

# ***Rival and Ally: An Analysis of the Feminist Movement's Multiple Perspectives Influences on the Evolution of the Porn Industry***

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**Abstract:** While recognizing the tremendous economic and cultural impact of today's porn industry and pornographic culture in the digital age, pornography has rarely been the subject of analysis by social movements and some progressives. This paper then reviews the sex debate, the attitudes and influence of different feminist schools of thought on the porn industry since its boom in the 1960s. It examines how anti-pornography feminism brought attention to the porn industry and what regulation and transformation it brought to this industry. It also illustrates how pro-sex feminism brought a new discourse and space for development in the porn industry. However, different schools of feminism did have some influence on the construction of the porn industry, while lacking substantial and prominent achievements. The polarized tension caused the absence of critical perspectives on the porn industry, thence the less effective strategy toward it.

**Keywords:** Anti-porn feminism, Pro-sex feminism, Pornography, Porn industry, Feminist porn.

## **1. Introduction**

The porn industry was created under the dual constructs of patriarchy and the capitalist system. Shira Tarrant defined pornography refers to visual depictions that are intended to sexually arouse the viewer, such as still photos, magazines, adult cable television channels, or VHS movies in general. And today, pornography is more likely to mean online video; and, in the future, technological changes may again shift how these visual depictions are delivered to the consumer [1]. Under radical feminist analysis, the institution of pornography reveals the dominance of men as well as the subordination of women [2]. The sexualization and objectification of women in pornography reveal a social system of inequality. The institution of the porn industry can also be reflected in material terms, which demonstrates the capitalist nature of the porn industry. The pornography market occupies a significant

position in the global capitalist economic system, with a market value of over \$100 billion in some assessments [3]. As a result of the strong investment in the porn industry, it has also brought many technological innovations in the last century. With the development of technology and the update of devices such as virtual reality in recent years, pornography is also considered the industry most likely to drive consumer adoption of virtual reality technology [4].

Due to a number of factors such as the emergence and expansion of the global network, and the advancement of globalization, the porn industry is also expanding and causing the expansion of pornographic culture. A 2011 study noted that revenue from the world's porn industry - including revenue from Internet sites, cable television, magazines, in-room hotel movies, and sex toys - was calculated to be about \$97 billion in 2006. As noted by Hilton, Jr, and Watts, the global porn revenue reportedly exceeds the total revenue of Microsoft, Google, Amazon, eBay, Yahoo, Apple, and Netflix. We can reasonably speculate on the size of the porn industry by the high revenue it generates [4]. Because of the expansion of the porn industry, pornographic culture is gradually proliferating in reality. For example, sexually suggestive advertisements and music videos can be seen everywhere, and many games are full of obscene and sexy elements. Pornography-driven images and entertainment are growing in the public domain.

We can see pornography as an important media medium through which to question normative expectations. Pornography can also be understood as a sociological phenomenon to provide a glimpse of historical and contemporary morality. However, pornography has rarely been the subject of analysis by social movements and some progressives. Feminist marketing scholars were the first to recognize the importance of the market for pornography to the discipline. These early studies not only acknowledged the scope of the market but also gave special attention to the commodification of pornography and violence against women. After some seminal works (e.g. Hirschman 1991, Stern 1991), however, not only did pornography largely disappear from the attention of the discipline of marketing, but scholarship on pornography as a male power structure also disappeared around this time [3-6].

During the times of “sexual liberation” and the “Golden Age of Porn” (1969-1984), the production and distribution of pornographic films were at the high of their development. The increasing public exposure to porn has brought a heated debate within the feminist movement. From 1980 to 1984, on the feminist issue of sexual morality, American feminists were divided into two separate camps. One camp is radical feminists, who believe that sexuality in a male-dominated society exacerbates and perpetuates gender violence against women. Among the opposite camp, which we call libertarian feminists, believe that the main characteristic of sexuality is sexual liberation which is brought about by the exchange of pleasure between sexual partners with sexual consent. This debate had a profound impact on the subsequent attitudes and the movement of different feminist schools toward the porn industry. Subsequently, the two sides with opposing attitudes toward the porn industry evolved into Anti-Pornography Feminism and Pro-sex Feminism. Even though these two feminisms hold different attitudes toward the porn industry, they have both influenced the industry through their different efforts.

