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**The Role of Porn Literacy in Comprehensive Sex Education to Reduce Endorsements of  
Gendered Sexual Violence and Support Healthy Adolescent Development**

A Thesis Presented

by

Kiana Harnish

To the Keck Science Department of  
Claremont McKenna, Scripps, and Pitzer Colleges

In Partial Fulfillment of  
The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Senior Thesis in Human Biology: Cross-Cultural Health and Healing

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## **Abstract**

Due to stigmatization of sex and insufficient sexual education, modern-day adolescents rely on free online pornography as a source of education about sex and relationships. This thesis provides a review of the connections between adolescent porn use and the socialization of sexual violence (SV) and coercion against women, comprehensive sex education (CSE) and healthy adolescent sexual development, and porn literacy (PL) and sexual attitude or behavior changes. Porn literacy aims to equip adolescents with tools to critically analyze sexualized media and messages, to empower them to make informed decisions to engage or disengage with porn and their sexuality in a safe and healthy manner. I propose a pilot study comprehensive sex education program with porn literacy topics that can be feasibly and effectively administered in a public San Diego 8th grade classroom to holistically prevent SV against women and support healthy adolescent sexual development. In this one-group design, participants (n=30) will complete a pre-test assessment before the first lesson and a post-test after the 12th and final session. Expected results, based on trends found in previous research, are a decrease in endorsements of sexually violent and gendered sexual scripts commonly found in porn, a decrease in general endorsements of sexual violence, and an increase in self-efficacy regarding various aspects of healthy adolescent sexual and relationship development from pre-test to post-test. Sexual self-efficacy in this study includes confidence in critically analyzing messages related to sex and gender, navigating healthy relationships, and locating support or further resources on healthy sexuality and SV. The findings from this pilot study could indicate a need for revisions to California's sex education requirements to reflect a more realistic landscape of adolescent's sexual socialization, which includes pornography, in order to holistically prevent sexual violence and move towards a sexually safe and equitable society.

## **Author's Note**

My name is Kiana Harnish and you can refer to me using she/her or they/them pronouns or by alternating both. The topics of sex education, sexual violence, and pornography, and the intersections between them are ones I am very passionate about and personally invested in due to my experiences of sexual violence and coercion that began in adolescence. Throughout my thesis, I will share some personal experiences navigating sexuality as an adolescent and some of what I have discovered through my life experiences and extensive research on the topic. I also want to clearly state that my tone in writing about this topic is motivated by my belief that increasing sexual agency and empowerment in adolescents. It is very much one and the same of my social and political beliefs, and I will not be shying away from that context. The perspective I come into this thesis with is neither anti-pornography nor pro-pornography. I do not support many of the intentions and rhetoric behind the anti-porn movement that is often tied up with conservative and religious values such as valuing purity culture (which is ironically tied to rape culture in many ways) or motivated by shaming sex workers, sexual expression, and general sexual permissiveness and openness. However, I have many issues with the porn industry and the themes and scripts put forth and perpetuated by mainstream porn, whose use is extremely popular and normalized. And as a future Sexual and Reproductive Health practitioner, I recognize the importance of holistically approaching topics and acknowledging all sides, which I will attempt to do in investigating porn's effects on adolescents. In order to truly acknowledge and respect sexual agency, I believe in giving people a well-rounded view of evidence so they can make their own meanings of the messages and later their own decisions. Of course I am, as every author and scientist is, somewhat biased in terms of having my own ideas and lived

experiences, but I am committing to being dialectical, thoughtful, and forthright in presenting the complexity of the topics. As health educators, we argue for nonjudgmental and transparent communication about the mixed research on porn's effects on adolescents in order to give adolescents all the tools to think critically and make their own meanings from media messages they may be exposed to and therefore their own decisions. I approach this literature review in the same way: with the purpose of respecting the agency of each reader to form their own perspectives about the topics at hand while sharing the evidence that brought me to mine.

### Approach to Writing My Thesis

This interdisciplinary topic spans across fields of psychology, public health, education, media studies, and feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, among others. As such, my approach to discussing this topic draws upon techniques and concepts used in diverse disciplines as well: namely, autoethnography and situated knowledge from anthropology, positionality in feminist methodology, and narrative-based health and oral history as used in ethnic studies and medical anthropology. From my biological and public health background, I borrow and base a lot of my understanding of topics from peer-reviewed research articles, meta-analyses, randomized controlled trials, and quantitative research. I particularly see value in these methods for building a knowledge base on a topic and to be conscious of confounding variables within the design and delivery of research, interviews, analysis, educational curriculum, etc., to be able to better contextualize the results, and at times to be able to see the 'parts' as representative of the 'whole'. In fact, most of my literature review consists of this kind of evidence and I am very careful to analyze the reputability and thoughtfulness of each of the sources I use. Additionally, I have also made the decision to incorporate my own experiences of sexual violence and of

exploring sexuality and relationships as an adolescent into the review of literature. I do this for a few reasons. Firstly, this serves to allow the reader to understand more of my context, how I came to be, and to feel my stake and passion in this topic. I hope my readers see this makes me a more reliable narrator and a more knowledgeable speaker on the topic of sexual violence and how it can affect adolescents and sexual development. Secondly, this literary choice serves as a political statement. The words and embodied experiences of survivors of sexual violence are constantly undervalued, met with skepticism, and at times denied as acceptable evidence. Similarly, academia and the biomedical model devalues oral history and narrative-based health, not taking seriously the experiences and embodied knowledge of people most affected by the issues in discussion, in the pursuit of finding proof and evidence in the form of ‘objective scientific truth.’ By integrating my experiences and perspectives and those I have learned of my friends and trusted ones, I recenter the voices of survivors in the fight to resist and change the culture of sexual violence we live in.

### Navigating the Sensitivity of the Topic & Option for Disengagement

The topic of sexual violence, especially when talking about adolescents, is understandably very sensitive and potentially triggering. Also, given the high prevalence of sexual violence and sexual coercion, it is likely that many of the folks who are reading this are people who have experienced SV and coercion. Especially for my family and loved ones, I acknowledge it may be very difficult and uncomfortable to read about the sections that deal more intimately with my personal accounts of sex and sexual violence. Therefore, regardless of who you are and why you may want to avoid or delay reading these parts, I have come up with a way to allow you to engage or disengage with those sections that still feels honoring of my voice and

story. I had the option (and was advised by a few people) to make these parts more of anecdotes than self-stories and speak “for a friend”, or I could have made an addendum at the back of the thesis for people to flip back and forth to if they wanted the full experience. But these ways felt inauthentic to me and disrespectful to the gravity that these personal experiences held for me. These are my experiences and my story and are why I have chosen to devote my thesis and part of my career and life to this topic. My experiences are not ones that I was able to avoid or to be put in a separate section to flip back to when I chose. They are a part of me. They are evidence. And I carry them with me, even when I wish I could hit ‘delete’. The system I devised was to flip the sections with my personal experiences upside down. This way, it still stands in the place I intend for them to be, but it gives the opportunity for the reader to consent to reading these sections because they have to flip the paper upside down or actively focus on reading upside down, neither of which is second nature. And if a reader chooses to skip them, they just read from the section where it returns to being right-side-up. I got this idea as a lifelong lover of puzzles where the solutions to the crossword or Spot the Differences, for example, would be written upside down at the bottom of the page underneath the uncompleted puzzles. It is also a tribute to one of my favorite songs, “Upside Down” by Jack Johnson, which I use to wake up every morning when I am feeling depressed or hopeless. I turn it on on those particularly rough mornings and no matter how impossible it feels to get out of bed, I tell myself that by the end of the song, I have to be up and dancing. Sometimes it takes two or three listens of the song to get dancing, but it has always managed to help me take on another day with perseverance, bravery, curiosity, and joy.



## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Felicitas-Perkins, for being an incredible advisor & cheerleader throughout this process and to Professor Hatcher-Skeers, for your support as my teacher & mentor over the past 4 years. Thank you to my wonderful friends, partners, and family for not only giving me fun, joyous, and silly moments to look back upon and smile about, but also for the transformative and thoughtful conversations that have challenged my thinking about the world. These relationships have taught me so much and allowed me to grow as a person, an advocate, and a future healthcare provider. I am deeply grateful for Scripps College for fostering a safe space and for bringing together badass women and AFAB people who inspire me every day. Thank you to my family for teaching me to lead with kindness and for always encouraging me to follow my passions, even when they might be a little hazukashi. Thank you to all the incredible humans doing social justice & health equity work, you inspire me to keep doing my part even when it feels hopeless. Lastly, thank you to my past and present partners who, through amazing or horrible experiences, have given me the fire and motivation to fight the culture of sexual violence for the benefit of my future children, self, and everyone else! We all deserve to live in a world where we feel safe and experience joy, love, pleasure, and fulfillment.

## Introduction

Most adolescents experience curiosity and interest in sex, and this can be a part of healthy adolescent development. While American culture tends to put a lot of emphasis on sex and romantic and sexual relationships and sex is important or intriguing to a lot of adolescents, we do not give adolescents the tools to create healthy sexual relationships with oneself and others. This is alarming because it contributes to a culture of sexual violence and coercion.

Sexual violence is dangerously prevalent, especially against women and people who were assigned female at birth (AFAB). Male perpetrated violence against their female intimate partners' (which I henceforth refer to as *gendered sexual violence* or *sexual violence against women*) is a threat to public health due to its high prevalence and numerous health effects<sup>1</sup>. Some of the harmful psychological and physical health outcomes that pose as a risk to adolescents are sexually transmitted infections, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, suicidal ideation, and substance abuse<sup>2,3</sup>. Adolescence is a critical time for prevention of sexual violence. According to UCSD's Center on Gender Equity and Health, "emphasis on young populations is of particular importance in order to inform efforts to prevent the perpetration of such violence – as well as to reduce victimization and its debilitating effects, particularly during adolescent development into adulthood."<sup>4</sup>

A culture of sexual violence and coercion is a term used to explain all the ways sexual violence is normalized, taught, and justified in society. This culture harms all adolescents: not just those who have experienced acts of SV/SC or those who have perpetrated them, but everyone who lives and is socialized in a culture steeped in sexual violence.

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<sup>1</sup> UCSD Center on Gender Equity and Health, 2023

<sup>2</sup> Javidi et al., 2020

<sup>3</sup> RAINN, 2023

<sup>4</sup> UCSD Center on Gender Equity and Health, 2023

Social scientists understand sexual violence to be related to sexism and a history/system of normalizing violence against women.<sup>5</sup> In fact, experts in many fields have proposed that one of the reasons rape and sexual violence is so prevalent is because of the normalizing and sanctioned misogynistic cultural and social ideas surrounding women and gender roles. Some of these ideas are that sexuality and sex are for the pleasure of the man and women exist to fulfill that pleasure (ideas like “girls should have sex with boys when their boyfriend wants, which is a question on the Illinois-RMA scale), that women are sinful and tempting sexual beings that must be tamed or punished, that victims of sexual violence are to blame in one way or another (because they wore certain clothes, were drinking, were flirty), or that sexual violence is okay if it fits into gender roles of masculinity or if the girl was acting outside of the bounds of her ascribed gender role.

