance of youth rebellion and individuality and the actual branding of youth subcultural identity collide at SuicideGirls.com. Commentary on and around the site, as in the discussion inspired by Nintendo’s blunder, appears to concentrate on whether SuicideGirls.com is art, erotica or pornography. Yet the site is often described as both a recognisable brand and a celebration of uniqueness: that contradiction receives little attention. The back cover of the SuicideGirls book contains a quote from the LA City Beat: “The SuicideGirls phenomenon is optimistic, it is a living breathing expression of youth culture right now ... A lifestyle brand for Generation Y in the way Playboy was a cultural beacon for the swinging bachelors of the 1960s and 70s” (SuicideGirls book,
back cover). As quoted, the *LA City Beat* appears to find no inherent conflict between the phrases a “living breathing expression of youth culture” and “a lifestyle brand for Generation Y”: depressingly, in this review, they are synonymous expressions.

SuicideGirls.com has escaped much of the stigma of commercialisation attached to conventional pornography. Since it supposedly celebrates “alternative” beauty and “let[s] [the models] create the site… set the tone and share their unique attitudes with the world”, SuicideGirls.com is perceived, as model Nic puts it, as “so far removed from the spirit of other porn sites that I’ve seen that I don’t even consider it porn” (*SuicideGirls* 9; 139). The “spirit” of other porn sites is perceived as objectifying, tacky (“cum-stained blondes with photoshop-smearred skin”) and exploitative of women for commercial gain (Drake, *SuicideGirls* 122). According to this argument, the “spirit” of SuicideGirls.com is none of these things. Under the cover of representing youth “alternative” subcultures, SuicideGirls.com produces a form of pornography that negotiates around charges of sleaze and objectification. Therefore, a pornographic website with an ethos derived from alternative youth subcultures, which caters to young people, becomes considered cool, edgy and anti-corporate, even as it endorses youth lifestyle branding.

The hip young cybertizen is not the only cultural representative who approves of SuicideGirls.com. In the site’s interview section are interviews with celebrities and cult figures who endorse SuicideGirls.com as “alternative”, smart and sexy. Multi-genre author and cult figure Neil Gaiman, probably most famous for the multi-award-winning *The Sandman* graphic novel series, was interviewed by SuicideGirls.com interviewer Kith Daniels. During the interview, Gaiman explains how he discovered SuicideGirls.com: “One of those magazines, Bust or the other one, the nouveau-feminists things, had a whole article on [SuicideGirls.com] about a year ago, and I remember reading it and going "Oh! That looks really sensible and cool. I like that. Empowering porn, what a cool.
idea." Then I went and looked at the site and saw smart people having fun talking, and
great interviews” (Gaiman, Interview with Keith Daniels). Gaiman does not say anything
about the site’s photo sets, and may not have seen them; there is no indication in the
interview that he is actually a member. However, he appears to approve of the “smart
people having fun talking”. The voices found in the journals and message boards appear
to be, for him, like many others, the site of the “empowered” aspect of SuicideGirls.com.
Film actress Selma Blair, best known for comic book adaptation Hellboy and a famous,
lengthy kiss with Sarah Michelle Gellar in Cruel Intentions, enthused “I love SuicideGirls. SuicideGirls are some of my only fans. I don’t know how it happened”
(Blair, Interview with Daniel Robert Epstein). When asked “[d]o you think it’s empowering?”, however, she equivocated somewhat: “To them, not to me. I think women
should have a choice to say whatever they want to say however they want to say it.” Blair
again appears to indicate approval of the ability of the SuicideGirls.com models to “say
whatever they want to say”, but questions the “empowerment” spin. The phrasing “[t]o
them, not me” juxtaposes the Suicide Girls articulation of empowerment through their
modeling with her own notion that empowerment is rooted in the “choice” to utilise their
voice.

Author Chuck Palahniuk is less equivocal in his praise, explicitly praising SuicideGirls.com as an enterprise untainted by consumerism. In responding to the
question “Suicide Girls is huge. It’s going to be around for a long time. What do you think of that?” he said “Thank god someone has benefited from the internet. It’s not just eBay
and Amazon. Somebody has made a name that’s not just monetary but a cultural icon.
There aren’t a lot of them created from the internet” (Palahniuk, Interview with Daniel
Robert Epstein). Palahniuk argues that unlike the commercial “just monetary” enterprises
of eBay and Amazon, which are iconic internet businesses, SuicideGirls.com is a
culturally significant icon. In distinguishing between commerce (bad) and culture (good) when applied to prominent internet businesses, Palahniuk downplays the business aspect of SuicideGirls.com, and performs a sign-slide wherein the perception of SuicideGirls.com’s cultural status diminishes or occludes its actual position as an internet business. Palahniuk’s quote appears in the “Tour” section of SuicideGirls.com and on the back cover of SuicideGirls, demonstrating the marketability of his endorsement.

The explicit and implicit message in these interviews and celebrity endorsements is that SuicideGirls.com is not the ordinary dotcom porn site. If Neil Gaiman likes SuicideGirls.com, if Selma Blair likes the Suicide Girls, if Chuck Palahniuk thinks SuicideGirls.com is a cultural icon untainted by commerce, then the average cyberspace citizen, is also permitted to like SuicideGirls.com without feeling guilty or sleazy. The perception among many cybercitizens appears to be that SuicideGirls.com is different from ‘mainstream’ internet pornography: it might be erotic, but it’s not tacky; it’s alternative, not commercial; and its models are subjects, not just objects. The reality is that SuicideGirls.com is also a commercial enterprise. Regardless of the site’s mission, SuicideGirls.com makes money by trading on a expertly marketed image of the site as “alternative”, and that alternative status relies on a perception of SuicideGirls.com as anti-consumerist.

SuicideGirls.com could not exist without money. This is not necessarily a sinister state of affairs: even if staffed by volunteers donating their time, the domain name and website space would have to be paid for somehow. In fact, employees are paid, but again, this circumstance does not necessarily equate to a betrayal of the supposed SuicideGirls.com ethos of anti-mainstream alternative culture. Missy ends her introduction to the SuicideGirls book thus: “a word of thanks not only to the girls who have created this website with me, but to you, for buying this book, and by doing so,
letting me do what I love. I wish you the same incredible fortune that I have had. I do
what I love every day, and it’s made all the difference. Thank You.” An artist making a
living from her artwork seems a relatively innocent motive for commercial viability.
However, SuicideGirls.com clearly generates more than Missy’s living expenses. It
makes a substantial amount of money; at least enough to pay the salaries of six full-time
staff, pay its models $300 US per published photoset (as I write, two photosets are
published each day) and produce a Burlesque dancing show that toured the USA and UK.
Moreover, Missy’s site makes a profit at the same time she derides mainstream “hardcore
pornography” on the internet as a commercial enterprise (SuicideGirls 7).

SuicideGirls.com’s profitability lies at least in part in the uneasy tension between
the perception and the realities of alternative youth subcultures. While the site rhetorically
promotes individuality and anti-mainstream values, its economics are firmly rooted in the
capitalist exploitation of alternative youth subcultures. The site is problematised not by
the SuicideGirls.com commercial success, but by the fact that SuicideGirls.com trades on
a philosophy of anti-commercialism, which it actively promotes as part of its “lifestyle
brand”.

While, in theory, SuicideGirls.com endorses individuality and freedom of
expression, in practice, it promotes the homogenisation of style. The site charges
membership fees, which provide access to photosets and many site features, but probably
the most overt example of consumerism on SuicideGirls.com is the gift shop. This shop
includes items such as the Suicide Girls book, a calendar, a SuicideGirls.com skateboard
decal, stickers, and most significantly, various items of clothing emblazoned with the
SuicideGirls.com logo, including underwear, though not the special pink panties given
only to models. While a case could be made that site members wanted, and, in some
cases, demanded these items, by providing them, SuicideGirls.com is also providing an
endorsement for members to literally buy into consumerist culture. Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile the conflict between the anti-mainstream celebration of unique identity and style that is SuicideGirls.com’s purported ethos with a gift shop that sells clothing branded with a logo that is reproduced on every item.

Rather than emphasising the uniqueness and individuality of its wearer, the SuicideGirls.com clothing homogenises style. Branded clothing endorses not only the coveting of brand items, but also equates marketing with style. The gift shop item thus turns the wearer into the equivalent of a clothing billboard. There is little functional distinction between a shirt with a SuicideGirls.com logo and a shirt emblazoned with the Nike swoosh. In both cases, style becomes corporate property, not personal expression; and the only choice is in which corporate brand you choose to represent “your” style.

SuicideGirls.com’s public mission statement, however, asserts that the company exists to fulfil a higher purpose of “empowerment”, rather than to merely turn a profit. This higher purpose, in the eyes of the members and celebrities who endorse SuicideGirls.com, excuses the site from the category of “bad”, commercial pornography, and allows it into the artificially distinct category of “good”, culturally significant erotica.

The purpose of the site, according to the SuicideGirls book, is also to present Missy’s “personal vision of femininity”, as opposed to “the impossibly perfect bodies of the blonde bombshells of soap operas”, and to “give them [the models] a voice on the website, and let them create the site with me, set the tone and share their unique attitudes with the world” (7-9). “Real” pornography is constantly presented, both on the site and in discussion of it, as an innately objectifying commercial enterprise, as opposed to the nobler aim of encouraging individual artistic expression. Missy writes of her early ambitions for SuicideGirls.com: “Surely, with the proliferation of hardcore pornography and graphic sex all over the internet and cable, there wouldn’t be the same sort of
widespread appeal for the understated beauty of the demure there once was, but so what? I had done jobs to make money and they didn’t make me happy, this time I would start with a job that would fulfil me artistically and I’d worry about the making a living part later” (SuicideGirls book, 7-8). “[H]ardcore pornography and graphic sex” is associated with mainstream appeal and commercial viability, whereas Missy’s vision of the “understated beauty of the demure” is depicted as explicitly anti-commercial. In fact, she is apparently so determined to fulfil her individual artistic vision that she decides to “worry about the making a living part later”.

Perhaps the most interesting example of the divide where ‘real’ porn is associated with commerce and SuicideGirls.com with culture can be found in another SuicideGirls.com interview. SuicideGirls.com’s Daniel Robert Epstein recently interviewed Eon McKai, the pseudonym of the director of a hardcore pornographic film, Art School Sluts. The film is putatively about the sexual adventures of art school students who are goths, ravers and junglists, all alternative youth cultures. Although most of the pierced and tattooed actors have acted in pornography films before, the marketing for Art School Sluts emphasises that they are also genuine members of alternative youth subcultures. McKai claims that he is “trying to start a whole new culture inside [film distributor] VCA” by producing hardcore pornography for young hipsters; the same demographic at which SuicideGirls.com is targeted, starring actors from the same youth subcultures to which the Suicide Girls belong (McKai, Interview with Daniel Robert Epstein). However, the transcript of the interview maintains the familiar divides between hardcore pornography/SuicideGirls.com and commerce/culture.

McKai draws parallels between his film and SuicideGirls.com, but is also careful to differentiate between “real” pornography and SuicideGirls.com. During the interview, he remarks that “I’m casting the way SuicideGirls gets their girls. It’s the same
philosophy. Obviously certain things are different because SG girls aren’t porn stars.”

When asked “Have any SuicideGirls ever auditioned for you?” he replied “So far I’m really trying to stay away from that. That’s a danger zone because SuicideGirls is so close to my heart. I really enjoy the way SuicideGirls is going and I don’t want to see SuicideGirls go the way of hardcore porn.” In differentiating between Art School Sluts as hardcore pornography and SuicideGirls.com as something different and better, McKai appears to be discounting the fact that SuicideGirls.com is also selling sexually explicit imagery.

Interviewer Daniel Robert Epstein also preserves this distinction between “mainstream” hardcore pornography and SuicideGirls.com. After commenting earlier in the transcript that he was “really surprised Suicide Girls signed off on this interview”, Epstein says “[b]ut Art School Sluts is a hardcore porn film. It’s not exactly female friendly.” McKai responds “[f]rom the emails I get I don’t see it as being only for men. I’ve gotten a lot emails from girls who are into looking at other girls for their style and how bold they are.” When pressed (“But is this movie for guys to jerk off to?”), McKai admits “That’s the commerce of it but I see a lot of art in it as well”. He adds, “For VCA to back a project like this it needs to be in a certain digestible structure that they can sell. It has to have so many discreet sex scenes, a certain amount of anal and things like that. These are the hard and fast things that a porno company needs to get the money back out of it.” McKai’s responses again present Art School Sluts – even though it contains authentic members of alternative youth subcultures - as representative of commercial pornography and contrast the film to SuicideGirls.com, which, he implies, is more “art” and less “commerce” than a film which the director describes as having “a lot of art in it”. SuicideGirls.com is certainly less hardcore in content than a film like Art School Sluts, but it does, like this film, profit from the sexually explicit presentation of members of
alternative youth subcultures. The Suicide Girls do not have anal sex on camera, but they profit just as surely as the stars of *Art School Sluts* from a market eager to consume the sexualised lifestyle brands of increasingly homogenised "alternative" style subcultures.

5. SuicideGirls in Cyberspace: Female Subject; Female Space?

Significantly, the SuicideGirls.com juxtaposition of commercialised sexual imagery of public life-writing from women is situated in cyberspace, a challenging new location for the performance of the gendered subject. The feminist possibilities and potentials of cyberspace have been hotly debated since the Internet became a commercially viable option for millions of people worldwide in the mid-1990s. Initial responses to the Internet by feminists were largely negative. Suspicious of its military origins, and objecting to technology in general as a masculine tool of patriarchal oppression, feminists saw the Internet as yet another Boys’ Club that would suppress female forms of expression and being. In *Technofeminism*, Judy Wajcman writes that by the 1980s feminists had moved away from an insistence that more women should pursue equal opportunities in what were originally understood as the gender-neutral and empirical fields of science and technology; instead, they had begun to characterise Western science as “a masculine project of reason and objectivity, with women relegated to nature rather than culture” (18).

Many feminists who have concluded that technology is intrinsically patriarchal and oppressive point to the popularity of pornography on the Internet as definite proof that cyberspace is also male space, and thus automatically denies and represses women. So Donna Hughes states, “[t]he Internet industry will not admit to the pervasiveness of pornography on the Internet because it profits enormously from the pornography industry.
Web page owners, owners of search engines, and Internet Service Providers make a lot of money selling advertising for the sex industry are common” (Hughes 7). This article, like many others, automatically assumes that pornography intrinsically and necessarily degrades women, and that “the Internet industry” therefore condones their degradation and the general exploitation of women. Hughes uses ‘prostitution’ and ‘pornography’ as largely interchangeable terms and also makes the claim that “[t]he Internet industry exists today because of the prostitution industry” (7). Not only does this claim ignore the actual origins of the Internet as a militaristic communications network, it figures “the Internet industry” as one unified oppressive being, where, in actuality, the Internet is an immeasurably vast distributed network of interconnected points which contains discussion or reference to almost every conceivable activity or topic. Following the arguments of technophobic feminism, SuicideGirls.com could be read as nothing more than another exploitation of women by the technological tools of an aggressively anti-female patriarchal hierarchy. However, since SuicideGirls.com explicitly positions itself as a site with feminist aims, claiming it provides a voice, and thus subject status, for its models, a more complex reading is required.

Donna Haraway, in her visionary work, “A Cyborg Manifesto” argues against any simplistic “them versus us” reading of technology as the tool of patriarchy. Instead, Haraway argues for the development of the cyborg self, a creature of partiality and multiplicity, which rejects the fictions of wholeness and unity. Although Haraway wrote the “Manifesto” in 1985, fifteen years before SuicideGirls.com existed, the imagined cyborg self anticipates the multiple subjects found within the online personal journals of the Suicide Girls.

Haraway argues that “[b]y the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we
are cyborgs” (150). The cyborg she describes is “resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence” (151). She denounces fictions of unity and wholeness in the definition of woman, particularly Catherine MacKinnon’s “radical theory of experience” which constitutes woman’s identity as being formed from a "non-subject, a non-being" (159). Instead, she argues that “[t]here is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as ‘being’ female” (155). In contrast to theories that seek to deny or unite binary oppositions or fractured identities into a whole, Haraway argues that in the post-modern imagination, “[I]dentities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic” (155). The result is the cyborg: “a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self. This is the self feminists must code” (163).

Haraway’s view of this “disassembled and reassembled”, “collective and personal self” is an almost eerily accurate anticipation of the complex presentations of person and persona in the online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com. Her insistence that the cyborg self is “no longer structured by the polarity of public and private” and her replacement of the “hierarchical domination” of “Public/Private” with the “informatic of domination” of the Cybercitizen” (151; 161-2) seem to foresee the arrival of personal online journals. Personal journals, documents whose private status was often rigorously protected by social convention, have, in the cyberspace inhabited by Haraway’s cyborg chimeras, become public documents. However, these public journals are still distinctly marked by conventions, both social and syntactical, which also inform our conceptions of the traditional, “private” personal journal. Like the Suicide Girls, Haraway’s cyborgs are also writers: she argues “[w]riting is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century. Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning
perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism” (176). The body modifications displayed on the bodies of the Suicide Girls are a literal manifestation of these “etched surfaces”, coded messages of many possible readings. Moreover, the multiple, often contradictory, narratives the Suicide Girls etch into their intangible, public/private journals, appear at first glance the ultimate realisation of Haraway’s manifesto for the development of the cyborg self.

However, Haraway’s ideal cyborgs are fiercely self-aware of their chimerical, disassembled/reassembled nature, and evince an intellectual rigour and self-awareness that often appears to be lacking in the journals of the Suicide Girls. It is necessary to note, also, that while in the late twentieth century (and, presumably, early twenty-first century) “we” are all chimerical cyborgs, “we” are not necessarily all cyborg feminists. The cyborg feminist is not the product of a natural, easy process; she must be constructed and interrogated. Haraway continually emphasises the need for cyborg feminists to rigorously argue and examine the politics and possibilities of the cyborg self. She writes that “[c]yborg feminists have to argue that ‘we’ do not want any more natural matrix of unity and that no construction is whole” (157). So, Haraway not only posits the deconstruction of the natural whole in favour of the partial construct, but phrases this process as an ideological mission for feminists that will require determination and effort.

In the introduction to a collection of Haraway’s essays, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Haraway asks, “Can cyborgs, or binary oppositions, or technological vision hint at ways that the things many feminists have feared most can and must be refigured and put back to work for life and not death?” (4). It is clear that one cannot be born a cyborg feminist; one must work towards cyborg feminism. Haraway borrowed the phrase “inappropriate/d others” from Vietnamese film-maker and feminist theorist, Trinh T. Minh-ha for the title of the section of *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* in
which “Cyborg Manifesto” appears. She argues that “[Trinh’s] metaphors suggest a geometry for considering the relations of difference other than hierarchical domination, incorporation of “parts” into “wholes”, or antagonistic opposition. But her metaphors also suggest the hard intellectual, cultural, and political work these new geometries will require, if not from simians, at least from cyborgs and women” (3). While the online personal journals of the models of SuicideGirls.com often appear to present the fractured, partial cyborg selves Haraway theorises, few of the Suicide Girls (Tina and Olivia are notable exceptions) appear to adhere to the “hard intellectual, cultural, and political work” ethic that Haraway considers an ethical imperative for her cyborg feminists.

