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PORNOGRAPHY IN THE DIGITAL AGE: DISCOURSES, EVIDENCE, AND THE QUEST FOR BALANCED PUBLIC POLICY

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Abstract

Pornography, a ubiquitous phenomenon in the digital age, presents a multifaceted challenge for rational, evidence-based public policy globally. This critical analysis synthesizes 21st-century academic literature to unravel the complex interplay among socio-cultural discourses, empirical evidence of their effects, and diverse public policy approaches worldwide. We reveal that perspectives on pornography are profoundly varied, rooted in differing religious, political, and gender ideologies. Empirical findings are often contradictory, indicating both adverse outcomes from problematic use (mental health, relationships) and potential positive roles in sexual exploration for others. Correspondingly, global policy responses range from strict prohibition in religious contexts to liberal regulation. From this synthesis, we propose a nuanced policy framework that prioritizes the protection of vulnerable groups—particularly children and those at risk of exploitation—through robust age verification, comprehensive sex education, and strict industry oversight. Simultaneously, this framework advocates for respecting adult liberties, balancing harm reduction with individual freedom, and grounding policy decisions in ongoing, independent, and culturally sensitive research. Our analysis challenges simplistic, monolithic views of pornography, advocating for context-sensitive interventions that acknowledge its complex realities and diverse impacts on society and individuals.

Keywords: Pornography, Public Policy, Empirical Evidence, Discourse Analysis, Exploitation

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Introduction

Pornography is a social and cultural phenomenon with a long history, viewed in vastly different ways across societies. It ranges from an illicit, strictly prohibited medium in some cultures to a legal, regulated industry in others. This understanding and attitude towards pornography reflect diverse values, religious beliefs, and ethical frameworks (Döring & Miller, 2022). Concurrently, the accessibility of pornography in the digital age has rapidly increased, becoming an integral part of daily life for millions worldwide (Döring, 2009). Particularly among adolescents and young adults, pornography has emerged as a significant, albeit unintended, form of sex education (McKee et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, debates about the effects of pornography and its consumption continue across academic, public, and political spheres. Some feminist groups argue that pornography is a tool of oppression, subordinating women. Conversely, another group views pornography as a space for sexual liberation and expression of gender identity (Bridges, 2008; McKee et al., 2020). Health researchers express concerns about the links between pornography use and mental health issues, relationship problems, and sexual functioning (Grubbs et al., 2019). Meanwhile, economists recognize the pornography industry as a lucrative economic sector that creates numerous jobs (Hakim, 2015).

Empirical research in the 21st century has generated diverse and sometimes contradictory evidence regarding the effects of pornography. Some studies find associations between pornography use and reduced sexual satisfaction, relationship problems, and brain changes (Sinke et al., 2020). While other studies suggest that pornography can play a positive role in exploring sexuality, learning about sexual preferences, and increasing sexual flexibility, particularly among women and LGBTQ+ individuals (Flory & Shor, 2025).

The diversity and occasional contradictions in empirical evidence, coupled with varying cultural and societal values, result in a wide range of public policies concerning pornography. These policies range from absolute prohibition in countries with strict laws, such as many in the Middle East and Asia, to regulated but open approaches in many Western nations (Person et al., 2016; Hyden, 2023). A key question arises: what stance should the state ultimately adopt towards pornography and its consumption by the public that is reasonable and evidence-based? Moreover, how should public policy be formulated in today's global context, where pornography is easily accessible and widespread?

This study, therefore, aims to: 1) Synthesize, categorize, and compare perspectives and debates on pornography and its consumption across different societies and cultures. 2) Synthesize, categorize, and compare empirical research from the 21st century regarding the benefits and harms of pornography and its consumption to individuals, interpersonal relationships, and society. 3) Synthesize, categorize, and compare public policies concerning pornography and its consumption in various countries worldwide. Moreover, 4) Critically analyze the question of what stance the state should adopt towards pornography and its consumption by the public, which is evidence-based.

This study employs a systematic review of academic literature from the 21st century (2001-present). Research was conducted across multiple academic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, and TCI, to gather studies on socio-cultural discourse, empirical evidence from psychology, neuroscience, public health, and the social sciences, as well as public policies across various countries. The analysis adopts a critical approach, combining descriptive synthesis with comparative analysis, to provide a comprehensive overview and multi-dimensional understanding of this phenomenon.

