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What does it mean to be ‘porn literate’: perspectives of young people, parents and teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand

Siobhán Healy-Cullen, Tracy Morison, Joanne E. Taylor and Kris Taylor

School of Psychology, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand; Critical Studies in Sexualities and Reproduction, Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa; School of Psychology, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Porn literacy education is a pedagogical strategy responding to youth engagement with pornography through digital media. The approach is intended to increase young people’s knowledge and awareness regarding the portrayal of sexuality in Internet pornography. However, what being ‘porn literate’ entails, and what a porn literacy education curricula should therefore include, is not a settled matter. Recognising the importance of end-user perspectives, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, teachers and young people in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and analysed via critical, constructionist thematic analysis. Participants drew on a developmentalist discourse and a discourse of harm to construct porn literacy education as a way to inoculate young people against harmful effects, distortions of reality, and unhealthy messages. In addition to this dominant construction of porn literacy education, we identified talk that to some extent resisted these dominant discourses. Building on these instances of resistance, and asset-based constructions of youth based on their agency and capability, we point to an ethical sexual citizenship pedagogy as an alternative approach to porn literacy education.

Introduction

Porn literacy education has recently been proposed as a solution to widespread concerns about the ‘problem’ of young people’s sexual socialisation as it relates to Internet pornography (Byron et al. 2021; Rothman et al. 2018). Broadly speaking, porn literacy education is a pedagogic strategy intended to increase young people’s knowledge and awareness about the nature of the portrayals of sexuality in Internet pornography, including issues such as gender politics, body ideals, and safety (Albury 2014). There is much enthusiasm for porn literacy education, despite ambiguity and
uncertainty about how it should be implemented, and scant evidence regarding outcomes (Byron et al. 2021; Albury 2014). Little is known about what youth, caregivers, and teachers—as ‘end users’ or those likely be most invested in and/or affected by porn literacy education—think of educational responses to Internet pornography and effective ways forward. Insights from these groups are crucial for the design and implementation of effective programmes. Crucially, young people’s understandings of what porn literacy education might entail have been neglected, despite the importance of their insights to the success of sexuality education initiatives more broadly (Jearey-Graham and Macleod 2015). Speaking to this knowledge gap, we present findings from a larger project about Internet pornography and porn literacy education conducted in Aotearoa (New Zealand). Our aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how porn literacy education is viewed by those who will be most affected by it as stakeholders or end-users, drawing on a thematic analysis of interview data generated with 16 to 18-year-old students, parents and teachers about porn literacy education and what it means to be ‘porn literate’. We begin by introducing the concept of porn literacy education as a relatively new phenomenon and object of inquiry.

**Porn literacy education**

Porn literacy education derives from media literacy more broadly and aims to teach young people how to engage critically with pornography as a media format that is increasingly prevalent and accessible through the Internet (Albury 2014; Rothman et al. 2018). The underlying concern motivating such an intervention is that young people might accept Internet pornography’s depictions of sexuality—including gender, bodily appearance, and intimate relationships—at face value and re-enact what they see in their own lives (Byron et al. 2021). For example, Johnson and Bridges (2018, 449) claim that ‘to the extent that adolescents perceive pornographic media as real, they are more likely to endorse… and imitate pornographic behaviours in their own lives’. Similarly, Ward, Moorman, and Grower (2018, 395) contend that ‘viewers’ own sexual decisions can be shaped by observing, identifying with, and following the rewarded actions of media models’.

Concerns about the harmful effects of Internet pornography, as with more general concerns about media effects, have to a large degree been driven by Bandura’s (1977) notion of observational learning and subsequent social cognitive theory. In this view, children acquire knowledge and a repertoire of expected behaviours, role models and scenarios by observing others. The media are seen as important sites for observational learning as mediated content is understood as providing symbolic modelling of behaviours that can influence attitudes and behaviours. The content that children and youth observe via the media is therefore regarded as critical because it provides templates or models that can be applied in daily life. Accordingly, Internet pornography is thought to serve as modelling behaviours that can be applied in sexual encounters (Johnson and Bridges 2018).

Numerous effects-based studies have sought to investigate the extent to which pornography influences young people’s adoption of the behaviours observed in Internet pornography and the subsequent impact on their sexual development or practices (e.g. Wright 2011). However, effects-oriented research, which draws heavily
on social cognitive theory, has been critiqued for its narrow and reductionist approach that *inter alia*: (1) oversimplifies the ways that people engage with media content; (2) fails to meaningfully consider the role of the social context and other sources of sexual information; (3) over-privileges rational choice in behaviour change; and (4) obscures the value-laden nature of determinations regarding ideal or healthy sexual practice (Healy-Cullen and Morison 2023). Nonetheless, this research has had a profound impact on how youth engagement with Internet pornography is conceptualised and approached, assisted by ‘a dominant psychological paradigm that emphasises the significance of human behaviour, and intervenes at this individual level’ (Bragg 2015, 94).