## **2. Rivalry Against Alienated Sexuality: Anti-porn Feminism and their Effect on Porn Industry**

In the mid-1970s and early 1980s, with the growing awareness of pornography potentially leading to sexual violence and exacerbating gender inequality, the anti-porn feminism (mostly radical feminism) movement emerged particularly in anglophones (English-speaking) countries such as UK and US, advocating the elimination of pornography. Anti-pornography feminists insist pornography is an industry that exploits females complicit in violence against women. Hence pornography abolition is necessary to ensure women's political and civil rights [6].

Anti-pornography feminists frame the issue in terms of “harm to women”. They assert that pornography causes two forms of harm in production and consumption. The first form of harm happens during the making of pornography, where evidence illustrates the rampant abuse and exploitation of women performing in pornography. The consumption of pornography leads to the second form of harm which affects all women in society. The broad exposure to pornographic material reshapes the sexual and cultural attitudes towards rape and sexual harassment which contributed to the humiliation and coercion towards women [7].

The effects of pornography consumption are mixed and still widely debated. From the perspective of anti-pornography feminists, they consider pornography leads to perpetuating sexism and violence against women through the stereotyping of bodies, the sexual objectification of women, and the androcentric construction of sex [8]. At the level of social impact, the lack of regulation of pornography will normalize sexual objectification, enticement to sexual violence against females, increased rape of children, hatred of women, and boost sex trafficking [9].

The effort of Anti-Porn Feminism is committed to mitigating the effects listed above. The feminist anti-pornography movement emerged during the second half of the 1970s with feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, and Gloria Steinem, amongst others. They attracted particular attention through their campaigns, books, and legislative efforts.

Anti-pornography feminists conduct campaign activities, including slide shows, public demonstrations, conferences, lobbying, sex industry tours, and collaborative adversarial movement with conservatives. The expose slide show of hardcore and soft-core pornography as educational efforts to raise consciousness among women and men to end pornography consumption. Large public demonstrations against pornography are held with public panel discussions, most notably the WAP's march on Times Square in 1979 with the slogan "Stop Violence Against Women." Conferences focus on state opposition to sex-positive feminism and addressing the question of the role of trafficking in the international sex industry also be arranged within and between anti-pornography organizations like WAP and WHISPER [10]. Anti-pornography feminist groups devote lobbying for relevant legislation. To highlight the feminist "civil rights" approach in anti-pornography legislation, Anti-pornography feminists successfully lobbied for the passage of the Dworkin-MacKinnon Anti-pornography Civil Rights Ordinance to distinguish from the traditional ordinance "obscenity" approach. The Media coverage of guided tours to the sex industry also brought lots of attention to Anti-pornography Feminism. In WAP's Times Square tours and WAVPM's red light district tours, Anti-pornography Feminism groups with the purpose of education organize participants to visit sex shops and talk with sex show performers who are at leisure. With the same goals of reducing or eliminating pornography, Anti-Porn Feminism also has several collaborative adversarial movements with conservatives to increase influence and push legislation related to anti-pornography [11].

In the area of books and literature, Anti-pornography feminists focus on the analysis of pornography and how the prevalence of mainstream pornography negatively affects women's autonomy and self-worth, exacerbates the tension between gender inequality, and foreshadows social instability. One representative Anti-pornography feminist Andrea Dworkin with her notable works *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), *Woman Hating* (1974), and *Intercourse* (1987), emphasizes the sex-based harm against women. On top of her dozens of works of feminist writing, Andrea Dworkin also works closely with Catharine A. MacKinnon to publish the reveal works, including *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality* (1988) and *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (1998). These works have generated widespread public attention, discussion, and a great deal of media coverage.

