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Citation for published version:

McGlynn, A 2022, 'What can philosophy contribute to 'education to address pornography's influence'?', *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, vol. 56, no. 5, pp. 774-786. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12695>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/1467-9752.12695](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12695)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of Philosophy of Education

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What can philosophy contribute to ‘education to address pornography’s influence’?

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Abstract

Responses to the pernicious influences of mainstream pornography on its viewers fall into two main sorts: regulation and education. Pornography has long been a core topic in analytic feminist philosophy, but it has largely focused on issues around regulation, in particular with trying to undermine arguments against regulation on the grounds that pornography should count as protected speech. Here I instead look at some ways that philosophy can contribute to an education-based approach, in particular to what has been called an ‘education to address pornography’s influence’. I first argue that philosophical considerations can help to motivate this kind of overall approach to countering pornography’s influence, but the main contribution of the paper is to contend that such considerations can also contribute to shaping the kind of content and messaging that such an education should have. I discuss two related issues, focusing on pornographic films. The first concerns the status of pornographic films as *fiction*; it is misleading and unhelpful to tell teenagers and young adults that pornography is ‘just fiction’, as is sometimes proposed, but it is not clear what more effective and accurate message might be offered instead. The second concerns the ways that pornographic films often present the people (and in particular the women) who perform in them as ideals or archetypes when it comes to what

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kinds of sexual acts people typically choose and enjoy, which I argue is a neglected form of objectification. I briefly evaluate some suggestive examples of proposed messaging, targeted at teens and young adults.

KEYWORDS

fiction, objectification, porn literacy, pornography, sex education

INTRODUCTION

My aim in this paper is to present some ways that philosophy might contribute to discussions of what Maree Crabbe and Michael Flood call 'education to address pornography's influence' (Crabbe & Flood, 2021). The first part contributes to the case for a particular approach, usually called 'porn literacy education', by critically examining its rivals and by responding to some recent objections to it from the philosopher Amia Srinivasan. The second part turns to making more specific points about the content such an education should have, based on philosophical analysis of what kind of messaging is needed to address the influence of pornography, pornographic films in particular. Here I focus on two related issues. One concerns the status of pornographic films as *fiction*; it is misleading and unhelpful to tell teenagers and young adults that pornography is 'just fiction', as is sometimes proposed, but it is not clear what more effective and accurate message might be offered instead. The other concerns the ways that pornographic films often present the people (and in particular the women) who perform in them as ideals or as archetypal when it comes to what kinds of sexual acts people typically choose and enjoy, which I argue is a neglected form of objectification. In light of the conclusions I draw from the discussion of these two issues, I evaluate some recent examples of proposed messaging designed to be part of education to address pornography's influence, targeted at teens and young adults.

I want to be clear, though, that in contending that philosophy has something to bring to these issues, I don't mean to discount the contributions made by other disciplines, particularly more empirical disciplines. I take such work to be vital, and I draw on it in my own discussion here. What I hope to show is that empirically informed philosophy, which draws on and works together with other relevant disciplines, can contribute to our understanding of how best to work to address pornography's influence: *not* that philosophy can lead the way from the armchair. I also think there are more specific limitations to what philosophy can hope to achieve here, and I will identify these towards the end of this paper, contending that they indicate places where philosophical considerations can inform, but should not be allowed to pre-empt or replace, empirical studies on what approaches to education to address pornography's influence are most effective.

Pornography, for the purposes of this paper, is sexually explicit material made with the primary aim of sexual arousal. This way of characterising pornography, unlike some found in the literature, is neutral on the moral status of pornography, and it leaves room for feminist pornography, queer pornography, and other forms of sexual explicit material that aims to reflect or promote egalitarian views of gender and sexuality. However, my focus here will be on so-called mainstream pornography, the mass-produced, widely available variety that has been the object of much concern from feminists.¹ The particular worry that kick-starts the present paper is that such pornography influences the views and desires of its consumers, particularly (but far from exclusively) teenage boys and young men, and that it acts as a kind of sex education in the absence of better options.²

PART 1. MOTIVATING PORN LITERACY EDUCATION

Regulation vs Education

Crabbe and Flood (2021) usefully draw a distinction between *regulation* and *education* as broad, rival approaches to addressing the pernicious influence of mainstream pornography. The dominant paradigm for discussions of pornography within philosophy has tended to be associated with regulation. According to this paradigm, the issues raised by pornography are intimately tied to issues about freedom of speech, with feminists challenging the liberal conception of pornography as protected speech. Consider Rae Langton's hugely influential contributions to this debate (e.g., Langton, 1993). If pornography is indeed speech, Rae Langton argued, then we can ask what it says and does.³ What it says and does, Langton contended, is rank women as subordinate and silence them. This means that the right of pornographers to produce and distribute pornography comes into direct conflict with women's right to equality and with their right to freedom of speech, calling into question pornography's status as protected speech. Langton does not explicitly draw the conclusion that pornography should be regulated, but her thinking does tend to point in this direction.⁴

