Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Porn Studies

ISSN: 2326-8743 (Print) 2326-8751 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rprn20

Pornographic aura, AI and the value of authenticity

Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith

To cite this article: Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith (16 Jun 2025): Pornographic aura, AI and the value of authenticity, Porn Studies, DOI: 10.1080/23268743.2025.2511311

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2025.2511311

Published online: 16 Jun 2025.

PORN STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2025.2511311

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Pornographic aura, AI and the value of authenticity

Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith

School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

The emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools which can produce images and video from text inputs has prompted questions about the impacts of the technology on the pornography industry. While there has been extensive research into the implications of pornographic deepfakes, work which addresses the impacts of generative AI images and video that do not mimic a specific person is presently limited. Authenticity in pornography refers to multiple concepts, ranging from the depiction of non-simulated acts to the representation of 'authentic' pleasure. Multiple types of pornographic authenticity add value to a scene and can enhance the viewers' enjoyment. This article argues that generative AI is unlikely to significantly disrupt the pornography industry, because the material it produces lacks a kind of auratic authenticity which pornography that depicts human subjects does possess, ultimately undermining the pleasure derived by the viewer.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 19 September 2024
Accepted 15 May 2025

KEYWORDS
online sex work; pornography; authenticity; generative artificial intelligence; deepfakes; aura

Introduction

In early 2024, OpenAI shared initial videos from their text-to-video generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool Sora (Brooks et al. 2024). A few months prior, news outlets had reported on an AI-driven app launched by adult content creator Sophie Dee, which was trained on her image, voice, and biographical data, offering a combination of text-based chat, images, and short videos to fans who subscribed (Harwell 2023). The emergence of tools which could generate short videos from prompts, alongside the slightly more established image generation tools, prompted questions about the impact of generative AI on pornography (Alilunas 2024; Hunter 2024; Lapointe et al. 2025). That new technologies are often taken up and put to use by the adult entertainment industry before they receive widespread adoption is often repeated as a truism (Kikerpill 2020; Hunter 2024). In the realm of text-based AI, many users engaged with the chatbot Replika for explicit chat; the company removed the model's ability to discuss sexual topics, although reinstated it after an outcry (Hanson and Bolthouse 2024). While OpenAI and many other AI image generators prevent the production of overtly sexual content, multiple AI pornography image generators exist, and within and outside the

CONTACT Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith contact@gwynesmith.com; g.easterbrook-smith@massey.ac.nz

industry there are competing views about whether generative AI poses a threat to the industry as it currently exists (Alilunas 2024; Hunter 2024; Lapointe et al. 2025), with some emerging research suggesting images perceived to be AI generated are less arousing than those perceived to be real (Marini et al. 2024). Following the logic that new technologies are often pioneered for broader usage by the adult entertainment industry, some have suggested that 'questions of identity and authenticity' in relation to AI may first be explored in the pornography industry (Harwell 2023, n.p.). Within the field of porn studies and sex work studies more broadly, the topic of 'authenticity' has been extensively explored, with an understanding that customers often value the 'authentic' (Bernstein 2007a, 2007b; Berg 2017; Laurin 2019; Cardoso, Chronaki, and Scarcelli 2022). Authenticity can serve multiple purposes for parties on both sides of the transaction: it can be a marketing tactic, drawing in customers, and can enhance workers' sense of satisfaction with their job (Bernstein 2007a, 2007b; Young 2014; Laurin 2019).

Consideration of the interaction between generative AI and pornography has often focused on the potential for deepfakes to be used to facilitate image-based abuse, and the failure of legislation to keep up with the issues raised by the technology (Ajder et al., 2019; Gosse and Burkell 2020; Kikerpill 2020; Maddocks 2020). More broadly, pornography is often considered first through lenses of social or moral harm, criminality, and danger, rather than as a cultural product (Williams [1989] 1999; McKee 2016). However, generative AI production raises questions that directly tie pornography to wider conversations about the impact of this technology on entertainment and creative industries, both the industrial impacts for workers and more philosophical questions about the specific value inhered in 'human-created work' (Bender 2024, 2). As well as being a popular media genre in its own right, 'every porn scene is a record of people at work' and, as in other industries slated for 'disruption' by AI, questions arise about the impacts on workers' livelihoods (Paasonen 2010; Berg 2021, 1). This article considers the various ways in which authenticity has been defined and understood in the context of live-action pornography featuring human performers, arguing that the dominant understandings of this quality and the ways in which it is valued make it unlikely that generative AI image and video technology poses a serious threat to the sector. Ultimately, this article argues that some kinds of filmed pornography carry something akin to an aura, holding a unique value through virtue of their linkage with a fleshly referent which cannot ultimately be supplanted by generative AI images.

