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Reading for Realness: Porn Literacies, Digital Media, and Young People

Paul Byron[1,3] · Alan McKee[1] · Ash Watson[2] · Katerina Litsou[1] · Roger Ingham[1]

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Abstract

This paper adds to recent discussions of young people's porn literacy and argues that researchers must address porn users' engagements with, and understandings of, different porn genres and practices. As part of a larger interdisciplinary project which consisted of a series of systematic reviews of literature on the relationship between pornography use and healthy sexual development, we reviewed articles addressing the relationship between pornography use and literacy. We found few articles that present empirical data to discuss porn literacies, and those we found commonly frame young people's porn literacy as their ability to critically read porn as negative and comprising 'unrealistic' portrayals of sex. This model of porn literacy tends to be heteronormative, where only conservative ideals of 'good', coupled, and vanilla sex are deemed 'realistic'. Data from the literature we reviewed shows that young people make sophisticated distinctions between different kinds of pornography, some of which could be called 'realistic', as per do-it-yourself and amateur porn. We extend this discussion to young people's understandings of 'authenticity' across their broader digital and social media practices. From this focus, we propose the need to incorporate young people's existing porn literacies into future education and research approaches. This includes engaging with their understandings and experiences of porn genres, digital media practice, and representations of authenticity.

Keywords Pornography · Digital culture · Porn literacy · Young people · Realism · Sexuality

Introduction

As part of a series of interdisciplinary systematic literature reviews of the relationship between pornography use and aspects of healthy sexual development (McKee et al. 2010), we reviewed literature on the relationship between pornography use and

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✉ Paul Byron
paul.byron@uts.edu.au

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

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literacy. Our review was not limited to research on young people, but because they were the dominant focus in the literature we found, and because wider academic discussions of porn literacy centre young people when discussing this concept, this paper will foreground research discussions of young people.

For our overarching project, we devised a search and analysis protocol (McKee et al. 2019) that would be deployed for each systematic literature review of the healthy sexual development themes we considered. This protocol was developed with an international Delphi panel of porn researchers. In relation to porn literacies, we located just seven relevant articles that featured empirical research with porn users. Because this small sample limits the claims we can make from our systematic review, we instead report on our thematic analysis of these articles (rather than offering a systematic review), and connect this analysis to broader discussions of porn literacies (a subset of the wider concept of 'media literacy'), including digital media literacies. We argue that researchers need to better engage with young people's digital literacies if they wish to explore their competencies in negotiating pornography and other sexual media. This includes being more attuned to a range of porn practices and genres, and what these offer to a range of young people in terms of learning, intimacy, and pleasure. This is also useful for researchers exploring the influence that pornography may have on the sexual intimacies and relationships of broader populations, and vice versa.

This paper questions understandings of porn literacy that hinge upon a simple distinction of good/bad representations of sex, whereby 'good sex' is associated with private sexual expression confined to normative (typically monogamous) couple-based relationships, and where this is held in contrast to porn which is taken to offer an unrealistic and exaggerated representation of what some researchers describe as 'degrading' sex (see for example Hald et al. 2013). Such descriptions usually arise in adult fears surrounding young people's media use—predominantly the fear that young people are learning more about sex through porn than formal education, and mistaking porn texts as manuals for sex, gender, bodily norms, and sexual relationships. This article considers whether the evidence supports this model of learning about sex, and what we know about the distinctions that young people make about different kinds of pornography they encounter. Our findings challenge common conceptualisations of porn literacy.

Porn Literacies

Media literacy has been described as "the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes" (Aufderheide 1993, 6), and this definition is used to support a range of media literacy interventions, often targeting young people. The concept has also been described as a "useful health promotion strategy" (Bergsma and Carney 2008, 540), yet media literacy interventions by health promoters tend to focus on top-down interventions that educate young people about health risks. In their systematic review of health-promoting media literacy education, Bergsma and Carney report: "We were unable to locate studies about media literacy education interventions focused on prevention of unsafe sexual behaviors,

even though this is a key health concern" (2008, 538). This comment underscores a media literacy approach akin to a top-down model of education, with little interest in engaging with young people's existing media literacies. The same applies to much research on porn literacies.

Albury (2014) notes that porn literacy is not a straightforward concept, yet she usefully outlines a key distinction between porn literacy approaches for adults as opposed to young people. She notes that some adult sexual health interventions use explicit depictions of sex and bodies for those discussions, particularly if this is deemed relevant to the sexual cultures of a target group, such as gay men (2014). For young people, however, porn literacy most commonly refers to a top-down education of young people that seemingly seeks to 'inoculate' young people against pornography's perceived harms (2014).

For Dawson et al., "Porn literacy education aims to facilitate youth in thinking critically about the content they see" (2020, 10). For some scholars, this involves thinking beyond the content of pornographic texts, to also think about power, gender, sexuality, and a range of other socio-cultural aspects at play through (but also beyond) these media texts (Albury 2014; Jenkins 2004). However, much research on young people and pornography tends to isolate pornography from broader media ecologies (Goldstein 2020). Further to this, a media studies approach to porn literacy can also (but rarely does) address the cinematic, technological, and economic aspects of porn and its production and industries (Jenkins 2004). However, most approaches to porn literacy in the research literature we found tend to engage with young people to promote "critical disengagement" (Albury 2014), whereby young people are simply guided to become literate in the social and personal harms of pornography. This is what Alanna Goldstein refers to as "traditional media literacy interventions" in her argument for a need to move beyond these in relation to porn literacies (2020).