Haraway’s “Manifesto”, however anticipatory and prophetic it proved to be, is still clearly a product of its time, and a startingly optimistic response to the paranoia of the mid-1980s Star Wars fear. In the 1990s and new millenium, a new school of thought has emerged in which cyberspace is envisioned as a possible feminist utopia. Cyberfeminist Sadie Plant envisions a “technology without logos” where “[t]he metaphors for this new technology are drawn from women’s worlds” (Wajcman 64, author’s italics). Plant imagines cyberspace as a feminised terrain where the realspace disadvantages of women in a phallocentric society are neutralised or overturned. She is particularly determined that by utilising the new technologies and exploring cyberspace, women can demonstrate their agency in a territory where they will not be objectified. Plant writes that “[c]yberspace is out of man’s control: virtual reality destroys his identity …man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female and dangerous” (“On the Matrix” 181-182).

However, Plant’s utopian future feminist cyberspace appears to be only lightly rooted in the real activities and expressions of women in cyberspace, the actual mechanics of which she does not deeply examine. SuicideGirls.com, with its mission statement of
"empowered erotica", may well represent progress towards a "radically [recoded] pornographic consciousness", yet as a business centred in selling the image of the body (and, moreover, the young, conventionally attractive female body) it does not appear to represent an end-point in such a re-visioning (Wajcman 70). Subjectivity and objectification in the journals of the models of SuicideGirls.com appear to be more complex and potentially problematic than the utopian and triumphantly subversive female cyberspace envisioned by Plant would allow.

Women's life-writing on the internet is a topic that has hitherto largely been neglected by feminist theorists. Many literary and sociological studies since the second wave of feminism have concentrated on the topic of women's life-writing in the domain of realspace, mainly in the form of letters, autobiographies and personal journals, published or unpublished. These public and private narratives of women's experience have contributed immeasurably to establishing theoretical constructs of the female subject. However, although life-writing in a traditional format is considered a vital contribution to theorising the female subject, few theorists have specifically addressed women's life-writing on the internet. This lack is probably due to the relative recency of the phenomenon of blogging, which has only become accessible to most internet citizens in the years of the new millennium. However, feminist theorists have theorised that the experience of participation in cyberspace is metaphorically similar to the experience of performing the female subject.

Theorist Patricia Wise examines cyberspace as a technological manifestation of female subjectivity and the possibilities for the female subject in cyberspace (although not in life-writing) in her seminal article "Always Already Virtual: Feminist Politics in Cyberspace". Like Plant, Wise pictures cyberspace as a virtual, fractured space metaphorically identical to the fractured female subject of realspace. Wise posits that
feminists could be at an advantage in cyberspace, precisely because of what she terms the “already always virtual status” of women (187). She points out that “the ‘fantasy of reason’, like the fantasy of uninvolved sex, relies on the central tenet of the logos – that the mind and body are somehow separate entities, which is itself a fantasy. ... caught by the fantasy that male domination of realspace can be extended to dominations of cyberspace, phallocentric subjectivities are problematized” (182). To Wise, the male “I-identity” is compromised by cyberspace, since cyberspace, by virtue of its fractured distributed network, challenges the wholeness of a single, united subjectivity. Wise argues that the object-status for women in the dominate male logos, which disadvantages women in realspace, can actually be advantageous for women in cyberspace. Having been marginalised as almost but never quite men, always the invisible Other, women already possess a virtual experience that can advantage them in cyberspace. The shattered female subjectivity she describes, already accustomed to partiality, multiplicity and multiple literacies within the logocentric discourses, is far more suited to the necessarily fragmented partiality of cyberspace than is the fiction of the whole male subject.

Wise writes of the women’s position in postmodernism: “the difficulty for feminists . . . is that history has been declared dead before women got to be written back into its narrative and the subject has been buried before women got to be subjects” (183). However, she follows this pessimistic view with the inquiry: “Is the subject who is woman any longer possible? If so, where can she speak from? And will women be subjects in cyberspace, or in virtual communities?” (183). SuicideGirls.com administrators would argue that their site provides a cyberspace site from which the female subject can speak; but their arguments may ring hollow.

6. Intangibility, Destructibility and Silence: Mary and the “archive girls”
It may be advantageous for the female subject as performed on SuicideGirls.com to have access to a form of life-writing that echoes the multiplicity of voice and forms of feminine interaction found in performances of realspace female subjectivity. However, the personal online journals of SuicideGirls.com models exist in an intangible and intrinsically ethereal media, which carries in its existence the constant threat of annihilation and consequent invisibility. Invisibility, an unvoicing that has handicapped and threatened the female subject in realspace, is no less a threat to the female subject in cyberspace.

Unlike the traditional journal composed of paper and ink, or the printed autobiography that exists in volume form, personal online journals are totally intangible objects. Fundamentally composited from binary code, the invisible yes/no of cyberspace, they are projected onto a computer monitor as particles of light, visible, but untouchable. Essentially, the appearance of personal online journals on one’s screen is a feat of technowizardry. While the contents certainly exist in the ether of cyberspace, and while they are “real” expressed thoughts in the familiar language of sign and signifier, the intangibility of the “matter” of personal online journals renders them curiously fragile. Similarly, personal online journals can be composed, but not scribed, in the tangible sense of pen on paper. Copies of the journal entries can be printed out as tangible “hard copies”, but this is not how they were composed nor how they are intended to be consumed. While personal online journals are objects, in that they consist of reading “material”, the intangibility and mutability of these journals makes them closer in composition to the untouchable psyches of which they are a non-physical representation than the physical objectivity of paper journals or volume autobiographies. The
intangibility of personal online journals can be read as reflecting the intangibility of the subject as well as providing a space in which that subject can be performed.

However, the very intangibility of these journals makes them easy to destroy. When Suicide Girls leave the site, either by their own cognisance, or by administrator-enforced removal, their online personal journals are deleted from the site. The journals are replaced with the highlighted text “[Model’s name] is no longer active on SuicideGirls.com” (Hel). The photosets remain, and in the terminology of the site, the Suicide Girl in question then becomes an “archive girl”. The implications of archiving the now “silenced” photographs of the models while not archiving the journal entries already made by that model are disturbing. It appears that Missy’s claim that SuicideGirls.com gives a “voice” to the model is only valid for the term of that model’s employment on the site. The intangibility of Suicide Girls’ personal online journals aids the ease of their disappearance, which in turn contributes to an impression of these personal online journals as transient documentation. Once gone, it is as if the journal of a Suicide Girl had never been. Thus, the journals of SuicideGirls.com are fragile as well as potentially powerful; their presence in cyberspace as publicly available records gives the subjects presented in the journals an enormous potential audience, but their attempts to reach that audience can be easily negated by the complete and irrevocable deletion of those journals. The constant threat of this potential deletion is a threat implicit in the medium of the online personal journal and a threat made explicit by the SuicideGirls.com journals that have been already deleted from the site. That this threat has been carried out on numerous occasions, leaving only the silenced photosets of the “archive girls”, seriously compromises the SuicideGirls.com claim to “empowered erotica”. In removing the “voice” given to former Suicide Girls, but retaining the images of their bodies for access by paid members, SuicideGirls.com effectively removes the most important component of
the subject-position of the model. Without an online personal journal to contextualise the
photosets and provide a space for the voice of the model, her presence on
SuicideGirls.com is almost completely reduced to the photographs of her naked body.
Stripped of context, the photosets may well encourage a reading of the model as an
object, rather than a subject. In this context, deletion is a metaphorical death.

Perhaps the most intriguing journal on SuicideGirls.com is one that for some time,
did not exist. Mary is literally the face of SuicideGirls.com. A Suicide Girl from the
earliest days of the site, her face is on the site’s logo, which in turn appears on stickers,
the site’s branded clothing items, and on every photoset on SuicideGirls.com. She herself,
as of April 2005, is the star of 15 photosets (an extraordinarily large number), none of
which involve other Suicide Girls. Mary appears on the cover of the SuicideGirls book,
with the site logo prominently displayed as a tattoo on her arm. Yet, for several years, she
was the only model who maintained no journal on the SuicideGirls.com site and had no
profile besides her photosets. Not maintaining a journal would not be an unusual
circumstance on any conventional internet pornography site, and would be unlikely to be
remarked upon as a lack by its viewers. However, when juxtaposed against the journals of
every other Suicide Girl, Mary’s lack of the “voice” the other current Suicide Girls had
claimed, and the reaction of readers to it is extremely significant.

On Tuesday 1 January 2002, an entry was made in Mary’s journal which reads, in
its entirety: “Mary does not keep a journal on the site.” This one-line entry, as of 15
March 2005, had received 309 comments. Many of them remarked with dismay upon
Mary’s lack of journal and implored her to start keeping one. On 7 January 2005, Suicide
Girl Wren writes: For some reason, I always click on Mary expecting to read a journal
entry. And when I read "Mary does not keep a journal on the site" I'm dissappointed. I've
probably done it a hundred times.” (30 Jan. 2005). On 8 May 2004, member Gilgamosh
writes “mary does not keep a journal on this site? but i wish she would! please mary! journal yer self!” Several comments note that they would find the journal of Mary an added pleasure to their appreciation of the images of her body. Member ‘complainey’ writes:

    i really wish mary had a journal on the site and visited the boards. i wanna chat with her hardcore.

    her "sleeping" set..wowza. (5 June 2002)

The juxtaposition of the articulated desire for Mary’s journal with the expression of appreciation for the ‘Sleeping’ photoset indicates that for member complainey, Mary’s refusal to keep a journal is a lack, decreasing the pleasure s/he confidently expects from the “whole” picture of journal juxtaposed beside photosets. Member Weso articulates this sense of lack more explicitly: “If only I could find one as radiant as you. It would be even better if I could know if the beauty has brains to match, then you would be like nova to me.” (9 Sep. 2002). Weso already considers Mary’s physical beauty ‘radiant’, but requires knowledge of her “brains”, as articulated through her missing journal, in order to fully appreciate what s/he considers the hypothetical “nova” of Mary.

The wishes of these Suicide Girls and members were eventually fulfilled. In February 2005, Mary wrote a profile for herself and began keeping an online personal journal at SuicideGirls.com. Her first entry makes it clear that her earlier silence, in contrast with that of the “archive girls”, was entirely voluntary: “when a person has decided to be mute for so long it is not always easy to make a sound come out.” (4 Feb. 2005). She goes on to articulate why she chose to keep silent, and why, eventually, she chose to speak:

    but suddenly here i am creating a journal on SG for the first time. those who've been around a while know this is a strange thing, the simplest explanation
is that from the beginning i never wanted to be considered famous for my image, i
wanted it to be for something unique and intelligent and personal that i DID or
created. i thought if i let myself get really involved in this, it might make me
wonder someday whether or not any success i may have was coming from a
source that i wanted it to come from. now i see it a little differently, it seems that
by not keeping a journal i am sending out "just an image" even more!! at least if
you are going to be known, its nice to be known a bit more for who you are, i
think.

so hello, i am mary. i've already put a bunch of my interests in neat little
boxes. like i said im not so sure how to go about expressing myself to the world,
but i love to write, so eventually, hopefully, it will fall into place.

Mary's articulates the opinion that keeping silent encouraged an objectifying view of her
as "just an image". Intriguingly, she apparently does not consider posing for the photosets
of SuicideGirls.com as "something unique and intelligent and personal that [she] DID or
created". By thus disowning uniqueness, intelligence and her personal agency in the
creation of the photosets, Mary's journal denies the claims of the site that its models have
full control over their image and that its "erotica" is "empowering". Indeed, to "go about
expressing [herself] to the world" and "be known a bit more for who [she is]", Mary
suggests that she must mitigate the effect of her photosets by keeping a journal. In true
cyborg feminist fashion, her way of expressing herself to the world is to write.

Without a journal, Mary was an unknown quality, and attained a certain iconic
status of mysterious allure. However, she appears to agree with her admirers: a silent
Suicide Girl lacks personality and agency. Mary's decision to speak and her articulated
reasons for so doing thus further highlight the hypocrisy of maintaining the photosets of
the "archive girls" while deleting the journals which were formerly juxtaposed beside
them. The “archive girls”, whose silence is compulsory and retroactive, if not necessarily involuntary, cannot, like Mary did, choose to speak. Their photosets are forever “just an image”, always lacking, and much more available to objectification than the photosets of current Suicide Girls, who have some opportunity at expressing their subjectivity to their audience.

While the utopian idealism of earlier cyberfeminist theory is occasionally unrealistic when applied directly to the experiences of women in cyberspace, Wise’s more practically grounded notions that cyberspace itself may echo ways of being already experienced by the female subject appears more applicable to the online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com. Both the content and the form of the online personal journals of the SuicideGirls.com models appear to parallel the fractured, partial subject with multiple voices of the realspace female subject. The journals, freed from the limitations of realspace publishing, encompass methods of performing the subject available only in cyberspace. The personal journals of SuicideGirls.com allow for multiple, fractured subjectivities expressing themselves through a medium that is immediate and allows for the interactivity of “gossip”. They thus appear to be well suited to a performance of the female subject; the process and product of life-writing in cyberspace more closely conform to the experience of performing the female subject in realspace than the tangible, inalterable presence of life-writing in realspace. The SuicideGirls.com journal is thus a way of writing female subjectivities that echoes ways of being for the female subject.

However, while the fractured multiplicity of cyberspace may be more familiar to female subjects than the phallocentric certainty of the realspace male I-dentity, there is a threat posed by the intangibility and possible destruction of the journals espousing those subjects. This threat may seriously compromise a reading of the SuicideGirls.com as a performance of the female subject in cyberspace as advantageous for women as the
possibilities Wise envisages. She writes, "[b]ecause of their experience in the modern, in
the real, women are perfectly placed for cyber-citizenry," and goes on to dismiss the
possibility that "feminists [would be] dislocated by what Baudrillard calls the 'trompe
l'oeil' effect of postmodern technologies, in which an 'undermining of the privileged
position of the gaze means that the subject becomes the object…" (191). Is it not just as
possible that women in cyberspace, accustomed to objectification, would translate that
objectification to their presentations in cyberspace?

Have the models, administrators and members of SuicideGirls.com taken
advantage of their cybercitizenry and the appropriateness of their media of
communication to forward feminism and "empowered erotica"? Do they work at
becoming cyborg feminists and responsible cybercitizens? Or do they merely repeat the
objectification of women and disempowerment of the female subject so rife in realspace?
Haraway’s "Cyborg Manifesto", is "an argument for pleasure in the confusion of
boundaries and for responsibility in their construction" (150, author’s italics).
SuicideGirls.com clearly gives and takes pleasure and makes money from its confusion of
boundaries; any responsibility it takes for their construction and de-construction is much
less evident in the site.
Endnotes

1 The Suicide Girls assume one-word names as part of their presentation of their personas on the site. Some models use their own first name, or a variation on their own name, whereas others choose a pseudonym. Since this thesis is concerned with the content of the journals as articulated by those personas, I have chosen to accept the names as given, and have indicated the few cases where distinction from the name of the “real” person and the SuicideGirls.com persona is relevant.

2 In quoting from the online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com, I have in the main refrained from following the convention of [sic] to label spelling, punctuation or grammatical errors as the original writer’s own. Many extracts contain so many errors of this type that to mark them in this manner would greatly decrease ease of comprehension. Accordingly, the reader may assume that all technical errors in quotes from the personal online journals of SuicideGirls.com are faithfully reproduced.

3 Emoticons (“emotional icons”) are small pictures meant to represent an emotion or an expression; a smiling face for happiness, a teary one for sadness. In internet interactions, much of the emotional context that body language and vocal tone lend to other media of communication is necessarily missing. In an attempt to provide this context, emoticons were invented. They are often utilised by Suicide Girls in their journals, and I have therefore attempted to translate them as closely as possible into words.

4 Corset pieces are increasingly popular piercings in the fetish and BDSM scenes. They are usually performed as a show or demonstration, and are meant to be temporary piercings. As Shannon Larratt, editor of Body Modification Ezine, points out, surface ring piercings, like Dyme’s, “will at best fail as anything but a play piercing, and at worst leave the customer with serious and permanent unsightly scars.” Despite this, “if you read
people’s stories in BME’s archives, most *want* them to be permanent” (“Seriously, WTF? Start Doing Corset Piercings Properly”, author’s italics).

While all the LiveJournal.com administrators have livejournals and there are myriad “LJ Support” and “LJ News” journals, none of these administrators are described as “LiveJournallers”. Rather, they are described as “having a livejournal”. The Suicide Girls are always denoted as “Suicide Girls”, not as “having Suicide Girl journals”. For LiveJournal.com staff, having an online journal is something they *do*; for Suicide Girls, having an online personal journal is representative of what they *are*.

Holkins also goes by the pseudonym “Tycho Brahe”. His co-creator, Mike Krahulik, goes by the name of “Johnathan Gabriel” or “Gabe”.

In the era of computer-composed texts, writing with pen and paper may soon be the near-exclusive domain of traditional personal journals.
Chapter Two: Riot, Suicide and Style: Alternative Culture as Pro-Feminist Pornography?

1. Introduction: Subculture, Style and Suicide Girls

The site maintainers of SuicideGirls.com position the “alternative” youth subcultures of punk and goth as rationale for the site’s purported “empowerment” and use elements of their style to disassociate the site from mainstream pornography. The site’s title bar describes the site as “Pin-Up Punk Rock and Goth Girls”. Missy, the creator of SuicideGirls.com, announces that “SuicideGirls is empowered erotica, a place where girls outside of mainstream culture can make the case that rebellion, a unique personal style and nonconformity are far sexier than anything you will see in mainstream pornography” (Sascha 3). Both punk and goth, which is the strongest contemporary post-punk subculture, emphasise the importance of anti-mainstream ideology and creativity and have visually distinct styles. The most immediately apparent visual element of punk style on SuicideGirls.com is confrontational body modification. Body modification is visible in the photosets of every model. Nipple piercings and facial piercings, including eyebrow, tongue and multiple ear piercings, are especially common forms of body modification in the photosets. Tattoos are also very common, including large tattoos over the breastbone (“chest pieces”) and large images or patterns (“arm bands”). Several models have tattoos enscribed upon the skin of their pubis or breasts, providing a visual emphasis on their primary and secondary sexual organs which can be read as both a deliberately shocking desecration or a proud emphasis of the insistently female body. Most models display both
tattoos and piercings and many models have more than one example of each on their bodies.