Accordingly, as shown in Byron et al.’s (2021, 786) recent systematic literature review, the most common conceptualisation of porn literacy education is as a means of improving young people’s ‘ability to critically read porn as negative and containing “unrealistic” portrayals of sex’. This conceptualisation of young people’s interaction with online pornography goes hand-in-hand with the main way that porn literacy education frames them: as naïve, vulnerable and in need of adult protection (Healy-Cullen and Morison 2023; Vertongen, Chamberlain, and van Ommen 2022). Porn literacy programmes therefore frequently seek to help young people to make sense of and negotiate the material they will inevitably encounter. For example, the Responsible Sex Education Institute (RSEI, 2019) explains on its website that porn literacy education

… teaches individuals to think about, analyse, and evaluate the media they choose to consume and the media that is naturally around them … 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.

As this explanation suggests, the objective of porn literacy education is to prevent young people (in particular) from developing so-called unhealthy or unrealistic views of sexuality so that they are able to ‘make healthy decisions’ about sex and relationships.

As such, porn literacy education is a pragmatic form of harm reduction, developed in the context of increased digitalisation in which regulating young people’s access to or engagement with Internet pornography or other sexual content is increasingly difficult and implausible (Bragg 2015). The approach is therefore based on the recognition that youth engagement with Internet pornography is unavoidable and it is fundamentally motivated by the assumed harmful effects of Internet pornography’s ‘messages’ and their ‘influence on young people’ (Crabbe and Flood 2021, 1). Though social cognitive theory sees observational learning as more complex than simple mimicry, the prevalence of media effects scholarship may well be a result of its easy alignment with common-sense cause-and-effect understandings of media engagement.

As porn literacy education develops and becomes more widely adopted, Albury (2014, 2018) notes that some teaching may favour an ‘inoculation approach’. Substantiated by media effects research rooted in social cognitive theory, this approach seeks to safeguard young people from the harmful effects of ‘exposure’ to Internet pornography (e.g. poor body image, violence, risky sexual practices). Accordingly, the
rationale of the inoculation approach to porn literacy education is harm reduction by teaching youth how to critically analyse Internet pornography correctly, indicating a value-laden approach in which the ‘correct’ outcome is ultimately that young people repudiate Internet pornography (Baker 2016; Crabbe and Flood 2021; Rothman et al. 2018). Indeed, analyses of porn literacy resources indicate that (hetero)normative and middle-class ideals frequently underlie determinations of practices named as harmful, unhealthy or risky and as having a deleterious effect on young viewers (Byron et al. 2022, 2021; Goldstein 2020).

Relevance of the present study

Our study aims to contribute to overall discussion about the development and implementation of strategies to support young people in navigating Internet pornography by listening to the accounts provided by young people themselves and situating their voices alongside those who typically manage their sexuality education (i.e. caregivers and teachers). A key attribute of the research is its polyvocality; hearing from three stakeholder groups concurrently provides a rich dataset, foregrounding the people who will be most invested in the concept of porn literacy education. This is valuable in a social environment where there are calls to support youth in navigating Internet pornography through porn literacy education, but there is disagreement and lack of information among policy makers and sexuality education experts as to how to begin; and indeed, whether any initiative should begin at all.

Materials and methods

The data presented in this paper were generated as part of a larger project about youth, caregiver and teacher perspectives on youth engagement with Internet pornography, approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (SOB 18/51). Participants were recruited between February and July 2019 from nine schools with diverse characteristics (e.g. co-educational, single-sex, rural, urban, and differing decile groupings) located across the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Participants received the call for participation from their school principals, who had agreed to allow the research to be conducted at their schools. The call invited students and their parents and teachers to take part in an initial exploratory online survey about Internet pornography (see Healy-Cullen et al. 2022a, 2022b). Those completing the survey were offered a chance to register interest in participating in a follow-up interview. Interviewees were invited to refer friends who were also interested in taking part in an interview (snowball sampling). The participant group comprised ten students, seven parents, one teacher, and six teachers who were also parents (see Table 1). Participant names used in this article are pseudonyms and all identifying information has been removed to ensure confidentiality.