Discourse and the Struggle for Meaning: Cross-Societal and Cultural Perspectives

Pornography is not merely a medium with explicit sexual content; it is a cultural symbol whose meaning is contested within diverse discursive fields. Perspectives on pornography reflect

varied religious values, political ideologies, notions of gender and sexuality, and social power structures. Cross-cultural discourse analysis reveals that the meaning of pornography is not universal but is constructed and interpreted differently according to social contexts (Lišková, 2007; Attwood, 2022).

Feminist Discourse: Between Oppression and Liberation

The most intense debates surrounding pornography have emerged within feminist circles, broadly divided into two opposing camps. Anti-pornography feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, argue that pornography subjugates women and constitutes a form of violence against women. They contend that pornography constructs and reinforces male sexual power over women by presenting women as sexual objects and normalizing sexual violence (Eade, 2013; Zhu et al., 2022).

In contrast, sex-positive feminists argue that pornography can be a space for female sexual expression and liberation. They criticize outright opposition to pornography as another form of controlling female sexuality and for overlooking the voices of women who willingly choose to work in the industry. Recent studies indicate that feminist pornography, produced by and for women, often emphasizes consent, body diversity, and female sexual pleasure, distinguishing it from mainstream pornography (Taormino et al., 2013; Castillo, 2023).

The tension between these two camps persists and continues to influence policy formulation. Critical scholarship suggests that this polarized debate may hinder a constructive critical perspective on the pornography industry, leading to ineffective problem-solving strategies (Taormino et al., 2013). Contemporary scholars propose viewing pornography as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, necessitating a distinction between pornography as a concept and pornography as an industry (Zhu et al., 2022; Castillo, 2023).

Religious Discourse: Morality and Sin

Religious perspectives on pornography are often rooted in doctrines concerning sexual morality and purity. In Christianity, especially among conservative groups, pornography is viewed as a sin that contradicts God's plan for sexual relationships, which are meant to occur exclusively within the institution of marriage. Viewing pornography is considered adultery of the heart and a desecration of sexual intimacy. Christian theologians warn that pornography damages marital relationships and can lead to problematic pornography use (Adarsh & Sahoo, 2023), with some even describing it as a "cancer of society" (Dumitrescu, 2018).

In Islam, viewing pornography is strictly forbidden (Haram) as it violates the principles of safeguarding honor and purity (Hifz al-'ird) and protecting life and mind (Hifz al-nafs), according to the Maqasid al-Shari'ah (objectives of Islamic law). Muslim scholars emphasize that pornography constitutes a serious sexual transgression that threatens the structure of the family and Islamic society. Muslim researchers similarly highlight pornography as a significant problem severely impacting human resources in Indonesia (Suwarni & Wahyuni, 2023). Consequently, Islamic criminal laws in several countries impose strict penalties for the production, distribution, and possession of pornography (Sanuri, 2021; Aulia et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, some Muslim scholars propose a more reformist approach, emphasizing the necessity of providing appropriate sex education based on Islamic principles to prevent Muslim youth from turning to pornography as a source of sexual knowledge. Studies reveal that Muslim scholars recognize the growing need for more open discussions on sex education, even while still affirming that pornography remains forbidden (Ismail et al., 2022).

Economic and Labor Rights Discourse

From an economic perspective, pornography is a multi-billion-dollar industry that employs hundreds of thousands of people worldwide (Fleming et al., 2024). Some economists and scholars argue that viewing pornography solely through moral or sexual lenses may overlook its economic dimensions and the labor rights of workers in the industry. Research into the experiences of pornography performers reveals a diverse range of experiences, both positive

and negative. Some choose to work in the industry due to high income and flexible work arrangements, while others face exploitation and coercion (Donevan et al., 2025).

A recent study in Sweden, interviewing individuals filmed in pornography production, found that this group often has a history of repeated violence and ongoing mental health problems (Donevan et al., 2025). This finding underscores the importance of protecting the rights and welfare of workers in the industry and distinguishing between consensual labor and exploitation and human trafficking, which are severe issues linked to the pornography and sex work industries.

Cross-Cultural Differences

Perspectives on pornography differ significantly between Western and Asian cultures. In Western societies, which emphasize individual liberty and freedom of expression, pornography is often seen as part of the right to access information and artistic expression, albeit with regulation to protect children and prevent exploitation (Giroux, 2021; McGlynn et al., 2024). Conversely, in many Asian societies, particularly those influenced by Islamic, Buddhist, and Confucian religions, pornography is often perceived as a threat to family values, social relationships, and public morality (Ning, 2011; Esmaeil et al., 2023).