To combat pornography and defend the rights of women harmed by pornography, the legislative and judicial efforts of anti-pornography feminists brought new ordinances and regulations to

pornography. The Anti-pornography Civil Rights Ordinance, written by Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon in 1983, advocated laws that defined pornography as civil rights harm and allowed victims to sue pornographers in civil court. This approach to civil rights highlights the difference between the new Ordinance to traditional obscenity law uses prior restraint and criminal penalties to suppress pornography. The Anti-pornography Civil Rights Ordinance was one of the few ordinances that passed. In contrast, most of the anti-pornography feminists' right-based approaches met with multiple resistance and stay in the stage of bills. For example, the Pornography Victims' Compensation Act permits survivors of crime (pornographic influences) to sue the relevant pornographers. And a Senate committee holds a hearing on the bill. Still, there is no vote on the bill. Even though the anti-pornography feminists' legislative efforts and the outcome are hard to establish through legislation, the passed ordinance can still be overturned. The Anti-pornography Civil Rights Ordinance for instance, with the reason violate the freedom of speech protections of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, passed versions of ordinance were struck down by courts [12].

The years of effort of anti-porn feminism successfully raise consciousness among women and men about pornography consumption. Their steps in legislative and judicial efforts also lead to the regulation of specific genres of pornography.

The agreement of Anti-porn feminism that pornography caters the demand for creates a demand for the sex trade, followed by sexual violence and abuse. Therefore, they advocate using the criminal legal system to address sexual violence, redefining sex crimes in the law, and extending sex offenders' prison sentences. While Anti-porn feminists' act of pornography abolition emphasizes ensuring women's political and civil rights, their action of drafting legal solutions also is criticized for ignoring the position of transactional sex workers and pornography performers. Rather than fundamentally reducing the harm of sexual violence, these laws shift the burden of those harms to sex trade workers and performers. The claims of the right of non-sex workers leave the safety of sex workers in an insecure place [13].

There are also objections within anti-porn feminism groups to keep focusing on legislative and judicial efforts. They find the outcome of legislative measures will be rendered ineffectual by the courts while violating the principle of free speech. The concentration on legislation makes Anti-pornography feminists and groups entangled in police squabbles. At the same time, this also takes their energy away from education which may harm the anti-pornography movement.

Anti-porn feminism raises public awareness of harm to women caused by pornography with an educational approach. They further defended and protected women's rights through judicial supervision. Educational efforts have caught public attention to the profound effects of pornography, and media exposure has brought about public discussion and debate. Despite repeated pushback and opposition to defining pornography as civil rights harm, the legislative push to limit particular genres of pornography has driven industry regulation.

### 3. Allies of the Anathema<sup>1</sup>: Pro-sex Feminists and their Interaction with Porn Market

When it came to the question that “is the porn emancipation or alienation<sup>2</sup> to women”, a cluster of feminists stood firmly opposite to the anti-porn feminists. Their critique on anti-porn feminists firstly appeared in 1979, marked by the publication of Ellen Willes's essay, *Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography*. They emerged as “pro-sex feminism” in the 1982, Bernard Conference, and initiated

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<sup>1</sup> “Anathema” refers to the porn industry. In the 1970s, porns were fiercely criticized by Anti-porn feminists, and seen as unethical and obscene by the conservatives.

<sup>2</sup> “Alienation” refers to the alienated labor for women who directly participate in the production of porns according to Marx's theory of labor.

their debate with anti-porn feminism about sexuality. This vein of feminism movement was mainly grouped by sexually liberal feminism and post feminism. The pro-sex feminists allied with the porn, as another approach to the rebellion against patriarchal representation and construction of reality on sexuality.

In order to prevent anti-porn feminist's claim to abolish or censor on the porn from being legitimate, Feminists Anti-Censorship Taskforce was founded by pro-sex feminist on 1984 [14]. The leading figures for pro-sex feminist were Gayle Rubin, Carole Vance, and Judith Butler. Gayle Rubin, the queer anthropologist, suggested the urgent need for new theories and approaches to represent sexuality, and that it was inevitable for feminist and women to enter the porn industry. Carole Vance, in her work *Pleasure and Danger*, discussed the two sides of the pursuit for female sexual freedom in a dialectical perspective and emphasizes the ignored possible female agency in sexuality and the marginalized female sexual pleasure in the anti-pornography narrative [15]. Putting forward that even biological sex is the construct of society and culture, Judith Butler's theory had a significant influence on the change of porn culture leading to the invention of queer porn.

Whilst allying with the porn industry to reckon with the censorship on pornography, pro-sex feminists also have sought the approach to deal with the problematic issues within it. Therefore, the goals set for the pro-sex movements such as *PornYes*, were not only to pursue sexual freedom as an important part of women's liberation, but also to interrogate and deconstruct the patriarchal hegemony of sexual representation and the dominant discourse in the pornography industry.

