

Hot Scenes, Steamy Words: A Validation Exercise of a Speculative Script Resulting From an Analytical Study of the Typical VivaMax Film

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Abstract

This paper presents a practice-led validation of a functional screenwriting framework derived from an analytical study of the typical VivaMax film. VivaMax (aka VMX) is the Philippines' leading producer of softcore erotic cinema. My earlier VMX Study analyzed fourteen films and proposed a Screenwriting Framework and Female Sexual Agency Rubric grounded in recognizable patterns of theme, narrative structure, sexual behaviors, and representations of female sexual agency. In this paper, I use a practice-led research approach to evaluate a speculative screenplay originally written for submission to the VMX Film Festival against that Framework. Because the screenplay was completed before the framework was finalized, it functions unintentionally as a control text for validation. Results reveal the screenplay organically aligns to the earlier study on narrative structuring and pacing, sexual behaviors, and character development trajectories. The screenplay features a female lead who exhibits high female sexual agency on the aspects of initiation, consent, choice, and narrative consequence. These results suggest that the Framework and Rubric can effectively guide the development of softcore cinematic works that are mindful and character-driven while retaining the eroticism expected of the genre. This study contributes to the discourse of Philippine Cinema in how it reinforces the potential of softcore cinema and erotica as a platform for scholarship and inquiry on the interrelated concepts of authorship, agency, and representation, among others. Despite its limitations, this validation exercise reveals the clear potential of the Framework and Rubrics' replicability in future studies and exercises in erotic screenplay development.

Keywords: Philippine softcore cinema, female sexual agency, Vivamax, practice-led research, screenwriting framework

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Introduction

Online Subscription-Video-On-Demand (SVOD) platform Vivamax was launched to leverage on Viva Film's extensive catalog of foreign and Filipino films (Lo, 2020; Soliman, 2021). Viva Films was already one of the country's largest and most prolific producers of commercial films as well as direct-to-video adult-themed content. It was during the Global Pandemic that Viva Films channeled production funding into developing adult-themed films intended for the Vivamax platform (Manio, 2023; Pingol, 2022; Soliman, 2021).

Vivamax, since then, has become widely recognized as the Philippines' leading producer and distributor of softcore pornographic films.

In 2024 Vivamax (rebranded into VMX) celebrated a 12-million subscriber milestone with initiatives that included, among others, a call for entries into the first VMX Film Festival which, according to VMX Head of Aggregation Ronald Arguelles, seeks:

...to make the VMX brand both daring and groundbreaking. That is why we are having this festival in order to discover fresh talents with brave visions that can eventually revitalize and reshape their chosen platforms and hopefully the industry in general.

We are looking for filmmakers who are edgy, and ready to break the mold and redefine erotic cinema, those with bold perspectives and brilliant storytelling abilities. We are encouraging content creators who will further diversify our current film catalog to join, especially regional filmmakers and stories about their communities, including the LGBTQ+ with alternative takes on erotica. (Gallardo, 2024)

Hard, Soft, and Philippine Society

How a society defines obscenity varies and changes depending on that society's circumstances and context (Pope et al., 2007). Sam Hardy also adds that pornography and pornographic forms may be seen as a function of censorship; where the "social elite" (church, government, "moral majority") define and restrict access by means of control, administration, or exclusion (2015). In this last definition, pornography can thus be seen as a form of resistance and protest on explicit or societal censorship.

Much of the definition and differentiation of "pornography" in the dispute over what defines it is dependent on how the form combines the aesthetic and the sexual, rather than just the sexual and exploitative. Hardcore pornography is generally characterized by the explicit depiction of sex and genitalia (Hardy, 2015). Softcore and erotica, on the other hand, may be defined as "any feature-length narrative whose diegesis is punctuated by periodic moments... of simulated, nonexplicit sexual spectacle" or what can be described as "bumping and grinding" (Andrews, 2006, p. 2).

Sex, the topic of sex and the representation of sexuality in media and society, has always been a contentious and controversial issue in the Philippines. The "sexualization" of Philippine Cinema began amidst the "Sexual Revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s (Herzog & Schmacks, 2024). In the late 1960s the influx of foreign films featuring simulated scenes of nudity and sex drew audiences away from locally produced films; it was in the early 1970s that Filipino productions "caught up" with the trend.

Established in 1985, the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) is repeatedly embroiled in conflicts with the industry it is meant to support. The Board has long been criticized for its wavering standards. Recently the MTRCB has begun lobbying Congress to legislate an expansion of the Board's jurisdiction to include online streaming services citing lewd and immoral content they claim are available to the underaged public. While this kind of legislation will affect all platforms such as Netflix, Disney+ and HBO Go, at the center of this sociopolitical crossfire is local streaming service Vivamax.

The “VMX Study” as Backdrop

It is in this complex relationship – a celebrated adult platform, a generally conservative society, and a regulatory agency reasserting authority over an evolving medium – that I myself developing a speculative screenplay with the intent of participating in the VMX Film Festival.

This study stems from a research paper I authored that analyzed the narrative structure of the typical VMX Film. The research *Plotting Pleasure: Narrative Structure and Female Sexual Agency Toward a Functional Screenwriting Framework for VMX Softcore Films*, currently under journal review and hereinafter described as “The VMX Study”, identified prevalent narrative themes in a selection representing approximately 10% of VMX films from the October 2024 catalog, it also identified the durations of sex scenes and these scenes' placement within a traditional cinematic 3-Act structure.

The study further categorized the sexual behaviors represented on-screen as either Autoerotic, Typical, or Atypical behaviors; Atypical behaviors were behaviors identified with paraphilias and included both non-consensual (deviant) and consensual (kink). The most common paraphilias include exhibitionism, fetishism, masochism, and sadism, among others (Betchen, 2002; Fisher & Marwaha, 2023, and Greenberg et al., 2017 in J. Garcia, 2025). These analyses and categorizations led to a functional framework for the development of films and screenplays intended for the VMX platform.

Another key result and insight of the VMX study is the high degree to which lead female characters in the typical VMX film exhibited sexual agency moderate to high female. The study utilizes a rubric to measure female leads' participation in the initiation of sex, their negotiation of consent, the degree to which they choose to engage in sex, and the narrative consequences sex has on their characters.

Ultimately the study suggests that these high-agency and distinctly sex-positive narratives allow for the VMX film – and by extension the VMX platform – to provide a space for female empowerment, agency, and resistance to traditional and normative narratives, albeit within audience expectations and structure of a softcore platform (Garcia, 2025).

This study thus asks the question: “how does a speculative screenplay intended for the VMX platform align to the proposed functional framework posited in Garcia's 2025 VMX Study?”

Relating to this, the study asks the sub-questions:

1. How does the speculative screenplay align or conform to the framework in terms of theme and narrative structure?; and
2. How does the speculative screenplay provide sexual agency to female lead characters?

Method

A speculative screenplay was developed for a full-length film conforming to the submission requirement of VMX’s call for entries. Standard conventions for screenwriting were followed, and the draft was written using WriterDuet, a web-based screenwriting platform.

The story concept was not prescribed by any entity and was developed intentionally for the VMX Festival and independently of the VMX Study. Due to the mismatch between the Festival submission deadline (November 2024) and the development of the VMX Study manuscript, it was not possible for the VMX Festival script to be written using the framework as a guide. Instead, the resulting speculative screenplay was validated against the framework after the study’s manuscript was completed in February of 2025. In this study results are specific to one script, but indicative of broader applicability.

The validation exercise aligns with practice-led and performative research practice described by Haseman (2010) where the research output – or what Haseman refers to as “utterances” – become the research itself. He describes the validity of self-reflective or self-validating practice if these new methodologies are articulated in terms of transferability and transparency (including structure, clarity of purpose, and outcomes) (Haseman, 2010, pp. 155–156).

By reflecting on the screenplay as both author and analyst, I hope to gain insight into how narrative decisions, character agency, and sexual portrayals are constructed during the writing process – something that may not necessarily reveal itself in more traditional textual analysis.

The screenplay will be evaluated against the framework proposed in the VMX Study (Garcia, 2025) to wit:

Table 1

Functional Framework for Softcore Screenplay Development (Garcia, 2025)

Principle	Description
Pay Attention to Story Beats	Sex scenes should be narratively meaningful, not random insertions. They must serve as narrative beats — not distractions.
Establish in ACT I	Build tension, introduce desire, and establish power dynamics.
Complicate in ACT II	Escalate conflict, destabilize relationships, and explore social or moral transgressions.
Resolve in ACT III	Complete character arcs, reveal consequences (social, moral, or emotional), and deliver emotional or moral payoff.
Scene Counts Count	Aim for 8–9 sex scenes across 25–30% of total runtime. Erotic pacing should mirror narrative rhythm — rising action, climax, resolution — to sustain engagement and avoid tonal fatigue. The following scene count breakdown is suggested: • ACT I – 1-3 scenes, depending on running time; sex scenes helping define relationships and power dynamics • ACT II – 4-5 scenes, functioning to complicate relationships and strengthen character intent and commitment • ACT III – 1-2 scenes, used to provide moral payoff or justify transgressional consequences
Make Female Leads Matter	Write female leads with evolving sexual agency across acts. Use the Sexual Agency Rubric (initiation–consent–choice–consequence) to guide agency across narrative arcs.

Embed Eroticism in Plot and Character	Sex scenes must advance plot, shift power, heighten conflict, or deepen emotional stakes. If it doesn't serve the story, it weakens it.
Honor the Platform	VMX subverts traditional cinematic norms. Writers should explore kink, fantasy, and transgression, while anchoring narratives in culturally resonant themes like romance, justice, and emotional closure. Avoid defaulting to exploitation.

Female sexual agency will likewise be measured in the four-point rubric described by Garcia.

Table 2

Female Sexual Agency Rubric (Garcia, 2025) and Corresponding Interpretation of Scores

Indicator	Low Agency (1)	Moderate Agency (2)	High Agency (3)
Initiation of Sexual Encounters	The character does not initiate or appears passive; encounters are instigated by others without her active participation.	The character shares initiation or signals partial consent but does not fully drive the interaction.	The character actively initiates sexual encounters and demonstrates clear intent and motivation.
Negotiation of Consent and Boundaries	No evidence of negotiation; compliance is assumed or subtly coerced.	Partial negotiation; some preferences or conditions are expressed.	Explicit negotiation of consent and clear articulation of personal boundaries.
Degree of Choice Exercised	Little or no agency in decision-making; actions are reactive or constrained.	Some choice, but significant limitations or ambivalence remain.	Full autonomy in deciding whether, when, and how to engage sexually.
Narrative Consequences of Actions	Sexual choices result in negative or punitive outcomes reinforcing passivity or victimhood.	Mixed or ambiguous consequences; partial empowerment.	Outcomes are framed positively, reinforcing agency and personal growth.

Total Score	Average	Interpretation
4 – 6	1.00–1.49	Low agency: Character is largely passive or objectified, little to no control over sexual encounters or narrative role.
7 – 9	1.50–2.49	Moderate agency: Some initiative or negotiation; mixed signals on autonomy; possibly transitional or ambivalent portrayal.
10 – 12	2.50–3.00	High agency: Character demonstrates clear decision-making, initiates or navigates sexual encounters on their terms, and influences the plot.

Results and Discussion

The draft submitted to VMX was a standard fictional narrative screenplay with the working title “*Alat ng Dagat*” (Salty As The Sea). Thematically the screenplay is an erotic romance with a secondary theme of identity and self-discovery; both of these themes align to the VMX Study’s results on the prevalence of love and romance as narrative theme (Garcia, 2025).

The screenplay is approximately 77 minutes based on the film industry rule-of-thumb of “1-page-equates-to-1-minute” and a director’s approximation of individual scene duration (Table 3). Mature content comes to approximately 26% (± 21 minutes) of the total running time with the remaining 74% (± 56 minutes) dedicated to diegetic content. Based on the VMX Study this falls below the 36% recorded average across the study’s selection (Garcia, 2025).

It is worth noting, though, that *Alat ng Dagat*’s 26% is higher than the average proportion in selected films greater than 60 minutes running time (*Call Me Alma*, *Kitty K7*, and *Pintor at Paraluman* average 23%).

The screenplay contains 11 individual scenes featuring sexual content, almost 25% more than the 8-scene average identified in the VMX Study, these scenes are situated across all three Acts. Scenes show a range of variations between Autoerotic through to Atypical behaviors with *Alat ng Dagat* leaning towards more towards Typical behavior (6 of 11 sequences).

Table 3

Breakdown of Sex Scenes Written Into the Speculative Screenplay and Approximate Duration of Sex Scenes Based on Director's Projections

Act	Sequence	Scene	Type	Duration
ACT I	Seq 2	Mix & Tess shower scene	Typical	0:00:45
	Seq 2	Ella & Enzo “ <i>nauna na friends mo</i> ”	Typical	0:02:00
	Seq 4	Jake & Jenny “casual condo hook-up”	Typical	0:02:30
	Seq 6	Ella “shower scene voyeur”	Autoerotic	0:01:00
ACT II	Seq 9	Ella “fantasy daydream”	Autoerotic	0:01:00
	Seq 14	Ella & Jake “sex on the beach”	Atypical	0:04:30
	Seq 16	Ella “boy, <i>isampay mo 'to</i> ”	Autoerotic	0:00:30
	Seq 18	Ella's Mom & Priest “world crumbles”	Typical	0:01:00
	Seq 22	Ella & Jake “growing closer” montage	Atypical	0:03:30
ACT III	Seq 26	Ella & Random Lady “no love, no emotion”	Typical	0:02:00
	Seq 29	Ella & Stranger “thunder and lightning”	Typical	0:02:00
				0:20:45

The screenplay's lead female character Ella is written as independent, intelligent, and self-assured. She chooses to live free from traditional expectations of family and society; while harboring a romantic side, relationships are also pragmatic – made and ended purely on her own terms.

It is also in this context that erotic scenes are drafted; sex scenes in the screenplay are used to drive narrative advancement or build character development.

Sex scenes written in the ACT I established both Ella's and Jake's key character traits – Ella's independence and sex-positive outlook and Jake's typical machismo and misogyny. ACT II's scenes explored Ella and Jake's relationship – first as casual affair, and later as something deeper. In ACT III sex is used to as Ella's attempts to regain control of her “world” and reclaim her power after being “betrayed” by Jake and losing her business. Of the 11 sex scenes in the screenplay, only 2 (Seq 2 and Seq 18) can be said to have a clear “spectacular” orientation – providing more erotic pleasure for the audience rather than serving a distinct narrative development purpose.

Although the screenplay reflects an orientation towards primarily Typical sex acts, Autoerotic and Atypical (femdom and public/ exhibitionist) sex is also incorporated into the screenplay. Likewise, the screenplay does not make distinctions or judgements on same-sex relations (Seq 2, 18, and 26) and social consequence (shaming) as a result of sexual acts is framed only as a result of transgressions (Seq 18 – Ella's “pious” mother is caught having sex with a priest).

What is most notable in this “transgression” is not simply being caught *in flagrante delicto* with a supposedly celibate priest, but how sex is juxtaposed against ultra-conservative views on sex and sexuality. In the narrative what is framed as shameful and transgressive is not simply

the act of sex with the priest, but more importantly, the act of sex vis-à-vis the mother's faith-based hypocrisy.

Using the Female Sexual Agency Rubric, lead character Ella exhibits very high female sexual agency scoring 3.00 according to the rubric (Table 4).

Table 4

Evaluation of Ella As Lead Female Character Using Female Sexual Agency Rubric

Indicator	Evidence from Screenplay	Rating
1. Initiation of Sexual Encounters	ACT I: Ella pulls Enzo into the room to fully engage in sexual acts (Seq 2). ACT II: Ella initiates first full sexual encounter with Jake – she is the one to approach and take sexual lead (Seq 14). ACT III: Ella connects to and reciprocates visual cues from the stranger (Seq 29) <i>Ella drives sexual activity rather than responds passively.</i>	3 – High Agency
2. Negotiation of Consent and Boundaries	ACT I: Ella asserts dominance and enforces her boundaries when she was being watched (Seq 6). ACT II: Ella controls sexual positions and rhythm (Seq 14) ACT III: Ella refuses the kiss during a lesbian encounter (Seq 28), and aggressively defines what the stranger is “allowed” to do during their encounter (Seq 29) <i>There is no depiction or coercion; non-consensual approaches (voyeurism) are immediately rejected or managed in her favor</i>	3 – High Agency
3. Degree of Choice Exercised	ACT I and II: Ella determines if and when she will engage in sex with Jake (Seq 9, 14, 16, 22) ACT III: Ella chooses to engage with the lesbian (Seq 28) and stranger (Seq 29) <i>Ella's sexual acts are self-initiated and self-contained. She chooses her partners and is not manipulated into choice. Even when emotionally detached, she retains control of when, how, and with whom.</i>	3 – High Agency
4. Narrative Consequences of Actions	ACT I: Ella exists in a world of independent and informed choices (Seq 2 and 6) ACT II: Ella changes through emotional – not sexual – curiosity to disillusionment (Seq 9, 14, 16, and 22) ACT III: Ella is emotionally “destroyed” but sex gives her “power” (Seq 28 and 29) <i>Ella's sexuality is never punished but evolves - sex mirrors her emotional state but does not define her downfall.</i>	3 – High Agency

While Ella's character exhibits high sexual agency, Jake's character exhibits the deconstruction of traditional male dominance and power. In Seq 4 Jake acts upon desire – he dominates and defines the parameters of a casual encounter with Jenny. As the narrative evolves, Jake is confronted with sexuality and loses his sense of control – particularly in the aspects of initiation and choice (Seq 14 and 22; in Seq 24, Jake looks forward to sex with Ella, but this is withheld from him because of a duplicity).

While there is no directive – from producers or festival organizers – to provide this level of agency in female characterizations, it does appear that contemporary social philosophies and outlooks do lean towards a more inclusive and mindful aesthetic in terms of messaging and representation. The VMX Study pointed towards attempts of the typical VMX Film to be more sex-positive, non-judgmental, and normative of concepts traditionally seen as “deviant” (such as kink, queer sex, and fetishes). This trend makes itself apparent in the writing of *Alat ng Dagat* with its strong female lead, an empowered ending, and an open, non-judgmental outlook on sex and sexuality.

These results reinforce how practice-led inquiry clarifies and brings to light the narrative, ethical, and affective dimensions of erotic storytelling in ways that purely textual analysis cannot. By evaluating the screenplay through the Framework described in the VMX Study, this validation exercise demonstrates how creative decisions around intimacy, agency, and desire operate within the lived realities of writing erotica. Ella’s strong agency profile – as reflected in her character’s negotiation of initiation, consent, and narrative consequence – suggests that contemporary Philippine erotica can move toward character-driven, mindfully-aware representations when guided by intentional creative tools.

Furthermore, in the context of research, the screenplay becomes both artefact and method: a space where the embodied processes of authorship reveal how sexual representation is negotiated, refined, and made meaningful. This highlights softcore cinema not as a forgettable or insignificant genre but as a productive forum for examining authorship and the politics of representation within Philippine Cinema.

Conclusion

The happenstance that caused the *Alat ng Dagat* speculative screenplay to be written before the framework was developed had the unintended effect of providing a control group against which to validate the framework. Creative and technical development of the screenplay thus occurred independent of the influence and structure of its supposed guide.

This validation exercise confirms the functionality of the Framework as a tool and guide for screenplay development, particularly for the VMX Platform. The screenplay *organically* aligns itself with the norms and characteristics of a “typical” VMX film: theme, pacing and narrative structure, and ratio of sexual to diegetic content.

What this study also illustrates is that the Framework leads to an increased degree of creative exploration on the part of the writer. The lack of explicit sexual portrayals (e.g. showing of genitalia, penetrative sex) requires the further imaginative use of cinematic technique and alternative sexual content to populate the screenplay. This has the tendency to lead to the exploration of alternative themes and atypical behaviors; *Alat ng Dagat* does so with the use of public and angry sex as narrative technique.

The Female Sexual Agency Rubric of Initiation, Consent, Choice, and Consequence also appears to effectively operationalize the abstract concepts of empowerment and authorship within erotic storytelling. The tool can function as a critical lens for the writing and development of characters with observable narrative behaviors – how they negotiate desire as well as relational power dynamics on the screen. It enables both writers and academics to differentiate between agency that is structurally embedded in the story and agency that is only implied. The Rubric, then, becomes more than a tool or support for critical analysis, but more

so may function as an aid for screenwriters to develop more deliberate, sex-positive, and character-driven representation of sex and sexuality in softcore films.

The primary limitation of this study is that this is a self-validation exercise of only one screenplay. The study has revealed though that there are indications of a broader implications for the tool and the results of the study. Further validation of the Framework – external evaluators, multiple screenplays, and other evaluation frameworks – are highly encouraged.

Ultimately, the Framework and accompanying Rubric functions as a replicable development tool for erotic screenplays that consider narrative cohesion and integrity as well as erotic spectacle. The Framework, by acknowledging the genre's narrative expectations while considering character agency and positive sexual representation, provides screenwriters and producers with a flexible structure for developing responsible erotic work. The Framework and Rubric emphasis on purpose and representation is a step towards sexual content that goes beyond spectacle and titillation but as a driver of story and character.

The Pen Is Mightier

Screenwriters, even before directors, have the power – agency, if you will – to write and develop stories and characters that can transcend the inherently commercial and exploitative nature of adult cinema. More consciously- and mindfully developed screenplays can become a platform for sensitivity, inclusivity, discourse, and sex-positivity; writers have the power to subvert the traditional male gaze where non-male characters are given more active and subjective viewpoints rather than being passive and objectified subjects. Platforms such as VMX, with its more provocative and countercultural content, can be a platform for introducing and normalizing non-heteronormative and non-male perspectives to a wider audience. Ironically adult cinema can – and likely should – become a forum for postfeminist negotiation and discourses on gender and representations in society.

This validation exercise demonstrates that erotica – when guided by a structured narrative framework and agency rubric – can serve as a space for ethical, character-driven, and culturally resonant storytelling.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

This paper was prepared with the assistance of Generative AI Tools such as ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot for tasks such as drafting, refining, and suggesting alternative language and phrasing. All intellectual content, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author. Generative AI was not utilized for, nor did it contribute to, data collection, theoretical framing, or argumentation; likewise, all AI outputs were critically reviewed, evaluated, and/ or validated by the author to ensure accuracy and adherence to accepted academic standards.

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