As cultural theorist and semeiotician Dick Hebdige points out in "Hiding in the Light: Youth Surveillance and Display", young people use subcultural style to play with the "only power at their disposal: the power to discomfort" (18). Hebdige argues that "in our society, youth is present only when its presence is a problem" (17). Subcultural style is not playing dress up or simply a method of displaying one's group allegiance: deliberate style shock is a tactic in itself, threatening to disrupt the fictions of order in the mainstream. From this perspective, the "unique personal style" and "nonconformity" of the Suicide Girls is another weapon in this war against mainstream placidity.

Assuming punk or goth style is a near-essential component of participating in punk or goth culture. In *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture* Paul Hodkinson points out how goth dress style is a distinct and identifying characteristic of goth identity, acting as the "practical basis for the distinctions they [draw] between insiders and outsiders", and is one of the most integral parts of that group identity (62). Missy's portrayal of the ideal Suicide Girl in the introduction to the *SuicideGirls* book, where she describes the ideal her by what she wears, reads and listens to, is a perfect example of the identification process Hodkinson describes. Youth subcultural movements such as punk, punk's subgroup, the Riot Grrrl movement, and goth, all claim disdain for "mainstream" culture, and favour non-conformity and personal freedom, articulated visually as "individual" and "unique" style. However, that individuality is heavily stylised in the form of clothing choices and treasured possessions. While calling these style choices a uniform would be an exaggeration, the styles of these alternative subcultures are easily recognizable as representative of these subcultures. Although some punks and goths argue that their subcultures are more musically or politically orientated than dependent on their
distinctive visual style, it is the clothing, body modifications and possessions of the punk or goth girl that most immediately identify her as part of that subcultural group.

Significantly, both punk and goth use dress style and body modification to challenge traditional stereotypes of feminine behaviour. Hepdige writes “[t]hese girls disrupt the image-flow. They play back images of women as icons, women as the Furies of classical mythology. They make the s-m matrix strange. They skirt round the voyeurism issue, flirt with masculine curiosity but refuse to submit to the masterful gaze” (28). Subcultural style that sets out to shock is an even more effective tactic for women, since they are generally held to stricter mainstream cultural standards of “appropriate” dress than men. Lucy O’Brien writes in “The Woman Punk Made Me” that “women [understand] the need for a visual vocabulary. Women are so regularly evaluated in physical terms, it is hardly surprising that much of the gender battle takes place in terms of image” (189). For women especially, style represents self, and can be a valuable weapon in the fight to establish themselves as subjects.

On SuicideGirls.com, where exposure of the “self” is supposed to trump the usual criticisms of pornography as objectifying women for the male gaze, there is a strong focus upon some stylistic elements of punk and goth. A “personal” style that conforms to punk and goth visual standards is essential for Suicide Girls. The possession of tattoos and body piercings are de rigueur for SuicideGirls.com models, and appear to be an unwritten condition of acceptance into this “anti-mainstream” group. Would-be Suicide Girls must look the part in order to be accepted as models. However, although the personal online journals of SuicideGirls.com allow models to express their politics, ideals or musical tastes (often interconnected), an ideological allegiance to punk or goth articulated through their journals is not compulsory. The application form on the website includes the question “Why do you want to be a Suicide Girl?” with a text box which
potential models must fill in. The form includes an open description of what the administrators are looking for: “SuicideGirls are unique, strong, sexy and confident women” (“Model”). Such an open description of the ideal Suicide Girl could be seen as a sign that SuicideGirls.com is open to a wide range of possible sources of female beauty. However, this is manifestly untrue: the site’s dominate body aesthetic is young, white and slender. The unwritten criteria of selection therefore centre around the descriptor “sexy”, described in SuicideGirls.com rhetoric as “rebellion, a unique personal style and nonconformity”. Visual evidence for these traits appears to be the only evidence required: a Suicide Girl has body modifications and is willing to pose nude; therefore, she is a non-conforming rebel with “unique personal style”, regardless of what she writes in her journal or articulates in message boards.

Many models do articulate allegiance to goth or punk ideals in their journals, and write of participation in subcultural activities outside body modification and style choices. However, it is the stylistic elements of those subcultures that receive the greater emphasis on SuicideGirls.com; indeed their acceptance as models hinges upon them, regardless of ideological opinions. Models are permitted to “speak” mainstream, but are very unlikely to become models if they project a mainstream style. Despite the potential value of “alternative” style as a source of empowerment, SuicideGirls.com’s claims to “empowered”, non-objectifying erotica are thus problematised: if a model’s individuality, agency and subjectivity are assumed mainly or solely from the presentation of a set of stylistic choices; if the object of her body is privileged as the most important articulation of her ideal, is she not then objectified? Does the site’s incorporation of stylistic elements of punk and goth support the site’s claim to ‘empowerment’, or is it merely hypocritical lip service to the “anti-mainstream”? 
2. “Pin-Up Punk-Rock Girls”: Re-Sexualising Anti-Sex Style

“Punk”, as Roger Sabin writes in his introduction to the collected book of essays *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk* is “a notoriously amorphous concept” (2). However, he nonetheless attempts a definition:

[W]e can say punk was/is a subculture best characterised as being part youth rebellion, part artistic statement. It had its high point from 1976 to 1979, and was most visible in Britain and America. It had its primary manifestation in music … Philosophically, it had no ‘set agenda’ … but nevertheless stood for identifiable attitudes, among them: an emphasis on negationism (rather than nihilism); a consciousness of class-based politics…; and a belief in spontaneity and ‘doing it yourself’. (2-3)

This definition accurately summarises the nature, historical high point, manifestation, and attitudes of punk. It is a definition, however, that excludes what many - especially outsiders - would consider the most instantly recognisable element of punk: punk style. Punk style, according to Daniel Wojcik, was “a coherent and elaborate system of body adornment that expressed their estrangement from mainstream society and that horrified the general public” (11). Wojcik considers punk style a direct expression of punk’s dominant attitudes of despair and negationism (which he distinguishes from nihilism), and a political statement in itself: “By manipulating the standard codes of adornment in socially objectionable ways, punks challenged the accepted categories of everyday dress and disrupted the codes and conventions of daily life” (12). Punk style was, perhaps ironically, characterised by an “anti-fashion” aesthetic which “privileged the “flawed” and “rejected”” (Wojcik 15). By embracing, for both men and women, elaborate and dyed hairstyles, heavy make-up, body modifications such as home-made piercings and tattoos
and a multitude of clothing styles which embodied aggression, dirt and the literal deconstruction of garments, punk style openly challenged the mainstream ideals of beauty and fashion.

In Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Hebdige describes punk style as "defined principally by the violence of its 'cut ups'" (106). He particularly emphasises as a distinctive mark of punk style the inclusion of items considered inappropriate as clothing or accessories, such as tampons, razor blades and chains. Early punk style embodied contradiction and rupture, and through its deliberately constructed "(un)fashion", exposed the just as false 'natural' style of 'normal' dress. Hebdige notes that "Conventional ideas of prettiness were jettisoned along with the traditional feminine lore of cosmetics. Contrary to the advice of every woman's magazine, make-up for both boys and girls was worn to be seen" (107). Most models on SuicideGirls.com display this sort of emphasized make-up, worn not to subtly enhance features, but to be a stylistic feature in itself. However, few SuicideGirls.com photosets display the "inappropriate" dress items or deliberate anti-fashion constructions of the punks. Instead, despite some unique variations in body modification, the photosets are remarkably similar, restricted by narrow aesthetic standards of 'beauty' and usually following the same limited narrative of the strip-tease. Hebdige points out that in terms of punk style, "the subculture was nothing if not consistent" (114). However, alongside punk's distinct, if varied, style was an adamant refusal to countenance permanent signifiers: "the forbidden is permitted, but by the same token, not even these forbidden signifiers (bondage, safety pins, chains, hair-dye, etc.) is sacred and fixed" (115). SuicideGirls.com's endorsement of a distinct visual style that scarcely varies from photoset to photoset is in direct contradiction with this key punk attitude. Without variety, without deliberate and jarring integration of "un-fashion", SuicideGirls.com's allegiance to "punk" style appears to be a weak one. According to
Hebdige’s theories of punk style, the only elements of SuicideGirls.com’s style that might be considered genuinely punk are the body modifications that appear on the models and the site’s appropriation of fetish clothing. However, both of these elements do deserve serious consideration when examining SuicideGirls.com’s claim to represent “alternative” youth subcultures.

3. Inside/Outside the Corset: Dyme, Body Modification, and the Subject as Fetish-Object

It is not surprising that a pornographic site that claims “empowerment” on behalf of its members incorporates elements of punk and goth style in its look. These styles often appropriate clothing material and styles associated with prostitutes, fetishism and pornography; Hebdige describes sexual “kinkiness” as “that other great punk signifier” (121). However, punk (and to a lesser extent, goth) use these fetishistic styles in a visually aggressive assault upon mainstream taboos and assumptions about female sexuality and sexual freedom. Wojcik characterises this confrontational dress style as anti-romantic: “punk women for the most part rejected established notions of feminine beauty, mocking sexist stereotypes through exaggeration, inversion and parody” (15, 16).

In her study of the relationship between fetish wear and fashion, *Fetish: Fashion, Sex & Power*, fashion historian Valerie Steele makes special mention of the female punk fashion of wearing bras and girdles as outerwear. She argues that in so doing, “punks subversively reappropriated the much maligned symbols of sexual repression” (136). Body modifications, such as the tattoos and piercings displayed on the bodies of almost every SuicideGirls.com model, can also be interpreted as a reaction against mainstream culture’s taboos against the “defilement” of the body and the self-imposed infliction of pain. Whereas visible underwear, boots, and even the name “punk” were all once
signifiers that a woman was sexually promiscuous and probably a prostitute, they have been reappropriated by punk style as an aggressive challenge to such assumptions. Punk style reacts against mainstream assumptions of style, sex and the female body by openly displaying heavily sexualized style items at the same time it eschews sex and romanticism. By utilising elements of punk style such as body modifications and fetish wear in the creation of their SuicideGirls.com personas in the context of a commercial pornographic website, SuicideGirls.com models can be seen as similarly challenging mainstream assumptions about pornography. Punk thus becomes a possible source of the site’s claimed “empowerment”. However, the process of reappropriating punk style as a stylistic gloss of a pornographic text problematises claims to “empowerment”, as it refigures as sexually attractive clothing choices that punk itself had defiantly de-sexualised.

Punk women challenge the categories of “bad girls” and “good girls” defined by the Madonna/whore dichotomy so central to pornographic discourse. In the misogynistic, patriarchal pornographic discourse, only “bad girls” willingly take part in pornography, and therefore objectifying them is acceptable. Having transgressed societal taboos by participating in sexually explicit material, “bad girls” can be viewed and used as the dirty objects they are. Sometimes in pornographic narratives, as in the Marquis de Sade’s Justine, overtly “good girls” are revealed to be very “bad” indeed. According to common pornographic discourse, even the most pure of “good girls” could be a “bad girl” in disguise, just waiting for the right opportunity to demonstrate her availability as a sexual object. By appropriating “bad girl” wear into their everyday style, punk women acknowledge that the “bad girl”/”good girl” assumption exists, but attack its validity. The “bad girl look” Wojcik describes is sexually explicit, but confrontational and aggressive rather than seductive. It is a style that confronts and attacks stereotypes.
The journal of Dyme reveals one particular body modification that appears to incorporate the aesthetic and confrontational attitudes of punk style and develop them further by incorporating them into her body. She reinterprets a particularly restrictive piece of traditional feminine wear, the corset, as a body modification that could be read as symbolising female sexual freedom. The entry of 28 June 2004 begins with a picture of a piercing piece. The piece, called a "corset piece", consists of two sets of six rings, resembling the eyelets of a corset, inserted in her lower back, under the shoulder blades. The rings are set in two lines with a slight inclined angle towards the waist so that the two lines of rings become closer together by the time they reach the base of her back. The piece is finished off by a wide black ribbon, which ties the rings together in a criss-cross pattern that ends in a large bow at the base of her back. This "corset piece", as implied by the name, mimics a corset, a garment with a long history in female fashion. In the past, corsets have symbolised the literal pains women will go to in order to conform to a masculine view of "proper" feminine shape. It is not surprising that feminists have reviled the corset; when worn by women, a corset is literally a constriction of the female body, restricting movement, breath, and reportedly in some cases, the natural positioning of bones and internal organs. The early feminist Kate Sheppard was "a determined advocate of the abolition of such restrictive devices" as the effects of corset-wearing, particularly tight-lacing, were thought to be physically dangerous (NZedge.com, Heroes. "Sheppard"). Although Steele argues, after exhaustive research, that the physical dangers of corsets were greatly exaggerated, corsets - and later bras - were also seen as symbolic of the patriarchal restriction of the female body, and many feminists rejected them as a symbolic action of empowerment (58). The rejection of the corset and its descendents reached its high point in the symbolic burning of bras and girdles in the late 60s and early 70s hippy movement. O'Brien describes "the slinging of bras and girdles into the
Freedom Trashcan at the 1968 Miss America Contest” as part of the visual gender battle of style she theorises (188).

The next stage of this gender battle, as found in punk style, was an ironic and aggressive reappropriation of the corset. This reappropriation was in part a reaction against the feminist hippy movement, which rejected feminine foundations garments as both physically and symbolically restrictive. Punks generally despised hippies as “the enemy”, and using bras, girdles and corsets as outerwear not only confronted societal stylistic conventions, but demonstrated their disdain for hippies (Wojcik 13). Steele believes that the “hard and ‘nasty’ side” of such garments formed much of the appeal, as opposed to the soft and flowing lingerie of hippies (136). As the punks were aware, the corset is also a common fetish object, and is particularly popular in the BDSM “scene”, where it is worn by dominants as rigid armour and laced onto submissives as “punishment”. In the context of fetishism, the corset can be read as a highly loaded symbol of transgression and perversion. The confrontational aspect of punks reappropriating the corset and its style descendents as outerwear lies partly in that it forces that symbol of transgression and perversion into the public eye, as visible transgression against the public discourse of style. Although punk style often utilised elements of dress from both “mainstream” lingerie and the BDSM scene, most members of punk subculture were, if not anti-sex, certainly against the romanticism of sexual relationships. Punk women were not wearing corsets to look or feel sexually attractive, but to confront dominant notions of what constitutes sexually attractive appearance and behaviour in women.

Dyme’s corset piece is a further step in feminist interaction with the corset and is a symbolically dense body modification carrying several interlocked messages. Dyme has reappropriated the corset in a way that connects with punk style “mutilation”. However,
her corset piece creates a slightly different dialogue between itself and her body than the traditional relationship between the corset and the female body. The corset piece is not applied externally to her body, either under or over her clothes, but has been attached to her body's natural outer covering, the skin. The corset piece is not necessarily a permanent body modification. Indeed, most corset pieces are meant to be temporary, which reportedly causes some disappointment to many of those who have them inserted. However, although the insertion of the rings was presumably painful (in the picture, the skin around the rings is inflamed and bruised) the corset piece does not restrict movement in the same fashion as a conventional corset and will almost certainly have no effect on her internal organs. This corset piece is then both more and less transformative of the female body than the traditional corset. While the actual physical impact of the piece is relatively minor, the piece is extremely powerful in visual terms. The restrictive and symbolic power of corset imagery has been incorporated into Dyme’s own body, making her body integral to O’Brien’s “visual vocabulary” of the “gender battle” of image, not merely the site of that battle. The image of the corset piece in Dyme’s journal could be read as a defeat of the female body. The corset has been assimilated into the body, and this “mutilation” of the female body could be viewed as a triumph for a patriarchal instrument of oppression. However, the corset piece image in Dyme’s journal can also be read as a confrontation of societal taboos surrounding the female body as defiant as any shock to the “system” delivered by punk women wearing bras outside their clothes.

Unlike early punks, however, Dyme displays the image of her corset piece in the context of an explicitly sexual setting. The picture of the corset piece is embedded in a journal situated on the website of a successful internet pornography business and the text of the journal entry confirms a reading of the image as a statement on sexuality. Immediately after the picture Dyme writes: “So this is what i spent doing friday night at a
BDSM show here @ a huge sex shop called The Adult Super Fun Store. There were other vendors there with clothing leather and all kinds of goodies for the bedroom or wherever you like to get kinky... [wink emoticon]”. By contextualising the construction of the corset piece as the outcome of a BDSM show, Dyme demonstrates that the “punk” aesthetic of SuicideGirls.com is somewhat divorced from the style movement that eschewed sexual attractiveness in favour of sexual shock value.3 While those elements of exposing destruction and desecration of the body (especially the female body) are still present in Dyme’s corset piece, the piece is meant to be enhance sexual attraction at the same time it shocks. Dyme’s position as a SuicideGirls.com model is based upon the assumption that she is sexually attractive, and the image of the corset piece, contextualised by the knowledge that it was acquired at a BDSM show, situates the sexual attractiveness of her body as conscious and constructed. The construction of the corset as part of her skin situates the corset as both sexually attractive and shocking. This journal entry can be read as a statement that the corset, formerly demonised as restrictive and repressive, is both sexually attractive and a statement of female empowerment. The journal entry functions as Dyme’s proclamation of her freedom to do what she wants with her body: she is so free to express her sexuality that she can transform her own body into a symbol that has, in the past, stood for the constriction of both the female body and female sexual freedom as realised through that body.

Dyme’s corset piece is both a parody and a celebration of a corset, transforming the maligned corset into a form that is more expressive than repressive. Moreover, it is playfully ironic, still shocking to societal conventions, but with the added allure of sex appeal. The journal entry marries the confrontational aspect of body modification with the sexual connotations of BDSM, presenting an oddly attractive challenge. One interpretation is that Dyme’s journal breaks new ground in the “visual vocabulary” of the
“gender battle”, and aptly demonstrates how it is possible for the impact of SuicideGirls.com’s subcultures to mould the traditionally misogynistic genre of pornography into a form of feminist challenge and exploration of female sexual freedom.

However, the image of Dyme’s corset piece also re-sexualises and commodifies a punk style that was originally anti-commercial in its do-it-yourself attitude and adamantly anti-sexual in its aggressive reappropriation of lingerie and fetish wear. While Dyme opens interesting possibilities for new ideas of the interaction between the female body, style and subculture, by setting this journal image in a site that commodifies sexual expression, she also risks objectification as a “bad girl” for sale.

4. Riot Grrrls and Suicide Girls: Body Image, Sex Appeal and Exclusivity at SuicideGirls.com

Although punk is still a strong subcultural presence, punk’s high point is widely acknowledged to have been in the late 70s. Sabin notes that “[m]ost accounts take the termination date to be 1979” with the death of Sid Vicious, of seminal punk band the Sex Pistols, serving as “a symbolic full-stop” (3). 4 However, before its demise, punk spawned several subcultures closely related in their anti-authoritarian attitudes and a scorn for anything and everything that was mainstream. Punk itself was never a feminist moment; any concrete and united “punk” ideology was impossible to accurately discern, and some punks were viciously macho and misogynistic. However, O’Brien notes punk’s impact on the women’s movement: “What survived, though, and continued to evolve long after the mediated version was pronounced dead, was punk’s meaning for women. … [Punk] still has an impact on the way women operate, not just in music, but culture generally” (197). Several of the subcultures descended from punk do have a definite ideological basis.
Some of these subcultures are noticeably pro-feminist, or include feminist attitudes in their general ideology.