Porn Literacy and Realism

Our theoretical challenge to the discourse of 'realism' in porn literacy is that there exists a discourse in academic research which conflates 'realistic' sexual practices with conservative modes of sexual practice, while other representations of sex are dismissed as being 'unrealistic'. In what follows, we highlight how academic discussions of pornography's perceived realism, and the associated risks, are often informed by public concerns (non-academic nor research-driven) regarding young people's media use. A common research argument regarding pornography's effects on young people can be found in Doornwaard et al.'s research on sexually explicit internet media (SEIM) (2015). The authors highlight the concerns of parents and professionals "that adolescents may have difficulty putting the often one-sided and unrealistic character of SEIM in perspective and, as a result, uncritically adopt the attitudes, expectations, and behaviors displayed in SEIM" (2015, 269). Following such concerns, which they argue to be justified, Doornwaard et al. associate young people's 'exposure' to this unrealistic media with the likelihood of "earlier sexual

initiation, more sexual experience and sexual partners, more permissive attitudes about sex, and more conventional gender-role beliefs" (2015, 269).

Similarly, Hald and Malamuth write that "Pornography, while depicting people actually engaging in sexual acts, often portrays an unrealistic picture of sexuality as it is practiced in real life" (2008, 615), referencing the book *Pornified: how pornography is transforming our lives, our relationships and our families* (Paul 2005). This book argues that "Unlike women in real life, the girls in pornography seem willing to share themselves with a man" because "real women aren't nearly as into sex" (2005, 43). Porn is unrealistic, says Paul, because women in porn, among other acts, will "dominate or act submissive" and they will have "anal sex, double penetration, or multiple orgasms" (2005, 44). Pornography, Paul argues, "gives men the false impression that sex and pleasure are entirely divorced from relationships" (2005, 80). Hald and Malamuth also quote Fordham who worries that pornography "creates unreal (and unrealistic) expectations" about "frequency of sexual activity [and] the kinds of sex acts performed" (Fordham 2006, 82). We note that neither of these references cited by Hald and Malamuth are refereed academic research—one is a book by a journalist, the other an unrefereed report prepared for an evangelical Christian organisation.

Two other non-peer-reviewed examples that have featured heavily in research discussions of pornography's effect on young people, and therefore influence discussions of young people's porn literacies, are Horvath et al.'s *Basically… porn is everywhere* report (2013), and the *Sexualisation of Young People Review* by Papadopoulos (2010). Horvath et al. write: "pornography has been linked to unrealistic attitudes about sex; maladaptive attitudes about relationships; more sexually permissive attitudes; greater acceptance of casual sex…" and more (2013, 7). They refer to Papadopoulos (2010) when arguing that "young people who view pornography have ideas about sex and sexual relationships that are unrealistic" (Horvath et al. 2013, 48).

Papadopoulos writes that pornography "shapes young people's sexual knowledge but does so by portraying sex in unrealistic ways", and 'online pornography' in particular "is increasingly dominated by themes of aggression, power and control" (2010, 12). Following this, she cites sadomasochism as an example of 'harmful' or 'extreme' behaviours depicted in online porn (2012, 12). As such, practices like BDSM are relegated to a site of fiction—as an unrealistic portrayal of sex—despite the evidence that this is practiced, and with no attempt to engage with practitioners nor BDSM porn consumers. Neither of the above reports are guided by original empirical research, but present reviews of existing literature and knowledge. While this does not preclude relevant discussion, it is problematic for these reports to be used as though they offer authoritative knowledge of young people's actual experiences of pornography. Yet, this echoes a long history of adults discussing young people's 'needs' without inviting young people into such discussions. Researchers increasingly consider young people's participation and consultation in health and media research (see for e.g. Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Heath et al. 2009), and we see this as vital for future porn literacies research.

The claims made in these reports arguably resonate for their familiar conservative accounts. In this tradition of writing, sex that falls within a conservative framework

of sexual relations is sanctioned and held as the standard, as per Rubin's 'charmed circle' (1992). Rubin argues that a 'sexual value system' persists in which:

> sexuality that is 'good,' 'normal,' and 'natural' should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female (1992, 280–281).

