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Beyond the risk paradigm: why we need to apply a youth-centered approach to porn literacy

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Abstract: This paper explores the conceptual evolution of porn literacy, examining its initial emergence within a traditional risk-prevention paradigm and advocating for a necessary pedagogical shift toward a youth-centered approach, which considers more broadly their digital practices and literacies. Through an analysis of current academic literature on porn literacy interventions, the study highlights how the dominant risk paradigm is inherited from the inoculation approach that characterized the initial phase of media literacy. The main limitations of risk approach are highlighted as follows: "top-down" instruction, protectionism, and the view of young people as inherently vulnerable. The contribution therefore invites to consider modern theoretical frameworks of media literacy—particularly those inspired by social studies of communication and the "digital turn"—in order to rethink the educational approach to sexually explicit media and pornography. Aligned with contemporary developments in new media literacies, the new paradigm of digital porn literacies proposes to integrate youth pre-existing digital competencies and consider their active engagement with digital practices in order to foster their agency, critical thinking, and overall sexual well-being.

Keywords: Porn literacy; Media literacy; New literacies; youth-centered approach

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1. Introduction

In the literature, "porn literacy" is commonly conceptualized as a form, a subset, or an extension of the broader concept of media literacy, highlighting the possibility of applying media literacy's frameworks and techniques also to the domain of sexually explicit contents in general and pornography in particular (Byron et al., 2021; Healy-Cullen & Morison, 2024; Tigert, 2024). We could for example adopt the well-known conceptual framework of David Buckingham (2019) in order to analyze the pornographic texts according to the concepts of production, language, representation and audience, answering questions like: What are the codes and conventions used in porn? Is the representation of sex realistic? Does it convey stereotypes or inequalities? How does the porn industry work? How has the consumption of sexually explicit content changed with the advent of digital technologies and the internet? In summary, adapting Patricia Aufderheide's foundational definition of media literacy (1993), we can therefore define porn literacy as the capacity of an individual to access, analyze, deconstruct, and critically evaluate pornographic texts, encompassing an understanding of how these materials are produced, circulated, and consumed.

The emergence of this specialized branch of media literacy is primarily driven by the ubiquity of online pornography and its function as a pervasive, informal site of sexual socialization for young people. Consequently, pornography literacy has been viewed as a strategic intervention to be introduced into institutionalized educational settings and public health agendas, in order to mediate the relationship between media consumption and sexual development (UNESCO, 2018; Vandenbosch & van Oosten, 2017). Indeed, porn literacy education has been increasingly considered as necessary, as it represents "a pragmatic response to the difficulty of restricting and/or regulating young people's exposure and access to or engagement with pornography or other sexual content in the current digitalized and 'pornified' era" (Healy-Cullen & Morison, 2024, p. 609).

When aimed at young people, the specific goal of porn literacy is to prevent them from adopting unhealthy sexual behaviors and, ultimately, to foster a "critical disengagement from pornographic texts" (Albury, 2014, p. 173). As an example, we report in full the definition of the Responsible Sex Education Institute: "Porn Literacy is a form of media literacy, which teaches individuals to think about, analyse, and evaluate the media they choose to consume and the media that is naturally around them, such as billboards and advertisements. Everything has a message, whether it's intentional or not. Knowing how content is created, why it is created, and for whom it was/is intended for can help youth better understand what they see and what they hear and how they can make healthy decisions for themselves".

This approach to porn literacy has been criticized by many authors for being overly focused on risks and for relying on a top-down, transmission-based model of knowledge and literacy. Recent research therefore points to the need for a radical shift in the educational approach to pornography, which should be integrated into the broader context of young people's digital practices concerning intimacy, sexuality, and relationships. This contribution aims to show how such an evolution is consistent with the approaches adopted by media literacy itself—particularly following the digital turn—and with the concept of "new media literacies".

2. The emergence of porn literacy within a risk-prevention paradigm

As noted by several scholars, pornography literacy education is dominated by a risk paradigm (Albury, 2014; Byron et al., 2020; Goldstein, 2020): its primary goal is to prevent young people from adopting inappropriate sexual views or behaviors that they can see in mainstream porno. Within this paradigm, sexually explicit internet materials are understood to provide "sexual scripts" that audiences – especially youth - may subsequently implement in real-world contexts. Consequently, porno literacy programs informed by risk paradigm have the operational objective of acting like an "inoculation" and prevent young people from uncritically accept the highly stylized, commercial representations of pornography. To mitigate this risk, standard interventions emphasize teaching youth to recognize mainstream commercial pornography as inherently fake, using media deconstruction techniques to "critically read porn as negative and comprising 'unrealistic' portrayals of sex" (Byron et al., 2021, p. 786).

This approach is grounded in a definition of youth as inherently vulnerable, impressionable, and cognitively or emotionally unequipped to interpret explicit media without adult intervention. Therefore, porn literacy initiatives are commonly

characterised by a top-down pedagogical structure wherein adult experts retain authoritative control over the transmission of knowledge. Pornography is positioned almost exclusively as a hazardous vector of moral or physical risk, and the primary role of the educator is to guide the student toward a rejection of these media contents.