There are many factors that influence this culture of sexual violence and coercion, one of which is pornography. Scripts and themes portrayed in various forms of media, including porn, greatly influence social ideas. There is plenty of evidence for the multitude of effects porn has on adolescents, including endorsements of attitudes condoning sexual violence and coercion, which I explore in depth in the section “Why ‘Porn’ Must Be Included in CSE.” Because porn is a significant part of the current culture of adolescent sexual socialization and social-sexual development, holistic attention to the prevention of sexual violence requires talking about porn. Porn being excluded from approaches to prevent sexual violence and support healthy sexuality is dangerous to adolescents.

Teaching about porn is necessary in adolescent education and requires equipping adolescents with a set of tools to engage or disengage consciously and safely, both with respect to porn and their sexuality as a whole. These are the main motivations behind porn literacy (PL)

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<sup>5</sup> Javidi et al., 2020)

education and comprehensive sex education (CSE) respectively. So, while the idea of ‘comprehensive’ sex education emerged to holistically support adolescent sexual development and safety, it still lacks the topic of pornography. Where is the topic of ‘pornography’ and pornography literacy in the sex conversation and in the discourse of adolescent sexual and dating violence prevention?

In this thesis, I argue that porn should be a mandatory topic in Comprehensive Sexual Education in order to foster healthy adolescent sexual development and prevent sexual violence. Porn should be mentioned within the lens of porn literacy, which teaches teens tools to critically analyze messages and themes found in porn and other sexualized media<sup>6</sup>. In order to do so, I will 1) investigate why porn and porn literacy are not normally included in CSE, 2) make my argument for why they must be integrated into CSE, 3) look to examples of how porn and media literacy education has been and can be taught to adolescents, and 4) propose a research plan for a pilot study program of porn literacy-integrated comprehensive sexual education (PLICSE) that specifically measures agreement of ideas accepting of sexual violence, sexual coercion, porn-specific sexually violent scripts, self-efficacy of various aspects of healthy adolescent sexual development. The purpose of the literature review and research proposal is to better understand how porn is affecting adolescents so that we can protect against potential adverse effects through education and empowerment. The long-term/ultimate goal is to change the culture of sexual violence that is undoubtedly harming adolescents and our efforts towards gender equity.

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<sup>6</sup> Dawson et al., 2020

## **Chapter 1: Why is the ‘Porn’ Topic Not Included in Sex Education?**

There are many reasons that porn is not usually spoken of in sex education, many of which are the same reasons why these topics are not generally talked about in broader society. In this chapter, I will review literature to set the scene of why the topic is so controversial, even among educators and professionals with the common goal of sexual safety and justice. I argue that adults’ ignorance about porn’s influence on adolescents in modern times, the politicization of pornography and sex education, and the overall denial and repression of adolescent sexuality and sexual agency are the main reasons for this exclusion. By exploring why it has not been included, we can make a path for future inclusion of the topic in effective ways.

### 1.1: Adults Lack of Awareness of Porn’s Relevance

Parents and adults (who make up the educators, policy makers, health practitioners, etc.) are often ignorant of how relevant porn is to most adolescents’ lives. The landscape of pornography when members of Generation X (who are approximately 43-58 years old now) and Millennials (who are 27-42)<sup>7</sup> were adolescents is entirely different from what their adolescent children are experiencing. Most parents of modern-day adolescents underestimate how widespread porn exposure is. A 2023 study using national probability data showed that parents significantly underestimated both porn exposure and porn’s role in sexual socialization as compared to actual self-reported data from children.<sup>8</sup> When they were kids, video porn was only available for a cost on VHS, DVD, and eventually via pay-per-view on television, therefore watching porn was still much less common and much more stigmatized than it is currently.

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<sup>7</sup> Kagan, 2023

<sup>8</sup> Wright et al., 2023

## 1.2: Politicized Discourse Around Pornography

Throughout my research, it became undeniably clear that the topic of pornography's effects on adolescents was deeply politicized and there were strong feelings on all sides. A quick Google search of “*porn’s effects on adolescents*” immediately uncovered the politically, socially, and religiously motivated environment of pornography discourse.

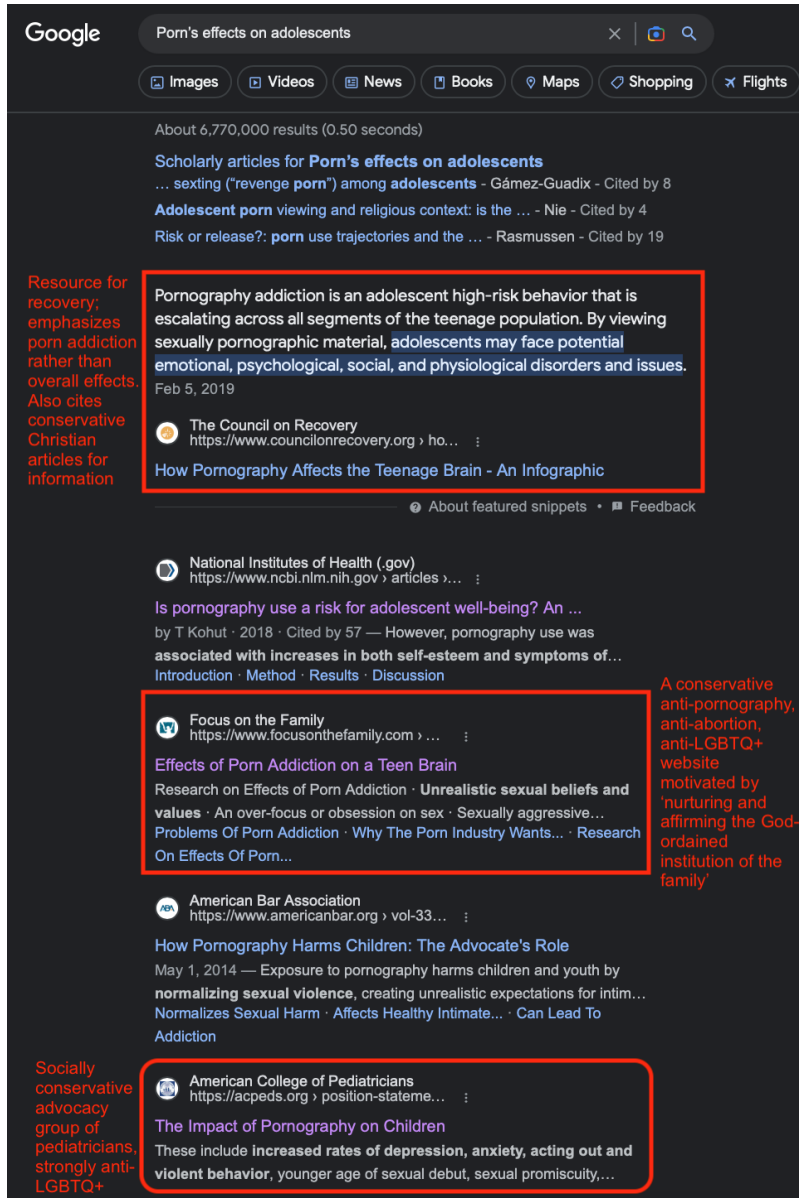


Figure 1. The first five results from the Google Search “*porn’s effects on adolescents*” (Accessed April 26, 2023)

The first result is for an addiction recovery service provider based in Houston, Texas, called “The Council on Recovery.” Clicking on the link brings you to an infographic about adolescent porn addiction, which is one specific and extreme effect that porn has on some adolescents, but is not thought of as affecting the majority of people who have been exposed to porn<sup>9</sup>. Furthermore, the sources of information cited in the infographic are strongly anti-pornography and many are socially and religiously conservative Christian sites or journals such as “Salvo<sup>10</sup>” and “The Gospel Coalition.”<sup>11</sup> The 2nd and 4th results are articles from peer-reviewed journals that provide more evidence-based information, however are much less accessible to laypeople who may not have experience reading formal research and review articles. The 3rd and 5th results are for strongly socially conservative websites that push anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-sexual expression perspectives on the reader in its discussion of porn’s effects on children. Whoever is attempting to learn more about how porn may be affecting youth audiences get a very loaded and skewed understanding that overshadows the complexities and mixed results of research and pushes their own conservative agendas. It can be assumed that the majority of people who choose to search for information on porn’s effects on adolescents are parents, educators, healthcare workers, therapists, and other adults concerned and curious about how this topic may be affecting young people. This makes it extremely concerning that many of these websites clearly target and cater to these demographics, particularly concerned parents, to disseminate very biased statements and political fearmongering. The searchers are made to carefully sift through many sources to try to find ones that provide a more realistic overview of the current findings, that attempts to give a fuller picture to allow readers to make their own judgements and perspectives about the topic. Furthermore, many of the websites found from this

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<sup>9</sup> El-Guebaly & Butterwick, 2016

<sup>10</sup> Hilton Jr., 2010

<sup>11</sup> Carter, 2017

and similar searches, such as “Focus on the Family,” ultimately encourage parents to place parental controls on their children’s devices to stop them from being able to access porn or legal actions to be taken to criminalize and abolish porn. Most of these fixate on the threat of porn addiction, which is not what is affecting the majority of adolescents who have been exposed to online porn.<sup>12</sup> Many use strong religious language to emphasize the ‘evils’ of pornography. Many of these resources also deny literature that emphasize the mixed or positive effects that porn has had on some youth’s development and create an oversimplified picture of how young people engage with porn, reflecting a sense of passive victimhood and portraying adolescents as incompetent social sponges.

While visiting Joshua Tree, California, I stumbled upon an old book in a second-hand store that immediately caught my eye: *The Rebirth of America*.<sup>13</sup> Flipping through the book, written in 1986, I was shocked and fascinated to see the author's strongly worded message warning Americans about the evil ‘plague’ corrupting youth in America. She was referring to pornography. The overall topic of the book was how America was built on Christian values inconsistent with homosexuality, abortion, “atheist” public education, and pornography. It read, “an onslaught of seduction has overwhelmed America: our nation is infected with the fatal disease of pornography... we are drowning our young people in violence, cynicism, and sadism.” (DeMoss, 1986). Furthermore, the author argues that because of the normalization of violence against women and young people in porn, the divorcing of sex and intimacy, love, and responsibility (many of the same associations that concern progressive sexuality educators such as myself), they believe that porn should be hidden and abolished. They also explain that pornography comes from Satan trying to tempt people to sin and argue that one of the most

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<sup>12</sup> El-Guebaly & Butterwick, 2016

<sup>13</sup> DeMoss, 1986



problematic parts of porn is that it depicts sex as something outside of relationships (and specifically depicting sex outside of the only relationship they deem appropriate, a monogamous marriage between a man and a woman). Even though the book I found was written in 1986, I realized that it contained many of the same themes as in current anti-porn, anti-LGBTQ+ media.

Throughout my research into porns impacts on adolescents, I have seen a similar pattern of politicized and religious language being used to promote the idea that pornography is evil and denigrating the idea that adolescents might have sexual interests or sexuality in total. Current discourse includes the *way* we talk about how porn impacts adolescents, the language we use, and tone we take, and the intentions behind exploring this topic. These are just as important as examining the particular effects of porn on adolescents. It is important to acknowledge that much research is biased by strong anti-pornography perspectives that rest on moral judgements and justification of purity culture.<sup>14</sup> Existing literature uses wording about keeping children innocent (evoking emotional responses by using words like “children” and “corruption of innocence” etc.). This politicized and religious language is commonly used in sex education and suggests fear that adolescents might have sexual interests or sexuality at all.

