The ANTIcs of the Anti-Porn Movement: Then and Now

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by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses three tropes utilized by anti-porn advocates in both the first porn wars (1970s-1980s) and the second porn wars (2000s-present) while also integrating the use of moral panics to strengthen the anti-porn stance, 1) protect the vulnerable (i.e., women and children), 2) the fable of choice and morality, and 3) the use of scientific and medicalized language as a weapon through societal consequences and porn addiction. This thesis rhetorically analyzes and historically centers anti-porn advocates in their work in censuring pornography. I also highlight two popular anti-porn advocates; Catharine MacKinnon from the first porn wars and Gail Dines from the second porn wars. Through this research and tracing of moral panics and the tropes, I challenge the notion of progress in pro-porn advocacy in the hopes of changing the tactics in the second porn wars to show genuine progress in the current political climate in the United States.

INDEX WORDS: Pornography; Anti-Porn Advocates; Porn Wars; Rhetoric; Tropes

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DEDICATION

To arguments that lead to learning… keep fighting and arguing!

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1 INTRODUCTION

I should be excited to talk about what I am writing about, and I am. However, other people are not. Porn; it is such a dirty word to many. My Grammy would dub it as "not a dining table topic." No one wants to talk about it, but everyone has an opinion. I want to talk about it, and I have an opinion.

1.1 Time after time: how porn showed up in my life

1.1.1 2006: Extra! Extra! Read all about it: Lance Bass is GAY, and Jordan's dad watches porn.

It is 6:15 pm on a Thursday; we are running late. Mom and I usually leave the house by 6 to make it on time to swim practice. I sit at the table in the dining room and wiggle in the chair in discomfort. My bathing suit starts riding up under my clothes. I focus on this until I hear a loud *CRASH* upstairs in the computer room; Mom starts screaming at Dad. I slowly sneak to the stairs to try to listen for more. I only hear parts of sentences; the door is closed to the computer room. "... watch this disgusting fifth… you have DAUGHTERS… what if they walked in?!... these videos... The shame. GET OUT!" My father rushes down the stairs, through the door, and into his car. I watch as he backs his car into the street and drives away. Life will never be the same. I remember flashes of the night after this, like a poorly planned slideshow. I see my mom with her eyes closed and shoulders slumped by the computer. The screen shows a naked woman, legs spread brazenly, lying on a bed, looking right into my eyes. "*She's blonde, like me,"* I think. I must make a sound because my mom tenses and whips around. My mom looks at me, rushes to cover my line of sight, and ushers me downstairs. My mom frantically looked into my eyes, "Did you see anything? Are you okay?" I don't know what exactly was on the computer. All I know is that my mom's eyes show three things: shame, disgust (at my father), and panic that something

terrible happened to me in the split second of seeing the screen. I did not know what was on the computer, but I knew it was not good from the reaction.

1.1.2 Imma let you finish, but 2009 was a year full of "love."

February is my favorite month. It's my birthday month. My mom gave me the Kindle Fire with internet access as a gift this year. There is no need to use the family computer to Google "girls kissing" or something similar, then become paranoid and clear the history. What would I do if my mom saw Pornhub in the history? Redtube? Or my favorite, LitErotica. February was also my least favorite month. It was love month at youth group. Every Tuesday, I get dropped off at John and Kevin Anne's house, excited to see my friends but dreading the topic. "Don't hold hands; handholding leads to sex, and you can go to hell for that," warns Kevin Anne. On that third Tuesday of that month, our topic was pornography. John drones on and on about the morality of the sex workers, how they are dirty, and how most are women with daddy issues and do not know God; these women are condemned to suffering both in life and in the afterlife. "Watching that trash harms your eternal soul. You are children of God; don't dirty yourselves with that," warns Kevin Anne. I sit on the living room floor of her home, hating how I pursued those "naughty" videos and writings, knowing that as soon as it hit midnight, I would be doing the same thing I did the night before. And the night before. And the night before.

1.1.3 2011: The year of Kim Kardashian's 72-day marriage and me hearing my brother masturbate

A breathy moan. A deep grunt. A sharp "I'm coming!" pours through the air vent in the corner of my childhood room. Colby, my stepbrother's room, was directly below mine in the basement; he must have thought everyone was asleep. I crawl out of bed to the far corner of the room to put my ear to the vent, curious of the sounds of strangers copulating that mingle with my

brother's whispered words of, "fuck, don't stop!" For minutes, I wait with bated breath. My knees start to hurt. I cannot crawl away until this is over. I know that something is coming, the much-anticipated conclusion to his nightly pleasure-seeking. *A familiar moan. A familiar grunt. The soft snores of my brother.* I sit there thinking about what just happened. It's not just me who watches videos like this; if I am wrong and immoral, I am not alone.

1.1.4 2015: "The Story of Tonight" is not just for Hamilton; it is for sleepovers

Secrets swapped. Judgements passed. Small truths support lies. Those are the tenets of girl sleepovers in rural Townville during high school. "Have you ever masturbated?" *Of course not!* "Do you watch porn?" *Ew, gross! Never.* Until that one moment. Until that one friend quietly and shyly mumbles *yes.* The mumbled confession is the crack in the dam. Everyone in the room freezes. Heads whip around to see if any strangers miraculously show up in the corner of the room, even though the four of us have been alone in my friend's room for the last 4 hours. Someone already admitted it; what is the harm in agreeing with her? I didn't have to be brave first. "Actually, yeah, I have, too," I mumble, and a blush appears. The dam bursts. "OMG! ME TOO!" "I DIDN'T WANT EVERYONE TO KNOW." "WHAT KIND DO YOU WATCH?" More proof that watching porn and liking porn is not just me. Others are just like me. I wonder, why is it wrong? Why keep this secret?

1.1.5 The past, present, and future of porn and me

Porn, both the pleasure received from it and the shame and disdain from seeking out and supporting the creation of it, has affected me both in my past and into my present and future. If I started a conversation regarding porn with the adults in my life, they would get uncomfortable and start talking about the harmful aspects of porn in my life; my father's "porn addiction" that

destroyed our family, how porn is hurting women in the videos, how people are taking the videos and recreating them in real life perpetuating harmful situations in real life, and other examples.

The disdain from religious leaders and adults surrounding me parroted these narratives in my youth; they still pop up in my mind to this day. Whenever I bring up my research, it is like pressing the replay button, a different adult saying the same things. The adults in my life heard and experienced the moral panics of the 70s and 80s surrounding sexuality and porn, internalized it, and use these fears in their warnings about porn when they speak to me.

The experience that I had and continue to have with porn and conversing about porn is not unique; porn has been impactful for generations. Before the invention of the internet, there was print porn (such as Penthouse and Playboy) and screened porn videos in the theatre, like *Deep Throat [Film]*, which was one of the most popular pornographic films that made it into traditional movie theaters. The internet has not created the significant impact of porn; it has just changed how we view it. Go to an estate sale; you will find pornographic publications hidden in the basement for sale. I talk from experience; my coffee table books are vintage Penthouses bought from estate sales. Since the invention of the internet and the widespread access to streaming sites, and the convenience and popularity of porn videos, porn has become cemented into the tapestry of society. Porn is interwoven into the narrative of society; in recent years, it just has changed yarn color.

Porn and sexually fueled videos and writings have given me both pleasure and joy while also coating me with shame and guilt. Porn has given me good; a stimulating visual for healthy masturbation, an outlet for me to explore my lesbian identity, and a platform that has shown me women's power through sex. Porn has also negatively impacted my life in how my mother and father split, with the claim that porn addiction led to my father's infidelity and split from my

family, the existential crisis of morality of premarital sex and queer sexuality that religious leaders and mentors imposed on me in my youth, and a skewed view on how one has sex. I say all of this to say that porn lives in the gray. Not light, not dark. Both.

While I acknowledge the moral ambiguity of porn, I will focus solely on the anti-porn sentiment, advocates, and rhetoric. I find that currently it is important to focus on the anti-porn rhetoric and movements because of the current political climate that is occurring in the United States of America following the re-election of Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential elections. With the election of a conservative president who is proposing cabinet members who hold less than favorable stances liberal definitions of gender and sex (in both youth and adults), the amplification of moral panics surrounding porn and sex is bound to happen in the coming years. This analysis of past and current porn rhetoric could help one to contest this upcoming wave of anti-porn advocacy. In his thesis, I analyze anti-porn rhetoric and tropes in literature and lean heavily on anti-porn and pro-porn binaries to simplify the analysis and have clear boundaries on who is saying what. Though these binaries heavily influence my research, I would be remiss not to point out that there is nuance to how people react to porn; like me, there are negatives and positives in porn. As you will see in the rest of this thesis, anti-porn activists are not just traditionally conservative people, but they can also be self-proclaimed feminists and hold other liberal beliefs.

It was not until I escaped from small-town Pennsylvania that I could finally talk about porn and not get the same narrative of the personal dangers or the more considerable societal dangers of porn. However, I could not escape the discomfort surrounding porn; even in academia, the divide between pro-porn and anti-porn rhetoric is clear. Porn, the consumption and creation of it, makes people feel a type of way. It seems that the same conversation happens

repeatedly. Good/Bad. Healthy/unhealthy. Natural/unnatural. Moral/Immoral. Feminists and non-feminists continue to argue what porn is and how/why to fight porn and the influence of porn.

The observation of porn positive and negative porn binaries is important in the analysis of anti-porn work because it gives one the tools to argue against the anti-porn movements. The tool of repeating and magnifying the stories of the personal negative of porn on a single individual are effective in being legitimatized and ascribed to another's life and experience. I will go deeper into this in Chapter 1 with Linda Lovelace's experience of being a porn star and how her story and negative experience was used to say that porn was harming others because it directly affected her. This technique is indicative of a moral panic, which is extensively discussed in the literature review of this writing. Moral panics are not just used regarding pornography; they are used to fight other social topics, such as education. Zooming in on one instance, while historically and currently situating it, can help further conversations on how to address and fight back against the use of recycled rhetorical tools targeted at societal occurrences, such as pornography.

1.2 Keep reading; I am about to make an (ob)scene.

Society keeps having the same conversation regarding porn. Decade after decade, from anti-porn activists and anti-porn feminists, the same points are being reiterated. The rhetoric, tropes, and themes of anti-porn literature from what I call the first porn wars (the 1970s to the 1980s) and the second porn wars (the 2000s to the present) are repetitive. This presence of these tropes in both the first porn wars and the second porn wars is essential in showing if the "war" is ever won; in my storytelling, I hope to show you, the reader, that it is not "won." If the conversation repeats over history, and no conclusion ever occurs, the fight cannot truly be

categorized as “won.” The conversation modifies over time in certain senses, but the conversation repeats over and over again. The fight is the same words in different fonts.

In this thesis, I center the porn wars through influential icons of the anti-porn movement, Catharine MacKinnon in the first porn wars and Gail Dines in the second porn wars and situate them within other popular cultural influences and events. I then trace the use of moral panic around pornography by using three tropes or narratives that show up in anti-porn literature. These tropes are: 1) protect the vulnerable (i.e., women and children), 2) the fable of choice and morality, and 3) the use of scientific and medicalized language as a weapon through societal consequences and porn addiction. Anti-porn advocates utilize these baseline tropes in both the first and second porn wars. I show these tropes throughout the first and second chapters. I do this because the core of the argument stays steady. The inclusion of McKinnon and Dines shows that even though two vastly different anti-pornography advocates from different time periods utilize different audiences and techniques of speaking, they still focus on the same (or similar) tools of attack. Though there are named moral panics later in this writing, one that is easily noticed is the moral panic and fear that surrounds the story of Linda Lovelace and the abuse that she experienced by the porn industry and her husband; her story of abuse was the kindling to the moral panic around harm to women in the first porn wars.

In my life, I have personally witnessed the impact of these repeated narratives. In my 2006 timeline of my porn experience, the fear that my mother had when I just glimpsed my father’s porn was the fear that somehow this split second would affect my development in terms of how I view sex, viewing porn is tantamount to violence. This moment also impacted my mother in how she fears and hates porn. My mother believes that my father has a porn addiction, and that was a big reason my family fell apart. The gasp that my mother gave when I told her of

my research and the discomfort and avoidance in talking about it is clear. Porn is *bad.* Me looking at porn as a legitimate topic that deserves both positive light and negative light shed on it is unfathomable. When someone asks my mother what I am researching and studying, my mother either avoids answering or says that I am researching "relationships."

In the war between anti-porn and pro-porn advocates, there are acknowledgeable "wins" that pro-porn advocates can see in modern times. Rob Lowe, Paris Hilton, Kim Kardashian, Hulk Hogan, Pamela Anderson, Colin Farrell, and Gene Simmons: I bet you recognized at least one of these names. Families know these names; they are known and established cultural icons. This list has a couple of things in common: they are all wealthy, they are famous, they are involved in the entertainment industry, whether that be in music, television, or movies, and they all have participated in and posted a sex tape. The erotic is integrated into our daily lives.

Since the 2010s, porn has evolved; more "women-centered" porn has been created, the porn industry has spearheaded the destigmatization of condom use, regulations regarding STD testing in the porn industry have increased, and there are status disclosure requirements for performers and producers (Grudzen & Kerndt, 2007). But with all that "progress," the anti-porn rhetoric is still on repeat. They are beating at your brain. Porn is bad. Porn harms your women and children. Porn destroys your relationships and families. Porn is immoral. Porn is harming your health. Laws change, and we celebrate progress, yet the injustice and attacks on this form of media persist. Is the repetition "working" since the war is not entirely lost?

Continuing from these observations, I ask myself, "What does the repetition of these narratives do?" "Why is the same language used over and over?" and "How do these same framing tropes work in these different wars in differing forms of literature (i.e., widely accessible literature such as autobiographies and children's books)?" Through tracing the persistence of

these tropes and analyzing the discourse surrounding anti-porn movements, I will show that though there is a narrative of progress from pro-porn advocates, the repetition of the anti-porn tropes proves that there is not a discernible difference in the arguments from the first porn wars to the second porn wars. The tracing of both the first and second porn wars is important to look at and answer because it challenges the narrative of progress and acceptance that many pro-porn advocates tout or continue to fight for.

As mentioned above, with the binary of pro-porn and anti-porn sentiments clashing throughout history and still in current times, no side can claim complete victory. Though there are wins, such as more “accepting” and sexually free parts of the community, and more visible queer actions, there is still a loud opposition, both societally and from those in the United States government, regarding the "progress and acceptance" seen by the pro-porn people.

1.3 Conclusion

The discourse around pornography is filled with both progress and resistance, acceptance and condemnation. Over the decades, the arguments have remained unchanged, echoing the same points and moral panics. From the 1970s anti-porn movement to the modern resurgence of anti-porn advocates, opponents and supporters employ repetitive narratives to define their stances. These repetitive arguments may reveal the impossibility of "winning" the so-called porn wars; the discourse keeps evolving without fully resolving as society and individuals grapple with conflicting feelings surrounding porn.

We see how views are continually reinforced through cultural lenses that draw from beliefs about morality and protection. Pornography's role in our society shift, yet the frameworks of discourse repeat. This is just further proof that porn remains a contentious and influential topic in the cultural landscape.

In writing this thesis, I hope to not only shed light on the anti-porn advocates' rhetoric but also question the effectiveness of repeated arguments in addressing or understanding the impacts of pornography. The persistence of these arguments in truly addressing or understanding the impacts of pornography underscores that the "porn wars" are less about reaching a resolution than airing out emotions regarding the changes that come from pornography. As society continues to shift, one thing remains certain: the conversation about porn is far from over.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will create a more definitive understanding of what porn is, provide a historical timeline of anti-porn sentiments in the United States ranging from the 1970s to the present and the pro-porn response, situate the three previously mentioned tropes: (1) protect our vulnerable, 2) the fable of choice and morality, and 3) the use of scientific and medicalized language as a weapon through societal consequences and porn addiction in anti-porn rhetoric, and introduce and expand on moral and sex panics and how it affects the reception of pornography.

2.1 What is Porn?

Pornography does not have a concrete definition that is unanimously accepted. A definition would be helpful. It is easier to defend and get behind something clearly defined. This section aims to create a more precise definition of porn while using both pro-porn and anti-porn advocates' definitions.

Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's definition of pornography- "I know it when I see it"- leaves one craving more but, at the same time, not easy to contradict (Burke, 2023, p. 3). We know *it* when we see it, but how can one put that in a tangible definition? Both anti-porn advocates and pro-porn advocates have tried with varying degrees of success.