Deepfakes, AI and pornography

Generative AI can produce various outputs, which are based on identifying patterns between various pieces of data within their training sets, and foundation models can be embedded within user-facing generative-AI driven platforms, like some of OpenAI's products (Ferrari, van Dijck, and Bosch 2023). This article addresses the potential impact of images and video produced by generative AI which aim for photorealism, and places text-based large language models – and chatbots such as Replika – out of scope. In order to allow a focused exploration of how 'authenticity' operates through pornography which depicts or purports to depict real people, animated pornography also falls outside the scope of this article. As Saunders argues, the animated genre of user-generated, computer-generated pornography represents a 'receding of the real' which sits in

contrast to conventional pornography, a 'physical visual genre historically delineated by its indexical link to real bodies' (2019, 248). Instead, it provides an exemplar of 'the erotic pull of the blatantly artificial' (2019, 248). As photorealistic generative AI moves towards an ideal of undetectable mimicry, I would suggest that any appeal must be different to the draw of the 'blatantly artificial'. Paasonen notes that animated pornography 'occasionally attempts to approximate the aesthetics of photorealism' (2019, 145), and in relation to pre-generative AI photorealistic pornography, appreciation for this material was often linked to the effort and skill of the creator, which is similarly absent or minimal in generative AI engines which output images or video based on text prompts (Saunders 2019). Linked to this appreciation for artistry, early indications of how online communities with a focus on fantastical or otherwise always-unreal pornography are responding to the influx of generative AI material suggest that, even in styles where clear artificiality is accepted, generative AI material is unpalatable or unarousing to at least some of the audience. Reddit's hentai-focused r/Monstergirls community, for example, has experienced a schism, with a splinter community created that is generative AI free, reflective of strongly divergent audience tastes (Maiberg 2024). Although it falls outside the scope of this article, this does suggest a fruitful exploration is possible of how the presence of the hand of the artist in animated pornography is valued by viewers, when compared to generative AI material.

Pornography is primarily a visual medium (Williams [1989] 1999, 29–30) and so any attempt to replace it must come from tools which produce visual outputs. Existing research into the potential interactions between generative AI and pornography has focused extensively on deepfakes and the potential for AI to facilitate image-based abuse (Gosse and Burkell 2020; Kikerpill 2020; Maddocks 2020). Pornography is the most prevalent category of deepfake, and as early as 2019, Ajder et al. noted that the growing number of websites hosting and offering access to deepfake pornography indicated it could be viewed as a business opportunity. In 2020, Gosse and Burkell described deepfake pornography as including the face of one party edited onto the body of another in pornographic images or video, noting that it functions to 'strip away the agency and autonomy' of both parties – the 'face' and the 'body' (2020, 499). More recently, developments in generative AI images mean deepfakes can be produced which resemble the face of an individual, without being digitally grafted onto a specific existing image or video – instead in practice violating the agency of all performers whose images are used for training data sets. A notable example of this type of media emerged in early 2024 when deepfake images of singer Taylor Swift began circulating on social media sites including X (formerly Twitter) and Reddit (Hsu 2024; Weatherbed 2024). While attempts have been made to remove deepfake pornography from particular venues via changes to terms of service on platforms like Reddit, this tends to simply displace it (Kikerpill 2020). A version of this displacement phenomenon can be seen through the proliferation of pornography-focused generative AI shopfronts which have sprung up to fill the void created by OpenAI's restrictions on adult content.

Maddocks (2020) identifies both deepfakes and 'shallow fakes' (created using lookalikes, altered audio, or recontextualized images) together as forms of 'fake porn' which can be used to harass victims and exist as a form of non-consensual pornography. Considering how deepfakes can be analysed as a phenomenon in relation to celebrity studies and porn studies, Popova (2020) notes they tend to rely on visual conventions

popular in gonzo porn and show less concern with the 'authenticity' often connoted by amateur-aesthetic pornography. Deepfake videos, Popova suggests, are 'by and large not an attempt to access an intimate, private person behind the star image' (2020, 374). The deepfakes analysed by Popova were often watermarked in ways that indicated they had been manipulated, and the paratexts accompanying them would sometimes identify the porn performer whose performance served as the basis for the video, as well as the celebrity grafted onto it (2020, 376). Although most deepfakes are nonconsensual depictions of celebrities, deepfakes are not inherently abusive, and in 2020 van der Nagel predicted a version of the practice which Sophie Dee and others have pioneered: 'it is not difficult to imagine enterprising porn performers using deepfake technology to allow their audience to buy porn with their own facial expressions' (van der Nagel 2020, 426).

Considerations of deepfakes have tended to focus on them as a form of misinformation and a mechanism for harassment (Kikerpill 2020; Maddocks 2020; Jin et al. 2023; Weikmann and Lecheler 2023). With recent advances in AI image and video generation, however, it is no longer necessarily the case that the images generated are intended to resemble a specific individual, celebrity or otherwise. This is reflected in changes on pornography platforms: while Pornhub specifically banned 'deepfakes' which resembled celebrities, the platform now hosts videos which signal their use of AI in titles, descriptions, or tags. Similarly, Xhamster now allows uploaders to indicate 'this video has no real persons in it' in the section of the upload form where performers must be tagged and verified. The potential of AI-generated deepfakes to harass and violate individuals is justifiably a concern, but this is no longer the extent of how the technology is used. As such, while deepfakes and shallow fakes can be understood as 'fake porn', how should pornography which does not mimic a specific individual, and does not depict one particular occurrence of a sexual act, be understood? Does this emergent genre or production style pose a threat to existing models of production and distribution?