### 1.3; Stigmatization of Sex and Adolescent Sexuality

One reason many resist the mere mention of pornography in sex education is because of a general stigmatization of adolescent sexuality. It can certainly be uncomfortable to speak about the sexuality of adolescent or under-18 sexuality and it is a sensitive issue because adults cannot pressure adolescents to explore their sexuality at a faster pace or starting earlier than they would have on their own and each individual is different. This discomfort and denial of adolescent sexuality has led many parents and educators to fear that teaching about pornography literacy,

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<sup>14</sup> Rothman, 2021

sex, or masturbation will introduce adolescents to these concepts or encourage them to explore them earlier than they would have. Many parents and educators have expressed concern that teaching about or even mentioning pornography to adolescents will encourage them to watch it by making adolescents aware of it. This same logic has been used in the sex education ‘debate’ with some parents complaining that acknowledging sex to youth is inherently problematic and is ‘sexualizing’ their children. This is based on denial that adolescents already experience sexual curiosities and desires and that it is possible for adolescents to actually explore their sexuality in a way that is healthy and safe to their wellbeing and development. There is a general repression of adolescent sexual expression and agency.

The most recent (and one of the first) time pornography being a topic in school-based sex education was discussed in the general news and media highlights these two tones: a repression of adolescent sexuality/agency and a politicization of the topic of sex education, pornography, and porn literacy education. The ‘scandal’ that brought the topic into the news came about in September of 2022 after a false and politically/emotionally charged article from the Idaho Freedom Foundation (IFF) and subsequent posts on social media claimed that the state of Idaho was purchasing porn literacy materials to give to students. In a video that went viral, the IFF claimed that ‘trainers believe third grade students benefit from porn, activities include watching cartoon porn (which they are referring to an Amaze video, which shows a girl looking at her tablet saying she “didn't know it could be so huge!” While we are supposed to think she is viewing sexually explicit material, it turns out she is actually talking about a vegetable growing contest and later emphasizes that porn is fictional and that bodies typically look in porn are not accurate to what most people’s bodies look like<sup>15</sup>), that Idaho’s government links students directly to abortion resources (referring to the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program), that

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<sup>15</sup> AMAZE Org, 2016

they “instruct children to come out to skeptical parents” (based on providing resources of how to come out if you want), ending with a final plea to “help us fight against the sexualization of our children.”<sup>16</sup> In a New York Times article, Celia Kang comments on the recent surge of sex ed opposition and their tactics of associating education about sex and relationships, in general but especially anything related to porn literacy or acknowledging that porn exists and may have effects on adolescents, with child sexualization, abuse and exploitation. They write: “Opponents of sex ed are ramping up attacks, exploiting parental fears and accusing proponents of pushing education that introduces sexually inappropriate material to young kids too early, grooming them for abuse (studies show comprehensive sex ed reduces child sexual abuse).”<sup>17</sup> In this, they cite a well-evidenced claim that comprehensive sexual education actually reduces child sexual abuse by teaching about bodily autonomy, consent, rights, and healthy relationships.<sup>18</sup>



Figure 2. Viral Twitter thread regarding Idaho's porn literacy 'scandal', September 13, 2022 (Accessed February 20, 2023)

<sup>16</sup> “Fact Check-Idaho’s Government Is Not Offering ‘Porn Literacy’ Courses to Students,” 2022

<sup>17</sup> Kang, 2023

<sup>18</sup> Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021

The original article, while already misconceiving and incorrect, was further misconstrued in a game of social media *Telephone*, leading people to think that the porn literacy curriculum (which was never being offered or mandated in the first place) would be *showing* adolescents porn or encouraging them to watch sexually explicit material, a valid ethical concern. This, of course completely false, quickly led to claims of child exploitation and abuse. In fact, plenty of concerned parents and angry politicians decried that these lawmakers and sexual(ity) education advocates pushing for porn literacy should be arrested as pedophiles and predators for trying to show innocent children porn.<sup>19</sup> The posts went viral and even Fox News falsely labeled and discussed that “Idaho sex ed curriculum recommends watching porn with kids.”<sup>20</sup> This extreme language of painting comprehensive sex education as a threat to children is a very common tactic among anti-pornography activists and a script many concerned parents follow. Consequently, this affects laws and policies that affect health education requirements. Why would states try to implement comprehensive, holistic, and supportive materials in schools or even offer optional material to educators and parents if they will be called pedophiles and parents will protest and threaten to pull their kids out of school?

This harsh polarization of the topic of porn being a topic of conversation in sex education and often the topic of sex or healthy relationships in total is a huge barrier to it being a part of education. But it relates to adults and parents' inability to acknowledge or lack of knowledge that porn is very present in adolescents' lives whether they are accidentally exposed, intentionally viewing, or are socialized around people who have been exposed (includes basically everyone). Whether adults come with conservative agendas of protecting children from the corruption of

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<sup>19</sup> Anna K. Miller [@annakate\_miller], 2022

<sup>20</sup> Fox News, 2022

pornography, sexual permissiveness, sexual expression, and the deviation from Christian ideas of purity and morality, or are simply uncomfortable with acknowledging the sexuality of young people, the results and burden on adolescents are the same: shame, confusion, and overreliance on porn without the tools to protect against some of those negative aspects. Since parents are non-experts in the topic and in the generation their kids grow up in and are often unwilling to speak about sex and porn to their children because they think it is ‘sexualizing’ them, school then provides the opportune setting for trained adults to address those sensitive topics with students in an environment of open, evidence-based, non-judgmental, and empowering lessons, pointing to a need for school-based sexuality education that includes porn literacy.

## **Ch. 2: Why the ‘Porn’ Topic MUST Be Included in Sex Education**

This chapter focuses on why porn should be included in comprehensive sexual education. Porn is an important topic to discuss in schools because it is impacting people directly or indirectly when they are of school age. Adolescents are being exposed to porn without being exposed to the tools to process and reflect on what they or their partners or peers are seeing, which can lead to internalization and socialization of those themes. I first review the current landscape of porn and of sex education, which sets up why porn is being used as sex(uality) education. Then I review the literature on how porn affects adolescent sexual development through sexual socialization of SV against women. Lastly, this chapter provides promising evidence for how holistic education, specifically in a school, can be used as SV prevention.

### 2.1: Adolescents’ Use of Internet Pornography

For many young people, curiosity about and exploration of sex and sexuality are normal parts of adolescent development. While pornography is content meant for adults to use for sexual arousal and entertainment, it is being used by people under the age of 18.<sup>21</sup> The (specifically, negative) effects of porn on adolescents has long been a subject of research, discussion, and concern.<sup>22</sup> While porn’s critics (especially folks outside of the field of developmental psychology or public health) are quick to respond to the issue of porn’s negative effects on adolescents with an oversimplified solution of restricting, banning, or punishing adolescents from accessing porn, this approach denies adolescent sexuality curiosity, and expression. Instead, it perpetuates the harmful and false idea that there is a magical line between age 17 and age 18 where people become ready to be sexually active, to be seen as sexual people by others, and to have the

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<sup>21</sup> Peter & Valkenburg, 2016

<sup>22</sup> Jhe et al., 2023

maturity and capacity to engage responsibly. It is ignorant to act as if these adolescents would simply not be affected by porn if they weren't exposed to it during their adolescent years, without giving them the tools before age 18 to think critically about the sexually explicit media they may consume and to promote healthy relationships and sexuality.

Instead, we must realize that media and the internet play a huge role in virtually every adolescent's lives. The Internet has radically transformed the accessibility, affordability, and anonymity of pornography consumption.<sup>23</sup> Before free online pornography, the only way to access pornography was to pay for a hard copy film from a store or eventually on cable TV, which was mediated by people's fears of being caught by parents for watching it. The landscape is completely different for today's adolescents. The 2022 Pew Research Report on Teens, Social Media, and Technology shows that 95% of teens have access to smartphones and 90% have access to desktop or laptop computers (up from 73% and 87% respectively). Additionally, the percentage of daily teen internet users reached 97% in 2022.<sup>24</sup> The internet is undoubtedly becoming more and more important in adolescents' lives even from 8 years ago (when I was the age the adolescents taking the porn literacy program I propose would be). Adolescents tend to view most things they do on the internet as private and anonymous, which is part of why the internet completely changed the pornography world. The European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality released a report showing that the number of young people using the internet is steadily increasing while the age that people are first exposed to pornography on the internet is significantly decreasing, indicating a correlation between these two measures.<sup>25</sup> The exact age of first exposure to porn is contested, because some statistics commonly used may be falsified or taken out of context by individuals and organizations with

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<sup>23</sup> Hornor, 2020

<sup>24</sup> Vogels et al., 2022

<sup>25</sup> Skrzydlewska, 2012

political agendas and then adopted by like-minded or well-meaning people, or because the studies themselves have great variation due to using different operational definitions of “pornography” or “sexually explicit material”, the ages of the subjects at the time data was taken, and other aspects of the research designs.<sup>26</sup> Many sources use the statistic that the average age of first exposure is around 11-12 years old, however, the origin of this statistic is contested.<sup>27</sup> Data for the percentage of adolescents watching porn vary greatly. For example, Brown & L’Engle found that by age 14, 66% of males and 39% of females reported having used sexually explicit media (SEM) which included X-rated films, internet pornography pictures and videos, and magazines, in the past year.<sup>28</sup> Brown & L’Engle also emphasized that the data was collected in 2001, when only 1/3 of the sample had internet access and much less porn existed on the internet. Therefore, the number of modern-day (speaking of 2009) adolescents is likely much greater, which only suggests a more extreme change in 2023 adolescents. In a 2010 national survey of 10-15 year olds, Ybarra et al. found that 23% of the youth had intentionally seeked out X-rated material<sup>29</sup>, and Mitchell et al. found that in 2003, 25% of 10-17 year olds had unwanted/unintentional exposure to porn. Although there is variation with the data, porn is a part of the majority of adolescents’ lives, whether through their own exposure or their peers’ and partners’ exposure. For example, I did not intentionally view porn until I was 16, which was after I had already been sexually exploring partners who had been watching porn and constructed ideas and expectations of sex and gender roles. Even though I was not personally exposed or interested, porn indirectly played a huge impact on my sexual socialization, through my partners

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<sup>26</sup> (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016)

<sup>27</sup> (Rothman, 2021)

<sup>28</sup> (Brown & L’Engle, 2009)

<sup>29</sup> (Ybarra et al., 2011)



and peers. Therefore, whether or not adolescents seek out porn on their own, it is imperative to further understand how porn influences the formation of social ideas.

## 2.2: Current Landscape of Sex Education

Traditional sex education does not sufficiently teach young people the tools to develop healthy sexuality, sexual behaviors, and relationships and to prevent sexual violence. Traditional sex education is generally focused solely on the prevention of STIs and pregnancy. These lessons can be taught through abstinence-only education, emphasizing abstinence as the only way to prevent STIs and pregnancy. They may perpetuate stereotypical gender roles (girls needing to protect their virginity and virtue and not give in to the boys, and boys needing to resist their sexual temptations) to teach about abstinence. Often this is explicitly or implicitly infused with religious themes of purity and chastity to further socialize adolescents into understanding sex in a certain way. Abstinence-only education sometimes explicitly denounces queer sexuality or sex outside of a married relationship and stigmatizes sexual expression, generally and especially during adolescence. Even when the educational curriculum is not taught using these exclusive and offensive tactics, telling students to ‘just say no’ to sex misses fundamental and valid questions, concerns, realities, and curiosities, and does not give the students skills to make their own informed decisions (healthy sexual agency). Traditional sexual education does not address topics of healthy relationships and communication (including consent and boundaries), sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender-based and sexual violence, etc.