A parallel exists between this charmed circle and porn researchers' and commentators' (cited by researchers) common arguments about the unrealistic nature of sex in pornography. In other words, sexual depictions falling outside the charmed circle are read as unlikely, unusual, or abnormal practices, and such practices spark concern that young people may become more sexual as a result. Such research also implies that minority sexual interests (such as BDSM or group sex) are 'unrealistic' sexual interests, and such a perspective is undoubtedly heteronormative (Warner 1993). Heteronormativity relies on overlooking a range of sexual orientations, identities, and practices, as seen in research discussions of porn use that identifies porn as risky because it features representations of sex deemed as 'unrealistic' or felt to be unfamiliar. Also unfamiliar to many porn researchers and commentators are new modes and mediums of pornography that complicate notions of 'reality' implied in the above discussions. While the significance of understanding how sexualities are mediated in pornography is of longstanding concern, this is centrally relevant to current debates about porn literacy which grapple with how new technologies and practices are reshaping mediation—smartphones, for instance, impact accessibility, shift genres and aesthetics of porn (Tziallis 2016), and go some ways to collapse or disrupt traditional media production/consumption binaries (Ashton et al. 2019; Hasinoff 2012).

The Project

This paper emerges from a larger interdisciplinary project that researches empirical research on 'porn use' through a series of systematic literature reviews. Over its three-year course, five researchers from different disciplines have drawn together their various expertise in media studies, sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and sexology. Our project reviewed academic journal articles that relate to McKee et al.'s 15 domains of healthy sexual development (2010) (see "Appendix"). This original framework was developed among an interdisciplinary group of scholars to assist future research into healthy sexual development, recognising that there had been no interdisciplinary model through which to do so. Where McKee et al.'s (2010) model focuses on young people, our systematic reviews focused on porn users of all ages. This paper's focus is on the domain of *Competence in Mediated Sexuality* which recognises one's need to "develop skills in accessing, understanding, critiquing, and creating mediated representations of sexuality in verbal, visual, and performance media" (McKee et al. 2010, 18). Current research to this theme commonly discusses 'porn literacies' (see for e.g. Dawson et al. 2020; Goldstein 2020), and

while the literature we found reflects discussions of porn literacy, not all articles use this more recently developed concept. We were interested to review these literature and consider how links between consuming pornography and levels of porn literacy are understood and framed, particularly in relation to different porn genres, and a broader understanding of literacy that extends to digital media literacies.

Early in the project, we developed and consulted a Delphi Panel of international porn researchers from a range of disciplines, asking them to rank the relevance of each of the 15 domains regarding our study of the relationship between pornography and its audiences. The Delphi panel ranked *Competence in Mediated Sexuality* as the most important domain. Based on our search and analysis protocol devised in consultation with the project's Delphi panel (McKee et al. 2019), we searched abstracts and titles to find peer-reviewed journal articles relating to this domain, published from 2000-2017. We only reviewed articles that reported on original, empirical research engaging with porn users. As smartphones arrived in the 2000s, this date range encompasses over a decade in which mobile digital media has played a significant role in how pornography is accessed, used, produced and shared. We therefore anticipated discussion of digital media literacies in relation to porn use, as per a rich scholarship of 'digital literacies' (Livingstone 2004; Pangrazio 2018). However, while our initial search yielded 1127 articles, only seven articles related to this theme.[1] Our resulting articles were subjected to two forms of analysis: a quantitative content analysis as well as a qualitative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), each conducted by two members of the research team who coded independently but liaised throughout the analysis process. The whole group met regularly to discuss themes and content. Rather than presenting findings from a systematic review of literature, this paper draws upon our thematic analysis, since this best accommodates all seven articles and the different research approaches they report on, from qualitative interviews to a randomised experimental design.

This interdisciplinary study was undertaken with an interest in how different disciplines can work together on a topic of shared interest, as much as the topic itself. From discussing the variations in how our disciplines study pornography we recognise differences in axioms about what counts as healthy sexual development, and presumptions about the questions we should ask, how we should gather and analyse data, and what counts as 'data'. While we conducted a thematic analysis of our data, we are not reporting here on all the themes we identified but focus on the theme identified as most dominant by all team members—pornography as unrealistic.

A necessary aspect of our interdisciplinary study was to return to the classic question: "What is pornography?" From each of the systematic literature reviews performed within this study, we located countless journal articles that do not define pornography (McKee et al. 2020). A lack of definition, or an uncompromising 'traditional' definition complicates interdisciplinary porn research and can also foreclose attention to digital cultures that include recent practices of producing, sharing,

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[1] Many articles were irrelevant to this domain and were likely captured through our use of general search terms such as 'education' and 'real*'. Search terms were identified by the Delphi panel – see McKee et al. 2019 for a full list.

and engaging with sexual media online. In the literature we reviewed for all domains of healthy sexual development, a focus on digital media rarely extended beyond references to 'the internet' as simply generating greater access to porn. There is little to no reflection on digital cultures of sex and how pornography has changed and continues to change through dynamic media landscapes (Mercer 2017; Paasonen 2011; Paasonen et al. 2019). As acknowledged by many media studies scholars, "Each new media has, in turn, changed what porn is and how it relates to its consumers" (Jenkins 2004, 2).

