

Alternatives Against Porn:

Making the Case for a Marxist – Socialist Feminist Critique of Pornography

CalPolyPomona



Emma L. Del Real, Department of Political Science

Mentor: Dr. Liza Taylor

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Background

Discussing the current dialogue on the subject is essential to situate the conversation in today's society. The evidence illustrates those influential individuals and researchers on this problematic subject.

- One significant figure in the cultural sphere, Billie Eilish, was exposed to porn at 11 years old. She states, “I think [pornography] really destroyed my brain, and I feel incredibly devastated that I was exposed to so much porn” (Giray, 2022, p.1).
- Gary Wilson, who studied pornography impacts on porn users and their relation to women, expresses that porn **ruins** sexual intimacy, that **is no such thing as good porn**, and that women are viewed as sexual objects rather than having personhood (Giray, 2022, p. 2-5).
- Empirical evidence also emphasizes that women exposed to the “rape myth supportive pornography” become **desensitized, internalized**, and have an increased likelihood of becoming sexual victims.

Purpose & Motivation

The motivation behind this research is to express my personal and political stance on pornography. I believe pornography offers **nothing** to women and illustrates a society that **oppresses** women. Pornography dehumanizes and places women in a highly sexist and bigoted environment. Therefore, I turn to feminist theory to find substantial literature and arguments on the necessity to critique pornography and the industry it proliferates within. Feminist theory concerns itself with women because women have been severely disadvantaged in society within the public and private spheres. Hence, feminist theory gives relevance to this controversial subject due to the nature that porn is primarily tied to women's bodies and realities. However, many feminists will not agree with me that pornography is a problematic reality for women as there is much discourse and strife on this subject. Therefore, the goal of this project is for me to offer a viable critique of pornography through a feminist lens that provides a substantial response that goes beyond the common responses within feminist circles to target a larger audience in hopes of persuading others about the *harmful and problematic nature of pornography*.

Thesis

My research is set up to encapsulate the common arguments in the feminist sphere and offer a new, more persuasive argument from a distinctly feminist lens.

My **thesis** seeks to recognize the common argument follows that Liberal feminism enables the proliferation of the porn industry, whereas radical feminism creates a narrow reaction that is often dismissed; therefore, what feminist theory offers the soundest argument in persuading the larger society about the problematic reality of porn?

I argue that Marxist-socialist feminism provides a more substantial argument in persuading society because it recognizes pornography as a capitalist patriarchal institution that is deeply problematic.

Theoretical Framework & Application

The most common feminist theory utilized in defense of pornography is **liberal feminism**. Liberal feminism is the first conceptual theory of feminism that was born out of the Enlightenment era. These key points are highly correlated with how pornography is defended.

- Liberal feminism argues that women's problems are that women are *excluded and discriminated* against in the public sphere and segregated into the private.
 - “[F]ocus group study of consumers of feminist pornography, Liberman found that participants had **developed a distaste for mainstream material**” (Davies, 2018, p. 32).
- Liberal feminism argues that the solution is that there needs to be **inclusion** and **equality** for women.
 - “[W]oman-made pornography that has attracted a growing audience of female consumers who are *using it to learn* about varieties of sex and sexuality and *to take more control over their sex lives*” (Davies, 2018, p. 34).
- Liberal feminism argues that the mechanisms for equality and inclusion involve dismantling discrimination through legal parameters and opening formerly enclosed spheres to women's participation.
 - “[F]ocus group study of consumers of feminist pornography [...] more likely to explore non-normative sexual behavior (including BDSM) when shot through the lens of **a feminist director's portrayal of women's sexuality and the ethics of the production of the portrayal**” (Davies, 2018, p.32).

The feminist theory that is the most vocal about the problematic nature of pornography is **radical feminism**. Radical feminism is split into two distinct approaches that are highly related to women's biology.

- Radical feminism argues that the problem is oppression. Rubin argues that women are oppressed due to their biological relationship to kinship, whereas Firestone argues that women are oppressed due to their biology.
 - A well-known radical feminist, Catherine Mackinnon is a vocal critic of pornography. She states that pornography defends “sex-based coercion, force, assault, and trafficking in sexual subordination” (Mackinnon, 1994).
- Radical feminism, both approaches argue that the solution is liberation.
 - “[P]ornography is factually connected in many ways to a whole array of tangible human injuries” (Mackinnon, 1994).
- Radical feminism argues that the mechanism for change for each respective approach is for Rubin to restructure society's relationship to parenting and family structures, and Firestone is seizing the control of reproduction.
 - “Reports from women's real lives are then trivialized as ‘intended to shock’” rather than accepted about their lived experiences due to the prevalent use and acceptance of pornography (Mackinnon, 1994).

Radical feminism is *limiting because of this narrow perspective and allows for a larger society to dismiss it*. This narrow perspective is primarily due to arguing about women's biology and personhood, which is often ignored as a subjective concept because of the argument over consent and choices.

- “[W]omen and children in pornography are, in the main, not there by choice but because of a lack of choices. [T]hey usually ‘consent’ to the acts only in the degraded and demented sense of the world” (Mackinnon, 2005, p. 995).
- **Marxist-socialist feminism** builds on radical feminism by recognizing that women live in a highly patriarchal society and adds on to it by also emphasizing that women live in a capitalist society. Therefore, in this matter, socialist feminism moves away from radical feminism by situating itself on a capitalist patriarchal framework.
- Marxist-socialist feminism argues that the problem is that women are oppressed, and the cause for their oppression is **capitalist patriarchy**.
 - The Internet age enables the “online pornography market” to flourish and change how “material [is] sold as well as distributed by a market for the purpose of sexual arousal of mostly male consumers (McVey et al., 2021, p. 57).
- Marxist-socialist feminism argues that the solution is liberation, likewise to radical feminism.
 - “[T]o user-generated platforms and associated business models for the global pornography industry [...] a pressing need to understand how the industry is selling itself to women as self-producers of content, and how this relates to newer manifestations of women's sexualized inequality” (McVey et al., 2022, p.1).
- Marxist-socialist feminism argues that the mechanisms towards the solution are revolutionary change through lived struggles, cross-race and class organization, and campaigns to change the perception of labor that society accepts.
 - “[T]he economic and cultural elite that shape the material and ideological world that determines how women – and their children will live,” therefore, they reject the **“ridiculous claim that the only industry that has no power in the real world is porn”** (Dines & Smith, 2012, p. 19).

Conclusion

Pornography and the porn industry is a *capitalist patriarchal institution* that encapsulates a more significant dialogue due to situating itself in a more objective environment. One cannot be dismissed that the porn industry does profit immensely from its degenerating product. Furthermore, it reestablishes the oppressive patriarchal society in maintaining its dominance over women's lives in a personal and public manner.

The Marxist-feminist lens offers a distinct way to see that pornography moves past the standard rhetoric given between liberal and radical feminists.

To establish a grander project would utilize feminist methodology to emphasize further the environment that women find themselves within and outside the porn industry. This larger potential project is necessary to understand women's narratives, lived experiences, and stories to illustrate the problematic nature of pornography.

- It must be done through a **“genuine reciprocal dialogue”** through the motivation of friendship, as argued by Lugones and Spellman.
- The **“Stick-In-the-Pond Metaphor”** argued by Harding addresses the need to create dialogue and document the different lived experiences of women and other individuals concerning pornography.