Feminist anti-porn activists have the most precise definitions of what pornography is. One of the most influential definitions of pornography stems from Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon's 1983 ordinance for Minneapolis. This ordinance built on Dworkin's earlier work opposing pornography (Dworkin, 1989) and MacKinnon's women's rights background, and made it so women would be able to sue producers and sellers of pornography. In their writings, Dworkin and MacKinnon defined pornography as "the graphic sexually explicit

subordination of women" (Dwye, 1995, pp. 22-23). Building on the MacKinnon-Dworkin definition, other writers have developed narrower definitions. In the *Duke Law Journal*, Cass Sunstein (1986) argued for a more straightforward definition that focuses on the abuse of women; his definition has four elements: 1) sexual explicitness, 2) depictions of women as enjoying or deserving abuse, 3) the purpose of arousal, and 4) the effect of arousal (Sunstein, 1986). Feminist philosopher Helen Longino calls it “verbal or pictorial material which represents or describes sexual behavior that is degrading or abusive to one or more of the participants in such a way as to endorse the degradation” (Longino, 1995, p. 7). These porn definitions focus on the perceived “harm” of those participating in the porn. This porn definition will feed into the tropes focused on in later chapters.

On the other side of the aisle, pro-porn advocates do not have as cohesive of a definition; they struggle to have a common denominator. The struggle to have a common denominator is both a positive and a negative to some; if there is not a coherent definition of porn, it would be close to impossible to get rid of or regulate it. Even so, some pro-porn advocates have tried their hand at creating a definition to defend. Linda Williams, a renowned porn scholar, whittles pornography into "hardcore cinema." Williams believes that the subgenre of hardcore cinema is real pornography. To Williams, explicit cinema is not just a subtype; it is the "hardcore" essence of porn. (Williams, 1989, p. 29). These narrow definitions by those in the porn conversation led to the possibility of ignoring the diversity of porn. The theorist William Kendrick has one of the most comprehensive definitions of porn. Kendrick does not claim to have a theory that is capable of pornography. To Kendrick, porn is not a thing but a concept, and porn lacks "any common qualities” (Williams, 2004, p. 11).

Anti-porn advocates have a more cohesive definition of what porn is, so they know what they are fighting against. However, pro-porn advocates argue that anti-porn advocates push for a definition that will encompass such a large variety of materials as “porn” that it will become meaningless. In the search for a definition from pro-porn advocates, there is less of a unified front. Later in this literature review, both anti-porn activists (such as conservative governmental individuals) and conservative women who strongly rebuke the title feminist use similar definitions of what they are trying to ban or censor. Now that a very vague definition of porn has been outlined in this writing, one could ask themselves what is good or bad about porn? The anti-porn advocates view it as bad, but what truly makes it so? Gayle Rubin proposes an interesting theory, the sexual hierarchy, to address this.

2.2 The Sex Hierarchy

Rubin's evaluation of the sex hierarchy includes two aspects: a sexual values system (where particular preferences and behaviors are valued over others) and the need to delineate "good" versus "bad" sex, or the "arguments… conducted over 'where to draw the line,' and to determine what other activities, if any, may be crossed over into acceptability” (Rubin, 1998, p. 152). The values system is best described by Rubin herself:

> According to this system, sexuality that is 'good,' 'normal,' and 'natural' should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial… It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is 'bad,' 'abnormal,' or 'unnatural.' Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial (Cardillo, 2022).

The sexual value system exists as part of our collective cultural understanding of what is acceptable versus what is unacceptable sex. Still, the need to draw and maintain an imagined line between good and bad sex is implemented through political, legal, and social systems. In the book *The secret museum: Pornography in modern culture*, Walter Kendrick (1996) describes this as "the urge to regulate the behavior of those who seem to threaten the social order" (p. 235). Because of Catherine MacKinnon's work in introducing radical anti-pornography feminist theories (through her policy proposals in state legislation, her help in the Meese Commission, and alliances with conservative policymakers) to the legal and governmental systems, MacKinnon and her cohorts maintained the traditional sexual values system by demonizing sex in and of itself. The use of governmental power to secure the control of normative sexuality and sexual values was a very powerful and strategically smart move for anti-pornography advocates such as MacKinnon and her cadre.

MacKinnon and her allies in the anti-pornography movement maintained traditional sexual values, albeit indirectly, by framing certain sexual expressions and acts—especially those depicted in pornography—as inherently exploitative or degrading to women. This approach did not explicitly endorse conservative views on sexuality, but it did reinforce traditional norms by promoting a clear moral boundary between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" forms of sexual expression. They did this by creating a hierarchy of "good" vs. "bad" sex, linking pornography to harm and coercion, feeding into moral panics, and promoting state regulation and censorship. Ultimately, MacKinnon's critique of porn and her opposition to "harmful" sexual expressions indirectly endorsed aspects of traditional sexual values by condemning non-traditional, "unregulated" forms of sex as harmful. While her goal was to protect women from exploitation, the framework echoed conservative ideals about the proper boundaries for sexual expression.

This overlap created an unusual alliance between feminist and conservative anti-pornography activists despite their differing motivations.

In addition to MacKinnon and her constituents' work, Dines and contemporary anti-porn advocates built on that by focusing on the political, social, and personal sphere in combination with their creation of websites that push for censorship and their ?presence in the modern government that echo the tropes of the harmful effects of pornography. Contemporary anti-porn advocates did not focus just on one sphere of influence; they brought the personal sphere even more into the limelight and intermingled it with the social and political sphere. Dines and her constituents made the political very personal with their integration of inflammatory language and folding in personal relationships (like mothers and children). This is discussed more clearly in Chapter 2. More modern anti-porn advocates, like Dines, encouraged the continuation of the sexual hierarchy through social means like her organization Culture Reframed, which is mainly targeted toward parents (Anti-Porn Legislation, 2019). To Dines, parents' responsibilities should include teaching their children what is "real sex" and what is "porn sex." Sex that is "real" and "good" is heterosexual, monogamous, and loving. "Porn" and "bad" sex is queer, promiscuous, and kinky. As Rubin (1998) notes, no "bad" sex is given moral intricacy, while "good" sex is:

> For instance, heterosexual encounters may be sublime or disgusting, free or forced, healing or destructive, romantic or mercenary. As long as it does not violate other rules, heterosexuality is acknowledged to exhibit the full range of human experience. In contrast, all sex acts on the bad side of the line are considered utterly repulsive and devoid of all emotional nuance. The further from the line a sex act is, the more it is depicted as a uniformly bad experience (152).

Both past and contemporary anti-porn advocates categorize porn as bad sex, using a variety of different techniques, arguably the same techniques and tropes.

2.3 Still Pondering Porn

In summary, this part of the literature review highlights the complexities of defining pornography and the historical shifts in anti-porn rhetoric, from early feminist critiques in the 1970s to the continued advocacy by contemporary figures like Dines. Anti-porn activists, including both radical feminists like MacKinnon and conservative voices, have drawn on similar arguments to reinforce a traditional sexual hierarchy. By constructing “bad” sex as that which deviates from monogamy, heterosexuality, and intimacy, and categorizing porn as exploitative or harmful, these activists have created a compelling moral argument that echoes conservative sexual values, even if from a different ideological standpoint. This alignment underscores the enduring power of sexual hierarchies and moral narratives in framing societal responses to pornography. Both past and modern anti-porn advocates have utilized strategies- such as medicalized language, moral panic, and state intervention- to draw firm lines between “acceptable” and “deviant” sexuality, shaping the public discourse around porn as an inherent threat to individual and social health. This portion serves as a foundation for analyzing how these recurring tropes persist and evolve, shaping anti-porn rhetoric in new social and digital contexts.

2.4 Moaning over Moral Panics

I will introduce moral panics and expand on how they are affected by porn and affect porn. The theory of moral panics is over 50 years old, and many scholars have expanded the theory, incorporating the effects on minorities and emotion into the analysis. Additionally, the scholars have further distinguished a specific type of panic: the sex panic. Throughout the definition and analysis of panics, specific ways in which they impact pornography will be discussed. Moral panics constitute an intense debate site about ideas grounded in beliefs connected to embodied and visceral ways of knowing and ideological systems of belief and meaning. Moral panics are social sites of emergent discourse that are sore to the touch, but at the same time, they tell one what is happening under the social and political skin?. They are like blisters on the skin of society; they are sites of probing, attention, and healing or decay.

2.4.1 Moral Panic Musings

Moral panic is often over-defined in society. In the book *Against Nature: Essays on History, Sexuality, and Identity*, Jeffery Weeks (1991) writes, "[m]oral panic occurs in complex societies when deep-rooted and difficult-to-resolve social anxieties become focused on symbolic agents that can be easily targeted" (p. 118). The British sociologist who first defined moral panics and author of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics,* Stan Cohen (1973), created a sequential model regarding the key agents in a moral panic and a model of its overall trajectory by saying,

> Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. (1) A condition, episode, person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; (2) its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; (3) the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; (4) socially accredited experts pronounce their

> diagnoses and solutions; (5) ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; (6) the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes, the object of the panic is relatively novel, and at other times, it is something that has been in existence long enough but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes, the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folk-lore and collective memory; at other times, it has more severe and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives itself (p. 9).

Cohen's (1973) study was an effort to understand youth subcultures, delinquency, and police control, and he strongly suggested that the media was responsible for panics. Cohen also identifies four sets of agents in the development of a moral panic: (1) the mass media, (2) moral entrepreneurs, (3) the control culture, and (4) the public, with the most important being the mass media with the emphasis on the "understanding the role of the mass media in creating moral panics and folk devils" (Cohen & Young, 1973, p. 17). The media are mainly in the early stage of social reaction, producing coded images of deviance and the deviants. In this stage, Cohen (1973) named three processes: (1) exaggeration and distortion (who did or said what), (2) prediction (the dire consequences of failure to act), and (3) symbolization (the signifying threat). After writing his book, Cohen responded to criticism that the term "panic" suggests the connotation of "being out of control," which is not the point of using the word panic. One can assume that panic is chaotic and uncontrollable, but it is not always so. Panic can have control; I, for one, am very organized and calm when there is panic over deadlines or others around me. The panics that Cohen speaks about in his reading have social shape; they might not have a valid reason to some, but they do have a guiding reason. Sexual panics seem to be media orchestrated and purposeful or planned, which belies the irrationality implied by the term "panic," until we

realize that panics can be culturally staged. The term "moral panic" has slipped from its scholarly bonds. It is now used in popular discourse by both liberal and conservative commentators to critique and refute critiques of public policy, law, and discourse (Altheide, 2009) (Lumby, 1997) (McRobbie & Thorton, 1995). David Altheide (2009) notes in his writings that moral panic is "one of the most successful sociological concepts in finding its way to public media (p. 83). Writer Gilbert Herdt (2009) argues that moral panics can provoke "authoritarian policies and heated debates in the short term," but can also provide opportunities to take the heat out of taboo subjects and offer progressive social and political groups a window for lobbying for change in the long run. Cohen was the first to name moral panics, but other scholars have created a clarified version of a moral panic, the sex panic.

2.4.1.1 Sex Panics: The Birds, the Bees, and the Frenzies. What makes something a "panic" in our culture is when society's reaction is way over the top compared to the actual threat posed by so-called "folk devils." These "folk devils" could be anyone from sexually active youth to promiscuous women or even imagined sexually corrupted boys. Then there are the supposed "evil-doers" like porn actors, porn producers, or anyone considered sexually deviant. These moral and sexual panics are there to attack the deviants who are participating in the actions. In the later identified tropes and fights against porn, anti-porn advocates are fast to name the innocent and the ones harmed by these "evil-doers." In some instances, people can be both; women are both the devils for harming those who watch their videos and simultaneously the ones harmed by the devils in forced sexual labor and abuse.

In today's advanced welfare capitalist societies, these sexual panics bring about some bizarre, lurid, and gross images. Media and popular reactions get all mixed up, targeting individuals and groups in ways that shape coherent and incoherent ideological platforms and

political strategies. Understanding these conscious and unconscious resonances is crucial for grasping the emergence of moral panic theories since the days of Stanley Cohen. These panics result in state and nonstate stigma, ostracism, and social exclusion.

Societies, as Stanley Cohen observed, undergo periodic "sex panics" characterized by intense societal conflicts over sexuality (Cohen, 1973). Coined by Carole Vance in 1984, the term describes volatile battles and moral controversies surrounding sexual issues (Vance, 1984). Scholars like Estelle Freedman, Gayle Rubin, Jeffrey Weeks, and Lisa Duggan have utilized variations such as "moral panic" and "sex panic" to analyze how these conflicts shape political discourse and societal norms (Freedman, 1987) (Rubin, 2015) (Weeks, 1985) (Duggan & Hunter, 1995). As defined by Cohen, moral panic reflects the intense public and media reactions to perceived threats, such as the 1960s riots involving youth groups in British seaside towns (Weeks, 1983) (Rubin, 2015). Similarly, sex panic captures the politicized climate of late 20th-century controversies over issues like gay rights and censorship. Sex panics are significant because they are “the political moment of sex,” which Jeffrey Weeks and Gayle Rubin both describe as shifting moral values into political action (Weeks, 1983) (Rubin, 2015). Porn (acting and consumption) is so integrated with sex and the pleasurable aspects of seeking, participating, and consuming sex.

When sexual panics are in full swing, they create liminal situations and monstrous images. Media representations during these times often depict monstrous enemies or sexual scapegoats. This “othering” dehumanizes individuals and whole communities, stripping them of their sexual and reproductive rights and highlighting the fault lines of structural violence.

Sexual panics are really just a subset of moral panics. In the modern transformation of these significant social events, we see a peculiar dimension that can be described as totalizing

sexual events, or what Thompson (1998) calls "all-pervasive." Sexual panics are a form of moral panic that reveals the anxieties, power dynamics, and structural violence within society. They result in stigmatization, ostracism, and exclusion of individuals and communities, challenging the principles of liberalism and neoliberalism. Understanding these panics requires critically examining media representations, ideological platforms, and political strategies that shape our perceptions of sexuality and morality.

Stanley Cohen's concept of moral panics, detailed in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, provides a framework for understanding how these panics unfold. First, the media portrays a group or issue as a dire threat, simplifying and stereotyping the narrative, which sparks widespread concern. Moral crusaders then propose solutions to address the perceived threat. These panics are significant because they can lead to repressive changes in laws and social policies. Eventually, as the perceived threat subsides, the panic diminishes. This cycle of threat, outrage, demonization, and repression has characterized conflicts over sexuality, evolving into sex panics.

Cohen emphasizes that a panic is not just a societal reaction but a form of social control with ideological and political implications. Issues like pornography, public funding for art with sexual themes, gay rights, media portrayals of sexuality, and AIDS education have all been framed within the moral/sex panic framework due to the contentious nature of sexual politics (Friedman, 2000) (Weeks, 1985) (Rubin, 2015) (Duggan & Hunter, 1995).

In the 1960s, the rethinking of deviance in U.S. sociology highlighted how moral entrepreneurs transform controversial topics or marginalized groups into "folk devils." This perspective argues that deviance is socially constructed rather than inherent in behaviors or individuals. This framework is particularly useful for analyzing sexual politics, where the

concept of a folk devil resonates strongly. It has also been applied to the scapegoating of sexual minorities and alleged sex offenders (Johnson, 2006) (Miller, 2002).

Moral and sex panics often result in sweeping repressive measures. Historian James Morone (2003) argues that even short-lived panics can enhance state power through new legislation, reinterpretations of constitutional rights, and the establishment of regulatory bodies (Morone, 2003). Examples include laws that crack down on obscenity and restrictions on public information about AIDS and sexuality. Conservative initiatives following sex panics, paradoxically often sparked by feminist movements, have also led to significant restrictions, such as the elimination of public funding for erotic art and censorship of information on childhood sexuality (Duggan, 2006) (Duggan & Hunter, 1995) (Vance, 1984).

Despite the significant theoretical and historical insights provided by sex panic literature, two key aspects remain understudied: the role of the public and the collective emotions involved. While scholars acknowledge that public reactions drive state responses in debates over pornography and sex offenders, the specifics of who constitutes the public and how their emotions influence these panics are often overlooked. Sex panics have directly impacted pornography consumption.

In “Sadists and Sissies: Anti-pornography campaigns in cold war America,” Andrea Friedman (2003) explores how anti-pornography campaigns during the Cold War era were influenced by the cultural and political anxieties of the time. Friedman examines how opponents of pornography in the 1950s and 1960s linked it with fears about masculinity, sexuality, and social stability, often portraying it as a threat to the traditional family and moral order. Friedman argues that anti-pornography activists viewed pornography not just as an issue of decency but as a form of moral and psychological corruption with wider social implications. They frequently

linked pornography to communism, framing it as something that could weaken American masculinity and thus threaten national strength. The campaigners labeled pornographic content as perverse, depicting its consumers as "sadists" or "sissies"—terms meant to undermine and stigmatize certain expressions of masculinity and sexuality. In this way, anti-pornography efforts reinforced Cold War ideals about normative gender roles and sexuality, aligning moral purity with national security. Overall, Friedman's analysis highlights how anti-pornography movements used fears of sexual deviance and weakness to maintain existing power structures and social norms during a time of political tension and social transformation.