The liberal philosophy was the basis for goals and directions guiding the pro-sex feminist movement, and it offered them a different path of thought in understanding pornography than anti-pornographic feminism. For anti-porn feminists whose theory based on radical feminism and partly Marxism, pornography was patriarchal oppression and exploitation of women in the expression of sexuality and the representation of unequal gender relations in sexuality. It was a direct product of patriarchy and the phallocentrically constructed reality of sexuality that should be abolished and overthrown. Meanwhile, in the perspective of liberal feminism, pornography, as the sexually explicit image, was not essentially harmful and oppressive, and there still remained the possibility of creating porns depicting more on women's sexual gratification and sexual consent. Therefore, as Valero Heredia precisely described, pornography was the 'instrument' with the potential faculty of 'transformative and empowering' for those marginalized by the dominant discourse within the porn culture [16].

The long-standing problems within the pornography industry were also the source of their theories. They express their disapproval of the phallocentric sexuality of mainstream pornography, in which women were usually degraded, the objects of male sexual desire. When verbally and physically roughed up, or when performing oral and facial sex, women act as the recipients of the money shot. They may show sexual pleasure, but this does not mean that women's sexual gratification and freedom of pursuing pleasure are respected in these works. Therefore, pro-sex feminists have insisted on women's freedom to pursue sexual pleasure and their subjectivity in sex, and they have hoped to cease women's passive suffering from phallocentric sex and enjoy it as active participants in sex.

A critical understanding of anti-pornographic feminism also forms part of the theory of pro-sex feminism. Anti-porn feminism argued that under the influence of male hegemony, there is no real consent in sex in patriarchal societies, and therefore women were victims of non-consensus sex. Pro-sex feminists pointed out that in anti-pornography feminism's indictment of pornography, women exist only as victims, and their agency in sex is almost completely erased [16]. They did not agree with anti-pornography feminists on this point because they believed that women still have the possibility to pursue sexual pleasure of their own free will and to reach sexual consent with their sexual partners.

The above discussion actually took place in a gender binary, heteronormative, and homonormative

context, and after being influenced by queer theory, this discussion of porn has opened up to more diverse gender identities, thence changed the porn culture promoted by pro-sex feminists.

Based on these theories, pro-sex feminism defines the basic strategies of the movement. First, they joined forces with the media, publishers such as Sage, and artists to fight against censorship and interference in sexual representation [16]. In 1985, the organization of pro-sex feminists, Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce, contributed to the declaration that Indianapolis Ordinance as unconstitutional. Indianapolis Ordinance was one of ordinances co-authored by MacKinnon and Dworkin to allow women appeal the pornography considered to be harmful to themselves [17].

However, pro-sex feminists were not completely protective of pornography; they also have advocated women to enter the porn industry and participate in the porn industry profession of writing or directing to produce more positive pornography. Thus, rather than abolishing pornography altogether, they preferred to control the discourse of pornography and eliminate the dominant pornography in the pornosphere, which was deeply influenced by the male-centered discourse, by producing better and more egalitarian pornography. In 1985, the erotic magazine for lesbian, *On Our Backs*, publish its first volume in San Francisco devoting effort for women's sexual pleasure and desire.

After years of their effort, new genre of porn was created as the prominent achievement of pro-sex feminism. The first pornographic film made for female consumers were called 'porn for women', and such type of pornography could be seen as the prototype of feminist porn. Then in the 1990s, feminist porn came into being with the call of feminist in the social context of sexual liberation, which was also the remarkable result of feminists' experiment of sexual representation. According to Taormino's definition, feminist porns was the challenger and contestator to the hegemonic discourses about 'gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class, ability, age, body type, and other identity markers.' [18]. On the other hand, it was also the explorer for the new sphere for feminist discourse out of the limited context of 'gender hierarchy and both heteronormativity and homonormativity [18]. Have been impacted by the queer movement during late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the porn industry opened up for the queer porn, a new genre of alternative porn. Very much similar to feminist porn, queer porn as the product of avant-garde theory of sexual politics, has the potential to change the dynamic of porn market and the stereotype of sexuality within the porn culture. Combined with other subcultures, such as punk culture, the produce of queer porn attached great importance to the self-representation of diverse gender identity [19]. Distinct from the performative sexuality depicted by the mainstream pornography, 'realcore' was emphasized due to the pursuit of real desire and pleasure in the queer porn.