What is authenticity in pornography?

The concept of authenticity in pornography is a contested one. At its most elementary level, what makes live-action pornography real and authentic – what distinguishes 'hardcore' from 'softcore' – is that it explicitly depicts non-simulated sex acts, particularly penetration, rather than simply nudity (Williams [1989] 1999; Attwood 2007; Escoffier 2014). In a different application of the term, authenticity is often associated with alternative pornography, or pornography which is produced by 'amateurs', outside the commercial studio system (Paasonen 2010; Frith 2015; Saunders 2020). However, 'amateur' in this instance does not necessarily connote someone who does not profit from the material, and the descriptor may extend out to producer-creators who film, release, and market their own material, especially through platforms such as OnlyFans (Bleakley 2014; Laurin 2019; Hamilton et al. 2023). 'Authentic' is also sometimes used as a marketing angle for 'indie' or 'feminist' pornography, where it intends to signal that the sex acts depicted are ones that are genuinely pleasurable for the performers: 'a performance of being oneself and wanting to be there' (Young 2014; Berg 2017, 671). It may also be used to indicate that the performers are real couples (that they have a relationship off-screen), that the sex acts are ones they would be engaging in without a camera present, or that the presence of the camera is part of the erotic play. Authenticity within pornography

can imply that the orgasms which are depicted are physiologically real – and while this pornographic 'truth' of the body can be substantiated through ejaculation from performers with a penis (a fluid authenticity of sorts), it is harder to quantify for other performers (Frith 2015; Lebedíková 2022). Considering 'real' and 'fake' orgasms, Frith argues that authenticity is 'a necessarily contested meta-discourse' through which pornography is marketed and constructed (2015, 388), while Lebedíková draws attention to the disconnect between pornographic authenticity on and off-screen, noting 'contrary to consumers' belief, authenticity in pornography does not have to be connected to the authentic pleasure of the performers off the camera' (2022, 211).

Authenticity in pornography, despite the elastic and slippery nature of the term, is something which is often valued by consumers (McKee 2006), and therefore can be deployed as a marketing tactic. 'Mainstream' pornography is often considered less authentic, presumed to follow the logic of the culture industry, producing scenes which are standardized and characterized by their sameness and artificiality, and consequently considered less worthy of serious critical consideration (Adorno 2001; Paasonen 2010; Young 2014). The boundaries between mainstream and indie or alternative pornography on the internet, however, are porous, with many performers moving across both genres throughout their careers, and indie pornography adapting to new digital technologies far in advance of more established print and film companies (Paasonen 2010; Stardust 2019; Berg 2021). Much pornography reflects a kind of quasi-individualization: gonzo scenes where a producer may shoot dozens if not hundreds of scenes on the same set, individualized by a different female performer, yet performing the same series of positions, filmed from the same angles, concluding with nearly identical, ubiquitous, money shot(s) (Adorno 2001; Young 2014). In contrast, the associations between indie or amateur pornography and authenticity mean that aesthetic qualities associated with these genres are sometimes taken to connote authenticity. These characteristics may run the gamut from a handheld point of view footage and the use of ambient or available light, to deliberate and stylized lighting and *mise-en-scène* choices in pornography which consciously and conspicuously operates as a creative and expressive audiovisual form. Many consumers seek out pornography which they perceive as authentic, and in response to a cultural perception that their products represent an artificial sterility, mainstream producers increasingly attempt to add the veneer of authenticity to their work (Berg 2017; Wang 2021; Lecomte, Antoniazzi, and Villesèche 2024). This occurs both on an aesthetic level – scene debriefs, often shot with performers in dressing gowns, recalling the domesticity of DIY amateur pornography – and on a socio-cultural discursive level, when performers' social media accounts directly or indirectly promote scenes they appear in and studios they work for, with producers borrowing authenticity from individuals (Ashley 2016; Wang 2021; Lecomte, Antoniazzi, and Villesèche 2024). As I argue in the following section, pornography that is perceived as 'authentic', in the sense that it depicts genuine pleasure from the performers, has a ritual value whereby it has a greater capacity to induce visceral, physical reactions (Williams [1989] 1999). Specific aesthetics are taken to convey this genuine pleasure from performers, and recognizing them offers a dual enjoyment, both allowing the consumer to experience the feeling of pleasurable embodied erotic knowing and to perceive their viewing habits as being more aligned with a high rather than low cultural form (Foucault 1978 [2008]).