After obtaining informed consent, participants were interviewed by SH-C, an Irish cisgender, heterosexual woman, who was 27-years-old at the time of interviews. The interviews took place in schools at a private location and at a time convenient to participants. They were audio recorded and lasted between 40 and 90 min. Interviewees
were asked to discuss their views of what Internet pornography is (including how we had framed it in the survey) and of ‘porn literacy education’. To help generate discussion, we used stimulus material comprising common responses to the open-ended survey item ‘What does it mean to you to be porn literate?’; that is, ‘to understand the effects of what pornography can do to you physically and mentally’ and ‘understanding the difference between porn and sex in real life’. Interviewees were asked to comment on these responses.

The transcribed interview data were analysed following Braun and Clarke (2012) approach to thematic analysis. We conducted a critical, deductive, constructionist analysis, seeking to identify patterns of language use, including underlying conceptualisations, assumptions and ideologies. Our analysis centres on how participants conceived of porn literacy, their views of this as a response to youth engagement with Internet pornography, and their explanations of what it might mean to be ‘porn literate’. We then consider how various constructions of porn literacy education, or other ways of responding to youth engagement with Internet pornography, reinforce or resist existing power relations (Morison, Macleod, and Lynch 2021).

### Table 1. Participant demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Group</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Kate</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pākehā &amp; Māori</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>Pākehā</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>European</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liane</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avery</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pākehā &amp; Asian</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tristan</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pākehā &amp; Māori</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anthony</td>
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<td>Male</td>
<td>Pākehā &amp; Māori</td>
<td>Student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
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<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>Parent</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>Parent</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jessica</td>
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<td>American</td>
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<td>Willow</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>46–55</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>James</td>
<td>46–55</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Pākehā</td>
<td>Parent-Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the following analysis, we present two themes that represent distinct constructions of porn literacy education identified in participants’ talk. The first theme, **orn literacy as inoculation against harmful effects**, coheres around the prevalent notion of ‘media effects’ as evidenced in talk about the negative consequences ‘caused’ by viewing Internet pornography. These negative effects are, as we demonstrate further below, commonly construed in relation to Internet pornography’s distortion of reality
and/or its unhealthy messages. The concern therefore is not (simply) with the corruption of ‘childhood innocence,’ as is often highlighted in discussions of youth sexuality (Robinson 2013). On the assumption that ‘exposure’ to Internet pornography is unavoidable, participants most commonly proposed the more pragmatic response of educating youth about the dangers and harms of Internet pornography to mitigate or ‘inoculate’ against Internet pornography’s inevitably negative effects, aligning with the logic of porn literacy education. This talk is supported by dominant, mutually reinforcing discourses, namely, the harm discourse, and developmental discourse. In contrast, talk that to some extent resists these dominant discourses is encompassed in the second theme; Porn literacy: beyond harmful effects. This theme includes instances in which responses to youth engagement with Internet pornography were not solely articulated in terms of harmful effects or the un/reality of pornography representations. Such talk was relatively muted in comparison to that in the first theme but represents an important deviation from the prevalent way of envisaging responses to young people’s engagement with Internet pornography, as we shall show.

**Porn literacy education as inoculating against harmful effects**

The construction of Internet pornography as having negative effects on youth has come to dominate public discussion, supported and propagated by the media effects research mentioned above (Bragg 2015). This construction relies on two dominant discourses, a developmentalist and a harm discourse, that together create a powerful and compelling common-sense construction of youth as susceptible to imitating what they see in Internet pornography. Given the prevalence of this understanding, as attested to by the stimulus materials used, it is not surprising that all our participants reinforced the construction of Internet pornography as ‘dangerous’ and doing ‘damage’ (Marie, mother) to youth specifically, with many, like Avery below, citing research evidence of specific harms (e.g. addiction).

**Avery (student):** I guess for people to know (.) the downsides and the fact that women will get exploited and abused. The fact that it’s not an accurate representation and then maybe the health side-effects of it because (.) addiction is one side-effect. There’s also low mental health that’s attributed to porn. You’ve also got things like, other addictions and the inability to focus. Then the actors themselves, you’ve got things like STDs, STIs, genitalia damage…

Here, Avery draws on the harm discourse naming several negative outcomes of Internet pornography, including negative effects on young people’s ‘mental health’. Avery presents his claims as common knowledge, as suggested by the repetition of the factual nature of these negative outcomes (‘the fact that’). This construction of Internet pornography as harmful is supported by framing these outcomes as scientific ‘fact’ and drawing on a psycho-medical discourse (e.g. ‘side-effect’, ‘addiction’, ‘mental health’), which originates in media effects research, to warrant claims of harm and the ‘need for [young] people to know’ or be made aware of the this through porn literacy education. Following this logic, porn literacy education is construed as raising awareness of the ‘downsides’ of pornography and the various harmful effects it poses to youth. Avery illustrates clearly how porn literacy education was commonly rendered
as a means of inoculating youth against the inevitable harms and risks Internet pornography poses to their ‘normal’ development.