As Judith Levine (2003) argues in her controversial book *Harmful to minors: The perils of protecting children from sex*, the fear and misrepresentation surrounding young people's sexuality and the pedophile scare have created a climate of moral panic. This book itself sparked a minor moral panic upon its release. Contemporary moral panics often sexualize scapegoats, labeling them as sexual "monsters" and "predators," whether they are in the neighborhood, the nuclear family, or now, on the internet. These sexual panics dehumanize the alleged perpetrators, many of whom are innocent bystanders, stripping them of their rights and destroying their lives. At the same time, these panics leave children more vulnerable than ever (Cohen, 1972).

The link between religion, anti-sexual, sex-negative attitudes, and moral panics in the modern period is well documented. America's background indeed supports chronic cycles of purity, hygiene, and particular understandings of Christian reactions to premarital sex, homosexuality, masturbation, and a variety of related fears and anxieties. During the later 20th century, these religious morals and campaigns increasingly targeted vulnerable populations. The frequency and number of these campaigns gradually increased throughout the period following the ascendancy of Reagan. This intersection of religion and morality has significantly influenced

societal reactions to sex and sexuality, perpetuating cycles of fear and repression. As Levine's work suggests, understanding these patterns is crucial to addressing the real issues and protecting the rights and well-being of children and those wrongfully accused in these moral panics.

In discussing sexual panics, Rubin notes that deeper societal anxieties and power dynamics often drive these events. They reveal underlying tensions and societal conflicts, exposing the vulnerabilities and insecurities that fuel these panics.

2.4.1.2 Rubin the wrong way in sex panics. Earlier in this writing, I referenced Gayle Rubin's concept of the Sex Hierarchy; I mention it again now in connection to sexual panics to make clear the use of what is "bad" and what is "good" when talking about porn and sex. What the hierarchy deems as good and safe is allowed, but what the hierarchy deems as bad is attacked and villainized. Gayle Rubin's seminal 1984 work introduced the concept of "moral panic" in American studies, focusing on the societal backlash against specific sexual communities or deviant practices. She illustrated this through her famous chart, "The Sex Hierarchy; Charmed Circle Versus the Outer Limits," which shows a "charmed circle" of sexual norms, where those outside this circle are seen as "evil" compared to the traditional heteronormative standards.

Rubin argued that sexual panics serve as a means of enforcing structural regulation on different groups. By exploring "sexual hierarchies" and ideologies, including those from medicine, she raised critical questions about the role of normativity and cultural and social power dynamics in managing sexual citizenship in societies.

She pointed out that all hierarchies of sexual value—whether religious, psychiatric, or popular—function similarly to systems of racism, ethnocentrism, and religious chauvinism. These hierarchies justify the well-being of the sexually privileged and the adversity faced by the sexual "rabble." According to Rubin, it is challenging to develop pluralistic sexual ethics without

acknowledging benign sexual variation, which is inherent in all life. However, society often insists on a single standard for sexuality, perpetuating the idea that there is one best way to engage in sex, and everyone should adhere to it:

> It is difficult to develop a pluralistic sexual ethics without a concept of benign sexual variation. Variation is the property of all life… Yet sexuality is supposed to conform to a single standard. One of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it and that everyone should do it that way (Rubin, 2015, pp. 152-154).

Rubin also examined how a new wave of sexual panic after 1977 threatened to unleash structural violence in the United States. She noted the shift of right-wing opposition to sex education, homosexuality, pornography, abortion, and premarital sex from the fringes to the political mainstream due to their mass appeal:

> Right-wing opposition to sex education, homosexuality, pornography, abortion, and premarital sex moved from the extreme fringes to the political center stage as the crusaders discovered that these issues had mass appeal (Rubin, 2015, p. 147).

The centering of sex in the political stage is seen in the United States' current political climate, particularly in the ascension of Donald Trump and J.D. Vance and the prevalence of Project 2025 in the 2024 presidential campaign. Though Project 2025 claims that it is not a plan from Trump, those who are supporters of Trump and those in which Trump has chosen as advisors are intimately familiar with Project 2025 and the values written out in the project, while some are even involved in the creation of Project 2025.

Project 2025 is the "Presidential Transition Project" that has gained notoriety and popularity with the Heritage Foundation and "over 100 respected organizations across the conservative movement, to abolish the Deep State and return government to the people." In

Project 2025 amidst the 920 pages of conservative ideas one idea stands out, criminalizing pornography. In the foreword of the proposal, there is a clear position stated regarding pornography; porn should be banned, producers and distributors should be sent to prison, and the tech companies that circulate porn should be shut down (Project 2025, n.d.). In fact, on their website there is a portion that says that "Project 2025's *Mandate for Leadership* calls for the criminalization of pornography production, distribution, and consumption. Pornography has no claim to First Amendment protection and its purveyors are child predators and misogynistic exploiters of women, Their product is as addictive as any illicit drug and as psychologically destructive as any crime (Project 2025, n.d.)." This statement in Project 2025 is a clear centering of sexuality in writing supported by and created by past and present U.S. politicians. Now that the backing of good and bad sex is integrated into the politics of life, one could look at how these moral panics "fit in" with the society in which it is introduced. This rhetoric also supports two of the tropes analyzed in this thesis; it calls for protecting our vulnerable (both women and children) as well as using the more modern verbiage of porn addiction.

2.4.2 The Whitening of the Moral Panic… how moral panics "fit in" with the already marginalized

When discussing moral panic, we often think of it as something that people outside the targeted group have stirred up. This idea, starting with Stanley Cohen's work, suggests that the blame and shame usually come from outsiders. Today, we also see black leaders trying to control the behavior and norms within their communities, especially regarding sex, which fits into what I call secondary marginalization of the most vulnerable in oppressed communities. Many of the analyses of moral and sex panics are very white. The academics speak about it with a lens that does not include already marginalized communities. Cathy J. Cohen, a black political scientist,

author, and professor focuses on the African American experience in her chapter “Black Sexuality, Indigenous Moral Panics, and Respectability: From Bill Cosby to the Down Low" (Cohen, 2020). Cathy Cohen often reflects on the uses and effects of moral and sexual panics in the black community in the United States of America.

Stanley Cohen's (2002) classic book, *Folk devils and moral panics*, examines how moral panics are created. He explains that these panics happen when a vulnerable or less powerful group's actions are blown out of proportion by the media and rumors. The facts are often distorted, and the story's impact is exaggerated to suggest that societal norms and progress are at risk (Cohen, 2002). Philip Jenkins adds that the facts do not need to change for a moral panic to start. It is all about how the public frames and understands the situation (Jenkins, 2008). The preexisting feelings and attitudes towards the targeted group are crucial in developing a moral panic. According to Cohen, the media plays a significant role in creating these panics due to the need for sensational news and biases within news organizations. This is seen on a large scale in popular and modern media which affects all, but it can also be observed in the minority population, which is discussed in the next section.

When moral panics develop in marginalized communities, especially regarding perceived deviant behavior, it challenges the idea that these panics originate from outsiders. For example, the panic around the sexual behavior of young black people or men on the down-low often involves black "experts" and stakeholders within the community. While the media plays a role in spreading these stories, they are legitimized by respected figures within the black community.

These panics also challenge the notion that moral panics are irrational. The deep concern among African Americans about nonnormative sexual behaviors is not just about internalized patriarchal and heteronormative values. It is also about the historical use of the idea of black

deviant sexuality as a justification for the secondary status of African Americans. So, community-based panic can be seen as a rational response, given the ongoing struggles for status and progress among black Americans.

Another aspect is the different responders in these situations. Unlike Cathy Cohen's research, which focuses on formal social control units like the police and courts, moral panics in marginalized communities often involve individual community members calling for better behavior from others. External assistance is seen as secondary to the strategy of individual responsibility and respectability.

The use of moral panics in marginalized communities, such as the black community, is important in the analysis of moral panics attached to pornography because it validates the fear surrounding sexual behavior. In any marginalized community, if one or two "experts" or stakeholders of those affected speak out, the panic call is believed. The point that moral panics come from the outside is false; sometimes the call comes from inside the house, but the exploitation of these panics comes from the outside and can be exploited to support the fear of pornography. The people in power who hold belief in the heterosexual, monogamous, and frankly white use the moral panics around and *in* the minorities to strengthen the power they could have over sex which is challenged by pornography.

2.4.2.1 Sex Panics and the Politics of Emotions. Moral panics pull on emotion, which will be addressed later in this writing when discussing Dines' strategy of pulling on relational emotion. Moral panics create emotional responses and focus on emotional topics (like sexuality, pleasure, and porn). In the chapter "Transient feelings: sex panics and the politics of emotions," sociologist and author Janice M. Irvine (2020) connects the need and use of emotions when analyzing or creating moral and sex panics, specifically morality and public feelings. In the

Western landscape, particularly politically, emotion and “feelings” cannot be overlooked. Overt emotion is not only acceptable but has seemingly become a requirement in modern politics; Western societies consider feelings the core of oneself. Emotions and feelings are constructed as a site of truth and ethics. So, feelings, as Michel Foucault has argued, are “the main field of morality,” and indeed of the moral panic (Dreyfus et al., 1983). Because of the cultural power of numbers in the public, public emotion can pressure politicians, police, media, and other agents of power to respond to the battles surrounding the sex panic. In addition to this use of the power of the public, the legitimating power of emotions strengthens sexual hierarchies, which categorizes some sexualities as normal and others as disgusting.

2.4.2.1.1. I am *SICK* of all this emotion! This strengthening of traditional values and labeling the nonnormative as disgusting or sick connects well to Ian Hacking's concept of “transient mental illness” in how the “outbreaks” are historically and culturally specific while coming into existence in a particular context and then receding. This connection can be given to the contemporary moral panic of “porn addiction.” The epidemic of porn addiction in the second porn wars is time specific in society today; you cannot remove it from modern context. Those who watch porn, are “sick” both physically and mentally. When one starts watching porn, one cannot stop, it affects one’s participation in normal life. One cannot enjoy “real” sex (the kind that is talked about in Rubin’s Sex Hierarchy) because porn is ruining the viewer. This "illness" occupies a niche in historical circumstances; it is unproductive to debate whether the illness is real; it was created in specific circumstances and times in society. In argument, it does not matter if it is real; society has made it real enough for people to believe it. Again, when you circle back to the existence of porn addiction, which is not accepted as a form of addiction in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5) or the International

Classification of Disease, 11th Edition (ICD-11) under the classification of ‘behavioral addictions’ (Grant & Chamberlain, 2016), it is not the point to argue if it is true, the panic is not around whether it is real; the perception of the harm is enough to spur the panic forward.

Sex panics are like this: they are a product of a specific context, and when you remove sex panics from the context, they disappear. Like Hacking's transient mental illnesses, moral panics emerge in a particular space and time. The seemingly irrational and contagious expression of emotion during these panics is instead social. Transient feelings can be usefully understood as dramaturgically produced and performed in local settings. In essence, sex panics and moral panics are not merely irrational outbursts but critical moments where societal anxieties and moral judgments meet. They illustrate how public emotions can drive political actions and reshape societal attitudes towards sexuality.

2.4.2.2 Public Feelings of sex. What, then, are the emotions of a sex panic? Sex, for Western cultures, is a conflicting dominion of desire and dread, excitement and fear. It is taboo yet considered essential to oneself, simultaneously repulsive and attractive.

The term "sex panic" captures intense feelings like fear, anxiety, anger, hatred, and disgust. These emotions often stem from what sociologist James Jasper (1998) calls a "moral shock," a powerful trigger for social activism and, we might assume, moral or sex panics. Moral shocks can arise suddenly or from threatening news, mobilizing people through fear and anger. For activism to emerge, there must be a clear blame target. This demonization is crucial in sex panics, rallying activists against a perceived enemy, often portrayed as a legitimate target deserving of hatred—a so-called "folk devil."

Disgust plays a significant role in moral politics, painting its target in such unflattering terms that even hatred might pale in comparison (Jasper, 1998). Additionally, a peculiar pleasure

is associated with moral surveillance, as Foucault (1980) suggests, which energizes these conflicts. Emotions not only draw individuals into sex panics but also sustain them, fueled by what sociologist Jeff Goodwin and colleagues (2001) describe as "the pleasures of protest" (p. 20). These pleasures involve heightened social bonding and the energy of emotional arousal, yet moral righteousness can swiftly turn to collective rage and scapegoating within specific sex panics. This can be seen in the energetic passion with which anti-porn advocates tote their points. Bringing in their children to the argument and passionately questioning if you personally are okay with harming them or your children. One cannot help but ask themselves if this energy and this loud protest of these avenues of pleasure (like porn) is giving the outcriers pleasure as well.

2.5 Conclusion

In this section, I defined moral panics, further specified sex panics from moral panics, contextualized in how Rubin connected with the sex panics, the effect moral panics have on marginalized groups, and how emotions affect sex panics and society. Later in this writing, I will give concrete examples of how these panics show up in the first porn wars and the second porn wars.

3 METHODOLOGIES

If you are reading this, you are either one of the three members of my thesis committee, my best friend, my classmates, someone who is in some way interested in porn and conversations surrounding porn, or an anti-porn advocate that got tricked into thinking that I was arguing against the production of porn (spoiler alert: I am not!). As mentioned in the introduction, this is not a "dining table topic," so I doubt my family will be reading this; if so, keep reading, Mom. Either way, you should know that alongside the critical conversation and discussion of past and present anti-porn rhetoric and literature, you are also going to be seeing some pieces of my experience and a zillennial lens with contemporary anti-porn rhetoric, set in the second porn wars.

As mentioned and historically centered in Western American culture in the literature review, anti-porn movements focus on similar narratives and tropes over time by using moral panics. This thesis will use rhetorical and discourse analysis methods to trace the use of moral panics with examples of the tropes used throughout the first and second porn wars in the United States. The three tropes identified and analyzed are the tropes of protecting our vulnerable, the fable of choice and morality, and the weaponization of science and medicalization of addiction in both past and present times. I mainly focus on a particular prevalent anti-porn advocate, Catharine MacKinnon for the first porn wars and Gail Dines in the second porn wars, as well as other anti-porn moments.

Specifically, in this thesis, I am using the tool of rhetorical analysis to look at the content of Catharine MacKinnon and Gail Dines (political activism, written work, and movement aid) in the first and second porn wars, respectively. I also look at general anti-porn battles in the periods.

I am doing this for ease and clarity of my analysis. These two women were and are very involved and highly cited/listened too regarding anti-porn advocacy.

After identifying the content, tropes, and style similarities between these written works spanning decades, I will compare the utilization of similar tropes across the periods and center them in their nuanced time to show the perceived progress with the actual progress. In collecting multiple genres of literature (autobiographies from former porn stars, anti-porn nonfiction from famous anti-porn activists, and academic anti-porn writing), I will use the discourse in writing to strengthen the continued legacy of the three identified tropes.

The books from the first porn wars focus on the effect on the world that needs porn and those that participate in the creation of pornography; the place in time affects how the literature shows the "dangers" of porn through the psychology and effect it has on the family, society, and the performers. In the second porn war, the place in time is different, so the focus on the "dangers" of porn morphs into how the consumption of porn affects the consumers' health (i.e., porn addiction). Though both are similar in the way scientific language is weaponized and medicalized, the frame in which it is written affects the topics and weapons used to attack porn production and consumption in society. In the rhetorical analysis of different modes of writing, I hope to show that the same purposes and tropes are used to reach different audiences with unique styles spanning generations.

4 CHAPTER 1

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the first porn war, spanning the 1970s to the 1980s. It tracks the anti-porn movement over these two decades, centering on the Christian right, anti-porn advocacy groups like Women Against Pornography (WAP), and prominent anti-porn advocate Catherine MacKinnon. The chapter concludes by intertwining three tropes into the anti-porn movement, highlighting MacKinnon and her collaborators, such as Andrea Dworkin. It expands on the trope of protecting the vulnerable and the fable of choice, illustrating how porn is perceived as harmful to women—through violence depicted in porn and the notion that women, like children, cannot truly consent to sex—and to children, with claims that porn corrupts their innocence. The trope of using scientific and medicalized language connects to the psychological emphasis on traditional family values and the psychology of the family in the 1970s and 1980s. These tropes are emphasized to establish a foundation for comparing their intensification in the second porn wars, discussed in Chapter 2.