Regulation comes in various different forms, from familiar top-down state censorship, to the controversial ordinances written by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, which were designed to make it possible for women (and others) harmed by pornography to sue those involved in its production and distribution in civil court.⁵ Despite this variety, regulation is generally regarded as both ineffective and problematic. Censorship might have looked feasible when pornography required specialist equipment to produce or when it came packaged on physical media such as video tapes, but in the smart-phone/internet age, the task looks utterly impossible, at least without very severe restrictions to people's access to technology and the internet more broadly. There are also familiar worries with empowering the state to decide which representations of sex are harmful, in particular, that this will first and foremost lead to censorship of pornography produced by and for minority sexualities—for example gay, lesbian and BDSM pornography—rather than the mainstream pornography that we are concerned with. The Dworkin–MacKinnon alternative may be better intentioned, designed as it is to give power to women and other minorities harmed by pornography rather than to the state, but it would be incredibly difficult to actually demonstrate that a particular pornographic work was the cause of particular harmful treatment; moreover, in practice such ordinances have tended to raise precisely the concerns about handing the state control over what kinds of media are available that they were intended to avoid.⁶

Pornography as Education

If we turn away from regulation, that leaves us with education. However, I want to initially conceive of this broadly, perhaps more broadly than Crabbe and Flood intend, so that it encompasses the idea that certain types of pornography might in fact form part of an education to address pornography's influence. A tempting thought is that the features of mainstream pornography that make it particularly effective at influencing its audience are distinct from the features that make it harmful, so that feminist pornography and other varieties that try to improve on mainstream pornography's depictions of sexuality and gender might be thought to have equal power to influence their audiences, but in a much better direction (e.g., Dutilh Novaes, 2018; Eaton, 2017). I can readily identify with the temptation here, but I am sceptical that we can make this separation between what makes pornography such a powerful influencer and the particular kinds of messages it carries. Rather, I think that a crucial part of the story of pornography's success at spreading particular attitudes and preferences to its audience is that those attitudes and preferences fit with, reinforce and amplify those already encouraged by society at large and encountered repeatedly from a very early age. Feminist pornography, in contrast, is swimming against the tide, in terms of the attitudes, assumptions and preferences that its viewers are likely to bring to it. Related to this are issues concerning how to get the target audience,

largely men and teenage boys, to watch feminist pornography rather than the mainstream pornography they are often already watching, and which is typically free, more readily and more anonymously available, and perhaps also more in line with their sexual preferences and attitudes as they currently stand, without intervening in people's private lives in excessive ways.⁷

Pornography Education

That leaves us with a more traditional conception of education to address pornography's influence: provision of porn literacy education as a standard part of relationship and sexual education (RSE) in schools and other relevant educational settings.⁸ Porn literacy education is a specific form of media literacy education, where media literacy is 'the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create print, video, and internet messages, and think critically about society's consumption and production of these messages' (Rothman et al., 2018, pp. 3–4). The proposal to address pornography's influence via porn literacy education has to be taken up within the context of campaigns to support the provision of high-quality, compulsory RSE in schools, with schools being given adequate support and resources to deliver on this; sadly, this is not the case virtually anywhere, though some countries are much further ahead than others.⁹ The case for this approach to addressing the influence of mainstream pornography can not simply be an argument by elimination, since even if I am right that other approaches seem unpromising, that does not by itself do anything to show that porn literacy education is promising. There might just be no strategy for addressing pornography's influence that looks worth pursuing.¹⁰ Fortunately, there is some preliminary empirical evidence that porn literacy education might work. In a recent longitudinal study, Laura Vandebosch and Johanna van Oosten (2017) found evidence that porn literacy education had an 'attenuating' effect on the link between viewing online pornography and holding objectifying views about women. What Vandebosch and van Oosten studied, more precisely, is the relationship between viewing 'sexually explicit Internet material' (SEIM) and a particular 'unwanted media effect', namely, notions of women as sex objects (2017, pp. 1020–1021), with the question being whether porn literacy education loosened the relationship by diminishing that unwanted effect, both in the short-term and, crucially, over a longer timescale. They also conjectured that any effect found would be stronger for men than for women and stronger for adolescents than young adults. According to their study, porn literacy education *did* loosen the relationship between viewing SEIM and objectifying attitudes about women, but they did not find any support for the latter two conjectures. Here it's how Vandebosch and van Oosten sum up their results:

The present study ... suggests that media literacy education may attenuate potentially unwanted media effects over time. More precisely, the extent to which adolescents and young adults had learned about porn in their sex education in school appeared to moderate the relation between young people's SEIM use and notions of women as sex objects. Individuals who learned from porn literacy education at schools showed no relationship between SEIM use and notions of women as sex objects. In contrast, such a relationship between SEIM use and notions of women as sex objects did emerge for individuals who indicated that they learned little to nothing at school about the use of SEIM. This relationship was similar among males and females as well as among adolescents and young adults. (2017, p. 1029)

There are a number of limitations of Vandebosch and van Oosten's study, many of which they are upfront about. First, their study was conducted in The Netherlands, which is known to be more liberal than average around sexual matters (p. 1031). Second, the study relied on self-reports in collecting crucial information from the participants, including how often they viewed SEIM during the period in question and how much they assessed they had learned from the porn literacy education they had undertaken (pp. 1025, 1031). Third, the period of the study was limited to two months, and so we do not have information about what the effect would be over a longer period (pp. 1022, 1032).¹¹ Fourth, it is not clear that the category of SEIM employed in the study made any differentiation between

mainstream pornography and other, more egalitarian forms, such as feminist pornography (p. 1025). Finally, and most obviously, there is the general point that, independent of the particular limitations of this study, it is just a single study, and so by itself does not support very robust conclusions.¹² Given these points, at most a modest conclusion is warranted, and this is what Vanderbosch and van Oosten offer; they suggest we take their results as a 'first step' (p. 1031), while calling for further research to investigate the effectiveness of porn literacy education and to determine what future programmes should focus on if they are to be most effective at addressing pornography's influence (pp. 1031–1032). We should follow Vanderbosch and van Oosten both in the modesty of their conclusions and in their call for further inquiry; still, I think it is reasonable to hold that pessimism about porn literacy education is premature.

Meeting Porn on Its Own Ground

In a recent essay, 'Talking to My Students About Porn' (2021), Amia Srinivasan makes two points that bear on the case I have outlined in favour of porn literacy education. First, Srinivasan raises doubts about whether this kind of education can be effective without flouting restrictions on showing students pornographic images. Second, she contends more generally that porn literacy education is doomed to failure as it fails to 'meet porn on its own ground'. Let's take each of these points in turn.

Srinivasan's first point is simple; effectively teaching teenagers and young adults the skills and concepts they need to approach pornographic images critically would require showing them pornographic images. So legal and social restrictions on showing pornography to most teenagers are 'a serious problem for any attempt to teach 'porn literacy': how do you teach people to read texts you can't show them?' (2021, p. 70). But this is to offer a rhetorical question in place of an argument, and it is a question with an answer. It is true that porn literacy education cannot show much or any of the media that it concerns, and that this is a limitation that distinguishes it from other forms of media literacy education (e.g., Albury, 2014, p. 176; Vanderbosch & van Oosten, 2017, p. 1020), but more needs to be said to show that this is a 'serious problem', as Srinivasan claims. Educators have found ways of working around the limitations inherent in teaching about pornography to an audience that they cannot show pornographic material to, with these 'indirect' approaches involving discussions of descriptions of pornographic material that cannot be shown, educational games and so on. It is entirely natural to ask whether this kind of indirect approach to media literacy education can really work, but we have to then wait for the answer—not simply presume that the answer is obviously going to be 'it can't'.

What about the worry that porn literacy education fails to 'meet porn on its own ground'? Here it is less immediately obvious what Srinivasan has in mind. Here is what she writes more fully:

Insofar as sex education works on young people, it does so by appealing to their intellects – by asking them to deliberate, question and understand. In this, sex education, traditionally conceived, does not propose to meet porn on its own ground. For porn does not inform, or persuade, or debate. Porn trains. It etches deep grooves in the psyche, forming powerful associations between arousal and selected stimuli, bypassing that part of us which pauses, considers, thinks. Those associations, strengthened through repetition, reinforce and reproduce the social meaning assigned by patriarchy to sexual difference. (2021, pp. 63–64)

The kind of worry Srinivasan is expressing here is reminiscent of a point made by Catharine MacKinnon, who asked:

Have you ever tried to argue with an orgasm?¹³

MacKinnon's point was that pornography conditions men's sexual preferences, forming associations between women's subordination and their own sexual satisfaction. Those associations are not ones we are likely to be able to

disrupt by reasoning, however powerfully, with those in their grip. Srinivasan is making a related point about attempts to educate people in ways that are designed to counter pornography's influence on them.