SuicideGirls.com’s most immediate subcultural stylistic influence is not “pure” punk, but the Riot Grrrl movement, which does promote feminism and feminist ideals. Riot Grrrl, as the name indicates, is a female-only movement, and its adaptation of punk style for women, by women, is a crucial mark of what it means to be a post-modern “Punk-Rock Girl”. Riot Grrrl style is ideologically rooted in the notion that women should be free to demonstrate their agency by dressing how they wish, whether this is considered socially appropriate or not. This philosophy of style appears to be closely related to SuicideGirls.com’s argument that its models’ independence and “unique” style foster their empowerment.

The Riot Grrrl movement began as a reaction to the violent, macho mosh pits of the late 70s punk scene. Although women had been heavily involved in the early punk movement on both sides of the Atlantic, they quickly found themselves literally marginalised. Participation in the mosh-pit became increasingly dangerous for women as violence against women, threatened or actual, became an increasing feature of the punk scene. As Jennifer Miro of The Nuns puts it: “There were a lot of women in the beginning. It was women doing things. Then it became this whole macho anti-women thing. Then women didn’t go to see punk bands anymore because they were afraid of getting killed. I didn’t even go because it was so violent and so macho that it was repulsive. Women just got squeezed out” (Northrup . . . AND THEN THERE’S THE REVOLUTION: Riot Grrrls and Women in Rock). In a reaction to the misogynist hostility and ‘macho’ violence often found in punk, the Riot Grrrl movement was formed.

Modern Riot Grrrls owe much of their style to earlier female adherents of punk culture in the late 70s and early 80s. Like early punk women, Riot Grrrls consciously
dressed against stereotypical notions of feminine beauty. Unlike early punk women, however, the Riot Grrrl style’s confrontation of taboos of femininity appears to lie in its often explicitly sexually enticing nature. According to Wojcik, Riot Grrrls have “an affinity for little-girl dresses or a schoolgirl look.” (25) He argues that by combining these “little-girl” elements of dress with more aggressive or non-conventionally feminine elements of dress like Doc Martens or work boots and fishnet stockings, Riot Grrrls create “an overtly sexual style [that] parody stereotypes of women that portray them as innocent, dainty and timid” (26). Wojcik argues that this style “inverts and mocks dominant ideas about femininity in a manner similar to the ‘bad girl look’ employed by earlier punk women” (26). The Bikini Kill zine (produced by the Riot Grrrl band of the same name) states: “Being [a] sexy and powerful female is one of the most subversive projects of all” (Northrup Appendix B). Within this frame of reference, the deliberate titillation of SuicideGirls.com’s photosets can be therefore read not as exploitative of the models as objects, but as expressive of their Riot Grrrl status as subversive “sexy and powerful female[s]”.

However, SuicideGirls.com does not comply with the Riot Grrrl open and aggressively all-inclusive celebration of the female sexuality. It is true that most Suicide Girls project aggressive delight in their sexuality in their photosets, which usually follow the limited linear narrative of the strip-tease. Also, even with their clothes off, the sub-cultural antecedents for SuicideGirls.com models are obvious; body modification is a central component of punk and Riot Grrrl style. Through the piercings and tattoos that are de rigueur for SuicideGirls.com models, twinned with an aggressive display of sexuality, they can maintain a claim to Riot Grrrl style sensibility. SuicideGirls.com appears to fail on one pivotal point of Riot Grrrl (and punk) ideology; it operates under a philosophy of exclusivity, selecting models from a pool fed by what the business itself reports as “over
two hundred applications a week” (“Model”). Moreover, this philosophy appears to perpetuate an idealised and conventional Western standard of feminine beauty. This exclusivity, based on narrow aesthetic criteria of “beauty”, is absolutely opposed to the purported all-embracing nature of the Riot Grrrl movement.

The inclusiveness of the Riot Grrrl movement is indicated by this (perhaps naively optimistic) mission statement:

EVERY GRRRL IS A RIOT GRRRL. All you need is a healthy dose of pissed-off-ness at the treatment of womyn in our society. We are NOT all punk, all white, all lesbians, all musicians/zine editors/vegetarians/victims of abuse/straight edge.

There is no "stereotypical” Riot Grrrl. And there is no "hierarchy." You don’t need our permission to be an "official" Riot Grrrl. You don’t need us to set up an "official" Riot Grrrl chapter. (Soccio, “From Girl to Woman to Grrrl: (Sub)Cultural Intervention and Political Activism in the Time of Post-Feminism.”)

Yet, although every girl “with a healthy dose of pissed-offness” can be a Riot Grrrl, not every Riot Grrrl can be a Suicide Girl. The site’s application form cites that Suicide Girls are “unique, strong, sexy and confident women”. Therefore, according to the site’s assessment of model application numbers, less than 3.5 percent of applicants are “unique, strong, sexy and confident”. The administrators do not select not “every grrrl” for the site, but whatever potential models fit the criteria of being the “best”, assuring the most traffic, and maximum profitability for the site. The criteria for selection are clearly based upon the physical beauty of those models. That this “beauty” is assessed by models’ adherence to a limited Western aesthetic of the slim and even-featured woman as ideally beautiful casts severe doubt upon the site’s claims to be a site of “empowered erotica”.

Contrary to the ideals of beauty promulgated through the mainstream fashion industry, the size of a Riot Grrrl’s body does not necessarily impose limits on her fashion
choices. As Linder (self-described “art terrorist” and lead singer of the all-female band Ludus) explains of the punk women who became Riot Grrrls: “There were lots of... women over Size 12, daring to wear fantastic clothes... A lot of the women weren’t “ideal” prizes, but they had small skirts on if they wanted. Punk was about being looked at, creating a temporary celebrity. There was something glorious about all those shapes and sizes of bodies on show” (O’Brien 191). Indeed, part of the shock value of the female punk and Riot Grrrl aesthetic could be found in marrying overtly sexual dress styles with body types not considered sexually attractive by mainstream standards of beauty. However, most of the “bodies on show” at SuicideGirls.com are more readily identifiable with the body type found in mainstream fashion magazines than with the exuberant variety of female body types found in the Riot Grrrl and punk scene. The Suicide Girls are mainly white and young, with regular features, and, most noticeably, nearly all of them are well-proportioned and slender. Although some Suicide Girls are curvier than others, there is certainly no sense of “all those shapes and sizes of bodies on show” Just as in mainstream fashion and pornographic discourse, slenderness is privileged as aesthetically and sexually attractive on SuicideGirls.com. So, while I argue that the online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com facilitate a multiplicity of subject-positions within the same site, this is not matched by a multiplicity of female physical types in the photosets juxtaposed beside those journals. The absence of larger women from SuicideGirls.com implies that larger women and other body types or features not considered conventionally attractive are not “unique, strong, sexy and confident”. SuicideGirls.com thus contradicts the inclusive “EVERY GRRL IS A RIOT GRRL” philosophy while claiming “empowerment” through its identification with punk.

The administrators and models of SuicideGirls.com are not unaware of this apparent compromise of their avowed feminist principles. Olivia, who is both a model
and a full-time “Techie” for the site, began a thread on this apparent contradiction between rhetoric and reality in the Feminists forum of the site’s community message boards, entitled “how does sg make you feel?” She explains that she has been “reading [Naomi Wolf’s] the beauty myth and she’s talking about softcore pornography and how it serves to make women feel bad about ourselves, like we don’t measure up to an idealised version of ‘perfection’” (1). She then goes on to articulate that SuicideGirls.com “actually made me feel better about my body” (1). Olivia writes that:

looking at all the bodies on here and hearing girls talk about what they deem to be flaws about themselves brought me to the great shuddering realisation that all bodies are completely perfect, wonderful and amazing and by extension my body is completely perfect, wonderful and amazing. (1)

She then concludes the post with a request for others’ input: “I’m interested in hearing if it has affected anyone in any way, positive or negative.”

The topic proves to be very popular, reaching five pages of discussion. Many respondents express a similar realisation about the “perfection” of their own bodies, although curiously, this appreciation of the beauty of their bodies, like Olivia’s, seems to arise from other women expressing dissatisfaction with the perceived flaws of their own bodies. SuicideGirls.com model Morgan writes “I could see how all these beautiful girls dislike parts of their bodies, too. If these women who I find completely perfect can feel badly about certain parts of their body, maybe my feelings are crazy too” (1). If the models in question had not expressed misgivings about their bodies – if they had already come to the “the great shuddering realisation that all bodies are completely perfect, wonderful and amazing” – the other women who relied upon their complaints to appreciate their own bodies would have been left dissatisfied. Morgan’s willingness to blame herself for her “crazy” body image dissatisfaction, instead of finding fault with the
hegemonic power structure which encourages women to find their bodies ugly and "imperfect" is disturbing. "Empowerment" through shared dissatisfaction with one's appearance is a discouraging source of female strength in comparison to an adamant refusal to accept society's unattainable standards of perfection as normal.

Many respondents, including those who both agree and disagree with Olivia's "shuddering realisation", express disappointment with the site's adherence to dominant notions of the Western beauty ideals. One member writes in response:

[Despite being ridiculously beautiful, the girls on SG tend to be VERY thin. I mean REALLY, EXCEPTIONALLY tiny. I know there are a few exceptions but not many. Since I have become a member of SG, I am acutely aware of how much bigger I am than these girls... something I didn't usually think about before and, honestly, something I would rather not give a shit about. (topaz 1)]

This response is not unique. Member mathilde74 writes that "I do have a problem with the website because some girls are very thin" and archick, also a member, writes that her response to her own body in comparison to the "perfect" bodies of the SuicideGirls.com models is to feel "overweight, and riddled with imperfections" (1). Member humberthumbert objects to a perceived reinforcement of the status quo of the beauty of only one body type: "I too wish there was more diversity on the site. sg should take full advantage of their power to really change perceptions of beauty, as they're doing already" (2). A response by emmagoldman, a member who identifies himself as a man in the post, summarises the concerns over this part of the site's selection process: "I agree with many of the previous postings that there is an overwhelming number of very skinny girls on the site... there is a potential danger that by sg standards, all bodies may indeed be 'completely perfect, wonderful and amazing' as long as they are not overweight" (2).

Members of the site are clearly more aware of a possible contradiction between the site's
proclaimed anti-mainstream ideals and the limited selection of body types displayed in the site’s photosets. Olivia herself, in response to topaz, wryly acknowledges the “the skinny white girls dilemma” (2). She argues that “not all the girls are as slender as they look in the photos”, but acknowledges “that's really beside the point, because usually there is no context except for the photos” (2).

However, rather than being a silent contradiction, invisible or ignored by those who produce the messages, this message board thread displays what Olivia dubs “the skinny white girl dilemma” as an articulated concern of site members, models, and administrators (2). The site itself endorses the Western beauty ideal, privileging whiteness, slenderness, and even features. However, unlike the fashion magazines that run features on the dangers of anorexia beside images of uniformly slender models with no apparent consciousness of this irony, SuicideGirls.com’s forum and journal setup does at least allow room for exposure and discussion of the contradictory body image messages the site espouses. This is further collaboration for a reading of SuicideGirls.com as a site of multiple and often contradictory messages, reflecting the multiplicity of subject-positions found in the online personal journals of the models. Regardless of this, however, SuicideGirls.com’s alleged commitment to the anti-mainstream, pro-feminist ideals of Riot Grrrl does not concur with its presentation of female beauty in such a conventionally restricted, limited range. In this context, the tattoos and piercings which proclaim the unclothed models’ allegiance to Riot Grrrl sensibility can be read as little more than cosmetic. More fundamentally important to those ideals may be the creation of a space where site members and models can voice opinions that dissent with the site’s ideals.

Comparing the terms “Riot Grrrl” and “Suicide Girl” is especially illuminating when assessing SuicideGirls.com’s claims to anti-mainstream “empowerment”. The
"Grrrl" portion of "Riot Grrrl" was deliberately chosen as a rejection of the term "girl", which Riot Grrrls felt was too soft and passive. "Girl", indicating the female, was rewritten with a "grrr", indicating the growl and power of an angry or wary animal. The descriptor "Riot" implies destructive aggression, perhaps as a part of political action. Indeed, one of the possible origins for the term stems from a letter written by Jen Smith of Bratmobile, who is reported to have written a letter to a friend stating "We need to start a girl riot" after witnessing the Mt. Pleasant riots in Washington, D.C. (Northrup, "AND THEN THERE'S THE REVOLUTION"). Since it is difficult to conduct a riot by oneself, it also implies the presence of a female mob whom are not afraid to use violence if they think it necessary. "Girls" might be delicately feminine, but the destructive power of Riot Grrrls was to be feared and respected, and their visual style reflected this deliberate aggression.

The name "Suicide Girls" is a visual and verbal echo of the term Riot Grrrl. However, in "Suicide Girls", the destructive, communal power of the Riot becomes the self-destructive solo act of the Suicide. Wojcik writes that for Riot Grrrls, adding a growl to girl, "with its normally sexist, trivializing connotations and implications of immaturity" was an act of linguist appropriation and reclamation (26). SuicideGirls.com appears to have, in turn, rejected the angry growl of Grrrl in favour of a return to the diminutive form given children who have not yet achieved womanhood. This is particularly interesting in light of the pornographic nature of the site: because all models on the site must be 18 or over, the Suicide Girls are all legally women; yet immaturity is implied by the term "Girls". In this pornographic context, "Girls" is reminiscent of the flashing neon signs reading "Girls! Girls! Girls!" used to advertise strip clubs, labelling the performers as immature, anonymous commodities. The lack of "Grrr" in SuicideGirls.com is a softening of the tough and explicit style of the Riot Grrrl. The common Riot Grrrl colours
of red and black, colours associated with aggression and power, have faded to the signature SuicideGirls.com colours of pink and silver, associated with a pretty girlishness.

However, as discussed earlier, the "Suicide" envisioned by the models is not a one-time death impulse, resulting in the silenced body of the dead girl, but a perpetually repeated act of rebellion, where the model's journal achieves the status of a record of dying words and can continue to speak out against the adverse circumstances and setting that lead to the staging of her suicide. In this sense, the destructive power of the Suicide Girl's suicide is similar to the threatened action of the Riot Grrrl's riot; a political protest in continual progress. However, the constant suicide is a much more self-reflexive form of rebellion than the perpetual riot. Although Missy claims the origin for the site's name is the "Suicide Girls" of Chuck Palahniuk's Survivor, another reading she has advanced for the name is that the "Suicide" mentioned refers to "killing the part of yourself that is mainstream" (StarlaJo, LiveJournal comment). Unlike the riot, which is directed outwards at a threatening society, the rebellious protest of the Suicide Girls appears to be self-centred, focused on destroying elements of the self that rely on or endorse the mainstream culture; a cutting away, then, of the parts of a threatening society which has become part of the self, rather than being situated outside it. Self-destruction is a problematic qualification for "empowerment", however, and self-destruction projected as sexually alluring even more so. SuicideGirls.com's internal "suicide" has little in common with the Riot Grrrl's outwardly directed riot. Instead, the allure of self-destruction and metaphorical suicide is more closely linked with the other subculture with which the site identifies itself; goth culture.

5. Beautiful Darkness and Damsels-in-Distress: Snow as Pin-Up Goth Girl
The goth subculture began in the late 70s and early 80s as a subgroup of the punk movement and goth and punk remain closely related. The term goth appeared to have originated in 1979, when Tony Wilson, manager of the popular band Joy Division (which, following the suicide of the singer, became the even more popular New Order), described the band’s music as “gothic compared with the pop mainstream” (“Goth”, Religious Tolerance). Early goths dressed similarly to punks, although the predominant colour was black (“What is the Goth Culture?”). As with punk fashion, wearing fishnet and lingerie as outerwear was common for women who identified as goth, and the mohican hairstyle which was popular among punks was also found in goths, although the goth mohican was somewhat wider, with only the sides of the head shaved (“What is the Goth Culture?”).

Participants of the goth sub-culture (also known as “dark end” or “darkwave”) have acquired a reputation for being entranced, even obsessed, by the aesthetic of the beautiful death. Beatgrrl, a participant in goth culture, describes goth as “… seeing beauty, and its coming destruction, at the same time. For me… It’s the last dance as the walls are crumbling around you”. The stereotypical image of the goth in mainstream culture is that of a depressed, pretentious person, male or female, with a distinctive dress and make-up style of “extreme black clothing, light coloured makeup, unusual hair styles, body piercing, bondage items, etc.” (“Goth”, Religious Tolerance). The existential angst of the dark end scene appears less aggressive than the anarchic violence of the punk scene, but both cultures are united in their dissatisfaction with mainstream culture, and their clothing, make up and body modification choices signify this dissatisfaction. However, although goth culture promulgates an aesthetic of the beautiful death, this death need not be self-inflicted, or even concern an actual person. Metaphorical cultural decay, as explored through the gothic novel and film, the “ghosts” of architecture, as in the gloomy spectre of old-fashioned gothic buildings in the post-modern city, and moss
growing in the cracks of a marble tombstone are all equally valid demonstrations of the
gothic aesthetic of the beautiful death. The “suicide” of SuicideGirls.com, on the other
hand, specifically evokes the image of the dying woman as aesthetically and sexually
appealing. The title “SuicideGirls.com” therefore fits neatly into the discourse of the goth
sub-culture, but elides the aesthetic of the beauty of death into a specific, feminine form.

This specific form of an aesthetic of the self-destructive female can be read in the
online personal journal of SuicideGirls.com model Snow, who writes, “i love alcohol. i
love pills. i love sitting on the kitchen floor with blood running down my arms. i do. i
really do. this is who i am.” (13 June 2004). This entry was written after Snow left the
2004 SuicideGirls.com Burlesque Tour, a leave-taking apparently provoked by confusion
between her SuicideGirls.com persona of Snow and her “real” identity of Andrea. In the
quote above, self-destruction, or the notion and imagery of self-destruction, occupies a
favoured place for Snow, with the repetition of “i love” reinforced by a determined “i
really do”. While we are given no exact description of what event, if any, is being referred
to in this entry, the image of the Snow-skinned, alcohol and pills loving girl “sitting on
the kitchen floor with blood running down [her] arms” is a familiar image of self-inflicted
destruction in the popular imagination. Films such as The Rules of Attraction, Secretary
and Thirteen and books such as Lisa, Bright and Dark and Death, the High Cost of Living
present self-injury by cutting as an event of beauty, capable of inspiring art. Some films,
such as Girl, Interrupted prefer not to show scenes of cutting on-screen, but it is made
clear that cutting has occurred. The images and descriptions of cutters in these films and
books are, like Snow herself, consistent with Western ideals of feminine beauty. While
goth subculture is concerned with the beauty of death and pain generally, rather than
focusing solely upon self-inflicted pain, in these mainstream movies it is the imagery of
self-inflicted suffering that becomes associated with feminine beauty.
Snow does not merely proclaim a love for the self-injury she describes, but defines her SuicideGirls.com persona in regard to it; “this is who I am,” she declares. She thus internalises the imagery of self-destructive behaviour as not something she does, but as something she is. Snow’s journal entry therefore implicates her Suicide Girl persona as one of the site’s “Pin-Up Goth Girls”, and adds a disturbing element to the site’s name. In Snow’s case, the posited perpetual protest of the SuicideGirls.com “suicide” appears to take on a more disturbing aspect of self-harm, rooted in a narrow definition of a wider gothic aesthetic, wherein self-inflicted suffering is envisaged as beautiful.