As known, concerns about the harmful effects of media—especially on young people—have characterized a large number of studies on media impact. It is therefore not surprising that the inoculation approach is listed among the pedagogies that initially characterized media education (Masterman, 1997), even if defined as "the most backward perspective of all that can be taken toward the media" (Rivoltella, 2001, p. 44). Indeed, this model relies on a reductionist, linear understanding of media influence, assuming that passive audiences directly absorb and replicate textual messages while ignoring complex affective and contextual variables. This approach to porn literacy education "isolates content from the social context in which it is encountered and engaged with" and "fails to recognize that meanings are never singular, and that all people engage with media and relate what they see to other sources of information" (Healy-Cullen & Morison, 2024. p. 611).

Actually, academic debates concerning the effects of pornography consumption on youth users fails to offer a unified perspective on what messages pornography delivers or what audiences actually learn from engaging with it. A recent longitudinal study indicates that "pornography use was not a major uniformly negative or positive factor in the sexual socialization and sexual lives of most adolescents" (Landripet et al., 2026). Overall, scholarship highlights the highly heterogeneous nature of the outcomes and cautions against adopting causal or correlational interpretations regarding the impact of pornography on adolescent sexual development (McKee, 2010; McKee et al., 2022). In conclusion, it seems necessary to admit that "it is impossible to account for all the ways in which young people may use porn, and while pornography bestows certain lessons for those who view it, the specifics of these lessons, and whether they are overall negative or positive, are hard to determine." (Tigert, 2024, p. 623). As an example, empirical data demonstrates pornography often serves as a vital tool for validation, identity exploration, and community-building among LGBTQ+ youth (Albury, 2014; Healy-Cullen & Morrison, 2024). By organizing curricula around an ideal of "good sex" based on specific values and morals such as traditional gender dynamics and heteronormativity, porn literacy interventions completely ignore the lived experiences of queer individuals and pathologize non-normative expressions—such as BDSM, group sex, or commercial sex (Byron et al., 2021; Healy-Cullen et al., 2024).

Despite the long-standing academic attention given to sexually explicit contents and youth sexuality within academic research, the inclusion of pornography in sex education interventions is still in its early stages. A recently published literature review highlighted, as one of the most significant findings, the relatively late inclusion of pornography as a topic within empirically evaluated sexuality education programs (Freitas & Carvalho, 2026). Furthermore, the study highlights a strong geographical concentration of interventions in Western contexts (especially in United States) and a wide variety of programs in terms of setting, population, duration, and outcomes. Thus, the review concludes that the field of pornography literacy is still "relatively recent and insufficiently consolidated" (p. 6).

The delay in introducing porn literacy into sexuality education programs can be partly attributed to institutional, cultural, and pedagogical barriers, including the discomfort of schools, teachers, and families, the fear that addressing it equals encouraging its use, and the difficulty of tackling it in a critical and safe manner (Albury, 2014; Planting-Bergloo & Arvola Orlander, 2024). More generally, we might go so far as to note that "where pornography has been included as a topic, this has generally occurred under the rubric of 'media literacy' or 'pornography literacy'" (Goldstein, 2020, p. 61), as if this top-down paradigm centered on risk prevention was the only acceptable approach to a subject that is otherwise taboo or underrepresented, even within sex education.

3. Digital porn literacies: toward a youth-centered approach

To address the limitations of risk-avoidance and protectionist frameworks, contemporary research on porn literacy advocates for a paradigm shift that integrates digital media cultures, centers youth agency and deals with all the socio-cultural aspects at play through porn texts such as power, gender, sexuality, intimacy, pleasure and consent (Byron et al., 2021; Goldstein, 2020; Jenkins, 2004).

Actually, a similar paradigm shift can be traced within the evolution of the field of media literacy itself. As is well known, a new pedagogical and didactic approach began to develop within the field of media education in the 1980s, prompted by insights from social studies on communication. Rivoltella (2001) outlines two main innovations of this new approach: first, the combination of traditional text-based analysis with a focus on production contexts, their inherent values, and underlying ideological drivers; and second, a renewed emphasis on the audience, whose consumption habits and spontaneous interpretive practices are examined to map out their underlying value frameworks and subcultural affiliations. While the inoculation approach structures its educational intervention solely around the analysis and critical deconstruction of texts, this alternative approach aims to develop self-reflective skills, enabling young people to reflect on their own media-related practices, whether these involve consuming or even producing media.