Through the existing literature, the impact of pro-sex feminists on the porn industry can be broadly divided into three aspects. Firstly, feminist porns and other alternative porns enriches the variety of pornography, achieving a diverse marketplace. According to *The Feminist Porn Book*, because of the commercial potential of feminist porns and the success of 'porn for women', larger studios within mainstream industry such as Vivid Entertainment started to fund or produce feminist porns in addition to the independent feminist pornographers. Also, the development of digital technologies made it easier for the gender minority groups to produce and share their amateurs porns. Then, the social movement of pro-sex feminism has had an impact on both labor norms and the working environment within the pornography industry. Unlike anti-porn feminism, who have struggled to free women forced to work in the sex industry, they wanted women and sexual minority workers who voluntarily participate in the industry to have better pay and more friendly working conditions. To this end, feminist porn producers have become more respectful of the free choice of actors to have no-lists<sup>3</sup>, and they have become more concerned with the health and safety of workers and paid them decent

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<sup>3</sup> No-list refers to the name list of whom porn stars prefer not to work or cooperate with.



wages. Outside the industry, their movements have also attracted the attention of NGOs, allowing for more media exposure of human rights issues within the industry [20]. Finally, the new type of feminist pornography was invented for educational purposes, and this may have included the potential to expand the commercial value of pornography. For instance, feminist pornographer Taormino has done with mainstream pornographers for *The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Women*.

The pro-sex feminism movement had substantial impact on the pornography industry in a relatively limited way. In the article *After the feminist porn book*, the authors point out that the evidence regarding the impact of feminist pornography in business and industry is not strong enough [21]. Today, in 2022, feminist porn and other alternative porn still occupy only a niche market, and data and further information about feminist porn studios and production lines remain almost blank to academics. The effectiveness and implications were also not evident for efforts to promote the fair-trade principle within the industry. After all, improving the quality of pornography and ameliorating the working conditions of those who work in it means increasing the cost of production, and mainstream pornography companies that operate market-oriented and capitalist approaches are not necessarily willing to produce fair-trade porn in the absence of legal regulation. In addition, the decentralized and individualized approach to feminist pornography production indicates that it is difficult to achieve a top-down cultural impact that would change consumer habits and their taste about pornography.

#### 4. Conclusion

The paper starts with the background of the growing porn industry, and the expanding impact of porn culture that come with it. The porn industry has evolved profoundly with the time, but the unchanged patriarchal nature of pornography brought attention to feminisms respond to it in history. This paper examines anti-porn and pro-sex feminism's arguments in terms of the theories their work is based on, their efforts, including movements, campaigns, publications, and the results and influence of their efforts; then comments on each feminism's work with a neutral standpoint.

The anti-porn feminism asserts that pornography do harm to women in the making and consuming of porn, which further leads to sexism and violence against women. Their notable effort includes the WAP movement, also legislative efforts and works of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. They managed to raise awareness about pornography consumption, and has successfully regulated certain genres of porn. Conversely, pro-sex feminists are the firm allies of porn. They viewed porn as an emancipatory approach to the rebel against patriarchal representation and construction of reality on sexuality. For them, pornography could be utilized to empower those who are marginalized by the mainstream representation and oppressed by the patriarchal structure. Pro-sex feminists wished to control the discourse in porn culture and erase the dominate male-centered discourses. To this end, they made efforts to fight against censorship and involve women in the production of pornography and explored further and invented a new genre of porn-feminist porn.

Although feminist porn is relatively developed at this point than before, people are not exposed to it enough mainly because of its requisite membership and exclusive nature. More gratis feminist porn should be produced and promoted on mainstream platforms. To some extent, the academic discussion and research on porn industry and culture are not commensurate with the immense size and the penetration and influence of them, since porn is considered as a private subject that is difficult to be brought up in the academic settings. We suggest future research should focus more on those topics, the profit-making part of alternative porn in particular.

#### Acknowledgement

All the authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered as co-first author.

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