Our search returned seven journal articles. The lack of literature in this area is itself remarkable. The question of young people's porn literacy—their capacity to understand the mediated nature of pornography and the conventions of its genres—is fundamental to addressing a series of issues that are of concern to academics and in wider public debate about what young people are learning from pornography, how they are learning, and how we might conceptualise pornography's 'effects'. The multiple searches we conducted within this project showed that thousands of academic articles have been published about pornography and its audiences since 2000. And yet only seven of the articles we located (that undertake empirical research with porn users) provided specific data on the porn literacies of consumers.[2] Beyond this we note that none of the articles we found provided data that directly addressed our key concern—how porn users understand "how sex in the media, including pornography, works as forms of representation, and as genres with particular rules."[3] We also note that not all articles explicitly discuss the concept of 'literacy', yet they all engage with this concept.

Of the seven articles our search returned, five relate to young people and two relate to gay men. Of the five articles about young people, four involve empirical research with young men and women (Baker 2016; Hald et al. 2013; Mattebo et al. 2012; Smith 2013) and one only engages with young men (Antevska and Gavey 2015). These focus on heterosexuality, and various age groups are researched, with a composite age range of 16–32 years. One of the articles engages with men and women aged 16-17 years as well as teaching professionals (Baker 2016). Of the two articles about gay men of all ages, one focuses on porn use by men in Malaysia (Goh 2017) and the other concerns gay men's use of bareback porn in the UK (Mowlabocus et al. 2013)—these two papers engage men aged 18–55 years. The articles about young people report on empirical research from the UK, the US, New Zealand, Sweden, and Denmark.

Aware of the limitations of reviewing such a small sample, we do not present this as a systematic literature review, instead focusing on one of the dominant key themes we identified—porn as unrealistic. In what follows, we explore how this term is conceptualised, how it is mobilised in this literature, and some problems

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[2] We recognise that there has been more literature on this since we completed our systematic review. For example, see Dawson et al. (2020), Goldstein (2020), and Rothman et al. (2018). We also note that we only searched for journal articles, not books and chapters. See our Search and Analysis protocol for details of study parameters (McKee et al. 2019).

[3] This was how our Delphi panel survey explained what we meant by *Competence in Mediated Sexuality* to panellists who ranked this domain as the most important.

with its usage. We then propose a different way of thinking about porn literacy that engages with digital cultures of media use, production, and circulation, and how this more clearly aligns with young people's expertise, needs, and media literacies.

Porn Literacies of Gay Men and Young People

As Albury argues, porn literacy discussions tend to bifurcate into accounts of 'porn as pedagogy' (for adults, especially gay men) and pedagogies about porn (for young people), with the latter focusing on risky aspects of porn use (2014). This maps well onto the articles we review. In one article about gay men's porn literacy, Goh argues that "pornography consumption is understood by gay-identifying men as: a means to perform and make sense of sexuality; a self-validated avenue of pleasure; and a site of interior struggle" (2017, 448). This claim, in relation to gay men in Malaysia, echoes a common sentiment—that porn can be a useful resource when sexualities education is inadequate (Currin et al. 2017; Kubicek et al. 2010). This suggests an approach to porn literacy that is not simply about rejecting pornography and seeing it as a bad or dangerous object to be avoided or dismissed, and instead proposing that pornography is a source of information about sex. To accommodate these experiences of porn, a porn literacy framework should not simply focus on *what* is read (i.e. media content) but *how* it is read, acknowledging that porn can be *read well* to gain useful information about sex, sexuality and pleasure (Goh 2017; Mowlabocus et al. 2013).

Discussing one of his participants, Goh argues that porn use helped him "to increasingly clarify his own sexuality" (2017, 454), while another of his participants "suggests that his own use of pornography can provide crucial points of instruction, reflection and deliberation for himself" (2017, 455). Similarly, in the other article we found regarding gay men, Mowlabocus et al. argue that "By far the most popular understanding [of porn] was its perceived educational dimension, offering instruction on, and experiences of, gay male sexual practices" (2013, 527). As one participant states:

> …when you want to find out about it more, it's kind of like a research tool because you want to find out the right positions to do, the right methods, you know, the right actions, to help… just to help pleasure someone properly, you know. And you kind of… it sounds weird, but you kind of learn that in the back of your head and you keep it there (2013, 527).

Reflecting on such data, Mowlabocus et al. argue that "for many gay men pornography is more than 'just' material for masturbation" (2013, 530), and also offers "learning new sexual techniques" and assistance toward "validating a sense of self" (2013, 530). This suggests a dual process of learning and validation among gay men, and this could extend to other porn users.

By contrast, the articles focusing on young people (presumed heterosexual) take a different approach whereby porn literacy is conceptualised as consumers' ability to understand that pornography gives bad lessons about sex and, following this,

their recognition that such lessons must be rejected.[4] In this model of media literacy as rejection (Albury and McKee 2013), pornography is presented as an object to be avoided, not engaged with, and conceptualised primarily in terms of the risks it carries to healthy sexual development. The risks of porn use discussed across the five articles about young people include the potential development of: 'problematic sexual attitudes' (Smith 2013), 'sexist attitudes' (Hald et al. 2013), the belief that women are 'sex objects' (Baker 2016), and negative influences on sexual behaviour and relationships (Mattebo et al. 2012). Throughout are common concerns that porn might be read by young people as 'real sex'. This is understood as risky in terms of influencing young people's sexual practices and their expectations about what sex is or should be. These concerns are expressed among researchers as well as young participants. Unlike the articles focusing on gay men, for young people there is little indication that porn literacy might offer different aspects of learning beyond 'how to have sex', including insights into sexual identities, preferences and potential pleasures.