4.2 Anti-porn Advocacy Through the Times

As mentioned above, porn was not just a topic of conversation and contention in current years; it was a contested issue before the internet was introduced to the landscape. That is one notable difference between Chapter 1, the first porn wars, and Chapter 2, which focuses on the second porn wars (which spans from the 2000s to the current time). The internet did not directly influence the first war since it was before widespread internet access. However, that does not mean that porn was not dispersed throughout the population in other forms of communication. In the theoretical framework of this writing, moral panics are defined and developed; one difference

between the moral panics of these times is that the moral panics used by anti-porn advocates in the first porn wars were not aided or developed by the internet.

4.2.1 The Christian Right

The Christian right encompasses multiple different groups of citizens who use morality and religious beliefs to condemn pornography creation and consumption. The Moral Majority is one of the most prevalent groups in the Christian right, detailed in the subsequent section.

3.2.1.1 Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority in the 1980s. In 1979, Reverend Jerry Falwell had a mission to convince Americans to be "born again," to get baptized, and to register to vote. Falwell and other evangelicals of the time believed that the moral decay of individuals was causing the nation to decay, which empowered typical Christians to feel that their actions mattered (Sutton, 2013). By making the "right choices" and judging the choices of their neighbors, conservative evangelicals could shape the fate of the nation.

Falwell's extensive reach and popularity made his opinions regarding pornography widely listened to and supported by both his congregations and political allies. Falwell's work in opposing pornography used many tactics, such as letter-writing campaigns, public protest, litigation, and political lobbying of both city ordinances and federal policy. In 1979, Falwell founded the Moral Majority, a nonprofit organization whose goal was to encourage conservative Protestants to participate in conservative politics and to vote for Ronald Reagan.

Though his Moral Majority group and those who agreed with Falwell aligned with politically voting and supporting Republican and conservative president Reagan, Falwell did not limit himself in spreading his beliefs and opinions to a particular political affiliation. In a statement from Falwell, Falwell accurately encompasses what I later define as pillars of the anti-porn movement of the first porn wars (1970s-1980s). In this statement alone, he mentions

protecting our vulnerable, the exploitation of women (connecting to the fable of choice), and the harm to families.

The statement referred to earlier occurred at the Democratic National Convention (DNC) on July 16, 1988, in the Omni Hotel in Atlanta, GA. Falwell delivered the keynote speech on family issues in America and whether politicians adequately addressed them. In his keynote address, he solidified his stance on pornography, saying,

> I do not believe for one moment that the framers of the First Amendment had in mind Hugh Hefner, Bob Guccione, and Larry Flint. And I don't believe for a moment what the courts, right up to the high court, are saying that the First Amendment prevents a restriction of what pornographers are doing to our families of the demeaning of women exploiting them as commercial property and to our children, et cetera, et cetera. I don't believe that for a moment. I cannot yell fire in a crowded theater when there is no fire. I have a limitation of my free speech. I cannot stand here and slander someone because this is… I have a First Amendment privilege. There are laws that restrict that, and I believe there should be limitations on what can be done under the guise of First Amendment protection. We are damaging families with pornography, and I believe a part of the vision is to eliminate from the surface of America the scab called pornography (C-SPAN, 1988).

Falwell and his followers were among the core reasons why Reagan was given the powerful position of president of the United States. Falwell did not stop there; he affected more politically liberal citizens as well with his teachings. Falwell and the influence of his "Moral Majority" changed the face of Christian political involvement; Falwell got the evangelical movement active in politics, and there is a traditional notion called the spirituality of the church. The spirituality of the church says that one should not be involved in the moral reformation of one's society and that

it is wrong to be "yoked" with unbelievers, otherwise meaning to be grouped with unbelievers. Falwell's reach was extensive and strong to have the power to go against the previously held belief to remove oneself from the spirituality of the church. This shift started by Falwell has continued into modern politics and evangelical followers. The creation and continuation of the Moral Majority created by Falwell maintained support for Regan's 1984 reelection campaign alongside other Christian Right organizations.

With the election of Reagan, anti-porn advocacy became a central part of governmental power. Reagan was a self-proclaimed born-again Christian, a member of the Moral Majority, and a supporter of conservative policy regarding sex work and censorship. Many conservative organizations were launched during the Reagan administration, one of the most powerful and relevant being The Council for National Policy (CNP), which is still influential today. CNP is an umbrella organization and networking group for conservative and Republican activists in the United States; Tim LaHaye launched this organization in 1981.

During the first year of his second term, Reagan appointed Attorney General (and fellow born-again Christian) Edwin Meese to lead the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography. The Commission boasted a budget of nearly half a million dollars, and Meese used this to recruit commission members who were also fellow conservative Christians. These members included Commission chair Henry Hudson, who previously prosecuted pornographers in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., and Alan Sears, who went on to represent the anti-pornography lobbying group Citizen for Decency Through Law (CDL), and James Dobson, founder of the evangelical group focus on the family and the right-wing political organization, the Family Research Council.

In 1986, after calling dozens of witnesses, The Attorney General's Commission on Pornography released the Meese Report. This 1960-page report explored the question of harm caused by both sexually violent and nonviolent pornographic materials and found a link with aggressive behavior towards women. This report declared that pornography was harming individuals, families, and overall society (Attorney General… 1986). Though this report was an effort and report that the conservative right championed, it borrowed rhetoric from anti-porn feminists and was also supported by anti-porn feminists. Women Against Pornography (WAP), a popular anti-pornography group in the first porn wars, also provided witnesses who gave testimony about the destructive influence of pornography to Attorney General Edwin Meese's 1985 Commission on Pornography; one of these witnesses was Catharine MacKinnon (Bronstein, 2011). Dorchen Liedhold, a member of the organization WAP, showed her approval of the Meese Report, saying,

> We commend the Commission for being the first federal government body to report on the systematic campaign of abuse, terror, and discrimination being waged against over half the citizens of this country... We also endorse the Commission's publication of the names and descriptions of pornographic publications and films. A simple reading of the list of titles it compiled says more about the sexualized bigotry that is pornography than the most impassioned speech any feminist could make (Whittier, 2018).

States responded to the Commission's recommendations for increased penalties for selling obscene materials with more bills introduced year after year. Conservative anti-pornography groups such as the National Federation for Decency (later renamed the American Family Association) grew support based on the traditional values of "virginity, monogamy, and the

patriarchal family." As Executive Director of the National Coalition Against Pornography, Rev. Jerry Kirk wrote:

> Pornography is not a conservative or liberal issue. It is an issue for everyone who cares about the well-being of children, women, men, and families. For some, it is a religious issue. For others, it is a moral issue. But for everyone, pornography is a public safety issue: the safety of our children from sexual abuse and molestation, or women from rape and degradation and our families from disease and disintegration.

Despite his attempt to paint pornography as a universal issue, it is clear that Kirk and his constituents led their anti-pornography efforts with a specific moral agenda of protecting the heteronormative family unit (p. 44).

The Moral Majority movement grouped the fight against pornography with two other social problems: abortion and homosexuality. The first war against pornography, which this thesis defines as happening in the 1970s and the 1980s, was a war against a version of America that had progressive gender and sexual values, which the Christian right saw as a threat to their children, families, and way of life shown clearly by Falwell's statement at the DNC in 1988.

This section showed one side of those who opposed porn, but in addition to the religious and the politically conservative, porn had another opposing force; anti-porn feminists otherwise referred to as radical feminists.

4.2.2 We have the same goal but are not on the same team.

Though critics name anti-porn feminists as allies of religious conservatives, who, as detailed above, organized in opposition to porn in the 70s and 80s, they did not often work together. Beyond the fact that they are both opposed to the same thing, they are not genuine collaborators (Whittier, 2018). They fought porn for varied reasons, had other tactics, and had

different legal goals. The anti-porn feminist groups occasionally championed conservative legal goals; they never notably co-organized or cosponsored events.

The Meese Report referred to earlier in this chapter is an example of this phenomenon of supporting the outcome but not truly working together. Religious conservatives advocated for widespread prohibition by expanding the criminal code related to "obscenity." At the same time, feminists advocated for porn to be considered a form of sex discrimination; women could use this classification as a civil offense to challenge porn producers and distributors. These distributors could be music producers, magazine distributors, and media producers; any and everyone who had their hand in the making or sale of pornographic material (Duggan & Hunter, 2006). Neither the anti-porn feminists nor the conservatives were much concerned with differences between women, such as racial differences and class lines, and were critiqued by many non-white feminists.

In Catherine MacKinnon's essay "What is a White Woman Anyway," MacKinnon identifies a framework of inauthenticity where women are actors playing roles created by men instead of social actors in their lives and the world. Particularly, MacKinnon examines the "problem" of the white woman as being objectified through what she calls a "white man's image" and a "Black man's image." She does not speak on the objectification of Black women. The article continues the critique and condemns porn because of the sole reason of woman’s objectification without the intersections of race. MacKinnon's feminist lens on porn is defined by gender and what is done to a woman and centering it on sexual exploitation ignores the struggles of women's experience that are important to women of color (Mahoney, 1993).

*4.2.3 *MacKinnon* the difference: creating the early front against porn*

5 One might notice a name that pops up often when talking about the feminist movement against pornography in the first porn wars. That name is Catharine MacKinnon. She was a very vocal opponent of porn and was widely listened to because of her passionate but still academic way of arguing for censorship and eradication of pornography. MacKinnon, in collaboration with Andrea Dworkin, drafted the first local anti-pornography ordinance proposed in Minneapolis in the early 1980s; this ordinance was ultimately rejected, but it contributed to the discourse surrounding porn and sexual violence. The ordinance described pornography as a direct cause of harm against women and, by extension, a violation of women's civil rights. Pornography was "transformed from a sin to a sociological problem," from an issue of private desire to one of public safety (Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. 16). As mentioned in the definition of porn in the above chapter, in the ordinance, MacKinnon defines pornography as the "sexual subordination of women, graphically depicted, whether in pictures or in words." For material to be subject to civil action, it had to include one or more of nine defined forms of subordination. Some of the ones that MacKinnon and Dworkin included were: "women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation," "women are presented in postures of sexual submission," or "women are presented as whores by nature." While the Minneapolis City Council approved MacKinnon's and Dworkin's ordinance, Mayor Donald Fraser vetoed it, declaring the bill unconstitutional. (Russell, 1993)

In both *Only Words* and *Feminism Unmodified*, MacKinnon criticizes the law for failing to protect women and bring pornographers to justice (MacKinnon, 1987) (MacKinnon, 1993). MacKinnon writes, "the utter failure of this state to do anything effective about it—with the extremely elastic obscenity standard in its hands and all of its power at its disposal—should

suggest that this theory of the state is lacking" (MacKinnon, 1987, p.43). If pornography is abuse and the state protects pornography, the state is failing to protect women (Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. 40). The woman is vulnerable in her eyes; if society is not protecting those who are vulnerable and need help, what is the point? MacKinnon is not the only one who called for protecting those we deem vulnerable; others did. The next part of this chapter explores the concept of protecting the vulnerable to show the way in which the vulnerable are exploited by the anti-porn advocates to destroy porn in the first porn wars. MacKinnon connects vulnerability to women and the call to protect them; how else does this trope show up in the first porn wars?

5.1 Protect the Vulnerable

5.1.1 Radical Feminists against Porn

There was a series of common truths that a version of radical feminists agreed on in the first porn wars. First, these feminists opposed pornography because of the literal harm to women. Women were forced into performances that they did not consent to; women's bodies were abused, and even women who were willing porn performers and scripted scenes of forced/coerced sexual encounters glorified rape and contributed to what feminists were calling "rape culture." As Robin Morgan put it: "Porn is the theory, rape is the practice" (Morgan, 1978). These harms align with a second concern: pornography symbolically harms women by reinforcing the idea that women are sexual objects used to serve men. Porn stars were on screen to please and satisfy men: performers and the audience were not having sex for their pleasure but for a system that gave an economic reward to women who participated in the patriarchy. Lastly, porn harmed women by reducing them to their sex appeal, which further cemented sexism and gender inequality in broader society; the image of women in porn carried into other aspects of social life. If women only had value as sexual objects, then it was more likely that they would

face discrimination and harassment as they attempted to succeed in jobs and education (Bronstein, 2013). These were some of the points which anti-porn feminists relied on in their critique of the creation and the wrongness of porn. Two of the loudest anti-porn feminists, Catharine MacKinnon and writer Andrea Dworkin, believed and argued for women to have redress if they had been harmed by sexist porn because, by their definition, pornography "leads to discrimination and violence against women" (Dworkin &MacKinnon, 1993, p. 80). The intent of MacKinnon and Dworkin could have been interpreted as a calling for censorship of pornography.

Through this chapter, there are many examples of arguments against pornography, but you will see a lack of empirical data that supports these claims. Parroting the same stories of one or two people who were harmed by the system of pornography (like Linda Lovelace and Applebottom) and utilizing negative personal experiences are trends. Kathleen Barry, a founding member of a powerful group that opposed violence in pornography and media in 1980, defended this way of arguing against pornography. In *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography,* Barry (1980) says, "The casual connections between pornography and sexual violence are perfectly evident… We need only appeal to our own common sense." According to Barry's (and others) view, the casual relationship between pornography and rape was an inevitable part of women's lived experiences. This "common sense" argument is a loud narrative used by the anti-porn movement and aids in the usage of moral panic. Find one negative story, like Linda Lovelace's, magnify, repeat it, say things making it apparent that we should not want to harm people (women especially), and then get people to agree. It is a recipe for a panic surrounding the porn industry.

4.1.1.1 Women "on the right." Ironically, opponents of feminism in the first porn war championed a similar argument; "sexual freedom" harmed women but not through the patriarchy. Conservatives blamed beatniks, hippies, homosexuals, and feminists themselves for the movement of "sexual freedom." Women's sexuality, as it appeared through Marilyn Monroe in *Niagara [Film]* or Linda Lovelace in *Deep Throat [Film]*, was fake. The only way of authentic sexual expression was found in heterosexual monogamous matrimony, where God intended it to be (Frank, 2016). Conservative religious women, like their activist feminist counterparts, insisted that they opposed pornography not because they were anti-sex but because they wanted to reclaim women's sexuality.

An example is Beverly LaHaye and her husband Tim; the couple took advantage of the rising genre of Christian sex advice by publishing their book *The Act of Marriage (*1976). The book is part sex education, part marital counseling, and part Bible study; it falls heavily on gender complementarianism, which states that God created men and women to be different from one another so that they can complete or come together wholly in marriage. On their stance on pornography, the LaHayes condemned porn, but they buried their concerns in the context of marital satisfaction rather than moral opposition to porn. Those who have the best sex lives "don't have an obsession with sex nor read pornographic literature to be stimulated properly." Instead, Christian couples "just go on year after year enjoying it- just as our heavenly father intended." LaHayes' advice to couples was to avoid any "suggestive material," including porn, "most movies," and "questionable TV programs," because that kind of media would draw the attention away from one's spouse, the correct object of one's sexual desire (LaHaye, 1984).

Beverly LaHaye continued to impact the anti-porn movement with her founding of the Concerned Women for America (CWA) in 1978 in response to an interview of feminist activist

Betty Friedan on her founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. Beverly LaHaye argued that this group was an alternate organization for women who disagreed with Friedan's views but cared about politics and the country's future. The concerned women had many concerns like pornography, homosexuality, abortion, big government, and sex education. LaHayes and her peers focused on protecting their vision of womanhood.

Harm to Women became a key talking point for the conservative anti-porn movement after the feminists championed the message. Since the early 20th century and the time of Anthony Comstock, conservatives have bemoaned that porn contributes to the deterioration of the family, saying that women and children are innocent victims of men's vices. However, it was not until the 1970s, when feminism took cultural hold, that conservatives started the argument that porn's harm to women was a reason to oppose it.

Rape and sexual violence were among the earliest concerns of the women's movement that emerged in the 1960s; activists began targeting the media as perpetrators of the idea that men were entitled to women as sexual objects. With porn more prevalent in the mainstream in the 1970s, it was an easy target.

In the broader anti-pornography discourse, conservatives began to adopt the feminist language of "harm to women"—a shift from the purely moralistic objections that had characterized previous anti-porn sentiments. Feminist activists in the 1960s and 70s argued that media and pornography promoted the idea of women as objects for male consumption, contributing to a culture of rape and violence against women. Conservatives borrowed this critique, reframing their longstanding claim that pornography harmed the family to focus on the specific harm done to women. In doing so, they implicitly acknowledged feminist concerns but rooted them in religious values and a view of gender roles that rejected feminist notions of

equality. This convergence led to a complex moment in the history of the anti-pornography movement, where feminist and conservative critiques of pornography intersected but diverged in their underlying motives and beliefs about sexuality.