Studios' concern with authenticity reflects trends in the market more broadly. The elevation of OnlyFans to a point where it has tremendous mainstream name recognition is just one facet of the growth in platformized online sex work (van der Nagel 2021; Easterbrook-Smith 2023). Direct-to-consumer marketing of scenes and images by performers has an increasing share of the pornography market, and even among high-profile performers within the mainstream studio system, professional shoots typically make up only part of their income (Berg 2021). Sales of videos and images through platforms such as OnlyFans are characterized by consumers purchasing them while having a closer parasocial or quasi-personal connection with the creator than they would if they accessed the material via studios or tube sites (Laurin 2019; Cardoso, Chronaki, and Scarcelli 2022; Tynan and Linehan 2024). The value which customers find in these platforms – what drives them to pay for a subscription when tremendous quantities of free pornography exists online – varies, but frequently has a relationship to some version of authenticity. Customers experience a closer relationship with the creator, they often have the ability to message them directly, and they may be able to request or commission images or video to match their tastes or preferences. This of course is not an organic experience, and producing this impression of emotional connection is effortful work on the part of performers (Laurin 2019; Berg 2021; Cardoso, Chronaki, and Scarcelli 2022; Tynan and Linehan 2024). Adult content platforms which trade on authenticity and access, and the fan's ability to message and receive attention from the performer, have value partly because a performer's attention and time is a finite resource. While, as mentioned in the Introduction, AI models which are trained on one single performer have been developed, these models rely heavily on generative AI text, and reviews of them tend to emphasize their distinctly unnatural conversational progression and tendency to hallucinate autobiographical details (Harwell 2023; Hunter 2024). The internal inconsistency of text-based generative AI disrupts the immersion of the user, limiting its appeal. In contrast, and looking at direct-to-consumer pornography, text produced by or posted by producer-performers can function as a kind of paratext to their scenes or shoots. Social media posts, and subscription site direct messages and image captions which describe or promote new material function to add depth to the media, heighten the immersion and sense of connection the audience feels. They may add detail about the process of creating the material, locating it temporally ('filmed last week') or geographically ('filmed on holiday in California'), or share details about the experience of performing in it. The impression of an authentic connection – interpersonal authenticity validated further through paratexts – can be used to reinforce the audience's perception of the authenticity of pleasure, desire, and enjoyment displayed in recordings and images.

Although authenticity of enjoyment is the most prevalent form of authenticity used in the marketing of pornography, appeals to other kinds of authenticity also exist. Saunders (2020, 147) identifies a trend towards pornography reflecting bodily work and effort, through her analysis of the way gaping is depicted and represented, arguing that there has been a movement from visibility of pleasure to visibility of labour. While some styles of pornography attempt to render the camera invisible, permitting the viewer to inhabit the role and eye of the lens, pornography focused on the gape 'renders the existence of the camera explicit', making bodily discipline by the performer for an observer the focus (2020, 148). This is a form of authenticity too, foregrounding the mechanism of production and reproduction of the image rather than trying to obscure it. In doing so, it

produces a text whose creation consciously includes the viewer in the diegesis of the text, incorporated into a shared experience with the performer. Here, it becomes apparent that some kinds of authenticity cannot exist simultaneously and may contradict each other. While one form of authenticity is a performance identical to the one that would occur if the camera was not present, another is to respond visibly and audibly to the environment which we as the viewer know exists, incorporating our spectatorship into the dynamic.

Pornographic 'truth' and the aura

Williams ([1989] 1999) argues that because pornography seeks to reveal the 'truth' of the body and of pleasure, it realizes and reflects a *scientia sexualis*, as opposed to *ars erotica*, following Foucault. Williams proposes that hardcore pornography prioritizes a logic of 'maximum visibility', even when this documentary tendency frustrates the ability of the text to arouse or convey any eroticism and highlights filmic conventions of hardcore pornography as evidence of this ([1989] 1999, 48–49). The authenticity privileged by this 'frenzy of the visible' is one of non-simulated sex acts, with authenticity of pleasure limited predominantly to what can be verified via a fluid authenticity ([1989] 1999, 36). However, some of these aesthetic and technical conventions of 'maximum visibility' ([1989] 1999, 48) are directly challenged in more amateur-aesthetic pornography which aims to convey an authenticity of enjoyment. This can be seen in, for example, the Beautiful Agony series, which eschews the pornographic convention of a focus on genitals by showing only the performer's face. Foucault, comparing *scientia sexualis* to *ars erotica*, describes the way that an exhortation to 'truth' in turn creates a 'pleasure of knowing' which arcs back towards the erotic (1978 [2008], 70–71). Where a principle of 'maximum visibility' aims to produce a pornographic text which is maximally readable and decodable, a turn towards assumptively more erotic and 'authentic' pornography suggests the participation of the viewer who feels a greater sense of satisfaction and pleasure at decoding the more sophisticated text; Foucault's 'pleasure of analysis' (1978 [2008], 71).

