

Porn literacy and young people's digital cultures

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While research discussions of porn literacy have increased in recent years, this mostly focuses on incorporating *porn literacies education* into school-based sex education (Dawson et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2020; Planting-Bergloo & Orlander, 2022; Rothman et al., 2018). From a *digital cultures* perspective, I argue that porn literacy discussions must attend to digital cultures in which young people access, seek, find, share, watch, report, block, follow, learn from, and relate to a range of pornographic content and creators. Young people's *porn use* is mostly also *digital media use* – particularly in countries where porn literacies education is a focus.

If we define pornography as 'sexually explicit materials intended to arouse' (McKee et al., 2020), we can assume that a high proportion of young people produce it, even if just for partners and friends (Mitchell et al., 2014, p. 64; Mori et al., 2020). This reflects available technologies and follows a long history of people using technology to extend or enhance their access to sexual intimacy. It also references a pervasive socio-cultural desire for sexual self-knowledge (Foucault, 1978). Despite differences between porn produced by professional industries and an everyday person with a camera, common platforms that circulate porn (e.g. Twitter, PornHub) present professional and DIY content side-by-side, sorted through algorithms and found through hashtags or simply scrolling. Approaching young people as likely

porn users, we should consider their experiences of consuming and producing sexual content alongside their digital practices of sharing and circulating it, and the literacies developed across these practices.

Porn literacy or porn deterrence

Discussions of porn literacy education commonly propose school-based initiatives to defuse some of the messages young people are expected to learn from porn. Much of this work tends toward ‘inoculating’ young people against pornography (Albury, 2014; Goldstein, 2020; Smith, 2021), suggesting that its messages are well-understood by educators and researchers (as harmful), and that schools have a social responsibility to reduce this expected harm. As Goldstein (2020) suggests, this approach ignores the cultures in which young people engage with porn.

Inoculation approaches to young people’s ‘porn education’ reference a long history of shielding and protecting young people from sexual knowledge, as though a Pandora’s box will be opened once sex reveals itself to young eyes. This work often cites the safety of children and young people as its focus, and by discussing them together, positions young people *as* children.¹ Here, safety is situated in not knowing, seeing, or having to think about sex. Yet, an *out of sight out of mind* logic is bad logic if we are genuinely interested in young people’s literacies.

These inoculation strategies exist beyond sex education and can also be traced through digital media designed to filter out sex, as found in social media platforms and search engines that classify content as safe/unsafe (Paasonen et al., 2019). Google Image search, for example, offers a default SafeSearch mode that filters out most sexual content. As Paasonen et al. argue, “conflating safety with the filtering

¹ Explicit sexual content is unsuitable for children. My focus is on young people at an age where they are likely to be using porn and/or having sex.

of sexual content both builds on and bolsters an understanding of sex and sexuality as inherently risky, potentially harmful, and best hidden away and left unmentioned” (2019, p. 2).

Practices of media filtering and blocking, like educational messages that discourage porn use, do not stop people from finding or seeking porn, but may actually enhance their digital literacies of the obstacles to sexual media and how to negotiate these. Pornography is a resource with many uses. We know that young people use it to learn about sex (Litsou et al., 2021), particularly queer young people for whom school-based sex education is inadequate (Sill, 2022) – though this can be true for most young people. It is also used (and useful) for negotiating gender and sexual identities (Scarcelli, 2015; Spišák, 2020), and can offer valuable representations for people of colour (Nguyen, 2014; Paramanathan, 2019).

We might ask whether schools are the most suitable sites for porn literacy education, and perhaps even sex education in its current form. As disciplining institutions (Foucault, 1991), schools have traditionally enacted narrow forms of pedagogy that privilege a one-way transfer of knowledge, from teacher to student. Here, school-based lessons on what sex is and how it happens can imply what sex ought to be and where it ought to happen. A standard definition and account of sex as neutral, natural and socially agreed upon is not always useful, especially for LGBTQ+ young people whose sexual cultures and possibilities fall beyond this. A more open approach to discussing sex and porn – and where these intersect with health and intimacy – would invite young people to explore their existing understandings of sex, including how their digital media practices foster porn literacies.

Media literacy

School-based media literacy programs have been critiqued for simply focusing on students as media consumers, despite today’s participatory aspects of digital media (Dezuanni, 2016). Evidently, porn

literacy approaches echo this traditional media literacy education by focusing on consumption, and what media do to us more so than what we do with media.² More recent approaches foreground digital culture aspects of media literacy, acknowledging that media learning also occurs through media participation and production. A recent report informing Australian media literacy policy offers the following definition: “Media Literacy is essential for effective, ethical and safe media engagement. It refers to the ability to create, use and share media and to critically reflect on this engagement” (Dezuanni et al., 2021, p. 7).