Some of Snow’s photosets show a similar aesthetic of beautiful pain. One photoset entitled “Pain” follows a standard SuicideGirls.com format, with photographs forming the narrative of the model stripping, on the equally standard set of a bed. The imagery is thus not particularly remarkable, but it is contextualised by the following caption, with more than a hint of psychological masochism:

Snow says: The Snow... it fell so softly. There is darkness without comfort. I have not slept in 7 days. Pain inside this house, this bed, these eyes. This is not love, this is not hate. This is pain and torture.

Here I am, I am undone. I wait for you... to hold me. My body trembles, even for the cold. The pain does not escape. One touch... save me. (“Pain”)

The photoset, with its imagery of the beautiful girl stripping on the bed, is juxtaposed with the caption claiming the beautiful girl is in pain and that the viewer’s touch can save her from its effects. From here one can easily assume that the young woman in pain is a damsel in distress, a patriarchal narrative that positions women as the helpless prey of predatory monsters. We can assume from “this house, this bed, these eyes” that the pain is emotional, not physical, but choosing “Pain” as the title of the piece seems to indicate
that suffering is integral to the beauty of the photoset. Furthermore, since this is an internet website, the viewer never can rescue the girl in the photographs by the requested "[o]ne touch". Projected onto a computer screen, Snow’s image is literally untouchable; and hence, the pain as well as the beauty of this photoset will remain as long as the photoset remains available to viewers. With Snow occupying the subject-position of the damsel in distress, the “Pain” photoset does not function as protest, but as plea.

Another photoset, entitled “Doctor”, features Snow and London/Siren, who is both a model and a SuicideGirls.com photographer. The photoset begins with the depiction of a Snow bound to a chair by a scarf. She is “examined” and stripped by Siren. The photoset is captioned thus: “The first set in two girl week is Siren and Snow playing a little Doctor. Siren is the aggressor and Snow is the innocent. Isn’t that always’s the way?” (“Doctor”). In many of the photographs, Snow appears frightened, turning wide, terrified eyes towards the camera as if seeking help from the viewer as Siren holds a syringe in one hand or places a stethoscope between her bared breasts. These themes of force and restraint are pictured through much of the narrative. However, by the end of the photoset Snow, now freed from her bonds, appears to have been successfully seduced by the other Suicide Girl. She smiles at the camera and touches Siren without coercion.

While we can assume that the act of photography for this photoset is consensual, there appears to be little of the consensual in the early stages of the images themselves. Snow is pictured as “the innocent” under attack by “the aggressor”, and her frightened expressions support a reading of the stereotypical damsel in distress. She is, moreover, being “attacked” by a Siren; a mythological monster who traditionally symbolises the alluring and dangerous evil of female sexuality, who delights in luring unwary men to their death. The caption’s presentation of the photoset as “playing a little Doctor” presumably refers to the childhood game of exploring and examining the bodies of one’s
peers. The presentation of Snow in the imagery as bound and coerced, however, is more akin to criminal cases where doctors have abused the doctor/patient power dynamic to sexually assault patients. Snow is being threatened by an aggressor with ties to both the classical and modern monsters of the damsel in distress story.

The aesthetic pleasure in the beauty of darkness found in the goth culture appears to have been here appropriated to make acceptable the tired and familiar patriarchal narrative of the beautiful woman in pain who, unable to save herself, must be saved by another. This rescue fantasy reinforces stereotypes of feminine passivity and masculine activity at best, and the stereotype of the helpless female who requires male protection at worst. While Missy claims that the site’s identification with “alternative” youth subcultures is empowering, Snow’s “Pain” photoset conforms to a mainstream misogynist narrative. Stylistic signifiers of ‘rebellion’ and ‘nonconformity’, like body modification and “alternative” clothing styles have been translated into the pornographic discourse of sex for sale. By presenting this photoset as part of the expression of anti-mainstream “Pin-Up Punk Rock and Goth Girls”, SuicideGirls.com is appropriating goth culture to provide a thin veneer of counter-culture authenticity for a piece that appears to promote one of the very narratives reinforcing the culture the site claims to counter. Moreover, it presents that narrative as sexually appealing and centred on a central figure that is less a subject, and more an object of desire to be rescued from her pain. Afterwards, it hints, in the best tradition of the damsel in distress narrative, she can be acquired. When juxtaposed with Snow’s journal entry of 13 June 2004, the beauty of “Pain” becomes self-destructive, with disturbing implications for the presentation of suffering on SuicideGirls.com. In this example, the SuicideGirls.com “suicide”, may not indicate a perpetual act of protest or self-improvement, but a plea for salvation.
Snow does project more in her SuicideGirls.com persona than death and self-destruction. Her journal entries include musings on food: “fuckin mangoes man”; notes on the burlesque tour: “we performed at tallahassee last night... oh what a town. i played bouncer last night and drug some kid out of the dressing room”; and favourite musicians: “how beautiful is pavement?? still.... fucking 7 years later. ... i still listen to pavement...” (2 Oct.; 21 Jan.; 24 Dec. 2003). However, the majority of her entries present the persona of someone who rarely chooses to share optimistic thoughts or feelings, if she indeed experiences any. On 22 August 2004, she writes, “i'm at that point where i "feel" happy. i don't know if it is true or not. i don't know how long it will stay. have you heard...” For Snow, happiness appears to be fleeting and of dubious authenticity.

Moreover, the journal entries present her as someone who frequently and knowingly engages in self-destructive behaviours. On 30 August 2004, she writes, “what i have left for this fine evening... drink vodka (leads to smeared lipstick, black circles, green green eyes, tears, regret, and wanting more), smoke some nasty cigarettes (please), paint my toenails red, drink, smoke, drink, smoke, and maybe i will write. if i feel like it.” The repetition of “drink, smoke, drink, smoke” implies excess, and the fact that Snow writes of this as a planned event rather than a past incident indicates self-knowledge of the harmful behaviours. She is aware that the consequences of her planned activities for the evening will include “tears, regret and wanting more” and yet still intends to undertake them. On several occasions her journal entries imply that Snow’s drinking can also result in physical self-injury. On 2 September 2004, she writes, “here she sits. two bloody mary's. six shots of vodka. 3 hours later. doesn't remember how to spell”. Later in the same entry she writes “i don't taste that bad. except for the blood dripping down my right thigh...”
Not all journal entries that feature possible self-injury to Snow include mention of alcohol. On 31 December 2003, she writes:

the Snow fell today
and i watched my skin turn pale
my wrists bled in the bathtub
but i am home at last
the hospital kept me warm
i didn’t return your calls

The poem, with its reference to pale skin and wrists bleeding in the bathtub, again appropriates cinematic imagery of the beautiful, dying woman. “[T]he Snow fell” is a phrase of both literal and metaphorical meaning, playing on the name Snow chose for her SuicideGirls.com persona and suggests that Snow feels her self falling. The entry’s timing may also be significant. Although it describes an event (whether real or invented for the purpose of the poem) which the phrase “home at last” indicates occurred some time in the past, Snow chose to post the entry in the early hours (12:26 am) of the last day of the year. Snow’s choice of this posting time further enhances the gloomy sense of endings inherent in the piece. At the same time, however, 31 December is a date associated in the Western culture with the celebrations of New Year’s Eve, and New Year’s Day, which symbolise new beginnings and often include resolutions made to improve or help one’s self.

Snow’s journal, then, uses imagery and ideals closely related to those used in both mainstream and goth culture to depict depression and obsession with death and darkness. Her journal is a site of possibly contradictory messages, where everyday banalities are situated beside posts expressing images of self-inflicted injury and a gothic pleasure in darkness. These posts do not necessarily indicate helplessness on the part of Snow’s
SuicideGirls.com public journal persona. However, when juxtaposed with the photosets in question, Snow’s journal posts acquire something of the helplessness depicted in the photosets. An association with the anti-mainstream ideals of goth culture with which SuicideGirls.com identifies is thus used to give stylistic credibility to patriarchal narratives, which, far from empowering women, objectify them.

6. Style, Subculture and Consumption: “Everyone’s favorite goth girl SCARLETT”

Another model’s identification with goth culture, at least in terms of her SuicideGirls.com persona, appears to be stylistically rooted. In all but one of her five featured photosets, Scarlett’s clothing is entirely black. The exception, entitled “The Force”, features Scarlett dressed in a blue police officer costume which she strips off during the course of the photoset. By the eighteenth photograph in this series, the uniform has completely disappeared. In the next 20 pictures of “The Force”, Scarlett poses naked or dressed in a gothic black vinyl bustier, black panties, and fishnet stockings. In captions beside two photosets, she is explicitly named a representative of goth culture. One caption asks “What would you give to have Scarlett be your dark, goth Valentine?” (“Unzip”), while another refers to her as “Everyone’s favorite goth girl SCARLETT” (“Qtopia”). In one photoset, entitled “Bats”, Scarlett appears at the beginning of the photoset dressed in a black bustier and black shorts. She is wearing a wide red leather cuff around her neck, and a pair of large, vinyl bat wings strapped to her shoulders. During the course of the photoset, she follows the standard SuicideGirls.com narrative of the strip to expose brassiere and panties (in this case, both are made of black vinyl) and then to reveal her breasts and genitals. However, throughout the photoset she retains her red neck cuff and
bat wings. Even when she is functionally naked, Scarlett retains ties to her goth subject position through the retaining of props that indicate a dark end style sensibility.

Scarlett’s SuicideGirls.com profile appears to adhere to this presentation of her persona as a “Pin-Up Goth Girl”. She lists her occupation as “transylvanian concubine” and her “Stats” as “living dead girl”. Her “Hometown” is “Halloweentown”, a reference to *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, a cult favourite film directed by Tim Burton which is, like the rest of Burton’s oeuvre, listed as one of Scarlett’s favourite movies. Under “Favourite Musicians”, she lists only “marilyn fuckin’ manson!!!”. Manson and Burton are indeed artists admired by many goths, but they are also recognised by and very popular in mainstream culture. However, Scarlett’s profile does not project “hardcore” goth identity; many “hardcore” goths privilege obscure musicians and artists as more distinct from mainstream culture and disdain Burton and Manson as “sell-outs”. Her profile conforms to stereotypes of goth so exactly one could almost suspect self-conscious parody.

Scarlett’s SuicideGirls.com public journal also does not appear to conform to the stereotypes of goth culture as strongly as her visual style. The style and contents of Scarlett’s journal are very unlike those of Snow. Snow’s journal largely consists of glancing reference to everyday events couched in a lower-case stream-of-consciousness flow, and often present her SuicideGirls.com persona as depressed or tortured. Entries written completely or partially in free verse are common. In contrast, Scarlett’s journal entries are often upbeat and enthusiastic, focusing largely on recent and contemporary events in her life:

My HOTTT Friday night

~ visited my mom

~ did laundry
~ cleaned my room
~ ate 2 bowls of count chocula [The culinary equivalent of Marilyn Manson]
~ borrowed $70 from my 12yr old sister... heh
~ turned down a kickin party
~ organized clothing
~ lurked online like all day
~ ate pepperoni pizza combos and a fudge round for dinner
~ watched tv and got stoned... all while in BED (5 Nov. 2004)

Listing activities and accomplishments is a common theme in Scarlett’s journal, and her tone is frequently cheerful and enthusiastic. Even entries recounting less enjoyable days and events often end on an optimistic note. An entry with the final paragraph reading, in part: “just trying to put my life back together. hard shit. getting out of debt sucks, finding a job is going to suck, moving definety sucks, and my stupid black heart has to go and like boys that it shouldn't. . . . . that sucks the most!” finishes with the line “at least things are seeming to get better” (22 Sep. 2004). One entry on 14 December 2003 was morose in its entirety:

What do you do when no matter what you say, or how much effort you put forth into making things better - your voice goes unheard. the truths and desperations in my heart are just fucking meaningless. and it doesnt matter.

...

hello nervous breakdown!

all i know is my own truth...
However, the next entry signalled a return to optimism for Scarlett:

Thanks to all my comments for the previous depressed entry -- things worked themselves out, like they always do. i've been a bad girl lately again though, why am i so weak to ___ and ____? oh well! its life, have fun, then you die. right?

anyway!!!!!!!

Scarlett's devotion to the credo of "its life, have fun" is a marked contrast to Snow's suspicions of happiness as a fleeting, possibly inauthentic emotion, and appears contrary to the romanticised goth aesthetic ideal of painful beauty.

However, Scarlett is undeniably presented by SuicideGirls.com administrators as one of SuicideGirls.com's "Pin-Up Goth Girls". Scarlett's journal reveals little ideological conformation to the aesthetic of beautiful depression that typifies dark end culture. Nevertheless, her journal does contain content that reinforces the profile and photoset representation of her SuicideGirls.com persona as a "Pin-Up Goth Girl". This content, significantly, is largely visual and relies on goth style; Scarlett frequently includes references to and photographs of herself in the body of her journal entries. In every picture where her face is visible, thick, black eyeliner encircles Scarlett's eyes, (a near-universal feature in gothic makeup) and in all but one photograph where clothing is visible, the clothing in question is predominantly black, visually echoing the predominantly black goth costuming of her photosets. Several photographs include close-up shots of new tattoos, piercings or changes in hair style. On 20 October 2004 she begins an entry with a photograph, then writes under it, "that is me today, at work... being bored. i redyed the front of my hair purple... and you can also see my newest piercings. ... cat eyes!" 7 On 19 August 2004 she writes:

"I'm like a balloon. Unless someone holds my string, I'll blow away"
Anyone know what movie that quotes from? Great fucking movie.

It sums up how I've been feeling lately. Eh, on the bright side I got myself some new ink.

The entry is followed by a close-up shot of a five-pointed star outlined in thick black ink which has presumably been tattooed onto Scarlett's body. Scarlett also includes references to her “Pics” folder, a feature of her SuicideGirls.com page that is also available only to paying members of the site. Scarlett often uploads new pictures into this folder, and is eager to inform readers of the fact: “NEW PIX IN MY BURLESQUE FOLDER!”; “new pix in my phonecam folder, and more new ones to come very soon” (5; 10 July 2004).

Scarlett’s SuicideGirls.com persona projects a strong reliance on visual representation of her identity. The material in Scarlett’s journal that is most easily identified as typical of dark end culture is primarily visual, or refers to visual clues to Scarlett’s identification as gothic. Her gothic identity appears to be rooted in materialistic consumption, relying on gothic make-up, clothing, props (such as Count Chocula cereal) and the electronic images that Scarlett frequently uses to display these markers of goth subculture. Valerie Steele points out in *Fashion, Sex & Power* that “[t]he fetishistic appeal of a second skin extends to decorating the body itself” (160). By frequently piercing and marking her skin, Scarlett is making her body a fetishistic object rooted in the goth subculture.

Goth style is heavily and self-consciously influenced by fetishism. Paul Hodkinson writes of modern goth style that “aspects of the 1990s fetish scene, and, indeed the sex industry generally became popular. Goths of both sexes were increasingly
likely to be seen in ... rubber trousers, skirts, leggings, corsets, tops and dog collars” (51). These fetishised clothing items are also popular costumes on more conventional pornography websites which make no claim to “empowered erotica”. However, although goth and the fetish scene do have some participants and stylistic choices in common, they are distinct subcultures with distinct ideologies. Fetish enthusiasts are united by their sexual kinks; goths by a vaguer set of ideals and tastes that usually revolve around the beautiful darkness of life. SuicideGirls.com, by sexualizing goth use of fetish wear on a pornographic website, conflates fetishism and goth culture. By dressing in commonly fetishised clothing in several photosets (“Qtopia”, “Bats”) and by having herself tattooed and pierced, Scarlett modifies herself into the “Pin-Up Goth Girl” and allows the sale of images of herself as a fetishised goth object.

Significantly, in one entry Scarlett refers to a gift from her mother: “She bought me this bleeding edge goth doll, that she thought looked like me. It kinda does it has the same piercings/makeup and almost the same hair as me” (25 Oct. 2003). Scarlett betrays no self-consciousness in reference to this doll; the above quote is the only reference to it made in her journal. However, the mention of a goth doll that looks similar to Scarlett, identified as similar by “the same piercings/makeup and almost the same hair as me”, further points out the reliance of Scarlett’s gothic subject-position on visual style. Moreover, the doll is an indicator of the commodification and popularisation of goth culture, from which SuicideGirls.com commercially benefits, even as it positions itself as opposed to mainstream pornography. One could ask whether there is a difference between buying the goth doll and buying access to pictures of Scarlett as living goth-looking doll when both doll and pictures appear to objectify her gothic identity as a commodity.

This is, perhaps, a compelling argument against a reading of SuicideGirls.com as "empowered erotica”. However, arguing for a reading of Scarlett as a sort of
commodified living goth doll is also to argue for an incomplete reading, failing as it does to take into account the complexity of Scarlett’s relationship with objects of significance in goth culture. In her journal entry, Scarlett does not identify the doll as being her, or like her, but as “kinda” looking like her, a statement that represents a recognition of likeness, but not sameness.

It is also important to mention that Scarlett’s adherence to the visual elements of goth subculture, with little emphasis in her journal on the darker emotional tones underlying goth aesthetics, does not necessarily taint her SuicideGirls.com persona as shallow or only interested in goth culture as a fad. Style is an integral part of goth culture, used by both goths and outsiders to identify members of the subculture; perhaps even the most important element of that subculture. Paul Hodkinson argues for the importance of style in the goth community’s subcultural identity in *Goth: Identity, Style and Subculture*. In preparation for the writing of this book, he conducted hundreds of email and face-to-face interviews with insiders in the British goth scene. He notes that regardless of social status, sexual orientation, age or location, “virtually every respondent, at some point in his or her interview, emphasized feelings of identification, similarity and community, with others perceived to share their taste in fashion and music” (68). Goth style is an integral element of a gothic subject-position.