Again, we might note that Srinivasan does not offer any evidence that porn literacy education is *ineffective*, nor does she discuss the evidence that suggests that it might be effective, sketched above; the objection appears to be based on armchair considerations. It is also not clear that Srinivasan's assumptions about how pornography influences its viewers and how porn literacy education is meant to counter that influence are right. Philosophers who have considered the idea that pornography conditions the preferences of its viewers have tended to dismiss it as overly simplistic and deterministic (e.g., Eaton, 2007; Langton & West, 1999). More importantly, Srinivasan assumes that porn literacy education is supposed to work by *persuading* viewers of pornography to adopt better views or preferences, and that assumption can be questioned. Indeed, those who study media literacy have developed a number of different models of how it works: what it is that media literacy education (of which porn literacy education is an instance) is educating for, and how those outcomes are meant to make people less susceptible to being adversely influenced by the media they are subsequently exposed to (e.g., Vandernbosch & van Oosten, 2017, pp. 1017–1078). It is entirely sensible to want more evidence that porn literacy education really has the positive effects that it needs to have if it is to play a significant role in addressing pornography's influence, and to want to subject the different accounts on offer that try to explain how such education could have these positive effects to critical scrutiny; I have already said as much above. But Srinivasan's pessimism about the whole project looks unwarranted, as it does not engage with this kind of work from media studies at all, instead seeming to be based on assumptions made from the armchair. That risks prematurely abandoning a promising line of approach. I again suggest cautious optimism might be a more warranted stance than pessimism in our current state of information.

Part 2. THE CONTENT OF PORN LITERACY EDUCATION

Fiction

My aim in this second section is to examine ways in which philosophical reflection might help generate and evaluate proposals for the *content* of education to address pornography's influence: that is, what messages should such an education be trying to convey, and how should they be pitched to their intended audience if they are to be both accurate and effective? I lack space to attempt any kind of general survey here, and so I will have to content myself with instead focusing on two points from my own research into mainstream pornography's influence. My hope is that this discussion of these two points is both valuable in its own right, but perhaps more importantly, offers concrete illustrations of my broader hope that philosophy can be part of these important conversations.

One place that philosophers have a distinctive contribution to make to discussions of pornography is in disputes over whether, or the degree to which, pornographic works are fictional, and the significance of different positions within this dispute. These issues usually arise in the context of an objection to feminist critiques of pornography. Feminist philosophers, and feminist theorists more generally, have argued that pornography adversely influences the attitudes, and perhaps even the behaviour, of those who watch it.¹⁴ In particular, they worry that pornography encourages its audience to form a false and potentially dangerous picture of sexual and gender relations. One response that is often made to such critiques is that pornography is *just fiction*, and that people who perform in pornography films are *just acting*. If these claims are right and, importantly, if viewers of pornography recognise the fictional status of what they're consuming, that suggests that pornography is not likely to have the kind of influence on how they view and treat women in their everyday lives that its feminist critics allege.

In other work (McGlynn, 2021b), I have argued that this attempt to dismiss feminist concerns about pornography fails. There is a grain of truth in it that it is important to recognise, namely, that there are frequently fictional elements in pornographic works, and that such works should often be classified as fictional overall. However, I contend that these concessions to the objection do not help to establish that feminist concerns are unfounded. Let me explain.

Take the notorious example of the film *Deep Throat*. The plot of this film is clearly fantastical, involving a woman who has her clitoris located in the back of her throat, and so who can only reach orgasm by performing oral sex on men. The main character, Linda Lovelace, was played by Linda Boreman, and Lovelace was a persona that Boreman also adopted in other pornographic films she starred in. So the film begins from a fictional premise, was scripted and directed and involves fictional characters being performed by people with different names, jobs, traits and lives than the ones depicted. Clearly, *Deep Throat* contains fictional elements, and it is natural to classify it overall as a work of fiction. Still, this hardly seems to silence feminist concerns about the influence of the film. Media can influence people's beliefs and other attitudes even if it is clearly fictional; indeed, there is some evidence that, odd as this may seem, labelling a text as fictional makes us *more* likely to accept some of the things it says.¹⁵ Moreover, although the film has clearly fantastical elements, it's not clear its audience was in a position to determine where the line between what was fictional and what wasn't is drawn.¹⁶ This vagueness was at least in part intentional. Boreman was presented as Linda Lovelace not just in the films she performed in, but to the public when she appeared at press events to promote them, when she gave interviews and when she published her first two autobiographies. Moreover, she was represented as offering a glimpse of what a sexually liberated woman really looked like, in all of these contexts.¹⁷

More obviously, for all its status as a work of fiction, *Deep Throat* featured Boreman and the other performers engaged in real, unstimulated sexual acts, including oral sex and sexual intercourse. Linda Boreman really did perform oral sex on Harry Reems, the film's male star, so in that sense at least there is nothing fictional about it, and they weren't 'just acting'. The film depicted a fiction in which Linda Lovelace gains sexual pleasure from 'deep-throating' her psychiatrist Dr Young by showing Boreman performing oral sex on Reems while, we can suppose, pretending to be greatly enjoying the experience. So while we can say that *Deep Throat* is a work of fiction, and that it contains fictional elements and involves performers engaged in acting, this misses a crucial part of the picture, which is that the way that the fiction is depicted depends crucially on the real-world activities of real people. Moreover, as stressed above, the line between what is fictional or acted and what is real is not transparent to viewers; Lovelace is depicted as deriving great sexual pleasure from performing oral sex, but is that enjoyment real or was it acted? Above I assumed it was faked, and with good reason; Boreman later published a memoir, *Ordeal*, detailing the horrifying circumstances under which *Deep Throat* was made, and her own coercion into playing the part of Lovelace. However, none of this backstory is on the screen, and so is not manifest to those who simply watched the film.