In order to safeguard young people from the harmful ‘messages’ conveyed by Internet pornography, participants frequently referred to teaching young people to ‘read’ pornography in a critical way in order to discern (1) distortions of reality, usually articulated as distinguishing between representations of sexuality in Internet pornography and ‘real life’, and (2) unhealthy portrayals of sexuality, including physical appearance and relationship norms. We discuss each of these sub-themes in turn.

**Inoculation against Internet pornography’s distortion of reality**

A key facet highlighted in participants’ explanations of being porn literate was young people’s claimed in/ability to decipher ‘real-life’ sex from pornographic portrayals. This understanding of porn literacy education is based on a common view of the media as presenting unrealistic or distorted versions of reality that audiences, especially children and young people, then ‘absorb’ and imitate in a literalist way (Bragg 2015).

The possibility of problematic representations being imitated by youth in their daily lives was frequently raised, as shown in the following extracts. These extracts show how such talk is informed by the notion that children learn how to behave through observation, especially of media content. As mentioned, this oversimplified view of the role of media in socialisation is based upon the notion of social learning through observation propagated by early media effects research drawing on social cognitive theory.

**Raymond (parent-teacher)—**It’s hard to watch pornography now without the woman being smacked and she’s getting slapped all the time. Good grief. It’s just abusive toward them. That’s what I’m worried the boys think, “Yeah, I’ve got to slap her to make her like it”.

Here, Raymond suggests that harmful practices (abuse) viewed in Internet pornography will be uncritically imitated or taken up by young men. This is a common assumption, popularised by media reporting on the issue, and has been reported in other research, for instance, with teachers in the UK (Baker 2016), parents in the USA (Zurcher 2017), and adult pornography viewers in Aotearoa (Taylor 2021). Raymond raises the concern that after viewing gender violence in Internet pornography, young men will believe that these are acceptable or ideal practices; the implication is that they may be unable to critically reflect on these representations themselves. Based on a developmentalist construction of the adolescent as ‘devoid of social agency, [and as] … ‘immature’, ‘irrational’, and vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation’ (Coulter 2020, 21) young people are rendered susceptible to being taken in by representations of ‘porn sex’. This construes Internet pornography as the primary influence on youth’s sexual socialisation, attributing much power to online media, but overlooking the other forms of sexual information young people may encounter in their daily lives, as is common in the social cognitive view of Internet pornography’s deleterious effects (Healy-Cullen and Morison 2023).

Based on the construction of youth as incapable of discerning ‘porn sex’ from ideal or ‘real’ sexual practices, participants frequently spoke of the need for education to help ‘make young people aware’ that representations of sex in pornography are not
true reflections of reality. Such intervention was implicitly cast as protecting young people from Internet pornography’s negative influence on their behaviour and the harmful consequences that could ensue, such as sexual violence, distorted body image, unrealistic expectations of self or partners and so forth. Echoing international findings (e.g. Baker 2016; Zurcher 2017), all the participants (youth, parents and teachers) envisaged such educational efforts as involving adult-led, didactic teaching about the artificial and problematic nature of the representations in Internet pornography. This construction of porn literacy is illustrated in the following extracts.

**Ava (parent):** I think just making teenagers aware of the difference between pornography and what’s well, like, actual real life. Um, yeah and, and, yeah, I just think the literacy around that is really is really [sic] important so they can differentiate between, yeah, that and what’s actually going on in their life and then their relationships and stuff.

**Willow (parent):** Well, the conversation is more about what I have learned, and that is if he sees anything like that, it’s not real and it’s not, you know, it’s not giving you a true idea of what relations are like because I think that’s what’s causing a lot of harm.

**Diane (parent):** Yeah, I don’t think you need to go into great detail… I think they need to know that it’s definitely false. It’s there. But it’s not real. It’s not how a relationship is formed. That’s not how a relationship goes.

The developmentalist and harm discourses are once more apparent here as speakers construct the ‘harm’ (Willow) of Internet pornography as related to its ‘false’ (Diane) or distorted representations of sexuality and youths’ implied incapacity to ‘differentiate’ (Ava) between these and reality—described variously as ‘actual real life’ (Ava), what is ‘real’ (Ava, Willow, Diane) or ‘how a relationship goes’ (Diane).

In turn, porn literacy education is described as an intervention to correct Internet pornography’s distorted representations of reality by informing youth (‘making teenagers aware’, Ava) of Internet pornography’s unrealistic nature; although participants did not offer further details of what this might entail in practice. As such, porn literacy education emerges as an intervention very similar to knowledge exchange interventions in sexual health education, which aim to promote behaviour change primarily through increased knowledge of risks and harms associated with undesirable practices (Healy-Cullen and Morison 2023).