Perceived Realism

The dominant mode of thinking about porn literacy for (presumed heterosexual) young people seeks to ensure that they understand porn as 'unrealistic'. This is a particular focus in the article by Mattebo et al. (2012), which centres on the influence of pornography among adolescents in Sweden. The article includes participant (16–19 years) accounts of porn bodies as stereotypical—for example:

> "A porn-star stereotype. Very large breasts, thin waist and I think you get a very distorted aspect of what a natural look is. That becomes the ideal."

> "The female does not have to be muscular but she should be thin and have a light suntan and the perfect body. I think very few females have that exact body."

> "In porn movies and stuff there is always this, large penis, and things that follow with that…" (Mattebo et al. 2012, 44).

These concerns—expressed by young research participants and presented by porn researchers –come down to representations of sex, bodies, and sexual bodies and, within these, limited representations of gender and heterosexuality. Throughout the articles, these concerns are guided by a discourse of reality and realism, as well as implied rules about what porn is and does, and a belief that porn is a distortion or misrepresentation of 'realistic sex'. By demarcating inauthentic representations as unhealthy, these discussions implicitly associate 'real sex' with positive, truthful and authentic sexual information. Researchers engage with their participants to further a discourse of realism as something that is valuable for learning about sex, which

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[4] Of these five articles, one excludes non-heterosexuals, one describes participants as 'mostly heterosexual', and the other three do not indicate (or did not ask about) sexual orientation. All articles centre heterosexual experiences by referring to 'young people' as though their porn use is heterosexually oriented.

relies on a research-driven critique of porn that is always 'unrealistic'. However, this implied value of 'real sex' is troubled by discussions of do-it-yourself (DIY)/amateur porn found in some of these articles, and broader porn research literature. This will be explored in a later section of this paper.

The concept of 'perceived realism' features significantly in two of the five articles about young people (Hald et al. 2013; Smith 2013) and references a common concern that young people do not read porn critically enough to know that it is not real. The logic of this approach relies on the understanding that it is dangerous for young people to mistake pornographic depictions of sex as 'real sex' because this may result in sexism[5] and/or a distorted understanding of sexual practice and pleasure. The term 'perceived realism' emerges from communication theory and is associated with a media effects approach. In a much-cited academic text on young people and porn, Peter and Valkenburg present perceived realism as a key variable that may contribute to understanding porn's effect on young people (2010, 376)—though they refer to 'sexually explicit internet media' (SEIM) rather than pornography.[6] They state that: "The perceived social realism of SEIM refers to the extent to which the content of SEIM is perceived to be similar to real-world sex" (2010, 376–377). Their argument looks not only at 'perceived reality' but also 'perceived utility' and they discuss these together to focus not only on young people's perceptions of reality in pornographic sex, but the usefulness of pornographic media as a resource for understanding real-world sex. In other words, they ask if sexual media inform the sex that young people have or will go on to have. The legitimacy of such questions relies on a discourse of risk, and a common expectation that young people are easily influenced by the sexual media they consume (Buckingham and Bragg 2004).

On one hand, researchers in our dataset felt it important for young people to know that porn is not real—that sex is not like *that*. On the other hand, some researchers dismissed participants' accounts of porn as fantasy, insisting that porn actresses experience very real effects of the 'degrading sex' they perform. For example, reflecting on discussion among young straight men in their study, Antevska and Gavey (2015) state: "Even portrayals of extreme sexual violence appear able to be recuperated through reference to the apparent consent of the victim" (2015, 613). This is supported by inclusion of the following participant quote:

Chris [participant]: Umm, but then the lines are quite blurred I think, around, where, the degraded and, consensuality begins and ends, yeah for instance, you'll come across clips that, the person, you know being, seemingly, umm… tied up and whipped and raped, by twenty or thirty people (Alex [author]: Mmm) and you watch the entire thing, and then there will be an interview at the end, with them, umm quite normally, talking and laughing about the segment that they've shot (Alex: Mmm) umm, so it takes what

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[5] This argument obviously relies on a heterosexist understanding of porn, whereby porn is only imagined as heterosexual and is so persuasive as to guide a viewer's approach to heterosex. When this framework is absent – as per the papers focusing on gay men – there is greater discussion of the complexity of participants' porn use, which is not simply measured against expected gender codes.

[6] This article is not part of our dataset because it was not captured by the parameters of our search terms.

is quite a degrading scene and, normalizes it, at the end, by making it quite clear, that it was something that they'd gone into consensually, and enjoyed.

Following this, Antevska and Gavey (2015, 614) question "the 'reality' confession" and propose that this too could be performative (i.e. inauthentic), thereby dismissing Chris's porn literacy and his awareness of certain genres and tropes.