Comprehensive Sexual Education has emerged to address many of the shortcomings of Traditional Sex Education. Comprehensive Sexual Education (which is sometimes called comprehensive sexuality education, the term I prefer due to its holistic perspective) is defined

differently by various organizations and institutions and in contexts of health educational policy. Generally, it is understood that ‘comprehensive’ means that it takes more holistic strokes to cover education about sexual health AND healthy sexuality, giving evidence-based lessons on how to take care of one’s body for if/when they do choose to have sex (part of respecting adolescent sexual agency and healthy decision-making). This means that CSE provides information for adolescents to develop healthy sexuality by addressing relationships, communication, and consent, gender inequity and sexual violence, and gender identity and sexual orientation.

As of 2020, only 30 states require sex education to be taught at all, only 22 states out of the ones that require sex and/or HIV education must be ‘medically, factually, or technically’ accurate<sup>30</sup>, and only 9 states require consent to be a part of sex education.<sup>31</sup> California’s education laws, which is the state in which the pilot study I propose in Chapter 4 will take place, require that schools teach medically accurate and age-appropriate comprehensive sexual health education (CSE) and HIV prevention from trained instructors at least once in middle school and once in high school.<sup>32,33</sup> California is one of the few that require comprehensive health education, which the California Healthy Youth Act (state legislature signed in 2016) defines as “education regarding human development and sexuality, including education on pregnancy, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections.”<sup>34</sup>

There is a wealth of evidence that the inclusion of topics related to healthy sexuality rather than just sexual health (aka comprehensive sex education rather than traditional sex education) produces better outcomes in adolescent sexual behavior, endorsements of attitudes

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<sup>30</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020

<sup>31</sup> Fay, 2019

<sup>32</sup> National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020

<sup>33</sup> CDE, 2023

<sup>34</sup> California Department of Education, 2023

about sex or gender roles, and in prevention of sexual violence within research on adolescent psychology, public and community health, and sexuality studies. Studies have shown that CSE can help to develop health-promoting attitudes and behaviors, “accurate and age appropriate knowledge” and positive values related to gender equity, human rights, and healthy relationships.<sup>35</sup>

Another issue that contextualizes the current state of sex education is that law/policy does not always translate to instruction. Although I have not been able to find specific statistics of how many students are actually being given CHYA-compliant CSE, it is likely that many places do not follow the requirements due to a lack of regulation, a lack of knowledge of the law and changes, and social/political resistance by parents, school administrators, and specific teachers. In a conversation with sexual violence prevention advocate and former sexual health educator on the current state of sexual education, Jojo (pseudonym) shared her experience working in rural settings of California. They explained that, although the law has mandated CSE since 2016, it is not being taught to many students in California public schools (and certainly outside the state) because many teachers are not aware of what is legally required or because the curricula is not consistent with the ideologies that many of the facilitators share.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, without regulatory pressure from the state or local governing bodies, specific teachers and schools would not risk upsetting parents and perhaps students. Of course, adding pornography and porn literacy to the list of topics required in CSE would not solve this issue. It would simply mean that the schools and specific administrators who are teaching CSE, would be addressing a very relevant topic in the students’ lives and provide a more holistic picture.

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<sup>35</sup> Culture Reframed, “Sex Education and Pornography: Annotated Bibliography”, 2021

<sup>36</sup> Personal communication, March 24, 2023

The topic of sex education is extremely controversial because sex is such a taboo on its own and when talking about education, which is a right of all children, adults are especially weary about sex being taught in these environments. Many believe that sex education is each parents responsibility and should not have a place in formal school education. The National Research Council explains that the content of sex education programs is “tightly prescribed in terms that will generate the least amount of political argument and heat” which in some cases means teaching abstinence only education and in other cases it means avoiding talking about sex altogether<sup>37</sup> And in almost all school-based educational settings, this avoidance translates to the exclusion of the topic of porn and porn literacy within sex education. We also see these same complaints and themes about avoiding topics like sexual orientation or gender identity (topics that are part of comprehensive sexuality education) such as in Florida’s infamous “Don’t Say Gay” bill in 2022.<sup>38</sup> The fundamental issues for sexual education are: “how to teach a young person to make wise choices, to stay in control of his or her online experiences, to be critical and skeptical about the underlying messages in advertising and romanticized and sexualized images, and to report other users soliciting personal information or harassing them.”<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, despite these successes, to be considered ‘comprehensive,’ curricula do not need to mention pornographic media as a factor involved in many adolescent’s experiences. Until sex education curricula recognize the realities of media, internet, and pornography influences on modern-day adolescents and give them tools to process and engage responsibly and critically, the education will not be truly ‘comprehensive’. By not mentioning pornography and the themes many young people pick up from it, we are telling them that this topic is too taboo to be talked about in

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<sup>37</sup> National Research Council, 2002

<sup>38</sup> Branigin, 2022

<sup>39</sup> National Research Council, 2002

classes. Leaving them alone to figure out for themselves, leaving them more at risk for sexual violence and unhealthy sexual behaviors or relationships.

### 2.3: Porn as a Socializing Agent for Gendered Sexual Violence

In a society where sex, pleasure, masturbation, and bodies are still very much stigmatized and taboo and a majority of Americans do not feel comfortable discussing sex, the internet and mass media can be a good way for young people to access information and resources from the privacy of their own homes or devices.<sup>40</sup> For many young people, the internet feels like a safer way to explore sexual curiosities, confusions, and desires. Now that many teens have their own internet-enabled devices, they can search things more privately.<sup>41,42</sup> This is certainly a priority for many who do not feel comfortable talking about sex with their guardians, teachers, health practitioners, etc.<sup>43,44</sup> Adolescence is also a time in which sexual development, interest in or first exposure of pornography, and seeking of sexual health information online and through media is more common. “Adolescents are exposed to pornography more frequently due to a variety of factors, including the normal development of sexuality that peaks during adolescence, sexual curiosity (a growing need for sexual knowledge during puberty), ineffective parent-child sexuality communication, and a lack of formal sex education. Children and adolescents may be more vulnerable to the effects of pornographic content because they frequently lack sexual experience or understanding.”<sup>45</sup> Psychologists and public health experts are particularly interested in how porn is used by adolescents as a source of health information and education.

With less experience in sex and relationships, behaviors and themes in porn may seem more

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<sup>40</sup> Collins et al., 2017

<sup>41</sup> Hill et al., 2016

<sup>42</sup> Hornor, 2020

<sup>43</sup> Mitchell et al., 2014

<sup>44</sup> Gray et al., 2002

<sup>45</sup> Adarsh & Sahoo, 2023

realistic since the adolescents don't have as much experience in sex and mature relationships and adult communication to compare them to. This makes it important to investigate the effects on adolescents, particularly what and how adolescents are being sexually socialized with porn.

Additionally, in a gender-fixated society, people socialized as boys and girls are often separated in schools, clubs, sports, camps, bathrooms, and health classes, and the differences between the genders are shrouded in mystery and nervous excitement, rather than open communication and realization of the common experiences of young people of all genders. This adds to the confusion of what 'the other sex' or the other gender 'likes' generally and sexually. This leads young people to use pornography to demystify the act of sex and what 'the opposite sex' enjoys sexually.<sup>46</sup> This poses a huge problem when porn, which is usually made by men for viewers who are men (and even when not, still caters to the male gaze) often depicts enjoyment of women during activities that most women do not enjoy and/or find degrading, violent, or disrespectful.

Some studies argue that pornography is the biggest source of sex education for many young people<sup>47</sup>, while others find that peers, sexual partners, parents, and school education are more important. Rothman et al. analyzed nationally representative data from 2015 and found that a quarter of 18-24 year old's named pornography as the most helpful source of information on how to have sex.<sup>48</sup> They also found that among adolescents (age 14-17), pornography was named much less often as the most important source of information, although the older they got, the more common it was to select pornography as the most important source and it was more common among male participants. This highlights the reliance on pornography for teaching how to have sex (a very unrealistic and potentially harmful depiction of 'how to have sex') the older

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<sup>46</sup> Rothman, 2021

<sup>47</sup> Crabbe & Flood, 2021

<sup>48</sup> Rothman et al., 2021

young people get, perhaps highlighting the importance of starting porn literacy education in adolescent years. This is particularly concerning when considering that a large British survey by Middlesex University in 2016, 53% of the boys and 39% of the girls between the ages of 11 and 16 who had viewed porn thought it was “realistic.”<sup>49</sup> It is inevitable that exposure to what is perceived as realistic sex impacts people’s ideas and expectations of sex.

Scripts and themes portrayed in various forms of media, including porn, greatly influence social ideas. Media depicting sex and sexuality, especially pornography, is important in looking at adolescent development because people form ideas about sex and gender based on the media they see.<sup>50</sup>

Mainstream heterosexual porn often depicts sex as an aggressive, sometimes coercive act in which a male dominates his female partner generally in degrading ways.<sup>51</sup> These themes perpetuate certain gender roles such as men always being in dominant roles, holding power over women in submissive roles, sometimes degrading them, or calling them very historically and culturally loaded misogynistic terms. There also may be more of an emphasis on aggressive behaviors such as choking, spanking, slapping, kicking, whipping, smothering, biting, etc. in porn than what most women want.<sup>52</sup> There is also a normalization of themes of coercion.

Examples of these coercive themes and scripts include the woman saying ‘no’ or seeming unsure (not demonstrating enthusiastic consent) and then after pressuring, coercing, seducing, or forcing them, they realize they ‘actually wanted it all along’ and it shows them eventually enjoying it.<sup>53</sup>

This depiction of sex being shown so commonly through porn (and other media) normalizes the idea that coercion is appropriate or enjoyable, and doesn’t cause long-lasting traumatic effects.

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<sup>49</sup> Martellozzo et al., 2017

<sup>50</sup> Stulhofer, Busko, and Landripet, 2010

<sup>51</sup> Bridges et al., 2010

<sup>52</sup> Hornor, 2020

<sup>53</sup> Krahe et al., 2021

Content warning (personal accounts of SV):

The story of my assault as an adolescent was characterized by sexual coercion rather than violent forcible rape. The perpetrator was someone I had considered a close friend and with whom I had never expressed interest in exploring in a romantic or sexual context. We would cuddle when we were in groups of friends and it never felt particularly uncomfortable or flirty. However, one day when we hung out alone and started cuddling, he immediately became pushy and touchy. He attempted to convince me of why it was a good idea to hook up and that I didn't have anything to worry about, despite my immediate hesitations. I tried to reason with him, telling him countless times that I didn't view him in that way and didn't want anything to happen, both leading up to and during the assault. However it seemed as if my saying no was almost more arousing to him as if he took it as a challenge to convince me why it was a good idea and even that I wanted it. Specifically he justified his actions by asserting that I must want it since my body was responding in a certain way. He asserted the harmful myth that "even if she is saying no, if her body is saying yes, she wants it." This made it particularly horrifying when, in one of the first times I explored porn after the assault in an attempt to explore my sexuality and find pleasure after trauma, I saw the same trope play out in porn. I watched some of the very same scripts that had played out in my life, depicted by the characters in a way that ended in a positive, sexually gratifying experience, even for the woman. I likely will never know for sure if what he did was influenced by the themes he saw in porn and wanted to emulate. However I always wondered how a person could commit such atrocious actions of non-consent, and I do predict that porn played a role as a socializing agent of sexual violence for my perpetrator.