Many of the points just made about the way that a fiction is depicted by what real people do are not specific to pornographic films; rather, this is how fictional live-action films work in general. To give an example, in *Mission Impossible: Ghost Protocol*, the main character Ethan Hunt scales the outside of the tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, and at various moments he seems (understandably) nervous or fearful. This fiction was depicted by the actor who plays Hunt, Tom Cruise, really performing stunts outside the Burj Khalifa, albeit with much better safety equipment than Hunt is shown as having in the film. So Cruise really did hang off the side of the building. Was Cruise acting when he looked afraid, in order to depict Hunt as afraid? It is likely the answer is 'yes'; Cruise seems to actively enjoy performing these stunts, and as mentioned, he had much better safety equipment than his character is shown as having.¹⁸ But again, none of this is obvious given just what is on screen in the film, and so there is room to be unsure precisely what it's merely fictional or acted in the scene.

So what is wrong with dismissing feminist critiques of pornography on the ground that pornographic films and other works are 'just fiction', and are recognised as such by their audience, is that this objection ignores both the way in which pornographic fictions are depicted by real sexual activity by real people and the ways in which pornographic films can blur the lines between what is fiction and what is not. As I suggested above, we should acknowledge that many pornographic works are works of fiction and contain fictional elements, but this does not silence the concern that those who consume them will be disposed to draw conclusions about reality and real people from them.

Returning to our main topic, there is a flipside to this point when it comes to thinking about what kind of messages porn literacy education should try to convey. Just as it is misleading and ineffectual to try to dismiss feminist concerns about pornography's influence by saying it's 'just fiction', it is likewise misleading and likely ineffectual to try to inoculate people against forming a picture of the world based on watching pornography by teaching them that it's 'just

fiction'. This slogan is only partly true, and the ways in which it is misleading are significant. As already noted, explicitly presenting media as fictional does not always lead to people being careful to avoid believing its claims to be true, and this kind of messaging, like the objection we have been considering, fails to acknowledge the ways in which pornographic films are not merely fictional, and the difficulties that can be involved in knowing which elements are fictional and which are not.¹⁹

Objectification

There is something puzzling about what I have written in the previous section, which I have not yet acknowledged. I drew a comparison between some of the sex scenes in *Deep Throat* and the climbing scenes in *Ghost Protocol*, but we would not expect the fictional truths about Ethan Hunt depicted in the latter to have any influence on viewers' attitudes about the people in their lives. To borrow a piece of terminology from the philosopher Tamar Gendler (2000), it would be odd if viewers of *Ghost Protocol* 'exported' fictional truths about Ethan Hunt and the world he inhabits into their picture of the real world and the people in it. But feminist critiques of pornography often seem to allege something very like this; that viewers of pornography 'export' fictional truths about fictional characters such as Linda Lovelace, thereby adopting problematic attitudes about sex and women in the real world. If this latter claim is to be plausible, we need to explain this contrast.

I think the answer lies in the way that pornography objectifies women, in contrast to the way that Ethan Hunt is depicted as a (rather unusual) individual. Consider the following passage from Martha Nussbaum's influential paper 'Objectification':

Who is objectified in *Playboy*? In the immediate context, it is the represented woman who is being objectified and, derivatively, the actress whose photograph appears. But the characteristic *Playboy* generalizing approach ('why we love tennis' or 'women of the Ivy League')—assisted in no small measure by the magazine's focus on photographs of real women, rather than on paintings or fictions—strongly suggests that real-life women relevantly similar to the tennis-player can easily be cast in the roles in which *Playboy* casts its chosen few. (1995, p. 284)

I think there is a lot to be learned about why pornography is problematic from generalising and elaborating on some of the claims made in this short passage. First, Nussbaum observes that there a *generalising* dynamic present; that the ways in which the particular women depicted in *Playboy* are objectified contributes to the objectification of women more broadly, or at least those women who are 'relevantly similar'. Second, Nussbaum suggests that this generalising power is linked to the fact that the images in *Playboy* feature real women rather than drawings or overtly fictional representations of women. I think that these are insights, but Nussbaum does not develop them further, and so there is much more left to be said. Also, while Nussbaum focuses on *Playboy*, it's natural to think they can be generalised to mainstream pornography in general.