Meanwhile, in his ethnographic article engaging with gay men, Goh reflects on how his participants' lived experiences indicated a need for pornography debates "to adopt a more honest, critical and practical trajectory, rather than a notion of pornography as incontrovertibly exploitative, degrading and destructive" (2017, 459). Such arguments for the exploration of young people's lived experiences of porn use are not made in the five articles engaging with young people.

Porn Literacy as Porn Negativity

Returning to the quotes from young participants that opened the previous section, one talks about: "A porn-star stereotype. Very large breasts, thin waist and I think you get a very distorted aspect of what a natural look is. That becomes the ideal" (Mattebo et al. 2012, 44). Rather than reading this quote as evidence of the risks of pornography consumption, this can be read as evidence that some young people already demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the generic rules of (some kinds of) pornography. This understanding signals a degree of porn literacy.

While several of these articles present what we read to be 'evidence' of young people's porn literacies—i.e. an awareness of certain genres and conventions—this seems to be largely unrecognised by authors. Instead, porn literacy is coded as 'critical engagement' where young people read *against* the value of porn (Mattebo et al. 2012; Smith 2012). In these cases, young people's statements are 'critical of' (i.e. negative towards) pornography and what it does or may do. For example:

> Many participants viewed sexually explicit content with a critical eye in terms of lack of realism, problematic representation of bodies, and other messages conveyed about sexuality (Smith 2013, 73).

Here and elsewhere, a 'critical eye' or 'critical viewpoint' understands porn as lacking value due to its distance from reality, including its representation of unrealistic bodies. As such, young people's competence in mediated sexuality is only discussed as competence when young people frame porn as negative and distant from 'real-world sex' (without needing to define that).

In the article by Mattebo et al., evidence of young people's mediated competencies—framed here as a 'critical-analytical approach' (2012, 46)—includes the following discussion of how participants described pornographic bodies and sex:

> The women were represented as underweight with large breasts. This was viewed as demanding if it became an ideal of how young women should look (2012, 44).

The participants also commented on the lack of contraceptives and expressed opinions of discontent suggesting an ability to critically think in relation to pornographic films and messages (2012, 46).

In the latter quote, it seems that participants were asked about the value of pornography for sexual health knowledge, since it is unlikely that they would seek to learn about contraception through pornography. Evidently, a 'critical-analytical approach' is sometimes guided by adult concerns about young people's sexual health risks and safeties. In these articles, critical engagement is also constituted by questioning the gendered aspects of porn:

Messages from society regarding gender equality and public health seem to be in conflict with those from pornography and other media with pornographic messages. Some participants reflected on it and had a critical-analytical approach towards these messages, whereas others did not give it much attention (Mattebo et al. 2012, 46).

This extract represents a common discussion of gender across these articles, underscoring shared concerns about the risks of young people's perceived reality resulting in their acceptance of female objectification, the desire for unrealistic bodies, and male dominance and sexual violence. These arguments speak to anti-porn concerns that tend to overlook women's use of pornography for sexual pleasure (Smith 2013). The above example is certainly a form of critical engagement, but being able to read porn as unrealistic is not the only way to critically read pornography, its use, and its value. This division between real sex (as typically good and healthy) and pornographic sex (as risky, damaging, and inauthentic) arguably rejects more common framings of media literacy (Aufderheide 1993; Livingstone 2004). Not only does this avoid attending to the value people may find in pornography, but it also fails to critically engage with implicit notions of 'real sex' which is not always healthy nor good. Further to this, it fails to engage with the classist assumptions that permeate many analyses of young people's media literacies, also present in these articles:

The vast majority of participants in this research were from relatively privileged backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status and education. This likely influenced their ability to be critical consumers of information generally and SEM specifically (Smith 2013, 73).

In claims such as this, competence in mediated sexuality is aligned with 'the educated' young person and so it is presumably the 'less educated' young people that we must focus on—i.e. those less likely to demonstrate or recite negative attitudes towards porn. This *uncritical approach* to young people's differences (including class differences) warrants further attention, particularly if researchers and educators want to adopt a porn literacies framework that can accommodate a diversity of young people. Further to this, a need to expand 'porn literacy' beyond dismissing porn as 'bad representation' will help researchers learn about a range of porn uses and meanings that are embedded in young people's everyday digital media practices.

DIY Porn and Digital Media Authenticities

The articles we found often state that because of digital media, porn is easily accessible and pervasive—for example "research shows that pornography is easily accessible and widely used, particularly by youth and young adults" (Hald et al. 2013, 639). Similarly, Smith notes "a marked increase in the availability of sexual content online" (2013, 62), and Baker argues that "[s]exually explicit media has become more accessible via the Internet" (2016, 213) and warns that these media are largely unregulated. In relation to ease of access, Antevska and Gavey refer to a "presumed universality of pornography consumption" (2015, 611), and a participant from Mattebo et al.'s study says of pornography: "It is shown everywhere. Wherever you are" (2012, 43). For most of these articles, claims of prevalence and ease of access are the extent of any reflection on digital cultures of pornography.