Cross-national comparative studies show that attitudes towards pornography not only vary across cultures but also differ within societies based on factors such as age, education, religious beliefs, and personal experiences (Adamson et al., 2021). Understanding the diversity of these discourses is crucial for developing public policies tailored to each specific social context.

Table 1 Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Pornography and Its Consumption

Perspective/Discourse	Core Stance	Key Rationale	Policy Implication
Anti-Pornography Feminism	Pornography is a tool for oppressing women	Objectifies women and normalizes sexual violence	Should be strictly prohibited or restricted
Sex-Positive Feminism	Pornography can be a space for sexual liberation	Respects women's choices and expression	Should be regulated to protect labor rights and prevent exploitation
Christianity	Pornography is a sin and contrary to morality	Destroys the sanctity of sexual relations in marriage	Should be severely prohibited or restricted; emphasizes moral education
Islam	Pornography is absolutely forbidden (Haram)	Violates principles of safeguarding honor and purity	Should be strictly prohibited by religious law
Economics/Labor Rights	Pornography is a legitimate industry	Must consider the rights and welfare of performers	Should be regulated to prevent exploitation and human trafficking
Western Liberalism	Pornography is part of individual liberty	Freedom of expression should be protected	It should be regulated only to protect children and prevent violence
Anti-Pornography Feminism	Pornography is a tool for oppressing women	Objectifies women and normalizes sexual violence	Should be strictly prohibited or restricted

The analysis of these discourses demonstrates that there is no single, universally correct perspective. Each discourse reflects distinct values and social experiences, which must be considered collectively in formulating appropriate and equitable public policies.

Empirical Evidence: Between Harm and Benefit

Empirical research on the effects of pornography and its consumption has grown rapidly in the 21st century, particularly in the last decade. These studies cover multiple dimensions, from impacts on mental health, brain function, relationships, and sexual functioning, to social and economic effects. However, the existing evidence is often complex and sometimes contradictory, making interpretation and application for policy formulation challenging.

Impact on Mental Health and Well-being

Numerous studies have found associations between pornography use and mental health problems, especially among individuals with compulsive or problematic pornography use (PPU). Studies among U.S. college students indicate that compulsive pornography use is significantly associated with anxiety, depression, and impaired daily functioning (Grubbs et al., 2019; Menning et al., 2022). Individuals who perceive their pornography use as problematic exhibit clinically significant levels of psychological distress and psychopathological symptoms (Camilleri et al., 2021).

However, a longitudinal study during COVID-19 that tracked a sample of Americans found that while pornography website visits increased during the early phase of the pandemic, overall pornography use and problematic use among the general population did not significantly increase compared to pre-pandemic levels (Grubbs et al., 2022). This finding suggests that the relationship between pornography use and mental health might be more complex than a simple linear association and could depend on other factors, such as moral-religious beliefs and usage patterns.

Qualitative research exploring the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals revealed that pornography plays a significant role in their sexual identity and gender development, often serving as a more LGBTQ+-friendly source of sex education than other societal channels (Flory & Shor, 2025). This finding underscores that the impact of pornography on mental health and well-being can vary depending on social context and individual characteristics.

Impact on the Brain and Nervous System

Neuroscience research has provided insights into the effects of pornography on the brain. Studies using brain imaging technologies such as fMRI and fNIRS have shown that viewing pornography activates the brain's reward system, particularly dopamine-related areas involved in pleasure and reinforcement (Shu et al., 2025).

Studies on individuals with compulsive sexual behaviors found that sexual stimuli, including pornography, affect memory function and self-control. Individuals with compulsive behaviors exhibit slower response times when presented with pornography images during attention-demanding tasks (Sinke et al., 2020). Research using fNIRS in frequent pornography users found reduced accuracy in cognitive tasks after viewing pornography compared to infrequent users (Shu et al., 2025).

Event-Related Potentials (ERP) research indicates that individuals prone to problematic internet pornography use show an exaggerated brain response to novel pornography images, especially during early information processing (Wang et al., 2022). This finding aligns with addiction models that emphasize novelty-seeking and conditioned responses to addiction-related stimuli as key mechanisms in the development and maintenance of addictive behaviors. However, interpreting these research findings requires caution. The observed brain changes do not necessarily indicate "damage" or "addiction." Many neuroscientists emphasize the brain's plasticity and its capacity for continuous change in response to experience. Observed changes might reflect normal brain adaptation rather than pathological signs.