Theorizing the characteristics which distinguished the social and cultural tradition of *ars erotica*, Foucault argues that knowledge gained this way – through the body, as a practice and experience – 'must remain secret … it would lose its effectiveness and its virtue by being divulged' (1978 [2008], 57). I argue that the aesthetics of authenticity which reject some characteristics of Williams' 'maximum visibility' represent an attempt to reincorporate this type of erotic knowledge within pornography, reflective of the way that *scientia sexualis* cannot retain a complete hold on discourses of sexuality. Pornography which does not always privilege unimpeded visual evidence of the genitals, and particularly penetration, carries to some small extent a degree of subtlety or secrecy. It allows the viewer to participate in the 'pleasure of analysis' and to engage as a critical viewer (Foucault 1978 [2008], 71), assessing for themselves whether the performers are displaying pleasure, with this in turn heightening their own enjoyment (McKee 2006; Taylor 2022). Foucault suggests that some 'errant fragments' (1978 [2008], 71) of eroticism exist even within compelled confessions of sexuality, a resistance of sorts, and a value placed on the authenticity of the recorded actions of real performers reflects some drive towards the erotic even within the more standardized realms of pornography as a cultural product. Highlighting 'authenticity' seeks for the truth of pleasure to be captured and

displayed, despite the essential tension that 'proving' a truth may be at odds with producing material that remains arousing through its implicit invitation to the viewer to participate in its consumption as a knowing party.

Embedded within this desire for the authentic is the notion that a genuine pleasure can be more easily transmitted to the viewer. It is more enjoyable, following the logic which values authenticity as a marketable quality, to watch an authentic scene than one which is artificial. There is an ineffable quality or an aura to the recording of authentic pleasure of the performers which is presumed to be detectable or readable to the audience, and to enhance their experience (Benjamin 1935 [2007]; McKee 2006). Many of the strategies to enhance a sense of interpersonal connection or parasocial relationship between viewer and performer which are common in producer-performer or direct-to-consumer pornography, and sometimes adopted by commercial studios, function in part to strengthen readings of enjoyment, of 'wanting to be there' (Berg 2017, 671).

In relation to works of art, aura refers to the particular characteristic which an original work holds, linked in part to its location in time and space (Benjamin 1935 [2007]). Although, conventionally, reproductions of an item or work of art are presumed not to carry an aura because of their dislocation in time and space, I argue that in the case of pornography this concept becomes flexible and the enjoyment which authenticity provides is driven by an aura. Standing before a painting or sculpture connects the observer with the artist whose hand produced the object; viewing conventionally produced pornography makes one a witness to a record of real events which transpired with one or two or more human performers. Pornography created with generative AI lacks this distinct connection to a specific event and specific performers: it records a kaleidoscopic facsimile of potentially tens of thousands of events, creating an image which is wholly unmoored in both time and space. Aura is driven too by the perception of an object being unique or authentic, and through it having a greater ritual or cult value than exhibition value (Benjamin 1935 [2007]). As Williams has pointed out, in part the dismissal of pornography's cultural value is precisely because it can '"move" the body' ([1989] 1999, 5). Pornography, particularly when it meets what might be considered a criterion of 'success' through arousing the viewer, does then arguably also serve a ritual function.

Authenticity in pornography, and erotic services more generally, is valued in part because it carries a scarcity value, lending it a sense of exclusivity (Bernstein 2007). Ellis has similarly made the claim that an 'auratic authenticity' heightens the perceived value of censored, and therefore hard to access, erotic literature (1988, 41). Although a recorded scene can be reproduced essentially endlessly, and while reproduced images are assumed to lack an aura, there is a theoretical upper limit to the production of discrete scenes. A performer can only be in one place at a time; there are practical limitations to how many times they can perform; unlike a generative AI 'performer', their actions are located in time and space. There is a functional limit to the number of scenes in circulation which may then be reproduced, which grants them value. This is particularly clear if the reproduction of conventionally shot pornography is compared to the essentially limitless production of generative AI pornography. Evidently, not all scenes meet viewers' criterion of being 'authentic' (McKee 2006; Taylor 2022), meaning there is a yet smaller pool of auratically valued scenes in existence. Pornographic authenticity, then, is something which cannot be truly mass produced, its creation limited by some theoretical ceiling created by performers' very human limitations. Pornographic authenticity does not remain

secret, as Foucault proposes *ars erotica* must to retain its value, but it retains the impression of relative rarity. Critically, it also creates an opportunity for the viewer to inspect and assess the truth of the pleasure (McKee 2006; Taylor 2022), granting them access to the discursive meta-pleasure and 'fragments' of the erotic proposed by Foucault (1978 [2008], 71).

Although this auratic conveyance of enjoyment is based on an authenticity of pleasure, it is intrinsically linked to the most elementary kind of authenticity which exists in hardcore pornography. It records a real, not simulated, sexual act performed by real, not simulated, performers. Regardless of whether it is 'real' in the sense of being uncontrived, or 'real' in the sense of produced through persuasive deep acting (Hochschild 2012), the authentic pleasure depicted on-screen was experienced contemporaneously with the performance of unsimulated sexual acts shown in a recording. Through inspecting the recording and assessing the veracity of the enjoyment being depicted, the viewer becomes a part of the erotic play. If they deduce that what is being shown on-screen is authentic pleasure, this has the potential to enhance their own enjoyment (McKee 2006), and to validate their participation of sorts as a 'knowing' party. Through an auratic set of belief structures, 'authentic' pornography offers an enhanced enjoyment, with pleasure transmuted from performer to viewer, regardless of the reproduction of the image. In contrast, generative AI pornography cannot provide this pleasure of analysis. There is no single instance of a sexual act or sequence it depicts, and hence nothing to be analysed, no potential pleasure to be verified, leaving generative AI lacking when compared to much conventionally produced material.