Along with a 'media literacy' approach, a 'digital cultures' approach is warranted to accommodate young people's media practices that have changed considerably in the last three decades. From our resulting articles and broader academic literature it is evident that traditional approaches to porn research, along with traditional approaches to sex and relationship education, lack engagement with the cultural aspects of media use. Much pornography research hardly attends to young people's digital media practices of viewing, sharing, and producing pornography—with partners, peers, and broader networks. More attention to this would generate a better indication of the diversity of mediated sexuality practices—encompassing pornography, but not limited to a traditional understanding of pornography as produced and consumed in separate spheres to other media. This will also improve research understandings of porn literacies.

When we pay attention to the data gathered in the articles reviewed, we find that young people have a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how pornography works—perhaps a greater sense of porn literacy than many researchers. For example, several participants in these studies discuss their preference for 'real bodies' and how these are available through DIY and amateur porn:

> Positive assessments of SEM included that it portrayed a more realistic range of people and bodies than mainstream sexual content and that it provided a safe means of exploring and learning about sexuality (Smith 2013, 70).

Smith referenced the perceived realism of pornography as per Peter and Valkenburg's (2010) argument, yet also used this term to discuss a 'realistic range' of porn that participants discussed as more useful for learning about sex. So while 'perceived realism' is commonly deployed to highlight the risk of porn's negative effect on young people, some articles inadvertently complicate this by referencing the value of DIY or amateur porn for their representations of a wider range of bodies and more diverse sex practices.

As discussed by Paasonen (2011), digital cultures of porn consumption and production have shifted the ways we engage with sexual media. As part of this shift, Paasonen highlights how amateur and DIY porn trade in affect, and that in doing so, authenticity is a key aspect of DIY porn being read as intimate and representing ordinary people. On this basis, it can be argued that 'perceived realism'—to

resignify this term—is necessary to incite particular kinds of affect and erotic pleasure. As Paasonen observes: "Amateur porn revolves around notions and promises of real bodies, real pleasures, real people, and real places" (2011, 84). These sentiments were raised by participants within the articles reviewed, including the following examples from Smith's (2013) participants:

"I actually prefer the amateur stuff because I feel like it is more realistic. … [People in amateur SEM] are putting on an act, but I think it's also even more of a realistic act than porn from the porn industry. They look more real, they act more real" (Marion, 20).

"Amateur porn[ography] does a surprisingly good job of varying everything and so I never felt intimidated or bad about myself while watching it" (Sophie, 22).

Paasonen argues that porn's attraction is also about the "evidence of sexual pleasure captured by the camera" (2011, 81). This arises in these articles too, among research participants (both male and female) who express concerns for the situation of female performers (see Antevksa and Gavey 2015). For many porn users (including these young people), the pleasure of amateur/DIY porn relies on authenticity, and this is contextualised through critical understandings of pleasure and reality and where these meet. Reflection on this literacy is absent from most articles we found, and in porn research more broadly. Seemingly, it is presumed that young people do not possess the skills or experience to know what sex or sexual pleasure actually looks like. Yet several of these papers demonstrate that they often do.

As Paasonen argues, 'authenticity' is an increasingly important (if problematic and messy) value in entertainment, across such cultural arenas as reality television, social media and amateur pornography. For Paasonen, these three overlapping media genres thrive on depictions of authenticity, even in texts that are obviously constructed and therefore not authentic in a strict definition of reality (2010). The articles we analysed offer useful evidence that young people are literate in authenticities, in ways that complicate porn researchers' discussions of perceived realism, and this can be further explored through engaging with young people's everyday social media practices (Dalessandro 2018; Marwick 2005). Another digital media practice that foregrounds a desire for (and a literacy of) authenticity is the use of dating/hook-up apps. In their use of such apps, authenticity is a strong theme in young people's experiences of safety and risk (Albury et al. 2019). Whether a potential date or hook-up from an app such as Tinder seems real or not is central to app users' assessments of one another (Albury et al. 2019).

Hook-up app practices and amateur pornography (or self-pornification, as per Mowlabocus's (2007) discussion of Gaydar) share common ground. In his anthropological study of Grindr use, including self-representations of men using Grindr, Phillips notes that "[t]he amateur style is not avoided, but fully embraced. It gives a sense of reality and honesty" (2015, 70). This relates not only to app-based profile pictures, but also the sexual photos shared between users—a common practice among gay/queer men on hook-up apps (Arroyo 2016), but one that is also commonly practiced among young people more broadly. As found in the most recent

Australian National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health, almost half of surveyed participants (44.1%) had received sexually explicit images via mobile phones, and almost one-third (32%) had sent sexually explicit images to others (Fisher et al. 2019). Such photos (often referred to as 'sexting') may be considered as the production of pornography (or self-pornography) that is deeply informed by media/porn literacies and contemporary cultures of digital intimacy and authentic selves.

This 'reading for realness' can be traced to broader social media practices, including our engagement with content on Instagram or Snapchat, as well as the use of Tinder (Duguay 2016; Ward 2017). In all such media, content is often read as dubious, and sometimes publicly challenged, if it seems too staged, polished, filtered or 'professional'. As such, we can argue (as Paasonen and others do) that amateurism is a logic—one that carries through many sites, including social networking, digital dating, television, and pornography. It is also a preference, as well as a genre. Through various digital media practices—informed by digital media literacies and an ongoing development of media themes and genres—'reading for realness' can filter out risks of inauthenticity in one's everyday media practices (Albury et al. 2019), and this literacy can structure our affective engagement with everyday media (Paasonen 2018), as well as our pleasure preferences.