So let us return to the example of *Deep Throat*. As noted above, Linda Lovelace is shown deriving sexual enjoyment and satisfaction from performing oral sex on men. Moreover, she is depicted as representative of what most women *would* desire were they similarly 'liberated', or perhaps as showing what most women *really* want, but cannot admit to wanting due to being constrained, as Lovelace is not, by social norms and taboos.²⁰ If the first interpretation is right, Lovelace is represented as a kind of *ideal* for other women; if the second is, she is represented as *archetypal* of women.²¹ Either way, the sexual preferences that Lovelace is (misleadingly) shown as possessing are represented as ones that women more generally share or would come to share under certain circumstances in which their true sexual nature is finally revealed. Lovelace is not primarily objectified here by being represented as lacking sexual agency or autonomy, or as merely a tool for the satisfaction of men's sexual desires. Rather, she is objectified by being cast as a representative or ideal of a relatively homogeneous group; the myth is that she is genuinely expressing her preferences, but in

doing so she shows something about women's preferences more generally. In this way, pornography objectifies both Lovelace and women like her more generally. This is one way to develop Nussbaum's insight that pornography can involve a 'generalising' dynamic, where in objectifying the women that feature in them, pornographic works objectify women more generally too.

Again, I think this diagnosis of how pornography can represent women in harmful ways yields clues to what an education that undermines its influence should look like. The crucial takeaway is that such an education should emphasise the *individuality* of women, aiming to disrupt any tendency to project the (apparent) preferences of the particular women who appear in pornography films to a broader group. It should aim to disrupt the formation of assumptions or sexual social scripts which embed the idea that what is viewed in pornography is representative of what women more generally would want or would admit to wanting were they to be free to do so; people who watch pornography need to be given the tools needed to resist these generalising, homogenising tendencies.

Messaging

I have made two related points in this half of the paper so far, one about fiction and the other about objectification. What messages would a porn literacy education that took these points on board carry? I think we can start to answer this question by looking at messaging suggested in two recent resources produced in the UK (though this clearly falls far short of providing any kind of comprehensive survey). The first resource is produced by Edinburgh Rape Crisis, and is a short document designed to facilitate talking to young people about pornography, 'What Do You Think? A Young Person's Perspective on the Impact of Pornography'.²² In fact, the messages in this resource were formulated by a 16-year-old young woman in response to the prompts 'Is there anything that can be done to help counterbalance some of the harmful messages from pornography?' and 'If you could give a message to other young people about pornography, what would you say?'. Here are some of her answers:

Don't believe everything you see – don't base your ideas about sex on what porn says sex should be like.

Understand that porn doesn't show what sex is. It shows what sex is like what a film shows what a secret agent is, it's an over fictionalised version of something that actually is pretty simple.

There should be no pressure to live up to other people's expectations because you've never been in that situation with this specific person before, it's never going to be like anything else that you've experienced.

I think it needs to be said clearly from mid-teens that this is not what sex is like. Sex is going to be different for everyone, because every person is different, therefore every couple is different. If you're comfortable enough with someone to be doing that, you shouldn't then put this extra pressure on yourself that it has to look like it does in porn films.

These are, I think, excellent answers. They get across that pornography presents a distorted and 'over fictionalised' picture of sex and relationships, without merely dismissing it as 'just fiction', and the analogy to the way that Hollywood depicts what being a secret agent is like is helpful. And there's a tangible focus on seeing and treating people as individuals with their own particular preferences, desires and needs. These are precisely the sorts of messages that the discussion of our two topics above motivate.

The second resource I want to look at is the well-known website BISH, written and maintained by sex educator Justin Hancock, and aimed at teenagers and young adults aged 14 and above.²³ BISH devotes a portion of the website, made up of a number of pages, to the topic of pornography. Although it is not as precisely focused as the Rape Crisis

Edinburgh material on the topic of this essay, where the prompt explicitly concerned the kinds of messages that would counter the influence of pornography, we find similar messaging throughout BISH's pages. Indeed, Hancock makes the same analogy to Hollywood films that I made above when discussing whether pornography can be dismissed as fiction, and which the Rape Crisis Edinburgh material makes when likening mainstream pornography's depiction of sex to Hollywood's depiction of the lives of secret agents:

Just like in the movies everything in porn is acted, exaggerated and more epic than it is in real life.²⁴

Hancock is careful to note that this does not mean that the performers are not really having sex; rather he stresses that '[e]ven though they are actually having sex in porn scenes, they are acting'.²⁵ He is also clear that one respect in which performers in pornography are often acting is that they are pretending to enjoy the sex they are having (or at least pretending to enjoy it more than they are), and he cautions against drawing conclusions about what most people will find pleasurable from what is depicted in such films, emphasising instead the need for 'good communication' with one's sexual partners. On another BISH page, Hancock stresses that pornography establish its own 'norms' about what is typical and expected during sex, but that often there is a mismatch with what most people actually enjoy; pornography can push a sexual script that can 'make it harder to have more consensual and enjoyable sex'.²⁶ So BISH's messaging about pornography also fits well with the points made in the earlier sections.