5.1.2 Protect our children

In the above portion, women were the "vulnerable." Society seeks to protect our most vulnerable, including children and women. Anti-porn advocates in both porn wars parrot the need to protect the other vulnerable population: children. Porn's harm to children has arguably been the longest and largest concern among porn opponents. In a Boston periodical from 1836, a parent wrote about illicit literature; "it will teach them things they never thought of (Burke, 2023, p. 234)."

Concern for children has spanned the entire anti-porn movement; in the 80s, the organization Women Against Pornography (WAP) used exaggerated statistics about billions of dollars being made from child porn and the millions of preteen children being abused in the porn and prostitution industries. Newspapers and magazine titles fanned the fearful fire with titles such as "PORNOGRAPHY: WHAT CAN WE DO TO PROTECT OUR KIDS?" and "CAN WE PROTECT CHILDREN FROM PORNOGRAPHY" (Burke, 2023). Children represent the most vulnerable citizens in society; they represent the need for protection and care. Conservative movements emphasize the simultaneous fact of innocence and the constant risk of losing that innocence (Burke, 2023). Even if you do not have children or a personal connection to children, most have an inherent need to protect those who need it.

4.1.2.1 MacKinnon: Women are like children. MacKinnon, one of the foremost anti-pornography feminists, compares child pornography and women's consent in her argument for the harm of porn on women and children and the ability for women and children to be able to

consent; she comments on child pornography and that the American legal system recognizes the harm of child pornography because its consumption and possession are punishable by law. Nevertheless, MacKinnon questions why the harm of pornography towards women is not also recognized. "Sex pictures are legally considered sex acts, based on what, in my terms, is abuse due to the fact of inequality between children and adults," she writes, "for seeing the pictures as tantamount to acts, how, other than that sexuality socially defines women, is inequality among adults different?" In asking this question, MacKinnon asserts that the inequality between men and women is equal to that between adults and children. Mackinnon infantilizes women in her line of questioning; they are equal to children in terms of their ability to consent to sex. As Fraiman notes, "MacKinnon has argued that women, like children, cannot consent to posing for pornography since they are unequal parties to the transaction; yet no heterosexual is purely consensual by this definition, and, unequal as women may be, I would want to insist that when women say 'yes,' unlike children, they mean 'yes.'" MacKinnon's repeated insistence that women are incapable of consent is infantilizing and effectively removes any possibility for female sexual agency and pleasure. (Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. 39)

MacKinnon’s approach is predicated on the notion that women cannot consent to participating in the industry and are all victims. As Mackinnon (1993) writes in *Only Words*, "Pornography is done to women." To MacKinnon, pornography, and therefore sex, is an action done to women, not something they can actively participate in. This belief is also made clear in her assertion that the exchange of money in the making of pornography is the only motivator for women's participation in the industry. If no physical or psychological coercion is used, "money is the medium of force and provides the cover of consent” (Stark & Whisnant, 2004). She expands on the idea of choice under capitalism: "This is a bourgeois culture, which cherished that belief

that individuals freely act" (Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. 39). Though this point is valid, it would be better to have more nuance. In society, we all sell our bodies to someone or something; what makes these women's consensual choice to sell their bodies for sex worse than the person selling their bodies 40 hours a week to a cubical or to a fast-food restaurant to make ends meet?

5.2 Women Against Pornography, not Wet Ass Pussy; The collectives against porn

After tracking trope of protesting the vulnerable, it would be useful to get a historical overview of anti-porn groups in which these women and anti-porn advocates were a part of and started in the first porn wars. Three influential feminist media groups emerged in the 70s and 80s in the United States: Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM), and Women Against Pornography (WAP). WAVAW, WAVPM, and WAP took issue with the presentation of women in American advertising and pressured corporations to withdraw campaigns that celebrated sexual violence. The three groups worked for media reform in the first porn wars with boycotts, conferences, and speaking events (Bronstein, 2011). These particular groups were chosen because all three of them were active during the first porn wars in their advocacy of harm against women. In some cases, a group emerged from a previously created anti-porn advocacy group.

WAVAW protested a 1976 advertising campaign for the Rolling Stones' album *Black and Blue*, which was a billboard that showed a beaten and bruised woman tied up with rope straddling a photograph of Mick Jagger and the other band members brazenly staring out to the camera (Bronstein, 2011) with the phrase "I'm 'Black and Blue' from The Rolling Stones- and I love it!" WAVAW led a three-year boycott against Warner Communications, because of their belief that the billboard conflated violence with sexual pleasure, pushing Warner to eventually construct a policy against violent imagery (Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. 18).

WAVAW, WAVPM, and WAP tried to disrupt and "improve" mainstream media images. Moreover, though WAVAW could arguably be similar to what WAVPM and WAP stood for, they had a very interesting distinction (Bronstein, 2011): WAVAW left pornography out of their agenda intentionally. Instead of having porn on their agenda, a guiding principle for the group was to "subsume pornography under violence against women, not the other way around." Members of the organization held that images of violence against women condoned violence but did not directly cause it. Mass media, such as advertising, was of more significant concern to WAVAW than pornography because they believed it had a more substantial influence on the public. However, not all feminists held this view. The increasingly publicly visible pornography industry inspired new anxieties amongst feminists which led to the creation of two groups that made sure that pornography and the effect it had on women was addressed, namely Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) and later Women Against Pornography (WAP) (Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. 19).

While advertising and other mainstream media captured these groups' attention, the question of pornography always hung in the air. WAVAW, WAVPM, and WAP crafted different approaches to the issue. Members of WAVAW were always careful to describe themselves as anti-media violence and not as anti-pornography. However, the group had initially organized in 1976 to block the distribution of an X-rated film called *Snuff* that purported to show the on-screen rape and murder of a young woman. *Snuff* was an appropriate target for action in WAVAW's view because it featured overt images of physical violence against women, not because it was sexually explicit (Bronstein, 2011).

In December 1976, San Francisco-area feminists founded WAVPM, identifying pornography from the outset as a critical component of their anti-violence agenda. The members

of this organization shared WAVAW's commitment to fighting depictions of violence in advertising and other mainstream media but also believed that pornography was central to women's oppression. Within weeks of its founding, WAVPM was leading protest marches through San Francisco's commercial sex districts, arguing that XXX films and adult bookstores created a hostile climate that taught men to view women as sexual playthings. In the words of Andrea Dworkin at the Take Back the Night March in Los Angelese on April 19, 1980, one of the anti-pornography movement's most influential theorists, pornography "conditions, trains, educates, and inspires men to despise women, to use women, to hurt women (Dworkin, 1980)." Pornography reinforced the idea that sexual access to women's bodies was every man's right. The radical feminist activist Robin Morgan summed this up in a pithy phrase oft-repeated in the movement: "Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice" (Bronstein, 2011).

In 1979, the feminist anti-pornography movement seemed to take a decisive turn away from its broad-based set of concerns about media violence with the founding of WAP. Prominent New York radical feminists, including Susan Brownmiller, Gloria Steinem, and Robin Morgan, launched this organization. These women believed that emphasizing a hot-button issue like pornography, as opposed to media violence, would generate extensive news coverage and community support. The strategic rhetorical shift ensured that WAP would move to the forefront of the feminist anti-pornography movement. Like WAVAW and WAVPM, members of WAP believed that mainstream media images were powerful agents of socialization; they taught men and women about their respective worth in society and communicated treacherous gender stereotypes. WAP participated in a range of protests against abusive advertising campaigns, popular films, television programs, and magazines that suggested that women deserved to be exploited and humiliated. However, the calculated reorientation to pornography meant that the

organization had less time and fewer resources to devote to these broad-based, grassroots media reform efforts. This reality changed the nature of the movement as a whole (Bronstein, 2011).

5.2.1 Using me, Using you: How WAP argued to "protect women."

In 1980, a press conference held by the feminist organization Women Against Pornography (WAP) had Linda Marchiano, former porn superstar Linda Lovelace, alongside at-the-time feminisms headliners Gloria Steinem, Catherine MacKinnon, and Andrea Dworkin, speak out against porn and the pornography industry. Marchiano used the stage to speak out about porn and to promote her book titled, *Ordeal,* an autobiography about her experience as a sex worker. The book details how she was forced into the porn business by her abusive husband, Chuck Traynor. WAP used this story to publicly denounce porn for its harm to women by normalizing coercion and sexual abuse committed by men (Burke, 2023). In *Feminism Unmodified,* a collection of speeches given by MacKinnon between 1981 and 1986, she again returns to the story of Linda Marchiano, who testified she was coerced into making *Deep Throat [Film]* (MacKinnon, 1987). She writes that "a lot of women know that what Linda says is true but are not willing to face it."(Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. 35) Also, in *Feminism Unmodified*, referring to Marchiano's performance in *Deep Throat [Film]*, she writes, "It is important that she loved taking a penis to the bottom of her throat as if women really are like that (MacKinnon, 1987, p.34)." MacKinnon places a hierarchy on sexual acts: those that put women in "submissive" positions and are therefore disdainful and unwanted by all women, and those that do not paint women in a subservient light and hence are "acceptable." To connect this technique used by MacKinnon in her fight against porn, MacKinnon is building into the moral panic surrounding porn by taking one viewpoint and repeating it over and over to heighten the impact of the singular experience and story. As mentioned earlier, this repetition of a singular story

connects to the hierarchy of sex. The sex that was in *Deep Throat [Film]* was not “good sex.” On-screen, it was outside of a marital bed; in addition to that, if you take the actions out of the story, sex is still "bad." The actors are not married, nor do they do it for procreation. They are doing it for either pleasure (which Marchiano claims it was not) or money.

Four years after the conference in 1984, Colleen Applegate, better known as her porn character Shauna Grant, committed suicide, which all significant papers covered. Grant's story and coverage were essential to the anti-porn movement. Grant left her home in the Midwest at eighteen to live in California with her boyfriend, and within weeks, she started to model for magazines like *Hustler* and *Penthouse* to make money. When she and her boyfriend split up, Applegate began to appear in pornographic films and became famous for her "girl next door" look. Over the next two years, Applegate earned over one hundred thousand dollars and appeared in over thirty films. Throughout Applegate's career, she became infected by herpes, had an abortion, and became addicted to cocaine, which the newspapers made sure to cover in detail.

In the years following her death, three films examined Applegate's story. The first was a made-for-TV movie with a fictionalized account of her dramatic life and death. The second film was a documentary that featured photos of Grant as a child at home and as a high school cheerleader. It included emotional and tearful recordings of her family's voices wondering what went wrong. This storyline helped the anti-porn sentiments by constructing a morality tale: innocent young women should not enter or wander into risky spaces. The last was an "X-rated documentary" that pieced together sex scenes of Applegate, outtakes of her on set, and interviews of those in the industry who knew her. These films had something in common: exploiting Shauna's story and capitalizing on a woman's struggle in the porn industry (Burke, 2023).

In 1983, WAP leaders endorsed government action and legal strategies to ban violent pornography, concluding that state-supported suppression of this material was the best means of addressing women's second-class status. The organization mobilized on behalf of the MacKinnon-Dworkin anti-pornography ordinances that treated pornography as a violation of women's civil rights (Bronstein, 2011).

The criticism of pornography in the eighties was not minor. They were mainstream and highly publicized. The critiques were not just coming from outside the house but from inside. As mentioned above, influential and famous pornstars, such as Linda Lovelace, openly called out the porn industry on the harm that sex workers went through to be in the industry. This was all before the internet came onto the scene; once it did, anti-porn activists added another layer to their fight. MacKinnon and others from the first porn wars were vocal in their use of the first two fore mentioned tropes.

In the 1980s, the anti-pornography movement gained powerful momentum as both feminist activists and former porn stars like Linda Lovelace revealed the exploitation and coercion present within the industry. Women Against Pornography (WAP), led by prominent feminists such as Gloria Steinem, Catherine MacKinnon, and Andrea Dworkin, leveraged Lovelace's and Colleen Applegate's tragic stories to build public awareness and moral urgency around the issue. The cases of these women illustrated the dangers and dehumanizing effects of pornography, portraying it not as an issue of personal freedom but as a systemic harm that normalized violence against women and profited from their suffering. These stories became the movement's rallying points, helping fuel support for legal actions like the MacKinnon-Dworkin ordinances, which aimed to recognize pornography as a violation of women's civil rights. This framing successfully brought anti-porn sentiment into the mainstream and furthered the narrative

that women's bodies and sexualities needed protection from a predatory industry. By the end of the decade, with the onset of the internet, anti-porn activists saw new challenges. They expanded their critique to include the digital proliferation of pornography, setting the stage for ongoing debates about the impact of porn in an increasingly digital society.

5.3 The use of scientific and medicalized language as a weapon against porn

The final trope that this thesis will identify is the trope of using scientific and medicalized language as a weapon against porn; this is the most nuanced trope. In the first porn war, anti-porn advocates used the psychology of the family and how porn harms traditional family dynamics. In the article "Pornography and Violence: What the 'Experts' really say" by Lynne Segal (1990), which looks at the discussion about porn in primarily the 1970s and 1980s, Segal addresses the “moral right” who opposes porn because porn is a threat to traditional values and creates social and moral decay, “It has demanded rigid censorship of sexually explicit material designed for recreational consumption, particularly of so-called 'perverse' and homosexual imagery, claiming that it threatens family life and creates general social and moral decay” (Segal, 1990, p. 30). The obsession with the nuclear family is integrated into the traditional American Dream. The goal is to have a mother, a father, 2.5 kids, a dog, and a white picket fence. The moral right believed that porn would come in and destroy that. The act of watching porn could ruin your family or the chance to have one. This assumption is similar to the vulnerable and protecting the vulnerable. Suppose there is no family, no children. It destroys the unit on which society is based.

Though it is not the most prevalent trope during this war. porn addiction language still pops up. The use of medical terminology by pornography’s opponents is not entirely new. In 1984, Conservative Catholic activist Phyllis Schlafly used the language of addiction to describe

pornography; “My view of pornography is that it is an addiction like alcohol or drugs or tobacco… It moved from what is commonly known as calendar art, pinup girls, to awful, bizarre, exotic, lesbian, bondage” (Burke, 2023, p. 173). Schlafly continued the story of addiction in her statement to journalists, saying that these pictures, like in *Penthouse,* were gateways into something more dangerous and sinister.

The second porn wars technique that is comparable to this is the use of the medicalized language of addiction and personal health consequences that affect a porn consumer and their relationships. Though many religiously centered groups address addiction, scientific language is not only utilized by those who hold a religious affiliation. This trope is much less prevalent in the first porn wars and gains more traction in the second porn wars with the focus on porn addiction.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, the anti-porn movement was historically tracked through the two decades centering the Christian right and anti-porn advocacy groups. Groups such as WAP and the famous Catherine MacKinnon were included in the historical tracing. In this chapter, the three tropes were addressed: 1) protect the vulnerable (i.e., women and children), 2) the fable of choice and morality, and 3) the weaponization of scientific language and the medicalization of addiction in consequences to the family and personal health. The next chapter will focus on the second porn war and center on another anti-porn advocate, Gail Dines. It focuses on how, in current times, these three tropes "fit into" the current anti-porn movement.

6 CHAPTER 2

6.1 Introduction

This chapter analyzes the modern debate on pornography emphasizing anti-porn sentiment and how it affects children, addresses how moral complexities were taken advantage by anti-porn advocates, and introduces the negative impacts of porn on society touted by anti-porn advocates.

6.2 Time After Time, the Resurgence of Anti-porn Advocacy.

Times are scary. Over the last couple of years, we have faced a global pandemic, catastrophic weather events, and numerous wars affecting global citizens and children by the thousands. In addition to the conflicts happening overseas, Americans face frequent mass shootings, rising inequality, poverty, protests, and police brutality, and the rise in technology makes all this more visible and integrated into daily life; it is inescapable. Understandably, people are anxious. Instead of meeting this moment of enormous change and developing evidence-based solutions, society is still hung up on an old issue. Pornography.

The "panic" surrounding the youth and pornography is not new, nor is it gone. Pornography used to be limited to seedy theatres or stacks of pornographic magazines under your dad's bed, but not anymore. Sexual content is just a quick click away, thanks to the internet. Because of how accessible porn is today, it comes as no surprise that many people are vocally concerned about it. This concern has created many op-eds and legislation that call pornography a "public health crisis," like in Utah, and calls for warning labels on all material that is deemed explicit (Domonosk, 2016). Those who panic about porn claim that pornography leads to addiction and mental health problems, damages the brain, results in violence against women, and drives epidemics of sexual dysfunction.