Impact on Relationships and Sexual Satisfaction

One of the most extensively studied aspects is the impact of pornography on romantic relationships and sexual satisfaction. A large-scale longitudinal study in France, following over 100,000 individuals and more than 4,000 couples over three years (2015-2017), found that among men, higher frequency of pornography use and increased use over time were associated with lower sexual self-competence, impaired sexual functioning, and decreased partner sexual satisfaction (Kohut et al., 2021). These findings suggest potential negative consequences of frequent pornography use in men.

However, studies exploring the relationship between pornography use and relationship quality indicate that the *context* of use is more important than mere frequency. Research on couples found that partners who view pornography together report higher relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction than those where only one partner views it alone (Bridges, 2008; Kohut et al., 2021). Other studies show that incongruence in pornography use patterns between partners is associated with reduced relationship quality more so than individual pornography consumption (Maddox et al., 2021).

Furthermore, women's attitudes towards pornography play a significant role in mediating its impact on relationships. A study in New Zealand found that women with highly negative attitudes towards pornography reported lower levels of emotional and social intimacy when their partners frequently viewed pornography. At the same time, women with less negative attitudes did not exhibit this association (Adamson et al., 2021).

A 42-country study among women found that motives for pornography use were more significant for women's sexual well-being than the frequency of viewing alone. Women who viewed pornography for sexual exploration and pleasure tended to have better sexual well-being than those who viewed it to escape negative emotions (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2025).

Impact on Youth and Sexual Development

The impact of pornography on children and adolescents is a significant concern. Research indicates that exposure to pornography during childhood and early adolescence can affect sexual attitudes, expectations about sexual relationships, and future sexual behaviors (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016; Farré et al., 2020). A study in Malaysia found a correlation between pornography viewing among adolescents and mental health problems, relationship issues, and academic performance (Ali et al., 2024).

However, the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (DSMM) proposes that the effects of pornography on adolescents are not uniform but depend on individual risk factors, developmental stage, and social susceptibility factors (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). This model suggests that some groups of adolescents may experience more negative impacts than others, depending on factors such as family support, social environment, and personality traits (Farré et al., 2020).

Potential Benefits: Sex Education and Exploration

While most evidence focuses on negative impacts, some research has begun to explore the potential benefits of pornography, mainly when used in appropriate contexts. Qualitative studies found that some young men reported pornography as sexually educational, helping them understand their sexual desires, develop sexual identity, and learn new sexual techniques (McCormack & Wignall, 2016).

Research among women suggests that pornography can be a source of sexual knowledge, guidance for sexual practices and positions, and imagination (Mesquita & Pinto, 2020). A study in Austria found that frequent pornography viewing among women was associated with improved sexual functioning through increased sexual flexibility (Komlenac & Hochleitner, 2022; Perissini et al., 2024).

A study that developed criteria to identify pornography that can support healthy sexual development in young adults, using a Delphi Panel approach, found 6 important criteria: 1)

diverse sexual practices, 2) diverse body types, genders, and ethnicities, 3) explicit consent negotiation, 4) genuine sexual pleasure expression, 5) sexual communication, and 6) emotional/relational context (McKee et al., 2023).

Table 2 Empirical Evidence on the Effects of Pornography and Its Consumption

Dimension of Impact	Negative Effects Observed	Positive Effects Observed	Influencing Factors
Mental Health	Anxiety, depression, and psychological distress in PPU groups	No observed adverse effects; positive effects in LGBTQ+ groups	Usage patterns, moral-religious beliefs, social context
Brain and Nervous System	Changes in the reward system, impaired memory, and self-control	Brain plasticity and adaptation	Frequency and duration of use, individual risk factors
Relationships	Decreased sexual satisfaction and relationship quality, especially when viewed alone	Increased sexual satisfaction when viewed with a partner	Usage context (alone vs. with partner), partner concordance, attitudes towards pornography
Sexual Functioning	Decreased sexual self-competence, impaired sexual functioning in men	Increased sexual flexibility and improved sexual functioning in some women	Gender identity, frequency, perceived realism
Youth and Adolescence	Distorted sexual attitudes, unrealistic expectations, and mental health problems	Education and sexual exploration for some groups	Age of first exposure, individual risk factors, and family support
Education and Sexual Health	Distorted and unrealistic information about sexual relationships	Source of knowledge and sexual guidance for some groups (LGBTQ+)	Quality and type of pornography, existing sex education

The synthesis of this empirical evidence indicates that the effects of pornography and its consumption are complex and cannot be categorized as "good" or "bad." The effects depend on multiple factors, including user characteristics, usage context, type of pornography, and socio-cultural factors. This information has significant implications for public policy, which must consider this complexity rather than choosing one side over the other.