It is worth clarifying what I do and do not take these observations to show. What I hope to have shown is that the philosophical considerations sketched above can inform the messaging adopted as part of education to address pornography's influence. Such considerations add justification for adopting certain messaging—particular claims, analogies and guidance—and suggest that alternatives are likely to be problematic, as they are misleading and/or unhelpful. As one example of this, I have suggested that 'pornography is just fiction' is a bad piece of messaging and offered examples of more nuanced, accurate and helpful messages found in recent resources in the UK. My hope is that this illustrates how philosophical considerations can help to identify messaging that is both accurate and, in principle, apt to counteract the messages found in much mainstream pornography. However, we need to be very clear about the limitations of this last claim. Education is not all about content, and I am not naively suggesting or pretending that simply getting teens and young adults to read or hear messages like those quoted above is sufficient to give them the kind of media literacy needed to resist the influence of mainstream pornography. At most, identifying these slogans is a starting point; these are, I suggest, examples of some of the messages that should be embedded into and reinforced by porn literacy education, in whatever form it needs to take to be most effective.

However, filling out the details about how these messages might be effectively delivered seems to be a task that the philosophical considerations I have discussed have little to say about, which is disappointing, but not surprising. Figuring out what works best is an ongoing process of trying out different things, while being sure to carefully monitor the results, and this is not the kind of empirical work that philosophy typically does²⁷—but philosophical considerations can, I am proposing, have meaningful input to that kind of work. However, even if we conclude that philosophers have little to contribute to questions about the precise form that porn literacy education should take, the present paper has made the case that philosophical considerations and arguments *can* contribute to making the case for such education as a promising attempt to address pornography's influence, and to proposing and evaluating the kinds of messages that such an education should embody.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks are due to the audience members at the PESGB Relationship and Sexual Education: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives Conference in June 2021, and to Gerry Dunne, Mags Steele, and two anonymous referees for helpful feedback.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ I say more about mainstream pornography and the contrast with other varieties (such as feminist pornography) in McGlynn, 2021. Henceforth, by 'pornography', I mean mainstream pornography, unless I signal otherwise.
- ² I do not mean to suggest that there is a single feminist stance on even mainstream pornography; whether pornography is harmful or liberatory (or neither), its moral status, and what (if anything) should be done about it are all contested issues *within* feminism (as are issues about sex work more generally). Below I frame this paper as in part a disagreement between myself and Amia Srinivasan, but it is worth noting that I take us to largely agree on the larger background questions, and in particular we both suggest that second-wave anti-pornography feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon perhaps got more right that they sometimes get credit for today (though we do so while firmly rejecting some aspects of their views). I lack space to defend this broad orientation to these issues in the present paper, but I have begun to do so elsewhere (McGlynn, 2016, 2021). Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to be clearer about these issues, correctly noting that there are many feminist approaches to pornography that would not even agree with the present paper's starting point.
- ³ And if it is not speech, then it cannot have the status of *protected speech* (see Langton & West, 1999, p. 176: but see also Bauer, 2005, pp. 63–64, for criticism).
- ⁴ In arguing that women are silenced by pornography, Langton takes herself to be arguing that women cannot address pornography with 'more speech' (e.g., 1993, p. 47), which seems to leave little room for any solution that is not based on regulation. Moreover, Langton's contention that pornography is subordinating speech is explicitly a defence of the conception of pornography that figured in Dworkin and MacKinnon's well-known and controversial ordinances, to be discussed shortly in the main text. Still, Langton seems reluctant to explicitly endorse a regulation approach, and her position is subtle and noncommittal; her most recent essay on the topic of pornography ends with a call to 'think constructively about some solutions' (2017, p. 35).
- ⁵ Philosophers have not always paid attention to these differences (e.g., Langton, 1993, p. 25 fn1). A very helpful exception is Mari Mikkola (2019, chapter 4).
- ⁶ See, for example, the much-discussed issue of whether a version of MacKinnon and Dworkin's ordinances was used by Toronto police to justify seizing lesbian erotic fiction in the early 1990s (e.g., Srinivasan, 2021, pp. 54–55). See Mikkola (2019, pp. 96–97) for general discussion of this kind of worry.
- ⁷ This section is a very condensed version of the main points in McGlynn (2021), and is just meant to give the flavour of the arguments developed there.
- ⁸ Compare Heck (2021, p. 855). Crabbe and Flood note that there is a 'variety of contexts' in which education about pornography might be delivered, but they argue that schools are a particularly significant site given their ability (in principle at least) to reach most young people at a crucial age and provide them with high-quality porn literacy education, as well as the fact that schools are an early and key location in which young people are first exposed to both pornography and its influence (2021, pp. 6–7).
- ⁹ For a recent overview, see Srinivasan (2021, pp. 62–63); see also Galer (2022) for relevant discussion.
- ¹⁰ Srinivasan (2021) comes close to a statement of this kind of pessimism; I will discuss this piece shortly and say why I think such pessimism is premature.
- ¹¹ Vanderbosch and van Oosten have been criticised on this point (Kohut et al., 2020, p. 725), since the standard way to measure of pornography use for studies such as these uses a period of six months, and it is not clear what the rationale was for shortening this so much, nor do Vanderbosch and van Oosten discuss the possible significance of the shift from six months to two.
- ¹² Rothman et al. (2018) offer another relevant and promising study, though with a small number of students. Interestingly, this study looked at porn literacy education provided outside of a school setting (see note 8 of the present paper); they conclude that 'pornography literacy is an intervention that should be tested more thoroughly in different settings' (2018, p. 12).
- ¹³ MacKinnon's line was echoed a few years later by Rae Langton and Caroline West, when they mocked portrayals of pornography as political speech meant to persuade others to adopt particular political values and points of view: 'Pornography is designed to generate, not conclusions, but orgasms' (1999, p. 175).
- ¹⁴ As noted in note 2, I do not mean to suggest that this is the consensus view amongst feminist philosophers and theorists; only that it represents one main line of feminist engagement with the topic of pornography.
- ¹⁵ For discussion and references, see Friend (2016).
- ¹⁶ Compare Langton and West (1999, section 4) and McGlynn (2021b).
- ¹⁷ Langton writes: 'Linda is not just a woman, but woman, "Liberated Woman in her most extreme form, taking life and sex on her own terms"' (2005, pp. 139–140, quoting a real marketing slogan for the film).
- ¹⁸ In a documentary about the making of this scene, Cruise says: 'Climbing the Burj, you know, it's not just a stunt. It's a character, you've got to perform.'
- ¹⁹ I discuss BISH, a sex education website made by the creator of *Planet Porn*, in detail below. There is a further potential worry with messages like 'porn is just fiction'; as Byron et al. note (2021, pp. 788–790), there is sometimes a tendency to treat pornography as unrealistic or fictional just to the extent that it deviates from depictions of sex that are in line with conserva-