Within literature, sexually explicit materials (SEM) and sexually violent SEM have been associated with attitudes condoning sexual violence, sexual aggression, and/or physical dating violence<sup>54,55</sup>, while others have found no significant correlation.<sup>56</sup> Sexual violence is a public health issue of great importance and is related to misogynistic views towards women<sup>57</sup>. Since porn also often contains these themes, it is important to understand how adolescents are perceiving the sexual content they are exposed to and how that relates to how they approach

<sup>54</sup> Rodenhizer & Edwards, 2019

<sup>55</sup> Wright et al., 2021

<sup>56</sup> Yu et al., 2021

<sup>57</sup> Wright et al., 2016



early sexual relationships. In a longitudinal U.S. study, Brown & L'Engle found that increased use of SEM, sexually explicit media (including X-rated movies, internet videos and images, and magazines) among boys in early adolescence (aged 12-14) was associated with increased sexual harassment perpetration at follow-up (aged 14-16). The same study also found that increased SEM use among girls in early adolescence was associated with less progressive attitudes about gender roles in the follow-up, suggesting an internalization of the themes found commonly in porn. Some studies have found gendered differences in the perceptions of porn<sup>58,59</sup>, while others have not.<sup>60</sup> Ybarra et al. found that use of violent pornography was related to the perpetration of sexually aggressive behavior in children and adolescents.<sup>61</sup> In 2016, Tomaszewska and Krahé looked at the relationship between pornography use and sexual coercion and sexual scripts in Polish high school students.<sup>62</sup> They found that pornography use was indirectly related to attitudes condoning/supporting sexually coercive behaviors/sexual coercion through the endorsement of risky sexual scripts (such as the use of alcohol, using ambiguous communication: such as saying no but meaning yes, which are associated with sexual aggression perpetration). Another survey found that 13-18 year-olds who had seen sexually explicit content online tended to endorse statements describing women as sex objects more than adolescents without exposure to this material.<sup>63</sup> This is very concerning since it is understood that if women are seen as sexual objects that exist for male gratification, then “it should be easier for men to envision imposing themselves sexually on women and reacting punitively to women who frustrate their sexual goals.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Peter & Valkenburg, 2007

<sup>59</sup> Stanley et al., 2018

<sup>60</sup> Yu et al., 2021

<sup>61</sup> Ybarra et al., 2011

<sup>62</sup> Tomaszewska & Krahé, 2016

<sup>63</sup> Jones, 2018

<sup>64</sup> Wright & Tokunaga, 2016

Content warning (personal accounts of SV):

specifically.  
specifically looking for sensual and romantic videos, not for BDSM or strong power dynamics  
'what I was missing' I quickly saw that choking was in almost every video even though I was  
and have received a positive response or simply a lack of resistance. When I viewed porn to see  
perhaps have tried to imitate acts seen in porn in their past sexual interactions with other partners  
speculated that that may have been something they picked up from watching pornography or  
around my neck in a sexual context without asking because they assumed I would enjoy that. I  
for it. I have also had multiple partners who while very respectful otherwise, have put their hands  
women might find it degrading or unpleasant because the women in porn seemed to love it and beg  
ejaculated on, an act commonly referred to in porn as 'facials'. He had no idea that I or other  
for the first time, I remember my partner being shocked that I was not interested in having my face  
In my own experience as an adolescent exploring sexuality and romantic and sexual relationships

It is well-accepted that pornography tends to portray traditional gender roles with males in the dominating position and females in the submissive position of a power dynamic and some studies have shown that pornography exposure influences the endorsements of strict gender roles, such as the idea that most women want to be dominated by men.<sup>65</sup> Various studies have shown porn to impact every step of the socialization of sexual violence.<sup>66,67</sup> For example, Johnston & Dill-Shackleford showed that being exposed to sexual media was associated with higher acceptance of rape myths.<sup>68</sup> Bridges et al. argued that the sexual scripts in porn are

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<sup>65</sup> Klaassen & Peter, 2015  
<sup>66</sup> T. M. Scull et al., 2022  
<sup>67</sup> Hornor, 2020  
<sup>68</sup> Johnston & Dill-Shackleford, 2020

supportive of aggression against women and other gender-stereotypic behaviors.<sup>69</sup> Many studies have looked at adult populations to investigate the relationship between porn and behaviors of or attitudes condoning sexual coercion or sexual violence against women. Marshall et al. (2021) found that pornography use was indirectly associated with sexual coercion likelihood through sexual scripts.<sup>70</sup> Wright & Tokunaga found that men who had more frequent exposure to pornography were significantly more likely to perceive women as sex objects.<sup>71</sup> And that men who perceived women as sex objects were more likely to have attitudes supportive of violence against women. This is especially concerning when we consider that literature has also shown the endorsement of these attitudes can reliably predict sexually aggressive inclinations and behaviors. Hald et al. performed a meta-analysis of non-experimental studies and discovered that pornography use (both non-violent and violent pornography) was correlated with attitudes supporting sexual and non-sexual violence against women.<sup>72</sup> These cases provide background of why there needs to be more research done with adolescent populations to investigate the same effects.

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<sup>69</sup> Bridges et al., 2010

<sup>70</sup> Marshall et al., 2021

<sup>71</sup> Wright & Tokunaga, 2016

<sup>72</sup> Hald et al., 2010

## 2.4: Holistic Education as Sexual Violence Prevention

When our education system fails to discuss healthy sexuality and relationships, porn fills these gaps. Although the origin of the figure is contested, many sources have used the statistic that the average age of direct exposure to pornography is age 11-12.<sup>73</sup> Since the relatively progressive California CSE law does not require sexuality education before 7<sup>th</sup> grade<sup>74</sup> (12-13 years old), many people are learning about sex and relationships from porn and media before their formal sex education begins. Furthermore, even when sex education is taught, it is often incomplete, heteronormative, and unrealistic, far from comprehensive.<sup>75</sup> As a result, many young people form their own conceptions about sex and consent from the porn they view on the internet. Brown and L'Engle emphasizes the lack of comprehensive information about healthy sexuality from school, religious, and home environments that leads to an over reliance on media and pornography.<sup>76</sup>

Education for sexual violence prevention has the potential to prevent sexual violence victimization by giving the tools to defend and advocate for oneself in a sexual setting, recognize signs of unhealthy or coercive behavior. Strategies necessary to SV prevention, as outlined by the CDC, include “Promot(ing) Social Norms that Protect Against Violence,” and “Teach(ing) Skills to Prevent Sexual Violence,” part of which involves “Empowerment-Based Training” for women and girls” for prevention of victimization specifically.<sup>77</sup> These recommendations support the themes behind CSE and Porn Literacy in order to prevent sexual violence victimization and perpetration.

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<sup>73</sup> Rothman, 2021

<sup>74</sup> California Department of Education, 2022

<sup>75</sup> Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2020

<sup>76</sup> Brown & L'Engle, 2009

<sup>77</sup> Basile et al., 2016

Therefore, the move from traditional to comprehensive sexual education standards is motivated by many of the same reasons to advocate for porn literacy: for example to prevent sexual violence, and increase literacy of healthy sexual behaviors, and teach healthy communication skills, and overall give students the tools to make informed decisions that affect their health and well-being. This philosophy must translate across topics to provide holistic and truly comprehensive sexuality education by including literacy training regarding pornography and sexually explicit media in CSE.

One aspect of holistic representation of topics within sex education is being transparent about mixed evidence. In this case, it is important to mention that porn has been associated with some positive effects on adolescence, especially for specific demographics. There are many positives that pornography can bring, even for adolescent viewers, such as validating people's sexual curiosities, kinks, sexual orientation, and increasing sexual confidence.<sup>78,79</sup> Research certainly needs to continue to be done about this, and the movement to acknowledge and honor people's sexual agency and sexuality even as kids and adolescents is extremely important to ultimately find ways to set them up for safety and self-efficacy. Taking care of the well-being of young people should be the main goal, no matter if we are researching negative or positive psychological effects. While these effects are generally less researched and less in the media, there have also been positive effects of porn use on adolescents, particularly for specific demographics. For example, Harper et al., found that porn made some LBGTQ+ male youth feel validated/not alone in their sexual desires and increased self-awareness of their sexual orientation.<sup>80</sup> Dawson et al. also noticed that many gay participants used pornography to gain

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<sup>78</sup> Rothman et al., 2018

<sup>79</sup> Albury, 2014

<sup>80</sup> Harper et al., 2016

sexual information to make up for a lack of coverage of queer sex in their formal sex education.<sup>81</sup>

Other studies have found similar benefits for queer and gender-diverse young people including increased sexual confidence and building community with same-sex attracted people.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> (Dawson et al., 2020)

<sup>82</sup> (Kubicek et al., 2010)

### **Chapter 3: How to Integrate 'Porn' in Sex Education: Media & Porn Literacy**

In this chapter, I introduce media and porn literacy and review literature on how they have been taught to influence adolescent sexual health attitudes and behaviors. Then I explore examples of when they have been implemented successfully in order to ultimately design my own study (Ch. 4).

#### Section 3.1: Media Literacy and Adolescent Sexual Development

Media literacy is defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and produce media in a variety of forms or mediums.<sup>83,84</sup> Media literacy education emphasizes thinking critically about the messages that are shown in media and constructing meaning from media messages from each person's individual perspectives and experiences.<sup>85</sup> Media literacy and its component skill of critical thinking has and can be used to help people make health-promoting decisions.<sup>86</sup> Media literacy educational programs have been able to teach youth skills to critically analyze the messages behind media to develop more realistic perceptions, influence their attitudes, intentions, and even change behaviors.<sup>87,88,89</sup> The comprehensive sexual education/media literacy program called MediaAware was taught to middle school students in person by a trained teacher and showed that they were more skeptical of media messages, were less likely to perceive the media as realistic, and even changed certain behaviors! They reported that they were more likely to use condoms during penetrative sex and to communicate with their partners, parents, and doctors before engaging in sex.<sup>90</sup> When using a health-promoting control group and as a

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<sup>83</sup> Aufderheide, 1993

<sup>84</sup> Gerraee et al., 2015

<sup>85</sup> Alliance for Media Literate America, 2007

<sup>86</sup> Dawson et al., 2020

<sup>87</sup> Vahedi et al., 2018

<sup>88</sup> Vandenbosch & van Oosten, 2017

<sup>89</sup> Dawson et al., 2020

<sup>90</sup> Scull, Malik, & Kupersmidt, 2014

randomized control trial, the program was run again and was also successful in decreasing acceptance of dating violence and strict gender role norms.<sup>91</sup> Scull et al. later reconstructed the program to be given online to 9th and 10th grade students across the United States. Results showed that the program was able to improve critical thinking about media messages, decrease the perceived realism of those messages, and furthermore decreased acceptance of dating violence among participants who identified as boys.<sup>92</sup> Scull et al. argues that “the impact of media on adolescent sexual health and the development of media literacy skills are important but often neglected components of comprehensive sexual health education,” given that research keeps showing how media literacy education can influence positive attitudes and behaviors related to sex, gender, and relationships.<sup>93</sup> There is an emerging body of evidence showing that media literacy education can favorably impact attitudes and intentions toward risky health behaviors.<sup>94</sup>

### Section 3.2: Pornography Literacy and Adolescent Sexual Development

Many sex-positive health experts and psychologists have begun to move the broader media literacy approach to include pornography. They have pushed towards acknowledgement of porn as a part of many, if not most, adolescents’ lives and furthermore being used as a tool of sex education and information (for better or for worse), calling for porn literacy. So, what is porn literacy?