Conclusion

While a great deal of attention has been paid to deepfake pornography, the emergence of generative AI material which does not mimic one specific person presents different questions, particularly as this material becomes easier for the average consumer to access. Despite a sense that pornography can be so repetitive and homogeneous that there is no meaningful distinction between scenes (Williams [1989] 1999, xvi), as this article has shown, there is a distinct auratic value which inheres in pornography that depicts sexual acts which actually occurred. This auratic quality emerges to a greater or lesser degree depending on how persuasive the viewer finds the enjoyment and engagement displayed by performers, and this can be assisted through various strategies of connection and personalization offered by some modes of production and distribution.

As noted earlier, some porn creators and performers have viewed generative AI as having commercial potential. It can be a tool which provides the ability to expand their suite of offerings, pushing past the functional limits of how much material can be created by one individual and thereby maximizing their potential earnings. While at the time of writing, the creator's use of generative AI tended to lean heavily towards text-based chatbots and occasional short videos and images (Harwell 2023; Hunter 2024), it is plausible that it will soon become feasible for performers to produce generative AI images and video of themselves to offer to fans or subscribers in an economical manner. Similarly, the potential may exist for studios to produce generative AI material after licensing the likenesses of performers. While the primary focus of this article is generative AI material which does not mimic a specific person, this possibility raises a further

question. Potentially, this material could hold more appeal than generative AI material which depicts a wholly unreal person – it can be viewed and assessed with reference to non-AI material and paratexts featuring the performer. This places it within a web that does interlock with the real, lacking aura but possessing a kind of intellectual interactivity which sits below conventional pornography but above non-specific generative AI imagery. Such an appeal would, however, rely on the existence of non-AI material which the viewer can also access.

There is no clear line that can be drawn between mainstream and alternative pornography, or between artifice and authenticity. I argue that, accordingly, generative AI's influence and impact on the pornography industry will vary, impacting scenes which are closest to a standardized norm the most, and direct-to-consumer platformized sales the least. Pornography created through generative AI realizes the mass-produced and standardized yet seemingly individualized product which mainstream pornography is accused of being. It creates an image or video based on what it has calculated as the most likely or frequently occurring blend of characteristics for a particular prompt or set of descriptors. It cannot produce something new, because it can only draw on its data set. What it creates may be unique, in that this precise image has never occurred before, but it is a reproduction of a concept, the hyperreal revealing nothing of the truth of the body and pleasure, not even the truth of a body once existing in front of a lens. Its uniqueness in this instance does not grant it an aura. Generative AI pornography wholly closes off the possibility of the pleasure of identifying, assessing, and judging the veracity and truth of pleasure, with the assessment brought to an abrupt halt as soon as the generated nature of the image is apparent.

Although scholarship examining pornography as a kind of culture industry and cultural product dates back decades, to a great extent pornography is still understood popularly through lenses of moral danger, or at best as a kind of artless, formulaic, and easily dismissed low culture (Paasonen 2010; McKee 2016). Ignoring movements within the live-action pornography industry which increasingly draw upon authenticity as a marketing tool, and the complexities of the industry more broadly, has incorrectly led to some assumptions that it is ripe for replacement or significant disruption by generative AI (Hunter 2024). In contrast, I would argue the valuing of authenticity of different types renders pornography less vulnerable to replacement by generative AI than some other kinds of visual culture. While it seems inevitable that some generative AI will make entrance into the industry, I argue that the specific kind of pleasure which non-AI-generated pornography offers will naturally limit its uptake and adoption.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8621-3733

References

Adorno, Theodor W. 2001. *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. London, New York: Routledge.

Ajder, Henry, Giorgio Patrini, Francesco Cavalli and Laurence Cullen. 2019. *The State of Deepfakes: Landscape, Threats, and Impact*. DeepTrace. https://regmedia.co.uk/2019/10/08/deepfake_report.pdf.

Alilunas, Peter. 2024. 'What We Must Be: AI and the Future of Porn Studies.' *Porn Studies* 11 (1): 99–112.

Ashley, Vex. 2016. 'Porn – Artifice – Performance – and the Problem of Authenticity.' *Porn Studies* 3 (2): 187–190.

Attwood, Feona. 2007. 'No Money Shot? Commerce, Pornography and New Sex Taste Cultures.' *Sexualities* 10 (4): 441–456.

Bender, Stuart. 2024. 'Generative-AI, the Media Industries, and the Disappearance of Human Creative Labour.' *Media Practice and Education*, 1–18. doi:10.1080/25741136.2024.2355597.

Benjamin, Walter. 1935 [2007]. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.' In *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 217–252. New York: Schocken Books.