tive values (for example, those involving heterosexual couples in monogamous relationships), and so sometimes dismissing pornographic depictions of sex as fictional is a way of implicitly endorsing those values.

²⁰ Recall the quote from Langton above: 'Linda is not just a woman, but woman.'

²¹ Eaton (2012) argues that female nudes in the Western art tradition objectify women more generally by acting as ideals of feminine beauty, vulnerability and sexual availability.

²² This resource is available to download, but with a recommended donation to Edinburgh Rape Crisis: <https://www.ercc.scot/what-do-you-think/>. [Accessed 8th August 2022]

²³ Hancock is also the creator of the resource *Planet Porn*, discussed in an earlier footnote. Hancock's sex education work was originally publicly funded by a local authority, but that funding was withdrawn following massive cuts to public health funding in England, leaving the financial support for the site precarious despite its popularity (Galer, 2022, pp. 195–197); at the time of writing, BISH is funded entirely by donations via the online subscription platform Patreon (see Galer, 2022, p. 195, and the webpage 'About BISH': <https://www.bishuk.com/about-bish/>). This, unfortunately, illustrates some general patterns about the lack of funding put into resources like this, even when they have proved popular and helpful.

²⁴ 'Porn Is Like a Movie, Exaggerated and Epic': <https://www.bishuk.com/porn/porn-is-like-a-movie-exaggerated-and-epic/>. [Accessed 8th August 2022]

²⁵ On the same page, Hancock also draws an analogy to professional wrestling: 'even though they are actually hitting each other it's all staged because it's entertainment'. However, it's often not the case that professional wrestlers are really hitting each other; there's frequently an element of illusion or simulation here, not present in mainstream hardcore pornography. That's not to say that the analogy is without interest, since wrestling does raise a number of similar issues concerning what's real and what's fake/acted/scripted, the relationship between a person and their on-screen and public persona, and so on: see Edwards (2020) for entertaining and accessible discussion of these philosophical issues as they pertain to wrestling.

²⁶ 'An Educational Guide to Porn': <https://www.bishuk.com/porn/an-educational-guide-to-porn/>. [Accessed 8th August 2022]

²⁷ This echoes some of my criticisms of Srinivasan in the first half of the paper; she seems to rely too heavy on untested presumptions about what sex education can hope to achieve, when what it's needed is careful and relatively open-minded empirical study.

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How to cite this article: McGlynn, A. (2022) What can philosophy contribute to 'education to address pornography's influence'? *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 56, 774–786.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12695>