**Inoculation against Internet pornography’s unhealthy messages**
Repeate appeals to the ‘false’ or unrealistic portrayals of sex in Internet pornography—versus actual, true or real sexual practices and relations—suggests the distortion of a singular, objective reality. Framing objectionable content in terms of its un/reality allows value judgements about sexual practices and relationships to be obscured. Like critiques of social cognition researchers’ emphasis on ‘perceived reality’ (Byron et al. 2021, 2022; Taylor 2022), appeals to ‘reality’ can be understood as concerning ‘what children ought to believe about the world’ and their subsequent conduct (Bragg 2015, 91, emphasis added). Hence, rather than an objective external reality, it is a preferred reality that is at issue here. The moral dimension of judgements about the nature of content became clearer in discussions of harm in which speakers
referred to Internet pornography’s influence on un/healthy sexual development. For example:

**Raymond (parent-teacher):** So, I think, with watching pornography, the reason we are concerned is that you’re going to end up with performance issues and, you know? Your skew on what normal, healthy sex is, is going to be wrong. Well, is it going to be wrong? If they all understand it’s normal and healthy then maybe that’s what normal and healthy will become.

**Diane (parent):** So, I think it’s just more important to point out what’s right and what’s not… Sex is a very special thing with your partner. It’s not like you sleeping with Tom, Dick, and Harry, and everyone else. It’s more once you get in a relationship, it’s personal and it’s… it’s loving. Like, it’s showing your affection. […] There’s no message coming across that it’s all just wrong. […] It’s actually not the correct way to have a relationship.

In these extracts, a psycho-medical discourse implicitly creates a healthy/unhealthy binary, in which Internet pornography is aligned with the latter due to its ‘harmful’ effects (e.g. ‘performance issues’, Raymond). At the same time, ‘healthy’ is equated with ‘normal’ and ‘correct’ sexual relationships, and contrasted with those represented in Internet pornography, which are deemed ‘wrong’ (Raymond, Diane). The implication is that viewing Internet pornography will cause young people to have incorrect or unacceptable ideals or expectations vis-à-vis sexuality. References to what is right and wrong, ‘the correct way to have a relationship’ (Diane), and the need to demarcate boundaries of acceptability introduce a moralistic tone.

It appears then that the threat of Internet pornography is related to its potential to undermine a normal, ‘healthy’ (hetero)sexuality. These findings echo previous research showing that some adults fear that viewing sexual practices deemed unacceptable by society may warp young people’s ideas about ‘healthy and normal’ sexuality (Healy-Cullen et al. 2022a; McKee, Dawson, and Kang 2023). Hence, in the extracts above, the concern is that youth may engage in sexual relations that are abnormal, incorrect/wrong’ (Raymond, Diane) and cross boundaries of acceptable practices. Moreover, from the lack of explanation or detail regarding what sexual relationships should be like or what constitutes ‘normal healthy sex’ (Raymond) we can infer that this is assumed to be obvious and taken for granted as known. Thus, the silence alongside references to abnormal or unhealthy sex suggests that participants are appealing to highly normative understandings of heterosex. For instance, Diane draws on what Farvid and Braun (2013, 359) term ‘hierarchies of respectability’ in which monogamy is privileged as ‘the ideal way to have a heterosexual relationship; the pinnacle of all heterosexual unions’. The juxtaposition of casual sex or non-monogamy (‘sleeping with Tom, Dick, and Harry’) with an emotionally intimate relationship (‘loving’, ‘personal’, ‘showing your affection’) invokes the entrenched view of the monogamous dyad as not only a natural and essential aspect of human relating, but also as morally correct (Farvid and Braun 2013).

Accordingly, porn literacy education is construed as a form of inoculation from moral harm in which adults ‘point out what’s right and what’s not’ (Diane) for young people. The implication is that youth are unable to do this for themselves and adult intervention is required, thereby forming the basis of arguments for adult intervention on behalf of young people’s and society’s welfare. Arguments about the corrupting
influence of Internet pornography in turn justify particular forms of adult intervention, namely teaching incapable, vulnerable youth acceptable views of sexuality and ‘the correct way to have a relationship’ (Diane).

**Porn literacy: beyond harmful effects**

There were however instances of talk in which youth, parent and teacher participants resisted the deficit view of young people as ‘cultural dupes’ upon which the dominant understandings of porn literacy education discussed above rest. This was evident, for example, when the young people positioned themselves as critical viewers of Internet pornography, even while positioning *other* youth as at risk of being taken in by Internet pornography, as shown in the following examples.