The advent of the internet and the convergence toward digital media will further reinforce the view of the individual as a "prosumer" of digital content, and will pave the way for a redefinition of the very concept of literacy—a shift underscored first by the proliferation of various forms of literacy necessitated by technological advancement (such as computer literacy, network literacy, information literacy, and visual literacy) and ultimately leading to the adoption of plural terms like multiliteracies or new media literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Tyner, 1998; Jenkins, 2010). There are two considerations that lead to preferring a plural form. The first concerns the very nature of literacy: it is no longer just a matter of acquiring technical or cognitive skills, but also ethical and social ones. Navigating digital environments requires, in fact, a particular focus on the dynamics of participation, inclusion, respect, and responsibility toward oneself and others. The second reflection is the observation that young people, through their own practices in digital landscapes, independently develop forms of literacy, which must be recognized and valued even within formal education and training contexts.

In line with this view of digital landscapes and informal literacies, also newer approaches to porn literacy suggest that rather than treating young people as passive, media-illiterate subjects, interventions must acknowledge and build upon

their pre-existing digital competencies. Unfortunately, scientific research to date has focused primarily on understanding the potential consequences of pornography consumption for the sexual behaviors of young people, while completely overlooking the identification of the forms of literacy that young people already possess regarding sexually explicit content. A systematic literature review on this specific topic (Byron et al., 2021) identified only a small number of relevant studies - though more recent contributions have since then been published (Goldstein, 2020; Healy-Cullen et al., 2024) – and highlighted a lack of research on youth's proficiency at 'reading' pornography texts.

In their review, Byron and colleagues noted that qualitative empirical data indicates that youth frequently possess a sophisticated understanding of porn conventions and readily differentiate between representation and reality. However, it is the researchers themselves who often fail to recognize evidence of young people's competencies, unless those competencies are linked to a clearly negative view of pornography (Byron et al., 2021, p. 796). On the other hand, the narrative that pornography is dangerous for young people is so dominant in public discourse that it is even echoed by young people themselves when they are asked about the meaning of being porn literate (Healy-Cullen et al., 2024).

Byron and colleagues also stressed that "much pornography research hardly attends to young people's digital media practices of viewing, sharing, and producing pornography—with partners, peers, and broader networks" (2021, p. 798). Indeed, contemporary digital landscapes – which includes social media, dating applications, and peer-to-peer image sharing - have redefined pornographic practices and disrupted the traditional dichotomy between media production and consumption. Within this context, youth exhibit a distinct literacy oriented around realness and authenticity, which can refer to self-representation and social media, but also to pornography, where a preference for user-generated, do-it-yourself (DIY) and amateur contents is documented (Goldstein, 2020).

By expanding porn literacy to accommodate multiliteracies and digital cultures, researchers and educators can move beyond the rhetoric of risk reduction toward a framework that genuinely fosters sexual well-being and media competency. Thus, we suggest adopting the name *digital porn literacies* to signal a paradigm shift away from the inoculation approach that characterized the initial phase of porn literacy. This new paradigm should draw upon the most recent approaches to media literacy, which have successfully adapted both to contemporary digital practices and environments, and to the need to be youth-centered, including their media expertise and existing literacies. The new paradigm of digital porn literacies should "meet students where they are" by centering their lived experiences, sexual subjectivities, and diverse cultural contexts. According to Goldstein (2020), youth identified the need for conversations about pornography in formal educational settings, where they can share honest experiences and ask questions. This proposal shifts from top-down moral mandates and fear-based rhetoric toward the creation of non-judgmental, collaborative educational spaces where students can safely unpack their actual media practices and anxieties.

Although a new frame of reference has been outlined, the question of which methodologies might be used in educational settings remains open. Indeed, some of the methodologies typically used in new media literacies cannot be imported into the realm of digital porn literacies—specifically, activities involving text analysis or

media production. Conversely, methodologies that facilitate meta-reflection on one's own practices of consuming and producing sexually explicit content could prove promising. Future research should therefore focus on analyzing potential educational methodologies to be used in digital porn literacies, in order to design curricula that are relevant to young people.

4. Conclusions

This contribution has examined the evolution and current limitations of porn literacy education, highlighting the inadequacy of the traditional risk-prevention paradigm that treats young people as passive and vulnerable subjects in need of inoculation (Albury, 2014; Byron et al., 2021). Indeed, porn literacy interventions have long relied on a top-down, fear-based approach to discourage pornography consumption and prevent the adoption of unrealistic sexual scripts, however empirical research demonstrates that the actual effects of pornography are highly heterogeneous and heavily dependent on individual and contextual factors (Landripet et al., 2026; McKee et al., 2022).

Furthermore, as analyzed through the lens of new media literacies and digital cultures, contemporary youth actively engage with digital media landscapes, possessing pre-existing competencies, literacies and practices that should be recognized and valued (Byron et al., 2021; Goldstein, 2020). Moving away from rigid protective frameworks requires adopting a youth-centered paradigm—termed digital porn literacies—which integrates the evolution of new media literacies, addresses core socio-cultural aspects such as power, gender, consent, and intimacy, and meets students where they (Goldstein, 2020). To put this new approach into practice, future educational research should address how to design learner-centered digital porn literacies initiatives, identifying the best educational methodologies to empower young people, develop their critical thinking, and foster sexual well-being.

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