With its singular focus on porn consumption, porn literacy education initiatives do not reflect the above definition of media literacy. Obviously, schools will not support young people to produce sexual content, and nobody wants that, least of all students. This is not to say that formal education strategies cannot approach young people as having a range of experiences and literacies of sex and porn, including a sense of the social, cultural, historical and technological aspects of pornography and its use.

Porn as social, cultural, historical, technological

As well as offering lessons about sex, bodies, and how bodies have sex, porn can also support our knowledge of gender and its performances (Scarcelli 2015). It is also used, like all media, to reinforce existing social accounts or imaginaries of gender (Spišák, 2020). Porn scholars have explored how gender representations have changed throughout porn histories, signalling a relationship between pornographic texts and social values and ideals. For example, John Mercer tracks how gay porn cultures moved from a focus on 1980s untouchable porn stars, to everyday accounts of porn actor lives in the 2000s (as per performer blogs), to porn performers building intimacy with audiences on social media

² While sexting education addresses young people’s sexual media production, this is a deficit framing that suggests young people are unaware of the risks involved, and do not have skills/literacies to managing such risks.

(2017). This history not only speaks to shifts in technology and (micro)celebrity culture but also reflects a reduction of social stigma around sex work and sexual self-representations. While specific to gay pornographers, Mercer's work usefully demonstrates what porn literacy may entail – in this case literacies of the social, cultural, historical, and technological aspects of sexual media.

Last decade saw significant research on 'sexting education' (Albury et al., 2013; Dobson & Ringrose, 2016). Much of this feminist-led research challenged resources for young people that used shame as a tool for educating girls away from sexual self-representation. A social panic for the safety of girls (mostly imagined or represented as White) is not new but takes new forms and intensities. At this time we also saw news media panics and responses to these from policy makers, educators, parents, and academics alike. As per Mercer's work (2017), we see that social stigma and punishment (like the social exclusion of sexual subjects/communities) shifts over time, reflecting changing social attitudes towards sex, sexuality and its representations.

A recent study from Sweden found that teachers struggle to engage with students about pornography in classrooms, particularly figuring out how to structure the *message* (Planting-Bergloo & Orlander, 2022). Teachers felt compelled to convey the negative aspects of pornography to students and found it difficult to approach this differently, even when they wished to (2022). Evidently, a discourse of pornography as harmful is culturally dominant and structures how and where porn education can happen.

Young people's literacies

From a review of key literature on porn literacies³, colleagues and I noticed that young people's *concerns* about the dangers of porn, when expressed to researchers, were leveraged to argue for more porn literacies education to increase their 'critical thinking' (Byron et al., 2021). Meanwhile, learning to recite and repeat sentiments that porn is unrealistic, exploitative and leads to deviant behaviour – as key themes found in Goldstein's research with young people (2020) – is hardly critical. As Goldstein notes, these themes are unsurprising, reflecting an entrenched association of porn use with risk:

The prevalence of these kinds of narratives suggests the possibility that young people have deeply internalised normative discourses around pornography and/or that they were performing the kinds of narratives deemed acceptable around these contentious topics.

(Goldstein, 2020, p. 64)

Meanwhile, young research participants demonstrate critical engagement with porn in instances when they discuss their preferences for 'real bodies' experiencing 'real pleasures' (Byron et al., 2021).

Concerns with authenticity are often reflected in research with women who use porn (Tillman & Wells, 2022) but are less discussed in relation to young people. When cast as 'risk subjects', young people's knowledge and agency is not up for discussion, since we expect porn to be shaping them, not vice versa. However, understandings of authenticity in porn are ripe for interrogation and could certainly be a focus of porn literacies education that invites young people to explore their literacies of, and desires for, authentic representations. This offers a more valuable approach than relying on assumptions that young people misunderstand porn as real (Taylor, 2022).

³ We only reviewed literature up to and including 2017, and where porn users were engaged.

Young people's interest in ethical porn production, and the enjoyment and authenticity of performers, is unsurprising when considered in relation to contemporary digital cultures. As per Mercer's (2017) discussion of the historical shifts in gay porn, we see a movement toward greater access to porn performers, where audiences can feel closer to performers and find pleasure and assurance in this proximity. That young people want to know if porn performers are enjoying sex – as highlighted in the *Porn Laid Bare* documentary (Smith, 2021) – reflects broader cultural concerns for, and literacies around, sexual pleasure and consent. For many, the pleasures of porn consumption may depend on the perceived pleasures of performers, and this reflects contemporary digital cultures of reading for and performing authenticity (Byron et al., 2021).