**Danielle (student):** I never really thought it was an issue, but then when you start thinking about it, you’re like, “Oh actually it [porn literacy education] would probably be a good idea!” so that people kind of more understand what it’s about, that it’s like not real a lot of the time [laughter] […] Just teaching kids that maybe they shouldn’t do some of those things that are in it, the more like violent kind of stuff or whatever […] teach them what the difference is and that it’s not like an actual relationship or like it’s not actual, you know, they’re actually actors. It’s entertainment.

**Frank (student):** It’s [viewing Internet pornography] meant to be a positive thing, like, what the actual activity is, but I feel like some of the impacts that it’s had on the younger generation of people is quite devastating, and how their expectation of what it is in real life is based off what they see online, which is just, like, nothing compared to what it is like in real life.

Note how the speakers above once again draw on developmental and harms and risks discourses, both reiterating the construction of Internet pornography as offering a distorted representation of ‘real sex’ and thereby negatively influencing young people’s sexual development. As such they echo the oversimplified media effects thesis, discussed earlier, that often functions as a rationale for porn literacy education. Danielle construes porn literacy education as necessary for teaching ‘kids’ ‘the difference’ between ‘real sex’ and the sexual representations offered as ‘entertainment’ in Internet pornography. Similarly, Frank describes porn literacy education as remedying the unrealistic ‘expectation’ of sex gleaned from watching Internet pornography. Despite claiming that ‘people’, ‘kids’ (Danielle) or the ‘younger generation’ (Frank) require education about the harmful and unrealistic aspects of watching Internet pornography, by virtue of showing their awareness of this ‘need’ the speakers undercut the deficit construction of youth as unable to view Internet pornography critically without adult intervention, at least insofar as they themselves are concerned. Danielle positions herself in contrast to other young people, intimating that she was not initially perturbed by Internet pornography (‘I never really thought it was an issue’) and emphasising her awareness of pornography as ‘entertainment’ with ‘actors’.

These extracts illustrate how youth participants sometimes positioned *others* as ‘duped’ or harmed by Internet pornography. Like Danielle and Frank, all participants (youth and adults alike) reiterated the construction of porn literacy education as teaching about distinguishing between reality and fantasy. However, there were
positive depictions of young people in general as capable decision makers, resisting the deficit-based view of youth. Based on this more empowering construction of youth, some participants questioned the favoured harm-reduction approach to porn literacy education and argued that youth should be supported rather than taught through a top-down approach. For instance:

**Liane (student):** I think the goal for all education isn't to show a right or wrong way but show all the ways. And then letting the person make the informed decision themselves.

**Aidan (parent):** Some people will say, ‘Well, that’s not it’s not healthy. It should be between a man and a woman.’ But, to me, anything that doesn’t exploit anyone, isn’t harming yourself or anyone in any way. That’s your business. [… ] You know we live in a multi-coloured world. It’s a pretty big, um umbrella of what healthy sexual themes are.

Here, porn literacy education is not constructed as ‘telling’ youth ‘a right or wrong way’ (Liane). Rather, it is constructed as non-judgemental education (‘that’s your business’, Aidan) which focuses on supporting youth agency (‘let the person make the informed decision themselves’; Liane). As already described, Aidan articulated that being porn literate would involve looking beyond prescribed sexual (hetero)normativity and questioning what ‘healthy sexual themes’ (Aidan) truly are. Accordingly, these quotes support the assertion that ‘porn ed’ teacher training which solely focuses on content analysis (or the question of whether porn sex is or is not “real”)’ is not necessarily always supported or deemed to be the optimal approach by youth, caregivers and teachers (Albury 2018, 107).

In a similar vein, there were instances where participants suggested that harms-focused messaging may be insufficient, not resonate with youth, or could be too superficial or simplistic. For instance:

**Adam (student):** Going through like the sexual education system myself, like, in a PE [Physical Education] class and seeing a video made on the dangers of it [pornography] and it just being so out of touch with absolutely everything to do with young people, that it made it quite hard to take it seriously.

**Liane (student) -** There weren’t any conversations [about Internet pornography at home]. I did get caught once. That was like your typical “You shouldn’t do that. You’re getting grounded. I’m taking away your computer privileges”, that kind of thing. Just like a blanket ban kind of thing without any context […] and how to talk about porn, like, obviously coming back to the like “Don’t teach me. Don’t tell me what to do” but like ( ) how to have those open dialogues about porn and like that kind of thing would be also very beneficial.