Significantly, tattoos and piercings in a Western cultural context are often considered to be a direct statement of the agency of the person they decorate. Steele quotes photographer and subculture documentarian Charles Gatewood: “body art has everything to do with taking control of your life and your body” (161). The choice of body modifications and dress style is her own, and by treating her body as a canvas for her creativity, Scarlett signals her gothic subject-position on her skin. Rather than intensifying a reading of her position on SuicideGirls.com as objectifying, the body
modification process to which she frequently alludes and for which she provides photographic evidence in her journal illustrates her subject-position as creative controller of her own body. Moreover, by updating readers on new tattoos and piercings, Scarlett’s journal depicts her body modification as a work in progress, making her body a fluid, continually changing expression of those creative choices. Rather than objectifying her body as passive receiver of decoration, Scarlett’s gothic-style body modifications signify the subjectivity of the persona who actively selects them.

Moreover, Scarlett’s choice of fetishistic clothing for photosets should be read as an expression of goth subcultural aesthetic, rather than a fetishising of herself as a sex object by associating with such fetish styles. SuicideGirls.com’s place as a business selling access to pornographic images positions Scarlett’s gothic garb as sexually arousing. However, reading Scarlett’s appropriation of fetish dress style as a fetishistic objectification of Scarlett is to ignore the impact of SuicideGirls.com’s anti-mainstream rhetoric, however hollow it is. By continually repeating that SuicideGirls.com empowers its models, the site encourages the most optimistic reading of the models’ presentation possible; in this case, that Scarlett’s materialistic goth identity expresses her subject position through her body modification and style choices. It may be a subjectivity compromised by Scarlett’s conspicuous and apparently unironic consumption of popular mainstream “goth” icons, but it is undeniably present.

Steele acknowledges “the problem [with fetishism] is that one cannot control the way others ‘read’ one’s clothed appearance” (139). However, Hodkinson points out that “in the context of the goth scene, all but the most extreme examples of such [fetishistic] attire were often valued more in terms of their subcultural aesthetic qualities than for their sexual connotations” (51). He points out that there is a “differential symbolic value of fetish clothing” in subculture and mainstream culture, demonstrated by the fact that
“many female goths were nervous about the possible reaction... in environments they regarded as more mainstream” (52). Scarlett has taken a fetishistic style that has been largely stripped of its sexual connotations by association with a subculture that depends strongly on style as a factor of subcultural membership and then employed it in a pornographic setting for commercial gain; a complex play upon the relationships between style, power and sexual attraction that should not be simplified to a single reading. Scarlett is a “Pin-Up Goth Girl”, not a pin-up mainstream girl, and this contextualisation necessarily alters a reading of Scarlett as a simple sexual object. However, as SuicideGirls.com becomes more popular and increases its mainstream appeal, it becomes more likely that Scarlett’s appropriation of fetish wear will not be read as an empowering subcultural statement, but with the connotations of the “bad girl” object attached to fetish wear in the mainstream. If Scarlett is not quite an objectified “goth doll”, neither is she the non-conformist, anti-mainstream rebel the site claims.

7. Branded Punk: Conclusion

SuicideGirls.com’s identification with punk and goth culture gives superficial credibility to the site’s claim it provides “empowered erotica”. Punk (particularly Riot Grrrl punk) and goth can indeed be very empowering cultures for women. Punk and goth styles often turn stylistic choices into weapons in a gender battle, confronting conventional ideals of ideal femininity. However, the stylistic choices of SuicideGirls.com’s “Pin-Up Punk Rock and Goth Girls” do little to encourage and inspire “empowerment.” Instead, by sexualizing styles that were often an ironic statement against “bad girl” sexual stereotypes, SuicideGirls.com performs a reverse sign-slide wherein what was aggressive becomes alluring, and what was the visible sign of serious debate
becomes dress-up (or dress-off) foreplay. Although models like Dyme present interesting dialogues between style, subculture and the female body with their body modifications, those modifications are necessarily sexualized and commodified by their display on an online pornographic website. Snow’s journal entries and photoset captions project a dark gothic sensibility that simultaneously revels in pain and self-destruction and endorses the feeble stereotype of the damsel-in-distress; hardly an empowering role model for the post-modern woman. Moreover, this stereotype is commodified by the site. The woman behind the persona Snow is not for sale, but the image of Snow the Suicide Girl is, and her pleas to be saved from her internal and external demons sanction patriarchal assumptions of the innate fragility of the female object, best answered by purchasing and protecting her. Scarlett’s position as “everyone’s favorite goth girl” is far less insidiously misogynistic, but even more overtly commercial. The good-natured gothic identity projected in Scarlett’s journal is rooted in her interaction with objects representative of goth style and subculture, and the objects with which she displays her allegiance are so stereotypically “goth” that they are almost what one would choose to deliberate create the parody of a goth girl. The subject she presents is thus limited by its unselfconscious consumption of a commercialised goth “lifestyle brand”, to the point where she can unironically relate receiving a mass-produced goth doll that “looked like me”.

Probably the most damning and unanswerable argument against SuicideGirls.com’s rhetoric of empowerment is the criteria of exclusivity under which it operates. SuicideGirls.com’s extremely narrow aesthetic standards, privileging the pale-skinned, slender, even-featured Western beauty ideal at the expense of more varied ethnicities and body types, reveal the ultimate hypocrisy of its claim to anti-mainstream credibility. Goth, punk, and the Riot Grrrl movement that descended from it, are all subcultures that privilege the unique, the varied, the Other and the genuinely alternative
over commercial viability. In sharp contrast, SuicideGirls.com’s “Pin-Up Punk Rock and Goth Girls” are only superficially visually “alternative”; their bodies absolutely endorse the ideal body of mainstream fashion. When coupled with this near-universal adherence to the narrow Western beauty ideal, the body modifications and subcultural stylistic choices of the models become little more than playfully naughty. While her style choices may express an individual model’s subject-position and her genuine commitment to an anti-mainstream subculture, the site trivialises this subject-position by making it clear that it is the likeness of her body to this restrictive aesthetic ideal upon which her selection ultimately relies. By invoking the anti-mainstream credibility of punk, Riot Grrrl and goth, SuicideGirls.com seeks to support its claims of “empowered erotica”, citing its models as rebellious representatives of those “alternative” subcultures. However, SuicideGirls.com does not genuinely support the anti-mainstream ideals and (generally) pro-women attitudes of punk, Riot Grrrl and goth; on the contrary, these subcultures are cheapened by the site’s eagerness to commodify their styles in the name of empowerment.
Endnotes

1 An assumption to which Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol ironically allude in the title to the collected essays they edited, Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures: The Fight To Reclaim Feminism.

2 See note 3 on Chapter One.

3 Bondage-Domination-Sadism-Masochism.

4 Few commentators appear to consider that the death of Vicious’s girlfriend, Nancy Spungeon, the same night, allegedly murdered by Vicious, might also have indicated an end-point for punk, where rage against the state and the vision of a dystopian future became (again, allegedly) violence against a woman. Lucy O’Brien is an exception, implying that Spungeon’s death was one of the signs of “punk going through its last incoherent blast” (197). She regards Spungeon as “the most powerless, timeless example of women in rock ‘n’ roll – the woman as groupie and victim” (197).

5 Although they are in a minority, there are women of various ethnicities on the site, including women of Latino, Hispanic, Asian or African physical appearance, although most of these women conform to the same slender body type of SuicideGirls.com’s white models. Once again, this is not an “invisible” problem: A section of the SuicideGirls.com application form reads “SuicideGirls encourages women of color to apply. We aim to be a more diverse site, and we need your help!”

6 The Suicide Girl in question replaced her old identity of Siren with the new one of London. Her profile includes the note: “STATS: the ghost of Siren Suicide”, perhaps indicating the further disposal of an unwanted subject position as the “suicidal” killing of a particular self, much like the posited SuicideGirls.com suicide of the mainstream culture-aligned self.
Scarlett explains: “for those of you who don’t know what [cat’s eyes] looks like, it’s the tiny barbells on the sides of your eyes” (14 Oct. 2004). These have the effect of two small silver points angling upward from the outer corner of each eye, which elongates the line of the eye to provide a “cat’s eyes” effect. The term “cat’s eyes” in body piercing can also refer to jewellery with a fibreglass “stone” that reflects light similarly to genuine feline eyes.
Chapter Three: Selling the Subject?: Commerce, Culture and Consumerism In the Online Personal Journals of Suicide Girls

1. Product, Production, and Profit: the Commercial "Benefits" of the Suicide Girls' Journals

Site co-creator Missy reports that when she first decided on the concept of SuicideGirls.com, she was certain that "there wouldn’t be the same sort of widespread appeal for the understated beauty of the demure there once was" (SuicideGirls 8). Given the site’s obvious popularity and profitability, this pessimism proved to be unfounded. In particular, her decision to allow the models to contribute to the site in their online personal journals was a stroke of business genius as well as an interesting development in the evolution of pornography on the Internet (SuicideGirls 8). Overtly designed to give the models a place to express their personalities and demonstrate that the women in the photographs are people, not voiceless objects of lust, the journals have another, related, function; they function as justification or apologia for both the models and the members of SuicideGirls.com. The existence of the models online personal journals is used to justify the purchases of memberships and gift shop items by hip youngsters who consider themselves too enlightened and “empowered” to consume mainstream pornography. As previously cited from the feminist forum threads, both members and models feel that the journals contribute to separating SuicideGirls.com from mainstream pornography. The online personal journals thus add to the “alternative” niche appeal of SuicideGirls.com. The online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com are a factor in the commercial visibility and viability of the site.
The business the journals help attract does not necessarily negate the site’s argument that the journals provide a subjectifying, rather than objectifying, experience of the naked female body in an online pornographic context. However, we have seen that the purported “alternative” culture and independent style ethos of SuicideGirls.com does not correspond to the commercially significant life-style branding of its own highly profitable “unique personal style”. A great deal of money depends on a careful marketing of “alternative” youth subcultures as anti-mainstream when, in reality, the most easily accessible “alternative” clothing and music labels are largely owned by massive corporate bodies. The journals, although a genuinely interesting demonstration of individual “voice” on the site, also contribute to the false perception of SuicideGirls.com as an independent supporter of unique style. Despite its independent owner-operator position, the site is inextricably implicated in the lifestyle branding of “alternative” youth subculture. That its models also have access to a space in which they can express their subjectivity does not absolve the site from literally not putting its money where its mouth is.

Commerce and consumerism in the journals of the Suicide Girls themselves therefore demands close scrutiny. While the administrators promote a hypocritical commercialisation of the SuicideGirls.com brand, the journals of the models vary wildly in the treatment of commercialisation and objectification. The online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com are clearly of commercial as well as aesthetic value to SuicideGirls.com. They can also provide potential commercial benefits to the models themselves. This is explicitly outlined on the site in the “Model” section of SuicideGirls.com which lists the benefits of becoming a Suicide Girl above the model application form under the heading “Benefits”. The “Benefits” section in full:
In addition to being paid for your photo sets, there are all sorts of perks just for SuicideGirls!

You’ll get free membership to the site, the coveted pink SG panties, stickers and other goodies from the shop.

Your journal will reach millions of people, and you’re free to advertise your projects, events or art.

Just from being featured on SuicideGirls, girls have been hired to appear in music videos, tv shows, radio shows, film and music festivals, fashion shows, countless magazines and advertising campaigns. (“Model”)

The benefits of being a Suicide Girl are constructed within a commercial framework. Despite the promotion of SuicideGirls.com as “empowered erotica”, the “Benefits” section does not include any mention of the purported ideals of SuicideGirls.com as a place for anti-mainstream culture hipsters. Instead it mentions that models are paid for the sets, that they receive items from the gift shop, as well as the “coveted” SG panties (which are not available for sale) and the possibilities for further employment as models “[j]ust from being featured on SuicideGirls.com”. Doubtless, Missy’s reported vision of the journals of SuicideGirls.com as a place where she could “give them a voice on the website” was sincere (SuicideGirls 8). However, in this section of the site, above the application for would-be models, the online personal journals are not described as “a space to write, rant, scream, explain, whatever”, the purpose ascribed to them in the SuicideGirls book (8). Rather, the journals are touted as a good opportunity for advertisement. The promise of personal expression may be assumed in the “Benefits” section, but the potential financial benefits are explicit. In this context, the promise of “[y]our journal will reach millions of people” can be read as a guarantee of market saturation, rather than a promise of an audience for one’s public life-writing. As promoted
in this section, the personal online journals of SuicideGirls.com models appear to be less about the self, and more about self-promotion.

However, just as the Suicide Girls articulate differing responses to “alternative” youth subcultures, they reveal different strategies of negotiating the apparently binarily opposed categories of commercially available branded object and unique subject independent of the constraints of commerce. Some journal personas present a personal view of SuicideGirls.com not as an empowering alternative celebration of female sexuality, but as just another job, and a source of much needed income. Most SuicideGirls.com personae are less direct than this, but nevertheless use their journals to directly or indirectly profit in some way from their status as Suicide Girls. There are models who use their journals to sell their possessions, either directly through their journals or as advertisements for their eBay.com auctions. There are models who publish their Amazon wishlists in their online personal journals in the hope that readers will use the lists to buy them items.

In conjunction with those models that use their journals as an effort to directly leverage more profit from their association with the site, there are also models who use their journals to promote and sell their writer’s own creative efforts (pornographic or otherwise) in a form of internet cottage industry. The grass-roots, anti-corporate ethos of cottage industry may prove a subversive form of truly independent commercial activity within the confines of SuicideGirls.com as a business entity. There are models who use their journals to advertise the handbags, makeup or artworks they create. There are models who use their journals to advertise upcoming feminist, sex-positive art shows and events they are involved in, and models who promote events at which they will be stripping or burlesque dancing, a form of entertainment which many of them find personally empowering. Commerce and consumerism are strong presences in the online
personal journals of the models of SuicideGirls.com, but individual models negotiate the relationship between the culture of commerce and their journals in varying ways.

It is impossible to quantify the value of varying photosets in terms of profit for the site. Since members pay for a full membership, rather than access to each photoset in turn, it is impossible to ascertain how much each photoset is responsible for bringing business to and retaining it for SuicideGirls.com, although attraction and approbation for the photosets is not evenly apportioned. Formerly, members could nominate and vote for any photoset as their “favorite”, with “favorite” photosets becoming daily features on the site. However, recently, as the site expanded, this feature has been removed so that at present there are four featured photosets at any one time: the photoset of a “new girl” and a new photoset from an established Suicide Girl are presented every day, with the sets promoted on the frontpage for two days each.

In an email interview, Missy protests that “People do pay membership fees but that money gets distributed back into running the business. I feel that I just provide a forum for the girls to express themselves in an environment where sexuality is thought of as a positive, healthy thing” (Sascha 2). As Sascha observes in her resulting article, this “[s]ounds nice, but somebody, somewhere, is making money off the backs of girls using the ‘empowerment through sexuality’ formula” (2). Whether her photoset is especially popular or not, a SuicideGirls.com model receives a single payment per photoset, which, as of February 2005, is $300US. Sascha, who is familiar both academically and personally with the sex performance industry and the pay scales which operate in that industry, argues that “[a]s it turn out, girls are paid shit to be on Suicidegirls--$100 to $200 per photo session to fuel a website that has a brisk little boutique and has a quarter of a million visitors a week, many of them, presumably, paying members” (6).¹ The site administrators of SuicideGirls.com do not dictate the clothing, style or content of
photosets, but they do reserve the right to accept or decline photosets, decide when new photosets will be uploaded, and assert economic and legal ownership over the photosets once accepted. Missy asserts in the *SuicideGirls* book that she would “let them [the models] create the site with me”, but this vision of shared creation of the site does not translate to a direct share of the profits; the photosets, once displayed, make money for the site, not for the models (11). The images of the Suicide Girls thus become product: While the creation of the images is at least partially controlled by the women in the photographs, they are then onsold for a flat fee to a business which can potentially profit off the photographs for years to come. Moreover, with no male bodies pictured on the site, the images become a feminised product, with access sold to an audience in a pornographic context. On first glance, this might well lend credence to a reading of the SuicideGirls.com photosets as exploiting sexually explicit images of women’s bodies for commercial gain, with a thin veneer of “alternative” style and pro-feminist rhetoric to conceal an essentially objectifying commercial and artistic endeavour.

However, it would be an oversimplification of a complex, problematic situation to suggest that the photosets represent woman as an object for sale under terms that deny her autonomy, and that the online personal journals represent woman as the seller of product that she controls. These binary distinctions are constantly confounded by the self-contradiction and ironic play commonly found in both the pornographic images and personal life-writing of SuicideGirls.com. They are further confused by the fact that the journals of SuicideGirls.com models help attract business to the site, and that the photosets of Suicide Girls attract attention to the journals from which the models can promote and conduct their own business ventures. Neither are the sometimes complex navigations between object-for-sale/subject-as-seller wholly unconsciously presented in the erotic imagery of the site. Tina’s “Soil” photoset, contextualised by her journal, is a
deliberate challenge to the traditional taxonomy of critical thought about distinctions between pornography/art and commerce/culture. Nor is hers a unique example, as several other photosets centre around props which question and challenge roles for women as both subjects and objects of consumer culture.

2. Just Play Along: Advertisement and Play in the “Penny Arcade” Photoset

One of the most provocative and thought-provoking of these sets is Quinne’s “Penny Arcade” photoset. The photoset begins with Quinne wearing a Penny Arcade T-shirt and playing video games before stripping off her clothes and posing for the camera. The photoset could be read as a woman challenging the traditionally male-dominated youth subculture of “gamer” or “geek” culture, and insisting that women can participate in gaming culture and still remain emphatically female and sexual while not denying her femaleness and becoming “one of the boys”. It could also be read as one object of gamer lust – Nintendo – placed beside another – an attractive, naked woman. After all, sex sells video games, as the success of Lara Croft: Tomb Raider can attest, and gamer culture can be deeply misogynist. It is true that the dark-haired, short, round-faced Quinne bears little resemblance to the lithe, E-cupped Ms. Croft, nor to the usually blonde, long-legged models hired to promote new products at game expositions. Her nudity in the photoset, juxtaposed with the popular gaming system, confronts stereotypes of women who participate in gaming culture, even as it caters to the tastes of the stereotypical male gamer.

Furthermore, although the reader would have to be in the know to recognise it, the photoset also provides wry commentary on the fact that extremely popular gaming webcomic and community nexus point Penny-Arcade.com has on several occasions
refused to host ads for SuicideGirls.com. The caption to the photoset included a link to
Penny-Arcade.com. Following the publication of this set, Penny Arcade’s co-creator
Krahulik included a link to the photoset from Penny Arcade’s news column:

I honestly don’t think Penny Arcade is for kids and so I’ve never really felt
the need to censor the sorts of things we talk about here on the site. Even so,
we’ve consistently turned down porn sites who ask to advertise on the site.