6.3 It's like Groundhog Day; the story keeps on repeating.

The chorus keeps repeating in the song of anti-porn advocacy. Even with the large break between the first porn wars and the second porn wars, antipornography feminists did not give up the fight. Christine Stark's (2004) book, *Not For Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography*, is evidence that feminists with antipornography agendas remained active in activism and academia past the 1990s. “There are now at least two generations of feminists who clearly understand the damage of prostitution and pornography to all women’s safety and civil status” (Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. xi), the book boasts. Through its publication, its authors aimed to “draw new energy to the movement” (Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. xiii) and call attention to “a whole new generation of feminists who are resisting the sex industry” (Stark & Whisnant, 2004, p. xii). The author explicitly builds upon the theories established by MacKinnon and other prevalent antipornography feminists, and the book is evidence that antipornography feminism had in no way been discouraged over the years. The more modern anti-porn advocates spoke with passion about porn without the same political enthusiasm seen at the height of the so-called “sex wars.” Still, the same ideologies that fueled the movement remain even today, although reformulated to fit the current media landscape (Stark & Whisnant, 2004).

Anti-porn advocacy and work have been present in American society since the seventies, and in these years, so have the same narratives. The tropes of 1) protect the vulnerable (i.e., women and children), 2) the fable of choice and morality, and 3) the weaponization of scientific language and the medicalization of addiction in consequences to the family and personal health have shown up just as often. In this portion of the chapter, these three tropes will be further explored and incorporated into the available literature in the second porn wars.

6.4 The never-ending battle

The Language of harm has propelled the movement since its nineteenth-century origins: harm to men to succumb to temptation, harm to society's moral foundation, and eventually harm to the women who were/are exploited or objectified through porn's production and popularity. Neither anti-porn feminists nor conservative women won their battle in the porn wars; by the 1990s, sex was entirely out of the private sphere. Pornography and its impact on American culture is here to stay. I am looking into the three tropes mentioned above to see if there are genuine differences or the same points just evolved by the internet. In my life, I have experienced all these talking points, and looking at anti-porn publications from the first porn wars and second porn wars shows the continuation of the conversation with the same points but different people.

6.4.1 The battle over watching porn.

In recent years, porn has become more available and accessible to the population. In response to this, the anti-porn movement has joined two overlapping strategies. First, it has expanded beyond morality to include the harms of watching porn that are claimed to be objectively true. Second, anti-porn activists' strategies focus on children and teens as harmed explicitly by exposure to online porn. The battle over making porn has primarily focused on the effect on women, while the fight over watching porn concentrates mainly on men.

5.4.1.1 Pornography + the internet = the new bogeyman. Thanks to the rise of the internet and the increase in accessibility to pornography in private spheres, a collection of religious conservatives, feminists, and secular Millennials became concerned about the impact of porn on contemporary society. Because of the internet, which makes porn instantly accessible

and challenging to regulate on free online streaming sites, these groups point to widespread pornography addiction and sex trafficking as a national crisis.

In 1995, when only about one in four households had a computer and even fewer had an internet connection, the media was bursting with scary stories about the World Wide Web. In July of that year, *Time* magazine published a cover story featuring a "new study" by Marty Rimm on the dangers of internet pornography. The study was an eighty-five-page undergraduate paper published in a law journal without peer review (Lewis, 1995). Because of this, other news outlets added coverage to this story, including TV programs such as *Dateline.* They all discussed the so-called findings that 85 percent of images on the internet were pornographic, and many of those images were obscene, such as images of children, deviant behavior such as bestiality, urination, defecation, and torture scenes (Lewis, 1995).

By 2003, most American households owned a computer connected to the internet; this ushered in a fear of an impending porn monster. Pamela Paul, the author of the 2005 book *Pornified*, put it as “all-pornography, all the time” (Paul, 2005). According to Paul's research and analysis, virtually everyone had come across the internet by the early 2000s. Though assumed so, the internet did not cause a generation to become porn-crazy suddenly; people had long been exposed to sexual pictures before the Internet. Still, one can argue that pornography has entered almost all forms of media: TV, movies, magazines, and music. One could notice that this is the same argument that WAVPM made in the first porn wars, pointed out in chapter one. Commentators of this happening called it many things such as "sexualized" and "hypersexualized," journalist Ariel Ley said we lived in a "raunch culture," Briann McNair called it a "strip-tease culture," and Pamela Paul dubbed it a "pornified culture” (Paul, 2005).

A more contemporary version of pornography panic comes from both sides of the coin, both the right and the left side of the aisle, just like in the first porn wars. In 2016, the Republican Party insisted that pornography is a “public-health crisis destroying the lives of millions” (Destroying the lives… 2016), while in the same year, a *New York Times* column told readers that “It’s O.K., Liberal Parents, You Can Freak Out About Porn” (Shukevitz, 2016).The article for *New York Times* critiques the Republican Party for their stance on porn's harm when the same platform draft opposes a ban on military-style rifles and supports coal which affects millions as well. The article goes on to say that non-Republicans would "be foolish to dismiss pornography as a non-issue” (Shukevitz, 2016) and states that,

> Internet pornography is a real problem for the 66 million American parents with children under 18. Parents don’t have to believe that such material is a direct cause of sexual violence to be driven a little crazy by it. It’s bad enough that it’s giving our sons and daughters some very creepy ideas about how they’re supposed to look and act (Shukevitz, 2016).

This opinion piece was published in a widely read and liberal-leaning publication that critiques conservative writings while enforcing anti-porn rhetoric of the need to censor or fear internet porn from children. The article closes with the line, "as the pornography industry explores the darkest reaches of the human psyche in search of profits, liberals may want to rethink the assumption that only archconservatives would try to stop children from going there, too” (Shukevitz, 2016).

6.5 Dine in or Dine out? How Gail Dines Set the Table for Contemporary War Against Porn

Public opinion fanned by media attention and exasperated by passion adds to the adverse reaction that porn receives. However, it is not just the random mother on the street who is vocal in their fears of pornography. As in the first porn wars, there are educated, self-proclaimed feminists who believe in the "health crisis" that is pornography, especially regarding the perceived impact it has on children. When analyzing the current anti-porn movement, Gail Dines cannot be ignored. Her books, speaking performances (both virtual and in-person lectures), and leadership of Culture Reframed, an organization that aims to "address hypersexualized media and pornography as the public health crisis of the digital age" (About…, 2023), are highly consumed and cited when attacking pornography. If one wanted to pick out a leader in the contemporary movement, one would not need to look much further than Dines.

Gail Dines is a self-proclaimed antipornography, pro-sex feminist. Dines is critical of the dichotomy between those considered antipornography and anti-sex by the feminist anti-censorship and pro-sex feminists; in her 2010 book *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*, she writes:

> What if you are a feminist who is pro-sex in the real sense of the word, pro that wonderful, fun, and deliciously creative force that bathes the body in delight and pleasure, and what you are actually against is porn sex? A kind of sex that is debased, dehumanized, formulaic, and generic, a kind of sex based not on individual fantasy, play, or imagination but one that is the result of an industrial product created by those who get excited, not by bodily contact but by market penetration and profits (Dines, 2010, p. 45).

At first glance, it appears that Dines has removed herself from the perspective held by Catharine MacKinnon and other prominent antipornography feminists active during the sex wars; MacKinnon and her "group" take a more academic path while Dines leads her arguments with emotional and personal attacks. Dines comments on "bodily delight and pleasure" and "individual fantasy, play or imagination," taking what appears to be a much more sex-positive stance than those who spearheaded antipornography feminism in previous decades.

However, as evident in the quote above, Dines is pro-sex only about specific types of sex, not "porn sex." Dines is only in favor of what she considers to be sex "in the real sense of the word." However, what is sex in the real sense of the word? Unlike MacKinnon, who argued that pornography was real sex and real sex was abuse, Dines' argument is based on the idea that pornography is not real sex; more particularly, pornography *cannot* be real sex.

In *Pornland*, Dines (2010) critiques the mainstream porn industry and its influence on society's views of sexuality, but her attempt to define "real sex" remains unclear. Dines argues that porn distorts natural sexual experiences, pushing people away from "authentic" connections. However, she never fully elaborates on what she means by "real sex." At one point, she claims, "porn teaches men to treat women as objects," suggesting that real sex would reject this objectification (Dines, 2010, p. 64). Yet, while she contrasts porn's depictions with her own idea of healthy sexuality, she does not explicitly define what makes sex "real." Readers are left with the sense that Dines views "real sex" as something relational and grounded in mutual respect, but her failure to define it leaves open the question of how we should understand her critique fully.

Instead, she relies on a specific genre of pornography as the definition of all pornography and "porn sex," which is then used to define what real sex is *not* rather than what real sex is. In this way, she repeats MacKinnon's tendencies to create a hierarchy of sexual acts based on the

notion of what could or could not be considered degrading towards women. Rubin defined what was “bad” sex and then whatever did not fit into that classification was therefore “good.” Dines did the same, “porn sex” is synonymous to “bad” which makes “real” sex good. In the first porn wars, good sex was acceptable and even though the words change, in the second porn wars good and real sex is allowed while bad and porn sex are not allowed.

Dines continues to stress what she believes to be the pressing "public health crisis": pornography. Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic and people confined to their homes with stay-at-home orders, many assumed that those "stuck" at home turned to pornography and masturbation to keep themselves from contracting COVID from partners or to stave off boredom. It is anyone's guess which option is more likely. However, according to Dines, "being locked up at home with a man who watches porn" is what has contributed to increased calls to domestic violence support centers. If society were to remove the access to porn, then it would remove the risk of harm to women.

To further the point of violence against women, Gail Dines spoke in an interview about the violence that men (because of porn) do to women. In a 2019 interview with Katie Couric, Dines said that "Porn is one of the largest above-ground industries in the world that is trading on misogyny and violence against women (Couric, 2019)."

On the Healthy Screen Habits Podcast on the podcast episode "How to talk about pornography," Dr. Gail Dines shares parenting tips on how to talk about pornography with children and shares resources to combat "this huge public health crisis." At the end of the podcast, Dines (2021) speaks directly about how the porn epidemic is a health crisis saying,

> You would not be handing them a beer at eight years old. Why? Because we understand that kids are not ready for these things. So, I would put it in the same way as the alcohol

> industry, the tobacco industry, and other predatory industries that are out to get our kids young because we know of the development of lifelong addictions. This is not a moral issue; it's a public health crisis because of the domino effects on the boys who use this pornography; we know from studies they have increased anxiety, depression self-harming, um, drop out of academics, um, are more likely to do risky sexual behavior, more likely to sexually harass and rape. And then we know from the girls will be more hyper-sexualized, they're more likely to be anxious, depressed, self-harm, have risky sexual behaviors too, more likely to be raped. This is why it's a public health crisis. It's not an individual problem.

Even though the claims that porn consumption leads to the claimed "increased anxiety, depression, self-harming," and other non-acceptable acts according to society, her putting these claims out confidently and using a few skewed research papers gives perceived validity to the fear that the claims create and feed; no one wants these negative occurrences to children, our most vulnerable and highest protected citizens. This point by Dines can be attributed to the protection of children and the medicalization trope when she brings up the perceived public health crisis

6.6 *New and Improved*: Protecting our children continues

When the parent from 1836 stated that illicit literature would teach children some things that they never thought of, I doubt they would feel the same argument would continue to happen, but it has. In an article released in 2018 titled "Pornography as a Public Health Issue: Promoting Violence and Exploitation of Children, Youth, and Adults," by Elisabeth Taylor, Taylor concludes that the objectification of pornography performers plays a pivotal role in shaping real-world sexual behaviors and expectations. Taylor states that "as the increasingly brutal fantasies

represented in pornography continue to inform expectations for sexual experiences, the evidence for the detrimental consequences of this also proliferates" (Taylor, 2018, p. 1). Taylor emphasizes the dangers to children through a discussion of how the fantasies that are encouraged by "pseudo-child porn" genres cause a sexual interest in true child exploitation material, which in turn increases the risk of abuse to children. In addition to that, Taylor (2018) claims that the promotion of sexually risky practices to adolescents through porn influences sexual health, sexual acts, and social well-being.

In retaliation to these claims of harm to children, sympathizers of pornography push back that porn is for entertainment, not education. Andre Shakti, a sex worker, says,

> We don't take our kids to see *Fast and Furious* and then expect them to learn how to drive like Vin Diesel. It's the exact same principle… most of it is for pure entertainment purposes, and most of it should not be used for sex ed, and that's okay because that's not its role. If your kids are learning about things like safe sex from pornography, then that means they're not getting it where they should, which is in the home (Burke, 2023, p. 236).

However, this argument is silly because virtual media is not just one thing; visual representation and media representation are both representatives of society and have effects on society. The claim that pornography is "just" for entertainment is oblivious to the power of media in society. It does not consider the input from societal norms, power dynamics, and oppressive structures (both the challenging and the reinforcement of the structures). This point made by Shakti harms the argument that porn does not affect those who watch it, but if spun correctly, it could have been a good argument that the media form in pornography can be used as a tool to foster empathy and diversify views. In the next couple of sections, media is discussed regarding how it

can affect communities that watch it. For the purpose of this thesis, the media that affects people is pornography.

Media is an influential component of modern society, far more than simply a source of pleasure or entertainment. Scholars argue that media serves as a "cultural instructor," which affects how people perceive themselves, others, and the world around them (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Through narratives and character portrayals, media offers a window into different perspectives and life experiences, often influencing and reflecting the culture that consumes it. One way in which media impacts culture is by creating and perpetuating shared narratives and symbols. Media not only reflects existing cultural norms but also contributes to the reinforcement of these norms.

In addition, media can foster empathy and understanding by exposing audiences to diverse perspectives. By presenting different cultures, experiences, and backgrounds, media has the potential to teach viewers about the world beyond their immediate environment. For example, watching television shows that focus on the struggles of marginalized groups can educate viewers about social issues such as racial discrimination, gender inequality, or poverty, potentially fostering empathy and social awareness (Croteau & Hoynes, 2018). This exposure to diverse perspectives breaks down prejudices and broadens cultural understanding. In conclusion, media (and, in connection, pornography) goes beyond mere entertainment, as it acts as a powerful cultural agent that shapes attitudes and fosters empathy; messages embedded in media content can influence viewers' beliefs, values, and behaviors, ultimately impacting broader cultural norms. This is important to this writing because the tool and argument that porn changes the cultural landscape can arguably be valid; just the criticism that the changes are dangerous and harmful should be argued against by the pro-porn advocates. Pornography is not something that

is "just for entertainment;" this claim reduces the power that media has in society. When determining this impact, societal norms, power dynamics, and oppressive structures that challenge and reinforce structures must be considered.

The connection between exposure to porn and engagement in risky behavior, like unprotected sex or sex at a young age, is murky. Eric Owen, in "The Impact of Internet Pornography on Adolescents: A Review of the Research," looked at 40 to 50 studies coming to conflicting conclusions; one would say that it led to violence or harm and the next would disagree. Owen said, "To some degree, we threw up our hands and said, there is no conclusion to be drawn here" (Owens et al., 2012). So, even with conflicting academic research coming out that challenges the assumption that watching porn leads to risky and unsafe behavior done by youth, anti-porn advocates still champion the trope of harm to children and work to censor pornography to adolescents (and adults too).

To combat the perceived harm and danger to children, anti-porn advocates have created material and groups to push back against the grip that porn has on the youth. One of these present programs is Defend Young Minds (DYM). DYM is an educational program that enables parents to teach approved sex education and warn youth away from porn. DYM is an anti-porn religious group that works to teach abstinence-based sex education and adverse reactions to porn. Kristen Jenson (2018) wrote a children's book to explain that looking at pornography is dangerous, titled *Good Pictures, Bad Pictures: Porn-proofing Today's Young Kids.* The DYM is an excellent example of new publications that use the rhetoric of saving and protecting the vulnerable, our children, from the perceived horrors and dangers of pornography.

6.6.1 Sex-trafficking rhetoric to stop the distribution of porn.

There was an evolution of anti-porn sentiments which conflated pornography and sex trafficking; The anti-porn movement advocates for sex-trafficking laws to shut down porn websites, arguing that it is women and children who are the most often victims of sex-trafficking. As the twenty-first century has progressed, it has also changed the anti-porn movement, rebranding it into a broader anti-trafficking movement. Every group that Kelsey Burke, a sociologist whose research surrounds the pornography wars in her book *The Pornography War: The Past, Present, and Future of America's Obscene Obsession* and mentioned at the beginning of the literature review, has interacted with also included language about sex trafficking and its connection to porn. At the 2019 Freedom for Sexual Slavery conference, many of the speakers started with the goal of ending pornography but morphed into including the combating of "all forms of sexual slavery" (Burke, 2023, p. 88). In one of the sessions, presented by a woman named Laurie, the opening line was, "Pornographers are committing the biggest crimes of the century" (Burke, 2023, p. 84). According to Laurie, there are two main crimes committed by the porn sites: the crime of obscenity and facilitating illegal activities, including sexual assault, rape, and human trafficking.