Digital cultures of porn literacy

Today, porn is commonly found, produced and shared through digital media (Scarcelli, 2015), and “digital media are involved in the emergence of new forms of literacy, articulation and mediated activity” (Race, 2018, p. 1327). As well as an access point, digital media offer the means to produce, share, and build sexual cultures and communities through sexual self-representations (Bury & Easton, 2022; Race, 2018; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020). Social media have long offered opportunities for building or connecting to communities that support a range of sexual intimacies and subjectivities, where members can witness, consider, feel, and imagine a range of possibilities (Bronstein, 2020; Tiidenberg & van der Nagel, 2020).

Sexual media are dispersed through digital sites and platforms in complex ways, with their distribution informed by platform governance, platform affordances, platform cultures, and where these intersect. Sexual media also extend beyond porn sites and includes social media platforms such as Twitter, Reddit,

and Tumblr.⁴ Further, sexual content creators use social media platforms to invite audiences to sexual content published elsewhere. Most social platforms offer private spaces for chat and media sharing, where sexual content is less likely removed, and dating/hook-up apps also host sexual self-representations (Phillips, 2015; Tziallas, 2015), and may be experienced as ‘interactive porn’ sites (Dasgupta, 2022).

Social media platforms that allow sexual content (or where its regulation can be evaded) have afforded the development and maintenance of sexual communities that are marginalised or fetishised elsewhere (Bronstein, 2020; Tiidenberg, 2016). Sharing our sexual selves/bodies online can be experienced as empowering and speaks to a sexual politics of self-representation that is important for the many people whose sexualities and desirabilities are underrepresented (Lavigne, 2017; Paramanathan, 2019).

Learning about sex has historically happened beyond classrooms – through pedagogy not structured nor crafted by formal educators or institutions. This learning – from friends, peers, media, experimentation – offers something more accessible and relatable and less awkward. Here, learning can emerge through shared curiosities, interests, or pleasures. Today’s social media ecology ensures there are endless opportunities for peer learning due to expansive access to the personal experiences of others. TikTok is one such site, and while it prohibits sexual content, it hosts discussions of sex and porn.

Anyone spending time on TikTok is familiar with its personable-education genre in which pedagogy happens at peer level and invites response in the form of comments or *duets* and *stitches*, as platform features “conducive to community-engaged knowledge exchange” (MacKinnon et al., 2021 n.p.). This happens across any topic, including porn. To evade content removal or algorithmic systems that

⁴ Tumblr removed porn in 2018 but it can still be found and shared there.

minimise the circulation of 'unsafe' content, TikTokers posting about porn use a range of decoy words and hashtags (e.g. corn, or p0rn with a zero). These strategies are deployed by pornographers, sex educators, and anti-porn activists alike and this creates a dynamic where a search for #p0rn will generate a diverse selection of content from peers, performers, educators, shitposters, and more, offering a wide range of conflicting messages. In such spaces, young people are not only learning but developing and exercising their digital literacies (alongside sexual/porn literacies).

Conclusion

Porn literacy is an ill-defined concept and as Smith highlights, arguments for a critical pedagogy in schools rarely offer practical insight into what that entails (2021, p. 15). Common to porn literacy discussions to date are: a focus on young people; assumptions of young people's porn illiteracy; an inoculation/deterrence approach; and lack of attention to digital cultures. If porn literacy education only serves to deter young people from porn use, then it is not guided by a concern for literacy. Meanwhile, on social media (e.g. TikTok; Reddit), young people are sharing their experiences and understandings of porn, often in the context of health, intimacy, relationships, and sex education.

As adult researchers and educators, we must be open to learning from young people about their porn literacies and how we can support these, rather than relying on assumptions of problematic porn use (Taylor, 2022). Inviting young people's contributions to our discussions of porn literacy will give us insight into their many strategies for using porn in ways that feel better for them (Spišák, 2016, 2020). We also have a responsibility to not imagine porn as an isolated object with a singular use, but as something with many uses embedded in contemporary digital cultures of learning, connection, and expression.

Finally, we must be guided by young people's own concerns for sexual safety, rather than pre-established ideals of what safety means to educators and digital platforms alike. That online safety has become short-hand for sex-free media, unhelpfully suggests that any sexual representations are unsafe and not up for discussion (Paasonen et al., 2019). But this neglects our responsibility to ensure that young people are adequately resourced to find supportive, useful, and pleasurable spaces. Porn use can be safe and so too can young people's sexual self-representations. As educators and researchers, we have a lot to learn from young people's porn literacies.

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