Berg, Heather. 2017. 'Porn Work, Feminist Critique, and the Market for Authenticity.' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42 (3): 669–692.

Berg, Heather. 2021. *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Bernstein, Elizabeth. 2007a. 'Sex Work for the Middle Classes.' *Sexualities* 10 (4): 473–88. doi:10.1177/1363460707080984.

Bernstein, Elizabeth. 2007b. *Temporarily Yours: Intimacy, Authenticity, and the Commerce of Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bleakley, Paul. 2014. ''500 Tokens to Go Private': Camgirls, Cybersex and Feminist Entrepreneurship.' *Sexuality & Culture* 18 (4): 892–910.

Brooks, Tim, Bill Peebles, Connor Holmes, Will DePue, Yufei Guo, Li Jing, David Schnurr, et al. 2024. 'Video Generation Models as World Simulators.' OpenAI. https://openai.com/research/video-generation-models-as-world-simulators.

Cardoso, Daniel, Despina Chronaki and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli. 2022. 'Digital Sex Work?: Creating and Selling Explicit Content in OnlyFans.' In *Identities and Intimacies on Social Media*, edited by Tonny Krijnen, Paul G. Nixon, Michelle D. Ravenscroft, and Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, 169–184. New York: Routledge.

Easterbrook-Smith, Gwyn. 2023. 'OnlyFans as Gig-Economy Work: A Nexus of Precarity and Stigma.' *Porn Studies* 10 (3): 252–267.

Ellis, Richard. 1988. 'Disseminating Desire: Grove Press and 'The End[s] of Obscenity.' In *Perspectives on Pornography: Sexuality in Film and Literature*, edited by Gary Day and Clive Bloom, 26–43. Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press.

Escoffier, Jeffrey. 2014. 'Beefcake to Hardcore: Gay Pornography and the Sexual Revolution.' In *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, edited by Eric Schaefer, 319–347. Durham: Duke University Press.

Ferrari, Fabian, José van Dijck and Antal van den Bosch. 2023. 'Observe, Inspect, Modify: Three Conditions for Generative AI Governance.' *New Media & Society*, 1–19. doi:10.1177/14614448231214811.

Foucault, Michel. 1978 [2008]. *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*. Penguin Books edition. London, England: Penguin.

Frith, Hannah. 2015. 'Visualising the 'Real' and the 'Fake': Emotion Work and the Representation of Orgasm in Pornography and Everyday Sexual Interactions.' *Journal of Gender Studies* 24 (4): 386–398.

Gosse, Chandell and Jacquelyn Burkell. 2020. 'Politics and Porn: How News Media Characterizes Problems Presented by Deepfakes.' *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 37 (5): 497–511.

Hamilton, Vaughn, Ananta Soneji, Allison Mcdonald and Elissa M. Redmiles. 2023. ''Nudes? Shouldn't I Charge for These?': Motivations of New Sexual Content Creators on OnlyFans.' In *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, edited by Albrecht Schmidt, Kaisa Väänänen, Tesh Goyal, Per Ola Kristensson, Anicia Peters, Stefanie Mueller, Julie R. Williamson, and Max L. Wilson, 1–14. New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery.

Hanson, Kenneth R. and Hannah Bolthouse. 2024. ''Replika Removing Erotic Role-Play Is Like Grand Theft Auto Removing Guns or Cars: Reddit Discourse on Artificial Intelligence Chatbots and Sexual Technologies.' *Socius* 10: 1–16. doi:10.1177/23780231241259627.

Harwell, Drew. 2023. 'Creators, Porn Stars Turn to AI Doppelgangers to Keep Fans Entertained.' *Washington Post*, December 19, sec. Technology. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/12/19/ai-porn-sophie-dee-jack-nicklaus/.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2012. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Third edition. Oakland: University of California Press.

Hsu, Tiffany. 2024. 'Fake and Explicit Images of Taylor Swift Started on 4chan, Study Says.' *The New York Times*, February 5, sec. Business. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/05/business/media/taylor-swift-ai-fake-images.html.

Hunter, Tatum. 2024. 'AI 'Dream Girls' Are Coming for Porn Stars' Jobs.' *Washington Post*, February 25. https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/of-interest/2024/02/25/ai-porn-avn-industry/.

Jin, Xinyi, Zhuoyue Zhang, Bowen Gao, Shuqing Gao, Wenbo Zhou, Nenghai Yu and Guoyan Wang. 2023. 'Assessing the Perceived Credibility of Deepfakes: The Impact of System-Generated Cues and Video Characteristics.' *New Media & Society* 27 (3): 1651–1672. doi:10.1177/14614448231199664.

Kikerpill, Kristjan. 2020. 'Choose Your Stars and Studs: The Rise of Deepfake Designer Porn.' *Porn Studies* 7 (4): 352–356.

Lapointe, Valerie A., Simon Dubé, Sophia Rukhlyadyev, Tinhinane Kessai and David Lafortune. 2025. 'The Present and Future of Adult Entertainment: A Content Analysis of AI-Generated Pornography Websites.' *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 1–19. doi:10.1007/s10508-025-03099-1.