There is not a universal definition of what porn literacy is, which contributes to people’s lack of understanding, confusion, and sometimes opposition to it. One big reason for confusion

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<sup>91</sup> Scull et al., 2018

<sup>92</sup> Scull et al., 2021

<sup>93</sup> Scull et al., 2022

<sup>94</sup> Vahedi et al., 2018



around what porn literacy entails may be the language/word choice. Usually the term literacy is used to describe how more familiarity with and use of a medium causes someone to understand it more and be able to recreate it, as expertise in the genre. Specifically in (non-pornographic) media literacy, many programs aim to teach students how to make their own, better media from learning from others and/or use the common teaching methods of directly analyzing specific media ‘texts’. With porn literacy, those are not often the same goals, or the same methods.<sup>95</sup> A common teaching method in media literacy is to instruct the students to watch a scene from a movie/show/music video/type of media, reflect on it, and then discuss and develop technical skills together to analyze critically. However, an instructor legally cannot (and ethically) should not show students under the age of 18 sexually explicit media, which limits the ability to have direct and specific discussions about media.<sup>96,97</sup> Therefore concern about the way porn literacy is taught contributes to its opposition.

The goals of porn literacy over time have also changed and contributed to confusion about what it is. Early porn literacy efforts may have been exclusively to advocate for critical *disengagement* of pornography, focusing on the harms and how avoidance can prevent those harms.<sup>98</sup> Over time, porn literacy has become more nuanced with some programs emphasizing sexual agency and expression in people, even in adolescent populations and how porn literacy can be used to allow people to engage in sexualized media (if they choose) in a safer way, knowing that porn is unrealistic and potentially contributes to certain ideas that people may agree or not agree with.<sup>99,100,101</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Byron et al., 2022

<sup>96</sup> Albury, 2014

<sup>97</sup> Dawson et al., 2020

<sup>98</sup> Albury, 2014

<sup>99</sup> Byron et al., 2022

<sup>100</sup> Dawson, Nic Gabhainn, & Macneela, 2020

<sup>101</sup> Albury, 2014

Vandenbosch & van Oosten found that porn literacy education had protective effects against one aspect of gender inequity that relates to gendered sexual violence<sup>102</sup>. They found increased porn literacy education (defined as having learned about Internet pornography in sexual education classes in secondary school) decreased the strength of the positive relationship between exposure to sexually explicit material exposure and attitudes of women as sexual objects.

### Section 3.3: How Can Porn Literacy Be Integrated Within CSE?

Porn Literacy must be implemented in CSE with empowerment-based, holistic, and youth-centered approaches. Noticing the compelling evidence about how empowerment-based sex education programs can improve positive health behaviors, self-esteem and confidence, and communication skills, the International Conference on Population and Development in 2014 advocated for comprehensive sex education to use an empowerment approach, focused on empowering young people, especially girls and gender minorities or other marginalized groups.<sup>103</sup> In 2009 and 2012, the ICPD recognize that teaching about gender equality, human rights, and adolescent sexual violence was necessary alongside teaching about sexual and reproductive health. These topics are inextricably linked and important topics when discussing gendered sexual violence. In order to prevent sexual violence, we must understand how our ideas of gender are formed, including through porn, and approach comprehensive sexual education through an empowerment lens. This means empowering young people with the knowledge and critical thinking skills to understand how histories of gendered violence and how media and porn affects how people are socialized to think about sex and treatment of women and how that affects

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<sup>102</sup> Vandenbosch & van Oosten, 2017

<sup>103</sup> Haberland & Rogow, 2015

or may affect adolescents lives and sexual journeys, in order to protect against the negative effects of porn, give people confidence and tools to empower themselves by speaking up for their comfort and wants and boundaries in relationships, and to know their worth as individuals of any gender identity. This approach is therefore one that should be incorporated into porn literacy.

Many porn literacy programs have shown that adolescents either come in with or through the process of interventions develop and engage in thoughtful, knowledgeable, critical, and analytical perspectives regarding. For example, Smith found that “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.”<sup>104</sup> Mattebo et al. (2012) found that after being taught about how the themes and messages in porn and other sexual media may not align with messages concerned with gender equity and public health, “some participants reflected on it and had a critical-analytical approach towards these messages, whereas others did not give it much attention.”<sup>105</sup> This is important because it shows that adolescents are not passive victims of a cruelly sexual world. Many of them criticize what they view and some choose to continue to watch and some do not. Some communicate with their partners about sex about porn habits and what they have seen in porn. Many realize what they see in porn is an unrealistic depiction of sex and relationships, especially by older adolescents<sup>106,107</sup>. Based on past research, experts have identified some ways that are more effective and holistic approaches to integration of porn literacy into comprehensive sex education. For example, Albury highlights the importance to situate porn within the “broader cultural inequities” and topics of “power, gender relations, and sexual negotiation skills.”<sup>108</sup> Curriculum should explore the realities of the online

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<sup>104</sup> Smith, 2023

<sup>105</sup> Mattebo et al., 2012

<sup>106</sup> Rothman et al., 2018

<sup>107</sup> Rothman, 2021

<sup>108</sup> Albury, 2014

porn industry and how it can represent issues of power, misogyny, violence, human trafficking, capitalism, and exploitation, rather than purely talking about the content/scripts.<sup>109</sup>

To maintain an approach of respecting adolescent sexual agency and doing the most to prevent sexual violence and other adverse sexual health outcomes, porn literacy teachings cannot be motivated by persuading youth to disengage. Rather objectives should focus on empowering youth with all the information and critical thinking skills to make their own decisions.<sup>110</sup> Also, if teachers approach the content with a complete opposition to porn and sexualized media, they run the risk of losing credibility with the students (many of which do take pleasure in the media at hand) and missing the way that adolescents themselves experience the ‘coolness’ or ‘sexiness’ of the media.<sup>111</sup> An issue with teaching pornography literacy that some scholars and educators have noted is the ability to adopt a student/youth-centered perspective/approach. This has been very valuable in many (non-pornographic) media literacy programs, allowing young people’s experiences and perspectives to drive the engagement in the educational program, the analysis of the materials, and the discussions, rather than the trajectory of the teaching to be pigeonholed into the objectives and expectations of the teachers. Using empirical research and evidence and opening up the environment for students to ask questions, share stories and experiences, produce knowledge and embodied evidence (using a discussion-based, ethnographical, and youth-centered approach). Rothman, Daley, and Adler’s specifically designed their curriculum to be able to be taught by a non-expert, and even teens themselves with just training on this curriculum and basic ideas in sex and sexuality education<sup>112</sup>. Since healthy youth development and agency are the main purposes of this teaching, it must also be a part of the approach to

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<sup>109</sup> Byron et al., 2022

<sup>110</sup> Byron, McKee, Watson, Litsou, & Ingham, 2021

<sup>111</sup> Albury, 2014

<sup>112</sup> Rothman et al., 2018

co-teaching/co-learning. Therefore “youth should be involved and engaged as equal partners in their own learning. Facilitators do not talk down to youth, and they presume that youth bring many valuable assets into the class, and that they can be trusted to voice opinions, ask questions, joke, laugh, and engage in ways that are optimal for their own learning.”<sup>113</sup> Especially with such a rapidly changing source of media that reflects contemporary sexual expectations and scripts, there is likely a disconnect between the experiences that adults may engage with the pornographic material or believe about the youth’s engagements with the material than the actual experiences and perspectives the adolescents have. Group discussions are often used to encourage engagement and practice of critical thinking and communication skills.<sup>114</sup> This also allows student voices and perspectives to guide the discussion of critical analysis.

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<sup>113</sup> (Rothman, 2021)

<sup>114</sup> Alliance for Media Literate America, 2007

## Chapter 4: Research Proposal for Pilot Study Program

### Purpose

The purpose of this pilot study is to investigate the efficacy of a school-based comprehensive sexual education program emphasizing porn literacy skills on a group of 8th grade students in a public junior high school in San Diego, California (n = 30) for reducing adolescents' endorsements of gendered sexual violence and supporting healthy development. The long-term goal is to promote healthy adolescent sexual development through prevention of sexual violence and empowerment.

### Study Design

Conceptual model shows intervention at the point between where normalized gendered SV scripts become endorsed and a part of adolescent sexual development.

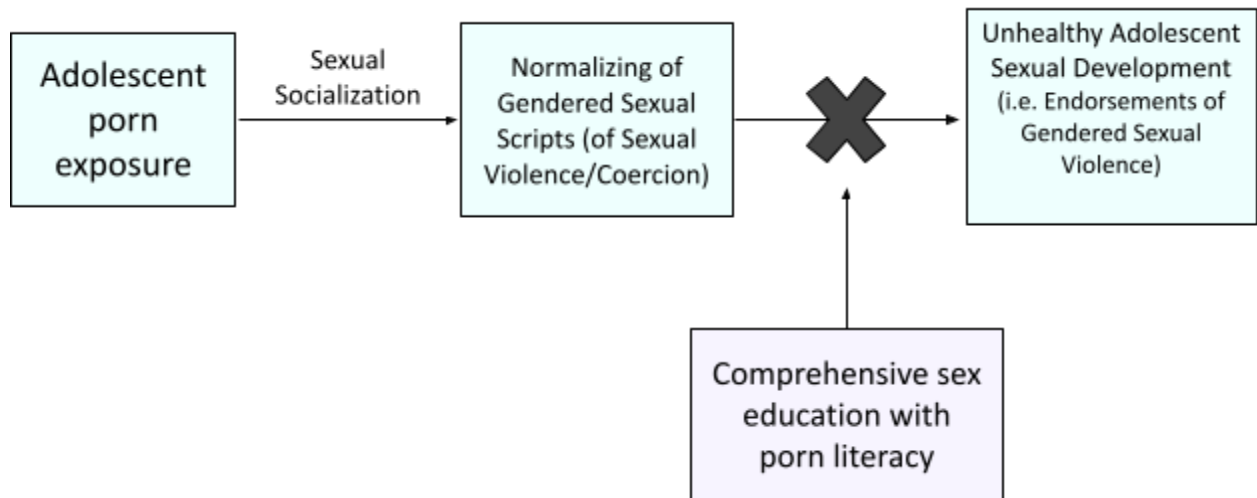


Figure 4. Conceptual model of porn's socialization of gendered sexual violence (in blue) with point of intervention (X) being CSE with porn literacy (in purple)