Here, Adam critiques education focused on ‘the dangers of pornography’ as ‘being so out of touch’ with young people’s realities. In so doing, he challenges the harms discourse, suggesting that education premised on the construction of youth as susceptible to Internet pornography’s harmful ‘messages’ is ‘hard to take seriously’. Similarly, Liane maintains that to ‘teach’ youth about how Internet pornography does not reflect reality, and to ‘tell them what to do’ or introduce a ‘blanket ban’ may not be the optimal way to engage with youth on this topic. Rather than a didactic, teacher-led approach, Liane suggests that ‘open dialogues about porn’ might be more ‘beneficial’. In this vein, an approach that would simply critique pornography as a
'bad' educator and encourage avoidance was problematised by some participants, as it has been problematised in the wider literature (Albury 2014).

Participants sometimes described porn literacy education in ways that went beyond the harm reduction construction, and constructions of porn literacy education as involving deciphering ‘porn sex’ and ‘real sex’. Challenging the harm and developmentalist discourses, some adult participants supported the construction of youth as legitimate sexual citizens who can be discerning viewers of Internet pornography. In response to a question about what it means to be porn literate, the following quote provides evidence of how some participants constructed porn literacy education as needing to incorporate notions of desire, pleasure, and fantasy and not (only) harms:

Marie (parent): I think for me it would be understanding [long pause] understanding how different porn can be to real life. Being able to make that disassociation between viewing something and expecting that in a relationship. I think maybe around [pause] being able to see through some of the things behind the porn maybe the misogyny [...] sexualising women of colour [...] how there’s no diversity and also [pause] also probably around the different feelings it might bring up in them and how to work through some of those. Some things they might see that they like and be wondering why they like it and being able to sort of perhaps work through [that]. I’d like to think it [PLE] would be, you know, “If sort of something turns me on but it makes me uncomfortable, how do I deal with that?” You know? “Do I use that in my fantasy world? Do I try to bring it into my real world? How does that work?” You know, navigating their own sexuality and relationships having seen what’s on the screen.

While the focus in Marie’s account tends toward the possible negative consequences of Internet pornography viewing (e.g. harm, confusion, discomfort), the description of Internet pornography is more complex than in harm-focused renditions. Marie describes how Internet pornography can evoke a range of emotions (‘different feelings’) and responses (both desire and discomfort). Accordingly, in addition to constructing porn literacy education as needing to educate youth about the harmful aspects ‘behind’ Internet pornography, which may not be apparent to them, Marie includes a broader range of issues within the purview of porn literacy education. These include young people’s feelings and responses toward the representations they encounter in Internet pornography, including desire; navigating conflicting responses; and engaging with how the fantasies engendered by Internet pornography relate to their own lives, sexual identities, and sexual relationships.

Conclusion

The dominant way of understanding porn literacy education in our data is represented as inoculation against harmful effects. Participants frequently highlighted the need to help youth distinguish between reality and fantasy so that they can disregard any ‘dangerous’ or ‘unhealthy’ messages conveyed in Internet pornography. This was commonly deemed to be a way of preventing young people from developing ‘unrealistic’ ideas about sexuality and thereby mitigating potential risks and adverse consequences (Bragg 2015). This construction of porn literacy education as a form of inoculation against media effects corresponds with the common understanding in international scholarship and curricula of porn literacy education as an educational intervention.
aimed at addressing the believability or realism of pornography (Byron et al. 2021). A prominent Australian intervention, for example, advises that

‘young people need support to critique what they see in pornography … one of the most important things for young people to know about porn is that it is not reality. Much of what is portrayed in porn is not only false, but also conveys dangerous messages’ (Crabbe and Flood 2021, 1).

The understanding of porn literacy education as inoculation rests upon the common assumption that when young people engage with Internet pornography they lack the relevant cognitive ability and/or emotional maturity to make sense of the representations they encounter, despite the absence of research on youth’s proficiency at ‘reading’ pornography texts (McKee et al. 2022). This construction of youth, which emphasises their assumed naïveté and susceptibility to the dangers of Internet pornography, is fundamentally a deficit perspective of youth (Healy-Cullen and Morison 2023). The construction has become cultural common sense, largely due to western understandings of ‘normal’ child development based on a dominant developmentalist discourse propagated by mainstream psychology and its associated disciplines. A developmentalist discourse renders young people as inherently vulnerable children, particularly in relation to sexuality, supported by the entrenched association of youth sexuality with risk and negative social and health consequences (Macleod 2009; Robinson 2013). Consequently, the careful management of young people’s sexual knowledge is required to protect them from the risk of harm (Bragg 2015). It is the content of the information youth receive that is of primary concern—as demonstrated by our analysis—and adult concerns about the consequences of youth acquiring unacceptable sexual information appear to drive the dominant formulation of porn literacy education as inoculation (Byron et al. 2021; Robinson 2013).