Government Stance and Public Policy in the Contemporary World: A Diversity of Approaches

Public policies concerning pornography and its consumption vary widely across the globe today. These policies reflect diverse cultural differences, religious values, political systems, and interpretations of empirical evidence. A comparative analysis of policies across regions and countries reveals a spectrum of approaches, ranging from strict prohibition to open regulation.

Strict Prohibition Approaches: The Case of Islamic and Asian Countries

Most countries in the Middle East and North Africa, predominantly Muslim, enforce strict prohibitions on the production, distribution, and possession of pornography. These policies are

rooted in Sharia law, which considers pornography religiously forbidden (Haram). Violations can lead to penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment or corporal punishment, such as flogging. Countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan rigorously enforce these laws and utilize technology to filter and block pornography websites (Shishkina & Issaev, 2018; Cherati et al., 2019; Aulia et al., 2023).

In Asia, countries like China and Indonesia also maintain strict anti-pornography policies, though their rationales may differ. China prohibits pornography, citing the protection of public morality and the prevention of "spiritual pollution" under the Communist Party's policy (Nagle, 2011; Jacobs, 2020). Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority country, enacted an Anti-Pornography Law in 2008, which prescribes severe penalties for the production and distribution of pornography (Febriansyah, 2018; Rahamathulla, 2021).

Strict Regulation Approaches: The Case of the United Kingdom and South Korea

Several countries in East Asia and parts of Europe adopt strict regulatory approaches rather than outright bans on pornography. The United Kingdom's Section 63 of the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 (known as the "extreme pornography law") strictly controls the possession of pornography depicting violent acts in a sexually explicit context. Even possession for private viewing is considered a criminal offense, making it the first country in Europe and the Western world to enact such a law (Pitaksantayothin, 2019). Furthermore, the Digital Economy Act 2017 mandates effective age verification systems for commercial pornography websites to prevent access by children and young people. While this law has not been fully implemented due to technical challenges and privacy concerns, it demonstrates the state's intent to protect children from pornography (Sharpe & Mead, 2021; Turvey et al., 2024).

South Korea implements strict internet filtering, including automatic blocking of pornography websites. Citizens wishing to access blocked content must submit a request to unblock it, which involves complex procedures and identity verification. This policy aims to control youth access and prevent the spread of illegal content, such as child pornography (Feng et al., 2020; Pitaksantayothin, 2023).

Japan presents an interesting approach. Despite having a large and diverse pornography industry, all domestically produced pornography must undergo "mosaic censorship" to obscure genitals, as per Article 175 of the Criminal Code, which prohibits the dissemination of obscene material. This policy aims to strike a balance between freedom of expression and the preservation of public morality (Alexander, 2003; Matsui, 2015).

Liberal Approaches: The Case of Nordic Countries and the Netherlands

Nordic countries such as Sweden and Denmark, along with the Netherlands, have more liberal policies regarding pornography compared to other nations. Pornography involving consenting adults is legal and considered part of the adult entertainment industry. However, these countries have stringent laws to protect children and prevent human trafficking and exploitation (Hyden, 2023; Loibl et al., 2023).

Sweden offers a notable example with its "Nordic model," which criminalizes the purchase of sexual services but not their sale. This policy aims to reduce demand and protect potential victims of human trafficking (Måansson, 2017). Although it does not directly ban pornography, this policy reflects a strict stance against sexual exploitation. Recent studies in Sweden on the experiences of individuals filmed in pornography have revealed issues of exploitation and mental health problems, which may prompt a review of future policies (Donevan et al., 2025).

The United States Approach: Between Freedom of Expression and Regulation

The United States adopts a complex and internally contradictory approach to pornography. Often described as a "cultural center" (Adler, 2007), non-obscene pornography is protected as freedom of expression under the First Amendment. However, determining what constitutes "obscenity" remains a complex and controversial issue. Federal laws such as the Child Online Protection Act (COPA) and the Communications Decency Act (CDA) have attempted to

regulate youth access to online pornography. However, many provisions have been challenged as infringing on freedom of expression (Hyden, 2023).

At the state level, there is considerable variation. Southern states and those with conservative ideologies often have stricter laws, whereas coastal states tend to be more liberal. Counterintuitively, empirical research has shown that conservative and more religious states may still have higher rates of pornography consumption (Perry & Whitehead, 2020), including obscene content online (MacInnis & Hodson, 2014). The tension between individual liberty and the protection of children and prevention of exploitation remains a contentious issue in American society (Fairchild, 2007).