In the context of broader digital media use, a model of porn literacy that simply seeks to label pornography as 'unrealistic' fails to engage with the complexities of understanding realism or authenticity across young people's digital media practices. Such an engagement offers a useful elaboration for pornography researchers and sexuality educators who want to better understand, and build upon, young people's porn literacies.

Conclusion

In their engagement with literacy, the articles we reviewed reify certain positions of expertise, whereby educators have authority and should use their skills to teach young people how to critically engage with, and better understand, pornography. Yet this model of knowledge (who has it, who delivers it, who receives it) has been undermined by digital media cultures in which young people's literacies are recognised as often surpassing that of adult educators and researchers (Third et al. 2019). Therefore, we see a need to disrupt that model of education if we are to fully engage with 'porn literacies', and we suggest that adult researchers and educators can learn much from young people's media expertise (Byron 2015), including their existing literacies built around uses and understandings of porn and mediated sex. We need to consider what porn users make of these media, what they do with them, and what this tells us about their media literacies—and also, what this tells us about the media literacies of researchers and educators, and how these might be expanded.

In the articles reviewed, there is a persistent discourse that presents 'porn literacy' as young people learning to attest that pornography is 'unrealistic'. The concept of 'perceived realism' is used to suggest that if we can simply get young people to agree that porn is unrealistic, then they will not learn its wrong lessons about sex. But this

'traditional understanding' of porn literacy (Goldstein 2020) is complicated by research participants who (when given the opportunity) point to their awareness of different genres of porn, sometimes including their preferences for DIY/amateur porn. Obvious in these discussions, whether from researchers or their participants, is that the values, risks and problems of porn commonly relate to its distance from 'realness'. Also evident in these articles is that young people often already possess some degree of porn literacy. Furthermore, an underlying heteronormativity pervades the articles relating to young people, where a sense of realistic sex (undefined, yet a reference point nonetheless) implies commitment to a sense of sexual norms that are kept apart from pornographic sex. Yet the distance between 'real-world sex' and pornography is inadvertently undermined by the participants of these studies who enjoy porn that is 'real'.

Despite young people discussing porn preferences for 'real bodies' engaging in 'real sex', these articles predominantly flatten pornography as a singular media genre, and as something that is sought, found, and used for a single, instrumental purpose (presumably masturbation, alone, and in a private setting), rather than something that can be connected to and embedded within a broader ecology of mediated sexual practices, intimacies and self-representations. As suggested, digital media scholarship of dating/hook-up apps, sexting, and other mediated sexual practices are useful for broadening a research focus on pornography and porn literacies, including young people's literacies around authentic representations of sex, self, and sexual selves. Further attention to this can generate more insight into everyday practices of producing sexual media, with recognition that media production is a key facet of digital media cultures (Hasinoff 2012).

Within these articles is strong evidence that young people are not confusing pornography with real sex. As noted, some participants can find 'positive' examples of sex and sexual pleasure through pornography, and may use DIY porn to avoid guilt around the potential exploitation of commercial porn performers. Evidently, approaches to porn literacy must expand to accommodate porn users' existing literacies, as well as their concerns and questions about sexual media. The articles in our sample that engage with gay men signal a more generous conceptualisation of porn literacy—an approach less oriented to 'porn risks'. As with gay men, young people can also receive valuable lessons about their sexual identities, preferences and potential pleasures from their use of porn. A more generous and engaged approach to young people's porn literacies would open space for these discussions, and would also allow researchers and educators to learn more from young people's existing porn literacies. This can pave the way for greater discussion of ethical digital practice and mediated negotiations of sexual intimacy and pleasure.

Appendix

15 Domains of Healthy Sexual Development

1. Freedom from unwanted activity during sexual development
2. An understanding of consent and ethical conduct more generally
3. Education about biological aspects of sexual practice
4. An understanding of safety
5. Relationship skills
6. Agency
7. Lifelong learning
8. Resilience
9. Open communication
10. Sexual development should not be 'aggressive, coercive or joyless'
11. Self-acceptance
12. Sex can be pleasurable
13. Understanding of parental and societal values
14. Public/private boundaries
15. Competence in mediated sexuality

(McKee et al. 2010)

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Affiliations

Paul Byron[1,3] · Alan McKee[1] · Ash Watson[2] · Katerina Litsou[1] · Roger Ingham[1]

Alan McKee
alan.mckee@uts.edu.au

Ash Watson
ashleigh.watson@unsw.edu.au

Katerina Litsou
a-m.litsou@soton.ac.uk

Roger Ingham
roger.ingham@soton.ac.uk

1   University of Technology Sydney (School of Communication), Sydney, NSW, Australia

2   UNSW (Social Policy Research Centre and Centre for Social Research in Health), Sydney, NSW, Australia

3   University of Southampton, University Road, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK