

'Porn Star': Why We Should Probably Lose the Term

A few years ago, an 18-year old Duke University student named Miriam Weeks began performing in pornographic films for \$1,300 per scene to make ends meet. Today she is better known by her *nom de porn*: [Belle Knox](#).

The story created a national stir, especially after Weeks, who said she began shooting porn because tuition at Duke was quite expensive, announced that Duke had pulled her financial aid.

"The Blue Devil in Miss Belle Knox: Meet Duke Porn Star Miriam Weeks," [announced](#) Rolling Stone in an extensive feature.

"The Duke Porn-Star Student's Degrading Plan to Pay Tuition," [blared](#) the headline of a Washington Post article authored by Ruth Marcus.

"Ruth Marcus Is Very Concerned About the Duke Porn Star Because She Goes to Duke," [countered](#) Amanda Marcotte at Slate.

"Duke Porn Star Belle Knox Reveals Herself," [declared](#) Fox News.

The one thing that ties all of these headlines together is the use of two particular words: "*porn star*." The terminology is problematic for a few reasons, particularly for media.

First, the phrase is imprecise if not altogether inaccurate. Most of the people are not "stars" at all; they are merely actors in pornographic movies.

Second, the phrase is euphemistic. Euphemisms cloud truth. Since one of the primary goals of communication is clarity, they should be avoided in serious writing. This is why the Associated Press [insists](#) on using the terms "death" or "die" instead of phrases such as "passed away" (except in direct

quotes).

Third, the phrase glamorizes pornography. The terminology “porn star” is far more alluring than the more neutral terminology “pornographic actress.”

This final item invites an important question: Should pornography be glamorized? This is a trickier question than one might expect, at least when analyzed through the prism of 21st-century feminism.

Weeks, who was able to make a great deal of money and stay enrolled at Duke, said pornography is empowering. “I love the porn industry,” Weeks says in the short biopic [Becoming Belle Knox](#). “It makes me feel like a strong, independent woman.” Marcus disagrees. “Letting a man ejaculate on your face is not empowering under anyone’s definition of the term. It’s debasing,” she writes.

Whether pornography is oppressive or empowering is not really the point, however. The point is that “porn star” has become a colloquial phrase that gives a false impression. We don’t refer to Hollywood actors in B movies as “stars”; nor should we refer to pornographic actors and actresses as stars, not if we take words seriously.

Such a contention might seem like a trivial matter. It’s not. As the cultural historian Jacques Barzun observed, language is one of the most powerful forces in civilization.

“Language molds our thoughts; it gives color and shape to our desires; it limits or extends our sympathies; it gives continuity to our individual self along one line or another,” Barzun [wrote](#). “These effects occur whether we are conscious of them or not.”

These effects could have been at play when Miriam Weeks made the decision to become Belle Knox. She simply Googled “how to become a porn star,” she says.

Ms. Weeks and others in the ~~adult entertainment industry~~ pornographic movie business (another euphemism to look out for) are certainly entitled to refer to themselves as "stars" or whatever term they choose. But media should not be co-opting their euphemistic language, at least not if they take their craft seriously.