Case Study: Age Verification Enforcement

In recent years, several countries have attempted to mandate age verification systems for pornography websites to protect children and young people. However, implementing such systems faces various challenges, including technical issues, privacy concerns, and questions about their effectiveness.

A study in the United Kingdom exploring the feasibility and acceptability of technology for preventing youth access to online pornography found that parents were highly concerned about privacy, especially regarding the use of biometric data. Parent-child dialogue remained the most preferred approach, although parents often felt they lacked resources for such conversations (Turvey et al., 2024).

Research on public policy and law suggests that mandatory age verification may have unintended consequences, such as directing users to unregulated platforms with potentially more harmful content or creating data security risks (Sharpe & Mead, 2021). Therefore, while age verification is a popular public policy approach, its effectiveness and actual outcomes require further study and evaluation.

Table 3 Public Policies on Pornography in Various Countries

Country/Region	Policy Approach	Key Laws/Measures	Rationale	Effectiveness and Challenges
Islamic Countries (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan)	Strict Prohibition	Sharia-based laws, website blocking, and strict criminal penalties	Religious morality, protection of Islamic values	Difficult to enforce; access via VPNs and black markets
China	Strict Prohibition	Anti-obscenity laws, an internet censorship system	Content control to maintain social and political stability	Strict enforcement, but still accessed via illicit channels
United Kingdom	Strict Regulation	Section 63 Criminal Justice and Immigration Act 2008 (extreme pornography), Digital Economy Act 2017 (age verification), Online Safety Bill	Protection of children and youth	Not fully implemented; privacy and technical issues
South Korea	Strict Regulation	Automatic website blocking, unblocking request system	Protection of youth, upholding public morality	Relatively effective enforcement, but criticized for violating freedom

Country/Region	Policy Approach	Key Laws/Measures	Rationale	Effectiveness and Challenges
Japan	Mixed Regulation	Article 175 Criminal Code (Mosaic Censorship)	Balance between freedom and public morality	Large industry but requires censorship; criticized for inconsistency
Sweden, Norway, Denmark	Liberal but strict on child protection	Anti-human trafficking laws (Nordic Model)	Respect for freedom but prevention of exploitation	Relatively good balance, but exploitation issues persist
Netherlands	Liberal	Industry is regulated like other industries	Pragmatic and harm reduction approach	Legal and regulated industry
United States	Mixed approach, varies by state	First Amendment, COPA, CDA, diverse state laws	Tension between freedom and protection	Inconsistent, ongoing legal conflicts

The comparative analysis of these policies demonstrates that no single approach is universally appropriate. Effective public policies must consider cultural differences, social values, and empirical evidence, while balancing individual liberties, protecting vulnerable groups, and preventing exploitation.

Towards Evidence-Based and Reasonable Public Policy: A Critical Analysis

From the synthesis of socio-cultural discourses, empirical evidence, and existing public policies, a crucial question arises: What stance should the state reasonably and evidence-based adopt towards pornography and its consumption by the public in today's global context? This critical analysis proposes a conceptual framework for balanced, evidence-based policies.

Acknowledging the Complexity and Diversity of Evidence

A key lesson from reviewing the empirical evidence is the necessity of recognizing that the effects of pornography are complex and not monolithic. Effective policies must avoid an extreme view of pornography, neither seeing it as entirely harmful nor completely harmless. Instead, they should acknowledge that 1) pornography is not a single medium but highly diverse in terms of content, quality, and production context, 2) its effects vary depending on user characteristics, usage context, and social factors, and 3) it can have both negative and positive impacts, depending on the circumstances (Döring & Miller, 2022; McKee et al., 2023). Acknowledging this complexity means that policies must be flexible and targeted, rather than general prohibitions or blanket permissions. Policies should differentiate between consensual adult pornography and exploitative content. They should consider the context of use and specifically identify vulnerable groups, such as children and adolescents, who require special protection.

Protection of Vulnerable Groups: A Top Priority

Evidence clearly indicates that children and adolescents are highly vulnerable to adverse impacts from exposure to pornography at a young age (Farré et al., 2020; Adarsh & Sahoo, 2023). Therefore, protecting children from inappropriate access to pornography should be a paramount public policy priority in all cultural contexts (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). Effective measures may include:

- 1) Effective and privacy-respecting age verification systems. While implementation is challenging, new technologies, such as anonymous age verification, could offer a solution that balances child protection and adult privacy (Sharpe & Mead, 2021; Turvey et al., 2024).
- 2) Parental controls and filtering tools. Providing parents with practical tools to control their children's access to content, along with training on how to use these tools (Dumitrescu, 2018).
- 3) Pornography literacy education. Education that helps young people develop critical analytical skills for pornography content, understand the distinction between sexual fantasy and reality, and cultivate healthy sexual attitudes. Such programs have shown promising results in reducing the adverse effects of pornography on youth (Davis et al., 2020; Rothman et al., 2020).
- 4) Promoting parent-child dialogue. Studies show that open and age-appropriate conversations between parents and children about sex education and pornography can mitigate adverse effects. However, many parents feel they lack the skills and resources for these discussions, highlighting the need for developing parental resources and training (Dawson et al., 2024; Turvey et al., 2024).

Preventing Exploitation and Human Trafficking

Protecting performers in the pornography industry from exploitation and human trafficking is another critical priority. Evidence indicates that some individuals filmed in pornography production have a history of repeated violence and ongoing mental health problems (Donevan et al., 2025). Effective policies should include:

- 1) Strict regulation of the industry, including setting safety and health standards for working conditions, verifying consent, and severely punishing exploiters.
- 2) Supporting workers' rights. Ensuring performers have the right to organize, collectively bargain, access healthcare and social services, and be protected from discrimination.
- 3) Actively combating human trafficking. Strict enforcement of laws against human trafficking for sexual exploitation and comprehensive support for victims (Bawono et al., 2025; Rando, 2025).

Promoting Comprehensive and Evidence-Based Sex Education

Pornography has become a significant source of sex education for young people, even though it is not designed for this purpose and often provides distorted or unrealistic information. Addressing this problem requires promoting comprehensive, evidence-based, and age-appropriate sex education (Philpott et al., 2017). Good sex education should cover (Döring et al., 2017):

- 1) Biological and physiological knowledge about the reproductive system, adolescent development, and prevention of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies.
- 2) Social and emotional skills, including communication in relationships, consent negotiation, mutual respect, and relationship management.
- 3) Media literacy and pornography literacy, developing the ability to analyze sexual imagery in various media, including pornography, critically.
- 4) Respect for diversity, including acceptance of diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, and relationship forms. Comprehensive sex education can reduce reliance on pornography as a primary source of information and help young people develop healthier sexual attitudes.

Supporting Ongoing Research and Evaluation

Knowledge about the effects of pornography is still evolving, and many questions remain unanswered. Effective public policy requires up-to-date and high-quality evidence. Therefore, states need to:

- 1) Support independent and high-quality research, mainly longitudinal studies that can establish causal relationships, studies covering diverse populations, and research exploring under-examined dimensions.

- 2) Promote transparency and data sharing, including supporting open data access and collaboration among researchers from various disciplines and countries.
- 3) Systematically evaluate policies. Monitor and evaluate implemented policies to facilitate continuous improvement and development.

Balancing Individual Liberty and Public Protection

Effective policies must strike a balance between respecting adult individual liberty, protecting vulnerable groups, and preventing harm. Key principles include:

- 1) The Harm Principle: State intervention should be limited to cases where there is clear harm to others, rather than solely enforcing moral values.
- 2) Harm Reduction: Policies should focus on reducing actual harm rather than absolute prohibition, which may be unenforceable and lead to undesirable side effects.
- 3) Respect for Cultural Diversity: Policies should consider cultural differences and societal values, but these should not be used as an excuse to neglect fundamental human rights, such as child protection and the prevention of exploitation.

Conclusion, Discussion, and Recommendations

This study synthesized and analyzed socio-cultural discourses, empirical evidence, and public policies concerning pornography and its consumption in the contemporary global context, addressing the fundamental question of what rational stance the state should adopt on this issue. This synthesis reveals a complex and diverse landscape, challenging simplistic binary views of pornography as either entirely harmful or completely innocuous.

Key findings indicate that 1) discourses surrounding pornography vary significantly across cultures, reflecting diverse religious values, political ideologies, and understandings of sexuality. 2) Empirical evidence suggests that the impacts of pornography are complex and contingent upon multiple factors, including user characteristics, usage context, pornography type, and social factors. Problematic pornography use is associated with mental health and relationship issues, while use in appropriate contexts can play a positive role in sexual exploration and education. 3) Current public policies worldwide exhibit vast diversity, ranging from strict prohibition in Islamic and some Asian countries to permissive regulation in Nordic nations. Moreover, 4) effective policies must balance the protection of vulnerable groups with respect for adult individual liberties.