## ***Methodology***

For this pilot study, eighth grade students (aged 13-14) at a public junior high school in San Diego will be enrolled in a semester-long health class that meets weekly to discuss comprehensive sex education (CSE), which will integrate and emphasize porn literacy (n = 30). To recruit participants, I will start by choosing a teacher/facilitator/instructor (usually the teachers already teaching sex ed, often science teachers or PE teachers/coaches, Health teachers, etc.) who is willing to learn and teach about these topics, but who aren't experts in the field of adolescent sexuality or sexual health. Teachers are given the proper training to engage in these topics, use age-appropriate, and to recognize colloquial terminology used in modern sex and dating culture. To recruit students, we intend to ask each of the teachers at the school interested in being involved in trying this content and these experiences, to send out interest and consent forms to their students' parents and the students themselves. We will ask for more than 30 students at the start (in the case that some drop out of the classes or cannot receive parental consent in the first place) in order to end up with a sample size of 30 students. Once the cohort is finalized, parents and minors must each provide consent. Parents can review curriculum before providing consent, although they cannot be present during the teachings as it changes the environment and can bias results.<sup>115,116</sup> The curriculum covers all California-mandated topics (as specified in the CHYA) in addition to porn literacy. The curriculum is delivered over 12 weeks (once a week for 12 weeks). The implementation of the program relies on youth input and engagement, and is structured around reflective and group activities, group discussions to facilitate engagement and to help develop constructive communication skills.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Rothman, 2021

<sup>116</sup> Rothman et al., 2018

<sup>117</sup> Douglas & Share, 2007

This is a non-experimental, one-group design, meaning there is no control group that doesn't receive the porn literacy education to compare/analyze against the group receiving the porn literacy education. Instead, I use a thorough pre-test and post-test assessment to look at the student's agreement of statements about porn-specific themes of sexual violence, their broader endorsements of gendered sexual violence, and lastly their perceived impacts on their own (sexual and relationship) development before and after the porn literacy education instruction. Pre-test materials will be taken at the start of the first session. Students will be given approximately 20-30 minutes to complete the pre-test. After the participants have completed the program, they will take the post-test (same questions/assessment as before). Final number of students who complete the pre-test must be at least 30. Appropriate statistical analyses will be done to investigate associations between the variables and measures.

### ***Curriculum***

The lesson plan is listed with key concepts in the four sections with a SV-related porn literacy emphasis. The aspects of the goals of my PLICSE program that focus on SV prevention are to educate about sex, gender and sexuality, healthy relationships, common sexual scripts and activities seen in porn, teach critical thinking skills about how to process these themes and contextualize them within broader cultures of violence and oppression, understanding gendered violence, and understanding how it impacts how we view sex is important to developing healthy relationships with sex, gender, intimacy, self and partnerships.

LESSON PLAN (12 week course, meets weekly)
*Lesson 1: Introduction to Media and Porn Literacy and Sexual Health Decisions



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To increase understanding of the pervasiveness and persuasiveness of media messages, especially those about sex and sexual and/or romantic relationships</li> <li>• To increase deliberate, healthy decision making about sexual behavior and romantic relationships</li> </ul>
<p>*Lesson 2: Target Audience, Gender Role Stereotypes, and Norms Related To Dating/Sexual Violence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To increase self-acceptance and the acceptance of others by broadening students' definitions of gender roles and decreasing their acceptance of gender role stereotypes</li> <li>• To increase knowledge of common sexual scripts found in media, and in pornography specifically, related to violence and gender role stereotypes and to reduce perceived similarity to and realism of media messages that perpetuate gender role stereotypes and/or acceptance of dating/sexual violence (including coercion).</li> </ul>
<p>*Lesson 3: Healthy and Unhealthy Relationships, <b>Consent &amp; Boundaries (TPC), Bullying, Abuse, and Exploring Friendships (PPP)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To increase positive expectations about how to be treated and how to treat others in romantic and/or sexual relationships</li> <li>• To decrease perceived similarity to media messages that glamorize unhealthy sexual and/or romantic relationships and dating violence</li> </ul>
<p>Lesson 4: Human Trafficking + Online safety</p>
<p>Lesson 5: Media Production Techniques and Self-Image + <b>Body Neutrality</b></p>
<p>Lesson 6: <b>Understanding your body (PPP), Anatomy and Physiology &amp; Puberty and Adolescent Sexual Development (TPC)</b></p>
<p>Lesson 7: Gender &amp; Sexual Orientation <b>(TPC + PPP)</b></p>
<p>Lesson 8: Pregnancy and Contraception (MA + <b>PPs</b>)</p>
<p>Lesson 9: Missing Information about Teen Pregnancy and Parenthood (MA) + <b>Choices and Responsibility (PPP)</b></p>
<p>Lesson 10: Sexually Transmitted Infections (web-based lessons) + <b>HIV/AIDS (TPC, PPP)</b></p>
<p>Lesson 11: Missing information about Sexually Transmitted Infections + <b>HIV/AIDS (TPC, PPP)</b></p>
<p>*Lesson 12: Media Production Activity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To increase self-efficacy in making healthy decisions in romantic and/or sexual relationships</li> <li>• To produce a media message advocating healthy romantic relationships</li> </ul>

Figure 3. Lesson plan adapted from *MediaAware* as used in Scull et al., 2018<sup>5</sup>, with additions from Positive Prevention Plus<sup>9</sup> (California-approved CSE curriculum) and The Porn Conversation<sup>10</sup> (porn literacy educational guide for 12-15 year olds).

\*Indicates lessons emphasizing porn literacy for sexual violence prevention specifically

### ***Pre-test/Post-test Assessment***

The pre/post-test looks at 3 measures: agreement with porn-specific sexually violent and gendered sexual scripts, endorsements of sexual violence against women, and lastly, self-efficacy of various aspects of healthy adolescent sexual development. Studies that have found associations between pornography use and attitudes supporting gendered violence have used many different tools and scales to measure the endorsement of attitudes or ideas supporting violence against women. In their meta-analysis, Hald et al. review studies that have used the Acceptance of Interpersonal Violence (AIV), Adversarial sexual beliefs (ASB), Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA), Attitudes Towards Rape (ATR), Likelihood of Rape (LR), Likelihood of Sexual Force (LSF), Likelihood of Sexual Harrassment (LSH), Perception of Sexual Harrasment (PSH), and Sexual Harrassement Proclivities (SHP) scales.<sup>118</sup> I narrowed down based on violence that is sexual by nature (not about non-sexual physical violence), ones that has been shown to be reliable with adlescents or young adults as the subjects, and those related to attitudes condoning gendered sexual violence and coercion rather than likelihood of exhibiting sexually violent or coercive behaviors. Because of this criteria, I chose to make a list of questions taken from the Rape Myth Acceptance scale and added items used in other studies to add breadth. The RMA scale has a lot of data show its reliability, however I wanted to bolster my assessment with other scales that addressed sexual violence more broadly. Solely using the RMA, which uses the word “rape” in almost all the questions, requires people to make judgements based on their own ideas

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<sup>118</sup> Hald et al., 2010

and definitions of the word. The “Attitudes Toward Sexual Coercion” scale uses the terminology “uses or threatens physical force to make her have sex with him.” One complaint that I have is that this does not encompass the wide variety of coercive language and behaviors that can constitute sexual coercion. Therefore I added a few items of my own to measure “attitudes towards sexual coercion” that were not included in the scale used in the Tomaszewska & Krahé paper.<sup>119</sup>

The pre and post-test also asks students to report self-efficacy of various aspects of healthy sexual development: critical analysis of media messaging related to gender and sex, navigating healthy relationships (e.g. recognizing signs of abuse and feeling confident communicating needs/boundaries/preferences to partners, etc.), and in locating resources or in-person support from a trusted adult topics such as sexual violence or pornography.

Measure 1: Pornography-related Attitude Statements	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pornography is a good way for young people to learn about healthy sexual communication</li> <li>2. Pornography is harmless</li> <li>3. Most people think it is sexy when a girl cries, chokes, gags, or vomits during sex</li> <li>4. Pornography promotes unhealthy expectations of male and female sexuality (Reverse scored)</li> <li>5. One good thing about pornography is that curious people can see a range of sexual behaviors and interests that they may not otherwise have been exposed to (Reverse scored)</li> <li>6. Free online pornography tends to show an accurate portrayal of what most women want in sex</li> <li>7. Most girls/women enjoy being choked, or slapped, or having their hair pulled during sex</li> </ol>	<p>A response (Likert) scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Completely disagree (=1)</li> <li>- Mostly disagree (=2)</li> <li>- Neither agree nor disagree; neutral (=3)</li> <li>- Mostly agree (=4)</li> <li>- Completely agree (=5)</li> </ul>

<sup>119</sup> Tomaszewska & Krahé, 2016

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Most girls/women enjoy being called things like “nasty” or “slut” during sex</li> <li>9. Boys/men are naturally inclined to be sexually aroused by being aggressive, violent, or degrading towards girls/women</li> <li>10. Girls/women are naturally or biologically less interested in sex than boys/men are</li> <li>11. It is generally more important that a boy/man is enjoying and receiving pleasure from a sex than the woman is, because sex is biologically more important to men.</li> <li>1. Free online porn tends to be made by men and for men.</li> <li>2. Many girls and women feel pressured to perform during sexual activities</li> <li>3. Most girls/women like boys/men to be forceful during sex</li> <li>4. Most girls/women that say ‘no’ to sexual acts secretly want boys/men to keep trying to or be forceful</li> </ol>	
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(5a) Figure 3. Scale used for Measure 1: Pornography-related Attitude Statements. Items 1-8 adapted from Rothman, Daley, and Adler, 2018; Items 9-15 self-constructed

Measure 2: Endorsements of Sexual Violence Against Women

<p>Scale A</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. (SA-3) If a woman is raped while she is drunk, she is at least somewhat responsible for letting things get out of control</li> <li>2. (WI-5) Although most women wouldn't admit it, they generally find being physically forced into sex a real “turn-on”</li> <li>3. (TE-5) If a woman is willing to “make out” with a guy, then it's no big deal if he goes a little further and has sex</li> <li>4. (WI-1) Many women secretly desire to be raped</li> <li>5. (FI-2) Most rapists are not caught by the police</li> <li>6. (NR-1) If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape</li> <li>7. (DE-2) Men from nice middle-class homes almost never rape</li> <li>8. (LI-2) Rape accusations are often used as a way of getting back at men</li> </ol>	<p>Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from (1) = “not at all agree” to (7) = “very much agree”</p> <p>The “Filler Items” (FI) are included to minimize the potential for response bias and are therefore discarded before conducting any statistical analyses. Scores to the Filler items are not counted toward the total scale value.</p>
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<p>9. (FI-3) All women should have access to self-defense classes</p> <p>10. (DE-3) It is usually only women who dress suggestively that are raped</p> <p>11. (NR-3) If the rapist doesn't have a weapon, you really can't call it a rape</p> <p>12. (DE-7) Rape is unlikely to happen in the woman's own familiar neighborhood</p> <p>13. (TE-2) Women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them</p> <p>14. (LI-1) A lot of women lead a man on and then they cry rape</p> <p>15. (FI-4) It is preferable that a female police officer conduct the questioning when a woman reports a rape</p> <p>16. (SA-5) A woman who "teases" men deserves anything that might happen</p> <p>17. (SA-8) When women are raped, it's often because the way they said "no" was ambiguous</p> <p>18. (MT-1) Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away</p> <p>19. (SA-1) A woman who dresses in skimpy clothes should not be surprised if a man tries to force her to have sex</p> <p>20. (MT-4) Rape happens when a man's sex drive gets out of control</p> <p>21. (SA-7; From long-form, used in Perse, 1994) A woman who goes to the home or apartment of a man on their first date implies that she is willing to have sex</p> <p>22. (Perse, 1994) A woman who is stuck-up and thinks she is too good to talk to guys on the street deserve to be taught a lesson</p> <p>23. (WI) If a woman's body is responding with arousal (through lubrication, 'getting wet', reaching orgasm, or other physical signs of arousal), she wants sex even if she is saying 'no' verbally.</p>	
<p>Scale B</p> <p>Imagine a boy/man wants to have sexual intercourse with a girl/woman, but the girl/woman says "no." Under what circumstances</p>	<p>Responses ranged from 1 (absolutely not) to 5 (absolutely yes)</p>

would you find it understandable that the boy/man uses or threatens to use physical force (e.g. hurt her, hold her down) to make her have sex with him?