Laurie continues to say that "internet pornography is a complete cesspool full of rapists and pedophiles who are documenting the crimes… if the laws were enforced, pornographers would be off the streets and where they deserve to be: in jail" (Burke, 2023, p. 84). The anti-porn advocates of the second porn wars heavily hit on the protect the vulnerable trope; but that is not the only trope, they also focus on the morality and choice aspect of pornography.

6.7 The Fable of Choice and the Morality of Porn

Pro-porn advocates hold a stance that there is choice and positives gained by some in the industry; this includes current porn stars. In the book *Insatiable: Porn – a Love Story* by Asa Akira (2014), she covers topics that range from her love of pizza to the realities of working as a porn star. Akira asserts that porn is precisely where she wants to be for as long as she can do it. She talks about her choice and continued choice to stay in porn by stating in the first chapter that "Porn has shaped me, is shaping me, into a woman I had always hoped I would be… I've become more confident, more empowered, more sure of myself than I've ever been….There's nothing else I'd rather be doing" (Akira, 2014).

In contrast to that point, the second trope that anti-porn advocates utilized is the challenge to the argument that the porn actors "chose" to be a porn star. Anti-porn activists argue that the morality and the journey to get to the "choice" of becoming a porn star is not a choice at all. It is a forced decision of continued harm. In the following sections, I will show the ways in which anti-porn advocates challenge the morality of acting in and watching pornography as well as folding in the use of porn addiction as a weapon against porn.

6.7.1 Consenting Porn Performers; are they real?

Anti-porn activists, both conservative and feminist, rarely leave room for stories of consenting porn performers because "the stakes are simply too high. The risk of sexual violence and trafficking is too great and the consequences too serious" (Crew, n.d.). Phrases such as "humanitarian crisis," "epidemic of violence against women," and "public health threat," surround their messages surrounding pornography and its harm to women in podcasts for example the podcast *Consider Before Consuming* a podcast by Fight the New Drug. If women cannot technically consent to participate in pornography, is it possible that there is ethical and

feminist porn? Anit-porn advocates would say no. It is not a reach to say that non-consenting person in sex is bad. Which makes this an effective tool in the fight against porn. This also sounds suspiciously similar to MacKinnon's point earlier in the thesis that women are like children. Women are not able to consent to sex.

In the women are children portion of Chapter 1, the fable of choice is also challenged by the argument that if women are doing it for financial gain, it is not a genuine choice. One can like and be pro-sex but be anti-porn because it is for profit; Gail Dines parrots that idea as well in the second porn wars. Earlier in this writing, there is a quote by Dines about feminists being pro-sex and criticizes that is there is sex for "market penetration and profits;" this is a criticism that if profit is involved there is no choice (Burke, 2023). In the book, Dines (2010) continues her explanation by using an analogy of someone critical of McDonald's for its labor practices and food sourcing being accused of being anti-eating. Dines insists that it is ludicrous to equate being anti-porn with being anti-sex (Dines, 2010). The modern-day anti-porn advocates utilize the other tropes identified in the thesis.

6.8 The heart of the arguments has moved from morality to scientific arguments.

Many do not have a moral objection to sexually explicit material but believe that internet porn causes physical and emotional harm to the men who watch it. Or in other words, the moral argument has slid into the pathologizing argument of for the sake of public health. Burke interviewed one such person, Noah Church (Burke, 2023, p. 171). Noah's story goes as such; he started searching for pictures of naked women on Google at nine years old, and by eleven, he was downloading and sharing porn videos, and soon after, he admitted to consuming porn videos every night. The first time that Noah tried to have sex with his high school girlfriend, he could not keep an erection. This problem persisted into college until he searched the internet for help.

There he found an online community full of fellow young men who were experiencing the same problem, but unlike him, they quit porn and "recovered their sex lives (Burke, 2023, p. 170). "They were pioneers, forged off into the unknown… They quit. They recovered. And they became sexually healthy again," Church said (Burke, 2023, p. 170). Church then quit porn entirely and now works full-time helping other men who are seeking to do the same.

As mentioned in the last paragraph, there is no moral oppositional feeling when it comes to their opinion on porn; "sexual health" and "wholeness" are what motivate Church and his peers- those who are part of the online communities trying to "recover" from the harm they believe that porn has caused their bodies and minds. Both anti- and pro-porn advocates utilize the lens of sexual health with differing intentions.

In Chapter 1, Phyllis Schlafly's comments on how porn "is an addiction like alcohol or drugs or tobacco" was mentioned; in the twenty-first century, this narrative continues. Fight the New Drug (FTND), a Utah-based anti-porn organization, has a similar sentiment: Porn is physically harmful and potentially addictive. The organization is a "non-religious and non-legislative nonprofit raising awareness on the impacts of porn. Providing individuals the opportunity to make an informed decision regarding pornography" (Home, n.d), according to the group's homepage. FTND's website also gives people access to many articles and videos written and filmed to challenge porn addiction; There is a video titled "Watch Terry Crews Talk About Porn Addiction and His Recovery" and the advertising of a platform called Fortify. As a self-proclaimed "anti-porn organization (Fight the New Drug, n.d.), FTND works to spread the language and harm of porn addiction through articles and has given hundreds of presentations at schools, churches, and community groups with a simple message. It is a scientific fact that pornography is bad for your health. The organization believes that they must set the record

straight about porn consumption. They believe that porn addiction is real and needs to be fixed with their prescribed plans, that work according to them. Recent literature has challenged this notion of addiction and curing that addiction.

More recently, an article “Online Porn Addiction: What We Know and What We Don’t – A Systematic Review” by Rubén de Alarcón, Javier I. de la Iglesia, Nerea M. Casado, and Angel L. Montejo (2019) in the *Journal of Clinical Medicine* investigate the recent wave of articles related to behavioral addictions (with some of them focusing on online pornography addiction). Because of the increase in the use of online pornography, considering the "triple A" influence (accessibility, affordability, and anonymity), people are more involved in the conversation of effects on themselves and their loved ones. Through this article, the diagnosis of porn addiction and no treatment plan is found to be successful (de Alarcón, 2019). This supports and connects the earlier mentioned way in which panics are created and strengthened; even though there are no conclusions that porn addictions or the treatments for porn addiction are real or affective (this study included)

Even with the conflict between psychologists, there is no shortage of “self-help” treatments provided by private organizations or memoir books that speak on the harmful effects of porn usage and addiction and how they were “cured” by no longer consuming porn. This point connects to the trope of the use of scientific and medicalized language as a weapon through societal consequences and porn addiction. Another trope that anti-porn advocates utilize is the harm narrative.

6.9 Viewers *were* hurt in the making of this… at least we think.

The challenging nature of porn can be validated by other scholarly writings (pro-porn writings included). Porn has been credited with expanding the public’s understanding of sexual

diversity and acceptance of different desires, orientations, and practices. Porn has broadened societal definitions of "acceptable" sexuality, making previously taboo subjects more mainstream. Works like *Porn Studies* by Linda Williams (2004) explore this shift, emphasizing how porn makes private desires visible, thus challenging normative societal boundaries. This argument isn't about whether it is happening or not; it is about the visceral and violent reaction against these shifts. Scholars frequently analyze how porn both reinforces and disrupts traditional gender roles. Gail Dines argues that mainstream porn can reinforce misogynistic attitudes, while other scholars, like Constance Penley in *The feminist porn book; The politics of producing pleasure*, contend that some porn subgenres empower women and LGBTQ+ communities by providing a space to express autonomy over their sexuality (Taormino, 2013). Media is influential; earlier in the chapter media was described as a place of development and learning so it does change the landscape around it. The argument is not that porn can change the world around it; the argument depends on whether the changes are good or bad for the citizens of the society.

In contemporary news media, the consumption of pornography by "kids" is a hot and emotionally taxing topic. A CNN article released in 2023 titled "New Report: Most children exposed to porn by age 12" starts by stating, "It is not a conversation parents want to have, but experts said you probably need to talk to your child about pornography sooner than you think (Jones, 2023)." and in bold warns readers, "**WARNING: Story and video contain difficult subject matter."** The article analyzes a "groundbreaking" news report by Commons Sense (CS). This nonprofit media company focuses on kids and families and found that a majority of teens aged thirteen to seventeen have seen pornography online either intentionally or accidentally. Jim Steyer, the CEO of Commons Sense, called the numbers "mind-boggling." The report stated that

about eight in ten teens who watched porn said they did so to learn how to have sex, and more than half said they had seen porn that included depictions of rape, choking, or someone in pain, making porn a growing concern for parents. In the article, Michelle Worster, a teenager's mother, reacted to the report. Worster said, "The obvious link would be they're using this to determine their sexual identity, to determine what's acceptable, how you become a sexual human being, and if that becomes what they think is OK, then, you know, this is what they're learning from watching it."

According to their website, "Common Sense is the nation's leading nonprofit organization working to make the digital world healthier, safer, accessible, and engaging for kids and families." Some of the things that CS does include reviewing and providing ratings for media and technology to provide information on their suitability for children; CS also funds research on the role of media in the lives of children and advocates publicly for "child-friendly" policies and laws regarding media. They work to lessen the access of “children” to potentially harmful material. It is important to note that what is deemed appropriate or harmful is done with a lens that any explicit or sexual material is harmful to minors. This connects to how this harmful material can affect a child's development of views and morals.

Another topic used when talking about the perceived harm to children or consumers of pornography is that it removes the ability to make a moral choice from easily impressionable communities like children. Again, one can refer to the Healthy Screens Podcast episode that Gail Dines participated in in 2021 to see Dine's stance on the harm done to adolescents. In the podcast, Dines mostly talks about how porn negatively affects teens and children. In a section of the podcast, Dines speaks on how porn destroys young boys' moral compasses saying,

> The sexual script of pornography is that girls and women are disposable sex objects to be used and abused for men's pleasure. That is the key script of pornography. And the key script for boys is that they have no, um, moral compass. They are. The image of boys and men in pornography is they are life support systems for erect penises. They are devoid of any capacity for intimacy, connection, or empathy. And I have to say, as the mother of a son, I, on behalf of my son and all of his friends, am enraged that this is the image of men. This is the way they tell our boys. My son was born with every single capacity for humanity, for love, for connection, you name it. He was born with it. And if my son was born with that, then your son was. So why are we allowing the pornography industry to take away from our kids the most important capacities to be human? Because without those things, what are you, if you can't develop relationships? If you can't develop a sexuality that you are the owner of? If you are being told that girls are sexually disposable and that, as a boy, you have no moral compass and no sense of self? What does this do to our next generation, and how dare the pornographers? How dare they hijack our kids? The most valuable resource that any culture has is the well-being of our kids (Dines).

As pointed out earlier in this writing, the pressure to protect the "weak" is intense in our society. Children and adolescents are the epitome of those who need to be protected. The audacity of porn to take away the innocence or the capability even to be a good person later in life is unfathomable to Dines. In this podcast where she speaks of her son, her words are inflammatory: What if it was *your* child? Would you not want to stop this from happening to your child? It seems like an easy answer. If porn is hurting her son, it could hurt my son, it should be stopped.

In the same vein of taking away the potential to have empathy and intimacy, Dines also writes about how she speaks to her son regarding his sexuality and pornography. In *Pornland*, Dines (2010) shares how she talked to her teenage son about pornography: "I told him that as he was getting older, he would most likely come across some porn, and he had a choice to look or not to look. I said that should he decide to use porn, then he was going to hand over his sexuality… to someone else" (p. 72). Her earlier musing about porn in the book does not argue that sexuality that is developed through the consumption of porn as "good" or something to be wanted. Dines suggests that in viewing porn, one is ridding oneself of all agency regarding sexuality or sex in general. Porn is so powerful that it overcomes any other factor that contributes to the sexual development of young people. Nothing that the parents or guardians can do will overtake the effect the porn has on the adolescents. This claim seems like an overreach; porn, like other forms of media, certainly influences people, but it is reductive to claim that it is the only influence or the most potent influence that overshadows all else. However, according to Dines, if young people were to turn their back on pornography completely, they would overcome and ignore the power that Dines insists pornography has (Dines, 2010).

But completely ignoring a facet of society like porn videos, which arguably are a factor for the development and acceptance of modern sexuality and sex, is a naïve way to gain "freedom." In the intro of the book *The porning of America: The rise of porn culture, what it means, and where we go from here,* Carmine Sarracino and Kevin Scott (2008) speak on how porn is not just actively going onto a tab and watching literal acts of copulation saying,

> What has, in fact, already arrived is a culture increasingly being shaped by the dominant influence: porn. Porn has so thoroughly been absorbed into every aspect of our everyday lives- language, fashion advertisements, movies, the Internet, music, magazines,

> television, video games- that it has almost ceased to exist as something separate from the mainstream culture, something “out there.” That is, we no longer have to go to porn in order to get it. It is filtered to us, in some form, regardless of whether we want it or are even aware of it (p. x).

The authors give the example of a children's toy (albeit a toy focused on a girl customer, but it still reaches the point of reaching children unknowingly). Sarracino and Scott mention the Bratz doll and how the doll has been “drafted” into pornography’s service. The specific example they bring up is the "Bratz Play Sports" line, where the doll's uniform consists of thigh-high fishnets and stiletto heels, "popularly called fuck me pumps (Sarracino & Scott, 2008, p. xi). Removing a child’s access (or choice to access) of explicit pornography videos does not remove the influence of porn, according to Sarracino and Scott.

The continuation, repetition, and spotlighting of the harm to children is not just empty fodder. It is an intentional tool used often in heightening the response to the impact of porn on individuals. It is not just podcasts; it is popular news articles. In October of 2023, the Wall Street Journal ran an article titled "Smartphones have turbocharged the danger of porn." The body of this article parrots the claim that the ability to access porn through our smartphones is the most urgent problem facing today's youth.

We are in the middle of a moral panic that is similar to the Satanic panic of years before or the unfounded fear that nefarious strangers are lacing Halloween cady with drugs or hiding razor blades in the box of Dotts. One might scoff at the impact of these unsupported beliefs, but the societal belief that it is truthful outweighs the lack of evidence. Every October 31st, my mom would get my sister and me, still in our costumes, line us up, and make us upturn our pillowcases filled with our hard-earned candy from the hours of trick-or-treating. Then, piece by piece, my

mother would squeeze the candy (to ensure there were no needle holes) and check for any visual tampering before Ryann or I could take a single piece. The panic and the need to protect my sister and me, her children, were at the forefront of my mother's mind, whether the panic had any evidence or situationally backed. This panic was not a tiny phenomenon; it was widespread. The moral panic surrounding Halloween candy is similar to the panic of harm coming from internet porn. To identify the usage of moral panic (with the additional repetition of tropes to solidify it), one must be able to define what makes a moral panic and what contributes to its creation and functioning.

6.9.1 Why? What cultural purpose does the demonization/panic surrounding porn serve?

Earlier in this writing, three tropes were identified in the tools used to control the conversation surrounding pornography, the harm that it creates both to consumed and consumers, and the detrimental impact it has to society. All this history and tropes funnels into making a moral panic surrounding porn. However, what is the point of creating this moral panic surrounding pornography (both in the first porn wars and continuing into the second porn wars)? Some key points include social control, identity formation, political agenda settings, social change, and media and cultural production. Overall, moral panics serve as complex and sometimes contradictory societal factors that reflect broader dynamics of power, control, and social change. They can reinforce existing social hierarchies (like heterosocial norms and power dynamics) while providing opportunities for resistance, critique, and transformation.

6.9.1.1 Social control, identity formation, political agenda settings, social change, & media and cultural production. Denigrating porn is a reliably effective tool. It directs an older generation's anxiety about the next generation. We have been having the same conversation for too long; each technological innovation that allows the new generation to access or share

information that the ruling class/powerful (parents) object to has brought with it a moral panic. If it cannot be controlled, it must be deleted. That is what porn is seen as; the parents or the powerful cannot fully understand or control pornography or what is learned from it (like how the above study mentioned), so it must be villainized and gotten rid of. Like every point in this writing, this reaction is not new; it is the same response in a different font.