The construction of young people’s vulnerability supports adult control of content and modes of delivery realised in adult-centred, authoritative approaches to sexuality education (Ngabaza and Shefer 2022). Accordingly, while porn literacy programmes often aspire to be youth-orientated and promote youth agency, their basis in a fundamentally deficit view of youth results in protectionist and adult-centric approaches (Healy-Cullen and Morison 2023). Such approaches maintain unequal power relations between youth and adults and, importantly, have been shown to encourage youth disengagement and rebellion (Jearey-Graham and Macleod 2015). Moreover, qualitative studies of young people’s views of Internet pornography suggest that youth from a range of contexts are already ‘porn literate’ (e.g. Goldstein 2020). Yet, proponents of porn literacy education fail to meaningfully recognise these capabilities, retaining the deficit-based, developmentalist view of young people (Byron et al. 2021).

The didactic sexual health education approach that underpins literacy programmes, as well as the rigid developmentalist rhetoric it is based on, must be thoroughly confronted in order to design curricula that are relevant to young people. This is a challenge to which academics and educators advocating for critical pedagogical initiatives must rise. Byron et al. (2021, 800) assert that ‘adult researchers and educators can learn much from young people’s media expertise, including their existing literacies built around uses and understandings of porn and mediated sex’. If the aim is truly to promote youth agency and empowerment, then a fundamental shift is needed
away from the dominant deficit-focused lens through which young people are viewed (Macleod 2009). Taking an alternative assets-based, youth-led approach—as proposed by scholars such as Goldstein (2020) and Healy-Cullen and Morison (2023)—and ensuring support and uptake among stakeholders requires challenging this view and promoting alternative understandings of youth that emphasise their capabilities, agency, and resilience.

There were instances in this study where participants resisted the deficit-focused construction of youth, as shown in our analysis above, as well as our previous findings (Healy-Cullen et al. 2022a; Healy-Cullen et al. 2022b; Healy-Cullen et al. 2022c). However, such talk was exceptional and largely overshadowed by the prevailing conceptualisation of porn literacy education as inoculation, with its deficit-based positioning of youth. The prominence of the deficit view of youth in our data, and its use by both adults and young people, shows how entrenched such a perspective is, and its centrality to common and powerful explanatory resources that describe specific dangers Internet pornography poses to youth. Nevertheless, the identification of such resistance to the dominant discourses framing youth engagement with Internet pornography, and sexuality more broadly, creates space for the construction of an alternative to deficit understandings of youth towards a more empowering position that is based on their agency and capability. One such approach is that of ethical sexual citizenship pedagogy, which draws on scholarship that consciously eschews a deficit-based view of young people described above. It typically includes the use of critical pedagogies, a focus on sexual and reproductive citizenship, and builds on Foucauldian notions of ethical sexual subjectivities and ethical pleasure (Carmody 2009; Healy-Cullen and Morison 2023). Rather than simply delivering ‘good’ information to youth, this approach aims to respond to young people’s expressed needs and desires, aiming to create youth-led dialogic spaces to foster discussion and meaning-making with youth as agentic, desiring sexual subjects (Calder-Dawe and Gavey 2019). (See Healy-Cullen and Morison (2023) for further discussion).

The findings presented in this article indicate some consensus among participants regarding what it means to be ‘porn literate’ and therefore what porn literacy education curricula should include. However, perhaps openness—rather than consensus—will engender a more useful discussion about ‘the possibilities’ of moving porn literacy education discussions and interventions into new places (e.g. as previously intimated, via an ethical sexual citizenship pedagogy). The task here is to work with youth, and their caregivers and teachers, to explore ways of drawing out and fostering more productive conceptualisations and discourses—some of which may exist beyond dominant Western frameworks—upon which to ground educational responses that support asset-based constructions of youth and promote their sexual agency. Based on our findings, we call for further research that reaches beyond porn literacy education as it is currently conceptualised within discourses of harms and developmentalism and their joint positioning of all young people as naïve and susceptible to messages portrayed in Internet pornography. Rather than a harm-focused and effects-based pedagogy based on cognitive models, we call for further exploration with key stakeholders as to the potential value of an emerging poststructuralist-inspired, critical approach; ethical sexual citizenship pedagogy (Healy-Cullen and Morison 2023).
Notes
1. This term is commonly used to refer to content accessed online, although it can be argued that it is somewhat redundant to make this specification, given the porous nature of media content today.
2. In Aotearoa New Zealand, decile 1 schools have the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities, whereas decile 10 schools have the lowest.
3. (.) is a notation which indicates a short pause, as per transcription conventions.

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Data available upon reasonable request from the authors.

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