I can’t tell you why I think its [sic] okay to say in a comic that a man has
to kill a dog to have an orgasm, but I won’t run an ad for a site with vaginas. With
that said, I can’t help but make mention of the most recent update at
SuicideGirls.com.

WARNING!!!!! You should only follow this link if you want to see a girl
playing videogames and wearing a Penny Arcade shirt get naked. Knowing our
audience as I do, I have a feeling that’s going to be a lot of you. I should mention
that this is not a free show.

[hyperlink to the “Penny Arcade” photoset] (23 Feb. 2005)

Krahulik’s column represents a moral and commercial victory of sorts for
SuicideGirls.com, as Krahulik admits that he cannot provide a coherent argument for why
porn sites shouldn’t be advertised on the adult-rated webcomic site, especially when
SuicideGirls.com (and this set in particular) has potential appeal to Penny Arcade’s
readership. Quinne’s use of props alluding to a gaming cultural icon, when that icon has
in the past rejected SuicideGirls.com’s advertising requests, declares that
SuicideGirls.com is still willing to “play”. In return, Krahulik “can’t help” but advertise
Quinne’s “Penny Arcade” photoset in an internet quid pro quo. This photoset, and its
promotion on Penny Arcade, ably demonstrate both SuicideGirls.com’s cultural icon
status and the commercial benefits that can accrue from that status. Krahulik does not use
the descriptor “alternative” or the euphemism “erotica” for SuicideGirls.com; rather, his descriptions verge upon the cacophemistic, describing SuicideGirls.com, at least by implication, as a “site with vaginas”. However, the mere fact of his endorsement, despite well-publicised reservations about placing advertisements for “porn sites” on Penny-Arcade.com, emphasises a perception of SuicideGirls.com as different and special, not like conventional or mainstream pornography.

Several of SuicideGirls.com’s photosets, then, are able to be read as questioning commercial and cultural conventions, even as they confirm them. However, insofar as this thesis is concerned primarily with the personal online journals of SuicideGirls.com, an examination of the commercial process as presented primarily within the models’ journals is certainly warranted. Much like the body modifications and challenging photosets of the previous chapter which depicted their models as sex objects, sexual subjects, or both simultaneously, the online personal journals of SuicideGirls.com models have the potential to portray their writers as commercial subjects and objects. Certainly, as the “Benefits” section outlines, the personal online journals provide more scope for financial initiatives controlled by the Suicide Girls themselves. Although their internet iconic fame (or notoriety) is rooted in the fact that, as Amelie puts it “[they] get naked on the internet”, the Suicide Girls can, through their journals, parlay their internet iconic status into publicity for an unlimited variety of personal commercial endeavours (Amelie, 2 Feb. 2004). Unlike the photosets, where the direct commercial benefit to the model is limited to the one-off lump sum payment per set, the models’ journals offer far greater scope for a demonstration of commercial agency.

3. Journal as Promotion: JenniRae, James, and Internet Cottage Industry on SuicideGirls.com
The online personal journals of the Suicide Girls offer scope for the truly anti-mainstream consumerism activity of internet cottage industry, selling independently-owned and controlled goods and services directly to the consumers. Internet cottage industry has been praised by socio-liberal technofeminists as an excellent option for women to make a living partially separated from the patriarchal behemoths of capitalism and consumerism. The same technofeminist thought often condemns pornography on the internet as an expression of patriarchal ownership and objectification of the female body which perverts the possibilities for freedom and empowerment of women in cyberspace.

However, on SuicideGirls.com, models are able to turn their status as alternative erotica models to their own advantage, not merely selling the images of themselves, but by promoting and selling their creations. The journals of Suicide Girls are rife with examples like that of JenniRae, who uses her journal as an offhand promotion for the website which showcases her home-made handbags, unloveableinc.com. The site is described as “an 'artist collective' sort of website” and features the work of independent designers selling items such as buttons, T-shirts, artwork and custom-made makeup, as well as JenniRae’s individually crafted handbags (“Info”, www.unloveableinc.com). Her journal entries contain references to the site and her creative activities incorporated into accounts of her recent activities: “Ok..I need to right about something..I had a very uninteresting weekend... I sat at the sewing machine and made about 12 new handbags for the site.... I watched some movies....and jammed out to old Depeche Mode... which was good times....” (10 May 2004, ellipses author’s). While most references are glancing, the occasional entry includes direct promotion of the site:

if any of you ladies are into custom eyeshadow colors or odd little handbags or buttons or rock tshirts... then check out
www.unloveableinc.com... I get bored and make shit... yeah...

(Saturday May 8, 2004)

JenniRae does not use her journal to sell her projects to readers directly, but as an off-hand advertising tool, informing readers of her creative efforts, and directing them to “check out” unloveableinc.com if they are “into” such products. Nevertheless, by promoting her craftworks on the journal attached to a website which has granted her cyberspace fame, JenniRae is a visible reminder of cottage industry success. The promotion of her individually crafted handbags can be read as creating and encouraging “unique” style. Although her journal is embedded in a website which, despite protestations, is actively engaged in lifestyle branding, JenniRae is able to promote a genuinely unique style through her craftworks.

One of the most interesting examples of cottage industry at SuicideGirls.com is the journal of Suicide Girl James, which reviles the capitalist, corporate system, while she engages in her own creative and commercial efforts. Her SuicideGirls.com journal reveals that she is a student (apparently at an art school), an artist, and co-owner of the independent design business Killing Spree Productions. James uses her journal to sell various creations, such as T-shirts and prints of photographs and other artworks. On 12 May 2004 she advises her readers of the creation of an “Artworks” folder in her “Pics” section, with various posters and photographs of her own design. She does not specifically advertise them for sale, but writes “also the "Plastic Surgery" poster is available in quantity (for just a postage or any donation), just email me...” The “Artworks” folder also includes this image:
Fig. 1. Samantha Humphreys. \textsuperscript{3} Silkscreen shirt image.

The image is captioned thus: “an image for a silkscreen for shirts I made. . . .screened this on some old goodwill shirts so every one was unique.” On 13 June 2004, James advises her readers that “for those who sent me stuff for shirts and prints while i was gone, your shit will be in the mail before i leave for Cali. . . . sorry for the delay but i didnt know til i got home“. On 14 June 2004 she reminds readers of the sale of her works by writing “Yes Yes, the mail order thing os for peeps who wanted the shirt design i have in my art folder and some people ordered prints of my photographs. If anyone else in interested let me know, email me. . . .”. Though ensconced in the business of SuicideGirls.com, James is able to promote, manage and control the sale and distribution of her own designs. Using her journal, she can advise readers of the availability of her designs and inform them of the shipping dates of their goods. Her commercial endeavours, as managed through her
SuicideGirls.com journal, do not appear to be profit orientated (for the “Plastic Surgery” poster she requests merely “a postage or any donation”), but a creator-controlled outlet for her artistic efforts.

James’s journal reveals an ideological and personal hostility towards capitalism, coupled with a desire to make a living her own way. Part of a journal entry which consists of a list of messages, includes a blistering attack upon the capitalist system and corporate culture: “Dear cool non corporate career, where are you?...Dear money, why do you escape me so often? Dear Capitalism, why are you so overpowering and greedy and fucking shitty?” (27 May 2004). The entry reveals frustration at the capitalist system, while acknowledging James’s need for money. She derides capitalism for being “overpowering and greedy and fucking shitty”, yet grumbles that money “escape[s] me so often”. She does want a career, but insists that it be a “cool, non-corporate career.” The contradictions of being forced to live within a capitalist system while trying to defy it are also articulated in an entry that reveals an unease about the cyberspace fame she has achieved as a Suicide Girl. She writes:

Yeah that’s right, no gods no fucking masters. I have noticed since being on this site the way in which all of us SG’s are treated, put up on a pedestal for some reason. We are no different than you and your friends. We just happen to sign up to have pictures taken of us and put on the internet. I find it so weird when people send me emails like I'm some celebrity. I'm not, at all, I'm just me and you are just you, and we are all human. (10 May 2004)

James articulates dismay here at a “celebrity” status imposed upon her, a status she implies she did not seek. Her protestation that “we just happen to sign up to have pictures taken of us and put on the internet” may appear ingenuously naïve, but the persona of James projected in her journal displays a commitment to a philosophical ideal by which
people would not acquire status based purely on their physical attributes or their association with popular cultural icons. “We are all human”, she protests, implying a natural equality of status which, ironically, SuicideGirls.com actively denies by deliberately privileging its models.

However, James seems at least partially aware that her ideal is not, despite the site’s purported mission, wholly supported at SuicideGirls.com itself. She continues the entry with a hasty disclaimer which attempts to mitigate any offence SuicideGirls.com or its models might take at the implication that they purposefully seek undeserved celebrity status: (this comment is meant to relate my feelings ingeneral about celeb status in a way that everyone reading my journal will absolutly know, i am in no way shape or form wanting to put down any SG or SG.com itslef, i love this place, it give me an arena to talk about this stuff and people will actually read it, so use it as a metaphor, nothing else)” (10 May 2004). She ends the entry proper with a final exhortation in favour of individualism: “Don't let anyone decide what is cool, acceptable, hip, right or anything for you, be your own master!!!! Own Yourself!!!” (10 May 2004). James does not clearly articulate any conflict between insisting her readers decide for themselves “what is cool, acceptable, hip, right or anything for you” and her appearance on a website which privileges a narrow aesthetic of beauty heavily influenced by the Western body image ideal. However, she presents another disclaimer in the entry’s second footnote (the first included the statement “fuck society's ideas that they have hidden in my brain for my whole life. I'm taking god damned fucking control!”):

** I also do not want to lead anyoneon in the thought that I am trying to tell anyone how to behave, this journal is and was meant to be empowering and all of my other [journals] and posts are i guess just a clue into how i role, not saying its for everyone, but again, i love this place because i can say what i want, so again,
words are words, if you don't think you are going to like what they say then don't read them. No disrespect to anyone seriously.

If James truly "love[s] this place because I can say what I want", her disclaimer of her opinion as "just a clue into how I role, not saying its for everyone" is disconcerting, particularly when she has just emphatically ordered her readers to "Own Yourself!!!"?

While James does not directly articulate the conflict between SuicideGirls.com's official anti-commerce rhetoric and its "lifestyle brand", this entry, with its peculiar mix of strident anti-commerce, anti-celebrity rhetoric and anxious appeasement, does highlight the tension engendered by the conflict between SuicideGirls.com's ideals and actual practices.

James's negative "feelings in general about celeb status" conflict ideologically with her appreciation of SuicideGirls.com as "an arena to talk about this stuff."

SuicideGirls.com has bestowed upon her a privileged position her journal entry derides. James's journal entry articulates that the site has given her an audience for her thoughts and opinion. However, it also appears to assume that the audience for her life-writing is a phenomenon distinct from her cyberspace fame, not a closely related circumstance. Her railings against capitalism and her ideological endorsement of celebrating individuality are uncomfortably juxtaposed against the commercial success of SuicideGirls.com and its idealisation of a narrow standard of cosmetically "anti-mainstream" beauty.

However, unlike the SuicideGirls.com merchandising efforts, with their logo T-shirts and carefully cultivated, integrated style, James appears to genuinely promote an ethos of individual style through her commercial efforts. The silkscreen design is a case in point; although the design of the wings on the coat hanger remains the same for each t-shirt, James screens the design onto second-hand shirts, specifically so that "every one [is] unique." The message of the design itself is ambiguous. It could be read as a protest...
against consumerism. With the disembodied wings pinned to a coathanger, the design can be pessimistically interpreted as picturing clothing design as a gruesome industry which cripples the imagination and insists upon being able to pin style down. Alternatively, the design could be read as representing the possibilities of asserting individual freedom (represented by the possibility of flight implied by the wings) in one’s choice of clothing, particularly when the clothing is, like the finished product of this particular T-shirt, a truly unique piece.

The “Plastic Surgery” poster is another example of James’s fervently articulated anti-standardisation ideals:

![Plastic surgery is self-imposed domestic violence.](image)

Fig. 2. Samantha Humphreys. “Plastic Surgery” poster.

This stark, powerful image of the woman’s head wrapped in bandages in profile, superimposed over the procedural consent form, is almost self-explanatory. The poster,
which protests the violence of plastic surgery, can be read as a protest against the near-unattainable standards of beauty with which the media constantly bombards women. For most women, the faces and bodies they see in magazines and on television and movie screens can only be achieved by violently altering the natural features of their faces and bodies. In protesting the violence of cosmetic surgery and arguing against the perceived need to alter one’s natural features, the poster is also a protest against the standardisation of the concept of beauty. Cosmetic plastic surgery is perhaps the ultimate standardisation process: if one forcibly alters one’s body and face to match a preconceived ideal of beauty, and others do the same to meet the same ideal, then beauty as an aesthetic concept is not compatible with individuality or unique style, but with a prefabricated form. James’s “Plastic Surgery” poster is thus a powerful statement in favour of individuality and a vehement protest against standardisation.

However, the poster could also be read as chastisement of women. Instead of directly criticizing the hegemonic power structure that finds it so commercially convenient to create impossible beauty ideals for women, the “Plastic Surgery” poster insists that the “domestic violence” of cosmetic surgery is “self-imposed”. The blame is therefore implicitly laid not upon those who create the environment of standardization, but on the victims of it. The “Plastic Surgery” poster is not a celebration of individuality, but a condemnation of the perceived lack of it in beauty-obsessed Western society. It is, moreover, an attack on the women who attempt to reproduce the impossible beauty ideal, women who are victims of the standardisation process at least as much as they are perpetrators of it. That James’s artwork aggressively privileges individual choices and unique style is laudable; that its aggression is directed towards the women who buy into impossibly perfect beauty ideals is not.
In selling T-shirts based on the wing design and the “Plastic Surgery” poster, items which reject conformity and promote unique style and independent choices, James demonstrates that her money is literally where her mouth is: she is firmly committed to the anti-mainstream ethos which SuicideGirls.com itself claims to embody, even as it standardises ideals of beauty and personal style. However, she is also ensconced in the hypocritically “anti-mainstream” consumerist business of SuicideGirls.com.

James’s online personal journal and the original artworks she sells through it neatly encapsulate the tensions of commerce and culture that permeate SuicideGirls.com. James attempts to negotiate these tensions by articulating her anti-conformity stance through her journal and artworks, and her cottage industry business demonstrates the viability of small business creativity online. Her artworks and journal writings privilege individual style and uniqueness. However, this section of her commercial activities (as distinct from her co-owned design business Killing Spree Productions) depends on the celebrity status which she adamantly denies. James’s privileged “pedestal” position disturbs her as it conflicts with her ideals, but her status as a cultural icon is also responsible for at least some of her commercial success. Her insistence that her real reason for doing SuicideGirls.com is “[t]o spread radical ideas” sits uneasily beside the fact that an audience for her ideas and “an arena to talk about this stuff” is a result of the “celebrity” status she detests. Moreover, both that status and her audience are the results of her willing participation in a capitalist business venture which sells a “lifestyle brand” of anti-mainstream “alternative” culture. Her many disclaimers and anxiety not to offend her readers or “SG.com itslef” imply a conflict between her anti-celebrity protests and the business of the site, which actively promotes its models as a subcultural elite.

James’s journal thus both denies and conforms to the official SuicideGirls.com business ethos. The passionate anti-capitalism of her journal entries and her dedication to
promoting an individualist life philosophy run parallel to the official presentation of SuicideGirls.com as an anti-mainstream website dedicated to individuality and unique style. However, that very celebration of unique identity and her adamant denial of celebrity status contradict the site’s subtextual business practices, which actively create celebrity status for the models, commodify identity and standardise “unique” style. Commerce in James’s journal is cast as a complex process which requires frequent explanation and re-articulation to negotiate between the ideal of the official SuicideGirls.com anti-capitalist mission statement and the actuality of the site’s more pro-capitalist business practices.

4. “Anti-Corporate” Business: Lennon Murphy and Lennon Suicide as Integrated Business Bodies

Some Suicide Girls, like James and JenniRae, use their SuicideGirls.com personal online journals as a way to directly distribute or advertise products, exploiting their internet audience as an internet cottage industry market. Others use their journals to advertise events and performances in realspace, hoping to convert a cyberspace audience into a realspace audience. Lennon, a self-described musical “Recording Artist”, casually mentions her upcoming tour performances during entries that update readers on recent events in her life (“Profile”). On 5 August 2004, she writes, as a casual end to an entry that informs readers of the outcome of a recent tour bus crash: “So 2 shows a day is starting to hurt us, but we’re surviving like always. But what can you do. By the way, thanks to everyone who has been able to make it out to the shows.” The acknowledgement of “everyone who has been able to make it out to the shows” indicates some convergence of Lennon’s realspace and cyberspace audiences. Other entries
mention tour places, or direct readers to Lennon’s website, www.lennononline.com, where a complete listing of tour dates can be found.

In fact, Lennon’s SuicideGirls.com persona, as presented in both journal text and photosets, is that of a successful (if occasionally struggling), fiercely independent female musician. Lennon’s SuicideGirls.com photosets and journals constantly intersect with her musical career. Three of her four photosets are obviously inspired by her life as a musician, centred around the themes of performing, travelling and living on the road (“On Stage, “The Bus” and “Hotel Unwind”). An image from the “The Bus” photoset forms the cover for the DVD charting her musical career entitled After The So Called, while images from this and her other SuicideGirls.com photosets appear as graphic elements of lennononline.com. SuicideGirls.com appears actively to encourage the integration of Lennon the Suicide Girl and Lennon Murphy the musician. The “On Stage” photoset is accompanied by an effusive caption that also functions as an advertisement for Lennon’s own website:

Suicidegirls is proud to count independant recording artist Lennon Murphy among it's ranks. After two years of extensive touring with such acts as The Cult, Alice Cooper, Drowning Pool, Otep, Mushroomhead, as well as many others, Lennon's goal is to release her latest album on her own terms and her own dime. She took time out of her busy schedule to pose for SG. Check out her pictures and then go listen to her music on her website [link to website].

Following the link to www.lennononline.com brings the reader to a website when they can listen to samples of Lennon’s music, buy the contents of her discography and learn that she is, in realspace, an apparently wholly independent artist. Having left record label Arista after “creative differences”, Lennon informs readers that “In an industry where you have four weeks to hit and then they move on to the next thing, a career is the last thing
corporate America is considering. By putting this new album out through my own company, I want to give myself the chance of still being around in 10 years” (“Lennon”, lennononline.com). Leaving a record label, establishing her own company and stating that she intends to be a career musician, rather than a short-lived one-hit-wonder are all marks of an independent musician determined to remain so, in defiance of corporate America.