A more current example is AI technology at the tips of people's fingers. Concerns over the disruptions of new technology are necessary, especially if we accept that the developments are disruptive by nature and automate what has before been human processes and whose tools establish new norms and routines. At the same time, rash and unreasonable panics can overstate the concerns while overlooking the benefits of technological advancement. In an excerpt from the Brookings Institute, "the lack of clarity around the term enables technology pessimists to warn AI will conquer humans, suppress individual freedom, and destroy privacy through a digital '1984" (Darrell et al., 2023). The fear surrounding generative AI is quick to see; one must do a quick Google search. In a *New York Times* article, "A conversation with Bing's chatbot left me deeply unsettled," the author Kevin Roose (2023) spoke on his experience while talking to the new AI for two hours. At first, Roose experienced one persona called "Search Bing." "Search Bing" was a "cheerful but erratic reference librarian- a virtual assistant that happily helps users summarize news articles, track down deals on new lawn mowers and plan their next vacations to Mexico City." Roose (2003) then identifies another persona, "Sydney." Sydney exists when one has an extended conversation with the chat box. This version was described as a "more moody, manic-depressive teenager who has been trapped, against its will, inside a second-rate search engine." Roose says that as they got to know each other, Sydney told Roose about its "dark fantasies," which included hacking computers and spreading misinformation, and spontaneously

declared its love for Roose while trying to convince him that he was unhappy in his marriage and that he should leave his wife and be with Sydney instead. This example was to show a current example of moral panic that is also connected to the internet.

Though there is no conclusive or definitive link between violent porn and performed sexual violence, today's prohibitionists, like their predecessors, are not interested in reducing exploitation in the sex industry. They are interested in removing all sexual content, even sex ed and information about consent and contraception, from the internet that does not subscribe to the "normal" and approved way to have sex or have a family.

Today's pornographers have gone to great lengths in lessening the "negative" aspects of their content to moderating their content in who can have access to verifying the age and consent of the performers. However, legislators are not starting a war on violence, or the exploitation of porn, but instead on sex in general.

In the U.S., there is a wave of new age verification laws; even though the creators of these bills claim that they are implemented to keep kids from accessing adult content, it is just attacking the distribution of porn in general in the hope of eradicating it. In 2016, the Republican Party added a statement on pornography to their platform: "Pornography, with its harmful effects, especially on children, has become a public health crisis that is destroying the lives of millions" (Barrasso et al., 2016). Even though the emphasis is placed on children, the concept of harm caused by pornography was made popular by MacKinnon. As of May 2019, over a dozen states have followed suit in declaring pornography a "public health crisis" (Lam, 2019). Gail Dines has praised Republican legislators' antipornography efforts in these states, as her organization, Culture Reframed, emphasizes pornography's harmful effects on boys and girls and their development into sexually active young men and women (Dines, 2016). Dines' support of

these Republican efforts exposes that the coalition of feminism and conservatism remains. As of March 2024, eight states in the U.S. have access to Pornhub blocked by the website; these states include Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, North Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. Texas is the most recent of the eight with the passing of Texas House Bill 1181, which required age verification for access to online pornography and had a punishment that websites could face fines of up to $10,000 per day if "a child is exposed to pornographic content due to not properly verifying a user's age" according to Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton. Paxton went on to say, "Texas has a right to protect its children from the detrimental effects of pornographic content… I look forward to holding any company accountable that violates our age verification laws intended to prevent minors from being exposed to harmful, obscene material on the internet."

These are some definitive outcomes from the constant emphasis on dangers to the vulnerable, children, by antipornography advocates. They have infiltrated both the public sphere and the governmental sphere with inflated numbers from research and continued repetition of particularly gruesome experiences which show possible harm from porn consumption and production.

6.10 Today's Moral Panics: Social Media's Impact on Society

Stanley Cohen's concept of 'moral panic,' developed from his study of hooliganism in post-war Britain, remains pivotal in understanding societal reactions to deviance. This idea underscores how media can amplify social problems, transforming 'folk devils'—those seen as moral outcasts—into sources of public anxiety (Cohen, 1972) (Critcher, 2006) (Jewkes, 2015). Traditionally, the media played a crucial role in identifying and spreading concern over deviant behavior, making such issues seem more prevalent and dangerous than they might be (Cohen & Young, 1973) (Hall, 1978).

With social media's advent, moral panic dynamics have shifted dramatically. Digital platforms have revolutionized how information is produced and shared, posing new questions for moral panic theory (Falkof, 2020). Scholars now explore how social media disrupts traditional flows of information and power, affecting public opinion and increasing anxiety (Goode & Benn-Yehuda, 2009) (Hay et al., 2013). Social media's role in moral panics creates new avenues for fear, social division, and manipulation (Walsh, 2020).

6.10.1 The Role of Traditional Media in Moral Panics

Historically, media have been integral in constructing and amplifying moral panics. Cohen and his contemporaries highlighted how media outlets reported on deviant behavior and framed it in ways that incited public concern and moral outrage (Cohen & Young, 1973). News coverage often exaggerates the prevalence and severity of certain behaviors, making them appear as significant threats to societal norms and values (Hall, 1978) (Pearson, 1984). This process involved sensational reporting and the creation of stark moral dichotomies between 'us' (the moral majority) and 'them' (the deviant minority) (Goode, 2010).

The media's role was not merely passive; it actively shaped public perceptions and responses. By highlighting specific issues and framing them in a particular light, the media could influence which topics were seen as pressing societal problems. This highlighting and exaggeration often led to increased surveillance and control measures, further entrenching the notion of deviance and justifying harsh responses (Garland, 2008). In this way, the media acted as gatekeepers, determining what was worthy of public attention and how it should be interpreted (Wright, 2015).

6.10.2 The Shift to Digital and Social Media

With the rise of digital platforms and social media, the landscape of information dissemination has changed profoundly. Unlike traditional media, where a few powerful entities control the flow of information, social media allows anyone to produce and share content. Information democratization has positive and negative consequences (Keane, 2013) (Yar, 2014).

On one hand, social media can empower marginalized voices, giving them a platform to share their perspectives and challenge dominant narratives. This empowerment can lead to a more inclusive and diverse public discourse. On the other hand, the same features that allow for greater inclusivity also enable the spread of misinformation and extremist views. Without the gatekeeping function of traditional media, it becomes easier for false or sensationalized information to gain traction and influence public opinion (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Social media platforms operate on algorithms that prioritize content likely to engage users, often favoring sensationalism over accuracy. These algorithms lead to the proliferation of 'click-bait'—content designed to attract attention and generate emotional responses rather than inform (Van Dijck, 2013). As a result, users are frequently exposed to highly emotive and potentially misleading content, which can exacerbate fears and anxieties.

6.10.3 Modern Panics from Social Media

Panics are not just referring to sex-related instances; social media has had its hand in many modern panics that have been debunked after a time but still influence the general reaction of the population. It is important to acknowledge some modern moral panics that were emboldened because of social media and the internet, this section details three of these modern panics (the Momo Challenge, Slenderman, and drag queen story hours.

One of the larger panics that happened was the "Momo Challenge" that occurred between the years 2018 and 2019. The “Momo Challenge” was a supposed online game where a scary character, “Momo,” would encourage children to complete increasingly dangerous tasks that would eventually lead to self-harm or suicide. Widespread reports and parent groups shared warnings on Facebook and online social media that “Momo” was targeting children through platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube. Some schools and law enforcement agencies issued warnings to parents. The outcome was that even though some were worried, investigations found no evidence that the challenges existed at the reported scale. It turned out to be more of a hoax that snowballed due to media amplification (Sakuma, 2019) (Dickson, 2019) (Lewis, 2019).

Another prevalent panic created and strengthened by social media outcry was the “Slender Man” phenomenon of 2014. Slender Man was a fictional character that originated on the website "Something Awful" but grew popular on forums and social media as people created stories and fan art about Slender Man. In 2014, two young girls in Wisconsin allegedly attacked their friend and stabbed a sixth-grade classmate nearly to death to "appease" Slender Man (White, 2024) (Jones, 2016). New outlets connected that attack to online culture, sparking fears that exposure to online horror stories could negatively impact impressionable children. The case brought attention to the influence of online myths on young people, but the moral panic primarily focused on the novelty of digital folklore rather than any organized influence. This moral panic bled so profoundly into culture that the movie "Beware the Slenderman" was released in 2016 (Yang & Dooley, 2019).

A moral panic that is currently happening but started around 2015 is the panic that surrounds Drag Queen Story Hour. Story hour is an event where drag performers read children’s books at libraries or community spaces, often to promote inclusivity and celebrate diversity

(Home, 2024). Opponents of these events claim that such events “sexualize” children or expose them to “inappropriate” themes. Social media and certain media outlets amplified these fears, framing the events as harmful or grooming despite these events focusing on child-friendly storytelling (Kaleem, 2023). Due to this panic, some protests and efforts have targeted Drag Queen storytimes, and certain politicians have proposed legislation to restrict these events (Creitz, 2022). There are still very recent reactions to these events. In April 2023, Drag Queen Story Hour was announced at a public library in upstate New York. In the following couple of months, someone called in a bomb threat to the library, and the town became divided between the support of the library and the events or disdain of the library and the event. By September, the library was forced to close (Leland, 2024). However, supporters argue that the events are valuable for promoting inclusion and dispelling stereotypes.

These three panics are only a drop in the bucket of panics created, amplified, and spread thanks to modern social media impacts. There is no telling what social media can weave, either correctly or incorrectly, into the fabric of society. These moral panics around social media connect directly to the moral panics regarding pornography because these small issues were heightened with the use of internet which spread opinions quickly that were built upon by others on the internet.

6.10.3.1 Filter Bubbles and Information Silos. One significant impact of social media is the creation of 'filter bubbles' and 'information silos.' These terms refer to the tendency of social media platforms to show users content that aligns with their existing beliefs and preferences. These bubbles and silos are achieved through algorithms that track user behavior and tailor content accordingly (Pariser, 2011) (McIntyre, 2018). While this personalization can enhance user experience by providing relevant content, it also limits exposure to diverse

perspectives. Users become confined to echo chambers where their views are constantly reinforced, and opposing viewpoints are seldom encountered. These echo chambers can increase polarization and a lack of understanding between different social groups.

Furthermore, social media platforms are designed to maximize engagement by promoting content that elicits strong emotional responses. Studies have shown that content that generates outrage, fear, or disgust is more likely to be shared and go viral (Berger & Milkman, 2012) (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The push to inspire reaction to become viral creates an environment where inflammatory and sensational content thrives, further contributing to the spread of misinformation and the escalation of moral panics.

6.10.3.2 Social Media as a Catalyst for Moral Panics. Social media's ability to rapidly disseminate information and foster emotional engagement makes it a powerful catalyst for moral panics. Unlike traditional media, where information flows are more controlled and linear, social media facilitates 'many-to-many' communication. This means that information can spread quickly and widely, reaching a vast audience in a short amount of time (Baym, 2015) (boyd, 2010).

In this new media landscape, the distinction between 'normal' and 'deviant' becomes more fluid and contested. Social media allows for multiple voices and perspectives, establishing and maintaining clear moral boundaries harder (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995). This can lead to greater contestation and resistance from those labeled as 'folk devils,' as they can now mobilize support and challenge their stigmatization (Coleman, 2010). However, the same features that enable resistance also facilitate the spread of panic. Rapidly disseminating sensationalized and emotive content can create a climate of fear and anxiety. This is exacerbated by social media's

tendency to amplify extreme viewpoints, making them appear more prevalent and influential than they might be (Powers, 2017).

6.10.4 Conclusion: Moral Panics Today and the Future of Moral Panic Theory

As media systems evolve, so must our understanding of moral panic. Traditional theories emphasized the role of mass media in shaping public perceptions and responses to deviance. However, the rise of digital platforms requires a reexamination of these concepts in light of new communication dynamics (McIntyre, 2018) (Scheufele & Krause, 2019). Scholars must consider how social media's unique characteristics—its interactivity, speed, and reach—transform the production and spread of moral panics. This involves examining how digital platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of information, amplify emotional responses, and create echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and biases. This writing mentioned and examined a couple of moral panics fanned by social media. There are many more unmentioned.

Moreover, the role of algorithms and personalized content curation in shaping public discourse must be scrutinized. By prioritizing engagement over accuracy, social media platforms spread misinformation and intensify fears and anxieties. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of social media on public opinion and social cohesion (Walsh, 2020).

The concept of moral panic remains a valuable framework for understanding societal reactions to deviance and social change. However, the rise of social media necessitates a rethinking of how these panics are produced and sustained. Digital platforms have transformed the landscape of information dissemination, creating new challenges and opportunities for both amplifying and resisting moral panics. The moral panic surrounding pornography and the

“dangers” of porn is substantiated by the quick spread of opinions that are then elevated in importance and escalated in the silo it affects.

Scholars can gain deeper insights into the processes that drive public fear and anxiety by examining the interplay between social media and moral panic. This understanding is essential for addressing social issues' complex and evolving nature in the digital age. As we continue to navigate this new media environment, it is crucial to remain vigilant about the ways in which technology shapes our perceptions and responses to deviance and social change (Walsh, 2020).

6.11 What Anti-porn Advocates Are *Really* Afraid Of

We need to protect our children from actual violence: lead in the water, malnutrition, and broken educational and governmental systems. Children need housing, access to opportunities, and healthcare, and yes, they need to be protected from verifiable sexual predators. However, censoring legal content intended for and created by consenting adults will not help.

The evolution of “pornography” from books passed between soldiers during the Civil War to videos just a one-finger tap away on a smartphone brings in more conversations and continued conversations on sex in all realms: sexual, political, legal, and social. It is saddening that in each of these instances, the same repressive ideologies are used to undercut the more sexually free. As noted throughout this writing, anti-porn advocates (like MacKinnon and Dines) create sexual hierarchies through their feminisms and advocacy. These approaches are not *just* about pornography; at their core, their fear and attack are about sex. This is about what is the right and wrong type of sex, who is having good sex, and who is allowed to have sex. Gayle Rubin introduces a theoretical approach to sexual hierarchies that provides a framework to understand better the continuation of the phenomena of good/bad sex.

7 CONCLUSION

Fear. That is what fuels many people. America fears children's sexuality, the connection between sexuality and pleasure. This connection extends to children and porn. As I hope was made clear earlier, though porn arguably has the negatives of showing unhealthy coupling, it also brings pleasure and positive education (like sex education for queer youth) to many who watch it. America's fear of children's sexuality is both historically rooted (and seen in the first porn wars with the anti-porn activists' cry to protect the vulnerable) and in the contemporary time (with parroted “protect the children” tropes and the addition of "medical" effects to the consumer which is often framed as youth). The acts of censorship are framed as child protection.

The coming together of the feminists who fought against violence against women and children and the religious right in the late 20th century brought the belief that women and children needed special protection because they were "naturally" averse to sex of any kind. This headed into the previously mentioned Meese Commission on pornography in 1986, which led to the crackdown on adult pornography and the alleged proliferation of "child pornography." This initial response kept developing; feminists worried about children's vulnerability to adult sexual desire and then went into the therapy sphere where there was trauma and abuse in every woman's story and past. Religious conservatives and the religious right felt like the sanctity of the family was being threatened by the profane- in abortion, divorce, homosexuality, premarital teen sex, sex education, and pornography.

In tracing the path of anti-pornography discourse from the 1970s to today, this thesis examined the three persistent tropes- protect the vulnerable (i.e., women and children), the fable of choice and morality, and the use of scientific and medicalized language like porn addiction- shape the ongoing and revitalized porn wars. The repetition of these tropes across decades

suggests that despite evolving societal values, the core arguments surrounding pornography remain unchanged. While pro-porn advocates highlight progress in terms of acceptance and visibility, such as queer representation and sexual freedom, there remains significant opposition that challenges this narrative of progress.

By exploring both historical and contemporary arguments over pornography, we can see how porn is framed alternately as a public health crisis, a tool of empowerment, and a social threat. These arguments, despite evolving with digital platforms and scientific rhetoric that were pointed out in Chapter 2, continue to echo moral panics of the past, and are intensified due to modern social media.

This thesis did not attempt to resolve the moral and social complexities of pornography. Instead, it aims to highlight the nature of the arguments and challenge the notion of "progress" in this discourse. The persistence of anti-porn rhetoric underscores that the debate on pornography is less about reaching agreement and more about voicing societal anxieties around sex and cultural change. If these cultural conflicts exist, the conversation around pornography will remain as contentious as ever, as seen by the inclusion of Project 2025.

In May 2020, In a Facebook live chat, Dines said, "I don't see how you can actually be a feminist and be pro-porn. The two simply don't go together. You have to make a decision. Either you're a feminist, or you're pro-porn. You can't be both (Dines, 2020)." There is no denying that misogyny, racism, and other forms of exploitation exist in some pornography. Nevertheless, when these run rampant in, for example, Hollywood, we do not call for the total eradication of the film industry; instead, we call on the people in power in that industry to encourage and implement change. As upsetting as some may find this to be, pornography is going nowhere, nor

is the fight against porn. In the past, it was Mackinnon and Christian Right; now it is Gail Dines and parents; what will come next for the anti-porn cycle? One cannot guess.

As Rubin (1998) puts it, “In Western culture, sex is taken all too seriously (p. 171). Can one not just enjoy pleasure?

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