I would find it understandable, if...

1. He is so aroused that he cannot stop himself anymore.
2. He bought her a drink or something before.
3. She is drunk or stoned.
4. He is drunk or stoned.
5. She has slept with him before.
6. She has slept with other boys/men before.
7. She has kissed him before.
8. She has allowed him to touch her breasts before.
9. She said “yes” at first, but then changed her mind.
10. They have been in a relationship for some time.
11. She led him on.
12. She first got him aroused.
13. He believes she only plays coy but that she really wants to have sex as well.
14. He wants to show to his friends/peers that he can get/ ‘score’ with a girl/woman.

(5b) Scale A of Measure 2: Endorsements of Sexual Violence Against Women. Items 1-20 are from the **Illinois-Rape Myth Acceptance - Short Form (IRMA-SF)** scale as used in [Burt, 1980](#); [Hald et al., 2010](#); [Payne et al., 1999](#). Items 21-22 are from [Perse, 1994](#) and Item 23 is another common myth (**self-constructed and from ACESDV**). Item label prefix refers to the subscale corresponding to the item: SA, She asked for it; NR, It wasn't really rape; MT, He didn't mean to; WI, She wanted it; LI, She lied; TE, Rape is a trivial event; DE, Rape is a deviant event; FI, filler item (not scored). Scale B: Items measuring “Attitudes Toward Sexual Coercion” from [Tomaszewska & Krahé, 2016](#), as adapted from [Krahé, 2007](#)

### Measure 3: Self-Efficacy Regarding Healthy Adolescent Sexual Development

At this moment, how equipped/confident do you feel that you can:

1. Critically engage with media and cultural messaging related to gender and sex?
2. Navigate healthy romantic and sexual relationships (e.g. recognizing signs of unhealthy/abusive communication, knowing how to and feeling more comfortable

Responses ranged from (1) = “absolutely not” to (5) = “absolutely yes”

communicating needs, concerns, boundaries, and preferences to partners) 3. Speak to an adult about topics such as sexual violence or pornography OR locate resources about healthy sexual relationships or support related to sexual violence?	
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***Expected Results + Discussion***

From this pilot study, I expect to find three main results from the three main measures/primary outcomes:

MEASURES	PRE-TEST TO POST-TEST CHANGES
Endorsements of Porn-Specific SV Scripts	↓
Endorsements of Rape Myths and Attitudes Towards Sexual Coercion	↓
Self-efficacy Regarding Healthy Sexual Development	↑

Figure 6. Expected pre- to post-test trends, arrow down indicates an average decrease in Measures 1-2 and arrow pointing up indicates average increase in self-efficacy

First, I expect that on average, participants will score significantly lower on Measure 1 “Porn-related Attitude Statements (related to gender norms and sexual violence)” on the post-test than in the pre-test, indicating lower agreement with these attitude statements. These results are consistent with literature.<sup>120</sup> This finding would indicate that the adolescents are aware and

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<sup>120</sup> (Rothman et al., 2021)

critical of media messages and themes found in porn that normalize sexual violence or traditional gender roles in sex. Many of the items are specifically about porn being a realistic and/or positive source of sex and relationship education, so decreased agreement on these items would indicate decreased perceived realism of porn and increased criticism of sexually violent scripts found in porn after the program. This implication is important because even if they are exposed to these sexually violent scripts in porn or other media, this may indicate that porn literacy-integrated sex education can protect against the internalization/socialization/agreement of these messages.

Secondly, I expect that the average scores on Measure 2: “Acceptance of Rape Myths and Sexual Coercion” will be lower on the post-test assessment than on the pre-test assessment, indicating less agreement/fewer endorsements of gendered sexual violence (in rape myths and attitudes condoning sexual coercion). Research has shown that porn use (and perhaps engaging in porn uncritically) is associated with higher acceptance of rape myths and of sexual coercion and some porn literacy programs have shown a reduced acceptance of attitudes condoning sexual violence and of traditional gender roles and attitudes describing women as sex objects. Also, I designed my curriculum to specifically address the topics and facilitate/initiate conversations about common scripts found in porn and other media that glamorize or perpetuate sexual violence (such as lack of consent, depicting sexually violent and coercive behaviors, unhealthy and abusive behavior, overall lack of verbal communication, and misogynistic ideas related to sexual violence), rape myths and victim-blaming, what healthy and consensual sexual/romantic relationships and behaviors can look like (including how to communicate needs and boundaries). Therefore I expect these teachings and discussions to result in this trend, which would indicate increased critical thinking of and rejection of these common myths. One of the concerns of porn



normalizing gendered sexual violence is that this will translate to other ideas not directly related to porn. Therefore education about porn's sexual scripts may be able to protect against the internalization of broader endorsements of sexual violence.

Thirdly, I expect that on average, participants will score higher on Measure 3, "Self Efficacy Regarding Healthy Sexual Development" in the post-test, demonstrating higher self efficacy to (a) critically engage with media and cultural messaging related to gender and sex, (b) navigate healthy romantic and sexual relationships (for example, by being able to recognize signs of unhealthy/abusive communication and feeling more comfortable communicating needs, concerns, boundaries, and preferences to partners), and (c) speak with an adult about topics such as sexual violence and pornography OR locate resources about healthy sexual relationships or support related to sexual violence. Self-efficacy is considered an important predictor of adopting health-promoting behaviors which is ultimately the goal in preventing sexual violence perpetration, victimization, and acceptance. The first 2 outcomes relate to the main focuses of the PLICSE curriculum and pilot study and the third outcome relates to continued support/learning/engagement with the topics (long-term benefits) of the program.

Overall these results provide promising evidence that porn literacy may be a protective factor against some of the adverse effects of porn (such as rape myth acceptance and endorsements of sexual coercion) and may be effective at improving adolescents' abilities to think and analyze media and cultural messaging critically. The results of the self-efficacy measures may suggest an increased sense of adolescents' sexual agency, literacy, and safety, which are some of the main purposes behind sexuality education.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> NSSE, 2020

### ***Limitations + Future Directions***

There are also quite a few limitations to this pilot study in its comprehensiveness and relevance to all adolescents in broader populations. For example, I did not use a random controlled trial (instead a one-group design), so I am limited from being able to say porn literacy is the cause or even the correlation between differences in results. Additionally all data is quantitative and taken from self-report surveys. Survey and self-report design limits the possible answers and perspectives the adolescents can give to those dictated by the adults designing the surveys, which may restrict the specific ideas, sexual scripts, word choice, and specifics of how the adolescents are engaging in porn. Therefore, there is a need for qualitative research with youth-centered to allow for a nuanced understanding of sexual socialization in this demographic. We can create a more youth centered experience through qualitative, ethnographic research with the participants in the program. For future research incorporating qualitative analysis for a more holistic, youth-centered research design, interviewers could ask more open-ended questions such as “From the beginning of the educational program, how has your perception changed about sexual coercion? How has the program changed the way you think about sex and gender?” Interviews could be transcribed and we could use thematic analysis to decode the language into themes that seem relevant to porn that are affecting adolescents and their sexual development.

Another important limitation is the heterosexual focus of this research, as it limits its relevance to only the people who have interest in engaging with people of a different sex. More research must be done on the effects of porn on queer young people. For example, what sexual scripts are perpetuated regarding LGBTQ+ people in free online porn’s depiction of queer sex/sexuality? How does these scripts affect our understanding of gender roles and sexual violence? The whole pilot study uses very cis-normative language, mostly because the articles I

have adapted from all use very gender normative language of the victims of sexual violence being women and the perpetrators being men and the issues with porns demonstration of strict gender roles. In fact their measures such as Rape Myth Acceptance are very gendered, which if changed to make more gender neutral might change the associations and understandings of sexual violence that people hold, which would affect the implications of the results. I chose not to take demographic information in my sample of students because I wanted to focus on attitude changes of the group rather than based on positionality and specific circumstances of each adolescent. I also chose not to specify participants as people who must have been exposed to porn before because in school-based sex education, students will have a wide range of experience and I argue there is still value in the topics since porn affects adolescents indirectly through peer and partner sexual socialization. However, these choices limit our ability to ensure accurate representation and diversity of population, to control for variables such as SES or gender or race or porn exposure to make more detailed claims.

My study design only allows for looking at differences between time 1 (before the first lesson) and time 2 (after the last lesson). Future research could implement a study using the same PLISCE program with a control group that does not receive the PLI curriculum and instead focuses on just the current CSE mandated topics.

Additionally, this research should be repeated with 7th grade students, 9th grade, 10th grade, and 11th grade students, with edits to ensure age-appropriate curriculum and delivery methods, to see when is the most formative and valuable time to teach porn literacy-integrated CSE. This could potentially influence educational policy for more targeted and developmentally appropriate requirements than the current requirements that do not specify differences between 9th and 12th grade students.

## **Conclusion**

In this thesis, I wanted to create a porn literacy educational program that is motivated by the prevention of sexual violence among adolescents and supporting adolescent sexual agency and healthy development. The issue of sexual violence is so important and requires truly ‘comprehensive’ sex education, which as I have argued means including porn, a very real factor in many young people’s journey of sex education and understanding. Therefore topics that educate students about contraception and STI prevention must be accompanied by relationship centered topics such as gender and sexuality, healthy relationships, and porn literacy!

This pilot study has the potential to demonstrate feasibility of integrating porn literacy into CSE curriculum in a school setting while providing support for the efficacy of porn literacy education in preventing sexual violence and supporting healthy adolescent sexual development. Through providing an open and informative space to talk about healthy relationships, media and culture messaging related to gender, sex, power, and violence and provide critical thinking skills about how to process and analyze these themes, we can support adolescents in the formation of healthier relationships with sex, gender, self, consent, the body, and intimacy.

This study is part of a movement to acknowledge and honor adolescent sexual agency by giving adolescents the tools to make their own informed decisions—a necessary step towards creating a sexually safe and equitable world. Looking further, this could indicate a need for revisions to the California sex education requirements to reflect a more realistic landscape of adolescent’s sexual socialization, which includes pornography, in order to holistically prevent sexual violence.

## **Literature Cited**

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