Certainly, SuicideGirls.com benefits Lennon as a method of reaching a potential audience for her music. Although the caption to “On Stage” mentions Lennon as being in the “ranks” of SuicideGirls.com, the site’s promotion of Lennon’s music and website and the “pride” articulated in her appearance on the site indicates a status granted to Lennon that privileges her even above the normal celebrity status granted Suicide Girls on the website. Lennon’s presence on SuicideGirls.com is, however, mutually advantageous from a commercial standpoint. Lennon receives extra exposure for her performances and recordings through her SuicideGirls.com photosets and journal. In turn, SuicideGirls.com receives the alternative subculture credibility of having an independent recording artist take “time out of her busy schedule” to appear on the site, endorsing its official anti-mainstream credo by her presence.

In addition to increasing SuicideGirls.com’s credibility as an “alternative” website, Lennon’s online journal writes her as the creator and manager of her music. The journal stresses her agency and ownership of the creative process and she is depicted as a female artist who refuses to be exploited by “corporate America”, favouring the independent management of her own career. The journal depicts her competent (if occasionally exhausted) management of the stresses and challenges of the life of a travelling musician. She refuses to allow such a trivial incident as a life-threatening accident to halt her current tour: “Yes, my home was completely totaled and yea we should have died,” she writes, but adds, “Well, everyone is okay and we’re definitely still
going” (5 Aug. 2004). Lennon writes herself as an artist who lives to create “real” music, as opposed to the commercial machinations of the corporate machine.

Lennon’s aggressive proclamations of independence from commercialism are problematic. Centred around the themes of life on the road, Lennon’s photosets could be read as an endorsement of her fierce independence and dedication to artistic integrity. However, a demand on her website for her audience to “look past the sexual imagery, and discover Lennon in the honesty of her music” sits uneasily beside the erotic appeal of her photosets and the utilisation of images from those photosets in her musical career. The instruction to disregard “sexual imagery” is an attempt to deny categorisation of Lennon as a sex object, even as she uses that imagery to promote herself. While the course of Lennon’s career is written as a fierce struggle for independence against the evils of “corporate America”, she is implicated in the entirely capitalist consumerism of SuicideGirls.com, providing a endorsement of consumerism even as her website derides corporate business practice in the modern music industry. Ironically, her anti-commercial career ideals accord her particular reverence from SuicideGirls.com. For all the anti-commercial rhetoric of both her own website and SuicideGirls.com itself, both commercial entities have engineered a loop of “alternative” credibility which denies capitalism and the unempowered use of sexual objectification for commercial gain even as Lennon and SuicideGirls.com profit from them. The tension between the presentation of Suicide Girl Lennon promoted as a commercial sex object and the presentation of Lennon Murphy the musician claiming ownership of her independent career and instructing fans to disregard her sexual imagery is clearly apparent, but completely ignored by both sites.
5. Events Promotion and the Commerce/Culture Category Challenge: Tina and Femina Potens

Like Lennon, Suicide Girl Tina finds her SuicideGirls.com journal a useful forum for promoting her creative ventures. Tina Butcher founded and manages the San Francisco art gallery Femina Potens, which is a “a grassroots DIY Non-Profit Art Gallery and Performance space” (15 Sep. 2004). Tina often promotes shows and events at the gallery through her SuicideGirls.com online personal journal. This is not, however, corporate-style marketing where the marketing ‘message’ appears carefully planned and produced for maximum market penetration. Rather, the promotion of Femina Potens in Tina’s SuicideGirls.com journal is casual, even off-hand, and rarely appears to be the sole purpose of a journal entry. Tina’s promotion of exhibitions and events at Femina Potens is usually integrated into entries describing other recent achievements and activities, as in this entry:

I'm going to LA this weekend for work. Have a big show at the gallery on Friday. Working on getting a grant into SFAC for Femina Potens. I just submitted an erotica piece for an anthology that will come out next year. I'm trying to work on submitting a proposal for a queer foundation to get writing funds - so I can travel less and write more. My interns at the gallery are amazing. My friends are amazing. My girlfriend is amazing. Life is really good. (19 Jan. 2005)

She mentions the “big show at the gallery”, but it is merely one item in a catalogue of fortunate events and recent activities. Although “the gallery” or “FP” is frequently mentioned in Tina’s SuicideGirls.com journal, it is usually in this casual context. Mention of the gallery is usually not direct advertisement, but the natural inclusion in her journal of a project which appears to take up a great deal of her time and attention: “Today was
my day off from the gallery so I had a chance to write and clean the house which I'm always less stressed when things are more organized so I'm a happy one” (24 Sep. 2005). Tina’s frequent allusions to and mentions of Femina Potens in her journal do not appear to be commercially-motivated, but part of entries summarising her normal activities, opinions and achievements. Many of Tina’s entries, therefore, could not be considered advertisement in the conventionally commercial sense. However, casual and off-hand as these mentions are, they are indeed endorsements of Tina’s commercial activities.

Occasionally, Tina does specifically promote the gallery and its activities on her SuicideGirls.com journal. As Femina Potens is a non-profit organisation, its commercial viability depends a great deal on fund-raising and grants. SuicideGirls.com provides Tina with a forum to advertise the former. On 15 September 2004, she posts an entry solely devoted to advertising a fund-raising event:

Femina Potens presents:
Femina Potens Auction, Raffle, and Celebration
“Celebrity & Star F*#!ers Gala”
September 18th @ 7pm
465 S.Van Ness
SF, CA 94103
$5 - $10

featuring performances by Carol Queen, Michelle Tea, Tami Hart, Urban Hermitt, & The Fat Bottom Revue/ Big Bottom Burlesque Dancers, Autographed auction items by such artists as
Ani DiFranco
Carol Queen
Annie Sprinkle
Inga Muscio

Diane Diprima

The remainder of the entry includes biographies of the artists and a brief description of the art gallery’s form and function, again emphasising that it is a non-profit, DIY organisation dedicated to sex-positive feminist works and performances. This entry is clearly an advertisement in terms of both content and style. The entry reads as if it was press release copy, as opposed to Tina’s usual casual journal-writing style.

However, unlike Lennon, Tina has articulated the tensions between commerce/culture and pornography/art in her journal. As in the “Soil” set, she has explored those tensions and challenged the conventional taxonomy of such categories. This advertisement for the Femina Potens exhibition performs another challenge to easy categorization. By mentioning artists such as noted sex workers and performance artists Carol Queen and Annie Sprinkle and including a burlesque dancing troupe among the entertainments listed, the entry is in itself a declaration of the sex-positive philosophy of both Femina Potens and its creator. Though clearly an advertisement, this entry is not only promotion for the hope of commercial gain. Tina’s entry articulates a philosophy as well as promoting an event from which she (or her gallery) will hopefully profit. Thus, for Tina, her SuicideGirls.com online personal journal functions as a medium for her sex-positive message even when commercially active, constantly articulating her active and conscious challenge to the assumed binary opposition of the categories of art/porn and culture/commerce.

The journal of SuicideGirls.com model Katia reveals a very different attitude towards commerce and sexuality. Rather than, like James, regarding SuicideGirls.com as an “arena” for her ideas, accompanied by an unwanted “pedestal”, or, like Tina, seeing it as an interesting site in which to explore negotiations between conventionally opposed categories, Katia’s journal writes SuicideGirls.com primarily as a money-making venture. Katia is originally from Russia (English is evidently her second language, which is a probable explanation for the almost parodic number of grammatical and spelling errors in her journal entries) and a self-proclaimed “SEX PREFERMER” (1 Apr. 2004). Her journal does not situate SuicideGirls.com as an empowering opportunity to demonstrate her anti-mainstream sensibilities. Instead, her journal entries imply that she regards SuicideGirls.com as a valuable secondary source of income she can add to the money she makes from strip-dancing. On 19 January 2004, she writes:

i am trying to do more photosets or a moves, but for some reason its not working out for me. [frown emoticon]

nobody would respond to me and give me any answers. [mad emoticon]
is it anybody out there, who does photoshoots for SG this days?
or maybe i'll just go find misster Suicide.

if i am lucky. [confused emoticon]

this is fucking suck. i am starting to get mad. [mad emoticon]

or maybe i am just ugly and nobody wants me? [robot emoticon]

Since Suicide Girls are paid per photosets, having multiple photosets accepted would give Katia more income from the site. Although the site no longer accepts video footage, models were also paid more for videos than for photosets. Despite SuicideGirls.com “empowering erotica” byline, Katia’s entry indicates no awareness of SuicideGirls.com as
an “empowering” artistic venture, implying that quantity (“more photosets”) is more important than the potential artistic value of the photosets.

Unlike James, Katia has no apparent compunction in criticising SuicideGirls.com. On 1 April 2004, she recounts her unsuccessful audition experience for the upcoming Suicide Girls Burlesque Tour:

    well, anyway i went to LA to audition for SGB tour. men, did i ever emberest myself any more. . . . . . no, i don’t think so. [vomit emoticon]

    it was so fucking horeble that i don’t think that i can describe it, in any american words that i know. [skull emoticon]

    first i was absolutly sober surreal which is not normal as it is.

    second THEY had a fucking carpet on there stage!!! and absolutly nothing to hold on to or lean on.

    have you ever tryed to walk (i am not even going to talk about dance) just fucking walk in 7" inch heels on the FUCKING CARPET. [mad emoticon]

    I AM A SEX PREFERMER NOT A FUCKING ACROBAT.

    well, i guess i could get down on it and do some flore work if. . . . . . . . . . . . .

    ........................................

    if it wasn’t sooooooooooo fucking dirty, that i wouldn’t let my dog to go shit on it [robot emoticon].
if any of you work in this industry, you know how IMPORTANT MUSIC and the SOUND OF YOUR MUSIC.

well, THEY want you to audition on a DIRTY ASS FUCKING CARPET STAGE and PLAY YOUR MUSIC ON THE CHIP ASS WALL MART STEREO, THAT MOST LIKELY WAS BOUGHT AT THE LOCAL GOODWILL, BECAUSE MANUFACTURE STOP MAKING THEM IN FUCKING 1989.

i guess i should say that we was very fucking lucky that its even had a fucking CD player.

sound??? what fucking sound??? my fucking radio playes louder and have more stereo in it, then this piss of fucking gerbage that THEY want you to audition to. [vomit emoticon]

This critique is significant because Katia objects to her audition on professional grounds. She expects that the stage should be uncarpeted; if it is carpeted, the carpet should be clean; the stereo equipment should be up to industry standard since “if any of you work in this industry, you know how IMPORTANT MUSIC and the SOUND OF YOUR MUSIC [are].” The auditions does not meet Katia’s professional sex performer standards. Furthermore, that she criticises the SuicideGirls.com’s burlesque auditions by characterising them as an amateur production indicates that she expects them to be professional. This critique confirms Katia’s view of SuicideGirls.com as a commercial venture. For Katia, at least, the image of SuicideGirls.com as a coalition of enthusiastic amateurs demonstrating the beauty of the “anti-mainstream” female body out of ideological fervour is a myth, and not one to which she is attracted. She is a sex
performer, and regards SuicideGirls.com as an arena for commercial sex performance, even when the site does not meet her professional standards.

Katia’s journal could thus be read as a positive denial of SuicideGirls.com hypocrisy, exposing the anti-capitalist, pro-feminist rhetoric of the site for the thin veneer of “alternative” ideology it is. The entry above could be read as focusing instead upon a presentation of its author as a woman unashamedly confident in the commercial aspect of her work, and demanding that the professional standards of her industry be upheld. While her work certainly encourages sexual objectification, Katia’s journal does not disguise this fact with false claims of “empowerment”. Indeed, her honesty and her criticism of SuicideGirls.com are peculiarly encouraging; Katia is a sex performer, and entertains no illusions as to the commercial nature of her work. Although she displays her body as an object, she also articulates a personal ownership of that process, where she can have reasonable, standardized expectations as to how that display should be carried out.

However, despite the refreshing lack of hypocrisy in Katia’s attitudes towards commerce and her body, her journal does not promote a reading of her work as a positive commercial career for women. Instead, Katia’s journal presents what is very nearly the perfect stereotype of the drunken, drug-dazed, money-grubbing stripper which has so long contributed to a view of the sex performance industry as suitable only for “bad girls”, the inferior, “damaged goods” of the feminine world. She writes that her state of mind at the Burlesque Tour auditions might have been impaired by her unusual sobriety. In fact, several entries detail drinking binges. On 18 January 2004 she writes:

for a christ and my personal sake i need

 to at least try, not to drink so much. [skull emoticon]

i got sooooooooooooooo waisted on thursday night. i actually had a lots of fun.

till my last drink, i guess. [rolls eyes emoticon]
because after i don't remember shit. and the next thing i know, i got waking up by
the security dude, in front of my ex-fuck apartment door. [robot emoticon]

On 9 February 2004 she writes:

i got so drunk last night, that i got keeked out of "dante's".
i can't believe it. i've been going there for years, and its never happend before.
i know the fucking owner, for a christ sake. know him really good. i guess it didn't
help. no, this is funny. i wish i remember, what actually was going on. [grin
emoticon]

Katia relates drinking to the point of passing out and discovering gaps in her memory
with some initial concern, but by the 9 February entry she once again writes her self-
destructive behaviour as amusing, rather than damaging.5

Moreover, this damaging behaviour is directly linked to her career as a sex
performer; indeed, it may be an asset. On 11 May 2004, she writes:

oh my god! here is the grate fucking news for people who have seeing me
and knows where i work - I GOT FUCKING FIRED!!!
why?...................... because i got REALLY, REALLY
DRUNK.

well this is actually what i suppos to do at my work, but this time I GOT
REALLY, REALLY DRUNK and TOLD EVERYBODY (including patty, this is
for people who is familiar with my work environment. for everybody else - she is
my "BOSS"), I TOLD THEM ALL EXACTLY WHAT I THINK ABOUT
THEM. [angry emoticon]

The revelation that she is “suppos[ed]” to be drunk at work caters to some of the worst
stereotypes of sex performance work as the exclusive arena of damaged, self-destructive
“bad girls” with various addictions. Drunkenness, strictly forbidden on the job in most
“legitimate” careers in is not detrimental in itself to Katia’s career. Rather, it is the honesty that the drunkenness engendered that is the real case of Katia’s unemployment.

Katia’s experience with the sex performance industry as articulated in her journal is one of frustration and self-destructive behaviour. It is her position as a representative of SuicideGirls.com which seems particularly significant. SuicideGirls.com’s ethos is sex-positive, and sex-performance positive. The site’s founder has claimed that “Suicidegirls believes that creativity, personality and intelligence are not incompatible with adult entertainment… Suicidegirls mixes the smarts, enthusiasm and DIY attitude of the best music and alternative culture sites with an unapologetic, grassroots approach to sexuality” (Sascha 2). Certainly, artistic integrity does not appear to be of great concern to Katia compared to making enough money to live on, and “creativity, personality and intelligence” are almost the antithesis to the repetitive, poorly-articulated, badly spelled prose of her personal online journal entries. Although Katia’s journal writes her as bluntly realistic about her job and honest about the commercial benefits of her position on SuicideGirls.com as few other models are, she does little to realistically promote ideals of “empowering erotica”. Instead, her self-destructive behaviours as represented in her journal only confirm misogynistic narratives of the drunken self-destructive stripper. The style of her journal entries also endorses these stereotypes. Although English is almost certainly Katia’s second language and she communicates competently in it, this information must be deduced from several journal entries and photoset captions. Therefore, stylistically, her journal is a mix of badly-spelled, ungrammatical prose, and thus gives the impression of her persona as unintelligent as well as self-destructive.

Katia’s honesty may be refreshing but her presentation of her Suicide Girl persona as an almost stereotypical damaged bad girl is an ultimate endorsement of negative “bad girl” narratives.
7. Commerce and Culture at SuicideGirls.com: Conclusions

SuicideGirls.com commodifies the images of the models to whom it claims to give a "voice", standardises the concept of beauty by privileging a certain form of "anti-mainstream" beauty that still falls firmly within the Western ideal of female beauty and contributes to the elimination of unique style with its logo T-shirts. SuicideGirls.com, despite compromising its own initial anti-commerce ideals, also allows and actively encourages its models to pursue business opportunities through their online personal journals. This helps create the perception of SuicideGirls.com as a cool, anti-mainstream employer, despite the site’s casual profiteering, and further endears Suicidegirls.com to its young, anti-mainstream audience. However, the site’s policy that models are “free to advertise [their] projects, events or art” can also genuinely commercially benefit its models, if they choose to exploit it (“Model”). The commercial benefits that accrue to models at SuicideGirls.com are of obvious value to models like JenniRae, Lennon and Katia. Therefore, although the photosets could be read as commodifying the models as a product of the site, the Suicide Girls’ journals allow them greater leeway. The journals of the Suicide Girls reveal a variety of often complex responses to commerce, and many of them place their writer’s personas in the place of the subject controlling the commercial process, rather than the object which is produced by it.

However, although the journals of Suicide Girls could be read as articulating a subversive discourse that promotes the site’s official ethos of unique identity and intelligent sexuality, the site’s actual business practices commodify the images of its models and seek to standardise beauty and personal style. The journals of James and JenniRae espouse a philosophy of individual style and unique expression of identity
through style but their arguments are qualified by their location in a site which
hypocritically encourages aesthetic standardisation. Lennon’s persona on
SuicideGirls.com is inextricably linked to her career as a successful independent
musician. The SuicideGirls.com sexual imagery she uses to promote her music and her
demands for fans to “look beyond the sexual imagery” create tensions between object and
subject that go unexamined in her journal and belie the presentation of Lennon as
“independent” and “anti-corporate”. Tina’s casual advertisement of her art gallery is less
profit orientated, but provides an interesting commercial endorsement of pro-women, pro-
sex events and exhibitions, once again challenging easy categorisation of
commerce/culture.

Like almost every aspect of SuicideGirls.com, commerce in the online personal
journals of its models is a complex, problematic, and often self-contradictory many-
voiced construction which denies simple binary distinctions between culture/commerce,
art/pornography and subject/object. Several models have articulated feminist negotiations
between the apparently contradictory juxtaposition between the female object and the
female subject on the site, or challenged the traditional taxonomy of binary distinctions
altogether. However, the journals of the models, however enlightened, must be read
within their context on a site which, despite its rhetoric, also endorses the aesthetic
standardisation and consumerist objectification of its models. The models may well find
their work personally empowering, but the business practices and policies of the site
replicate patriarchal narratives that serve to disempower women. SuicideGirls.com is not
a cyborg feminist text and its claim to “empowered erotica” is a fraud.
Endnotes

1 Accurate as of August 2003; models are now paid $300 per photoset.

2 James is not this model’s given name, which is Samantha Humphreys (Sam). One possible reading of the masculine name for her Suicide Girls persona is that it symbolises James’s questioning of the performance of the female in a commercial framework.

3 When granting permission for the reproduction of these images, James instructed that her real name, Samantha Humphreys, should be used in citations.

4 This was true through most of my period of study. As of May 2006, SuicideGirls.com has begun to host videos once more.

5 Katia updates her journal with relative infrequency. While these two entries are nearly a month apart chronologically, in the text of her journal they are separated by only three entries, adding to the impression of frequent performance of self-destructive behaviours.
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