Academically, this study carries several significant implications. Firstly, the cross-cultural discourse synthesis highlights the necessity of understanding pornography as a socially constructed phenomenon whose meaning is interpreted within specific contexts rather than possessing a fixed, universal meaning. This recognition opens avenues for context-sensitive research and policy formulation tailored to individual societies. Secondly, the comprehensive review of empirical evidence underscores the importance of avoiding reductionist interpretations of pornography's effects. Future research should employ more sophisticated models, such as the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model, which accounts for moderating and mediating mechanisms (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

In terms of policy application, this study has significant implications for the development of public policy at multiple levels. Nationally, policies should shift from general prohibitions or permissions towards targeted, evidence-based approaches. The protection of children and adolescents should remain a paramount priority in all contexts, implemented through diverse measures including age verification, pornography literacy education, and parental support. Additionally, preventing exploitation and human trafficking within the pornography industry must be prioritized through strict regulation and support for performers' labor rights. Internationally, this study advocates developing a conceptual framework that respects cultural differences while adhering to universal principles of child protection, exploitation prevention, and evidence-based education. International organizations, such as the WHO and UNESCO,

can play a crucial role in developing best practices and facilitating knowledge exchange between countries.

Discussing the findings in relation to current debates, this study contributes to several ongoing discussions. Firstly, this synthesis challenges the anti-pornography feminist argument that uniformly views pornography as inherently an oppressive tool for women by demonstrating its diversity and varying effects on women. This acknowledgement does not negate the issues of objectification and violence in mainstream pornography (Taormino et al., 2013; Castillo, 2023) but suggests that the solution lies in industry reform and promoting women-respecting alternative pornographies, rather than outright bans. Secondly, the study contributes to the debate on pornography and addiction, highlighting that while compulsive pornography use is a genuine problem for some individuals, applying a substance addiction model to all pornography use may be inappropriate (Ley et al., 2014). A more suitable approach might be to view problematic pornography use as a symptom of underlying issues like stress, relationship problems, or conflicting moral beliefs, rather than an inherent addiction (Dwulit & Rzymski, 2019).

This study offers several significant academic contributions. Firstly, it provides a comprehensive synthesis on pornography and its consumption, a topic often considered taboo in Thai academic discourse despite its significant societal relevance (Srisawat, 2024). This integration of cross-cultural discourses, empirical evidence from various disciplines, and global public policies offers a more comprehensive overview than single-dimensional studies. Secondly, this study proposes a conceptual framework for public policy that balances protection with respect for freedom, acknowledging the complexity of empirical evidence. This framework is designed to be adaptable to diverse cultural contexts and serve as a robust basis for developing evidence-informed, context-specific policies. However, despite these contributions, this study also has several limitations that should be considered. Firstly, this review primarily focused on English- and Thai-language literature, potentially overlooking significant research in other languages, especially in African and other Asian contexts. Future research should incorporate multilingual literature for a more comprehensive picture. Secondly, most empirical evidence is derived from cross-sectional studies, which inherently limit the ability to establish causal relationships. Future research should therefore focus on longitudinal studies that can track the effects of pornography over time. Additionally, future research should explore under-researched dimensions, including: 1) the effects of pornography on often-overlooked populations such as older adults, people with disabilities, and diverse ethnic groups; 2) the role of alternative pornographies, such as feminist and queer pornography, in promoting healthy sexual attitudes; 3) the effectiveness of various policy approaches in different cultural contexts; and 4) the development and evaluation of effective pornography literacy education programs.

Recommendations for Researchers and Policymakers

For researchers, we suggest 1) employing more complex models that account for moderating factors and underlying mechanisms; 2) conducting longitudinal studies to establish causal relationships; 3) studying diverse populations and different cultural contexts; and 4) collaborating with stakeholders, including industry practitioners, to understand real-world experiences and develop appropriate research methods. For policymakers, we recommend 1) developing targeted, evidence-based policies rather than general prohibitions or permissions; 2) prioritizing the protection of children and adolescents and the prevention of exploitation; 3) promoting comprehensive sex education and pornography literacy; 4) supporting independent research and systematic policy evaluation; and 5) creating spaces for constructive public dialogue on this issue that respects cultural differences and integrates empirical evidence.

In summary, pornography and its consumption represent a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that cannot be easily understood or managed. This study demonstrates that

effective public policy requires a deep understanding of this complexity, including acknowledging diverse discourses, utilizing high-quality empirical evidence, and striking a balance between crucial principles. Ultimately, the state should adopt a rational stance that protects vulnerable groups, prevents exploitation, promotes evidence-based education, and respects individual liberties and public diversity, while remaining flexible enough to adapt to new evidence and evolving social contexts.

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