Laurin, Daniel. 2019. 'Subscription Intimacy: Amateurism, Authenticity and Emotional Labour in Direct-to-Consumer Gay Pornography.' *AG About Gender – International Journal of Gender Studies* 8 (16): 61–79. doi:10.15167/2279-5057/AG2019.8.16.1114.

Lebedíková, Michaela. 2022. 'How Much Screaming Is an Orgasm: The Problem with Coding Female Climax.' *Porn Studies* 9 (2): 208–223.

Lecomte, Louise, Flora Antoniazzi and Florence Villesèche. 2024. 'Business, Porn, and Morality: What Morality Do Feminist Pornographers Construct for Their Practice?' *Organization* 31 (5): 801–819.

Maddocks, Sophie. 2020. '"A Deepfake Porn Plot Intended to Silence Me": Exploring Continuities Between Pornographic and 'Political' Deep Fakes.' *Porn Studies* 7 (4): 415–423.

Maiberg, Emanuel. 2024. 'Reddit Hentai Community Fights Over AI-Generated Monster Girls.' 404 Media, August 6, 2024. https://www.404media.co/reddit-hentai-community-fights-over-ai-generated-monster-girls/.

Marini, Marco, Alessandro Ansani, Alessandro Demichelis, Giovanna Mancini, Fabio Paglieri and Marco Viola. 2024. 'Real Is the New Sexy: The Influence of Perceived Realness on Self-Reported Arousal to Sexual Visual Stimuli.' *Cognition and Emotion* 38 (3): 348–360.

McKee, Alan. 2006. 'The Aesthetics of Pornography: The Insights of Consumers.' *Continuum* 20 (4): 523–539.

McKee, Alan. 2016. 'Pornography as a Creative Industry: Challenging the Exceptionalist Approach to Pornography.' *Porn Studies* 3 (2): 107–119.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2010. 'Labors of Love: Netporn, Web 2.0 and the Meanings of Amateurism.' *New Media & Society* 12 (8): 1297–1312.

Paasonen, Susanna. 2019. 'Monstrous Resonances: Affect and Animated Pornography.' In *How to Do Things with Affects: Affective Triggers in Aesthetic Forms and Cultural Practices*, edited by Ernst van Alphen and Tomáš Jirsa, 143–162. Leiden: Boston: Brill Rodopi.

Popova, Milena. 2020. 'Reading out of Context: Pornographic Deepfakes, Celebrity and Intimacy.' *Porn Studies* 7 (4): 367–381.

Saunders, Rebecca. 2019. 'Computer-Generated Pornography and Convergence: Animation and Algorithms as New Digital Desire.' *Convergence* 25 (2): 241–259.

Saunders, Rebecca. 2020. '*Bodies of Work: The Labour of Sex in the Digital Age*.' In *Dynamics of Virtual Work*, edited by Ursula Huws and Rosalind Gill. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stardust, Zahra Zsuzsanna. 2019. 'From Amateur Aesthetics to Intelligible Orgasms: Pornographic Authenticity and Precarious Labour in the Gig Economy.' *AG About Gender – International Journal of Gender Studies* 8 (16): 1–29. doi:10.15167/2279-5057/AG2019.8.16.1115.

Taylor, Kris. 2022. ''I've got to put one Side Aside if I Want to Enjoy it': Pornography, Perceived Reality, and Pornography Viewers' Negotiated Pleasures.' *Sexuality & Culture* 26: 1215–1234.

Tynan, Luke and Conor Linehan. 2024. 'OnlyFans: How Models Negotiate Fan Interaction.' *Sexuality & Culture* 28: 2289–2322. doi:10.1007/s12119-024-10230-2.

van der Nagel, Emily. 2020. 'Verifying Images: Deepfakes, Control, and Consent.' *Porn Studies* 7 (4): 424–429.

van der Nagel, Emily. 2021. 'Competing Platform Imaginaries of NSFW Content Creation on OnlyFans.' *Porn Studies (2326-8743)* 8 (4): 394–410.

Wang, Yidong. 2021. 'The Twink Next Door, Who Also Does Porn: Networked Intimacy in Gay Porn Performers' Self-Presentation on Social Media.' *Porn Studies* 8 (2): 224–238.

Weikmann, Teresa and Sophie Lecheler. 2023. 'Visual Disinformation in a Digital Age: A Literature Synthesis and Research Agenda.' *New Media & Society* 25 (12): 3696–3713.

Williams, Linda. [1989] 1999. *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible.'* Expanded edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weatherbed, Jess. 2024. 'Trolls Have Flooded X with Graphic Taylor Swift AI Fakes.' *The Verge*. https://www.theverge.com/2024/1/25/24050334/x-twitter-taylor-swift-ai-fake-images-trending.

Young, Madison. 2014. 'Authenticity and Its Role Within Feminist Pornography.' *Porn Studies* 1 (1–2): 186–188.